

Iran's Role in a Post-Afghanistan, Post-Arab Spring, Chaotic, Unpredictable, and Financially Constrained "New, New World"

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A European diplomat I used to visit in Tehran in the 1990s kept a rope ladder, bullhorn, and first aid kit under his desk. Tehran, he said, was overdue for a massive earthquake and a big one was sure to hit by 2025.

A natural disaster in Iran's crowded capital city would undoubtedly have significant repercussions beyond the destruction of property and loss of life. A high death toll could help unify Iranians behind their government or—more likely—undermine it even further if the citizenry blamed the regime for poor planning and shoddy construction. In any event, EUCOM would almost certainly seek to respond, with America joining European and Eurasian allies in offering urgently needed relief—just as EUCOM flew over thirty-six tons of firefighting supplies and equipment to Russia in 2010 to respond to record forest fires¹ and also responded to a 2011 earthquake in Turkey.

There is precedent for US relief to the Islamic Republic of Iran; the United States provided aid when an earthquake struck the ancient Iranian city of Bam in December 2003, the first time American military planes landed in Iran with the permission of the government since the 1979 revolution. Another quake would be an opportunity for the United States to show magnanimity toward the people of Iran despite decades of hostility toward Iran's government and vice versa.

Unfortunately, there is also the prospect of a different sort of encounter between the US military and Iran—minor clashes or more significant fighting if the United States and/or Israel attack Iran's nuclear program or Iran responds aggressively to Western efforts to sanction its oil exports. While CENTCOM would have primary responsibility in such a conflict, EUCOM would be drawn in because of anticipated military moves by Iran and its Arab partners against Israel and shipping in the Mediterranean as well as against allied forces in Afghanistan and tanker traffic in the Persian Gulf.

Predictions are inherently risky when it comes to the Middle East, which has been the scene of unprecedented political turmoil since January 2011. Nevertheless, this paper will bravely sketch possible scenarios for Iran's near-term political future and regional power projection, with a particular emphasis on developments that would involve EUCOM. It will also make a few policy recommendations intended to preserve and if possible enhance US leverage in a rapidly changing Middle East.

A Moving Chessboard

When trying to predict the future of the Islamic Republic, humility is in order. Just as few Western analysts foresaw the successful 1979 revolution against the Shah, few anticipated the 1997 election of a relative moderate, Mohammad Khatami, as president or the demonstrations by millions of Iranians in 2009 protesting fraud in the re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Iran is now under unprecedented stress as a result of economic and

¹ Testimony of Admiral James G. Stavridis before the 112th Congress, 2011, p. 12. <http://armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2011/03%20March/Stavridis%2003-29-11.pdf>

other sanctions; its regional influence—which peaked in 2006 while the United States was bogged down in Iraq and Israel fought an inconclusive war with Hezbollah—is on the wane even as Iran retains the capacity to disturb, though not dominate, its neighbors. The uprisings that began to convulse the Arab world in 2011—especially the civil strife in Iran’s most durable Arab ally, Syria—have turned the Middle East into a dynamic, three-dimensional chess board. Moves by the United States, the European Union, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel could further check Iran’s regional reach or draw the Middle East into a new conflagration.

At this juncture, Israel and Iran appear to be the biggest losers in terms of influence over regional events. Both are increasingly out of step with neighboring countries and are becoming more rigid and intolerant of opposition views. If they clash—directly or through proxies—they can bring enormous pain and dislocation but will not stop the trend toward more populist regimes with a Sunni Islamist coloring. Other factors that are reshaping the region are growing sectarianism—which hurts Shiite Iran’s attempts to portray itself as a champion of pan-Islamic interests—and intolerance of religious and ethnic minorities in general. Turkey and Saudi Arabia are likely to emerge as the regional power houses—Turkey because of its economic growth and relative success in merging democracy and religion; Saudi Arabia because of its oil wealth and new willingness to project military force, as in Bahrain. The United States, meanwhile, will be increasingly torn between its democratic impulses, its support for Israel, its desire for an orderly withdrawal from Afghanistan and its need to placate Arab Gulf oil suppliers nervous about Iran’s nuclear program and support for Arab Shiites and Syrian Alawites.

