Singh, Robert. "Iran." *Barack Obama's Post-American Foreign Policy: The Limits of Engagement*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012. 89–110. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781780931111.ch-005>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 10:29 UTC.

Copyright © Robert Singh 2012. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

5

Iran

To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.

—President Barack Obama, Inaugural Address,
January 20, 2009¹

When the Israelis begin to bomb the uranium-enrichment facility at Natanz, the formerly secret enrichment site at Qom, the nuclear-research centre at Esfahan, and possibly even the Bushehr reactor, along with the other main sites of the Iranian nuclear program, a short while after they depart en masse from their bases across Israel – regardless of whether they succeed in destroying Iran’s centrifuges and warhead and missile plants, or whether they fail miserably even to make a dent in Iran’s nuclear program – they stand a good chance of changing the Middle East forever; of sparking lethal reprisals, and even full-blown regional war that could lead to the deaths of thousands of Israelis and Iranians, and possibly Arabs and Americans as well; of creating a crisis for Barack Obama that will dwarf Afghanistan in significance and complexity; of rupturing relations between Jerusalem and Washington, which is Israel’s only meaningful ally; of inadvertently solidifying the somewhat tenuous rule of the mullahs on Tehran; of causing the price of oil to spike to cataclysmic highs, launching the world economy into a period of turbulence not experienced since the autumn of 2008, or possibly since the oil shock of 1973; of placing communities across the Jewish diaspora in mortal danger, by making them the targets of Iranian-sponsored terror attacks, as they have been in the past, in a limited though already lethal way; and of accelerating Israel’s conversion from a once-admired refuge for a persecuted people into a leper among nations.

—Jeffrey Goldberg, September 2010²

Introduction

If the notion of a post-American world held forth the promise of transformative change, one important feature of the international landscape appeared mired in geo-political inertia. Barack Obama became the sixth US president since 1979 to be confronted by the vexing dilemma of how to productively shape American relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran represented “Exhibit A” in the readjustment of US foreign policy from the Bush era, and the marquee test case for the administration’s strategic engagement approach, which saw several public and private overtures – some unprecedented – to the Iranian leadership and people during 2009–10. The Obama administration’s overt emphasis on multilateralism, diplomacy and engagement received crucial tests in several bilateral relationships, but none so explicitly as Iran.

Iran also posed a fundamental test to the logic underlying the Bush Doctrine and, hence, the extent to which Obama could successfully depart from that logic: no rogue state can be permitted to develop a militarized nuclear weapons capacity that can be made available to anti-American terrorists, not least those for whom martyrdom counted as a divine blessing. While engaging with Iran to find a diplomatic solution to the nuclear impasse, the Obama administration also sought to revive the stalled international momentum against nuclear proliferation in general and to build strong multilateral support against Iran’s nuclear ambitions in forums such as the UN and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

The notoriously opaque features of Tehran’s governing regime make it very difficult to assess how far internal Iranian deliberations seriously entertained any concessions on its nuclear program, still less a broader “grand bargain” with Obama’s Washington that might normalize bilateral relations. As Karim Sadjadpour rightly observes, “If 20th-century Russia was to Winston Churchill a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma, for observers of contemporary Iran, the Islamic Republic often resembles a villain inside a victim behind a veil.”³

What is reasonably clear is that the ultimate outcome of such discussions in Tehran was a decisive rejection of Obama’s outstretched hand. US policy options therefore became focused on four possible approaches (engagement, sanctions, military strikes, and containment/deterrence) and bounded by five possible outcomes on Iran policy: an Iranian retreat; an effective set of unilateral and international diplomatic and economic sanctions; regime change in Iran; containment and deterrence; and military action, on a continuum from covert attacks to a full-scale air assault. With the costs of strong military action widely seen as prohibitively high, and the open endorsement of containment and deterrence a concession of effective defeat, administration policy shifted from an initial emphasis on engagement to one that oscillated between a sanctions approach that sought to alter regime behavior and a more open effort – abetted

by covert action – to encourage regime change, albeit from within rather than through direct US intervention.

Ultimately Obama's administration appeared to settle on a policy of extended "wait and see and delay," seemingly more in hope than expectation that either an Iranian back-down, the success of sanctions or domestic regime change might materialize. The administration appeared to reach a consensus of sorts to put off the crisis point of decision – the supremely difficult moment when Washington has to choose between taking military action against another Muslim nation, sanctioning a surrogate Israeli attack, or accepting a nuclear-capable Iran as a *fait accompli* – until a later date, either for a second term or a new administration after 2013. But in some key respects this ultimate outcome appeared to resemble less a coherent policy – never mind a deliberately calibrated strategy – than an aspiration. In this instance, Obama's appeals to "hope" seemed to rely on the notion that a combination of the Green Movement, acute internal divisions within the Tehran governing authorities, the contagion of the Arab uprisings and covert action against the program would together propel the regime uneasily into "the dustbin of history."⁴

But, although the eruption of the Arab Spring threatened a region-wide democratic contagion that could potentially encompass Iran as well, nervous Iranian authorities nonetheless relished its adverse consequences for the "Great Satan." As Robert Satloff of the Washington Institute for Near East policy testified to the House Foreign Relations Committee in June 2011:

Over just the past six months, Iranian leaders revelled in the demise of US allies in Egypt and Tunisia, the departure of the pro-American ruler of Yemen, violent clashes in Bahrain, and the deep tensions that have emerged between Washington and its two most significant strategic pillars in the region – Saudi Arabia and Israel.⁵

As both domestic divisions and international concerns on Iran mounted during his presidency, Obama's outstretched hand itself appeared to be steadily but inexorably closing in the face of implacable Iranian intransigence on its nuclear program and a carefully calculated pragmatic fanaticism by Ayatollah Khamenei – waging an intense internal battle against the more accommodationist President Ahmedinajad – on increasing its malign regional influence.

Extending a hand, unclenching a fist: towards a "grand bargain"

During his campaign for the Democratic Party nomination and subsequently the presidency, Obama's stated position towards Iran encompassed two key elements. First, he made it clear that he was willing to reach out to US adversaries and seek a dialogue to end long-held enmities and make progress towards new relationships based on mutual interests and mutual respect.

On several occasions, Obama cited the example of Ronald Reagan negotiating with the Soviets as proof that, no matter how difficult and ideologically distant the parties, dialogue was invariably preferable to isolation. In one Democratic Party debate, his willingness to do so “without preconditions” was even pounced-on by his primary opponents – not least Hillary Clinton – as a sign of his alleged lack of international experience and policy expertise, and his more general political naivety.

