

# Nuclear Iran is Not an Option: A New Negotiating Strategy to Prevent Iran from Developing Nuclear Weapons

by Alon Ben-Meir

## THE NATURE OF US-IRAN RELATIONS

The relationship between the United States and Iran has increasingly been deteriorating, especially since Tehran began to flex its muscles following the Iraq war in 2003 and continues with its insistence on maintaining its uranium enrichment program. Both sides have grievances against each other that date back to the 1979 Iranian Revolution and beyond. The lack of understanding demonstrated by both sides—of the other's national psyche, history, religion, culture and strategic interests—has compounded the problems and hampered any tangible progress. The Bush Administration's refusal to negotiate directly with Tehran and its preoccupation with Iraq has played to the advantage of the clergy, allowing them time for nuclear advancement with impunity.

From the Iranian perspective, decades of being abused by Western powers—especially the United States—came to an end with the Islamic revolution. Ironically, the Bush Administration's decision to topple Saddam Hussein has ended America's dual containment policy of Iraq and Iran. In effect, this has left Tehran to claim the spoils of the Iraq war. They moved swiftly to take advantage of the chaotic war conditions, exploiting their close ties to the Iraqi leaders and entrenching themselves in most of Iraq's social, economic, and political spheres. Although many Iranians feel stifled and isolated by their government, they still view the Islamic revolution as something that has freed them from Western bondage and set them on a historical journey to greatness. The Iranian leaders are determined to assert themselves in the region, especially now that their country has become a substantial player in the oil market. The pursuit of a nuclear program is a symbol of the government's newly found power and a means by which it can enhance its regional leadership, if not the country's regional hegemony. The government feels confident it can continue to do

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so in defiance of the international community while paying only a minimal price.

As a signatory to the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT)<sup>1</sup>, Iran has the right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes, but must do so under the strict guidelines of the International Atomic and Energy Agency (IAEA). However, the government has

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failed to fully comply with the NPT provisions and has been unwilling to comply with efforts to settle the impasse over its nuclear program.<sup>2</sup> Iran has for more than eighteen years concealed its nuclear program, expanded its nuclear facilities—some of which remain unknown to the IAEA—and resisted unannounced inspections. Iran also appears to be seeking industrial enrichment of higher-grade uranium, has failed to answer many questions regarding its ongoing nuclear activity, and continues to threaten Israel existentially. Iran's behavior, in this regard has eroded its international credibility and raised serious questions about its ultimate intentions.

This is the Iran that the Obama Administration will face, proud and resolute with some self-conceit and willing to take risks, albeit carefully calibrated. Iran's confidence in itself, however exaggerated, is due in part to the West and American policymakers, further aided by many political intellectuals who have postulated that the global economy cannot do without Iranian oil. The West's concerns over any interruption in the delivery of oil (25 percent of global oil passes through the Strait of Hormuz)<sup>3</sup> resulting from the destruction of Iran's nuclear facilities has, for all intents and purposes, removed that option from the table. As a result, the Iranians demonstrate a lack of appreciation about the consequences of their defiance, although they remain terrified of American Naval and Air force's presence in the neighborhood. In addition, as the Iranian leaders have managed to play successfully for time in the past, they feel that they may be able to stall long enough to produce nuclear weapon technology before the next American administration gets its bearing.

This paper puts forth three critical requisites for the Obama Administration. They should be considered in order to pave the way for effective negotiations that could lead to a peaceful resolution in the Middle East. The first requisite is for the US to accord Iran the respect it seeks. Secondly, the US must end the threats against the regime. Finally, the security concerns of Iran must be assuaged.