Divided we stand

A crucial question is whether Iran’s theocratic government can withstand the growing economic pressure and diplomatic isolation. Those hoping for a change in Tehran see the regime as increasingly divided and brittle. Yet the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) has endured far worse, including the eight-year war with Iraq in the 1980s that killed a quarter of a million young Iranians and wrecked the country’s infrastructure.

There are a number of common misconceptions about Iran in the West. For starters, Iran is not a totalitarian state, a North Korea with oil. Iran has always been fractious, with a system in which elections create new political divisions and narcissistic politicians firmly believe they alone have the answers to Iran’s problems. This very fractiousness, however, is also an element of strength, allowing for the airing of different views and personnel and policy shifts over time.

Unlike North Korea, China and the old Soviet Union, Iran lacks a single ruling political party. Large swathes of the population—those who reject theocratic rule—are denied representation. Since the 2009 elections, Islamic liberals have also been harshly repressed. But it is an axiom in Iran that as soon as one group appears to consolidate control, fissures within that group become apparent and widen. Thus Ahmadinejad’s alleged “landslide” win in 2009 led to growing polarization within the conservative elite.

The president erred when he thought he could exert more power in his second term after the country’s pre-eminent political figure—Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei—endorsed Ahmadinejad’s disputed re-election as divinely blessed. Instead the pattern in Iran

is that presidents weaken in their second terms while the Supreme Leader consolidates power.²

After his re-election, Ahmadinejad replaced several officials close to Khamenei—including the Foreign Minister, Manouchehr Mottaki—but was forced to rescind an effort to fire Intelligence Minister Heydar Moslehi in April, 2011. The president sulked at home for 11 eleven days but returned to work after being threatened with removal. For several months following this incident, Iranian state media intensified a campaign against so-called deviationists close to Ahmadinejad said to be responsible for crimes ranging from sorcery to financial corruption. Ahmadinejad's chief of staff, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, was a particular target. While a number of Mashaei and Ahmadinejad associates were arrested, the Justice Ministry—controlled by an Ahmadinejad rival, Sadeq Larijani—has not moved directly against Ahmadinejad or Mashaei, whose daughter is married to Ahmadinejad's son. The president, meanwhile, has not carried out public threats to reveal information that could discredit his rivals.

Parliamentary elections in March 2012 further marginalized Ahmadinejad's supporters while exposing new divisions in the shrinking conservative elite. The regime announced that 64 percent of eligible voters participated—a figure that was almost certainly inflated—in an effort to reclaim legitimacy lost in 2009. While largely a public relations exercise, the elections could influence presidential elections in 2013 and affect the government's flexibility in nuclear negotiations scheduled for April 2012.³

Assuming presidential elections are held in 2013, possible candidates include the mayor of Tehran, Mohammed Baqer Qalibaf, a pilot and former chief of police; Gholam-ali Haddad Adel, a relative of the Supreme Leader by marriage and prominent parliamentarian; Ali Larijani, speaker of the outgoing parliament and brother of the justice minister; and Ali Akhbar Salehi, a nuclear physicist and technocrat who currently serves as foreign minister. Any of these men would be more palatable interlocutors for diplomatic engagement than Ahmadinejad but the Supreme Leader will remain the ultimate decision-maker.

Several factors will influence Iranian domestic politics:

- More external pressure, especially a US or Israeli attack, could promote a more hardlinehard-line government in Tehran and a further increase in influence by the intelligence establishment and the Revolutionary Guards. It is also possible that an attack might further destabilize the government and lead to a resurgence of popular unrest. However, Iranian security forces appear sufficiently strong and united at this point to suppress protests.
- Khamenei has suggested that he might eliminate the post of president and restore the job of prime minister in an effort to reduce regime infighting and further consolidate his powers.

