

## Doubling Down on Iran

It is natural for monumental events to drown out all other issues, and what has transpired in the Middle East these past months has been nothing short of stunning. The region's dramatic, wonderful, dangerous upheaval has fixed the attention of the world. As such, it is easy to have missed the recent developments both in Iran as well as between Iran and the international community. Although far less dramatic—and far less hopeful—they have the potential to be no less meaningful for the Middle East and the United States.

In Istanbul in January 2011, senior Iranian officials met for the second round of talks with the Baroness Catherine Ashton, the European Union's de facto foreign minister (officially the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy), and senior representatives from China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (the P5+1 as they are known). Istanbul was meant to be a critical step in the Obama administration's Iran policy. Only it wasn't.

Since taking office in 2009, the administration has patiently pursued a two-track policy which seeks to persuade the Iranian leadership to give up its nuclear weapons ambitions by creating a series of reinforcing positive and negative incentives. The administration started out, properly, by offering to repair relations through a process of engagement. When Tehran rebuffed these overtures, Washington switched over to the path of pressure, securing a harsh UN Security Council resolution in June 2010 and multilateral initiatives to impose painful sanctions on Iran. At Istanbul, Washington hoped that the pressure from those sanctions would compel Tehran to change course and agree to begin serious negotiations. But that didn't happen. Instead, Iran once again defied the United States and the international community, refusing to consider any limits on its nuclear program.

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In truth, Obama's approach to Iran was another variant of the basic strategy embraced by the George W. Bush administration—a carrot-and-stick policy designed to create a combination of incentives and disincentives which would convince the Iranian leadership to give up its nuclear program (and hopefully its support for terrorism and other anti-status quo gambits). Naturally, Bush leaned heavily on the sticks, emphasizing the threat of sanctions and occasionally even force if Iran would not comply, while keeping relatively mute about the benefits of complying for Iran. In contrast, the Obama administration started out

**Iran's ideology and mistrust of the U.S. has fundamentally bedeviled the two-track strategy.**

with a passionate determination to emphasize the carrots by promising real rapprochement for Iran, and with such conviction that even the Chinese and Russians were persuaded by Washington's sincerity. Obama's team did turn back to the sticks following Iran's contested June 2009 presidential election and the regime's brutal crushing of the Green Movement, but did so only very reluctantly when it became clear that the emphasis on rapprochement simply was not going to be enough.

It is time to acknowledge that the current version of the two-track policy has reached its limits, and is unlikely to achieve its objectives with the current Iranian regime. We say this with no joy. The two of us were among the very first to propose this policy. In 2004 and 2005, before Bush's embrace of it, we articulated both the rationale and the broad features of the dual-track approach, arguing that whatever its challenges, it unquestionably represented the best course for the United States.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, events in Iran transformed the situation in a manner which makes pursuit of this policy implausible, at least in its current form.

Recognizing this reality should not, however, make U.S. policymakers believe that there is no hope of persuading Iran to relinquish its nuclear program and end its other dangerous activities. This is the conclusion of many on the far right and the far left, who argue that since both Bush's sticks and Obama's carrots (and sticks) now have failed to move Iran, the United States needs to “face facts” and simply make the awful choice between waging war on Iran to destroy its nuclear program (and perhaps overthrow the regime) or else simply accept a nuclear Iran and learn to live with it. At some point, the United States may have to face that Hobson's choice, but not yet. And because both of those alternatives are so unpalatable, if there is anything else that the United States and its allies can try, they should.

All is not lost, and there is still reason to believe that the United States can achieve its goals without the use of force. It is still possible to craft an Iran policy that could compel Tehran to relinquish its nuclear ambitions, adhere to prevailing norms on terrorism and human rights, and respect the sovereignty of its neighbors. Nor is it necessary to jettison all aspects of the existing policy, as it has broadened the international coalition pressing Tehran. Nonetheless, it is time to appreciate that the only manner of inducing meaningful change in the Islamic Republic's behavior without the resort to war is to otherwise imperil its very existence.

