

NOREF Report

Iranian nuclear weapons: a self-fulfilling prophecy?

Mariano Aguirre

Executive summary

The debate about the Iranian nuclear programme has heated up over recent months, with the danger that the situation could get out of control and violence may erupt. Currently, the main threat is an escalation of violence between Iran and the U.S. Strategically, an attack will further decrease U.S. legitimacy in a region already in turmoil and will isolate Israel even further. The consequences of these processes are both serious and unpredictable.

In this climate, negotiations are more important than ever. The basic point of entry is that Iran wants to pursue its nuclear programme, while Israel, the U.S., Europe and other countries in the Middle East want to ensure that Teheran will not develop a military nuclear programme. While several proposals have been put forward to create a negotiation framework, key political interests go beyond the technical aspects of a possible agreement. Israel and the U.S. reject the idea that Iran should have a nuclear programme at all. This is a non-starter for any negotiation with Teheran, which sees having a nuclear capacity as

a symbol of power and national identity. Iran, with its rich history and religious tradition, wants to be treated as regional power, not a pariah state that deserves sanctions.

The U.S. and Europe should recognise the needs of both Iran and Israel in a regional security framework. Such a framework should be based on a recognition of the Iranian revolution; an acceptance of the Shia way of organising religion; an acceptance of Iran's role in the region and the country's reincorporation into the international community; a transparent Iranian nuclear programme without nuclear weapons; the lifting of sanctions; full security and recognition for Israel; no support for any kind of terrorism; and world access to the region's oil and gas. Iran and the U.S. want stability in Iraq, Afghanistan and the region; Israel, Iran, the U.S. and Europe want stability in the transitions in the Arab world. Multilateral formulas to allow Iran to develop its civil nuclear programme can be explored with the IAEA and with the co-operation of third countries.

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In January 2012 *The New York Times* published an article by the Israeli journalist Roner Bergman that contained a long explanation as to why Israel is ready to go to war against Iran based on interviews at the highest levels of the Israeli government. Bergman presented the discrepancies between Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's and Defence Minister Ehud Barak's hawkish position and the assessments of the intelligence service, indicating that the two ministers cannot take the risk of waiting too long in the defence of their country against "an existential threat". He concluded that "after speaking with many senior Israeli leaders and chiefs of the military and the intelligence, I have come to believe that Israel will indeed strike Iran in 2012".¹

Similarly, on February 3rd the well-informed journalist David Ignatius reported that the U.S. defense secretary thinks that there is a strong likelihood that Israel will attack Iran in the next months: "Very soon, the Israelis fear, the Iranians will have stored enough enriched uranium in deep underground facilities to make a weapon – and only the United States could then stop them militarily."² Israeli defence minister Barak says that the Iranian nuclear programme is reaching the point where it could become "immune" to military attack because it will be hosted in bunkers and underground facilities that will be difficult, if not impossible, to destroy.

According to Ignatius, the U.S. should be trying to deter Israel from attacking Iran in two ways: by encouraging Teheran to stop its nuclear programme due to the sanctions and the risk of war and by using "covert actions to degrade the program so much that Israelis would decide that military action wasn't necessary".

President Barak Obama stated in his State of the Union speech: "Let there be no doubt: America is determined to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, and I will take no options off the table to achieve that goal." At the same time, three Republican presidential candidates – Rick Santorum, Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich – have

expressed their willingness to bomb Iran. Israel would prefer the U.S. to carry out the attack, but is signalling its willingness to do so itself without Washington's approval. The Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has responded by playing the nationalist card: "I am saying openly that if you [the West] continue to use the language of force and threat, our nation will never succumb to your pressure."

Bergman's article is a continuation of what journalist Jeffrey Goldberg wrote for *The Atlantic* in 2010. Based on several interviews he conducted in Israel, he indicated that "the point of no return" had been reached: either the U.S. destroys Iran's nuclear installations by force or Israel will have to do it.³ In November 2010, while visiting the U.S., Israeli prime minister Netanyahu said that the economic sanctions imposed on Iran by the UN Security Council were not having the desired effect and that Iran's nuclear programme was still on course. "The only way to ensure that Iran will not go nuclear", he said, "is to create a credible threat of military action against it."