² Barbara Slavin, "The Incredible Shrinking Ahmadinejad," *Foreign Policy*, May 25, 2011. http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/05/25/the_incredible_shrinking_ahmadinejad?page=full

³ Yasmin Alem and Barbara Slavin, "The Supreme Leader Grows Ever Lonelier at the Top," *The Atlantic Council* Iran Task Force, March 2012. http://www.acus.org/files/publication_pdfs/403/031912_ACUS_IranInternal.PDF

- Khamenei, who is seventy-two⁷², could die, creating a crisis over his succession and weakening the position of supreme leader. Khamenei, rumored for years to be suffering from cancer, is said to be grooming Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, a former head of the judiciary who was born in Iraq. However, pent-up public frustration with the regime is likely to erupt during the interim between Khamenei's death and the selection of a successor.
- The collapse of the Assad government in Syria could undermine the Iranian government's narrative of being on the right side of history and embolden Iran's own opposition.

Barring new external shocks, it appears likely that Iran's next president will be less rhetorically confrontational than Ahmadinejad. The same may be true of a successor to Khamenei. However, it is difficult to see Iran abandoning its nuclear program; Iran's political elite doubts that the United States will lift sanctions against Iran, even if it agrees to cap uranium enrichment. More likely, the Iranian leadership will view nuclear weapons capability as an insurance policy for regime survival.

Given Iran's posture, it is also difficult to envision a change in US strategy toward Iran. Under intense pressure from Congress, Israel and his own desire for re-election, President Barack Obama has acquiesced in increasingly punitive sanctions that seek to expel Iran from the international financial system and make it almost impossible for Iran to be paid in hard currency for its oil and gas exports. As a result, Iran is increasingly relying on China and India and is turning to barter to circumvent sanctions.⁴ In March 2012, the United States, the other four permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany—the P5+1—agreed to new talks with Iran that were scheduled for mid-April. While some of the atmospherics in advance of the talks looked more favorable than in the past, prospects for progress were uncertain.⁵

A shadow war could escalate

Beyond economic sanctions, the United States and Israel are likely to continue covert efforts to set back Iran's missile and nuclear programs through sabotage, cyber attacks, and assassinations of Iranian nuclear and missile experts. These measures may provoke Iranian retaliation—most likely through proxies—against US and allied military and diplomatic personnel in the region and terrorist attacks further afield, such as an alleged plot against the Saudi ambassador in Washington. Iran also appears to have been behind a series of largely failed attacks in early 2012 against Israelis in India, Thailand, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.⁶ As it prepares to impose a complete embargo on Iranian oil on July 1, 2012, Europe—and EUCOM—should be on alert against the possibility of Iran-instigated terrorist attacks on

⁴ Barbara Slavin, "Iran Turns to China, Barter, to Survive Sanctions," The Atlantic Council, Iran Task Force, November, 2011. http://www.acus.org/files/publication_pdfs/403/111011_ACUS_IranChina.PDF

⁵ Barbara Slavin, "Subtle Signs Obama Diplomacy May Work on Iran," Al-Monitor.com, March 14, 2012. <http://www.al-monitor.com/cms/contents/articles/opinion/2012/barbara-slavin/us-and-iran-improve-atmosphere-f.html>

⁶ Ethan Bronner, "Israel Says Iran Behind Bombs," *The New York Times*, Feb. 13, 2012 <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/14/world/middleeast/israeli-embassy-officials-attacked-in-india-and-georgia.html>

European soil, where Iran has a history of political assassinations. The London Olympics are an obvious potential target.

In his testimony before Congress in March 2012, EUCOM commander Adm. James G. Stavridis noted, “We are also seeing increased Iranian activity in Europe from the Qods Force, the external operational arm of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps. Similarly, we are seeing an increase in the capabilities of Lebanese Hizballah.”⁷

Once a staunch defender of ties with Iran, Europe has increasingly followed and sometimes exceeded America in imposing ever harsher measures against Tehran. Iran’s human rights abuses after the 2009 elections were a major cause.⁸ So was US legislation that threatens European energy companies and financial institutions with expulsion from the US market and the global financial system if they continue to do business with Tehran. Another powerful factor has been European fear of a possible Israeli attack on Iran. European countries would much rather deal with a slight increase in oil prices due to ending imports of Iranian oil than the much greater shocks emanating from another Middle East war.⁹ European officials have also expressed impatience with Iran’s negotiating style and efforts to play for time.

