

## **US Reaction to the 2009 Iranian Election: The End of “Regime Change” Politics**

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### **Introduction**

The Obama Administration’s response to Iran’s presidential election of June 2009, and the aftermath of protests in Iran, signals a departure from the Bush Administration posture of regime change concerning the “axis of evil.” Some may say Obama abandoned freedom and those aspirants in the streets of Tehran. Others may welcome the cautious reply and more respectful approach to Iran as a means of better securing US goals. But the point was clear: the US is not interfering and is not going to interfere in Iranian domestic politics. In other words, the US is out of the “regime change” business.

This new approach exemplified in Obama’s restraint amidst Iranian demonstrations over the controversial election results is meant to reign in a controversial and provocative American posture that threatened the US with overstretch and alienation in the Middle East and beyond. This return to cautious realism, begun in the latter months of the Bush administration and embraced by Obama, stands opposed to the aggressive realism of the early years of the Bush administration, which combined neocon idealism and hegemonist aspirations for American domination and shaping of a New Middle East.

But the 2009 elections created a political puzzle for the US as it sought engagement with Tehran, opening itself to charges of being soft on a brutal regime and a “tepid” fighter of freedom. Below I analyze how the Obama administration navigated through the summer’s elections, crises, and criticisms, and I compare prospects and implications of the Obama position against those pushing for a harder line.

### **US-Iranian Relations Before the 2009 Elections**

The US and Iran have had a roller coaster of relations long before the summer 2009 elections. From the CIA’s role in ousting nationalist Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953, to the strong friendship forged with the Shah as one of the “pillars” of US strategy and Middle East stability, to America becoming the “Great Satan” in the eyes of revolutionary Iran’s Islamic regime, the countries’ fates have been linked. The Islamic revolution ushered in what is now a 30-year period of mutual non-recognition and rivalry. The US sanctions on Iran dating to the hostage crisis, in which American embassy officials were held for 444 days until their release in 1981, remain firmly in place. While the enmity that emerged from revolution was not inevitable, it has become a stable and enduring feature of the relationship.

To be sure, there have been ups and downs in this dynamic. The Americans aided Iraq against Iran in the Iran-Iraq war, yet were careful “not to push the new clerical regime into the Soviet orbit.”<sup>1</sup> President Rafsanjani’s “nationalist pragmatism” included offered US Conoco Corporation a \$1 billion offshore development deal in 1995, and reformist President Mohammed Khatami called for a “dialogue of civilizations” and publicly apologizing to the American people

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for the hostage crisis of the revolution. The US responded with an apology for the Mossadegh coup, a call for “a road map leading to normal relations,” and waived sanctions against foreign companies that picked up on the scuttled Conoco deal.<sup>2</sup>

But despite calls from analysts and task forces for normalization and a move from “dual containment” to “differentiated containment,”<sup>3</sup> both Iranian and US hardliners opposed Khatami’s reform-minded moderating trends. Ayatollah Khamenei continued his predecessor’s ruling out of ties with the US.<sup>4</sup> 1995 appropriations by the Republican Congress to fund CIA covert action to “overthrow” the Iranian regime “set off alarms throughout the Iranian hierarchy” and prompted a symbolic reciprocal move by the *Majles* to fund covert operations against the US.<sup>5</sup> A 1996 truck bomb detonated at the US Air Force complex in *Khobar*, Saudi Arabia, aroused suspicions of Iranian involvement; though short of evidence implicating the Tehran regime, the US deferred action.<sup>6</sup>

After 9/11, US-Iranian rapprochement became a possibility. Iran cooperated with Washington in the formation of a post-Taliban government in Afghanistan, and after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Tehran “put out feelers” about resolving differences with Washington.<sup>7</sup> What Gareth Porter describes as a “burnt offering,” Iran’s moderate reformist regime, supposedly with the blessing of the spectrum of “major political players in the Iranian regime,” offered the possibility of cutting Iran’s support for Hamas and Islamic Jihad, helping to pacify and disarm *Hizb’allah*, and addressing US concerns about its nuclear program.<sup>8</sup> By Porter’s reporting, the US rebuffed Iran. Secretary of State Colin Powell and his deputy, Richard Armitage, were reportedly in favor of engaging the Iranian offer, but the offer was rebuked as a result of opposition by Vice President Cheney and officials in Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith’s Office of Special Plans—hardliners interested in regime change in Iran.<sup>9</sup> A combination of assertive nationalists and “neocons” demanded from Iran full information on any high-ranking al-Qaeda members in their possession, but were unwilling to reciprocate with Iran’s request for names of Mujahideen-e Khalq (MEK) members held by US forces in Iraq.<sup>10</sup> By 2005, hardliners recaptured the presidency and a spiral of confrontation sent relations on a collision course to be discussed below.

