One

A Peace of Necessity

You cannot prevent and prepare for war at the same time.

—Albert Einstein

Tim Guldimann arrived in Washington in early May 2003. As the Swiss ambassador to Tehran, he served as caretaker of American interests in Iran because the United States does not have an embassy there. He visited the U.S. capital every few months to brief American officials on the latest developments in the Islamic Republic. But this was no ordinary visit. In Guldimann's possession was an Iranian document offering something many at the time believed was unthinkable: comprehensive negotiations between the United States and Iran.

Guldimann's visit to Washington came only weeks after U.S. troops had sacked Baghdad and ended Saddam Hussein's tyrannical rule. In less than two years, the George W. Bush administration had defeated both the Taliban in Afghanistan and Iraq's Republican Guard. Iran was encircled. Hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops were now deployed on Iran's eastern and western flank. Tehran could very well be next on the Bush administration's list of targets. Though Washington had shown minimal interest in talking to the Iranians, Tehran made a final effort to get the Americans to the negotiating table. An offer for comprehensive negotiations was prepared by Sadegh Kharrazi, Iran's ambassador to Paris, and it eventually won the approval of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The proposal spelled out the contours of a strategic

realignment between the United States and Iran based on the resolution of all major points of contention between them. To make sure that Washington understood Iran's seriousness, the negotiation proposal was given to the Swiss ambassador—the recognized and authentic intermediary between the United States and Iran in the absence of direct diplomatic channels—to be hand-delivered to the U.S. Department of State.

The proposal astonished the Americans. The Iranians put all their cards on the table, declaring what they sought from Washington and what they were willing to give in return. In a dialogue of "mutual respect," the Iranians offered to end their support for Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and pressure them to cease attacks on Israel. On Hezbollah, the pro-Iranian Shiite group in Lebanon that Iran had helped to create, Tehran offered to support its disarmament and transform it into a purely political party. The Iranians offered to put their contested nuclear program under intrusive international inspections in order to alleviate any fears of weaponization. Tehran would also sign the Additional Protocol to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and even allow extensive American involvement in the program as a further guarantee and goodwill gesture. On terrorism, Tehran offered full cooperation against *all* terrorist organizations—above all, al-Qaeda. Additionally, Iran would work actively with the United States to support political stabilization and the establishment of a nonsectarian government in Iraq.

What probably astonished the Americans the most was Iran's offer to accept the Beirut Declaration of the Arab League—that is, the Saudi peace plan from March 2002, in which the Arab states proffered collective peace with Israel, recognizing and normalizing relations with the Jewish state. In return, Israel would agree to a withdrawal from all occupied territories and accept a fully independent Palestinian state, an equal division of Jerusalem, and an equitable resolution of the Palestinian refugee problem. Through this step, Iran would formally recognize the two-state solution and consider itself at peace with Israel. This was an unprecedented concession by

Tehran. Only a year earlier, hard-liners in Tehran had dismissed the Saudi initiative, arguing that an Israeli return to the pre-1967 borders would be an unjust solution for the Palestinians.[1] The laundry list of policies that Iran was willing to discuss and amend was nothing short of an American wish list of everything that needed to change about Iran.

In return, the Iranians wanted members of the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MEK), a U.S.-designated terrorist organization of Iranian origin based in Iraq, handed over to them in return for the al-Qaeda operatives Iranian authorities had captured. At a more strategic level, the Iranians wanted to reach a long-term understanding with the United States that involved ending all U.S. sanctions; respecting Iranian national interests in Iraq and supporting Iranian demands for war reparations; respecting Iran's right to full access to nuclear, biological, and chemical technology; and, finally, recognizing Iran's legitimate security interests in the region. The proposal also spelled out a procedure for step-by-step negotiations toward a mutually acceptable agreement.

Guldimann delivered the proposal to the State Department and briefed U.S. officials on his conversations with Iranian officials. To ensure that the proposal would reach the president's desk, the Swiss ambassador also gave a copy of the proposal to Republican congressman Robert Ney of Ohio, who in turn delivered it directly to Karl Rove, Bush's special adviser. Ney, a fluent Persian-speaker who had lived in Iran prior to the 1979 revolution and favored diplomacy with Tehran, received a call from Rove within a few hours. Rove wanted to be sure of the authenticity of the proposal, which he called "intriguing," and promised to deliver it directly to the president. While few had expected the Iranians to initiate such outreach efforts, the response of the Bush White House was even more stunning.

Many in the State Department recognized the proposal for what it was: an authentic offer for negotiations approved by the highest authorities in Iran, partly motivated by America's strength in the aftermath of—at that time—successful military operations in Iraq

and Afghanistan, and by Iran's sense of vulnerability.[2] Some senior officials favored a positive response to Tehran, including Secretary of State Colin Powell and his deputy, Richard Armitage. But Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld denied them an opportunity to debate the pros and cons of the issue. Their argument was simple but devastating. "We don't speak to evil," they determined.[3] Not one single interagency meeting was set up to discuss the proposal.[4] "In the end," Lawrence Wilkerson, Colin Powell's former chief of staff told me, in a harsh reference to the neoconservatives, led by Cheney and Rumsfeld, "the secret cabal got what it wanted: no negotiations with Tehran."[5]

The hard-liners in the Pentagon and the vice president's office did not disagree that Iran's decision to make a proposal blatantly opposed to its official ideology was a sign of its weakness and sense of vulnerability. But negotiating with Iran was simply wrong, they contended, because America could get what it wanted for free by simply removing the regime in Tehran. If, on the other hand, talks were initiated and America accepted Iran's assistance, Washington would be put in the awkward situation of owing the ayatollahs.[6] Why talk to Iran when you could simply dictate terms from a position of strength?

An opportunity for a major breakthrough had been willfully wasted. Many former Bush administration officials admit that the nonresponse was a mistake. The proposal had come at an opportune time—Tehran did not yet have a functioning nuclear program, it was not swimming in oil revenues from soaring energy demands, and it was not enriching uranium. In fact, its centrifuges were not even spinning. To those in the administration opposed to the neoconservative agenda, it was difficult to fathom how such an opportunity could have been dismissed. "In my mind it was one of those things you throw your hands up in the air and say, 'I can't believe we did this,' " Wilkerson said.[7]

But merely rejecting the proposal was not enough. The hard-liners in the Bush administration apparently wanted to add insult to injury. Instead of simply turning down the Iranian offer, the Bush

administration decided to castigate the Swiss for having delivered the proposal in the first place. Only a few days after its delivery, Washington rebuked Guldimann and the Swiss government for having overstepped their diplomatic mandate. The message to Tehran was clear: not only would the Bush administration refuse Iran the courtesy of a reply, it would punish those who sought to convey messages between the two countries.

Only a few months later, an insurgency erupted in Iraq that simultaneously emboldened Iran and entangled the United States. While Tehran's influence began to rise because of its ties to the Shia in southern Iraq and to the Kurds in the north, Washington's maneuverability began to shrink. With its outreach to Washington rejected, Iran instead opted to pursue a more aggressive policy, challenging U.S. interests and expanding its nuclear enrichment program. Mired in Iraq and Afghanistan, Washington was increasingly incapable of stopping Iran from expanding its influence and reach in the region. With the Bush administration refusing to engage in diplomacy, sanctions failing to change Iran's policies, and military action remaining a deeply unattractive option, the Bush administration had few policy options left beyond issuing various empty threats.

Soon enough, even some of the most hawkish figures in Washington's foreign policy establishment began to recognize the foolishness of this squandered opportunity for diplomacy. But recognizing the mistake was not enough. A new president had to occupy the White House before diplomacy would be given a chance.

The thirty-year-old U.S.-Iran enmity is no longer a phenomenon; it is an institution. For three decades, politicians and bureaucrats in both countries have made careers out of demonizing each other. Firebrands in Iran have won political points by adding an ideological dimension to an already rooted animosity. Shrewd politicians, in turn, have shamelessly used ideology to advance their political objectives. Neighboring states in the Persian Gulf and beyond have taken advantage of this estrangement, often kindling the flames of division.

Israel and some of its supporters in the United States, in particular, have feared that a thaw in U.S. relations with Iran would come at the expense of America's special friendship with the Jewish state.

But the strategic cost to the United States and Iran of this prolonged feud has been staggering. Harming both and benefiting neither, the U.S.-Iran estrangement has complicated Washington's efforts to advance the peace process between the Israelis and Palestinians in the 1990s, win the struggle against al-Qaeda, or defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan and the insurgency in Iraq. Still, the strategic cost of this enmity has oftentimes been dwarfed by the domestic political cost to overcome it. In Washington, the political cost for attempting to resolve tensions with Iran has simply been too great and the political space too narrow to justify starting down a fraught and uncertain path to peace with Iran. Political divisions, in turn, have paralyzed Tehran at key intervals, with vying political factions not wishing to see their competitors define the outcome of a U.S.-Iran rapprochement or get credit for reducing tensions.

The hostility has been institutionalized because either too many forces on both sides calculate that they can better advance their own narrow interests by retaining the status quo, or the predictability of enmity is preferred to the unpredictability of peace making. Thus, over the years, this antipathy has survived—and hardened—because the cost of maintaining the status quo has not outweighed the risk of seeking peace—until 2008, that is.

With the election of Barack Obama, the stars aligned for a radical shift in U.S.-Iran relations. Tensions between the United States and Iran had risen dramatically during the Bush administration, putting the two countries on the verge of war. While the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and the occupation of Iraq put American troops on Iran's eastern and western borders, respectively, the defeat of the Taliban and the end of Saddam Hussein's reign also removed two of Iran's key regional rivals from the strategic chessboard. Freed from the burden of its long-standing enemies, Iran was now a fast-ascending power that astutely took advantage of America's inability to win the peace in

the Middle East. At the same time, Iran's advancing nuclear program added more fuel to the fire. Increasingly, Iran's rise, combined with America's painful predicament in the region, rendered a continuation of the U.S.-Iran rift too costly. Iran and the United States were gravitating toward a confrontation that neither could afford.[8]

Meanwhile, the American public had turned against not only president George W. Bush's invasion of Afghanistan and occupation of Iraq, but also the ideological foundation of Bush's worldview. Previously, Beltway hawks maintained that negotiations and compromise were not mere tools of diplomacy, but rather rewards that should be granted only to states that deserved an opportunity to talk to the United States. Inspired by this philosophy, Bush refused to engage with Iran during his entire presidency, even on issues of such importance as Iraq and Afghanistan (with the exception of episodic instances of brief diplomatic outreach for tactical purposes). Moreover, the neoconservative philosophy, viewing the United States as the source of legitimacy at home and abroad, dictated that talking to the autocratic rulers in Tehran would help legitimize Iran's theocratic and repressive government. But while refusing engagement with Iran upheld a sense of ideological purity for the Bush White House, it did nothing to address the growing challenge that Iran posed to the United States in the region. During the Bush presidency, Iran amassed more than 8,000 centrifuges for its nuclear program while expanding its influence in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon.

This reality was widely acknowledged in the United States toward the end of the Bush administration. In March 2006 Congress appointed a bipartisan Iraq Study Group to assess the Iraq war and to make policy recommendations. One of the group's key endorsements was direct U.S. dialogue with Iran over Iraq and the situation in the Middle East—a stark refutation of the Bush White House ideology.[9] And in September 2008, only two months before the U.S. presidential elections, five former secretaries of state—Madeleine Albright, Colin Powell, Warren Christopher, Henry A. Kissinger, and James A. Baker III—called on the United States to talk to Iran.[10]

Then-Senator Obama recognized that unprecedented political space had emerged for new foreign policy thinking. So rather than shying away from the issue of diplomacy with Iran, Obama took the unusual step of making engagement with U.S. adversaries a central part of his foreign policy platform during the 2008 presidential election—something that, under normal circumstances in Washington, would have been considered political suicide. In the televised presidential debates, Obama boldly declared that it was "critical" that we "talk to the Syrians and the Iranians," and that those saying that the United States "shouldn't be talking to them ignore our own history."[11]

Finally, the persona of Barack Obama himself was an important factor. He was a most unlikely candidate—and the most difficult one for the Iranian leadership to dismiss or vilify. Born to a Kenyan Muslim father and a American Midwestern mother, Obama spent most of his childhood in Hawaii and, later, in Indonesia, after his mother was remarried to an Indonesian. Having been exposed to both the Muslim and Christian religions, having grown up in a Third World country shortly after it had won its independence from colonial powers, and having the middle name Hussein—the name of one of the most revered figures in Shia tradition—Obama simply did not fit the Iranian stereotype of American, "imperialist" leaders—arrogant, ignorant, and incapable of empathizing with the grievances of Third World states against Western powers.

Clearly, Obama recognized the historic opportunity that lay before him. Only twelve and a half minutes into his presidency, he sought to seize it by extending America's hand of friendship in the hope that Iran would unclench its fist.

Two

With Friends Like These . . .

We live in a neighborhood in which sometimes dialogue . . . is liable to be interpreted as weakness.

—Israel's foreign minister Tzipi Livni, declaring her opposition to U.S.-Iran diplomacy, November 2008

Millions around the globe were glued to their TVs to watch President Obama's message of hope on Inauguration Day 2009. In Tehran, however, decision makers were looking for a key buzzword in the new president's speech: mutual respect. Obama didn't disappoint. "To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect . . . we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist," Obama said in his address to the 1.5-million-strong crowd on the Washington mall. "Mutual respect" has become an almost mysterious term in U.S.-Iran relations. The Iranians have repeatedly stated that improved U.S.-Iran relations can come about only when the two countries negotiate with each other as equals, with "mutual respect." The rather ambiguous term has often bewildered U.S. officials who do not understand what exactly the Iranians are demanding of the United States. "What does this 'mutual respect' mumbo-jumbo mean?" an American lawmaker once asked me. "Why don't they just say what they want?" While from the American point of view the U.S.-Iran conflict is rooted in policy differences and opposing visions for the Middle East,

to the Iranians it is very much about discarding an uneven relationship—that between a master and a servant. The term "mutual respect" is so critical to Tehran that the Iranians even included it in their 2003 negotiation offer to the Bush administration (see chapter 1).

But the Iranians were not the only ones listening for signals in Obama's articulated vision for U.S.-Iran relations. Washington and Tehran may be the main actors in this drama, but plenty of other states also follow every twist and turn of their dysfunctional relationship. While some of them welcomed the Obama administration's promise of a new approach toward international affairs in general, and its policy toward Iran in particular, most feared what such change could bring about.

Europe's Relief and Anxiety

In Europe the election of Obama was largely welcomed, as was his promise for U.S.-Iran talks without preconditions, in contrast to the Bush administration's insistence that it would talk to Iran only on the condition that Iran first suspend its enrichment program. "The new tone set by the Obama administration engendered hope, not least since many European countries for a long time had identified and propagated a less conditioned approach to negotiating with Iran," a senior non-EU3 (France, Germany, United Kingdom) diplomat explained. Few doubted, however, that the task lying ahead of Obama was daunting. But the opportunity was too great to be missed; the United States was led by a new president with no baggage, giving Washington and Tehran a "chance for a new start." What emerged from Europe was principled support for diplomacy, with realistic expectations of what could be achieved. "For us it was a relief. It was a lot of happiness," a senior EU official told me. The Bush administration's refusal to engage in diplomacy, as well as its militaristic foreign policy, had frustrated the Europeans. There was a strong sense that the nonproliferation objectives of the U.S. and the EU could be better achieved with an American administration "that

could be more flexible on modalities" and that "would be ready to meet the Iranians." Even when the United States endorsed the EU-Iran talks in 2006 and agreed to sit down with the Iranians—albeit with a precondition that was widely viewed as self-defeating—Washington still did not want to give the appearance of really engaging with the Iranians. "They were part of the group, but they really wanted to remain in the back," a senior French diplomat said.[1]

But once the diplomacy that Europe officially supported was about to start, fears and apprehensions emerged in some European capitals, despite their official support. What exactly did "direct" diplomacy "without preconditions" mean? Would the Obama administration cut the Europeans out of the process and opt for a bilateral channel with Tehran? If Europe were cut out of the process, would it lose its ability to bring pressure against any eventual military action down the road? "We didn't have many indicators with regard to the shape of the new Obama Iran policy," a senior EU diplomat explained. In France, specifically, there was "unease" and "apprehension" that Washington would go soft on Iran and, in the words of French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner, "ruin the dual-track approach"—the idea that the most effective strategy on Iran would entail an appropriate balance between talks and incentives on the one hand and hard-hitting sanctions on the other.[2]

"Going soft on Iran" would be especially problematic from the perspective of the French, in the event that Washington would amend its redline on the nuclear issue and accept enrichment on Iranian soil. During the campaign, then-Senator Obama had expressed strong opposition to the spread of nuclear weapons and declared that a *nuclear-armed* Iran would be intolerable. "Iran's development of a nuclear weapon, I believe, is unacceptable. And we have to mount an international effort to prevent that from happening," he said at his first postelection press conference on November 7, 2008. But throughout the campaign, Obama, unlike his presidential opponents, avoided making any statements on the issue of *uranium enrichment,* which is a key step in the process of producing nuclear fuel for peaceful

purposes, as well as for producing nuclear weapons material. The Bush administration maintained a zero-enrichment objective, meaning that Iran should not only be denied nuclear weapons, it should also be prohibited from gaining the knowledge of the enrichment process. As such, the Bush administration rejected the Iranian claim that, as a signatory of the nonproliferation treaty, Iran had an inalienable right to enrichment. (Article IV of the treaty stipulates that member states have an "inalienable right" to "develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination.") Most states contested the Bush administration's rejection of the right to enrichment on a legal basis, and many U.S. allies also questioned the feasibility of denying Iran knowledge of the enrichment process.[3]

