



# Beyond Incrementalism

A New Strategy for Dealing with Iran

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In the coming years, few if any countries will more preoccupy the foreign policy attention of the United States than Iran. The United States has long lacked a viable and coherent policy toward Iran. Perhaps for the first time since the fall of the Shah's regime in 1979, the United States seems determined to try to forge one.

The United States must move swiftly to chart a bold, new course that addresses all three of America's principal national interests with Iran. Our policy should seek to halt the development of an Iranian nuclear bomb, to end the regime's support of terrorist groups, and to help the democratic movement in Iran. Each of these goals is vital, but they are also intertwined. Compared to autocracies, democracies are more transparent about their foreign policy intentions and their military capabilities. Only when we have a government in Iran that is truly accountable to its people and to the rule of law will we be able to achieve a permanent and verifiable halt to that country's pursuit of nuclear weapons and its support of international terrorism.

Little progress toward achieving any of these three objectives is apparent. After the United States invaded Iraq, many in both Tehran and Washington thought that

Iran would be next. Yet next to nothing has been advanced to define a new Iran policy. Consumed by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and divided internally, the United States managed no new initiatives to deal with the threat posed by Iran. Ironically, despite its anti-European rhetoric during the contentious debate over the Iraq war, the United States outsourced Iran policy to the foreign ministers of England, France, and Germany, who spearheaded an effort to reach a new agreement with the Tehran regime about its nuclear program.

Currently, the only comfort in failing to articulate an American strategy toward Iran is that, over the past thirty years, no other American entity has been able to do so.<sup>1</sup> Since the 1979 Iranian revolution, no American president has proved able to devise a proactive strategy for achieving American foreign policy objectives on Iran. Rather, every major policy initiative, be it Carter's aborted mission to rescue the hostages or Reagan's ill-conceived plan to swap arms for hostages, has left the United States worse off. Even after the election of reformist President Hojatoleslam Mohammad Khatami in 1997, President Clinton could not develop a new mode of dealing with Iran. Instead, American policy has been stuck for thirty years.

Today, however, the United States cannot afford to ignore Iran. The mullahs who rule Tehran are determined to acquire nuclear weapons. A nuclear Iran is most likely to undermine the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), destabilize the balance of power in the region, and threaten American allies. In response, Egypt and Saudi Arabia will be tempted to launch full-scale efforts of their own to acquire nuclear weapons, sparking a nuclear arms race in the single most volatile part of the world. Moreover, an Israeli strike against Iranian nuclear facilities could provoke major violence between American friends and foes in the region. Finally, a nuclear Iran will further embolden the mullahs in Tehran to suppress pro-democratic forces inside Iran, as well as challenging and subverting American allies in the region. A nuclear Iran increases the chances of political survival of the Islamic Republic.

A new approach requires both a short-term strategy for suspending Iran's nuclear weapons development program and a long-term strategy of fostering democratic change within Iran. In the long term, only a democratic regime in Tehran will truly eliminate the threats Iran now poses to regional and

international peace and security. A democratic regime that represents the will of the Iranian people—now overwhelmingly pro-American and pro-democracy—not only will have much less need for nuclear weapons but would become an American strategic partner in the region. Furthermore, only a democratic Iran will allow for the kind of serious, rational, and reasoned national debate—free from Iranian jingoism and falsely aroused nationalist sentiments—that can end the current “nationalist” frenzy stirred up by the regime and bring a permanent, verifiable halt to Iran’s nuclear weapons development program. A democratic Iran would decisively reject hard-line clerical rule at home and halt state support for terrorist organizations abroad.

It is impossible to predict, however, when exactly this transition to democracy will take place in Iran. Consequently, in parallel to a comprehensive strategy for fostering democratic change in that country, the United States must also pursue a carefully constructed strategy of engaging Iranian society, and the regime, in order to suspend or at least slow Iran’s nuclear weapons development.

An effective American strategy toward Iran must be based on proactive measures and policies. One consequence of America’s past failure to develop a strategy has been that policy on Iran, particularly on the sensitive question of Iran’s nuclear program, has been passive and reactive. The initiative has been delegated to Europe, which shares American concern about Iran’s desire to acquire nuclear weapons but has not been willing to make the promotion of democracy a central component of Western policy in dealing with Iran.<sup>2</sup> As Richard Youngs has noted in assessing the results of the EU’s “critical dialogue” with Iran, “The focus on internal politics was negligible. The conditions set by the EU for upgrading relations with Iran related to the country’s external actions and not democratic reform.”<sup>3</sup> The United States must play a direct role in limiting Iran’s acquisition of a nuclear bomb, and the Europeans in turn must play a more active role in fostering democratic development within Iran. American policymakers must also recognize that, when it comes to Iran, the United States does not necessarily share the same interests on all issues with the EU.

The United States must adopt a bold new policy. The current, tentative tit-for-tat approach has failed in the past because it afforded enemies of democracy and of more-normalized relations with the United States a chance to torpedo

any new initiative. The dual policy we propose could disarm these foes while helping to undermine the very foundation of the regime's anti-American rhetoric.

## Arms Control

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### The Threat

Some analysts in the West as well as several Russian government officials still cling to the illusion that the Tehran regime is not really trying to develop a nuclear weapon but is only interested in using nuclear technologies for the generation of electricity. Others acknowledge that the Islamic Republic may have pursued a secret nuclear weapons program in the past but believe that it has now given up the project. Both these perspectives are dangerously wrong. Despite public pledges to the contrary, the mullahs who run the Islamic Republic believe that Iran has a strategic interest in acquiring the capability to build nuclear weapons. There is little evidence to suggest that their strategic thinking on this issue has changed appreciably in the last decade.

In fact, Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability precedes the Islamic revolution of 1979. During the height of his power in the mid-1970s, the Shah launched an ambitious, forty-billion-dollar nuclear program under his direct supervision. Iran agreed to buy twenty reactors, eight of them from Westinghouse in the United States. By 1977, the United States—once an important source of encouragement for this program—began to grow wary of the Shah's intentions, particularly when he began to invest heavily in all phases of mining and enriching uranium. Overt and covert ties with West Germany, France, and South Africa were the immediate cause of these concerns. Akbar Etemad, the head of the Iranian nuclear program at the time, claims that the Shah had in mind a two-track approach, wherein Iran would join the Non-Proliferation Treaty, remain within all the existing guidelines, and at the same time develop the ability to go nuclear if anyone in the neighborhood took that step. The Shah's closest confidante, Assadollah Alam, writes categorically that the Shah wanted to develop the bomb.<sup>4</sup> Under the Shah, Iran began to lay extensive foundations, from building research facilities to sending Iranian students to learn nuclear physics in some of the best Western universities.