A key question for the US was the status of Iranian nuclear programs.<sup>11</sup> Well before 9/11, some analysts speculated that Iranian civilian nuclear-energy programs merely “serve as the foundation for a nuclear weapons program.”<sup>12</sup> Kemp and Harkavey reported in 1997 that Iran “appears to be striving mightily to acquire nuclear weapons,” confidently asserting that “it will if it can.”<sup>13</sup> The nuclear question gained international attention in 2002-2003, when the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) found Iran in violation of the NPT and related safeguards agreements pertaining to undeclared activity. Iran had not revealed certain past nuclear activities and sites, and the IAEA identified additional undeclared parts of the Iranian nuclear program and encountered problems in obtaining Iran’s cooperation in resolving a number of issues.<sup>14</sup> In 2003-2004, the IAEA reported trace elements of highly enriched uranium (HEU) in an Iranian nuclear facility, and that Iran had withheld from inspectors blueprints for an advanced centrifuge design usable for uranium enrichment.<sup>15</sup> By 2006, the IAEA could not conclude that Iran’s nuclear program is “exclusively for peaceful purposes.”<sup>16</sup>

After alternating between promises to freeze enrichment plans and asserting a sovereign right to do so, Iran broke the UN seals on their nuclear facilities and resumed uranium conversion at their facilities in Isfahan in August 2005.<sup>17</sup> Iran announced in April 2006 that they had successfully enriched uranium for the first time but that they had no intention to develop

nuclear weapons. The UN Security Council demanded that Iran stop enrichment activity by August 31, 2006, and placed sanctions on Iran in subsequent resolutions when that deadline was defied by Iran.

While the Bush administration pursued multilateral sanctions and worked through the UN, it refused direct talks with Iran. By 2006, Bush made overtures to talk with Iran, but only with the precondition of “the Iranian regime fully and verifiably” suspending its enrichment and reprocessing of uranium, to which Iranian nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani said that, “if they want to put this prerequisite, why are we negotiating at all?”<sup>18</sup> The Bush administration was building a case against Iran in international circles and with domestic audiences while wrestling with possible scenarios involving the use of force to deny Iran nuclear weapons capabilities. The Bush administration put Iran on notice in 2002, the year of preemption and the “axis of evil” reference, saying that regimes the US deemed to be developing WMD and supporting terrorism could be subject to US military action. Katzman claims that a “US ground invasion to remove Iran’s regime has not, at any time, appeared to be under serious consideration,” if for no other reason that US forces were tied down in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup> Others argued the “regime change” decision was made “probably” in November 2004, pointing to a strategy document in March 2006 outlining an updated preemption strategy.<sup>20</sup> Several options for bombing sites and fomenting change were floated and leaked in analyses in 2005-2006.<sup>21</sup>

Regime change can occur in different ways from invasion, of course. Some reports allege US covert operations of as much as \$400 million to aid opposition groups to destabilize the regime, though such reports have not been confirmed.<sup>22</sup> In 2007, accusations of secret funding of “militant ethnic separatist groups in Iran” surfaced, as incidents of domestic ethnic unrest rose. American former CIA and counterterrorism officials claimed that such classified programs were “no great secret” and that the attacks in Iran “fall in line with US efforts to supply and train ethnic minorities to destabilize the Iranian regime.”<sup>23</sup> Democracy promotion in Iran was funded to the tune of \$67 million through various agencies, and was aimed at strengthening “independent voices in Iran and expand ties between the people of Iran and the United States,” as well as “strengthen Iran’s civil society, increase awareness and respect for human rights, and promote the rule of law.”<sup>24</sup> Such activities, Iran argues, violated the 1981 Algiers Accord calling for “non-interference in each others’ internal affairs.”<sup>25</sup>

### ***A Return of Realism***

The Bush Administration’s posture changed dramatically in 2006, as neoconservative ambitions of an extended war on terror against Iran gave way to a posture of containment and even fig leaves of possible diplomacy. Theoretically, the tilt was away from offensive realism and “hegemonist” policies of regime change and expansive American power toward a defensive realism, more conservative, pragmatic, and cautious. The so-called “April Revolution” in 2006 refers to a time when the military establishment of the US finally convinced the Bush administration to ease up on the path to conflict with Iran, taking issue with war plans that referenced nuclear options and uncomfortable with the implications of bombing scenarios given the state of affairs in Iraq and Iran’s ability to complicate the war there for the US.<sup>26</sup> Reports emerged in 2007 that several US generals quietly threatened to resign “rather than approve what they consider would be a reckless attack.”<sup>27</sup> The 2007 National Intelligence Estimate deflated Bush administration claims of a pending nuclear armed Iran, acknowledging a weapons project but noting the project seemed to have been halted since 2003. The replacement of Secretary of

Defense Rumsfeld with Robert Gates signaled a new outlook in US thinking, as Gates was on record against the efficacy of a military option. In 2008, Gates signaled the new tone with a speech suggesting that “we are unlikely to repeat another Iraq or Afghanistan anytime soon—that is, forced regime change followed by nation-building under fire.”<sup>28</sup> The same year, Bush authorized the first public meetings between American and Iranian officials since the revolution occurred, limited to specific discussion regarding Iraq.<sup>29</sup>

Yet the debate was never definitively settled under the Bush administration. Speculation continued over whether Bush would bomb Iran before leaving office. As late as April 2008, Iran’s Qods Force was designated a “terrorist organization” by the American Congress and was accused by US General David Petraeus of participating in the funding, training, and arming “special groups” in Iraq targeting American soldiers, leading to speculation of a build-up for justified retaliatory war.<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, war plans were rejected by the Bush administration. Former Vice President Cheney later said he “was probably a bigger advocate of military action than any of my colleagues.”<sup>31</sup>

A decisive break with regime-change politics and the combative approach to Iran came with the new administration of Barack Obama in January 2009. While the Obama administration declared at least one goal common to that of his predecessor concerning Iran—namely, preventing a nuclear weaponized Iran—the means to that end would vary in the explicit call for diplomacy. Any additional goals such as regime change, which had remained in play until the end among some in the Bush administration, were jettisoned as obstacles rather than vehicles toward a non-nuclear Iran. Obama sought to reassure Iran of US intentions in the new administration and give them ample room and reason to accept talks. Obama requested no funding for democracy-promotion programs in Iran for fiscal year 2010, perhaps believing, as Ken Katzman surmises, that such efforts are “inconsistent” with dialogue with Iran.<sup>32</sup> President Obama offered to “extend a hand” and engage in direct talks without Bush’s precondition that Iran should first suspend all uranium-enrichment activity.<sup>33</sup>

