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**INTERPRETING THE IMPLACABLE FOE:  
AMERICAN PERCEPTIONS OF IRAN**

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“We face a fanatical, messianic, apocalyptic regime with the aspiration to defeat Western civilization. And in this picture Israel is the minor Satan and America is the great Satan.”<sup>1</sup>

Moshe Ya’alon  
Vice Prime Minister, Israel

Ever since the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the hostage crisis that followed, most American policymakers and analysts have seen Iran as an implacably hostile theocracy challenging both U.S. interests and U.S. values – and in recent years, one in relentless pursuit of nuclear weapons. Most in the Iranian government have taken a similarly jaundiced view of the United States. There are deep realities behind these negative views that each country has of the other. US and Iranian interests do clash in many areas, and each country has launched both hostile rhetoric and aggressive actions against the interests of the other. But there are also grounds for a more nuanced view in each country, and common interests that the two countries might be able to pursue if they could overcome the huge gulf of hostility and mistrust that separates them.

**BORN HOSTILE**

The Iranian revolution was anti-American from the outset, as the United States had been the principal patron of the hated Shah, and had helped him come to power. On their televisions, Americans saw burning American flags and crowds chanting “Death to America.”

Two dramatic developments in the early days of the Islamic Republic cemented the negative perceptions the two sides had of one another. For Americans, the searing event was the seizure of the US Embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979 by a mob of students angered that the Carter Administration had

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<sup>1</sup> Ya’alon’s comment on Iran is quoted in David Remnick, “Letter from Tel Aviv: The Vegetarian,” *The New Yorker*, September 3, 2012, p. 27.

decided to admit the Shah into the United States. The students, whose actions were openly supported by Ayatollah Khomeini, made hostages of 52 Americans who had been serving at the embassy. For 444 days they were held captive, with the American public subjected to a daily barrage of television coverage, leaving behind a lasting image of Iran's apparently fanatical hatred of the United States. For Washington, the hostage crisis was, as Kenneth Pollack has written in his comprehensive account of US relations with the Islamic Republic, the "defining moment" of the relationship with Tehran, which produced "an abiding antipathy for Iran."<sup>2</sup> The implications have been enormous and long-lasting. As Pollack concludes,

"American officials considered Iran to be one of the greatest threats to American interests on the planet; it was maniacally anti-American and highly aggressive, which made preventing Iran from growing any stronger...a vital national interest. This context was critical because all of Iran's actions were interpreted in light of it."<sup>3</sup>

In reaction to the hostage crisis, the United States severed diplomatic relations with Iran. More than three decades later, they have yet to be restored.

For Iranians, it was US support for Saddam Hussain's war against Iran, launched on September 22, 1980, that reinforced the Iranian belief in unremitting American hostility. The Iran-Iraq War dominated the first decade of the Islamic Republic's existence and killed hundreds of thousands of Iranians; this was one of the formative experiences of the newly born regime and it contributed to an enduring fear in Tehran that the United States desires the destruction of the Islamic Republic.

From the outset of the Iranian revolution of 1979, then, the United States and Iran were locked into extremely negative perceptions of one another, with each seeing in the other an unshakeable hostility. Over the intervening decades, there have been significant ups and downs in US-Iran relations. There have been occasional moments of cooperation or efforts at engagement. There have been voices, certainly in the United States and probably in Iran, that have questioned or challenged the dominant perceptions by offering alternative interpretations of the other side. There have been debates and disagreements in each country about how best to deal with the other. The full texture of this relationship is not fully captured by a purely monotonic picture of reciprocal hostility. Nevertheless, the broad framework of negative perceptions that was established at the outset of the Iranian revolution has never been escaped or supplanted. All efforts at negotiation, engagement, cooperation, or (most ambitiously) rapprochement have taken place in the context of this framework and all have foundered on the enormous reservoirs of

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America*, (New York: Random House, 2004), pp. 172, 206.

<sup>3</sup> Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, pp. 206-207.

suspicion, mistrust, and antipathy that remain. As David Crist writes in his history of US-Iran relations, “In the end, 2012 still looks remarkably like 1979, with the two nations still at loggerheads.”<sup>4</sup>

American critics of US policy toward Iran have challenged central elements of the common American perception of Iran. Quite controversially, for example, Flynt and Hillary Leverett have been scathingly critical of what they see as Washington’s fundamental misreading of Iran; in their view, wrongheaded and counterproductive American policies flow from flawed understandings of the Islamic Republic.<sup>5</sup> Other advocates of diplomatic engagement with Iran have not gone as far as the Leveretts, but have offered more nuanced and optimistic interpretations of Iran. Thus lifelong Iran expert (and former US diplomat) John Limbert cautions against exaggerating the threat posed by Iran and urges that Iran’s expressions of interest in diplomacy be taken seriously.<sup>6</sup> Former US diplomats Thomas Pickering and William Luers have been tireless in advocating a more accommodating US approach to Iran (often writing with MIT’s Jim Walsh as part of the Iran Project).<sup>7</sup> But these contrary perspectives are dissents from a deeply entrenched orthodoxy that holds that Iran is a bitter antagonist, unlikely to agree to or abide by agreements acceptable to the US as long as the current regime remains in power. Particularly among the political class in Washington DC, the default position of politicians and policymakers is harshly and reflexively anti-Iranian. This anti-Iranian impulse represents not a single point of view but a spectrum of interpretations, ranging from hard-nosed objection to Iranian behavior and skepticism about the utility of diplomacy with Tehran to all-out opposition to Iran’s “fanatical and irrational” regime, rejection of diplomacy as unsuitable in relation to Iran, and calls for regime change. What this range of views shares is a fundamentally negative assessment of Iran. As former US

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<sup>4</sup> Crist, *The Twilight War*, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Among the Leveretts’s prolific writings, see in particular Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett, *Going to Tehran: Why the United States Must Come to Terms with the Islamic Republic of Iran*, (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2013). The Leveretts’s more sympathetic interpretation of Iran and their aggressive dismissal of what they see as Washington’s hackneyed and incorrect bromides about Iran has elicited harsh reactions, showing, perhaps, the cost of fundamentally disputing the entrenched narrative. See, for example, Ray Takeyh’s severe critique of *Going to Tehran* in *Survival*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (February-March 2013), pp. 178-181; in Takeyh’s view, the Leveretts are “morally depraved.” For the Leveretts’s vigorous response to Takeyh and Takeyh’s unforgiving reply, see “Objectivity and the Iran Debate,” *Survival*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (April-May 2013), pp. 207-210.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, John Limbert, “We Need to Talk to Iran, But How?” *Foreign Policy*, February 7, 2012, as available at [www.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.foreignpolicy.com). For a fuller exposition of Limbert’s views on changing course in US-Iran relations, see John Limbert, *Negotiating with Iran: Wrestling with the Ghosts of History*, (Washington DC: US Institute of Peace, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, William Luers, Thomas R. Pickering, and Jim Walsh, “For a New Approach to Iran,” *New York Review of Books*, August 15, 2013.

Ambassador to NATO Robert Hunter has written, the “climate of demonizing all things Iranian continues to hold much of the US government in its grip.”<sup>8</sup>

American views of Iran derive from judgments in three categories. First, US perceptions are heavily colored by understandings about the nature of the Islamic Republic, which is seen as both deeply hostile and pursuing a deeply unattractive system of governance. Second, there is the issue of Iran’s international behavior: the US government sees Iran as carrying out sustained, aggressive, and sometimes violent efforts to act against American interests, putting Iran at the top of Washington’s list of “rogue state” adversaries. Third, Washington is gripped with urgent concern that this hostile, misbehaving theocratic adversary may obtain nuclear weapons. The ongoing confrontation over Iran’s nuclear program has been a virtual obsession in Washington for over a decade and clouds the whole relationship between the two countries. In what follows, we sketch these three mutually reinforcing categories in fuller detail to paint a picture of the perceptual context out of which American policy toward Iran emerges. We then describe the structures of politics and discourse that sustain and reinforce these images. But we end on a more hopeful note, with a discussion of the fact that successive American presidents, both Democratic and Republican, have nonetheless seen the potential value in a different relationship with a country of Iran’s strategic importance, and have each attempted some form of engagement to address urgent issues or, more ambitiously, to change the relationship.

