

IRAN TASK FORCE

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“Strategically Lonely” Iran Exploits Opportunities for Regional Influence

The Context

Over the past three decades, the Islamic Republic of Iran has shown remarkable endurance. It has survived an eight-year war with Iraq, mounting economic sanctions, and serious domestic unrest. It has benefited from the missteps of adversaries, which have created opportunities for Iran to expand ties to militant movements in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories, and to increase its influence in Afghanistan. Recent uprisings against Arab governments long allied with Washington have encouraged the Iranian government to portray itself as the fulcrum of a “new” anti-Western Middle East.

The reality is more complicated. Iran, in the words of Middle East scholar Shireen Hunter, remains in many ways a “strategically lonely” nation¹—a predominantly Persian, Shiite island in a Sunni Muslim Arab and Turkic sea. Not a member of any significant defense alliance, Iran has gained strategic depth from the U.S. overthrow of rival Sunni regimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, and has accomplished a key goal in ensuring that Iraq will not pose a military threat to Iran for the foreseeable future. Still, both Iraq and Afghanistan are likely to retain military ties with Washington in part to counter Iranian influence. Unlike Britain after World War II, the U.S. is not withdrawing “east of Suez.” The U.S. has military facilities in Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman, and is deepening its defense relationships with Gulf Arab states that fear Iran. Recent unrest in Bahrain, a Shiite majority state under Sunni rule in the Persian Gulf, has added to those fears. Iran’s steadily progressing nuclear

program—despite its recent problems—may boost its sense of self-importance, but it has come at the price of growing enmity among its neighbors. Meanwhile, Iran’s relations with organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas do not give Tehran the power to order actions that contradict those of these partners. Endemic and growing fractiousness within the Iranian government and a history of hedging have undermined Iranian strategic goals. Pro-democracy trends in the Arab world are boomeranging back to Iran, reigniting in 2011 domestic dissent, which was brutally suppressed after the disputed presidential elections in 2009.

The Issue

This brief will outline Iran’s relations with Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, and the Arab nations across the Persian Gulf and discuss the impact of unsettled Arab politics on Iran. What kind of regional role is the Iranian leadership seeking? How will this role fit in with the aspirations of the Arab states in the Gulf? How are American interests affected? This brief will also make modest proposals for including Iran more purposefully in regional diplomacy, particularly in regard to Afghanistan, while not letting up pressure to preclude Iran from becoming a nuclear weapons state. It will underline a dilemma for U.S. policy, which appropriately seeks to penalize Iran over its nuclear program, while shoring up stability in Afghanistan—a process that may require accepting Afghanistan’s growing economic ties with Iran, and Iran’s role as a major transit route for Afghan and Central Asian trade.

¹ Telephone interview with the author, February 8, 2011.

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The intent is to provide guidance to the public and to U.S. policymakers as Washington seeks new ways to counteract malign Iranian activities and to find potential areas for, if not explicit cooperation, then at least nonconfrontation where it is in America's national security interest. There are three main goals: to help stabilize the region in a sustainable way; to allow U.S. forces to be drawn down from Afghanistan to more modest levels, within the 2014 timetable agreed to by NATO; and to encourage Iran to be less confrontational toward the United States and its allies. The challenge is not unlike the Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union, in which the U.S. led an allied effort to combat Soviet expansionism and belligerence while seeking areas where cooperation was in the U.S. national interest, such as arms reduction.

Iran and Afghanistan

Joined under successive Persian empires until the late nineteenth century, Iran and Afghanistan have a love-hate relationship that derives in part from each regarding itself as the origin of high Persian culture. The two countries retain significant linguistic, cultural, and religious ties. Many Afghans speak Dari, a version of Farsi. About 20 percent of Afghans—predominantly members of the Hazara ethnic group—are Shiite Muslims.

Relations were cordial throughout most of the twentieth century, but became fraught in 1979 after the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Preoccupied with fighting a war to the west against Iraqi invaders, Iran did not participate in the battle against the Soviets, yet bore the brunt of harboring millions of Afghan refugees. After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, Afghanistan descended into civil war. The Taliban—backed by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia—took Kabul in 1996 and began persecuting Afghan Shiites. Iran massed troops on the border and nearly went to

war with Afghanistan in 1998, when the Taliban captured the western city of Mazar-e Sharif and killed scores of Shiites, including eight Iranian diplomats and a journalist. Rather than confront the Taliban directly, Iran increased aid to the Northern Alliance, a coalition of militants from non-Pashtun ethnic groups.