### **Why the Two-Track Policy Failed**

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On the surface, the administration's two-track policy was a measured and balanced approach to a recalcitrant adversary. It gradually escalated economic pressure while offering the theocratic leaders a respectful path out of their predicament. The policy proved tempered in its claims, flexible in its tactics, and judicious in its execution. However, in the end, the strategy of engagement that we proposed and the Bush and Obama administrations implemented was bedeviled by its core intellectual misjudgment—discounting ideology and mistrust of the United States as critical ingredients of Iran's international relations. There is no evidence to suggest that the policy of sanctions and dialogue has had a tangible impact on the perceptions of Iran's leading decisionmakers—Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, among others. It is even possible that Iran's officialdom does not make the type of cost-benefit assessments common to their Western counterparts.<sup>2</sup> At the very least, it is clear that both the incentives and disincentives which the United States and the international community have so far put in place have been inadequate to affect their thinking.

Iran is a land that revels in ambiguity, opacity, and complexity. Its regime has taken those traits to their illogical extreme, making it exceptionally difficult for outsiders to perceive Iranian motives and intentions clearly—especially in real time. Consequently, the best that outside observers can do is guess at Tehran's motives, and they should be duly humble given our incomplete understanding of Iran's politics or the policies which emerge from them. Nevertheless, repeated statements by Iranian officials, in public and private, do affirm at least one aspect of Iran's likely motivations: play for time. Many Iranian leaders believe that the United States will never be able to hold the current international coalition together, and at some point, the pressure on Iran will abate and then dissolve. The tidal wave of unrest across the Arab world appears to have bolstered many Iranian leaders in the belief that the United States and the other great powers

will be too preoccupied to keep the pressure on Tehran. If they can just hold on until then, Tehran thinks, they will get to have their cake and eat it too.

Tehran's deeper motives are usually even harder to discern, although they are typically of greater importance. In a largely ignored speech last summer, Khamenei laid out his case against engaging the United States: "The change

**E**ngagement with the United States is itself subversive to the Islamic Republic.

of behavior they want—and which they don't always emphasize—is in fact a negation of our identity ... Ours is a fundamental antagonism," he declared.<sup>3</sup> Khamenei has long been deeply suspicious of the United States, and thus of any American initiative no matter how appealing it might seem to an objective observer. Moreover, Iran's Supreme Leader appreciates that engagement with the United States is itself subversive and could undermine

the philosophical pillars of his pristine republic.

The politics of resistance and nuclear empowerment, on the other hand, offer Iran a means of affirming its revolutionary values and preserving the last vestiges of the regime's legitimacy. Khamenei's rhetoric since January 2011 suggests that he believes that one reason Arab autocrats are confronting national uprisings is the popular perception that they too often accommodated U.S. mandates and too readily conceded to U.S. imperatives. As Khamenei declared, "Rulers affiliated and appointed by the West have treated the nations in a manner that they felt they had no choice but to have a huge national uprising and revolution."<sup>4</sup> In the midst of a changing Middle East, Khamenei sees opportunities to set his "republic" apart and continue to promote Ayatollah Khomeini's ideological template, no matter how stale that now seems to the Arab world. Such perceptions militate against a negotiated agreement with Washington that would impose important limits on Iran's nuclear aspirations. In the midst of the current tumult, Iran cannot be seen as a country yielding to U.S. demands as the hard-pressed Arab autocrats had done for decades.

And then there's Ahmadinejad. At times, it appears that despite his bellicose declarations, Iran's president is an ironic advocate of dialogue with the West. After all, Ahmadinejad has written several meandering letters reaching out to presidents Bush and Obama, has hinted at his desire to engage the United States, and was purportedly behind the aborted October 2009 deal whereby Iran agreed to ship out a large portion of its enriched uranium for processing abroad. However, such views ignore the fact that Ahmadinejad's geopolitical pretensions may require nuclear weapons, at least in his own warped *weltanschauung*. Iran's deeply delusional president sees his country as the leading power of the Middle East—a vanguard republic seeking to emancipate the region from the clutches of

imperial dominance. A toxic blend of national chauvinism, Islamist assertion, and deep suspicion of the international system characterize Ahmadinejad's ideological perspective. Although it is impossible to know for sure, it may be that the only way for him to bridge the gap between his aspirations and Iran's actual capabilities is by acquiring nuclear arms.

