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## Upheaval

*U.S. Policy Toward Iran in a Changing Middle East*

By Marc Lynch



Center for a  
New American  
Security

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### Cover Image

Demonstators wave Iranian opposition flag on March 9, 2011 during a protest against the Iranian regime on the Place des Nations (Nations Square), next to the United Nations offices in Geneva on the sidelines of U.N. Human Rights Council session.

(FABRICE COFFRINI/AFP/Getty Images)

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# UPHEAVAL: U.S. POLICY TOWARD IRAN IN A CHANGING MIDDLE EAST

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## I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

By Marc Lynch

The wave of uprisings that have rocked the Arab world will have dramatic consequences for America's strategy toward Iran. Arguments rage over whether the upheavals have strengthened or weakened Iran, Tehran's role in sparking or exploiting the turbulence, how new regimes in key Arab states might interact with the Islamic Republic, and if the wave of protests might reach Iran itself. But for all of the uncertainty, one thing seems clear: The foundations of the Obama administration's Iran strategy are crumbling. A policy well-crafted for the regional status quo inherited by the Obama administration must now adapt.

Until recently, the Obama administration could justifiably claim some success in its policy toward Iran. While negotiations about Iran's nuclear program went nowhere, and hopes for a quick change of regime in Iran in the aftermath of the June 2009 elections quickly faded, the administration brokered an unexpectedly strong regional and international consensus in response to Iran's continuing progress toward achieving the capability to produce a nuclear weapon.<sup>1</sup> Its policies increased pressure through tough sanctions, reportedly undermined the Iranian nuclear program through sabotage and covert actions, reassured regional allies and generally bought time while holding out the hope of either a diplomatic solution to Iran's alleged pursuit of a nuclear weapon or some form of political change from within Iran.<sup>2</sup> Momentum for military action faded as U.S. and Israeli assessments of setbacks in the Iranian nuclear program cooled the urgency to act quickly. As a result, most observers agreed with former CIA Director Gen Michael Hayden, who concluded, "We've got more time than we thought."<sup>3</sup>

The administration's policy of strategic patience, which arguably made sense even months ago, can no longer be sustained. Key regional supporters of that policy have passed from the scene, including former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and the U.S. and Saudi-backed Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, whose government was toppled by

Hezbollah's coalition and has not yet been replaced. Other members of the anti-Iran coalition, including Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, face intense domestic challenges. Even where current regimes survive, they must be more responsive to the preferences of empowered publics that generally lack enthusiasm for more aggressive moves against Iran. For the foreseeable future, Arab regimes will be preoccupied with threats to their survival driven not by Iran (though they will likely point fingers toward Tehran), but by their own political and economic failures. They will be highly attuned to the risks of adopting unpopular foreign policies.

The upheavals in the Middle East affect other key pillars of the Obama administration's approach to Iran as well. The war with Libya undermined the logic of the nuclear negotiations with Iran, the leaders of which will likely conclude that having nuclear capabilities is even more urgent, and place even less faith in the ability of a negotiated agreement to guarantee the interests and survival of the regime. Higher oil prices have blunted the impact of international sanctions. Finally, the uprisings across the region have rekindled hopes that change inside Iran might be more possible than earlier believed.

Many observers fear, and many in Tehran hope, that these regional changes will strengthen the Islamic Republic. But in fact, Iran is not benefiting from the uprisings and may be weaker than many recognize. It has not been able to make inroads into Tunisia or Egypt and its key ally, the regime in Syria, faces a potentially mortal challenge. A wave of anti-Iranian, and at times anti-Shi'a, panic sweeping the Gulf could have unanticipated consequences across the region. And Iran's own repression of domestic protestors in the summer of 2009 has crippled efforts to align itself with the Arab uprisings.

America's interest in preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and reassuring Israel sufficiently to prevent a disastrous war remain

urgent. But the United States cannot deal effectively with Iran in this new environment by containing it. Getting policy toward Iran right means getting U.S. policy toward the region right: aligning the United States with the emerging empowered Arab public and preserving key regional alliances, while denying Iran the ability to exploit the changing environment.

Attempting to repolarize the region against Iran will only undermine U.S. interests. Iran thrives when the regional agenda is positioned as a bipolar struggle in which it is the only alternative to the American- and Israeli-backed regional status quo. Many Iran hawks fear the Arab uprisings will distract attention from Iran, not realizing this is one of the greatest opportunities presented by the uprisings. These changes undermine the bipolar narratives on which Iran's appeal depends, shifting attention away from the "resistance" and toward internal political struggles in which Iran has little role.<sup>4</sup> The worst thing the United States could do is to overstate the Iranian menace and feed Tehran's interests and narrative. Key Arab allies across the Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia, are pushing hard to restore the traditional regional order, resisting democratic transitions and hyping Iran's role in countries from Bahrain to Yemen. The United States should resist such efforts, and be vigilant about feeding self-fulfilling prophecies about Iran's role.

The United States has a historic opportunity to align itself with the aspirations of the people of the Middle East, arguably for the first time in a generation, and risks squandering it by falling back on conventional policies. It faces a chance to move beyond the zero-sum political struggle between Iran and America's regional allies that has dominated the last 30 years. While the domestic turmoil faced by America's regional allies may appear to strengthen Tehran in the short term, over the long term the reform of these regimes will challenge Iran's regime more than any effort to contain Iran ever did.

In developing a new approach to Iran, the administration should:

- **Engage newly empowered publics.** The administration should lay out a vision that aligns the United States with the aspirations of publics in the Arab world and Iran, and demonstrate that commitment in practice.
- **Focus on human rights and universal freedoms.** The United States should call for the same universal rights and freedoms in Iran that it has articulated for the rest of the region, and significantly increase its focus on human rights in its approach to Tehran.
- **Communicate Iran's weakness.** The administration should launch a strategic communications campaign designed to highlight Iran's irrelevance to the uprisings and dwindling soft power, and avoid the temptation to embrace narratives that give Tehran an undeserved centrality in the region's transformation.
- **Use diplomacy to shape the future.** A negotiated solution to the Iranian nuclear challenge is unlikely in the short term, and this is not the time for a new public initiative. However, the administration should continue pursuing lower-level diplomacy and confidence-building measures designed to create possibilities for movement when conditions change.
- **Watch out for war.** The administration should guard against sudden spirals to war based on miscalculations, fear and unpredictable proxy struggles. It should reject efforts to adopt the model of intervention applied in Libya to Iran, and continue to resist calls for military action.

There is no magic bullet to solve the broad challenge posed by Iran in the region. No policy, whether war or diplomacy, will easily change Iran's behavior at an acceptable cost. These recommendations are designed to help the United

States deal with Iran's political challenge in a rapidly changing region. They should complement, rather than replace, a broader strategy of patience designed to delay Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapon, reassure regional allies, encourage constructive trends in Iranian politics and shape the terrain to allow for more effective negotiations in the future.

## II. U.S. STRATEGY BEFORE THE ARAB SPRING

The Obama administration came to office hoping to reset America's relations with the Middle East. Its efforts included an ambitious push for Israeli-Palestinian peace and to engage Muslim public opinion. While the administration did attempt to engage the Iranian leadership and people, it largely maintained the previous administration's tight focus on Iran's alleged pursuit of a nuclear weapon, a prospect it defined as both urgent and unacceptable.

For its first two years, the administration approached Iran with its eye toward extending the time on three "ticking clocks:" Iran's progress toward nuclear weapons capability, Israel's strategic calculus and Iran's domestic politics.<sup>5</sup> It used diplomatic engagement, economic sanctions and political pressure, and efforts to disrupt progress in the Iranian nuclear program to extend the time on those clocks in the hopes that Iranian calculations would change. Recognizing that no policy – from war to a "grand bargain" – could resolve definitively the Iranian nuclear and political challenge, the administration instead adopted a patient strategy aligned with the preferences and fears of key regional allies.

Sudden change in the region is transforming these strategic horizons, with implications for all three of the "ticking clocks." The Obama administration's strategy for dealing with Iran worked effectively within the status quo, ratcheting up pressure on Iran globally and regionally. It was not well-suited to cope with the sudden and unexpected challenge to that status quo.

**The first "ticking clock" is Iran's progress toward enriching enough uranium to produce a nuclear weapon.** It is generally assumed that Iran is pursuing a nuclear weapon, although Tehran itself has denied such an intent and the head of the

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has acknowledged that "despite all unanswered questions, we cannot say that Iran is pursuing a nuclear weapons program."<sup>6</sup> Many speculate that Iran seeks breakout capability without actually weaponizing. Any move to accelerate efforts to cross the nuclear threshold would be quickly detected, leaving Iran to face a more intense and unified international response with only a handful of weapons to show for its troubles.

Time on the nuclear clock is set by both objective and subjective indicators. Objective factors include available intelligence about the number of centrifuges spinning, and the time it would take to produce enough highly enriched uranium (HEU) for a nuclear bomb and to perfect the technology for detonating it. The subjective calculations revolve around assessments of the intentions of the Iranian leadership.<sup>7</sup> Although Iran's progress toward a nuclear weapon is often presented as a clock counting down as HEU inexorably accumulates, in fact the clock has been reset frequently. Israeli and U.S. officials have declared routinely that Iran is two years away from a weapon over the past 10 years, with the deadline endlessly receding like a Zeno's paradox. For instance, Israel's outgoing Mossad chief Meir Dagan revealed that Israel's estimate of Iran's likely date for a nuclear weapon had extended from 2012 to 2015. Similarly, IAEA reports do not indicate linear progression in Iran's nuclear development, and revise observations about that progress frequently.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the Obama administration estimates that the Iranian nuclear program has not developed as quickly as expected due to supply chain problems, inferior equipment and technical problems (and not only from the reported effects of the Stuxnet virus).