At the same, time, however, Obama made it clear that the US would defend Israel’s security and that, like his predecessor in the White House, no option – including military action – would be prematurely ruled off-the-table regarding Iran’s nuclear ambitions. As early as 2007, Obama had asserted that “Iran and North Korea could trigger regional arms races, creating dangerous nuclear flashpoints in the Middle East and East Asia. In confronting these threats, I will not take the military option off the table.”⁶ Obama also reassured an influential domestic lobby, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), that he would “do everything in my power to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.”⁷ A nuclear Iran was “unacceptable.”

In terms of his strategic engagement approach, an obvious logic informed a change in how the US dealt with Iran. Bush’s “Global War on Terror,” Obama reasoned, was a classic example of overreach. Bush had defined the strategic threat as the convergence of state sponsors of terrorism, terrorist groups, and weapons of mass destruction. That definition placed the United States in conflict with al Qaeda, obviously, but also with Iran, among other states. From Obama’s perspective, lumping all terror sponsors together was an excessively crude, un-nuanced and expensive strategy: it forced a number of potentially helpful states, including Iran, solidly into the enemy camp. The Iranian regime might be deeply unsavory, Obama reasoned, but it shares with the United States a strong hostility to the Sunni al Qaeda – albeit that it approached the group pragmatically – and a desire for stability in Iraq. While Obama did not appear to share the provocative analysis of former CIA operative Robert Baer⁸ – that Iran could potentially prove a far more reliable and effective ally for the US than Sunni Saudi Arabia – a less Manichean approach could nonetheless allow Washington to exploit the overlap in national interests and, perhaps, move towards some kind of more ambitious “grand bargain.”

Consequently, Obama defined the strategic threat facing America much more narrowly: as the previous chapter detailed, he declared war to be waged narrowly rather than expansively, with a specific focus on al Qaeda and its affiliates. Iran, though certainly not a friend of the US, was no longer clearly defined as an implacable adversary. On balance, Obama’s initial approach leant heavily towards reconciliation, renewal and accommodation, more so – in both public and private – than any American president since Jimmy Carter. In March 2009 Obama recorded a *YouTube* address targeted directly

at the Iranian people. The president also sent private letters to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic.

The calculus informing the outreach effort was readily understandable. But the difficulties of engaging the Iranians were threefold. First, the approach relied on minimizing the salience of the form of regime that Washington was dealing with, along classical realist prescriptions. While historic examples here pointed in different directions, the evidence overall seemed to weigh more heavily in the direction of “ideology” broadly conceived as a factor, even if not the dominant one. As with the Soviet Union in the 1970s, ideology did play a role in Iran’s strategic calculations, alongside geo-politics. Second, as Colin Dueck notes, diplomacy may be desirable or undesirable, but rather than being an end in itself it constitutes but one important tool among several in a nation’s foreign policy toolkit:

The notion that diplomatic contact or unilateral concessions on their own can transform hostile regimes is not well supported by historical experience, to say the least. Diplomatic promises and warnings must be supported by other forms of power, including military power, or else they are meaningless in practical terms.⁹

Third, for those other forms of power to be meaningful – whether sanctions, blockades, or the threat or use of military force – the administration (and, ideally, its allies and “partners”) needed to be unified in its public face. One of the problems of the Obama administration was that, like its immediate predecessors, the internal stresses and differences among its members occasionally found public expression. In particular, the obvious doubts expressed by figures such as Clinton, Gates and Mullen about the use of military force against Iran substantially undercut the credibility of invocations by others of that particular dimension of US power. Moreover, the Obama administration proved only marginally more successful than its predecessor in assembling a united international front against the Tehran regime.

The Iranian presidential election crisis of 2009

Iran’s domestic political crisis profoundly complicated the Obama outreach effort, notably with the popular demonstrations that erupted after the June 12, 2009 presidential election was widely seen as having been stolen by incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. While most outside observers conceded the possibility that the president might indeed have won re-election legitimately, the claimed landslide of almost twice as many votes as his nearest competitor was simply not credible. Some three million Iranians took to the streets, claiming the vote had been rigged. Ayatollah Khamenei’s intervention, describing the result as a “divine assessment,” increased the sense of injustice while undermining his own legitimacy as Supreme Leader. Determined to

prevent an Iranian “velvet revolution,” the violently repressive reaction to the protests reflected longer-term trends in which the theocratic regime was increasingly morphing into a security state or quasi-military dictatorship, with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) assuming ever greater influence in economic policy, politics and foreign policy-making.¹⁰ The government arrested hundreds of protestors, employed the plainclothes *Basij* paramilitary militia to use brutal deadly force, and detained many young men and women in prison, among reports of widespread torture and rape.

Obama’s policy towards Tehran had been one of strategic patience from the outset, in part to afford the Iranian regime time to reach a unified reaction to his overtures, but also because with the June 12 elections no rapid response was likely to be forthcoming. When Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu urged Obama to speed up the outreach efforts with a clear three-month deadline, Obama replied that he expected to know by the end of the year whether Iran was making “a good faith effort to resolve differences.” The post-election turmoil both implicitly endorsed but also complicated Washington’s new efforts at engagement. In one respect, Obama’s open-hand policy in some ways assisted the protests, since the Iranian regime could not credibly accuse a US transparently seeking *rapprochement* with Tehran either of malign intent or pursuing regime change. Indeed, many Iranian protestors were deeply disappointed with Obama’s initially muted response, with “Obama, Obama, either you are with them or us” a popular chant. But the popular protests also ensured that Obama faced a difficult tactical decision. Overt public support from Washington could taint the opposition cause, leading to charges of the protestors as foreign puppets and facilitating even greater repression. Yet the size and vehemence of the crowds, and the existing fissures within the Tehran regime, together held out the enticing potential for an internal struggle that could result in an opposition victory. While not a panacea for the US, a less hard-line government might at minimum prove a more willing negotiating partner for Washington; conversely, the popular opposition made the existing hard-line government even less likely to abandon its nuclear aspirations, one of the few remaining sources of its dwindling popular legitimacy.