The tragedy of Iran is that since the fraudulent presidential election of 2009, the Islamic Republic has been gradually purged of its moderate voices. The theocratic regime was always different from traditional autocracies populating the Arab world. Its cantankerous elite and competing centers of power gave the system the aura of pluralism. Today, forces of moderation have been largely excised from the corridors of power. Gone are the days when Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani and reformers such as Muhammad Khatami had an important say in national deliberations.

Beyond the Supreme Leader and the president, the only other institution with important influence over nuclear policy at present is the Revolutionary Guard Corps. A fundamental tenet of the Guards' ideology is the notion that the Islamic Republic is in constant danger from predatory external forces, necessitating military self-reliance. Beyond vague notions of deterrence, the Guards almost certainly look at nuclear weapons as a means of solidifying Iran's preeminence in the region. As such, it is highly unlikely that they would ever barter the program away in return for commercial contracts or security guarantees, which they openly scoff at. They would have to be overruled by the Supreme Leader, who has always been difficult for the West to influence and appears entirely uninterested in a nuclear deal today.

For now, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic is being defined by interactions among a series of hard-line actors and institutions. A truculent dictatorship contemptuous of international norms, sensing opportunities for its aggrandizement in a changing Middle East, feels no compulsion toward conceding its nuclear assets. The problem that bedevils the Obama administration is that such Iranian perceptions have so far proven immune to either economic pressure or political inducement.

## **How the Arab Spring Helps Tehran**

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As problematic as Iran's internal politics and identity have always made U.S. and international efforts to dissuade its nuclear ambitions, recent changes in Iran's external environment will likely reinforce these trends. Over the long term, successful democratic transitions and meaningful reform programs in the region will likely isolate Iran and endanger both its regional position and its internal legitimacy. In those circumstances, the pressure Iran will face to change or comply will be intense, hopefully enough either to convince the Islamic

Republic to mend its roguish ways or else find itself keeping company with the Soviet Union, Austria–Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire.

However, the long term is likely to be years, even decades, away, and in the short term, the recent changes in the Middle East have unfortunately played very much to Iran's benefit. Whatever his other qualities, Hosni Mubarak was no friend of Tehran's. He may have been Iran's most implacable enemy in the entire Arab world, and he pitted Egypt squarely against Iran however he could. His fall has meant that Iran no longer faces its most ardent Arab foe, and the United States has lost its most determined Arab ally against Iran.

Moreover, the turmoil gripping the entire Arab world has created several other advantages for Iran. First, Arab states themselves are less focused on Iran and more attentive to their own internal fissures (even though many blame Iran for them). Second, the United States and its allies are similarly consumed by the internal unrest in the Arab world, and have little time, attention, or political capital left to focus on devising new sanctions and other pressure tactics against Iran. Third, the uncertainty and risk attendant upon any revolution and any transition to democracy creates new opportunities for Iranian mischief-making. Iran doubtlessly will continue to try to stoke unrest in places like Bahrain and Iraq, and may also try to do the same in Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, and elsewhere. Chaos in those countries may make it possible for more radical elements more closely aligned with Tehran's anti-status quo, rejectionist regional alignment to take power.

