

A REPORT OF THE CSIS  
MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM

# Gulf Kaleidoscope

REFLECTIONS ON THE IRANIAN CHALLENGE

*Editor*

Jon B. Alterman

*Foreword*

Zbigniew Brzezinski

*Contributors*

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Richard Dalton  
Nathan Freier  
Geoffrey Kemp  
Haim Malka  
Michael O'Hanlon  
Barbara Slavin

May 2012



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YEARS | CHARTING  
OUR FUTURE

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Cover photos: Left: A U.S. Navy MH-53E Sea Dragon helicopter assigned to Mine Countermeasures Squadron (HM) 15 flies in formation with UK, Pakistani, French, and U.S. countermeasure ships in support of the U.S. Fifth Fleet during Arabian Gauntlet 2011 in the Persian Gulf, April 24, 2011; photo by Second Class Petty Officer Lynn Friant/DefenseImagery.mil, <http://defenseimagery.mil/imagery.html#a=search&s=110424-N-YX920-244&guid=c1913319d601e00c76b9f5b5a665e85f9b18fb2e>. Top right: An Iranian soldier standing atop an antiaircraft machine gun salutes as he passes by a poster of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, during the annual Army Day military parade in Tehran, April 17, 2008; later that day, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad referred to Iran as the "most powerful nation in the world"; Behrouz Mehri/AFP/Getty Images. Bottom right: Saudi security forces on parade, November 23, 2009; Omar Chatriwala/Al Jazeera English/Flickr Creative Commons, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/aljazeeraenglish/4126175248/>.

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# FOREWORD

## Zbigniew Brzezinski

This volume from the Center for Strategic and International Studies clearly but concisely articulates different strategies that the United States might pursue toward Iran, strategies broadly defined as engagement, containment, and deterrence. In so doing, it outlines the political, military, economic, and diplomatic aspects of any path forward. Of course, these strategies are not mutually exclusive, and in some cases even can be complementary. A robust military presence can make deterrence more credible, for example, while engagement can provide incentives to escape from sanctions and other aspects of containment. While the strategies are outlined distinctly, they need not be applied in a doctrinaire manner.

Moreover, this volume makes a truly original contribution by assessing how different U.S. strategies toward Iran can affect the calculations of a range of international actors. Seen from others' perspectives, what do different U.S. strategies tell others about U.S. resolve? What do they say about what the United States considers an acceptable end state to be? What do those strategies tell countries about their own future relationships with the United States, and the future U.S. relationship with Iran? And, most vitally, to what extent do those other countries trust that the strategies will be able to shape Iranian behavior, and to what degree do they believe that their own actions can push the United States toward a set of behaviors that they see as better serving their interests?

This collective undertaking also attempts to anticipate Iran's own reactions to different U.S. policy approaches. Iran is certainly not the United States' equal in terms of military might or defense intelligence, but it has certain tools of its own that it has sought to exploit. In part, Iran can sow chaos in the region through its support for non-state actors, threatening U.S. allies and interests. Iran has also sought to capitalize on its reputation as a country that undermines the status quo, in a region in which the status quo is increasingly endangered. Iran has skilled negotiators and a global information operation that seeks to influence public opinion. Finally, Iran's influence in oil markets gives the country an important tool with which to influence the behavior of consuming nations. Iran is not without its options.

For the foreseeable future, Iran will remain an issue on which U.S. policymakers must remain consistently engaged. The military and strategic threats Iran poses to U.S. interests are serious and diverse, and they will require determined effort to address. When it comes to large-scale tasks like the rebuilding of Iraq and Afghanistan, it would be much more advantageous to have Iran on our side, or at least not actively undermining our efforts.

A deeper understanding of how the tools at our disposal are likely to interact should help us to fashion a realistic response to the complex challenges posed by contemporary Iran.







# INTRODUCTION

Jon B. Alterman

If there is to be a war in the Middle East in the months or years ahead, it will likely involve Iran in some way. Enduring U.S.-Iranian hostility has been one of the few constants in a region that has been turned upside down in the last year by revolts and revolutions. Iran's widely presumed efforts to develop a nuclear weapons capability persuade many in the United States that Iran is an enduring menace to the Middle East and to U.S. interests in the region. Meanwhile, Iran continues to see the United States as a hegemonic power that seeks to expand its own influence at the expense of Iran assuming its natural leadership role in the Middle East. Each side is arming its allies and playing for advantage while seeking to avoid triggering a strong military response from the other side. There is no issue higher on the U.S. security agenda, nor on the Iranian one.

While it is increasingly hard to remember, there was a time when Iran and the United States were close allies. From the start of the Cold War through the 1970s, the United States viewed Iran as both a moderate and a moderating force in the Gulf, and as a pillar of its security policy. Iran's importance to U.S. strategy increased after the United States assumed the role of the principal external guarantor of Gulf security when the British pulled back from "East of Suez" in 1971. Tens of thousands of Americans lived in Iran, and in the late 1970s and early 1980s Iran sent more students to the United States than any other country in the world.<sup>1</sup>

The United States was able to secure the Gulf region largely from afar. A "twin pillars" strategy of building up Iranian and Saudi Arabian capabilities meant that the United States needed to commit only scant troops to the area, focusing most of its military attention on hot spots such as the Korean peninsula and Western Europe.

When the Islamic Revolution in 1979 overthrew the existing order in Iran, both the U.S. relationship and the Iranian role in global affairs were fundamentally changed. To many, it seemed that anti-Americanism (and its corollary, hostility to Israel) was embedded in the DNA of the revolution. By pivoting hard against the United States, Iran's revolutionary leaders closed the door on old elites, old networks, and old patterns of behavior. The old Iran was Westernizing; the new Iran was a thorn in the side of the West. The old Iran had been a status quo power; the new Iran was a revolutionary power. Sustaining that revolutionary zeal has been a component of Iranian domestic and foreign policy in the three decades since. Ideological and military elites, tied to the activist clerical establishment, continue to enjoy a privileged place in society, with special access to higher education, access to state-owned enterprises, and a range of other incentives and benefits. Ideology continues to drive their actions, and the zeal with which they distrust the United States helps legitimate their power.

The origins of U.S. and Iranian hostility trace to U.S. (and British) support for the 1953 coup that overthrew Iran's populist leader and reinstated the Shah, thereby closely tying the United

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1. Institute of International Education, "Fact Sheets by Country: 2011—Iran," *Open Doors 2011*, <http://www.iie.org/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors/Data/Fact-Sheets-by-Country/2011>.

States to the ancien régime. Yet, the animus is more than simply that. There is raw emotion in U.S.-Iranian relations, and that emotion has persisted for three decades. To some degree, its driver is the wounded ego of a former empire that felt subservient to foreign interests for centuries. By casting Iran as the rival of the United States, Iran's revolutionary leaders have sought to elevate their country to great-power status and to reclaim some of its former glory. Every time Iran is a central factor in global diplomacy, it emphasizes Iran's centrality to the world. Summits with superpowers validate Iran as a peer and not a vassal. In his day, the Shah did much of the same, not least with his extravagant celebration of 2,500 years of the Persian Empire that gathered world leaders in Persepolis in 1971.

For the United States, Iran carries with it emotional baggage as well. The 1979 hostage crisis was a special low point, as the United States proved unable to free 52 diplomats held hostage in the American embassy in Tehran for 444 days. In a country wearied by three decades of the Cold War, and just emerging from the culture wars of the 1960s and 1970s, sustained impotence in the face of scruffy young revolutionaries was especially humiliating. That the revolution had swept aside a long-time secular ally and replaced him with what Americans almost universally saw to be religious zealots made matters even worse.

And so, for both sides, U.S.-Iranian hostilities are about more than merely strategies and interests. In part for that reason, the United States and Iran have been at loggerheads for much of the last three decades, and each has expended extraordinary energy to check the actions of the other. This volume is an effort to help inform a U.S. debate about what the goals of U.S. policy toward Iran should be and how different U.S. strategies toward Iran are likely to play out.

For both the United States and Iran, enduring bilateral tensions are among each country's most serious strategic concerns. Seen from the Iranian side, the United States has been hostile to Iran's national interests for more than a half century, and that hostility increased once Iran ceased to be a reliable instrument of U.S. foreign policy. Surrounded by U.S. allies on its southern edge, lawless Afghanistan to the east, chaotic (and, for many decades, murderously hostile) Iraq to the west, and the often-menacing Russia to the north, Iran has felt deeply vulnerable. Direct and indirect U.S. support for Iran's enemies has fanned Iranian hostility. In the George W. Bush administration, widespread reports of U.S. aid to ethnic separatist groups in Iran<sup>2</sup> confirmed to many in the Iranian leadership that their battle with the United States was an existential one. Some scapegoating is at work as well. As the Iranian economy continues to strain under mismanagement, corruption, and crippling subsidies, Iranian officials point to U.S.-led sanctions and stoking of anti-Iranian sentiment as the proximate cause.

For the United States, Iran's frequent resort to asymmetrical threats is deeply threatening. Support for armed groups around the world—and especially in and around Israel—feeds an impression that Iran undermines the world order that the United States is dedicated to protecting. From the bombing of the Khobar Towers complex in Saudi Arabia in 1996 to the menacing acts of swarming small boats in the Gulf that continue to this day, Iran confronts the United States in a way that makes direct response difficult. The most recent source of tension, the Iranian nuclear weapons program, fits on this spectrum as well. Officially, Iran claims not to have a weapons development program, and yet it continues to play cat-and-mouse games with International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors, who concluded in a recent report that “the Agency has serious con-

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2. “US promises PJAK [Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan] financial, military aid,” PressTV, August 10, 2011. <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/193275.html>.

cerns regarding possible military dimensions to Iran's nuclear programme."<sup>3</sup> The report went on to detail credible accusations that the Iranian government had covertly acquired dual-use materials, developed detonators and created testing facilities, and carried out other activities consistent with an effort to build a nuclear weapons option. Iran has a consistent pattern of pushing boundaries in unexpected ways.

None of this comes as special news to the Obama administration, which took office in 2009 with a focus on Iran.<sup>4</sup> During the campaign, opponents criticized Obama for saying in a debate in 2007 that he would be willing to meet the leaders of Iran and other problematic states without preconditions in his first year in office.<sup>5</sup> His principal political opponent—then senator and now Secretary of State Hillary Clinton—told a newspaper, “I thought that was irresponsible and frankly naïve.”<sup>6</sup> That criticism has dogged the administration since it took office, feeding a fear that the president either is not tough enough to deal with Iran or has let his hopes overtake the facts on Iran's behavior and what might be required to change it.

The Obama administration's official strategy has been to emphasize the possibility of diplomacy while preparing for the possibility diplomacy might fail. Twice in his first six months in office, Obama reportedly wrote personal letters to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Akbar Khamenei, seeking a resolution to tensions.<sup>7</sup> U.S. diplomats have also engaged in multilateral negotiations with Iran over the nuclear file, offering in October 2009 to supply an Iranian research reactor with fuel in exchange for Iran transferring its low-enriched uranium—which could be further enriched into explosive materials—out of the country.

One of the principal avenues of the diplomatic approach has been building an international coalition on the Iranian issue. Notably, the Obama administration has persuaded China and Russia to go along with tightened UN sanctions, while Japan and Korea, Western European states, and the United States have gone far beyond those efforts. Japan and Korea, which consume large amounts of Iranian oil, agreed in late 2011 to reduce purchases from Iran and to “exercise restraint” in supplying oil equipment to Iran. In late 2011, the European Union agreed to stop importing Iranian oil by July 1, 2012. The U.S. Congress has been far out in front of all the global efforts, in some cases spurring them. In 2010 and 2011, Congress passed laws tightening sanctions on Iran, discouraging other countries' energy trade with the Islamic Republic, and making it increasingly difficult for banks with business in the United States to have any dealings with the Cen-

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3. International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), “Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” November 8, 2011, 10, <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2011/gov2011-65.pdf>.

4. Iran also ranked high on the Bush administration's agenda when it came into office in 2001. According to rumors, an agenda item on the first National Security Council meeting was “Iran strategy review,” but the administration was never able to agree on a new policy before the 9/11 attacks gave a new focus to U.S. security thinking and the Iraq war became the principal Middle Eastern foreign policy priority of the government.

5. Patrick Healy and Jeff Zeleny, “Novel Debate Format, but Same Old Candidates,” *New York Times*, July 24, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/24/us/politics/24debate.html?pagewanted=print>. Obama added, “The notion that somehow not talking to countries is punishment to them—which has been the guiding diplomatic principle of this [George W. Bush] administration—is ridiculous.”

6. Katharine Seelye, “Clinton-Obama Commander Duel,” *New York Times*, July 24, 2007, <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/07/24/clinton-obama-commander-duel/>.

7. “Obama sent second letter to Khamenei,” *Washington Times*, September 3, 2009, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/sep/03/obama-sent-second-letter-to-irans-khamenei/?page=all>.

tral Bank of Iran. The administration has followed up with executive orders extending the reach of sanctions and with diplomacy that has kept friendly states from seeking to undermine them. In practice, a combination of that diplomacy, a fear of secondary U.S. sanctions, and a deep sense of alarm at Iranian behavior have all contributed to an unprecedented degree of global support. The impact on the Iranian economy has been particularly profound, as the Iranian rial plummeted in value in late 2011 and the government of Iran has struggled to find other markets for its oil and other financial modes to support its global trade.

Yet, so far, not only has the Obama administration's diplomacy failed to halt Iranian enrichment efforts, but it has proceeded in the face of Iranian efforts to accelerate those efforts. Further, the discovery of increasingly hardened sites for enriching uranium and better understandings of the dispersion of Iranian nuclear sites around the country cause many outside observers to fear that Iran is purposefully constructing a program that could not be halted even by a sustained military campaign.

While this does not yet represent the failure of the diplomatic approach, it is increasingly difficult to argue that failure is not drawing closer. The U.S. government has repeatedly said that the option of a military strike against Iran remains "on the table," and it maintains sufficient forces to do so. When a senior Iranian official in January 2012 warned a U.S. aircraft carrier not to return to the Gulf, the carrier did so undeterred, and another one took its place when the time came to rotate out. The United States has placed Patriot missiles in every Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) state but Oman, providing cover against Iranian missiles; the sale of a theater missile defense system to the United Arab Emirates, the sale of more than \$60 billion of military equipment to Saudi Arabia, and military bases in every GCC country except Saudi Arabia are all intended to serve as signs of U.S. resolve, U.S. capabilities, and a U.S. commitment to the security of the region.

These efforts appear to fall short of convincing regional allies. Israeli officials in particular are growing increasingly agitated about the Iranian nuclear program. The head of Israeli military intelligence told a conference in February 2012 that Iran has enough enriched uranium to make four bombs;<sup>8</sup> Israel's vice prime minister told the *New York Times Magazine* in January 2012,

It is a matter of months before the Iranians will be able to attain military nuclear capability. Israel should not have to lead the struggle against Iran. It is up to the international community to confront the regime, but nevertheless Israel has to be ready to defend itself. And we are prepared to defend ourselves in any way and anywhere that we see fit.<sup>9</sup>

Whether Israel has the ability to carry out a successful strike on the Iranian nuclear program remains a matter of some debate.<sup>10</sup> Some argue that, in fact, Israeli saber rattling is part of an effort to ensure that the United States remains focused on Iran and that Iran remains wary of Israeli capabilities. The leadership of many of the wealthy Gulf Arab states appear to share Israeli sentiments, even if they do not voice them. High-level conversations between senior Gulf royals and U.S. diplomats reveal an impatience among the Arab leadership to deal with Iran swiftly, and a

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8. Neri Brenner, "MI chief: Iran can produce 4 bombs," Ynetnews.com, February 2, 2012, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4184286,00.html>.

9. Ronen Bergman, "Will Israel Attack Iran?," *New York Times*, January 25, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/29/magazine/will-israel-attack-iran.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/29/magazine/will-israel-attack-iran.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all).

10. Anthony Cordesman, "The Iran Attack Plan," *Wall Street Journal*, September 25, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204518504574418813806271306.html>.

skepticism that there is any way to deal with Iranian power and aspirations other than through military might.<sup>11</sup>

One of the deep challenges of U.S. policy toward Iran is defining success. Failure is fairly easy to define and to imagine. A nuclear-armed Iran that sows instability in the Middle East—through its stepped-up support of proxies, through direct and indirect attack on regional states, and through its spurring of a nuclear arms race among regional powers—would count as a failure for U.S. policy. Yet, short of that are a wide number of alternative Iranian behaviors. Among the most desirable are clear and verifiable indications that Iran is not pursuing nuclear weapons and seeks to ease tensions with global powers. Such a move would build stability between Iran's neighbors and the outside world; it would also erase an important question mark hanging over the security of energy supplies for years to come.

Yet, between the most desirable and least desirable outcomes is a wide continuum of possibilities. For example, what if the world could be reassured of some significant delay in any Iranian acquisition of nuclear warheads and delivery systems? With confidence that there was no urgent threat, diplomacy could have time to work, and Iranian politics could have time to work as well. A future Iranian government might be less alarming than the current one, and it could entertain assurances and safeguards that the current government will not consider. A less secret program could lower the temperature as well, and while there would surely be calls for greater transparency, it might alleviate the current crisis atmosphere. Among the other possible middling outcomes is a symbolic outside military effort that serves to put the Iranian government on warning without prompting a large retaliation. While calibrating the effort and predicting the Iranian response is difficult, it could be part of a solution set that exists in between unequivocal success and regional turmoil.

Timelines matter here as well. If a military strike buys two years of time, is it worth the cost, both directly and in terms of its likely impact on Iranian domestic politics and the Iranian leadership's commitment to pursue a deployable weapon? Is there a value in delaying an Iranian program for several years? What outcomes represent success, and which ones represent failure?

Reasonable people can and do differ on all of these issues, and in the case of Iran, they all have a vote. Governments take actions based on their interests and their assessments of the impact of others' actions on those interests. Pleasing the U.S. government is not an independent goal for any foreign government, and the attraction of doing so diminishes sharply when it is seen to carry heavy costs. For its own part, the Iranian government is neither monolithic nor transparent. Predicting its actions—either as a whole or as the actions of component parts—is a perilous business. Different governments that feel themselves to be potential targets of Iran have markedly different assessments and tolerances for risk.

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11. See, for example, "US embassy cables: Saudi king urges US strike on Iran," *Guardian*, November 28, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/150519>: "Al-Jubeir recalled the King's frequent exhortations to the US to attack Iran and so put an end to its nuclear weapons program. 'He told you to cut off the head of the snake,' he recalled to the Chargé." See also, "US embassy cables: Abu Dhabi favours action to prevent a nuclear Iran," *Guardian*, November 28, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/59984>: Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed reportedly said that "action against Iran and President Ahmadinejad should be taken this year or next year" and that he personally "was unwilling to wait much longer."

Central to this mix of motivations and strategies is the dynamism of the situation. That is to say, when the United States and its allies appear to pursue a policy of engagement, that sends a signal of intentions and commitments that the entire world observes—including Iran. All of the different actors respond to that signal, changing the very circumstances in which the policy was constructed. Similarly, when the United States commits extensive military forces in order to contain Iran, that sends a signal, and when the United States relies on credible statements rather than a visible presence, that sends a signal as well.

This volume is an effort to understand those signals and the likely responses of key actors to them. The first three chapters seek to outline what different U.S. diplomatic policies toward Iran might entail. For the sake of analytical clarity, they focus on three alternatives. The first is engagement, that is, seeking to heighten shared interests in order to induce better Iranian behavior. An engagement strategy seeks to build trade ties and to acknowledge Iranian interests. It seeks to provide Iran with better pathways to many of its national goals than through confrontation and defiance.

The second alternative is containment, that is, amassing enough diplomatic and military assets so as to prevent Iran from expanding its political or military reach. A containment strategy necessarily involves the heavy deployment of U.S. and other troops to Iran's neighborhood, and it seeks to stunt the growth of the Iranian economy. Everywhere Iran turns in a containment scenario, it finds the hand of the outside world frustrating its aims and keeping the country isolated until it relents in its policies.

The third is deterrence. Oftentimes, containment and deterrence are folded into one concept. What is intended here is a somewhat less visible and aggressive policy that consists principally of defining clear red lines and credibly threatening consequences for crossing those lines. Deterrence could include giving additional security guarantees to the GCC states and even giving them shelter under the U.S. nuclear umbrella. Short of that, it could include enhancing the GCC states' independent capabilities to inflict heavy damage on Iran should Iran attack, and reducing the time needed for the United States to surge troops and equipment to the Gulf to defend allies under attack. Deterrence has a somewhat lower up-front cost than containment, because it relies more on statements and benchmarks than on the sustained presence of troops and weaponry, but the need to act on consequences after an Iranian violation could provoke an all-out war, raising the long-term costs higher than the cost of containment.

In practice, the United States practices all three of these strategies simultaneously, albeit in constantly varying measure. The United States has not closed the door on nuclear talks with Iran, yet it has led a large global sanctions push and emphasized that closing the Strait of Hormuz would be a red line for the United States. Meanwhile, the world is constantly responding, sometimes applauding U.S. action, sometimes calling it too tepid, sometimes undermining it—and sometimes all three. It is an awkward dance between enemies and allies, between global powers and regional players.

The key actors examined in this volume are Israel, Iran's Gulf Arab neighbors, the emerging powers of Turkey, China, India, and Russia, and the Iranians themselves. As practice has shown, the United States' East Asian allies and the Western Europeans have largely supported U.S. policy. A larger book could have examined their strategies, and perhaps will.

This volume does not explore a range of military scenarios that seek to shape Iranian behavior. A wide range could be contemplated, from an Israeli strike at a select number of nuclear facilities

to an all-out U.S. assault on Iran's conventional capabilities. Many believe that a military confrontation is increasingly likely, although far from certain. The range of military options is large, the range of Iranian responses is large, and the product of both creates a dizzying array of possibilities. We leave the task of military prediction to others.

Instead, the intention of this volume is to focus on the diplomatic route to understand better the opportunities and challenges contained within it. The particular goal here is to highlight the subtle dynamism in any strategy that the United States pursues. Should there be a military confrontation with Iran, there will also be an aftermath, and some new status quo will emerge. Many of the findings of this volume would prove as valuable in that environment as they are in the current one.

Iran has been a central concern of U.S. strategy for more than three decades, and it is hard to foresee a time in the coming decade in which it will cease to be. This collection of essays is intended to help enrich thinking in the years to come.







## APPROACHES



# 1

## ENGAGEMENT

Barbara Slavin

The 2008 election of Barack Obama, who campaigned on a promise to seek dialogue with Iran, raised expectations that a negotiated solution to the long estrangement between the two countries was, if not likely, at least possible. Events since then have largely dashed those expectations even as the gathering crisis over Iran's nuclear program and uncertainties about the outcome of Arab and South Asian political upheavals make engagement more vital.

A paucity of official contacts between the United States and Iran over the past three decades has deepened mutual distrust and enhanced the chances for miscalculations that could have devastating consequences not only for the two countries, but for U.S. allies and the global economy. Blame for this state of affairs lies with both parties, but the United States can try harder to change the dynamic and use the leverage of new sanctions to seek a negotiated settlement.

Avoiding a crisis with Iran is especially crucial at a time when the Arab world is so unsettled and the United States is withdrawing forces from both Iraq and Afghanistan and attempting to maintain a relationship with Pakistan. Iran can be a potent force for stability or instability in the neighborhood and it would be prudent not to burn all bridges with Tehran—particularly if Pakistan becomes even more adversarial toward the United States and U.S. allies.

Likewise, the United States should not blindly embrace the animosity toward Iran of Sunni Arab Gulf powers, in particular Saudi Arabia, whose anti-democratic, anti-Shiite agenda is not fully commensurate with U.S. values and long-term interests. Contrary to some Gulf narratives, Iran did not cause the 2011 uprising in Bahrain although Tehran has benefited from that government's repression of the Bahraini Shiite majority. Iran has taken the opposite side in support of a repressive Alawite minority government in Syria but will adjust if the Assad family dictatorship falls so as not to lose links to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

The United States should recognize that it is penalizing itself more than it is Iran by not having a relationship with Tehran. With the perception growing in much of the world that U.S. power is declining and that Asia is on the ascendancy, current and future Iranian officials may conclude that reconciliation with the United States is not worth the costs. Although the Obama administration is also trying to pivot toward the Pacific, the United States retains important strategic interests in the Middle East, in particular regarding the fate of Israel and the security of oil supplies.

As difficult as it may sometimes seem—a U.S. diplomat in the 1950s, George McGhee, compared negotiating with Iran to eating soup with a fork—the United States must pursue contacts with Iran. U.S. officials might actually learn something of use about their long-time adversary and find nuggets of common ground. Not talking will not improve matters; the Islamic regime has shown time and again that if it is excluded from the regional security order, it will seek to undermine it.

## History of Engagement

The history of U.S. and Iranian attempts to resolve their differences through dialogue is replete with missed opportunities. It has been the pattern, indeed the curse of U.S.-Iran relations, that when one side was ready for progress, the other was not and vice versa. Domestic politics have exercised a malign influence on both sides. Election years have been particularly unpropitious for diplomatic initiatives; given the crowded electoral calendar in both the United States and Iran, it is rare to find an interval when neither country is about to vote.

In the 32 years since the United States broke diplomatic relations with Iran, there have been instances of overt and covert conflict but also of successful negotiations and even tacit collaboration. Giandomenico Picco, a former assistant secretary general of the United Nations for political affairs and veteran negotiator with Iran, has counted at least 11 successful negotiations involved the United States and the Islamic Republic:<sup>1</sup>

1. The Algiers Accords of January 19, 1981, under which Iran freed 52 American hostages in return for assets that had been frozen in the United States and a U.S. pledge of noninterference in Iran's internal affairs.
2. The Iran-Contra affair of 1985–1986. Although it became a political scandal in both the United States and Iran when it was revealed that the United States was trading arms for hostages and using the proceeds to fund anti-Communist guerrillas in Nicaragua, three U.S. citizens were freed in Lebanon as a result of Iranian intercession with their Shiite captors. (Unfortunately, during the same period three more Americans were seized.)
3. The cease-fire in the Iran-Iraq war. The United States, along with Saudi Arabia, negotiated with Iran and Iraq to end the 1980–1988 conflict.
4. Practical understandings that facilitated the 1991 Gulf War, which liberated Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. Iran, among other helpful steps, impounded Iraqi fighter jets flown into Iran to save them from U.S. bombing. (Interestingly, those planes are still in Iran.)
5. An understanding that led to the liberation of the last Western hostages in Lebanon and the return of the remains of two Americans. These developments were prompted in part by comments by President George H. W. Bush in his 1989 inaugural address, promising Iran that “goodwill begets goodwill,” suggesting that a release of remaining U.S. captives in Lebanon would lead to reciprocal gestures. The United States also engineered a United Nations report blaming Iraq for starting the Iran-Iraq war.
6. A 1995 Iranian offer to the U.S. oil company Conoco to develop two major offshore oil fields. (Unfortunately for Iran, the offer only drew attention to the fact that U.S. energy firms were still lifting Iranian oil, albeit selling it in Europe, not the United States. Then-president Bill Clinton responded by barring all trade and investment in the Iranian oil industry and, later, signing into law the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act, which called for U.S. penalties against major foreign investors in Iran's petroleum sector.)
7. Iranian involvement in the return of the bodies of Israelis killed in Lebanon throughout the 1980s.

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1. Giandomenico Picco listed these in an e-mail to the author on December 2, 2011.

8. The release in 2003 of the last of 13 Iranian Jews charged with espionage in 1999 in a case that appears to have been trumped up to discredit then-president Mohammad Khatami. Picco said that he successfully mediated between Khatami, the U.S. Jewish community, the U.S. government, and the government of Israel.
9. A diplomatic gesture orchestrated in 2000 at the UN General Assembly when Khatami was present for Clinton's speech and vice versa.
10. Support for the U.S.-led toppling of the Taliban in the fall of 2001 on both the military and diplomatic fronts. Then-U.S. envoy for Afghanistan James Dobbins has said repeatedly that Iran was the most helpful participant in talks in Bonn that created a new government for Afghanistan led by Hamid Karzai. Iran also extradited several hundred members of al Qaeda who had fled into Iran.
11. Understandings on the military level in preparation for the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq.

One could add to Picco's list talks in 2007 in Baghdad between the U.S. and Iranian ambassadors to Iraq. Although the talks did not lead to any breakthroughs, attacks on U.S. forces by Iran-backed Iraqi militants subsequently decreased.<sup>2</sup>

Since the Obama administration took office, Iran has also participated in multilateral discussions on Afghanistan and agreed to several communiqués pledging to support stability there. Despite growing tensions with the United States, Iran sent its foreign minister, Ali Akbar Salehi, to a U.S.-organized conference in Bonn on the tenth anniversary of the 2001 accords that created the first Karzai government. Salehi sat behind Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton but the two did not interact.<sup>3</sup> Pakistan, a nominal U.S. ally, boycotted the meeting because of anger at the deaths of two dozen Pakistan soldiers inadvertently killed by U.S. fire along the Afghan-Pakistani border.

Over the past three decades, contacts between U.S. and Iranian diplomats have been tactical, not strategic. Often, negotiations involved undoing a wrong for which Iran bore significant responsibility, such as hostage holding. Still, history shows that negotiated agreements between Iran and the United States are possible and that the security interests of the two countries sometimes coincide.

Efforts at broader reconciliation have failed, however, and there have been a number of missed opportunities. The biggest came in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States. The attacks elicited widespread revulsion among Iranians and a groundswell of sympathy for the United States. The two countries also shared the objective of toppling the Taliban government in Afghanistan with which Iran had nearly gone to war in 1998 following the massacre of Afghan Shiites and Iranian diplomats in the Afghan city of Mazar-e Sharif.

Then-president Khatami indicated that he was prepared to offer intelligence cooperation with the United States against al Qaeda and to help train a new army in Afghanistan. Members of the Qods Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards had long assisted the Northern Alliance, an

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2. James Dobbins, Alireza Nader, Dalia Dassa Kaye, and Frederic Wehrey, *Coping with a Nuclearizing Iran* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2011), 76.

3. Steven Lee Myers and Rod Nordland, "At Conference, Afghans Say They'll Need Aid for Years," *New York Times*, December 5, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/06/world/asia/afghans-tell-conference-they-need-aid-for-at-least-another-decade.html?pagewanted=print>.

anti-Taliban Afghan militia, and were present when Kabul fell in 2001.<sup>4</sup> Qods members even reportedly provided targeting information indirectly to U.S. forces, while nominal U.S. ally Pakistan sometimes gave erroneous information so that the United States would bomb the Northern Alliance.<sup>5</sup>

A former high-level Iranian diplomat said his country's motivation for helping the United States after 9/11 went beyond a common interest in replacing the Taliban regime. "There was not another moment in U.S. history when there was more of a psychological need for success on the U.S. part," he said in an interview with the author in 2006. "That is why we consciously decided not to qualify our cooperation on Afghanistan or make it contingent on a change in U.S. policy, believing, erroneously, that the impact would be of such magnitude that it would automatically have altered the nature of Iran-U.S. relations."<sup>6</sup>

History, of course, turned out otherwise. The Bush administration pocketed Iran's help and put it on an "axis of evil" along with North Korea and Saddam's Iraq. Nevertheless, Iran continued near-monthly talks with the United States in Paris and Geneva from the fall of 2001 to May 2003.<sup>7</sup> The talks, at the level of deputy assistant secretary of state–deputy foreign minister, dealt with extraditing al Qaeda members fleeing Afghanistan and broached the looming U.S. invasion of Iraq. Iran offered advice about what the Americans would face in Iraq and won a U.S. pledge to declare members of the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), an anti-regime Iranian group harbored by Saddam in Iraq, enemy combatants—a promise that the Bush administration promptly violated after Saddam was overthrown.<sup>8</sup> Iran offered to swap several senior al Qaeda figures detained in Iran for MEK leaders, a proposal that the Bush administration rejected. One of those al Qaeda members, Saif al-Adel, the organization's nominal number three, was given freedom of movement in 2010 in return for the release of an Iranian diplomat kidnapped in Pakistan.<sup>9</sup>

## No Grand Bargain

As the 2001–2003 talks in Europe were ending, an unusual document arrived at the State Department. Presented by Tim Guldemann, the Swiss ambassador in Tehran (Switzerland represents U.S. interests in Iran), it was the brainchild of the Iranian ambassador to France, Sadegh Kharrazi, the nephew of Iran's foreign minister and a relative by marriage of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Much has been written about the document, a blueprint for a so-called grand bargain between the United States and Iran. The unsigned paper was an agenda for talks including all key areas of dispute between the two countries, from Iran's then fledgling nuclear program and support for anti-Israel Arab militants, to U.S. sanctions against Iran and protection of the MEK. The

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4. Barbara Slavin, "Iran helped overthrow Taliban, candidate says," *USA Today*, June 9, 2005, [http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2005-06-09-iran-taliban\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2005-06-09-iran-taliban_x.htm).

5. Barbara Slavin, *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, the U.S., and the Twisted Path to Confrontation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007), 91.

6. *Ibid.*, 107.

7. Barbara Slavin, "Iran, the U.S. holding talks in Geneva," *USA Today*, May 11, 2003, [http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2003-05-11-iran-usat\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2003-05-11-iran-usat_x.htm).

8. Slavin, *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies*, 202–203, 206. (According to former deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage, then-deputy secretary of defense Paul Wolfowitz and a top aide, Douglas Feith, wanted to preserve the MEK for future use against Iran.)

9. Brian Murphy, "Top Al-Qaida Ranks Keep Footholds in Iran," Associated Press, July 9, 2011, [http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=14035825#.Tt97Mfl\\_18E](http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=14035825#.Tt97Mfl_18E).

document was a trial balloon that was not shot down; rather, it deflated from the complete lack of a U.S. response. Whether it could have been the basis for substantive negotiations will never be known.<sup>10</sup>

The Bush administration, then flush with “victory” in Iraq, was not interested in talking to the Iranians, believing that the Islamic regime would soon follow Saddam’s secular Baathist dictatorship onto the ash heap of history. Instead, U.S. forces became bogged down in Iraq and Iran revealed the extent of its influence over Iraqi Shiite politicians and militant groups.

In 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad succeeded Khatami as Iran’s president and accelerated both Iran’s intervention in Iraq and Iran’s nuclear program, elements of which had been suspended during Iranian talks with Britain, France, and Germany before Ahmadinejad took office. Faced with a deteriorating situation in Iraq, a more aggressive Iranian nuclear posture, and growing anxiety among European allies, the Bush administration finally joined the so-called P5+1—the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany—in presenting a proposal to Iran to curb its nuclear program in return for economic and political concessions.<sup>11</sup> However, the United States insisted that Iran must first suspend uranium enrichment before formal negotiations could commence. Efforts to arrange a face-saving formula for a brief suspension ultimately fell apart.

The Bush administration also considered on at least two occasions requesting that American diplomats be allowed to staff a U.S. interests section in Tehran—analogous to the office in upper Georgetown in Washington that handles visa requests and services for Iranian Americans. However, the idea was scrapped in the fall of 2005 after it leaked to the press and again in August 2008 when the Georgia-Russia war consumed the Bush administration’s waning diplomatic energies.<sup>12</sup> In December 2011, the Obama administration announced a “virtual” U.S. embassy for Iran, a website that Iranians could consult for information about the United States and instructions on how to apply for a visa—less risky than a real embassy but hardly a substitute for on-the-ground diplomacy. Iranian authorities blocked the site within hours of its inauguration.<sup>13</sup>

## Obama and the “Single Throw of the Dice”

President Obama made a concerted initial effort to get talks started with Iran. He began by using respectful language toward Iran in his inaugural address and later directed Persian New Year’s greetings to the Islamic Republic of Iran as well as to the Iranian people—a sharp break with Bush administration practice, which sought to reach out to the people over the head of the regime. Obama also wrote two personal letters to Ayatollah Khamenei.<sup>14</sup> However, Iran’s disputed June 2009 presidential elections and the brutal government crackdown on peaceful protestors that followed soured the atmosphere for negotiations and made compromise trickier for both countries.

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10. Slavin, *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies*, 204–205. See also Appendix to the book.

11. Iran Nuclear: Joint Letter, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, June 14, 2008, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/news/latest-news/?view=News&id=3772654>.

12. Author interview with a senior U.S. official, October 10, 2009.

13. “U.S. ‘virtual embassy’ blocked by Iran net censor,” Reuters, December 7, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/12/07/us-iran-usa-website-idUSTRE7B610E20111207>.

14. Barbara Slavin, “U.S. contacted Iran’s ayatollah before election,” *Washington Times*, June 24, 2010, [http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jun/24/us-contacted-irans-ayatollah-before-election/?feat=home\\_cube\\_position1](http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jun/24/us-contacted-irans-ayatollah-before-election/?feat=home_cube_position1).

Internal Iranian politics and the limited time frame Obama gave for engagement before intensifying sanctions undermined the U.S. approach.