Many reform-minded Iranians and American proponents of regime change therefore supported a greater emphasis on enriching human rights than opposing uranium enrichment, arguing for ceasing US engagement in order to deepen the legitimacy crisis and hoping that a successful Green Movement would at least prove more willing to negotiate on the nuclear issue. Even prior to Obama’s election, even erstwhile “hard-line” neo-conservatives such as Robert Kagan had urged an opening to Iran.¹¹ With the turmoil in the nation of the summer, though, influential commentators such as Kagan and Richard Haass concurred that the moment had passed and that embracing regime change now made optimal sense for Washington.

Obama's evolving response anticipated that of the Arab Spring in 2011. His relative silence after the elections suggested that his realist inclinations were triumphing over his Wilsonian idealism, preferring a quiet subsidence in the protests so that diplomatic engagement with Tehran could continue apace. But the increasingly repressive regime response caused a steady shift in the Obama administration's approach. In his December 10, 2009 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, the president called forcefully for the respect of human rights and liberties, condemning the "violent and unjust suppression of innocent Iranian citizens," and the White House also that month accorded moral support to the popular opposition by joining the public mourning of the funeral of Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, an outspoken opposition cleric. But the waning, after several months, of opposition protests encouraged the administration to quietly abandon a human rights focus and instead concentrate increasingly on how best to employ targeted sanctions against Iran.

From engagement to sanctions to regime change

Obama's outstretched hand had yielded some modest movement in Tehran. In June 2009, Iran had requested help from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in obtaining replacement fuel for its Tehran Research Reactor (TRR). By October 2009, an offer was placed on the table: if Iran would export the bulk of its low-enriched uranium (LEU) to Russia, Russia would enrich it to 19.75 percent and ship it to France for processing into fuel assemblies for the TRR – sufficient to produce fuel for the reactor. But because the French would take a year to reprocess, Iran would have to part with its LEU before receiving the TRR fuel. Surprisingly, President Ahmadinejad's representatives accepted the principles of an exchange in an October 1 meeting in Geneva (one that featured a rare bilateral meeting with US officials), only for domestic opposition to cause him to reverse course.¹² No further discussions with the P5+1 (the permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany) were to occur, due to Iranian refusals.

By early 2010, US policy shifted further with a renewed emphasis on economic sanctions and diplomatic attempts to increase Iran's international isolation. In May, Iran suddenly agreed to a deal brokered by Turkey and Brazil, incorporating elements of the October 2009 fuel swap. But due to its more lax provisions, the major powers declared it too little, too late. UN Security Council Resolution 1929 was adopted on June 9, 2010 by a 12-2-1 vote, over the objections of erstwhile US allies Turkey (a NATO member) and Brazil, who both voted "no," and Lebanon, which abstained. While far less than the crippling sanctions sought by the US, UK and France, 1929 imposed

new targeted sanctions on Iran. China and Russia ensured that there were no measures targeting Iran's oil and natural gas sectors and few mandatory restrictions of any type. The US went along with that on the basis that Security Council unity was more valuable than tough content, of which there nonetheless were some examples: specified categories of arms sales to Iran were banned; Moscow agreed to interpret the ban as including S-300 ground-to-air missile systems Iran had been keen to import; and ballistic missile development activity by Iran was prohibited.

Most significant, 1929 called on countries to restrict a number of financial activities, including transactions involving the IRGC that could contribute to sensitive nuclear and missile programs. EU heads of government agreed on June 17, 2010 to go beyond the UN measures by prohibiting new investment and technology transfers in key parts of the gas and oil industries, and to focus additional sanctions on trade, insurance, banking and transport sectors. On July 1, 2010, Obama also signed legislation – the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act of 2010 – imposing new extraterritorial sanctions on foreign entities doing business with key Iranian banks or the IRGC and involved in refined petroleum sales. (Most congressionally imposed sanctions on Iran would be terminated if the president certified that Iran has “ceased the pursuit, acquisition, and development of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons and ballistic missiles and ballistic missile launch technology” and is no longer a state sponsor of terrorism.¹³)

In essence, UNSC 1929 reiterated demands made in resolutions 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), and 1803 (2008) and required Iran to “cooperate fully with the IAEA on all outstanding issues ... without delay comply fully and without qualification with its IAEA Safeguard Agreement ... ratify promptly the Additional Protocol, and ... suspend all reprocessing, heavy water-related and enrichment-related activities.” Beyond this, 1929 also: embargoed eight categories of heavy military equipment; expanded penalties against Iranian companies, including those associated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps; restricted the sale and transfer of missile technologies; prohibited Iranian investment in nuclear industries, including uranium mining; and called for more stringent measures on Iranian shipping, financial, commercial and banking activities.

UN sanctions and penalties against Iran would be lifted if the IAEA Board of Governors confirmed that “Iran has fully complied with its obligations under the relevant resolutions of the Security Council and met the requirements” of the Board.¹⁴

By tightening the economic pressure on Tehran, and especially through exerting pressure on foreign firms to limit or abandon economic activities with Iranian entities directly or indirectly supporting the nuclear program, the administration sought both to bring Tehran back to the negotiating table and to further hamper the program's advance. But implementing sanctions is typically

an imprecise and unreliable science. Even if effectively adhered to, monitored and enforced, the impact of tightening a sanctions regime is normally unclear. One possibility is that, much like Saddam Hussein's tyranny through the 1990s, sanctions simply serve to entrench the Tehran regime in power. Alternatively, sanctions could – as in South Africa in the 1980s – embolden the opposition forces amid an economy in turmoil or, equally, encourage the regime to enact even more repressive measures to crush dissent. Or, possibly, the economic, political and social impact could be such that they alter the calculus of key elements within the regime to either halt or delay the nuclear program's progress.

The evidence of Obama's efforts here was inconclusive. On the one hand, the various new sanctions agreed to in 2010–11 did appear to be having a serious effect on aspects of the Iranian political economy. The factional conflict and rifts within the regime that had been growing for decades also seemed to be exacerbated by the new sanctions and the willingness of key non-US players, such as all twenty-seven EU member states, to go along with them. After mobs stormed the British Embassy in Tehran in November 2011, the EU also moved to impose an embargo on oil imports from Iran to cripple its economy. As the former parliamentary speaker of the Majlis and a leading opposition figure, Mehdi Karoubi, wrote in an open letter to Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the former president, the consolidation of power by the IRGC that had previously been prevented by the leader of the Iranian revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, now "threatens the nation": "Chaos is evident in all of the Government's decisions ... The sanctions against us ... are due to the lack of wisdom, lack of expertise and continuous bragging by the Government, especially by the President."¹⁵

Tighter international sanctions appeared to be biting deep into the national economy, reinforcing Iran's domestic economic problems and fuelling political unrest and dissent. In a nation possessing the third-largest oil reserves in the world, and the second-largest natural gas reserves, the population had long been shielded from the full costs of consumer goods by government subsidies on basic foodstuffs and other essentials such as petrol, gas and electricity. The unsustainability of these subsidies was expected to see their controversial termination in 2011 or 2012.¹⁶

On the other hand, three weaknesses hampered the extent to which the sanctions could bite sufficiently to induce a genuine shift in the decision calculus in Tehran.

