The Role of Villain: Iran and U.S. Foreign Policy

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THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN HAS BECOME, in two senses, an extraordinary preoccupation of the United States. One sense is that Iran is the subject of a strikingly large proportion of discourse about U.S. foreign policy. American pundits and politicians repeatedly mention Iran, usually with specific reference to its nuclear program, as among the biggest threats the United States faces. Republican nominee Mitt Romney, when asked in the last presidential debate of the 2012 campaign what was the single greatest future threat to U.S. national security, replied "a nuclear Iran."[1] For politicians of both major U.S. political parties, expressions of concern about Iran and of the need to confront it have become a required catechism. The U.S. Congress has spent much time on such expressions and on imposing with lopsided votes ever broader economic sanctions on Iran. Frequent and evidently serious references are made to launching a military attack against Iran, even though such an attack—an act of aggression—would probably mean a war with heavy costs and damage to U.S. interests and probably would stimulate the very development of an Iranian nuclear weapon that it ostensibly would be designed to preclude.[2]

The other extraordinary aspect of this preoccupation is that it is divorced from the actual extent of any threat that Iran poses to U.S.

[1]"Transcript of the Third Presidential Debate," 22 October 2012, accessed at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/22/us/politics/transcript-of-the-third-presidential-debate-in-boca-raton-fla.html?pagewanted= all&_r=0, 30 December 2012.
[2]The Iran Project, *Weighing Benefits and Costs of Military Action Against Iran*, accessed at http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/IranReport_091112_FINAL.pdf, 30 December 2012.

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interests. The Islamic Republic, as a matter of capabilities as well as intentions, does not endanger those interests to a degree that corresponds to the intense focus that the subject receives in American debate. The principal sources of the preoccupation are instead to be found in history, politics, and customary American ways of perceiving adversaries.

AN EXAGGERATED DANGER

One of the most-obvious indications of the disconnect between rhetoric and reality on this subject—and specifically on the core concern of a feared Iranian nuclear weapon—is that the Iranian regime, as assessed by the U.S. intelligence community, has not even decided to build such a weapon.[3] The Iranians are interested in nuclear weapons, and some of their past work belies their public assertions that only non-military purposes have entered the thinking about their nuclear program. They have good reasons, however, not to have decided to cross the nuclear weapons threshold and instead to let any future decision about building a bomb be a response to the policies of the West and especially of the United States. The prospect of reaching economically and politically beneficial agreements with the West is a reason never to build a bomb, which any such agreements would rule out. Conversely, if armed hostilities appear more likely, this would be an incentive to try to develop a nuclear weapon, because of its presumed deterrent value.

American alarm about Iran's nuclear program seldom considers the long record that this program, which began in the 1970s under the Shah, has of slow progress, evidently due to technical problems and insufficient Iranian knowledge.[4] Previous Western assessments have overestimated how quickly Iran could become able to build a nuclear weapon.[5] A similar observation can be made about Iran's work, and estimates about that work, on delivery systems and, specifically, ballistic missiles, notwithstanding cooperation for many years between Iran and North Korea on missiles and other defense matters.[6] An Iranian missile with intercontinental range now seems at least several years away, if it ever materializes at all.

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[3]James Risen and Mark Mazzetti, "U.S. Spies See No Iran Moves to Build Bomb," *The New York Times*, 25 February 2012.

[4]On the technical and knowledge deficiencies of the Iranian program, see the comments of former international nuclear inspector Olli Heinonen in Yossi Melman, "Behind the scenes of UN nuclear inspection of Iran," *Haaretz*, 22 October 2010, accessed at http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/week-s-end/behind-the-scenes-of-un-nuclear-inspection-of-iran-1.320599, 31 December 2012.

[5]Jeffrey T. Richelson, *Spying on the Bomb* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 503–517.

[6]Steven A. Hildreth, *Iran's Ballistic Missile and Space Launch Programs* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 6 December 2012), 35–38.

Presumptions rather than analysis have characterized American discourse about the consequences if Iran were to acquire a nuclear weapon. It is widely taken for granted, and repeatedly voiced even by those who disagree among themselves on other aspects of Iran, that the advent of an Iranian nuclear weapon would be a very bad development that would exacerbate instability, or even worse, in the Middle East. Few have challenged this consensus.[7] The consensus, however, is grounded in little more than intuition, augmented by stereotyped images of the Iranian leadership.

Some of the belief that an Iranian nuclear weapon would be a calamity rests on the notion that Iranian leaders are religiously driven radicals who do not think like Western leaders and who cannot be deterred even by the prospect of severe retaliation against their country. The problem with this view is that it simply does not accord with the behavior that Iranian leaders have displayed during the more than three decades of the Islamic Republic's existence. The Iranians have repeatedly demonstrated that they respond to foreign challenges and opportunities with the same considerations of costs and benefits, and of the impact on the interests of their regime, as other leaders do. This has been true even on matters involving Iranian behavior that violated international law or was otherwise objectionable to the West. For example, Iran ended an earlier campaign of assassinating Iranian dissident exiles in Europe when it became apparent that the assassinations were beginning to harm significantly Tehran's relations with European governments. Iranian leaders demonstrated the same carefully calculated way of determining policy even during the most trying experience in the Islamic Republic's history: the eight-year war that began when Saddam Hussein's forces invaded Iran in 1980.[8] The Iranians' prosecution of the war at great cost to themselves demonstrated how fervently they, like most other peoples, resist when their homeland is the target of aggression. The war nonetheless ended when the Iranian supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, "drank the cup of poison," as he put it, in agreeing to a cease-fire when the costs of continuing the war appeared to outweigh any benefits. Khomeini's successors have given every indication of being motivated, as are other leaders, by an interest in maintaining their regime and their power—in this life, not some afterlife. They are subject to the same principles of deterrence as anyone else.