Regional turbulence has had little direct effect on the objective dimensions of Iran's nuclear efforts. The enrichment of uranium continues largely as before, as do the problems caused by sanctions and technical struggles. Although some worry that the

world has lost its focus on Iran because of the Arab uprisings, there is little evidence of any concrete change in the enforcement of sanctions. What may have changed, however, is Iran's calculations about the value of a nuclear weapon and the prospects of a negotiated deal. The international military campaign against the regime of Moammar Gadhafi likely strengthened the argument of hawks in Tehran and that it would be foolhardy to give up a nuclear program in exchange for international promises of goodwill, as did Libya. While there are no signs that the program has accelerated, and U.S. officials argue that Iran was already progressing as fast as it could before recent events, this strategic shift could affect the time on the first clock.

**The second “ticking clock” is the potential for Israel to launch a preemptive military strike based on its existential fear of an Iranian nuclear weapon.**<sup>9</sup> Israelis generally view the Iranian nuclear threat as existential, given the extreme anti-Israeli rhetoric of the Iranian leadership and doubts about the fundamental rationality or strategic calculations that might guide Iran's nuclear strategy. Worried about declining international attention to Iran, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu recently expressed his hope that “the world put similar pressure on Iran. Iran is at least equal to Libya, and I believe that its importance is even greater.”<sup>10</sup>

Much American effort has gone into managing the Israeli defense establishment's concerns, including offering security assurances, providing military aid and assistance, and demonstrating the effects of tough sanctions. The unexpectedly successful sanctions regime reassured Israelis, which gave the administration time to carry out its strategy. Over the long term, however, there is little doubting the urgency with which Israelis view the Iranian nuclear threat, or Israel's willingness to take bold actions in the face of American restraint, international condemnation and strategic logic. Israel's experience in bombing Iraqi (1981) and Syrian (2007) reactors gives some Israelis confidence that

they can succeed in at least setting back the Iranian program while suffering only limited retaliation.<sup>11</sup> American strategy must therefore constantly take into account the possibility of unilateral Israeli action, which will obstruct more dovish positions or long-term containment scenarios.

Short of Iran actually using a nuclear weapon against the Israeli homeland, Israelis worry about losing their own exclusive nuclear deterrent in the region, about new constraints on the U.S. ability to intervene militarily in the Gulf, about the response of fearful Arab regimes that might restrict or end their quiet cooperation with Israel, and even about the risk that fearful citizens could leave the country for safer shores. That said, they clearly recognize the logistical, military and political challenges of attacking Iran's nuclear facilities. Indeed, if they did not, then surely they would have acted already.

Yet regional turbulence is leading many Israelis to conclude that the strategic environment is turning against them. The changes in Egypt have proven particularly alarming, leading some to publicly question America's commitment to its allies in the wake of Mubarak's fall. Moreover, media reports indicate that the deployment of anti-missile systems may make Israel more confident in its ability to withstand retaliation from Hezbollah or Iranian missiles in the wake of an armed attack.

These trends may change Israel's calculations about Iran and, as a result, U.S. success at extending this clock during 2009-2010 may now be faltering. Israelis view Iranian nuclear weapons in more apocalyptic terms than do most Americans. While some evidence suggests that Israel's current government has ruled out military action, it is likely that future Israeli governments would reconsider it based on shifting strategic considerations.<sup>12</sup>

**The third “ticking clock” is the prospect of a significant change in Iranian domestic politics.** During the turbulent days following Iran's

presidential election in June 2009, hopes began to rise that the Green Movement might sweep the Islamic Republic from power and fundamentally change the nature of the strategic relationship.<sup>13</sup> At the height of the Green Movement's protests, Washington policy analysts even speculated that a change of regime might prove easier than a change in Iran's nuclear posture.<sup>14</sup> Backers of the Green Movement urged Washington not to talk to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, but instead to support the opposition movement. The administration concluded – correctly – that an imminent collapse of the Iranian regime was unlikely, and that it had little ability to affect the outcome of those domestic struggles. Over the past year and a half, the Iranian regime has systematically reasserted its control, despite continuing evidence of popular discontent.

Recognizing the faint prospects for wholesale regime change or revolutionary upheaval, the Obama administration moved toward a strategy based on sanctions, isolation and pressure, in the hope that it would tilt Iran's internal balance of power away from the hardliners and toward the pragmatists. Thus far, the trends seem to be more in the opposite direction. Pragmatists such as Hashemi Rafsanjani have been removed from their positions, as Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei gravitates yet farther to the right, toward hardliners and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). As a result, the regime's most conservative elements have expanded their control over Iran's politics, economy and society. Ahmadinejad forced through painful, wide-ranging subsidy reforms apparently without losing political support or provoking significant protests.

Still, the Arab uprisings have revived hopes that Iranians will follow the example of their neighbors and actively challenge the Islamic Republic's leadership. The idea that the Islamic Republic might fall to a popular movement now seems more plausible to many in Washington than it did before the fall of Hosni Mubarak and Zine el-Abedine Ben Ali. Few Iran experts expect such a

revival of the Green Movement in the short term, and focus instead on the intensifying struggles among conservatives and the potential triggering effects of parliamentary elections scheduled for next year. But, then, few experts on the Arab world predicted the uprisings that have transformed the rest of the region. The revived hopes for internal change in Iran may affect U.S. policy calculations, even if such change is not probable in the short term.

**Finally, the administration's calculations regarding Iran cannot help but be shaped by the political clock in the United States.** Iran is a defining issue for conservative critics of the Obama administration and one of the only foreign policy issues mentioned in the "Pledge to America" platform of the House Republican Caucus. As the United States enters the 2012 presidential election campaign, there will be strong incentives to politicize the issue, which could pose real problems for the strategy of buying time outlined above. It is possible that the campaign will focus on economic issues, but if any foreign policy issue intrudes, Iran is a likely candidate.

Moreover, there is bipartisan support for more hawkish approaches to Tehran, particularly in Congress. The 2010 Iran Sanctions Act restricted the administration's efforts to reach out to and negotiate with Tehran. Congressional efforts to punish China for non-compliance with international sanctions on Iran could complicate the administration's carefully calibrated diplomatic strategy, as could inadequately coordinated sanctions bills already on the legislative horizon.<sup>15</sup> In short, there seems little prospect that Iran policy will be insulated from politics in ways that might allow a strategy of patience to play out.

The Obama administration formulated its policies according to these "ticking clocks." It initially hoped to take advantage of the transition away from the Bush administration to achieve a fresh start in U.S.

relations with Iran. President Obama adopted new rhetoric and a new tone upon taking office. His 2009 Nowruz message notably referred to the “Islamic Republic of Iran” in a sign of respect for the existing regime, while a series of other messages conveyed a readiness to turn the page. The administration signaled its intention to negotiate on the nuclear issue, and sent several private letters to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei asking to designate interlocutors and about a framework for talks.<sup>16</sup> It received no meaningful response.

The timing of the Obama administration’s overtures was not propitious. After setting itself an informal deadline of November 2009 to demonstrate progress in its engagement strategy, the administration waited until after the June 2009 election to begin talks. It did this partly to avoid conveying legitimacy on Ahmadinejad, who could then show Iranian voters that his belligerence had not isolated them from the world, and partly because Tehran was preoccupied by its internal politics. The mass protests that followed the June elections then disrupted negotiations for many more months. With the Green Movement in the streets protesting an election that they considered stolen, neither the United States nor Tehran could come to the table.

The promised talks materialized only in September 2009 – but the short timeline to demonstrate success was not altered as Iranian centrifuges had continued to spin through the political chaos. A creative American offer, an exchange of enriched uranium as a confidence-building measure, created the prospect of real movement for the first time.<sup>17</sup> Tehran rejected the tentative deal, however, frustrating American diplomats who believed that Iran had failed a crucial test of its intentions. The United States later rejected a last-minute attempt by Turkey and Brazil to broker a late adoption of the September uranium exchange deal, partly because Iran’s progress in enriching uranium in the interim had reduced the value of the exchange

and partly because it wished to avoid derailing its carefully constructed sanctions resolution. Following a short round of talks in Geneva in November 2010, the United States almost immediately signaled its intentions to seek a new round of even more painful sanctions.<sup>18</sup> Talks in Istanbul in January 2011 produced little progress, leaving the diplomatic track at a standstill. In May, Iranian lead negotiator Saeed Jalili wrote to European High Representative Catherine Ashton indicating Tehran’s interest in a new round of talks, but few in Washington expected such talks to make significant progress.

Upon determining that diplomacy was not feasible, the United States switched decisively to a “pressure track,” and it is here that it claims the most success.<sup>19</sup> While it continued to look for opportunities to negotiate, its primary efforts focused on securing multilateral sanctions to put pressure on the Iranian economy and demonstrate Iran’s growing isolation and weakening stance within the international community.<sup>20</sup> U.S. envoys traveled the world, pushing tougher enforcement of existing sanctions and the adoption of new sanctions. The United States was joined by a range of other countries, including not only traditional members of the anti-Iran coalition such as the European Union (EU) but also South Korea and the United Arab Emirates. As the White House Iran policy czar Dennis Ross put it in December 2010, “the combination of our diplomatic initiative and Iran’s behavior has helped build a broad-based international coalition that is now imposing significant pressure on Iran to change its behavior.”<sup>21</sup>

The administration also adopted measures to tilt the regional balance of power against Iran. On the hard power front, it authorized unusually large conventional arms sales to the Gulf states in order to ensure their military advantage over Tehran, and continued security assistance to Israel. Its drawdown of troops from Iraq reduced the opportunities for Iranian-backed militias to wreak havoc

there. Its efforts to promote Israeli-Palestinian peace and reach out to Muslim publics aimed to reduce Iranian soft power, though those efforts have clearly struggled to produce results.