Iran is also benefitting from the turmoil economically. The price of oil keeps rising on fears of future disruptions. Indeed, most oil analysts believe that next year, Saudi Arabia will need to keep the price of oil over \$100 per barrel to cover its massive budgetary expenses (inflated by its panicked efforts to preclude any domestic dissent).<sup>5</sup> High oil prices are enormously helpful to Tehran, in particular by blunting or even eliminating the impact of sanctions. What's more, Iran's own efforts to reform its archaic and crippling subsidies policies have gone extremely well so far, further alleviating its financial distress and mitigating the near-term bite of economic sanctions.<sup>6</sup>

## **Adapt and Overcome**

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All of this strongly suggests that the carrot-and-stick approach that we proposed years ago, and that the Obama administration has adopted, is unlikely to work with the current Tehran regime. Although Washington has made the seriousness of its offer of engagement clear to all but the most biased of observers, and despite persuading the international community to impose some of the harshest international sanctions ever on Iran, the regime remains uninterested in making any meaningful compromises on its nuclear program.

Many fear that the United States will soon be left with nothing but the awful choice between accepting a nuclear Iran while trying to deter or contain it, and going to war with Tehran to forcibly eliminate its nuclear program—or the regime itself. Certainly, recent developments have increased the likelihood that the United States and its allies will have to make that choice. But not yet. There are still things that Washington and its allies can do.

Although the Obama administration has done a better job than its predecessors of explaining to the Iranian people the extent of its outreach, it can still be more explicit. The United States and the international community have offered Iran a path toward a responsible civilian nuclear program, integration into the global society, and access to financial markets should it conform to its Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) obligations. Unfortunately, the Iranian people know little of this because the international community has made little effort to educate the Iranian public about the deal on offer. In addition, the West could further sweeten the deal by offering trade credits, investment and loan guarantees, development assistance, and other economic inducements—but the key is to do so loudly enough that Iranians understand that there is something worthwhile on offer. A key point of such a public diplomacy venture would be to make clear to the Iranian public that the cause of the impasse in U.S.-Iranian relations is not Washington's animus, but Tehran's truculence, and to reassure Iranians that the better lives they seek is precisely what is being offered.

As helpful as a more explicit explanation of the benefits of compromise might be, the majority of our effort will likely have to be put in dramatically increasing the pressure on Tehran. If Iran were interested in reaching a compromise agreement that would enable them to have a better relationship with the international community, the Obama administration's offer of engagement was a more than adequate starting point. When even the Russians and Chinese agree that this is the case, it is probably a safe conclusion. It suggests that a dearth of carrots is probably not the key deficiency. Instead, the key is to defeat Tehran's strategy by putting more pressure on the regime than it is prepared to withstand.

Iran's hardliners seem to believe that they can endure any pressure from the international community, and that over time, that pressure will slacken as the United States turns to other matters and the rest of the world tires of the confrontation with Iran. America's best chance then is to design a strategy that will ensure that the pressure never slackens, and instead increases steadily over time.

Intense pressure on the regime could slow the nuclear program further. It could create new stresses and strains in the system. It could create new opportunities for Iran's moderates, those most interested in reaching an accommodation with the international community on the nuclear program and Iran's other problematic behavior (like its support for a wide range of

**The key is to put more pressure on the Iranian regime than it is prepared to withstand.**

terrorist groups). It could even create opportunities to empower the Green Movement. The key question is how the United States can apply such intense pressure on the Tehran regime.

### **Threatening What Tehran Values Most**

Despite its inflammatory rhetoric, the theocratic Iranian state has considerable vulnerabilities. A concerted strategy of pressure—particularly one that targeted key groups inside Iran and raised doubts about the Tehran regime’s legitimacy—would complement the efforts to stress Iran’s economy with an entire range of political and strategic moves. The purpose of this policy would be to so weaken or provoke the theocratic regime that it is forced to abandon its objectionable policies abroad and negotiate a new national compact with the opposition at home. In essence, this policy probes the Islamic Republic’s breaking point, forcing it to make painful concessions in order to preserve its authority. It is important to note that, throughout this process, the United States and its allies would not be creating new realities, but exploiting and accelerating trends already in existence.