It is a fallacy often promulgated by the Islamic regime that the United States went along with the Shah's program and today is unfairly singling out Iran. Documents from the last years of the Shah's rule, however, show that the United States was using every tool at its disposal in the late 1970s to force Iran to curtail its ambitious nuclear program and eliminate its military component.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, faulty designs in the German reactors gave rise to increasing concern for the safety of the Iranian program, particularly in light of the fact that many were to be built on highly active fault lines.<sup>6</sup>

With the 1979 revolution, Iran's nuclear program came to a screeching halt. Iran's new leaders claimed that Iran under the Shah had been forced to buy "nuclear junk" and invest in programs for which the country had no need. The war with Iraq (1980–88), however, during which the world was silent in the face of Saddam Hussein's repeated use of chemical weapons, as well as evidence of Iraqi and Pakistani intentions to develop the bomb, convinced the mullahs that their survival depended on joining the nuclear club. In the early days of this new policy, Tehran officials such as onetime Speaker of the Parliament and then president, Hashemi Rafsanjani, openly talked of developing an "Islamic bomb." But as their program began to attract the world's attention and as they followed events in Iraq and in North Korea, they became convinced of two things: to avoid the fate of Saddam, they had to develop the bomb quickly, and to avoid another Osirak—in which the Israeli air force took out Iraq's nascent nuclear program in 1981—they had to hide their nuclear sites and disperse them around the country, even in highly populated areas.

The mullahs' true intentions were gradually exposed as the extent of their covert activities and their ties to the black market in nuclear materials run by Pakistan's A. Q. Khan became known.<sup>7</sup> In reaction to these allegations, Iranian president Khatami eventually admitted candidly on February 9, 2003, that his government was building facilities that would enable Iran to produce its own highly enriched uranium to fuel the nuclear reactor in Bushehr being built by the Russians. With that highly enriched uranium, Iran could also produce nuclear weapons in short order.

In the wake of these embarrassing revelations, the Tehran government decided on a two-pronged policy. Internationally, it decided to use tensions between

the United States and the European Union, on the one hand, and between the United States and Russia and China, on the other, to buy time for themselves and, in their own words, “to isolate the United States” on the global diplomatic scene. Recently, Iran’s political leaders have described their agreement—for another “temporary suspension” of enrichment activities, signed in October 2003 with England, France, and Germany—as essentially a diplomatic ploy to isolate the United States. More important, on the domestic side, they began an astute propaganda blitzkrieg portraying the United States as the sole government trying to deprive Iran of its sovereign and legal right to a nuclear program and themselves as the champions of Iranian national interests. It is a measure of the failure of public diplomacy in the West and of opposition politics among the Iranians that the very Islamic regime that disparaged “nationalism” and “popular sovereignty” as concepts concocted by the colonialists to undermine and divide Islamic solidarity has now become the champion of Iranian nationalism and popular sovereignty.

Iranian officials have repeatedly made it clear that they will accept only a “temporary suspension” of enrichment activities and that they will insist on Iran’s right to a complete fuel cycle. To date, Iran’s government has refused to commit to dismantling its enrichment program and its heavy water reactor. Again, in Iranian officials’ public pronouncements in Iran about the terms of their recent agreement with England, France, and Germany, they emphasize that “the heart of the agreement” is Europe’s consent to Iran’s right and “existing ability” to develop the full “fuel cycle” for the reactors being built in Iran (even if Europeans involved in these negotiations disagree that the EU is willing to recognize Iran’s “right” to fuel-cycle technology). If the Islamic Republic is allowed to develop its own capacity for enriching uranium or reprocessing plutonium or both, it must be assumed that Iran would then use this control over the fuel cycle (as did Pakistan and India) to build nuclear bombs.

Iran’s highly developed ballistic missile program adds corroborating evidence about Tehran’s nuclear weapons intentions. Each new generation of the Shahab missile has had a longer-range capability than the previous one. These ballistic missiles, however, lack the capacity for the precise targeting necessary to make them effective with conventional warheads. They become lethal weapons only

if armed with a nuclear, chemical, or biological warhead. In March 2005, the new, democratically oriented government in Ukraine headed by President Yushchenko released new information about secret sales of two dozen nuclear-capable cruise missiles to Iran, a clear indication of the regime's true intentions.

Iran's attempts to develop both a nuclear weapon and vehicles to deliver it over long ranges pose a profound threat to American national security interests and a strategic blow to Iran's indigenous democratic movement. A direct nuclear attack on American soil is not a serious threat. Iran's current leadership has neither the means nor the intent to strike the United States with a nuclear warhead (or any other kind of warhead). It knows that such an attack would bring massive retaliation. Furthermore, if the regime's military assistance program to Hezbollah in Lebanon is an indication, Tehran's rulers are not likely to use nuclear weapons against American allies in the region or to hand over a nuclear weapon to terrorist proxies. The mullahs who rule Tehran understand power and deterrence; they have long given up on their ideological quest to foment or export revolution, instead using the rhetoric and practice of supporting Islamic radicals only as a pragmatic tool of their own foreign policy of preservation. We cannot know whether the regime might attempt to transfer a nuclear weapon to a terrorist group at some point in the future. In the near term, however, the threat of a nuclear Iran comes instead from the reaction it would spark in the region and the world—including a nuclear Egypt, a nuclear Saudi Arabia, and the effective end of the NPT. Often misunderstood in the West, the mullahs ruling Iran today have another domestic motivation for acquiring or developing a nuclear weapon—self-preservation at home. Like the last generation of octogenarians who ruled the Soviet Union, Iran's leaders today want nuclear weapons as a means to help them *preserve* their corrupt regime, rather than spread their model of theocratic rule to other countries.

### Failed Past Solutions

If the Iranian nuclear threat is real, the Western attempt to defuse it is not. The American strategy has consisted primarily of isolation and embargo. The effect of sanctions is always difficult to measure; in the case of Iran, evidence indicates they have utterly failed. Would the Iranian nuclear weapons program be even

more advanced had American sanctions been lifted long ago? This is unlikely, since the U.S. government would never allow U.S. companies to sell technologies to Iran that could be diverted to a nuclear weapons program. What is obvious, however, is that Iran has acquired nuclear technologies and materials for developing nuclear capabilities during the era of American sanctions for the obvious reason that other countries have not enforced sanctions against Iran. Russia has continued to build the light water nuclear reactor at Bushehr for the last decade, despite numerous American attempts to halt this project. Likewise, European companies provided the technology and materials needed to build the centrifuges in Natanz, which could enable the regime to enrich uranium to weapons grade. All of these transfers were legal. And, obviously, the sanctions regime did not prevent the illegal acquisition of nuclear technologies from the A. Q. Khan network or cruise missiles from Ukrainian black marketers.

In recognition of these failures, unnamed U.S. government officials have floated new “arms control” strategies, ranging from the crazy to the ineffectual. The boldest and most outlandish idea is military invasion. Two years ago, when the American-led invasion of Iraq looked simple and successful, this idea gained some modicum of support; and to be sure, though we find the idea of an attack on Iran to be dangerous, unwise, and ill-advised, military planners continue to develop scenarios for the use of force against Iran. But this idea, crazy even before the intervention in Iraq, has no credibility today because the U.S. government has neither the military means nor the political support at home to undertake such a strategy for eliminating Iran’s nuclear threat.

A less audacious but still dangerous idea is a surgical strike, conducted by either the United States or Israel, against Iran’s most important nuclear facilities, including the enrichment complex in Natanz, the Bushehr reactor, and perhaps some other facilities in Tehran and Isfahan. Proponents of this option cite Israel’s air strike against Iraq’s nuclear complex at Osirak in 1981 as their model of success. An American or Israeli strike will not end Iran’s aspirations, but it would—so the argument goes—slow down the process and make the mullahs reconsider the costs of trying to restart the program again.