Finally, the United States has reportedly supported a range of covert activities designed to disrupt and delay Iran's progress in its nuclear program. Although details of these activities remain sketchy, it is widely assumed that the Stuxnet virus, which disabled large numbers of centrifuges at Iran's Natanz nuclear facility, originated with a foreign intelligence agency. Similarly, the assassinations and disappearances of several Iranian nuclear scientists remain shrouded in mystery. Whatever the case, American and Israeli officials now appear confident that Iran's nuclear timeline has been significantly extended.

This strategy prevailed through December 2010, but many of its pillars were undermined by the wave of uprisings that have consumed the Arab world. The region's transformation is changing the security and political calculations of all actors, shifting the strategic focus and creating new opportunities and challenges. The goal of U.S. strategy must be to prevent Iran from taking advantage of these regional changes, while constructing a new regional architecture that protects core American interests.

### III. IRAN WITHIN THE REGION

The wave of Arab protests has profoundly reshaped Arab politics. The fall of Ben Ali in Tunisia inspired the Arab world, but had little immediate relevance to Iran. The 18-day drama in Egypt struck closer to the heart of the regional order, captivating international attention and finally bringing down one of the strongest American allies in the region.<sup>22</sup> Protests spread rapidly across the region, with demonstrators chanting similar slogans from Morocco and Algeria to Yemen and Oman to Jordan and Syria. Peaceful transitions in Tunisia and Egypt gave way to increasingly brutal responses by the Yemeni, Bahraini and Syrian regimes, and in the extreme case, to an international intervention in Libya. While Iran played little role in most of these events, Bahrain became a proxy arena for an intense Saudi-Iranian struggle, which risks spilling far beyond that island.

There is no consensus as to whether these events strengthen or weaken Iran's strategic posture. Some argue that the uprisings strengthen Iran, as pro-U.S. Arab regimes totter and publics furious with Israel and hostile to American foreign policy gain in power.<sup>23</sup> Key advisers around Ahmadinejad and Khamenei view themselves as working from a position of increasing strength.<sup>24</sup> Farideh Farhi notes that "Iranians judged that the sentiment of the Arab public will ultimately be more along the lines the Iranians have taken in terms of their positions on the Arab/Israeli conflict."<sup>25</sup> Khamenei has sought to brand the uprisings as an "Islamic Awakening," and seems to see them as a vindication of his foreign policy. Many panicked Arab leaders attribute their struggles to Iranian subversion, whatever the underlying merits of their claims. Sunni Arabs in the Gulf fear Iranian expansionism, while sectarian strife both offers Iran a useful political lever and risks undermining its efforts to cast itself as a non-sectarian Islamic "resistance." Similarly, some analysts assess that "Egypt under a post-Mubarak political order will be strongly inclined to pursue better relations with the Islamic Republic and other members of the Middle East's 'resistance

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bloc' ... [adding] its considerable weight to the Iran-Syria-Turkey (and perhaps Iraq) axis.<sup>26</sup> According to this view, Iran is an inexorably rising power, moving from strength to strength with the assistance of misguided American policies.

Equally informed observers disagree, noting that Iran has struggled to take advantage of or to find a place in the emerging environment.<sup>27</sup> Repression by the Iranian regime since the June 2009 presidential elections has alienated many Arabs, while Turkey's growing regional profile and public stand in defense of Gaza have undermined Tehran's claims to leadership of the "resistance camp." Iran's role in Iraq has been unpopular with Sunni Arabs across the region, and even Iran's alliance with Hezbollah has lost some of its cachet as enthusiasm for its 2006 "victory" against Israel has faded and Hezbollah has become mired in Lebanese domestic politics. WikiLeaks exposed to popular view the depth of the hostility toward Tehran in Arab palaces.<sup>28</sup> And while publics in Egypt and elsewhere in the region widely share Iran's antipathy toward the status quo in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there are vanishingly few signs that this translates into sympathy for Iran or its broader foreign policy agenda.

It does not appear that Iran played any significant role in sparking the protests against autocrats across the region. Egyptian protestors pointedly

rejected Iran's attempt to appropriate their revolution. The current U.S. view of Iran's place in these events was expressed by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates: "We have no evidence that suggested that Iran started any of these popular revolutions or demonstrations across the region. But there is clear evidence that as the process is protracted, particularly in Bahrain, the Iranians are looking for ways to exploit it and create problems."<sup>29</sup> Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff ADM Mike Mullen observed more bluntly: "Iran is the real loser here."<sup>30</sup>

Disagreements about Iran's place in the Arab uprisings cut across national borders, with Americans, Israelis, Arabs and Iranians divided in their assessments. These disagreements have political and strategic implications, as all actors in the region make calculations based on their beliefs about the future balance of power. What is more, conditions change quickly: Iran's irrelevance in Egypt gave way to its centrality to the politics unleashed by the unfolding repression in Bahrain and allegations of a role in Yemen. The U.S. decision to escalate to military action in Libya has deeply unpredictable effects on Iran's strategic position. Those who fear Iran's growing power have a strong case, particularly given the distraction of world powers and the chaos within the traditional anti-Iranian bloc. But the skeptics about Iran are more persuasive. Iran has lost international support and popular Arab appeal, faces ever tougher international sanctions, and has been unable to exploit changes in the region. A March 2011 BBC public opinion survey found Iran tied with North Korea as the least favorably viewed country in the world (16 percent favorable), down nearly 10 points since 2005.<sup>31</sup> The changes sweeping the Arab world pose more challenges than opportunities to Tehran, undermining its appeal to empowered Arab publics and highlighting the costs of its own growing domestic repression.

Tehran's regional influence peaked in the middle of the last decade. With Saddam Hussein gone and a devastated Iraq, and America increasingly

bogged down in a ferocious insurgency, there was no power to check Iranian power in the region other than Israel and America's Arab allies.<sup>32</sup> The willingness of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and other Arab regimes to align themselves with Israel even as the peace process foundered was largely driven by their need to balance against an Iran empowered by the removal of Iraq from the regional power equation. The enthusiasm of these leaders was never matched by popular support, however, allowing Iran to appeal to Arab publics in the name of "resistance." The rising fear of a "Shi'a Crescent" that swept the region in 2004 and 2005, along with Hezbollah's ability to withstand Israel's 33-day war in the summer of 2006, rebounded sharply to the benefit of its Iranian backers, even among those who found little to admire in the Islamic Republic. Saudi-backed media, in particular, for years has offered a steady stream of anti-Iranian propaganda aimed at tarnishing Tehran as "Shi'a" or "radical" rather than as a legitimate force of "resistance." The outbreak of Sunni-Shi'a sectarian tensions across the region reflected the imbalance of power created by a weak and divided Iraq and focused conflict along a single axis: Iran and the "resistance camp" on the one side; the United States, Israel and the "moderate" Arab regimes on the other.<sup>33</sup>

The regional context is key to Iran's efforts to project power and to contest American interests in the region. Iran has defined itself, and been defined by, its resistance to the American-dominated regional order and by an intense new Middle Eastern cold war with Riyadh. The United States, Israel and most Arab regimes increasingly defined regional politics around this axis over the last decade. The focus on Iran had the paradoxical effect of highlighting Iran's position, allowing Tehran to benefit from and take credit for any real or perceived setback faced by its rivals. Obama's calculated outreach to the Muslim world initially unsettled Iranian diplomacy, depriving it of its familiar lines of attack.

There is little sign of any regional bandwagoning with Iran today among either regimes or newly empowered publics. Indeed, Iran's push for a nuclear weapon and regional influence has alarmed the regimes of the Gulf.<sup>34</sup> Arab regimes have chosen to balance against Iran rather than to join it in a challenge to U.S. policy, and are deeply fearful of Iranian power. They have moved closer to the United States and to Israel out of fear of Iranian power, and have been increasingly active in their efforts against Iran. They have also intensified their military relations with the United States, including massive arms purchases and military coordination. These leaders fear that American engagement with Iran will come at their expense, and are as worried about abandonment as they are about exposure to Iranian retaliation. This does not mean, as is often suggested, that they would support an American-led military attack on Iran. As much as they fear and detest Iran, they also fear the consequences of such a war, including Iranian retaliation and the response of their own people, and would prefer the problem be solved short of war. But while independent-minded states such as Qatar and Turkey have built solid working relations with Iran and sought a role as mediators, few states in the region show any signs of actually aligning with Tehran.

Changes to the regional status quo will influence the ability and willingness of leaders to confront Iran. More democratic Arab states will likely be less enthusiastic about playing their assigned role in containment. Egypt's new Foreign Minister Nabil al-Arabi, for instance, has given notice that Cairo now expects to have "normal" relations with Iran rather than joining a regional anti-Iranian axis. On the other hand, most Gulf states have become both more hawkish toward Iran and more internally repressive.