According to Goldberg, Netanyahu believes the Iranian government to be in the hands of a "messianic and apocalyptic sect". Some Israeli and U.S. analysts (such as Arabist Bernard Lewis) have concluded that, given Teheran's unreasonableness, deterrence does not work. Consequently, the only option would be to carry out a preventive military attack.

The full consequences of such an attack are debatable, but it would clearly produce an increase in the price of oil, something that would have a dramatic effect on the currently vulnerable European and U.S. economies.⁴ Iran could close the Strait of Hormuz, although this step would go against its interests. Regarding retaliation against Israel by Hizbullah and Hamas, which Bergman assumes will occur, it is unlikely that they will put at risk their political agendas, militants, and infrastructures in Lebanon and Gaza. Teheran

1 Roner Bergman, "Will Israel attack Iran?", *The New York Times Magazine*, February 25th 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/29/magazine/will-israel-attack-ran.html?pagewanted=11&ref=nuclearprogram>.

2 David Ignatius, "Panetta: Israel will attack Iran", *Washington Post*, February 3rd 2012.

3 Jeffrey Goldberg, "The point of no return", *The Atlantic*, September 2010, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/09/the-point-of-no-return/8186/>.

4 Paul Stevens, "An embargo on Iranian crude oil embargo: how likely and with what impact?", Chatham House Paper, January 2012, http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Energy,%20Environment%20and%20Development/0112pp_stevens.pdf.

could activate terrorist commands to target U.S. or European interests or may launch missiles against Israel, but any retaliation of these kinds would put Iran under high risk of a massive air attack by the U.S. and Israel. However, in a situation of war, not everyone acts rationally. The main threat could be an escalation of conflict between Iran and the U.S., even if Washington does not launch the first attack. Strategically, an attack will further decrease U.S. legitimacy in a region already in turmoil and will isolate Israel even further. The consequences of these impacts will be serious and unpredictable.

An attack could have very bad consequences for Obama during his presidential campaign. Juan Cole, professor of history at the University of Michigan, considers that the

threats [to close the Strait of Hormuz] and the [January 2012] Iranian naval exercise made the oil markets jittery and put the price up. Higher oil prices are bad for presidential reelection bids. American voters, i.e. drivers, seem to think that the purpose of the president is to find and deliver to them cheap gasoline. Presidents who failed to do so, including Nixon, Ford and Carter, left the political stage under a cloud and either didn't get or didn't finish a second term.⁵

The negative impact of an attack on Obama is an attractive scenario for the Republican candidates and for the Israeli government, which does not trust him. Some sources indicate that if Obama is re-elected he will push Netanyahu to cut a deal with the Palestinians.⁶

The Iranian threat also allows the Israeli government to move attention away from the Palestinian case. According to the newspaper *Haaretz*, Netanyahu and Barak "have turned the Iranian nuclear threat into an impressive ploy to distract attention from settlement policy and the perpetuation of the occupation [of the Palestinian territories]". On January 26th the Quartet gave Israel and the Palestinians a deadline to present their positions about reinitiating negotiations.

Israel presented a general plan that rejects the 1967 borders.

A changing strategy

Obama's strategy towards Iran started with opening dialogue and evolved into keeping the pressure up through the sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council. The June 2009 elections in Iran and the consequent opposition protests and massive repression by the Ahmadinejad government deeply affected this strategy. As Obama moved from engagement to pressure, Iran reacted by speeding up its programme. The 2010 launch of the nuclear reactor in Bushehr turned Iran into a de facto nuclear state.