Despite a series of Israeli threats and US insistence that the “military option” remains on the table, it does not appear in the interest of any of the parties to escalate to all-out war. However, there is a danger that an incident could spiral out of control. In recent years, the Supreme Leader has narrowed his circle of advisers so that it is heavily weighted toward the Revolutionary Guards and intelligence officials. The Supreme Council of National Security, which is chaired by the president and includes a number of civilian advisers, rarely meets. The Assembly of Experts, which is supposed to supervise the Supreme Leader, is impotent and was stripped last year of its last influential leader, former President Akhbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. As a result, Iran is more prone to miscalculate foreign reaction to its behavior and could overstep in ways that would provoke a US kinetic response.

While US military action would primarily be the responsibility of CENTCOM, EUCOM would be drawn in because of its relationship with Israel and its responsibility for protecting shipping in the Mediterranean. Israel and EUCOM hold a number of conferences and joint exercises in part to deal with such contingencies. In fall 2012, they plan the largest of four combined exercises and engagements, JUNIPER COBRA, “providing a further demonstration of US commitment to the security of Israel.”¹⁰ Should Iran carry out threats to attack oil tankers in the Persian Gulf, CENTCOM would call upon European allies that are already present in the Gulf and that patrol nearby waters for piracy.

⁷ Testimony of Admiral James G. Stavridis before the 112th congress, 2012, p. 52, <http://armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2012/03%20March/Stavridis%2003-01-12.pdf>

⁸ As of March 2012, Europe had sanctioned 78 Iranian officials for human rights abuses. <http://www.enduringamerica.com/home/2012/3/25/iran-special-the-17-leading-officials-in-new-eu-sanctions-fo.html>

⁹ Barbara Slavin, “New Sanctions Aimed at Averting Wider Conflict,” *Inter Press Service*, Jan. 25, 2012 <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=106549>

¹⁰ Testimony of Admiral James G. Stavridis before the 112th Congress, 2011, p. 12. <http://armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2011/03%20March/Stavridis%2003-29-11.pdf>

While the chances for an Israeli or US strike on Iran appear diminished in 2012, they cannot be ruled out. Proponents of military action against Iran argue that the United States and Israel must act sooner rather than later to prevent Iran from installing a large number of centrifuges at Fordow, a facility near Qom which is tunneled into a mountain under 90 ninety yards of rock. In January 2012, Iran declared that it had begun enrichment at the site.¹¹ Some of those who favor military action say the US United States should act even after Iran demonstrates a nuclear weapons capability to take advantage of Iran's initial relative strategic inferiority.¹² A more likely scenario is that the US United States and its allies would tighten containment and eventually seek dialogue to reduce tensions. This has been the pattern in the past with China, the Soviet Union, India, Pakistan, and North Korea after they became nuclear weapons states.

The Obama administration clearly does not want to become embroiled in a major new war in the Middle East. As he was leaving office, Defense Secretary Robert Gates famously said that "any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should have his head examined."¹³ His successor, Leon Panetta, said in December, 2011 of an attack on Iran's nuclear program: "at best it might postpone it maybe one, possibly two years." He added that the negative consequences of such an attack would include bolstering the Iranian regime—both internally and regionally—sparking Iranian retaliation on US ships and military bases and causing "severe economic consequences that could impact a very fragile economy in Europe and a fragile economy here in the United States." Fighting would likely escalate and "consume the Middle East in a confrontation and a conflict that we would regret."¹⁴ After being criticized for his comments, however, Panetta toughened his stance in January, 2012, saying that an Iran with nuclear weapons was a "red line," for the United States. He did not specify how the US United States would respond.¹⁵

¹¹ Ali Akbar Dareini, "Report: Iran begins uranium enrichment at new site," The Associated Press, Jan. 9, 2012. <http://www.businessweek.com/ap/financialnews/D9S4OUH80.htm>

¹² Eric S. Edelman Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr. and Evan Braden, "Why Obama Should Take Out Iran's Nuclear Program," *Foreign Affairs*, Nov. 9, 2011. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/136655/eric-s-edelman-andrew-f-krepinevich-jr-and-evan-braden-montgomer/why-obama-should-take-out-irans-nuclear-program>

An excerpt: "From the very start, the nuclear balance between these two antagonists would be unstable. Because of the significant disparity in the sizes of their respective arsenals [Iran would have a handful of warheads compared to Israel's estimated 100-200], both sides would have huge incentives to strike first in the event of a crisis. Israel would likely believe that it had only a short period during which it could launch a nuclear attack that would wipe out most, if not all, of Iran's weapons and much of its nuclear infrastructure without Tehran being able to retaliate. For its part, Iran might decide to use its arsenal before Israel could destroy it with a preemptive attack. The absence of early warning systems on both sides and the extremely short flight time for ballistic missiles heading from one country to the other would only heighten the danger. Decision-makers would be under tremendous pressure to act quickly."