Because Iran’s facilities are spread out and located in urban areas, a preemptive military strike against Iranian nuclear installations could kill hundreds if not

thousands of innocent Iranians and destroy ancient buildings of historical and religious importance to the Persian people. Isfahan is the central headquarters of Iran's nuclear program; Isfahan is also one of Iran's most beautiful cities with many precious historic landmarks. Widespread American or Israeli air attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities—and they would have to be massive and widespread to have any chance of success—would mobilize the Iranian people behind the mullahs, strengthen the regime, and undermine the considerable admiration and goodwill Iranians now have for the United States.

A military strike against Iran would thus severely damage the vital long-term goal of U.S. policy: the democratization of Iran. Iran is the only Muslim country in the greater Middle East today in which the vast majority is firmly pro-American. The democratic movement inside Iran—which is now dormant but still alive with hope, conviction, and possibilities—would suffer yet another blow if military conflict erupted between the Tehran autocracy and the West because, in a time of war, Iranians would rally around the flag much like any other patriotic people.

The Tehran government, in turn, would be compelled to muster a counter response. Iran has no military capacity to attack American territory, but the mullahs could orchestrate terrorist attacks against Israeli and American targets in Iraq while more actively destabilizing the entire region. Moreover, air strikes are unlikely to succeed in destroying Iran's nuclear facilities. Some are buried deep underground. Others may not yet have been discovered. And even if the military operation were successful in slowing down the nuclear program, it would only induce Tehran to redouble its efforts in building a bomb and to withdraw from the NPT altogether.

Some American proponents of military confrontation argue that Khaddafi's recent decision to dismantle Libya's nuclear weapons program means that the mere threat of military force will alter the mullahs' thinking about the bomb. The analogy is a false one. First, Libya's investment in a nuclear program, and its capacity to sustain and develop the technology, was only a fraction of Iran's. Khaddafi was never fully serious about developing nuclear power; the mullahs in Tehran, just like the Shah before them, are deadly serious. Second, Khaddafi had reason to fear an American military strike. Such a strike could have eliminated

not only his nuclear weapons programs but also his entire armed forces and maybe even himself and his regime. Iran, on the other hand, is a much larger and more complex country, with seventy-five million people and a hydra-headed regime not organized around one leader and his family. Especially with American forces overstretched and bogged down in Iraq, Iranian leaders no longer fear a full-scale invasion. Any other kind of strike would greatly benefit them politically.

For the moment, instead of invasion or a surgical air strike, the Bush administration is pushing a third set of tools for preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons: allowing the EU to negotiate a deal for the temporary suspension, which it hopes would translate into a permanent suspension of enrichment activities while keeping alive the threat of a strike. One interpretation of this policy is that the Europeans and Americans are now playing “good cop, bad cop.” Another interpretation is that the Bush administration is waiting for the European agreement to fail so it can then call on the UN Security Council to discuss sanctions against Iran for violating the NPT.

Tehran does not want an embarrassing discussion at the United Nations about its treaty violations. The mullahs are eager that Iran be considered a legitimate state by the international community. If implemented, a rigorous UN sanctions regime *might* inflict *some* pain on the Iranian rulers. Many other scenarios, however, are more likely. First, even if the Bush administration did succeed in compelling the Security Council to take up this issue, Russia and China would still be very unlikely to support new sanctions. In addition to the Bushehr reactor, Russia has many other economic interests in Iran, not least the hope that Bushehr will be the first of many multibillion-dollar Russian contracts to build several more nuclear power plants in Iran. Rosenergoatom, the government agency responsible for building Bushehr, is both a cash-strapped, giant conglomeration and a powerful lobby within the Russian parliament and government, whose economic interests in Iran will not be easily impeded by Russian diplomats.<sup>8</sup>

China wants and needs Iran’s oil. A recent multibillion-dollar oil and gas agreement between Iran and China gives the mullahs added insurance against the possibility of UN sanctions. Not long after the agreement was signed, China’s

Foreign Ministry announced that it would veto any UN sanctions against Iran. Even the French and British may be reluctant to back sanctions that would hurt their companies. (American firms would not be hurt by new UN sanctions because U.S. law already prohibits most American firms from doing business in Iran.) More generally, if a sanctions regime endorsed by the UN is to have any meaning, it must include oil, a policy unlikely to be supported by anyone. If sanctions could not be enforced with any effectiveness after the horrific seizure of American hostages by Iran in 1979, why should anyone believe that they would be successful now with the price of oil at more than fifty dollars a barrel?

Second, even if a new UN-backed sanctions regime did win approval, it would not prevent Iran from acquiring some nuclear weapons technology. In fact, Iran already has amassed the technological and theoretical know-how and instruments to develop a bomb.<sup>9</sup> Sanctions that prohibited the export of enriched uranium would slow Iran's efforts but only somewhat because Iran can mine its own uranium and eventually enrich it in its own centrifuges.

Finally, the economic pain of sanctions would fall on the masses, not on government elites. Broad new economic sanctions would hurt the very people we are trying to empower.

### A New Strategy

The only viable strategy, albeit still risky, is a new U.S. policy on Iran that combines negotiations in the short run with a principled long-term quest for peaceful regime change. A key element of this new approach would be negotiations over a more comprehensive deal about the future of Iran's nuclear program that would include the United States directly. The latest deal renegotiated by France, Germany, and Britain in November 2004 is at best a temporary solution. The agreement provided for a temporary suspension of the Iranian uranium enrichment program in the hope that a permanent suspension might be traded for generous promises of economic benefits—including entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) and an end to the embargo on badly needed spare parts for Iran's aged and ailing military and civilian aviation. The deal in hand (not the future deal hoped for) is an interim solution, which will remain contingent until the Americans engage in the negotiations. Meetings

in March 2005, intended to finalize some aspects of the deal, failed to result in any concrete agreements. Some Iranian officials have begun to voice doubts about the ability of the EU to deliver on its promises or even on its intentions as a supposed mediator. As a recent member of the newly elected Iranian parliament declared, many in the Islamic regime have come to believe that Europe and Russia are not good mediators between Iran and America. These countries, he said, have interests of their own, and Iran must therefore open direct, one-on-one negotiations with the United States.

After so many years of habitual lying about their secret nuclear program, the mullahs cannot be trusted to abide by their promises. If, as they claim, the purpose of the program is peaceful, then they should accept international control over Iran's nuclear fuel supply. They should also accept the suggestion that they borrow what fuel they need, presumably from Russia. Furthermore, Iran must allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to monitor all these actions much more closely and comprehensively, even on short notice. Past efforts by the IAEA to confirm Iran's compliance with NPT guidelines have exposed "many breaches of its obligations."<sup>10</sup> The West in turn must give the IAEA the necessary new resources to enable a more thorough and probing monitoring operation in Iran. (This would put in place the technology to monitor reactors and other nuclear facilities around the clock and in real time and analyze the data collected that now exist and make them available to the proper international bodies.) Iran must not only pledge to give up its aspirations to generate highly enriched uranium but also allow the international community to verify that pledge.