The Teheran government maintains that its programme is solely for peaceful purposes, that it complies with the terms of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and that it is willing to submit to international verification. But in return it wants the P5 + 1 (U.S., Russia, Britain, France, China and Germany) to clarify what they intend to do about Israel's nuclear weapons, whether the nuclear powers intend to comply with the NPT by promoting disarmament, and whether they will negotiate on the basis of respect and friendship or by means of force.

For Iran, its nuclear programme fulfils three purposes: furthering its economic development; enhancing its national prestige as a country that wants to become part of the emerging powers club; and having the capacity to develop a military programme in a regional context in which Israel, Pakistan, Russia and India already have nuclear weapons. Inside both the Iranian government itself and the opposition, differences have arisen between those who oppose negotiations with Washington and its allies and those who would prefer to reach an agreement.

In testimony to the U.S. Congress last February, Lieutenant General James Clapper, the director of national intelligence, said that Iran could technically produce enough material for a nuclear weapons programme in the next few years, but that the U.S. intelligence community "did not know ... if Iran will eventually decide to build nuclear weapons". *Haaretz* stated that

5 <http://www.juancole.com/2012/01/israel-no-iranian-nuclear-weapons-program-barak-any-decision-to-strike-iran-far-off.html>.

6 Americans for Peace Now, "Hard questions, tough answer with Yossi Alpher", January 23rd 2012, http://peacenow.org/entries/hard_questions_tough_answer_with_yossi_alpher_-_january_23_2012.

the intelligence assessment Israeli officials [presented] to U.S. armed forces chief General Martin Dempsey indicates that Iran has not yet decided whether to make a nuclear bomb. The Israeli view is that while Iran continues to improve its nuclear capabilities, it has not yet decided whether to translate these capabilities into a nuclear weapon – or, more specifically, a nuclear warhead mounted atop a missile. Nor is it clear when Iran might make such a decision.⁷

Despite having earned vast amounts from oil sales since 2005, Iran is currently experiencing economic stagnation and suffering from the effects of the international sanctions imposed on it. The UN has so far imposed four sets of sanctions via Security Council resolutions 1737, 1747, 1803 and 1929. The U.S. and the European Union (EU) have also imposed a series of sanctions outside the UN framework. In 2011 they increased the pressure, cutting their imports of Iranian oil and forbidding banking operations with the Central Bank of Iran, but it is extremely unlikely that these sanctions will induce Teheran to give up its nuclear programme and institute a democratic opening.

Two leading British experts on Iran consider that the sanctions regime and a military attack could be counterproductive. Chatham House researcher Sir Richard Dalton thinks that although Iran is near the point where it could develop a nuclear weapon, he believes Teheran was pushing towards the goal of “latency”, i.e. where Iran would have the capability to produce nuclear missiles, but would only hold that option in reserve. “Iran believes it is gaining strength as the West declines”, he said, adding that he was not sure that any further sanctions on Teheran by the West would “lead to any positive development”. Former Tory chancellor of the exchequer Lord Lamont, who is now the chairman of the British-Iranian Chamber of Commerce, says that “the sanctions will only serve to consolidate the regime in Teheran”.⁸

The sanctions regime has been criticised for the boomerang effect that it could have on the U.S. and its allies. Kenneth Pollack, director of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution and a former National Security Council official who advocates war against Iraq, considers that the sanction regime will increase the price of oil and would have a dramatic humanitarian impact on the Iranian population, and that over time “there is a high likelihood that other countries will come to see the misery of the Iranian people as being the fault of the United States, not of the Iranian leadership, exactly as happened with Saddam Husein in Iraq”.⁹

Politically, internal splits have appeared in Iran within a fragmented power system and there have been clashes between the Iranian government and the private sector. But at the same time, the pressure from abroad and the imposition of sanctions enable the government to play the national sovereignty card and stand defiant. In addition, while successive Iranian governments since 1979 have taken a very radical stance towards the U.S., they have been careful not to go so far as to risk a devastating attack that could put an end to the Islamic regime.

