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# RAISING THE STAKES

## THE NEED FOR A MORE AMBITIOUS AMERICAN POLICY TOWARDS IRAN



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THE NEED FOR A MORE AMBITIOUS  
AMERICAN POLICY TOWARDS IRAN

**Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

The election of Barack Obama unleashed unprecedented hopes around the world for a renewed leadership of the United States. Due to the controversial foreign policy record of the previous presidency and because of Obama's widespread appeal, deriving from both his personal life story and from his exceptional oratory skills, the inauguration of the first African-American president seemed, indeed, to represent a new beginning. The President himself, after campaigning on a platform of change ("yes we can"), repeatedly underscored the notion of a renewed America in his Inaugural Address.<sup>2</sup> Referring not only to the repercussions of the economic crisis but also to the US global role, Obama called for a "new era of responsibility." The United States, stated the President, "are ready to lead once again," but in a rapidly evolving world order in which responsibilities have to, necessarily, be shared.

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<sup>1</sup> Please do not quote without permission from the author. This is a working paper and the author welcomes constructive feedback from the readers. References in footnotes are made only for direct quotes. The list of selected sources at the end refers to the material directly linked to the content of the paper. The author wishes to thank Matti Nojonen and Teija Tiilikainen for commenting on an earlier version of the paper.

<sup>2</sup> The transcript of President Obama's Inaugural Address – from which the direct quotes are taken – is available at: [www.nytimes.com/2009/01/20/us/politics/20text-obama.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/20/us/politics/20text-obama.html)

When turning towards the more problematic concerns hindering effective American foreign policy-making, Obama stated:

“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.”

This phrase anticipated the new administration’s policy of engagement with many of America’s long-standing adversaries, including the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the course of his first year in office, Obama did signal his intention of opening a dialogue with Tehran. In particular, he called for negotiations on the controversial nature of the Iranian nuclear program. In the following months, a tentative dialogue was initiated, but no real progress was made and Iran’s pursuit of its nuclear ambitions continues. According to many, the United States’ outreach failed because of the intransigence of the Iranian leadership – which retained its power despite the disputed presidential elections of June 2009. Hence, the call to resort to tougher policies in order to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. Currently, in fact, the debate focuses on imposing more “crippling sanctions” and on obtaining the largest possible international consensus on these new measures, to be targeted against a specific sector of the Iranian establishment (i.e. the Revolutionary Guards, because of their influence on the unfolding of the nuclear enrichment process).

In this paper, however, both the starting point and the main argument take a radically different stance. The basic starting point is that the Obama administration did not really effectively “extend its hand.” Although the President called for engagement, in reality he pursued relatively limited objectives and did not conceive a comprehensive long-term strategy for the management of the US-Iranian relationship. This was and is the problem of America’s Iran policy. Therefore, the Obama administration’s one-year record (in itself too short of a time frame for any kind of assessment) should not be cited as “proof” that a balanced and well-designed diplomatic approach towards Iran would, in any case, be doomed to failure. The central scope of the paper is, in fact, to underline that an authentically new and ambitious policy on the part of the United States is not only a vital necessity but could, in the long run, constitute the only viable option to reduce the dangers inherent in this 30 year-long impasse.

In the first section, the current deadlock is put into perspective by assessing the problematic history of the US-Iranian relationship, an essential first step for any understanding of the future options available for Washington. The second section underscores the strategic importance of Iran, thus unveiling the crucial importance of formulating a wide-ranging policy. A three-fold policy recommendation, which would raise the stakes and allow the US to pursue its interests more effectively, is set forth in the

third section of the paper. The fourth part points to the reasons why an exclusive focus on the nuclear program has not and, most likely will not, produce tangible and lasting results. The final section argues that it is not a given that the current problematic domestic situation in Iran makes the pursuit of an ambitious policy impossible.

It is important to underline that this study focuses on the evolution of the US-Iranian *bilateral* relationship, whereas the potential impact of the policies of other major international actors remains outside the main scope of the paper. Moreover, the paper will only marginally refer to the internal divisions of the Obama administration's Iran team, while concentrating on the outcomes and/or shortcomings of America's overall policy.