By 2008, an increasing number of influential foreign policy and nonproliferation voices in Washington had begun to question the wisdom of the zero-enrichment policy. In February 2008, former U.S. undersecretary of state for political affairs Thomas Pickering co-wrote an article in the *New York Review of Books* proposing that "Iran's efforts to produce enriched uranium and related nuclear activities be conducted on a multilateral basis, jointly managed and operated on Iranian soil by a consortium including Iran and other governments." At a conference a few weeks later in the U.S. Senate organized by the National Iranian American Council, Pickering defended his position in favor of abandoning the zero-enrichment policy. "We should not let the perfect become an enemy of the good," he said, arguing that, while zero-enrichment may be ideal, it is not the only solution to the Iranian nuclear challenge. At closed U.S. think tank seminars, one could hear even more blunt acknowledgments that the zero-enrichment policy had failed. The challenge was how to discard it without further emboldening the Iranians.[4]

As Washington was ready to move toward diplomacy, the enthusiasm for engagement in parts of Europe was waning. Neither the French nor the British were encouraged by the new mood in Washington and feared that the Obama administration would move the

nuclear redlines. "We thought that was wrong, we thought it was bad tactics to signal [abandonment of the zero-enrichment objective]. . . . You shouldn't say that until the full might of U.S. diplomacy had been tested," a senior European official explained. President Nicolas Sarkozy of France was pushing toward a harsher stance that appeared to be closer to Bush's outlook on Iran than to Obama's. Together with the United Kingdom, France pressed the EU to adopt tough new sanctions on Iran in January 2009 at the same time that Obama was taking office. The push reopened divisions within the EU, with several states opposing it, preferring to place the emphasis on dialogue with Tehran instead. The French had several reasons for adopting a tougher stance. There was some resentment that the U.S. was taking over the process, and adopting a more rigid line would increase Europe's leverage and relevance. There was also a fear that Iran would play for time and outmaneuver the Obama administration, which could unravel the momentum for sanctions. Harsher EU measures could also help ensure a more hard-line outcome of the Obama administration's review of its Iran policy. Moreover, there was a general fatigue in Europe when it came to talks with Iran. Although more than two years had passed since the previous United Nations Security Council sanctions resolution had been imposed on Iran, Tehran had nevertheless continued with its nuclear program. It was time for new punitive measures, decision makers in Paris reasoned.[5]

While the French maintained that harsher EU sanctions would strengthen the Obama administration's hand in dealing with Iran, other EU states disagreed and worried that punitive measures at that time would undercut Obama. "Going in hawkish on the European side while Obama was stretching out his hand would certainly undermine the credibility of the outstretched hand," a senior non-EU3 diplomat said. These EU states welcomed Obama's impending outreach since they did not believe that there was a sanctions solution to the Iranian challenge. In the end, the French and British push for sanctions fell flat and the EU decided to wait for Obama to make the first move.[6]

Arab Doublespeak

Concerns about Obama's outreach to Iran were even greater in parts of the Arab world. Many Arab states were vehemently opposed to the policies and approach of the Bush administration in the Middle East—primarily the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq; the way those military missions helped unleash Iranian and Shiite influence in the region; the neglect of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; as well as the failure to consult and take into consideration the advice and concerns of the Arab states. There were also "deep concerns" that while the Arabs would be immediately affected by Iran going nuclear, they were not involved or consulted in the nuclear negotiations with Iran.[7]

During a visit to Saudi Arabia in October 2010, many Arab officials complained to me that the United States had "given Iraq to Iran on a golden platter" and that Iran was now in a position to establish hegemony in the region. Some officials could not fathom that these were unintended consequences of the Bush administration's Middle East policy, and rather suspected that the U.S. was secretly colluding with the rulers in Tehran. After all, the Arabs maintained, they had warned the United States about these exact consequences. Others blamed the situation on neglect and incompetence. "The Bush administration policies regarding the region suffered from a lack of consultations and dialogue with its regional friends like Saudi Arabia. We clearly and repeatedly warned them of the potential problems of their original plans in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and explained the geostrategic imbalances they might create, but they were not in the listening mode," Rayed Krimly, a special envoy of the Saudi king, told me. "Only much later did they begin to recognize the inherent contradictions in their policies and became more willing to seek dialogue and cooperation from Saudi Arabia and other allies. But by then it was clear to everyone that Iran was the only side in the region that benefited from U.S. mistakes by expanding its influence in both Iraq and Afghanistan," he continued.[8]

The Saudis and their Sunni Arab allies fear U.S.-Iran diplomacy

primarily for three reasons. First, a U.S.-Iran rapprochement could help facilitate and grant acceptance to Iran's alleged ambitions for regional hegemony. Tensions between Iranians and Arabs have historic roots, dating back to the Arab conquest of Iran in the seventh-century AD. For centuries, Iran and Saudi Arabia have viewed each other as regional rivals. In more modern times, the Saudis have feared and resented the idea of the U.S. reestablishing the relations it had with Iran when, under the shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iran was considered the custodian of stability in the region. In Arab eyes, the shah enjoyed the blessing of the United States to behave as a regional hegemon, much to the chagrin of Iran's Saudi rival. Any movement back in that direction would inevitably come at the expense of the Sunni Arabs' standing and influence in the region, the Saudis fear. Only days after Obama's election victory, the Jordanian foreign minister, Salah Bashir, told Western diplomats that "the nuclear crisis became a crisis [for the West] but for us the Iranian surge for hegemony has become a crisis." Egypt's then-president Hosni Mubarak told American officials repeatedly that he viewed Iran as the region's primary strategic threat and that its influence must be rolled back. An oft-repeated line by Saudi officials reads, "Engagement yes, marriage no," meaning that diplomacy for reducing tensions was acceptable, but not for a full-fledge rapprochement with American acceptance of Iranian policies and ambitions. "The [Saudi] kingdom's main concern is to prevent any ceding of Saudi-Arab interests for the sake of what has been termed by some Iran lovers as 'The Grand Bargain,'" Prince Turki bin Faisal Al Saud, the former director general of Saudi Arabia's intelligence agency, told me. "This term, generally, means that anything to do with the Middle East has to pass by Iranian doors," he argued.[9]

To the Americans, these concerns were generally viewed as exaggerated and unrealistic. The idea that the Americans would betray the Saudis if "the Iranian price is right" seemed removed from reality since a U.S.-Iran rapprochement was neither likely nor necessarily desirable to many American officials. "There's probably some con-

cern in the region that may draw on an exaggerated sense of what's possible," said Robert Gates, secretary of defense in both the Bush and the Obama administrations, while on a visit to Saudi Arabia in May 2009. To reassure America's Sunni Arab allies, Gates added that "building diplomacy with Iran will not be at the expense of our long-term relationship with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states that have been our partners and friends for decades."[10]

Second, even if improved U.S.-Iran relations would not grant Iran a hegemonic position, they could still enhance Iran's ability to "meddle in Arab affairs." Describing Iran not as "a neighbor one wants to see" but as "a neighbor one wants to avoid," King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia impressed on Obama administration officials early on that "Iran's goal is to cause problems." Many Arab states are particularly sensitive to Iran's penetration of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has provided Tehran with ample opportunities to extend its influence in the Sunni Arab world. By taking a tougher stance against Israel than that of Washington's Arab allies, Tehran has increased the divide between these regimes and their populations. This bewilders Sunni governments, which despise being outflanked by Iran and having their inability—or unwillingness—to safeguard the rights of the Palestinians revealed. According to classified State Department cables, King Abdullah told Iran's foreign minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, in a heated exchange in March 2009 that "you as Persians have no business meddling in Arab matters," referring to Iran's involvement in the situation in the Palestinian territories.[11]

According to some analysts, Arab anxiety over Iran's rising influence has created new fault lines in the region. The old fault line of "Israel versus Arabs and Muslims" has been replaced with one that divides the region between states aligned with or opposed to the West. In this new Middle East, if given a choice between fighting Israel or opposing Iran's increased influence, the Sunni Arab dictatorships will choose the latter. This view of the region gained credence during Israel's bombing campaign of Gaza in late 2008.

Operation Cast Lead began on December 27, 2008, with surprise air strikes by the Israeli air force against the Gaza Strip, followed by a ground invasion on January 3, 2009. The assault continued for twenty-one days and resulted in seventeen Israeli and more than 1,400 Palestinian deaths. Images of the war and the Goldstone Report findings of Israeli war crimes brought anger in the Arab world to a boiling point. What was perhaps most problematic for America's Sunni Arab allies, however, was the information that emerged suggesting that some of them had been colluding with Israel in order to bring down the Hamas government in Gaza as a means to counter Iran's growing influence. Hamas's ties to Iran had provided Tehran with credibility among Arabs and a dangerous entrance to the heart of Arab politics, they argued. A defeat for Hamas would also be a defeat for Iran.[12]

That objective never materialized, but the war did impose a major cost on all actors in the region. The Egyptian government's alleged support for the Israeli operation, particularly its refusal to allow a general opening of the Rafah Crossing into Gaza, earned it much criticism in the Arab world. In a speech on al-Manar TV, the leader of Hezbollah singled out Egypt and echoed Hamas's condemnation of the leadership in Cairo. According to the *Jerusalem Post,* the Iran-aligned Hezbollah leader appeared to be calling for an open revolt against the Egyptian government as part of the fight against Israel. Iran's hard-line president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, further pounced on the Mubarak government in Egypt. "Today it has been heard in some of the West's political meetings that the Egyptian government is a partner in crimes in Gaza and they are after breaking Hamas as part of the resistance and bring it under their own influence," the semiofficial Mehr News Agency quoted Ahmadinejad as saying. The Egyptians, faced with demonstrations at home against the government's position on the Gaza war, in turn accused Iran and Hezbollah of provoking a conflict in the region to advance their own interests. "[They tried] to turn the region to confrontation in the interest of Iran, which is trying to use its cards to escape Western

pressure . . . on the nuclear file," then-Egyptian foreign minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit said. Whether or not there are new fault lines in the region, the Gaza war did reveal the extent to which Sunni Arab dictatorships fear Iran's rising influence and the lengths they are willing to go to contain it.[13]

The third, and perhaps most important, reason that the Saudis and their Sunni Arab allies fear U.S.-Iran diplomacy is because such a dialogue, and the continued spread of Iranian influence that the Arab states assume it would entail, could constitute a direct threat to the survival of the Sunni Arab autocracies. The Islamic Republic is viewed as a twin threat because it embodies the idea of political Islam, which, prior to the Arab spring, was believed to be the primary domestic political threat to these autocratic and monarchial regimes. And during the first decade after the Iranian revolution in 1979, the Islamic Republic openly sought to export its revolution to its neighboring Arab states with the aim of replacing their governments with Islamic regimes. In addition, Iran challenges the U.S.-dominated order in the region—an order under which the United States seeks to guarantee the survival of its allied Sunni Arab dictatorships. The collapse of this order would constitute a direct threat to the survival of the current autocratic political systems in key Sunni Arab states.

Though leaders of these states publicly oppose a U.S.-Iran war, classified U.S. State Department cables that recently have come to light reveal that some Arab states have pushed the U.S. to go to war with Iran. In February 2007, Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, urged the chief of staff of the U.S. Air Force, General Teed Moseley, to "delay their program—by all means available." He added: "I am saying this knowing that I am putting my country at risk and placing myself in a dangerous spot." Moreover, the king of Saudi Arabia had made frequent exhortations to the U.S. to attack Iran, the cables said, asking U.S. officials to "cut off the head of the snake."[14]

The Israel Factor

"We live in a neighborhood in which sometimes dialogue . . . is liable to be interpreted as weakness," Israel foreign minister Tzipi Livni said during an interview with Israel Radio only twenty-four hours after congratulating President-elect Obama on his historic election victory. Asked specifically if she supported discussions between the U.S. and Iran, she left no room for interpretation: "The answer is no," she declared. For decades, Israel has been a key factor in America's relations with Iran. Israel has at times pushed Washington to get closer to Tehran, but in the past twenty years has been a vehement opponent of a U.S.-Iran dialogue. In fact, Sunni Arab apprehension about the Obama administration's promise of diplomacy with Iran has been surpassed by only that of Israel.[15]

When Ahmadinejad began his tirades against Israel, the world appeared to be light-years away from the idea that ideological conflicts had come to an end. It seemed that ideologues had once more taken the reins of power and rejoined a battle in which there could be no parley or negotiated truce—only the victory of one idea over the other. Even before Ahmadinejad pulled Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's poisonous anti-Israel rhetoric from the dustbin of history, the tense relations between Iran and Israel were often seen as one of history's last ideological clashes. On one side was Israel, portrayed as a democracy in a region beset by authoritarianism and an eastern outpost of Enlightenment rationalism. On the other side was the Islamic Republic of Iran, viewed as a hidebound clerical regime whose rejection of the West and aspiration to speak for Muslims everywhere were symbolized by its refusal to recognize Israel's right to exist.

The Israeli-Iranian confrontation is far more complex than an ideology-based understanding would indicate, however. Exclusive focus on the vitriol between the two countries has come at the expense of a deeper understanding of the strategic nature of their conflict and its impact on U.S.-Iran relations. That the conflict is strategic is

underscored by the fact of past Iranian-Israeli cooperation. Prior to the overthrow of the shah, the conventional view in both countries was that non-Arab Iran and Israel—both surrounded by a sea of hostile Arabs and at odds with the Soviet Union—enjoyed strong common strategic imperatives, perhaps even a natural alliance. Indeed, as long as Iran and Israel faced common Arab and Russian threats, they forged close clandestine security ties that survived the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and continued for a number of years. It was not just the shah who traded and cooperated with the Israelis; Khomeini had his fair share of dealings with Israel as well. In spite of his frequent calls for Israel's destruction, the Khomeini government was very careful to avoid direct confrontation with Israel. "We never wanted to get directly involved in the fights against Israel," Alavi Tabar, an Iranian revolutionary close to Khomeini, explained to me over tea and cookies at his Tehran office. Iranian passivity regarding Israel had everything to do with Iran's strategic imperatives. Khomeini was careful not to turn Israel into a direct threat to Iran, and he told his associates that, in the event of an agreement between the Palestinians and the Israelis, Iran should lend its support to the agreement by standing behind the Palestinians.[16]

Indeed, the Israelis recognized the difference between Iran's rhetoric and its policy, and treated Iran as a potential regional ally, regardless of the nature of its regime and its oratory. While Khomeini called Israel a "cancerous tumor," the Israelis—particularly Shimon Peres, successively Israel's prime minister and foreign minister—were lobbying Washington to boost Iran's defenses and bring Tehran "back into the western fold." Only three days after Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980, Israel foreign minister Moshe Dayan interrupted a private visit to Vienna to hold a press conference to urge the United States—in the middle of the hostage crisis—to forget the past and help Iran keep up its defenses. In 1982, Ariel Sharon (then Israel's defense minister) proudly announced on NBC television that Israel would continue to sell arms to Iran in spite of an American ban on such sales. Sharon added that Israel provided the arms to Iran

because it felt it was important to "leave a small window open" to the possibility of good relations with Iran in the future.[17]

In that period, Iran's strategic imperatives and its rhetorical objectives clashed, and the ideology of the revolutionaries was repeatedly sidelined by realist calculations. As a result, Iran huffed and puffed but did very little against Israel. Similarly, geopolitical factors compelled Israel to seek a revived working relationship with Iran in spite of the Iranian regime's Islamist nature. Israel regarded Iraq's invasion of Iran with great concern since an Iraqi victory would leave Israel in a far more vulnerable position. Baghdad would become the undisputed hegemon over the Persian Gulf, with the world's third-largest oil reserves and an army more than four times the size of Israel's. It would make the threat of the "eastern front" worse than ever before: an Arab alliance with Iraq's full participation could overrun Jordan and quickly place the Iraqi army on Israel's eastern front. Although Iraq was flirting with the United States, and some in the Reagan administration—like Donald Rumsfeld, President Reagan's special envoy to Iraq—were flirting back and toying with the idea of making Saddam their new ally in the Persian Gulf, an Iraqi-Western rapprochement would have little bearing on Baghdad's hostility toward Israel. An Iranian victory, as unlikely as it appeared at the outbreak of the war, did not particularly worry Israel. Because Iran was a thousand miles away, its ability to participate in a war against Israel was minimal, even if it came out of the war victorious. "Throughout the 1980s, no one in Israel said anything about an Iranian threat—the word wasn't even uttered," said Professor David Menashri of Tel Aviv University, Israel's foremost expert on Iran.[18]

At the height of Iran's ideological zeal, Israel's fear of an Iraqi victory, its dismissal of the dangers of Iran's political ideology, and its efforts to win Iran back and revive its periphery alliance with the non-Arab states in the region all paved the way for Israel's policy of arming Iran and seeking to defuse tensions between Washington and Tehran. Stopping Saddam was paramount, and if "that meant going along with the request for arms by the Iranians, and that could

prevent an Iraqi victory, so be it," asserted David Kimche, former head of the Israeli Foreign Ministry. But there was more. Inducing Washington to reach out to Iran had the benefit of not only stopping Iraq and reviving its strategic ties with Iran; it would also distance the United States from the Arabs and ultimately "establish Israel as the only real strategic partner of the United States in the region." A majority of senior Israeli officials, including Yitzhak Rabin, simply continued to believe that Iran was a "natural ally" of Israel.[19]