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[7]A conspicuous exception is Kenneth Waltz, "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb," *Foreign Affairs* 91 (July/August 2012): 2–5. For an argument that does not go as far as Waltz in suggesting that an Iranian bomb would be desirable but explains why it would not be a significant threat, see Paul R. Pillar, "We Can Live With a Nuclear Iran," *Washington Monthly* 44 (March/April 2012,): 13–19.

[8]Bruce Riedel, "If Israel Attacks," *The National Interest* 109 (September/October 2010), 6–13, at 11.

Even many commentators who reject the image of irrational Iranian mullahs subscribe to another part of the conventional wisdom about why an Iranian nuclear weapon supposedly would make the political and security situation in the Middle East markedly worse. This part, which sounds more sophisticated than the hypothesis about mad mullahs, holds that even if Iran never detonated a nuclear weapon, the mere possession of one would enable it to intimidate other states and otherwise to throw its weight around in harmful ways. Intuitively this seems to make sense. Nuclear weapons are serious business. Shouldn't owning them have a serious impact on what the owner can do in his neighborhood?

Moving from intuition to analysis, however, this part of the conventional wisdom breaks down, too. Possession of nuclear weapons can make a difference in international relations only insofar as the possibility that they will be used somehow enters into the thinking of decision makers. If no one believes that is a possibility, the weapons are merely a very expensive adornment in an ammunition bunker. For possession of a nuclear weapon to make possible Iranian intimidation that is not taking place today would require something that Iranian leaders would like to do but currently are dissuaded from doing because of the prospect of some foreign actor retaliating. The issue in question also would have to be seen as so important to Tehran that it could credibly threaten to escalate the matter to the level of nuclear war—and thereby neutralize the other actor's threat of retaliation—with all of the costs and risks such escalation would entail for Iran itself. One struggles to think of any conceivable issue where these conditions would arise.

Nuclear weapons, given their awesome effects, are good for deterring what a regime might consider awesome, particularly the regime's own extinction from foreign attack. This deterrent role is almost certainly the major reason for any interest Iranian leaders have in developing nuclear weapons. But the weapons' very awesomeness makes them too blunt an instrument for accomplishing much else. Accordingly, the record of nuclear proliferation that has already occurred around the globe does not support the notion that nuclear weapons are game-changers that facilitate regional bullying or adventurism.[9] We should have known as much from the extensive body of doctrine about nuclear weapons and escalation that was developed during the Cold War.[10] But the alarmist, conformist approach that has characterized discussion of a possible Iranian nuclear

[9]Stephen M. Walt, "The mother of all worst-case assumptions about Iran," 30 November 2012, accessed at http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/?page=2, 1 January 2013; and Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, "Crisis Bargaining and Nuclear Blackmail," *International Organization* 67 (Winter 2013): 173–195.
[10]A classic text is Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (New York: Praeger, 1965). On the significance of the nuclear weapons threshold, see chapter 6.

weapon has not encouraged people to crack open textbooks from the Cold War era.

Similar considerations apply to oft-repeated arguments that an Iranian nuclear weapon would somehow embolden Hamas or Lebanese Hezbollah to undertake their own forms of adventurism. Such arguments overstate the tightness of relations between Iran and these two actors. Sunni Hamas was never a client of Shia Iran, although with meager support from elsewhere, it has accepted some Iranian help. Hezbollah was very much Iran's client and is still its ally, but the power and position it has achieved in Lebanon have greatly reduced its dependence on Iran, as well as giving it important equities of its own. Whatever deterrence currently applies to Hamas and Hezbollah does not have to do with Iran's strategic situation. It instead concerns the groups' conventional confrontation with Israel and the political costs that any adventurism would have among their own constituencies and larger courts of opinion. In any event, it is not credible that Iran would assume the extremely large risks to itself of nuclear escalation on behalf of some mischief by Hamas or Hezbollah. The leaders of Hamas and Hezbollah are smart enough to realize that.

What attempts there have been to offer analysis supporting the idea of an Iranian nuclear weapon being especially dangerous show the strains of trying to make a case with a preferred conclusion. Such attempts are laden with worst-case speculation about what a nuclear-armed Iran "could" do in the region, without explaining exactly how the nuclear weapons would make a difference or how Iran could make credible a threat to escalate to nuclear war.[11] Analysis suggesting that war with Iran would be less costly and dangerous than the existence of an Iranian nuclear weapon is prone to self-contradiction, particularly by depicting an Iran that supposedly is too unpredictable to be deterred from initiating a war but that, if on the receiving end of an attack, would be a model of calmness and rationality and would be deterred from striking back.[12] Another variety of self-contradiction is to argue that an Iranian nuclear weapon might be more costly than a war because the existence of the weapon would raise fears of war (which, in turn, would adversely affect the oil market).[13]

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[11]An example is Ash Jain, *Nuclear Weapons and Iran's Global Ambitions: Troubling Scenarios* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 2011). For a critical commentary on this monograph, see Paul R. Pillar, "Iran's Nuclear Oats," 29 September 2011, accessed at http://nationalinterest.org/blog/paul-pillar/irans-nuclear-oats-5960, 1 January 2013.

[12]See, for example, Matthew Kroenig, "Time to Attack Iran," *Foreign Affairs* 91 (January/February 2012): 76–86.

[13]This is the main argument in the Bipartisan Policy Center report, *The Price of Inaction: Analysis of Energy and Economic Effects of a Nuclear Iran* (Washington, DC: Bipartisan Policy Center, October 2012).