The first requisite is according Iran the respect it seeks. Iran is a proud nation with a rich heritage and continuous civilization that expands over four millennia. Iran is not an amalgamation of ethnic groups put together by colonial power, and thus the Iranians take national pride very seriously and demand to be accorded some deference, especially in public discourse. They see themselves as the Middle East's legitimate regional hegemon and attach national pride directly to having and operating an independent nuclear program. The Bush Administration's propensity to use public forum to denounce the Iranian republic has been counterproductive because it alienated even the Iranian moderates, including followers of the former

Iranian President Khatami and the current speaker of the Parliament Laranjani, who sought a dialogue with the United States.

From the time the Bush Administration designated Iran as a member of the axis of evil in 2002 along with Iraq and North Korea,<sup>4</sup> all civil discourse between the two nations was ended. Instead of building on the thaw that came about immediately after September 11th, and creating a favorable atmosphere for negotiations, the US government's public denunciations of the Iranian leadership were seen as a strategy to prepare the American public opinion for much harsher measures including the use of military force. The next administration must open a new chapter with Iran and show some strategic sensitivity by first recognizing Iran's historical riches and geopolitical importance. If the United States wishes to achieve an agreement with Iran on the nuclear issue, it must first improve the public atmosphere. This includes an end to public verbal-onslaughts, which only legitimize Iran's counter-belligerency toward the United States.

The second requisite is to end threats against the current Iranian regime. The preservation of the regime is seen by the Iranian clergy as the single most important task. Threats against the regime are viewed not only as a threat against the government as an institution, but against the Islamic revolution itself. Therefore, the regime must be defended at all costs and threats provoke disproportionate aggressiveness toward the source. In this regard the Bush Administration played into the hands of the Iranian clergy by threatening a regime change and openly allocating an excess of \$75 million for operations inside and outside Iran to undermine the regime. For example, Khalaji Mehdi of the Washington Institute found that, "ABC reported that the CIA had hired Jundullah, a Pakistan-backed Baluchi group, to carry out sabotage operations inside Iran."<sup>5</sup>

The Obama Administration must make it clear from day one that it has no intention of interfering with Iran's domestic affairs. If the objective of the negotiations is to end Iran's nuclear enrichment program, then this must be the focus of the negotiations. Threatening the regime runs contrary to what Washington wants to achieve. To some extent, like its counterpart North Korea, the Iranian government is seeking to acquire nuclear weapons because it feels threatened. The new administration must instead adopt the policy of constructive engagement by dealing with Iran's nuclear program as a separate issue from dealing with other American grievances against Iran.

Finally, the US must work to allay Iran's security concerns. The relationship between Iran and the United States has been acrimonious as well as paradoxical. Both sides feel aggrieved by the conduct of the other and both are deeply suspicious of the other's intentions. While a majority of the Iranian public has a positive view of the US and would prefer to normalize relations, others—especially among the clergy—see the US as ill-intentioned and a detriment to the revolution. The clergy is terrified of American military power, especially in the wake of the Iraq war, as Tehran is completely surrounded by American Military. Tehran wants to see the American military out of the Middle East because as long as the US remains fully

entrenched in the region, it is nearly impossible for Iran to be the dominant regional power. The Bush Administration's refusal to negotiate directly with the Iranian government further deepens Iran's distrust of the United States. Whereas, negotiating directly with Tehran lends the legitimacy that which the Iranian government seeks. Direct negotiations between Iran and the US will remove many of the hurdles that have hampered the negotiations between Iran and the P5+1. Meeting face to face will give both sides a much better sense of the other's genuine concerns and it will alleviate some of Tehran's trepidations about Washington's ultimate intentions.