### **US-Iranian Relations in Perspective**

Since the severing of formal diplomatic ties in 1979, the US-Iranian relationship has essentially remained stalemated. The United States denied recognition to the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Iranian regime based its policies on an open and declared anti-Americanism. Despite some moments of marginal, albeit temporary, improvement in the bilateral relationship, thirty years of isolation have deepened the hostility and mutual suspicion. But what are the origins of this deeply rooted enmity? While the answer is inherently complex, the following outline of the troubled US-Iranian relationship might unveil at least some of the motivations of this prolonged impasse.

The United States initially directly entered Iran during the Second World War. The Allies benefited from the country's strategic location, which served as a logistical supply route connecting Europe to the Soviet Union. In the immediate aftermath of the War, the American presence in Iran was generally viewed positively, especially when juxtaposed with the unfavorable image of the Russian and the British (because of the legacy of the respective empires' territorial and economic ambitions over what had anciently been the Persian Empire). In contrast to the other two major outside powers, America represented the ideals of democracy and modernization in a country struggling to emerge from underdevelopment, dominant external influence and authoritarian rule. In the post-war years, Iranian resentment mainly focused against the British colonial "exploiters" who maintained control of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and its rich revenues. Within this context, the nationalist movement led by Mohammed Mossadeq, elected Prime Minister in 1951, had the declared objective of promoting the autonomous development of Iran. The first obvious step in that direction was the nationalization of the Oil Company, which reduced foreign intervention

into Iranian affairs, while enabling the country to benefit from its own revenues.

However, in the early 1950s the general Cold War context overwhelmingly influenced the perceptions of the US leadership. The economic setback combined with the prospect of continued political instability in Iran, potentially open to communist infiltration, necessitated rapid “countermeasures.” Therefore, in 1953 the US authorized “Operation Ajax” – the CIA covert intervention that led to the removal of Mossadeq and the consolidation of the openly pro-Western rule of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (the Iranian monarch in power since 1941). From that moment onwards, the United States was able to secure both the existence of a friendly government, geared towards the containment of Soviet expansionism, and the penetration of the Iranian oil fields. In concrete terms, and from the standpoint of a superpower engaged in an increasingly global Cold War, the 1953 coup (the first “regime change” intervention of the US-CIA) was, therefore, a clear-cut success. At the same time, however, the coup inevitably, and irreparably, damaged the US-Iranian relationship. From the Iranian standpoint, 1953 was synonymous of the rupture with the United States – an outside power that henceforth came to be viewed as simply another “ordinary” great power ready to exploit Iran for its own benefits, regardless of the needs, ambitions and requests of the Iranian people.

The choices made by the United States in the years that followed seemed only to substantiate this view. Despite the obvious need for social and economic reform, during the 1950s American aid programs to Iran primarily focused on military assistance. Consequently, the Iranian military forces expanded and, in parallel, the US military presence in Iran became increasingly visible. In particular, the ties between Washington and Tehran were strengthened after the 1958 coup in Iraq that led to the overthrow of the Iraqi monarchy and the end of the close association between Baghdad and the United States. The importance of Iran as an anti-Soviet strategic ally therefore became increasingly crucial.

The emphasis on security was not, however, unanimously viewed with favor in Iran. American aid was seen as incrementing the corruption of the regime and, while the military forces expanded, the social and economic conditions of the majority of the Iranian people did not improve. In the early 1960s, the Kennedy administration sought to introduce a different policy towards Iran, advocating internal development, social and economic reform over outright military assistance. The US thus cautiously favored the so-called “White Revolution” initiated by the Shah – a broad, wide-ranging program intended to transform and modernize the Iranian society and economic structure.

However, the Shah’s reform programs did not have a positive domestic impact. Raising the expectations of the population while not producing the intended results, these policies only provoked further protests,



while deepening the fissure between the regime and the society. Moreover, the United States viewed as intrinsically related to the monarchy and to its failed promises, increasingly emerged as a target of the anti-regime demonstrations. During the 1960s, as the US became entangled in Vietnam and thus even less concerned about the Shah's management of his internal affairs, the Iranian leader tightened his repressive measures. This, in turn, inevitably produced louder protests and demonstrations (and, giving voice to the religious opposition, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini emerged as a leading figure). In January 1965, Iranian Prime Minister Hassan Ali Mansur was killed and later that year the Shah himself survived an assassination attempt.