First, the evidence that key states were complying with sanctions packages was not fully compelling. States as varied as China (the only major foreign nation still active in Iran's oil exploration, and for whom Iran represents the third-largest supplier of crude oil and a key guarantor of price stability), Austria and Switzerland have either refused to authorize sanctions or tried to undermine and circumvent those that were agreed. Moreover, Iran was actively responding to the tightening knot by seeking either to subvert or circumvent the sanctions. For example, after the US Treasury Department blacklisted

sixteen Iranian banks for allegedly supporting Iran's nuclear program and terrorist activities, other countries responded with their own measures against Iran's banking sector. Iran in turn attempted to secretly establish banks in Muslim countries around the world – including Iraq and Malaysia – using dummy names and opaque ownership structures in order to skirt sanctions that have increasingly curtailed the Islamic republic's global banking activities. Although US officials suggested that Tehran's search for new banking avenues was a clear sign of the growing effectiveness of the sanctions, others interpreted Iran's response as an indication of their limited impact.¹⁷

Second, while the Iranian economy was adversely affected, this has rarely been a dominant factor in the regime's assessments on the nuclear program's relative costs and benefits. As in the Arab states across the region, the welfare of the people has rarely been a motivating factor in authoritarian regimes' strategic calculations. Moreover, while US, EU and UN sanctions appear to be having an effect to some degree, sanctions have often not generated the sought-after results, even when imposed on nations that are more vulnerable than Iran, such as Syria and Cuba. Strategic patience is also an important issue, since tough sanctions entail political costs and can also erode over time, as was memorably the case with Iraq under Saddam Hussein.

Third, in geo-political terms, the Iranians believed themselves to be in a strong regional position. While, in virtue of this, some analysts recommended either a conventional Cold War-style containment and deterrence posture, others still favored a new detente in which the US would "publicly recognise Iran's legitimate security requirements and offer credible security guarantees to Iran, in terms that relate to objective but not fanciful Iranian requirements, provided, of course, that Iran meets key US requirements, as well as those of regional countries."¹⁸ But as the twin sets of "requirements" in Table 5.1 suggest, the prospects of reconciling such stark differences and basic conflicts of interest remain slight. Iran's shadow wars with the US in Iraq and Afghanistan reflected the core conviction of its leaders that while it cannot properly compete with the US, "it does believe it can exhaust it,"¹⁹ a strategy reliant on the inherent anarchy of the ever-volatile Middle East. By the end of Obama's term, visible symptoms of that growing US exhaustion were increasingly clear as the Arab Spring convulsed the region.

Evaluating Obama's Iran strategy

Like the Bill Clinton administration (1993–2001) previously, which had pursued a policy of "dual containment" of Iran and Iraq that then latterly sought tentative outreach to Tehran under the reformist Khatami presidency, the well-intentioned efforts by Obama to engage Iran were ultimately unproductive, a case less of "hope" than of "giving futility its chance."

Table 5.1 US-Iran security requirements and guarantees

Key US requirements	
i.	An adequate resolution of issues regarding Iran's nuclear-development program, in particular relating to concrete steps for determining (absolutely verifying) that Iran is not seeking to develop nuclear weapons or even, for purposes of confidence, nearing a break-out capacity.
ii.	Iranian abstention from efforts to make more difficult resolution of key issues, both security and political, in Iraq's immediate future.
iii.	Iranian willingness to support efforts to stabilize Afghanistan or at least not to make matters worse for the US and NATO.
iv.	Iranian willingness to seek positive, constructive relations with its Persian Gulf neighbors, assuming that they would be willing to reciprocate on the basis of common-sense standards.
v.	Iranian willingness to abandon support for any organization or persons (including Hezbollah and Hamas) who could be considered to be terrorists or either to practice or support terrorism.
vi.	A halt to commentary by Iranian leaders regarding the Holocaust and Israel's right to exist.
vii.	Iranian willingness, if not to support the Arab-Israeli peace process, at least not to interfere actively to oppose diplomatic efforts to resolve it in any of its key particulars, including Israeli-Palestinian relations.
Likely Iranian requirements	
i.	Security guarantees to Iran, underwritten by the United States and others and with a high degree of credibility, provided that Iran met security and other reasonable requirements propounded by the United States and others (especially regarding the Iranian nuclear program but also regarding terrorism, Israel, and subversion of regional states or governments).
ii.	An end to economic sanctions, both unilateral and multilateral, and a full reintegration in the global economy and commerce.
iii.	An end to efforts to destabilize the Iranian regime/government that can reasonably be seen as illegitimate, especially those that entail violence, subversion or active support for dissident elements.
iv.	An end to efforts to split up Iran, including promoting subversion among Iranian minority populations.
v.	Recognition of Iran's right to a peaceful nuclear-energy program (this has already happened).
vi.	Recognition of Iran's major-country status in the Persian Gulf, within the limits of others' own legitimate interests (Iran would like to be the dominant country in the Gulf).
vii.	A role in the future of Iraq sufficient to reduce to an adequate degree risks of spill-over of any continuing conflict to Iran (Iran would like to dominate Iraq if it could).
viii.	A role in the future of Afghanistan to reduce the risks of insecurity stemming from the Taliban, al Qaeda or the trade in drugs (Iran would want to have major, continuing influence in Afghanistan).
ix.	Respect as a country, society and people, with both equal rights and obligations within the region and in the international community.

Source: Adapted from Robert E. Hunter, "Rethinking Iran," *Survival* 52 (5) 2010, 148–149.