Prior to the elections, Iran's need for more fuel for a research reactor that makes medical isotopes prompted a U.S.-backed idea for Iran to send out most of its stockpile of low-enriched uranium (LEU) to be turned into reactor fuel. Iranian negotiator Saeed Jalili agreed to the deal in principle in talks in Geneva in October 2009 with then-U.S. undersecretary of state for political affairs Bill Burns—the only significant bilateral diplomatic encounter between the United States and Iran since Obama took office. But domestic opposition to Ahmadinejad from both his right and left—former nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani and the leaders of the reformist Green Movement—caused Iran to backtrack and the Supreme Leader to withdraw his support.

Brazil and Turkey stepped in to try to salvage the deal and won Iranian approval in May 2010 for a “Tehran Declaration” that would have sent out 1,200 kilograms of Iranian LEU for safekeeping in Turkey in return for reactor fuel. By then, however, Iran had increased its stockpile and the Obama administration was on the verge of winning approval for a major new sanctions resolution against Iran in the UN Security Council. Despite the fact that the deal satisfied the conditions specified in an April 20, 2010, letter from President Obama to his Brazilian and Turkish counterparts, the United States rejected the Tehran Declaration, infuriating Turkey and Brazil, which voted against the UN sanctions.

The United States took part in two subsequent meetings with Iran of the P5+1, the last in Istanbul in January 2011. At that meeting, the United States and its partners presented a revised version of the uranium swap. According to an Iranian official who spoke on condition of anonymity, Iran was asked to “send out 2.8 tons of LEU—nearly 90 percent of its stockpile—and 40 kilograms of uranium Iran had enriched to 20 percent.”<sup>15</sup> Iran rejected the new offer and demanded that the P5+1 formally recognize Iran's right to enrich uranium and promise to lift all UN sanctions—preconditions that were clearly unacceptable to the international community. As of this writing, there have been no full-scale negotiations since then, although both sides expressed a willingness to meet again in April 2012 after the Iranian New Year. Meanwhile Iran has amassed more than 5,400 kilograms of LEU and more than 100 kilograms of uranium enriched to 20 percent U-235—material sufficient, if further enriched, for several nuclear weapons.<sup>16</sup> The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported in November 2011 that Iran may have resumed research into making a nuclear warhead that could be delivered by a ballistic missile.<sup>17</sup>

One author refers to the president's outreach efforts to Iran as a “single role of the dice.”<sup>18</sup> Once its initial overtures had been rebuffed, the administration pivoted to what is known in Washington as the “pressure track” and focused on sanctioning the Iranian economy and Iranian officials. According to the argument, this was in part due to congressional pressure as well as at the insistence

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15. Barbara Slavin, “Istanbul Talks Prove to be a Non-starter,” Inter Press Service, January 25, 2011, <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=54234>.

16. International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), “Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” February 24, 2012, [http://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/IAEA\\_Iran\\_Report\\_24February2012.pdf](http://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/IAEA_Iran_Report_24February2012.pdf).

17. IAEA, “Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” November 8, 2011, [http://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/IAEA\\_Iran\\_8Nov2011.pdf](http://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/IAEA_Iran_8Nov2011.pdf).

18. Trita Parsi, *A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama's Diplomacy with Iran* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 187.



of Israel, which demanded that Obama set a time limit for Iran to make concessions or face severe consequences, up to and including military force.<sup>19</sup>

While sanctions can provide leverage, they need to be accompanied by a robust diplomatic strategy. Unfortunately, the United States has been far more successful at finding new ways to punish Iran than in convincing Iranian leaders to curb their nuclear program. Obama's early willingness to engage put the onus on Tehran for the lack of progress and helped convince other countries to support more sanctions. The U.S. reset with Russia softened Moscow's opposition to such measures, while Iran's egregious human rights abuses following the 2009 elections overcame European resistance to concerted economic and diplomatic pressure. The brief takeover and trashing of the British embassy in Tehran in December 2011 also contributed to international willingness to sever economic and diplomatic ties with the Islamic Republic.

The United States has enacted comprehensive unilateral sanctions directed toward Iran's energy, petrochemical, and financial sectors that have been magnified as major international companies flee Iran rather than risk losing business in the United States. This sanctions effort is beginning to resemble the blockade on Iraq that followed the 1991 Gulf War and preceded the 2003 U.S. invasion. Mindful of the Iraq debacle, Russia and China indicated in the fall of 2011 that they would not support new sanctions against Iran in the UN Security Council.

However, pressure has continued to escalate. President Obama, his hand forced by the U.S. Congress, on December 31, 2011, signed a law barring foreign banks from the U.S. financial system—and thus the global financial structure—if they continue to do business with Iran's Central Bank. Although the legislation includes waiver authority, it is already having a significant effect on European countries, which are feeling pressured to stop importing Iranian oil and have agreed to cease imports by July 2012. Japan and China are also scaling back their purchases.<sup>20</sup> After years of claiming that Iran is impervious to sanctions, President Ahmadinejad has admitted that they are hurting the Iranian economy.<sup>21</sup> The Central Bank measures and the looming European oil embargo have contributed to a record devaluation of the Iranian currency, the rial. There are no indications, however, that these measures have undermined Iran's resolve to continue its nuclear activities. Iranian officials insist that they will not agree to end uranium enrichment, although they have floated proposals to cap the level of enrichment in return for fuel for the Tehran reactor. The nuclear program has taken on almost totem-like political significance among Iranian politicians, who appear to agree on little else.

While demonstrating creativity in crafting new sanctions, the Obama administration has not shown similar skill in pursuing a diplomatic settlement. Even though administration officials refer constantly to a "two-track" approach, they appear to have relegated diplomacy to a parenthesis. In a speech in December 2011 at the Brookings Institution, White House national security adviser Tom Donilon listed five options for dealing with Iran. Diplomacy was mentioned in between

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19. According to Trita Parsi, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, shortly after taking office, told visiting U.S. lawmakers on April 9, 2009, that engagement with Iran should last a maximum of 12 weeks. See Parsi, *A Single Role of the Dice*, 72.

20. Stanley White and Tetsushi Kajimoto, "Japan vows 'concrete' steps to cut Iran oil reliance," Reuters, January 12, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/01/12/usa-geithner-japan-idUSL3E8CB0J820120112>.

21. Thomas Erdbrink, "Ahmadinejad admits impact of sanctions on Iran," *Washington Post*, November 1, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/ahmadinejad-admits-impact-of-sanctions-on-iran/2011/11/01/gIQAvBlacM\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/ahmadinejad-admits-impact-of-sanctions-on-iran/2011/11/01/gIQAvBlacM_story.html).

hyphens under the fifth option, which was military force. Engagement did not even rate its own bullet point.<sup>22</sup>

In January 2012, the situation deteriorated further as Iran threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz to oil traffic in response to new sanctions. Unidentified assailants assassinated a fourth Iranian nuclear scientist in two years and Iran sentenced an Iranian American and former U.S. Marine to death for espionage.<sup>23</sup>

In March 2012, however, President Obama, after meeting with Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, affirmed his desire for a diplomatic solution to the crisis.<sup>24</sup>

Robert Hunter, a former U.S. ambassador to NATO, says that both the Bush and Obama administrations were disingenuous when they claimed that they had tried to engage Iran and failed. According to Hunter, U.S. offers have been limited to the nuclear file and “call on Iran to provide as a precondition of talks the outcome the U.S. desires.”<sup>25</sup>

## Breaking Free of the P5+1

In devising a new engagement strategy, the Obama administration should seek direct bilateral talks with the Iranian government outside the P5+1. This multilateral framework was devised under the Bush administration in part to blunt domestic criticism of the United States for being seen talking to “evil.” Like the six-party talks involving the United States and North Korea, however, the construct has failed to deal with the root of the problem, namely Iran’s hostile relationship with the United States. Only direct talks can alleviate mutual suspicion and lay the groundwork for a reduction in tensions. Otherwise, the United States will be condemned to “leading from behind” — the unfortunate phrase used by an unnamed administration official to describe U.S. policy toward NATO military intervention in Libya in 2011.<sup>26</sup>

Given the deterioration of relations with Iran in recent years and the apparent resistance of Ayatollah Khamenei to détente with Washington, it may be difficult to arrange full-blown bilateral negotiations. However, the Obama administration can increase the odds for such talks occurring by permitting, indeed encouraging, contacts between U.S. diplomats and Iranians at the United Nations, in other multilateral forums, and in foreign countries. Former envoy Dobbins has repeatedly called for this step, as have other U.S. diplomats who have had productive encounters with Iranian officials in the past.<sup>27</sup> Discreet back-channel envoys could also be dispatched. It may well

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22. Tom Donilon, “Iran and International Pressure: An Assessment of Multilateral Effort to Impede Iran’s Nuclear Program” (lecture, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, November 22, 2011), [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/events/2011/1122\\_iran\\_nuclear\\_program/20111122\\_iran\\_nuclear\\_program\\_keynote.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/events/2011/1122_iran_nuclear_program/20111122_iran_nuclear_program_keynote.pdf).

23. Barbara Slavin, “Obama Administration Edges toward Iran Regime Change,” Inter Press Service, January 11, 2012, <http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=106416>.

24. Barbara Slavin, “Bibi Bows to Reality,” *Al-Monitor*, March 6, 2012, <http://www.al-monitor.com/cms/contents/articles/opinion/2012/barbara-slavin/bibi-bows-to-reality.html>.

25. Posting by Robert Hunter on Gulf 2000, a computer list serve, on December 2, 2011. Quoted with permission of the author.

26. Ryan Lizza, “The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring remade Obama’s foreign policy,” *New Yorker*, May 2, 2011, [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/05/02/110502fa\\_fact\\_lizza](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/05/02/110502fa_fact_lizza).

27. Dobbins et al., *Coping with a Nuclearizing Iran*, 108.

be that, given the current atmosphere in Tehran, the Iranians would shy away from such contacts. But the onus should be on Iran, not the United States.

Topics for negotiations should be broader than the nuclear question. While the atmosphere now is not propitious for a grand bargain, several issues can be addressed sequentially or simultaneously. Among them:

- Military-to-military talks on an “incidents at sea” agreement with Iran to prevent a clash in the crowded waters of the Persian Gulf from escalating into a wider war. The Obama administration should make a formal request to Iran to begin such negotiations in a neutral venue, such as Qatar. Such an agreement would benefit both U.S. forces and the Arab nations across the Persian Gulf from Iran. Included in the agenda would be the establishment of a hotline between U.S. and Iranian officials similar to the lines of communication that existed between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.
- Establishing a new security forum for talks among Gulf states, Iran, and Central and South Asian nations. Once an integral part of U.S.-led military alliances, Iran is no longer a member of any significant defense or security organization. The United States should encourage regular security consultations with Iran through the offices of the Islamic Conference Organization, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (in which Iran has observer status), and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Iran could also be included in an existing international task force against piracy.
- A comprehensive new nuclear proposal acknowledging Iran’s right to enrich uranium to a level of 5 percent U-235, in return for ratification and implementation of the Additional Protocol of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The United States—in line with a “step-by-step” concept advanced by Russia—should also draft a road map for removal of nuclear-related sanctions—both U.S. and UN—tied to positive Iranian actions, including implementation of the Additional Protocol and resolution of all questions about military dimensions of the Iranian nuclear program as enumerated in the November 2011 IAEA report. If Iran agrees to such a road map, the United States and Israel should desist from attacking Iranian facilities and scientists. It would be unreasonable to expect Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, the reputed mastermind of Iran’s weaponization research, to make himself available for questioning when four of his colleagues have been assassinated on the streets of Tehran apparently by foreign intelligence operatives. However, export controls that target Iran’s nuclear and missile programs should remain in place until the IAEA certifies that Iran is in compliance with its NPT obligations.
- Bilateral talks on Afghanistan. In addition to the meetings of Afghanistan’s neighbors and of an international contact group, there could be consultations between the United States and Iran on economic projects in western Afghanistan and efforts to curb narcotics trafficking. While seeking to channel Central Asian trade through Afghanistan to Pakistan, the Obama administration has allowed its opposition to Iran over the nuclear program to interfere with recognition of Iran’s role as the major investor in western Afghanistan and an important conduit for Central Asian and Afghan trade. Iranian officials also believe

that the United States has given insufficient attention to the drug problem emanating from Afghanistan, which has contributed to record addiction levels among Iranians.<sup>28</sup>

- Talks about a nuclear weapons-free Middle East. As long as Israel maintains a large unacknowledged arsenal, it is difficult to convince some nations that Iran has no right to the nuclear fuel cycle. Israel is understandably reluctant to give up its weapons given Iran's hostile rhetoric and Israeli concerns about growing Islamic influence among Arab states. But Israel's policy of nuclear opacity is outdated and it would be better for the country to seek an India-style agreement with the United States and the IAEA that provides transparency about its weapons program and allows it to participate in discussions on eventual disarmament if Iran is prepared to forsake nuclear arms in a verifiable manner.

President Obama should direct his overtures—as he did previously—to the office of Iran's Supreme Leader, who is responsible for decisions on foreign policy and will determine who should represent Iran in negotiations. Obama's support for tough sanctions against Iran should insulate him against charges in this presidential reelection year that he is somehow “soft” on Tehran. Political divisions in both countries need not be an excuse to avoid contact.

The most important goal is to begin negotiations as soon as possible. A report in December 2011 by the RAND Corporation recommends that “the United States move toward a set of graduated objectives, seeking in the short term to dissuade Iran from actually testing and deploying nuclear weapons, while retaining the leverage necessary to eventually secure full Iranian compliance with its NPT obligations.”<sup>29</sup> The report adds that “an all-or-nothing U.S. approach, one that insists on full rollback of enrichment before any easing of sanctions can take place, risks allowing the best to become the enemy of the good because neither the current nor any future regime in Iran is likely to agree to accept restrictions over and above those required by the NPT.”<sup>30</sup>

Some argue that negotiations would be used by Iran as a stalling tactic while it continues a march toward nuclear weapons capability. Not negotiating, however, will not slow that advance. If Iran does succeed in building a nuclear weapon, negotiations will be even more imperative to avoid an accidental war. (The United States negotiated with China, the Soviet Union, and North Korea *after* they became nuclear weapons states, a fact not lost on Iran's leadership.) Should Iran succeed in achieving a nuclear weapons capability, the United States and its allies would be in an extremely strong position to contain Iran because of economic sanctions and robust military relationships with neighboring states. The United States has strengthened military ties with the GCC and is providing multibillion-dollar packages of advanced weaponry to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates as well as retaining substantial forces in the region, including 15,000 troops in Kuwait.<sup>31</sup> Another argument frequently raised by opponents of engagement is that talking with Tehran will bolster a repressive regime. However, history shows that engagement and *détente* undermine such governments more quickly than ostracism and enforcing a pariah status do. Russia is no democratic paradise but the average Russian has more personal freedom than he or she

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28. Barbara Slavin, ‘Strategically Lonely’ Iran Exploits Opportunities for Regional Influence, Iran Task Force, Atlantic Council, March 2011, [http://www.acus.org/files/publication\\_pdfs/403/032511\\_ACUS\\_Slavin\\_LonelyIran.PDF](http://www.acus.org/files/publication_pdfs/403/032511_ACUS_Slavin_LonelyIran.PDF).

29. Dobbins et al., *Coping with a Nuclearizing Iran*, xvii.

30. Ibid.

31. David S. Cloud, “U.S. boosts its military presence in Persian Gulf,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 12, 2012, <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-us-persian-gulf-20120113,0,5991473.story>.

did under the Soviet Union. The same is true in China. From the perspective of advancing human rights, negotiations provide a venue for raising such concerns along with other issues. Without direct talks, all the United States can do is verbally bludgeon Iran from the outside.

American officials would learn a great deal by talking directly with Iranians and no longer having to rely on third parties who may interject their own agendas when passing messages. While the current crop of Iranian officials may be less charming than their predecessors under Khatami, many are experienced professionals. Someday, U.S.-Iran estrangement will end and it would be helpful for Americans to have some personal knowledge of Iranian counterparts so as to represent U.S. interests more effectively.

Richard Armitage, the former deputy secretary of state who argued unsuccessfully for negotiations with Iran under the George W. Bush administration, told the author in 2006: “We should discuss the full range of our relationship with the Iranians and should have enough confidence in our diplomacy to do so. Diplomacy,” he added, “is the art of letting the other guy have our way.”<sup>32</sup>

John Limbert, a former U.S. diplomat—and hostage—in Iran, summed up the reasons for engagement this way:

Talking to Iran, hard and disagreeable as it might be, is likely to be more productive than continuing almost three decades of noisy and sometimes violent confrontation....Iran is not going to change its behavior immediately and stop all of its misdeeds in the areas of terrorism, Middle East peace, human rights, and nuclear development. Yet [with] serious negotiations—even with a regime we dislike and mistrust—we may discover areas of common interest that lurk behind walls of hostility and suspicion.<sup>33</sup>

At a time when tensions between Iran and the United States are rising almost daily, prudent statecraft requires a more concerted effort to engage the Islamic Republic. Iran is facing unprecedented pressure and might respond to a face-saving exit from its nuclear dilemma—if one is offered. Should Iran persist and develop nuclear weapons, it will be even more imperative to engage Iran’s leadership to avoid a disastrous new confrontation in the Middle East.

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32. Slavin, *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies*, 223.

33. John Limbert, *Negotiating with Iran: Wrestling the Ghosts of History* (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2009), 180–181.

# 2

## CONTAINMENT

### Nathan Freier

Containment has been at the core of U.S. strategy toward Iran for more than three decades. Through a comprehensive web of legal prohibitions on trade and investment, diplomatic pressure, and a network of military alliances and deployments in the Middle East, the United States has sought to limit Iran's ability to strike at its neighbors and constrain Iranian activities outside its borders.<sup>1</sup>

Containment's history as a modern theory reaches back almost a century, to when French prime minister George Clemenceau's cordon sanitaire sought to create a string of buffer states to prevent the spread of Communism into eastern Europe after World War I.<sup>2</sup> George Kennan famously elaborated on the idea in his "long telegram" analyzing the sources of Soviet conduct; he elaborated still further in an anonymous *Foreign Affairs* article that developed many of the same themes.<sup>3</sup> Curiously, Kennan's secret telegram was more analytical and less policy-prescriptive than his public article. For example, Kennan's telegram made the analytical observation that Soviet power is "impervious to [the] logic of reason, and...highly sensitive to [the] logic of force."<sup>4</sup> The policy recommendation for the public article was as follows: "It is a sine qua non of successful dealing with Russia that the foreign government in question should remain at all times cool and collected and that its demands on Russian policy should be put forward in such a manner as to leave the way open for a compliance not too detrimental to Russian prestige."<sup>5</sup> Clear in both pieces was a determination to be extremely deliberate and measured in the use of force, and patient in the execution of strategy. Whereas Kennan understood the Soviet belief in the inevitability of Communist victory over the West, he believed that if U.S. policy were able to increase the strains under which the Soviet Union labored, a rising generation would grow impatient and force either moderation on the government or a breakup of the government itself.

Implicit in Kennan's understanding of containment is a presumption that a foe such as the Soviet Union projects both hard and soft power through myriad instruments. Containment seeks

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1. See Kenneth M. Pollack, "Containing Iran," in *The Iran Primer*, ed. Robin Wright (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2010), <http://iranprimer.usip.org/sites/iranprimer.usip.org/files/Containing%20Iran.pdf>.

2. André Fontaine, *Histoire de la guerre froide, tome 1: de la Révolution d'octobre à la Guerre de Corée* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1965).

3. For an explicit linking of Kennan's strategy of containment and an argument for U.S. strategy toward Iran, see Karim Sadjadpour, *The Sources of Soviet Iranian Conduct*, foreignpolicy.com, November 2010, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/10/11/the\\_sources\\_of\\_soviets\\_iranian\\_conduct](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/10/11/the_sources_of_soviets_iranian_conduct).

4. George Kennan, telegram to Secretary of State James F. Byrnes, February 22, 1946, George Washington University, National Security Archive, 861.00/2 - 2246, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm>.

5. "X" [George F. Kennan], "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs* 25, no. 4 (July 1947): 566-583, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/23331/x/the-sources-of-soviet-conduct>.

to mobilize a similar array of forces in order to prevent an enemy from acquiring or projecting additional power and influence. A successful containment strategy should be all-encompassing and utilize a variety of mechanisms that deny the adversary access to resources, markets, strategic alliances and diplomatic contacts, information and technology, and military hardware.

While containment and deterrence are closely related, it is useful to distinguish between the two. Containment mixes positive and negative incentives, whereas deterrence is based on the latter. Containment aims to prevent the acquisition of power, whereas deterrence threatens to punish its use. Implicit in containment is a belief that one's foe will succumb to the contradictions of its own problems, whereas deterrence presumes an enduring hostility.

Even so, deterrence and containment are not mutually exclusive, and military deployments and alliances can serve both strategies. Indeed, sometimes the line between the two is so blurry as seemingly to disappear. For example, the U.S. strategy of containing Iraq before the intervention of 2003 included the use of the threat of force to discourage Saddam Hussein's attempts to acquire more power. The Clinton administration made it clear that "should Saddam try to break his containment through force, he will be punished."<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the greatest difference between the two strategies is judging the success of each. The success of deterrence is easily measured: each day that one's opponent does not engage in a proscribed action is a victory. Because a successful deterrence strategy focuses on a discrete set of red lines, it is easy to see its success. Containment has a more complex and ambitious set of objectives and a more ambiguous set of indicators. Further, because one of the goals of containment is engendering moderation or even systemic collapse in one's opponent over the long term, one is tempted to judge enduring tensions as a sign of failure rather than success.

The United States has pursued a policy against Iran that includes multilateral sanctions, U.S. military deployments, and upgrading the defense capabilities of U.S. allies. That policy has constrained Iranian growth on many levels. Despite possessing massive oil and gas reserves, Iran's economy faces a multitude of structural deficiencies including high inflation, unemployment, and multiple constraints on foreign investment and trade. Its diplomatic missions are limited and under intense scrutiny. Moreover, decades of sanctions have limited Iran's conventional military modernization while its principal foes possess technologically advanced and superior weaponry.

Iran has adapted to U.S. containment efforts by developing a unique set of asymmetric military capabilities and leveraging its vast hydrocarbon resources to maximize its economic and diplomatic interests. More importantly, Iran continues apace with many of the activities the United States and its partners find objectionable. For example, Iran has expanded its uranium enrichment program, and according to a November 2011 International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report is strongly suspected to be building nuclear weapons capability.<sup>7</sup> It is importing and actively producing solid fuel long-range ballistic missiles that might be ultimately capable of delivering nuclear and nonconventional payloads.<sup>8</sup> Iran also continues to provide lethal support to terrorist

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6. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Brent Scowcroft, and Richard Murphy (1997), "Differentiated Containment," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 3 (1997): 26.

7. International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), "Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran," Report by the Director General, GOV/2011/65, November 8, 2011, 7–8, Annex 1–12, [http://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/IAEA\\_Iran\\_8Nov2011.pdf](http://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/IAEA_Iran_8Nov2011.pdf).

8. *Ibid.*, Annex 12.

organizations and paramilitary proxies, threatening the internal stability of critical states in the region. It is also believed to be actively undermining the authority of U.S. regional partners through subtle political interference and pressure.<sup>9</sup>

Iran's responses to U.S.-led containment efforts pose significant challenges for U.S. policy-makers and military planners. For example, Iran cannot win a war against the United States or its regional partners, given current U.S. military deployments. At the same time, it has ensured that the human, matériel, and financial costs of any conflict with Iran remain high. Iran's political, economic, military, and paramilitary tactics attempt to leverage the country's key strengths, circumventing overwhelming U.S. and allied hard power advantages.

While many essays in this volume focus on the merits or utility of comprehensive containment policies, this chapter will set the strategic context for the military component of a U.S. containment policy toward Iran, analyze Iran's unique "hybrid" threat, and outline the military actions necessary for a successful containment policy.

## Current U.S. Containment Policy

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the United States has worked to contain Iranian power and influence. The effort has largely rested on three primary efforts: military alliances, multilateral sanctions, and military deployments. Given overlapping interests with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and shared skepticism toward Iranian intentions, the United States has built a robust Gulf security architecture, anchored in large measure around close bilateral security relationships with the GCC states. Though not a collective security arrangement, sophisticated Western military capabilities in the hands of the GCC militaries allow these countries to act as a bulwark against Iranian expansion. Between 2000 and 2009, GCC states spent more than \$500 billion in sophisticated arms purchases to bolster their military capabilities.<sup>10</sup> These systems include F-16s, advanced munitions, and antiballistic missile systems including the PAC-3 and THAAD.<sup>11</sup> Still, some military analysts caution that "[t]he practical problem for the [GCC] states is that they have not transformed either their spending or their arms imports into forces whose effectiveness is proportionate to their cost."<sup>12</sup>

It took some years for the current conflict to take shape, however. In the late 1980s, Iranian harassment of ships at the height of the Iran-Iraq war led the United States to set up Operation Earnest Will to reflag Kuwaiti tankers and assume principal responsibility for the security of shipping in the Persian Gulf. Through a sustained period of direct military interactions between U.S. and Iranian forces, Iran learned many lessons. According to a leading U.S. naval historian of the conflict, chief among them was the idea that operating in the narrow confines of the Gulf provided

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9. White House, *National Security Strategy*, May 2010, 26, [http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss\\_viewer/national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf).

10. Carina Solmirano and Peter D. Wezeman, "Military Spending and Arms Procurement in the Gulf States," SIPRI Fact Sheet, October 2010, <http://books.sipri.org/files/FS/SIPRIFS1010.pdf>.

11. "UAE first Mideast buyer of PAC-3 missile—Lockheed," Reuters, December 3, 2008, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/12/23/lockheed-uae-idUSN23121020081223>; Jim Wolf, "U.S. in \$3.5 billion arms sale to UAE amid Iran tensions," Reuters, December 31, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/12/31/us-usa-uae-iran-idUSTRE7BU0BF20111231>.

12. Anthony H. Cordesman and Aram Nerguizian, "The Gulf Military Balance in 2010: An Overview," working draft, CSIS, April 22, 2010, 9, <http://csis.org/publication/gulf-military-balance-2010-overview>.



Iran with some advantages. While Iran “could not contend with the Americans in a conventional engagement...their asymmetrical operations proved successful.”<sup>13</sup> Years of trial and error pushed the Iranians toward employing agility and speed, because their ships were no match for U.S. fire-power.

Direct military engagements have, for the most part, been the exception since, and a kind of cold war settled in over the next 20 years.<sup>14</sup> In the 1990s, Iran became more subtle, nuanced, and surreptitious in its regional conduct. Still, it continued sponsoring successive acts of violence across the Middle East during this period.<sup>15</sup> The most bellicose activity vis-à-vis the United States included Iranian-sponsored terrorism and proxy wars, leaving the United States without a clear *casus belli*.<sup>16</sup> Yet throughout this period, Iran skillfully avoided U.S. retaliation. According to Ted Bromund and James Phillips, “Ambiguity would shroud every political and military event...Iranian involvement would often become clear only after many years...In the interim, there would be legitimate disagreement about the extent of Iranian involvement.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, in the end, according to one analyst: “Terrorism...offered Iran some degree of deniability...By working through proxies, Iran was able to achieve its own interests against the United States, Israel, or states supporting Iraq without paying the consequences that more direct involvement might entail.”<sup>18</sup>

This pattern of proxy resistance has continued over the past decade as well. Because of Iranian meddling in the Iraq and Afghan wars, Iran’s support for foreign extremist groups, and its pursuit of nuclear weapons, the United States and Iran are closer to armed confrontation than at any other time since Operation Earnest Will. Iran, after all, became (and remains) a party to the Iraq and Afghan wars, inserting itself into both countries’ turbulent politics and lethal resistance. According to the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), Iran has provided or is providing lethal aid—including weapons, training, and matériel support—to Iraqi Shia and Afghan insurgent groups.<sup>19</sup> The large-scale U.S. presence in Afghanistan and the apparent permanence of a U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf region, even after the U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq, have only hardened Iranian

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13. *Ibid.*, 21. Crist observes that mining, for example, had a one in ten (mines to hits) success rate.

14. For a poignant description of the U.S.-Iranian relationship as a cold war, see Robin Wright, “U.S. vs. Iran: Cold War, Too,” *Washington Post*, July 27, 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/27/AR2007072701694.html>; and Thomas L. Friedman, “The New Cold War,” *New York Times*, May 14, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/14/opinion/14friedman.html?pagewanted=print>.

15. See Kenneth Katzman, *Beyond Dual Containment*, The Emirates Occasional Papers, No. 6 (Abu Dhabi: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 1996), 8; and Daniel Byman, “Iran, Terrorism, and Weapons of Mass Destruction,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31 (2008): 171–172. These included three bombings in Beirut—the U.S. embassy, the embassy annex, and the U.S. Marine barracks; a bombing of the U.S. embassy in Kuwait; a series of kidnappings; and the aforementioned attack on the U.S. barracks in Saudi Arabia.

16. See Byman, “Iran, Terrorism, and Weapons of Mass Destruction,” 178. Byman recounts how, in the wake of the bombing of the U.S. military barracks in Saudi Arabia, “the passage of time since the 1996 attacks and the eventual determination of Iranian culpability made it harder to generate international support for any retaliation.”

17. Ted R. Bromund and James Phillips, *Containing a Nuclear Iran: Difficult, Costly, and Dangerous* (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, February 4, 2011), 7, [http://thf\\_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2011/pdf/bg2517.pdf](http://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2011/pdf/bg2517.pdf).

18. Byman, “Iran, Terrorism, and Weapons of Mass Destruction,” 172.

19. See U.S. Secretary of Defense, *Unclassified Report on Military Power of Iran* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, April 2010), 2–3, <http://www.iranwatch.org/government/us-dod-reportmilitarypow-eriran-0410.pdf>. On Iraq specifically, see the summary in Byman, “Iran, Terrorism, and Weapons of Mass Destruction,” 174–175.

perceptions that the United States is a fundamental threat to Iranian core interests: securing the regime against internal and external threats and exercising regional hegemony. These two core interests are interdependent, just as the third core interest—playing a greater role in international affairs—is interdependent with the Islamic Republic’s hegemonic ambitions.<sup>20</sup> According to Vali Nasr and Ray Takeyh, Iran’s hegemonic and international roles are facilitated by being “an unexceptionally opportunistic state.”<sup>21</sup>

In the U.S. view, Iranian conduct is threatening in several ways. First, Iran’s nuclear program at best flouts the country’s international obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and at worst threatens to spur conflict and nuclear proliferation throughout the Middle East. Iran’s persistent efforts to avoid transparency, combined with the threatening language of its leadership toward Iran’s neighbors, significantly raises tensions throughout the region.

Second, and following from the first, Iran threatens the global commons in which the United States has invested vast resources. By threatening to close the Strait of Hormuz, and by taking increasingly aggressive steps with its advanced asymmetric military and paramilitary capabilities, Iran threatens access to the Gulf and its energy resources, on which the world relies.

Finally, the United States sees Iran’s regional meddling and overt bellicosity—toward it, Israel, Europe, and a number of Gulf Arab partners—as directly undermining regional stability and potentially limiting U.S. access and freedom of action. In the end, while each player assesses the Iranian threat in different ways, the common threads among all are an enduring sense of hostility and a persistent sense of threat. Combined, Iran’s pursuit of regional hegemony through proxy violence, political subterfuge, buildup of asymmetric military capabilities, and pursuit of a “warm” nuclear weapons production capacity mark Iran as a wider threat to global stability and make U.S. and Iranian policy irreconcilable.

## Elements of a Military Containment Policy

Since at least 1993, the United States has pursued a containment policy—officially and unofficially—toward Iran.<sup>22</sup> During the Clinton years, the United States sought to contain both Iran and Iraq simultaneously through a policy known as “dual containment.” Today, although the source and character of tension between the two countries have shifted over time, U.S. containment policy remains virtually unchanged from Daniel Pipes’s 1995 description of U.S. containment policy toward Iraq and Iran: “[l]aying down clear markers, standing vigilant while avoiding military confrontation, and hoping that internal problems will eventually cause the [Iranian regime] to fall.”<sup>23</sup>

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20. See, for example, Jordan D’Amato, “US Strategic Competition with Iran: Energy, Economics, Sanctions, and the Nuclear Issue,” CSIS, March 11, 2011, 4, [http://csis.org/files/publication/110311\\_IranComp\\_Jord.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/110311_IranComp_Jord.pdf); U.S. Secretary of Defense, *Unclassified Report on Military Power of Iran*, 1; and Vali Nasr and Ray Takeyh, “The Costs of Containing Iran: Washington’s New Misguided Middle East Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 1 (January/February 2008): 85–95, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/63048/vali-nasr-and-ray-takeyh/the-costs-of-containing-iran>.

21. Nasr and Takeyh, “The Costs of Containing Iran,” 92.

22. David H. Saltiel and Jason S. Purcell, *Moving Past Dual Containment: Iran, Iraq, and the Future of U.S. Policy in the Gulf* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council of the United States and the Stanley Foundation, January 2002), 1, <http://www.stanleyfoundation.org/publications/archive/EFCiran01.pdf>.

23. Daniel Pipes, “Two Cheers for Dual Containment,” testimony prepared for the Sub-Committee on the Near East and South Asia, Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, March 2, 1995, <http://www.danielpipes.org/265/two-cheers-for-dual-containment>.

Initially, the Obama administration chose a less threatening path. It attempted to engage Iran in a more constructive dialogue, while laying down both positive and negative “markers.” That changed in the wake of Iran’s crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators during the failed 2009 “Green Revolution.” As a result, containment in its truest form returned and endures today. According to then–undersecretary of state William J. Burns, the “markers” of current containment policy remain clear: “We must prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. We must counter its destabilizing actions in the region and beyond. And we must continue to do all we can to advance our broader interests in democracy, human rights, peace, and economic development across the Middle East.”<sup>24</sup>

Although, as Daniel Pipes suggested, avoiding direct military confrontation is a pillar of any containment strategy, success ultimately relies on maintenance of appropriate military pressure. In the case of Iran, that pressure is intended to nullify any of its perceived military or paramilitary advantages. Iran has chosen to pursue containment of sorts against the United States, as well. Reflecting a distinction that the historian John Lewis Gaddis made, Iran has pursued an asymmetrical strategy, recognizing its limited resources and consequently stressing “the need to pick and choose the manner of one’s response.”<sup>25</sup> That is to say, the Iranians seek to deny the United States and its partners the ability to “select the nature and location of competition” by changing the dimensions of the playing field and the nature of the game.<sup>26</sup> In many important respects, Iran’s commitment to asymmetry mirrors Frank Hoffman’s “hybrid warfare” concept. Hoffman identifies “hybrid war” as “simultaneously and adaptively [employing] a fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism and criminal behavior...to obtain...political objectives.”<sup>27</sup> In the military and paramilitary domains, Iran pursues its cost-imposing, hybrid strategy through myriad, mutually supportive lines of operation.

The most important and dangerous among these are its nuclear program, its ballistic missiles, its unconventional naval/maritime capabilities, and, finally, its paramilitaries and foreign proxies. These four collectively are the pillars of Iran’s hybrid strategy and pose real risks to the core U.S. security objectives in the region. Iran intends to employ these lines of effort in the Persian Gulf region and throughout Iran’s near abroad to complicate U.S./partner risk calculations and exact extremely high tactical, operational, and strategic costs in the event of conflict.<sup>28</sup> For example, in the event of open conflict, the United States has key operational vulnerabilities that are made more acute by the unique geography of the Gulf and the potential vulnerability of the U.S. naval assets operating in it. According to Frank Hoffman again: “U.S. planners must be prepared to deal with both the formal Iranian navy and [Iran’s] Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy in these tight waters.

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24. William J. Burns, “Implementing Tougher Sanctions on Iran: A Progress Report,” testimony before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, December 1, 2010, <http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/111/62665.pdf>.

25. John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 353.

26. *Ibid.*, 353.

27. Frank G. Hoffman, “Hybrid vs. Compound War—The Janus Choice: Defining Today’s Multifaceted Conflict,” *Armed Forces Journal* (October 2009), <http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2009/10/4198658/>.

28. Friedman, “The New Cold War.” Drawing heavily on analysis from Israeli security affairs specialist Ehud Yaari, Friedman describes a “sophisticated strategy of deterrence” where open confrontation with Iran promises open warfare on the “Lebanese, Palestinian, Iraqi and Persian Gulf fronts.”