¹³ Tom Shanker, "Warning Against Wars Like Iraq and Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, Feb. 25, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/26/world/26gates.html>

¹⁴ Remarks by Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta at the Saban Center, Dec. 2, 2011. <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4937>

¹⁵ "Leon Panetta warns Iran to keep Strait of Hormuz open," *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 8, 2012. http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/world_now/2012/01/panetta-warning-iran-hormuz.html

Israel has often sounded more hawkish in calculating the risks of a nuclear Iran versus the costs of military action. Dennis Ross, a veteran former senior White House official dealing with the Middle East, has said that Israel simply cannot abide a nuclear Iran. “You are not going to have a stable situation where anyone can feel that they are going to wait,” he said in December, 2011. “If there is the slightest indication that Iran is changing its readiness, can Israel wait? ... The potential for miscalculation would be enormous.”¹⁶

Israel lacks sufficient means to mount an effective and sustained strike on Iranian nuclear installations. Israeli leaders might start a war and expect the United States to try to finish the job. President Obama—who has repeatedly said that an Iranian nuclear weapon is “unacceptable,” would be under intense pressure to join the fight, especially in an election year.

Bruce Riedel, a former White House National Security Council official who has dealt extensively with Israel about Iran, said such a “nightmare scenario” was possible. “Sometime in the course of the spring, summer or even into the fall, the president would get a phone call or receive a senior envoy from Israel who would say, “We’re going to attack in 72 seventy-two hours and we want you to be with us,” ” Riedel said. “The president is boxed in. If he says anything other than yes, [Israeli Prime Minister] Bibi [Netanyahu] will call House Speaker John Boehner.”¹⁷

Another possible scenario is that Iran responds to a European oil embargo by carrying out threats to close the Strait of Hormuz through which passes more than a third of the world’s oil carried on tankers.¹⁸ While Iranian threats appear to be largely bluster—and help its economy by driving up the price of oil—the US military and its NATO allies have vowed to use force if necessary to keep the Strait open. The last time the US United States protected Gulf shipping—during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s—US naval clashes with Iran did not escalate. Iran was preoccupied then fighting Iraq; now, it is flanked by friendlier regimes in Iraq and Afghanistan. Iran is also better equipped with missiles, mines, small boats, and submarines and might succeed in closing the Strait for as long as two weeks.¹⁹

Targeting Tel Aviv

In the event of a major US or Israeli attack on Iran, Iran would likely seek to retaliate against Israel through the Arab militant groups it supports, primarily Hezbollah. Hezbollah might be reluctant to oblige but could be drawn into a conflict anyway because Israel might couple an attack on Iran with a pre-emptive strike on Hezbollah, seeking to destroy Hezbollah rockets before they can rain down on Tel Aviv.

The Lebanese Shiite group, which Iran helped create in the early 1980s, has rearmed since a 2006 war with Israel and now has an estimated 50,000 rockets and missiles, including

¹⁶ Ross spoke at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy on Dec. 13, 2011. http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/html/pdf/Ross_Transcript_20111213.pdf

¹⁷ Interview with the author, Dec. 19, 2011.