In return, a major policy speech must be made, one laying out the key elements of a new American policy. It should clearly state that the United States has no intention of invading Iran and at the same time affirm American support for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in Iran. However obvious this policy may be to American national security experts, Iranian citizens need to hear it. The president must also make it clear that the United States has no intention of imposing its own choice of rulers on the people of Iran and that it recognizes that Iran's democratic future will be determined by the people of Iran and no one else. In addition, the United States, Europe, and Russia must



guarantee Iran a steady supply of enriched uranium to fuel its light water power plant at Bushehr. (Russia is the obvious supplier.) As an added incentive, the suppliers might offer this fuel at reduced prices. The subsidy would be a small price to pay if it helped slow Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons.

Iran should not be singled out as the only signatory of the NPT that is forbidden to develop uranium enrichment (or plutonium reprocessing) capacities. Instead, at the NPT review conference in the spring of 2005, all signatories should amend the old treaty to ban any new production of highly enriched uranium or plutonium.

Those countries in need of enriched uranium to develop nuclear power will resist this new amendment, which yet again constrains their freedom to maneuver while offering no commensurate constraints on the suppliers. The NPT, however, does not offer any non-nuclear country the *right* to nuclear power or enriched uranium. And if a country such as Iran is proved to be in violation of the treaty, then any other benefits of the treaty should be revoked. The amended or newly interpreted treaty should clearly stipulate that, if any country violates provisions of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, it loses its right to nuclear fuel even for energy generation.

At the same time, American officials cannot compel Iran or the rest of the world to take a bigger step toward nonproliferation if the United States does not demonstrate some deeper commitment to the principle outlined in the original treaty. Forgoing development of a new generation of nuclear weapons, and accelerating the dismantlement of American and Russian nuclear weapons, would send a strong and credible signal about the U.S. commitment to denuclearization. A new treaty that defined rules for counting warheads, specified a timetable for dismantlement, included robust verification procedures, made cuts permanent, and did not allow demobilized weapons to be put in storage (as is now the practice under the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) would send a message to the world that the United States is serious about meeting its obligations as specified in Article 6 of the NPT.

Similarly, the United States and Russia should sign a new bilateral agreement that constrains the development of battlefield nuclear weapons (which might make the use of nuclear weapons more likely). In its 2002 Nuclear Posture

Review, U.S. officials expressed a desire to develop low-yield, earth-penetrating nuclear weapons as a more effective weapon for destroying bunkers. Thankfully, the U.S. Congress cut funds for this research in 2004, but the desire to revive the program within the Bush administration remains. Russian strategic doctrine continues to emphasize the utility of battlefield nuclear weapons. In addition, President Putin announced in February 2004 his desire to deploy a new generation of strategic ballistic missiles armed with nuclear warheads.<sup>11</sup> All this modernization is unnecessary. In particular, neither the United States nor Russia needs to develop “mini-nukes” or bunker-busting nuclear weapons because the deployment of such systems would increase, however slightly, the probability of using nuclear weapons. Instead, Russian and American officials should pledge to devise military strategies that do not rely on nuclear weapons. Only after American and Russian officials commit to reducing the role of nuclear weapons in their own defense plans will other countries take a similar approach. As Sam Nunn forcefully argued, “if the United States and Russia de-emphasize the role of nuclear weapons in our security it would immediately reduce the dangers we pose to each other; it would give us more standing to encourage other nations to dismiss the nuclear option—nations like Iran and North Korea. And it would rally the world to take essential steps in preventing catastrophic terrorism—not only in the nuclear arena, but also the biological and chemical.”<sup>12</sup>

To demonstrate a commitment to curtailing nuclear weapons development, officials might also choose to obtain the changes necessary to allow the United States to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Ignoring this important international treaty sends the wrong message about America’s commitment to nonproliferation. Russia and the United States also must get serious about reducing existing nonstrategic nuclear weapons and making more verifiable the safe storage of these weapons, including the safe storage of the highly enriched uranium needed to make them. As a first gesture of its commitment to lessen reliance on these kinds of weapons, the United States should remove all nonstrategic nuclear warheads from Europe. If we want Iran to honor its NPT obligations, then we must show more commitment to our treaty obligations.

If this new framework for monitoring and halting Iran's nuclear program breaks down, then the international community will be more receptive to a tougher policy on Iran. The United States will then be in a far better position to implement its new policy, combining tough measures on the nuclear issue with conciliatory measures on other areas. The breakdown of the agreement and the sense of international isolation that would follow it might also bring about a more sober assessment of the costs of the nuclear program on the part of the Iranian people. In the meantime, the United States can help this eventual process of rethinking by promoting independent, scholarly, and impartial studies that show the real economic, political, and military costs of a nuclear weapons program as well as the real and dubious contribution a nuclear bomb would make to Iran's security. The serious safety problems associated with Iran's nuclear reactor designs must also be conveyed to the Iranian public. International broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts also must convey to the Iranian people that the inevitable consequence of Iran's "going nuclear" will be to entrench a repressive and corrupt regime that they detest. A vigorous multifaceted campaign of public diplomacy on the real problems and prospects of the nuclear issue can begin to change the terms of discussion that have been hitherto dominated by the regime in Tehran. A new vigorous national debate is sure to strip away the current widespread public support for Iran's nuclear program and separate the people from the regime on this issue.

## Democracy Promotion

Even under the strictest inspection regime, the Islamic regime in all likelihood will eventually divert enriched uranium from peaceful to military purposes, develop its own uranium mines, and continue, albeit at a slower pace, to develop the bomb. The mullahs have repeatedly lied about the extent of their nuclear program, just as they have lied about many other things. Why would anyone believe that they would not seek to subvert clandestinely any new agreement? Particularly in the context of their past deceitful practices, the concept of *Tagiye*—unique to Shi'a Islam, wherein the devout are allowed, indeed encouraged, to lie in the service of promoting and preserving the faith

and the faithful—further undermines the credibility of their words and promises. Efforts at arms control outlined here only buy time. In the long run, by far our best hope of ending, once and for all, the danger of an Iranian nuclear weapons program is the emergence of a truly democratic and transparent government in Iran.

### The Status of Iranian Democratization

Recent developments in Iran have brought some to the premature conclusion that the Iranian democracy movement is dead. Fortunately, these rumors are premature. When Saddam's regime collapsed; when the United States seemed to have won a stunning and easy victory in Iraq; when there were close to two hundred thousand American soldiers, fresh from victories in Afghanistan and Iraq, surrounding Iran; and when world public opinion was becoming increasingly concerned about breaches of human rights in Iran, the Islamic regime grew timid and even more bereft of legitimacy or hope. The economy was in shambles, and the youth were deeply disgruntled and increasingly active in Iran's democratic movement.

The pendulum quickly swung. The insurgency in Iraq grew, the Islamic regime succeeded in sending hordes of its political, intelligence, and security agents across the border in Iraq, the price of oil shot above fifty dollars a barrel, China grew more thirsty for Iranian oil, and Europe grew more anxious than ever to make a deal with Iran. All these factors combined to give the regime in Tehran a new lease on life. When their gross abuses of electoral procedures in the parliamentary election in February 2004 were all but ignored by outside observers, the mullahs became more self-confident.

Despite these short-term setbacks, Iran still exhibits many structural and strategic characteristics that make it conducive to, even ripe for, democratization. In a comparative context, the state and nation of Iran are well defined in terms of territory, culture, and history. A nearly five-thousand-year-old shared history creates a distinct and common identity for Iranians, a factor that facilitates the emergence of a stable democracy.<sup>13</sup> Unlike many other countries seeking to democratize or consolidate democracy, Iran is not plagued by national debates about the borders of the state. Although ethnic strife, particularly from the

Iranian Kurds and the Turkish-speaking people of Iran, did emerge in the aftermath of World War II, and again after the revolution, there is little indication of a serious ethnic flare-up in the near future. Nor was the country created out of scratch a century ago by an imperial power.