As the war progressed without the fall of Iran's revolutionary government, Israeli thinking increasingly shifted from counting on the Khomeini government's disintegration to seeking the strengthening of moderate elements within it. Though the Israelis began to realize that the Khomeini regime was not going to collapse anytime soon, they still viewed its Islamic nature and extremist views as a historical parenthesis. The real, geostrategically oriented Iran that would resume the shah's strategic cooperation with Israel would soon reemerge, they believed. This made it all the more important for Israel to support Iran in the war because an Iranian defeat would not only embolden the Arab front against Israel, it would also reduce the chances of reviving Israel's alliance with Iran, as the next regime would be weak and dependent on Iraq. Empowering moderates within the Iranian regime could facilitate the process of reestablishing Israel's ties to Iran, and the one element in Iran that could change the situation for the better amounted to the professional officers in the Iranian army. "There was a feeling that if we in Israel could somehow maintain relations with the army, this could bring about an improvement of relations between Iran and Israel," Kimche explained. It was this reasoning that eventually culminated in the Iran-Contra scandal, which was an Israeli initiative to convince the United States to talk to the Khomeini government in Tehran, sell arms to it, and ignore its anti-Western rhetoric.[20]

What changed the nature of Israeli-Iranian relations from a tacit alliance to open enmity was not the Iranian revolution of 1979, but the geopolitical changes that swept through the Middle East in the

early 1990s. The defeat of Iraq in the 1991 Persian Gulf war and the collapse of the Soviet Union eliminated the two common threats that had brought Iran and Israel closer to each other since the 1950s. This improved the security environments of both Iran and Israel, but also left both states unchecked. Without Iraq balancing Iran, the Persians would now become a threat, Israeli hawks argued. These new geopolitical conditions necessitated new strategies and policies. This was particularly true for Israel, given that the end of the Cold War had put Israel's strategic utility to the United States under question. During the Persian Gulf war, which drove Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait, Washington had increasingly treated Israel as a burden rather than an asset. And as the United States gravitated toward the Arab position (Washington organized the Madrid conference immediately after the war to pressure Israel to compromise with the Palestinians), and as its need for Israel as a bulwark against Soviet penetration of the Middle East evaporated, how would Israel's standing in Washington fare if the U.S. also sought a rapprochement with Iran?

Drastic actions were needed to adjust to these new realities. Israel needed to make peace with the Palestinians to reduce friction with the United States, and it needed to redirect its resources toward the potential Iranian threat to convince Washington to confront Tehran. In October 1992, the Labor government undertook a major campaign to depict Iran and Shia Islamic fundamentalism as a global threat. Rhetoric reflected intentions, and, having been freed from the chains of Iraq, Iran was acquiring the capacity to turn intentions into policy, Labor argued. And since Tehran was "fanatical and irrational," finding an accommodation with such "mad mullahs" was a nonstarter. While the threat depiction resembled prophecy more than reality, it underlined the link between the Labor Party's intent to secure a peace deal with Israel's immediate Arab neighbors and the new drive to confront Iran. To convince a skeptical Israeli public that peace could be made with the Arab vicinity, it was necessary to bolster the threat portrayal of the Persian periphery. Even though Iran was weak mili-

tarily after the devastating war with Iraq, Rabin told Israel's Knesset (parliament) in 1993 that Israel's "struggle against murderous Islamic terror" was "meant to awaken the world[,] which is lying in slumber," to the dangers of Shia fundamentalism. "Death is at our doorstep," Rabin said of Iran, even though just five years earlier he had dismissed Iran's rhetoric as inconsequential. A key component of the campaign to isolate Iran was the effort to prevent a U.S.-Iran rapprochement, in the words of a former Israeli ambassador to Washington, since improved relations between Washington and Tehran could come at the expense of Israel's strategic relationship with the U.S.[21]

Soon enough, the Iranian government began hitting at Israel. Fearing that Israel was pushing the U.S. to build a new regional order based on Iran's prolonged isolation, Iran started targeting what it perceived to be the weakest link in that strategy: the peace process. The new realities in the region had realigned Iran's ideological goals with its strategic interests, causing Tehran to turn its anti-Israel rhetoric into policy. Now, venomous outbursts against Israel were to be accompanied with action, primarily in the form of providing material support to militant organizations targeting the Jewish state. Paradoxically, Tehran had not misperceived American and Israeli intentions. According to Martin Indyk, a key Middle East hand in the Clinton administration and an architect of the "dual containment" policy that wedded peacemaking between Israel and the Palestinians with efforts to isolate Iran, "The more we succeeded in making peace, the more isolated [Iran and the rogue states] would become; the more we succeeded in containing [Iran], the more possible it would be to make peace. So they had an incentive to do us in on the peace process in order to defeat our policy of containment."[22]

Initially, the American establishment was skeptical toward Israel's change of heart on Iran. "Why the Israelis waited until fairly recently to sound a strong alarm about Iran is a perplexity," wrote Clyde Haberman of the *New York Times* in November 1992. Haberman went on to note: "For years, Israel remained willing to do business with Iran, even though the mullahs in Teheran were screaming for an end

to the 'Zionist entity.' " Eventually, however, the mad mullah argument stuck. After all, the Iranians themselves were the greatest help in selling that argument to Washington. From the Israeli perspective, rallying Western states to its side was best achieved by emphasizing the alleged suicidal tendencies of the clergy and Iran's apparent infatuation with the idea of destroying Israel. As long as the Iranian leadership was viewed as irrational, conventional tactics such as deterrence would be rendered impossible, leaving the international community with no option but to prohibit Iranian capabilities. How could a country like Iran be trusted with missile technology, the argument went, if its leadership was immune to dissuasion by the larger and more numerous missiles of the West?[23]

Israel sought to ensure that the world—Washington in particular—would not see the Israeli-Iranian conflict as one between two rivals for preeminence in a region that lacked a clear pecking order. Rather, Israel framed the clash as one between the sole democracy in the Middle East and a theocracy that hated everything the West stood for. When it was cast in those terms, the allegiance of Western states to Israel was no longer a matter of choice or real political interest. Ironically, Iran too preferred an ideological framing of the conflict, since its desire for Iranian great-power status would gain more support among the Muslim masses if it were projected as an effort to advance Islam and the rights of the Palestinians.

The ideological zeal masking the Israeli-Iranian rivalry contributed to Washington's poor understanding of the root causes of this conflict. While there was some recognition that Israel exaggerated the Iranian threat in order to push Washington to take a harder line on Iran, there was little acknowledgment of Israel's real concerns about Iran. In spite of its rhetoric, Israel views the regime in Tehran as rational (but extremist), calculating, and risk-averse. Even those Israeli officials who believe that Iran is hell-bent on destroying the Jewish state recognize that Tehran is unlikely to attack Israel with nuclear weapons due to the destruction Israel would inflict on Iran through its second-strike capability—a guaranteed ability to retaliate

because of its nuclear-equipped submarines. "Whatever measure [the Iranians] have, they can't destroy Israel's capability to respond," Ranaan Gissin, spokesperson for Israel's former prime minister Ariel Sharon told me.[24]

What lies at the heart of Israel's concern is not necessarily the fear of a nuclear clash, but the regional and strategic consequences that nuclear parity in the Middle East will have for Israel. The real danger a nuclear-capable Iran poses for Israel is twofold. First, an Iran that does not possess nuclear weapons but that has the capability to *build* them in short order would significantly damage Israel's ability to deter militant Palestinian and Lebanese organizations. It will damage the image of Israel as the sole nuclear-armed state in the region and undercut the myth of its invincibility. Gone would be the days when Israel's military supremacy would enable it to dictate the parameters of peace and pursue unilateral peace plans. "We cannot afford a nuclear bomb in the hands of our enemies, period. They don't have to use it; the fact that they have it is enough," Israel's former deputy minister of defense, Ephraim Sneh, explained to me. This could force Israel to accept territorial compromises with its neighbors in order to deprive Iran of any justification for fomenting hostility toward the Jewish state. Israel simply would not be able to afford a nuclear rivalry with Iran and continued territorial disputes with the Arabs at the same time. "I don't want the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations to be held under the shadow of an Iranian nuclear bomb," Sneh continued.[25]

Second, the deterrence and power Iran would acquire by mastering the nuclear fuel cycle could compel Washington to cut a deal with Tehran in which Iran would gain recognition as a regional power and acquire strategic significance in the Middle East at the expense of Israel. "The Great Satan will make up with Iran and forget about Israel," Gerald Steinberg of Bar Ilan University and an adviser to Israel prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu said of the Israeli fear. All likely outcomes of U.S.-Iran negotiations are perceived to be less optimal for Israel than the status quo of intense U.S.-Iran enmity that threatens to boil over into a military clash. Under these circum-

stances, U.S.-Iran negotiations could damage Israel's strategic standing. Common interests shared by Iran and the U.S. would overshadow Israel's concerns with Tehran, thereby leaving Israel alone in facing its Iranian rival. After Obama's election victory, the Israeli National Security Council foresaw two possible Iran-related diplomatic developments that could hurt Israel: a U.S.-initiated dialogue leading to rapprochement between Iran, the United States, and the Arab world, or the U.S. building a wide international coalition against Iran for which Israel might be forced to pay a price. Preventing these scenarios was essential, the Israeli National Security Council argued. Yuval Steinitz, right-wing Likud Party member of the Knesset and aspiring defense or foreign minister, went so far as to compare Obama to Neville Chamberlain, the British prime minister who thought Adolf Hitler could be stopped through diplomacy. Obama "will have to choose in the next year whether to be [Neville] Chamberlain or [Winston] Churchill," Steinitz said.[26]

U.S.-Iran diplomacy could come at Israel's expense due to the risk of diverging American and Israeli redlines on the nuclear issue. To Israel, nuclear know-how is tantamount to a nuclear bomb; once Iran controls the fuel cycle, Israel maintains, it can weaponize at will in spite of its obligations under the nuclear nonproliferation treaty (NPT). Consequently, Israel has insisted that Iran's nuclear program should be halted well ahead of the redline of uranium enrichment, even though enrichment is permitted by the NPT and is conducted by numerous states. Then-Israeli defense minister Shaul Mofaz told U.S. lawmakers in March 2005 that the operation of the enrichment cycle was the "point of no return" for the Iranian program. Meir Dagan, chief of Mossad (Israel's intelligence agency), went a step further, saying that the Iranian program will be unstoppable once it no longer requires outside assistance to complete the enrichment process. Hence, any diplomacy would require as its primary objective a "complete, full, verifiable cessation of the fuel cycle program," which means a full suspension of all enrichment, reprocessing, heavy-water-reactor construction, and related research activities. Israeli Deputy

Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon was categorical about zero-enrichment as an unbending Israeli redline. "Enrichment in Iran is certainly unacceptable," he told me in October 2010. While the Bush administration maintained an identical objective with regard to enrichment, there were still concerns in Israel that Washington would compromise that stance through negotiations. Once Obama took office, those concerns grew significantly. Confidence in the United States' sincerity in maintaining a zero-enrichment objective plummeted. In the Israeli view, the Obama administration had made America's redlines flexible and unreliable.[27]

Although Israel believes that the only way to stop Iran is through the threat or use of force, Israel itself lacks the military ability to destroy the Iranian nuclear program. "To our regret, there is no Israeli military capability that would enable us to reach a situation whereby Iran's nuclear capabilities are destroyed without the possibility of recovery," former National Security Council chairman Giora Eiland warned in December 2008. "The maximal achievement that Israel can accomplish is to disrupt and suspend Iran's nuclear program," he said, adding that Israel "cannot defeat Iran." In an even more blunt admission contradicting Israel's many warnings that it will attack Iran unless it stops its nuclear program, outgoing Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert told the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* in October 2008, "What we can do with the Palestinians, the Syrians and the Lebanese, we cannot do with the Iranians. . . . The assumption that if America and Russia and China and Britain and Germany do not know how to deal with the Iranians, we, the Israelis, know—that we will take action—is an example of the loss of proportion. Let's be more modest, and act within the bounds of our realistic capabilities."[28]

Israel's inability to take on Iran militarily made it all the more important for Israeli policy makers to push the U.S. to embark on a bombing campaign. To that end, serious, concerted efforts were undertaken by Israel in the spring of 2008, pressing the U.S. either to attack Iran (the preferred option) or to support an Israeli attempt to take out the Iranian nuclear facilities. On May 14, during President

George W. Bush's trip to Israel for the sixtieth anniversary of the state's founding, then–prime minister Olmert raised the issue in a one-on-one meeting. But America was already overwhelmed with problems resulting from its occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. Even the Bush administration, which otherwise was widely viewed as favoring military action, resisted Israeli pressure to go to war with Iran. Bush also refused to give a green light for an Israeli attack at that time.[29]

Israel was deeply disappointed but did not relent. Hoping that Bush would eventually agree to order an American strike on Iran's nuclear facilities before leaving office, Israel's deputy prime minister, Iranian-born Shaul Mofaz, told the newspaper *Yedioth Ahronot* a few days after Olmert's meeting with Bush, "If Iran continues its programme to develop nuclear weapons, we will attack it. The window of opportunity has closed. The sanctions are not effective. There will be no alternative but to attack Iran in order to stop the Iranian nuclear programme." The Bush White House's wariness about Israeli pressure and the risk of Israel acting unilaterally prompted the administration to send a flurry of senior American officials to the Jewish state to implore them to show restraint. Mike McConnell, director of national intelligence, traveled to Israel in early June 2008. Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, followed suit in late June. Both officials reportedly argued against an attack on the grounds that it would retard the Iranian nuclear program without destroying it; rally support for the unpopular government of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at a time of growing economic difficulty in Iran; undermine U.S. policy in Iraq and in Afghanistan; and produce unpredictable consequences. A week after his return from Israel, Mullen gave Israel a strong rebuke for its pressure on America. Asked about speculation concerning an Israeli strike on Iran, Mullen responded, "From the U.S. perspective . . . opening up a third front right now would be extremely stressful on us . . . that would really be very challenging." Mullen seemed to indicate that an Israeli strike would inevitably drag the U.S. into

war—a war Washington neither wanted nor could afford. "This is a very unstable part of the world and I don't need it to be more unstable," he added.[30]

The military route, however, was not Israel's only option. Rather, it increasingly became the preferred option due to the belief that other tactics had failed. In April 2007, Mossad head Dagan explained to Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns that Israel's approach to Iran consists of five pillars: 1) Efforts to isolate Iran internationally; 2) Covert actions; 3) Counterproliferation actions to prevent Iranian access to know-how and technology; 4) Efforts to secure international sanctions; and 5) Promoting regime change through support for political and ethnic groups opposing the Iranian regime. Iran's minorities are "raising their heads, and are tempted to resort to violence," he said. (Iran has long accused Israel of being behind acts of violence and terror conducted by ethnic separatists in Iran.)[31]

With Israel, and, to a certain extent, the powerful Jewish-American constituency in the U.S. already viewing Obama as an unknown entity at best—or, at worst, as suspect—the Israeli appetite for advancing the American president's Iran policy was clearly limited. Though there was some concern among Israeli officials not to be viewed as a spoiler, and though some isolated, careful, and qualified statements were made in favor of diplomacy, Israel predictably became a key obstacle to Obama's engagement efforts.[32]

The hard truth was that the appetite for Obama's outreach to Iran was lukewarm at best among America's most powerful allies in Europe and the Middle East. Many wished Obama well, but few of the key actors wished him success.

Three

"He Is with Us"*

In a building adjacent to the Iranian embassy in The Hague, high-level representatives of the Iranian government and senior American foreign policy experts—many of them associated with the Obama campaign—met over the course of two days in early spring 2008 to see if the problems between the two countries could be resolved peacefully. It was their second meeting in less than three months; two more meetings would be held before the year's end.

It was neither an official meeting nor an official negotiation. But the high-level representation from both sides signified that this was not an ordinary academic or track-two diplomacy session. The renowned Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs—an international organization that brings together prominent practitioners to work toward solutions to global security threats and reducing the danger of armed conflict—organized the meetings. In 1995, Pugwash won the Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts to "diminish the part played by nuclear arms in international politics and in the longer run to eliminate such arms." Pugwash's strength lies in its ability to talk to all parties involved in a conflict, and to bring the world's top scientists and key officials to the table. In the case of the Iranian nuclear crisis, Pugwash's energetic secretary general, Professor Paolo Cotta-Ramusino, had achieved what no other peace and conflict resolution organization had managed at the time: bringing to-

*Direct Persian translation of the name "Obama"

gether current and former American officials with representatives of the conservative factions ruling Iran.[1]

The American side was represented by top nuclear scientists, lawmakers, senior Senate staff, and prominent members of the Washington foreign policy establishment, and was led by former defense secretary William Perry, a member of the Obama campaign's national security working group. Mojtaba Samareh Hashemi, an old friend and ally of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, led the Iranian delegation. Samareh had served the Ahmadinejad government in several capacities, including as senior adviser to the president, vice president, and later director of Ahmadinejad's reelection campaign. His hard-line views have earned him the sobriquet "Ahmadinejad's Dick Cheney." Representatives from Iran's national security adviser Saeed Jalili and the Supreme Leader's office, as well as Ambassador Ali Asghar Soltanieh, Iran's permanent representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency, accompanied Samareh to the meetings. Other participants included prominent foreign policy experts from Europe and Canada. With the Iranian officials reporting back to their national security teams, it was widely believed that Defense Secretary Perry personally briefed then-Senator Obama on the exchanges.