These events, which evidently unveiled the increase of the Iranian domestic unrest, could have been warning signs for the United States. But they were not. In the early 1970s, the Nixon administration not only continued to develop the relationship with Iran but decisively and irrevocably strengthened the partnership with the Shah. During this decade, the US-Iranian relationship translated into a strong and *personal* link between the American leaders and the Shah. Therefore, when the Iranian monarch's rule started to vacillate and became the target of increasingly violent and radical protests, the identification of the United States with the Shah led to the consolidation of the anti-American character of the revolution. When Ayatollah Khomeini returned from his exile and became the leader of the newly born Islamic Republic, he declared that one of the founding pillars of the "new Iran" was to end the decades-long interference into Iranian affairs of the "Great Satan" – the United States of America.

US President Jimmy Carter (who himself had in essence continued to support the Shah for the same long-standing strategic necessities of his predecessors), was unable to effectively respond to the unfolding of the crisis and, in the end, witnessed practically unarmed to the radicalization of the revolutionary process in Iran. When, in November 1979 a group of revolutionaries stormed into the American Embassy in Tehran taking more than 50 American citizens hostage (the crisis would last for 444 days), Washington severed diplomatic relations with Iran and put into place a series of emergency measures to deal with the Iranian threat. These are the same measures that, since then and for the following 30 years, successive American presidents (including Barack Obama) renew each year. In fact, if 1953 irreparably damaged the Iranian perception of the United States, 1979 unequivocally represented the rupture point for many Americans whom, from that moment onwards, viewed the Iranian regime as radical, extremist and uncompromising.

Since the birth of the Islamic Republic, US-Iranian relations have been characterized by tension and mutual suspicion. Like a pendulum, the bilateral relationship has oscillated between periods of tacit (though limited) improvement and further (rapid) deterioration. From the US standpoint, the underlining necessity of reopening a direct dialogue has been constantly

acknowledged, but the means to attain the objective have, throughout the decades, been incoherent and inconclusive. For example, during the 1980s, at the height of the Iran-Iraq war, the Reagan administration clumsily sought to establish a direct channel of cooperation with the Iranian leadership through arms sales, while at the same time trying to enlist Iranian support for the liberation of Western hostages detained in Lebanon (these events then led to the infamous Iran-Contras scandal). In the late 1990s, the Clinton administration, prompted by the election in Iran of moderate president Mohammad Khatami, intensified efforts to reach out to Tehran by relaxing sanctions on food and medicine, proposing cooperation on terrorism and in part recognizing past historic grievances. In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorists attacks, before George W. Bush embraced regime change and declared Iran as part of the “axis of evil,” the US and Iran cooperated in Afghanistan against their common enemy, the Taliban. Ultimately, however, despite repeated efforts, all American presidents since Carter have been unable, unwilling or incapable of crafting a balanced and comprehensive policy towards Iran, one which would lead to a real breakthrough and to a gradual normalization of relations. Today, more than ever, it would be vital for the United States to conceive a way to overcome this 30-year impasse.

### **The Strategic Importance of Iran**

The sheer facts about Iran’s importance as a regional power are evident: its size and population; an established (which does not necessarily means good) political system in a region where most countries are much smaller, unstable or inadequately institutionalized; its geographic location – Iran controls one shore of the Persian Gulf, through which some seventeen million barrels of oil transit each day – and borders Iraq and Afghanistan, the countries in which the US retains significant presence and that are the focus of current American foreign policy interests; its resources – Iran detains the world’s second largest reserves of oil and second largest reserves of natural gas (which remain largely untouched).

These reasons alone convey the potentially vital importance of breaking the US-Iranian deadlock. Moreover, the developments of the last decade have added urgency to changing an already paradoxical situation. Before 2001, Iran was viewed in the US as a difficult though relatively marginalized country towards which, in the long run, a renewed policy would have to be conceived. But the issue was not considered pressing, nor was it deemed a priority. Between 2002 and 2004, however, this perception dramatically changed. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed the existence of a more advanced and disputed nuclear program than had previously been known. At the same time, the US policies in the