## **ESTABLISHING NEW NEGOTIATING STRUCTURES**

Past negotiations between Iran and the P5+1, with the United States' representative only attending the July 2008 negotiating session, were by and large a futile exercise.<sup>6</sup> The Iranian negotiators were neither swayed by the various economic incentive packages presented nor deterred by the various United Nations sanctions that followed. The new administration must change the format of the negotiations in a fundamental way by establishing three-track concurrent negotiations that deal with separate but intertwined agendas. The first will generally follow the present format consisting of the P5+1 but this time the US must take the lead. The focus of this negotiating track should be Iran's uranium enrichment program and the economic incentive package to be offered in exchange for permanent suspension. The second negotiating track will be a third party mediated track between the United States and Iran with Turkey as a possible mediator. Due to the extremely sensitive nature of the talks in this track, especially for the Iranians, the deliberation must remain secret. The focus of the negotiations will be on the hard-core regional security issues, their global implications, and what the consequences will be for Iran should it continue to defy the international community. The third negotiating track will be bilateral between the US and Iran, focusing on resolving the grievances against each. As the rules of engagement are established, it is important to include the provision that the lack of progress on any of the tracks should not prejudice the negotiations on the other tracks, and also that the Iranian government must fully subscribe to any rules previously agreed upon.

## **THE P5+1 NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE US IN THE LEAD**

The first negotiating track will consist of the present P5+1 with the United States taking the lead. Like the previously held negotiations, the focus of these talks will be Iran's nuclear enrichment program with no preconditions and with the objective of ending it peacefully. That is, Iran should not be required to suspend its enrichment of uranium as precondition to American participation, as the Bush Administration insisted in the past,<sup>7</sup> rather the suspension and the eventual termination of the program will be the ultimate goal of the negotiations. Under this set of talks the Obama Administration must establish three critical criteria.

First, the United States must reach in advance an agreement with the other security council members and Germany, so should the negotiations fail after making a supreme effort to reach a peaceful agreement with Tehran, they will have to fully support the most sweeping and painful sanctions against it. This will limit Tehran's maneuvering room and prevent it from taking advantage of the competing interests of the negotiating partners as it has done so skillfully in the past. Even if Russia and China do not go along with this, it is necessary for the US and its Western allies to agree on and coordinate a policy of severe sanctions, including limiting third party transactions. The Iranian government should know that the EU will definitely be on board as the United States would have made the agreement a pre-condition to direct engagement. China and Russia may also joining the multilateral efforts, as they may wish to protect their interests in Iran, especially in oil, gas, and nuclear technology. Bearing in mind Iran's sensitivity to being publicly threatened, this will be the forum for the United States to fully explain that once an agreement on the enrichment is achieved, the United States will have no reason to take any punitive action whatsoever against Iran.

Second, Iran should be presented with a most attractive and detailed economic incentive package in exchange for the permanent suspension of its enrichment program. The package should include Iran's list of key items that only US involvement in the EU-Iran talks can provide. These will include the unfreezing of Iranian assets, lifting US unilateral sanctions, and a number of security assurances as well. Iran wants recognition of its security and regional interests, a US commitment to accept its regime, and the right to civil nuclear power. The Europeans previously offered an incentive of light water reactors in exchange for a complete cessation of uranium enrichment. The Russians have also offered to enrich Uranium for Iran and supply it with nuclear fuel, however, this was not accepted either as it was not seen as an even exchange. In addition, being that Iran's infrastructure is in serious disrepair, it will need substantial capital investment. No threats of regime change or ultimatums should be placed on the negotiating table because it should not appear that Iran was conceding under coercion.

Third, to prevent the likelihood of Tehran playing for time, Iran must accept that the negotiations will be limited to three months (with the possible extension by another month only if there is a strong reason to believe that an agreement is at hand). It should be noted that Iran's tendency to stall negotiations was always deliberate as well as cultural, and used as a tactic to advance its enrichment program. Limiting the negotiations to three months will also help to prevent the Iranians from being deliberately evasive which is designed not only to frustrate their opponent but to also retain the flexibility to retract, change their mind, or avoid hard decisions. This trait also offers a cover for the lack of cohesiveness and agreement between the various Iranian centers of power. These stalling tactics and ambiguities have manifested themselves throughout the negotiations in the past and given the opportunity for Iran to continue with the same approach to reach their nuclear objective.