The piles of emptied Persian pistachio shells grew as the two sides tested each other's sincerity, strength, and genuineness. Iranian diplomacy is predicated on patience and endurance, and the Americans' stamina was tested early on. In their more than hour-long opening statement, the Iranians provided a detailed description of the principles and sources of Iranian foreign policy under the Islamic Republic, ranging from Islamic definitions of justice to the role of spirituality in human nature. Once the conversation turned into more concrete policy issues, the two sides delved into the details of the nuclear issue, security in the Persian Gulf, and substantive ways in which the mistrust between the U.S. and Iran could be shed. Though some headway was made during the talks, at least in gaining a better understanding of each other's positions, aims, interests, and

even misperceptions, the most significant value was perhaps the creation of a personal rapport between the key actors from the U.S. and Iran. The importance and utility of this grew considerably in the following months as some of the American participants moved into top positions in the Obama White House.[2]

Two days after Obama's election victory, he received a most unexpected congratulatory note. The letter was from Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, sending the Islamic Republic's first congratulatory message to an American president. While not as harsh as Ahmadinejad's previous letters to President George W. Bush, it nevertheless contained a heavy dose of criticism of America.

> The nations of the world expect an end to policies based on warmongering, invasion, bullying, trickery, the humiliation of other countries by the imposition of biased and unfair requirements, and a diplomatic approach that has bred hatred for America's leaders and undermined respect for its people. They want to see actions based on justice, respect for the rights of human beings and nations, friendship and non-intervention in the affairs of others. They want the American government to keep its interventions within its own country's borders. In the sensitive Middle East region, in particular, the expectation is that the unjust actions of the past 60 years will give way to a policy encouraging full rights for all nations, especially the oppressed nations of Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan.[3]

From the Iranian perspective, the content of the letter was less important than the fact that the letter had been sent in the first place. It was an unprecedented move, the Iranians maintained, aimed at showing Iran's interest in dialogue and its willingness to take political risks to begin engagement with America. "It showed Ahmadinejad's guts," one of Iran's nuclear negotiators told me.[4]

The letter quickly became a political issue in Iran. It had not been coordinated with or approved by Iran's Supreme Leader, which made it easier for Ahmadinejad's political rivals in the Iranian *Majles* (parliament) to attack him for it. Ahmad Tavakkoli, the head of the Majles national security committee and a sworn rival of Ahmadinejad, viewed the letter as indefensible, arguing that American officials have in the past responded poorly to unilateral Iranian efforts to reopen talks. The right-wing daily newspaper *Jumhouri Islami* said that the issue was of a magnitude that only Iran's Supreme Leader was qualified to address. Ironically, it was Ahmadinejad's bitter rivals on the reformist side that expressed support for the letter, calling it "a brave act."[5] While the letter became a hot-button issue in Iran, it made almost no waves in Washington. Discussion as to whether the president should send a formal response was unsurprisingly brief. Obama immediately poured cold water on Ahmadinejad's initiative. When asked by a reporter three days after the election whether he would reply to the letter, Obama asserted, "Iran's development of a nuclear weapon I believe is unacceptable. And we have to mount an international effort to prevent that from happening."[6]

The response and its reference to the nuclear issue did not go over well with the Ahmadinejad faction in the Iranian government. But it did not visibly change the contradicting combination of fascination, hope, skepticism, and fear that the Iranians felt about America's mysterious new president. Several Iranian officials had publicly voiced their preference for an Obama victory due to his comments and positions during the campaign. Ali Larijani, the powerful Speaker of the Majles and staunch opponent of Ahmadinejad, said that he fancied an Obama victory because "he is more rational and flexible, despite our knowledge that U.S. policy will not change much."[7] Obama's vice-presidential pick, Senator Joseph Biden, also received cautious praise in the Iranian media, citing his policy positions on Iran.[8] Moreover, the newspaper *Aftab* viewed a John McCain victory as a continuation of a neoconservative American foreign policy that would increase the risk of war.[9] Even among conservatives, although

they publicly denied any difference between Obama and McCain, the general preference was for an Obama victory.[10] Tehran-based foreign journalists reported that the general public in Iran tended to hold similar sentiments. "The Democrats are a people who do not like war. If Obama wins, he will open the way to negotiations with Iran," a prominent merchant told the *Wall Street Journal.*[11] Once Obama secured the presidency, the Iranian public's enthusiasm became even more evident. *Time* reported that Iranians were "relieved" and hoped for improvement in relations. According to the BBC, Iranians were "thrilled" by the election results.[12]

The perspectives of decision makers within the Iranian government, however, were more complicated. Some of the archconservatives expressed disbelief. In their cynical view of the American political system, perhaps reflective of their own political conduct, they never thought that Obama could win, in spite of his popular support. Rather, he won because "those behind the scenes who make presidents and make policies—the puppeteers—decided, and only changed their puppet."[13] But there was also hope.[14] Iranian officials were on the record favoring diplomacy; Ayatollah Khamenei deemed dialogue with the U.S. reasonable, and Ahmadinejad said that Tehran was "ready to have positive dialogue" with Washington. There was also a sense that Obama's background might differentiate him from previous presidents.[15] Amir Mohebian, a prominent conservative figure, argued that Iran should seize the opportunity provided by Obama's election to further Iran's interests through diplomacy, but "without an unreasonable level of optimism or pessimism."[16]

Among the various cross sections of Iranian people and political elite, the reformists most readily harbored a sense of optimism, hoping that Obama could provide long-term change in America's foreign policy. With Iran's own presidential elections less than a year away, the possibility of change coming to Tehran could "bring together historical forces that could finally turn around this very troubled relationship."[17]

But some of the hope quickly transformed into fear and skepti-

cism. While Bush was hardly a popular president on the world stage—thereby complicating America's efforts to isolate Iran—Obama could use his global superstar status to push through new economic sanctions at the UN or amass a coalition of the willing to cripple Iran's economy. "We're afraid someone like Obama would have the diplomatic influence necessary to form a strong coalition against us," a private Iranian banker said.[18] Bush's aggressive and oftentimes clumsy approach made him a convenient target to vilify and demonize, lending the Iranian government an air of reasonability and victimization. Losing this inept nemesis could prove to be costly for the Iranian government. "America was doing a lion's share of the work here, demonizing itself by its actions and . . . loud and incompetent, inept propaganda efforts in the Middle East," said Ahmad Sadri, a prominent Iran expert and professor at Lake Forest College.[19] There was also an ideological dimension. After thirty years of institutionalized enmity between the U.S. and Iran, some elements in the Iranian government believed that the animosity had become an important element of the Islamic Republic's identity. "If we solve it, we will dissolve ourselves," Mohebian said.[20]

Despite the skepticism and cynicism, Obama's posture and interest in engagement did help prompt an unprecedented debate in Iran about relations with the U.S.—an age-old, strictly enforced taboo in the Islamic Republic. Discussions and debates about the relations between the two countries that only months before were unthinkable now took place publicly, including in the media. U.S. diplomats were told by their contacts that members of Tehran's political elite who favor cooperation with the West had become noticeably emboldened. In the words of a reformist strategist, Obama had helped open up the political landscape in Iran.[21] On the other side of the spectrum, a growing number of voices in the Iranian media started questioning Obama and whether America was capable of altering its approach to Iran. Some arguments, such as accusations of Obama putting "on a mask of friendship, but with the objective of betrayal," appeared based on nothing but fear and paranoia, while others pointed to

structural factors inhibiting Obama's maneuverability. Pressure from pro-Israel groups in the U.S., which, in Tehran's view, are inherently hostile to Iran, would limit how far Obama could move when it came to Iran, they argued. Even if Obama's intentions were pure, the gigantic foreign policy machinery in the United States would overwhelm and devour him, these skeptics said.[22]

Early decisions by the Obama administration made the Iranian skeptics feel vindicated, particularly with some of the foreign policy personalities Obama decided to bring with him to the White House. His choice for secretary of state, Senator Hillary Clinton, who during the campaign had threatened to "obliterate Iran" if it ever attacked Israel, strengthened the conviction of pessimists and raised doubts among those holding a more optimistic view.[23] Clinton, in turn, appointed Dennis Ross of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy to serve as her envoy to the Middle East. The hard-line *Kayhan* newspaper viewed Ross's pick as an "insult" due to his role as a "pioneer of the American-Zionist lobby." Other, more moderate, elements in the Iranian foreign policy establishment shared the view that the appointment would undermine Iran's confidence in the Obama administration. "It shows that the Americans appointed Dennis Ross by the eyes of the Israelis. It means flying to Tehran by the connecting flight via Tel Aviv," said Sadegh Kharrazi, the coauthor of Iran's 2003 negotiation proposal.[24]

These appointments, as well as that of Rahm Emanuel—who had volunteered to serve in the Israeli army during the first Persian Gulf war—along with the mixture of hawkish Clinton-era officials and nonproliferation hard-liners populating the Obama White House, caused Iranian officials to call on Islamic states not to raise their expectations for Obama, and rather "heed the reality of his administration."[25] The Iranian government had also taken notice that the Obama administration publicly argued that diplomacy was needed in order to increase Iran's isolation. If Iran did not respond favorably to diplomacy, Washington would be in a better position to put international pressure on Iran, the argument read. Obama said

that he will be "tightening the screws diplomatically on Iran," and getting sanctions in place as soon as possible. "We've got to do that before Israel feels like its back is to the wall."[26]

As the debate in Tehran proceeded, the hard-line view eventually prevailed; Obama's intentions and capabilities were unclear, and as a result Iran could not take a risk by making conciliatory moves toward the Obama administration. Change had to be fundamental and not cosmetic, they argued. Mere words and slogans would not do; concrete evidence of a new policy toward Iran was needed. "The U.S. must prove that their policies have changed and are now based upon respecting the rights of the Iranian nation and mutual respect," said Mojtaba Samareh Hashemi, one of Ahmadinejad's closest advisers. If America's policies toward Iran change, "the distance between Iran and the U.S. will become less. If these promises are acted upon, there will be more chance for closeness between the two nations," he continued.[27] The Iranian line was to signal skepticism, while keeping the door open for a positive surprise. At the same time that the Iranians were cautiously entertaining the possibility of change in U.S. foreign policy, they were increasingly preparing for it not to happen. The unified position among key Iranian officials was instructive.[28] A few days after Obama's inaugural address, Ahmadinejad told reporters that he was waiting patiently to see the Obama administration's next move. "We will listen to the statements closely, we will carefully study their actions, and, if there are real changes, we will welcome it," he said.[29] That same day, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, then–foreign minister Manouchehr Mottaki said that Tehran would take a "cooperative approach" with Washington as long as it saw changes that go beyond words. "We do believe that if the new administration of the United States, as Mr. Obama says, is going to change its policies not in saying but practice, they will find in the region a cooperative approach and reaction," Mottaki said.[30]

Majles Speaker Larijani presented perhaps the most candid assessment. The U.S.-Iran conflict was "serious and not for fun," and

could not be resolved through mere "gestures." Denouncing Obama's "carrots and sticks" policy as "savagery" and "cowboy" foreign policy—Iran's national interest could not be compromised through bribes or threats—Larijani went to the heart of the matter: the conflict between the U.S. and Iran is of a strategic nature and can be resolved only through a change in strategy, not tactics. "If the Americans think they can approach Iran instrumentally through tactical change, they are wrong." A "strategic conversation," he pointed out, "is a different matter."[31]

The underlying reason for Iran's insistence on a strategic conversation was its fear that Washington would seek Iranian collaboration to stabilize its predicaments in Iraq and Afghanistan, only to return to the enmity characterizing U.S.-Iran relations, including efforts to topple the Iranian government, once Iran's assistance was no longer needed. In other words, Washington would engage with Iran *tactically* to achieve its own strategic aims, the Iranians feared. At the time, the reformists in Iran sought *strategic* engagement aimed at fundamentally changing the nature of U.S.-Iran relations.

The Iranians' fear was not necessarily rooted in paranoia and suspicion; it also had a basis in Iran's experience dealing with the Bush administration. After 9/11, Washington initiated talks with Iran about Afghanistan, led by James Dobbins, the president's special envoy to Afghanistan. Contrary to the commonly held perception, the U.S. did not assemble a coalition against the Taliban; Washington joined an existing coalition led by Iran. Meeting in Geneva in the fall of 2001, the U.S.-Iranian discussions focused on how to effectively unseat the Taliban and establish an Afghan government. Iran's material help was not negligible. The Iranians offered air bases to the U.S.; they offered to perform search-and-rescue missions for downed American pilots; they served as a bridge between the Northern Alliance and the U.S. in the campaign against the Taliban; and they even used information provided by American forces to find and kill fleeing al-Qaeda leaders.[32] Nowhere was this common interest clearer than at the Bonn Conference of December 2001, where a number of promi-

nent Afghans and representatives from various countries met under UN auspices to develop a plan for governing Afghanistan. The United States and Iran carefully laid the groundwork for the conference weeks in advance. Iran's political clout with warring Afghan groups proved crucial. Washington and Tehran were on the same side, but it was Iran's influence over the Afghans—not American threats and promises—that moved the negotiations forward.

On the last night of the conference, an interim constitution had been agreed upon and all other issues had been resolved except the toughest: who was to govern Afghanistan? The Northern Alliance insisted that, as the winner of the war, the spoils should be theirs. Though they represented about 40 percent of the country, they wanted to occupy eighteen of the twenty-four ministries. At around two o'clock in the morning, Dobbins brought together the Afghan parties, the Iranians, the Russians, the Indians, the Germans, and Lakhdar Brahimi of the UN to resolve this final point. For two hours, the various delegations took turns trying to convince the representative of the Northern Alliance to accept a lower number of ministries, to no avail. Finally, the Iranian representative took him aside and began whispering to him in Persian. A few minutes later, they returned to the table and the Afghan conceded. "Okay, I give up," he said. "The other factions can have two more ministries." The next morning, the historic Bonn agreement was signed. America had not only won the war, but, with the help of Iran, it had also won the peace.[33]

For the Iranians, this was a moment of triumph. Not only had a major enemy—the Taliban—been defeated, but Iran had also undeniably demonstrated that it could help stabilize the region and that America could benefit from a better relationship with Tehran. And yet, only a few weeks later, on January 29, 2002, in his first State of the Union address, Bush lumped Iran together with Iraq and North Korea as dangerous and threatening states that formed an "Axis of Evil." Tehran was shocked. Then-president Mohammad Khatami's policy of détente and Iran's assistance in Afghanistan had been for naught. Having seen his domestic agenda fall apart, Khatami's inter-

national standing was now also undercut. He had stuck out his neck and argued against hard-liners in Tehran, whose skepticism about America's trustworthiness appeared to have been justified.[34] "'Axis of Evil' was a fiasco for the Khatami government," said Farideh Farhi, an Iran expert at the University of Hawaii. "It was used by hard-liners, who said: 'If you give in, if you help from a position of weakness, then you get negative results.' "[35] Hard-liners argued that Iran should not have offered the U.S. any help without exacting a price beforehand. Some Iranian diplomats involved in the Afghan talks were later forced to pay for the calamity with their careers, making others think twice before extending a hand of friendship to the U.S.

What the Iranians did not know was that prior to their engagement in Afghanistan with the U.S., Deputy National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley had adopted rules to regulate how Washington should interact with rogue states such as Iran in a meeting of the "deputies committee." The regulations were informally called the "Hadley Rules," and they determined that tactical collaboration with rogue states such as Iran was permissible within the context of the so-called War on Terror, but that this tactical collaboration could never be permitted to translate into a change in the strategic nature of America's relations with these states. In other words, regardless of how fruitful U.S.-Iran collaboration in Afghanistan would be, it simply would not change the definition of Iran as a mortal enemy of the United States. Iran's aim of improving its relations with Washington by demonstrating its utility in Afghanistan was doomed from the outset. Providing assistance to the U.S. would not help Iran achieve its strategic objectives—a relationship with America that, at a minimum, eliminates the risk of military confrontation and recognizes Iran's legitimate security interests and regional aspirations.[36]

The experience in Afghanistan negated what little trust existed between Washington and Tehran, and rendered any future cooperation more difficult. Any serious engagement with Washington absent a clarification of its strategic aim became increasingly unlikely, as the Iranians feared that Washington would seek tactical cooperation with

the strategic aim of overthrowing the Iranian government the instant Tehran's help was no longer needed. Iran's experience with the Bush administration tainted its perception of the Obama administration's outreach and diminished Tehran's willingness to give Obama the benefit of the doubt. "Our viewpoint is, the U.S. strategy to Iran has not changed, but the tactics have changed," conservative politician Hamidreza Taraghi said. "When the U.S. says to open your fist, our fist has always been in defense. It's the U.S. that has always had its fist clenched."[37]

The mistrust among the conservatives was so grave that they risked missing the opportunity that lay before them. Information that vindicated the mistrust—such as Iranian intelligence reports claiming American support for the anti-Iranian terrorist organization Jundollah, a group tied to al-Qaeda—was magnified, while indications that Obama sought a strategic shift with Iran—such as the inclusion of PJAK, a militant Kurdish organization, on the U.S. State Department's terrorist list due to its violent activity against Iran—was met with disbelief or ignored.[38] This solidified the belief that the conservatives' mistrust was not baseless, reformist politician Ataollah Mohajerani said, and they "concluded that they didn't have the confidence needed to proceed."[39]

Similar mistrust on the American side had caused the U.S. to miss opportunities with Iran, prominent Iran expert Ali Ansari of St. Andrews University in Scotland pointed out. In 1997, the victory of reformist, antiestablishment candidate Mohammad Khatami in the Iranian presidential elections took the world by surprise. The world was unprepared for Khatami and his ideas of détente, and consequently failed to seize the opportunity he represented. America's perception of Khatami in 1997 was a carbon copy of Tehran's later perception of Obama: at the end of the day, the structures of the Islamic Republic of Iran were believed to be incapable of permitting any meaningful change. "The Iranians never really knew what to do," Ansari said. "They weren't prepared for Obama."[40]

Four
The Review

The hybrid option is designed to concentrate the minds of Iranian leaders on what they stand to lose without humiliating them.