After 9/11, Iran played a role in the overthrow of the Taliban by continuing to provide arms and advisers to the Northern Alliance. Members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's Qods Force were present when the Alliance, with U.S. air support, took Kabul in November 2001.² Iran also provided crucial diplomatic aid in creating a post-Taliban government for Afghanistan, and offered to help equip and train the Afghan army, a proposal that the George W. Bush administration rejected.³ Some Iranian officials anticipated that cooperation over Afghanistan would lead to a major improvement in U.S.-Iran relations. Those hopes were dashed when President Bush put Iran on an "Axis of Evil" with Iraq and North Korea in 2002, and rejected an agenda for comprehensive negotiations in 2003. Nevertheless, talks that grew out of UN-sponsored consultations over Afghanistan provided cover for bilateral U.S.-Iran diplomacy in Europe from the fall of 2001 through the spring of 2003.⁴ U.S. ambassadors to Afghanistan also met routinely with Iranian ambassadors in Kabul until 2005, when talks were broken off by the Bush administration.⁵

Disappointed by the lack of U.S. appreciation for its post-9/11 role, Iran responded with a hedging strategy, deepening ties with its coreligionists in western and northern Afghanistan, supporting the central government of President Hamid Karzai—at times with hefty cash payments⁶—while also providing some assistance to the Taliban as that group began a comeback, exploiting U.S. diversion of resources to Iraq.⁷ At the same time, Iran became increasingly involved in the Afghan economy. At a 2002 conference in Tokyo, Iran

² Barbara Slavin, "Iran Helped Overthrow Taliban, Candidate Says," *USA Today*, June 9, 2005 (www.usatoday.com/news/world/2005-06-09-iran-taliban_x.htm).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Barbara Slavin, *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, the U.S., and the Twisted Path to Confrontation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007), p. 199.

⁵ Author interviews with former U.S. ambassadors to Afghanistan, February 14, 2011.

⁶ Dexter Filkins, "Iran Is Said to Give Top Karzai Aide Cash by the Bagful," *The New York Times*, October 23, 2010 (www.nytimes.com/2010/10/24/world/asia/24afghan.html).

⁷ Bill Roggio, "ISAF Captures Qods Force-Linked Taliban Leader in Afghan West," *The Long War Journal*, January 10, 2011 (www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/01/isaf_captures_qods_f.php).

pledged \$560 million—the most per capita of any donor nation.⁸ According to Iranian ambassador to Afghanistan Fada Hossein Maleki, \$380 million has been spent—\$220 million on roads, and more than \$60 million on education, telecommunications, electricity, border security, health, and sports.⁹ Iranian aid and investments have helped to make the western city of Herat the most peaceful and prosperous in Afghanistan. Herat has resumed its historic role as a trading center on the old Silk Route, collecting as much as \$1 million per day in customs duties on goods imported from Iran and Turkmenistan.¹⁰ Iran's annual trade with Afghanistan has increased twentyfold since 2001, and last year amounted to about \$1.6 billion, according to the Iranian foreign ministry.¹¹ Afghans working in Iran send back an estimated \$2.5 billion a year in remittances.¹²

Iranian goals in Afghanistan are sometimes contradictory. Iran does not want the Taliban to take control of the central government. Iran would like its neighbor to become stable and prosperous enough so that it can lure back an estimated two million Afghan refugees who remain in Iran. It would also like to stem the influx of opium and heroin from Afghanistan, the world's biggest supplier of such drugs. At the same time, Iran "wants to ensure that the United States is not a dominant player in whatever new order emerges in the region," in the words of Abbas Maleki, a former deputy foreign minister of Iran.¹³ Iran also seeks to limit the influence of Pakistan, Turkey, and Russia.