With a per capita national income (in Purchasing Power Parity dollars) greater than \$7,000, Iran is a middle-income country, with levels of wealth, education, information, and independent social organization sufficient to sustain a democracy. To be sure, a democratic Iran would face the same set of economic challenges that the current regime must tackle. Yet cross-national studies have demonstrated that countries with the level of development equal to Iran are much more likely to maintain democratic institutions after a transition than are poorer countries.<sup>14</sup>

The illegitimacy of the current regime is also a positive factor for democratization in Iran. Dictators have a much greater probability of maintaining autocratic rule if they sustain either an ideology or a national and even international project that morally justifies their form of rule. In the first years of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini championed such an ideology, which enjoyed popular support. He also pursued an ideological mission internationally, which helped to create enemies abroad and thereby popular support for defending the regime at home. Soon after the victory of the revolution, the “Great Satan” (the United States) of course played a central role in Khomeini’s propaganda, but Israel, Iraq, and even at least ostensibly the Soviet Union—when it still existed—also served as useful villains for rallying popular support to defend Iran’s theocracy. Khomeini’s charisma also helped to develop and maintain the ideology of the revolution.

Today, however, this ideological creed offers the existing regime little or no legitimacy. The cataclysmic toll of the war with Iraq (1980–88) exhausted popular support for revolutionary ideas and the regime that propagated them. Iran’s failure to export its form of government through revolutionary means has also helped undermine popular support for the ideals of the revolution from a quarter century ago. The blatant and increasing corruption of the revolutionary leaders, who advocated piety and otherworldliness but engaged in wanton greed, further undermined the legitimacy of the regime’s ideology, especially in the

eyes of many youth who fought bravely in the war and returned home to discover the altogether changed reality. In 1997 and 2001, solid electoral support for Mohammad Khatami, the reformist presidential candidate, demonstrated society's unequivocal rejection of the regime's ideology. Some of Khatami's most energetic supporters came from the ranks of the disgruntled, erstwhile supporters of the discredited revolutionary ideology. Although Khatami has disappointed his supporters by failing to secure enduring democratic reforms, public opinion polls show little support for those in power and mass support for ideas antithetical to those of the revolution. Moreover, the regime's leadership itself has also abandoned the cause of the revolution, much like the Soviet Communist Party officials in 1970s and 1980s who simply went through the motions of building and exporting communism and instead became increasingly corrupt and devoted to two goals: staying in power and enriching themselves. In contemporary Iran, the ruling mullahs have the same obsession with merely surviving in power and expanding their personal wealth.

Nonideological autocrats who have largely squandered popular legitimacy can stay in power if they produce enough economic growth to pacify or buy off potential opposition. The so-called pragmatic mullahs, led by former president and current Expediency Council chairman Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, look to China—where economic liberalism comes along with the elite's continued despotic hold on power—as a model for contemporary Iran to emulate. In reality, however, the current Iranian rulers do not have the know-how or resources to deliver the kind of economic prosperity that their Chinese counterparts have produced. To be sure, high oil prices have fueled positive economic growth rates over the last several years. Nonetheless, the regime's corruption and incompetence, as well as its state-dominated crony capitalism, have created massive unemployment and widespread dissatisfaction. The expanding middle class and especially the swelling ranks of Iranian youth—unemployed, with no hope for the future, no ideological attachment to the regime, and much sympathy for America and democracy—constitute a seething volcano that at some point could erupt. The lower classes are being crushed under the weight of inflation and sinking standards of living. Corruption is now endemic in its frequency and breathtaking in its scale, dramatizing the moral bankruptcy of

the regime. Unfortunately for too many Iranians, drugs, particularly opium and heroin, have become the only cure; estimates are that several million are addicts.

An additional factor that offers hope for a regime transition is the deepening divisions within the ruling elite. There is increasing evidence that elements of the Revolutionary Guards are demanding a bigger share of political power and thus of the economic spoils. The Revolutionary Guards are already a veritable economic powerhouse in the country. They bid on almost every major contract, usually making offers no one can refuse. Within clerical circles, increasingly more daring and public challenges are made to the authority of the “Spiritual Leader.” Some of the clergy support Rafsanjani’s candidacy for the June 2005 presidential election; others adamantly oppose it. The intense competitive maneuvering and distrust between Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Rafsanjani are one striking manifestation of the regime’s widening cracks.

The presence of a vigorous, inventive, albeit constrained, civil society in Iran is another positive element for democratization. Iran’s democratic movement remains fractured and demoralized in the wake of Khatami’s lackluster record of achievement as a reformist president. Highly undemocratic elections to parliament in February 2004 delivered another blow to Iran’s democrats, first, because the opposition could do little to stop the gross electoral manipulation and, second, because the attempts by reformist members of parliament to protest the rigging by organizing sit-ins in the parliament met with popular apathy. The rigged results further deprived the democrats of a key parliamentary beachhead for promoting democratic change. The presidential election in June of this year will most likely transfer control of yet another key state institution to the conservatives. At the same time, more than eight thousand nongovernmental organizations continue to function, human rights lawyers continue to battle the state, more or less independent media outlets such as the *Sharg* (East) newspaper and the *Khandaniha* (Readables) magazine are still in business, and a new opposition force—an estimated 75,000 bloggers (one of the highest numbers anywhere in the world)—has suddenly exploded onto the political scene. More generally, society performs subtle acts of resistance every day: women wear their scarves higher and higher on their foreheads and dress in bright colors, students gather at home to drink alcohol and listen to Western music,

and, particularly, youth seek out a wide range of independent (and subversive) information and ideas on the Internet, radio, and TV. Although the regime has declared owning satellite dishes illegal, a veritable war of nerves is waged by nearly every Iranian who can afford a dish and has the wherewithal to hide it from the intruding gaze of the morality police. These are all palpable signs of a regime in decay.

Iran's regional environment is a final, albeit changing, favorable factor for democracy. Two years ago, the Iranian mullahs were panicked as they saw American military might swiftly topple Saddam Hussein's dictatorship and wondered if they were next. A year ago, the travails of America's postwar engagement in Iraq reassured and emboldened Iran's mullahs. Seeing the mighty American armed forces bogged down in Iraq gave the mullahs a sense of security and confidence. Today, however, after the largely successful January 2005 elections in Iraq, the regional pendulum has swung back against the Islamic Republic. Two of Iran's most strategic neighbors now have governments chosen by the people through competitive elections. Iraq's Shiite religious establishment, in particular its leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, has embraced democracy and explicitly rejects the Iranian system of *vilayat al-faqih* (rule of theologian), further undermining the legitimacy of Iran's theocracy. If Iraq is able to stabilize and develop a democratic form of government, particularly one that is supported and condoned by an ayatollah of Sistani's stature, then more and more Iranians will ask, if Iraqis can do it, why can't we?

Furthermore, if Najaf becomes, once again as it had been for much of the twentieth century, a center of a variety of Shiism different than Khomeini's radicalism, it will surely go a long way in further undermining the rapidly waning authority of Qom as the spiritual epicenter of Shiism.