As a distinct ideological entity, the theocratic regime requires an argument to convince its cadre that the regime’s repressive tactics are justified and in the service of a higher ideal. The measure of success of the Green Movement is the damage that it has done to this argument, to the *raison d’être* of the current Tehran regime. The Green Movement that began in the aftermath of Iran’s contested presidential election in 2009 has presented the regime with a legitimacy crisis that it cannot address. Since the summer of 2009, it is becoming ever more evident to the regime’s diminishing loyalists that they are not defending a sublime orthodoxy, but protecting corrupt men devoted to privilege and power at all cost. The departure of both reformers and pragmatists such as Rafsanjani from councils of power is evidence of this. Such subversive perceptions have led to a huge and ongoing exodus from the regime, as former presidents, parliamentarians, and stalwarts of the system have separated themselves from the state through a combination of critical statements and withdrawal of support.

All this is not to suggest that the collapse of the regime is imminent or that it can be dislodged easily. Governments, groups, and individuals have been trying to threaten the clerical regime’s grip on power for decades with little to show for it. That past history ought to be a warning, not a cause for despair. This is particularly true because the Iranian regime has consistently demonstrated a self-crippling paranoia regarding any threat to its control. Any such threat, no matter



how slight, has often caused the regime to take disproportionate actions which end up causing it problems much greater than those it believed it was guarding against. For instance, in the mid-1990s, as part of a domestic political debate between Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich and President Bill Clinton, Iran mistook Gingrich's public demand for a small increase in the CIA budget for covert operations against Iran as a U.S. declaration of covert war, prompting Tehran to take steps which led to the 1996 terrorist attack against the Khobar Towers housing complex in Saudi Arabia, killing 19 U.S. military personnel.<sup>7</sup> As a result, U.S. public opinion fulminated against Iran, and but for the 1997 election of Muhammad Khatami as president, the United States might have responded with a massive conventional military attack, which Tehran clearly dreaded. Also, the regime's suppression of the Green Movement partly stemmed from its paranoia that its members are unwitting agents of the West; as such, the Islamic Republic mistook reform for sedition.

Thus, threatening the regime's hold on power will be difficult, but it should not be impossible, especially since the regime is likely to overreact to even the most modest U.S. efforts—and overreact in ways harmful to itself. But because doing so has proven so difficult in the past, the United States and its allies are going to have to explore a wider range of options to put pressure on the regime's grip on power, likely including some that for good reason have been considered *verboden* for decades. This is not to suggest that the gloves should come off, and that the United States should try anything that might hurt the regime, regardless of the risks. It is instead to argue that so much has already been tried and failed (and the region has changed in such profound ways) that policymakers ought to be willing to question whether old taboos—such as providing direct assistance to Iranian opposition groups—still apply or whether there aren't new, smarter, better (or even more limited) ways to pursue them that would avoid much, if not all, of the feared downsides. The real question is determining whether specific operations—political, economic, diplomatic, and covert action—have a high enough probability of success, a low-enough probability of failure causing serious harm, and a reasonable expectation that even partial success would be significantly useful.

The specifics of such a strategy are more difficult to spell out. It is important to be honest about this. Certainly, they should include the full gamut of political, economic, diplomatic, and intelligence components. There might be a role for very limited military operations (primarily reconnaissance or very small Special Forces missions), but given Iran's sensitivities, any military function would have

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to be undertaken with the utmost care to avoid an unwanted escalation to war. Beyond this, the greatest problem that the United States faces is that it is hard to know what can work or how. Because of Iran's maddening opacity, and the United States' self-censorship over the years as successive administrations from George H.W. Bush to Obama have sought to avoid debilitating confrontations with Iran, there is a great deal that the United States does not know about how best to implement a more confrontational strategy. Consequently, much of the initial efforts would have to be focused on exploring the possibilities and understanding how best to accomplish various objectives.

A critical component of any strategy, however, would be to make connections with the Green Movement. Today, there are many opportunities to connect with Iranian activists. Iran is a land of labor protests and political demonstrations. The challenge is to establish ties, overt or covert, with important trade unions and student organizations that already have a national network connected through social media outlets. Clerical dissidents of all sorts should be induced to condemn the moral shortcomings of the Islamist regime, while efforts should be intensified to provoke a stream of defections from Iran's nuclear industry and diplomatic corps. An attempt to systematically hollow out the Islamist state should be one of Washington's top priorities.