Iran's challenge to the region has always been primarily political, not military. Iran spends less on its military than do most of its individual Gulf counterparts, and its weapons are technologically

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*The Arab states of the Gulf continue to enjoy a massive conventional military advantage, which will only increase as proposed arms sales are consummated and sanctions continue to take a toll on the readiness and reliability of Iran's military.*

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inferior.<sup>35</sup> The Gulf states have access to advanced Western military technology, and are bolstered by an extensive network of U.S. military bases and forward deployments. The United Arab Emirates' Air Force alone is qualitatively and quantitatively superior to Iran's, while the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a whole far outguns its larger neighbor. Iran's military power projection capabilities are declining because of the debilitating effect of sanctions. As one mocking Kuwaiti commentator put it, "Iran has been threatening the Gulf for 40 years, but has never once entered and won a war."<sup>36</sup> The Arab states of the Gulf continue to enjoy a massive conventional military advantage, which will only increase as proposed arms sales are consummated and sanctions continue to take a toll on the readiness and reliability of Iran's military.<sup>37</sup> Iran has the ability to inflict harm – through missile attacks or by interfering with Gulf shipping – but is not a major conventional military threat. An Iranian nuclear weapon would have serious security implications, especially for America's freedom to intervene in the Gulf. However, most Arab regimes fear it more for the signal it would send across the region about Iranian potency.

Arab regimes fear Iran not because they fear invasion, but because of Iran's political appeal to elements of their own populations, which could challenge their grip on power at home. They are nervous about Iran's ability and willingness to funnel money and weapons to non-state actors such as Hezbollah, Hamas, Iraqi organizations (such as the Badr Organization and the Jaysh al-Mahdi) and an allegedly wide range of other groups. The weakening of authoritarian states in the recent protests holds the potential to open these domestic arenas for subversion and ideological penetration. Arab regimes would do more to meet the Iranian threat by liberalizing their own political systems and adjusting their foreign policies in order to reduce the deep grievances among their populations. The crackdown in Bahrain, for instance, has left Bahraini Shi'a without opportunities to participate in the political system and fueled intense anger with both the monarchy and Saudi Arabia that Iran can exploit.

How much Iran will benefit from this emerging regional political environment remains an open question and the United States can affect the answer. Iran gains from regional polarization, and struggles when the regional agenda fragments and other issues such as domestic politics come to the fore. It has thrived in the last decade's environment of regional cold war, which allowed it to claim to speak for all of those who did not actively support the American-led camp which united Israel with many Arab regimes. Both Iran and the United States have struggled when regional states such as Turkey and Qatar act more independently and have the ability and inclination to appeal on their own to the Arab public. The new regional environment will likely produce more such states, particularly the new Egypt, which has already restored normal diplomatic relations with Iran, pledged to open its border with Gaza, and brokered a long-delayed reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah. Rather than seeing such efforts as strengthening Iran, the Obama administration should recognize that they represent the introduction of powerful new

competitors to Tehran which will ultimately help marginalize Iranian appeal.

Iran will try to expand its efforts to capitalize on the recent instability in Arab states – but will find it more difficult to do so if it is unable to align itself effectively with empowered Arab publics. And here it faces serious obstacles. Iran’s appeal to Arab publics has waned over the last two years. In the Gulf, anti-Iranian and anti-Shi’a sectarianism has run rampant. Tellingly, even Israel’s war on Gaza in December 2008 did little for Iran’s image in the region. Iran has also been hurt by the rise of Turkey as an alternative resistance leader, and Recep Tayyip Erdogan has replaced Ahmadinejad across Arab capitals as the public face of that resistance. Indeed, many Arabs saw Erdogan’s public denunciations of Israel’s war with Gaza and support for the humanitarian flotilla as far more effective than Iranian threats and support for terrorism. Iran’s perceived role in driving sectarian bloodshed in Iraq also alienated many Arabs, whose initial support for resistance to American occupation over time gave way to revulsion at the sectarian and indiscriminate bloodshed.

Iran’s botched 2009 elections are the single greatest reason for its declining appeal to the Arab public. The violent repression of the Green Movement was widely covered on al-Jazeera and other satellite television stations, disgusting an Arab public largely sympathetic to democracy movements. This is particularly important given the empowerment of Arab publics by the recent wave of uprisings. As one Arab commentator put it, Tehran struggled with “the contradiction between its open support for the Egyptian protestors ... and its harsh position towards the demands raised by the protest movement against the election results in June 2009.”<sup>38</sup> This is a very common refrain across much of the Arab media. Many commentators go even further, speculating whether Iran’s own opposition will be inspired by the Arab uprisings to renew its challenge to the Islamic Republic.<sup>39</sup> Thus far, the regime has consolidated and narrowed its base of support, with pragmatists like Rafsanjani forced from

power, but this could be a false patina of stability. Some go so far as to warn that “if Iran is not able to control the course of the Egyptian revolution, then the Iranian regime itself will be in danger.”<sup>40</sup>

The decline in Iran’s appeal should not be exaggerated – the “resistance” axis it champions does retain great appeal across the region, and key regional fissures such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could rapidly refocus attention on such issues. A new Israeli war with Hezbollah or Gaza, or with Iran, could drive Arab publics toward Tehran. But nor should the claims of Iran’s backers, or of those seeking to exaggerate its role to distract from their own domestic struggles, be taken at face value.

Iran’s leaders are attempting to turn the new Arab movements to their advantage, and wrong moves by the United States or its regional allies such as Saudi Arabia could create opportunities for Iran to exploit.<sup>41</sup> Initially, however, Iran encountered great difficulty in appealing to Arab protestors having crushed its own.<sup>42</sup> The head of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood pointedly rejected Khamenei’s claim that the Egyptian protests were inspired by the Iranian Islamic model. As one Arab commentator contended, “the truth is that the Iranian regime suffered a severe injury in the last few days, as the representatives of the Egyptian youth rejected their call and the Iranian opposition demanded the right to protest.”<sup>43</sup> Another was even more cutting: “Khamenei’s speaking of an ‘Islamic New Middle East’ is a clear attempt to revive through the intifadas the victory of the Iranian project over the late lamented George Bush’s project!”<sup>44</sup> The spread of the protest movement to Syria, Iran’s key regional ally, undermined its efforts to portray the Arab protests as a revolt against American or Israeli foreign policy.

Yet, things can change rapidly. The deteriorating situation in Bahrain has already strengthened the Iranian position and severely challenged the American stance. The Saudi and GCC intervention into Bahrain and rising sectarian discourse there

rekindled “cold war” dynamics that had largely been absent to that point. The harsh crackdown on Bahrain’s Shi’a has given Iran an opening to appeal to other enraged Shi’a, from Iraq to Lebanon, and could create a self-fulfilling prophecy as despairing Bahraini Shi’a abandon the political process and search for help where they can find it. The sectarian tensions unleashed by Bahrain have already had regional repercussions. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah’s April 2011 speech declaring support for Bahrain’s Shi’a triggered fierce denunciations in the Saudi-backed Lebanese political class.

In all likelihood, Iran will also attempt to exploit the continuing Israeli-Palestinian stalemate, which tends to strengthen the appeal of “resistance” actors. Iran’s actual role in the Palestinian arena is limited, in spite of its support for Hamas and other Palestinian organizations. The conventional wisdom is probably correct that a truly comprehensive and just peace would complicate Iran’s regional position, and the collapse of the peace process completely would likely play to Iran’s advantage. Less obviously, however, a partial peace agreement might actually strengthen Iran’s position as a potential avatar of “resistance” if that agreement is viewed negatively in the region.

Lebanon has traditionally been the primary proxy arena for the regional contest for power, but has been less central during the months of the Arab uprisings than in the last months of 2010. At that point, an escalating showdown over the Special Tribunal for Lebanon’s (STL) reported intention to implicate Hezbollah in the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, and Israeli fears of the rising military capabilities of Hezbollah, focused international and regional attention on Beirut.<sup>45</sup> The ability of Hezbollah and its allies to bring down the Hariri government in response to the STL’s indictments was widely seen as a victory for Iran. This has sparked something of a backlash, with Hezbollah increasingly portrayed as a partisan Lebanese actor, even though Hassan Nasrallah remains extremely popular across the region. Hezbollah’s, and by proxy Iran’s,

momentum stalled over the inability of their choice for Prime Minister, Najib al-Mikati, to form a new government for more than four months. Should war break out between Lebanon and Israel, it could be a useful vehicle for Iran to mount a regional comeback.

Iraq remains a crucial arena in which Iran’s regional influence will be shaped. Iran proved less able than many expected to impose its will on Iraqi electoral politics and the formation of a new government. While Shi’a politicians such as Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki have dominated the political system, the most successful have catered to a resurgent Iraqi nationalism. Bahrain’s regional impact has already been felt in Iraq, where the support expressed for the protestors by the government of Iraq (including by both al-Maliki and the Sunni Speaker of Parliament Osama al-Nujayfi) triggered a fierce backlash across the Gulf and calls to postpone the Arab Summit meeting scheduled for Baghdad this spring. The diminishing prospect that the Iraqi government will be willing to request a highly unpopular extension of the security agreement to allow the U.S. military to stay in Iraq beyond December 2011 in the face of its own energized domestic protestors further complicates matters. Should sectarian polarization drive Iraq closer to Tehran and the United States be unable to secure an effective strategic partnership with Baghdad, it would be a major strategic shift in Iran’s favor.