region ironically reinforced Iran's geopolitical position. The overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and, later, of Saddam Hussein's rule in Iraq eliminated Iran's two greatest and long-standing enemies, unleashing the opportunity to expand Tehran's influence throughout the region. Washington's subsequent mismanagement of its involvement and reconstruction efforts in both Afghanistan and Iraq hampered effective American policymaking in the area, further damaging the image and the influence of the United States. Concurrently, Iran strengthened its ties with Hezbollah in Lebanon and with Hamas in Palestine, thus consolidating a network generally perceived as acting against American (and, more generally, Western) interests. By 2005-2006, compounded also by the election in Iran of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the US seemed to be vulnerable and in retreat while Iran's power, as the leader of a revisionist coalition set to transform the dynamics in the Middle East, was seen as on the rise. Moreover, actively balancing the absence of relations with the United States, Iran was active and successful, particularly in its economic policies, towards Russia and China. This, to a certain degree, enabled Tehran to bypass US sanctions and, most importantly, to weaken the international community's capacity to present itself as a unified front capable of effectively countering Iran.

President Obama therefore inherited an enormous and daunting challenge. Seemingly radically breaking from the recent past, at the beginning of his administration the President declared engagement with Iran an essential part of America's renewed foreign policy. In March 2009 he sent a message to Iran in occasion of the Nowruz (the Iranian New Year) celebrations. Obama directly addressed the people of Iran, recognizing their "great and celebrated civilization." This signaled a new approach, "the promise of a new day" in the troubled US-Iranian relationship. Despite the "serious differences" between the two countries, Obama declared that his administration was committed to diplomacy and to constructive engagement that would address "the full range of issues" that hamper the improvement of the bilateral relationship. Indeed, the tone and substance of the message were unique.<sup>3</sup>

One year after those words, the prospect of a new beginning seems to have already vanished. While Obama himself might have been seriously committed to engagement, from the outset his administration appeared to be divided on the actual policy lines to follow. On the one hand the offer to "talk" was repeatedly underscored, but on the other senior members of the administration stressed that "all options remained on the table" (i.e. also the military one) in case of Iranian continued rebuke of the international community's rules. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton repeatedly declared

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<sup>3</sup> President Obama's Nowruz message in March 2009, audio message available at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=HY\\_utC-hrjI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HY_utC-hrjI)

that the US would not talk simply for the sake of talking. Specifically, the nuclear issue dominated the discourse and the first, tentative dialogue focused on the disputed nature of Iran's nuclear program. Amidst failed promises and endless debates over the details of the uranium enrichment process, no tangible progress was made. In the meantime, the Iranian leaders continue in the pursuit of their nuclear ambitions.

Greatly complicated by the turmoil and uncertainty following the June 2009 presidential elections, Obama's Iran policy has already (though perhaps prematurely) been labeled as a failure. Considering the strategic importance of Iran and, therefore, of the necessity of conceiving a more effective policy – particularly because of the sense of urgency conveyed by the prospected (if only potential) nuclearization of Iran – it is imperative to pose the following questions: why has Obama's opening not yielded results? What policy should be adopted for the future? Can there be expectations for progress, considering the current Iranian domestic scene?

### **How to Move On?**

Critics of the Obama approach have described it as naïve, counterproductive, and dangerous, since it could easily translate into appeasement of Iran's radical leadership. Pointing to the ideological character of the Iranian regime – that bases its legitimacy on a strong anti-Americanism and on revolutionary purposes that run counter to US interests in the region – many analysts consider any diplomatic approach to be hopeless. The leaders of the Islamic Republic would simply not be willing to compromise with their long-standing adversary. This could, obviously, be true. On the other hand, however, one could make the counterargument that, after three decades, the ideological appeal of Iran's revolutionary ideals may be eroding. As in other revolutionary states, once in power leaders have to necessarily balance ideals with pragmatism in order to retain their power. In the case of Iran, the clerical rulers have had to occasionally soften their stance, make agreements with rivals and, ultimately, pursue their policies within the regional order they promised to challenge. In these 30 years, the regime has been capable of recognizing the limits of its power and of mixing ideological proclaims with pragmatic assessments. In other words, focusing only on the ideological component of Iran's policies seems short-sighted. Moreover, an effective assessment of US policies has to necessarily consider the possibility that the stalemate may depend, at least in part, on the inappropriateness, or ill-conception of *American* policies.