### **The Election, Aftermath, and US Response**

When the presidential election arrived, there was anticipation of a triumph of a more moderate or reformist candidate against Ahmadinejad, though a victor was not a foregone conclusion. As the tallying unfolded election night, both Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and challenger Hossein Mousavi claimed to be ahead in the vote. Then the Iranian Election Commission held a press conference and announced that, with 20% of the votes counted, the president was leading with 69% to Mousavi’s 28%. Iran’s state-run Press TV said variously that 42% and 69% of the vote had been counted, leading to confusion and charges of potential foul play. Mousavi held a press conference declaring himself the winner, which mobilized his support against the state’s eventual claim of victory for the incumbent.<sup>34</sup>

When the results were declared official, by such wide margins and with such confidence endorsed by Ayatollah Khamenie himself, Iran broke out into protests unrivaled in 30 years. Protests were banned but continued, leading to violent clashes between the protesters and government forces and the citizen militia known as the *Basij*, mobilized to counter the demonstrations. Iranian officials have said between 17 and 20 people died in the month-long protests. Independent organizations tracking human-rights violations in Iran put the death toll closer to several dozen.<sup>35</sup> Three hospitals recorded 34 deaths in a single day alone, by comparison.<sup>36</sup> Officials began tracking the movement’s online activities, using Facebook and

Twitter as sources of intelligence even as the protesters used them to mobilize and communicate.<sup>37</sup> Iranian police raided offices connected to Mousavi and other candidates. “Show trials” of key reformist politicians and leaders of the forcibly dispersed street protests were intent on silencing and scaring protesters into submission, and some clerics called for death and execution for those engaging in protests as traitors to Iran.<sup>38</sup>

Though the Iranian government’s reactions were criticized by mainstream voices in government and the clerical establishment, the debate largely remained confined to Iranian rights and votes within the existing system.<sup>39</sup> In addition to former reformist president Mohammad Khatami and the protesting 2009 candidates, the mayor of Tehran, Mohammad Baqer Ghalibaf, a former commander in the Revolutionary Guards, and the speaker of Parliament, Ali Larijani, called for fair treatment for protesters and allowing legal protests, challenging Ahmadinejad’s bellicose policy postures even while being described as loyal to the leader and committed to Islamic government.<sup>40</sup> Members of Parliament aligned with Ayatollah Khamenie encouraged Moussavi to quell the uprising as a threat to the regime.<sup>41</sup>

This underscores perhaps what the Obama administration surmised, that the debate was about who won within the Islamic Republic framework, and not about revolution to overthrow the Islamic Republic. It also was not clear just how popular the movement was, or rather, how unpopular the elections and the regime were. A world public opinion poll taken in September 2009 found 81% of Iranian respondents saying they “consider Ahmadinejad to be the legitimate President of Iran.”<sup>42</sup> Given this backdrop, the movement as a protest against the election waned, though it reemerged recently as a “movement” for reformist change.<sup>43</sup>

While Obama promised such engagement as a candidate for office, and as President had sent two letters to Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenie to that effect, Barabara Slavin notes that “the policy has become more controversial in the aftermath of Iran’s disputed June 12 elections.”<sup>44</sup> Obama balanced his commitment to diplomacy with expressions of US sympathy and support for those Iranians who protested the election results and who have suffered imprisonment, beatings, torture, show trials, and a crackdown on media and free expression.<sup>45</sup> Obama belatedly condemned the “outrageous violence that we’ve seen directed against peaceful demonstrators post-election” but in the same press conference said “we’ve left open for them to stand down on nuclear weapons development, and to be able to pursue a more peaceful path with their neighbors and abide by international norms.”<sup>46</sup> Vice President Joe Biden expressed doubts about the election results, but said in an interview that “we’re going to withhold comment” until there is more information about Mousavi’s charges that the election was rigged. Biden stated, “Our interests are the same before the election as after the election”: namely, “to cease and desist from seeking a nuclear weapon and having one in its possession, and, secondly, to stop supporting terror.” White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs told reporters, “we continue to have concern about what we’ve seen” and “continue to be heartened by the enthusiasm of young people in Iran,” but stressed that “what’s important is the concerns that we have about their nuclear weapons program.” Trying to deflect any sense of American meddling, Biden added that there was “clearly a debate going on among Iranians about Iran. It is not about us.”<sup>47</sup>

Kenneth Walsh surmised the two reasons for the Obama position on Iran’s election crisis: The Obama administration does not want to totally alienate Ahmadinejad because the West will have to continue dealing with him. In addition, administration officials do not want to be too critical of Ahmadinejad’s victory because that might make the anti-Ahmadinejad reformers seem like puppets of the United States and weaken their position internally.<sup>48</sup> As the protests began to

fizzle and the election seemed to stand against legal and political challenges, after a summer of trepidation, the two sides resumed the initial course of preparing the ground for diplomatic talks. The episode may have worked in Obama's favor by both demonstrating US noninterference (engendering goodwill with Iranian leaders) and putting Iran's leaders in an awkward position in world opinion ahead of possible international action about its nuclear programs.