Reflecting these conflicting priorities, Iran has managed on several occasions to shoot itself in the foot and antagonize

Afghan public opinion by heavy-handed measures, such as blocking the delivery of fuel to Afghanistan for six weeks during the winter of 2010–11.¹⁴ Iranian, U.S., and Afghan officials have provided various explanations for the stoppage of 2,500 trucks, which led to a 70 percent hike in Afghan fuel prices and anti-Iran demonstrations in Kabul and Herat. One Iranian official said the action was supposed to send a message to the Obama administration that its policy of sanctioning Iran over its nuclear program would undermine U.S. goals elsewhere in the region.¹⁵ According to Shireen Hunter, the Iranians wanted to show the Afghan government that Iran should not be taken for granted as the Karzai government pursues a political settlement with the Taliban. Kenneth Katzman, a Middle East analyst at the Congressional Research Service, said Iran held on to the fuel—which was apparently in transit from Iraq—in case it was needed to quell domestic shortages arising from Iran's phasing out of consumer subsidies in late December 2010.¹⁶ It is also possible that the motive was purely monetary: to boost revenue for merchants on both sides of the border. Iran has also antagonized Afghans by discriminating against Afghan refugees in Iran, jailing several thousand and executing scores convicted of drug trafficking.¹⁷ Afghan authorities have maintained close ties with Iran, however, as part of their own hedging strategy—to provide options as they contemplate a likely U.S. withdrawal and contend with Pakistani interference and instability.

Iran and Afghanistan are members together of two regional organizations, both of which have limited clout: the

⁸ Shireen Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Resisting the New International Order* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010), p. 154.

⁹ "Iran Aid to Afghanistan at \$280 Million," World Defence Network, Pakistan Defence, March 10, 2010 (www.defence.pk/forums/world-affairs/49874-iran-aid-afghanistan-280mn.html).

¹⁰ Mark Sappenfield, "Afghan Business Thrives on Iran's Border," *The Christian Science Monitor*, August 10, 2007 (www.csmonitor.com/2007/0810/p01s08-wosc.html).

¹¹ E-mail from an Iranian official, February 20, 2011. Items exported to Afghanistan include food, building materials, electricity and power plants, oil, gas and petrochemical products, medicine and medical equipment, communications gear, iron and steel, plastic piping, cars and spare parts, clothing, shoes, carpets, and insurance and banking services.

¹² Hunter, p.155.

¹³ "The New Silk Roads: Transport and Trade in Greater Central Asia," Johns Hopkins University-SAIS, Washington, D.C., 2007, p. 176.

¹⁴ Pamela Constable, "Iran's Fuel Blockade Strains Relations with Afghanistan, Prompts Protests," *The Washington Post*, January 17, 2011 (www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/16/AR2011011604262.html).

¹⁵ E-mail interview with author, January 18, 2011.

¹⁶ Telephone interviews with the author, February 8, 2011.

¹⁷ Ahmad Shuja, "The Failure of Iran's Public Diplomacy in Afghanistan," *The Huffington Post*, February 3, 2011 (www.huffingtonpost.com/ahmad-shuja/the-failure-of-irans-publ_b_814372.html).

Economic Cooperation Organization, which includes Turkey, Pakistan, and the Central Asian countries, and the Central and South Asia Transport and Trade Forum, which has the same membership minus Turkey, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. As a landlocked nation, Afghanistan supports Iran's ambition to become a major conduit for trade from Afghanistan and Central Asia via a new Iranian port at Chabahar on the Gulf of Oman. The port is connected by road to the Afghan border at Zaranj, which has been linked to the Afghan ring road between Herat and Kabul at Delaram. Rail links are also being built. The U.S. and Pakistan are promoting alternative routes through Pakistan to Karachi and a new Pakistani port at Gwadar. However, so far, the Iranian route is considered more secure by Afghan officials and by India, which financed the new Iranian port and the road from Zaranj to Delaram.

Regional experts such as Frederick Starr of Johns Hopkins University School for International Studies say Afghanistan's future prosperity—as well as that of its Central Asian neighbors—depends on having numerous routes to ports in both Iran and Pakistan. “The essential nature of this is that everyone gains,” Starr said.¹⁸ Starr criticized the Obama administration for what he called a lack of leadership and strategic vision, and said that more should be done to promote Afghanistan as “the inevitable hub and pivot of continental trade extending across it from all directions: India, Southeast Asia, Europe, Russia, the Middle East and China.”¹⁹ Hunter said that more energy pipelines should also be encouraged to transit Iran, to give the Islamic Republic assets that it is loath to lose. Current U.S. policy actively discourages an Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline in favor of one that would connect the gas fields of Turkmenistan to India via Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Iran and Iraq