The Iranian ability to constrict, if not deny access is palpable given the geography of the Gulf and Iran's multiple means for producing maritime mayhem."<sup>29</sup>

While Iran has opted to apply its limited resources against the United States in ways that challenge conventional war-fighting strategies, the United States has clear asymmetric advantages of its own. These include, but are not limited to, its ability to project power into the Persian Gulf, its precision strike capabilities and potential for air and sea dominance, ballistic missile defenses, forcible entry capabilities, and unique special operation force. For the time being, the United States must find ways to combine these real asymmetric advantages into an innovative and coherent approach to Iranian containment that has a high probability of success at the lowest or most manageable levels of operational and strategic risk. Ultimately, both symmetrical and asymmetrical military (and paramilitary) methods and capabilities will need to combine in a comprehensive approach. For optimal containment, as Gaddis suggests, "[t]he obvious solution would be to devise some new strategy of containment" that draws on the strengths of symmetric and asymmetric approaches but also rejects their weaknesses.<sup>30</sup>

If the ultimate goal of U.S. containment policy is, as Gaddis argues, "[t]o create situations which will compel [in this case, Iran] to recognize the practical undesirability of acting on the basis of its present concepts," then the United States military has three broad modalities available for doing so—*dissuasion*, *deterrence*, and, when necessary, *defeat*.<sup>31</sup> These three lines of effort provide the United States with "an active and layered" counter to Iran's key military and paramilitary methods.<sup>32</sup> Attacking Iran's hybrid military/paramilitary strategy and containing Iran's hostile designs with its own asymmetric advantages allows the United States to assume some operational risk with respect to Iran's decaying conventional forces while applying the dissuade, deter, defeat construct against the four key lines of effort outlined above.

*Dissuasion* proceeds from the premise that it is far better to prevent Iran from acquiring provocative or threatening capabilities in the first place. If successful, dissuasion is the ultimate instrument in containment. As Iran appears to be pursuing primacy on the back of destabilizing military capabilities, dissuading it from acquiring those capabilities will substantially constrain its pursuit of increased influence.

In the Iranian case, dissuasion has two focus areas—first, dissuading Iran from developing by itself dangerous capabilities like long-range ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons and, second, preventing it from acquiring the same capabilities off the shelf from abroad. U.S. forces play a central role in the first case. In this regard, dissuasion of Iran's nuclear and missile programs, for example, requires that the United States military (1) maintain, demonstrate, and, if necessary,

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29. F. G. Hoffman, "'Hybrid Threats': Neither Omnipotent Nor Unbeatable," *Orbis* (Summer 2010), 452, <http://www.lifelong.ed.ac.uk/OAC2010/archive/Hoffman%202010%20Hybrid%20Threats.pdf>.

30. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 353.

31. *Ibid.*, 71. This description captures one of three stages of George F. Kennan's original containment strategy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Naturally, it has been modified slightly to conform to the Iranian case.

32. U.S. Department of Defense, *The National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, March 2005), 6–7, <http://www.defense.gov/news/mar2005/d20050318nds1.pdf>. The 2005 NDS discussed an "active, layered defense" and largely described it as seizing the initiative forward and contending with challenges prior to their emerging as fully mature threats. Both the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review and the 2005 National Defense Strategy used *dissuade*, *deter*, and *defeat* in their strategic frameworks. The analysis in this chapter does not rely directly on either document. Nonetheless, the basic logic behind dissuading, deterring, and, if necessary, defeating any opponent—including Iran—makes sense as an organizing construct for thinking about containment.

employ capabilities against Iran that can—with a high degree of certainty—neutralize or set back Iranian progress before dangerous weapons enter mass production or become operational; and (2) aggressively develop and demonstrate advanced systems and methods aimed specifically at nullifying emerging Iranian capabilities when and if they are fielded.

The first action convinces Iran that the process for acquiring a future capability (e.g., nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles [ICBMs]) is too costly. The second makes development of the destabilizing capability irrelevant. Obvious examples of the first approach include preemptive military strikes, selective quarantine, and sabotage including cyber attack.<sup>33</sup> A clear example of the second is ballistic missile defense.

*Deterrence* is most relevant now if focused on irresponsible employment of Iran's current cruise and ballistic missile capabilities, its unconventional naval/maritime assets, and its paramilitary and proxy forces. These are forces available now for immediate escalation of Iran's cost-imposing approach. In the future, if U.S. dissuasion focused on Iranian nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities fails, deterrence will need to be extended to nuclear threats emanating from Iran as well. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said as much in July of 2009 when she observed: "We want Iran to calculate what I think is a fair assessment that if the United States extends a defense umbrella over the region, if we do even more to support the military capacity of those in the Gulf, it's unlikely that Iran will be any stronger or safer because they won't be able to intimidate and dominate as they apparently believe they can once they have a nuclear weapon."<sup>34</sup>

The "active, layered" nature of the U.S. military approach to Iran should be most evident in deterrence. Deterring Iran will require that the United States maintain an active, overlapping, and highly responsive reconnaissance-strike complex both resident in the Gulf and over the horizon. This standing capability will need the capacity to meet an Iranian provocation with a swift, effective, and dislocating U.S.-led response. The nature and scope of planned responses should be "public enough" that Iran perceives that unacceptable harm would result from excessive provocation. According to the most recent defense strategy, deterrence "requires influencing the political and military choices of an adversary, dissuading it from taking an action by making its leaders understand that either the cost of the action is too great, is of no use, or unnecessary."<sup>35</sup>

The most nettlesome Iranian challenge—paramilitaries and proxies employed against third parties—requires a more creative approach to deterrence. Deterring use of covert paramilitaries or proxy forces like the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps's Qods Force, Hezbollah, or Hamas still relies on the credible threat of force. But, use of force in response to this type of challenge will need to be discriminating. The United States military does have reasonable deterrent options for paramilitaries and proxies. These range from the demonstrated capacity for persistent surveillance, precision strike, and special operations strike to a restored capacity for large-scale forcible intervention.

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33. On the latter example, see "U.S. and Israel Were behind Stuxnet Claims Researcher," BBC News, March 4, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-12633240>.

34. James Rosen, "Clinton: U.S. Will Extend 'Defense Umbrella' Over Gulf if Iran Obtains Nuclear Weapons," Fox News Online, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2009/07/22/clinton-extend-defense-umbrella-gulf-iran-obtains-nuclear-weapons/>.

35. U.S. Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, June 2008), 11, <http://www.defense.gov/news/2008%20national%20defense%20strategy.pdf>.

As was argued earlier, central to any containment strategy is nimble avoidance of direct military confrontation. However, the surest route to underwriting containment is maintaining key U.S. and partner military capabilities essential to prevailing against Iran's perceived niche advantages. Achieving this means that U.S. and partner capabilities must be able to dominate every stage of Iranian escalation and, ultimately, *defeat* Iranian military and paramilitary forces in open hostilities. In the end, a demonstrated and unquestioned ability to defeat Iran's most destabilizing capabilities and methods provides the United States and its partners with the best instruments for continued military containment.

In practice, this means denying Iranian unconventional naval and maritime forces the ability to adversely affect either military operations or commerce in the Persian Gulf and along the critical approaches leading in and out of it. Further, it means developing, with regional and extraregional partners, the capacity to nullify the Iranian ballistic missile threat and strike and eliminate with a high degree of confidence facilities that would support development and fielding of nuclear weapons. Finally, defeat today means that the United States must maintain its newfound capability for distributed high-value counterterrorism operations and restore what is likely an atrophied capacity for forcible ground intervention, so as to hold at constant risk capabilities, territory, and infrastructure that Iran values strategically. In the future, should Iran realize a real nuclear capability and field longer-range ICBMs essential to their out-of-area delivery, defeat would require all that is listed above. It would also require the capability to find and disable Iran's nuclear arsenal prior to its employment, a robust and reliable missile defense capacity, and the ability to deliver high-volume precision strikes against hardened targets deep inside Iran that might harbor Iranian nuclear weapons.

## Conclusion: Five Key U.S. Military Capabilities

Fortunately, Iran presents a limited conventional military threat to its neighbors. But, as has been outlined, Iran is not harmless from a military and paramilitary perspective. It has opted for a security strategy predicated on a niche, cost-imposing approach. Countering this, and by implication underwriting a comprehensive containment strategy, requires the United States to dissuade, deter, and, if necessary, defeat Iran's approach employing five key countervailing military capabilities: integrated ballistic missile defense, high-volume precision strike, hybrid air-sea battle, special operations strike, and forcible intervention.

Missile defense and precision strike capability affords the United States and its partners the capacity to dissuade continued Iranian pursuit of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles by driving costs to unacceptably high levels and by nullifying any strategic advantage afforded by their possession and/or use. Should Iran realize capabilities in both areas, this combined sword-and-shield capability enables the United States to deter even threatened use of these capabilities by holding them at persistent risk. Currently, integrated theater-level ballistic missile architecture would be sufficient, but that capacity may need to expand and mature over time should dissuasion fail. Both missile defense and precision strike are essential enablers for effective employment of the other three capabilities.

Frank Hoffman suggests that the United States Navy must be prepared for a complex hybrid war-fight with Iran within the confines of the Persian Gulf.<sup>36</sup> This, he suggests, requires U.S. naval

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36. Hoffman, "Hybrid Threats," 12.

forces in particular to reacquaint themselves with the lessons of the 1980s' naval warfare—this time, however, in a twenty-first century context.<sup>37</sup> As Iran is increasingly classified under the rubric of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) threat and as the A2/AD challenge is the focus of recent joint Navy and Air Force work on an integrated air-sea battle concept, the two services should pay particular attention to solving the unique operational challenge presented by Iran's hybrid naval and maritime threats. An effective reciprocal hybrid air-sea battle construct will underwrite the ability to both deter Iran and defeat it in the event of conflict.

Ten years of near-continuous irregular war fighting leaves American intelligence and special operations forces exceedingly good at identifying malign actors, tracking them, and ultimately, targeting them deep inside unfriendly territory. The recent action against Osama bin Laden is the latest in a string of victories in this regard. Persistent demonstration of the capacity for discriminating special forces strike operations—against Iranian paramilitaries or their proxies—is likely to deter both individual actors as well as the senior Iranian or proxy leaders who employ them. In the event deterrence fails, this capability will be an essential instrument in dismantling Iranian paramilitary and proxy infrastructure and defeating it in detail.

Finally, the United States should not underestimate the value of being able to physically hold some of Iran's most important material resources at risk, deny Iranian paramilitaries and proxies secure bases of operation (in Iran and elsewhere), and deny use by Iran's military and paramilitary forces of key terrain from which they can threaten critical lines of communication. The ability to enter Iranian territory forcibly with considerable numbers of U.S. and partner ground forces, seize and hold key terrain, and destroy adversary ground-based capabilities and infrastructure should remain a critical tool in U.S. containment strategy. This does not suggest regime change. It does suggest the ability to force entry and conduct punitive ground operations against Iranian or proxy forces.

Containment faces two principal challenges as a strategy going forward. The first is that it relies heavily on capabilities and actions and therefore requires a high level of ongoing effort and expenditure. While a desire to contain Iran does not by itself commit the United States to having two carrier battle groups in the Gulf or additional air wings on the ready, it does affect the U.S. global force posture in a measurable way. In a budget environment in which the U.S. government is seeking to trim military expenditures, sustaining a robust military and diplomatic presence over the long term may be problematic.

The second challenge is that until it succeeds, containment appears to be failing. Because the nature of containment is a long-term effort to frustrate an enemy's aims, by most appearances every skirmish or increase in tensions is seen as a sign of failure. Given the threat posed by a potential Iranian nuclear weapons capability, and given growing concern that the government of Iran is nearing such a goal, patience is likely to be in short supply.

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37. *Ibid.*, 15.

# 3

## DETERRENCE

Michael O'Hanlon

The coming years will witness major changes in the U.S. military position in the Persian/Arabian Gulf and broader Middle East region. At a minimum, the major U.S. military presence in Iraq has ended, and the United States position in the Middle East will go from being principally one of war fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan to reassuring allies and unsettling foes. The containment concept of the late twentieth century, focused as it was on deterring Saddam Hussein from further adventures while maintaining vigilance over the UN sanctions on Iraq, will provide no rationale for a sustained U.S. presence in the Gulf. At the same time, the widespread concern with a growing menace from Iran fills much of the gap.

The issue of how the United States should respond to Iran's nuclear ambitions and expansionist posture in the Middle East has become more important than ever as the country winds down its deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan and begins the painful process of focusing on budget retrenchment at home. Deterrence offers one possible answer, as the United States will still be well positioned to implement a robust deterrence regime against Iran. Yet despite the feasibility of deterrence as a policy option, the specific scenarios that such a policy would entail have yet to receive adequate public discussion. This chapter seeks to inform the debate by exploring how the United States can still project commitment and resolve in the Gulf, even as the United States adjusts its regional posture and addresses its problems at home. This requires credible military options that could be invoked in response to egregious Iranian behavior—both on the nuclear issue and otherwise—together with doctrinal and declaratory measures to make those options credible. It also requires enough sustained American military forward presence in the region to give flesh to these policies and signal solidarity with U.S. security partners as well.

### Toward a Comprehensive Deterrence Strategy

Deterrence is a theory and strategic framework that rests primarily on negative incentives. Based on a tangible, credible, and communicated threat, the goal is to persuade a potential aggressor that restraint is preferable to the consequences of alternative behavior. While containment tries to coerce and incentivize using a variety of economic, diplomatic, and military checks and countermeasures, and engagement pursues *détente* through negotiation, deterrence influences through explicit and credible threats to use force. As the government in Tehran appears intent on defying international efforts to contain and engage it, deterrence represents the strategic middle path between outright war and acquiescence to a nuclear Iran.

Although deterrence theory is intimately associated with modern U.S. defense policy and strategic studies, the instinct to deter enemies seems as old as warfare itself. In his *Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides recounts many instances in which one side sought to persuade its opponent that



beginning or expanding a war would not be worth the costs. More than a thousand years later, the “Great Powers” system that dominated Europe from the early modern period up to World War I—in which the threat to inflict high costs played at least as great a role in strategic calculations as actual warfare—included many of the principles inherent in contemporary notions of deterrence.

Nuclear weapons spurred the development of a well-articulated theory of deterrence that contemplated managing an adversary’s behavior over time through the long-term threat of massive destructive force. Theorists such as Alexander George and Kenneth Waltz hypothesized that the lingering threat of destruction could actually be a force for stability in an unstable world, as it would incentivize countries to avoid provocations. Since the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet threat, the challenge of reinterpreting deterrence theory to meet the present strategic environment has been the subject of extensive debate in the defense and strategic community.

In this post–Cold War world order, an Iranian nuclear capability poses a multilayered threat to the United States. Most acute is the threat of a direct nuclear attack on U.S. allies. There is the possibility—albeit slight—that Iran could hand off such weapons to terrorist groups. More likely is the possibility that a nuclear-armed Iran would seek to undermine the prevailing Middle Eastern order with impunity, bullying U.S. allies and supporting an array of violent nongovernmental actors in the Levant and beyond. More broadly, a perceived Iranian nuclear capability could trigger a regional arms race.

Operationally, the first step in implementing deterrence as a national security strategy against Iran would be clear and authoritative U.S. government statements committing the United States to respond harshly to a range of Iranian actions. In their March/April 2010 *Foreign Affairs* piece, James Lindsay and Ray Takeyh suggest three explicit “no’s” President Obama could prescribe to the Iranians: “no initiation of conventional warfare” against another state; “no transfer of nuclear weapons, materials, or technologies”; and no increase in support for terrorists.<sup>1</sup>

Such a threat could principally be a conventional threat, it could be an explicitly nuclear guarantee, or it could leave the nature of the response open. A nuclear option certainly could be sustained, against any possible Iranian use of nuclear weapons specifically, even as the United States remains committed to the goal of a nuclear weapons–free world. The Obama administration’s plans to provide full coverage of Europe with sea- and land-based missile defense systems by 2018<sup>2</sup> could form part of this “nuclear umbrella” in defensive terms. In retaliatory terms, the U.S.-based deterrent remains extremely capable and is adequate. This overall concept would be the basic formula for a nuclear deterrent against Iran.

While a nuclear umbrella would constitute the ultimate recourse for deterring Iran, a comprehensive deterrence framework would also need to include a military architecture supporting a range of conventional deterrent options, including gradual escalation, preemptive attacks, and offensive retaliation against a range of targets (military, industrial, command and control, infrastructure). Based on Richard Kugler’s assessments, to take one approach, a possible posture for provid-

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1. James Lindsay and Ray Takeyh, “After Iran Gets the Bomb,” *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2010): 43, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/66032/james-m-lindsay-and-ray-takeyh/after-iran-gets-the-bomb>.

2. Steve Holland and Gabriela Baczynska, “Obama reaffirms U.S. security pledge to ally Poland,” Reuters, May 28, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/05/28/us-poland-obama-idUSTRE74Q5FW20110528>.

ing this range of operational capability in the Persian Gulf might include around 25,000 ground forces, an air defense unit, up to three U.S. Air Force fighter squadrons, a marine battalion aboard amphibious ships, a navy carrier strike group, headquarters units, and pre-positioned equipment.<sup>3</sup> Other troops would also have to be ready for deployment in a crisis (as during the 1990s, when the Defense Department planned for roughly half its active-duty combat forces to be available for wartime Persian Gulf missions).

Although a policy of deterrence need not necessarily require formal alliances and partnerships, establishing a shared strategic mindset between the United States and its allies and friends would be essential for creating an effective deterrence regime. The NATO model of collective defense and integrated multilateral planning would be the optimal formula, but it is unrealistic for a variety of political and military reasons. An arrangement based on the Bush-era's "coalition of the willing" or an array of bilateral partnerships with key stakeholders are both also possibilities, particularly if they were to focus on bolstering the military capabilities of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. But strategic planners should also not rule out the prospect that the United States would have to act unilaterally in a Middle East deterrence scenario.

The financial costs of a fully capable deterrence regime would be substantial, but the necessary force structure is already "bought and paid for" within the broader U.S. defense budget<sup>4</sup> and that can and should remain true even as the force structure is downsized as part of deficit reduction efforts in coming years. Effective collaboration with partners and allies could further lighten the load. Meanwhile, elements of containment and engagement should not be abandoned. There is no reason why the assets of key firms and elites linked to the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) should not continue to be frozen, nor why the United States should not continue to attempt to talk to Iran: Aside from contingency planning, it will be useful to have a blueprint for the eventual normalization of relations.

To be sure, there is already ample public discussion of how the United States might respond to various Iranian acts of aggression. But most of it centers on the nuclear issue and the possibility of U.S. (or Israeli) air strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities. There is little attention to and discussion of other possible scenarios. Nor are there adequate signals to the region's security officials, including those in Teheran, of the range of options the United States does have and will have *even if* defense budgets decline in coming years. Arguably, U.S. defense planning documents should be more explicit about U.S. options; any strategy emphasizing deterrence more clearly might wish to consider doing so.

Nothing in the pages that follow is meant to endorse military response in a given situation necessarily.<sup>5</sup> Yet this chapter proceeds from the premise that having credible options is in fact important for deterrence.

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3. See Richard L. Kugler, *An Extended Deterrence Regime to Counter Iranian Nuclear Weapons: Issues and Options* (Washington, DC: National Defense University/Center for Technology and National Security Policy, September 2009), 36, <http://www.ndu.edu/CTNSP/docUploaded/DTP%2067%20Deterring%20Iran.pdf>.

4. Colin Clark, "Wartime' QDR Modifies Two War Strategy," DoD Buzz, February 1, 2010, <http://www.dodbuzz.com/2010/02/01/wartime-qdr-modifies-two-war-strategy/>.

5. To be clear, the author opposes the air-strike option against nuclear facilities for most plausible circumstances, as he has written elsewhere. See, for example, Michael O'Hanlon and Bruce Riedel, "Do not even think about bombing Iran," *Financial Times*, February 28, 2010, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/7a5af1b8-24a3-11df-8be0-00144feab49a.html#axzz1tqjXvErW>.

The scenarios examined here include the following cases:

- The laying down of specific “red lines” to Iran.
- A credible nuclear umbrella over U.S. allies in the region. That is, a U.S. willingness to reply to an Iranian use of nuclear weapons with a response in kind.
- A possible air campaign against Iranian strategic and key economic assets (modeled in some ways after NATO’s aerial attacks on Serbia in the Kosovo War of 1999).
- A possible blockade of Iran to enforce an oil or gasoline embargo of some sort.
- Active planning for a possible invasion/overthrow of the Iranian regime—though not necessarily one coupled with a subsequent occupation—plus public rhetoric emphasizing the possibility of an invasion and clarifying the Iranian actions that would trigger it.

Each of these scenarios is considered in greater detail below. The calculations presume, for the sake of conservatism, that the United States would have to supply virtually all combat capabilities itself—though it would of course be preferable that regional or extraregional allies contribute forces too. First, however, a survey of existing U.S. military capabilities in the region is provided as a way of understanding the security arrangements and core capabilities that presently exist, with a primary emphasis on assets not directly dependent on or related to the current operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

## Current U.S. Military Capabilities in the Region

Currently, there are about 89,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan<sup>6</sup> and virtually zero in Iraq.<sup>7</sup> About 68,000 American troops are slated to remain in Afghanistan by the end of 2012, with a complete drawdown to occur by the end of 2014.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond Iraq and Afghanistan, Kuwait hosts the second-largest U.S. capability in the region. The size of this deployment is not commonly appreciated, but it has numbered well over 20,000 troops providing rear-area support to those in Iraq. Roughly 16 bases were used to support this presence.<sup>9</sup> Substantial forces remain there today.

Otherwise, American forces in the Middle East are modest in size and generally somewhat discreet in location and visibility, even while being significant in military terms (and thus probably of the right basic character in general). It has taken the United States 30 years—essentially since the fall of the Shah of Iran—to construct this regional force structure, which depends on a

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6. Ian S. Livingston and Michael O’Hanlon, “Afghanistan Index,” Brookings Institution, February 29, 2012, 4, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/Programs/FP/afghanistan%20index/index20120229.pdf>.

7. Michael O’Hanlon and Ian Livingston, “Iraq Index,” Brookings Institution, October 28, 2011, 13, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/Centers/Saban/Iraq%20Index/index20111028.pdf>.

8. “Q&A: Foreign forces in Afghanistan,” BBC News, March 11, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11371138>.

9. Andrew Krepinevich and Robert O. Work, *A New Global Defense Posture for the Second Transoceanic Era* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2007), 150, <http://www.csbaonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/2007.04.20-New-Global-Defense-Posture.pdf>; and “Kuwait Facilities,” GlobalSecurity.org, June 20, 2005, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/kuwait.htm>.

carefully orchestrated meeting of the minds between Washington and regional partners. The latter must strike a balance between minimizing their dependence on outside military help for domestic and political reasons, while providing the basic structure to protect themselves with U.S. help. This delicate balancing act preceded both Iraq wars, as well as Iran's rise, and probably transcends both of them in its basic logic and its staying power. As such, these existing U.S. relationships in the region are generally sound and sensible and should be disrupted or significantly modified only with the greatest of care.

More specifically, there are currently more than 5,000 U.S. uniformed personnel in quasi-permanent positions in the broader Middle East region, beyond those focused on the two current U.S. engagements. About 3,000 troops are land-based and 2,500 are typically deployed on ships in the region's waters.<sup>10</sup> Most countries in the region try to minimize the visible U.S. presence on their territories and keep overall numbers down; yet they must maximize combat and reinforcement capability within these constraints.<sup>11</sup>

Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, and Pakistan have all been designated as "major non-NATO allies" by Washington. All have installations of significance to America's strategic purposes and activities in the region. Bahrain is notable for providing a home to the U.S. Fifth Fleet, with more than 20 ships and 1,000 U.S. sailors located ashore (and 15,000 afloat).<sup>12</sup> Before 9/11, the "normal" extent of a U.S. naval presence was roughly one carrier battle group, one underway replenishment (supply) group of ships, and two minesweepers, for a total of 10 to 15 vessels.<sup>13</sup> Qatar is a major logistical hub as well as the regional headquarters for U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM, the main headquarters for which are in Tampa, Florida) and hosts the main U.S. regional airbase (Al Udeid); several hundred Americans are stationed in that country.<sup>14</sup> Some 400 U.S. personnel are in Egypt, mostly airmen and airwomen.<sup>15</sup> Limited forces focused largely on training are in Oman, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. About 1,000 U.S. personnel are also stationed on Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean.<sup>16</sup>

Normally the U.S. Army has two brigades' worth of pre-stationed or pre-positioned combat equipment in Kuwait as well. However, ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have largely made use of these stocks, in addition to two brigade sets typically on ships (one at Guam, the other at Diego Garcia).<sup>17</sup> Of the army's normal allotment of five pre-positioned brigade sets of equipment, only the set in South Korea has remained roughly complete over the last decade.<sup>18</sup> In terms

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10. Michael O'Hanlon, *Unfinished Business: U.S. Overseas Military Presence in the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, June 2008), 28, <http://www.cnas.org/node/124>.

11. See Douglas J. Feith, *Strengthening U.S. Global Defense Posture: Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, September 2004), 13.

12. "U.S. Fifth Fleet says won't allow Hormuz disruption," Reuters, December 28, 2011, <http://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFTRE7BR0K220111228>.

13. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2000–2001* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 33.

14. Michael E. O'Hanlon, *The Science of War: Defense Budgeting, Military Technology, Logistics, and Combat Outcomes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 156.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. Ann Scott Tyson, "Military Is Ill-Prepared for Other Conflicts," *Washington Post*, March 19, 2007, A1; Government Accountability Office, *Defense Logistics: Improved Oversight and Increased Coordination*

of other pre-positioning, the U.S. Marine Corps has a policy of keeping a brigade's worth of pre-positioned equipment afloat at Diego Garcia, a second in the Mediterranean, and a third at Guam. The air force keeps ammunition ready to move quickly on ships at Diego Garcia; the army also keeps support equipment quickly deployable on Guam.<sup>19</sup>

## Scenarios and Requirements

In determining what types of forces may be needed in the future, the United States and its allies/partners need to do some scenario planning. This is the most practical way to ensure that available forces will be adequate for deterrence. They need not tell Iran every detail of their plans, of course, but deterrence is actually strengthened to the extent that the unclassified literature includes the rudiments of how such operations would be conducted.

Whatever forces are needed for these purposes is one thing, but it is an altogether separate matter to determine how many need to be based in the region. Ideally, all potentially necessary forces would be situated in the broader Middle East, as that would ensure the most rapid possible response to a crisis or conflict. However, friends of the United States could suffer domestic and regional political repercussions if a more quantitatively visible force presence is interpreted as being too close to Washington. Moreover, the United States has other purposes for its military forces than Mideast missions, so it may not be able to afford placing all of those needed for plausible scenarios permanently in the region. Strong standing capabilities in the region, not just trip wires, are needed for deterrence. But this permanent U.S. military presence need not comprise the full range of potentially relevant capabilities as long as they are adequate to project resolve and facilitate rapid reinforcement.

## Laying Down “Red Lines”

The purpose of laying down “red lines” is to make clear to Iran what actions on its part would trigger a U.S. military response, whether conventional or nuclear. Clearly articulated red lines are the foundation of nuclear deterrence. Yet, as numerous Cold War case studies remind us, this foundation can be undermined by “faulty implementation, poor communication, misperception, malign intent, and excessive ambiguity or excessive specificity.”<sup>20</sup> It was difficult enough to achieve effective deterrence between the United States and the Soviet Union, two mature, mostly status-quo powers with regular lines of communication to each other. Figuring out deterrence with Iran will be even more challenging, as the United States tries to overcome Iran's opaque political system, a history of mutual misunderstanding, and a relative lack of bilateral communication.<sup>21</sup> As such,

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*Needed to Ensure Viability of the Army's Prepositioning Strategy*, Report to Congressional Committees, GAO -07-144 (Washington, DC: Government Accountability Office, February 2007), 17.

19. Rachel Schmidt, *Moving U.S. Forces: Options for Strategic Mobility* (Washington, DC: Congressional Budget Office, February 1997), 36, 40; Eric Labs, *The Future of the Navy's Amphibious and Maritime Prepositioning Forces* (Washington, DC: Congressional Budget Office, November 2004), 6.

20. Kenneth M. Pollack, “Deterring a Nuclear Iran: The Devil in the Details,” working paper (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, May 2010), 1.

21. *Ibid.*

Washington and Tehran must develop the ability to “read” each other if the United States wants to lay down more effective red lines in the future.

The most obvious red line is that any use of Iranian conventional or nuclear force beyond its borders would be met by whatever means necessary to defeat it—including a nuclear attack should Iran itself use nuclear weapons.<sup>22</sup> A related red line would be Iranian transfer of nuclear expertise, materials, or weapons to a third party. In the strictest application of such a red line, Washington would announce that even credible intelligence about an Iranian transfer of nuclear material or weaponry to another country would trigger a punitive U.S. response.

A further red line might apply to any initiation of unconventional or asymmetric warfare by Iran—or escalation of its support for terrorism—with the promise that the United States would respond firmly. This would be a difficult policy to implement, as it is difficult to measure precisely support for terrorism and thus difficult to determine when an increase in such support has occurred. Blatant escalation, however, can be qualitatively identified and countered.

The United States should also not abandon the imposition of red lines on Iran’s nuclear program specifically—despite the fact that Iran has crossed with relative impunity the red lines that have been drawn to date.<sup>23</sup> To arrest this trend and prevent Iran from going nuclear, the United States should clearly define a set of *nuclear* red lines and set the consequences for crossing them. For example, if Iran were to produce highly enriched uranium (HEU) from its current stock of 20 percent low-enriched uranium (LEU), or to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the United States would embark on a well-defined set of steps. The merit of this approach is that it would hold Iran responsible for the negative consequences of its decisions, knowing in advance that it cannot count on any UN Security Council permanent member’s veto. A distinction might also be made between a “bomb in the basement” program—limited numbers of warheads with diverted HEU—versus industrial-scale production of nuclear bombs using plutonium from large reactors (which can be destroyed by aerial bombardment more easily than underground centrifuge facilities).

The current ambiguity of Iran’s nuclear program may not be enough to fully align countries like Russia and China with U.S. goals, but no country has an interest in Iran actually acquiring nuclear weapons. All might therefore be worth approaching as contributors to a U.S.-led preventive solution that establishes nuclear red lines and thus holds Iran entirely responsible for its actions.

## Extending—and Reinforcing—the Nuclear Umbrella

The natural adjunct to laying down red lines to Iran would be to formalize the United States’ commitment to the defense of its Middle Eastern allies. Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia have already been designated as “major non-NATO allies,” and the Iranians probably believe that the United States would retaliate if it attacked any of those states. To date that commitment has seemed self-

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22. Note that this would be contrary to the April 2010 Nuclear Posture Review, which eschewed a policy of “no first use” of nuclear weapons. U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, April 2010, <http://www.defense.gov/npr/docs/2010%20Nuclear%20Posture%20Review%20Report.pdf>.

23. See, for example, Pierre Goldschmidt, “Nuclear Prevention and Red Lines: The Case of Iran” (paper prepared for the IISS-CFR workshop “The Iranian Nuclear Challenge: Reassessing the Options,” London, March 22–23, 2010), [http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/goldschmidt\\_red\\_lines\\_iran.pdf](http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/goldschmidt_red_lines_iran.pdf).

evident to most in light of the decisive U.S. military actions this decade in Iraq in particular, and even given the growing ambiguity in GCC states' attitudes toward U.S. regional strategy.

Yet with Iran widely believed to be edging closer to the bomb, former U.S. ambassador to Israel Martin Indyk and Tamara Wittes have worried that, even with a continued American role in the region and continued U.S. retention of a large and flexible nuclear force, additional explicit security guarantees might be required for regional security partners should Iran acquire a bomb.<sup>24</sup> Indyk and Wittes have spoken of a more explicit extension of a U.S. nuclear umbrella over the region, rather than leaving vague the circumstances under which the United States would respond in kind to any Iranian nuclear attack against its regional partners. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has voiced a similar idea.<sup>25</sup> Because Saudi Arabia and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council are U.S. security partners but not formal allies, such a measure might be seen as especially significant by some observers. Historical and economic ties between the United States and Saudi Arabia, for example, would seem to suggest a strong security commitment. Even with tensions over the U.S. response to the Arab uprisings, the United States is moving ahead with arms sales to Saudi Arabia and training assistance to a special Saudi security force. However, the potential for these tensions to grow, along with the fact that 15 of the 9/11 hijackers came from Saudi Arabia, suggest that informal commitments may not be enough.<sup>26</sup>

Part of any successful nuclear umbrella would be a more tactical focus on the placement of conventional U.S. forces around the region. Beyond serving as the foundation for a force structure that is capable of invading and toppling the Iranian regime<sup>27</sup> (discussed in greater detail below), conventional forces proximate to Iran would help diversify the potential means of punishing the regime. In a way, this could put more force behind the idea of a U.S. nuclear retaliation as the ultimate punishment, if means of inflicting lower-grade punishments are constantly present on Iran's doorstep.

The lead-up to a region-wide nuclear umbrella need not be particularly blunt or belligerent on the matter. It would suffice for Washington to announce to the region—friend and foe alike—that from this point onward it will view its security obligations toward Middle East partners as it does those within NATO. The full range of U.S. military instruments should be viewed as relevant to the defense of regional partners and regional interests, and Washington should underscore that it considers all of these instruments as fully applicable to the Middle East region (even though no U.S. nuclear weapons are based in or deployed in the Middle East—and in fact, none need be, even under this policy). Since no other U.S. security commitment *requires* Washington to use a nuclear weapon in response to an attack on an ally, this approach would not tie American hands or fly in

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24. Martin S. Indyk and Tamara Cofman Wittes, "Back to Balancing in the Middle East: A New Strategy for Constructive Engagement," in *Opportunity 08: Independent Ideas for America's Next President*, ed. Michael E. O'Hanlon (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2007), 123.

25. Mark Landler and David E. Sanger, "Clinton Speaks of Shielding Mideast from Iran," *New York Times*, July 22, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/23/world/asia/23diplo.html?pagewanted=print>.

26. Rachel Bronson, *Thicker Than Oil: America's Uneasy Partnership with Saudi Arabia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 150–151, 252–254.

27. Thomas Donnelly, Danielle Pletka, and Maseh Zarif, *Containing and Deterring a Nuclear Iran: Questions for Strategy, Requirements for Military Forces* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, December 2011), 40, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/files/fp\\_uploaded\\_documents/111205\\_AEI%20Iran%20report%20text%20final%20Dec%206%202011.pdf](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/files/fp_uploaded_documents/111205_AEI%20Iran%20report%20text%20final%20Dec%206%202011.pdf).

the face of the Obama administration's general desire to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. security policy. Nor would the new policy sound particularly like a threat (because policies are typically well thought out, not reactive); in fact, the word *nuclear* need not be enunciated. But even if it were not said, it certainly would be heard. And that would be the point.

## A Punitive Air Campaign Modeled on NATO's Air Campaign against Milosevic

The United States certainly has the capacity to inflict tremendous damage on the Iranian nuclear program through air strikes. The NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, which utilized precision munitions and tailored intelligence, serves as a useful model for what an air campaign against Iran might look like. The three-month campaign targeted Serbian energy, communications, commercial, and political infrastructure, but avoided attacks that would kill large numbers of people (and in some instances used "smart" weapons to limit physical damage and make reconstruction easier after the war).

This approach could have relevance to a future campaign in which the United States and its allies must respond to an Iranian violation of the red lines discussed above, but must also minimize the expected human cost borne by the Iranian people. The targeted strikes could focus on Iranian nuclear and weapons facilities, or be part of a wider campaign to degrade organs of the state, such as Revolutionary Guard command locations and encampments. Future targets in a limited air campaign against Iran need not be limited to fixed infrastructure either. Innovations in real-time tactical intelligence since the Kosovo War (primarily during the past ten years of fighting in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere) have produced an extremely effective means of targeting individuals too. These innovations have been vividly demonstrated recently in Pakistan as well, where U.S. drone strikes (with Pakistani intelligence support at times) have led to the killings of dozens of top insurgent and terrorist leaders—with fewer and fewer innocent civilian casualties over time.<sup>28</sup>

Yet it is unlikely that even a highly successful air campaign—"successful" here meaning the destruction of strategic infrastructure and the minimization of collateral damage—would eliminate the Iranian nuclear program entirely. If anything, the force requirements and logistics of an air campaign would be complex enough—and the likelihood of Iranian retaliation high enough—that such a comprehensive campaign would simply be too risky.<sup>29</sup> So why adopt such a deterrent policy? This question raises several crucial related issues surrounding the policy.

The first is the premise for the air strikes. As Kenneth Pollack has written, Iran would have to have done something "stupidly belligerent" in order to justify the air campaign.<sup>30</sup> In terms of the red lines discussed above, such an action might be one involving escalated proxy warfare or nu-

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28. See Benjamin S. Lambeth, *Air Power Against Terror* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2005), 247–258; Ian S. Livingston and Michael O'Hanlon, "Pakistan Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction & Security," Brookings Institution, January 31, 2012, 3, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/Programs/FP/pakistan%20index/index.pdf>. See also, "The Year of the Drone: An Analysis of U.S. Drone Strikes in Pakistan, 2004-2012," New America Foundation, last updated March 13, 2012, <http://counterterrorism.newamerica.net/drones>.