Risk of war in the region

Any move Obama makes towards opening dialogue with Iran is fiercely criticised by the Republicans, who accuse him of weakness. From the outcome of the U.S. mid-term elections in November 2010, the signs are that the White House is under heavy pressure from Congress to lean on Teheran. Republican senators John Cornyn from Texas and Sam Brownback from Kansas have already tabled a bill calling for the president to approve operations that are designed to bring about “regime change”.

The U.S. has increased its naval presence in the area around the Persian Gulf and in September the government approved the sale of \$60 million worth of heavy weapons to Saudi Arabia. Washington is also building up the military capabilities of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) states. The

7 Amos Harel, “Barak: Israel ‘very far off’ from decision on Iran attack”, HAARETZ.com, February 14th 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/barak-israel-very-far-off-from-decision-on-iran-attack-1.407953>.

8 International Institute for Security Studies, “Sir Richard Dalton, former UK Ambassador to Iran, says the West is pursuing the wrong strategy”, November 14th 2011, <http://www.iiss.org/whats-new/iiss-in-the-press/november-2011/sir-richard-dalton-former-uk-ambassador-to-iran-says-the-west-is-pursuing-the-wrong-strategy/>.

9 Kenneth Pollack, “Are we sliding toward war with Iran?”, *The New Republic*, January 18th 2012, <http://www.tnr.com/article/world/99741/war-iran-america>.

purpose of such measures would appear to be to strengthen the capabilities of Saudi Arabia and the GCC states (and Israel) so that Iran will be deterred from using any nuclear arms it may have in the future. From the Iranian perspective, these are steps to encircle the country.

According to Alastair Crooke, a former British intelligence agent and the director of Conflicts Forum (based in Beirut), the sale of arms to Sunni governments in the Gulf region and Washington's obsession with having "sufficient leverage" over Iran to force it to abandon its nuclear programme could lead to war in the region. And the Iranian-American researcher Trita Parsi, director of the National Iranian American Council, warns that militarising the Iranian-American relationship will lead to misunderstandings that increase distrust between the parties, making Obama's wish for a peaceful solution to the conflict with Iran a more distant goal.

In January 2011 it was revealed by *The New York Times* that a cyber attack on Iran's uranium enrichment programme had been launched by the U.S. and Israel. Columbia University researcher Gary Sick called it the "the first publicly known case of targeted, state-sponsored international cyber warfare". Iran has "been notified unequivocally that the United States and Israel have declared war ... and have successfully carried out a first strike. The debate in the United States and Israel about whether or not to launch a strike against Iran has been answered — just not in the way most people expected, with bombs". Sick asks whether Iran will now stop or redouble its effort to acquire nuclear weapons and how this attack will affect future International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) visits.¹⁰

For some Israeli experts, the sanctions and the covert actions (cyber attacks and the killing of scientists such as Mostafa Ahmadi-Roshanai in January 2012, although they are officially denied by the Israelis) to sabotage the Iranian programme are succeeding. "We are winning the war against Iran – and I am more confident this year than last year", said Efraim Halévy, a former head of Israel's Mossad intelligence

agency, in February. But other analysts consider that the pressure on Iran could merely generate a rationale for speeding up the nuclear programme before it can be destroyed. But the fact is that all of Iran's known nuclear-fuel enrichment facilities are currently under UN monitoring and there is no evidence that any of Iran's enriched uranium has been diverted to a military programme.

In Israel, meanwhile, there is a strong consensus across the political spectrum about the danger posed by an Iran that possesses nuclear weapons. Another cause for Israeli concern is Iran's development of a medium-range missile system. For those on the right of the political spectrum, including Netanyahu, Iran poses an "existential threat"; for others, the problem is whether the government in Teheran will launch a future attack, which they see as improbable at the moment, but not impossible in the mid-term.