### ***Back to Business***

Obama tested the waters of potential engagement in the context of the post-election crisis, by giving Iran a deadline in September to show some progress regarding its controversial nuclear program. Iran's response was a letter to the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, plus Germany, calling for general cooperation among the world's powers in addressing a host of international problems. Iran offered Western officials a long-awaited package of proposals to restart negotiations over its nuclear program. But diplomats who viewed the offer said the document ignored questions over Iran's production of nuclear fuel and instead focused broadly on other international issues. The US envoy to the International Atomic Energy Agency relayed an increasingly skeptical tone from the Obama administration, that Iran has enough fissile material to produce a nuclear bomb and that "ongoing enrichment activity ... moves Iran closer to a dangerous and destabilizing possible breakout capacity." Optimists in the Obama administration claimed "at least now we have a response from Tehran, and we can test what Iran is willing to do going forward."<sup>49</sup>

The United States agreed to Iran's call for direct, multilateral talks with Iran, including Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and China. In terms of conciliation and the creation of face for both sides, Iran sent a letter in September 2009 calling for broad dialogue on a variety of issues of world peace and security, a goodwill gesture that deflected direct mention of the Iran nuclear question. Obama personally led a UN Security Council meeting that passed a UN resolution committing the US to a world "free of nuclear weapons," urging non-signatories of the NPT (which includes Israel) to join the treaty and abide by its rules in the meanwhile. The same resolution, recognizing the right to civilian nuclear-energy programs, conditions those rights upon proving themselves to be adhering to the NPT as verified by the IAEA.

Ahead of talks was a flurry of activity likely meant to create favorable leverage in the October 1 discussions. On September 17, 2009, the Obama administration announced it was scrapping Bush-era plans for missile defense in Europe. While no doubt part of a broader context involving Russia's concerns of NATO encroachment and American unilateralism, the defense shield proposal was offered and retracted in relation to an alleged "Iran threat" to Europe. The Pentagon position in the policy change was that the plan "was ill-suited to the true threat from Iran, and that "Iran's changing capabilities drove the decision."<sup>50</sup> As much as the move may be about allaying Russia's concerns, it nonetheless bears on the Iran question in two ways: (1) the continued framing of an Iran threat, and (2) the potential for this move to prompt more Russian cooperation in dealing with Iran's nuclear situation.

In terms of conciliatory acts, Obama took the step of restating the call for US and global nuclear disarmament, an issue from the Iranian letter that removes a perceived double standard from the nuclear talks. The United States resolution on nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation also made the "right" of a country to pursue a peaceful nuclear program contingent on not being found in violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty's other obligations.<sup>51</sup> Robert Gates, the secretary of defense, stated publicly that the United States does not have a military option to

deal with Iran's nuclear program: "The reality is, there is no military option that does nothing more than buy time. The only way you end up not having a nuclear-capable Iran is for the Iranian government to decide that their security is diminished by having those weapons, as opposed to strengthened."<sup>52</sup>

The Iranians for their part were busy ahead of the October 1 talks. The very tone of the offer Iran made to address proliferation issues, Trita Parsi contends, reflects Iran's "refusal to accept any unique solution to address its nuclear program" but rather seek a solution "generalized" to also apply to perhaps Israel and other countries with existing or potential enrichment programs.<sup>53</sup> The Iranians test-fired short-range missiles to demonstrate that Iran has the necessary arsenal to defend itself, saying they would "respond to any military action in a crushing manner, and it doesn't make any difference which country or regime has launched the aggression."<sup>54</sup> They disclosed a second enrichment site at Qom days ahead of the talks, which the US and "P-5 +1" denounced as a deception, though administration officials also claimed to have known about it already.<sup>55</sup> Iran suggested the new plant will produce enriched uranium of up to 5 percent, consistent with its nuclear energy program and within the framework of the IAEA regulations, and reiterated that the Islamic Republic has no intention of making nuclear weapons."<sup>56</sup>

A more positive gesture, related to the perception of American "regime change" politics, came when Ayatollah Khamenie announced that, contrary to hardliner accusations in Iran, there was no evidence of foreign meddling in the post-election mayhem. Khamenie dismissed calls for escalatory moves against reformist leaders "based on suspicions and rumors" and said that claims of their subordination to "the foreigners ... has not been proven for me."<sup>57</sup>

The sum total of these various activities was to convince each other of their seriousness while offering gestures of conciliation, in hopes to have their positions respected at the October 1 talks in Geneva while also being able to claim something out of the talks. The meeting on October 1 "produced results that exceeded the expectations of many," in that Iran agreed to ship some of its low-enrichment uranium to Russia and France for processing, while Iran won the "right to enrich" more generally. Subsequent meetings would determine specifics and verify intentions, but it was a momentous step merely to meet in face-to-face talks.<sup>58</sup>

### **Alternative approaches in US Iran Policy**

Views on US policy toward Iran and the summer election crisis break down into four basic dichotomies: those who think the US should talk to Iran and those who do not, and those who think the US should back the Iranian opposition and those who do not. Supporters of negotiations say that negotiations (a) hold together the Western countries that are presently united in the need to put the nuclear issue as the priority, (b) second, the United States has always negotiated with corrupt dictatorships when it served its interests, most dramatically with the Soviet Union and China during the cold war, and (c) on some issues, especially Afghanistan and stability in Iraq, the US and Iran do have common interests. Kemp asserts that "there is an increasingly short fuse on the nuclear matter" politically, and the end of the year is the deadline the administration has imposed for meaningful changes in Iran's nuclear program.<sup>59</sup>