Finally, this forum of negotiations should remain formal and known to the public, from which public disclosure about progress can be made by the participants and by mutual agreement. This forum will be fed into by the two other sets of negotiations which should be conducted simultaneously.

### SECRET NEGOTIATIONS

The second set of negotiations should be held between the United States and Iran, with a third party acting as a mediator. The chances for success in these negotiations will dramatically improve only if Iran is assured that the US and the mediating country will not reveal or leak any part of the deliberations. Turkey is an ideal choice for its unique relationship with both countries as well as its recent diplomatic efforts in the Middle East.

The presence of a third party mediator is necessary, particularly if this mediator represents a major Muslim state of a certain stature, such as Turkey. Apart from Turkey's recent diplomatic achievements between Israel and Syria, there are many reasons why Turkey may succeed in mediating a peaceful solution to the nuclear impasse. To begin with, Turkey has a vested interest in the success of the negotiations. Many Turkish officials and academics have expressed grave concerns about the growing danger of yet another potentially devastating war in the Middle East, especially one which may be avoidable. For the Turks, finding a diplomatic solution is not one of many options, but is the only option. Other than being directly affected by regional events, Turkey generally enjoys good relations with all states in

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the region; it has not been tainted by the war in Iraq. It is also a predominantly Muslim state, but comfortably straddles the identity of being European as well as Middle Eastern. Turkey shares the longest-standing border with Iran, and has maintained good neighborly relations with Tehran for centuries with expanding trade relations. Moreover, Turkey and Iran have collaborated

recently on the Kurdish issue, and both have a shared interest in this regard for the emergence of a stable Iraq.

Turkey, as a fellow Muslim state, stands a much better chance of conveying to Iran the sentiments of Israel in trying to prevent a terrible miscalculation. Because of Turkey's standing in the region, and as a credible bridge between East and West, it has the potential to succeed where others have failed. Turkey is a close ally and a reliable friend of the United States; it is an important member of NATO, it has worked fervently to maintain the democratic nature of the state, and it has received due praise for its recent diplomatic mediating efforts.

Turkey can better understand the nature of why Iran feels threatened threats, specifically in connection with the United States who has made no secret of its efforts to support Ahmadinejad's opponents. Turkey may also be in a better position than the EU representatives to bypass Ahmadinejad and reach out directly to Iran's

supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei.<sup>8</sup> Khamenei, whose power goes practically unchecked in the Iranian government and institutions, has refused to speak to any American representatives. Turkey plays a strategic role in this sense because it can appeal to Khamenei, who will ultimately be responsible for any course of action the Iranian government decides to make on the nuclear issue. In addition, Turkey may offer an alternative where Iran can be persuaded to enrich uranium on Turkish soil under strict IAEA monitoring. Turkey, in short, can change the dynamics by offering a new venue for Americans and Iranians to meet and by generating a new momentum for serious dialogue. Finally, Turkey can provide Iran with a dignified disengagement plan, because if Iran is to make any concessions it will more likely make them to a fellow Muslim-majority state with which it has long and friendly relations.

There are four points on which the negotiations need to focus and the first is regional security. Although most Iranians insist that their nuclear program is designed solely to generate nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, they argue that this should not be confused with Iran's legitimate national security concerns. They cite the 1980-1988 Iraq-Iran War that claimed the lives of more than a half-million Iranians and they accuse the United States of seeking regime change. Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons is prompted partly by its genuine security concerns and partly by its ambition to become the region's dominant force. Therefore, Tehran may not be persuaded to give up its nuclear enrichment program unless its national security concerns are alleviated. In this regard, only the United States can provide such assurances. There are two schools of thought in Iran concerning the question of security. The first group is composed of those who believe that Iranian security can come about only through confrontation with the US, and the second who believes that Iran's security can be enhanced only through a constructive relationship with the US. Finally and most importantly, the Iranian clergy understands that the ultimate preservation of the revolution may depend largely on US willingness to recognize the regime and establish full diplomatic relations with Tehran.