But the Obama administration's approach nonetheless entertained from the outset the prospect of Tehran refusing to unclench its fist and soften its hard-line approach. As Colin Dueck observed:

The irony of Obama's diplomatic overtures toward Iran is that they may well reveal, more fully than Bush's approach ever could, the underlying intransigence of Iranian policy. Whether or not this result is intentional, it will have the effect of hardening opinion against Tehran inside the United States and perhaps even among America's leading allies.²⁰

That was precisely the intention underlying the engagement strategy. The fourth round of UN sanctions, the very pointed Iranian exception to the new Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) of 2010 that made it US policy not to employ nuclear weapons against states that were not nuclear-armed,²¹ and the subsequent revival of speculation about possible military action – whether genuine or merely a tactical bluff – occurred after a number of transparent American tests of Iranian intent had conspicuously failed. By September 2010, the effective abandonment of strategic engagement in favor of a type of hybrid policy of tightening sanctions while promoting regime change from within was complete, with Hillary Clinton publicly calling for “some effort inside Iran, by responsible civil and religious leaders, to take hold of the apparatus of the state.”²² 2011 also saw an increase in malware computer attacks on the nuclear program, targeted assassinations of nuclear scientists, and covert attacks on missile and uranium processing plants in Iran – widely attributed to Israel but with the possible assistance of the US and others.

The downside of the Obama administration's much vaunted patience, however, was four-fold.

First, Arab alarm at Iran's growing power grew substantially over 2009–12.²³ Arab concern about Iran has a very long pedigree. In recent years, for example, after the revolution of 1979, Arab states assisted in arming Saddam Hussein's Iraq for its invasion and war with Iran during 1980–88. While unsuccessful in toppling Khomeini's regime, the effort nonetheless halted the spread of Khomeinist revolutionary fervor to Iraq and the Gulf. But the prospect of Iran marrying its arsenal of long-range ballistic missiles with unconventional warheads – including, over time, nuclear warheads – represents the greatest threat facing Gulf Arab states. In the case of Saudi Arabia, in particular, the traditional rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran has been exacerbated in recent years by perceptions of a steadily shifting balance of power towards Iran: the unchecked nuclear program; greater influence in the region's conflict zones, from Iraq and Lebanon to the Palestinian territories, and the construction of a Shia crescent menacing Sunni Muslims across the region; the removal of the *Baathist* check in Iraq and the imminent US withdrawal of all its military forces; and the possibility of Iranian retaliation against Saudi territory in the event of an Israeli, or American, strike against its nuclear and military facilities.

In the fall of 2010, the Saudis requested eighty-five new F-15 fighter jets and the upgrading of seventy existing F-15s from Washington; the UAE submitted requests for Patriot and THAAD missile defense systems along with assorted helicopters, transport aircraft and UAVs; Oman requested eighteen new F-16 jets and upgrades to twelve existing ones; while Kuwait asked for thirty-nine F-18 jets to be replaced, to upgrade Patriot missile defenses and command-and-control computer systems. The Saudi deal alone, at \$67 billion, represented the largest order in US arms history.²⁴

Beyond the conventional weapons and defense deals, though, the Iranian program also encouraged other states in the region to pursue their own nuclear programs – assisted by the renewed political and economic viability of nuclear power in the face of rising oil prices and concerns about the environmental impact of fossil fuels. Some estimates suggested that by 2025 at least fifteen new nuclear reactors would be built in the Middle East, including sites in Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, Kuwait, Saud Arabia and the UAE. While some states, such as the UAE, had ruled out the uranium enrichment or reprocessing required to make weapons-grade material, the danger remained that other states would be less scrupulous if their security or regional status became under threat.

Notwithstanding such commitments to the IAEA, the dangers of a volatile region in which several aspirant nuclear states exhibited high corruption levels, low political stability and limited regulatory capacity are strikingly acute. The resumption of the Iranian uranium enrichment program after 2005 was married to a fast-track plan to construct a nuclear power plant on the Gulf, just over sixty miles from several major Arab cities, including the Kuwaiti capital. Not only is the plant located in an earthquake zone, but its waste will likely be washed into the shallow Gulf waters, threatening an ecological disaster.²⁵ It was hardly surprising, in this context, when the Wikileaks disclosure in late 2010 of thousands of US State Department cables featured as a lead item several pleas from Arab leaders to the US to take decisive military action against Iran – most notably, Saudi King Abdullah's request to the Bush administration in 2008 to "cut off the head of the snake."²⁶

The second problem with Obama's patient engagement approach was that, while intelligence assessments admittedly varied, further advancement in the Iranian nuclear program had clearly occurred since 2009, as even the ever-cautious IAEA confirmed in November 2011. The revelation by President Obama and the leaders of the UK and France at the UN in September 2009 that intelligence had uncovered a secret nuclear facility at the Iranian holy city of Qom had added to international concern about Iran's intentions and Iranian duplicity. Iran's consistent games of cat-and-mouse and bait-and-switch echoed those of Saddam during the 1990s and early 2000s – a disquieting example, especially in the context of intelligence services' historic failures to estimate accurately the extent of the adversarial regime's WMD stocks. While the Stuxnet computer virus attack in the fall of 2010 and a "decapitation" strategy involving

assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists in 2010–11 – widely attributed, without clear or conclusive evidence, to Israeli saboteurs – undoubtedly created serious problems in the uranium enrichment program, this appeared at best a temporary, albeit important, palliative by Iran's international enemies.

Third, even greater repressive control exerted by the regime on the most pro-American population in the region (outside Israel) occurred throughout 2009–12. Obama's studied silence in the immediate aftermath of the popular protests in the summer of 2009 reflected the delicate balancing act between offering steadfast support to a people whose grief after 9/11 for America's pain was spontaneous and heartfelt – unlike the gleeful street demonstrations of some Palestinians and the obvious relish of Saddam Hussein – and worsening their plight still further by inadvertently discrediting their independence. As a succession of horrific instances of regime brutality revealed, however, such reticence in support of human rights and democratic values did nothing to alter the thuggish mindset of an embattled and divided regime increasingly fighting for sovereign control between the military and the mosque, with elements of the Revolutionary Guard alleged to be complicit in exporting drugs to the West and the mullahs increasingly resistant to the attempts of Ahmedinajad to end Iran's international isolation.