Despite this impressive list of factors conducive to democratization, it would be wrong to conclude that the regime's collapse is imminent. On the contrary, when compared with several countries that have experienced the demise of a semiautocratic regime recently, such as Serbia in 2000, Georgia in 2003, or Ukraine in 2004, Iran's political condition still lacks several key ingredients.

First and foremost, when compared with these other semiautocratic regimes, Iran's regime is more ruthless. In Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic ordered



the slaughter of thousands in Kosovo and in neighboring countries, actions for which he now sits as a war criminal in The Hague. He also closed down radio stations, allegedly ordered the murder of an independent journalist, and arrested hundreds of student protestors. And yet he never tried to cancel elections or even remove his main opponents from the ballot, an act that the mullahs ruling Iran have brazenly turned into their “right” and implemented most forcefully during the last parliamentary election. In Ukraine, President Leonid Kuchma and his government apparently also ordered the murder of an investigative journalist, periodically launched assaults against independent media, and orchestrated massive electoral fraud during the 2004 presidential election as a means to put his chosen successor in power. Yet Kuchma also allowed the election to occur and then eventually refrained from using force against the demonstrators who demanded that the actual results be recognized. In Iran, opposition leaders cannot know for certain whether the mullahs would refrain from ordering troops in to disperse a mass peaceful demonstration, but both the ruling mullahs and the Revolutionary Guards have a capacity for ruthlessness that students and other opposition forces are understandably reluctant to test.

Second, when strategizing about how to bring about regime change, Iranian democrats face a greater challenge than their Ukrainian or Serbian counterparts in that they must change the constitution significantly in order to democratize Iran. To varying degrees, democrats in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine either pursued or threatened to pursue extraconstitutional means to achieve democratic breakthroughs.<sup>15</sup> Yet when they did so, their aim was to make sure that the formal laws embodied in existing constitutions were actually followed and no longer abused by corrupt governments. By contrast, Iran’s constitution itself is not democratic. Guaranteeing its enforcement would not produce a democratic breakthrough. In particular the position of the supreme leader, the “Great Leader of the Revolution” in the parlance of Tehran, must be eliminated, as should the role of the “Guardian Council” and “Council of Experts”—both by law dominated by the clergy. Furthermore, the existing criminal code, family law, and innumerable other statutes are all in need of radical revision if they are to become democratic. To make such changes by operating from within the rules of the current system may be impossible, as the bitter experience of the

last decade demonstrated. Despite having a reformist president in power and a significant number of reformist deputies in parliament, Iran's reformist movement could not democratize the current regime by participating within it. Some kind of rupture with the existing constitutional system will likely be necessary in order to bring about democracy in Iran. At the same time, the people's bitter experience with violent revolution, their recognition that in such times only the most ruthless and organized win the day, has made them averse to the idea of another revolution.

Third, and as a consequence of the bitter experience just described of playing by the current regime's rules and then losing, Iran's democratic movement is currently demoralized, with some activists disenchanted with politics and the movement in disarray. Expectations after Khatami's election in 1997 were very high. Nearly a decade later, little has been achieved in the way of enduring political reform, which has precipitated division among Iran's democratic leaders. Some have offered harsh criticisms of Khatami and his policies. A number of activists and leaders have lost all hope and become, at least temporarily, depoliticized. Student apathy is most disturbing. No new charismatic leader or broad coalition has emerged to inspire and unite Iranian democrats. Nor is there much agreement about tactics or next steps. For instance, democrats remain divided about whether to participate in the June 2005 presidential elections, knowing that victory is a remote possibility and that even victory—as the Khatami era showed—is unlikely to produce democratic change.

Ironically, this failure to achieve democratic breakthrough in the 1990s may yet be a favorable condition for success in the future. For instance, in Poland in 1980–81, Solidarity organized a democratic movement against the communist regime that eventually included one out of every four people in the country. Yet even this amazingly successful democratic movement was crushed by military rule in December 1981. For several years thereafter, prospects for democratization in Poland looked dim before suddenly taking a turn for the better in 1989. Likewise, Serbia's Together Movement staged a hundred-day protest throughout the country in 1996–97 to protest falsified local elections, yet Milosevic did not fall and many considered the act a failure. Three years later, however, many of the same activists who organized Together regrouped

to overthrow Milosevic in October 2000. In Ukraine, the Ukraine without Kuchma Movement in 2000 failed miserably. Although not apparent at the time, this failed social movement contributed greatly to the successful mass mobilization for regime change in the fall of 2004.

It is impossible to predict when and under what conditions Iran's democratic forces might build on past experiences of success and failure, reorganize in a more effective way, and then adopt a successful strategy for toppling the current regime. Yet many of the key ingredients for such a political earthquake already exist inside Iran. A latent potential for remobilization is there. What exogenous shock might trigger a new campaign for democracy is a central question.

#### A New American Strategy for Promoting Democracy in Iran

Could the United States provide this exogenous shock? Might a new American approach to Iran help reinvigorate Iran's democratic movement? Our answer is probably not. More likely, the trigger for regime change will come from within Iran, perhaps in some domestic development that precipitates a crisis within the ruling elite, which in turn might then allow for the reemergence of a formidable democratic opposition. At the same time, however, the United States could make an important contribution by helping create more favorable conditions for Iranian democratization. The United States loses nothing in trying to pursue such a strategy. Rather, it gains, in Iran and internationally, by advancing and standing behind its principles.

To be sure, the U.S. track record in trying to encourage positive change in Iran has not been encouraging. Before the creation of the Islamic Republic, the United States played a direct and largely negative role in influencing regime change in Iran. The Anglo-American-led coup in 1953 against Iran's nationalist leader, Mohammed Mossadeq, marked the darkest moment of American meddling in Iran's internal affairs. Mossadeq surely made many grave errors of his own, but the CIA operation against him, as Iran's democratically elected prime minister, placed the United States on the wrong side of history in Iran for several decades. In the context of the cold war, the newly reinstalled Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi did seem to serve American geopolitical interests in the short term. But, ultimately, his regime led to the creation of the

Islamic revolution in Iran, and that event, more than any other, has been the trigger for the rise of Islamic movements and terrorists in the past quarter century. The bitter experience of the hostage crisis has frozen U.S. policy toward Iran. Since the Islamic revolution of 1979, no president has articulated a coherent policy toward Iran, let alone a grand strategy for fostering Iranian democratization.

This policy vacuum and the de facto prescription of “do nothing” have more merit than a strategy of military intervention, either directly or through proxies, as a means of aiding Iranian democratization. Doing no harm is better than doing massive harm to the democratic cause inside Iran. The do-nothing approach, however, assumes that current U.S. policy is doing nothing, when in fact it has, even if unwittingly, helped preserve autocracy, not undermine it. Most important, the American sanctions regime has not weakened Iran’s dictatorship. Instead, it has generated huge economic rents for the mullahs and isolated democratic forces by keeping Western nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) devoted to fostering democracy out of Iran and by denying Iran the economic and social ties with the world that can serve as a powerful force for change.