Some Israeli analysts believe that the real danger from any Iranian ownership of nuclear weapons is that regional anti-Israeli movements, such as Hamas and Hizbullah, would have a nuclear umbrella, on top of the financial and armed support they already receive from Iran. Others even think that war with Iran is inevitable. But analysts from the Israeli centre and left believe the only way out is to initiate a process of dialogue and negotiation between Israel and Iran. Given that the two countries were strategic allies and maintained close relations until the 1990s, such a dialogue could realign their relationship. The main problem for Israel, argues Parsi, is that the political and military elite fear that an agreement and engagement between Washington and Iran would weaken Israel's position in the region and destroy its nuclear leadership.¹¹

The end of Israel's nuclear monopoly?

Iran has been interested in acquiring nuclear energy and weapons since the 1950s. Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi signed a co-operation agreement with the U.S. in the context of the "Atoms for Peace" programme. In 1968 Iran

¹⁰ Gary Sick, "The Stuxnet worm and Iran: the day after", gary's choices, January 16th 2011, <http://garysick.tumblr.com/post/2779081304/the-stuxnet-worm-and-iran-the-day-after>.

¹¹ For an overview of the different Israeli positions in early 2012, see "What to do about nuclearizing Iran? The Israeli debate", <http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/meb59.html>.

signed up to the NPT and throughout the 1970s Teheran bought nuclear technology from the U.S., France, the then-Federal Republic of Germany and South Africa to enable it to build 20 nuclear reactors. The shah wanted to maintain a nuclear weapons option, but Washington opposed it.¹²

During the early years of the Iranian revolution the nuclear programme was shut down, but, following the war with Iraq in the 1980s and growing tensions with the U.S., the idea of becoming a nuclear power gained strength. For the Islamist government, having nuclear capacity has always been a symbol of power and a sign of national identity. In 1990 Iran signed a co-operation agreement with China and in 1995 it began to import Russian components. Since then, relations between Teheran and the IAEA have been tense. The IAEA has ordered Iran to allow its inspectors to visit its nuclear facilities and to provide adequate guarantees that its nuclear programme will be used solely for peaceful purposes. Iran has withheld information during some periods and uses IAEA access as a bargaining chip. At the end of January 2012 a new IAEA mission started a visit to the Iranian installations and agreed to pay a second visit on February 28th.

The Iranian nuclear programme is not only of concern to Israel, which would no longer be the only nuclear power in the Middle East, but also to other countries in the region, especially those who fear that a movement towards a Shia ascendancy is under way, headed by Teheran. Accordingly, and in response to the Iranian programme, Jordan, Egypt, Turkey and Saudi Arabia may be planning on building their own nuclear reactors and do not rule out enriching uranium or reprocessing plutonium. On November 27th 2010 WikiLeaks revealed that Saudi Arabia and Jordan had asked Washington to halt the Iranian nuclear programme, by force if necessary.

In 2007 the then-French prime minister, Jacques Chirac, claimed that if Iran had one or two nuclear weapons, it would not affect the security situation in the region. Zbigniew Brzezinski, U.S. national security adviser under President Jimmy Carter, declared that since nuclear deterrence had worked with Russia and China, it would also

be effective if Iran produced nuclear weapons. In March 2010 the U.S. journal *Foreign Affairs* launched a debate on possible scenarios if that were to happen.¹³

The statement issued after the NPT Review Conference in May 2010 stressed “the importance of the establishment of nuclear-weapon-free zones ... especially in the Middle East”, urged states who are not members of the NPT to sign the treaty, and planned an international conference in 2012 to discuss the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons.¹⁴ It is significant that the U.S. and 180 countries supported the statement; but even more significant is the concern it caused in Israel. The latter is not a party to the NPT and has a policy of neither confirming nor denying that it has between 100 and 200 nuclear weapons.

In September 2010 Bruce Riedel, researcher and adviser to several U.S. governments, argued that the U.S. should convince Israel that attacking Iran would be a regional disaster and also “persuad[e] [it] ... that now is the time to give up its regional nuclear monopoly”. In Riedel’s opinion, that would mean enhancing Israel’s nuclear deterrence capability by supplying it with more sophisticated U.S. weaponry, ensuring a nuclear commitment on the part of the U.S. and advocating Israel’s future entry into NATO.¹⁵ The problem is that while this would strengthen Israel, it would not guarantee greater security for Iran.