Expressions of concern about an Iranian nuclear weapon often also posit that the introduction of this weapon would trigger a cascade of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. As with other presumed effects of an Iranian bomb, the image of a proliferation cascade is merely held as an assumption, repeatedly referred to by politicians and others without supporting analysis. The assumption disregards how, ever since President John F. Kennedy spoke about the prospect of 15 or 20 nations having nuclear weapons by the mid-1970s, actual nuclear proliferation has lagged well behind projections about it. The assumption also does not explain why the development of nuclear weapons by Israel—which, according to Avner Cohen, the foremost historian of the Israeli program, and other researchers who have studied the subject, probably *did* have such weapons at least by the mid-1970s[14]—has not triggered a corresponding response by any of the many Middle Eastern states that have considered Israel an adversary. Most important, close examination of both the capabilities and motivations of the most-plausible Middle Eastern proliferators—particularly Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey—indicates that an Iranian bomb would be unlikely to lead any of them to cross the nuclear threshold that they so far have refrained from crossing.[15] Even if any of the states had the capability to build a nuclear weapon, negative repercussions from doing so, especially including likely damage to their relations with the United States, would be a significant disincentive.

Stepping back from the fixation on Iran's nuclear program, one has to ask—and future historians are sure to ask—how the sole superpower of the early twenty-first century could come to see this state along the Persian Gulf as posing such a supposedly immense threat. Iran, even before the damage inflicted by the most recent rounds of sanctions, has been a mid-level nation with numerous internal problems, a narrowly based economy dependent on oil exports, and almost no ability to project power at a distance. Estimates of Iranian military spending are uncertain but usually put at between one and one-and-a-half percent of U.S. defense spending, as well as being only one-fifth of military spending by the sheikhdoms on the other side of the Persian Gulf.[16]

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[14]Avren Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 337–338; and Warner D. Farr, *The Third Temple's Holy of Holies: Israel's Nuclear Weapons* (Maxwell Air Force Base: Air War College, 1999) accessed at http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcqate/capc-pubs/farr.htm, 4 March 2013.

[15]Steven A. Cook, "Don't Fear a Nuclear Arms Race in the Middle East," 2 April 2012, accessed at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/04/02/don_t_fear_a_nuclear_arms_race, 3 January 2012.

[16]Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, accessed at http://milexdata.sipri.org, 2 January 2013; and Anthony H. Cordesman, "The Iran Primer: The Conventional Military," accessed at http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/conventional-military, 2 January 2013.

THE ROOTS OF DEMONIZATION

The origins of the current American attitude toward Iran are thus not primarily to be found in whatever actual threat Iran poses today to U.S. interests. That raises the question of what does account for the enormous attention and alarmism centered on this subject in American political discourse today. The answer to that question begins with the historically based American way of looking at foreign adversaries. It is supplemented by the historical baggage of the past dysfunctional and strife-ridden relationship between the United States and the Islamic Republic. A further significant ingredient is the position of the government of Israel, which, because of the uncommon role that Israel-related issues play in American politics, has done much to shape U.S. policy and discourse on Iran. All of these factors combine to maintain a political environment in which a grave Iranian threat is taken for granted and any questioning of that threat is dismissed as being outside the mainstream. This set of attitudes is further perpetuated by mutual reinforcement with attitudes in Iran that in some respects mirror attitudes in the United States. Each side's worst presumptions about the other side encourage words and actions that make the presumptions look true.

American Thinking about Enemies

Americans' manner of viewing foreign adversaries today is rooted in the history of their country's past relations with the outside world. Their attitudes have been shaped especially by the most costly and all-consuming episodes in that history, in particular the wars—hot and cold—of the twentieth century. Not having the same experience as, say, Europeans have long had of continuous and unavoidable contact with a variety of neighbors having an assortment of conflicting and parallel interests, American attitudes are disproportionately molded by the great conflicts in which the United States has crossed its ocean moats to confront enemies deemed awful enough and threatening enough to warrant such expeditions. Most Americans thought of the conflicts then, and still think of them, as morally clear struggles between good and bad forces, even if, as with the world wars (and worldwide communism during the Cold War), they actually were complicated multilateral affairs with varieties of interests within the warring coalitions. In short, Americans have a profoundly Manichean way of viewing their interaction with the outside world and their confrontation with foreign adversaries.

The Manichean outlook leads to demonization of the most salient of those adversaries. They are viewed not just as having interests that conflict with those of the United States, but as genuinely evil. Some of those

adversaries really have been undeniably evil, with Adolf Hitler being at or near the top of almost any such list. The lasting influence on American thinking of the experience with the Nazis stems partly from the sheer scale and disproportionate impact of World War II and from how the dealings with Germany in the 1930s were tailor-made to become the historical analogy most frequently invoked by anyone arguing that it is necessary to confront some other adversary.[17] The evil of Hitler has, in effect, been transferred by analogy to various later foes of the United States.

Once the United States has become locked in conflict with any adversary, especially if warfare is at least a possibility, other incentives accentuate the demonization. Gaining popular backing for an expensive war (or other expensive confrontation, such as the Cold War) is more feasible when the enemy is perceived as evil rather than being merely the other side of a conflict of interests. This aspect of gaining popular support is reinforced by the American self-image as a peace-loving people who go to war only in response to someone else's aggression. Accordingly demonization, including the Hitler analogy, played an especially important role in the selling of a war that clashed with that image: the one against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which was an offensive war of choice and thus itself an act of aggression.[18]

Americans need a foreign villain. That has been the case since, beginning with World War II, the United States has had large and expensive overseas commitments that can be sustained only if American citizens support them and believe they understand the need for them. The need for a villain is a matter of public psychology and, because of that, also a matter of politics. As for who can play that role, Saddam Hussein is gone, and the unpleasantness of the Iraq War has provided a political incentive to erase quickly the memory of it (and along with that, some of the lessons from it). Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda have, of course, been prominent foes over the past decade. But a terrorist group can never fill the same role as a state, and now bin Laden is gone, too. Well-suited on several counts to play the current role of villain is that other state on the Persian Gulf with oil resources and radical politics: Iran.