—Middle East envoy Dennis Ross, explaining the logic of the dual-track approach, September 2008

For almost a decade, Mohamed ElBaradei, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), was at the center of the discord over Iran's nuclear program. Yet the former Egyptian diplomat readily recognized that the nuclear issue was not the root problem; rather, it was a symptom of the ongoing dispute between the United States and Iran. As the temperature between Washington and Tehran reached a boiling point under the Bush administration, ElBaradei went beyond just addressing nuclear technicalities and began acting as an indirect mediator between the two capitals. And rather than just seeking to stop an Iranian bomb, he did not shy away from declaring that he also sought to stop Iran from being bombed. In the view of top IAEA officials the two were linked, because a likely consequence of an attack on Iran would be a nuclear-armed Iran. It was a role that won ElBaradei few friends in the Bush White House. But it did win him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005.[1]

Neither Tehran nor Washington was without blame, in ElBaradei's view. Yet he took particular exception to the Bush administration's approach to Iran, which he argued had exacerbated an already unstable situation. "Anytime you try to isolate a country, the situation gets much, much worse," he said in an interview with CNN, declar-

ing that he had had "zero confidence" in the efforts to isolate Tehran.[2] ElBaradei ascribed this failure to "a combination of ignorance and arrogance," as well as to the unrealistic objectives of hard-liners around Vice President Dick Cheney—or "Darth Vader," as ElBaradei called him. The end result of the isolation policy was that instead of limiting the Iranian program to a few dozen centrifuges, Iran managed to amass thousands of centrifuges, stockpile several hundred kilos of low-enriched uranium, and master knowledge of the nuclear fuel cycle.[3]

These points were not lost on Obama when he took office in January 2009. Clearly, a new approach was needed that centered on diplomacy. But neither the end nor the strategy had been determined. The first measure of the Obama administration was to initiate a comprehensive review of the Iran policy to identify how best to implement the president's promise for diplomacy. Middle East Envoy Dennis Ross and Puneet Talwar, senior director for Iraq, Iran, and the Gulf States at the National Security Council, led the review. Talwar came to the White House from the Senate, where he had been a longtime adviser on the staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a staunch proponent of engagement. A tightly held and top-heavy process, the review looked at all aspects of America's Iran policy and involved numerous entities within the government, as well as a few outside experts.[4] It also gave the White House an opportunity to demonstrate to its allies that the Obama administration would listen to its friends and take their concerns into consideration, in contrast to the modus operandi of the Bush administration. "We will be consulting with regional leaders and listening. . . . Be confident that you will be privy to our strategy and be consulted," Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reportedly told United Arab Emirates foreign minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahayan.[5] Several sessions were held with EU officials, including the EU diplomats who had led Europe's nuclear negotiations with Iran since 2003. American and European officials closely studied past negotiations to identify successful strategies with Iran. "There was a sense of actu-

ally listening to the European allies when it came to Iran," a senior EU official told me.[6]

The Obama administration exhibited humility, receptivity, and a visible willingness to learn and to fine-tune its approach, according to foreign and American officials involved in the process. For instance, when it came to their attention that the term "carrots and sticks" translated badly into Persian—both linguistically and culturally—and angered the Iranians rather than make them more open to Obama's extended hand, the phrase was quickly eradicated from the administration's vocabulary.[7] This openness was also appreciated by elements in the bureaucracy who viewed the emphasis on diplomacy with some skepticism. Though most State Department officials were "thrilled" by the Obama administration's new approach, members of the nonproliferation community within the U.S. government felt "some discomfort." There was a concern that the Obama administration would rush to the judgment that all Bush era policies were flawed and reverse them by default. Furthermore, some feared that the desire for a quick deal with Iran was so strong that many interests, including important nonproliferation principles, would be sacrificed in the process. In particular, some hard-line nonproliferation hands in the bureaucracy opposed the idea of dropping the zero-enrichment objective. "There was a fear that the new crowd would seek too quick a deal and make too many compromises," a senior State Department nonproliferation hand told me. But as Obama began assembling his new team, some of these concerns were alleviated. Putting Clinton, Ross, and Gary Samore, a veteran arms control negotiator in the Clinton administration, in charge significantly increased the comfort level of the nonproliferation hawks in the bureaucracy. "These were no softies on Iran," the State Department official continued. Moreover, the very review itself indicated that the Obama team did not have a prepared plan, and no strategy, idea, or tactic was shelved simply because it had Bush's fingerprints on it.[8]

Prior to joining the Obama administration, Ross had recommended secret back channels to the leadership in Tehran to avoid

empowering Ahmadinejad or publicly undercutting the ongoing nuclear negotiations. "Keeping it completely private would protect each side from premature exposure and would not require either side to publicly explain such a move before it was ready. It would strike the Iranians as more significant and dramatic than either working through the Europeans or non-officials," Ross wrote for the Center for a New American Security in September 2008. Ross favored a hybrid option that combined tightening the noose of sanctions, including incentives to Russia and China to support the sanctions, while engaging Iran without preconditions. "The hybrid option is designed to concentrate the minds of Iranian leaders on what they stand to lose without humiliating them," Ross wrote. Samore, on the other hand, argued for a more open and comprehensive approach—direct bilateral talks addressing the nuclear program, U.S.-Iranian relations, Iraq, as well as regional security. And talks could begin without Iran suspending its enrichment activities, Samore argued in a paper published by the Brookings Institution. John Brennan, Obama's White House director for counterterrorism, went a step further and called for a presidential envoy to handle negotiations with Iran while publicly recognizing that Iran had significantly scaled back its use of terrorism in the past decade.[9]

The review of U.S. policy toward Iran addressed many different options and strategies. On the diplomacy side, the administration considered a series of measures and the order in which to offer them, including but not limited to: easing sanctions on investment in Iran's decrepit oil infrastructure; establishing a low-level diplomatic presence in Iran; recognizing and aiding a limited civilian nuclear capability for Iran under strict IAEA inspections; opening up a direct channel of communication with Iran's Supreme Leader; and lifting the prohibition on direct contacts between American diplomats and their Iranian counterparts. Simultaneously, much in line with Ross's hybrid recommendation, the administration explored strategies to escalate pressure by significantly strengthening sanctions against Iran. Considerations included sanctions on Iran's purchase of gas-

oline; sanctions targeting Iran's banking sector; and more extreme measures such as cutting off credit guarantees to European companies that do business with Iran.[10] These sanctions would not be effective unless there was significant international support behind them, the administration believed. Iran had been astute at exploiting divisions within the international community and finding loopholes in the sanctions. Any new sanctions strategy would have to remedy this, it was argued.

The Europeans, whose sanctions would have greater impact by virtue of their extensive trade ties with Iran, would likely not get onboard unless a new UN Security Council resolution was adopted. Such a resolution, however, would in turn require support or, at a minimum, no opposition from Russia and China. Analysts both inside and outside the administration argued that Russian collaboration was essential to any effort to pressure Iran. Rather than giving concessions to Tehran, concessions should be given to Moscow in return for its collaboration in pressuring Iran, the argument read. Such concessions could include cancelling the plan to set up the missile defense system in Eastern Europe and showing greater consideration for Russian concerns regarding potential NATO ascension countries that Moscow views as part of its sphere of influence.[11] At the same time, pressure on Russia was needed to thwart its planned sale of the S-300 long-range air-defense system to Iran. The sale would significantly enhance Iran's air defense capability and make the country more resistant to threats of American or Israeli air strikes against its nuclear sites. In February 2009, only weeks after the review had begun, the Obama administration requested support from several Arab states to press Russia to stop the sale. Saudi Arabia even offered to buy the system from Russia in return for a promise that Moscow would not sell it to Iran.[12]

Securing Chinese support was in some ways a less complicated effort, in spite of the stiff resistance Beijing likely would exert. Two factors dominated China's interests with regard to Iran. First, China did not want sanctions that could impair Chinese economic growth

and its priority of moving millions of Chinese out of poverty. China receives approximately 13 percent of its oil from Iran, and any disruption in that trade would have considerable economic and political repercussions for the leadership in Beijing. Second, China is very reluctant to be the odd man out in the Security Council. Beijing's opposition to sanctions was relatively cost-free as long as it could hide behind even stiffer Russian opposition. But if Russia could be brought onboard the American effort to punish Iran, it was believed that China would likely follow suit. Ross had devised a strategy to secure Chinese support prior to entering the Obama administration. In his and David Makovsky's book *Myths, Illusions & Peace: Finding a New Direction for America in the Middle East,* published in 2009 but authored before Ross joined the Obama team, the two wrote that China is more reliant on Saudi Arabia than on Iran. Securing Beijing's support for sanctions could be achieved if the Saudis offered to guarantee replacing Iranian oil sales to China—and threatened to cut their own sales to China if Beijing did not collaborate. "Business is business, and the Chinese have a higher stake in Saudi Arabia than in Iran. Again, the Saudis need not broadcast what they are doing—but they do need to be enlisted to quietly pressure the Chinese to change their approach to Iran lest they lose out on a profitable future with Saudi Arabia," Ross and Makovsky wrote.[13] Later in 2009, Obama sent Ross to Saudi Arabia to seek a guarantee that it would help supply China's needs in the event of an Iranian cutoff. "We'll look for ways to make sure that if there are sanctions, [the Chinese] won't be negatively affected," a senior official told the *New York Times.*[14]

The administration was aware that time, in many ways, was not on its side. The Iranians were amassing more low-enriched uranium; the political space for any elaborate diplomacy would likely shrink once Obama's honeymoon with the U.S. Congress came to an end; and nervousness among U.S. allies, particularly Israel, was growing. At the same time, the White House was also aware that Obama's greatest strength—his novelty and lack of baggage with Iran—would

quickly evaporate if the first attempt at diplomacy failed. Obama, it was said, could be a virgin only once. So while America needed to act fast, its first move also needed to be well thought through. In this regard, the upcoming June presidential elections in Iran complicated the administration's calculations. As the Iranians entered their political season, their ability to engage with the United States was compromised. The question was whether to initiate the engagement prior to the elections, or wait for the next Iranian administration to get situated before serious diplomacy began. Initially, the debate within the administration tilted in favor of starting talks before the elections. Ahmadinejad was likely going to win anyway, the argument read, so the concern that engagement could help boost his reelection bid was moot. Moreover, if America engaged with the conservatives and they ended up losing to the reformists in the elections, the conservative camp would have a more difficult time opposing and sabotaging any ensuing reformist-led engagement with the U.S. It would be a way for Washington to show its interest in engaging with the Iranian government as a whole and not with any particular faction within it. After all, time was running out and engaging Iran was important not just to resolve the nuclear issue, but also to help stabilize Iraq and Afghanistan and address regional and global energy security. The administration also considered reaching out directly to the Supreme Leader rather than to Ahmadinejad, which would circumvent the entire issue. Eventually, however, the administration decided to avoid any interaction that could inadvertently end up benefiting Ahmadinejad.[15]

Israeli Opposition

Though the policy review ostensibly addressed America's interests vis-à-vis Iran, a significant portion of the discussions dealt with alliance management—the arduous task of ensuring that America's allies, particularly those nervous about the implications of improved U.S.-Iran relations, would go along with the policy and not sabotage

it. This was particularly true in the case of Israel, which possessed both the ability and the history of creating complications for U.S.-Iran diplomacy. Though the U.S. and Israel agreed on the strategic objective of preventing an Iranian bomb, their similarity tended to end there. On tactical matters, Israel's and the Obama administration's perspectives were steadily diverging.

Even on intelligence matters, despite often reviewing the same information, Washington and Tel Aviv's conclusions differed vastly. When the United Nations reported that the Iranians had amassed enough low-enriched uranium to build one nuclear bomb, American and Israeli differences on how to interpret and react to this development were worlds apart. The Israeli press reported that Amos Yadlin, the chief of Israeli military intelligence, had told Prime Minister Netanyahu's cabinet that the crossing of this technological threshold meant that Iran could reach military nuclear capability through a mere adaptation of its nuclear strategy. It would no longer be a question of ability, but of preference. Iran was now no more than one step away from being a nuclear-capable state, Israel maintained. In Washington, however, the perspective was a bit more sober. Admiral Dennis Blair, the new director of national intelligence, told Congress that the Israelis "take more of a worst-case approach to these things."[16] A month earlier he had, in an annual threat assessment delivered to Congress, cast doubt on the assumption that Iran was dead-set on acquiring a nuclear weapon. "Although we do not know whether Iran currently intends to develop nuclear weapons, we assess Tehran at a minimum is keeping open the option to develop them," he said. Though Blair's assessment echoed that of the IAEA—ElBaradei had repeatedly stated that he did not "believe the Iranians have made a decision to go for a nuclear weapon, but they are absolutely determined to have the technology because they believe it brings you power, prestige, and an insurance policy"—it was not appreciated in Israel.[17]

Israel made no secret that it was uncomfortable with Washington's outreach to Tehran, expressing "constant skepticism" to U.S. decision makers. One of Netanyahu's common talking points read

that "Persia" was closing in on Israel through its tentacles—Hamas and Hezbollah—and that it could be stopped only through massive economic sanctions, including a naval blockade, and the insistence that America's military option remain viable. Israel did not, he said, oppose diplomacy per se, provided that it was not pursued for more than two months and with fixed results; that is, zero-enrichment as the outcome. Otherwise, Iran would "take you to the cleaners," he told a delegation of U.S. lawmakers in February 2009. Israel's four demands on U.S.-Iran diplomacy were broad and debilitating: tight deadlines, a set outcome for the talks, more sanctions, and persistent reference to the military option. Without a clear time frame and set benchmarks, Washington would fail to stop Iran, according to Strategic Affairs minister Moshe Ya'alon. "I have no doubt that the Iranians will use any dialogue to stall for time if there will not be a clear time frame and clear benchmarks like telling them that they have two months to stop the enrichment," Ya'alon said. "What the West needs to do is stand up against this wave and confront it." Israel believed that Iran had suspended its enrichment program in 2003 and offered to negotiate with the U.S. once it perceived of a credible American military threat. Iran needed to be confronted, the Israelis asserted, because without re-creating that viable threat from 2003 Tehran could not be stopped. Even if diplomacy was pursued, it should be under the "stick of military pressure," according to Israel.[18]

Israel's insistence on the military option at this early stage of the president's outreach campaign undermined the Obama administration's prospects for diplomacy in several different ways. During this initial phase, Washington and Tehran were still testing each other's intentions to determine the other side's sincerity. The long-standing atmosphere of mistrust granted neither side any margin for error. From Tehran's perspective, uncertainty about Washington's intentions during the Bush administration was fueled partly by the insistence of the military option remaining on the table. Iran was wary of negotiations potentially designed to fail, as failed talks could strengthen the case for military action against Iran. Now the Bush administra-

tion's tough talk was being replaced by Israeli rhetoric. Iran's inability to appreciate the policy differences between Washington and Tel Aviv resulted in Tehran's shrinking confidence in Washington's intentions whenever Israel explicitly or implicitly threatened military action. Moreover, Iran's threat perception vis-à-vis the U.S. (and, by extension, Israel) is believed to be one of the driving forces of Iran's nuclear program. Whether Iran seeks a weapon or a civilian program that provides a weapons *capability,* the program's existence provides Tehran with a level of deterrence against the perceived U.S. threat. The Obama administration sought to reduce Iran's sense of threat in order to kick-start negotiations. The threat of Israeli military action risked doing the opposite; it would likely fuel Iranian insecurity and shut the window for diplomacy.[19]