## **IRAN THE EVIL THEOCRACY**

It is not foreordained that the United States will have poor or hostile relations with deeply religious, socially conservative, undemocratic Islamic regimes. On the contrary, it has close relations with and security commitments to some such states, notably the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf. Iran, however, falls into a special category of states viewed as particularly inimical to American power and interests: it is a “rogue state” – “wrapped in dictatorship and belligerence, veiled by secrecy and propaganda, and malevolently framed by terrorism,” as one analysis of rogue states puts it.<sup>9</sup> In the eyes of many in Washington, the fundamental and unchangeable nature of the Iranian regime is *inherently* opposed to American values and interests. Four features of the Islamic Republic as viewed by many in the United States tend to lead to this conclusion.

**Iran as an Ideologically Motivated Theocracy.** The Islamic Republic came to power on a wave of revolutionary rhetoric and Islamic triumphalism, with much brave talk of ideological purity and the export of the Islamic revolution. From the

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<sup>8</sup> Robert E. Hunter, “New Iranian President; Same Old US Approach,” *Lobellog*, July 10, 2013, as available at [www.lobellog.com](http://www.lobellog.com).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas H. Henriksen, *America and the Rogue States*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 1.

beginning, it had a reputation for being a radical, extremist, revisionist state led by figures unwaveringly devoted to their religiously derived ideology. This was a worldview that struck many outsiders as marked by fanaticism and irrationality; it created fears that Iran might not be deterrable in the ordinary sense, as its leaders might see their reward in the hereafter rather than the here and now. Many observers were wary of the “mad mullahs.”

After several decades, this imagery persists, despite signs of pragmatism on the part of Tehran and despite the belief of some analysts that Iran, like most states, is moved more by considerations of national interest than by religious ideology. Even sober official voices sprinkle their speeches with references to Iran’s “model of extremism” and commitment to violence.<sup>10</sup> Iran is routinely characterized as “defiant”: it is defying the international community, defying UN resolutions, defying the international atomic energy agency, flouting its international obligations, all at considerable cost to itself – thereby identifying itself as an outcast state whose rationality is in doubt. “IAEA talks in Tehran to test Iran’s nuclear defiance,” reads a typical headline.<sup>11</sup> Iran is widely regarded as untrustworthy, prone to deceit and duplicity in its zeal to export the Islamic revolution and achieve regional hegemony; Iran cannot be trusted to keep its word or fulfill its commitments. The Islamic Republic’s ideological foundations are viewed as based on rejection of the norms and values of the United States and its allies; as Trita Parsi has written, Iran is seen as “a theocracy that hated everything the West stood for.”<sup>12</sup>

In the wider public discourse on Iran, less temperate voices offer more flamboyantly harsh assessments of the Islamic Republic. Conservative television pundit Tucker Carlson stated on a national broadcast in 2012, for example, that “Iran deserves to be annihilated. I think they’re lunatics. I think they’re evil.”<sup>13</sup> Former Director of the CIA, James Woolsey, commented in Senate testimony, “Mr. Ahmadinejad and the Iranian regime are genocidal.”<sup>14</sup> Historian Walter Russell Mead, formerly of the Council on Foreign Relations and a known and respected moderate figure, has written, “It’s a legitimate argument and subject for discussion about whether the Iranians are jerks like Franco who will settle down to peacefully

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the speech by then-National Security Advisor Tom Donilon at the Brookings Institution November 22, 2011, as available at <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov>.

<sup>11</sup> Fredrik Dahl, “IAEA Talks in Tehran to Test Iran’s Nuclear Defiance,” *Reuters*, January 26, 2012, at [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).

<sup>12</sup> Trita Parsi, *A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama’s Diplomacy with Iran*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 25. Parsi was describing an Israeli perspective but the point applies more generally.

<sup>13</sup> Eli Clifton, “Tucker Carlson: Iran Deserves to be Annihilated,” *Thinkprogress*, February 22, 2012, as available at <http://thinkprogress.org>. Carlson later clarified that he was not advocating military action against Iran, merely pointing out that it deserves to be destroyed.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Crist, *The Twilight War*, p. 500.

hang homosexuals and torture dissidents at home if left to themselves or whether they are megalomaniacal nutcases who will interpret our forbearance as weakness....”<sup>15</sup> Or, as one of the most influential figures in Washington on matters pertaining to Iran, Senator Joe Lieberman, put it, in a common refrain, “Iran is a fanatical, terrorist, expansionist state and has a leader and a leadership that constantly threatens to extinguish the state of Israel.”<sup>16</sup> There, in one concise sentence, is a summing up of the typical Washington view of Iran.

Can one do business with such a state? Many in Washington have serious doubts. Particularly those with the most severe views of Iran argue that Tehran will either refuse to agree to or would violate any agreement that would serve US interests, in particular any agreement that would seriously constrain their nuclear program. Congress is generally inclined to the view that more sanctions and more credible threats of force are in order and insists that Iran must make big concessions in order to prove its good faith if diplomacy is to proceed in a serious way. As the latest Congressional letter on Iran, this one signed by 76 Senators, exhorts President Obama, “the time for diplomacy is nearing its end. We implore you to demand immediate serious moves on Iran’s part.”<sup>17</sup> Demand and coerce; that is how one deals with a regime like the Islamic Republic, in this view.

**Iran the Oppressive Regime.** The United States displays a notable tolerance for the democratic shortfalls and human rights imperfections of its friends and allies around the world. In the case of US adversaries such as Iran, however, a lack of democracy and repression of human rights are often offered as part of the bill of indictment. In consigning Iran to the “axis of evil,” for example, President Bush mentioned not only Iran’s worrisome weapons programs and connections to terrorism, but also underscored that in Iran “an unelected few repress the Iranian people’s hope for freedom.”<sup>18</sup> The Obama Administration has articulated a range of concerns and objections about Iran’s external behavior and weapons activities, but

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<sup>15</sup> Mead as quoted in Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett, “The Mad Mullah Myth,” *Harper’s Magazine*, November 2012, p. 1 as available at <http://harpers.org>. In contesting what they call the “mad mullah myth” the Leveretts provide a nice overview of the more common perspective on Iran: illegitimate, fanatical, radical, aggressive, irrational. These are the labels that commonly attach to the theocracy.

<sup>16</sup> Lieberman as quoted in Sam Stein, “Obama in Heated Conversation with Lieberman,” *Huffington Post*, June 12, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> For the text of the letter, see “76 Senators Call for Tougher Sanctions,” August 2, 2013, available at <http://iranprimer.usip.org>.