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[17]On the use of this and similar analogies in discourse about U.S. policy, with particular reference to the Vietnam War, see Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu , and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

[18]Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz was especially fond of applying the analogy of Hitler to Saddam Hussein. See Wolfowitz's own description of his use of the analogy, quoted in Derrick Z. Jackson, "A fatal distraction," *Boston Globe*, 26 March 2004, accessed at http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2004/03/26/a_fatal_distraction/, 22 January 2013.

Current American attitudes toward Iran illustrate several consequences that commonly flow from demonization of a foreign adversary. One is a disinclination to see any reasonable basis for the adversary's actions, or at least a basis that is compatible with one's own needs or interests. Another is a tendency to underestimate how much of what the regime on the other side does may have broader support among its own population. Yet another is a tendency to see the other side's ambitions as more negative and farther-reaching than they really are. Related to this is an underestimation of the other side's willingness to compromise.

Historical Baggage

The history of Iran's relations with the United States has set the stage for the current deeply antagonistic American attitude toward it. The American view of the Islamic Republic was bound to be initially negative because of the pointedly critical view of the United States that Khomeini and his followers voiced and because they overthrew a regime that had been a significant ally of Washington. By the 1970s, the United States had come to rely on the Shah of Iran, a profuse purchaser of U.S.-made arms, as a major protector of stability and U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf. Even this aspect of the history was not enough to foreordain that the relationship would become as intensely antagonistic as it later did. During the Iranian revolution, views of it within the administration of Jimmy Carter varied, with some members of the administration disparaging the Shah as an autocrat and not mourning his departure.[19] The dominant view of the Shah's ouster, however, was as a shocking setback to U.S. interests in the region.

The experience that did more than anything to color for decades American attitudes toward the Islamic Republic of Iran was the seizing of the American embassy in Tehran in November 1979 and the holding hostage of 52 Americans for 444 days, until the day Carter left office. The hostage crisis was one of the few international events to have, largely through the medium of television, a profound and sweeping impact on the perceptions and emotions of the American public. The perpetuation of the drama for more than a year imparted a remarkable degree of public awareness and familiarity with the story, with some of the hostages and their more-outspoken family members back in the United States becoming

[19]Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser 1977–1981* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1983), 354–355; and Gary Sick, *All Fall Down: America's Tragic Encounter with Iran* (New York: Random House, 1985), 68–72.

familiar names. The popular ABC television program *Nightline* began as a nightly report on the hostage saga.

As an act of terrorism against Americans, the seizure of the embassy and its staff also identified Iran in the American consciousness as the number one terrorist state in the world. That status was further cemented over the next several years by terrorism at the hands of Lebanese Hezbollah. Americans were again victims, including in the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983, which was the deadliest terrorist attack against American citizens until September 11, 2001. Hostage-taking in Lebanon, with Americans among the most prominent victims, dragged on through the 1980s.

During the early years of the Islamic Republic, Iran was doing even more than this to earn a deserved reputation as the world's number one terrorist state. Operations included numerous assassinations of exiled dissidents in Europe and elsewhere, and subversive activities in the Middle East and Persian Gulf region. Iranian international terrorism later subsided as Tehran strove to improve its relations with the Europeans and came to realize that survival of the Iranian revolution did not depend on the fomenting of similar revolutions in nearby states. State-sponsored terrorism in general, however, also subsided during the same period,[20] and so Iran has remained in most eyes—including official ones—the leading terrorist-sponsoring state.[21] In any event, past history remains more important in shaping American attitudes about Iran than current patterns of sponsoring terrorism.

The label of arch-terrorist state is reason enough for most Americans to have a firmly embedded view of Iran as an implacable enemy. An added dimension, however, that plays directly into the preoccupation with Iran's nuclear program is the merging of terrorism, in popular fears as well as political rhetoric, with the proliferation of unconventional weapons (or weapons of mass destruction, to use the common vocabulary). Fascination with scenarios of terrorism involving such weapons has prevailed at least since the 1990s; the attack with sarin gas by the Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo on the Tokyo subway in 1995 stimulated public interest in the subject. The George W. Bush administration's aggressive selling of the Iraq war depended on repeatedly connecting terrorism and weapons proliferation, with the President rhetorically obliterating any distinction between the two in his "axis of evil" speech.[22] The later discrediting of this sales

[20]Paul R. Pillar, *Terrorism and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 2d ed. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), chap. 6.

[21]U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2011*, 31 July 2012, chap. 3; accessed at http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2011/195547.htm, 5 May 2013.

[22]President George W. Bush, State of the Union Address, 29 January 2002, text accessed at http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html, 22 January 2013.

campaign as it applied to Iraq did not seem to dispel the specter of a nuclear-armed state giving its weapons, or technology to make them, to a terrorist client. The specter gets invoked today in agitation about Iran's nuclear program.[23] It probably contributes to American public perceptions and sentiments about that program, even though there is no known instance during the entire history of the nuclear age of a nuclear-armed state—even one with terrorist clients—doing anything like that. That record is unsurprising, given the absence of any advantage in surrendering control over such weapons or materials, and the very dim prospect of the state achieving any deniability. Iran would be widely and automatically assumed to be behind any appearance of nuclear materials in the hands of a group with which it had an association, such as Hezbollah.

Alongside the history of conflict and confrontation between Washington and Tehran is a meager history of engagement. What engagement there has been has tended to discourage most Americans from more engagement. In this respect, the most significant attitude-forming event also dates from the early years of the Islamic Republic: the Iran-Contra affair of 1985–1986. A U.S. purpose of this secret initiative, which involved the sale of arms to Iran, was to try to secure Iranian help in the release of American hostages in Lebanon. Once revealed, the affair was quickly regarded as a scandal, not only because of the sour taste left by trading arms for hostages but also because of the illegal use of proceeds from the arms sales to fund rebels in Nicaragua, as well as efforts to cover up the entire caper. Some of those involved on the U.S. side were convicted of criminal offenses, and the affair is now seen as perhaps the blackest mark on Ronald Reagan's presidency. The episode poisoned the American political waters for anyone else thinking about initiatives to engage Iran. It also discredited the concept of "moderates" in the regime in Tehran, who were the ostensible Iranian interlocutors.