Such tactics may go against the grain of current U.S. thinking, which has refrained from providing active support for Iranian opposition groups in the belief that doing so would do little to advance their efforts, and could easily taint them as foreign spies in the eyes of their countrymen. This assumption may still be valid, but this is unquestionably an area where the United States ought to test the proposition, especially in light of the popular uprisings across the Arab world where U.S. support was desired (even demanded), not dreaded, by the opposition. U.S. intelligence and diplomatic personnel should make clear that they are open to meeting Iranian opposition figures and even to providing assistance, if the opposition groups themselves are willing to accept it. The CIA would need to tread carefully lest it fall into traps inevitably laid by Tehran's own security forces, but at this point, it would be extremely productive to establish contact with Iranian opposition groups in hope of finding out what the United States could do to help them. The United States has been so cut off from those groups for so many years that it does not know what it could do that might be advantageous. Moreover, because of the Iranian regime's paranoia, it will doubtless inflate every surreptitious conversation into a full-scale covert campaign and overreact accordingly, potentially creating new opportunities for U.S. action.

The Green Movement is not the Iranian regime's only internal opposition. There are Kurdish, Baluch, Arab, and other opposition groups fighting the regime, and Washington ought to explore whether it would be worth supporting

any non-violent opposition—something the United States has largely eschewed for fear of an Iranian backlash, given the sensitivities of this matter to the regime. They too are unlikely to overthrow the regime, and there are serious complications involved in supporting each, but they might help turn up the heat. Indeed, it is the very sensitivity of the regime, which the United States has in the past largely respected, that now ought to interest Washington in exploring the possibility of helping these opposition groups. Moreover, since the regime is convinced that the United States is doing this already, there would appear to be little further downside from stoking Tehran's paranoid suspicions.

One area that appears to be a certain route to help the Iranian opposition—and hurt the regime—lies in the overlapping areas of Internet freedom and information and cyber warfare. This is an area where the United States has made some tentative forays, trying to re-open Internet service to Iran in the face of the regime's efforts to choke it off, but much more can and should be done. The United States and its allies should look into providing readily accessible, redundant means of communication (both overt and covert) to the Iranian opposition. The more that its members can be enabled to speak freely, the more the Iranian public and the world will be able to hear their message, and the better they can shake the foundations of the regime. Likewise, the more that the success of the Stuxnet virus, which is believed to have badly impeded Iran's nuclear enrichment program, can be replicated, the better. The Iranian regime is terrified of losing control over information technology, and equally terrified that that same technology will provide an avenue of attack for its enemies. That too ought to automatically qualify it as an area for aggressive investigation, especially since it has proven fruitful so far.

As the focus of U.S. policy switches to supporting internal opposition forces, the overall question of how to employ economic sanctions has to be reconsidered. Given the brutal nature of the regime and its indifference to the welfare of its population, sanctions cannot be the only means by which the United States and its allies pressure Iran to change its behavior, but they should not be discarded either. Instead, they need to be properly targeted to apply selective pressure on Iran over a prolonged period of time.

The United States has largely concentrated on financial sanctions, which have had a considerable impact on Iran so far. But the problem with financial sanctions is that they require enormous attention and maintenance to retain their effectiveness, because the targeted country will simply keep creating new

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front companies, bribe foreign banks and governments, and find new routes to move money. Over time, financial sanctions have a habit of eroding badly, as the United States learned from its efforts to contain Saddam Hussein's regime in the 1990s.<sup>8</sup> That same experience also demonstrated the danger of shifting to a focus on trade sanctions, which often have devastating effects on innocent people because they limit the availability of food and other goods. Even the proposed bans on oil sales from Iran, or gasoline sales to Iran, should be treated very cautiously because they have the potential to result in innocent people being

harmed, which will quickly undermine the moral case against the Islamic Republic as well as vital international support for sanctions.