Finally, a reassertion of Iranian influence across the Gulf, the Levant and Gaza was apparent as Tehran sought determinedly to bog the US down in the region and advance an ignominious American retreat. As Frederick Kagan observed, "Iran sees both a threat and an opportunity in the Arab Spring, and it's trying to take advantage and extend its reach by engaging in proxy conflicts all around its periphery, to include in Afghanistan, Yemen, Bahrain, and especially Iraq ..." ²⁷ Despite the inherent contradictions in its approach – hailing the Arab Spring as a popular "Islamic Awakening" inspired by its own revolution in 1979, yet at the same time backing Damascus in its repression of a supposedly foreign-inspired revolt akin to its own in 2009 – Iran's proclivity for pragmatism over doctrinaire religious or ethnic positioning once more prevailed. Even if this appeared to be taking international *chutzpah* to a breathtaking new level, such a choice was especially important in the context of Iran's popularity declining among the Arab masses while that of a growing regional rival, Turkey, soared over 2009–12.

In the Syrian case, for instance, Tehran felt it necessary to balance its interest in preserving a friendly regime in Damascus with its unwillingness to stand squarely against popular Arab opinion. While assisting Assad's brutal repression, some Iranian officials hedged on the ultimate outcome by making contact with opposition groups in Syria and commending reform by the autumn of 2011. Iran's approach to Iraq and Afghanistan, too, amounted to a pragmatic policy of systematically promoting "managed chaos": assisting indigenous insurgents to cause sufficient problems to US and allied forces to hasten their withdrawal, but without hastening a total state collapse that could threaten Iran's vital interests.

Iran thus declined to participate in a January 2010 conference in London on Afghanistan's future, but while Ahmadinejad condemned the US presence there in a visit to Kabul in March 2010, he simultaneously called for ISAF to do more to tackle Afghanistan's narcotics trade, a major problem for Iranian youth. In Iraq, Tehran concluded six agreements deepening economic, technological, health and cultural cooperation between it and Baghdad in 2011, causing alarm among American and Saudi officials that a US abandonment of Iraq could prompt its re-emergence as a proxy battlefield between Sunni groups supported by the Saudi and Persian Gulf monarchies and Shiite militias supported by Iran.

The fundamental dilemma for US policy-makers was therefore no closer to resolution towards the twilight than at the dawn of the Obama administration. If an Iranian nuclear capability, or actual weapon(s), represented a strategic "red-line" for Washington, what coercive measures would the White House realistically contemplate to prevent it, given both the inevitable Iranian military response across the region to American or Israeli strikes and – as Table 5.2 documents – the limited international support for yet another US use of military force against a Muslim state? Well prior to the Obama

Table 5.2 International support for preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons (2010)

	Percentage willing to consider:		
	Tougher sanctions	Military action	Difference
US	85	66	-19
Britain	78	48	-30
Spain	79	50	-29
Germany	77	51	-26
France	76	59	-17
Russia	67	32	-35
Poland	72	54	-18
Turkey	44	29	-15
Lebanon	72	44	-28
Egypt	72	55	-17
Jordan	66	53	-13
Japan	66	34	-32
China	58	35	-23
India	46	52	+6
Pakistan	19	21	+2

Source: Pew Research Center, *Pew Global Attitudes Project 2010*, Q84 and Q85. (Questions asked only of those who oppose Iran acquiring nuclear weapons.)

administration, a fairly broad (though by no means universal) consensus had developed among the majority of Iran observers that a military strike was, on balance, not the optimal solution to the threat of the Iranian nuclear program. Reflecting the general parameters of that consensus, then Defense Secretary Robert Gates stated on April 13, 2009 that, "Militarily, in my view, it [a bombing of Iran's nuclear facilities] would delay the Iranian program for some period of time, but only delay it, probably only one to three years."²⁸

Not only was international support for military action against Iran limited, but the post-Bush American public too was deeply sceptical about US options. While opinion surveys confirmed that most Americans supported actions to try to stop Iran enriching uranium and developing a weapons program, they were hesitant about resorting to military action because of the perceived dangers and presumed limits of such a response. Even though 54 percent opposed restoring diplomatic relations with Iran, for example, 62 percent favored US leaders meeting and talking with Iran's leaders. Only 18 percent agreed that the US should carry out a military strike against Iran's energy facilities, with 41 percent preferring economic sanctions and 33 percent wanting to continue diplomatic efforts to encourage Iran to cease enriching uranium. 77 percent nonetheless opposed engaging in trade activities with Iran.²⁹

Having said that, while Americans were pessimistic about the prospects of a strike causing Iran to give up its nuclear program, or even slowing it down, and believed that an attack would increase Muslim hostility to the US and prompt retaliatory action against US targets in the region and even America itself, almost as many supported a military strike (47 percent) as opposed it (49 percent) in the event that diplomacy and economic sanctions ultimately failed.³⁰ It is worth noting in this context that, far more so than Iraq, Afghanistan or Pakistan, the place of Iran in American history has a very powerful resonance, given the chequered post-1979 history: the fall of the Shah, the American Embassy hostages held by the regime, the abortive rescue attempt in 1980, and the Iran-Contra affair. There are, after all, few other nations in which a presidential candidate could happily recite in public a popular song calling for another nation's bombing (and relatively few where such a popular song would be made [and reissued seven years later]).³¹ Moreover, among the commentariat, the options for military intervention were not universally held to be prohibitively costly. As Amitai Etzioni argued, it may be that a successful military strike need not – and perhaps should not – target the nuclear facilities in whole or even part in order to induce the required effect on the existing, or an alternative, Iranian governing regime.³²

As the Arab Spring erupted, ebbed and flowed through 2011, and the Obama administration became increasingly erratic in dealing with the unanticipated popular challenges to entrenched (and, mostly, pro-US) Arab

autocrats, it became increasingly apparent that the prospect – if it ever had existed – of large-scale US military action against Iran was now minimal under Obama's leadership. Admittedly, the president still sought to provide reassurance about the steadfastness of the US position. In his May 22, 2011 speech to AIPAC, Obama stated:

You also see our commitment to our shared security in our determination to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons ... Its illicit nuclear program is just one challenge that Iran poses. As I said on Thursday, the Iranian government has shown its hypocrisy by claiming to support the rights of protesters while treating its own people with brutality. Moreover, Iran continues to support terrorism across the region, including providing weapons and funds to terrorist organizations. So we will continue to work to prevent these actions, and will stand up to groups like Hezbollah who exercise political assassination, and seek to impose their will through rockets and car bombs.