29. Donnelly et al., 42–43.

30. Kenneth M. Pollack, "Pariahs in Tehran," *National Interest*, no. 110 (November/December 2010): 45, [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/articles/2010/11\\_iran\\_pollack/11\\_iran\\_pollack.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/articles/2010/11_iran_pollack/11_iran_pollack.pdf).



clear transfers to a third party. Without such an action for the United States to react to, the United States would have weak recourse to international law and public opinion. (All of the recent UN Security Council resolutions on Iran, for instance, stipulate very clearly that they do not authorize the use of force to ensure compliance.)

Second, a possible ancillary outcome of an air-strike campaign against Iran would turn Iranians against their leaders. Yet the evidence that air strikes would bolster this kind of popular regime change in Iran is far from overwhelming. Historians and political scientists who specialize in the region typically refer to a deep and resilient Iranian nationalism. More recent evidence, such as the reactions to the Iraq invasion of 1980 and the Taliban's killing of eight Iranian diplomats in 1998, suggests that it is just as likely that Iranians will "rally around the flag," no matter who is in charge. Indeed, an unanticipated consequence of a U.S. air campaign could be to strengthen popular support for the leadership and provide the regime with an excuse to crack down on opposition.

Another, but by no means the last, issue concerns the extent and vitality of Iran's nuclear development program itself. Most U.S. (and Israeli) nuclear experts now think that Tehran is so far along with its nuclear program that it would be able to rebuild the entire program in two years. In this light, a successful air campaign would be a Pyrrhic victory—if even that, given the ambiguity surrounding the exact nature and extent of Iran's nuclear facilities. Many believe Iran has secret facilities or is hiding key material and machinery for its nuclear development program; many of Iran's nuclear installations are underground and protected by hardened bunkers. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has also reported that Iran has produced nuclear triggers designed exclusively for use in nuclear bombs.<sup>31</sup>

Given these political, planning, and logistical uncertainties, an air-strike option as a deterrent concept is indeed preferable over an actual operation. But establishing a viable deterrent requires credibility and plausibility that the military option is both technically and politically feasible. Under the right circumstances, this approach could be.

## Blockading Iran

Should Iranian terrorism or a major Iranian nuclear buildup program lead the United States and its partners to consider sterner measures against Iran, an armed blockade of Iran's energy trade could be considered. Both the Iranian government and its opponents recognize the importance of Iran's energy sector: oil and gas production accounts for a very large share of Iran's revenue and hence the regime's ability to satisfy the basic needs of its populace. In some ways, a blockade could be seen as more muscular than an air-strike option, given its potential economic effects. Yet, just as with air strikes or other military action, a blockade is not necessarily guaranteed to turn the Iranian people against the regime. In other ways, a blockade could in fact be less dramatic and less escalatory, since it would not involve the possibility of collateral damage (as would an air campaign). Indeed, a "targeted" blockade might even seem to follow naturally from previous sanctions policy if Teheran carried out some type of escalation of the current situation. Whereas existing sanctions attempt to contain Iran using legal restrictions, a full blockade would take effect if these containment measures proved insufficient and a physical deterrent became necessary to constrain Iranian behavior.

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31. David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, "Watchdog Finds Evidence That Iran Worked on Nuclear Triggers," *New York Times*, May 24, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/25/world/middleeast/25iran.html?pagewanted=print>.

To be sure, the blockade option has not received significant analytical attention. However, as one possible option among more destructive policy choices, a directed blockade deserves serious consideration.<sup>32</sup> Logistically, the easiest way to conduct a (partial) blockade of Iran would be to focus on the Gulf of Oman, the body of water just southeast of the Strait of Hormuz. It is roughly 300 miles long and 100 to 150 miles wide, extending along the entire southern coast of Iran (except for that part within the Persian Gulf itself). If the blockade were directed to focus only on large ships carrying bulk crude on the way out, or gasoline on the way in, the force requirements, although substantial, would not be enormous. It would still be necessary to have ample monitoring capability within the Persian Gulf, on top of assets devoted to the Gulf of Oman, in order to know ships' origins and destinations (since many vessels in the Gulf are obviously not traveling to or from Iran).

A simple way to think about force requirements in this regard is to assume that any Iranian ship transiting the Strait or leaving from southern Iranian coastal regions should be stopped and queried before it could reach open ocean waters (where it would be much harder to track). A picket of fast ships (major surface combatants, for example, aided by smaller patrol craft) spaced every 50 miles would be able to cut off any Iranian ship before it could reach the Arabian Sea, assuming adequate scouting is provided (most likely from aircraft). That implies a half dozen ships on station at a time, and another half dozen as a tactical rotation base.

Beyond these initial force requirements, other assets would be necessary for a naval blockade response to aggressive Iranian actions. Two carrier battle groups based further offshore that included Aegis-equipped ships with robust missile defense capabilities would be needed—not only for missile and air defense, but also for the reconnaissance aircraft that monitor littoral shipping and alert the picket ships to vessels that need to be intercepted. To ensure escalation dominance on the scene of any encounter, it would also make sense to deploy a Marine Expeditionary Unit (typically three to four ships with a total of 2,000 marines) in the vicinity and to have it backed up by another such unit at sea or on land.<sup>33</sup>

A blockade of Iran would have to presume Iranian retaliation in kind (and perhaps in other ways as well). Most obviously, Iran could retaliate effectively against oil production and export facilities in southern Iraq, where it exerts considerable influence. There would also be other ramifications of a U.S.-led blockade of Iran's energy sector. Chief among these would be an immediate jump in the price of crude oil and a global crude oil shortage. Too big a jump might threaten the international political will for continuing the blockade, though working with countries like Saudi Arabia to fill the supply gap might help counter this problem. Finally, a blockade policy relies heavily on international cooperation. For instance, if Russia opposed the embargo, it could mitigate the effectiveness of the blockade with shipments through the Caspian Sea.

While a blockade would make the most sense as a deterrent method once containment has faltered, it could also function in concert with containment efforts. If, for example, the Obama administration continues ramping up efforts to sanction Iran's central bank,<sup>34</sup> it could make it harder

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32. A partial (and brief) exception can be found in Daniel Coats and Charles S. Robb, *Meeting the Challenge: U.S. Policy toward Iranian Nuclear Development*, Report of an Independent Task Force Sponsored by the Bipartisan Policy Center (Washington, DC: Bipartisan Policy Center, 2008), 71.

33. On the scouting mission, see Capt. Wayne P. Hughes Jr., *Fleet Tactics and Coastal Combat*, 2nd ed. (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2000), 210–220.

34. Indira A. R. Lakshmanan and Cheyenne Hopkins, "U.S. Targets Iran Oil, Bank in Bid to Halt Nuclear Program," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, November 28, 2011, <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2011>

for Iran to skirt an oil blockade by buying energy from overland sources like Russia. Progressively stricter sanctions on the Iranian oil sector itself could have a similar effect. With tools like these in place, a subsequent blockade could form a synergy with containment efforts rather than simply replace them.

## Invading Iran to Overthrow the Government

An actual ground invasion is by far the least likely scenario of all, but planning for and threatening such an attack should not be off limits. Indeed, Pentagon officials have war-gamed a possible land invasion on several occasions and determined it to be very difficult. However, an invasion plan is worth mentioning as a deterrent against extreme Iranian actions such as a major terrorist attack against the American homeland or against a close ally.<sup>35</sup>

Three U.S. divisions spearheaded an invasion of Iraq that quickly disposed of the Iraqi dictator and led to the dissolution of the regime's security apparatus. A fourth division aided in the latter stages of the invasion. All told, about 200,000 U.S. troops were involved.

It is possible that U.S. military planners would request a greater number of troops for an invasion of Iran, due to the country's far greater size and armed forces trained to fight a much stronger military with asymmetrical tactics. Some scholars have even suggested that an invasion aimed at regime change would require force levels similar to those of Desert Shield and Desert Storm.<sup>36</sup> However, there are three reasons to think that comparable levels of ground power would suffice in Iran. First, the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq War provided vivid (and tragic) evidence about the rough equivalence of Iraqi and Iranian forces then, as they engaged in World War I–style fighting. Roughly one million soldiers perished in the war, and neither Iran nor Iraq had the wherewithal to greatly improve its military thereafter.

Second, in terms of the size of the two countries and the quality of their war-fighting equipment, Iran's armed forces appear roughly comparable to those of Iraq in the last years of the Saddam Hussein era. Iran's armed forces now appear to have some more advanced Russian equipment and have modernized more than Iraq had during the late Saddam period, but Iran began with a military that was somewhat less well equipped overall than Iraq's.

Third, as in the invasion of Iraq, the U.S. goal (in addition to deposing the regime) presumably would not be to annihilate all of Iran's military forces but, rather, those elements most loyal to the regime—the roughly 150,000-strong IRGC<sup>37</sup> and the 10,000-to-15,000-strong<sup>38</sup> Qods Force. Other elements of the armed forces might be left intact.

The United States could realistically make plans for a four-division invasion under emergency circumstances. The United States has ten divisions in its active army, three in its marine corps, and

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-11-28/u-s-targets-iran-oil-bank-in-bid-to-halt-nuclear-program.html.

35. Kenneth M. Pollack, Daniel L. Byman, Martin S. Indyk, Suzanne Maloney, Michael E. O'Hanlon, and Bruce Riedel, *Which Path to Persia? Options for a New American Strategy toward Iran* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2009), 96–110.

36. Donnelly et al., 43.

37. Council on Foreign Relations, "The Regime Structure" (diagram) in "The Iranian Regime," *Crisis Guide: Iran*, [http://www.cfr.org/interactives/CG\\_Iran/index.html#/the-iranian-regime/](http://www.cfr.org/interactives/CG_Iran/index.html#/the-iranian-regime/) (accessed March 19, 2012).

38. Ibid.

the equivalent of another eight in its national guard, making for a total of about 75 brigade equivalents. Mobilizing four divisions for an invasion of Iran would not be out of the question; presumably, it will be increasingly feasible in the coming years, even if the ground forces are cut 10 to 20 percent as part of deficit-reduction efforts.

By contrast, an occupation of Iran would require up to one million U.S. and other foreign troops over an extended time and, hence, would indeed be implausible. But an invasion, with the single goal of deposing the government, could be considered a possibility under extreme circumstances—if for example there were unmistakable evidence that Iran’s current government was preparing a major attack on Israel, or if it responded to any U.S. “surgical” air campaign with an all-out global terrorist response, using Hezbollah and various elements of its security apparatus.

Beyond envisioning and even planning a potential invasion, the United States has to make the threat of it clear to Iran. One way to do that would be to suggest publicly that the Iranian regime could be toppled as easily as Saddam Hussein’s was. Another way might be to publicize the American military’s efforts to train ground troops for Iranian geography and terrain, since any serious invasion plan would have to involve such training. Other selective releases of information about the U.S. planning process and mentality could play a similar role, as long as they do not divulge actual U.S. plans. The counterargument to such public diplomacy is that Iran might seize on it to justify and gain international sympathy for its nuclear program, so America should only speak in such terms if seriously provoked. In addition to increasing its anti-American rhetoric, Iran might respond to all of these moves by increasing proxy pressure on the United States, perhaps leading in an extreme case to brinkmanship that makes war inevitable. Beyond calibrating its threat of invasion properly, the United States could guard against such brinkmanship by maintaining its other efforts at deterrence as well as at containment and engagement.

## Conclusion

The current U.S. policy approach to security in the Persian Gulf provides a sound basis for future policy decisions. The basic approach of discretion, combined with deployment of real combat capability, is prudent. The concept of fostering a number of security partnerships that allow the United States major air bases and access to large ports and pre-positioned equipment in the region makes sense. Given the regional security parameters, it also makes sense to keep certain combat capabilities, such as missile defenses, land-based combat and surveillance aircraft, and a carrier battle group (plus some additional naval assets), permanently in the region. This balanced approach allows the United States to assuage the general concern of regional allies and partners over Iran’s rise, yet also avoids assuming that the specter of an adventurist Tehran will always make Gulf states and others draw closer to Washington. In other words, a balanced approach correctly considers the constraints that operate—and will continue to operate—in the broader Middle East.

Nevertheless, U.S. security officials and defense planners will have to remain attentive to changing conditions that could require occasional modification and further nuance in this basically continuous approach to international and regional security policy. For example, a somewhat more clearly articulated U.S. nuclear umbrella may become more appropriate as Iran moves closer to a bomb. The ongoing regional unrest should also remind policymakers to anticipate changes in the regional balance of power that might affect the United States’ ability to deter Iran. Although

the historic relationship with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain persists, the tensions created by U.S. support for Mubarak's exit and by Saudi Arabia's intervention in Bahrain highlighted fault lines that could undermine future cooperation. Ongoing instability in Yemen could also provide an opening for an expansion of Iranian influence that would complicate the U.S. deterrence structure.

The broader Persian Gulf region remains, and will remain, turbulent and tense for years to come. But the good news is that the United States, together with regional allies and partners, is better positioned than commonly perceived to stay for the long haul in this key part of the world.





## COUNTRY STUDIES





# 4

## ISRAEL Haim Malka

Israel and the United States are searching for a solution to the Iranian threat that may not exist. Although the Israeli and U.S. governments share a broad common objective—to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power—their strategies for achieving that objective differ dramatically. Whereas the United States seeks to use primarily economic leverage to change Iranian decision-making, Israel prefers a strong and credible threat of military action to convince the Iranian leadership that the price of pursuing nuclear weapons capabilities outweighs the benefits. While that debate rages, ultimately both strategies may fall short.

Increasingly, the strategy of one ally affects the other in consequential ways. U.S. strategy to stop Iran's nuclear enrichment and weapons program is at the center of Israeli strategic thinking and calculations. Israel's conventional and nonconventional military capabilities are far superior to any other regional army's, including Iran's. And although Israeli military strikes may have the ability to delay Iran's nuclear enrichment program for a limited period, only the United States has the combined political and military assets to mount a sustained strategy to confront Iran's nuclear and regional ambitions. Israel, like other U.S. allies in the region, is dependent on the United States to lead the confrontation against Iran. This greater dependency coincides with a period of heightened uncertainty where Israelis question U.S. strategic judgment and contemplate the decline in the U.S. ability to influence agendas and shape outcomes in the Middle East.

Thus, Israel's national security has never been more directly tied to the Persian Gulf and U.S. Gulf security architecture. Israeli actions and strategies will also have a profound impact on U.S. interests and management of Gulf security. Many senior U.S. administration and military officials believe that a military confrontation with Iran is not in U.S. interests. For the past half century, Israel has been ancillary to U.S. military planning and operations in the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility where the United States has built a series of military bases and alliances in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states.<sup>1</sup> Israel's geographic location, limited naval force projection, and political conflict with Gulf governments have constrained Israel's overt cooperation in the Gulf. That could change, however, should Iran become a declared or undeclared nuclear power. As the United States manages the aftermath of its withdrawal of troops in Iraq and prepares for a drawdown in Afghanistan, its strategy to secure the Gulf region while addressing Iran's nuclear ambitions will have a major impact on Israeli security posture and U.S.-Israeli cooperation for the foreseeable future.

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1. The U.S. European Command (EUCOM), headquartered in Stuttgart, Germany, is responsible for military planning and cooperation with Israel. Israeli Defense Force (IDF) cooperation with EUCOM has expanded dramatically, and Israeli military officials acknowledge upgraded strategic cooperation and improvements in joint war-fighting capabilities. To date, however, Israel has virtually no strategic cooperation with CENTCOM, the U.S. military's theater-level command unit for the Middle East. Private discussion with Israeli Ministry of Defense official, Tel Aviv, May 3, 2010.

Despite the rhetoric and multilayered concrete efforts to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon through a comprehensive set of economic sanctions and pressure, the United States and Israel both must quietly prepare for a wider set of scenarios if those efforts fail. Both Israeli and U.S. intelligence officials openly acknowledge that Iran's current stock of low-enriched uranium (LEU), if further enriched to weapons-grade level, could produce several nuclear weapons.<sup>2</sup> Although current U.S. and Israeli assessments conclude that Iran has not made the political decision to build a bomb, nor does it have an effective delivery mechanism, a recent IAEA report suggests Iran's enrichment efforts are accelerating.<sup>3</sup> Israeli officials add that Iran is proceeding intently on three tracks simultaneously: enrichment, delivery systems, and warheads. Moreover, the record of preventing states from developing nuclear weapons is mixed. In the last several decades, India, North Korea, and Pakistan all successfully acquired nuclear weapons through clandestine programs. Regardless of the outcomes of current debates about how to prevent Iran from pursuing nuclear weapons, the United States and Israel will likely pursue a combination of strategies in order to maximize their interests and security in confronting Iran.

In this new strategic milieu, Israel will have to adapt and work within a broader U.S. security architecture, regardless of Israeli doubts about such a framework. Rather than speculate on the probability of Israeli military action against Iran or assess the risks and benefits of such action, this chapter seeks to examine how a range of U.S. strategies to address an ambiguous or overt nuclear capability, including deterrence, containment, and engagement, will likely influence Israeli strategic thinking in the months and years ahead.

## Different Threats, Different Assessments

Israeli and U.S. strategies to prevent Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons and assessments of Iran's capabilities differ because the threat of a nuclear Iran is different for each. A nuclear Iran threatens U.S. allies, could destabilize pro-U.S. Arab regimes, and could expose U.S. troops in the region to more aggressive action from Iran and its allies. Moreover, it would disrupt the American-led security order in the Gulf that has endured since the British withdrawal in 1971. But for all the threats a nuclear Iran poses, it does not currently threaten U.S. cities or civilians.<sup>4</sup>

For Israel, Iran poses a unique threat that many Israelis describe as "existential." As one Israeli commentator explains, a nuclear Iran denies Israelis the sense of "collective relief that Jews no longer live—and die—at the whim of others." It is a deep insecurity dating back to the pre-Israel

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2. Ronen Bergman, "Will Israel Attack Iran?" *New York Times*, January 25, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/29/magazine/will-israel-attack-iran.html?pagewanted=print>.

3. David Sanger and William Broad, "Atomic Agency Says Iran Is Making Fuel at Protected Site," *New York Times*, February 24, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/25/world/middleeast/atomic-agency-says-iran-is-making-fuel-at-protected-site.html>; "Iran Has Material For 4 Nukes: Israeli General," *Agence France Presse*, February 2, 2012, <http://www.defensenews.com/article/20120202/DEFREG04/302020008/Iran-Has-Material-4-Nukes-Israeli-General>; International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), "Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of the Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran," GOV/2012/9, February 24, 2012, <http://iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2012/gov2012-9.pdf>.

4. Howard LaFranchi, "Is Iran trying to develop a missile that could reach America?," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 2, 2012, <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Foreign-Policy/2012/0202/Is-Iran-trying-to-develop-a-missile-that-could-reach-America>.

Jewish experience of defenselessness.<sup>5</sup> Even one nuclear explosion over a major Israeli city could have a deep psychological impact beyond the physical damage, and radically alter the nature of Israel's economy and society.<sup>6</sup> Israel would be forced to adapt, yet, faced with a nuclear Iran, deeper insecurity could fuel Israeli emigration and a range of negative social and economic consequences that could weaken Israel's economic, scientific, and cultural dynamism.

Beyond the psychological aspect, most Israeli policymakers and strategic thinkers see Iran as a threat to Israel's regional hegemony and freedom of action. The threat is less of an immediate nuclear strike against Israel, but of a new strategic environment where Israel's conventional military superiority is in check and its enemies emboldened.<sup>7</sup> More specifically, many Israeli security officials fear that a nuclear Iran creates a strategic environment that erodes Israel's military superiority (and reported nuclear monopoly), constrains its freedom of action to use conventional military force, and emboldens its enemies as they operate under the protection of an Iranian nuclear umbrella. Such an environment could also set off a regional nuclear arms race, raising the probability of nuclear accidents or terrorism. Under such conditions miscommunication or misinterpretation of intentions can trigger an unintended conventional or even nuclear confrontation.<sup>8</sup> As one Israeli security expert points out, "[W]hile the Iranian leadership is not seen as suicidal or particularly prone to high-stakes risk taking, there are likely to be many misperceptions regarding Israeli intentions and redlines."<sup>9</sup>

Different Israeli and U.S. threat perceptions lead to different assessments of how to confront Iran effectively, introducing a dramatic element of tension and uncertainty when the United States and Israel should be cooperating closely to meet a common threat. To some degree, Israeli and U.S. threat assessments and strategies in the Gulf have always diverged. In 1991, during the first Gulf War, many Israelis felt the United States failed to neutralize Iraqi missile launchers in the opening hours of the war, facilitating an attack of 39 Scud missiles on Israeli cities and indirectly weakening Israel's military deterrent after Israel did not respond to the attack due to U.S. pressure. Two decades later, Israelis watched Iran's regional influence grow following the U.S. invasion of Iraq and overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003. The divergence in threat perceptions, priorities,

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5. Daniel Gordis, "The Other Existential Threat: Iran's Bomb, Israel's Soul, and the Future of the Jews," *Commentary*, October 2010, <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/viewarticle.cfm/the-other-existential-threat-15530>.

6. Alexander Wilner and Anthony H. Cordesman, "Iran and the Gulf Military Balance," CSIS, December 1, 2011, 159, [http://csis.org/files/publication/111128\\_Iran\\_Gulf\\_Military\\_Bal.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/111128_Iran_Gulf_Military_Bal.pdf).

7. Defense Minister Ehud Barak has made several public statements suggesting that Iran would not use a nuclear weapon against Israel. See, for example, Gidi Weitz, "Barak to Haaretz: Iran won't drop nuclear bomb on Israel," Haaretz.com, May 5, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/barak-to-haaretz-iran-won-t-drop-nuclear-bomb-on-israel-1.359870>; and Israeli defense minister Ehud Barak, speech at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, DC, February 26, 2010, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/html/pdf/EhudBarak.pdf>.

8. The Lebanon war of 2006 was sparked by Hezbollah's miscalculation of Israel's response to its cross-border attack and kidnapping of three soldiers. Following the war, Hezbollah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah admitted that had he predicted the Israeli response he would not have launched the operation. Whether this revealed his true position or was intended for domestic Lebanese consumption remains unclear. "Nasrallah: Soldiers' abductions a mistake," CNN, August 27, 2006, [http://articles.cnn.com/2006-08-27/world/mideast.nasrallah\\_1\\_hezbollah-leader-hassan-nasrallah-hezbollah-militants-israeli-soldiers?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://articles.cnn.com/2006-08-27/world/mideast.nasrallah_1_hezbollah-leader-hassan-nasrallah-hezbollah-militants-israeli-soldiers?_s=PM:WORLD).

9. Gerald Steinberg, "Walking the Tightrope: Israeli Options in Response to Iranian Nuclear Developments," in *Reassessing the Implications of a Nuclear Iran*, ed. Judith S. Yaphe and Charles D. Lutes (Washington, DC: Institute for National Strategic Studies, August 2005), 80.

and strategies continues to grow as Israel faces a new kind of threat from a potentially nuclear Iran.

The Arab uprisings in 2011 have further strained diverging strategic assessments between the two allies that extend beyond the Gulf. Israeli officials were particularly dismayed when the Obama administration called for Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak to step down. Mubarak had been a stalwart U.S. and Israeli ally in the region and the linchpin of Israel's regional security for two decades.<sup>10</sup> U.S. support for popular Arab uprisings, particularly the uprising in Egypt, was deeply disturbing to many Israelis who feared greater instability and an increasingly hostile regional environment fueled by the rise of Islamic political forces across the Middle East. As the United States struggles to develop policies to address the political changes under way in the region and Israeli officials fret that the unrest will further upend the regional balance of power, the divergence in threat perceptions, priorities, and strategies will continue to grow as Iran's nuclear program moves forward.

Even though U.S. and Israeli assessments may differ, the United States has been deeply engaged in thwarting Iranian ambitions. Successive U.S. presidents have declared that a nuclear Iran is "unacceptable," and the Obama administration has strengthened the rhetoric by expressing its commitment to preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. In a speech to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in 2012 President Obama stated: "I made a commitment to the American people, and said that we would use all elements of American power to pressure Iran and prevent it from acquiring a nuclear weapon. And that is what we have done."<sup>11</sup> To that end the Obama administration has led an international effort to impose a powerful set of comprehensive sanctions on Iranian oil exports and the Central Bank of Iran that are having a devastating effect on the Iranian economy and currency. In addition, U.S. leaders continue to state that "all options are on the table," implying that military action may be a last resort.<sup>12</sup>

To many Israeli government officials, however the language is weak and unconvincing, and the sanctions effort too late. Moreover, while the United States is committed to preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, Israel is focused on preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability—that is, the technological know-how and materials necessary to assemble a nuclear weapon—within a defined time period. Although many Israelis acknowledge that the United States, as a superpower, has a wider set of issues to manage in the Middle East and globally, they have argued for several years that U.S. efforts to stop Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons are weak and unfocused, and lack a clear strategy that includes benchmarks and consequences for Iranian noncompliance.<sup>13</sup> Increasingly public opposition to a U.S. or Israeli military confrontation

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10. Barbara Opall-Rome, "Hedging Against America: Israel Eyes New Alliances as Non-Arab States' Power Grows," *Defense News*, February 14, 2011, <http://www.defensenews.com/article/20110214/DEFFEAT04/102140308/Hedging-Against-America>. Israeli president Shimon Peres even publicly stated his support for the besieged Egyptian president. See Douglas Hamilton, "Israel shocked by Obama's 'betrayal' of Mubarak," Reuters, January 31, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/01/31/us-egypt-israel-usa-idUSTRE70U53720110131>.

11. White House, "Remarks by the President at AIPAC Policy Conference," March 4, 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/04/remarks-president-aipac-policy-conference-0>.

12. See *ibid.*; and Donna Cassata, Associated Press, "Panetta: No Iranian decision yet on nukes," February 16, 2012, [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-501363\\_162-57379321/panetta-no-iranian-decision-yet-on-nukes/](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-501363_162-57379321/panetta-no-iranian-decision-yet-on-nukes/).

13. Reports of a 2010 memo from U.S. secretary of defense Robert Gates to White House officials, arguing that the United States does not have an effective long-term strategy to address Iran's pursuit of nu-

from the highest echelons of the U.S. military deepens Israeli doubts that the United States will take military action against Iran if sanctions prove ineffective.<sup>14</sup>

Despite ongoing high-level consultation between U.S. and Israeli military officials, this fundamental rift in perspectives continues. Israeli officials routinely argue that a preemptive military strike against Iranian nuclear sites offers at least a temporary solution to the problem by potentially delaying Iran's nuclear program by one to two years if not longer.<sup>15</sup> Israelis believe that only an unambiguous and credible military threat against Iran will persuade the Islamic Republic to suspend its nuclear weapons program. Responding in 2010 to Israeli calls for a credible military threat, then-secretary of defense Robert Gates clearly rejected Israel's interpretation: "I would disagree that only a credible military threat can get Iran to take the actions it needs to end its nuclear weapons program."<sup>16</sup> More recently, in February 2012, Israeli officials complained to U.S. administration officials after Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Martin Dempsey publicly opposed an Israeli military strike against Iran: "I don't think a wise thing at this moment is for Israel to launch a military attack on Iran," Dempsey said, adding that a strike "would be destabilizing" and "not prudent."<sup>17</sup> Israeli officials including the prime minister argue that these types of statements serve Iranian purposes by exposing divisions between the United States and Israel and undermining the credibility of military threats against Iran.<sup>18</sup>

While Israel's coalition government has been largely united on its public messaging regarding the use of force against Iran, Israeli media reports suggest that there are several ministers within the inner cabinet who remain undecided.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, a handful of high-profile former Israeli security officials have dissented, most noticeably former Mossad chief Meir Dagan. In a public speech after his retirement, Dagan said that an Israeli attack against Iran would be a "stu-

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clear capabilities, reinforced Israeli fears. See David E. Sanger and Thomas Shanker, "Gates Says U.S. Lacks a Policy to Thwart Iran," *New York Times*, April 17, 2010, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/18/world/middleeast/18iran.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/18/world/middleeast/18iran.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print).

14. "Transcript: Interview with Gen. Martin Dempsey," *Fareed Zakaria GPS*, aired February 19, 2012, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1202/19/fzgps.01.html>.

15. According to Israeli journalist Ronen Bergman, Israeli officials believe a preemptive military strike on Iranian nuclear facilities could delay the Iranian program by three to five years. See Ronen Bergman, "Will Israel Attack Iran?" *New York Times*, January 25, 2012; Anshel Pfeffer, "Israel could strike Iran's nuclear facilities, but it won't be easy," *Haaretz.com*, February 20, 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/israel-s-eye-on-iran/israel-could-strike-iran-s-nuclear-facilities-but-it-won-t-be-easy-1.413795>.

16. Dan De Luce, "US Rejects Israel Call for Military Threat Against," *Agence France-Presse*, November 7, 2010, [http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hwiRPxFdXPjFEHtqN\\_2SUOLDIlow?docId=CNG.1ec17e6b417fa531977cea8fc63ac880.2c1](http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hwiRPxFdXPjFEHtqN_2SUOLDIlow?docId=CNG.1ec17e6b417fa531977cea8fc63ac880.2c1)

17. Then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen publicly stated on several occasions that a military strike on Iran would be "very, very destabilizing." See Admiral Michael Mullen, address to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, DC, January 7, 2010, <http://www.jcs.mil/speech.aspx?ID=1309>. Admiral Mullen's successor, General Martin Dempsey, has used similar language. See "Transcript: Interview with Gen. Martin Dempsey," *Fareed Zakaria GPS*.

18. See Barak Ravid, "Israel: Public U.S. objections to military attack serve Iran's interests," *Haaretz.com*, February 21, 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/israel-public-u-s-objections-to-military-attack-serve-iran-s-interests-1.413845>.

19. Barak Ravid, "Israeli threats of attack sparked new wave of Iran sanctions, officials say," *Haaretz.com*, March 16, 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/israeli-threats-of-attack-sparked-new-wave-of-iran-sanctions-officials-say-1.418970>.

pid thing.”<sup>20</sup> Among the Israeli public, support for a unilateral military strike largely depends on U.S. support. According to one opinion poll, only 31 percent of adults polled support a unilateral Israeli military strike against Iran without the cooperation of the United States; that support, however, jumps to 62 percent if Israel has the support of the United States for such an attack.<sup>21</sup>

Despite this debate, many Israeli officials argue that U.S. statements questioning the use of force against Iran project weakness. As one senior security official lamented in a private conversation, “When the United States acts weak and not like a superpower, it worries Israel.”<sup>22</sup> Because Israel and the United States are so closely allied, Israelis believe that the perception of a weak United States in the region affects Israel’s own deterrence and power projection. As Iran moves closer toward developing a nuclear weapons capability and delivery mechanism, Israeli and U.S. threat assessments are likely to widen farther still, making cooperation on a range of issues more challenging, tense, and uncertain.

## Debating Deterrence

Deterrence is a central component of both the U.S. and Israeli military posture in the Middle East. Yet, the United States and Israel are having two separate conversations about deterrence when it comes to Iran. The current debate in the United States largely views deterrence as a strategy to prevent Iran from using nuclear weapons should Iran acquire such capabilities in the future. Israeli officials, meanwhile, argue foremost for deterring Iran from developing nuclear capabilities in the first place, through the threat of overwhelming military force or “crippling sanctions.” Should efforts to deter Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability falter, Israel is adequately positioned to maintain a deterrent posture.

The United States has gone to great lengths to strengthen Israel’s deterrent capabilities by providing additional funding for offensive and defensive military platforms. It has supported the development of Israel’s multilayered missile defense systems, including Israel’s Arrow 2, which is expected to reduce the impact of retaliatory missile strikes by Iran or its proxies.<sup>23</sup>

While Israel has invested in ballistic missile defense systems, it sees offensive capabilities as the core of deterrence. The United States has also supported various offensive military platforms for Israel: the approved transfer of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (expected by 2015) is the most recent effort in strengthening Israel’s deterrence posture. Beyond these conventional capabilities, Israel reportedly possesses more than 100 nuclear warheads that can be delivered by Jericho missile,

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20. Isabel Kershner, “Israeli Strike on Iran Would Be ‘Stupid,’ Ex-Spy Chief Says,” *New York Times*, May 8, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/09/world/middleeast/09israel.html?pagewanted=print>; and Yossi Melman, “Ex-Mossad chief Dagan: Military strike against Iran would be ‘stupid,’” *Haaretz.com*, May 8, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/ex-mossad-chief-dagan-military-strike-against-iran-would-be-stupid-1.360412>.

21. Israel Democracy Institute and Tel Aviv University, “The Peace Index—February 2012,” February 28–29, 2012, <http://www.peaceindex.org/files/The%20Peace%20Index%20Data%20-%20February%202012.pdf>.

22. Private discussion with senior Israeli security official, Jerusalem, May 5, 2010.

23. See Yaakov Katz, “Israel can defend itself against barrages from Iran,” *Jerusalem Post*, February 29, 2012, <http://www.jpost.com/Defense/Article.aspx?id=259810>; see also Mordechai Twersky, “Uzi Rubin describes Iron Dome as ‘game changer,’” *Jerusalem Post*, April 12, 2011, <http://www.jpost.com/VideoArticles/Video/Article.aspx?id=216272>.

F-15I and F-16 aircraft, and submarine.<sup>24</sup> This poses a strong deterrent against any Iranian attack. Israel is also expanding its second-strike capability by acquiring additional submarines that are reportedly capable of launching nuclear-tipped missiles.<sup>25</sup> These capabilities make up the core of Israel's deterrence against a potentially nuclear Iran. According to one report, with such an arsenal Israel could simultaneously target at least 15 major Iranian cities.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to Israel's own capabilities, American officials have at times raised the idea of extending the U.S. nuclear deterrent to protect Israel as well as GCC states. Such a deterrent requires an unequivocally credible message to Iran that any nuclear attack against Israel would be met with a similar U.S. attack against Iran. The United States could extend its deterrent through purely declaratory means, such as a definitive presidential statement, or through more formal means, as part of a defense treaty.<sup>27</sup>

Still, many Israelis in the foreign and defense establishments consider discussions of classical deterrence or deterring a potentially nuclear Iran from launching a nuclear strike as counterproductive at this stage and a sign that the United States has accepted the inevitability of a nuclear Iran. When Secretary of State Hillary Clinton suggested that the United States could implement an "umbrella of deterrence" in the Middle East and later threatened to obliterate Iran if it attacked Israel, Israeli officials reacted sharply.<sup>28</sup> Deputy Prime Minister and Intelligence and Atomic Energy Minister Dan Meridor responded: "[I]t was as if they were saying that they have come to terms with such a possibility, and this is a mistake. Right now, we must deal with preventing such an eventuality, not coming to terms with it."<sup>29</sup>

Despite Israeli unease, some U.S. analysts have argued that extending the U.S. nuclear deterrent would prevent Israel from taking unilateral military action against Iran and set the framework for a U.S. deterrence regime against the Islamic Republic. According to Bruce Riedel and Gary Samore, "[I]f Israel were confident . . . [about] a formal U.S. assurance that a nuclear attack on Israel would be met by a U.S. nuclear attack on Iran, Jerusalem might be more inclined to calculate that the risks of living with a nuclear-capable Iran were manageable."<sup>30</sup> Riedel and Samore argue that a "guarantee of U.S. retaliation against Iran would provide important psychological and political reassurance to the Israeli public and strengthen deterrence against Iran."<sup>31</sup>

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24. Lionel Beehner, "Backgrounder: Israel's Nuclear Program and Middle East Peace," Council on Foreign Relations, February 10, 2006, <http://www.cfr.org/israel/israels-nuclear-program-middle-east-peace/p9822>; and Douglas Frantz, "Israel's Arsenal Is Point of Contention," *Los Angeles Times*, October 12, 2003, <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/oct/12/world/fg-iznukes12>.

25. "Germany Sells Israel More Dolphin Subs," *Defense Industry Daily*, February 6, 2012, <http://www.defenseindustrydaily.com/germany-may-sell-2-more-dolphin-subs-to-israel-for-117b-01528/>.

26. Wilner and Cordesman, "Iran and the Gulf Military Balance," 159.

27. Then-prime minister Ehud Barak reportedly raised the idea of an extended U.S. deterrent with U.S. president Bill Clinton as part of a comprehensive U.S.-Israeli security package in the 2000 Camp David negotiations.

28. Hillary Clinton also raised the idea during a presidential debate in 2008. Oxford Analytica, "Clinton Raises 'Nuclear Umbrella' Issue," *Forbes.com*, May 23, 2008, [http://www.forbes.com/2008/05/22/clinton-nuclear-iran-cx\\_0523oxford.html](http://www.forbes.com/2008/05/22/clinton-nuclear-iran-cx_0523oxford.html).