Overall, the impact of the regional upheavals on Iran’s place in the region remains very much in question. There are good reasons to see Iran benefiting from the changes, and even more valid reasons to see it struggling to adapt. The rapid pace of change, the large number of potential flashpoints and the potential impact of unanticipated events makes it foolhardy to completely commit to either analytical trend. But it does seem clear that the status quo is unlikely to return, and that this has important ramifications for U.S. policy options toward Iran.

#### IV. THE LIMITS OF CONVENTIONAL OPTIONS

The new regional environment undermines the foundations of not only the administration's strategy of patience and containment, but also those of most conventional alternatives: sanctions, negotiations, military options, regime change and containment. The calculations surrounding all of these options (which are intertwined and not mutually exclusive) have radically shifted. Each has serious limits and must be reconsidered in light of recent events.

##### **The Limits of Sanctions**

The sanctions put in place by the Obama administration have generated considerably more international support than anyone realistically expected, and seem to have had some impact on Iran's economy. But there are limits to what even the most intense sanctions can achieve. Iran, like most targeted regimes, can take counter-measures in the short term to mitigate sanctions' effects on politically important constituencies. This generally involves the capture of black markets by regime elements (the IRGC for instance), which actually strengthens the hold on power of the regime relative to less politically connected sectors of society. Sanctions can also help the regime justify its own poor economic management. Over time, strategic adaptation takes place, as the targeted country learns to live with the new rules and restrictions while also cultivating alternative markets and networks. Iranian opposition and civil society leaders already complain that the effects of sanctions are most felt by small-business owners and ordinary people.

In Iran's case, the adjacent loosely or ungoverned spaces of Iraq and Afghanistan; alliances with Syria; robust trade with Turkey; and energy relationships with Europe, Russia and many Asian nations offer multiple options for circumvention. Ahmadinejad's decision to slash subsidies has had

far more direct effect on most Iranians than have the sanctions. The high price of oil, currently over 100 dollars a barrel, has dulled the effect of sanctions, while allowing the Iranian regime to blame whatever problems exist on its foreign adversaries rather than its own mismanagement. If the economic pressure did really begin to take a toll, then international attention to the suffering of innocent Iranians – which could be highlighted by the global news media – will likely undermine support for the sanctions regime, as happened with the Iraqi sanctions in the 1990s.

In short, sanctions are unlikely to deliver changes in Iranian policy through the brute force of inflicted pain. The more pain that is inflicted, the more it will harm the Iranian people and undermine the position of would-be reformists. The more realistic hope is that the increased costs will change the calculus of either the regime or significant political sectors within Iran, leading them to conclude that the nuclear program is no longer worth the cost. But it should be sobering that the sanctions to this point seem only to have strengthened the most politically influential sectors such as the ascendant IRGC.

Finally, the regional transformations make it less likely that regimes in the region will be willing to take costly steps toward enforcing sanctions that might anger local businesses or financial communities. It is also unlikely that more stringent international sanctions are in the works, although more unilateral American sanctions are already passing through Congress. Carefully targeted sanctions can continue to disrupt Iran's nuclear program by affecting supply chains and financial transactions, and can limit the mobility of regime officials, but they are not likely to generate the kind of behavioral change the Obama administration seeks.

##### **The Limits of Negotiations**

It is difficult to see any serious prospect for negotiations in the short to medium term. There are many

reasons for the current impasse including, most obviously, a lack of interest on the part of Iran. Iran has demonstrated no willingness to negotiate about its nuclear program, insisting on discussing only broader regional issues when talks have been convened and rejecting the uranium exchange deal proposed by the United States. The military intervention against the Gadhafi regime in Libya may also complicate a nuclear deal, as Tehran sees that the nuclear bargain did not buy Tripoli long-term security or political guarantees.<sup>46</sup> As Khamenei acidly noted in his 2011 Nowruz speech, “Gadhafi gathered up all his nuclear facilities and gave them to the West. And now you can see the conditions our nation is living in versus their conditions.”<sup>47</sup> The United States, for its part, has resisted efforts to broaden the agenda for negotiations beyond the nuclear issue.

If negotiations do resume, there is one way that the United States could directly affect their prospects: by establishing the credibility of America’s commitment to reduce or remove sanctions if Iran agrees to a robust regime of IAEA inspections that confirm it is not pursuing nuclear weapons. The administration has presented steps Iran can take to improve relations and avoid further pressure, but Iran has little reason to believe that addressing the nuclear issue exhausts those concerns.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, it is not clear that the administration could accept a Libya-style deal with Iran – one in which it abandons nuclear weapons programs while leaving its foreign and domestic policies untouched – any more than could Tehran. As former Bush administration official Michael Singh notes, Iran’s support for terrorism and for anti-American groups around the region “demonstrates that even a resolution of the nuclear issue would only begin to address the far broader concerns about the regime and its activities, making a true U.S.-Iran reconciliation far away indeed.”<sup>49</sup> Iranian Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi agrees: “Would an agreement on the nuclear issue really end your problems with this regime?”<sup>50</sup>

The distance between the narrow terms of the negotiations over Iran’s nuclear program and the deeper underlying political differences between Iran and the United States has always deeply complicated hopes for reaching a workable bargain. Iran would have to believe that it can alleviate the pain of sanctions by agreeing to a nuclear deal and the United States would have to believe that Iran could be trusted to honor it. Neither has been the case. Tehran sees the negotiations and sanctions as part of a semi-permanent condition of containment, much as Saddam Hussein viewed American policy in the 1990s as one of veiled regime change.<sup>51</sup> Congressional resolutions that extend sanctions beyond the nuclear program address real and significant issues, but at the same time deeply complicate any serious bargaining strategy and reduce the prospects of success.<sup>52</sup>

Negotiations are useful for maintaining international support for pressuring Iran, and also can be used to build confidence and explore opportunities when political conditions change. But it does not seem likely at this point that nuclear negotiations on their own can succeed in transforming the U.S.-Iranian relationship or achieving vital U.S. interests.

### **The Limits of Military Options**

The debate over whether to use military force to stop or damage Iran’s nuclear program remains a crucial undercurrent in all strategy discussions. Many argue that, ultimately, military action such as bombing known nuclear facilities will be needed to either set back the Iranian nuclear program by several years or to decisively end it. The administration has kept the military option on the table in order to give its diplomacy teeth and to prepare for the failure of engagement. As Dennis Ross recently put it, “Should Iran continue its defiance, despite its growing isolation and the damage to its economy, its leaders should listen carefully to President Obama who has said many times, ‘We are determined to prevent Iran from acquiring

nuclear weapons.”<sup>53</sup> Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu argues that if the United States “hopes to stop Iran’s nuclear program without resorting to military action, it will have to convince Iran that it is prepared to take such action.”<sup>54</sup>

Not all military options are equivalent, of course. Most public discussions of military options assume that it will take the form of a single airstrike, or at most a few days of airstrikes (along the lines of the 1998 U.S. Desert Fox Campaign against alleged Iraqi weapons of mass destruction [WMD] sites). Such a strike would target known Iranian nuclear facilities, attempting to deliver a significant setback to the nuclear program.

Yet, there is no consensus on the prospects of success in even a limited mission. Most analysts worry that small strikes would have major negative effects, would not solve the fundamental problem and would risk escalation. Larger-scale operations, meanwhile, are unlikely given U.S. economic pressures and enduring commitments in Iraq, Afghanistan and around the globe.<sup>55</sup> Administration officials have frequently spoken out against striking Iran. Secretary of Defense Gates has said that a military strike on Iran would only delay and not prevent an Iranian nuclear weapon and would unite the country behind the current regime.<sup>56</sup> In short, there is no conceivable military option that would resolve the core problems at an acceptable price.

The optimistic case assumes that the mission would succeed to a reasonable degree in setting back Iranian nuclear capabilities. It also assumes that Iranian retaliation would be limited in its duration and scope, with supporters pointing to the muted response to the 2007 Israeli bombing of a Syrian nuclear reactor and the relatively limited regional fallout of Israel’s wars with Hezbollah (2006) and Gaza (2008/2009).<sup>57</sup> Optimists also point to the capabilities of U.S. precision “bunker buster” ordnance and Iran’s limited air defense capability. The case for the United States doing this

mission rather than Israel rests upon the reality that Israeli bombers would face a much more difficult mission than would U.S. bombers, covering greater distance over unfriendly territory to deliver a lower grade of ordnance. Those most optimistic even express hope that a strike would rally the Iranian people against the regime and trigger an overthrow of the Islamic Republic. And even if such strikes might only push back the Iranian program for a few years, they argue, such an exercise would at least buy more time in line with the broader strategy of strategic patience.

Skeptics are less willing to accept the best case scenario for either the outcome of attacks or Iranian retaliation. In their calculus, Iran learned from the examples of Osirak and the Syrian reactor, and has long prepared for the possibility of an Israeli or U.S. strike on its facilities. Nuclear sites are dispersed, underground and in some cases located near large civilian populations. Intelligence limitations mitigate against assuming that military strikes would destroy all of Iran’s nuclear sites. It would be irresponsible to assume that Iran would not retaliate in some form, whether by escalating tensions in other theaters (Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan); disrupting shipping in the Gulf; attacking (directly or indirectly) America’s Arab allies in the Gulf; or launching terrorist campaigns against Israeli or American targets.