<sup>18</sup> “The President’s State of the Union Address,” January 29, 2002, as available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>.

says also that “We are equally disturbed by the regime’s ongoing campaign of repression against its own people.”<sup>19</sup>

The potency of this set of issues was clearly demonstrated in the aftermath of Iran’s June 2009 presidential election. The results were contested, protests ensued, the regime cracked down harshly, and the world witnessed televised images of bloodied (and sometimes fatally injured) young Iranians being mistreated by security forces. The Obama Administration, new to office, was seeking to introduce an element of dialogue into the US-Iran relationship but found its room for maneuver curtailed by the harsh repression in Iran; it was much more difficult to establish a diplomatic process with the Iranian regime when it was behaving in such an objectionable way. In the end, after the passage of a few months, Obama did make a fleeting attempt at diplomacy (“a single roll of the dice,” in Trita Parsi’s formulation) but there is no doubt that Obama’s engagement initiative was at least partially derailed by the domestic developments in Iran. As Parsi concludes, “Events in Iran had caused the administration to lose both momentum and much of its ability to set the agenda.”<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the mood in Washington turned even more harshly anti-Iranian. One administration official describing the prospects for Obama’s engagement efforts commented, “After the [Iranian] election, skepticism in Congress against our strategy turned to outright hostility.”<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, the widespread international perception that Iran’s President Ahmadinejad had been fraudulently re-elected in a stolen election reinforced the notion that his was an illegitimate and unpalatable government. The repercussions of this judgment were significant, as the Leveretts point out: “The continued perception that Ahmadinejad’s reelection could only have been the result of fraud has had devastating consequences... reinforcing the conviction among many that the Islamic Republic could not (or should not) be dealt with diplomatically.”<sup>22</sup> In particular, there was a widespread reluctance in Washington to provide Ahmadinejad and Ayatollah Khamenei the political benefits that might accrue from a deal with the United States that might have led to a substantial easing of sanctions. Indeed, the Obama Administration itself may have been influenced by this view. Explaining Obama’s rather rapid “backtracking” from diplomacy with Iran, for example, Steve Coll suggests that after the harsh suppression of protest in Iran following the disputed 2009 election Obama had come to the realization that “Iran’s

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<sup>19</sup> Wendy Sherman, “US Policy toward Iran,” Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, May 13, 2013, p. 3 as available at <http://www.state.gov/p/us/rm/2013/202684.htm>.

<sup>20</sup> Parsi, *A Single Roll of the Dice*, p. 102. Parsi provides a full account of the 2009 Iranian election controversy. See pp. 79-102.

<sup>21</sup> Anonymous Obama administration official quoted in Parsi, *A Single Roll of the Dice*, p. 103.

<sup>22</sup> Leverett and Leverett, *Going to Tehran*, p. 229. The Leveretts offer a detailed reconstruction of the 2009 Iranian election that disputes the claim of fraud.

government was not a workable partner for open diplomacy requiring a degree of trust.”<sup>23</sup>

**Anti-Americanism Legitimizes the Islamic Republic.** Anti-Americanism was one of the fundamental platforms of the Islamic revolution in Iran and the revered leader of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, often said and apparently believed that the United States was satanic. Eliminating all American influence from Iran was one of the goals of the revolution.<sup>24</sup> To American eyes, it has appeared that anti-Americanism is an essential element of the founding ideology of the Islamic Republic, representing a source of internal legitimacy that cannot be abandoned without jeopardizing the regime. Conservative Middle East analyst James Phillips concisely summarizes this view. Iran, he says, is “the implacably hostile regime whose self-defined ideological legitimacy is unceasing antagonism to the United States....Iran’s rulers fear Washington’s friendship more than they fear its enmity. Their power and legitimacy is based on resistance to the United States....”<sup>25</sup> This perspective explains the harsh anti-American rhetoric that has emanated from Iran, the reluctance of Iran’s clerics to engage with the United States, and their rejection of U.S. negotiating proposals that many in Washington believe would otherwise have been acceptable to Tehran.

**Iran the Implacable Enemy.** From the belief that the Iranian regime derives legitimacy from anti-Americanism, it follows, of course, that Iran can have no genuine interest in better relations with the United States. In the American understanding of the evolution of US-Iran relations, there is a recurrent narrative that at various times Washington has sought in one way or another to reach out to Tehran, only to rediscover the harsh truth that Iran prefers confrontation. From the failed overtures of its predecessors, Pollack writes, for example, the Clinton Administration concluded that “the Iranians had proved themselves to be implacable foes, impervious to gestures of kindness.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, of President Obama’s gestures toward Iran, David Sanger says simply, “Engagement failed – the Iranians were not interested....”<sup>27</sup>

The belief that the Islamic Republic is by its very nature inescapably an implacable foe has enormous implications. While some Iranian behavior may represent reactions to aggressive and hostile US policies, the US belief in implacable Iranian hostility is an obstacle to seeing this possibility clearly. If Iran requires confrontation no matter what the United States does, then aggressive US actions will

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<sup>23</sup> Steve Coll, “Will Iran Get that Bomb?” *New York Review of Books*, May 24, 2012, p. 34.

<sup>24</sup> On these points, see Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, pp. 128-135.

<sup>25</sup> James Phillips, “Iran’s Nuclear Program: What is Known and Unknown,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders*, No. 2393, March 26, 2010, pp. 10-11.

<sup>26</sup> Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, p. 260.

<sup>27</sup> David Sanger, *Confront and Conceal: Obama’s Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power*, (New York: Random House, 2012), p. 150.



not make matters any worse, and conciliatory gestures will be futile. Another implication is that Iran's overtures and occasional willingness to negotiate cannot be real. Tehran may see tactical advantages to occasional cooperativeness, but it cannot be genuinely interested in changing the strategic character of the relationship when it depends in part on antagonism with the United States to justify its rule.

In sum, Iran is commonly seen as a fanatical and possibly irrational theocracy that treats its own people harshly while thriving as an implacable enemy of the United States. It is not hard to understand why Washington would have its doubts about the desirability and feasibility of diplomacy with such a state. Nor is it hard to understand why in Congress, where this harsh view of Iran is commonplace and sometimes stridently articulated, there is deep opposition to positive moves toward Iran and widespread bipartisan support for sanctions and other punitive measures. Distaste for Iran is one of the very few subjects which inspire bipartisanship in today's highly polarized Washington.

## **IRAN THE ROGUE**

American views of Iran are shaped not only by what Iran is but also by what it does: Iran's foreign policies are seen as relentless attacks on American interests and allies. This antagonistic behavior, in turn, reinforces negative perceptions about the nature of the regime. These are two states whose interests regularly clash, whose perceptions differ, and whose preferred outcomes often diverge. Even in those cases where their interests are compatible (as was true in opposing Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan) the hostility, mutual suspicion, and unhealthy relations between the two have prevented more than temporary collaboration; lasting cooperation has proven unattainable.

Washington finds Iran's policies objectionable in a number of ways. At the broadest level, Iran has opposed, criticized, and resisted American influence and presence in the Persian Gulf and has sought to contest and minimize the American role in the region. It has sought a role and voice for itself in the management of affairs in the Persian Gulf region, creating a sense of rivalry with the United States. More disconcertingly, there is a wide perception in both the United States and Israel that Iran has hegemonic aspirations, that it seeks to evict or displace the United States and to dominate the region. The regional stage is structured as a kind of endless intense competition between the United States and Iran on both regional and bilateral issues – "a state of low-grade, daily conflict," as one Obama administration official characterized US-Iranian relations.<sup>28</sup> Within this broad context of competition, there are several areas of Iranian policy that are especially troubling to Washington.

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<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*, p. 144.

**Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism.** Central to the American image of Iran is the belief that Tehran is the most important state sponsor of terrorism. This belief derives in part from past terrorist incidents that have been linked or attributed to Iran – including the US Marine barracks bombing in Beirut in 1983 (which killed 240 American servicemen) and the attack on Khobar Towers at a US military facility in Saudi Arabia in 1996 (which killed 19 Americans and wounded hundreds of others). In addition, Iran has deep and ongoing ties with groups that rank high in Washington’s pantheon of the world’s worst terrorist groups. Tehran has backed Hamas, the Palestinian faction centered in Gaza that is regarded as one of Israel’s most virulent enemies and that has made regular recourse to violence. Similarly, Iran has very close ties to and has been the most important backer of the Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah, which has been a strident opponent of Israel and has employed violence in pursuit of its aims. U.S. intelligence has concluded that many of the Hezbollah missiles that threaten Israel were supplied by Iran. Though Iran views Hamas and Hezbollah as legitimate resistance movements aimed at national liberation, the United States sees such groups as despicable terrorist organizations, beyond the pale of acceptable politics, and finds Iran’s support for them to be deeply objectionable.