The Obama administration seems to acknowledge a window of opportunity for its approach that will close eventually, though just when "is largely determined by Iranian behavior," according to an administration official. "If Iran refuses to negotiate seriously, we—the United States and the international community and the [UN] Security Council—can draw

conclusions from that” and “make some judgments in the future.”<sup>60</sup> Obama said that his “overall strategy to keep an open hand toward Iran had succeeded in isolating Tehran on the world stage, which means that if diplomacy does not work, we will be in a much stronger position to, for example, apply sanctions that have bite.”<sup>61</sup>

The failure of diplomacy does not preordain the regime change option, however. Secretary of State Clinton's summer 2009 commitment to extending a “defense umbrella” over Arab Gulf allies should Iran go nuclear, according to one analyst, “evoked a vision of the U.S. countering such a threat by bolstering regional defenses and reminding Iran of the dangers of mutually assured destruction—but *not by seeking regime change in Iran or by taking military action to destroy the country's nuclear apparatus.*”<sup>62</sup>

This administrative position, as discussed earlier, takes a hands-off approach to the “Green Movement” opposition in Iran, relegating the election dispute to an internal matter for the Iranian people. This is cautious realism in the face of criticisms from the left and right for neglecting human rights and freedom in the face of oppression. One advocate for both diplomacy and support for the opposition is Trita Parsi, who argues for broadening the negotiating agenda and calling Iran out for encouraging “knife wielding militias to terrorize the Iranian people.”<sup>63</sup> Parsi warns against supporting the opposition with open American resources that would lead to their arrest and condemn the movement, but that they should be championed more rather than be treated as an off-subject topic. Robin Wright and Robert Litwack thought the Obama administration’s offer to engage was the right idea, but that the crackdown since the June 12 presidential election creates the need for a broader approach that factors the opposition movement into a calculation of the conditions that can help Iran transition to “a normal state.”<sup>64</sup>

Others opposed diplomacy from the start and advocate a more aggressive posture. They share some skepticism about the value of talks, and even consider it dangerous in that they buy time for Iranian nuclear advancements. To critics, Iran’s call for talks “derailed the sanctions’ project and will gain in prestige without any cost,” while “the Iranian regime suffers no cost for stealing the election [and] repressing the opposition.”<sup>65</sup> Ajami condemns “three decades of playing cat-and-mouse” in which various forms of American appeasement has “emboldened Iran's rulers,” advocating what he sees as a long overdue confrontation of the “Persian menace,” showing “the Iranian theocrats...that there is a price for their transgressions.”<sup>66</sup> Rubin charges that the “[t]he United States had tried to engage with Iran but that country refused,” that Iran is “extremist and adventurist, anti-American and anti-Semitic, and bent on getting nuclear weapons, destroying U.S. influence in the region, and wiping Israel off the map.”<sup>67</sup> Obama’s Republican opposition pounced on Obama’s missile defense reversal with charges that it “weakens our national security” and is “dangerous and shortsighted.”<sup>68</sup> Mitt Romney, contender for President in 2008 and 2012, charged that, despite Iran’s growing ability to “devastate Europe and America, and of annihilating Israel ... the Obama administration chooses inaction—no new severe sanctions, no hint of military options. Ahmadinejad can act with confidence that the forceful options once on our proverbial table have been shelved.”<sup>69</sup>

Of the advocates of a tougher stand on Iran, some suggest courting the Green movement. John Hannah challenges the Obama administration to “find its voice and rally the international community” to save the opposition and support “the most potent threat ever to the Islamic Republic’s survival.”<sup>70</sup> He calls the mass protest movement “the most viable option available for satisfactorily resolving the Iranian nuclear crisis short of war.” The US, he says, needs to make clear that the Islamic Republic will not “get away cost-free” if it moves against the opposition’s

top leaders.<sup>71</sup> In a subsequent analysis, Hannah calls the “Green movement” the “most serious challenge to the survivability of the Islamic Republic in its 30-year history, and that “any outside action that further squeezes Iran’s tyrants and calls into question their legitimacy in the eyes of the world will be welcomed, even at the risk of imposing additional hardships on the Iranian people.”<sup>72</sup>

### **Key Variable: How Soon Nuclear Weapons?**

Leaving presidential politics aside, one reason for the disagreements in policy has to do with how close Iran is to obtaining nuclear weapons: the sooner the expectation, the more the sense of urgency. Many US and European experts say that Iran is still experiencing technical problems with centrifuges it would use to produce bomb-grade uranium, which could delay any Iranian bomb program for years.<sup>73</sup> This report was at odds with more alarming assessments offered by Israel, who leaked threats about a possible Israeli military attack on Iranian nuclear facilities. Germany’s foreign intelligence service also reported in 2008 that “development work on nuclear weapons can be observed in Iran even after 2003.” The American “Bipartisan Policy Center’s National Security Initiative released a report warning that “time is running out” to prevent a nuclear weapons-capable Iran.”<sup>74</sup> Pakistan’s A.Q. Khan said he had set Tehran on the road to achieving its nuclear ambitions through his network of scientists supplying Libya and Iran with key components to make specialized centrifuges for enriching uranium, “[s]ince Iran was an important Muslim country.” And success would mean “we will be a strong bloc in the region to counter international pressure” and “neutralize Israel’s power.”<sup>75</sup>