The next serious U.S. effort to reach out to Tehran, this time publicly, was by the administration of Bill Clinton in its last year in office. In a major speech in March 2000, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright expressed regret for the episodes in U.S.–Iranian history (mentioned below) that have most angered Iranians and took what the administration hoped would be the first step toward a better relationship by removing restrictions on the import of Iranian carpets, caviar, and pistachios.[24] This minor reduction in U.S. economic sanctions against Iran, however significant U.S. officials

[23]See, for example, Elliott Abrams, "The Grounds for an Israeli Attack," *World Affairs* 175 (May/June 2012), 25–30, at 26.

[24]Remarks by Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright before the American–Iranian Council, 17 March 2000, text accessed at http://www.fas.org/news/iran/2000/000317.htm, 22 January 2013.

considered it to be, evidently was less conspicuous to leaders in Tehran than wording in the same speech that referred negatively to "unelected hands" as still being in control of Iranian policy. Iranian leaders took this as one more indication that Washington was less interested in dealing with the regime as it existed than in trying to replace it.[25] The initiative went nowhere, and it entered an American lore according to which the Iranians reject opportunities for a normal or cordial relationship and are the ones to be blamed for the antagonistic nature of the relationship that exists today. Clinton's administration made no further significant effort to reach out to Tehran before giving way to the neoconservative-dominated administration of George W. Bush, which had no interest in talking with the Iranian regime.

Iranian Suspicions and Grievances

The negative impact of the history of U.S.–Iranian relations on American attitudes about Iran has been amplified by the resonance it finds in some similar Iranian attitudes about the United States. The similarity starts with the psychological and political need for a foreign villain, which is at least as strong for the revolutionary regime in Tehran as it is for the United States. More specifically, this is a political need for the hard-liners who have come to dominate the regime, have drawn support from the image they have nurtured as guardians against foreign threats, and use popular perceptions of such threats as a distraction from economic and other domestic difficulties. Regardless of how open the hard-liners may be to improved foreign relations and how much they realize that the incumbent regime would benefit from improvement, in the meantime, a perception of Iran being besieged from abroad serves a domestic political purpose.

The history of U.S.–Iranian relations makes the United States the arch-enemy from the Iranian viewpoint. That viewpoint highlights different episodes in this history than the American viewpoint does. Some of the relevant history even predates the advent of the Islamic Republic. A particularly salient episode for Iranians is the coup that in 1953 overthrew the populist (and democratically elected) Prime Minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh, and was partly engineered by the United States in cooperation with Britain. Although Mosaddegh was not quite as popular as the recounting of this story sometimes makes him out to be—and although the role of Iranians was greater and the role of Britain and the United States less than in most telling of the tale—Iranians came to see the coup as an indicator of U.S. hostility toward Iran and a U.S. proclivity to trample on

[25]Ray Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Times Books, 2006), 114–115.

the rights and prerogatives of Iranians. For many Iranians, it is as much of an attitude-shaping historical landmark as the hostage crisis is for Americans.

The subsequent close U.S. relationship with Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, whose power was reaffirmed with the ouster of Mosaddegh, is another part of the history that has put the United States in an unfavorable light in Iranian eyes. As the most-important foreign backer of the Shah's regime, the United States shared opprobrium generated by the regime's excesses. This is clearly the case with members of the current regime who worked to overthrow the Shah. The sentiments extend as well to many other Iranians who have unfavorable memories of repression under the Shah.

One of the most-traumatic events for a generation of Iranians is the Iran–Iraq War of 1980–1988, which began with an Iraqi invasion of Iran and in which several hundred thousand Iranians died. This, too, shaped Iranian perceptions of the United States because of a U.S. tilt in favor of Iraq, which was not undone in Iranian eyes by the later U.S. invasion of Iraq and overthrow of Saddam Hussein. U.S. support to Iraq during the war against Iran included arms, training, diplomatic support, and, during the war's final phase, the reflagging of oil tankers of Iraq's Arab allies and direct combat between U.S. and Iranian naval forces. Also during the war's closing months, a U.S. warship shot down a civilian Iranian airliner, killing all 290 persons aboard. The shooting was a mistake by a naval crew thinking it was under attack, but to this day, the Iranian government states that the downing of the airliner was intentional. Many other Iranians also probably believe it was.

Notwithstanding the historical basis for Iranians to perceive hostility from the United States and to feel hostility in return, the Iranian leadership evidently saw an opportunity for improving the relationship following the September 11 terrorist attacks, which the Iranian supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khomeini, strongly and publicly condemned.[26] Even though Khomeini also warned against launching a war in Afghanistan, once the United States did intervene in Afghanistan and oust the Taliban regime, Iranian and U.S. officials worked effectively together in midwifing a new Afghan political order under President Hamid Karzai. James Dobbins, the chief U.S. representative at the international conference in Bonn, Germany that reached agreement on creating the new Afghan government, observes that the Iranians were "particularly helpful" in that endeavor.[27] For a few

[26]Jim Muir, "Iran condemns attacks on US," BBC News, 17 September 2001, accessed at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/1549573.stm, 16 January 2013.

[27]James Dobbins, "How to Talk to Iran," *The Washington Post*, 22 July 2007, accessed at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/20/AR2007072002056.html, 16 January 2013.

weeks in late 2001 and early 2002, it looked as though Washington and Tehran were moving their relationship to a less-acrimonious path.