¹⁸ “Iran ‘to block Hormuz Strait’ if sanctions applied,” *Agence France Presse*, Dec. 27, 2011. http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hVjokLCubu8TF_UTg506UZ2_MJ1Q?docId=CN.G.f7ab34b17766df497253151fb35e8bcd.7d1

¹⁹ Comment by Colin Kahl, former deputy assistant secretary of Defense, Jan. 12, 2012. <http://thekojonnamdishow.org/audio-player?nid=20680>

weapons with sufficient range to hit major Israeli population centers. Israeli missile defenses, though much improved in recent years with the installation of systems such as Iron Dome, David's Sling and the Arrow, are unlikely to be able to intercept all incoming rockets. There are also reports that Hezbollah has moved long-range heavy weapons that had been positioned in Syria into Lebanon because of concerns that the Assad regime will fall. The weapons are said to include Iranian Zelzal, and Fajr- 3, -4, and -5 missiles.²⁰

While Iran lacks naval power that can be projected into the Mediterranean—the dispatch of two ancient warships through the Suez Canal in February 2011 was more a propaganda gesture than a military one—Hezbollah could acquire the capability to target Mediterranean shipping and oil pipelines in the next two years.²¹ Aram Nerguizian, an expert on Middle East militaries at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, has written that while Israel retains overwhelming military superiority, should another war break out, “the potential exists for Hezbollah to undertake both ground and seaborne commando operations within Israel.”²²

Traditionally, Syria has not become involved directly in clashes with Israel since the early 1980s, instead relying on Hezbollah and Palestinian groups based in Syria, such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. However in the current context, an Israeli attack on Iran or Lebanon could spark clashes along the Golan Heights. Indeed, the struggling regime of Bashar al-Assad would welcome an opportunity to change the narrative from battling domestic opposition to one of resistance against Israel. There is even the possibility that Syria would use biological or chemical weapons against Israel. According to Nerguizian, “while the US [United States] and its regional allies—including Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey – have invested in anti-missile capabilities, the consequences from a potential BCW strike on civilian population centers or critical military and infrastructure systems—especially in Israel—cannot be ignored or cast aside.”²³ EUCOM might be called upon to come to Israel's aid in the event of such attacks.

Iran might also seek to activate anti-Israel strikes by Hamas, although Iran-Hamas links appear to be weakening as a result of regime change in Egypt, growing pressure on Syria's government, and a rise in Sunni-Shiite tensions throughout the region. Hamas is more likely to take into account the wishes of Egypt's transitional authority and politically ascendant Muslim Brothers than the Assad regime or Iran. (More recently, Iran appears to be relying on a smaller proxy in Gaza, Islamic Jihad.) However, an Israeli or US attack on Iran would ignite opposition throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds—despite the anti-Iran sentiments of Sunni powers such as Saudi Arabia—and provoke anti-Israel as well as anti-American actions by a host of players. EUCOM would need to be ready to respond and, along with CENTCOM, could be drawn into a wider war.

²⁰ David Schenker, “Bashar Assad in the balance,” *The Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 14, 2011. <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/dec/14/opinion/la-oe-schenker-assad-20111214>

²¹ Nerguizian, “US and Iranian Strategic competition: the Proxy Cold war in the Levant, Egypt and Jordan,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, Oct. 26, 2011. P. 42

²² Ibid, p. 55.

²³ Ibid, p. 18.

Comments by senior US military officials, such as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Gen. Martin Dempsey, have suggested Israel might not inform the United States in advance of attacking Iran's nuclear installations so as not to put Washington in the difficult position of giving or withholding approval.²⁴ Given the magnitude of the likely fallout from such an attack, however, it is imperative that Israel and the United States closely coordinate strategy on Iran and find means of containing Iranian power short of a full-blown military campaign. In the view of this analyst, a nuclear Iran is less a threat to the region than a new Middle East war. Iran will not be in a position to actually use nuclear weapons against Israel, as that would be tantamount to committing national suicide. Iran's main source of strength remains the use of proxy forces and conventional weapons, such as missiles that could hit Saudi oil fields, oil tankers and US ships. A war against Iran will drive up the price of oil, thereby benefiting Iran, and hurting the economies of many of its adversaries.

Regime change in Syria

A more effective means of checking Iran's regional power would be the installation of a new government in Syria that is no longer allied with Iran. Syria has been Iran's premier regional ally—indeed only Arab ally—for more than thirty years, a relationship far stronger than the one Iran is trying to forge with post-Saddam Iraq.