Linked for centuries under Persian and then Islamic rule, Iran and Iraq have often been rivals for regional domination and fought a particularly bloody war from 1980–88 that killed or injured one million people. Many Sunni Arabs see Iran as the chief benefactor of the U.S.-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003. Iran not only lost its

fiercest adversary, but also managed to extend its influence to Shiite Muslim groups that had not had strong relations with Tehran prior to Saddam's removal. Iran has played a pivotal role in the formation of Iraqi governments since 2005, most recently helping to keep Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in power despite the better showing of Iyad Allawi's secular Iraqiya party in the March 2010 elections. As of this writing, Allawi's clout within the government remains uncertain, and decision-making is largely in the hands of politicians beholden to Tehran.

As in Afghanistan, however, Iran has antagonized even coreligionists in Iraq through heavy-handed tactics that intensified sectarian conflict from 2004–08 and adversely affected the Iraqi economy. Iraqis are sometimes obliged to buy Iranian products when they would rather have other goods; they complain in particular that Iranian foodstuffs take business away from Iraqi farmers. Iraqi shoppers may be asked by butchers whether they want “a Shiite chicken or a Sunni chicken.” (Shiite chickens come from Iran and have been deemed halal by an ayatollah in the Iranian theological center of Qom.) Iraqis also resent the fact that Iranian companies have monopolized the lucrative Iranian pilgrimage trade to Shiite holy places in Najaf and Karbala.²⁰

Iran has worked with a variety of Shiite groups, spreading its largesse to maximize its influence. Its first major partner was the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq—an organization of Iraqi exiles put together in and by Iran in the early 1980s. When that group—which changed its name to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) in 2007, in part to downplay the Iranian connection—joined successive Iraqi governments and merged its Badr militia into Iraq's new armed forces, Iran reached out to Muqtada al-Sadr and his Mahdi Army, whose members are drawn largely from the Shiite lower class. Tehran also armed Sadrist splinter organizations known as Special Groups—among them the so-called League of the Righteous (Asaib Ahl al-Haq)—to mount attacks on Sunnis and U.S. troops.

Sadr, the offspring of a famous Shiite clerical family with branches in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon, has sometimes been touted as a potential new Hassan Nasrallah after the

¹⁸ Telephone interview with the author, January 31, 2011.

¹⁹ S. Frederick Starr, “Afghanistan Beyond the Fog of Nation Building: Giving Economic Strategy a Chance,” Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Johns Hopkins University-SAIS, January 2011, p. 11.

²⁰ Interview with an Iraqi source, February 7, 2011.

charismatic leader of Iran's Lebanese partner, Hezbollah. Sadr, however, lost a power struggle with ISCI in 2007, and his forces were defeated by Maliki and the U.S. Army in Basra in 2008. Sadr fled to Iran—ostensibly to study to become an ayatollah, but most likely because he decided that he could not survive without Iranian patronage. Under Iranian pressure, his faction, which won 40 seats in the new 325-seat parliament last year, joined with other Shiite parties to keep Maliki as prime minister. Sadr himself returned without fanfare to Najaf on January 5, 2011, after three years in Iran, but left after only fifteen days, reportedly the object of death threats from the League of the Righteous.²¹

U.S. officials assert that Iran is not as powerful in Iraq as it claims to be, and that other countries—among them, Turkey—are equally if not more influential. Michael Corbin, a deputy assistant secretary of state, said recently that “Iran has on a number of fronts sought to exert its influence and has failed.” He said that the Iranians had shifted to the use of “soft power” after its involvement with militias backfired. Corbin noted that there are “natural barriers” to Iranian influence in Iraq given historic differences between Arabs and Persians, and lingering animosity from the Iran-Iraq and first Gulf wars.²² Despite the fact that 70 percent of Saddam's army was Shiite, fewer than a thousand Iraqis are said to have deserted during the Iran-Iraq war.²³ Iran has yet to return Iraqi planes flown to Iran in 1991 when a U.S.-led coalition expelled Iraq from Kuwait; Iraq has not paid Iran reparations arising from the 1980–88 conflict; and the two countries still have no peace treaty. When sectarian fighting in Iraq was at its height in 2006, few ordinary Iranians expressed much sympathy for their coreligionists.²⁴