Iran’s links to international terrorism became an even more compelling consideration after the Al Qaeda attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. After that, counterterrorism became a central element – arguably *the* central element – of US foreign and defense policy. Because Washington saw Iran as a major state sponsor of terror, it was regarded as one of the biggest threats the United States faced in the post-9/11 era. As senior Defense Department official Paul Wolfowitz wrote in a memo shortly after 9/11, “The events of September 11 make it clear that we can not longer tolerate networks of state support for terrorism – particularly not those which are pursuing weapons of mass destruction – whether or not they were involved in this tragedy.”<sup>29</sup> This was, of course, the logic that led directly to intervention in Iraq in 2003, but it was also a logic that some applied to Iran.

Iran’s support for terrorism has been a core element of the US bill of indictment against Iran since the 1980s and remains so to this day. Speaking on behalf of the Obama Administration to explain its policy of “unrelenting and increasing pressure” on Iran, for example, Undersecretary of State Wendy Sherman underscored the Administration’s “grave concern” with Iran’s involvement in terrorism:

“Iran is the world’s foremost state sponsor of terrorism, which it uses as a strategic tool of its foreign policy....The ‘Iran Threat Network’ comprises an alliance of surrogates, proxies, and partners such as Hizbollah, Hamas, and

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<sup>29</sup> From a Wolfowitz memo to Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, September 19, 2001, as quoted in Crist, *The Twilight War*, p. 425.

Iraqi Shi'a militants, among others. Iran fund, trains, and equips these terrorist organizations, in whole or in part, to use in attacks around the world. This clandestine threat network destabilizes countries throughout the Middle East and threatens regional security."<sup>30</sup>

So long as this perception remains unchanged, the United States will have a powerful incentive to oppose and thwart Iran and any fundamental improvement in relations between Iran and the United States will be very difficult to achieve.

**Iran as a threat to Israel.** Another pivotal factor shaping US views is Iran's status as a threat to Israel. From the days of Ayatollah Khomeini down to the present, Iran's theocratic nature, its aggressive ideological stance in the region, its harsh and sometimes threatening rhetoric toward Israel, and its support for some of Israel's bitterest and most difficult enemies have caused Tehran to loom large in Israeli threat perceptions. Many Israelis believe that Iran is committed to the elimination of Israel and could pose an existential threat if it acquired the means to destroy Israel. For Jerusalem, then, Iran represents the most acute security challenge in a generally inhospitable regional environment. As Ephraim Kam has noted, "Since 1993, every Israeli prime minister has cited Iran as the gravest strategic threat to Israel and to Middle East stability."<sup>31</sup>

The Israeli fear of Iran has a profound effect on Washington's perceptions for two reasons. One is the close alliance relationship between the United States and Israel, which makes American leaders sensitive to threats to Israel (while providing extensive opportunities for the security elites in the two countries to interact). As one study of Israel's concerns about Iran concludes, "Israel's fears of Iran have become an inescapable and urgent concern for US policy in the Middle East."<sup>32</sup> The second is Israel's unusual effectiveness in influencing the political scene in Washington. There is massive support for Israel in Congress and American politicians generally compete with one another to see who can be most pro-Israel. Then presidential candidate Hilary Clinton summarized the characteristic position of the American political class in her speech to the 2008 conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee: "America's position is unchanging, our resolve unyielding, our stance nonnegotiable. The United States stands with Israel, now and forever."<sup>33</sup> There are very few national political figures in the United States who

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<sup>30</sup> Wendy Sherman, "US Policy toward Iran," Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, May 13, 2013, p. 3 as available at <http://www.state.gov/p/us/rm/2013/202684.htm>.

<sup>31</sup> Ephraim Kam, "The US and Israel on Iran: Whither the (Dis)Agreement?" *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (April 2013), p. 62.

<sup>32</sup> Ehud Eiran and Martin B. Malin, "The Sum of All Fears: Israel's Perception of a Nuclear-Armed Iran," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Summer 2013), p. 78.

<sup>33</sup> "Clinton's Speech at the AIPAC Conference," June 4, 2008, as available at <http://www.cfr.org/elections/clintons-speech-aipac-conference/p16420>

take a different stance. In this political context, not only are Israel's threat perceptions bound to be influential in the United States, but Israel's fretting about American policy toward Iran – is it waiting too long, giving away too much, relying too much on diplomacy, being too weak? – is destined to find echoes in the American debate.<sup>34</sup>

So long as Iran actively supports Israel's enemies and is regarded itself as a dangerous enemy of Israel, this will be a major factor in shaping Washington's perceptions of Iran. This means that any dramatic shift in US relations with Iran is likely to require at least acquiescence in Jerusalem.

**Iran as rival of America's Gulf allies.** Israel is not the only American ally worried about Iran. The Arab states of the Persian Gulf are also discomfited by what they see as an Iranian threat. They fear that any rise in Iranian power will be at their expense. The smaller Gulf states fear Iran's power and what they see as its attempts at intimidation. As sectarianism seems to grow in force in the region, there is real concern on the part of Sunni-majority Arab states about Iran's role as self-anointed leader of the Shiites in the Gulf; those states with Shiite minorities feel vulnerable to Iranian mischief and manipulation. With the Sunni-Shiite divide enflamed by protracted crises in Iraq and Syria and by the Arab spring, with regional states aligning on sectarian lines, and with sectarian violence already in evidence, even fears of sectarian war in the region have become evident.<sup>35</sup> Accustomed to security partnerships with the United States and reassured by the American commitment to their security, the Arab allies in the Gulf see Iran's call for the elimination of US presence from the region as directed against them – and they have no interest whatsoever in facing up to the Iranian challenge without American backing.

At the center of this contention in the Gulf is the competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia. These two important regional players line up on opposite sides on a whole range of troublesome issues – Yemen, Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, the Arab spring. Often they are backing, funding, and sometimes helping to arm opposing factions in internal crises. They battle to shape the evolution of the regional order and see one another as rivals for regional influence. As one recent analysis comments, "The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is a central feature of the Middle Eastern

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<sup>34</sup> For a representative example of Israeli worries about the inadequacy of US policy toward Iran, see Emily B. Landau and Ephraim Asculai, "Is the US Receding to a Containment Policy on Iran?" *INSS Insight*, No. 430, Institute for National Security Studies, May 26, 2013.

<sup>35</sup> For one such warning, see Seyed Hossein Mousavian, "Sectarian War, the Major Threat to the Middle East," *Iran Review*, August 11, 2013, at [www.iranreview.org](http://www.iranreview.org). Mousavian writes: "If sectarianism is not rooted out, there is a risk that the region will be scorched for the foreseeable future, with worldwide repercussions."

security landscape....”<sup>36</sup> Like Israel, Saudi Arabia has enjoyed a long, close, and in its own way special relationship with the United States, which sees Saudi oil and Saudi Arabia’s position in the Arab world as of crucial strategic importance. Hence, Saudi perceptions of Iran are bound to find a hearing in Washington.