This brings us to the possibility of an Israeli attack on Iranian facilities. According to Seymour Hersh, the Israeli “redline” according to Hersh is “the moment Iran masters the nuclear fuel cycle, acquiring the technical ability to produce weapons-grade uranium.”<sup>76</sup> Former UN Ambassador John Bolton, pessimistic about negotiations or sanctions, advocates Israeli use of nuclear weapons against Iran’s program to avoid Iran obtaining nuclear weapons “in the very near future.”<sup>77</sup>

It may be argued that the new US posture may imply Israel will do the US’s dirty work, or that Israel will have to do its own dirty work, depending on views of the bilateral relationship. In September 2007, an Israeli air strike on a mysterious Syrian facility was claimed to target an illicit nuclear program, which some analysts suggested was a test-run for potential strikes on similar facilities in Iran.<sup>78</sup> Three times from January to March 2009, Israelis attacked suspected Iranian convoys in Sudan suspected of carrying weapons to the Gaza Strip, the third such air strike aimed at Iranian weapons for Palestinian militants.<sup>79</sup> Vice President Biden went on record saying that the US would not stand in the way of Israeli action against Iran,<sup>80</sup> leading Iranian Majles Speaker Ali Larijani to reply, “We will consider the Americans responsible in any adventure launched by the Zionist entity.”<sup>81</sup>

But signs point to the US restraining Israel, not encouraging it. Israel’s skepticism that the US would take action by 2007-2008 led them to approach the Bush Administration for bunker-busting bombs, refueling capability and over flight rights over Iraq, for contingency plans of a strike Iran’s facilities, but they were turned down.<sup>82</sup> The Bush administration refused to sell refueling planes, so as to avoid the perception of support for an Israeli attack on Iran.<sup>83</sup> Reports point to “a series of sharp, behind-the-scenes exchanges between the Israelis and top American intelligence and military officials, dating back nearly two years and increasing in intensity in recent months,” and that Israeli officials privately believe “the Obama administration is deluding

itself in thinking that diplomacy will persuade Iran to give up its nuclear program.”<sup>84</sup> For its part, Obama officials think that Israel is throwing out worst-case possibilities to “shorten the timeline” to pressure the Obama administration to act.<sup>85</sup>

### **Conclusion: Debate Over?**

As the United States prepares for a second round of direct negotiations with Tehran and the rest of the P5+1 in late October, diplomacy without sanctions is the norm. Regime change is out, as is overt or covert support for Iran’s Green Movement. Obama may cite the success of his policy in the October 1<sup>st</sup> meeting—that it happened at all, and that Iran agreed to some concessions about uranium processing—to justify his measured and steady position throughout the election crisis. There are differences of opinion about the efficacy of talks, but there seems to be support for trying as most estimates put an Iranian bomb years away. One analysis puts it this way: in contentious, high-stakes negotiations, deals are possible when both sides have a chance to declare victory, and that point may have been reached. Trita Parsi concludes that, “if the Iranian endgame is to keep enrichment, and if the United States’ endgame is to make sure there are no nuclear weapons in Iran, then it can be a win-win.”<sup>86</sup>

But nothing is forever, and Obama may be forced to harden his line and consider new options should his approach fail to yield results. Domestic politics and the pressure of Israel will increase with time. Obama asked Congress to hold off on sanctions, but the House went ahead anyway with the Iran Refined Petroleum Sanctions Act of 2009 that calls for expanding sanctions to “enhance US diplomatic efforts,” citing candidate Obama (2008) rather than sitting President Obama (2009).<sup>87</sup> The fallback the administration hinted at in the summer of 2009, for a “defense umbrella” and containment of a nuclear Iran, is not set in stone, so more aggressive options may reemerge with time. “Towards the end of the year, we’ll be able to calculate how much progress” has been made in those talks, State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said, adding, “If they continue to fail to answer the questions, then obviously there will be implications and consequences to that, as well.”<sup>88</sup> Just what those consequences will be remains to be seen, but for now the Obama playbook remains intact. For good or ill, cooler heads have prevailed in the heated debate over the future of Iran’s nuclear program.

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### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Fouad Ajami. “Iran Must Finally Pay a Price.” *Wall Street Journal*, May 5, 2008 <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB120994900431266471.html>> accessed September 10, 2009

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## **Commentary on Professor Shannon's Article**

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Professor Vaughn Shannon's article titled "The US Reaction to the 2009 Iranian Election," is an excellent overview of the major current events in the US-Iran relationship leading to the October 1<sup>st</sup> meeting. Comparing the Bush and Obama administrations, this work particularly focuses on the drastic change in Washington's policy posture toward Tehran since the start of the present administration, so gone are the days of calling Iran a part of the "axis of evil," talking about "regime change," and funding anti-regime programs. The author concludes that "there is a return to cautious realism, as opposed to the aggressive realism combining neocon idealism and hegemonist aspirations for American domination and shaping of a New Middle East."

Professor Shannon presents a fine description of the US-Iran roller coaster relations before the summer 2009 presidential election, but he shies away from explaining and predicating such ties--the task of all social scientists. Such shortcoming raises more questions than answers for readers. For example, why does the US aim to curb Iran's nuclear ambition? Why does Tehran aim for the nuclear option? How can the nuclear crisis come to an acceptable end? The following paragraphs are calculated answers to the above questions that should have been addressed by Professor Shannon.

### **Why does the US aim to curb Iran's nuclear ambition?**

The author does not address this question, whose main answer is that Washington and the West in general simply do not "trust" the leadership of Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) and their political intentions. There is nothing new about Iran's nuclear ambition which began during the Shah's regime with the help of the same Western states that are now IRI's main challengers. Facts suggest the West opposes Iran on both conceptual context and policy grounds.