Despite these divisions, Iran remains the most influential foreign power in Iraq. Iraqis note that Maliki's insistence on the U.S. withdrawing its remaining 48,000 troops in Iraq by the end of this year—in accordance with a 2008 Status of Forces Agreement—is in line with Tehran's wishes. The U.S.

hopes to retain a large diplomatic presence and military representation in Iraq, but a recent Senate report questions how safe Americans there will be after most U.S. troops are withdrawn.²⁵ U.S. officials also worry about whether Iraq will be able to defend its borders once the Americans are largely gone. Should the U.S. and Iran clash over Iran's nuclear program, Americans remaining in Iraq would be likely targets for retaliation by Iran and its agents.

Ultimately a strong and prosperous Iraq could compete with Iran for regional leadership, but that day remains far in the future. One significant impact of Saddam's removal has been to strengthen Iran's influence in Iraq and to reduce Iraq's influence in significant parts of the Arab world, which sees the rise of Shiite power as reversing centuries of Sunni domination. Iraq's reintegration into the Arab fold is a slow process that may be further complicated by the disarray following the fall of U.S.-backed authoritarian rulers in Tunisia and Egypt. An Arab League summit scheduled for this month (March 2011) in Baghdad, which was supposed to herald Iraq's reemergence as an Arab power, is likely to attract only low-level representation. There have been no U.S. bilateral contacts with Iran about Iraq since 2007; talks are unlikely while the nuclear dispute remains unresolved and Iran's domestic politics are so unsettled.

Iran and Lebanon

Strong ties between Lebanon and Iran date back to the sixteenth century, when Iran's Safavid king decided to make Shiism the state religion and imported Arab clerics, primarily from Lebanon, to instruct and minister to the population. Clerical families remain entwined: former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami is married to a niece of the Imam Musa al-Sadr, a charismatic cleric of Iranian origin who is credited with raising Shiite consciousness in Lebanon in the 1960s and '70s.²⁶ (Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr is a cousin of the late Imam.)

²¹ Barbara Slavin, “Behind the Spin, Egypt gives Tehran Political Heartburn,” Inter Press Service, February 9, 2011 (ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=54415).

²² Corbin spoke before the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, January 25, 2011.

²³ Telephone interview with a Gulf analyst, February 11, 2011.

²⁴ Author's reporting in Iran, 2006.

²⁵ Senate Foreign Relations Committee Report, “Iraq: The Transition from a Military Mission to a Civilian-Led Effort,” January 31, 2011 (<http://www.scribd.com/doc/48067156/Senate-Foreign-Relations-Committee-Iraq-The-Transition-From-A-Military-Mission-To-A-Civilian-Led-Effort>).

²⁶ Al-Sadr disappeared in Libya in 1978; it is believed that the regime of Muammar Gadhafi killed him, but it remains unclear who requested the assassination.

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran became even more active in Lebanon, profiting from clerical ties, as well as political links forged between Iranian opposition figures and Palestinian militants in Lebanon in the 1970s. Hezbollah emerged after the 1982 Israel invasion; Iranian Revolutionary Guards knit together several Shiite militant youth groups to create what has evolved into the most powerful political and military faction in Lebanon. If, in the 1980s, Hezbollah was known chiefly for kidnappings and car bombings, in the 1990s it began focusing more on social services and parliamentary politics. At the same time, it built a reputation for successful “resistance” against Israel, prompting Israel’s withdrawal in 2000 from a buffer zone in southern Lebanon where Israeli soldiers had been subjected to frequent guerrilla attacks. Hezbollah also emerged triumphant in its view from a 2006 war with Israel that devastated much of Lebanon but did not destroy the Hezbollah leadership. On the defensive after the 2005 car-bombing assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri, Hezbollah quickly recovered politically. By 2008, after a brief show of force in Beirut, Hezbollah gained a so-called blocking third in the Lebanese cabinet that gave it veto power over the actions of the Lebanese government. Hezbollah used that power on January 12, 2011, bringing down the government of Prime Minister Saad Hariri because of his refusal to end cooperation with a UN tribunal investigating his father’s murder. Hezbollah is supporting prime minister designate Najib Mikati in anticipation that he will sever Lebanon’s ties to the tribunal if members of the Shiite group are formally charged in the Hariri assassination. Once those indictments are revealed, Hezbollah—and Iran—could suffer a severe blow to their reputations in the Arab world.