**The U.S. should shift its sanctions efforts toward prohibiting foreign investment in Iran.**

Instead, the United States should begin to shift its sanctions efforts more fully behind prohibitions against foreign investment in Iran. Already, the United States has greatly diminished investment in Iran's hydrocarbon sector, and this is likely to prove extremely painful for Tehran in coming years. The United States and its allies should look into

shutting down the residual investment in Iran's hydrocarbon industry (largely from China at this point) as well as targeting other sectors, particularly manufacturing and high-tech industries. A loose analogy might be South Africa, in that a human rights-based campaign, which focused on slowly choking off direct foreign investment in South Africa, eventually succeeded in forcing the government to dismantle the Apartheid system. The "divestment" campaigns, coupled with state and business actions, certainly hurt South Africa's GDP, but never in a way that caused severe, direct harm to the vast majority of South Africans. Instead, they painted an unmistakable picture for the South African leadership that if they did not change, their country would be reduced to a poor, isolated pariah state, which ultimately proved intolerable for them. Given Iranian pretensions to great power status, a similar perspective might have equally positive effects.

Although China has consistently resisted imposing sanctions on Iran, it has just as consistently defied insistent predictions that it would never agree to them at all. Indeed, Beijing has agreed to much harsher sanctions on Iran already than anyone predicted beforehand. Thus, it is reasonable to believe that China could be convinced to support further restrictions under the right circumstances. The Saudis have demonstrated that they can have considerable sway with China by providing Beijing with a more reliable source of energy than Tehran.

Since the George W. Bush administration, the United States has tried to focus sanctions on Iran's Revolutionary Guards, the state's intelligence and security

services, and the Iranian armed forces themselves. This is another area where Western efforts are already on the right track, but need to be expanded, to shift from a posture of “leaning back”—doing as little as possible in hope that it is just enough to get Iran to change its behavior without making Tehran angry—to a posture of “leaning forward”—doing as much as is prudently possible in the explicit desire to make the Iranian regime frightened and unhappy. Efforts targeted at the nuclear program could certainly help delay it, but efforts at these other entities, particularly the Guard, could weaken the regime and erode the bonds it uses to control Iranian society.

Finally, one of the most important things that the United States and its allies could do to put additional pressure on the Iranian regime would be to expand the focus of the international community’s ire at Iran from just its nuclear program to its abuse of human rights. Leading Iranian dissidents and average citizens who oppose the regime all have consistently urged the United States to move in this direction. These widely-varying opposition figures argue that the regime is highly sensitive to any criticism of its human rights record because it fears that this delegitimizes Tehran in the eyes of its international interlocutors and remaining domestic constituents. Moreover, calling Iran to account for its deplorable human rights abuses is likely to strike a much more responsive note with many other countries around the world—even those whose human rights records are far from spotless. Many other developing countries resent the great power monopoly over nuclear weapons, but very few can afford to condone gross, systematic human rights violations. Indeed, the European left, who were once apologists for Iran, have now largely turned against it, incensed by the regime’s brutal crackdowns, torture, and tales of prison rape.

### Is There Enough Time?

The central question is whether there is enough time for the strategy of pressure—and the answer, as with so many things related to Iran, is unclear. Certainly there are some reasons for optimism. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has reported that Iran has been having trouble with its centrifuge cascades, and has not been rapidly adding new ones to its main enrichment facility at Natanz.<sup>9</sup> Although this raises the possibility that Iran is hiding centrifuges to go into a new facility like the one discovered near Qom last fall, it means that the rate at which Iran is manufacturing low-enriched uranium has remained relatively stable. Indeed, the U.S. intelligence community and most of

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its foreign counterparts believe that Iran most likely would not be able to field a nuclear arsenal until the middle of the decade. Even Israeli officials have privately indicated that their clock has slowed down because of recent developments in Iran. Last year, Mossad chief Meir Dagan said that it would probably take Iran until 2015 before it could field a functional nuclear weapon, and U.S. intelligence agencies reportedly share this assessment.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, there are measures that the United States could take to further extend the timeline of Iran's nuclearization. It is unclear to what degree the problems in Iran's nuclear program have been caused by Iran's own technological limitations and how much by external acts of sabotage, but both have unquestionably contributed. The Stuxnet virus alone has reportedly damaged Iran's pace, and that should be an obvious prototype for future action. In due course, Iran's enterprising scientists will have developed means of shielding their research from Stuxnet, requiring ever-more imaginative designs from the West.