29. "Meridor Slams Clinton for Offering 'Defense Umbrella,'" *Jerusalem Post*, July 22, 2009, <http://www.jpost.com/home/article.aspx?id=149487>.

30. Bruce Riedel and Gary Samore, "Managing Nuclear Proliferation in the Middle East," in *Restoring the Balance: A Middle East Strategy for the Next President*, ed. Martin Indyk and Richard Haass (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 116.

31. *Ibid.*

While Israeli officials are loath to discuss deterring a nuclear Iran, some Israeli analysts are already examining the issue. Noted Israeli nuclear scholar Ephraim Kam, for example, has argued that for deterrence to work, the United States will have to help strengthen Israel's deterrent capabilities, "not least as an important way of persuading Israel not to engage in an independent military operation."<sup>32</sup> Riedel and Samore's argument essentially sets out the basic framework for a U.S.-led deterrence strategy once Iran presumably achieves nuclear capabilities. As Riedel notes, "Israel's own nuclear arsenal should be sufficient to deter Iran, but an American nuclear guarantee would add an extra measure of assurance to Israelis."<sup>33</sup>

A small group of Israeli academics and analysts support the idea of extended U.S. deterrence. However, the overwhelming majority of Israelis both inside and outside of government reject the notion that a U.S. nuclear umbrella is a solution to the Iranian threat for two key reasons. First, the strength of deterrence rests on its credibility, for both those it seeks to defend and those it seeks to deter. Israelis increasingly question the credibility of a U.S. deterrent and doubt whether the United States would use military force to punish Iran or retaliate against an Iranian assault on Israel. Some openly question whether the United States would risk a war with Iran to defend Israel. The growing lack of trust between the U.S. and Israeli governments deepens this sentiment, despite the unprecedented level of communication and U.S. financial, military, and diplomatic support for Israel. Still, according to one Israeli official, "it is difficult for Israel to be reassured by words when it comes to Iran."<sup>34</sup>

Beyond Israeli assessments of U.S. credibility, it is unclear to what degree the Iranian leadership fears a massive U.S. strike against Iran. Iranian leaders are cautious not to antagonize the United States, which they acknowledge has the capability to inflict significant damage on Iran. With Iraq weak and unstable after the U.S. withdrawal, U.S. forces exposed in Afghanistan, and the U.S. military leadership publicly stating that a military confrontation with Iran is not in the interest of the United States,<sup>35</sup> the Iranian regime may conclude that the United States would not risk escalating any potential Israeli-Iranian confrontation into a nuclear war. According to General Kevin Chilton, commander of the U.S. Strategic Command, "doubt in the deterrent by a potential adversary could lead to catastrophic miscalculation."<sup>36</sup> As some Israelis acknowledge, even rational leaders can act on misperceptions and misunderstandings.<sup>37</sup>

Second, extended deterrence does not address the deep psychological effect a nuclear Iran would have on most Israelis. As one Israeli analyst explains, "Even if Israel does possess a second-strike capability, and even if the United States could be counted on to punish a nuclear attack on the Jewish state, the existential condition of the Jews would still have reverted to that experienced

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32. Ephraim Kam, "The Iranian Nuclear Issue: The U.S. Options," *Strategic Assessment*, August 2010, [http://www.inss.org.il/upload/\(FILE\)1283416564.pdf](http://www.inss.org.il/upload/(FILE)1283416564.pdf).

33. Bruce Riedel, "If Israel Attacks," *National Interest*, September/October 2010, <http://nationalinterest.org/article/israel-attacks-3907>.

34. Private discussion with Israeli foreign ministry official, Jerusalem, October 17, 2010.

35. "Transcript: Interview with Gen. Martin Dempsey," *Fareed Zakaria GPS*.

36. General Kevin P. Chilton, "Challenges to Nuclear Deterrence" (address to Air and Space Conference, United States Strategic Command, Washington, DC, September 13, 2010), [http://www.stratcom.mil/speeches/2010/50/Challenges\\_to\\_Nuclear\\_Deterrence\\_Air\\_Space\\_Conference/](http://www.stratcom.mil/speeches/2010/50/Challenges_to_Nuclear_Deterrence_Air_Space_Conference/).

37. Yair Evron, "Deterrence balance stability" (in Hebrew), *Haaretz.com*, September 4, 2009, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/spages/1112330.html>.



in pre-state Europe.”<sup>38</sup> Although his argument is largely one in favor of a preemptive military strike against Iran, the analysis sheds light on the depth of the Iranian issue in the Israeli psyche.

Israelis overwhelmingly believe the core of their deterrence must rely solely on Israeli capabilities.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, Israelis find little comfort in the idea that the United States would respond to an Iranian conventional or non-conventional attack against Israel. For the majority of Israelis, a U.S. counterstrike, whether as part of a formal nuclear umbrella or not, would be too late.

Israeli opinions differ on whether an extended U.S. deterrent could enhance Israel’s deterrence posture. Some academics propose that an extended deterrent could contribute to regional stability by signaling that the United States remains engaged and committed to the region.<sup>40</sup> Extended deterrence could also be useful if it were extended to Gulf allies. Such a nuclear umbrella could prevent or limit broader regional proliferation, which many analysts believe would occur should Iran cross the nuclear threshold. However, it is less likely to have a significant impact on the threat of nuclear terrorism from non-state actors, where deterrence theory is more difficult to apply.<sup>41</sup>

Despite differing U.S. and Israeli objectives regarding deterrence, some Israeli security analysts and officials believe the United States is already moving toward a deterrence strategy in the classic Cold War sense, where the threat of a nuclear attack and the inevitable retaliation kept each side in check. Many Israelis question the applicability of the Cold War model, which rests on a combination of deterrence and containment. Nonetheless, even in the aftermath of a potential Israeli attack against Iranian nuclear facilities, Israel will rely on deterrence as the core of its strategy against Iran.

## Containment

For the past two decades, the United States has largely sought to contain Iran through a combination of diplomacy and sanctions aimed at limiting Iran’s military capabilities and regional influence. U.S. strategy served to contain Soviet expansion in various ways during the Cold War, and many American analysts argue that the Cold War model applies equally to containing Iran, whether it has nuclear capabilities or not. Most Israelis, however, fear that any discussion of containment signals defeat and acceptance of a nuclear Iran. In the words of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, “Containment will not work against Iran.”<sup>42</sup> In response to congressional criticism of containment, President Obama has clearly stated: “Iran’s leaders should understand that I do not have a policy of containment; I have a policy to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.”<sup>43</sup>

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38. Gordis, “The Other Existential Threat.”

39. Some Israelis in the foreign policy elite believe that Israel’s own undeclared nuclear capability is sufficient to deter Iran.

40. Yair Evron, “An Israel-Iran Balance of Nuclear Deterrence: Seeds of Instability,” in *Israel and a Nuclear Iran: Implications for Arms Control, Deterrence, and Defense*, ed. Ephraim Kam (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, July 2008), 52, 58, 59, 61, [http://www.inss.org.il/upload/\(FILE\)1216205527.pdf](http://www.inss.org.il/upload/(FILE)1216205527.pdf).

41. For an overview, see Chuck Freilich, *The Armageddon Scenario: Israel and the Threat of Nuclear Terrorism*, Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 84 (Ramat Gan, Israel: Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, April 2010), <http://www.biu.ac.il/SOC/besa/MSPS84.pdf>.

42. “PM Netanyahu addresses the General Assembly of the Jewish Federations of North America,” November 8, 2010, [http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Speeches+by+Israeli+leaders/2010/PM\\_Netanyahu\\_addresses\\_GA\\_Jewish\\_Federations\\_8-Nov-2010](http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Speeches+by+Israeli+leaders/2010/PM_Netanyahu_addresses_GA_Jewish_Federations_8-Nov-2010); Charley Keyes, “Top Israeli Official: A Nuclear Iran Would Endanger World Stability,” CNN, February 26, 2010, [http://articles.cnn.com/2010-02-26/world/israel.iran.nuclear\\_1\\_barak-iran-nuclear-research?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://articles.cnn.com/2010-02-26/world/israel.iran.nuclear_1_barak-iran-nuclear-research?_s=PM:WORLD).

43. Remarks by President Barack Obama, AIPAC Policy Conference 2012.

In practice, containment is strengthened when combined with deterrence. George Kennan's formulation of containment in "Sources of Soviet Conduct" relied considerably on deterrence as a component of the broader strategy. "The United States," Kennan wrote in 1947, "has in its power to increase enormously the strains under which Soviet policy must operate, to force upon the Kremlin a far greater degree of moderation and circumspection."<sup>44</sup> This approach, Kennan predicted, would eventually lead to the "break up or gradual mellowing of Soviet power."<sup>45</sup> But as retired U.S. Army General Paul Gorman argues, deterrence only limited Soviet offensive tendencies.<sup>46</sup> The strategy did not dissuade Moscow from developing conventional and unconventional military capabilities sufficient to defend itself and launch offensive attacks when it deemed it necessary.<sup>47</sup>

Partly for this reason, Prime Minister Netanyahu and many, if not most, Israeli analysts reject the application of Cold War models of containment against a nuclear Iran. A principal argument centers on the question of whether the Iranian regime is a "rational actor" or whether its revolutionary religious ideology prevents it from acting rationally. Israeli officials and analysts, at least publicly, are largely split over this question. Netanyahu has argued that "the Iranian regime is different. They're driven by a militant ideology that is based on an entirely different set of values."<sup>48</sup> In contrast, Defense Minister Ehud Barak described the Iranians as "radicals but not total *meshuganahs* (crazy people)."<sup>49</sup>

Beyond the debate over Iranian decisionmaking, Israelis believe a containment strategy is inherently flawed because its success depends on multilateral support and cooperation. Israelis point to the repeated violation of international sanctions by European and Asian companies, and doubt that the international community will remain committed to enforcing long-term containment of Iran. Moreover, many Israeli analysts and government officials see a slow evolution toward a more multipolar international order, where the United States is increasingly constrained diplomatically and challenged by regional powers. Israelis point to Turkey's vote against UN Security Council sanctions on Iran in June 2010 as a sign that regional powers are setting independent agendas on critical issues that undermine any multilateral framework to contain the Islamic Republic.<sup>50</sup>

Regardless of their concerns and debates, Israelis see the United States building the elements of a more comprehensive structure to contain a potentially nuclear Iran through the defensive military buildup among Gulf Arab allies. They interpret the announcement of sales of defensive systems, such as the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system to the UAE and Patriot Advanced Capability missile to Kuwait, largely as an indication that "the United States has in some

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44. "X" [George F. Kennan], "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs* 25, no. 4 (July 1947), 582.

45. *Ibid.*

46. General Paul Gorman (ret.), "Military Instruments of Containment," in *Containment: Concept and Policy*, vol. 1, ed. Terry Deibel and John Lewis Gaddis (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1986), 221.

47. *Ibid.*

48. "Transcript: A Conversation with Benjamin Netanyahu," Council on Foreign Relations, July 8, 2010, [http://www.cfr.org/publication/22616/conversation\\_with\\_benjamin\\_netanyahu.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/22616/conversation_with_benjamin_netanyahu.html).

49. Ehud Barak, speech, Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

50. India has also refused to comply with U.S. and European sanctions against Iranian oil exports. Simon Denyer, "India walks tightrope as U.S. tightens Iran sanctions," *Washington Post*, February 14, 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/india-walks-tightrope-as-us-toughens-iran-sanctions/2012/02/10/gIQAwRRVDR\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/india-walks-tightrope-as-us-toughens-iran-sanctions/2012/02/10/gIQAwRRVDR_story.html); Rick Gladstone, "India Explores Economic Opportunities in Iran, Denting Western Sanctions Plan," *New York Times*, February 9, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/10/world/middleeast/india-sees-economic-opportunities-in-iran.html?emc=eta1&pagewanted=print>.

ways reconciled itself to an Iran able to threaten its neighbors with missiles.<sup>51</sup> Although much of the Gulf military buildup is defensive—and although Israel did not lobby against a proposed \$60 billion U.S. arms sale to the Gulf states announced in early 2010—Israeli security officials remain concerned about the sale to the Gulf states of offensive platforms and munitions such as Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) tail kits used to enhance the accuracy of unguided bombs.<sup>52</sup>

Israel is also actively developing its own multilayered missile defense network, which is the most comprehensive and sophisticated in the region. According to most official estimates, its missile defense system will be fully deployed by 2015.<sup>53</sup> The system includes the “David’s Sling” interceptor and the Arrow interceptor—including the Arrow III, aimed at countering ballistic missiles at high altitudes. According to news reports, Israel’s Green Pine radar system has also been linked to the U.S.-operated X-Band radar system and U.S. ship-based Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense system.<sup>54</sup> Israel has also built a national command center resistant to nuclear attack outside of Tel Aviv.<sup>55</sup>

The United States has been actively involved in these efforts. The Obama administration has gone to great lengths to publicly reassure Israelis of the U.S. commitment to Israel’s security and qualitative military edge, both rhetorically and through additional military aid and cooperation on missile defense. President Obama has reaffirmed the 2007 U.S. commitment to provide Israel with \$30 billion in security assistance through 2018, has secured an additional \$205 million in funding for the Iron Dome anti-rocket system, and has agreed to Israel’s acquisition of the advanced F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, which the Bush administration did not support.<sup>56</sup> In March 2012, the U.S. Department of Defense also announced that it would support additional financial support for Israel’s acquisition of up to ten more Iron Dome batteries at a cost of approximately \$500 million.<sup>57</sup>

Some Israelis and Americans have suggested that Israel could play an informal role in a regional defense structure involving the GCC states against a potentially nuclear Iran. During the George W. Bush administration, the notion that overlapping Israeli and Sunni Arab Gulf interests

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51. Jonathan Schachter, Emily B. Landau, and Ephraim Asculai, “Muddling the Iran Issue,” *INSS Insight*, no. 177, April 26, 2010, <http://www.inss.org.il/publications.php?cat=21&incat=&read=3969>.

52. Private conversation with Israeli Ministry of Defense official, Tel Aviv, May 3, 2010.

53. Dan Williams, “Israel burnishes missile shield as Mideast churns,” Reuters, May 12, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/05/12/us-israel-missile-defence-idUSTRE74B4FL20110512>.

54. “Israel’s Arrow Theater Missile Defense,” *Defense Industry Daily*, February 22, 2011, <http://www.defenseindustrydaily.com/israel-successfully-tests-arrow-theater-missile-defense-01571/>.

55. “Israel security cabinet ‘meets in Jerusalem nuclear bunker,’” Agence France-Presse, June 22, 2011. <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hNwArWH6JxTaw7L2ExKYIDhtYPPA?docId=CN.G.43151700fcb9bb91539d9143157eab49.1f1>.

56. The Obama administration judges that the Iron Dome system would help Israel take the necessary risks for peace. This assessment was probably in response to Defense Minister Barak’s discussions with U.S. officials in 2009, during which Barak reportedly argued that Israel could not make concessions on the Palestinian issue until it had the capability to protect itself from rocket attacks. Although Iron Dome may give Israel some protection against short-range rockets, it does not address the larger strategic threat of ballistic missiles and has generated significant criticism in Israel. Some analysts believe that the IDF had been reluctant to speed up production of the system. For a brief history of the controversy, see Barbara Opall-Rome, “Israel Speeds Iron Dome Short-Range Defense System,” *Defense News* 23 (4): 8–8.

57. See Barbara Opall-Rome, “Pentagon Plans Major Funding Boost for Israel’s Iron Dome,” *Defense News*, March 27, 2012, <http://www.defensenews.com/article/20120327/DEFREG02/303270010/Pentagon-Plans-Major-Funding-Boost-Israel-8217-s-Iron-Dome>.

in preventing a nuclear Iran could be leveraged to promote greater cooperation was discussed, but today that notion appears to have stalled, at least publicly. Although Israel could potentially play an informal role in a U.S.-led regional coalition against Iran, it is unlikely to go beyond that in the absence of any tangible progress toward an Israeli-Palestinian political agreement.

## Entente

Even before President Obama entered office, Israeli officials were skeptical about the U.S. president's pledge to engage Iran in order to resolve outstanding differences through dialogue. For one, they see such an approach as a projection of weakness rather than strength. Israeli officials had little choice but to acquiesce, though they sought to shape the contours of the initiative by publicly and privately pressing the United States to adopt a series of benchmarks for compliance, a clear timeline rather than open-ended negotiations, and close coordination with the P5+1 on a list of immediate sanctions should the talks fail.<sup>58</sup>

Many Israeli analysts do not completely reject U.S.-Iranian engagement and negotiations, but they do reject U.S. *tactics* as simplistic—in sharp contrast to the Iranian approach, which they see as sophisticated and determined. As one analyst argued, the United States needs to employ more pressure and tough bargaining to demonstrate to Iran that it is strong, determined, and “in control of the situation.”<sup>59</sup> Moreover, these analysts consider agreements that require international oversight and verification of Iran's nuclear activities as dependent on multilateral cooperation and, as such, prone to the same problems that surround containment.

This kind of U.S. diplomatic approach centered on multilateral negotiation is not new. Israelis closely watched years of diplomacy and negotiations between the United States and North Korea under President George W. Bush, who eventually acquiesced to a nuclear-armed North Korea in the Agreed Framework. Moreover, the Bush administration provided waivers to European and other companies doing business with Iran in violation of U.S. and UN sanctions. From Israel's perspective, the U.S. diplomatic record of accomplishment on this account under both Republican and Democratic administrations has been lacking.

When it comes to negotiated agreements with Iran, Israelis are inherently skeptical. Many Israeli analysts interpret a fuel swap agreement, such as the October 2009 offer and May 2010 Brazilian-Turkish understanding, as an Iranian gain, because such agreements lend legitimacy to Iran's domestic uranium enrichment program and contradict the five United Nations Security Council resolutions that call on Iran to suspend enrichment. Israelis also believe that focusing on the Tehran Research Reactor diverts attention from the core issue of Iran's nuclear weapons program. Besides, they also contended that such a deal would only delay Iran's advance to nuclear capability.<sup>60</sup>

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58. Barak Ravid, “Israel to Present Clinton with ‘Red Lines’ on Talks with Iran,” *Haaretz.com*, March 3, 2009, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/israel-to-present-clinton-with-red-lines-on-talks-with-iran-1.271282>.

59. Emily B. Landau, “The Iranian Quagmire: How to Move Forward,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 66, no. 6 (November/December 2010): 115–120, <http://bos.sagepub.com/content/66/6/115.full.pdf+html>.

60. Ephraim Asculai and Emily B. Landau, “The Nuclear Fuel Deal: A Gift to Iran?,” *INSS Insight*, no. 184, May 20, 2010, <http://www.inss.org.il/publications.php?cat=21&incat=&read=4077>.

## Conclusion

Israel has always sought to manage its security challenges, yet it now searches for a solution to the Iranian threat. As one retired air force general still active in policy debates declared, “Israel is dependent on a strong United States that can solve problems and influence events.”<sup>61</sup> Yet the solutions Israelis seek appear increasingly at odds with the direction of U.S. policy. A unilateral Israeli military strike could have damaging consequences for U.S.-Israeli cooperation and Israel’s diplomatic standing worldwide. Israel, like other governments, will continue trying to influence the shape of U.S. Gulf security architecture and strategy, but its ability will likely remain limited.

The future poses significant dilemmas for Israel and the United States. None of the strategies discussed above—deterrence, containment, and entente—as well as a military strike necessarily solve the threat of a potentially nuclear threat. Every strategy poses complicated dilemmas for Israel and the United States, which means that managing Israeli expectations and actions will become more complex in the months and years ahead. If Iran acquires nuclear weapons or develops a nuclear weapons capability, it would be a major blow to U.S. credibility in the Middle East. It would deepen the cycle of mistrust between the United States and Israel at a time of heightened instability. Moreover, Israel will become more vulnerable and dependent on the United States for military cooperation, ballistic missile defense, and political support at a time when its instincts will demand greater independence and freedom of action to address its military threats.

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61. Private discussion with retired Israeli Air Force general, Tel Aviv, May 4, 2010.

# 5

## THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL STATES

Jon B. Alterman

Iran is a large country in a neighborhood of small countries, and Iran makes its neighbors nervous. For five centuries, the Arab leaders in the Gulf have tried to work with and manipulate outside powers to further their own interests, often seeking to use the foreign presence to curb Persian influence on the Gulf's southern shores. Long before states took root there, tribesmen made pacts with Portuguese, British, Ottomans, and others that promised to secure the outsiders' interests in order to advance the tribesmen's own. In this effort, each country in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)<sup>1</sup> considers its bilateral relationship with the United States its most important international relationship and a vital buffer against Iranian ambitions. While the GCC provides a forum for discussion, it is the U.S. troops in the Gulf, and the personal commitment of U.S. presidents, that provides external security.

While the GCC states vary in terms of their power and capabilities, each country is dwarfed in its relationship with the United States. Partly as a consequence, the instinct among many leaders of these countries is to urge the United States to be strong while simultaneously balancing against U.S. actions and mollifying their Iranian neighbor. The calculus is partly that of small states that do not want to alienate their big neighbors. It is also the consequence of their belief that the Iranian threat is enduring rather than fleeting, and that it will persist long after the world moves away from oil as a principal energy source and the United States leaves the Gulf. Because of this dynamic, it seems almost certain that the leaders of the GCC states will simultaneously complain to Americans that U.S. actions are too weak while signaling to Iranians that they are too strong, regardless of what those actions are. Further, it is hard to imagine any state in the region taking steps that go significantly beyond an international consensus, despite the fact that the consensus is the product of Western states situated far away from Iran and far less affected by Iranian military activities than those in the Gulf.

Three things are worth pointing out at the outset. The first is that understanding the true feelings of these governments is largely a speculative exercise. Decisions on foreign policy are closely held at the highest levels of the Gulf leadership with no public consultation. Leaders of Gulf states are often mannered when talking with Americans, almost seeming as if they are calibrating their messages to achieve the desired response rather than to give insight into their own thinking. While it is worth paying attention to the words spoken in private, those words need to be supplemented with attention to the actions the leaders take, as well as to the parameters of the public debate that they allow to exist.

Second, there is a tremendous range of views within the GCC and within individual countries as well. While the rulers' decisions on strategy are rarely subject to debate, they are often vaguely

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1. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) consists of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

stated, allowing a diversity of views to persist within and among countries. When the United Arab Emirates' ambassador to the United States, for example, told an Aspen Institute audience in July 2010 that a military strike was preferable to an Iranian nuclear weapons capability,<sup>2</sup> he was not building on a record of Emirati government statements. Nevertheless, there is a widely shared belief that he reflected the sentiments of the leadership—a belief reinforced by the WikiLeaks revelations.<sup>3</sup> In those previously secret U.S. diplomatic cables, Gulf leaders directly and indirectly called for dramatic U.S. action against Iran.<sup>4</sup>

Although the publicity surrounding those cables has influenced the public debate in the GCC countries, it has not shaped that debate. There remains a broad public disinclination to engage too deeply in a public analysis of security strategy. Further, among publics, there seems to be less certainty than among leaderships that an Iranian nuclear weapon would be devastating to regional security.<sup>5</sup>

Third, the United States seizes on the immediacy of these issues while many of the Gulf countries see them through an historical prism. It is tempting to see the present Gulf Arab agitation as a reaction to the current leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran, that country's efforts to build regional influence, and its apparent drive to pursue a nuclear weapons option. Those are certainly the issues that drive Iran up the priority list in the United States. Yet, memories in the Gulf stretch back much farther, and the unease goes much deeper. One GCC leader speaking privately in 2007 dismissed talk of a sectarian rift threatening to rip apart the Middle East, saying Sunni-Shi'a tensions in Iraq had little to do with religion. "You don't understand," he said, "the Iranians have only been Shia for five hundred years. They have been Persians for millennia."<sup>6</sup>

## Responses to the Threat Environment

Although the Gulf Arab states have security concerns aside from Iran—including concerns with internal stability and with balancing Saudi Arabia's regional weight—Iran is overwhelmingly the most significant external threat for each of them. For some, such as Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, there is an intense fear that Iran will use its ties to their Shia communities to undermine those countries from within.<sup>7</sup> Some Gulf Arabs argue that was precisely what happened when protesters rioted in Bahrain in the spring of 2011, leading neighboring governments to send in

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2. Yousef Al Otaiba, Elliot Gerson, and Jeffrey Goldberg, "In Conversation: UAE Ambassador Yousef Al Otaiba" (event, Aspen Ideas Festival, Aspen Institute, Washington, DC, July 2010), [http://www.aifestival.org/sites/default/files/transcripts/aif10\\_022.doc](http://www.aifestival.org/sites/default/files/transcripts/aif10_022.doc).

3. See, for example, leaked cable Abu Dhabi 1725, April 29, 2006, republished at "A Selection From the Cache of Diplomatic Dispatches," *New York Times*, June 19, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/11/28/world/20101128-cables-viewer.html#report/iran-06ABUDHABI1725>.

4. Ulf Laessing and Raissa Kasolowsky, "Analysis: Wikileaks expose hidden Gulf views on Iran," Reuters, November 29, 2010, <http://af.reuters.com/article/energyOilNews/idAFLDE6AS03L20101129>.

5. In a 2010 poll, Shibley Telhami found that even among Saudis who believed Iran was pursuing nuclear weapons, 50 percent said they thought Iran had the right to its nuclear program. Only 16 percent of Emiratis agreed. Shibley Telhami, "2010 Arab Public Opinion Poll," Brookings Institution, August 5, 2010, [http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2010/0805\\_arab\\_opinion\\_poll\\_telhami.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2010/0805_arab_opinion_poll_telhami.aspx).

6. Private discussion with Emirati royal #1, January 2007.

7. See, for example, James Drummond, "Sunni-led Arab states on alert over Shia Iran," *Financial Times*, September 23, 2010, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/cde302c6-c732-11df-aeb1-00144feab49a.html>.

troops.<sup>8</sup> Others, such as the United Arab Emirates, fear that Iran poses a conventional or unconventional military threat and that their country is a convenient soft target to harm U.S. interests. All share a deep fear of the blowback from any military action.

However widely shared the GCC states' views of Iran are, each takes a slightly different approach to the perceived Iranian threat. Saudi Arabia's and Abu Dhabi's regional orientations emphasize deterrence, and each has a recent record of weapons purchases to prove it. The recently proposed sale of \$60 billion in U.S. weapons to Saudi Arabia—not including a widely rumored sale of littoral combat ships in the works<sup>9</sup>—is the largest foreign weapons sale in U.S. history, dwarfing the recent Emirati purchase of a nearly \$7 billion missile defense system. Iran's actions were clearly the instigator for both sales, and Iran's leadership is clearly the intended recipient of the message that the sale conveys.

Qatar's and Oman's orientations are toward engagement, as is that of the UAE emirate of Dubai, whose annual trade with Iran topped \$10 billion in 2010.<sup>10</sup> Qatar's interest in a huge gas field it shares with Iran clearly helps to shape the small country's orientation; so too does Qatar's population of fewer than 300,000 nationals, thrust up against a Saudi Arabia more than 65 times its size. Qatar seeks broad engagement, not just with the Iranians, but with the United States as well, which it keeps close by hosting the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) base in Al Udeid. Dubai has historically close ties to Iran in terms of both trade and people. At any given time, in fact, there are probably more Iranians in Dubai than native Dubaians. Even so, those ties have chilled somewhat since 2009, a victim of rising international sanctions against Iran and an economic downturn that makes Dubai more reliant on energy-rich Abu Dhabi.

Kuwait and Bahrain fall somewhere in the middle; the two small and often nervous countries rely heavily on the United States to deter aggression against their borders. The United States came to Kuwait's aid when Saddam Hussein invaded in 1990; Bahrain's leaders have demonstrated unease about a population that is 70 percent Shia and has seemingly grown weary of the island's Sunni-led government. The government seems to relish the security that comes from hosting the U.S. Fifth Fleet.

Seen this way, the GCC states themselves cover a whole range of approaches to Iran that the United States itself is bound to consider. And yet the small GCC states differ from the United States in important ways: To a degree, each seeks to employ engagement, containment, and deterrence simultaneously, albeit each in different measures. Whereas the United States has the power (and perceived necessity) to choose, the very weaknesses of the GCC states mean they can (and, in their view, *should*) avoid unnecessarily limiting choices. Equally important, each of these states appears averse to the United States adopting a modulated policy similar to its own. This aversion appears to arise in part from the belief that such a policy would do little to stem Iran's objectionable behavior. A modulating U.S. policy would also make it all the more difficult for the GCC states to artfully balance between Iran and the United States, as they have been doing for some time.

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8. See, for example, "Gulf States Reject Iran 'Interference,'" Al Arabiya News, April 3, 2011, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/04/03/144037.html>.

9. Otto Kreisher, "Lockheed Gives LCS Status Report," *Seapower*, April 13, 2011, <http://www.seairspace.org/2011/stories/20110408-lockheedlcs.html>.

10. Kambiz Foroohar, "Dubai Helps Iran Evade Sanctions as Smugglers Ignore U.S. Laws," Bloomberg, January 25, 2010, [http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=av5smtYe\\_DDA](http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=av5smtYe_DDA).



## The Nature of the Threat

Despite their disdain for Iran, Gulf regional elites are virtually unanimous in the view that the country represents their greatest security threat. As one senior Saudi prince put it memorably, “Iran is a paper tiger with steel claws.”<sup>11</sup> Even so, these elites are divided on how serious the implications of a dramatic change in Iranian nuclear capability would be. A senior Kuwaiti official argues that a nuclear Iran does not change much: “If someone already has a gun pointed at your head,” he asked in two separate conversations, “what difference does it make if he has a cannon pointed at your back?”<sup>12</sup> Other officials aver that an Iranian weapon would almost certainly spur a nuclear race throughout the region. Speaking with Western researchers, a senior Saudi diplomat said in 2006 that the best way for the Gulf to respond to an Iranian nuclear capability would be “with another nuclear weapon.”<sup>13</sup> “We are naked,” a Saudi prince complained not long ago. “We are surrounded by a country that already has a nuclear capability [Israel], and a country that is building it [Iran].”<sup>14</sup>

GCC states’ military capabilities remain relatively modest vis-à-vis Iran, with Iran’s superior manpower challenging the neighbors’ more advanced weapons systems. Iran has perhaps three times as many men under arms as Saudi Arabia, and the smaller GCC states’ armies are a mere fraction of that.<sup>15</sup> Although much of the Iranian equipment is outdated, Iran’s innovative patterns of warfare, including “swarming” operations and an apparent embrace of unconventional and asymmetric attacks, make them a serious military concern for their neighbors. In some cases, Gulf leaders’ war-fighting strategies consist of merely seeking to be able to protect their realms for a few days until help arrives—although given the relatively small areas and concentrated populations of most of the GCC states, even a few hours of attack could lay waste to an entire population.

For most GCC states, however, their fears are not principally military. Rather, they fear that an unencumbered nuclear Iran would bully them on a variety of political and diplomatic issues, support domestic subversion, and weigh in on everything from oil prices to domestic governance.<sup>16</sup> Their fears are confined mostly to the region. As the prominent Saudi columnist Abderrahman al-Rashed explained, “In fact, we are not afraid of the Iranian nuclear bomb as a weapon, because it will not be used militarily. Instead, it will be used as a means to change the rules of the game.”<sup>17</sup> Al-Rashed judges that no country would dare do battle with a nuclear-armed Iran, giving the

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11. Private discussion with Saudi royal #1, May 2010.

12. Private discussions with Kuwaiti royal #1, April 2006 and January 2007.

13. Cited in Dalia Dassa Kaye and Frederic M. Wehrey, “A Nuclear Iran: The Reactions of Neighbors,” *Survival* 49, no. 2 (Summer 2007), fn 20.

14. Private discussion with Saudi royal #3, May 2010.

15. Anthony H. Cordesman, “Saudi National Security and the Saudi-U.S. Strategic Partnership: Part Two: The Conventional Military Balance, Missile Warfare, and the Impact of Weapons of Mass Destruction,” working draft, CSIS, April 28, 2010, [http://csis.org/files/publication/100517\\_SaudiBrief\\_2\\_MilConv28.4.10.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/100517_SaudiBrief_2_MilConv28.4.10.pdf).

16. See, for example, Greg Gause reporting on his conversations in Saudi Arabia in “Saudi Arabia: Domestic Dynamics and Regional Politics,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 2010, [http://csis.org/files/attachments/100601\\_GRT\\_Summary\\_Gause.pdf](http://csis.org/files/attachments/100601_GRT_Summary_Gause.pdf). A discussion of the perceived nature of the Iranian threat also appears in *Chain Reaction: Avoiding a Nuclear Arms Race in the Middle East*, Report to the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 110th Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, February 2008), 11–12.

17. Abderrahman al-Rashed, “Lasna Khai’feen min Qanbalaḥ Iran al-Nuwawiyah” (We Are Not Afraid of an Iranian Nuclear Bomb), *Asharq al-Awsat* (London), February 21, 2010.

country the ability to wreak havoc with impunity. He continues, “We do not fear an Iranian bomb, but we fear the mentality of the current regime in Iran, which disperses its funds to Hezbollah and Hamas and extremist movements in Bahrain, Iraq, and Yemen, and to the Muslim Brotherhood, and supports everything extremist in the region.”<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, one senior Emirati official argued in May 2010 that Iran has established beachheads in southern Lebanon, Gaza, and Yemen, and has sleeper cells in Bahrain, the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. Iraq, he argued, “is a done deal.”<sup>19</sup> A sober-minded Lebanese academic asked, “Who would dare to question that Iran is part of the Middle East or deny the substantial role it plays in reshaping it?... The crossing of the nuclear threshold is intended to solidify that role and have the world recognize it.”<sup>20</sup>

Even Arab nationalists favoring a broader rapprochement between the Arab world and Iran are discomfited by Iranian behavior. A pro-engagement analysis noted that “Iran’s historically complex hostility towards the Arabs has at times cloaked itself in sectarianism while at other times has donned a nationalist garb,” yet the hostility itself remained indisputable.<sup>21</sup> However, the authors blamed Iran’s actions in part on their own governments, suggesting that

[t]he absence of an Arab position defending joint Arab interests and security... leads to interventionist and hegemonic policies motivated by memories of a burdened past and informed by a distinctly Iranian perspective of the future which does not take account of either Arab interests, or the identity of the Arab State and its citizenry, as demonstrated by the case of Iraq.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, even amidst a desire to make common cause with Iran against Western hegemony in the Middle East is a broad Arab concern that Iran is both foreign and hostile, a potential ally but a natural opponent.

Part of the difference in perspectives between the GCC states and the United States, it seems, is a consequence of different views of history. In the 1970s, the Nixon administration pursued a “Twin Pillars” strategy in the Gulf that sought to ward off possible Soviet proxy influence by building up Saudi Arabia and the Shah’s Iran as the co-guarantors of Gulf security following the British withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971. For many Americans, the interregnum of approximately a decade was a bright spot, ended by the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the Iraq-Iran War, which lasted most of a decade. As one former U.S. governmental official observed in 1981, “It is the large degree of commonality of interests and purpose between Iran and Saudi Arabia throughout much of the last decade that impresses the observer... Massive importation of arms and mutual military development did not bring about deep hostility or conflict between the two countries, while the

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18. Ibid.

19. Private discussion with Emirati royal #1, May 2010.

20. Ghassan Salamé, “Middle East, Old and New,” *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 3, no. 1 (January 2010), 4. Salamé is a former minister of culture in Lebanon and was the senior political adviser to the United Nations in Iraq.

21. “The Arabs and Iran,” Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, January 26, 2011, 3, <http://english.dohainstitute.org/Home/Details/5ea4b31b-155d-4a9f-8f4d-a5b428135cd5/9d0b522a-70b8-4781-ad3f-e58349397371>.

22. Ibid.

absence of formal machinery for the promotion of regional security did not preclude co-ordination and tacit co-operation.”<sup>23</sup>

The United States had a small military presence in the Gulf—with rarely more than a few hundred uniformed U.S. military personnel in Saudi Arabia at any given time—and few threats. The U.S. Fifth Fleet, which took over the British naval base in Bahrain after the British withdrew from the Gulf in 1971, typically posted fewer than 100 sailors ashore through the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>24</sup>

For many of the GCC states, however, the Twin Pillars strategy left them under constant threat. Iran’s occupation of three UAE islands in 1973 (and their continuing occupation since) was a sign that the Gulf states’ security relied on precisely that country that the Gulf states themselves were most worried about. Earlier in the century, it took a significant international effort in the early 1950s to coax the Saudi withdrawal from the Buraimi Oasis on what became the Saudi/Omani/Emirati border—and Saudi Arabia has emerged as the other principal arbiter of regional security. In the eyes of many Gulf leaders, the 1970s do not represent some golden age, but instead one in which the fox was guarding the henhouse. The fear of Soviet expansion had never much motivated the Gulf Arabs as it had motivated the United States. Instead, the smaller Gulf states feared they were losing an external guarantor, leaving them at the mercy of the Gulf’s larger, and never wholly friendly, regional powers.