The threat of Israeli military action also helped create arbitrary deadlines for negotiations with Tehran, which were combined with exaggerated expectations of what diplomacy must achieve. According to Netanyahu, results that sanctions and confrontation had failed to achieve with Iran over the past thirty years must miraculously now be obtained after only a few weeks of negotiations. Otherwise Israel said it would have no choice but to take military action. This logic arguably served two purposes. First, it sought to bring the U.S. back to the foreign policy approach of the Bush administration, in which diplomacy was treated with suspicion and skepticism, and military confrontation was viewed as a policy option with guaranteed success. Second, it ensured that diplomacy would fail by denying it the time and space it would need to succeed and by setting the bar too high. In short, threats of military action militarized the atmosphere and created an environment that rendered diplomacy less likely to succeed or, worse, prevented it from being pursued in the first place. The Netanyahu government's actions, whether aimed at undermining Washington's outreach or simply born out of Israeli fears and nervousness, deeply frustrated the Obama administration. Israel was "unnecessarily tying the hands of the United States," while failing to

recognize how Obama's strategy could greatly benefit Israeli security. As a sign of Washington's growing irritation with the Netanyahu government, Vice President Joseph Biden publicly cast doubt on Israel's readiness to take military action, and he also deemed such a measure "ill-advised."[20]

But the Obama administration did not stop there. By April 2009 U.S. officials began explicitly linking Israel's and America's differences on Iran with the other major point of contention between the Obama and Netanyahu governments: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "For Israel to get the kind of strong support it is looking for vis-à-vis Iran, it can't stay on the sidelines with respect to the Palestinians and the peace efforts. They go hand in hand," Clinton said in House testimony given on April 23, 2009.[21] The linkage to the Israeli-Palestinian issue deeply worried the Netanyahu government because it brought forward an idea that Israel had long sought to discredit: that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the main source of conflict in the Middle East. Acceptance of this premise would make the Israeli-Palestinian conflict rather than Iran the top priority for Washington and would lead to extensive pressure on Israel to make concessions to the Arabs, Israel feared. Dismissing this causality as "superficial," Ya'alon argued that most major problems in the region had nothing to do with Israel and its conflict with the Palestinians. "The Islamic Revolution [in Iran in 1979] did not erupt because of us. Al-Qaida was not created because of us and even Hizbullah did not rise up because of us," he said.[22]

Instead, Israel favored a different linkage between the two issues. Recognizing the weight the Obama administration put on mending fences with the Muslim world, and the centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian issue to that relationship, the Netanyahu government declared that it would not move on peace talks with the Palestinians until it first saw progress in America's efforts to stop Iran's nuclear program and limit Tehran's rising influence in the region. "It's a crucial condition if we want to move forward," said Deputy Foreign

Minister Daniel Ayalon. "If we want to have a real political process with the Palestinians, then you can't have the Iranians undermining and sabotaging."[23]

For the Obama administration, devising a new Iran policy and conducting a comprehensive review was very much about balancing America's relationship with Israel with its aspirations for a new relationship with Iran. The diplomacy gamble could lead to a fresh start for U.S.-Iran relations, but it could also lead to a crisis with Israel, or both. "I could draw you a scenario in which this new combination of players leads to the first real talks with Iran in three decades," a senior Obama official told the *New York Times.* "And I could draw you one in which the first big foreign crisis of the Obama presidency is a really nasty confrontation, either because the Israelis strike or because we won't let them." Whatever limitations existed for compromise between the U.S. and Iran, finding an acceptable compromise between Israel and Iran was even more complex. It was difficult to imagine the Iranians willing to give up enrichment entirely. And it was equally inconceivable that the Israelis would accept anything short of that. For the Obama administration, this was a dilemma with no solution. The result of the policy review was a strategy that, until the end, sought to avoid addressing this central issue.[24]

Obama Adopts Ross's Hybrid Option

By April, the review ended and a final strategy was presented. A paper listing Dennis Ross and Puneet Talwar as the primary authors was circulated within the relevant government departments, and the administration's focus turned from strategizing to implementation. The review produced a policy eerily similar to the hybrid approach presented by Ross months earlier: a strategy of simultaneously offering Tehran engagement without preconditions while ratcheting up sanctions in case Iran did not yield to American demands. The State Department called it the dual-track strategy—the idea that the diplomacy and sanctions tracks went hand in hand, and could be effective

only when pursued jointly. The long-standing American precondition that Iran suspend enrichment before any negotiations could begin was dropped. This would allow Iran to continue enriching uranium as the talks progressed, before a final status arrangement would be addressed. During this period, focus would shift to inspections and verification of Iran's nuclear sites. "We have all agreed that [the suspension precondition] is simply not going to work—experience tells us the Iranians are not going to buy it," said a senior European official. "So we are going to start with some interim steps, to build a little trust." But the suspension requirement was not eliminated; it just ceased to be a precondition. At some point, Iran would be required to suspend its enrichment activities, according to the strategy.[25]

The review also concluded that Washington's language and tone should change dramatically. Detoxifying the atmosphere was a necessary step to establishing an environment conducive to diplomacy. Otherwise, Tehran would not appreciate Washington's intent to resolve the conflict constructively through diplomacy, the administration believed. This decision would hold even if the Iranians continued their demonization of the U.S. This was a win-win for the U.S. If the Iranians reciprocated and toned down their rhetoric, chances of resolving the conflict would increase. If the Iranians refused to cool their rhetoric, Washington would score points in the international community and further push Iran into isolation.

On the specifics of the diplomatic strategy, the review stipulated that diplomacy with Iran would be centered on the nuclear issue. This was a point of contention within the administration, particularly among those working on the Afghanistan file. Many administration officials recognized that significant common interests existed between the U.S. and Iran in Afghanistan, and that diplomacy might get off to a better start if these common interests were addressed early on. Both Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and NATO secretary general Jaap de Hoop Scheffer publicly stressed the importance of Iranian involvement in resolving the conflict in Afghan-

istan, and they said that the United States and the Islamic Republic shared mutual interests that could offer possibilities for cooperation. "We need a discussion that brings in all the relevant players: Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, China, Russia—and yes, Iran," said de Hoop Scheffer. This assessment was widely supported by independent experts and by the Afghan government, which feared that Afghanistan would suffer from increased U.S.-Iran tensions. "If the relationship between the U.S. and Tehran stabilizes, things will be much better for us in Afghanistan," said Davood Moradian, senior policy adviser at the Afghan foreign ministry. The Iranians had also indicated some willingness to collaborate in Afghanistan, knowing very well that they held many cards in that arena and that Washington was in need of Tehran's help. "We have a lot to contribute on the issue of Iraq and Afghanistan and if the U.S. shows a genuine desire to talk to us, we will certainly negotiate," Iran's deputy foreign minister told the *Wall Street Journal.* But engaging on Afghanistan, where Iran's help was needed, could put Washington in a position of owing the Iranians. The administration feared that creating such linkages between regional issues and the nuclear issue would only increase the likelihood of the Iranians extracting nuclear concessions from the U.S.[26]

Yet it was Afghanistan that provided the first direct diplomatic contact between the U.S. and Iran under the Obama administration. Clinton invited diplomats from Tehran to attend an international conference on Afghanistan on March 31, 2009, in The Hague, Netherlands. Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, the president's special envoy to Afghanistan and a proponent of enlisting Iranian support to stabilize that country, held a brief but cordial meeting with Ambassador Mohammad Mehdi Akhoondzade in what was the first official face-to-face interplay between the Obama administration and the Iranian government. Besides exchanging pleasantries, Holbrooke delivered a carefully written letter to the Iranians, aimed at testing Tehran's willingness to take larger steps. Though no discussions on substance were held, the Obama administration was encouraged by Tehran's decision to partake in the conference and by the cordial

tone in their limited discussions. "We will look for ways to cooperate with them and I think the fact that they came today, that they intervened today, is a promising sign that there will be future cooperation," Clinton said.[27]

Concurrent with this outreach, the review stipulated that the pressure track should be prepared and that Tehran should have no doubt that sanctions would follow if diplomacy failed. The Iranians needed to know that Washington was ready to activate the second track and to impose "crippling sanctions," aimed at fundamentally changing Iran's nuclear cost-benefit analysis. The review also gave in to some of the demands of those who opposed dialogue. In a move partly meant to reassure the Israelis and some of America's Arab allies, a target of early October was set for diplomacy to bear fruit.[28] Moreover, Obama kept a key political appointee of the Bush administration who had led its sanctions track since 2006. The undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence at the Treasury Department, Stuart Levey, constructed American efforts to put the squeeze on Iran by cutting it off from international banks. The idea was to pressure the private sector, starting with the world's banks, to join the effort to sanction Iran regardless of the sanctions legislation in their respective countries. Banks were only as reputable as their clients' practices, and the reputations of banks that did business with Iran were at risk as long as Iran pursued nuclear technology, the argument read. Unlike previous U.S. sanctions on Iran, Levey's efforts turned out to be surprisingly effective in quickly harming Iran's ailing economy—though the pressure failed to change Iran's nuclear policies. Levey succeeded in getting major banks in Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and Japan to curb business with their longstanding Iranian clients. "They're not happy with what's happening," a European diplomat told American journalist Robin Wright. "They complain about U.S. pressure, but accept it. They hope it will pass soon." Levey was kept at the Treasury Department to ensure that the sanctions efforts did not relent, and to send a signal to Tehran that it had much to lose if diplomacy failed. The decision

was not popular in all quarters of the U.S. government. Some U.S. officials feared that the Iranians would get the wrong message; rather than interpreting Levey's reappointment as a warning of what would ensue if talks failed, Iranians might instead conclude that the Obama administration was not serious about diplomacy in the first place.[29]

A Journey with No Destination?

The most important part of the review, however, was not what it stipulated but rather what it kept ambiguous, unstated, or undecided. Israel demanded clarity on the issue of enrichment and insisted that the Bush administration's zero-enrichment objective be kept in place. "The Israelis were concerned every time there was a hint that that might have changed," a State Department nonproliferation hand pointed out to me. While Israel pushed the Obama administration to demand a complete cessation of Iran's enrichment activities, Washington increasingly viewed that objective as unachievable. "There were enough people that came into the Obama administration who understood that zero-enrichment was just not possible," a mid-level State Department official told me. Even some former Bush administration officials joined the chorus of voices calling for a negotiations-based solution predicated on limited enrichment, since "having a stockpile of enriched uranium is not the same as having a bomb." Richard Haass, who served in the Bush administration and who currently heads the Council on Foreign Relations, expressed doubt that Iran would simply give up enrichment and suggested that Washington accept Iran's right to enrich. "I believe then the negotiations would need to focus on whether Iran is allowed to have some enrichment capability. Or put another way, how the right to enrichment is defined —what is the scale, what is the degree of transparency, what is the degree of IAEA access," Haass said.[30] Though European diplomats note that Obama administration officials did not go into detail with them on whether enrichment would be off-limits, the general impression was that the Obama administration was preparing for an out-

come with limited enrichment on Iranian soil. In a move aimed at nudging the Obama administration to explicitly embrace a non-zero solution, the head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, John Kerry (D-MA), told the *Financial Times* that "the Bush administration's [argument of] no enrichment was ridiculous." The Massachusetts senator deemed the policy "bombastic" and "wasted energy." "They have a right to peaceful nuclear power and to enrichment in that purpose," he said. Kerry sought to create political space for the administration to become bolder in its outreach to Iran and to pave the way for a compromise solution down the road. But the administration did not appreciate his help. The White House quickly contacted Kerry after the interview had been published and impressed on him not to repeat any such statements—even though Kerry's point did not contradict the White House's new policy. The unambiguous zero-enrichment redline of the Bush administration had been altered under Obama to read that Iran would be treated no differently than any other nuclear nonproliferation treaty (NPT) state. As such, if Iran restored the international community's confidence, the possibility of enrichment on Iranian soil down the road did exist. The problem was that, for several reasons, the Obama administration did not want to signal this publicly. First of all, there was no consensus on this point between the U.S. and its allies. The Israelis were not the only ones opposing the new redline. Within the EU the French also rejected the existence of "a right to enrichment." In order to maintain a unified front vis-à-vis Iran, it was important to keep the new position ambiguous until consensus could be found. Second, the Iranians would likely interpret the move as a major victory. Rather than meeting the U.S. halfway, the move risked emboldening the Iranians and hardening their stance in the negotiations, the White House feared. Any change on this issue was best presented to the Iranians at a later stage in the negotiations rather than as an opening to the talks.[31]

The ambiguity surrounding America's desired nuclear endgame was closely linked to the lack of clarity in the review on the larger endgame with Iran—what end state in U.S.-Iran relations was Wash-

ington seeking, and what form would it have to take to be acceptable to both countries as well as to Washington's regional allies? What role would Iran have in the region, and in what ways would Iran's behavior have to change in order for U.S.-Iran relations to improve? If Iran did change its behavior, how long would the warm-up period in relations last, assuming that Iran was equally interested in seeking more positive relations? What end state was Iran seeking? Was there any overlap between Washington and Tehran's endgames, and would that potential overlap be acceptable to Israel? If such an overlap did not exist, what could diplomacy realistically achieve?

The difficulty of finding satisfactory answers to these fundamental questions had made the topic taboo in deliberations with Washington's EU allies. Rather than thinking hard about the strategic options, the conversations tended to be tactical in nature. The U.S. and the EU "were not looking at the endgame" in this phase; there was no search for "a defined political or diplomatic state." Instead, the discussions centered on "What is our next step in the UN? What is our next step in Vienna?" according to senior EU officials involved in the conversations. "It just wasn't the point in time where you would look at the endgame," the officials explained. Officially, the West rejected the idea that the lack of clarity made negotiations riskier and more difficult. "But how do you want to know before starting the negotiations what the end result of the negotiations will be? So why do you negotiate?" a senior EU official asked rhetorically. Inside the bureaucracy, however, as well as within the foreign policy establishment, there were fears that ambiguity, combined with the atmosphere of mistrust, would only play into the paranoia of the two sides and diminish the inclination to pursue diplomacy in earnest. The Iranians in particular would be disinclined to embroil themselves in a process that they suspected was aimed at denying what they considered to be their rights under the NPT. Instead, Washington's approach under the review was that the destination of the diplomatic journey was a function of the journey itself. If the journey went well, few limits would exist during the warm-up in

relations. If, however, the negotiations were difficult and produced few results, Washington would adjust its ambitions accordingly.[32]

The Obama administration's approach did not lack critics at home. Elements on the right opposed talking to the government in Iran and feared that the Obama administration's investment in diplomacy would only enable the Iranians to gain more time to enhance their nuclear program. But experts with greater political proximity to the Obama administration itself also expressed discomfort with the dual-track policy recommended by the review. Former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, who advised Obama during the presidential elections, expressed sharp criticism of many aspects of the policy in testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in March 2009. Brzezinski argued against preconditions and timelines for the negotiations; threats of sanctions; mentions of the use of force or regime change; or accusations of terrorism. "It seems to me that we run the risk of . . . wanting to have our cake and eating it too at the same time, of engaging in polemics and diatribes with the Iranians while at the same time engaging seemingly in a negotiating process," he told the committee. "The first is not conducive to the second."[33]

Moreover, senior administration officials seemed at times doubtful as to whether the strategy would work. During a visit to Egypt in early March 2009, Clinton told Arab officials that she was "doubtful" that Iran would respond positively to U.S. overtures of engagement. The secretary of state reportedly told the foreign minister of the United Arab Emirates that she did not expect that diplomacy would stop Iran's nuclear program, but that it would set the stage for stiff international sanctions. Similarly, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, a holdover from the Bush administration, seemingly contradicted Obama's vision when he told the Fox News network in late March 2009 that Iran was more likely to heed sanctions than diplomacy. "I think frankly from my perspective the opportunity for success is probably more in economic sanctions in both places (Iran and North Korea) than it is in diplomacy." These expressions of uncertainty—or outright opposition—toward the engagement strategy

raised questions about the Obama administration's sincerity with regard to diplomacy or about whether Obama had surrounded himself with advisers who did not share his foreign policy vision. While Obama's extended hand to Iran had encountered outside opposition, the last thing the president could afford was opposition from his own immediate circle of advisers.[34]

Obama's New Year's Greeting

Prior to the conclusion of the policy review, the Obama administration made an unprecedented outreach to the Iranian people and government on the occasion of the Iranian New Year. Obama taped a three-and-a-half-minute statement congratulating the Iranians on their new year and expressing his wish for a better future for the two nations. "I would like to speak directly to the people and leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran," the president said as he praised the contributions of the Iranian nation to art, music, and literature over the centuries and reminded the Iranians of the humanity that binds nations together. Addressing the differences between the nations, Obama sought to clarify America's genuine interest in diplomacy. "My administration is now committed to diplomacy that addresses the full range of issues before us, and to pursuing constructive ties among the United States, Iran and the international community. This process will not be advanced by threats. We seek instead engagement that is honest and grounded in mutual respect," the president said.