The path of negotiation

Iran’s approach is that of a country under siege, and as long as the U.S. and its allies insist on pursuing a strategy of putting pressure on Iran to make concessions, negotiations are impossible. Riedel’s main argument is that what Washington wants is to put an end to Iran’s nuclear programme and that this is something no Iranian government will agree to.

13 James M. Lindsay & Ray Takeyh, “After Iran gets the bomb: containment and its complications”, *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2010, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/66032/james-m-lindsay-and-ray-takeyh/after-iran-gets-the-bomb?page=show>.

14 http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=NPT/CONF.2010/50%20%28VOL.I%29.

15 Bruce Riedel, “If Israel attacks”, *The National Interest*, September-October 2010, pp 6-13.

12 See U.S. Institute of Peace, *The Iran Primer*, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resources/irans-nuclear-program>.

The national question is key to understanding Iranian policy. Historically, Iran has been controlled by Britain, Russia and the U.S. London controlled Iran's oil from the beginning of the 20th century until 1953, when Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh decided to take control of it. At that point, the British organised an international boycott that isolated the country. In 1951 at the UN Mossadegh had said that "[t]he oil resources of Iran, like its soil, its rivers and mountains, are the property of the people of Iran".¹⁶

London asked the U.S. for help and, following a campaign organised by the CIA, Mossadegh was overthrown and Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi seized total control. Former *New York Times* correspondent Stephen Kinzer says, "[t]his coup did more than simply bring down Mossadegh. It ended democratic rule in Iran and set the country off toward dictatorship. Mohammad Reza Shah gave the United States a quarter century of dominance in Iran, but his repression ultimately set off an uprising that produced a fanatically anti-American regime".¹⁷

The nationalist factor is bound up with the need of President Ahmadinejad's government to use the confrontation as a means of mobilising Iranian society and maintaining its own legitimacy. In fact, during the 2009 election campaign and the subsequent anti-government demonstrations, neither the opposition candidates nor the demonstrators on the streets questioned the nuclear programme.

Any negotiating agenda should therefore address the relationship between the U.S. and Iran from a strategic perspective, without focusing solely on the nuclear question, and include issues such as Iraq, Afghanistan and drug trafficking. According to Parsi, the P5 + 1 group should remember that since political power is fragmented in Iran, decision making is very slow, thus making it important to look for interlocutors at different levels. At the same time, Washington and its allies need to raise the problem of human rights and the repression of the opposition following the 2009 elections, but the human rights agenda and the nuclear agenda should follow different paths,

otherwise one will obstruct the other. Negotiations would benefit from the support of countries such as Brazil and Turkey that have good relations with both Iran and the U.S. The Turkish foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, declared in Washington in mid-February 2012 that the Iranian government is open to entering a negotiation and that the earlier proposals negotiated by Ankara and Brasilia could still serve as a "frame of reference" for a new deal.

The option of multilateral negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme must be revived. This was a proposal put forward in 2008 by a group of experts from the U.S. and Iran and taken up by Turkish-Brazilian diplomacy in 2010. (The proposal became a controversy among the U.S., Iran, and the governments in Ankara and Brasilia. The U.S. encouraged the Brazilian-Turkish diplomacy, but then rejected the proposal. Almost two years later, references in the mainstream media generally indicate that it was Teheran who rejected the deal.)

Two governments (e.g. France and Russia) could take charge of managing uranium enrichment for Iran. Iran would be able to use the enriched uranium for peaceful purposes, but would not be in a position to manufacture nuclear weapons. In return, Teheran would not face sanctions, would benefit from joining the World Trade Organisation and having access to scientific and technological exchanges, and its relations with Washington would be normalised. The proposal could include safeguards to prevent Iran from transferring technology to other countries or armed groups, one of Israel's main concerns. India, a growing Iranian trading partner, could also be a third party to play a role in future negotiations.¹⁸ Former director of policy planning at the U.S. State Department Anne-Marie Slaughter considers that the best option is to turn back to the Turkish-Brazilian proposal and reinstate negotiations.¹⁹

In 2011 the Norwegian Defence Research

¹⁶ Stephen Kinzer, *Reset: Iran, Turkey and America's Future* New York, Times Books, 2010, p 94.