A new Sunni-led government would look more toward Iran's rival, Saudi Arabia, and other Sunni powers such as Turkey for financial and political support. Such a government would sever the umbilical cord that has linked Iran to Hezbollah; given the outspoken support of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah for the Assad regime,²⁵ it is likely that a successor government would deemphasize those ties and try to forge a stronger relationship with the Lebanese government as a whole. Burhan Ghalioun, head of the opposition Syrian National Council, has said that a government under his administration would no longer maintain a "special relationship" with Iran.²⁶

Syrian brutality in attempting to crush a popular revolt has put Iran into the difficult position of trying to justify its support for Assad while backing regime change in other Arab countries. Syria also poses policy conundrums for the United States and its regional allies. The uprising appears to be dissolving into civil war and there have been disturbing outbreaks of sectarian violence that could reignite Sunni-Shiite tensions in Lebanon and Iraq.

²⁴ Mark Hosenball and Phil Stewart, "Wary US uncertain of Israel's Iran plans," *Reuters*, Dec. 7, 2011. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/12/07/us-usa-israel-iran-idUSTRE7B60BD20111207>

²⁵ "Nasrallah makes rare public appearance, says group better armed," *The Daily Star*, Dec. 6, 2011. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2011/Dec-06/156166-nasrallah-makes-rare-appearance-at-beirut-ashura-procession.ashx#ixzz1gpH63Z6x>

²⁶ Jay Solomon and Nour Malas, "Syria Would Cut Iran Military Tie, Opposition Head Says," *The Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 2, 2011. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204397704577070850124861954.html>

Prolonged instability in Syria also could destabilize Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey by spurring a mass exodus of refugees. Kurdish activists might also seek to take advantage of the chaos to press their case for greater autonomy in Turkey. Nerguizian predicts that in the event of a prolonged civil war, “Syria will likely supplement if not outright replace Iraq as a key arena for regional competition between Iran on the one hand and the US and its allies on the other.”²⁷

A series of attacks in late 2011 on UN peacekeepers in south Lebanon appears to be connected to the Syrian crisis as do Katyusha rocket firings into Israel from Lebanon. French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe blamed an attack on a French contingent in UNIFIL in December 2011 on Syria and Hezbollah.²⁸

A negotiated solution to the Syrian crisis is preferable. Key Syrian allies, including Russia and Iran, appear to be recalibrating their support for Assad as the bloodshed continues. Iran has reached out to the internal opposition, the National Coordinating Committee, and Ahmadinejad has criticized Assad for killing his opponents, an ironic comment in view of Iran’s own crackdown on protesters. If Iran’s leadership decides that Assad’s rule is untenable, it will transfer its support to other Syrian actors. It is likely to repeat the pattern it has followed in Iraq and Afghanistan—placing bets on several horses in the hopes that a successor regime will maintain a cordial relationship with Iran. If possible, Iran should be brought into regional and international diplomacy to try to resolve the fate of the Assad government, shorten the civil strife and minimize Iranian motivation to destabilize a successor government.

If, however, the conflict continues, the United States and its NATO allies are likely to become involved militarily. In March 2012, the Obama administration announced that it was already providing so-called nonlethal aid to the Syrian opposition.²⁹ Turkey has been considering establishing a humanitarian corridor for refugees and is hosting both political and military wings of the Syrian opposition. Although Syria has far more advanced weaponry than Libya and would be much more difficult to subdue, NATO forces have clear superiority over the Syrian military – an edge that will only increase as sanctions cut into Syria’s ability to bolster its defenses.

Strengthen ties to Israel, Lebanon, Egypt, and the Gulf

²⁷ Ibid, p. 27.

²⁸ Amos Harel, “Israel concerned by increased Hezbollah violence in south Lebanon,” *Haaretz*, Dec. 22, 2011. <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/israel-concerned-by-increased-hezbollah-violence-in-south-lebanon-1.402859>

²⁹ Anne Barnard and Rick Gladstone, “Turkey and Norway Shut Embassies in Syria; New Shelling Is Reported in Homs,” *The New York Times*, March 27, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/27/world/middleeast/us-and-turkey-to-step-up-nonlethal-aid-to-rebels-in-syria.html>

A prudent US strategy would be to prepare for intervention in Syria, continue military assistance to Lebanon and Egypt as well as Israel, and increase military sales and training to the Arab Gulf. In the event that Iran does acquire nuclear weapons, the United States should offer to extend a nuclear umbrella over US Arab allies to discourage them from seeking their own nuclear weapons capability. It is tempting in a time of aggressive budget-cutting to reduce foreign aid, but Washington needs to maintain programs for Lebanon and Egypt if it is to retain influence over those governments.