Then President George W. Bush declared the "axis of evil" and identified Iran as one of the points of the axis. To the Iranians, this was a shocking response to their post-September 11 cooperation. Being put in the same category as their old enemy Saddam Hussein only made the shock worse. The Iranian leadership still did not give up on the idea of an improved relationship with Washington. One indication of this was an Iranian proposal for negotiating a grand bargain of outstanding differences, with a written proposal to that effect transmitted to the U.S. government in 2003 by Switzerland, which serves as the diplomatic protecting power for the United States in Iran. Some observers have questioned the seriousness of this initiative, but the documentary evidence indicates that it was genuine.[28] The Bush administration, riding high at that moment—with Saddam Hussein having been toppled but the difficulties of the occupation of Iraq not yet having become apparent—made no reply to the overture and even reprimanded the Swiss ambassador for forwarding it. U.S.–Iranian relations were left in a bitter freeze, with no contacts at all for the next several years.

By the time Barack Obama entered the presidency, the United States and Iran were thus locked in a vicious circle of mutually reinforcing perceptions of hostility, which continues to prevail today. An action by one side that can be interpreted as an indication of hostile intentions leads to reactions by the other side, in words or deeds, that in turn are interpreted as hostile. A perception that the other side does not want a better relationship elicits negative or suspicious reactions that the other side perceives in the same way. It is difficult, though not impossible, to get out of such a circle of mistrust and misperception. Such difficulty, far more than any conflict of national interests, inhibits improvement of the relationship today.

Influence of Israel

A major added political factor on the U.S. end of this relationship is the posture of the government of Israel. That government's insistent pushing of the theme that Iran, and specifically a nuclear-armed Iran, poses a grave threat clearly has significantly shaped the handling of the issue in American political discourse and is a leading reason the issue has the prominence that it does. The pushing does not reflect strategic analysis of

[28]A recapitulation of this episode and links to the relevant documents are in Nicholas D. Kristof, "Iran's Proposal for a 'Grand Bargain,'" *The New York Times*, 28 April 2007, accessed at http://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/04/28/irans-proposal-for-a-grand-bargain/, 16 January 2013.

the actual threat that an Iranian nuclear weapon would pose to Israel. Assessments by think tanks and scholars of the size of Israel's nuclear arsenal vary somewhat, but a typical estimate postulates a stockpile of 75–200 weapons accompanied by an assortment of modern delivery systems—a capability far superior to anything Iran could ever hope to achieve in the foreseeable future.[29] The head of the Israeli intelligence service Mossad, like many retired senior Israeli security officials who can speak on the subject even more freely, has denied the frequently heard assertion that an Iranian nuclear weapon would pose an existential threat to Israel.[30] Many ordinary Israelis understandably fear an Iranian nuclear weapon, however, based on the history of the Jewish people and vituperative anti-Israeli rhetoric from Iran, and with the fear stoked by their own government.

The government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also has other motives for continuing its agitation on the issue. It naturally would like to maintain Israel's regional nuclear weapons monopoly. It may prefer not even to think twice the next time it uses Israel's conventional military superiority, as it has several times, in conducting operations in neighboring states or territories. The issue of Iran also serves as a distraction from the unsettled conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. The Israeli government and its supporters habitually respond to any raising of the Palestinian issue or the building of Israeli settlements in occupied territory by stating that Iran is the greatest threat to peace and stability in the region and where the international community ought to direct its attention instead.[31] Finally, any rapprochement between Iran and the United States would threaten to weaken Israel's claim to being Washington's sole reliable partner in the Middle East.

Whatever the exact mix of motives, the Israeli agitation about Iran has a big impact on American handling of the issue because of the extraordinary role that preferences of the Israeli government play in American politics.[32] In the United States, the Iran issue has become in large part an Israel issue and a way for American politicians to demonstrate support for Israel. This dimension of the issue underlies the posture that candidate Romney took

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[29]Robert S. Norris, William M. Arkin, Hans N. Kristensen, and Joshua Handler, "Israeli Nuclear Forces, 2002," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 58 (September/October 2002): 73–75.

[30]Barak Ravid, "Mossad chief: Nuclear Iran not necessarily existential threat to Israel," *Haaretz*, 29 December 2011, accessed at http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/mossad-chief-nuclear-iran-not-necessarily-existential-threat-to-israel-1.404227, 17 January 2013.

[31]See, for example, a speech by Netanyahu reported in "PM: Iran is greatest world danger, not settlements," *Jerusalem Post*, 8 January 2013, accessed at http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=298796, 16 January 2013.

[32]John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

on Iran. It also has shaped the public posture on Iran of Barack Obama's administration. One of the President's strongest and most-prominent declarations that an Iranian nuclear weapon would be unacceptable was in a speech he gave during his re-election campaign to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.[33]

The Iranian regime has no country comparable to Israel influencing its policies, but Israel itself has figured prominently in destructive Iranian rhetoric. This has especially been true of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iran's President from 2005 to 2013, who found Israel-bashing to be a fruitful theme in domestic politics. Ahmadinejad's rhetoric has been taken in the United States as confirming the worst assumptions about Iranian intentions, even though the Iranian President is not the most important decision maker in the regime on foreign policy or nuclear matters. One piece of bravado seized upon more than any other was in a speech Ahmadinejad gave in 2005, in which he predicted that Israel would eventually go the way of the Shah's regime. Disputes over translation of this speech have continued ever since, but it became the basis for an oft-repeated observation that the President of Iran threatened "to wipe Israel off the map."[34] Some American politicians have gone a step further and asserted falsely that Iran has stated an intention to use a nuclear weapon to accomplish this goal—notwithstanding Iran's public posture that it does not even want a nuclear weapon.[35]

STULTIFICATION OF POLICY

The net effect of all the influences—including history, Israel, and Iranian bombast—on American thinking about Iran is a deeply held and widely shared belief that Iran, and especially its nuclear program, poses a grave danger. In the most-recent biennial survey by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs of American attitudes on foreign policy, 67 percent of respondents said that Iran's nuclear program was a "critical threat to vital U.S. interests." This was the second-most-frequently mentioned threat, only slightly behind international terrorism.[36] Such a climate of

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[33]Remarks by the President at AIPAC Policy Conference, 4 March 2012, accessed at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/04/remarks-president-aipac-policy-conference-0, 17 January 2013.