## Evaluating Engagement

Seen this way, the Iranian revolution did not introduce so much new vulnerability as it amplified a long-standing one. Despite what the GCC states see as the enormity of the Iranian threat—or perhaps because of it—Gulf Arab states feel they have relatively few tools at their disposal to thwart such overwhelming Iranian influence. “The UAE is small,” a senior prince said, “and Iran has links from China to Chile.”<sup>25</sup>

A basic GCC response to threats from Iran is engagement with Iran, which all of the states do to some extent. Although the GCC states bankrolled Saddam Hussein’s bloody war against Iran through much of the 1980s, GCC-Iranian rapprochement began soon after the war ended. Ties warmed slowly through the 1990s and ticked upward when Mohammed Khatami became Iran’s president in 1997. By 2001, Iran and Saudi Arabia had a joint economic commission, a joint industrial committee, cooperation on oil production, and even a security pact. Every GCC state maintains an embassy in Iran, and Iran maintains an embassy in every GCC state. According to one close observer of the Gulf states, the GCC and Iran improved ties in the late 1990s and early 2000s because they had a convergence on three sets of issues: challenges at home, similar views on regional conflicts, and a “common disillusionment with the United States.”<sup>26</sup>

Saddam Hussein’s fall from power in 2003 eliminated a common threat that bound the sides of the Gulf together, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s 2005 election to the Iranian presidency increased

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23. Richard Haass, quoted in Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf: A Cultural Genealogy* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 14.

24. Jeffrey Macris, *The Politics and Security of the Gulf: Anglo-American Hegemony and the Shaping of a Region* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

25. Private discussion with Emirati royal #1, May 2010.

26. Gwenn Okruhlik, “Saudi Arabian–Iranian Relations: External Rapprochement and Internal Consolidation,” *Middle East Policy* 10, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 118–120.

the perception of many GCC leaders that Iran was becoming more hostile to their interests—a conclusion they saw borne out by the rise of Shia parties in Iraq and what the GCC leaders viewed as the dispossession of their Sunni allies.

Even so, the GCC is careful not to close the door on Iranian ties. Bilateral trade and high-level visits increase the value of positive bilateral relations to Iran, Gulf leaders argue, and they create a series of incentives for advancing positive relations. A security adviser to an Emirati royal explained that the Emirates has “a mature relationship with Iran,” and that the UAE government talks with Iran “more than any other country.”<sup>27</sup> In a January 2010 meeting between the Iranian and Omani foreign ministers, the latter expressed a willingness to expand ties with Iran in economy, industry, development, and trade.<sup>28</sup> For all of the Saudi fear of Iran, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia invited President Ahmadinejad to come to Saudi Arabia for pilgrimage in 2007, making him the first Iranian president ever to make such a visit as the guest of the Saudi king.<sup>29</sup>

At the same time, GCC officials throughout the Gulf have expressed concern that extensive U.S. engagement with Iran could threaten GCC interests and perhaps could result in the sacrifice of GCC interests in order to appease Iranian appetites. Emirati academic Ibtisam al-Kitbi told one reporter, “By negotiating with Tehran, Washington is trying to sell us [the GCC countries]. After sidelining Iran for decades, the United States is now facilitating the return of Iran into the mainstream of regional and international politics. In fact, Iran is trying to reorient this region away from Washington, which Washington itself is facilitating.”<sup>30</sup>

To be sure, the Gulf states fear that should there be a U.S.-Iranian rapprochement, the United States would trade away their interests in exchange for Iranian favors. The UAE foreign minister reportedly “demanded a definite commitment” from the Obama administration in the spring of 2009 that it would neither strike a secret deal with Iran nor make any agreement that compromised the interests of the GCC states.<sup>31</sup> This fear long pre-dated the Obama administration’s arrival in office. In a strong denunciation of Democratic presidential candidates’ determination in late 2007 to open talks with Iran, a prominent Saudi editor was incredulous. In an essay entitled, “Over What Will Washington Negotiate with Iran?” Tariq al-Homayed laid out the bill of particulars:

Iran occupies the islands of UAE in the Persian Gulf, and its agents tear apart Beirut and seek to restore the Syrian occupation under Iranian tutelage. Tehran occupies Iraq’s heart and its extremities, and does the inconceivable through its men in power.

Tehran is the financial backbone of Hamas, which split the Palestinian ranks, yet Iran has started talking on behalf of the Palestinian issue....Iran is intervening in every election in the

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27. Private Discussion with Adviser #1 to an Emirati royal, May 2010.

28. “Omani FM Highlights Iran’s Regional Importance,” Fars News Agency, January 13, 2010, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8810231279>.

29. “Abdullah, Ahmedinejad Hold Wide-Ranging Talks,” *Arab News*, December 21, 2007, <http://archive.arabnews.com/?page=1&section=0&article=104858&d=21&m=12&y=2007>.

30. Meena Janardhan, “US-Iran Detente Viewed With Caution,” Inter Press Service, July 25, 2008, <http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=43308>.

31. Nicole Stracke, “GCC and the Challenge of U.S.-Iran Negotiations,” Gulf Research Center, March 5, 2009, [http://www.grc.ae/index.php?frm\\_action=view\\_newsletter\\_web&frm\\_module=contents&int\\_content\\_id=60339&sec\\_code=grcanalysis&show\\_web\\_list\\_link=1](http://www.grc.ae/index.php?frm_action=view_newsletter_web&frm_module=contents&int_content_id=60339&sec_code=grcanalysis&show_web_list_link=1). See also Paul Aarts and Joris van Duijne, “Saudi Arabia: After U.S.-Iranian Détente: Left in the Lurch,” *Middle East Policy* 16, no. 3 (Fall 2009), <http://www.mepec.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/saudi-arabia-after-us-iranian-detente-left-lurch>.

Arab world, pumping huge amounts of money to impose a reality contrary to the nature of these states... Tehran is addicted to planting its agents in the Arab world under any pretext.

Is that all? Of course not! Iran is home to some of the al Qaeda leadership, and it destabilizes the relations of Pakistan and Afghanistan. And more of this and that, and even more dangerous, Iran steers the Arab world toward sectarianism, which gives the region's conflicts the disguise of religion, sinking the whole region into a sea of dark blood.<sup>32</sup>

Al-Homayed concludes: "Negotiating with Iran, and its announcement now, is nothing but a mistaken message to the Iranian system, and a sign that our region's crises will be prolonged. It is also an unmistakable sign of future concern in the event the Democrats come to the White House, bringing with them this political absurdity."<sup>33</sup>

Condemnations of U.S. engagement with Iran are not universal. In the spring of 2010, a wide variety of senior interlocutors in the UAE and Saudi Arabia expressed their approval of the way the Obama administration reached out to the Iranian government. That approval carried with it two reservations, however. The first is their fear that the U.S. government might actually believe the promises of the Iranians, which in their judgment would be a mistake.<sup>34</sup> The second is that the United States will make some deal with Iran behind its back. In January 2009, a senior Saudi foreign ministry official told a gathering of Western diplomats in Riyadh, "Please write this down. Whatever is discussed with the Iranians, we must be kept informed! Any negotiations with the Iranians must take into account the interests of Saudi Arabia; otherwise, we will not accept it! We should be told—in advance!—of what you plan to say."<sup>35</sup> More than a year later, the issue continues to be neuralgic for the Gulf states. Shortly after Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited the Gulf, a columnist writing in the pan-Arab newspaper *al-Hayat* complained,

The United States found no need to discuss the Iranian nuclear issue with its Arab partners. It rejected their demand to join the Geneva talks. It considered that they would approve of whatever agreements the big boys and Tehran reach, even if they agree on sharing influence in the entire Arab region, or even if their negotiations reach a dead-end and they are left with no choice but to resort to war, and to make use of their military bases and their fleets scattered in the region, and if chaos and destruction prevail in Arab homelands, diseases spread and the air fills with depleted and non-depleted nuclear radiation.<sup>36</sup>

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32. Tariq al-Homayed, "Ala Madha Tafawwad Washington Tahrān?" (Over What Will Washington Negotiate with Iran?) *Asharq al-Awsat* (London), October 15, 2007.

33. *Ibid.*

34. According to U.S. diplomatic cables that originally appeared on WikiLeaks's main site, the Amir of Qatar told visiting Senator John Kerry in February 2010, "[B]ased on 30 years of experience with the Iranians, they will give you 100 words. Trust only one of the 100." Josh Rogin, "WikiLeaked: John Kerry calls for Israel to cede Golan Heights and East Jerusalem," *The Cable* (blog), *Foreign Policy*, November 29, 2010, [http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/11/29/wikileaks\\_john\\_kerry\\_calls\\_for\\_israel\\_to\\_cede\\_golan\\_heights\\_and\\_east\\_jerusalem](http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/11/29/wikileaks_john_kerry_calls_for_israel_to_cede_golan_heights_and_east_jerusalem). This caution came shortly after the Qatari prime minister told Deputy Secretary of Energy Dan Poneman, "[The Iranians] lie to us, and we lie to them." "US embassy cables: Qatari prime minister: 'Iranians lie to us,'" *Guardian*, November 28, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/240782>.

35. "US embassy cables: Saudi official warns Gulf states may go nuclear," *Guardian*, November 28, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/189229>.

36. Mustafa Zayn, "Ala al-'Alaqat al-'Arabiyah-al-Amrikiyah" (On Arab-American Relations), *al-Hayat* (London), December 11, 2010.

Owned by the assistant to the minister of defense in Saudi Arabia and a senior royal, *al-Hayat* is often an accurate reflection of official Saudi views.

## Evaluating Containment

Despite their concerns, GCC officials rely on engaging Iran as a default strategy, while urging the United States to contain Iran more robustly than it has done before. Most GCC governments view sanctions as ineffectual.<sup>37</sup> They themselves generally continue to trade robustly with the Islamic Republic, generally within the permissible bounds of UN sanctions.<sup>38</sup> Whether their private views accord with their public views is a matter of some debate. For example, some observers suspect that China's acquiescence to additional sanctions against Iran in June 2010 had something to do with sharply increasing Chinese oil imports from Saudi Arabia, which now far exceed those from Iran.<sup>39</sup>

While the details have remained classified, the United States has stationed Patriot missiles in every GCC state but Oman, and it is pursuing the sale of more than \$120 billion of additional U.S. weapons to the region's governments over the next decade.<sup>40</sup> The departure of U.S. forces from Iraq and the impending drawdown of forces from Afghanistan raise questions about what the residual U.S. troop presence will be. U.S. diplomats speak quietly about defense understandings that fall short of a formal treaty but that reassure the Gulf states of U.S. commitment.

Yet the region's governments also are wary of seeming too close to the United States as it presses Iran. As two analysts observe, "The Gulf states have concluded that antagonizing Iran by siding fully and overtly with the United States now will bring no substantial benefits and will instead likely yield more tensions in the future." They observe that the point person for GCC complaints about Iranian nuclear activities is generally the secretary general of the GCC, "essentially a bureaucrat" in their words, rather than the ministers or rulers of the GCC states.<sup>41</sup>

In many ways, the most attractive kind of cooperation with the United States for GCC states is that which can be passed off as nothing to do with containing Iran whatsoever. Joint training exercises on land and sea both burnish GCC militaries' skills and improve their ability to operate with U.S. and other Western partners. So too do out-of-area operations, as UAE troops experi-

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37. See Abeer Alam, "Saudi Minister Plays Down Iran Sanctions," *Financial Times* (London), February 16, 2010.

38. Nader Habibi, "The Impact of Sanctions on Iran-GCC Economic Relations," Crown Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Brandeis University, November 2010, <http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/MEB45.pdf>.

39. Dan De Luce, "Saudi, UAE ready to press China on Iran sanctions: US," Agence France-Presse, March 11, 2010, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jLwzoSU7nqwXxbLVDEV1cbVhZtYw>.

40. On the Patriot missile stationing, Hassan Fattah, "Arab States, Wary of Iran, Add to Their Arsenals but Still Lean on the U.S.," *New York Times*, February 23, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/23/world/middleeast/23gulf.html?pagewanted=print>; and Elizabeth Bumiller, "Gates Meets with Emirates Crown Prince," *New York Times*, December 9, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/10/world/middleeast/10gates.html>. On the U.S. arms sales to the region, see "Emirates Boost U.S. Arms Purchases," United Press International, November 12, 2010, [http://www.upi.com/Business\\_News/Security-Industry/2010/11/12/Emirates-boost-US-arms-purchases/UPI-15931289585741/](http://www.upi.com/Business_News/Security-Industry/2010/11/12/Emirates-boost-US-arms-purchases/UPI-15931289585741/).

41. Emile El-Hokayem and Matteo Legrenzi, *The Arab Gulf States in the Shadow of the Iranian Nuclear Challenge*, working paper (Washington, DC: Henry L. Stimson Center, May 26, 2006), 9–10.

ence when they operate in Afghanistan, and as UAE and Qatari troops experienced operating in Libya. When a crisis exercise uses a domestic attack scenario, for example, the Gulf states argue that the exercise has little to do with the Iranians. The GCC states all share an interest in keeping the United States close by, and it is hard to imagine any of the smaller Gulf states seeking an end to the U.S. presence on their soil after U.S. combat operations in the region end. Perhaps the greatest Gulf investment in a sustained U.S. presence is the purchase of weapons systems themselves. Because any major weapons system carries with it a heavy need for both training and maintenance far into the future, some Gulf states view the purchase of such equipment, combined with the prolonged stationing of U.S. troops in the region, as an important insurance policy. Just as U.S. troops in Western Europe served as a trip wire against a Soviet advance, so too do U.S. troops in the Gulf protect against Iranian malfeasance.

## Evaluating Deterrence

Over the years, U.S. policymakers have relied on a comfortable and convenient combination of statements and agreements to reassure GCC allies and deter Iranian action. Especially in a world of constrained budgets, using words is infinitely cheaper than deploying a strike group, a battalion, or an air wing. On a couple of notable occasions—during her 2008 presidential campaign and more recently in 2009—Secretary of State Clinton floated the possibility of providing more formal assurances to Gulf allies as part of a response to Iranian actions.<sup>42</sup> Former Secretary of State James Baker went even further, suggesting that the United States should retarget its nuclear missiles toward Iran as a sign of U.S. seriousness about the Iranian nuclear program. In Baker's view, "Those people may be flaky and crazy, but they are not so flaky and crazy that they want themselves blown off the face of the earth."<sup>43</sup> He added, "We would then have to extend our nuclear umbrella to Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, and, of course, Israel," while also supporting tougher sanctions and direct dialogue.<sup>44</sup>

If the Iranians evaluated such statements as credible, the putative actions could have a strong effect on Iranian behavior. Yet it is far from clear that the GCC states would regard the U.S. deterrent *commitment* as credible: Actions speak louder than words. The United States was unable to persuade France that it was serious about protecting Western Europe in the Cold War, and France went ahead and developed its own nuclear weapon.<sup>45</sup> With persistent reports of Gulf Arab support for extremism and anti-Americanism in the rest of the Muslim world, some pertinent questions arise: "Would the United States really come to the aid of such an ambiguous ally? Even if it did, would U.S. public opinion sustain these policies in the long term?"<sup>46</sup> A British analysis from 2005

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42. Glenn Kessler, "Analysts Divided on Clinton's Arab Defense Plan," *Washington Post*, May 4, 2008; and Indira Lakshmanan, "Clinton Says U.S. Works on Gulf Defense Umbrella," Bloomberg, July 22, 2009, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=a4dFvxZRBdCg>.

43. Brent Gardner-Smith, "Baker Suggests Rattling Nukes at Iran," *Aspen Daily News*, July 3, 2009.

44. *Ibid.*

45. Kathleen J. McInnis, "Extended Deterrence: The U.S. Credibility Gap in the Middle East," *Washington Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 179.

46. *Ibid.* One analyst even wonders if Saudi Arabia would seek a nuclear weapon to deter a U.S. attack on Saudi Arabia following another 9/11-type incident. See Richard L. Russell, "Peering Over the Horizon: Arab Threat Perception and Security Responses to a Nuclear-Ready Iran" (paper prepared for the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center, Washington, DC, March 15, 2004), 8.

captured the issue well when it dryly observed, “Doubts about American reliability would probably diminish Saudi ardor.”<sup>47</sup>

For the GCC states, the most troubling situation would be if U.S. declarations provoked Iran yet did not represent firm U.S. commitments. As Mitchell Reiss notes, in the 1980s Western Europeans felt that the Reagan administration’s escalating conflict with the Soviet Union put them at risk. Reiss also suggests that a more vocal U.S. posture on Iran would highlight the governments’ reliance on the United States and hostility to a fellow Muslim power, undermining their domestic legitimacy. Either outcome would be tremendously damaging to regional governments.<sup>48</sup>

In fact, the problem with deterrence is that it is most persuasive when it is unambiguous; yet the Gulf states crave ambiguity as they navigate their course through their publics, the regional audience, and their allies. A 2009 RAND study cautioned:

A U.S. paradigm that views Saudi Arabia as a confrontational proxy against Iran, with the expectation that Riyadh will employ all levers of influence at its disposal, does not reflect regional reality or the pattern of interaction between the two states. Riyadh has a demonstrated tendency to hedge its bets, to avoid taking stark policy decisions, and to keep multiple options open—especially in the context of what it perceives as inconsistent and ambiguous U.S. policies toward Iran.<sup>49</sup>

Noting a traditional skepticism toward international agreements to provide security in the Gulf, James Russell suggests that the incentives for nuclear restraint in the region are diminishing, and that the attractions of “embracing a more ambiguous nuclear posture” are increasing.<sup>50</sup> Iran itself appears to be pursuing an ambiguous nuclear posture. In public statements, Obama administration officials embrace the view that the government of Iran appears not yet to have made a final decision whether to develop nuclear weapons (rather than merely the means to develop them).<sup>51</sup> While ambiguity keeps tensions high, the relatively weak powers in the region appear to cherish the nuclear ambiguity as a means to preserve their freedom of action.

## Conclusions

There is little question that the United States is central to the security framework of each of the GCC states. It is the U.S. alliance that protects them from the overwhelming power of some regional allies, shields them from the destructive power of regional foes, and ensures that the oil and gas that is their lifeblood reaches markets across the high seas. And yet these same countries are wary of the United States. Like small boats tossed in the wake of a large ship, these governments worry that they have little control over the actions of others; yet they suffer the consequences of

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47. International Institute for Strategic Studies, “Iran and Its Neighbors: Reactions to Tehran’s Nuclear Program,” *Strategic Comments* 11, no. 6 (August 2005).

48. Mitchell B. Reiss, *A Nuclear Armed Iran: Possible Security and Diplomatic Implications*, working paper (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, May 2010), 6.

49. Frederic Wehrey, Theodore W. Karasik, Alireza Nader, Jeremy J. Ghez, Lydia Hansell, and Robert A. Guffey, *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2009), xvi.

50. James A. Russell, “A Tipping Point Realized? Nuclear Proliferation in the Persian Gulf and Middle East,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 29, no. 3 (December 2008): 531.

51. See, for example, Tony Karon, “The Pentagon’s Message on Iran: Don’t Panic,” *Time*, March 2, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1882481,00.html>.



those actions. To cope with their own perceived weakness, they seek to sustain highly dynamic policies that reassure the Iranians and Americans alike, posing threats to none but retaining the ability to defend themselves. It is a difficult and uneasy balance, but they see no choice.

It is troubling to these governments, then, when the United States adopts a similarly dynamic policy. Whereas the Bush administration carefully stressed the pain that would befall an Iran with a nuclear weapon, the Obama administration has sought to employ a much subtler mixture of potential dialogue, collective action, and resolve. While such an approach in many ways more closely resembles that of the GCC states themselves, it is troubling for them, because it introduces another complex dimension of regional and international security that the GCC states must explore and safely navigate. Deeply concerned that U.S. actions will either draw them into war or leave them exposed to the mercies of an expansionist Iran, the GCC states express their alarm both publicly and privately.

And yet the GCC states have few options. Whereas greater uncertainty about U.S. action may nudge them toward sustaining a broader variety of security relationships—France, the UK, Russia, and India can all play small (yet significant) potential roles—none of those relationships or combination of them can come close to replacing the United States in their collective or separate strategy.

The GCC's preference for ambiguity will most likely remain a constant, especially in the absence of any regional power that can constrain Iran on its own. A proper U.S. understanding of this ambiguity, and a willingness to work around it when necessary, is probably the best that can be hoped for as the United States manages Iranian behavior in the coming decades.

# 6

## TURKEY, RUSSIA, INDIA, AND CHINA

Geoffrey Kemp

Turkey, Russia, India, and China have an increasing influence in the Middle East and important roles to play influencing Iran's foreign and domestic politics. Each of the four countries' strategies towards the Iranian nuclear issue involves balancing a variety of interests, including economic ties to Iran, that each country is afraid to lose. In the end, each relationship involves calculating which U.S. policies are more or less palatable given what the reality of a nuclear Iran might ultimately mean for all four countries.

Containment, in the Cold War sense, poses difficult choices for all four countries. The West's containment of the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies included an array of military, economic, and cultural boycotts designed to deny the Soviet Union and its allies access to Western markets and products. Since Turkey, China, India, and Russia all see commercial ties with Iran as a normal part of their bilateral ties to the Islamic Republic, and both Russia and China have sold arms to Iran, it will be difficult to persuade them to enforce tougher sanctions beyond those the UN has imposed.

Deterrence, which implies the threat to use force against Iran if it crosses a number of clearly defined "red lines," probably poses less of a problem for the four countries for one very simple reason: to be effective, any deterrence policy must be credible, and this implies that it is backed up by formidable military assets. Clearly, it is the United States that has these assets, especially in the nuclear arena. Although China, Russia, and India also have nuclear weapons, the U.S. nuclear arsenal is enough to convince Iran that they would lose against the United States (or even Israel) in a potential nuclear encounter.

Of the three alternatives for dealing with Iran—engagement, containment, and deterrence—it is noteworthy that all four countries examined here have been strong advocates of engagement. Part of this may be that they believe engagement would involve lifting the sanctions that have negatively affected their relations with Iran. But engagement could also lead to a fundamental realignment of power relationships in the Gulf and U.S.-Iranian rapprochement. India and China would likely accept such an outcome, while Turkey and especially Russia probably would be more ambivalent.

This chapter will examine the calculations of Turkey, Russia, India, and China and their positions toward U.S. policy options that seek to address the Iranian challenge. It will conclude with a brief discussion of the regional ramifications of an Iranian nuclear weapon and a final assessment for future U.S. policy.

## Turkey

Turkey's strategy towards Iran depends on both a deep connection to and a deep rivalry with the Islamic Republic. The Turkish instinct to accommodate Iran's nuclear development rather than challenge it directly has kept Turkey from playing a stronger role in cementing U.S. strategy. After distancing itself from Middle Eastern politics for decades, Turkey has recently emerged as one of the most assertive political entities in the region. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's dynamic role throughout the Middle East has had a significant impact on its complex relationships with Iran and the United States.

Decades of mutual suspicion have given way to more robust Turkish-Iranian relations, and for good reason. The two countries share a border, cooperate in strategic and economic arenas, have cultural ties, and have had a long history of working relations. Turkey has an open door policy with Iranian citizens, which makes it one of the only countries that allows Iranian citizens to enter its borders without a visa.<sup>1</sup> Economic ties between Turkey and Iran have also expanded rapidly since 2000. Between 2000 and 2010, trade between the countries rose tenfold, from \$1 billion to \$10 billion.<sup>2</sup> Trade surpassed \$7 billion in the first half of 2011 and was expected to hit \$13 billion by the end of the year.<sup>3</sup> High levels of future trade growth may come as a result of Iran's lessened dependence on Dubai for foreign investment, as Western sanctions on Iran have pressured the UAE to reduce business ties with Iranian investors.<sup>4</sup>

Turkey also imports a substantial amount of natural gas from Iran, which holds the world's second-largest natural gas reserves. From 2009 to 2010 Iran's gas exports to Turkey increased by 35 percent.<sup>5</sup> Iran exports 25 million cubic meters of natural gas to Turkey per day and has the capability to increase that number to 30 million cubic meters a day if necessary. Turkey receives its share of Iranian gas through a pipeline that was completed in 2001.<sup>6</sup> Turkey has also insisted that Iran be included in the proposed Nabucco pipeline that would bring gas to Europe via Central Asia and Turkey, despite strong U.S. opposition.<sup>7</sup>

As close as Turkey and Iran may be, the two countries have found themselves on opposite sides of the political spectrum in dealing with the Arab uprisings of 2011, particularly with regard

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1. Peter Kenyon, "Turkey Uses Open Door Policy To Engage Iran," National Public Radio, May 27, 2010, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=127206239>.

2. International Monetary Fund, "Direction of Trade Statistics: Islamic Republic of Iran, Top 10 Export Partners 2001-2010" and "Direction of Trade Statistics: Turkey, Top 10 Export Partners 2001-2010," IMF E-Library Database.

3. Saban Kardas, "Turkish-Iranian Ties Flourish," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, February 18, 2011, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=37534&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=27&cHash=ebb0c634b4e72f6ee0c89d41dbb48b5b](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=37534&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=27&cHash=ebb0c634b4e72f6ee0c89d41dbb48b5b); and "Iran-Turkey trade surpasses \$7 billion: ambassador," *Tehran Times*, August 3, 2011, <http://www.tehrantimes.com/index.php/politics/1069-iran-turkey-trades-surpass-7-billion-ambassador>.

4. Martina Fuchs, "Feature—Dubai traders fear sanctions impact on Iran business," Reuters, November 30, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/11/30/dubai-iran-idUSL5E7ML2E920111130>.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. David O'Byrne, "U.S. Ambassador Blasts Turkey-Iran Gas Deal," *Platts Oilgram News*, July 30, 2007.

to Syria and the Assad government's brutal crackdown on civilian protestors. Turkey has imposed extensive sanctions on the Assad government, sheltered Syrian opposition groups, recalled its ambassador to Damascus, and frozen Syrian government assets.<sup>8</sup> Iran, on the other hand, continues to support what it sees as its closest Arab ally and a bulwark against Sunni domination of the Levant.

Another point of Turkish-Iranian tension is the deployment of a NATO radar system in Turkey in September 2011. The radar, which will be located 435 miles from the Iranian border in the town of Kurecik, is reportedly designed to counter ballistic missile threats from Iran.<sup>9</sup> Iran responded by accusing Turkey of being subservient to the influence of "Westerners and Zionists"<sup>10</sup> and threatening to attack the radar system if the United States or Israel went on the offensive.<sup>11</sup> Turkey has maintained that the radar system poses no threat to Iran.<sup>12</sup>

On another level, Turkey so far seems to be winning the battle over which political model new Arab governments will follow. Recent polls from the Arab world indicate far higher approval ratings for Turkey's Erdogan than for Iran's Ahmadinejad.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, while some Turkish officials worry about Iran's growing influence in Iraq, Turkey's recent retaliation against Kurdish PKK violence in northern Iraq stands in contrast to Iran's relatively more complicated relations with the PKK. There are suggestions that Iran may use its support for Turkey's retaliatory measures as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the Turks.<sup>14</sup>

As Turkey tries to gain the upper hand over Iran, its coordination with the United States has diverged on a range of Middle East issues.<sup>15</sup> Despite similar ends—peace between Israel and the Palestinians, a stable Iraq, an Iran without nuclear weapons, stability in Afghanistan, and a Western-oriented Syria—the two allies have come to disagree on means and tools.<sup>16</sup>

Although Turkey supported the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and has contributed troops to the ensuing war effort, its parliament refused to allow U.S. troops to invade Iraq through

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8. Alexandra Zavis, "Turkey announces new sanctions on Syria," *Los Angeles Times*, November 30, 2011, [http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/world\\_now/2011/11/turkey-syria-sanctions.html](http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/world_now/2011/11/turkey-syria-sanctions.html).

9. "Turkey to site NATO missile shield radar in its south-east," *Guardian*, September 14, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/sep/14/turkey-nato-missile-shield-radar>.

10. Saban Kardas, "Arab Spring Sees Turkish-Iranian Rivalry Take a New Turn," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, October 11, 2011, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=38509&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=13&cHash=a44d47d593f5184d4d56ba9d9188211c](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=38509&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=13&cHash=a44d47d593f5184d4d56ba9d9188211c).

11. "Iran to hit Turkey if nuclear program targeted by Israel, U.S., general says," *Haaretz.com*, November 26, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/iran-to-hit-turkey-if-nuclear-program-targeted-by-israel-u-s-general-says-1.397862>.

12. "Ankara responds over Iran's critics on radar," *Hurriyet Daily News*, September 9, 2011, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=ankara-responds-over-iran8217s-critics-on-radar-2011-09-09>.

13. Zogby International and James Zogby, "Arab Attitudes, 2011," Arab American Institute Foundation, 2011, 7, [http://aai.3cdn.net/5d2b8344e3b3b7ef19\\_xkm6ba4r9.pdf](http://aai.3cdn.net/5d2b8344e3b3b7ef19_xkm6ba4r9.pdf); and Shibley Telhami, "2011 Annual Arab Public Opinion Survey," Brookings Institution, October 2011, [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/events/2011/1121\\_arab\\_public\\_opinion/20111121\\_arab\\_public\\_opinion.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/events/2011/1121_arab_public_opinion/20111121_arab_public_opinion.pdf).

14. "Top officials denied claims on Karayilan," *Hurriyet Daily News*, October 13, 2011, [http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=238&srch="iran"%20and%20karayilan"&nID=6218](http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=238&srch=).

15. Steven A. Cook, "How Do You Say 'Frenemy' in Turkish?," *Foreign Policy*, June 1, 2010, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/06/01/how\\_do\\_you\\_say\\_frenemy\\_in\\_Turkish](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/06/01/how_do_you_say_frenemy_in_Turkish).

16. *Ibid.*

its territory in 2003. In a serious blow to U.S. planning and U.S.-Turkish relations, Turkey argued that the U.S. intervention would create more problems than it would solve.

More recently, Turkey's souring relationship with Israel has also complicated U.S.-Turkish relations. Though Turkish-Israel cooperation slowly deteriorated after the AKP's (Justice and Development Party) consolidation of power, the 2008-2009 Gaza War worsened ties, which broke down further in the aftermath of Israel's 2010 assault on the Turkish flotilla to Gaza.<sup>17</sup> That confrontation resulted in the death of eight Turkish citizens and one Turkish-American dual national.

Iran's nuclear program has been another sticking point. While Turkey supports the creation of a "nuclear free" Middle East, Erdogan has also opposed sanctions imposed on Iran, calling them "arrogant." "Those who take this stance, who want these arrogant sanctions, need to first give these [weapons] up," he stated, referring to Israel, which is the only state in the region with a reported nuclear capability.<sup>18</sup> Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has even thanked Turkey for its "clear stance against" Israel.<sup>19</sup> Turkish officials have reassured the public of their belief in Iran's peaceful intentions in developing nuclear capabilities. Yet, combined with Turkey's continued opposition to sanctions and the idea of military strikes, Turkey's stance has not given much reassurance to American interlocutors. In mid-2010, Turkey struck a deal with Iran (with Brazilian involvement) that would have sent Iran's low-enriched uranium (LEU) to Turkey in exchange for fuel for the Tehran Research Reactor. Turkey has argued that the deal provides a starting point for internationally regulated cooperation and legal engagement of nuclear capabilities in Iran.<sup>20</sup> However, rejection of the agreement in May by the United States halted any further negotiation process.<sup>21</sup>

In all of this, the irony for Turkey is that better relations between the United States and Iran could potentially deprive it of its unique role as a mediator between the Islamic Republic and the West, a role that Turkey has used to demonstrate its growing regional stature. An improvement in U.S.-Iran relations would provide a huge boost to Iran's struggling economic sector and make it much easier for the beleaguered country to attract foreign capital for its energy sector. It could also remove one of the major threats to the region, and this in turn could permit the United States to draw down some of its military presence. The effect of all of this could be to diminish Turkey's role as an indispensable—if complex—player in Iranian efforts to circumvent U.S. regional strategy.

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17. Even prior to the Mavi Marmara incident, Turkey had taken a position supporting the Palestinians that was at odds with U.S. policy, including arguing that Hamas was not a terrorist organization but "a resistance movement trying to protect its country under occupation." See "Turkey's Erdogan: Hamas Is a Political Party, Not a Terrorist Group," Haaretz.com, May 12, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/turkey-s-erdogan-hamas-is-a-political-party-not-a-terrorist-group-1.361230>.

18. Reuters, "Turkey PM: If You Don't Want Iran to Have Nukes, Give Yours Up," Haaretz.com, October 31, 2009, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/turkey-pm-if-you-don-t-want-iran-to-have-nukes-give-yours-up-1.5055>.

19. Ibid.

20. Ivanka Barzashka, "New Fuel Deal with Iran: Debunking Common Myths," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, November 30, 2010, <http://www.thebulletin.org/web-edition/roundtables/iran-and-the-west-next-steps>.

21. "Iran Says Nuclear Swap Must Be Based on Brazil-Turkey Deal," *Iran Focus*, November 3, 2010, [http://www.iranfocus.com/en/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=22143:iran-says-nuclear-swap-must-be-based-on-brazil-turkey-deal&catid=8:nuclear&Itemid=45](http://www.iranfocus.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=22143:iran-says-nuclear-swap-must-be-based-on-brazil-turkey-deal&catid=8:nuclear&Itemid=45).

## Russia

Russian strategy toward Iran and the United States hinges on its goals of remaining a big economic player in Iran and indirectly challenging U.S. influence in the Middle East. While Russia agrees that a nuclear Iran is not desirable, it profits from its potential role by undermining U.S. efforts against Iran and preventing outcomes that are solely driven by the United States.

Russian involvement in modern Iran began in August 1941, when Great Britain and the Soviet Union jointly invaded Iran to preempt its possible fall to Germany. With the end of World War II in Europe in May 1945, it was expected that both Britain and the Soviet Union would withdraw their forces from Iran. Instead, in what became the first crisis of the Cold War, the Soviets tried to set up an autonomous region in the northern Iranian province of Azerbaijan. Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union posed a threat to the Persian Gulf, by now a vital oil resource for the West. When the Soviet Union began to establish close military relations with Egypt and Syria and later Iraq, the United States, and to a lesser extent Britain, strengthened their defense ties with the Baghdad Pact countries, thus denying the Soviet Union access to Iran.

The failed Soviet campaign in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, combined with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, drastically weakened Moscow's control over areas adjacent to the Middle East. Today, Russia seeks working relations with the West, the Middle East, and South and East Asia as it struggles to find a role for itself as a diminished power with a shrinking population but abundant natural resources. Its primary objectives include suppressing the rise of radical Sunni groups that would threaten Moscow, preventing the North Caucasus from becoming anti-Russian, and ensuring the security of Russian economic interests in the Middle East.<sup>22</sup>

Fostering a positive relationship with Iran can help Russia achieve these objectives. While historical animosities exist, Russia does not see Iran as a major threat to its national security.<sup>23</sup> Despite relatively low trade volumes between the two countries,<sup>24</sup> there are clear signs that Russia is trying to build economic ties with Iran, especially in the energy sector. And there are some signs that the desire is mutual. For example, after having excluded Russian state oil company Gazprom from exploiting its Azar oil field along the border of Iraq,<sup>25</sup> Iran invited Russian companies to participate in the development of other oil fields such as Changooleh.<sup>26</sup>

While these interactions show that Russian leaders believe that “Iran is a rising Middle Eastern ‘regional superpower,’” they do not see a nuclear Iran as being a direct threat toward their state.<sup>27</sup> Russia is much more worried about the growth of Islamic political groups in Central Asia and the

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22. Mark N. Katz, “Russia’s Policy Toward the Middle East,” *Russian Analytical Digest*, September 24, 2010, <http://www.res.ethz.ch/analysis/rad/details.cfm?lng=en&id=121789>.

23. Ariel Cohen, “Russia’s Iran Policy: A Curveball for Obama,” Heritage Foundation, January 15, 2010, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/01/russias-iran-policy-a-curveball-for-obama>.

24. International Monetary Fund, “Russia: Trade Statistics,” 2010, [http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc\\_113440.pdf](http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_113440.pdf).

25. “Iran can step in after Turkey break with Gazprom,” Reuters Africa, October 12, 2011, <http://af.reuters.com/article/commoditiesNews/idAFL5E7LC2ZU20111012>.

26. “Iran can be a reliable ally of Russia: FM,” Xinhua, October 16, 2011, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2011-10/16/c\\_131194803.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2011-10/16/c_131194803.htm).

27. Cohen, “Russia’s Iran Policy: A Curveball for Obama.”

continued threat of Islamic terrorism to its own homeland.<sup>28</sup> It does not believe Iran is complicit in these developments.