¹⁷ Ibid., p 98.

¹⁸ Real Clear World, "EU asks India to pressure Iran over nuclear program: report", February 9th 2012, http://www.realcworld.com/news/reuters/international/2012/Feb/09/eu_asks_india_to_pressure_iran_over_nuclear_program_report.html?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=rcw-today-newsletter.

¹⁹ Anne-Marie Slaughter, "Our least bad option of negotiating with Teheran", *Financial Times*, October 10th 2011.

Establishment presented a two-model proposal for multilateral nuclear fuel cycle co-operation with Iran. The models would imply the participation of different countries, from South Africa to the GCC states, in close co-operation with the IAEA. The proposal advocates accepting enrichment of uranium by Iran.²⁰

The problem is that although the Obama government initially stated its intention to negotiate, its position is now the same as that of the Bush administration, namely that Iran must close down its uranium enrichment programme completely, even for peaceful purposes. Iran appears to be willing to return to the negotiating table so that it can enrich a predetermined amount of uranium, but there will be no room for dialogue if Washington and Israel insist that it has to shut down the programme completely.

Negotiations are bound to fail unless they are part of a broader project. On the one hand, the production of enriched uranium and other related nuclear activities should be conducted on a multilateral basis that includes the Iranian and other governments.²¹ On the other hand, a regional framework is needed in which both Israel and Iran, as well as their Middle Eastern neighbours, will feel safe. For this to happen, Washington, London and their allies must stop threatening Iran and embark on a complex dialogue with Israel about ending its military monopoly in the region.

The establishment of a peace agreement between Syria and Israel would be an important step towards achieving security for the Jewish state. Within that negotiating framework, it would be essential for Iran to accept a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and for the countries of the region to recognise the State of Israel. But in the light of the present situation in Syria and in the foreseeable future, a negotiation is unthinkable. And the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian problem is completely off the agendas of all the actors inside and outside the region.

As Parsi indicates, “contrary to common perceptions, diplomacy has not been exhausted. In fact, it didn’t even fail – it was prematurely abandoned”:

By the time diplomacy could be tried in October 2009, Obama’s political maneuverability had become so limited that its entire Iran policy – in the words of a senior Obama administration official – had become “a gamble on a single roll of the dice.” It either had to work right away, or not at all. And diplomacy rarely works instantaneously.

The Iranians did not come to a “yes,” as Obama had hoped, during the October talks. Only weeks later, the Obama administration activated the pressure track and abandoned diplomacy in all but name. Ironically, Brazil and Turkey managed through their diplomacy to get Iran to a “yes” only six months later. But by that time, Obama had committed himself to sanctions and the pressure track. Between a sanctions resolution at the United Nations and a diplomatic breakthrough based on the benchmarks of the original October deal, Obama rejected the diplomatic opening and opted for sanctions and pressure politics.²²

The first crucial move would be for the U.S. to re-establish normal relations with Iran. Iranian society’s attitude to Americans is contradictory: on the one hand, it was the Americans who inherited British rule and reversed the nationalist revolution of 1953. More recently, the Bush government included Iran on the “Axis of Evil” list and in 2003 rejected the comprehensive regional agreement proposed by Teheran. On the other hand, Iranian society has great admiration for the culture and freedoms of its enemy.²³

From the U.S. point of view, the Iranian government held its embassy staff hostage in Teheran in 1979, supports terrorist groups, wants to have nuclear weapons and is fiercely anti-Zionist. Despite

20 Hege Schultz Heireng, Maryam Moezzi & Halvo Kippe, *New Multilateral Approaches to Solving the Nuclear Energy Dispute with Iran*, FFI Report 2011, http://www.ffi.no/no/Aktuelle-tema/FFI-FORUM/Documents/00005_iran_atomv%C3%A5pen.pdf.