The worries of Iran’s Arab neighbors are fully reflected in their relations with the United States, as was revealed when Wikileaks released a huge number of secret official US diplomatic cables, many reporting on the private views of Washington’s Gulf Arab friends. As one account summarizes, the Gulf Arabs are “often quoted in the secret US cables...as detesting and fearing the Iranian regime.” The Saudi King was said to have encouraged the United States to use military force against Iran and urged Washington to “cut the head off the snake.”<sup>37</sup>

**Iran as Enemy in Iraq.** Iran’s relations with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq were extremely hostile and were shadowed by painful memories of the Iran-Iraq war. Tehran thus shared an interest in overthrowing Hussein and was even prepared to collaborate on his removal. In fact, in discussions between Iran and the United States late in 2002, the idea of a joint campaign against Saddam was raised. Washington, however, had no interest in this idea; Iran was one of the potential targets of the ambitious US design to remake the Middle East as a key element of the post-9/11 war on terror, so it was not regarded as a desirable ally. This was a fateful calculation, however, because if the American war in Iraq was directed in part against Iran or was viewed as a prelude to a campaign against Iran, then Tehran would oppose and resist the US intervention. “If the Americans were not going to talk,” writes David Crist, “the Iranians had no qualms about fighting.”<sup>38</sup>

Iranian intelligence and Revolutionary Guard forces began flowing into Iraq not long after the US-led invasion in March of 2003. As the situation in Iraq deteriorated and Washington’s troubles mounted, Iran became a major factor in American efforts to find a more effective strategy in Iraq.<sup>39</sup> Tehran was supporting political factions in Iraq, arming and funding militias, encouraging instability and promoting violence. Weapons supplied by Iran were killing American soldiers. Understanding that American success in Iraq would mean a larger threat to Iran, Tehran had every incentive to keep the United States bogged down in a messy war.

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<sup>36</sup> W. Andrew Terrill, *The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Future of Middle East Security*, (Carlisle, Pa.:US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, December 2011), p. 55.

<sup>37</sup> Scott Peterson, “For Iran, Wikileaks Cables Validate Its Skepticism of Obama’s Sincerity,” *Yahoo.com*, November 30, 2010. For further discussion of these issues, see Robert J. Reardon, *Containing Iran: Strategies for Addressing the Iranian Nuclear Challenge*, (Santa Monica, Ca.; The Rand Corporation, 2012), pp. 97-103.

<sup>38</sup> Crist, *The Twilight War*, p. 460. Crist describes the overtures about a possible joint effort against Saddam Hussein on pp. 455-460.

<sup>39</sup> An extensive and detailed account of Iran’s role in Iraq and the impact on US policy can be found in Crist, *The Twilight War*, pp. 439-537.

(Similarly, U.S. officials have charged that despite Iran's antipathy for the Taliban, Tehran has provided arms and assistance to anti-American insurgents in Afghanistan.<sup>40</sup>) Seeing the future of Iraq as vital to Iran's security, Tehran was strongly motivated to play a role in shaping the outcome in Iraq in ways that advantaged its own interests. In Washington, Iran increasingly came to be seen as a significant part of the America's problem in Iraq, further poisoning perceptions of Iran and producing frustration and anger among US decision-makers. The fact of what has been termed a quasi-war between Iran and the United States in Iraq has reinforced the image of Iran as an enemy of the United States.

In short, Iran has been America's main regional opponent in a critical part of the world. Iran has criticized US policy and presence in the region, contested US influence, threatened US friends and allies, sponsored terrorism, and supported war against the United States. In the latest antagonism, Iran stands on the other side in the horrible civil war in Syria. To many in Washington the picture is clear: If Iran behaves like an enemy, it must be treated as an enemy

## **IRAN THE NUCLEAR MENACE**

In the early 1970s, the Shah of Iran launched an ambitious nuclear program aimed at acquiring nuclear power reactors and the full panoply of associated technologies, including dual use fuel cycle facilities that could be used for weapons purposes. Though there was some criticism from nonproliferation experts, the administrations in Washington at the time not only supported the Shah's nuclear initiative but scrambled energetically to sell Iran as much American nuclear technology as possible. Iran's nuclear program was interrupted by the 1979 revolution. After a brief hiatus, however, it was resumed by the Islamic Republic. What had been acceptable under the Shah, however, no longer looked tolerable now that this nuclear technology was going to be in the hands of the extremist clerics of the Islamic Republic. Over the years, alarm grew as it became clear that Iran's nuclear program was going far beyond civilian reactors, including uranium enrichment technology purchased and built in secret, and what appears at least until 2003 to have been a significant nuclear weapons design effort. For Washington, few things seem more menacing than the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran.

Iran claims that its nuclear program is civilian and there is no conclusive evidence that it still has an active weaponization program (though there is evidence that it had such a program in the past). Nevertheless, many in Washington see Iran's program as focused on building nuclear weapons as soon as possible. The Supreme Leader has repudiated the idea that Iran wants nuclear weapons, denouncing them

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<sup>40</sup> Jay Solomon, "Iran Funnels New Weapons to Iraq and Afghanistan," *Wall Street Journal*, July 2, 2011.

as immoral and contrary to Islam – but these pronouncements have done nothing to ease American fears of a nuclear-armed Iran.

To American policymakers, it has seemed obvious and unquestioned that Iran is seeking either a nuclear weapon, or at least a “nuclear weapons capability” (that is, the technological wherewithal to produce nuclear weapons if they choose to do so). In a major speech dedicated to Iran policy, Obama Administration National Security Advisor Tom Donilon stated, for example, “Despite decades of Iranian denial and deceit...it should be clear for all the world to see – under the guise of a purely civil nuclear program, the government of Iran is seeking to develop a nuclear weapons capability.”<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Obama’s nonproliferation expert on the National Security Council, Gary Samore, said in explaining the prospects for nuclear negotiations with Iran, “They want a nuclear weapons capability and we want to deny them a nuclear weapons capability. Finding a compromise between those two objectives is going to be very difficult.”<sup>42</sup>

The United States has so far consistently sought to prevent both nuclear weapons and a “nuclear weapons capability” in Iran, which is why it has been so tenacious in opposing the enrichment capability that would give Iran the technical capacity to produce bomb material. There is, however, a potentially large difference between an Iran determined to acquire actual nuclear weapons and an Iran that might be satisfied with an unexercised nuclear weapons option. If Iran is determined to get nuclear weapons, as many in Washington believe even though the intelligence agencies say Tehran has not yet made any such decision, diplomacy is probably futile. An Iran bound and determined to get the bomb would either reject or violate any agreement that would keep it from the bomb. By contrast, if getting most sanctions lifted and building a more cooperative relationship with the United States and Europe is more important to Iran’s government than actually building nuclear weapons – especially if it has the option to build them in the future if needed – then there may be a basis for negotiation over how much nuclear capability Iran would retain and how much transparency and verification it would offer.

In August 2002, it was revealed that Iran had made substantial and previously unrecognized progress in its nuclear program and was in the process of developing an enrichment capability – a “dual use technology” which can be used to manufacture fuel for nuclear reactors but that can also be used to produce nuclear material for bombs. This revelation triggered what has so far turned out to be a permanent and ever-growing intensification of concern about Iran’s nuclear program. In this protracted crisis, Iran has persisted with and made considerable progress on its program despite tremendous efforts to stop it (including pressure, sanctions, sabotage, assassinations, and threats of force). By 2013, Iran had built a large (and still growing) enrichment capability and had the technical ability to

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<sup>41</sup> Donilon, Brookings speech, Nov 2011, p. 5.

<sup>42</sup> Samore as quoted in Michael R. Gordon, “Iran Is Said to Want Direct Talks with US on Nuclear Program,” *New York Times*, July 26, 2013.

produce bomb material if it chose to do so – though such an effort carried out at declared facilities would likely be detected by IAEA inspectors, potentially provoking military action to stop any such race to the bomb.