To some extent, Russia also sees Iran as a more rational actor than either the United States or Israel does, and thus considers Iran a partner and “de facto ally” in Russian plans to reshape the Middle East power balance to America’s detriment.<sup>29</sup> While Russia may agree that a decrease in Iranian nuclear capabilities will calm tensions in the region, the factors in this determination are mostly economic. Russia has supported watered-down sanctions in an effort to cooperate with the United States, but it will not confront Iran directly. If anything, Russia is willing to play both sides of the fence when it comes to Iran, as indicated by remarks on *Larry King Live* by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in late 2011:

You certainly know that we’re concerned with any expression of the proliferation or any possibility, theoretical possibility, of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. This relates to absolutely all states, including Iran. Having said that, we don’t have any grounds to suspect Iran, in the sense that they seek to possess nuclear arms. But we’ve been cooperating with all our partners, including the United States of America, in the premise of the United Nations Organizations.<sup>30</sup>

Even after the publication of the November 2011 IAEA report on Iran’s illegal nuclear activities, Russia declared that new sanctions against Iran were “unacceptable,” arguing that tougher sanctions would be a punishment that would prevent a constructive dialogue with Tehran.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, differences between Russia and Iran still exist. They include Putin’s proposals for a joint U.S.-Russian missile defense system directed toward Iran; the ongoing border dispute in the Caspian Sea despite some cooperation that aims to limit Azerbaijan’s ability to exploit gas;<sup>32</sup> repeated Russian delays in completing the Bushehr nuclear reactor and refusal to help build other nuclear facilities in Iran after its opening;<sup>33</sup> increasing competition between Russia and Iran for influence in Central Asia, especially in Tajikistan;<sup>34</sup> and the delay and later cancellation of a sale of S-300 air-defense missile systems to Iran.<sup>35</sup>

Iran and Russia even diverge on the nuclear issue, as Russia is a party to P5+1 attempts to deplete Iran’s stocks of low-enriched uranium and prevent further enrichment up to weapons

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28. Katz, “Russia’s Policy Toward the Middle East.”

29. Mark N. Katz, “Russian-Iranian Relations in the Obama Era,” *Middle East Policy* 17, no. 2 (Summer 2010).

30. “CNN Larry King Live: Interview with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin,” CNN, December 2, 2010, <http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1012/01/lkl.01.html>.

31. CNN Wire Staff, “Russia slams new sanctions against Iran,” CNN, November 22, 2011, <http://www.cnn.com/2011/11/22/world/meast/iran-sanctions/>.

32. Nick Ottens, “Iran, Russia Obstructing Azerbaijani Gas Exports,” *Atlantic Sentinel*, October 6, 2011, <http://atlanticsentinel.com/2011/10/iran-russia-obstructing-azerbaijani-gas-exports/>.

33. Ladane Nasser, “Iran Agrees With Russia, Turkey to Build Power Plants, IRNA Says,” Bloomberg, September 21, 2011, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-09-21/iran-agrees-with-russia-turkey-to-build-power-plants-irna-says.html>.

34. Subrob Majidov, “Iran increases influence in Tajikistan at Russia’s expense,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, September 21, 2011, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/newsite/?q=node/5632>.

35. “Kremlin Bans Sale of S-300 Missile Systems to Iran,” BBC News Europe, September 22, 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11388680>.

grade.<sup>36</sup> Recently, Russia has shown increasing ambivalence toward Iran's nuclear capabilities by recognizing that the Iranian leadership may "have something else up its sleeve" instead of peaceful intentions.<sup>37</sup> Though previously a regular supplier of Iranian weapons, Russia has recently rejected further shipments of armored vehicles, warplanes and helicopters, warships, and S-300 missile systems in compliance with UN sanctions.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, since the cancelled S-300 deal there have been signs of renewed security cooperation and some level of intelligence sharing.<sup>39</sup> It is clear that, in an effort to maintain advantageous relations with both the United States and Iran, Russia seeks to maintain as much neutrality toward Iran's potential nuclear threats as possible.

Russia's success in securing working relations with Iran reflects a broader tendency in its relations with other major Middle Eastern actors, who fear losing Moscow's support and falling to their regional enemies.<sup>40</sup> Russia also exploits regional anti-Americanism to its own economic gain, allowing Middle Eastern governments to feel that they are independent of the United States. With regards to Syria, for example, Russian president Dmitry Medvedev maintained that additional sanctions against Syria are not needed, thus vetoing along with China a UN Security Council resolution calling for "targeted measures" against al-Assad.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, even though Russia advocates diplomacy between the United States and Iran, the degree to which Russian officials truly want such a diplomatic achievement is questionable: As Russian scholar Georgiy Mirskiy acknowledges, "[I]f the United States becomes reconciled with Iran, it will be bad for us, and the Americans will push us out of Iranian economic space. A nuclear Iran is better for us than a pro-American one."<sup>42</sup>

At the same time, Russia would also probably oppose a more comprehensive U.S. containment policy were diplomatic negotiations to fail. But an actual Iranian nuclear breakout—and the subsequent potential for a broader regional breakout—would ultimately necessitate a concerted reassessment of Russian foreign policy. In the meantime, should the United States adopt a more formal deterrence posture, Russia would likely condemn specific U.S. threats of retaliation just as it has always opposed the use of force against Iran.

## India

While itself a nuclear power, India leans more toward the side of the United States when it comes to Iran's nuclear program, even if it disagrees on the specific tactics used to halt it. India's economic interest in a stable Gulf and positive relations with the United States have made it a relatively dependable partner on the Iranian issue.

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36. Katz, "Russian-Iranian Relations in the Obama Era."

37. Dmitri Trenin, "The Modernization of Russia's Foreign Policy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 2, 2010, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/2010/08/02/modernization-of-russia-s-foreign-policy/58t#foreign>.

38. "Russia Won't Cease Military-Tech Cooperation With Iran," Xinhua, September 24, 2010, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2010-09/24/c\\_13526606.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2010-09/24/c_13526606.htm).

39. Segei Balmasov, "Iran opens defense secrets to Russia," *Pravda*, July 29, 2011, [http://english.pravda.ru/world/asia/29-06-2011/118346-iran\\_russia-0/](http://english.pravda.ru/world/asia/29-06-2011/118346-iran_russia-0/).

40. Ibid.

41. Talal al-Haj, "Russia, China veto U.N. council call for Syria action: U.S. calls for 'targeted measures,'" Al-Arabiya, October 5, 2011, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/10/05/170250.html>.

42. Katz, "Russian-Iranian Relations in the Obama Era."



India has had a long historical association with the Gulf based on its geographic proximity and ethnic, cultural, and economic ties to the Middle East. British India controlled much of the Gulf in the colonial era; during World War I and World War II, more than a million Indian citizens fought in the British Indian army in Arabia and North Africa and made up the bulk of the forces that invaded Iran in 1941. Since independence, India has established close ties with most Gulf countries, and nearly five million Indians currently work in the Gulf.<sup>43</sup>

Since India initiated major economic reforms in 1992, its growth rate has soared, along with its need for fossil fuel imports beyond domestic production. The GCC states supply India with approximately half of its oil imports, Saudi Arabia alone accounts for a quarter of India's foreign oil sources, and Qatar provides India with five million tons of liquefied natural gas annually.<sup>44</sup> Overall trade between India and the Gulf countries has grown from \$5.6 billion ten years ago to a projected \$130 billion in 2013–2014.<sup>45</sup> The relationships go beyond energy and trade. India invests heavily in the GCC in the form of tourism, engineering services, and chemical products,<sup>46</sup> and India's expatriate workers in the Gulf are a key factor in the region's economic growth and diversification.<sup>47</sup>

Defense factors into Gulf-India relations as well, as India has developed low-level military-to-military contacts with some of the smaller Gulf states and is also pursuing robust strategic ties and high-level diplomatic contact with Saudi Arabia. According to Harsh Pant, India perceives the kingdom as an ideal “counterweight to Pakistan in the Islamic world.”<sup>48</sup> Given Saudi clout in the GCC, growing ties between Saudi Arabia and India effectively draw the latter closer to all GCC states.

Indian ties with the United States are more complex, however. Both countries want regional stability, but their conceptions of that stability differ markedly. Despite U.S. disapproval, India is turning to Iran for access to fuel and has refused to comply with sanctions outside of the UN Security Council.<sup>49</sup> Iran accounts for 11 percent of India's oil imports, making it the second-largest single source of imported oil behind Saudi Arabia.<sup>50</sup> India has sought to circumvent the sanctions regime by paying for Iranian oil through Turkish and Russian financial intermediaries.<sup>51</sup>

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43. Barbara Surk and Sebastian Abbot, “India Pushes for Worker Rights in the Gulf,” Associated Press, March 27, 2008, <http://communicatinglabourrights.wordpress.com/2008/03/27/india-pushes-for-worker-rights-in-gulf-2/>.

44. Harsh V. Pant, “India's Relations with Iran: Much Ado about Nothing,” *Washington Quarterly* 34, no.1 (Winter 2011): 68, <https://csis.org/files/publication/twq11winterpant.pdf>.

45. Barbara Slavin, “Iran Turns to China, Barter to Survive Sanctions,” Atlantic Council Iran Task Force, November 2011, 5, [http://www.acus.org/files/publication\\_pdfs/403/111011\\_ACUS\\_IranChina.PDF](http://www.acus.org/files/publication_pdfs/403/111011_ACUS_IranChina.PDF).

46. Samir Pradhan, “India's Economic and Political Presence in the Gulf: A Gulf Perspective,” in *India's Growing Role in the Gulf: Implications for the Region and the United States* (Dubai: Gulf Research Center, 2009), 28, <http://www.cftni.org/Monograph-Indias-Growing-Role-in-the-Gulf.pdf>.

47. Pant, “India's Relations with Iran.”

48. Ibid.

49. Indira Lakshmanan and Pratish Narayanan, “U.S. may sanction India over level of Iran-Oil imports,” Bloomberg, March 15, 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-03-15/u-s-may-sanction-india-over-level-of-iran-oil-imports.html>.

50. Energy Information Agency, “Country Analysis Briefs: India,” August 17, 2010, 3, <http://205.254.135.24/EMEU/cabs/India/pdf.pdf>.

51. “Iran downplays report India paying for oil via Russia,” Reuters Africa, October 29, 2011, <http://af.reuters.com/article/energyOilNews/idAFL5e7lt06u20111029>.

The much-discussed 1,700-mile natural gas pipeline that would run from Iran to India through Pakistan remains politically infeasible because of the strained Pakistan-India relationship.<sup>52</sup> In any event, Iranian gas could never completely meet India's growing energy needs.<sup>53</sup>

Given that the United States is the guarantor of energy security in the Gulf, U.S.-Indian strategic ties have a direct bearing on the Indian-Iranian relationship. Ever since the United States accepted India as a nuclear power, the United States has opposed India's close ties with Iran.<sup>54</sup> Former President Bush compelled India to take a more critical line toward Iran's nuclear program, as evidenced by its vote to refer Iran to the UN Security Council in February 2006. A U.S.-Indian accord signed later that year required that India adhere to the United States' strategic line on the Iranian nuclear program.<sup>55</sup>

Yet for all these efforts, there are three reasons that Iran's relationship with India should not overly concern the United States. First, Pakistan is a complicating factor, and the relationship is as much about containing Pakistan as it is about the United States.<sup>56</sup> Pakistan and Iran agreed to a pipeline deal in 2009, rekindling India's interest in establishing a sea pipeline from Iran that would circumvent Pakistan.<sup>57</sup> In addition, India and Iran have a complex set of goals in Afghanistan, where Iranian support for the Taliban threatens U.S. efforts.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, India and Iran share an interest in maintaining Afghan stability and preventing Pakistani meddling.

Second, while India's interest in Iran is primarily commercial, India may have reason to doubt Iran's reliability as an economic partner. Iran has rejected or delayed projects with Indian businesses and the Indian government, and it has allowed China to increase its presence at India's expense.<sup>59</sup> By contrast, U.S.-Indian ties remain strong on a number of levels, and the two sides have pledged "increased cooperation on economic issues, on energy and the environment, on democracy and development, on non-proliferation and security, and on high-technology and space."<sup>60</sup>

Third, India, like China, has a high stake in the security of Gulf states, and thus an interest in halting nuclear proliferation in the Gulf.<sup>61</sup> Saudi Arabia is now the primary supplier of oil to India, and India is its fourth-largest consumer.<sup>62</sup> Seeking to preserve these sorts of relationships naturally brings India closer to the United States, since the U.S. militarily bears the burden for energy security in the Gulf region. India does not have the resources to mount this effort on its own and does not wish to upset enemies by challenging the status quo.

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52. Energy Information Agency, "Country Analysis Briefs: India."

53. Pant, "India's Relations with Iran."

54. Harsh Pant, "Looking Beyond Tehran: India's Rising Stakes in the Gulf," in *India's Growing Role in the Gulf: Implications for the Region and the United States* (Dubai: Gulf Research Center, 2009), 42, <http://www.cftni.org/Monograph-Indias-Growing-Role-in-the-Gulf.pdf>.

55. Pant, "India's Relations with Iran."

56. Pant, "Looking Beyond Tehran."

57. Pant, "India's Relations with Iran."

58. Pant, "Looking Beyond Tehran."

59. Pant, "India's Relations with Iran."

60. K. Alan Kronstadt and Kenneth Katzman, *India-Iran Relations and U.S. Interests*, CRS Report for Congress, Congressional Research Service, August 2, 2006, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/70294.pdf>.

61. Pant, "Looking Beyond Tehran," 52.

62. *Ibid.*, 47.

In light of these three points, the prospects for India's support for U.S. policy toward Iran seem reasonable. In fact, India has begun to implement its own policies to avert the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran. The Riyadh Declaration, signed in January 2010 during Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Saudi Arabia, recommended that Iran "remove regional and international doubts about its nuclear weapons program." India has also endorsed Arab initiatives for a nuclear weapons-free Middle East, a proposal previously directed at Israel but now increasingly focused on Iran.<sup>63</sup> India has a range of additional motives in addressing Iranian nuclear problems, including the need to combat terrorism, monitor developments in the region's energy security, and keep a watchful eye on the millions of Indian citizens that work in the Middle East.

At the same time, India does not support any sanctions or preemptive military options imposed on Iran.<sup>64</sup> In an interview in 2010, Jatin Prasada, the junior minister for petroleum and natural gas, said the Indian government "has conveyed to the U.S. government that sanctions on Iran have proved to be counter-productive."<sup>65</sup> India sees broad-based sanctions as inevitably detrimental to the Iranian people,<sup>66</sup> and recognizes that sanctions make it harder for Indian companies to do business in other parts of the globe, including Iran. India's long tradition of political independence stemming from resentment over colonial occupation has traditionally made it unwilling to enact or participate in sanctions-based diplomacy.<sup>67</sup>

## China

China's relationship with Iran is primarily economic, and its attitude toward Iran's nuclear program is therefore colored by the desire to preserve Chinese economic interests. While China is fundamentally dependent on the United States to secure trade routes for Gulf energy and Chinese goods, it perceives U.S. efforts against Iran as sacrificing China's privileged role in exploiting these channels.

Although China was a great global maritime power six hundred years ago, only since 1949 have its interests in the Middle East been rekindled. Its early involvement in the region entailed arm sales to Iran and Iraq and nuclear cooperation with Iran. In general, China used these arms sales to make inroads into the Middle East, often making deals with both sides, as in the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>68</sup> In the past two decades, China's economic boom has made it increasingly dependent on the Middle East for its energy needs and as a market for Chinese consumer goods.<sup>69</sup> Strategically,

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63. Raja Karthikeya, "India's Iran Calculus," *Foreign Policy*, September 24, 2010, [http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/09/24/indias\\_iran\\_calculus](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/09/24/indias_iran_calculus).

64. "Sanctions on Iran Counterproductive, Says India," *Hindu*, March 9, 2010, <http://beta.thehindu.com/news/national/article223516.ece>.

65. *Ibid.*

66. Ariel Farrar-Wellman, "India-Iran Foreign Relations," *AEI Iran Tracker*, June 25, 2010, <http://www.irantracker.org/foreign-relations/india-iran-foreign-relations>.

67. "Sanctions on Iran Counterproductive, Says India."

68. Michael R. Gordon, "War in Gulf Spurs China's Arms-Export Role," *New York Times*, May 19, 1987, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/05/19/world/war-in-gulf-spurs-china-s-arms-export-role.html>.

69. For more on Iran-China economic relations, see Jon B. Alterman and John W. Garver, *The Vital Triangle: China, the United States, and the Middle East* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2008), <http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/080624-alterman-vitaltriangle.pdf>.

in 1993 it became a net importer of oil, much of which comes from the region.<sup>70</sup> As of 2009, it surpassed the United States as the world's largest exporter to the Middle East.<sup>71</sup> In that year, it sold over \$60 billion of goods to the Middle East, including capital equipment, clothing, and electronics.<sup>72</sup> China has so far managed to have good relations with all of the important countries in the region, including Israel. China's primary interests in the Gulf are economic and it appears to have no desire to challenge U.S. hegemony even though it may espouse differing policy visions, particularly toward Iran.

Iran is a particularly important Chinese partner. In 2010, China exported \$12.2 billion worth of goods to Iran, and Iranian exports to China totaled \$16.5 billion.<sup>73</sup> In addition to being Iran's top destination for exports, China accounts for 18 percent of Iran's international commerce,<sup>74</sup> and Iran is China's third-largest supplier of crude oil.<sup>75</sup> The Western sanctions regime against Iran has enhanced Chinese-Iranian commercial ties and made Iran economically dependent on China.<sup>76</sup> These robust ties have in turn shaped China's views toward sanctions: Following the release of the IAEA's report on Iran's nuclear program, the Chinese foreign ministry claimed that sanctions "cannot fundamentally solve the issue."<sup>77</sup> Given that the Gulf is China's largest oil supplier—and the market for a great many of its exports—China is naturally concerned with U.S. policy in the Gulf and with maintaining friendly relations with Iran.<sup>78</sup>

At the same time, China seems to prioritize its relationship with the GCC at Iran's expense. Despite promising to implement \$40 billion in investments, China has contributed only \$3 billion to various projects throughout the Islamic Republic.<sup>79</sup> By contrast, the GCC states have an increased interest in an economic alliance with China because of China's large labor surpluses, a dynamic that has led to the accelerated expansion of Chinese-GCC trade.<sup>80</sup> Above all, China fears U.S. domination of the oil "trump card" in the Gulf,<sup>81</sup> and it addresses this imbalance by forging close ties with Gulf oil countries and staying neutral in regional conflicts. Ultimately, Chinese policy is more pragmatic than ideological.<sup>82</sup>

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70. Gal Luft, "Fueling the Dragon: China's Race Into the Oil Market," Institute for the Analysis of Global Security, 2004, <http://www.iags.org/china.htm>.

71. Ben Simpfendorfer, "China's Historic Return to the Gulf," *Foreign Policy*, April 2, 2010, [http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/04/02/china\\_s\\_historic\\_return\\_to\\_the\\_gulf](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/04/02/china_s_historic_return_to_the_gulf).

72. Ibid.

73. Barbara Slavin, "Iran Turns to China, Barter to Survive Sanctions," Atlantic Council Iran Task Force, November 2011, [http://www.acus.org/files/publication\\_pdfs/403/111011\\_ACUS\\_IranChina.PDF](http://www.acus.org/files/publication_pdfs/403/111011_ACUS_IranChina.PDF).

74. Ibid.

75. "China says sanctions no fundamental answer on Iran," Reuters, November 10, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/11/10/us-china-iran-nuclear-idUSTRE7A920V20111110>.

76. Mark Katz, "The Russia and China Factors in Sanctions," *Mark N. Katz's Blog, The Iran Primer*, U.S. Institute of Peace, November 28, 2011, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/all/Mark%20N.%20Katz>.

77. "China says sanctions no 'fundamental' answer on Iran."

78. Ibid.

79. Slavin, "Iran Turns to China, Barter to Survive Sanctions."

80. Lee Teslik, "China-Gulf Economic Relations," Council on Foreign Relations, June 4, 2008, [http://www.cfr.org/publication/16398/chinagulf\\_economic\\_relations.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/16398/chinagulf_economic_relations.html).

81. Luft, "Fueling the Dragon."

82. Ibid.

If China adheres to a Westphalian concept of sovereignty, which is to say that it believes in the sanctity of territorial sovereignty, then with regard to Iran, China ideologically rejects U.S. interference in the Gulf. China publicly asserts that U.S. interference in the Gulf is misguided and dangerous. Yet the People's Republic also "values pragmatism, strategic imperatives, and economic trade above differences in ideology."<sup>83</sup> When forced to decide between ideology and pragmatism, China's foreign policy in the Gulf has opted toward the latter.<sup>84</sup> This point helps observers distinguish between China's rhetoric and ideology on the one hand and its strategic interests on the other, which are often at odds.

Such pragmatism stems from the benefits China receives from U.S. dominance in the Gulf. It is in China's economic and ideological best interests to continue to free-ride as the United States acts as the regional policeman while China grows and maintains economically profitable Gulf friendships. John Garver contends that the Chinese military establishment does not necessarily see a nuclear Iran as antithetical to its interests, since such a contingency would force the United States to expend considerable resources on maintaining a regional presence. For the foreseeable future, China has neither the will nor the resources to match this presence or replace Washington as security guarantor of the region, as it is neither ideologically consistent nor economically profitable to do so. Rather, China has calculated that it can gain economic and political strength by using soft power and not challenging U.S. primacy.

This does not, however, stop China from taking a mixed view of U.S. policy toward Iran. Engagement is a telling example. On the one hand, greater engagement could lessen tension between the United States and Iran and prevent a military conflict—which is in China's interest. On the other hand, a U.S.-Iran rapprochement could undermine China's close relations with Tehran and give the United States more leverage in the Caspian region and Central Asia where China has major political and economic interests. China might also fear losing its own pride of place in Iran's energy trade. Sun Bigan, a former special envoy to the Middle East, noted in late 2009, "If relations between America and Iran were to improve, then American oil companies will 'swarm' Iran, and ...Iran, in turn, would strive for its 'maximum self-interest.'"<sup>85</sup> In short, engagement may mean less Iranian oil for China.

Like the other neighboring powers, China publically opposes sanctions and endorses a diplomatic solution. In February 2010, China declined to support Western diplomats' efforts to impose further sanctions on Iran, calling instead for continued negotiations to resolve the international standoff over Iran's nuclear program.<sup>86</sup> Then, in May 2010, Jiang Yu, a ministry spokeswoman, stated that the foreign ministry supported efforts to solve the nuclear issue diplomatically, adding that China "value[s] and welcome[s] the agreement reached among Brazil, Turkey, and Iran on Tehran's research reactor." Nevertheless, in June 2010, China voted in favor of UN Security Council Resolution 1929, which placed additional sanctions on Iran, primarily targeting the country's military and financial sectors.<sup>87</sup>

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83. John Keefer Douglas, Matthew B. Nelson, and Kevin L. Schwartz, "Rising in the Gulf: How China's Energy Demands are Transforming the Middle East," *Al Nakhlah* (Spring 2007), [http://ui04e.moit.tufts.edu/al\\_nakhlah/archives/spring2007/nelson-2.pdf](http://ui04e.moit.tufts.edu/al_nakhlah/archives/spring2007/nelson-2.pdf).

84. *Ibid.*

85. Simpfendorfer, "China's Historic Return to the Gulf."

86. Ariel Farrar-Wellman, "China-Iran Foreign Relations," *AEI Iran Tracker*, July 13, 2010, <http://www.irantracker.org/foreign-relations/china-iran-foreign-relations>.

87. *Ibid.*

Overall, though, China has generally given the impression that it is unwilling to take steps against Iran that would endanger the development of trade ties.<sup>88</sup> Since 2009, China has been participating in a “binding strategy” in an attempt to increase ties to thwart further sanctions.<sup>89</sup> This opposition was voiced by China’s foreign minister, Yang Jiechi, in March 2010: “As everyone knows, pressure and sanctions are not the fundamental way forward to resolving the Iran nuclear issue, and cannot fundamentally solve this issue.”<sup>90</sup> China formally supports the authority of the IAEA and opposes the development of nuclear weapons.<sup>91</sup> Yet unlike most Western nations, China does not view Iran’s nuclear program as an immediate threat. China would not support any type of sanctions-based containment policy, because it would prevent it from continuing economic engagements and be harmful to its economy.

Regarding deterrence, China—like Turkey, Russia, and India—is likely to tone down its criticism of the United States, because the salient assumption at that point is that Iran has crossed the nuclear threshold and will now pose a threat to the entire neighborhood, including close allies of China in the region like Pakistan.

## The Bomb

Should Iran weaponize, all of these regional powers would likely soften toward U.S. positions, though they would also have their own reasons for continued skepticism. Turkey’s position would likely be the most complicated if Iran developed a nuclear weapon, a potential “game changer” for Turkey: As a NATO member, Turkey would undoubtedly be more receptive to an overt deterrent posture by the United States and the rest of the Atlantic Alliance. Turkey might also reconsider its own commitment to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, especially if in the wake of an Iranian bomb other regional powers such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia pursue nuclear weapons and Israel adapts a more overt declaratory policy regarding its own nuclear deterrent.

Russia, which has opposed the use of force in Iran and condemned U.S. threats of retaliation, might take a less antagonistic stance if Iran actually goes public with a nuclear capability, especially if that capability theoretically could be used against Russia itself. India would also change its stance if Iran developed a nuclear weapon, based on the assumption that a nuclear Iran would prove destabilizing for the regime. Under these circumstances India would probably tolerate a U.S. policy of deterrence toward Iran because an Iranian bomb would also threaten India.

Despite ideological differences with the United States, China would probably also tolerate U.S. action if Iran developed a bomb. China cherishes its relations with Israel and Saudi Arabia—two countries that would be directly threatened by a nuclear Iran. Hence, a nuclear Iran would not be in China’s interest.<sup>92</sup>

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88. Ibid.

89. International Crisis Group, “The Iran Nuclear Issue: The View from Beijing,” February 17, 2010, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/north-east-asia/b100%20The%20Iran%20Nuclear%20Issue%20The%20View%20from%20Beijing.ashx>.

90. Atul Aneja, “China’s Stance Boosts Iran,” *Hindu*, March 26, 2010, <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/article306473.ece?homepage=true>.

91. Ibid.

92. Simpfendorfer, “China’s Historic Return to the Gulf.”

## Conclusion

In examining how the four countries view the parameters of U.S. policy in the Gulf, it is relevant to note that three of them, Turkey, India, and China, are net importers of Middle East fossil fuels and will become increasingly dependent on these sources in the years ahead. All three have strong economic stakes in the region and stand to lose if the region becomes less stable. In contrast, Russia is a net oil and gas exporter and to some extent is in competition with the Gulf states for worldwide energy markets. Russia has other stakes in the region that relate more to its geopolitical and strategic vision concerning its interests in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

All four countries have become more important players in the broader Middle East over the past decade. Indications are that these trends will continue as each country, in different ways, becomes more embroiled in the geopolitics of the region. The dramatic increase in Turkey's influence is perhaps the most consequential development, given that many Sunni Arabs would prefer to deal with a strong Turkey rather than a strong Iran. Likewise, the Gulf Arab states welcome India's growing presence because, as a last resort, they see India as a nearby neighbor and U.S. ally that has increasing stakes in the stability of the region. Thus, it can be argued that while the regional trends point to a diminishment of unilateral U.S. power, the new dynamics are basically not against American interests and may indeed be a reason for Iran's strident nationalists to worry.

Russian, Turkish, Chinese, and Indian approaches to Iran do not necessarily mean the United States should scrap one strategy in favor of others. If anything, they suggest that it is the dynamic combination and interaction of these strategies that can have the greatest impact in both influencing Iran and winning support from other major powers. Just as no one strategy is sufficient to keep Iran from developing a bomb, so is there no single answer to the question of how to maintain international opinion against Iranian nuclear ambitions.

## 7

IRAN  
Richard Dalton

Analysis of Iranian foreign policy generally revolves around two poles—one focusing on Iran’s revolutionary ideology, and the other centering on a more pragmatist strain in its international behavior. All states have ideals to which they aspire, but their daily choices about how to act externally are typically made among a range of practical options. They choose the ones that they believe, rightly or wrongly, will promote their interests to the greatest degree. Iran may still be a revolutionary state, but in its foreign policy behavior, the evidence suggests that, as Mehran Kamrava has put it, “Iranian foreign and national security policies are influenced far more by pragmatic, balance of power considerations than by ideological or supposedly revolutionary pursuits.”<sup>1</sup>

At the risk of oversimplification, Iran’s defensive actions and even its regional and international initiatives in support of the Islamic Revolution call for the security of Iranian territory and the preservation of the country’s strength, independence, and freedom above all. Power must be exercised for a purpose or mission, of course, and in revolutionary Iran’s case, that mission is to do God’s work, which includes leading Muslims worldwide by precept and example, defending Shiism and enhancing the lives of Shiites, and defending oppressed Muslims across the globe, but especially in the “Shia Crescent”—that large swath of territory populated overwhelmingly by Shiite Muslims that arcs from the Levant, above Saudi Arabia, and down to Bahrain.

Keeping at bay external pressures directed at weakening Iran and thwarting its mission is a principal animus in Iran’s foreign policy that will not change. With some justification, Iran sees the United States and Israel, and to a lesser extent certain European powers, as real and present threats to its core interests. Its default position is to respond to both deterrence and containment with defiance. In an address to representatives of the government, parliament, and judiciary on August 7, 2011, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei emphasized this recurrent theme: “Whenever the Islamic regime has made concessions to the United States and Europe, they have become more insolent. Whenever the regime has insisted upon the slogans and foundations of the revolution, the honor of the Islamic Republic has grown.”<sup>2</sup>

Foreign policy is also conducted to advance the national interest, and revolutionary Iran is no exception: It is Iran’s duty to use foreign policy to gain influence and thus promote the prosperity, the progress, and the welfare of its people. Maneuvering in the international arena to avoid dangers and gain advantage is the logic of all states’ roles in the international system, Iran

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1. Mehran Kamrava, “Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council,” in *The Iranian Revolution at 30, Viewpoints*, Special Edition (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, 2009), 158, <http://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/2009.01.The%20Iranian%20Revolution%20at%2030.pdf>.

2. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, quoted in Ali Alfoneh, Ahmad Majidiyar, and Michael Rubin, “Iran News Round Up August 8, 2011,” *AEI Iran Tracker*, August 8, 2011, <http://www.irantracker.org/roundup/iran-news-round-august-8-2011>.



included. Yet the Islamic Republic must balance the national interest against its revolutionary goals to protect the gains of the revolution. This balance is also a recurrent theme in Iran's foreign policy. During Khatami's eight years in office as president, from 1997 to 2005, the tenor of Iran's relations with both Persian Gulf and European states improved, although the substance remained much the same. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has reciprocated Turkey's overtures to the Islamic Republic, conceding major points to Turkey and Brazil in the May 2010 "Tehran Declaration" on export of low-enriched uranium from Iran in return for the supply of fuel for the Tehran Research Reactor.<sup>3</sup>

To be sure, despite its general resistance to conform to the will and dictates of the "comity of nations," in terms of regional and international security understandings Iran is not an irrational actor on the world stage. Its revolutionary goals throughout the region may put it at odds with the United States and Europe—and particularly with the West's allies and partners in the broader Middle East—and with international law. Yet the Islamic Republic has not lashed out with unpredictable and irrational moves in its conduct of a revolutionary *and* pragmatic foreign policy.

Perhaps what fills Western policymakers with the most fear about Iran is that it is difficult to ascribe any predictability to its foreign policy, regardless of its content. If it is unclear who is in charge, it is difficult to confirm whether today's pragmatist pronouncement will be followed by a violent revolutionary blast tomorrow. Put another way, the obscurantism surrounding Iranian politics in general—and its foreign-policy making in particular—perhaps sustains among Western powers and their regional allies a general defensive reaction to the Islamic Republic.

The purpose of this chapter is to assess how Iran might respond in the next few years to more explicit military deterrence, extra containment measures, and more—or more appropriate—engagement initiatives. It will assess likely Iranian responses to all three strategies given current Iranian political dynamics.<sup>4</sup>

## Factions and Cohesion

How Iran makes its choices on foreign and security policy is really less of a mystery than is often suggested. Parallel, and sometimes rival, institutions and political leaders advocate new approaches or criticize publicly and privately the choices of others, as is the case with practically every other political system in the world. The Iranian political system is subject to the same kinds of bureaucratic turf battles, the refinement of basic arguments through debate, and, eventually, the coalescing of various political elites around a basic foreign policy position—a process that characterizes most other governments.

Various agencies and ministries in Tehran act on their own authority in limited areas delegated to them, but on matters affecting the nation and its ruling system as a whole, policy coordination takes place in high-level committees and councils. However, on the most important questions

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3. Celso Amorim, "Brazil and the Middle East," *Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, n.d., <http://www.aucegypt.edu/gapp/cairoreview/Pages/articleDetails.aspx?aid=64>. Amorim was Brazil's foreign minister from 2003 to 2010 and also served as Brazil's ambassador to the United Nations and to the United Kingdom.

4. The perspectives in this chapter are shaped by the author's experiences as a student of Middle East politics for most of his professional career, and from the period from 2003 to 2006 when he served as British ambassador to Iran.

of policy, including the country's security and foreign-policy orientation, the president (as chief executive) will authorize government action only if he believes he has the backing of the Supreme Leader; else the decision will be reserved for the Ayatollah himself to take.<sup>5</sup>

Yet the question that has much more relevance for the purposes of this chapter is whether the Iranian system has the flexibility to offer unorthodox advice to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, even if that advice supports the Islamic Republic's adopting a new and different foreign policy course. The colorful and bitter language of Iranian politics conveys the willingness of politicians belonging to various political factions to accuse others of abandoning revolutionary ideals in order to advance their own faction's policy preferences—much like what happens in any other governmental setting. Yet in the current Iranian political milieu, one effect of the rivalry between various politico-religious factions and leaders is to inhibit the mutual trust and sense of common purpose needed to develop new approaches to and new policies for a rapidly changing international and regional strategic environment.

That kind of political cohesion last exhibited by President Khatami and his foreign policy team regarding tactical concessions on nuclear matters after 2002 (with the backing of former president and Assembly of Experts member Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani) is missing now. If it were to return, what we might see now is a general willingness of Iranian politicians to overcome their differences and unite in defiance (at least at the outset) of increasingly tougher economic sanctions, until the full costs to Iran had become apparent.

In such a cohesive political environment, these politicians would also be capable of conducting a policy reassessment without introducing political divisions so serious as to destabilize or paralyze the political system. For example, in the long term, they might conclude that the country could not live with the reduced oil revenue resulting from additional financial sanctions proposed by a group of U.S. senators to President Obama in August 2011.<sup>6</sup> These Iranian politicians might decide that opening negotiations with the P5+1 on the nuclear issues in return for the suspension of some the sanctions would be better for Iran's national interest *and* the "foundations of the revolution," as Ayatollah Khamenei put it in his August 2011 speech. In such a case, after a likely prolonged and difficult (and acrimonious) debate, negotiators would be empowered by Khamenei on the recommendation of the president, acting with the concurrence of the Supreme National Security Council.

However, there is reason to doubt whether Ayatollah Khamenei is close to seeking, or is even willing to accept, any such advice at present. He appears to believe that Iran's domestic and international positions, though far from ideal, are basically sound and potentially improving. President Ahmadinejad's domestic energy and food subsidy reduction program has gone well, and oil prices are looking reasonable in the near term. At the same time, though, Khamenei's strategy comes with increasingly high stakes. Inflation has risen to over 20 percent per year, forcing Iran to ease

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5. Mehran Kamrava, "Iranian Foreign and Security Policies in the Persian Gulf," in *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 187.

6. Barbara Slavin, "New Iran Sanctions Could Bring Unintended Blowback," Inter Press Service, August 11, 2011, <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=56828>.

regulations on foreign currency exchange.<sup>7</sup> Oil exports are dropping dramatically,<sup>8</sup> and could drop by nearly one million barrels a day when the European Union is expected to stop buying Iranian oil in July 2012.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, U.S. pressure is rising on Iran's central bank and the companies that deal with it,<sup>10</sup> and recent sanctions by a major international banking network could make it harder for Iranian banks to sell oil and transfer money abroad.<sup>11</sup>

Regionally, the wave of unrest sweeping the Middle East presents both opportunities and risks. On August 8, 2011, Khamenei made the following observation: "Such unprecedented events in the region and in the world have provided the Islamic regime with great opportunities, but if there is no realistic assessment of the conditions of the state, those opportunities may be wasted or even become threats... In the political, economic, and cultural fields, there have been some weaknesses, shortcomings, and problems, most of which are due to not living up to responsibilities."<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, the uprising in Syria has exerted tremendous pressure on the Assad regime, Iran's only Arab ally. The fall of the Assad regime could have dramatic repercussions for Iran's strategic interests as well as its ability to influence its non-state allies Hezbollah and Hamas. At the same time, the uprisings have facilitated a more assertive Gulf Cooperation Council in Bahrain as well as shaped events further afield such as Libya.