But the uprisings across North Africa, the Gulf and the Levant distracted both American and international attentions from Iran's nuclear program. Moreover, as Jennifer Rubin observed, Obama no longer even offered the standard mention of "all options being on the table." As she ruefully concluded, "The threat of military action is now clearly not credible."³³

Iraq

One final factor in the Obama administration's strategic calculus was bringing to a ultimate end the expensive and unpopular eight-year war with Iraq. The Bush administration had negotiated the Strategic Framework Agreement and the Status of Forces Agreement towards the end of 2008; the former laid out a framework for future US-Iraqi cooperation on matters such as diplomacy, trade, education, science and technology, while the latter committed all US forces to be removed from Iraq by December 31, 2011. Obama increased the momentum by withdrawing all US combat forces by August 2010, leaving a remaining presence of 50,000 troops for training, counter-terrorism and selective combat operations with Iraqi forces.

But with 46,000 US troops still in the country in the summer of 2011, and despite the looming urgency of the end-of-year deadline, American and Iraqi forces found it difficult to agree what a follow-on US presence – and the broader bilateral relationship – might look like. Despite his pledge for a complete withdrawal, the Obama administration had made it clear to Iraqis that they would provide a stay-on presence if so requested. The benefits of such a force appeared clear: helping to defend Iraq's porous borders, preventing Iranian weapons smuggling and insurgent meddling, providing counter-terrorism support against al Qaeda in Mesopotamia, and reassuring Iraqi

Kurdistan. Above all, for US strategic interests, an American presence could help to maintain Iraqi independence from Tehran's malign orbit.

American officials were insistent that the Iraqi government had to come forward with a request, placing the responsibility for a long-term US presence on the fragile coalition of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. But, while al-Maliki was granted the authority to engage in negotiations in August 2011, he did not make a public request for the US to stay. al-Maliki feared the political costs such an extension of the "occupation" would imply, and depended for support on the Shiite party of Moqtada al-Sadr – an Iranian client who threatened that his militia would wage war against US troops if they remained in Iraq. The protracted process of internal bargaining in the Iraqi government compounded the problem of being seen to concede the desirability of US forces staying put.

At the same time, the Obama administration was once again wrestling with its own internal rifts and rivalries. Eager to depart in a responsible manner that safeguarded the post-invasion political settlement, the Pentagon – including the US Commander in Iraq, General Lloyd Austin – had lobbied for follow-on forces ranging from 14,000 to 18,000 troops. But senior Pentagon officials let it be known in early September 2011 that a much lower number, reputed to be in the range of 3,000, had been imposed by the White House as adequate, if not optimal, for US interests.³⁴ Much as had occurred previously over the surge and drawdown in Afghanistan, strategic considerations were trumped by domestic ones for Obama. Ensuring the withdrawal of almost all US forces and underscoring the end of the Iraq war would represent a timely asset to his re-election ambitions and "nation-building" at home. But in strategic terms, a US force of fewer than 10,000 would encounter serious problems in defending itself against Iranian-sponsored militants and al Qaeda, much less carrying out effective training or counter-terrorism missions. It also would necessitate abandoning any effort to prevent violence in Kurdistan. In the context of an already deteriorating security situation – with attacks by Sunni *jihadists* on the increase and the Sadrist threatening to mobilize – a premature US withdrawal could threaten to unravel the fragile gains of the 2007–11 years, imperilling Iraqi sovereignty and stability and empowering Iranian ambitions still further. As even the normally pro-Obama *Washington Post* argued, "Any continuing military mission in Iraq should be founded on clear goals and a calculation of the troops needed to accomplish them – not an estimate of what troop number will be acceptable to Congress or the president's base of supporters."³⁵ Ultimately, the failure of the Obama administration to secure a deal that provided US forces with immunity from Iraqi lawsuits resulted in, once more, an outcome more congenial to the president's domestic electoral interest than necessarily America's strategic one: the withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq by the end of 2011.

Conclusion: the limits of strategic engagement with Iran

Despite the unmistakable symbolic contrast with its immediate predecessor, the Obama administration encountered very similar challenges in seeking even a mild *rapprochement* with Tehran, much less the “grand bargain” often touted by “realist” foreign policy commentators: a fractious Iranian regime mired in intra-conservative and theocratic convulsions, corrupt and despised by the Iranian people; a growing crisis of state legitimacy, founded on a set of chronically dysfunctional economic and social problems and exacerbated by the fraudulent presidential election of 2009 and subsequent repression; an appalling tolerance for human rights abuses, torture and terrorism; an abiding desire to project regional influence by stoking anti-Sunni, anti-Jewish and anti-Western sentiments, harboring and supplying terrorists (not just from Hezbollah and Hamas but also al Qaeda and other groups) and targeting US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan; and a dogged pursuit of an Iranian nuclear capacity that serves as the only moderately unifying force in an otherwise deeply divided and fissiparous society, one characterized by pervasive ethnic, religious and socio-economic divisions.

Faced by such intractable and unpropitious forces, the Obama administration’s attempts to effect a post-American foreign policy through moves towards normalizing bilateral relations were always likely to encounter close to insurmountable obstacles. However commendable and sincere the effort, by the fall of 2009 the weight of opinion within the administration was shifting to a harder-line position, one remarkably reminiscent of the Bush administration post-2004 but strengthened politically by the consistent Iranian rejection of Washington’s transparently clear wish for improved bilateral relations.

Predictably enough, Obama’s evolving positions – from outreach to sanctions to a *sotto voce* endorsement of regime change from within married to covert operations – encountered caustic opposition from both ends of the political spectrum. On the left, in a typically sober and balanced castigation, veteran Marxist agitator Tariq Ali lamented that “From Palestine through Iraq to Iran, Obama has acted as just another steward of the American empire, pursuing the same aims as his predecessors, with the same means but with a more emollient rhetoric.”³⁶ In similarly judicious and restrained commentary, the Iranian scholar Elaheh Rostami-Povey asserted that “the US policy of asserting global control over strategic resources – especially oil – and expanding its power militarily, economically and politically is continuing under Barack Obama,” as clearly demonstrated in the president’s continuing support for Israel and the lack of “substance” to his supposed outreach to Muslims worldwide:

The Obama administration has seemingly not learned the lessons of the failure of these policies and of the death and destruction they have brought to the people of the

Middle East as well as to the US military. Therefore, sanctions, “regime change” and democratization Iraq- and Afghanistan-style are on the agenda, and the threat of war with Iran persists. Although unilateralism is unlikely under Obama’s administration, multilateralism is just a tactical adjustment, reflecting an accommodation to the limits of American power rather than a strategic reorientation.³⁷