The nuclear issue intersects with the question of American perceptions of Iran in three significant ways. First, Iran's nuclear behavior has reinforced many of the negative impressions that abound in American views of Iran. Over many years, Iran committed a (subsequently admitted) series of violations of its safeguards agreements while keeping sensitive elements of its nuclear program hidden. This has contributed to the belief that Iran is untrustworthy; in many American eyes, Iran's nuclear program has involved a lot of lying and cheating. Iran's assumed pursuit of a military nuclear capability flies in the face of its commitments under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, buttressing the sense of Iran as an unreliable rule-breaking state. Iran has rejected UN resolutions aimed at altering its nuclear policy, showing yet again, in the U.S. view, its willingness to flout the will of the international community. (Iran argues that these resolutions are illegitimate, since Iran, in its view, poses no threat to international peace and security and the Security Council can only require state actions to address such threats.) Over many years, Iran has resisted strong American and international pressures to limit or abandon its nuclear program, demonstrating its defiant nature. Iran's relentless commitment to its nuclear program despite international objection is taken as a sign of Tehran's aggressive nature; Iran unwaveringly seeks nuclear weapons or a weapons option to support its aggressive regional hegemonic ambitions. The nuclear issue fits firmly into broad American conceptions of Iran.

Second, American perceptions of Iran feed into the ongoing nuclear crisis in an important way: they lead powerfully to the conclusion that a nuclear-armed or even a nuclear-capable Iran is unacceptable. Nuclear weapons in the hands of a possibly irrational theocracy that threatens Israel and U.S. allies in the Gulf is a nightmare scenario for Washington. If the Islamic Republic gains a nuclear weapons capability, it is feared, Tehran will be emboldened, Iran's regional neighbors will be intimidated, US efforts to restrain Iran may be deterred, Iran's desires to achieve regional hegemony will be advanced, and Israel will be jeopardized. A particularly frightening worry is the possibility, however remote, that Iran might facilitate nuclear terrorism by sharing nuclear assets with terrorist groups. There is, furthermore, deep concern that a fanatical and irrational Iran might not be deterrable, which implies that a nuclear armed Iran would be particularly dangerous. Former Bush Administration John Bolton exhibits this concern, for example, when he argues that the "calculus of deterrence" will not work with Iran: "A theocratic regime that values life in the hereafter more than life on earth is not likely to be subject to classic theories of deterrence...."<sup>43</sup> For Israel, a nuclear-armed or nuclear-capable Iran is widely regarded as an existential threat and this prospect agitates enormous concern – with direct reverberations in the American debate.

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<sup>43</sup> John Bolton, "Iran and Syria: Next Steps," Testimony before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, US House of Representatives, June 23, 2011, p. 10.



For the United States, this mélange of worrisome consequences is beyond undesirable; it is unacceptable. Hence the obsession with stopping Iran's nuclear program, the protracted crisis, the never-ending struggle to find effective leverage against Iran, the mounting alarm as Iran's nuclear program has progressed. The policy conclusion is unambiguous: the goal of American policy is to thwart Iran's nuclear program. This policy objective has been repeatedly articulated at the highest levels of the US government. During his joint press conference with Prime Minister Netanyahu in Israel in March 2013, for example, President Obama stated:

"We agree that a nuclear-armed Iran would be a threat to the region, a threat to the world, and potentially an existential threat to Israel. And we agree on our goal. We do not have a policy of containment when it comes to a nuclear Iran. Our policy is to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon."<sup>44</sup>

Obama has not only reiterated this point on multiple occasions, but he has been explicit about his willingness to use any means, including force, to achieve this objective. As he said in a prominent speech in 2012:

"Iran's leaders should understand that I do not have a policy of containment; I have a policy to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. And as I have made clear time and again during the course of my presidency, I will not hesitate to use force when it is necessary to defend the United States and its interests."<sup>45</sup>

American perceptions of Iran, in short, lead it to a completely unforgiving position on Iran's nuclear program. At a minimum, there is a commitment to deny Iran weapons. But for many even allowing Iran a nuclear weapons option is unacceptable, which is why there has been such a focus on stopping, constraining, and reversing Iran's enrichment program.

Third, the common American perceptions of Iran have important implications for how the nuclear issue should be handled and how Iran's behavior in the context of the nuclear crisis is interpreted. Certainty that Iran is seeking weapons or a weapons option means, of course, that Iran's denials and explanations are dismissed out of hand. It also means that Iran cannot seriously be interested in a deal that would necessarily constrain its program and would be designed to impede its weapons option. Therefore, Iranian expressions of interest in or

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<sup>44</sup> The White House, "Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel in Joint Press Conference," March 20, 2013, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/03/20/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-netanyahu-israel-joint-press->

<sup>45</sup> The White House, "Remarks by the President at the AIPAC Policy Conference," March 4, 2012, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/04/remarks-president-aipac-policy-conference-0>.

participation in negotiation are merely tactical game playing on their part. Typically the belief is that Iran has no real interest in a deal but is just seeking to ease pressure or buy time. Robert Einhorn writes, for example, “Khamenei’s key negotiating goal – at least so far – has been to weaken international support for sanctions and buy time for advancing Iran’s nuclear program.”<sup>46</sup>

The notion that Iran has no real interest in diplomacy and certainly none in a lasting deal is strengthened by two further considerations: the proposition that Iran gains domestic legitimacy from confrontation with the United States and the West and the belief that the Supreme Leader – the ultimate arbiter in the Iranian system – does not believe in diplomacy; the Supreme Leader calls the shots and he is fundamentally opposed to engagement with the United States. Again, Einhorn illustrates the point explicitly: “In the Islamic Republic, the ultimate authority on things nuclear is the supreme leader and Khamenei is perhaps the regime’s most uncompromising ideological opponent of accommodation with the United States.”<sup>47</sup> Over the many years of confrontation over Iran’s nuclear program there is an unbroken string of unsuccessful negotiations and abortive attempts at dialogue. These can be seen as an intended result of Iran’s policy, a consequence of Tehran’s ability to avoid the diplomacy and the diplomatic outcomes that are contrary to its nature and its objectives. As NSC Advisor Tom Donilon has said, “As we all know, the Iranian government has repeatedly rejected the opportunity for credible dialogue – and it also rejected substantial economic, political, and scientific incentives.”<sup>48</sup> Iran has rejected diplomacy; that is the American government’s take on the matter.

If Iran is reluctant to negotiate and unwilling to make a deal, then it stands to reason that there will be serious diplomacy only when enough pressure is put upon it to do so. Indeed, the American and international sanctions have often been explicitly justified as necessary to bring Iran to the table and to force it to bargain genuinely. Michael Gordon of the New York times comments in a recent news report about an upcoming round of negotiations, for example, that international sanctions “have helped bring Iran to the negotiating table but have not yet extracted significant concessions from Iran....”<sup>49</sup> Further, all signs of movement in Iran’s position or suggestions of disagreement in Tehran are taken as indications that the American strategy of pressure and coercion is succeeding. Einhorn suggests, for example, that sanctions have produced “deep divisions” in Tehran and that among Iranian elites there is “a growing belief that the only way out of Iran’s current predicament is to reach accommodation on the nuclear issue. Sanctions seem to

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<sup>46</sup> Robert Einhorn, “Getting to ‘Yes’ with Iran,” *Foreign Policy*, July 10, 2013, p. 2 of web version as available at [www.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.foreignpolicy.com).

<sup>47</sup> Einhorn, “Getting to ‘Yes’ with Iran.”

<sup>48</sup> Donilon Speech, November 22, 2011, p. 3.