21 Thomas R. Pickering, William Luers & Jim Walsh, “A solution for the US-Iran nuclear standoff”, *The New York Review of Books*, March 20th 2008, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2008/mar/20/a-solution-for-the-usiran-nuclear-standoff/>.

22 Trita Parsi, “Without renewed diplomacy, war with Iran lies around the corner”, December 28th 2011, <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2011/12/28/without-renewed-diplomacy-iran-crisis-will-deepen/>.

23 Flynt L. Leverett, “Iran: the gulf between us”, Brookings, February 14th 2012, http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2006/0124middleeast_leverett.aspx.

everything, Kinzer and other U.S. analysts, such as Ray Takeyh, Hillary Mann Leveret, Flynt Leverett and Juan Cole,²⁴ believe that Washington must stop threatening and underestimating this thousand-year-old nation and start opening up to it as Richard Nixon's government did with China.

That does not mean accepting the type of political regime it has or the human rights violations it commits, but Washington (and the EU) have relations with many governments that are not democratic. Opening a dialogue with Teheran does not mean giving in; on the contrary, it grants a certain legitimacy to a government that sees itself as the depositary of national identity and whose strategic aim is to protect regional security. At the same time, a government that is less threatened from abroad might be more flexible at home, thereby opening up more space for the opposition. The Arab uprising shows that political change is unpredictable and can topple the most authoritarian and apparently strong regimes, e.g. Hosni Mubarak's in Egypt.²⁵

Diplomacy in this case has a strong technical side, particularly in terms of Iran's willingness to continue with the process of uranium enrichment, its amounts and levels. Over the last few years several proposals have been presented by the P5 + 1, Russia and Teheran. While Iran makes the point that it has the right to enrich uranium, the U.S. and Europe consider that the enrichment process should continue only under certain very strict conditions. In January the Arms Control Association, a U.S. non-governmental advocacy group, presented a series of diplomatic paths that could be followed to establish confidence-building measures between Iran and the international community.²⁶

Former U.S. diplomats William Luers and Thomas Pickering consider that in developing a diplomatic strategy toward Iran, President Obama should consider the following as a starting point:

Iran wants recognition of its revolution; an accepted role in its region; a nuclear program; the departure of the United States from the Middle East; and the lifting of sanctions. The United States wants Iran not to have nuclear weapons; security for Israel; a democratic evolution of Arab countries; the end of terrorism; and world access to the region's oil and gas. Both Iran and the United States want stability in the region – particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan; the end of terrorism from Al Qaeda and the Taliban; the reincorporation of Iran into the international community; and no war.²⁷

Neither threats nor sanctions or cyber attacks and covert actions seem to force Teheran to be more democratic, or to abandon its nuclear programme, or to allow its enriched uranium to be monitored. On the other hand, strengthening Israel's security while continuing to threaten and fence in Iran will only increase tension and distrust and turn the development of Iranian nuclear weapons – and their likely use – into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

24 See Ray Takeyh, *Hidden Iran*, New York, Times Books, 2006; Juan Cole, *Engaging the Muslim World*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; and the interesting portal <http://www.raceforiran.com/>.

25 Steve Coll, "Table talk", February 6th 2012, http://www.newyorker.com/talk/comment/2012/02/06/120206taco_talk_coll?printable=true&ixzz1IL2pVXhH

26 http://www.armscontrol.org/files/Iran_Brief_Charting-a-Diplomatic-Path-on-the-Iran-Nuclear_Challenge.pdf.

27 William H. Luers and Thomas Pickering, "Envisioning a deal with Iran", *The New York Times*, February 2nd 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/03/opinion/envisioning-a-deal-with-iran.html>.