[34]On the translation issue, see Uri Friedman, "Debating Every Last World of Ahmadinejad's 'Wipe Israel Off the Map'," 5 October 2011, accessed at http://www.theatlanticwire.com/global/2011/10/debating-every-last-word-ahmadinejads-wipe-israel-map/43372/, 18 January 2013.

[35]Rep. Michele Bachmann asserted this during her campaign for the Republican presidential nomination. John Bresnahan, "Bachmann: Iran would use nuke against United States, Israel," *Politico*, 18 December 2011, accessed at http://www.politico.com/blogs/politico-live/2011/12/bachmann-iran-would-use-nuke-against-united-states-107923.html, 18 January 2013.

[36]*Foreign Policy in the New Millennium* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2012), 14.

public opinion stultifies any political action to improve relations with Iran. Political incentives push in the direction of words and policies that continue the vicious circle of hostility. Actions required to get out of that circle are politically hazardous because they are seen—and political opponents can criticize them—as being soft on Iran.

One of the specific consequences of this environment is the diffidence involved in what little diplomacy there is between Washington and Tehran, which have not had normal diplomatic relations since the hostage crisis more than three decades ago. The transition from George W. Bush to Barack Obama took the possibility of revived diplomacy out of the deep freeze, but the tentativeness each side has displayed in doing business with its bête noire is still apparent. The Obama administration made essentially a single attempt, during its first year in office, at a negotiated agreement with Iran before throwing its energy instead into gaining international support for anti-Iran sanctions. It even rejected an agreement that Brazil and Turkey extracted from Iran in 2010 that included the same Iranian concessions the United States was demanding in 2009. Diplomacy went back in the freezer, emerging only with the start of the current series of talks beginning in 2012.[37]

Another consequence is the unhelpful manner in which the sanctions have been handled, especially by the U.S. Congress. Ostensibly, the purpose of most of the sanctions is to induce Iran to make concessions regarding its nuclear program. In practice, they have instead played a different political role: as a means for American politicians to demonstrate their toughness on Iran (and their support for Israel). Repeatedly voting in favor of additional sanctions against Iran is an easy way to do this. An additional influence on American behavior regarding this subject is the hope of eventually doing away with the Iranian regime. Although regime change is not explicitly stated by most of those voting in favor of added sanctions, that hope almost certainly underlies much of the support for ever-increasing sanctions. Political conditions in Iran do not suggest that it is in a pre-revolutionary situation, but the upheaval in several Arab countries over the past two years has rekindled the hope.

Use of sanctions as leverage for obtaining concessions at the negotiating table requires that they be used flexibly. It is just as important for the other side to believe that relief from sanctions will result from concessions as that a lack of concessions will mean no relief. Use of sanctions as a device for political posturing or as a hoped-for way to hasten regime change,

[37]The most-thorough account of the Obama administration's diplomacy on the subject is Trita Parsi, *A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama's Diplomacy with Iran* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

however, instead implies that the pressure from sanctions should be inflexible and unrelenting. The latter approach has prevailed. In public and congressional discussion, the sweeping and unrelenting nature of sanctions against Iran has come to be treated as an end in itself, with almost no attention to exactly how the sanctions relate to Iranian concessions beyond a simple notion that the Iranians ought to give up and cry "uncle." Meanwhile, the United States and its negotiating partners in the P5 + 1 (the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany) have made no proposals that include any relief from sanctions other than those involving spare parts for commercial aircraft and trade in precious metals and petrochemicals.[38] The Iranians have been given no reason to believe that they would receive significant sanctions relief in return for concessions, and thus they have lacked an incentive to concede. Making promises credible is generally harder than making threats credible, and the history of mutual mistrust between the United States and Iran has made it even harder.[39] Inflexibility in the negotiating position of the P5 + 1 has made it harder still.

A similarly unhelpful pattern has characterized threats to use military force. A possible military attack on Iran was discussed originally as an alternative to a negotiated settlement as a way to prevent an Iranian nuclear weapon. The military option was discussed despite the likely counterproductive effect of stimulating an Iranian decision to build the very weapon the attack was intended to prevent. Once negotiations with Iran began but did not yield quick progress, a different purpose of a threatened military attack came to dominate discussions of the issue: the idea of such a threat as an inducement to Iran to make concessions to the P5 + 1 about its nuclear program. This idea gave greater respectability to the concept of launching an offensive war, because threatening such a war could be defended in the name of aiding negotiations. The threats and saber-rattling moves to go with them have been promoted not as a seeking of war but as supposedly a necessary aid to obtaining an agreement.[40]

The threat of armed force, however, probably has impeded rather than aided the reaching of a negotiated agreement. The threats

[38]Arms Control Association, "History of Official Proposals on the Iranian Nuclear Issue," August 2012, accessed at http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Iran_Nuclear_Proposals, 30 December 2012; and Arshad Mohammed, "Big powers to offer easing gold sanctions at Iran nuclear talks," Reuters, 15 February 2013, accessed at http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/02/15/us-iran-nuclear-gold-idUSBRE91E0TP20130215, 16 February 2013.

[39]Robert Jervis, "Getting to Yes With Iran: The Challenges of Coercive Diplomacy," *Foreign Affairs* 92 (January/February 2013): 105–115, at 111.