The cautionary note about certain parties not living up to their responsibilities refers to the disputes of the middle months of 2011 regarding Ahmadinejad's conduct of affairs and suggests the second main reason why Khamenei is not ready to reconsider Iran's refusal to negotiate in response to external pressures: He will not permit his subordinates, particularly the government under the increasingly discredited Ahmadinejad, to gain credit in the near term by changing any of their main current strategies in foreign relations and defense. If he were to decide to change, it would be at a time, and with people at the helm, of his choosing.

## Strategies and Policies

If Khamenei's cautionary note reflected a criticism of President Ahmadinejad's neglect of the Islamic Republic's goals among coreligionists in the turbulent Arab world, observers can readily conclude that the Supreme Leader confines his foreign policy purview mostly to broader, longer-term, *revolutionary* goals. And if we accept that working assumption, the observation prompts

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7. Rick Gladstone, "Strained by Sanctions, Iran Eases Money Policy," *New York Times*, March 19, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/20/world/middleeast/iran-eases-its-currency-exchange-policy.html?adxnnl=1&gwh=18507FA56B63768284445F9905CC9469&adxnnlx=1334955889-kte/%20MxJcaFcTJahmFMkEQ&pagewanted=print>.

8. Tom Gjelten, "Sanctions' Squeeze on Iran Tightens," National Public Radio, March 19, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/03/19/148902758/sanctions-squeeze-on-iran-tightens>.

9. Isaac Arnsdorf and Grant Smith, "Iran's Crude Oil Exports to Fall 50% on Embargo, IEA Says," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, March 14, 2012, <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2012-03-14/iran-s-crude-oil-exports-to-fall-50-percent-on-embargo-iea-says>.

10. Gladstone, "Strained by Sanctions."

11. Corey Flintoff, "New Sanction Severely Limits Iran's Global Commerce," National Public Radio, March 19, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/03/19/148917208/without-swift-iran-adrift-in-global-banking-world>.

12. Khamenei, quoted in Alfoneh, Majidiyar and Rubin, "Iran News Round Up August 8, 2011."

more salient questions for the purposes of this chapter: How effective are Iran's chief foreign-policy making bodies in the pragmatic realm of regional and international security policies, and how attached are they to the short- and medium-term policies or approaches they develop?

Specifically, again for the purposes of this chapter, the questions are: Will Iran become more flexible, more assertive, or even more belligerent if containment pressures increase and deterrence becomes more explicit? Or would it negotiate once more, as it did in 2003–2004, if presented with different terms and conditions for the negotiations? These types of questions are harder to answer, but we can supply at least some informed speculation by examining a number of strategic policies that Iran has employed in the recent past in three related foreign policy issue-areas and briefly reviewing the outcomes of those decisions.

## Conventional and Unconventional Weapons

Iran believes that it faces serious military threats. In response, it will continue to retain the option to develop nuclear weapons, deploy new conventional weapons and missile systems, and develop its asymmetric capabilities, especially in the waters of the Persian Gulf. As much as Iran would like to replace the United States and Saudi Arabia as the Gulf's hegemon, it is aware that its limited resources mean that its deployments must be defensive in nature. By reminding its Arab neighbors of its power to retaliate, Iran intends to maintain the current reluctance of GCC states to assist the United States in mounting an attack on Iran. Yet it is well aware of how exposed its land-based military assets are to the superior firepower of any potential adversary.

Regarding Iran's power projections (or lack thereof), it is worth noting that Hezbollah stayed quiet during the Israeli invasion of Gaza in 2008–2009. Despite some close approaches to show off readiness, Iranian naval forces have kept clear of U.S. and other naval units in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea. The passage of two Iranian warships through the Suez Canal in the spring of 2011 was a political gesture but did nothing to alter the balance of power.

## Nuclear Research and Development

Iran appears not to have taken a final decision to develop nuclear weapons, so far as external analysis of its intentions extends.<sup>13</sup> Yet Iranian leaders believe that defending their Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty rights successfully will be a significant defeat for their enemies. It sees mastery and successful use of nuclear technology as essential for its security in general terms: Such mastery would project strength by boosting national scientific and industrial progress, demonstrating that Islamic Iran can achieve what its neighbors have pioneered and showing that Iran is a full member of the nuclear club. Moreover, it would strengthen Iran's international bargaining position and create an option for assembling nuclear weapons.

The Iranians have the technical capability, the equipment (i.e., centrifuges), and a supply of the necessary material such that they could probably produce a weapon within one to three years from

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13. International Institute of Strategic Studies, *Iran's Nuclear, Chemical, and Biological Capabilities—A Net Assessment*, IISS Strategic Dossier (London: IISS, February 2011).

the decision being taken to do so.<sup>14</sup> So far, Iran's progress has been achieved at the price of sanctions and other measures that Iranian leaders believe the country can absorb and emerge stronger as a result. There is no visible or viable domestic agitation to change course at present.

## Forward Defense

In a rare public appearance to commemorate the martyrs of the Haqqani Theological Seminary on May 24, 2011, Qods Force commander Major General Qassem Suleimani made the following observation:

Yesterday there were Palestinians with stones, but today there is Palestine armed with missiles. This is why [U.S. secretary of state] Clinton advised [Israeli prime minister] Netanyahu to appreciate the passage of time. She knows well that, in the future, winning over Palestine will be impossible.... Such events provide our revolution with the greatest opportunities. Today, Iran's victory or defeat no longer takes place in Mehran and Khorramshahr. Our boundaries have expanded and we must witness victory in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. This is the fruit of the Islamic revolution.<sup>15</sup>

Hence there will be no going back on Iranian support for Hezbollah and Hamas, or the alliance with Syria, so long as Iran believes itself exposed to the danger of attack by the United States and Israel. It will seek new relationships with key countries affected by the Arab uprisings, notably Egypt. It will foster its new and vital position of influence in the new and much weakened Iraq.

## External Economic Relations

Iran cannot maintain economic growth *and* popular support for the regime on the basis of hydrocarbon exploitation alone. The devaluation of the rial in June 2011 showed how important continued development of non-oil exports and trade in general are for the Iranians. To give but one example, Iran has a huge and essential stake in the UAE: mutual trade is in excess of \$14 billion annually, making the UAE Iran's largest trading partner.<sup>16</sup>

A lack of the very self-sufficiency it so desires means that Iran cannot insulate itself from its neighbors and the world economy. Its economic limitations reinforce both its pragmatic inclination and its defensive posture. Hence it has not sought to alienate the GCC still further by exporting its Islamic Revolution to Bahrain or Saudi Arabia. Iran maintains close contact with and dispatches funds to co-religionists, it seeks to uphold rights overseas that it does not accord to all

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14. "The totality of the evidence indicates beyond reasonable doubt that Iran ... seeks a capability to produce nuclear weapons should its leaders choose to take this momentous step." Mark Fitzpatrick, "Iran's Nuclear, Chemical, and Biological Capabilities—Executive Summary," International Institute for Strategic Studies, February 3, 2011, <http://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/irans-nuclear-chemical-and-biological-capabilities/press-statement/>.

15. Major General Qassem Suleimani, quoted in Ali Alfoneh, Ahmad Majidiyar, and Michael Rubin, "Iran News Roundup May 25, 2011," *AEI Iran Tracker*, May 25, 2011, <http://www.irantracker.org/roundup/iran-news-round-may-25-2011>.

16. Will Fulton, Ariel Farra-Wellman, and Robert Frasco, "United Arab Emirates-Iran Foreign Relations," *AEI Iran Tracker*, August 2, 2011, <http://www.irantracker.org/foreign-relations/united-arab-emirates-iran-foreign-relations>.

in Iran, and it criticizes heavy-handed suppression of demands for reform, but it is not plotting to overthrow regimes by force.

The conclusion is that Iran is ambitious in terms of its revolutionary goals, but it is also pragmatic (and thus cautious), based on a tacit admission of the limits of its power in relation to that of its adversaries. The four branches of its foreign and security policy discussed above show why: They are considered vital, but they are also perceived to be exposed and not to be put at risk unnecessarily.

## Iranian Responses

### A More Explicit Deterrence Strategy

Iran does not accept that the countries surrounding it should need defense commitments by the United States and U.S. deployments on their territories, but it is clearly aware of the force that the United States could use against it. While Iran is publicly defiant, it is privately fearful. The determination of the United States to defend its vital interests in the region, and the mantra of successive U.S. presidents that all options to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon are on the table, are not lost on Iran's political leaders—despite high-level doubts cast in the United States against military action and Iranian public claims that the United States cannot do anything militarily effective against Iran.

Deterrence and containment are the opposite faces of the same coin. Military deterrence is an essential feature of a containment strategy. And given the uncertainties of a deterrence-based strategy, it should be accompanied by a range of counterforce and economic restrictions designed to check any power projections of the Iranian adversary, as was the case with the U.S. containment strategy against the Soviet Union. Iran's declared policy against such pressures is clear. Khamenei said in Bandar Abbas on July 24, 2011: "We have never urged any country to conflict and will not do so, and to the best of our ability, we will abstain from any confrontation, be it accidental or calculated. But those who secure their advance by force and bullying [others] should feel [the presence of] a mighty nation in front of them."<sup>17</sup> This statement is credible with respect to the past, but can it serve as a guide to how Iran would likely respond to additional military and containment constraints in the future?

Regarding military measures appropriate to deterring Iran, Michael O'Hanlon has already cited the three explicit "no's" referred to by James Lindsay and Ray Takeyh in their April/May 2010 *Foreign Affairs* article: no initiation of conventional warfare against another state; no transfer of nuclear weapons, materials, or technologies; and no increase in support for terrorists. In O'Hanlon's deterrence scenarios, a harsh U.S. response would be promised if Iran were to transgress any of these "no's," to wit: an aerial bombardment campaign or naval blockade. Iran has not publicly challenged these possible responses by building up its air defense or naval forces in anticipation of such actions, suggesting that credible military response options in the future as part of a deterrence strategy would not provoke Iran into taking aggressive measures to break out of such constraints.

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17. Ali Alfoneh, Ahmad Majidiyar, and Michael Rubin, "Iran News Round Up July 25, 2011," *AEI Iran Tracker*, July 25, 2011, <http://www.irantracker.org/roundup/iran-news-round-july-25-2011>.

The United States and its partners also believe that missile defense against Iran is essential. Not only are U.S. missile defense assets on board naval vessels in the Gulf, but the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait are taking delivery of various U.S. missile defense systems to give them some measure of protection against Iranian missile strikes. Once more, apart from pursuing its own defensive weapons and missile development programs, Iran has not demonstrated an ability to counter such an upgrade in the defense capability of its neighbors, or that it regards such proximal upgrades as an intolerable provocation. Iran has not undertaken any threatening action in response, nor has it undertaken the kind of subversion that the Iraqi experience shows it is capable of as a way of warning its GCC neighbors against taking steps that alter the military balance.

Similarly, Iran would have to live with the consequences of any explicit guarantee by the United States to use nuclear weapons to defend its allies in the region—the so-called nuclear umbrella—for it would have no way of challenging such a deterrence policy.<sup>18</sup> Then again, the announcement of such a deterrent policy could spur the Iranians to focus their efforts on developing nuclear weapons without delay. Much would depend on the actual U.S. nuclear force deployments and whether Iran detected any aggressive intent behind them.

The fear that a nuclear-capable state would hand weapons technology to terrorist movements was one of the drivers of anti-Iraq arguments in 2002–2003, and the same fears typically arise in connection with Iran. Arguments for and against such a possibility cannot be settled conclusively. Yet it is likely that Iran’s leaders harbor a different set of related fears regarding the consequences of such transfers: the fear that, once out of their control, the technology and materials could be passed on again, or stolen, to the benefit of Iran’s enemies; the likelihood of Iran’s hand in the transfer being detected, with highly damaging international measures, to say the least, taken against Iran in consequence; the certainty of wider nuclear proliferation in the future, leaving Iran relatively no better off than it is today.

Iran has, of course, been able to exploit the failures and mistakes of others, including the United States in Iraq, Israel in the occupied territories, and the GCC in its internal and regional disputes. The pattern that best fits Iran’s observed actions across the region is *opportunism*, extending Iranian influence to effect outcomes in its favor and using money, limited and targeted military assistance, and political persuasion and cultural links, but being sensitive “to crossing certain ‘red-lines,’ i.e., giving the United States an unequivocal pretext to attack Iran or provoking an intolerable anti-Iranian backlash among Arab audiences....”<sup>19</sup>

In short, Iran—nuclear capable or not—can be deterred. The extra military measures that could be adopted in the future to ensure the effectiveness of a deterrence strategy would be likely to confirm rather than weaken existing pressures on Iran not to move beyond the steps it is taking to protect its own interests in the region.

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18. Iran may consider, however, that it would be unlikely that the U.S. Congress would allow such an absolute guarantee, in which an attack on any of the countries covered was considered to be tantamount to an attack on the United States, given the potential consequences for the United States of being unable to control the buildup to a situation in which the guarantee had to be invoked and the evident concern in the United States about being dragged into such a conflict against its own interests.

19. Frederic Wehrey, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Jessica Watkins, Jeffrey Martini, and Robert A. Guffey, *The Iraq Effect: The Middle East after the Iraq War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010), xviii.

## Increased Containment Pressures

“Containment... simply attempts to prevent Iran from causing trouble beyond its borders—both directly and indirectly by trying to keep Iran weak... [I]t is effectively what the [United States] has pursued for most of the past thirty years.”<sup>20</sup> According to this definition, the Iranians have had plenty of experience with containment measures from the United States. Most recently, the assassination of Iranian scientists and the dispatch of computer viruses by a power hostile to Iran, probably Israel, have been added to the tally of such measures.<sup>21</sup>

The economic effects of successive rounds of multilateral and U.S. sanctions have slowed Iranian growth and complicated the structural problems that beset Iran’s economy. There has been impact in that sense but as yet no effect on Iran’s policy other than to harden its resistance. This was fully apparent at the Istanbul meeting between the P5+1 and Iran in January 2011, at which Iran maintained its insistence that sanctions be withdrawn and Iran’s right to enrich uranium be conceded as preconditions for a negotiation.

There is no doubt that sanctions have increased the potential for leverage by the P5+1 and the United States in particular, but it would require Iran to acknowledge this potential for leverage to be used in practice by those negotiating with Iran to help create new common ground. It is highly unlikely that additional measures on their own would bludgeon Iran into accepting the UN Security Council resolutions as they stand.

Analytical opinion is divided between those who consider that Iran will not negotiate from a position of weakness, which if valid would make sanctions self-defeating, and those who believe that Iran negotiates only under serious pressure. Neither approach is true for all time; it depends what is on offer to Iran in the putative negotiation. Pressure—in the form of a threat to take Iran to the Security Council in 2002–2003—helped when Britain, France, and Germany offered an alternative way for Iran to resolve the dispute over its past and present nuclear activities via negotiations and thus avert the uncertainties and potential damage to Iranian interests from transferring the question from Vienna’s IAEA headquarters to New York’s UN Security Council. Pressure—in the form of successive rounds of economic sanctions—is no help now in inducing a change of policy, as there is nothing on the table that Iran wants or values sufficiently, such as enrichment rights, additional security measures (what the Iranians term “respect,” meaning acceptance of their role in regional decisionmaking in general), and cooperation based on unwinding sanctions regimes.

## More Appropriate Engagement Initiatives

It is hard to imagine a doctrine of renewed engagement between the United States and Iran in the near future. Distrust is such that neither side is willing to meet the other on terms the other would accept. This may change, however. The P5+1 (even the United States and France) may come to see the reliance on sanctions, with military action in reserve, as potentially less effective in the long term than the prevention of a nuclear-armed Iran through internationally endorsed measures to limit, monitor, and inspect Iranian enrichment and greater assurances that Iran will not

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20. Kenneth M. Pollack, *Which Path To Persia? Options for a New American Strategy Toward Iran* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2009), 184, 189.

21. Richard Clarke, “Signs of a Covert War Between the U.S. and Iran,” ABC News, December 17, 2011, <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/covert-war-us-iran/story?id=15174919>.



divert nuclear material to bomb-making. Iran is obstructing the alternative, step-by-step approach preferred currently by the P5+1. Iran does not trust the hints it has apparently been given that enrichment rights might be negotiable in due course, provided Iran addresses first the accumulated concerns of the IAEA and its negotiating partners about certain aspects of its nuclear programs.<sup>22</sup>

Whether or not Iran has a fundamental interest in finding a *modus vivendi* with the United States, including on the nuclear question, continues to be debated in the country.<sup>23</sup> It is likely that in time underlying anxiety will reassert itself about the accumulated harmful effects of structural problems in the economy, sanctions, and years of low growth, including a slow rate of investment in the country's oil and gas resources.<sup>24</sup> Regardless of whether the negative effects of sanctions on Iran remain as serious as they are now or get worse with increasingly international pressure, sooner or later Iran is likely to explore measures to improve accommodation—provided the country can do so without a total loss of face. Hence, any shift toward a more accommodating posture will likely be limited. However, that does not change the fact that Iran will likely move closer to the posture it adopted from 2003 to 2005.

In the short term, however, Iran's leaders are unlikely to conclude that there would be anything to gain by seeking an accommodation with the United States, as they see little difference between hostile policies pursued under previous Republican administrations and hostile policies pursued by the current Democratic one. An early agreement would require what they consider to be surrender—a worse evil, they appear to think, than the ones they face now.<sup>25</sup> A shift could be signaled after the next Iranian presidential elections in mid-2013, when Iran's leaders will believe the country to be in a relatively stronger position in that the United States will have reduced its footprint in Afghanistan and Iraq, and Iran's nuclear development program will be even more ambiguous.

If Khamenei were to decide to respond constructively to offers of engagement on fresh terms, again it would be at a time, and with people at the helm, of his choosing. Khamenei would not decide to see through any new diplomatic process to a set of agreements, come what may. He would probably authorize a step-by-step approach that he could terminate if it did not appear likely to deliver substantial benefits to the Islamic Republic in return for any concessions.

Engagement should not be posited on Iran's being a "natural hegemon" in the region. The prerequisite for a stable Gulf is not domination by one power, but balancing different powers in

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22. Private interview with an official of a P5+1 member government. For an explanation of Iran's adherence to its position and a scenario in which Iran would return to the negotiating table, see the interview with Seyed Hossein Mousavian, former spokesperson of Iran's nuclear negotiation team (2003–2005) and former head of the Foreign Relations Committee of Iran's National Security Council (1997–2005) in Semira Nikou, "Hossein Mousavian: Iran is Ready to Negotiate—If," *Semira Nikou's Blog, The Iran Primer*, U.S. Institute of Peace, August 15, 2011, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2011/aug/15/hossein-mousavian-iran-ready-negotiate-if>.

23. For references to the debate, including the view of presidential candidate Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf that Iran's foreign policy must take into consideration the reality of the presence of other powers in the region, see Kamrava, "Iranian Foreign and Security Policies in the Persian Gulf," 193.

24. Chinese companies have disappointed in their intended role as a replacement for Western oil majors. According to *Mehr News* on August 9, 2011, two years after Iran entered a \$5 billion project with China's CNPCI company to develop the South Pars oil and gas field, the gas project has not yet begun. "Iran suspends gas deal with China's CNPCI," *Tehran Times*, October 11, 2011, <http://www.tehrantimes.com/index.php/economy-and-business/3443-iran-suspends-gas-deal-with-chinas-cnpci>.

25. "Iran ready for nuclear talks but not to yield to pressures: president," *Xinhua*, February 11, 2012, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/world/2012-02/11/c\\_131404800.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/world/2012-02/11/c_131404800.htm).

recognition of the legitimate interests of all in promoting their internal and external security. Practical cooperation will be achieved only if recognition of Iranian power and Iran's right to be involved in regional decisionmaking does not require other states to accept hegemony.

## Conclusion

Iran recognizes the obvious: that it is already exposed to its enemies' containment and deterrent power, and has been for decades. Its watchword will remain *resistance*. Nevertheless, Iran has no interest in provoking interstate warfare. The state of the Iranian economy and armed forces, along with the country's historical experiences since the 1979 revolution, predispose it to maintaining the maximum defensive capability. At the same time, these factors also leave Iran averse to the risk of exposing its weaknesses and entering a war that it could not be sure of winning.<sup>26</sup>

Leaving aside the impact of unforeseeable events, Iranian policy will be characterized by more continuity than change under any combination of the three strategies under examination in this volume. The regime will hold together and surmount the tensions between different factions of the elite. Ayatollah Khamenei has clear aims and is both cautious and conservative.

Iran's revolutionary goals require the nation to project strength. Yet such power projection is tempered by a pragmatism that Iran relies on at crucial times. Iran believes that it faces serious military threats. In response, it will continue to support regional allies, retain the option of nuclear weapons, deploy new weapons systems, develop its asymmetric capabilities, and counter what it calls "Iranophobia," adapting to constraints as far as it can. Iran's leaders are aware that the nation's resources are limited.

Under any U.S. doctrinal strategy involving containment, deterrence, and/or engagement, Iran will remain active and assertive in the Gulf and the broader Middle East. Iran's leaders consider such a policy response to be the best way of protecting Iran's revolutionary goals, influencing regional councils, supporting friends, promoting its material interests, and preventing harmful change inside and outside its borders. More elaborate, better-defined U.S. military commitments, alliances, and deployments intended to deter Iran would have little effect on Iran's external policy.

Containment as part of a policy of persuasion that is heavy on pressures and light on incentives will not bring Iran to the negotiating table. Attempting to answer the Iranian nuclear challenge, U.S. policymakers must overcome the current resistance of the P5+1 to modify its position to include conditional acceptance at the outset of Iran's right to enrich uranium. If the conclusion is reached that Iran can no longer be prevented from achieving a weapons capability and the powers fall back to a full-blown deterrence and containment strategy in preference to trying the military option, they will find that Iran will still seek the greatest degree of power that it can achieve in the region. It will vary its tactics depending on the challenges it faces in attaining real influence over the outcome of events.

As of now, though, Iran will not risk taking action that would bring on a military attack on its homeland by its enemies; Iranian security officials know that there are decided advantages in

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26. For a fuller discussion, see Anthony H. Cordesman, "Iran: Weakling or Hegemon?" in *Arabian Gulf Security: Internal and External Challenges* (Abu Dhabi: Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2008).

provocative actions, but they also fear that they would not be able to control the outcome of such a war. Iran is a rational actor and will be deterred from attacking others, from engaging in large-scale subversion or terrorism, and from taking hostile action (other than in self-defense) against international assets such as the Strait of Hormuz. Ayatollah Khamenei may be willing to endorse a more constructive policy after the next Iranian presidential election. The P5+1 should be ready with a more flexible approach.



## CONCLUSION

Jon B. Alterman

We end largely where we began. As the world works to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, there is widespread agreement on what failure looks like. It is an Iranian bomb—or, more likely, a number of Iranian bombs—that emboldens the Iranian government, threatens the Middle East, and prompts many of Iran’s neighbors to develop their own weapons, thereby raising tensions in the most energy-rich part of the world.

It is harder, though, to define success. For some, success can come only when the Iranian nuclear problem is “solved.” That is to say, success is when the government of Iran convincingly renounces any effort to develop nuclear weapons, opens all of its nuclear facilities to international inspection, and reveals the sources for its technology and materials. Anything short of that, they argue, represents an intermediate step in the “failure” category, and failure happens every day until success is achieved.

Defining success narrowly and failure broadly makes it difficult to achieve success on several levels. In part, it is harder to reach a higher bar. Few countries in history have openly renounced their covert nuclear programs, and even fewer have done so when under a combination of intense international pressure and what they see as enduring existential security threats. There is also another cost to defining success and failure in this way. Deep and enduring international differences about the goals of shared nonproliferation efforts and disagreements about what constitutes their success undermine international cooperation against Iranian nuclear efforts and make success of any stripe harder to achieve. A greater international consensus on what constitutes success builds broad international support for supportive actions seeking to change the Iranian calculus. Those actions will make such a change more likely, although not at all certain.

The hawks have a precedent for their ambitions. In essence, they seek to have Iran “pull a Gadhafi.” After more than a decade of harsh international sanctions, and following demonstrations of U.S. resolve in the months following September 11, 2001, the Libyan government began exploring what it would take to end Libya’s pariah status. The Gadhafi government’s goals were normalized relations with the rest of the world and confidence that the world would not seek to change Libya’s unique form of government. Two years of negotiations, some well-timed U.S. naval raids, and a massive U.S.-led invasion of Iraq produced a clear end to the Libyan nuclear and chemical weapons programs. It also led to a deeper understanding of Libyan supply networks and Libyan restitution for victims of terrorism.

There are at least two problems with applying Libya’s lessons to the Iranian situation. The first is that Libya had a single leader who was firmly in control of politics. While he himself was mercurial, it was inconceivable that others would constrain his freedom of action. He was an independent political actor. Iran has a Supreme Leader, but Iran’s politics are a serpent’s nest of competing

forces and factions on both the elite and public levels. Ayatollah Khamenei constantly maneuvers between the clerical establishment, the parliament, the Revolutionary Guards, and the street. He is without question the most influential person in Iran, but he is not the only influential person. Unlike Libya, where politics had long devolved into farce, the politics of disarmament and inspections in Iran would be genuine, and they would be hard.

The second problem is Gadhafi's fall, which came after six months of NATO bombardment. Gadhafi complained long and loud after 2003 that he never derived the expected benefits from ending his nuclear program—and that was even before Western troops bombed his forces with Arab support. By contrast, nuclear-armed North Korea has proved immune from attack despite high levels of tension. There are other factors insulating North Korea—Chinese attitudes chief among them—but for leaders considering survival, Gadhafi's ignoble end, compared to the death of Kim Jung Il from natural causes two months later, must serve as a cautionary tale.

Some analysts argue that Gadhafi's end is the only appropriate one for the Iranian leadership. They don't shy away from an overt policy of regime change—although they do not dwell on the difficulty of both forcing regime change and shaping its aftermath. The half-century-long U.S. embargo on Cuba is a reminder of the former, while the political fruits of \$1 trillion and almost 4,500 U.S. lives spent in Iraq is a reminder of the latter.

An overt strategy of regime change also makes it difficult to obtain compromises from target governments concerned with their own survival. If it is clear that U.S. and allied hostility is irrevocable, it persuades the targets that the goal of any negotiations is to weaken them rather than resolve tensions. Every overture becomes a trick to be evaded rather than an option to explore.

What are other options? One, often mooted, is a preventative military strike of indeterminate intensity, coming from either Israel or the United States. Some argue that Iran would shrink back after an attack, afraid to invite another strike.<sup>1</sup> They point to Iraq after Israel's attack on the Osirak Nuclear Reactor in 1981, and Syria after Israel's attack on a suspected nuclear site in 2007. Yet each of those actions was relatively simpler than any attack on Iranian nuclear facilities would likely be, and there were extraordinarily few casualties. The struck sites were relatively closer to Israel than the suspect Iranian sites are and almost wholly unprotected. In each case, too, no known radiological incident followed. They were, by all accounts, relatively straightforward—albeit daring—one-off strikes. Iran, by contrast, has a wide variety of sites with varying types of protection, some of which are burrowed underground. It may be possible to decimate the Iranian sites, but it is certainly not straightforward.

The context matters, too. Neither Iraq nor Syria believed it was locked in an existential battle with either Israel or the broader outside world. Each country's different psychology allowed for a more measured response, since the attack would not be seen as the beginning of an effort to unseat the regime.

The direct military goal of a military strike would be to cause so much damage as to delay any Iranian ability to make a weapon for at least a year, and perhaps more. The broader ambition, it would seem, is to persuade the Iranian leadership that it is fruitless to develop a weapon, because outside powers will destroy whatever capability they are able to develop. Judging the actual impact

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1. See Amos Yadlin, "Israel's Last Chance to Strike Iran," *New York Times*, February 29, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/01/opinion/israels-last-chance-to-strike-iran.html>.

of any attack is difficult, because the current state, trajectory, and speed of Iranian capabilities are unknown. Given the data that is currently publicly available, it would be impossible to prove that a strike has had any salutary effect, or how long that effect might last.

Some see the real prize of an attack—from the United States or any other source—as tempting Iran to enter into an escalating battle with the United States. This strategy would bank on a massive conventional U.S. military response to Iranian reactions to a strike that would set back the Iranian defensive capability a decade or more. Should Iran choose or stumble into a war with the United States in the Gulf, the indications are that the U.S. military would show little restraint.

Such a battle might stand to remove the government of the Islamic Republic once and for all. To many who study Iran, this is necessary for any solution to the challenges Iran poses. If it is necessary, however, is it sufficient to solve the Iranian nuclear challenge? Could one shape what came after? Probably not; the ability to do so is scant after a government falls even if there are ground forces, and even more negligible if the attack is done principally from the air and sea. Even if one accepts the proposition that there is widespread opposition to the Iranian government, the recent history of the Middle East illustrates how quickly battles for spoils turn bloody. The current Iranian government inherited its nuclear program from the Shah. Even if the current government were to fall, there is no reason to think that its successor would not come to follow the same logic in pursuing an independent nuclear weapons capability that many ascribe to the current government—although the resultant turmoil would likely set back a nuclear weapons program as the new government established its priorities.

Among the worst possible outcomes is a partially successful strike, which would likely invigorate rather than blunt Iranian nuclear weapons ambitions, seeing as no country with nuclear weapons has ever faced an overt assault. Iran could push forward developing its own program, or it could pursue purchasing technology and matériel overseas. Iran is currently constrained by its accession to the Non-Proliferation Treaty. If nuclear facilities allowed under the NPT treaty were attacked, Iran would likely withdraw from it, loosening constraints still further and diminishing any visibility into its program. An attack, especially one that had only narrow international sanction, would also shatter international efforts to press for a change in Iranian behavior. Such a strike could unleash a wide range of contingencies that would spike oil prices, drive the fragile global economy into a tailspin, and unleash a trail of death that reaches from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean.

Even short of a military strike, some argue that the only strategy to use toward Iran is to prominently and consistently raise the possibility of war in order to persuade the Iranians, and the rest of the world, of resolve.<sup>2</sup> Such an approach is problematic for two reasons. First, such talk helps boost oil prices, which gives the Iranian government further resources. A Gulf Cooperation Council ambassador to Washington estimated that sanctions will deprive the Iranian government of some 20 to 30 percent of its income. Yet all the talk of war has driven oil prices up a similar amount, putting back into the Iranian government's pockets precisely the amount of money that sanctions sought to keep out of them.

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2. See, for example, Michael Singh, "To Keep the Peace with Iran, Threaten to Strike," *Washington Quarterly* 35 (Spring 2012): 55–69, <https://csis.org/files/publication/twq12springsingh.pdf>.

Second, constantly threatening war but not delivering one creates its own dilemma, undermining the credibility of the threat itself. A party cannot deter if it is unable or unwilling to deliver the threatened punishments, and Israeli strategists in particular have worried that an unused deterrent is no deterrent at all.<sup>3</sup> While one might argue that a demonstrative use of force would be enough to reinforce a deterrent, it is difficult to persuade a target state that attacks are ending because of the attacker's predilection and not because of an inability to attack at will. At the same time, it can be harder for a target state to back down in the face of public attack. Seen this way, the logic of an enduring and oft-repeated threat invites at least some conflict in its effort to avoid conflict, with unpredictable results.

Succinctly put, there are many ways a military option could fail, and even more ways that its outcome would be impossible to judge. Obtaining a clearly positive outcome is extraordinarily difficult to achieve, and likely relies as much on luck and guesswork as it does on skill.

There is a better alternative. An Iranian nuclear program that has more intrusive inspections and narrower areas of uncertainty puts us in an unquestionably better position than we are in now. Despite more than a decade of drama after the U.S.-led war on Iraq in 1991, the resultant inspections regime was enough to stymie any Iraqi effort to develop a nuclear weapon. What was left was mostly smoke and mirrors and public relations, intended to bolster the regime rather than threaten its neighbors. Removing a large amount of enriched uranium from Iran, as the United States and its allies sought to do in October 2010, would lengthen any timeline and reduce tensions.

There is substantial international support for such an approach, ranging from governments whose principal focus is to bolster multilateralism to those that fear the economic consequences of a disruption in energy supplies. U.S. allies that are heavily reliant on Iranian energy, such as Japan and South Korea, have been cooperative with efforts to squeeze the Iranians economically as long as they refuse to cooperate with international inspectors. China and Russia have surprised skeptics, joining international efforts to push the Iranians toward moderation.

The complication in all of this is that the instinct of many countries is to follow the United States reluctantly rather than to lead emphatically on Middle East security issues. Russia and China are the most troubling in this regard. While neither country has a preference for a nuclear Iran, neither seeks a dominant and triumphant United States, either. Each country seems destined to create some friction with the United States on Iran. At the same time, however, neither country has a preference for all-out war, which would threaten regional stability and also hold out the prospect of no counterbalance to U.S. influence in the Gulf. One of the ways that the United States can sustain international unity is to remind all parties that it retains a war option while doing everything possible to find diplomatic alternatives to exercising it.

The GCC governments are unlikely to be wholly pleased with such an approach, because it leaves them in a state of some uncertainty. Even less likely to be satisfied is the government of

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3. See, for example, Aryeh Egozi, "Losing Our Deterrent Power," Ynetnews.com, October 13, 2010, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3968721,00.html>. For a robust justification of an Israeli deterrent strategy by a former head of Israeli military intelligence, see Amos Malka, "The 'Power of Weakness' Versus the 'Weakness of Power': Asymmetrical Deterrence" (paper presented at 8th Herzliya Conference, "Israel at Sixty: Tests of Endurance," Herzliya, January 20–23, 2008), [http://www.herzliyaconference.org/\\_Uploads/2812AmosMalka.pdf](http://www.herzliyaconference.org/_Uploads/2812AmosMalka.pdf).

Israel, which has staked out a position that it faces an existential threat from Iran. Winning these countries' acquiescence in the longer term, and persuading each that the U.S. policy is one taken deliberately and out of strength rather than one taken idly out of weakness, will be a major challenge. Essential to each is persuading them that the United States retains the capability and intention of pursuing other options should collective action fail.

Such an outcome would fall short of full success, and regional tensions would remain—and some say they would remain intolerable. Iran would be an enduring problem that needed to be managed. For those seeking a “solution” to the Iran problem, it is not that. If the alternative is complete success, the middle ground would count as a failure.

Yet, achieving complete success is both unlikely and unverifiable. With no agreed starting point and no clear ending point, and a host of contingencies in between, there seems little way to avoid at least some period of deeper uncertainty in efforts to change Iranian behavior.

The task, really, is to thread the needle between the many, many ways to fail on Iran, versus the scant number of ways to succeed. Defining success too narrowly moves it well beyond reach; defining it too broadly leaves the world a more dangerous place for decades to come. The fact that the world has a stake in this creates a powerful incentive for cooperation, especially given the alternatives.

As this volume has made clear, there are few who view collective action as either the most desirable course or a task for which they have much appetite. In most situations, many countries seek their own waivers for self-interested action, while asking others to sacrifice for the benefit of the whole. Collective action will prolong tensions rather than end them. Yet, efforts to drive a collective effort on Iran hold out the prospect of achieving the best outcomes, especially over a five- or ten-year period. There are a wide variety of imponderables in the intervening period—not least having to do with the gyrations of oil prices and the demonstration effects of political change in the Arab world, plus the potential for generational change in Gulf leaderships and in Iran itself—that could shape outcomes in unpredictable ways. Some hold out the prospect of changing the motivations of the Iranian government. At the very least, they will present opportunities for influencing Iranian decisionmaking. International solidarity increases the odds of efficacy in this regard.

Essential to all of this is that the United States maintains its military role in the Gulf and sustains the role it plays as a principal guarantor of regional security. Were it to cease to do so, it would risk greater conflict, as Israelis, Gulf Arabs and the Iranians themselves tested the new bounds of their behavior. It would also send a signal about U.S. commitment to energy security, making it harder for the United States to retain any durable presence in the region (as Britain knows after its 1971 withdrawal “East of Suez”). Clumsily done, regional states will see the United States as a necessary evil whose presence is resented and tolerated only so long as it serves short-term interests. In such an environment, regional states would expect the United States to devote extraordinary resources to sustaining a system that deals with Iranian threats, while each seeks official and unofficial avenues to pursue their own policies in ways that undermine U.S. efforts. Skillfully done, the United States will transition to a different kind of regional leadership. In this scenario, regional states would not only welcome the U.S. role but actively support it. They would understand the broader context and the alternatives, and they would have confidence that their solidarity would make acceptable outcomes more likely.



It is hard to foresee any scenario in which the United States would wholly neglect any of the strategies described here—engagement, containment, and deterrence. It is likely, instead, to pursue them in different measure depending on circumstances. Ensuring that allies and other powers feel as much a stake in the strategies as they do in the outcomes does not guarantee success, but it makes success far more likely.





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