From this standpoint, therefore, what would be the components of a more balanced and comprehensive US policy, geared towards a gradual and long-term normalization? The first step would be to address the historic

sense of insecurity that characterizes Iranian policies, consequence of decades of foreign intervention (the Russian and British empires first, the US later). Any approach that seeks to move beyond short-term tactical progress in search for a future strategy would have to necessarily assess and understand the roots of the grievances against the United States. And, consequently, this assessment and understanding would have to be unequivocally conveyed to the Iranian leadership. Afterwards, it would have to be posed at the basis of future policy-making.

Secondly, assuming that a certain degree of pragmatism does shape the policies of the Islamic Republic, the US would have work to identify common interests. As demonstrated by the brief parenthesis of cooperation in the aftermath of 9/11 (and considering the historical enmity between the Iranian leadership and the Taliban), the potential for cooperation in Afghanistan could and should be more actively pursued by Washington. Specifically, the US and Iran could start by working on curbing the drug trade which passes through Iran. More broadly, it would be in the American interest to foster more positive relations between Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan (the area along the border between these three countries is among the most dangerously volatile in the region). But these relations are hindered by the enduring US-Iranian hostility and by allegations of US support for local irredentism.

The acknowledgement of the importance of a regional policy would, in fact, have to be the third indispensable component of an effective diplomatic strategy (focusing attention on both the Eastern and Western borders of Iran). In the past, the United States has sought to forge an anti-Iranian stance of the Gulf countries – Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman – building on their fear of Iranian regional hegemony, rather than seeking to diminish it. The limits of this approach are evident, particularly in the aftermath of the US intervention in Iraq which has weakened the appeal of turning to America for protection and security. In the current situation, the smaller and relatively weaker Gulf States are less likely to challenge Iran, while seeking some sort of normalization that would protect their interests. Obama's America – still tied down in Iraq and Afghanistan – should encourage this trend, rather than opposing it. This could be a first step towards inducing a more responsible Iranian posture and towards the development of a new regional security framework for the region. Considering the uncertain future of Iraq, and the enduring, though perhaps overvalued fears of a crescent of Shia resurgence (that would mean Iranian dominant influence over Iraq), a security architecture which would, at least in part, dispel the fears of the Sunni countries would be crucial. From Washington's point of view, it would serve the dual purpose of reassuring its allies in the Gulf, while underlining the potential importance of a positive role for Iran in the management of regional affairs.

In view of the rhetoric emanating from Iranian President Ahmadinejad – who continues in his unrelenting attacks against Israel and in labeling any internal Iranian dissent as instigated from outside enemies (the Western powers above all) – and the stance taken by Iran’s supreme leader Ali Khameni – who has aligned himself with Ahmadinejad in the post electoral turmoil and has cataloged Obama’s overtures as dubious and insincere – the three-fold policy outlined above may appear as totally unrealistic. However, history demonstrates that engagement with adversaries is not only possible but may, in the long run, constitute the only viable option to reduce the danger of confrontational policies. This has been particularly true at times when – like in the current situation – American power appears to be declining, consequence of over-commitment abroad and economic distress at home. During the 1970s, US President Richard Nixon responded to the crisis of American power (caused by the Vietnam War and the relative decline of the US economy) by pursuing a dialogue with America’s long-standing adversaries, the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. His strategy of *détente* did *not* entail surrender to Communist ideology, nor did it translate into a weakening of America’s anti-Soviet stance. On the contrary, Nixon assertively resisted Soviet expansionism in certain areas of the world, while at the same time agreeing with Moscow on the need to curb the nuclear arms race (by signing the first strategic arms limitation treaty). Towards China, the dialogue, grounded on both sides’ vital geopolitical interests, broke a decade-long isolation and initiated the process of normalization that ensued a few years later. In both cases, divergences remained and the openings did not translate into instantaneous realignment on all issues. Ideological differences endured, but they no longer hindered pragmatic cooperation. By focusing on both sides’ common interests and by pursuing a gradual and incremental approach, the US managed to better secure its national interest through dialogue rather than confrontation.