What this adds up to is the sense that the United States and its allies have some time, probably several years but not forever, to pursue measures to threaten and hopefully weaken the regime's hold over Iranian society. It is impossible to know for sure, but it seems most likely that, should he confront such intensified pressures, Ayatollah Khamenei would acquiesce and negotiate with the United States and/or the opposition. However, he will only do so if he senses that his grip on power is slipping. As the walls start closing in on him, Khamenei would likely broaden his government and bring in opposition figures who would inject a measure of pragmatism and moderation in the system. The only time that the regime negotiated with any seriousness over its nuclear program (and even shut down its weaponization program) was in 2003, and then only briefly, when Tehran feared that the United States planned to invade Iran after Afghanistan and Iraq. (This is more evidence that only a threat to the regime's control over the country can move Tehran to compromise on its nuclear program.) Similarly, only the shock of UN Security Council Resolution 1929, the dramatically-stronger fourth round of UN sanctions in 2010, was enough to bring the Iranian regime to the table—again, only briefly—because the regime feared that these harsher sanctions would threaten its grip on power.

Despite all its professions of common interests and subtle, indirect hints of cooperation to come, the Islamic Republic will only meaningfully alter the dimensions of its foreign relations if it is confronted with a choice between its nuclear program as well as other odious behavior on the one hand, and something else it values more on the other. The only thing that policymakers can be certain that the regime values more is its control over Iranian society. A determined policy of pressure that tears the parasitic regime from its popular base can ensure that the Islamic Republic will be a crestfallen and endangered—and therefore constructive—interlocutor.

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**Notes**


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1. See Kenneth M. Pollack and Ray Takeyh, "Taking on Tehran," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 2 (March/April 2005); and Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2004), especially pp. 375–424.
2. On Iranian decisionmaking, see David E. Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2010), [http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND\\_MG878.pdf](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND_MG878.pdf).
3. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Islamic Republic News Agency, August 20, 2010.
4. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Islamic Republic News Agency, June 30, 2011.
5. See for instance, "Oil Finds \$100 Floor on Saudi Politics and Output Costs," *Reuters*, April 4, 2011, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/3/12/9278/Business/Economy/Oil-finds-floor-on-Saudi-politics-and-output-cost.aspx>.
6. Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, "Iran: Subsidy Reform Amid Regional Turmoil," The Brookings Institution, March 3, 2011, [http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2011/0303\\_iran\\_salehi\\_isfahani.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2011/0303_iran_salehi_isfahani.aspx).
7. Shortly after Gingrich's statement, Iran began to build a new group, Saudi Hizballah, which eventually conducted the terrorist attack on the Khobar Towers housing complex in Saudi Arabia, killing 19 American servicemen there. See Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, pp. 280–286.
8. See Independent Inquiry Committee into the United Nations Oil-for-Food Programme, "Manipulation of the Oil-for-Food Programme by the Iraqi Regime" (Colloquially known as the "Volcker Committee Report"), The United Nations, October 27, 2005, <http://www.iic-offp.org/documents/IIC%20Final%20Report%2027Oct2005.pdf>.
9. See the various IAEA reports on Iran. Most recently, International Atomic Energy Agency Board of Directors, "Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran," International Atomic Energy Agency, June 9, 2011, <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2011/gov2011-29.pdf>.
10. Yossi Melman, "Outgoing Mossad Chief: Iran Won't Have Nuclear Capability Before 2015," *Haaretz*, January 7, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/outgoing-mossad-chief-iran-won-t-have-nuclear-capability-before-2015-1.335656>.