<sup>49</sup> Gordon, “Iran is Said to Want Direct Talks with US,” *New York Times*, July 26, 2013.

have altered Iranian calculations.”<sup>50</sup> The logic of Washington’s approach to Iran is sometimes put quite starkly. State Department spokesman Victoria Nuland, for example, employed often-invoked imagery when she said that the noose is around Iran’s neck and is steadily being tightened.<sup>51</sup> This is how we will “get to yes” with the Islamic Republic.<sup>52</sup>

But many in Washington believe that this strategy of pressure must be accompanied by credible threats of military force. And others believe that no deal is possible with the current theocratic regime, regardless of the pressure and threats applied. That view leads inexorably to the conclusion that perhaps the only, and probably the best, way to resolve this crisis is through a change of regime in Tehran. And while American and other officials are sometimes at pains to insist that regime change is not the aim of US policy (understanding that this would produce recalcitrance in Tehran), the argument does make its way into the debate and is often an implicit consideration in discussions about what to do about Iran’s nuclear program. More than a few participants in this debate believe, as Ephraim Asculai has plainly put it, “today’s reality indicates that regime change is the only way to materially change the situation with Iran....”<sup>53</sup>

## **STRUCTURES THAT PERPETUATE HOSTILE PERCEPTIONS**

The tap root of American perceptions of Iran is, of course, the character and behavior of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as we have indicated in the discussion above. Iran may protest that it is a status quo power, that its behavior is defensive, that its actions and perceptions are legitimate and appropriate, that it is supporting not terrorists but national liberation movements, and that in general it is being punished for standing up to American bullying. But these claims make little headway in the US debate; the dominant American view of Iran sees things very differently. And that view is deeply implanted in an American political setting in which there are few incentives for anyone to see Iran differently: The perceptions of Iran as an implacably hostile foe are perpetuated and reinforced by deep structures of American politics and discourse. Key avenues of reinforcement exist in the media, among executive branch policymakers, in the Congress, and among non-government analysts.

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<sup>50</sup> Robert Einhorn, “Getting to ‘Yes’ with Iran,” *Foreign Policy*, July 10, 2013, p. 2 of web version as available at [www.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.foreignpolicy.com).

<sup>51</sup> Nuland reference in Bijan Khajepour, Reza Marashi, & Trita Parsi, “The Trouble with Sanctions,” *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, July 2013, p. 7 of web version.

<sup>52</sup> Also spelling out the coercive logic of American and Western policy is Shashank Joshi, *The Permanent Crisis: Iran’s Nuclear Trajectory*, Whitehall Paper No. 79, (London: RUSI, 2012), especially pp. 52-54, which portrays the nuclear confrontation as a contest between Western pressure and Iranian stamina.

<sup>53</sup> Ephraim Asculai, “Coping with Iran’s Nuclear Capabilities,” *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (October 2011), p. 40.

**The media.** From the earliest days of the Iranian revolution, the U.S. media has served up a steady diet of frightening images: burning American flags, crowds chanting “Death to America!”, the glowering eyes and anti-American rhetoric of Ayatollah Khomeini, missile launches, and more. Most American experts interviewed by reporters will point them in the directions suggested by the hostile perceptions we have described in this chapter. And stories about the Iranian threat are more exciting and bring in more viewers than nuanced accounts of Iranian politics and culture. Moreover, stories that seem too “soft” on Iran can provoke furious viewer complaints and even threats that companies may pull their advertisements.

**Executive branch policymakers.** Policymakers in the executive branch exist in an environment in which nearly everyone is convinced of implacable Iranian hostility. Intelligence agencies provide a constant drumbeat of information about Iranian support for terrorist groups, illicit Iranian attempts to purchase nuclear and missile technologies, and more. Suggesting that the fault may not all be on Iran’s side, or that the United States should consider a major compromise from its past demands, can mean being dismissed as naïve and foolish – and some non-government groups will fiercely criticize any official seen as “soft” on Iran. The fierce attempt to derail Chuck Hagel’s nomination to be Secretary of Defense is only one of many examples. Moreover, given the failures of past negotiations, few see much hope that a major compromise proposal would in fact lead to an agreement that Iran would accept and comply with; hence there is little point in taking political risks to push such a compromise. A substantial body of social science research makes clear that most people will come to believe what the other people in their environment believe – whether or not it is correct.

**Members of Congress.** For members of the U.S. Congress, the calculation on Iran has long been simple: there is no political advantage whatsoever in any action favorable to Iran, and considerable advantage in gaining a reputation for being “tough” on the Iranian threat. There are voters and donors who will be pleased by someone who is a leader in confronting Iran, but precious few who will be pleased by someone who pushes for compromise with this theocratic regime. This creates a dynamic in which there is an ongoing competition, with both Democrats and Republicans participating, to find more creative and severe ways to sanction Iran. Though Washington is marked by deep partisan polarization and there are very few issues that inspire consensus in Congress, recent votes on harsher sanctions against Iran have gained almost universal support. A package of punitive measures put forward in late 2012 passed the Senate 94-0, for example.<sup>54</sup>

**Nongovernment analysts.** For analysts of security and international affairs outside of the government, many of the same factors are in play. The sources of

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<sup>54</sup> See Donna Cassata, “Senate Votes to Tighten Sanctions on Iran,” *Huffington Post*, November 30, 2012.

information in the media and the government are predominantly portraying an image of unrelenting Iranian hostility. While there is more of a premium on originality, independence, and in-depth analysis in academia and non-government organizations, it is still extremely uncomfortable to stray very far from the mainstream of what others are thinking.

Of course, all of these communities influence each other. Nongovernment analysts whose views are congenial to the general flow of policy opinion in Washington are more likely to get invited to testify to Congress and more likely to be influential when they do. Members of Congress and nongovernment analysts who offer the sharpest sound bites that best encapsulate the mainstream view are more likely to be featured in the media.

Many in Iran (and some elsewhere) have argued that much of this situation is driven by people and organizations lobbying on behalf of Israel. It is undeniably the case, as noted earlier, that Israel's advocates in the United States are influential and take a dim view of Iran. They are frequently stinging in their criticism of those they see as taking a naïve view of the Iranian threat. But they are only one modest part of the larger structure of politics and discourse in the United States that reinforces and perpetuates an overwhelmingly negative view of Iran.

One factor, however, is beginning to shift these dynamics. As long as Iran was far away and there was no real risk of war in the near term, a tough position on Iran was essentially cost-free. But now that people have begun to sense that the only alternatives to negotiation and compromise are likely to be either an Iranian nuclear weapon or military action, there is more support for a vigorous exploration of negotiating proposals the Islamic Republic might plausibly accept.

## **PERCEPTION IS NOT DESTINY**

These perceptions of Iran as an implacably hostile, irrational “rogue” state seeking nuclear weapons and threatening U.S. interests across the Middle East have a profound effect on the thinking of U.S. policymakers. But the record suggests that they do not absolutely preclude attempts at a different relationship. Given Iran's oil and natural gas, its strategic position, and its leadership of the Shiite community, a more cooperative relationship with Iran, if it could be achieved, would benefit U.S. strategic interests.

Seeing that reality, every U.S. President since the Islamic Republic was established has made at least some attempt to pursue engagement or to forge a different relationship with Iran – though there have been hostile actions on each side during each of these presidencies as well. Jimmy Carter, of course, negotiated furiously to free the hostages at the U.S. embassy, and entered into the remarkable Algiers Accord, in which the United States pledged to release Iranian assets and

avoid any interference in Iran's internal affairs.<sup>55</sup> Ronald Reagan famously reached out to Iranian officials his administration considered "moderates" – including some who are still major players in the Iranian government, such as Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani – and reached an odd deal (which provoked a scandal in the United States) involving supplying arms (through Israel as an intermediary) in return for the release of hostages and funds for the Nicaraguan contras, which Congress had prohibited the Reagan administration from funding directly. George H.W. Bush, in his inaugural address, held out hope for Iranian help in gaining the release of U.S. hostages held by Hizbollah, promising: "Good will begets good will. Good faith can be a spiral that endlessly moves on."<sup>56</sup>

During President Clinton's term, Mohammed Khatami took office as President of the Islamic Republic, and proposed a "dialogue of civilizations." While the United States, reacting in part to the Khobar Towers bombing, imposed a number of sanctions on Iran during Clinton's term, Clinton repeatedly attempted to establish a direct dialogue, saying in a videotaped message for the end-of-Ramadan holiday in 1998 that the United States "regrets the estrangement of our two nations ... and I hope that the day will soon come when we can enjoy once again good relations with Iran." In March 2000, Secretary of State Madeline Albright made a major speech in which she apologized for the U.S. role in the overthrow of Mossadeq in 1953, announced the lifting of some sanctions and agreement to supply spare parts for aging civilian aircraft, offered to settle outstanding claims over frozen Iranian assets, and called for a new start in U.S.-Iranian relations. Ayatollah Khamenei rebuffed this initiative a few days later.