If the clergy of Iran come to the conclusion that acquiring nuclear weapons would have a diminishing return, then they may reconsider the nuclear program. That is, failing to achieve an agreement on the nuclear issue, the United States will move to further entrench itself in the region and resist Iranian encroachment by providing all of its Gulf allies, in particular Israel, with security guarantees akin to a defense treaty. The Iranians will have to understand that an attack on Israel or any other Gulf states will be viewed as an attack on the United States. The United States must also make clear that America's strategic interest in the region is long-term and the Iranians must choose to live with a friendly or adversarial America. Moreover, the new administration must commit itself to the premise and demonstrate through its actions that the Gulf states will emerge militarily, economically, and diplomatically stronger in the wake of the Iraq war.

The second focus should be on the threat of crippling sanctions. Should the United States fail to persuade Iran to accept security assurances in exchange for

ending the enrichment program, the focus will shift to the punitive measures that the United States will orchestrate against Iran. More importantly, the United States must demonstrate that it can muster and deliver such measures, which may include cutting off Iran from any business dealings with the US and EU, with absolute. This includes cutting off investment, trade, technology transfers, and gas and oil imports. It can also mean restricting equipment and technology imports related to weapons systems. Cutting off technology input would also have an affect as Iran's oil output has been slowly declining with outdated technology. Although these will be tough sanctions to carry out, as many countries and companies could offer to set up new oil companies in Iran, many will still be hard pressed to operate against American and European sanctions. A major sanction that should also be left on the table is blocking the Strait of Hormuz, which would paralyze Iran from exporting crude oil and importing any refined oil and gasoline. Russia and China will most likely object, but may not be in a position to defy American sanctions when backed by Europe. It is of note that 85 percent of Iran's exports income comes from oil sales.<sup>9</sup> Cutting off Iran's oil sales would translate to severing a lifeline. Moreover, the EU and United States have previously tried targeting and freezing assets and funds of major Iranian companies as well as the private funds of individuals. UN Resolution 1747 which was enacted in March of 2007 expanded the number of companies and individuals whose assets would be frozen. In addition, one private option would be to enlist the Saudi's, who have a clear vested interest in ensuring that Iran does not go nuclear. They can reward the Europeans (investment houses, energy companies, etc.) who in turn would cut off ties to Iran, and then the Saudi's could refuse to do business with those who have business ties to Iran. Dennis Ross, former Middle East envoy has said, "if China had to choose between Iran and Saudi Arabia, they would choose Saudi Arabia."<sup>10</sup> The Saudis would have to do this quietly, and may also be able to influence the UAE and other Gulf states to follow suite. To be sure, all of the Gulf States who seek to avoid confrontation with Tehran but need American protection can play a significant role as long as they know that the United States has spared no effort to reach a peaceful arrangement with Tehran.

It should be noted that in these secret talks through the Turkish mediation, the United States must be specific and articulate the nature of sweeping sanctions and other punitive measures to be taken both unilaterally and multilaterally to insure that the Iranian government fully internalizes what is at stake. This is particularly important because of the religious conviction of the Iranian government and the premise under which it operates. Iranians negotiate out of a deep conviction that they are on the "right" side which emanates from their belief that they are, in fact, guided by providence. Recently, President Ahmadinejad invoked the name of the Mahdi (as the great savior who will restore Islamic predominance via an apocalyptic event) in support of his policies. However irrational this may seem to Western thinking, operating from a religious conviction changes the subtext and the implication of any discourse with the Iranians.