Independent of Iran’s ability or willingness to retaliate, a military strike would very likely lead Iran to withdraw from the IAEA; end negotiations and accelerate a reconstructed nuclear program without those constraints; and would likely also mark the end of the carefully constructed international sanctions regime. An air strike, the success of which would depend on surprise, would almost certainly lack the legitimation of a U.N. Security Council resolution or the support of crucial international and regional actors. Many of Iran’s rivals in the region would privately welcome a successful attack, but will almost certainly place blame on

the United States and Israel in public. Arab and Muslim publics will not likely share the private hopes of their leaders for an Iranian setback. Many Iranian opposition figures have publicly opposed military strikes. The public backlash against the United States and its allies for such an attack would likely trigger a wave of anti-American fury similar to the one that swept the world with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and end the Obama administration's efforts to reach out to the Muslim communities of the world.

The possibility of escalation should be central to any serious discussion of a military option, and we should not assume that the conflict would necessarily end with a single American or Israeli air strike. Iran would retain a range of options for retaliation, and it is deeply unlikely that such a strike would conclusively end the perceived threat. Indeed, if freed from IAEA restrictions, the rebuilding of the nuclear program may be more rapid and intense, with fewer international obstacles and a more robust intent to weaponize. The strikes would likely strengthen the Iranian regime, at least in the short term, and seriously weaken both the Green Movement and the conservative opposition. The effects on the global economy are also potentially severe, particularly if there is any disruption of the flow of oil.

If Iran responds defiantly to the air strikes, then the United States will face another round of decisions – and with diplomatic and economic options likely dead at that point, will be oriented toward more intensive military options. Again, the lesson of the 1998 Desert Fox bombings should be kept in mind: While a number of alleged weapons sites were destroyed, the bombings also put an end to the United Nations Special Commission's (UNSCOM) intrusive inspections regime, undermined international support for the sanctions against Iraq, and (by removing a vehicle for diplomatic pressure) helped pave the way to the 2003 invasion.

If the limited air strikes are judged to have failed, then there will likely be only a short intermission before demands for more comprehensive military action follow. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., has already called for “crippling” military action designed to devastate Iran's regime and military capabilities. Such an air campaign would do far greater harm to the Iranian people, and would make Iranian retaliation in every available theater a near certainty. And if that campaign fails, there will then be few options other than invasion and occupation – an almost unthinkable option given America's crushing resource constraints, but one that would become all too thinkable if the only alternatives left are retreat and failure. Crucially, a military strike, which is often portrayed as providing the certainty that inspections and diplomacy cannot, will not provide a certain end to the nuclear program, either. Any strategy will leave a degree of uncertainty and risk. To do more would require an invasion and regime change, something that even war hawks insist is not on the table because of the costs and risks. The military does not have the deployable forces, nor does the American public have the appetite, for an occupation of Iran. The possibility of such an escalation after an initial military strike must not be excluded from responsible discussion, since wars can take on a logic of their own once they are initiated due to a failure to achieve initial goals or to the adversary's reaction.

Despite the general rejection of military action in the mainstream of the policy debate, there is a consensus that military options should not be taken off the table. The case for keeping the military option on the table despite recognition of its unattractiveness rests on the premise that such a threat strengthens the hand of diplomats and makes the actual use of force less likely. This is probably mistaken, though the military option will likely be kept on the table – more to reassure Israel and domestic constituencies than to really affect Iran's calculus.

Although Iran likely does take the threat of a limited air strike seriously – particularly an Israeli one – its leaders understand the many obstacles and drawbacks to such a strike, which undermines the credibility of the threat. The effect of a non-credible threat is poisoning the negotiating atmosphere, reinforcing the views of Iranian skeptics who oppose negotiation and undermining efforts to build trust, while producing little positive movement in return. At the same time, such threats can have a ratcheting effect on domestic political discourse, normalizing the prospect of military confrontation and creating reputational costs for failing to follow through.

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The military option should be rejected, barring some dramatic new Iranian move toward rapid weaponization. The benefits are limited, the costs potentially high, the risks of escalation significant and the impact on America's broader portfolio of global interests severe. The clear fragility of all Arab regimes in the new regional environment increases their perceived domestic vulnerability and make it unlikely that they would risk supporting an attack that might galvanize their publics and send them into the streets.

### The Limits of Regime Change

Those dismayed with the course of negotiations have argued repeatedly that the United States should abandon such efforts and instead push for regime change in Tehran. However, claims that the United States missed an opportunity to bring down the Islamic Republic in the summer of 2009 are misguided. The Green Movement did not want American assistance, and the United States had little leverage over events inside of Iran. Nonetheless, the wave of regional protests has rekindled interest in the idea that the Islamic Republic might be toppled from within, with or without overt American assistance. If other policy options have become more distant in the new regional environment, the possibility of sudden Iranian political change now looks less distant.

While regime collapse seems unlikely, we should not forget that so did the collapse of Hosni Mubarak's regime in Egypt or the outbreak of serious protests in Syria. There are signs of internal political jockeying being driven in part by the economic impact of sanctions and frustration with Ahmadinejad's domestic and foreign policies. The Iranian political system is turbulent and in transition, with domestic political vulnerability playing an underappreciated role in driving the regime's approach to the nuclear issue. U.S. officials have pointed to a range of indicators of internal dissatisfaction with Ahmadinejad as a sign that sanctions are working, including recent subsidy cuts and reports of internal warnings from the business community and more cosmopolitan leadership factions.<sup>58</sup> The unexpectedly severe impact of sanctions could embolden merchants and pragmatists to more openly challenge the current leadership. There is also clear dismay with the centralization of power in the hands of the IRGC and Ahmadinejad's office. Ahmadinejad and Khamenei increasingly seem at odds with each other, and tensions among conservative factions appear more intense than ever.

Efforts to date have focused on undermining hardliners within the regime by mobilizing groups harmed by the sanctions, including not only the Green Movement but also pragmatic conservatives, factions within the religious establishment and the business community. These forces, it is hoped, will conclude that the costs of the nuclear program are too great and the benefits insufficient and force a policy shift from within. There is a risk, however, that the sanctions could weaken precisely the groups upon which such a challenge would depend and strengthen hard-line factions who are better positioned to capture the illicit rents created by the market distortions associated with sanctions. The high value placed on the nuclear energy program (if not necessarily nuclear weapons) also makes it difficult for any such forces to endorse compromise on that front.

There is no obvious timing for the anticipated change in Iran's internal political balance. Indeed, it sometimes appears that the ultimate strategy is simply to buy time until the death of the elderly and reportedly unwell Khamenei, who appears to be the driving force behind the nuclear program and the confrontational approach to the United States.<sup>59</sup> Who or what might replace Khamenei remains unclear, however, so that even such a *deus ex machina* might not deliver fundamental strategic change.

It is still possible that the Egyptian and Arab uprisings may reignite the aborted Iranian uprisings.<sup>60</sup> The rapid rate of change in the region can only energize the opposition and alarm a regime that still nurses painful memories from 2009. To increase the prospects of a reinvigorated opposition movement, the Obama administration would be wise to avoid overtly supporting the Green Movement or endorsing regime change. As in Egypt and Tunisia, protestors do not need or want American leadership, and indeed fear that overt U.S. involvement would undermine their efforts. The administration should take precisely the same

stance it has with Arab countries, demanding respect for universal rights and rejecting violence against peaceful protestors. It should also conduct a concerted and intense strategic communications campaign using any repression against protestors to undermine Iran's image and appeal to mobilized Arab publics and media.

### The Limits of Containment

Containment has emerged as the primary policy option for those who recognize the folly of war, despair of a grand bargain and see regime change as a long-term prospect.<sup>61</sup> It comes in many flavors: before or after an Iranian bomb,<sup>62</sup> strategic patience,<sup>63</sup> aggressive containment,<sup>64</sup> militarized deterrence and containment,<sup>65</sup> multi-dimensional political containment,<sup>66</sup> and ideological cold war.<sup>67</sup> Regardless of its form, however, containment is not a satisfying long-term strategy. The wave of protests sweeping the region is in part a product of containment and cannot be sustained in the current climate. The United States has long backed authoritarian Arab regimes in part for their utility in confronting Iran, and is now paying the price for that embrace. More directly, the protest wave demonstrates the shaky foundations for containment in the future, as empowered publics are far less likely to support such an approach than did the old regimes.

Containment has been the U.S. policy since the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The spectacle of the collapse of a major regional power and American ally captured the imaginations of the region's publics and terrified the autocratic rulers of the region. The United States backed regional autocrats against rising popular enthusiasm, and tacitly encouraged Iraq's invasion of Iran in 1980. An explicit strategy of containment dates back to at least the "dual containment" of Iraq and Iran in the early 1990s. American arms sales and alliances have long been designed to meet the Iranian challenge, and the region has been increasingly polarized around this axis. The long history and deeply internalized

nature of containment means that “even if the Obama administration desires to shift U.S. policy toward Iran, containment policies will be difficult to overturn quickly.”<sup>68</sup>

Despite its familiarity, containment is not ideal. It has shaped a regional order that is far from attractive and carries many risks. The security architecture designed to contain Iran has helped to maintain authoritarian rule in most of the region, which in turn helps to fuel popular Arab unrest and creates domestic vulnerabilities for Iran, Islamists and others to exploit. Arab leaders hostile to democratic or reform initiatives portray them as risky in the face of Iranian subversion or the political aspirations of Shi’a (or any other) populations. Arms sales designed to keep the balance of power unfavorable to Iran fuel a general militarization of the region. The ideological containment of Iran has fostered a dangerous sectarianism across the region, as the American-allied regimes attempt to portray their rival as Shi’a rather than as a general avatar of Muslim resistance to the West.