Based on its experience, the acceptable model of political development for the West has been the gradual secularization of the polity over time as well as progress toward a more politically egalitarian society as the process of economic modernization proceeds. In the West, political developments often followed gains in economic development whether this process was recognized as a revolution or an evolution. In this regard, the so-called American Revolution was a rebellion of economically rich Americans to gain political rights. The well-known British Middle Class Revolution was not even a revolution but an evolutionary process when the growing richer middle class began to demand more political rights from the monarchy after the industrial revolution. Similar processes have occurred in many Western states. Educated and preached by the West, leaders of many developing countries have theoretically aimed to repeat such experience from the top of the social pyramid in their states and their results at best are a mixed bag of success and failure.

It is in this context that the Iranian Islamic Revolution was an iconic shock to the West and the Western educated leaders, after all modern societies should become more secular, not religious. For Washington, it was one thing to promote a brand of Islam which would generate dedicated foot soldiers fighting the atheist Russians with few resources, but it was completely another thing to accept an Islamic regime replacing a close western-oriented ally of the USA in a troubled part of the world. Despite all formal and informal apologies on both sides, the US has not forgiven IRI for an anti-Western Revolution, embarrassing the US by the Hostage Crisis, and its anti-hegemonic stand in the Persian Gulf, just as the IRI leaders have not forgiven the US over the 1953 Coup, American aid for Saddam during the Iran-Iraq War, and the US unconditional support of Israel since 1967.

This is the environment of the recent US-Iran relationship which allows seeds of animosity and mistrust to grow between the two capitals. That is why under different administrations major positive developments such as Mr. Rafsanjani's efforts to free American Hostages in Lebanon (During Reagan years), Tehran's neutrality (instead of hostility) toward US efforts to liberate Kuwait (during Bush Sr. term), offering a major oil contract to an American oil company (during Clinton era), and Iranian strategic partnership with the US to bring an end to Taliban (during George W. Bush years) have not snowballed into mutually beneficial ties between the two countries.

Beyond the above mentioned conceptual context of US-Iran ties are the policy dimensions, which include Mr. Ahmadinejad's ineffective leadership, fiery style, and undiplomatic rhetoric since 2005. The reality is that the failure of the Iranian reformist movement to improve the human rights conditions at home while securing better relations with the US led to the victory of the hardliners represented by President Ahmadinejad. In fact, one may argue that Ahmadinejad is a byproduct of Washington's failures to fully utilize past opportunities provided by the former president Khatami's accommodating approach along with his call for "Dialogue Among Civilizations" while the dominant paradigm for the Bush administration was the "Clash of Civilizations."

Following the American lead, the Western media did not disappoint us by sensationalizing the bad news about Iran, while silencing the voices of reason. Tehran's accommodating policy posture during the 8-years of Khatami administration received relatively little attention and his message of "Dialogue among Civilizations" was allowed to fade away, while the international media has scrutinized every Ahmadinejad's speech to emphasize his undiplomatic words and intolerant politics. When Ahmadinejad rhetorically talks about taking Israel off the map, his words are taken out-of-context which elevates the level of mistrust and serves as the proof of IRI leadership "bad intentions." Such structural bias leads to self-fulfilling prophecies and pre-judgments about Iran by all American administrations. Thus, the context of US-Iran relations must be first analyzed and examined before one would simply highlight the diplomatic interactions and posturing between the two capitals. In other words, beyond presenting a descriptive story, one should provide the causal explanation for understanding the full story.

### **Why does Tehran aim for the nuclear option?**

In a response to a reporter who asked why the nuclear issue is so important for Iran, Karim Sajadpour replied that his Iranian government connections stated that Tehran began to

care more about nuclear issue because Washington did so. Nevertheless, one may find other explanations for Tehran relatively recent interest in nuclear technology. By emphasizing “Regime Change” in Iran and taking an active role, George W. Bush administration was different from all previous American administrations that mainly aimed to contain the Iranian Revolution or to deal with Tehran indirectly via their proxies (such as Saddam or Iranian Mujahidin Army in Iraq).

The Bush administration was characterized by its neocon idealism, marked by the 9/11 experience, relied on the American military might as the only superpower, and was proud of its relative accomplishments by freeing Afghanistan from the Taliban, putting Al-Qaeda on the run, and defeating Saddam Hussein. If it was not because of Bush Administration “imperial overstretch” (borrowing Paul Kennedy’s phrase) fighting two major conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, they would have been even more aggressively towards Iran. Professor Shannon recognized this by referring to “April Revolution” in 2006, when the Pentagon finally convinced the Bush White House to ease up on the path to conflict with Tehran. However, he did not acknowledge that the IRI realized that the best deterrence against Washington would be to reactivate the past nuclear program and to reach some level of success (like North Korea) before they become another victim of Bush “preemption doctrine” like Iraq.

### **How can the nuclear crisis come to an acceptable end?**

Professor Shannon concluded his article by suggesting that “cooler heads have prevailed in the heated debate over the future of Iran’s nuclear program,” but he refuse to make any educated predication or evaluation by suggesting that “...consequences will be remains to be see, but for now the Obama playback remain intact.”