On the right, Tehran remained an outpost of extremism that the US should altogether shun, recognizing that as far as engagement was concerned, that dog was never going to hunt. Obama’s outreach efforts represented yet another instance of a naive and weak post-American foreign policy – one which imagined that apologizing for American arrogance and errors could somehow magically yield a “forgive-and-forget” reciprocal gesture from a tyrannically thuggish theocratic regime intent on stoking regional fires rather than putting them out. Reflecting on the Undersecretary (and latterly, Deputy Secretary) of State, William Burns’s, testimony on Iran to the House Foreign Affairs Committee on December 1, 2010 – in which Burns noted US concerns about Iran before observing that there was “still room for a renewed effort to break down mistrust, and begin a careful, phased process of building confidence between Iran and the international community” and declaring that “The door is still open to serious negotiation, if Iran is prepared to walk through it” – Stephen Hayes and Thomas Joscelyn argued:

Yet Burns said nothing about Iran’s efforts to fund, train, and equip jihadists in Afghanistan. He said nothing about the extensive Iranian backing of radical Shiite groups in Iraq over the past seven years. He said nothing of Iran’s ongoing support for al Qaeda – support that might have been particularly interesting to his audience of American lawmakers. In his remarks on Capitol Hill, Burns simply chose not to mention that the leaders of Iran have been fighting a stealth war against the United States, its soldiers, and its citizens. It is this fact that complicates the Obama administration’s efforts to engage Iran. So it is simply set aside.³⁸

Certainly, the Obama administration’s approach reflected an important underlying difference with his predecessor. Unlike the Bush administration, which took seriously the proposition that regime type had an important effect on external behavior (at least until 2006³⁹), the Obama administration viewed Tehran through a classical realist lens, as simply one among many states with whom it could – potentially – do constructive business, despite its more disagreeable practices, internal repression and destabilizing regional policies. But the central and inescapable feature of Iran’s strategic personality in the Middle East is that it views itself as the pre-eminent geo-strategic rival to Washington – not to mention Saudi Arabia and Israel – rather than as a potential partner. Moreover, while the priority for the Obama administration was the Iranian nuclear program, too myopic a focus on cutting a deal on that alone – while a very desirable outcome, without doubt – would neglect the multiple ways in which Iranian interests and ambitions pervade the region

and run directly against those of the US. As the leading British scholar of Iran, Ali Ansari, wrote:

... the nuclear impasse is a consequence of a far wider problem between Iran and the United States, not its cause. A solution to the nuclear issue will only defer and not solve the Iranian question. That question, which has been inherited by the United States, can trace its roots further back than 1979 or 1953, to the humiliation of Turkmenchai in 1828 and the gradual realization that Iran has suffered an imperial fall from grace. Our current preoccupation with the nuclear issue should not deflect us from the fundamentals of this historic situation and the political myths it provides.⁴⁰

Or, to put it another way, as one former Iranian president explained, Ayatollah Khamenei's position is, "*Ma doshmani ba Amrika ra lazem dareem*": "We need enmity with the United States."⁴¹ By the latter stages of his first term, Obama appeared to finally be reconciled to the notion that no amount of bridge-building or strategic engagement could alter that fundamental feature of Iranian statecraft: in turn, isolating Iran as far as feasibly possible became the central goal of American statecraft.

Where to go from there, however, remained highly problematic. The *New York Times* reported in January 2010 that a memo from Bob Gates to the White House claimed the administration lacked an effective strategy to counter Iran in the event that existing policies failed. While the Secretary subsequently claimed the memo had been "mischaracterized," it was widely seen as a prelude for a resigned acceptance of a nuclear-capable Iran and a nascent shift to a Cold War-style strategy of containment and deterrence, rather than a military confrontation damaging to America's regional position. Although other members of the administration repeated the familiar mantra of "all options" still being on the table, Secretary Clinton had seemingly given the strategic game away when she stated in Thailand on July 22, 2009 that, "If the US extends a defensive umbrella over the region, it's unlikely that Iran will be any stronger or safer, because they won't be able to intimidate and dominate, as they apparently believe they can, once they have a nuclear weapon."⁴² Gates, too, made clear on a number of occasions his strongly sceptical view of the utility or efficacy of military action. Such positions won modest international relief at the price of substantially undercutting the credibility of the military option within the overall US posture towards Iran, while simultaneously unnerving America's Arab allies in the region and Israel.

Moreover, the brute reality remains that Iran is already nuclear capable – it possesses the technology to produce fissile material. Its leaders must judge how close to crossing the red line to nuclear weapons production and how large a stockpile of LEU it can accumulate before it provokes a large-scale military response from – if not the US under Obama – Israel. Facing what Tel Aviv perceives as the genuine threat of another *Shoah*, how far Israeli tolerance

of Iran's efforts would last remained to be seen, since the Israelis themselves are clearly divided on how much of a threat a nuclear Iran would pose and on the merits of a military attack to prevent such an outcome. Moreover, in terms of domestic American opinion, Iran is one of the relatively few global issues where bipartisanship still prevails, with Democrats and Republicans overwhelmingly agreed on a tough line – a position likely to intensify even further in the absence of an American diplomatic breakthrough or economic sanctions working (during the Republican Party presidential debate in Iowa of August 11, 2011, for example, only the neo-isolationist Ron Paul [R-TX] departed from a strongly anti-Iranian line). As Andrew Parasiliti presciently observed in October 2010:

There seems to be only a fragile and largely unenthusiastic congressional constituency for engagement with Iran, and no constituency for living with an Iranian nuclear weapon. Congressional pressure on Iran will likely increase mid-2011 and into the 2012 US presidential campaign, especially if Republicans enjoy substantial gains in the November 2010 congressional elections. Republicans may seek to portray President Obama as naive or misguided for seeking to engage Iran.⁴³

As the intended marquee example for strategic engagement, Iran proved the gravest disappointment. The upheavals across the Middle East, the feuding between Washington and its key allies in Tel Aviv and Riyadh, the internal fissures in the regime, and the advance of Tehran's nuclear program and regional ambitions together provided explosive potential. Dana Allin and Steve Simon ominously but accurately concluded in their review of the increasingly parlous predicament: "The compressed coil of disaster linking Iran, Israel and the United States is not the only problem facing the Obama administration, and it may not even be its worst problem. But Iran's defiance and Israel's panic are the fuses for a war that could destroy all of Obama's other ambitions."⁴⁴ Even if this now appears an unlikely outcome for Obama's presidency, it may yet prove prescient for whoever occupies the White House after January 2013.