Third, it must be understood that a military strike remains on the table. Being



that Iran is bent on pursuing an independent enrichment program, there are still no assurances that Iran will comply under even the most severe sanctions and the United States may still have to consider the use of force. Here too, there should be no doubt in the Iranian mind that the Obama Administration will not tolerate a nuclear Iran. The Iranians need to understand that if they try to make nuclear weapons or if they build secret facilities that the US detects, Washington will not hesitate to strike. For this reason the use of force as an option must not be removed from the table. However unpredictable the consequences of an American onslaught on Iranian nuclear facilities will be, doing nothing about it is not an acceptable option. Unfortunately, an American military attack—however sweeping—may not totally obliterate Iran's nuclear facilities, as several of these facilities are buried dozens of feet underground. It is possible that following such an attack Iran could retaliate against American installations in the Gulf, unleash various terrorist groups, especially Hezbollah, to attack Israeli and Western targets and it may also try to sabotage international waterways like the Strait of Hormuz. In addition, Iran would probably pull out immediately from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and reconstitute its nuclear weapons program in the open at an accelerated pace. In the end Iran may be in a position to acquire nuclear weapons within four to six years (estimates vary) as it may still have left some underground nuclear facilities intact following such an attack. This scenario is contingent on the regional political and military conditions, which will change in the wake of an American attack. Will the Iranian government survive such a devastating attack? What would remain of Iran's nuclear abilities is in question. Since such an attack would occur only after months of destructive sanctions, will Tehran have the means to forge ahead especially after such devastation? Such an attack may not be necessary provided that the Iranian government fully understands its consequences.

Regardless of the continued US military involvement both in Iraq and in Afghanistan, America's naval and air force remain basically free to act at will. If negotiations break down and military action becomes necessary, the targets will include not only Iran's nuclear facilities but its air defense systems. For the Obama Administration it will be extremely important to leave no room for doubt on the part of the Iranian government. For the US, a nuclear Iran is not an option. To drive this point home, the United States must demonstrate its military readiness and the political will to destroy rebuilt nuclear facilities if it becomes necessary.

The fourth subject of discussion in the secret talks must be the Israeli factor where again Turkey, who is extremely familiar with Israel's concerns, can convey the gravity of the situation. While it is true that Israel too would much prefer to see the conflict resolved through diplomatic efforts, no Israeli leader, regardless of political leanings, feels sanguine about such a prospect of nuclear development. From this perspective, time is running out. Israel is being threatened by the Iranian leaders and cannot dismiss such threats as being merely rhetorical or inconsequential. The Israelis, who still have fresh memories of the Holocaust, take such threats seriously and as a result, are left with no choice but to consider any option, including a

unilateral military strike against Iran's nuclear installations, however uncertain the consequences may be. In these secret talks the United States must disabuse Iran—through Turkey—of the notion that Israel will not act alone without, at a minimum, American acquiescence. The Iranians must understand that while the Israelis will be concerned about the potential regional catastrophe resulting from an attack, they will be prepared to take the risks if they are convinced that their very existence is at stake. Israelis will always seek American support in the confrontation with Iran, but they will not hedge their survival on American consent.

Israelis reject, in principle, all discussions about nuclear deterrence because they do not accept the premise that deterrence works against Iran as it generally worked between the United States and the Soviet Union or as it may be working now between India and Pakistan. However, the Cuban Missile Crisis did bring nuclear exchanges very near to reality, in spite of the understanding of mutually assured destruction. Considering the volatility of the Middle East, a major crisis could easily trigger nuclear confrontation even though all sides have the same understanding. The Israelis who deal with these national security issues stress that if they believed deterrence would work against Iran, Israel would have abandoned its strategy of nuclear ambiguity—neither confirming nor denying its possession of nuclear weapons. Israel in this case would have declared its possession of weapons and lived with the balance and terror of mutual assured destruction (MAD). Iranian officials, including President Ahmadinejad, have suggested that Israel could be wiped off the map. The Israelis also insist that even if the current Iranian government has no intention of using a nuclear weapon to attack Israel, who knows what the succeeding government could do so long as the destruction of Israel is religiously imbedded. There is also the possibility that a nuclear device may be passed to a terrorist group with no compunction of using it against Israel. Moreover, Israel does not subscribe to the argument that Iran's desire to acquire nuclear weapons is designed only to neutralize Israel's possession of scores of such arsenals. The Israelis argue that their country never threatened Iran and in fact enjoyed good relations with the Iranians before the revolution.