Historical examples suggest only the possibility and never the guarantee of success. And, obviously, analogies can offer only loose comparisons. They are nevertheless important as reminders that, in the past, remarkable breakthroughs have only been achieved by pursuing ambitious and potentially uncertain policies. Although the Obama administration initially promised to reset US-Iranian relations, the policy actually pursued lacked both in vision and in determination. Despite calling for engagement, he never defined a long-term strategy and, far from seeking to address “the full range of issues” that characterizes the present state of hostility, attention focused almost exclusively on the nuclear controversy. Obama tried to persuade Iran, with the so-called carrot and stick approach, but neither the carrots nor the sticks were particularly well-conceived. The sole scope was to induce Iran into complying with the rules of the international community and to make concessions regarding its nuclear program. The nuclear issue was approached and dealt with outside the broader context of the US-Iranian

relationship. The concerns regarding the ambiguous nature of Iran's nuclear enrichment program undeniably *do* constitute the most urgent issue. However, the continuation of this one-sided approach is unlikely to produce tangible progress.

### **A Broader Context for the Nuclear Issue**

In fact, the nuclear issue should be inserted into a broader context for at least three distinct though inter-related reasons. First, on the basis of the long-standing and deeply rooted hostility inherent in the US-Iranian relationship, it is difficult to envision a breakthrough on the highly controversial nuclear issue unless the negotiations are accompanied by a more comprehensive approach (of the type outlined above). Only this would enable the gradual building of mutual confidence, a necessary precondition for any productive and successful negotiation.

Secondly, because of the complexity of the matter, focusing only on the details of the nuclear enrichment process will most likely continue to yield contradictory outcomes. The nuclear non-proliferation regime – to which the international community demands Iranian compliance – is, in itself, quite ambiguous. It allows the signatories of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes but *not* to enrich enough quantities that would permit the creation of a nuclear weapon. Therefore, the nations that use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes necessarily come to possess also the theoretical “know-how” to produce weapons, but commit not to stockpile enough quantities of uranium that would enable them to do so. Consequently, stating that Iran is entitled to a peaceful nuclear program means allowing Tehran to develop the *theoretical* capability to be also able to build a bomb. For this reason, it is essential to establish a degree of trust with Iran, even if it were “demonstrated” that its nuclear program is meant only for peaceful purposes. Only that degree of trust could reassure the international community that Iran will stop short of developing nuclear weapons. On a broader scale, American (and in general Western) intransigence on Iran's nuclear program appears one-sided and incoherent when juxtaposed to the stance taken towards Israel (whose nuclear capability is no longer doubted). And, historically, America's reliance on Pakistan, deeply grounded on geopolitical interests, was never seriously questioned despite Pakistan's problematic possession of nuclear weapons. Moreover, the Iranian domestic scene needs to be taken into consideration. The Iranian regime has been successful in portraying the nation's nuclear program as a means of internal development and progress for Iran. As a result, it is likely that for many Iranians the US constant criticism of the program may have come to signify that America is, yet again,

intervening in Iran's domestic affairs and opposed to Iran's internal development and modernization.

Third, American concerns regarding Iran's potential possession of nuclear weapons relate not only to the issue of how the Iranian leadership might decide to employ them but also to the unsettling question of whether Tehran would be willing to transfer the weapons to terrorists – or to organizations that support terrorists. This aspect in particular (i.e. the issue of nuclear proliferation into the hands of non-state actors) can only be tackled by enhancing cooperative regional security frameworks. Ultimately, once again, only the establishment of a degree of confidence and trust could effectively reassure the United States and its allies.

In short, all these elements suggest that in order to successfully negotiate on the nuclear issue, and for an agreement to endure, it would have to be part of a broader strategic realignment of the United States and Iran. Insisting that such an agreement constitute the precondition for realignment simply reveals limited and short-term objectives on the part of the United States.

### **An Uncertain Path: Iran's Domestic Turmoil**

The consequences of the June 2009 disputed presidential elections in Iran have undeniably complicated the already overwhelming task of crafting an effective US policy towards Iran. According to some analysts the way the Iranian leadership handled the post-election turmoil, the consolidation of Ahmadinejad's rule that followed and the Iranian supreme leader's reputation as an uncompromising anti-American, are elements that exclude any chances for a US pursuit of successful engagement. Hence, the necessity of considering alternative options.

The advocates of the need to adopt tougher measures – which vary from enforcing more crippling sanctions to military strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities – support their argument by stating that the current Iranian leaders base their authority on a declared hostility towards the United States and cannot afford to concede, for fear of de-legitimizing their power. These views point to the origins of the Islamic Revolution which, as outlined above, had a distinct anti-American connotation. One could, however, make the counterargument that, should the US seek gradual normalization, and thus adopt a radically different stance compared to *all* American administrations since 1979; it would be increasingly difficult for the Iranian leadership to justify its unrelenting enmity towards Washington. In other words, a real change in the American posture would weaken the stance of the hardliners and implicitly encourage the more moderate and reformist views already present in Iran. Consequently, in order to avoid a further weakening



of their position, and the risk of losing their grip on power, even the hardliners might be induced to compromise.