Containment by its nature encourages proxy wars, as protagonists take advantage of opportunities to compete for regional influence, especially in the kinds of internally weak states that the current upheavals may produce. The most brutal of these proxy battles has been the civil war in Iraq after the U.S. invasion, but the entire region has been shaped by the regional cold war. Lebanon has been profoundly affected by this regional conflict, as Iranian allies such as Hezbollah face off against the American and Saudi-backed March 14 movement and reportedly Saudi-supported extreme Sunni Salafi groups fighting against Shi’a on the street level. The Huthi rebellion, which broke out in northern Yemen in 2004, has taken on the overtones of a proxy war (though it did not begin that way), with Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni government alleging Iranian support for the insurgents and Saudi military forces crossing the border. Pro-American leaders across the

region have adopted sectarian language, most famously with Jordan’s King Abdullah warning of a “Shi’a Crescent” threatening the Sunni Arab world.

The containment of Iraq in the 1990s offers a vital comparative perspective on the dangers that could lie ahead. In that period, U.S. policy focused on “keeping Saddam in a box,” with comprehensive sanctions, international weapons inspections and episodic air strikes. Maintaining the sanctions against Iraq became an end unto itself, to the point where the United States accepted the end of the international inspections in 1998 rather than give up the sanctions. Like Saddam’s Iraq, Iran will almost certainly explore a variety of gambits to divide the coalition, and will seek to adapt to the economic pressures in ways that maintain regime power even as ordinary Iranians are harmed. It would likely reinforce the damaging political and sectarian polarization of the region, fuel regional arms races and propaganda wars, and offer opportunities to mobilize Arab and Muslim public opinion against the American-led coalition. Over time, the failure to decisively resolve the problem will likely lead to a renewed push for additional sanctions or else military action.<sup>69</sup>

A containment strategy alone will not prevent Iran from going nuclear and inevitably will involve concessions to Arab authoritarian regimes, a highly militarized region with plentiful opportunities for unpredictable conflicts and misperceptions, and regional polarization around sectarian identities.<sup>70</sup> The status quo is now crumbling, and the existing strategy of containment must quickly adapt to the new realities, as Arab leaders warily eyeing revolutions in Cairo and Tunis turn inward and become more cautious.

## V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Until the Arab uprisings, the logic of the current standoff pointed inexorably toward the continuation and intensification of the long-standing U.S. policy of containing Iran. The wave of protest movements sweeping the region will challenge this strategy. The new regional realities will focus Arab attention inward, empower publics who oppose confrontation with Iran, and thus collectively reduce the willingness and ability of Arab regimes to support tough approaches to Iran. U.S. strategy must follow suit. The rapidly changing regional landscape powerfully undermines any assumption that the status quo can simply be maintained. The new regional order cannot easily be molded back into the familiar lines of tacit alliance between Israel and autocratic Arab regimes against Iran.

This is a pivotal time in which the prevailing discourse is open to change. The Obama administration must develop creative diplomacy that takes advantage of the new opportunities suddenly opening across a region no longer focused on the traditional axes of conflict.<sup>71</sup> The key to weakening Iran's long-term power lies in undermining the zero-sum logic of regional divisions and authoritarian paranoia that sustained both Iran's and America's regional strategies. Highlighting evidence of Iran's weakness and isolation, rather than falling back on attempts to rebuild an anti-Iranian axis, should be a key part of a new strategy for a new region. The United States has done well thus far, but risks losing this advantage due to its perceived indifference to the crackdown in Bahrain.

A new approach will require discipline on the part of U.S. policymakers because both the United States and its regional allies have an incentive to exaggerate Iran's power and role in order to maintain international support for containment. Arab states such as Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain often use an alleged Iranian role as an excuse for cracking down on domestic dissent,

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*Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's claim in early March that "we know that the Iranians are very much involved in the opposition movements in Yemen" – a contention disputed by most Yemen experts – is counterproductive.*

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labeling legitimate political opposition movements as Iranian agents to delegitimize their claims. Israel genuinely fears Iran's progress toward nuclear weapons, and worries that acknowledging Iran's declining power would reduce the international sense of urgency and focus. Iran itself has every reason to exaggerate its foreign policy successes for domestic and regional political reasons. U.S. leaders should avoid making statements that play into the Iranian regime's narrative and exaggerate Iran's role. For instance, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's claim in early March that "we know that the Iranians are very much involved in the opposition movements in Yemen" – a contention disputed by most Yemen experts – is counterproductive.<sup>72</sup>

Changing the regional dynamic will require managing the expectations of U.S. allies in the Gulf and Israel, focusing on shared goals like stabilizing Iraq and Afghanistan, and coordinating a range of other policy choices in ways the administration has thus far resisted. The focus should be on transcending old divisions, and not on repackaging traditional policies such as "a coalition of moderates against extremists" or a renewed focus on containing Iran

and Islamism. The lodestar for guiding policy should be the recognition that the Islamic Republic thrives on regional polarization, and should be denied any opportunity to recapture it. The administration should welcome and work closely with the emerging regional powers, such as Egypt, Qatar and Turkey, rather than attempt to punish them for moving away from the old consensus.

The administration should not give in to the path of least resistance and return to an ever-less-tenable policy of containment. As Kenneth Pollack puts it, “the best course of action is to go back to the administration’s basic strategy – and put it on steroids. Pressure is our only recourse. Even intense pressure may not be enough, but it is better than doing nothing, and better than war.”<sup>73</sup> Congressional leaders are preparing additional sanctions to this end, and the administration may find adopting them useful for appeasing American and regional hawks. This approach failed to change Iran’s behavior over the last decade, and is unlikely to fare better in the emerging region. Moreover, that approach enabled, and even required, the kind of authoritarian regimes and ideological polarization that the Arab Spring movements have tried to leave behind. There are better ways to marginalize Iran than through atavistic efforts to intensify its containment.

A better model for the emerging region may be to return to the missed opportunities of the late 1990s, when the “dialogue of civilizations” outreach by the reformist President Mohammed Khatemi offered the promise of a transformed relationship between Iran and the United States. That initiative ran aground in the face of American hesitation and the retrenchment of Iranian hardliners. What is more, the current Iranian regime offers no Khatemi with whom to engage. Despite these challenges, returning to the concept of dialogue, empowering reformers and speaking directly to the aspirations of a public yearning for change could inspire the sort of new American approach that befits a new Middle East.

The United States can do better than attempting to recreate a fading status quo. Instead, it should adapt its regional posture to the changes sweeping the region, while holding out the prospect for a new relationship with Iran over the long term. Abandoning old ways does not mean ceding the region to a rising Iran, or making pre-emptive political concessions that would require abandoning core American national interests or values. And the United States and its allies must remain vigilant about Iran’s nuclear program and work to reassure its regional allies.

### Engage Newly Empowered Publics

The Arab uprisings have created a new reality in which empowered publics will have to be taken into account. It is no longer enough to count on the anti-Iranian views of ruling elites in an environment where the region’s leaders face unprecedented demands to respond to public opinion. Blocking Iran from taking advantage of the new environment requires effectively engaging with these publics and aligning the United States with their aspirations and hopes for democracy, economic opportunity and justice.

The Obama administration should publicly articulate a new approach that responds to the interests and aspirations of the people of the region, building on the core principles of American support for democracy and human rights, non-violence, economic opportunity and partnership. Doing so will require a delicate balancing act with regard to American allies in the region, who feel threatened by change and complain of abandonment by Washington. To them, the message must be that Mubarak’s fall proves that their survival can only be guaranteed by genuine reform – not by force, and not by Washington’s support.

The United States will only be able to keep Iran from taking advantage of the regional changes by taking concrete steps to align itself with the needs of the changing Arab world. This may involve a push on

Israeli-Palestinian peace, but equally important will be real moves to promote economic opportunity and to nurture democratic transitions. For example, accommodating the legitimate demands of Bahraini Shi'a would do far more to isolate Iran than the Saudi-led repression that is alienating that community. The administration has begun to sketch out such an approach, but has not yet clearly articulated its broader vision or established concrete programs or incentives.<sup>74</sup> Ideally, economic aid should be tied to continued democratic transitions, with a form of conditionality modeled after EU accession agreements. Iran should be invited to join such a new institutional framework, conditioned upon and a positive incentive for a major reorientation of its domestic and foreign policies.

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*The United States should support efforts to focus international attention on Iranian human rights violations and make this increasingly central to its policy and rhetoric.*

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At the regional level, the United States should encourage the efforts of states such as Turkey and Qatar to bridge regional differences and energize cooperative efforts. It should work diligently to ensure that Iraq emerges as a positive interlocutor with Iran, and to maintain a strong relationship with Baghdad. It should welcome an independent and constructive new Egyptian foreign policy. It should resist the recourse to sectarian or anti-Iranian appeals to justify repression in Bahrain and elsewhere

in the Gulf. And it should continue to reassure Israel on security issues, while doing what it can to encourage it to make its own adaptations to the rapidly changing region. Across the region, the United States should engage with these newly empowered publics, and use the newfound fear of abandonment or domestic crisis in allied regimes to push them toward making necessary reforms.

### **Focus on Human Rights and Universal Freedoms in Iran**

The United States has a rare opportunity to align its support for political change in its Arab allies with a call for change in Iran. Reform is integral to blunting Iran's appeal, as well as a worthy policy in itself. U.S. support for change in Egypt and Tunisia and across the region gives it far more credibility than ever before to support the aspirations of democracy protestors in Iran without being tarred with charges of hypocrisy (though its failures to do so in Bahrain undermine that position).