The Iran-Hezbollah link is Iran’s strongest defense alliance—one not with a state but with a non-state actor. Analysts disagree over the extent to which Iran controls Hezbollah’s activities. The majority view is that Hezbollah consults Tehran before major steps that could embroil the region in massive violence but determines day-to-day tactics on its own. Ali Fayyad, president of the Consultative Center for Studies and

Documentation, a Hezbollah think tank in Beirut, said in 2008 that Hezbollah was an equal if not the senior partner in determining strategy on the Arab-Israeli front. “The Iranian decision-making process depends on what Hezbollah is saying and advising the Iranian leaders,” he said. “It’s a two-way street.”²⁷

Iran provides significant funding and weapons to Hezbollah, but larger sums are believed to come from a wealthy Lebanese Shiite diaspora that stretches from the Middle East to Africa to Latin America. Hezbollah is involved in drug trafficking and other organized crime, as well as legitimate business.²⁸ The organization has attracted mass support in Lebanon primarily because it provides cradle-to-grave services for Shiites—a plurality in Lebanon, but historically the most downtrodden community in the country.²⁹ Anthony Cordesman, a military and Middle East expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said of Hezbollah’s relations with Iran and Syria, a source as well as a transit point for Hezbollah’s weapons, “Everybody uses everyone else. This is not a clear unified alliance but a complex set of political forces.”³⁰ Meanwhile, the impact of the impasse in Israel-Syria peace talks is that Damascus has no reason to reduce ties with Hezbollah or Iran.

A key question is whether Hezbollah would use the tens of thousands of rockets it has received from Iran and Syria to attack Israel, if Israel—or the United States—were to seek to destroy Iran’s nuclear facilities or made another move, such as to attack Iranian warships passing through the Suez Canal. Hezbollah’s “constituency doesn’t want to go to war,” says David Schenker, a Lebanon expert at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. “We don’t know if Hezbollah will decide to preserve its position in Lebanon or defend Iran.”³¹

Iran and the Gulf

Before the 1979 revolution, Iran was largely accepted as the U.S.-backed policeman of the Persian Gulf—even though neighboring Arab sheikhdoms sometimes resented Iranian hegemony. Those days are a distant memory. Anyone who

²⁷ Barbara Slavin, “Mullahs, Money, and Militias: How Iran Exerts Its Influence in the Middle East,” the United States Institute of Peace, June 2008, p. 13 (<http://www.usip.org/publications/mullahs-money-and-militias-how-iran-exerts-its-influence-middle-east>).

²⁸ Ibid, p. 10.

²⁹ Iranian largesse to Hezbollah and the Palestinian Islamic organization Hamas is controversial within Iran. During protest demonstrations following Iran’s disputed 2009 presidential elections, Iranians chanted, “No to Lebanon, no to Gaza, my life only for Iran.”

³⁰ Telephone interview with the author, January 23, 2011.

³¹ Telephone interview with the author, February 15, 2011.

has perused the WikiLeaks trove of U.S. diplomatic cables has gotten a vivid sense of what most Gulf Arabs think of Iran—and what they would like the United States to do to it. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia three years ago urged U.S. authorities to “cut off the head of the snake,” while Bahrain’s King Hamad in 2009 “argued forcefully for taking action to terminate [the Iranians’] nuclear program, by whatever means necessary.”³²

As the closest in proximity to Iran’s nuclear facilities, these regimes are petrified at the thought that Iran might acquire nuclear weapons—even as they fear that a U.S. or Israeli attack would result in Iranian retaliation against Gulf Arab oil fields and terminals. At the same time, there are differences among the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) when it comes to Iran. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have been the most hostile, Qatar and Oman the most accommodating, and Bahrain and Kuwait have been somewhere in between.

Qatar, which invited Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to a 2007 GCC summit, shares a mammoth undersea natural gas field with Iran that has at least 900 trillion cubic meters of reserves. Qatar relies on income from this field and does not want to jeopardize its livelihood. A former U.S. diplomat with long experience in the Gulf who asked not to be named said Qatar regards Iran as “the 800-pound gorilla and [knows] they’ve got to toss a bunch of bananas to it now and then.”³³ Qatar also benefits from a formal treaty with Iran signed during the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, delineating the maritime border between the two countries. The Islamic Republic of Iran has respected the treaty. This distinguishes Qatar from the UAE, which disputes Iran’s control of three small islands in the Persian Gulf—control that also dates from the Shah’s time.