Beyond describing the recent interactions of the Obama administrations with Iran, it is more helpful to evaluate the new administration’s record since January 2009. In reality, the Obama administration has played their hand very well against Iran in a short time at the office. First of all, Obama has put Iranian hardliners “on defense” by declaring that the willingness of his administration to meet anytime and anywhere with Iranian representatives and talk about any and all issues at hand without any preconditions. The hardliner have no more excuse that the American arrogance and preconditions does not allow a chance for fair and respectful negotiation between Tehran and Washington. That is one reason that Tehran did not formally respond to Obama’s initiatives for months until fall 2009.

Moreover, the tainted summer 2009 election which raised serious questions about the legitimacy of the Ahmadinejad’s reelection actually strengthened the hands of the Obama administration, which unconventionally ignored the Green Movement, despite his rare calls for protecting innocent life. In addition, President Obama has worked on a two-track policy. In one track, he has sent letters to Iranian Supreme Leader to improve the diplomatic atmosphere. On the other track, he restrained Israel from initiating any attacks on Iran while he has built an international coalition to deal with Iran. Using the international community has added to the legitimacy of the American concern about Iranian intention. In a short time, Obama has improved the American ties with European allies, especially with the EU big four.

Moreover, he has succeeded in bringing Moscow’s position very close to that of the West on Iran. Last July, Presidents Obama and Medvedev agreed in principle to reduce the number of strategic warhead and delivery systems. This was a major achievement in comparison to previous

administration record. Soon following reevaluation of the threat level and Iranian capabilities, Obama scrapped the Bush plan for missile shields in the Czech Republic and Poland. Although both Washington and Moscow deny any quid pro quo exchange, interestingly enough the Russian now put more pressure on Tehran, and are more inline for possible serious sanctions against Iran, if diplomacy does not succeed.

This development leaves only China (among the P-5 plus 1) which may still resist putting significant political pressure on Iran, but China also does not want to be the outlier among Great Powers on Iran's nuclear program. Thus, the international community, in part thanks to Obama's efforts, has not shown such a "united front" against Iran since the days of Hostages Crisis. This leaves very little political maneuvering space for Tehran to play one Great Power against others to survive the crisis. This is the essence of Iranian Non Alignment foreign policy strategy to minimize the foreign dependencies while balancing the influence of one Great Power with that of the others.

The October 1<sup>st</sup> (2009) P5-plus 1 meeting (in Geneva) on the nuclear program already indicated that Tehran made significant concessions, which were unexpected even a few months earlier. In principle, Tehran agreed to ship 75% of its enriched uranium to Russia which in turn would enrich it further before sending it to France where they converted it to metal rod useful for Iranian nuclear reactors. Moreover, IRI agreed to allow IAEA inspector to visit the new enrichment facility in Qom. Since the cohesion of international collation is expected for the near future, one may predict that Iran would be most likely under a great deal of political and diplomatic pressure to meet its new nuclear obligations. In this fashion, then President Ahmadinejad's tough rhetoric and unorthodox behavior may eventually serve to remind us of the expression "It takes a Nixon to go to China."

### **Rejoinder to Hooman Sadri**

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I welcome the opportunity to have my work reviewed and improved by the wisdom of my peers, and Hooman Sadri has given fresh perspective to my original work. To continue this dialogue, I have the following response to two of Sadri's observations, that I ignored the deterrent value of Iran's quest for nuclear weapons and that I equivocated in the role of predicting the future of US-Iranian relations.

Sadri notes that I "did not acknowledge that the IRI realized that the best deterrence against Washington would be to reactivate the past nuclear program and to reach some level of success (like North Korea) before they become another victim of Bush "preemption doctrine" like Iraq." I would amend this slightly, acknowledging that the IRI *believed* the best deterrence to be a nuclear program. Whether it is best or not would have depends on whether nuclearization would prompt preemptive attacks from the US or Israel, essentially begetting a self-fulfilling prophecy. Such is the security dilemma inherent in realist tactics of international security.

Still, with the "burnt offering" (to use Gareth Porter's words) and the Axis of Evil speech, combined with US operations on either side of Iran, it is no surprise that Iran felt insecure and reacted accordingly. Hardliners on each side constrain the options of these two

countries. Just as US hardliners limited Clinton's rapprochement with Iran in the 1990s, Iranian hardliners reject or rollback the agreement of October 1<sup>st</sup> with regards to exporting uranium. When in power, Bush and Ahmadinejad created a spiral of escalatory suspicion on a dangerous path toward confrontation. An Obama-Mousavi dynamic of moderates (or "doves") would ameliorate such tensions, but hardliners on both sides will prevent ultimate détente and cooperation – each sees the other as "useful adversaries" for heaping the blame of all society's ills. Still, a cold peace is better than a hot war.

Second, Sadri notes that I "refuse to make any educated predication or evaluation by suggesting that the future "remains to be seen, but for now the Obama playback remain intact." I am skeptical of pinpoint predicting in a field where contingency and human agency are pervasive, but my educated prediction is that future policy depends on the Iranian response, the US counter-response and, as always, domestic politics. Hardliners will point to Iranian behavior as duplicitous and stalling, painting Obama as an appeaser until the President relents to a hawkish position. The initial Iranian response to Geneva is not encouraging in this regard. My forecast is diplomacy for the next few months with a harder line by early or mid-2010, ahead of midterm elections and the ramp-up of US presidential politics for 2012. That is the window before a pragmatist Obama goes to being "Bush-Light" on Iran, considering containment and deterrence against charges of being "tepid" on freedom and the alleged Iran threat. Israeli strikes and support for Iranian dissident opposition may become fair game under such circumstances.

That said, so much depends on the choices of individuals in highly constrained domestic and international circumstances, that I'll gladly forego the role of soothsayer.