"You, too, have a choice," Obama continued. "The United States wants the Islamic Republic of Iran to take its rightful place in the community of nations. You have that right—but it comes with real responsibilities, and that place cannot be reached through terror or arms, but rather through peaceful actions that demonstrate the true greatness of the Iranian people and civilization. And the measure of that greatness is not the capacity to destroy, it is your demonstrated ability to build and create." The president concluded by making clear that the path forward would be hard and demanding. But citing one of

Iran's most famous poets, he emphasized again the common humanity between Iran and the U.S. "I know that this won't be reached easily," Obama said. "There are those who insist that we be defined by our differences. But let us remember the words that were written by the poet Saadi, so many years ago: 'The children of Adam are limbs to each other, having been created of one essence.' "

There was nothing ordinary about Obama's initiative. The outreach was unprecedented, as were the content and tone of the message as well as the medium through which it was distributed. The video was released at midnight, March 20, 2009—with Persian subtitles—on youtube.com and on the White House's own website. It immediately went viral in Iranian circles and dominated conversation in Iran the next morning. By putting the video online, the White House ensured that the president could address millions of Iranians directly without the interference of Iranian government censorship or editing. The thoughtful message was the product of several weeks of drafting between the State Department and the National Security Council. The process was very tightly held, and very few people outside of government were involved or aware of the initiative. The overarching purpose was to signal the Iranian government that the desire on the part of Washington to change the dynamic of the relationship between Iran and the United States was sincere. "We weren't trying to pull the wool over their eyes," a State Department official told me. At the same time, Obama was also making it clear to the Iranian people that engagement with the unpopular rulers in Tehran would not come at their expense. Obama was saying, "We're not trying to sell you down the river by reaching out to a government you don't like."[35]

The statement was remarkable in the extent to which it was signaling the administration's willingness to alter America's approach to Iran. As prominent Iran expert Farideh Farhi of the University of Hawaii pointed out, Obama did not try to drive a wedge between the people and government of Iran. Unlike his predecessors, he addressed them both and he also did not try to increase

cleavages between various political factions within the Iranian government. He did not entangle himself in the endless debate in Washington about whom to talk to in Iran or how talks could be used to strengthen one faction against another. Moreover, his statement that the growing problems between the U.S. and Iran could not be resolved through threats indicated a sharp departure from the approach of the Bush administration and could be interpreted as a dismissal of the military option on Iran.[36] And by referencing the official name of the Iranian government—the Islamic Republic of Iran—the president indicated that the days of actively seeking U.S.-sponsored regime change in Iran were past. Perhaps most important, Obama signaled his strategic intent with Iran—"We seek instead engagement that is honest and grounded in mutual respect"—and gave a hint of what the endgame of the engagement could be if diplomacy succeeded by stating that the U.S. wants Iran to "take its rightful place in the community of nations." The phrase appeared to indicate American willingness to grant Iran a greater role in regional and global affairs—a key demand of the Iranians who were deeply frustrated by their belief that their accepted role in regional affairs was not on par with their geopolitical weight.

Though the statement caught the Iranians off guard—not only because of the content of the message but also because of its level of cultural sophistication—their official response was swift. Within a day, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, gave a speech in his hometown of Mashhad, directly addressing Obama's New Year's message. The fact that Khamenei himself gave the first response, and that he did it so quickly, was significant. By swiftly responding, he made it clear who has the final word on determining Iran's positions and actions, while also setting the tone and approach toward the U.S. He essentially shut down any debate in Iran on how to respond to Obama—Khamenei's line on Obama and the U.S. would be Iran's only line. This was arguably itself a sign of the success of Obama's move, because no other U.S. president had managed to compel Iran's Supreme Leader to act in this manner.[37]

Khamenei's speech primarily dealt with domestic matters; the only foreign policy issue he addressed was Obama's statement, and he devoted roughly twenty minutes to it. Following what had become a typical pattern of the Islamic Republic's responses to U.S. overtures, he dedicated the majority of the time to revisiting the many grievances Iran had with the U.S., followed by a small and qualified opening at the end of the speech. Letters between U.S. lawmakers and Iranian officials regularly followed a similar pattern, oftentimes causing the American decision makers to miss the veiled opportunity the Iranians would present. Khamenei covered Iranian suffering due to sanctions; freezing of assets; his belief that Washington gave Saddam Hussein the green light to invade Iran in 1980; American support for Iranian opposition groups; and his belief that the U.S. supported the Baluchi terrorist and secessionist group Jundollah. He did not call for an apology, however, and cited these grievances not as reasons why dialogue with the U.S. should be avoided, but rather to reinforce his skepticism about the Obama administration and why a change of tone and vocabulary was not enough to reconcile the differences between the two countries.[38]

His response to Obama centered on three interrelated points, followed by a cautious opening to the U.S. First, he expressed his doubts about Obama's ability to change U.S. foreign policy, arguing that the real decision makers in Washington were unknown. This response echoed the speculation in Tehran that even if Obama were serious, structural factors would overpower him. Khamenei rhetorically said, "I do not know who makes decisions for America, the president, the congress, behind the scene elements, but I would like to say that we have logic. Since the beginning, the Iranian nation has moved with logic. Regarding our vital issues, we are not sentimental. We do not make decisions based on emotions. We make decisions through calculations."

Second, he categorically rejected the notion that Iran—or any respectable nation—would respond positively to a combination of engagement and pressure—that is, the dual-track policy. "If you go

on with the slogan of discussions and pressure, saying that you will negotiate with Iran and at the same time impose pressures, threats and adaptations, our nation will not like such words," Khamenei said. Sanctions and diplomacy did not go hand in hand, Khamenei indicated, because the former undermines the sincerity of the latter. Third, and perhaps most important, the Supreme Leader questioned Obama's sincerity by arguing that change thus far had only been a slogan with no follow-up. He said:

> They have the slogan of change. Where is the change? What has changed? Clarify this to us. What has changed? Has your enmity towards the Iranian nation changed? What signs are there to support this? Have you released the possessions of the Iranian nation? Have you removed the cruel sanctions? Have you stopped the insults, accusations and negative propaganda against this great nation and its officials? Have you stopped unconditional support for the Zionist regime? What has changed? They talk of change but there are no changes in action. We have not seen any changes. Changes in words are not adequate; although we have not seen much of a change there either. Change has to be real.[39]

Real change could not be a mere change of tactics while pursuing the same old strategic aim, Khamenei continued. "This is not a change. This is deceit," he declared soberly. But right there Khamenei also offered a small and cautious opening to the U.S. Admitting that the Obama administration did not carry the baggage of previous administrations when dealing with Iran, it would be too early to pass a conclusive judgment on the new American president. Moreover, Khamenei declared that Iran would change its policy toward the U.S. if Obama followed through with his promise and delivered real change in America's approach to Iran. "We do not have any experience with the new American president and government. We'll see and judge. You change and we will change as well,"

Khamenei said. According to veteran Iran-watcher Rasool Nafisi of Strayer University, Khamenei was signaling that Iran "will start afresh, without prejudice, and will evaluate the policy of the U.S. according to its actions rather than its rhetoric."[40] And if those actions involved concrete measures to show America's goodwill—as opposed to mere words—Iran would reciprocate. The Supreme Leader was saying, "Stop tightening the noose. Give me some hints that you are thinking in terms of an alternative policy," Farhi argued. So despite Obama's unprecedented outreach, the ball was still in America's court, Khamenei insisted.

The "change for change" mantra was not limited to Iran's hardliners. Even the reformists—though they tended to be more open to the possibility that Obama was sincere and seemed deeply impressed by the thought behind the New Year's message—agreed that it did not address the real grievances between the two countries. The reformist-leaning *Asr-e Iran,* for instance, argued that the measures that would reveal a real change of attitude in Washington would be the release of Iranian assets and lifting of sanctions. Pointing out that the U.S. was already preparing new sanctions on Iran, the reformist newspaper deemed Obama's gesture insufficient.[41] More conservative and centrist figures in Iran's political elite quickly endorsed Khamenei's position and offered a united front on this issue. According to Booz Allen Hamilton's Persia House News Brief, these figures all gave speeches and presentations following the same formula: initial questioning of the sincerity of Obama, followed by a stern warning that Iran would not be moved by anything other than substantive change, and concluding with a laundry list of items Iran would seek from any dialogue. Hashemi Rafsanjani, the chairman of the Expediency Council and the Assembly of Experts, said that the Obama administration must "show goodwill" by releasing Iranian assets frozen by the U.S. government since the 1979 hostage crisis. If such measures were taken, sincerity would be established and a new relationship could emerge because Iran didn't wish to have enmity with the U.S. "We don't have any enmity with the American people.

We won't have any enmity with the American government if it treats us fairly and acts in line with international norms," Rafsanjani said.[42] Iran's hard-line president Ahmadinejad reiterated the same points in his public comments, repeating the mantra that change must be real. Otherwise, Iran would respond to Obama as it did with Bush. Ahmadinejad, however, did take the unusual step of referring to Obama as "the honourable president of America"—a rather remarkable departure from the usually bombastic and belligerent rhetoric of the hard-line Iranian president.[43]

From the Iranian perspective, calling for a goodwill gesture beyond symbolic statements was justifiable, mindful of previous failed attempts at U.S.-Iran engagement. The Iranian request was moderate, Tehran argued, because it was not calling for difficult measures such as the lifting of sanctions. Rather, the Iranians were looking for much smaller measures such as the establishment of direct flights between the two countries or the unfreezing of Iranian assets in the U.S.[44] The Iranians were content with the fact that Obama had taken three important symbolic steps toward improving relations between the two countries. He had adopted a more respectful tone that recognized the Islamic Republic and signaled that U.S.-sponsored regime change was no longer an American objective. He had welcomed Iran's involvement in resolving issues of common concern such as Afghanistan. And he had declared Washington's intent to participate in nuclear negotiations with Iran under the auspices of the UN Security Council.[45]

But the Iranians wanted more. Though many Iran experts viewed Khamenei's response as ultimately positive—Iran would change if America changed—the irony was that Iran was seemingly emulating the Bush administration's policy. From Washington's perspective, the Iranian government essentially put a precondition for engagement to take place. The Iranian government famously said during the Bush presidency that they had only one precondition for diplomacy, and that was that there should be no preconditions. Now, as Washington dropped its precondition, Iran seemingly adopted its own.

Five

Israel and Obama Clash

It cannot be that the money is invested in enriched uranium and the children are told to remain a little hungry, a little ignorant.

—Shimon Peres' New Year's greeting to the Iranian people, March 2009

As Obama was preparing his Iran strategy and laying the groundwork for diplomacy, opponents and skeptics of engagement worked diligently to close the president's political space for any sustained outreach. In what many analysts viewed as attempted sabotage, Israeli president Shimon Peres released his own Persian New Year greeting only hours after learning of Obama's unprecedented video recording. Peres' predecessor, Iranian-born Moshe Katsav, had sent New Year's greetings in Persian to the Iranian people on the Voice of Israel radio for a few years. But this was the first time Peres spoke to the Iranians.

Peres did not mince his words, blasting the Ahmadinejad government and the many failures of the Islamic Republic while challenging the Iranian people to rid themselves of the ruling theocracy. "I urge you, the noble Iranian people, on behalf of the ancient Jewish people, to reclaim your worthy place among the nations of the enlightened world, while contributing a worthy cultural contribution," Peres said. "Things in Iran are tough," he continued. "There is great unemployment, corruption, a lot of drugs, and a general discontent. You can't feed your children enriched uranium, they need a real breakfast. It cannot be that the money is invested in enriched ura-

nium and the children are told to remain a little hungry, a little ignorant." The Israeli president also issued a warning, reminding the Iranians of the Jewish people's success in overcoming obstacles to their survival. "We've heard, over the 4,000 years of our existence, many speeches, many anti-Semites, many people who wanted to destroy us—we survived and they did not." Peres concluded by predicting that the Iranian people would soon topple their government and once again befriend Israel. "I think that the Iranian people will topple these leaders, these leaders who don't serve the people," he said.[1]

The Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* wrote that the contrast between Obama's and Peres' messages revealed the increasing distance between the U.S. and Israel on Iran. "While the Americans are actively seeking a way to start a dialogue, Israel is preaching confrontation and the toppling of the government in Tehran," the *Haaretz* editorial said. "It is clearly in Israel's interest to halt Iran's nuclear program, but it is no less in our interests to have close ties and a coordinated policy with the United States. The new government should give Obama's diplomatic initiative a chance."[2] A former Israeli peace negotiator called Peres' message a "sabotage attempt," and Marsha Cohen, a scholar of Israeli-Iranian relations, wrote that "nothing would make any Israeli politician happier than being considered personally responsible for preventing rapprochement between the U.S. and Iran." Recognizing the diluting effect Peres' statement could have on Obama's message, the Obama administration quickly clarified that there had been no coordination between the U.S. and Israel on this matter.[3] In fact, rather than coordination, Israel and America were heading toward a major political clash over Iran, as well as the Palestinian issue.

Showdown at the Oval Office

A showdown between the U.S. and Israel had been brewing ever since Obama entered the White House. Obama's diagnosis of and

vision for the region fundamentally clashed with Israel's views. Obama favored diplomacy with Iran, opposed Israeli settlements on Palestinian territory, and wanted to renew America's relationship with the Muslim world. Israel feared abandonment—that diplomacy would leave Israel facing the Iranian threat alone, that American opposition to settlements would lead to greater international pressure on Israel, and that Washington would sacrifice its relationship with Israel to improve ties with the Islamic world.

On May 18, 2009, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu came to Washington for a visit that both sides hoped would dispel fears of a crisis in their relationship, but neither side was in a compromising mood. Netanyahu did not have the appetite for either American diplomacy with Iran or American pressure against Israeli settlements. Going up against the American president, however, would be a dangerous gambit. Obama was an immensely popular president, both nationally and internationally, who enjoyed the political latitude American presidents usually experience only during their first year in office. The president's party also controlled all three branches of government and, on top of that, enjoyed a supermajority in the Senate. Clashing with Obama under these circumstances could be very damaging. Still, that was the path Netanyahu chose. In the weeks prior to his visit to Washington, he intensified the Israeli campaign to weaken Obama's ability to move forward with his vision on Iran. The strategy centered on four key areas: securing a tight deadline for diplomacy; tightening sanctions before any diplomacy began; securing American commitment to zero-enrichment; and keeping the military option on the table. Working in tandem with pro-Likud (Israel's right-wing political party) interest groups in Washington and lawmakers sympathetic to the Israeli perspective, Netanyahu hoped to outflank Obama and confine his room for maneuverability. That was easier said than done, as Netanyahu suffered two quick setbacks as he sought to take on Obama over Iran.

To Sanction or to Dialogue?

The first setback was on sanctions. On April 6, 2009, only a week after he assumed office, Netanyahu met with a bipartisan delegation of U.S. lawmakers led by Senator Jon Kyl (R-AZ). Adopting a "forceful stance," Netanyahu pressed the American delegation on what the U.S. planned to do if engagement failed to stop Iran's nuclear program. While Kyl concurred in his skepticism of diplomacy and support for sanctions, Democratic lawmakers pushed back, arguing that engagement needed to be tried. Not impressed, the Israeli prime minister told the American lawmakers that engagement should be given only four to twelve weeks, with the explicit objective of putting an end to the Iranian nuclear program—a near impossible task.[4] A week later, Senator Evan Bayh (D-IN) announced on the Fox News network that he and Kyl would be introducing a new sanctions bill targeting Iran.[5] The bill was introduced just a week before the annual conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in Washington, D.C., during which more than six thousand citizen lobbyists flock to Congress to push for legislation favored by the hawkish pro-Israel lobby. AIPAC argued that additional sanctions would give Obama the tools to pressure Iran if diplomacy failed. Also, imposing sanctions before talks began would increase the incentives for Tehran to be flexible in the negotiations. "The threat of a popular sanctions bill wending its way through Congress while U.S. officials negotiate outreach might help spur Iran toward allowing expanded U.N. monitoring of its uranium enrichment," a pro-Israel insider told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency.[6] Opponents of sanctions, on the other hand, argued that they did nothing to enhance diplomacy but would rather undercut the president's diplomatic message. Moreover, they pointed out that even those who supported punitive measures admitted that more sanctions would lead to the deaths of Iranian civilians. "Look, we need to be honest about this," said Fred Kagan, resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) at a con-

ference hosted by the AEI. "Iranians are going to die if we impose additional sanctions."[7]

Though Israeli officials and supporters of the Netanyahu government struggled to strike a tone that would not directly undercut Obama's push for diplomatic engagement—claiming that engagement "should be backed with tougher sanctions to enhance the probability of success"—the White House was not impressed and rejected their calls.[8] When the six thousand AIPAC supporters reached Capitol Hill to push for the sanctions bills to be passed within the first week of May, just a month before the Iranian presidential elections, they were met with surprising resistance. "Tomorrow is the day the rubber meets the road," AIPAC president David Victor told the conferees before they descended on Capitol Hill. "This is a moment of danger. We are the only constituency in America making this case [against Iran]." To their amazement, even some stalwart supporters of AIPAC in Congress refrained from supporting the sanctions measure. Howard Berman (D-CA), chair of the House Foreign Relations Committee, who introduced the sanctions legislation in the House and whose committee oversaw it, took the extraordinary step of declaring that he had no intention of moving the bill forward. "I fully support the Administration's strategy of direct diplomatic engagement with Iran, and I have no intention of moving this bill through the legislative process in the near future," Berman said. "However, should engagement with Iran not yield the desired results in a reasonable period of time, we will have no choice but to press forward with additional sanctions—such as those contained in this bill—that could truly cripple the Iranian economy."[9]

The unusual setback prompted Andrew Glass of the news organization Politico to write that AIPAC faced some "challenging times." AIPAC's failure resulted from the "rough consensus that had formed in Congress to give the Obama administration time and space" to pursue diplomacy, a senior Senate staffer told me. Lawmakers wanted the threat of sanctions to be very real, as a "sword of Damocles"

if engagement did not succeed. But they were at that time willing to give Obama the opportunity to try diplomacy first.[10] A few weeks later, Secretary Clinton told a congressional committee what the administration had until then only privately indicated to lawmakers: that the White House did not favor any new sanctions at that point. "I am not sure that adding new unilateral sanctions is really that helpful," Clinton told the lawmakers.[11] Tensions were also mounting between the Obama administration and Netanyahu's government on the Palestinian issue. Vice President Biden used his keynote address at the AIPAC conference to convey the Obama administration's insistence on a number of policies directly conflicting with those of the government in Israel, including the need for a two-state solution, cessation of settlement expansion, the dismantling of existing outposts, and provisions for enabling freedom of movement for the Palestinians.[12]