According to other analysts – the so-called “Iran watchers,”<sup>4</sup> constituting mainly of Iranian-Americans or of Americans of Iranian origin – under the present circumstances the United States should hesitate in conceiving wide-ranging and innovative policies, while observing the unfolding of the protest, or “green movement.” Because of the potential that the opposition in Iran holds of bringing about a change of regime, the US should wait in terms of political engagement. In this view, a focus on the nuclear program, and on means to curb it, even if only momentarily, is the correct policy in that it buys time until the emergence of more favorable circumstances for the United States. However, against these views, one could make a twofold argument: first, that despite the indisputable potential of the opposition, its future strength remains uncertain (particularly considering the repressive measures undertaken by the regime); secondly, that for the United States this is the moment to act precisely because the regime has been weakened by the post-election turmoil and by the divisions which have emerged within the Iranian clerical establishment. As stated above, a broad shift in US policy could further destabilize and weaken the intransigent stance of the more conservative camp.

The view of the more active supporters of the promotion of human rights take the argument of the “Iran watchers” a step further: the US would have to support the Iranian opposition, thus actively pursuing both regime change and support for democracy and human rights in Iran. While the moralistic, or idealistic, basis of this argument may be laudable, in essence it asks for active intervention in the internal affairs of Iran. This is a particularly dangerous call, considering the history of the US-Iranian relationship. It would give the hardliners a base for arguing that the foreigners are behind the opposition and instigate its actions. Moreover, and most importantly, the strength and the revolutionary potential of the green movement lie in its indigenous and autonomous origins. An outside intervention – even in its support – risks de-legitimizing the foundation of the movement and compromising its future development.

The dilemma between the active support or promotion of human rights and the pursuit of the national interest has traditionally characterized the shaping of American foreign policy. This is perhaps natural and inevitable, considering the particular history of the United States, a nation born on the basis of the democratic ideals of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and the successive global role undertaken during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as the leader and defender of the “free world.” It is undisputable that engaging with repressive regimes requires compromising the values and ideals of a democracy. This has occurred in the past; again the examples of *détente* with the Soviet Union

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<sup>4</sup> This is a term used in leading American think-tanks.

and China are emblematic, as are the Cold War partnerships of the United States with right-wing dictatorships in Latin America, autocratic regimes in Africa and elsewhere around the globe. Most probably, such compromises will continue to be necessary in the future.

These are justified and at times required on the basis of national interests or because of the potential contribution to international stability that they may entail. The present day impasse in America's relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran perpetuates a situation that increases the likelihood of the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the spread of terrorism and continued regional instability. This is a situation in which a responsible America would have to take the lead even, if necessary, by making pragmatic compromises. Ideological intransigence has not, and will not, help the Iranian people. Instead, a well-conceived and long term strategy for the management of the future US-Iranian relationship might both secure American interests in the region and, in the long run, promote favorable change for the Iranian people.

## **Conclusion**

Crafting a new and comprehensive policy towards a complex and inscrutable country like Iran is a difficult task; a challenge rendered all the more complicated by the ticking of the clock on Iran's nuclear pursuit and by the legacy of 30 years of mutual hostility. Nevertheless, it is imperative for the United States to envision a way out of the impasse, for the combination of reasons outlined above – from the strategic location of Iran, to its potential contribution to regional stability, to the sheer fact that perpetuating the absence of relations is in itself a paradox. It is evident, however, that short term tactical approaches, focusing only on tampering Iran's nuclear ambitions, will not yield any significant result and, ultimately, will not satisfy America's longer term objectives. While an authentic pursuit of engagement may appear perilous, if well-conceived, a gradual normalization strategy might be the least dangerous option. It would be the only viable means to tangibly demonstrate that "America is ready to lead once again" in the region, and in the world. Moreover, paraphrasing President Obama, it would put the United States on the "right side of history."