A serious strategy for fostering democracy in Iran must focus on one strategic objective—strengthening the forces for democratic change inside Iran. Given the current status of state-to-state relations between the United States and Iran, American tools for achieving this objective are limited but important. They include presidential speeches in support of Iranian democracy, radio broadcasts that provide independent news analysis and information about the practice of democracy, and strengthening democratic regimes on Iran’s borders. All these policies must be expanded. At the same time, a bolder approach for supporting Iranian democracy must consider new policies for engaging the Iranian state, which in turn will provide a more favorable international context for engaging directly with Iranian society. The recent fad of dangling dollars to exile groups to help the democratic movement is sure to backfire, attracting, as it surely does, opportunists masquerading as Iranian democrats and allowing the mullahs to further attack all democrats as “servants” of the United States. Only a dual-track strategy of engaging the state and society in parallel and at

the same time will create the conditions necessary for a genuine and comprehensive U.S. strategy of democracy promotion. In beginning to explore the modalities of new relations with the regime in Tehran, American diplomats must be absolutely transparent in their negotiations and clear about their long-term goals: fostering democracy, a genuine rule of law, and an open society in Iran. If at any time in the course of making these changes it becomes clear that the Iranian democratic movement is hurt by the unfolding developments or if the regime tries to use the new relations with the United States to further suppress or embarrass the democratic movement, then steps should be taken to change the dynamics of the relationship. Ironically, though, engaging the regime may well be a necessary condition for its eventual peaceful replacement.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice already has proposed the first step in redefining U.S. relations with the regime in Tehran—the end of American resistance to Iran’s application for membership in the WTO. As this process moves forward, however, American diplomats must make clear that the change in U.S. policy is not an inducement for cooperation on nuclear issues but another means for promoting political and economic change inside Iran. If Iran is to join the WTO, it will have to dismantle all sorts of state subsidies to inefficient enterprises and so-called *Bonyads*, or foundations, which provide revenues to the conservative clerics and their allies in the bazaars. Economic liberalization inside Iran will erode the strength of those economic groups that now profit from rents provided by the state. Iran is not China. In China, foreign investors, including many Chinese expatriates, are eager to work with the regime. By contrast, many American investors seeking to work inside Iran are Iranian Americans who despise the current regime. In the long run, they will wield their economic power to empower Iranian society at the expense of the mullahs, not to their benefit. To be sure, the Iranian regime realizes this threat and will do all that it can to thwart it. However, some—the so-called pragmatists—within the current regime will be tempted to cooperate, just as “pragmatists” in the former communist world were also willing to transform their political power into property rights.

Second, general economic sanctions on Iran must be lifted. At the same time the United States should develop a policy of placing smart sanctions and taking

legal steps against the illicit gains and activities of corrupt leaders and elites of any country. The limits should also cover the activities of the related foundations and fronts used by these corrupt leaders. These “smart sanctions,” which will surely affect some of the most corrupt leaders of the Islamic Republic, are entirely different in nature than the broad embargo currently in force against Iran. To date, the economic blockade has hurt the Iranian people and has strengthened a parasitic class of middlemen at the expense of a viable private sector. It has enriched a small coterie of cronies in cahoots with powerful mullahs who tend to belong to the most intransigent right-wing groups (such as the *Mo'talefe*, a group of terrorists organized in the early 1960s who eventually killed Mansur, the Iranian prime minister). Absurdly, the current sanctions regime makes it illegal for Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi to publish her memoirs in the United States, all but impossible for Western NGOs dedicated to assisting civil society to open offices in Iran, and extremely difficult to bring Iranian democrats to American conferences (as we tried to do at the Hoover Institution last spring). The embargo also allows the regime to blame the United States for the economic problems that are in fact the direct result of the regime's gross corruption and mismanagement.

Lifting the embargo would not be a reward to the conservatives but a threat to them. An end to the embargo will end the regime's ability to blame its economic woes on the United States, further endear the United States to an already pro-American Iranian populace, enable American companies and organizations to engage directly with the Iranian people, and undermine the argument that the regime needs nuclear weapons to defend against threats from the United States. Most important, generating robust development in Iran and the country's economic and social integration into global networks can be a Trojan horse of democracy. It will invigorate the fledgling private sector and empower the economically squeezed middle classes, which are historically the most viable foundations and effective advocates of democracy.

Third, as already suggested, a major policy speech must be made stating that the United States stands firmly behind the idea of a democratic and sovereign Iran in which the United States does not back individuals or organizations but only the process of democracy. Such a declaration will render ineffective the

regime's anti-American rhetoric, help free Iran's genuine opposition inside the country from the threat of being branded as American agents, and distance the U.S. government from those exiles seeking regime change but not necessarily democratic regime change.

Fourth, the United States should begin discussions to establish an American diplomatic presence in Iran. Of course, such discussions would have to take place in the context of the broader diplomatic effort to halt Iran's nuclear weapons program. In addition to agreeing to new restrictions on its nuclear program, Iran would also have to renounce support for terrorism before full diplomatic relations could be restored. A joint statement condemning or "regretting" both the taking of hostages by Iran in 1979 and the removal by coup (with U.S. support) of the Mossadeq government in 1953 might also be necessary.

In pursuing a new relationship with the Islamic Republic, U.S. officials must insist—as they did in the communist world—that they will engage Iranian society directly through diplomatic contacts and an active public affairs program. Limits on societal contacts cannot be permitted. Gradually, with normalized relations, American mass media and NGOs could open offices in Iran, establish ties with their Iranian counterparts, and promote cultural exchanges, free flows of information, and democratic development. A U.S. ambassador in Tehran could also act as a vocal defender of Iranian human rights groups and as a symbol of America's desire to engage the Iranian people and society.

A new kind of diplomatic relationship with Tehran would not be a concession to the mullahs but a step toward opening, liberalizing, and ultimately democratizing Iran. The end of the current sanctions coupled with a U.S. diplomatic presence in Tehran would allow much greater contact between American and Iranian businesspeople, civic leaders, academics, and elected officials committed to democratic change.

If our hypothesis is right and greater engagement with the outside world and the United States in particular will help precipitate the demise of the current Iranian regime, then why would Khomeini and his conservative allies want to enter into discussions about the normalization of relations with the United States? The answer is that autocrats continually miscalculate the extent of their power as well as their ability to control events.<sup>16</sup> They frequently believe

that they can manage change without losing their hold on political power. Sometimes they are right; sometimes they are wrong.

In the specific case of the mullahs in Tehran, they realize that they cannot be fully included in the global economy and polity without relations with the United States. They believe that they can obtain these international benefits of engagement with the United States and still retain autocratic rule at home. Normal-ization would then be a way for the regime (and specifically, Ayatollah Khomeini) to deliver something tangible to the people, as it would take place in the context of a broader thawing of Iranian American relations, an end to the economic embargo, and probably a significant increase in foreign investment. In that case, the mullahs might see a normalization and integration package as serving their near-term need to shore up their rule. They are wrong, but the logic of the argument might compel them to pursue such a diplomatic path.

At the same time, many actors in the theocratic establishment understand the potential consequences of normalization and opening for the stability of their rule. They fear what we desire. Yet, even if the Islamic Republic rejects the American offer for lifting sanctions and restoring diplomatic relations, such an initiative would serve American interests. The United States would win favor with its European allies for attempting constructive engagement and expose to the world the true sinister intent and intransigent nature of the Iranian regime. More important, a rejected overture from the United States might spark even greater hostility from the Iranian people toward their government.