The Deadline Debacle

The Netanyahu government's second tactical setback was over the issue of a deadline for diplomacy. The argument for tight deadlines was first raised in public in December 2008 at a conference hosted by the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, Israel. In an interview after addressing the conference, Berman said U.S.-Iran talks should last no longer than twelve weeks. Deadlines were needed in order to ensure that Tehran would not drag out the talks indefinitely, while simultaneously continuing its nuclear advances. Under such circumstances, Iran would eventually present the West with a nuclear fait accompli, having developed its nuclear weapon under the guise of negotiations. Furthermore, since talks were aimed at testing Iran's sincerity, after which sanctions and pressure would follow if Iran showed a lack of earnestness, this test period could not be permitted to be too long in duration. Israel's foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, said in a statement on May 6, 2009, that "it is

important that the dialogue with Iran be limited in duration and that if after three months it will be clear that the Iranians are playing for time and not ceasing their nuclear program, then the international community will have to take practical measures."[13]

Opponents of deadlines argued that the U.S. focus should be on making diplomacy succeed rather than on debating when to declare it a failure or to position the U.S. for other steps after an eventual breakdown. A conflict that has remained unresolved for three decades could not possibly be resolved after only a few weeks of talks. Rather than achieve success, deadlines would signal America's insincerity and contribute to the failure of diplomacy, opponents argued. After all, tight deadlines set by the Bush administration on the Iraqi government in 2003 helped ensure war rather than a negotiated settlement.[14] Throughout spring of 2009, recurring rumors surfaced regarding various deadlines for the talks, and each time the Obama administration resisted committing itself to any deadline. "Let me just say that we're not setting any deadline," a State Department spokesperson said on May 14 after reports emerged in the Israeli press that the administration had committed itself to an early fall deadline for talks. "We're not interested in setting any kind of specific or even notional timeline. We are, of course, monitoring very closely what the Iranians are doing, assessing progress. But it—we don't have any timeline forward."[15]

The real showdown over deadlines came a few days later, though, during Netanyahu's visit to the White House. The two leaders met for two hours—one full hour longer than scheduled—and this was followed by a joint news conference in the Oval Office, at which neither man appeared comfortable. The extended meeting, as well as their failure to issue a joint statement summarizing the talks, revealed the depth of their disagreements, according to former U.S. ambassador to Israel Samuel Lewis.[16] Indeed, each man's talking points and body language were at odds with the other's. With Netanyahu at his side, Obama explained the rationale for diplomacy and why it needed time to succeed:

> We didn't expect—and I don't think anybody in the international community or anybody in the Middle East, for that matter—would expect that 30 years of antagonism and suspicion between Iran and the United States would be resolved in four months. So we think it's very important for us to give this a chance. Now, understand that part of the reason that it's so important for us to take a diplomatic approach is that the approach that we've been taking, which is no diplomacy, obviously has not worked. Nobody disagrees with that. Hamas and Hezbollah have gotten stronger. Iran has been pursuing its nuclear capabilities undiminished. And so not talking—that clearly hasn't worked. That's what's been tried. And so what we're going to do is try something new, which is actually engaging and reaching out to the Iranians.[17]

Obama refused to commit to an arbitrary deadline but accepted that a timetable was needed in order to prevent talks from proceeding indefinitely.

> It is important for us, I think, without having set an artificial deadline, to be mindful of the fact that we're not going to have talks forever. We're not going to create a situation in which talks become an excuse for inaction while Iran proceeds with developing a nuclear—and deploying a nuclear weapon. My expectation would be that if we can begin discussions soon, shortly after the Iranian elections, we should have a fairly good sense by the end of the year as to whether they are moving in the right direction and whether the parties involved are making progress and that there's a good faith effort to resolve differences. That doesn't mean every issue would be resolved by that point, but it does mean that we'll probably be able to gauge and do a reassessment by the end of the year of this approach.

Obama also linked the Israeli-Palestinian issue to Iran, but with the causality reversed from that preferred by Israel. "To the extent that we can make peace . . . between the Palestinians and the Israelis, then I actually think it strengthens our hand in the international community in dealing with the potential Iranian threat," he said. Netanyahu's response evaded an explicit embrace of a two-state solution, contrary to what Obama had hoped. "I want to make it clear that we don't want to govern the Palestinians; we want to live in peace with them," said Netanyahu. And he challenged Obama by reinterpreting the president's remarks as an explicit acknowledgment that the military option remained in play. "I very much appreciate, Mr. President, your firm commitment to ensure that Iran does not develop nuclear military capability, and also your statement that you're leaving all options on the table," Netanyahu told Obama in front of the reporters.[18]

The disagreements between Obama and Netanyahu on Iran were decisive but were more about tone than substance. During their conversation prior to the news conference, Obama told the Israeli prime minister that the success or failure of diplomacy would be determined by the end of the year and that the military option remained on the table, according to leaked State Department cables recounting Netanyahu's version of the meeting.[19] The differences were in the public presentation and the volume of the rhetoric. The military option is always on the table, regardless of whether the president of the United States refers to it on a regular basis. But for the U.S., this line of thinking should not be expressed openly. It should be made explicit only if it serves a direct function. From Obama's perspective, reiterating the phrase would undermine the credibility of his outreach and fuel Iranian suspicions. From Netanyahu's viewpoint, however, Iran would respond to diplomacy only if faced with a credible military threat. A disconnect between the three states, their strategies, and their leaders seemed almost complete. "There's a three-way race going on here," one of Obama's strategists told the

New York Times. "We're racing to make diplomatic progress. The Iranians are racing to make their nuclear capability a fait accompli. And the Israelis, of course, are racing to come up with a convincing military alternative that could plausibly set back the Iranian program."[20]

In the end, all of Israel's pressure against the diplomacy it so feared was for naught. The Iranians, it turned out, would do far more damage to diplomacy than Israel ever could.

Six

Fraud

Where is my vote?

—Iranian protest sign in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential election

Journalists at the Press TV headquarters in Tehran were eagerly monitoring the country's June 2009 election results late into the evening. Though the English language station was set up during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency to convey his government's perspective on global affairs to an English-speaking audience outside of Iran, a "Green Wave"—the movement behind Mir Hussein Mousavi's presidential campaign—had swept most of the station's employees. The mood was jubilant as many of the employees predicted a strong showing by Mousavi. The polls had been closed for just an hour, and the results were starting to trickle in slowly.

The phone rang, and one of the producers answered. The caller was Press TV director Mohammad Sarafraz, who said sternly, "Announce that Ahmadinejad is ahead in the elections with a significant margin." The producer responded in anger and disbelief, asking, "But how?" It was impossible for the handwritten ballots to be counted this fast. "Is there a detailed vote count I can refer to?" he asked. "I repeat," Sarafraz fired back, "run headlines that Ahmadinejad is ahead. Details will be presented later." Shortly thereafter, Iranian state TV shocked the Iranian nation—and the world—with the announcement that Ahmadinejad was heading toward a landslide victory. In the meantime, Mousavi's campaign headquarters were

attacked and taken over by security forces. Dawn had yet to break when Facebook profile pictures began morphing into icons of a green square with the words "Where Is My Vote?" A few days later, several journalists at Press TV resigned in protest. The 2009 Iranian election scandal had begun, and Iran, the world, and the Obama administration all were caught off guard.[1]

Mousavi and the Green Wave

Few presidents in Iran have been as polarizing as Ahmadinejad. His persona and unpopularity among his many opponents guaranteed that the 2009 presidential election would be a nail-biter. Iranian elections are neither free nor fair. The Guardian Council, an unelected body of twelve clergymen, decides which candidates are permitted to run—a process that has been as political as it has been undemocratic. In 2004, for instance, sitting reformist members of the parliament were not approved to stand for reelection. And yet, Iranian elections have been competitive and have yielded surprising results. In 2009, the four candidates permitted to run were all insiders of the Islamic Republic: Mehdi Karroubi, the former Speaker of the parliament who ran on a reformist platform; Mohsen Rezaii, the former head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps; former prime minister Mir Hossein Mousavi; and Ahmadinejad. The candidate who would steal most of the limelight and pose the greatest challenge to Ahmadinejad was Mousavi and his Green Wave. His campaign had a slow start and initially ran into tensions with former president Mohammad Khatami, who withdrew his candidacy once Mousavi threw his hat in the ring.[2] But that changed about two to three weeks before the election. Suddenly, a groundswell of support for Mousavi emerged, beginning on the university campuses and then spreading like wildfire. Ahmadinejad, whom many Western governments thought would be comfortably reelected, was in trouble, as his many critics were energized and had found a candidate around whom they could rally.

The son of a tea merchant, Mousavi was born March 2, 1942, in Khameneh in the East Azerbaijan Province of Iran. He studied Islamic architecture in Tehran and became politically active against the Shah's regime during his student years. After the revolution, Mousavi joined with Mohammad Beheshti to found the Islamic Republic Party and eventually became the chief editor of its official publication. A distant relative of Iran's current Supreme Leader, he served as Iran's prime minister from 1981 to 1989 and was largely credited with the successful stewardship of the economy during the tumultuous Iraq-Iran war. But relations between Mousavi and then-President Khamenei were ridden with tension; they clashed repeatedly in their respective capacities as prime minister and president. Their conflict reached a peak in September 1988, when Mousavi tendered his resignation. Ayatollah Khomeini refused to accept it at first but, less than a year later, the post of prime minister was eliminated entirely to create a stronger presidency. Mousavi's defeat, together with the 1989 death of his patron, Ayatollah Khomeini, pushed him to withdraw from public life. He still remained an insider within Iran's political elite, and he advised presidents Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami while serving on the Expediency and Discernment Council. Mousavi refused to run in the 2005 presidential election but had by this time become a popular figure in reformist circles.[3]

In many ways, Mousavi was an unlikely candidate. He is not especially charismatic, and he lacked the political organization that both Ahmadinejad and Khatami enjoyed. While many reformists respected him, he was also viewed with some suspicion because of his conservative leanings. Others were skeptical about his ability to get back into the political game after a two-decade absence, or disagreed with his "outdated views" on economic and cultural policies.[4] And for much of Iran's young population, Mousavi's legacy as prime minister—his strongest political card—had little or no resonance. But one main point of attraction outweighed all of these factors: as an Islamic Republic insider with both conservative and reformist credentials, and with a reputation of being an effective

manager, Mousavi was believed to be the only candidate who could defeat Ahmadinejad at the polls.

From the American perspective, Mousavi brought little change in substance but offered a much-welcomed change in rhetoric and persona. Washington knew that Mousavi "was not going to revolutionize the dynamic," an American diplomat told me. "He would just make it easier, he was digestible."[5] Indeed, on the hot-button issues that had made Ahmadinejad so politically toxic in Washington, Mousavi offered a very different approach. He condemned the killing of Jews in the Holocaust, in complete contrast to Ahmadinejad, who in 2005 called the Holocaust a myth.[6] Both his and Khatami's foreign policy teams resented the confrontational foreign policy Ahmadinejad had pursued. Tensions with the United States did not serve Iran's interests, Mousavi believed, and Ahmadinejad had pursued an extreme policy that had raised tensions without bringing Iran any dividends. "It was *taghamol* against *taghabol*," one of Mousavi's campaign workers told me. Mousavi "would have switched from a confrontational [*taghabol*] approach to constructive interaction [*taghamol*]." A recurring theme in his campaign was denouncing Ahmadinejad's extravagant and adventurous foreign policy. "I have said that our foreign policy is extreme. Sometimes we have gone to an extreme and then found ourselves backpedaling," said Mousavi.[7]

Mousavi favored a softer approach centering on improved ties with the entire international community. "We want to have relations with all countries," he said, "whether they are in the West or the East." One of his campaign slogans was "A New Greeting to the World," indicating that he intended to bring about a new era in Iran's relations with the outside world. He continued: "The diplomacy of the new government coming in must be to create calm and lower tensions. It is important for us that our government develops friendship with others." "Others" included the United States, which the Mousavi camp hoped would show greater flexibility toward an Iran that had discarded the controversial image and rhetoric of Ahmadin-

ejad. But much like the conservatives, Mousavi insisted that negotiations would hinge on President Obama's willingness to change America's policies toward Iran in practical terms. "Holding talks with America is not a taboo for me. If America practically changes its Iran policy then we will surely hold talks with them," Mousavi said two weeks before the election. Mousavi had praised Obama's New Year's greeting but also expressed reservations based on Iran's past experience with the U.S. "Despite America's meddling in our affairs, whenever working with America was in our interest, like in the case of Afghanistan, we did it," he said. "However, as soon as these incidents are over, America returns to its old rhetoric and once again we've fallen down the same path. Of course, Obama's language differs from Bush's language. If he [Obama] effects real change, we will definitely negotiate with America. Otherwise, we will not."[8]

On Iran's redlines, however, Mousavi did not stray too far from the Ahmadinejad government. He insisted that enrichment was Iran's inalienable right and differentiated between the peaceful use of enrichment and building weapons. "It is our right and we have no right to backpedal or there will be dire consequences," the candidate said, insisting Iran was not aiming to produce nuclear weapons. "A right to have technology is different from deviating to weapons building," he continued. While refusing to abandon the Iranian nuclear program, Mousavi did offer greater "assurances" to the international community in the form of greater transparency and access for the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).[9] But Mousavi was not inclined to accept a suspension of the enrichment program as demanded by the UN Security Council. Mousavi had overseen Iran's nuclear program during his term as prime minister in the 1980s and was well versed in its details, and he held "strong, principled views" on the matter, according to one of his advisers. In 2003, when Iran agreed to suspend the program during the course of negotiations with the EU, Mousavi opposed the decision. "I don't think he would have under any circumstances given up Iranian enrichment," one of Mousavi's

advisers told me. "We would keep our enrichment capability, however, with safeguards and enough credible inspection regimes that would make it difficult for diversion [toward military use]."[10]

Although the foreign policy positions of the election challengers mattered greatly to Washington, this was not a top issue for Mousavi's campaign. He had a team of about a dozen foreign policy advisers who met on several occasions and drew up the larger themes of his policy. But the discussions would not deal with matters in great detail and were "very, very few" compared, for instance, with the meetings on economic affairs.[11] While the Obama administration's focus was turning toward Mousavi and his challenge to Ahmadinejad, Mousavi was fixated on Iran and not on America.

All Against Ahmadinejad

Ten days before the election, Iranian state TV introduced a new feature to Iran's political system: televised presidential debates. For the Iranian populace, which was not accustomed to the country's problems and policies being openly discussed on live TV, the debates were yet another indication that the political system seemed to be moving toward greater openness. The Islamic Republic, after all, prides itself in its recurring elections and the legitimacy that high voter participation injects into the system. The Iranian hard-liners walk a fine balance on this matter. On the one hand, they welcome high voter participation due to the legitimacy it lends the system. On the other hand, they fear very high participation since conservative candidates likely will not fare well if the masses cast their ballots. The decision to air live debates between the candidates was likely a product of this balancing act. But from the perspective of the hard-liners, it was a mistake, as the unprecedented confrontations on live TV energized primarily the anti-Ahmadinejad voters. Moreover, the debates showed that there was a real contest in the election and that every vote could matter. Consequently, many of those who had planned to boycott the election changed their minds.

Accusations flew in all directions when Ahmadinejad and Mousavi faced each other. Ahmadinejad attacked all of his predecessors and accused them of corruption. Severe accusations were leveled against key figures within the Islamic Republic—a strategy Ahmadinejad hoped would win him many of the antiestablishment votes. He brought up the wealth of former president Hashemi Rafsanjani and his family and noted that his own ministers were humble and pious. He accused the reformists of weakness on the international stage and argued that suspension of enrichment, acceptance of intrusive inspections, and other goodwill gestures had not brought Iran any benefits. Instead, Iran was branded by President George W. Bush as part of the "Axis of Evil." By contrast, Ahmadinejad asserted, his own uncompromising stance had brought the United States to its knees. Mousavi, who otherwise displayed few emotions in their exchange, heatedly derided Ahmadinejad's foreign policy and argued that his ferocity against Israel had aided the Jewish state's efforts to isolate Iran. Mousavi accused Ahmadinejad of causing instability in Iran with "adventurism, heroics and extremism." The hard-line president had "undermined the dignity of our nation" with his acidic anti-West, anti-Israel, and Holocaust-denying remarks, he added.[12] The most memorable—and decisive—moment in the debate, however, came when Ahmadinejad launched a series of personal attacks against Mousavi's wife, Zahra Rahnavard. To many Iranians, regardless of their political leanings, Ahmadinejad had crossed a line. The debates, and Ahmadinejad's miscalculation, shifted the momentum unambiguously in Mousavi's favor. In the end, the shift may have mattered little to the Ahmadinejad camp; their strategy for victory was ultimately not based on securing votes.

Takeover on Election Day

Whether the election in Iran was rigged, whether the votes were ever counted, and whether the fraud was unnecessary—some argue that Ahmadinejad would have won even without any cheating—will be