Against this backdrop, the Israelis are calibrating their strategy against Iran as they assess the speed at which Iran can muster the technology to produce nuclear weapons. Contrary to the National Intelligence Estimate, the Israeli intelligence community estimates that Iran can reach this threshold within a year. From this perspective, it is extremely urgent to find a diplomatic solution. Should no diplomatic solution be found, it would be foolish to assume that Israel's inability to completely destroy Iran's nuclear facilities would render the option of attempting it obsolete.

## **ADDRESSING MUTUAL GRIEVANCES**

The third set of negotiations should focus on resolving the mutual grievances that Iran and the United States have against each other. This set of negotiations is just as valuable as it focuses on sensitive issues that have soured relations between the two countries. The Iranian government's grievances against the United States go

back nearly six decades, including the charge that the United States orchestrated the toppling of the Musadek Government in the mid 1950's by the CIA. The US has also frozen Iranian assets since 1979 in American banks, imposed unilateral sanctions, and systematically attempted to undermine the regime by supporting efforts to overthrow it. In addition, Tehran accuses the United States of fully supporting the late Shah's ruthless policies that resulted in the detention and death of thousands of Iranians, and of having provided Saddam Hussein with weapons and munitions in his long war against Iran between 1980 and 1988. Beyond that the United States controls the air space to Iran from nearly all neighboring states which intensifies Iran's sense of vulnerability. The Iranian government complains that its grievances are not being addressed and that the US is dismissive of its rightful demands.

In response to Iranian charges the United States has its own list of countercharges going back to the days of the revolution in 1979 when the Iranian students seized the American embassy and held 54 American diplomats hostage for 444 days. The United States further accuses Iran of supporting terrorism, undermining the Arab-Israeli peace process, and fomenting political instability in Arab countries friendly with the United States such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan and especially Lebanon through its surrogate, Hezbollah. Even more worrisome to the United States is Iran's deepening involvement in Iraqi affairs while it stands accused of supporting the Shiite militia in Iraq with weapons and munitions used against US forces, resulting in the death of hundreds of American soldiers. Moreover, the US has major concerns over Iran's human rights abuses and what must be done to alleviate this situation. Topping this list, the United States is convinced that Iran is bent on acquiring nuclear weapons while its leaders threaten Israel, which could have dreadful implications for American relations in the Middle East and Asia.

These charges and countercharges continue to stand in the way of resolving the nuclear crisis, and will do so unless they are dealt with to the satisfaction of both sides. Obviously, there are no ready-made solutions to resolve all of these conflicting issues. That being said, the new Obama Administration must demonstrate that it is fully prepared to make good faith efforts to tackle these issues one by one and pave the way for better relations. Such an effort by the United States is not tantamount to an appeasement of the Iranian clergy, as many who oppose direct negotiations with Iran suggest. At least from their own perspectives, both American and Iranian grievances are legitimate, and the more powerful nation can afford to set the tone and take the initiative.

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While both sides must acknowledge and address the grievances of the other, both Tehran and Washington also have a mutual interest in cooperating as they did immediately after September 11th and in the aftermath of the war in Afghanistan. This includes Iraq, where both countries want to see the Shiite Maliki government

succeed. The US interests also coincide with Iran's on the future stability of the Talabani-Barzani regime in Northern Iraq. Finally, the US and Iran can find a common interest in dealing with the Caucasus in the search for a stable supply of gas and oil where Iran's cooperation remains essential. Reaching an agreement on issues for which there are mutual interests would allow for confidence building that can pave the way for tackling issues of unilateral concern.