As noted earlier, George W. Bush famously lumped Iran with Iraq and North Korea as part of an "axis of evil" in 2002. But in 2001, his administration had gratefully accepted Iranian cooperation in overthrowing the Taliban and establishing the Hamid Karzai government, and by 2006, then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was joining with European counterparts in a proposal to address a wide range of issues in Iran's relations with the West if Iran would suspend its nuclear enrichment activities. Then, as discussed above, Barack Obama has made repeated attempts at dialogue and proposals to resolve the nuclear issue.

From Iran's point of view, shaped by its own hostile perceptions of the United States, all of these initiatives and proposals may have been one-sided, and overshadowed by more aggressive U.S. actions and statements. But the fact that presidents from both parties have repeatedly tried to find a way out of the U.S.-Iranian stalemate holds out hope that someday, when both sides are ready to look

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<sup>55</sup> For the full text, see "Algiers Accords," [http://www.parstimes.com/history/algiers\\_accords.pdf](http://www.parstimes.com/history/algiers_accords.pdf).

<sup>56</sup> George H.W. Bush, "Inaugural Address," January 20, 1989, <http://www.inaugural.senate.gov/swearing-in/address/address-by-george-h-w-bush-1989>. The last of these hostages was not released until 1991, and there was little overall progress in U.S.-Iranian relations during the first Bush administration.

for compromise at the same time – as they may be at this writing (late 2013) – it may still be possible to overcome the negative perceptions each side holds of the other and build a less hostile relationship.

## CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the Islamic Republic of Iran has engaged in behavior, both internal and international, that is unattractive from the American point of view and challenging to American interests. This behavior has fed harshly negative assessments of Iran, reinforcing hostile impressions that originate with the founding of the Islamic Republic and have persisted through several decades of difficult and distant relations.

Nevertheless, notion that Iran is irrational, implacably and unchangeably hostile, and bent on immediate acquisition of nuclear weapons are challengeable and are in fact sometimes challenged.<sup>57</sup> The government of the Islamic Republic can be seen as cautious, rational, and pragmatic rather than radical, irrational, and extremist. There is evidence that Iran's leaders have (at least on occasion) put state interest over religious ideology. Some of Iran's aggressive moves can be interpreted as defensive in nature, the predictable and unsurprising reactions of a state that believes itself to be under siege by two very powerful and willful states, the United States and Israel. Iran's domestic political system surely oppresses the rights of many, but it is arguably no worse than most of the Islamic states in the greater Middle East and possibly better than some. This alternative interpretation of Iran is flatly contrary to the more common perception, and leads to very different conclusions about the kind of diplomatic relationship it might be possible to fashion with Tehran. Diplomacy and détente become much more thinkable, and probably more feasible, if Iran is regarded as a normal, self-interested autocracy rather than a radical, fanatical, theocracy.

Nevertheless the fact remains that American policy toward Iran is heavily influenced by a deeply entrenched, widely believed, and quite powerful interpretation of Iran as an ideologically driven, implacably hostile, aggressively dangerous, and domestically unpalatable state. This view has wide resonance with the American public, finds nearly universal (bipartisan) favor in the US Congress, and colors the perceptions and choices of American policy-makers. Everything Iran does, however malevolent or benign, is interpreted through this lens, resulting in an ever accumulating mass of evidence reinforcing the perception.

These negative images shape the options that US policymakers see and prefer. They are an integral part of the reality that influences the tenor of US-Iran

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<sup>57</sup> The most fully developed and coherently structured alternative interpretation is Leverett and Leverett, *Going to Tehran*.

relations. For several reasons, however, they do not represent an inescapable condition or an insuperable obstacle in US-Iran relations. First, arms control, properly understood, is importantly about the negotiated management of security relations with antagonistic states. American political elites held similarly harsh views of the Soviet Union but this did not preclude two decades of intense nuclear arms negotiations and the achievement of a number of agreements, commencing in the early 1970s when the USSR was supporting North Vietnam in a war against the United States. During the Cold War, it was sometimes argued that arms control was particularly important and particularly valuable precisely when relations were deeply hostile. Without question, the distrust that Iran and the United States have for one another makes diplomatic progress difficult, but arms negotiations and agreements do not depend on positive perceptions and warm relations. If each side has interests that can be advanced through negotiation, it may be possible to reach mutually acceptable deals despite the skeptical views each has of the other.

Second, where common interests exist, it is sometimes possible to overcome existing negative perceptions and establish more constructive relationships. When China and the United States each concluded in the early 1970s that they shared an interest in making common cause against the Soviet Union, then riding high, it was possible to transform Sino-US relations despite more than two decades of very hostile relations and very negative perceptions of one another. While the interests of the United States and Iran collide in many respects, there are also areas where their interests are compatible. Iran's enemies over the past decade included Saddam Hussein, the Taliban, and Al Qaeda, for example. There was extensive, if temporary, cooperation between Iran and the United States after the US invasion of Afghanistan; both Tehran and Washington were keen to replace the Taliban government and Iran played a large and helpful role in fashioning the new government in Kabul.<sup>58</sup> The shadow of 9/11 and Washington's fear of Tehran as a state sponsor of terror circumscribed the potential for collaboration in that case, but such occasional instances of constructive and mutually beneficial interaction may help ameliorate the negative imagery that has accumulated.

Third, even when states are locked in a firmly embedded negative spiral, it is sometimes possible to alter the dynamic and significantly refashion relations. The Soviet-American arms control process gave rise to periods of *détente*, for example, that affected perceptions of the USSR and of the possibilities for US-Soviet relations. More dramatically, in the late 1980s, Gorbachev's Soviet Union set out, as was often said at the time, to deprive the West of an enemy – which it attempted to do by a calculated series of international concessions and reassuring unilateral measures (including substantial cuts in the Soviet military). Gorbachev succeeded in transforming the Soviet Union's international position (though he was later undone

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<sup>58</sup> See, for example, the first-person account of James Dobbins, *After the Taliban: Nation-Building in Afghanistan*, (Washington DC: The Rand Corporation, 2008). Dobbins was the Bush Administration's coordinator for Afghanistan in the fall of 2001 and was personally involved in the cooperation with Iran.



by his inability to redress the USSR's internal weaknesses). Iran's narrative of its confrontation with the United States and its supporters portrays Iran as a besieged state that seeks nothing more than its rightful place on the international stage and the respect it is due as a significant regional power. If Iran would come to recognize the need to undermine its image in the United States – as an important self-interested step toward a more normal international position – it could take steps that would gradually alter its reputation. Some of the positions attributed to President Rouhani in the period after his election in 2013 seem as if they might be moves in this direction.

In the end, building a different relationship with Iran will require sustained presidential leadership, willing and capable partners in Tehran, and an element of luck. But similar things have happened before. President Nixon's trip to China helped break through decades of similarly extreme hostility to a country caricatured as "Red China," with whom the United States had fought a bitter war in Korea. And decades of discussions of arms control and other areas of shared interest helped change the U.S.-Soviet relationship in a context in which the Soviet Union posed a dramatically greater threat to U.S. interests than Iran does today. Change remains possible.