Lebanon is particularly important. The current travails of Iran and Syria are weakening Hezbollah and present an opportunity to strengthen other Lebanese political actors. Mona Yacoubian, an expert on Lebanon at the Stimson Center, has said that Hezbollah is facing a “moment of reckoning” and will need to decide whether to draw closer to Iran and behave more aggressively toward Lebanese rivals and Israel or turn inward and focus on better representing Lebanese Shiites politically.³⁰ In this context, US support for the Lebanese Armed Forces is crucial to bolster Lebanese democrats, prevent conflict from spilling into Lebanon from Syria, and keep the peace along the Blue Line between Israel and Lebanon.

EUCOM should also be alert to the possibility of clashes between Israel and Lebanon over competing claims to offshore energy reserves. Israel is projected to start developing three natural gas fields—Tamar, Dalit, and Leviathan—in the Mediterranean in 2012, with the intent of making them operational by the end of this decade.³¹ Nerguizian has written that the “issue has the potential to become the “new Sheb’a Farms”,” a reference to the disputed land border between Israel, Lebanon, and Syria that Hezbollah has used in the past as a justification for attacks on Israel.³²

Restoring Israeli-Turkish military cooperation

While Israel is benefiting to some extent from the current focus on Iran and Syria, Israel’s long-term regional prognosis looks bleak. New governments coming to power in Arab states are more attuned to popular sentiment against Israel; the Israel-Egypt peace treaty of 1979 will likely survive but only if Israel refrains from massive attacks such as the 2008-09 Cast Lead operation that killed more than 1,300 Palestinians in Gaza and the 2006 conflict with Hezbollah that killed more than 1,200 Lebanese. An Israeli attack on Iran, while privately welcomed in some Arab states, would also increase pressure on Egypt and Jordan to sever ties with the Jewish state.

The United States needs to convince Israel to re-engage seriously with the Palestinians to pre-empt regional pressure. Washington also needs to redouble efforts to ease the diplomatic crisis between Turkey and Israel that dates to Operation Cast Lead. Israel cannot afford to

³⁰ Yacoubian spoke at the Atlantic Council on Dec. 14, 2011. Audio available at <http://www.acus.org/event/irans-hand-levant>

³¹ Nerguizian, p. 146.

³² Ibid.

be estranged from a NATO member at a time when the region is in so much flux and Turkey is seen by many Arabs as a model and mediator. As Secretary Panetta has said, “Turkey is a key NATO ally and has proven to be a real partner in our effort to support democratic change and stand against authoritarian regimes that use violence against their own people. It is in Israel’s interest, Turkey’s interest, and US interest, for Israel to reconcile with Turkey. And both Turkey and Israel need to do more to put their relationship back on the right track.”³³

Try talking to Iran for a change

It is beyond the purview of EUCOM—and this paper—to determine diplomatic strategy toward Iran. But US military personnel, who have borne the brunt of decisions by civilian leaders to go into war in the Middle East, should advocate for a more robust strategy of diplomatic engagement with Iran. In addition to devising ever more punitive sanctions, the Obama administration needs to sketch a diplomatic off-ramp for Iran that will allow it to satisfy international concerns about its nuclear program without a complete loss of face. At a minimum, US military leaders should push for the opening of channels to the Iranian government and military to reduce the possibility of a war through miscalculation. Hot lines, incidents at sea agreements, etc. can be useful in this regard.

US policymakers must also understand that Iran will use its influence in Iraq and Afghanistan to further its interests – particularly if the Assad government falls. US efforts to minimize that influence are likely to fail if not backfire. At a time when US-Pakistani military and intelligence cooperation is in question, the United States should be alert for opportunities for improving relations with Iran in the context of bolstering Afghan stability. The United States should encourage the inclusion of Iran in regional forums and welcome dialogue with Iran by US partners, such as Saudi Arabia and India. Iran has shown time and again that if it is excluded from the regional security order, it will seek to undermine it.

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³³ Panetta speech at the Saban Center. <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4937>