## CONCLUSION

It is unfortunate that for the past eight years the Bush Administration has squandered every opportunity to deal effectively with Iran, especially after September 11th when the Iranians were willing to cooperate with the United States. The Obama Administration must not lose any time to act before Iran reaches a point of no return—acquiring the technical knowledge to build nuclear weapons. Such ominous developments will lead to regional proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, embolden Iran to bully and intimidate its small neighbors, challenge America's strategic interests in the region, and further bolster Iran's support of terrorist organizations. Finally, a nuclear Iran would dramatically change the security equilibrium of the region forcing Israel or even the United States to resort to military means to undo the Iranian technological breakthrough, igniting a major regional conflagration. To be sure, a nuclear Iran is not an option, and due to the urgency of the nuclear issue, the new administration must resolve to address it without any delays.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> International Atomic Energy Agency, *Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*. (Vienna, 1970), IV.2.3. Available at <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Infircs/Others/infirc140.pdf> (accessed on February 8, 2009). Article IV of the *Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons* states: "All the Parties to the Treaty undertake to facilitate, and have the right to participate in, the fullest possible exchange of equipment, materials and scientific and technological information for the peaceful uses of nuclear energy."

<sup>2</sup> International Atomic Energy Agency, *IAEA Board Report: Implementation of NPT Safeguards and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), 1803 (2008) in the Islamic Republic of Iran*. (Vienna, 2008), F.20.4. Available at <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2008/gov2008-59.pdf>. (accessed on February 8, 2009). On the November 27 IAEA Board of Governors noted that "Contrary to the decisions of the Security Council, Iran has not suspended its enrichment related activities, having continued the operation of PFEP and FEP and the installation of new cascades and the operation of new generation centrifuges for test purposes."

<sup>3</sup> The Energy Information Administration maintains that the Persian Gulf produced about 24% 28% of the world's oil supply in 2008, exporting 17 million barrels per day via the Strait of Hormuz which represents roughly one-fifth of the world oil supply.

<sup>4</sup> George W. Bush, "2002 State of the Union Address." *Government proceedings, House of Representative Chamber* at U.S. Capitol, Washington D.C., 29 January 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Ross, Brian and Christopher Isham. "ABC News Exclusive: The Secret War Against Iran." ABC News: April 3, 2007. Available at: [http://blogs.abcnews.com/theblotter/2007/04/abc\\_news\\_exclus.html](http://blogs.abcnews.com/theblotter/2007/04/abc_news_exclus.html)

<sup>6</sup> Thus far negotiations have been led by Spain's Javier Solana who serves as High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Secretary-General of the Council of the European Union (EU). Later talks were joined by the US Undersecretary of State William Burns.

<sup>7</sup> In a June 19, 2006 speech to the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy the President stated that talks with Iran would only come possible "as soon as Iran suspends enrichment and reprocessing activities." Richard Benedetto, "Bush's visit, speech thrill midshipmen," *USA Today*, June 19, 2006. Available at

[http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2006-06-19-bush-merchant-marines\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2006-06-19-bush-merchant-marines_x.htm) (accessed February 8, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> From a conversation with Turkish scholar Arzu Celalifer, of the International Strategic Research Organisation in Ankara, Turkey.

<sup>9</sup> Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, "Re: American Dependence of Foreign Oil," *House Committee Foreign Affairs*, June 12, 2008. Available at: [http://gopleader.gov/UploadedFiles/Energy%20memo%20edited3%20\(2\)%20\(2\).pdf](http://gopleader.gov/UploadedFiles/Energy%20memo%20edited3%20(2)%20(2).pdf) (accessed February 8, 2009). This memorandum from the House Committee on Foreign Affairs notes that, "oil accounts for roughly 85 percent of Iran's exports, comprising upwards of 65 percent of government income."

<sup>10</sup> Hillary Leila Krieger, "Dennis Ross tells 'Post' why Obama," (includes interview with Dennis Ross), *The Jerusalem Post*, November 1, 2008. Available at:

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=JPost/JPArticle/ShowFull&cid=1225199623130> (accessed February 8, 2009).