[40]Among the many who make this argument are James K. Sebenius and Michael K. Singh in "Is a Nuclear Deal with Iran Possible?" *International Security* 37 (Winter 2012/13): 76–77, 89–90.

contribute to the atmosphere of hostility that for years has added to distrust and worst-case assumptions between Tehran and Washington and thereby have made rapprochement more difficult. That the reaching of an agreement would be seen as a backing down in the face of a threat of armed force adds to the political and psychological costs to Iranian leaders of making concessions. Such threats also stimulate rather than diminish Iranian interest in nuclear weapons because of their presumed value as a deterrent against major foreign attack. The more that the brandishing of the threat of military attack makes an attack seem likely, the greater will be the Iranian interest in developing nuclear weapons and the less inclined they will be to make concessions that would preclude that possibility.

The Iranians have good reason to be suspicious of ultimate U.S. and Western motivations, and threats of military force are unhelpful in that respect too. The Iranians do not have to look far to see ample evidence, including in American political rhetoric, in favor of the proposition that the primary U.S. goal regarding Iran is regime change. And they do not have to look far into the past to see a recent U.S. use of military force—participation in the intervention in Libya—that overthrew a Middle Eastern regime after it had reached an agreement with the United States to give up all its nuclear and other unconventional weapons programs. Iranian leaders would have little reason to make concessions about their own program if they believed the same thing was likely to happen to them. This is already a problem; rattling the saber only makes it worse.

Despite all these considerations, the threats continue, not only in general American discourse but in the official position of the Obama administration, which talks about all options being on the table. They continue partly because the notion of threatening an adversary into submission has a simple appeal and primitive believability. They continue also because support for military threats, like support for sanctions, serves the political function of demonstrating firmness on Iran and backing for Israel—and for some, trying to appease the Israeli government enough to dissuade it from launching its own attack.

DIPLOMATIC POSSIBILITIES

The outlines of an achievable agreement between Iran and the P5 + 1 have been apparent for some time. They would include restricting Iran's enrichment of uranium to the lowest levels of enrichment, and even then in quantities corresponding to legitimate peaceful uses. Iranian production of medium-enriched (20 percent) uranium would cease, with existing stocks transferred out of the country. In return, most sanctions would be removed

and Iran would be guaranteed a supply of enough 20-percent-enriched uranium to power the research reactor that uses it as fuel. Such a formula would be consistent with Iran's insistence that its nuclear program is entirely for peaceful purposes. The formula is thus attainable in a way that simply pressuring the Iranians into crying "uncle" is not.

Iran reportedly made in the summer of 2012 a proposal to the Europeans that included these basic elements.[41] The Iranian proposal as presented was unacceptable to the P5 + 1 because under it, Iran would have taken its promised steps on uranium enrichment only after the West had removed sanctions. In this respect, the Iranian proposal mirrored that of the P5 + 1, which has called on Iran to take all of its required steps before the P5 + 1 would even consider significant relief from sanctions. The resulting disagreement is common in international negotiations; each side naturally would prefer not to implement its own end of a deal until the other side makes good on its end. Also common is the resolution of such differences by negotiating a schedule of phased implementation in which each side both gives something and gets something in each phase. It is the negotiation of such an implementation sequence, as well as other details such as the exact disposition of the 20 percent-enriched uranium, that remains to be accomplished.

Political impediments to such an agreement persist on both sides but are not insurmountable. Some elements in the Iranian regime that milk foreign hostility for political benefit are unlikely to believe that an improved relationship with the United States and the West works to their advantage, but for the top leadership, this would be outweighed by being able to claim credit for the resulting advantages in economics and prestige. On the U.S. side, a likely challenge is getting congressional cooperation in lifting sanctions, some of which are designated by law as responses to human rights questions or other matters besides the nuclear issue. There also is the potential for the government of Israel, which has disdained the very idea of negotiations with Iran, to be a spoiler.

If such an accord is nevertheless achieved, it would secure for each of the parties its most important stated objectives. For the United States and its P5 + 1 partners, restrictions on Iran's program would preclude it from building a nuclear weapon without major difficulty and conspicuous violations of the agreement that would give ample warning well before actual construction of such a weapon. For Iran, the agreement would bestow respect and acceptance of its nuclear program and would finally gain relief from the economically debilitating sanctions.

[41]David E. Sanger, "Iranians Offer Plan to End Nuclear Crisis," *The New York Times*, 5 October 2012.

A nuclear agreement would open the door to a better overall relationship that could bring other benefits to the United States ultimately more important than the nuclear issue itself. A reduction of tension with Tehran would permit a more relaxed and less costly U.S. military posture in the Persian Gulf, which currently is aimed overwhelmingly at Iran. There also would be a potential for positive cooperation with Iran, which, although a weakling in projecting power at a distance, has influence to be reckoned with closer to its own borders. One place with such potential is Afghanistan, where the parallel U.S. and Iranian interests that underlay the cooperation over a decade ago are still present. Another place is Iraq, where Iran is now the dominant foreign influence and where endless violence and instability serve neither U.S. nor Iranian interests.

None of this will turn Iran and the United States into close friends and allies, as they were in the time of the Shah. Differences, some of them sharp, will persist—including on matters related to Israel as long as the Palestinian issue remains unresolved. But the differences can be handled in a more normal way than in the context of the pathological non-relationship that has persisted for over three decades.

The U.S. posture toward Iran is a prominent example of how traumatic history, domestic politics, and emotions that flow from both can overpower more-sober evaluation of the U.S. interests at stake in a foreign relationship. Popular, politically charged sentiment about confronting foreign villains can have benefits; it fueled, for example, the enormous sacrifices by Americans that were necessary to win World War II. The case of Iran shows that it also can have major disadvantages.*

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