Advocating such an ambitious stance does not mean downplaying the inherent difficulties that Obama (or any US President) would have to face. One of the major obstacles, with both domestic and international repercussions, is America's close, though at times problematic, alliance with Israel. Divergences on how to deal with Iran, and Israel's probable harsh opposition to any softening of the US stance, are issues which would have to be tackled by Washington. And, considering the tense state of the bilateral relationship, consequence of the stalled Middle East peace process, this

would be a particularly tall order. On the other hand, however, Israel would be one of the first states in the region to benefit from a positive shift in the US-Iranian relationship. Pure fantasy, maybe. Or, perhaps, an end result achievable with able and ambitious statecraft. In this context, the historic links between the Israeli and Iranian populations, both non-Arab entities that in the past have had intense economic and cultural exchanges, could serve as a reminder that hostility is not, and need not, be the only defining character.

Another potentially insuperable obstacle relates to the domestic political scene in the United States. In an increasingly polarized atmosphere, evident during the political battle over the healthcare reform, building congressional support for an outreach to Iran would not be easy. Since a strategy designed to transform the nature of the US-Iranian relationship would take years (if not decades), Obama would easily come under attack for lack of “results.” The only way to rebuke criticism would be to point to the lack of progress made by current policies and to the dangers inherent in so-called “tougher measures” – sanctions and military options. In the past, sanctions have not succeeded in curtailing Iran’s nuclear program or in softening its more militant posture. Instead, they have had a negative impact on portions of the Iranian population. For an America still entangled in Iraq and Afghanistan, a military intervention – even if limited to “surgical strikes” against the nuclear facilities – would have destabilizing repercussions on the new regional role and image of the United States that Washington is, with extreme difficulty, trying to foster. Besides, a strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities would only delay and not eliminate Iran’s nuclear quest (which would, most likely, be boosted as a form of retaliation). In short, the President would have to convince his opponents – using all the arguments outlined in this paper – that a long term strategy is the least dangerous option and the only one which could potentially secure US interests in the “new era of responsibility” that Obama is seeking to forge.

Recently, the scholarly debates on Iran in the United States have shifted from designing policies to prevent Iran from building the nuclear bomb, to recommending strategies on how to effectively contain a potentially nuclear Iran.<sup>5</sup> Apart from underscoring, once again, that the discussion on Iran should *not* focus only on the nuclear controversy, this shift is significant because it signals the importance of acknowledging that Iran may, indeed, acquire a nuclear weapons capability relatively soon. Such a realization makes the conception of ambitious, longer-term policies on the part of the United States all the more crucial. In fact, in the long run, only rapprochement would allow for effective containment.

Paraphrasing the title of Obama’s best selling book “The Audacity of Hope,” former US National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski recently concluded an assessment of the American foreign policy challenges

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<sup>5</sup> The reference is to the article in *Foreign Affairs*, “After Iran Gets the Bomb” and other articles recently published by the New York Times.

that remain unaddressed by stating that “for the United States’ national interest, but also for humanity’s sake, it would be truly vital for Obama to pursue with tenacious audacity the soaring hopes he unleashed.”<sup>6</sup> This is particularly true in the case of the troubled US-Iranian relationship.

Unfortunately, the Obama administration seems to have already abandoned even the tentative engagement it initially proposed. In this year’s Nowruz message, the President’s tone has drastically changed, compared to a year ago. To “America’s extended hand,” asserts the President, “the Iranian leaders have responded only with an unclenched fist.” Any future prospects for a diplomatic approach, he adds, depend only on the course chosen by the Iranian leaders.<sup>7</sup>

The scope of this paper was to trigger a provocative reflection, setting forth the precisely opposite argument: that in reality Washington did not effectively “extend its hand” towards Iran; that it would be increasingly crucial for the US to do so by designing more ambitious and long term policies; and that, as a renewed and responsible global power, America should take the lead in a process geared towards breaking the deadlock.

After the approval of the landmark reform of the American health care system, President Obama stated that America is still a country “capable of great things.” While this is undeniably true, in the context of the US-Iranian relationship “great things” have yet to be conceived.

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<sup>6</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, “From Hope to Audacity” in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 1, January/February 2010.

<sup>7</sup> President Obama’s Nowruz message in March 2010, audio message available at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=b\\_Qf\\_Ut5RYU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_Qf_Ut5RYU)

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