This does not mean calling for regime change or supporting subversion in Iran. The lesson of Egypt and Tunisia is that change must come from within, not through American leadership or decree. Calls for the Obama administration to step up its rhetorical and material support for the Iranian opposition should be ignored.

Instead, the United States should apply the same standard to Iran that it has applied consistently to its allies: demanding respect for universal rights, deploring the use of violence against protestors, refusing to take sides or be seen as choosing another country's government, and supporting Internet freedom. The appointment of a U.N. human rights envoy for Iran in March 2011, achieved despite intensive Iranian lobbying, was a very positive step in this direction.<sup>75</sup> The United States should support efforts to focus international attention on Iranian human rights violations and make this increasingly central to its policy and rhetoric.

### Communicate Iran's Weakness

The United States should launch a major strategic communication campaign that emphasizes Iran's weakness and isolation. Iran's brutal treatment of the Green Movement during the protests following the June 2009 elections is as much of an Achilles' heel with mainstream Arab public opinion as was al Qaeda's frequent killing of innocent Muslims. A strategic communications campaign similar to the one used to drive up negative opinions of al Qaeda in the mid-2000s should be rapidly developed and deployed in the Arab world today.

This strategic communications campaign should attempt to shape the raging argument across the region regarding Iran's trajectory. Iran hopes to encourage the view that it will benefit greatly from the Arab revolutions, and feeds on the panicked rhetoric of Arab Gulf states blaming Tehran for their problems. The United States should instead highlight, as it has already, that an Iran that represses its own opposition cannot credibly appeal to Arab publics focused on democratic change. As Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs William Burns put it, "Beneath Tehran's bluster, the truth is that nowhere in the region is the disconnect between rulers and ruled any greater than it is in Iran. It is the height of hypocrisy for Iran's leaders to profess their enthusiasm for democratic changes in the Arab world while systematically denying them to their own people."<sup>76</sup> Similarly, National Security Advisor Tom Donilon argued that the peaceful, indigenous change of authoritarian governments offered "a strong counter-narrative to ... al-Qaida and the Iranian narrative."<sup>77</sup> Such statements should be the foundation for a serious, cross-platform strategic communications campaign designed to spread this message widely and effectively.

It is also essential to disaggregate the challenge posed by Iran rather than feed Iranian propaganda by conflating very different movements. Hamas and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood should be

treated as distinct local challenges, not as proxies for Iranian expansion. Saudi, Bahraini and other GCC intimations of an Iranian hand behind every political problem should be treated with considerable skepticism.

A strategic communications campaign to highlight Iran's failures would have the virtue of being true, while also depriving Iran of ammunition for its own propaganda. It might also force Iran to directly confront this evidence of its weakening position, which could open the door for a greater readiness to negotiate in the shadow of a worse future position. Promoting broader recognition of the challenges facing Iran in its new environment is not only politically advantageous, but also could help to prevent unwanted spirals to war.

### Use Diplomacy to Shape the Future

The time does not look ripe to move directly toward a grand bargain encompassing all the major outstanding regional and political issues dividing Iran from the United States and its allies. Indeed, the prospects for a deal look dimmer than ever. U.S. officials have largely concluded that the current Iranian government will not negotiate on the key issues, while Iran has shown virtually no interest in talks about the nuclear issue. Both sides seem comfortable allowing the current pressure track to play out – the United States because it perceives no movement on the Iranian side and feels that continued pressure will allow it to bargain from a position of strength, Iran because it feels that it can absorb and adapt to whatever sanctions might be imposed. The Western military intervention in Libya may also undermine prospects for negotiations, since Tehran will likely conclude that NATO military intervention, with the support of the U.N., exposes the hollowness of security and political guarantees.<sup>78</sup>

This does not mean that diplomacy should be abandoned, however. Talks are, at a minimum, needed to maintain international consensus

regarding the existing sanctions regime. More productively, they are needed to open lines of communication and to shape the bargaining space for larger-scale diplomacy when the time is right. Talks that take place in the near term should focus on small steps that build confidence, not on make-or-break gambits that are likely to fail. A new fuel-swap deal is one possibility, but is not an end unto itself.<sup>79</sup> Such small steps can create the time and space to exchange ideas, build relationships with interlocutors who may be influential in future Iranian governments, and give the opportunity to test new ideas or incentives. Technical working groups should be established for private discussions to begin making progress on achievable goals, such as countering drug trafficking.

Talks could also provide a way to supplement the pressure track by offering, conditionally, positive incentives to Iran to change its behavior. This would be a way to change the dynamic by offering an end-state that serves the interests of both sides, beyond the immediate nuclear issues at stake, while also reassuring regional partners.

Although the administration should emphasize its support for human rights in Iran at every juncture, Congressional sanctions resolutions that stipulate conditions beyond abandoning the nuclear program before sanctions can be lifted deeply complicate any serious bargaining strategy and reduce the prospects of success.<sup>80</sup> As Congress considers new legislation on sanctions, it should carefully consider how its requirements fit within this overall negotiating strategy – particularly regarding the punishment of Chinese or other third party companies, which could upset delicately negotiated international cooperation. The administration should work closely with Congress to build consensus for the strategy.

If an opportunity presents itself, the administration should be prepared to offer a game-changing

proposition. Only a comprehensive deal that addresses the vital interests of both sides has the chance of breaking through decades of hostility and mistrust.<sup>81</sup> As part of a broader reorientation of American policy in the region, President Obama should be prepared to personally and publicly issue a direct challenge and invitation to Iran. He should deliver a speech that clearly lays out a diplomatic offer that will be difficult for the Iranian regime to reject, includes significant positive incentives and credibly commits to reducing sanctions should Iran accept. The proposal should come directly from the president to make clear that this is not just another gambit to be easily dismissed. And it should be public to make it impossible for the Iranian regime to simply ignore it as it did earlier private communications. The public initiative would almost certainly entail accepting Iran's right to limited enrichment under the IAEA additional protocol – a position that is widely assumed to be an internationally acceptable end-state but that the administration has thus far refused to endorse.<sup>82</sup> But this offer should *not* be made until the time is right – which may not be for years.

### **Watch Out For War**

As it struggles to recalibrate its Iran policy, the administration should pay attention to the risk of an unexpected escalation toward war, which would badly harm U.S. efforts to consolidate a new regional order. In tinderbox conditions, local incidents, such as the killing of an Iranian in Bahrain or a rocket hitting Israel from Lebanon, could lead to sudden and rapid conflagration that could draw in multiple parties. Iran might seek to capitalize on a perceived window of opportunity through aggressive action, or simply push too far. Particular attention should be given to Israel's northern border with Hezbollah, the divided island nation of Bahrain and a collapsing Yemen as three flashpoints where simmering tensions could explode into broader regional war. The

regional upheavals have clearly increased Israeli security concerns, which could lead to its lashing out – whether at Gaza, Hezbollah or Iran itself – to address these perceived threats. Saudi concerns about Iran are also more intense than usual, and developments on the ground in Bahrain could trigger direct Iranian-Saudi conflict. Iran may test the extent to which these developments have constrained its rivals, and take provocative steps that trigger unexpected responses. Hezbollah’s confidence and growing military arsenal combined with Israel’s concerns about the shifting balance of power could combine to produce sudden and game-changing war.

The Libya intervention also introduces new risks, as well as opportunities. Netanyahu has called on the international community to deal with Iran as it did Libya. But the analogy is fatally flawed. There is little real comparison between the urgent humanitarian imperative to prevent an impending massacre in Libya and the longer-term human rights violations in Iran. Where the Libyan opposition and Arab public opinion demanded Western intervention against Gadhafi’s forces, the Iranian opposition rejects any military intervention. There would be no support in the Security Council for military action against Iran comparable to that seen in Resolution 1973 authorizing military action in Libya. In short, there are few grounds for extending the Libyan military precedent to Iran. Beyond that direct analogy, however, a successful intervention could become a model of Arab-Western military cooperation that might extend toward Iran. But if the West becomes bogged down in another long-term, inconclusive quagmire, it will become far more difficult to even threaten military force against yet another Middle Eastern nation.

The Obama administration should work actively to minimize the risks of war. It should maintain a steady and comprehensive security dialogue with Israel to guard against surprises and to reassure its

nervous ally. It should do the same in the Gulf, while also pushing its allies to both initiate real reforms and to avoid provocative and ultimately self-defeating actions. And it should make clear to Iran through all possible public and private messages that there is nothing to be gained by testing the resolve or capability of the United States or its allies.

## VI. CONCLUSION

It is too soon to know what will emerge from the upheavals sweeping the Arab world. No one can be certain whether stable democracies will emerge in countries that have experienced regime change, whether currently embattled regimes will survive or whether the upheavals will spread. It is clear that America will continue to have vital interests in the region, including the flow of oil, the prevention of the spread of WMDs and the security of Israel. Protecting those interests will require the United States to do far more than it did in the past to engage with empowered publics and to address their ideas and interests.

America's ability to check Iran's influence will depend on how it deals with a rapidly changing Middle East. To do this successfully, the United States needs to articulate a message supporting human rights and democracy, and back its commitments up with concrete actions. Attempting to contain Iran through renewed partnerships with authoritarian regimes will, in all likelihood, fail. Supporting the region's authoritarian regimes in this way would antagonize the newly empowered publics that will play a major role in shaping the region's future, and would implicate the United States in blocking their democratic aspirations. Instead, the Obama administration needs to formulate a new Iran policy for a new region.

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