Fifth, the United States must take the initiative to increase dramatically direct exchanges between Iranians and Americans in education, culture, science, and other avenues of people-to-people and society-to-society interaction. Over the medium to long run, one of our best means to inspire and promote democratic change in Iran is by simply exposing Iranians to the American model of a democratic and open society (and to other models around the world as well). Such educational and social exchanges proved critical in helping to foster liberalization in the former communist world and also helped to generate democratic sentiments in Iran during the era of the Shah. These



exchanges have dwindled during the era of the Islamic Republic, however, and the numbers of foreign students and visitors from the Middle East and the broader Muslim world in the United States have plummeted further since September 11. Thousands of Iranian students should be studying in the United States (and not only physics, but political science, law, and history), and young Americans should eventually be spending time at Iranian universities as well, studying the country and its language, culture, and history. Although mindful of security considerations, we need to open the doors to vigorous exchange again. In order to process the vast increase in visa applicants, we need to increase by a factor of several times the number of American consular officials available in Dubai to interview Iranian applicants—until such time, hopefully soon, that we can reestablish an embassy in Tehran and consulates in at least two or three other Iranian cities. We should also establish (for countries throughout the Middle East) a “fast-track” list of intellectual and civic leaders whose integrity and lack of hostility to the United States are well established and who are therefore able to obtain visas quickly, rather than having to go through a frustrating and often humiliating months’-long process. We cannot fully advance America’s interests and values in the region if we cannot engage the people from within these countries who are most likely to embrace them.

Sixth, and finally, to foster democratic regime change in Iran, the United States must work with allies in the region to create a regional, multilateral peace and security organization similar to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). This organization evolved out of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act—an international agreement that not only established processes and norms for making Europe more secure, but also established norms for how states in Europe treated their citizens.<sup>17</sup> At the heart of the Helsinki process was the recognition that true and lasting peace in Europe depended not only on relations between states but also on the relationship between rulers and ruled. Over time the OSCE has become a major force for strengthening democratic practices in the former communist world. An Iran embedded in such a multilateral organization in the wider Middle East would have to contend with another external force for democratization.

## Conclusion

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In the first years of his presidency, Ronald Reagan labeled the Soviet Union the evil empire and went out of his way to avoid contact with such a regime. After a few years, however (and well before Gorbachev came to power), Reagan realized that he had serious arms control issues to pursue with the Kremlin leaders and that the best way to facilitate the dissolution of the evil empire was by increasing contacts between the West and the Soviet people. He pursued both objectives—arms control and regime change—in parallel and at the same time.

The U.S. government would do well to study this approach toward the Soviet Union and pursue a dual-track strategy, simultaneously engaging both the Iranian state and Iranian society. The United States can pursue an active strategy of fostering democratization in Iran and at the same time seek an arms control agreement with the mullahs in Tehran. In fact, paradoxical though it may seem, a more substantive agenda at the state-to-state level would create more permissive conditions for Western engagement of Iranian society. This is precisely what happened in the 1980s, when the United States offered the Soviet regime serious cooperation on strategic matters while remaining true to America's democratic principles. There is no reason the United States could not follow a similar dual-track strategy toward Iran today. Given the failures of previous policies over the last quarter century, it is hard to see how taking a chance on this new grand strategy could make the situation any worse. And perhaps most important, it is the policy that Iranian democrats want to see from the United States.

In the long run, it was not arms control but democratization within the Soviet Union that made the United States safer. If the United States desires a lasting foreign policy of similar magnitude with regard to Iran, now is the time to think big and change course as dramatically and ultimately as successfully as it did in dealing with the challenges presented by the Soviet empire.

## About the Authors

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## Notes

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1. The definitive account of U.S.-Iranian relations, which underscores the absence of consistent U.S. policy, is Kenneth Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2004).

2. Some argue that the Europeans are not serious about arms control. See Jeffrey Gedmin, "Axis of Weakness," *Weekly Standard*, October 18, 2004, pp. 18–19.

3. Richard Youngs, "Europe's Uncertain Pursuit of Middle East Reform," in Thomas Carothers and Marina Ottoway, eds., *Uncharted Journey: Promoting Democracy in the Middle East* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005), p. 231.

4. Alam, in his *Daily Journal*, refers on more than one occasion to the Shah's intention to develop the bomb. For example, in volume five, he writes that the Shah "is definitively thinking of getting the nuclear bomb (although he consistently denies this idea)." Assadollah Alam, *Yadashthay-e Alam*, vol. five, edited by Alinaghi Alikhani (Bethesda, Md.: 2003), p. 360. The original is in Persian, and the translation is ours.

5. In interviews with Abbas Milani, Akbar Etemad talked at great length about these ongoing tensions and the nature of negotiations. The Islamic revolution aborted these negotiations, as well as Iran's nuclear program. Akbar Etemad, interview with Abbas Milani, Paris, August 11, 2004.

6. In numerous papers, presentations, and op-ed pieces, Professor Najmeddin Meshkati, of the University of Southern California School of Engineering, has written about serious safety concerns for Iran's nuclear program. For example, Najmeddin Meshkati, "Iran's Nuclear Program," Hoover Institution Conference on Prospects for Iranian Politics, October 2002, Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

7. Dafna Linzer, "Iran Was Offered Nuclear Parts," *Washington Post*, February 27, 2005, p. 1.

8. Public remarks by Aleksei Arbatov, former member of the Russian parliament, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C., December 13, 2004.

9. Remarks by David Albright, "Iran's Nuclear Program: Status, Risks and Prospects," to the Workshop on Iran's Nuclear Program, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and Hoover Institution, November 9, 2004, Washington, D.C.

10. George Perkovich, Jessica Mathews, Joseph Cirincione, Rose Gottemoeller, and Jon Wolfsthal, *Universal Compliance: A Strategy for Nuclear Security* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005), p. 169.

11. Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia Plans New Generation of Weapons," Associated Press, February 18, 2004; Rose Gottemoeller, "Nuclear Necessity in Putin's Russia," *Arms Control Today*, April 2004.

12. Remarks of former senator Sam Nunn to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Conference on International Nonproliferation, June 21, 2004, transcript provided by the Federal News Service.

13. Dankwart Rustow, "Transitions to Democracy: Towards a Dynamic Model," *Comparative Politics* 2, no. 3 (April 1970): 337–63.

14. Adam Przeworki et al., *Democracy and Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

15. Of the three cases, Ukrainian democrats abided most by the constitution. Yet, even there, Yushchenko took the presidential oath of office before any state body had authorized the results of the elections, thereby giving Ukraine for a short period of time two presidents. This condition of dual sovereignty is the definition of a revolutionary situation. Ukrainian activists also made plans to seize government office buildings, but Yushchenko interrupted the plans each time.

16. However, analysts and would-be promoters of democracy also miscalculate the causes and effects of policy changes. We must remain open to the possibility that engagement with Iran could strengthen the current regime, at least in the short run. Given how little has changed in Iran in the last quarter century, and the potential extraordinary payoffs of regime opening, we think this risk (and the related ones) are well worth taking.

17. Daniel Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights and the Demise of Communism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

## On the Cover

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A messenger brings news to Siavosh of the birth of his son, illustration from the *Shahnama* (Book of Kings) by the Persian School (16th century). Institute of Oriental Studies, St. Petersburg, Russia. Giraudon, Persian, out of copyright.

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