Oman has also maintained relatively cordial ties with Iran, a product of a long relationship and Oman’s desire for a counterbalance against Saudi Arabia. The Shah provided

troops to help the Omani royal family defeat a 1964–75 rebellion by the Dhofar tribe. The Omanis practice a unique form of Islam called Ibadism that is more moderate than the Wahhabi doctrine that is the Saudi state religion.³⁴ Omani officials, particularly longtime foreign minister Yusuf bin Alawi, have been mediators between the United States and Iran. In 1999, Alawi delivered a letter from then U.S. president Bill Clinton to then Iranian president Khatami asking for Iranian help in solving the 1996 bombing of a U.S. air base in Saudi Arabia—an act that killed nineteen U.S. airmen and is alleged to have had Iranian links.³⁵ More recently, the Omanis obtained the release of one of three U.S. hikers arrested by the Iranians in 2009 near the Iran-Iraq border.³⁶

While Iran’s relations with the UAE central government in the emirate of Abu Dhabi are strained, Iran has had close economic and cultural ties with Dubai, which has a large Iranian expatriate community. In recent years, U.S. efforts to sanction Iran—and to close the international financial system to Iranian transactions—have reduced business between Iran and Dubai. Nevertheless, the small enclave remains a key source of re-exports to Iran of consumer and other goods. In 2009, Iran took in \$8.9 billion worth of items from the UAE, its biggest source of imports.³⁷

Iran’s relations with the other GCC members are more fraught. Saudi Arabia is particularly suspicious, and with good reason. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the Iranian revolution, often inveighed against the Saudi monarchy, and Saudi security forces massacred more than 400 Iranian pilgrims in Mecca in 1987 when they staged an anti-Saudi demonstration. As host to Islam’s holiest cities and the citadel of Wahhabism, most Saudis regard Shiites as apostates and the Islamic Republic of Iran as unredeemable. After the fall of Saddam, Saudi media warned darkly of a “Safavid” takeover of Iraq that would spread subversion throughout the region by Shiite fifth columnists. Periods of détente between Iran and Saudi Arabia since Khomeini’s

³² Barbara Slavin, “Opinion: WikiLeaks’ Silver Lining,” Aolnews, November 29, 2010 (www.aolnews.com/2010/11/29/opinion-wikileaks-silver-lining/).

³³ Telephone interview with the author, February 11, 2011.

³⁴ “Background Note: Oman,” U.S. Department of State, Diplomacy in Action (www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35834.htm).

³⁵ Slavin, *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies*, p. 189.

³⁶ Thomas Erdbrink and John Pomfret, “Iran Frees U.S. Hiker Sarah Shourd,” *The Washington Post*, September 14, 2010 (www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/14/AR2010091401484.html).

³⁷ International Monetary Fund statistics. See chart on page 12.

death in 1989 have been brief. Relations have been particularly tense since Ahmadinejad became president of Iran in 2005 and assumed an aggressive nationalist stance.

Gulf rulers claim to see an Iranian hand in domestic disturbances, and this cannot be ruled out. But it may also serve to deflect attention from legitimate grievances caused by Sunni discrimination against indigenous Shiites. This is particularly the case in Bahrain, where a Sunni tribal monarchy rules a population that is 70 percent Shiite, and which has been the scene of massive protests and bloody crackdowns in recent weeks. Although Bahrain was once part of the Persian Empire, the Shah acquiesced in 1971 when the United Nations ruled in favor of Bahrain's independence from Britain. Neither Bahraini Shiites nor their coreligionists in the oil-rich eastern province of Saudi Arabia have been clamoring for an Iranian-style regime; instead, they are seeking more representation in their own governments and business elites, more freedom of expression, and a higher standard of living. So far, protestors have not demanded that the U.S. quit its base in Bahrain for the Fifth Fleet, which supports the local economy.

The Iranian regime is a genuine threat to the region, but this has enabled the United States to develop a closer defense and intelligence relationship with the Gulf states. They have contracted to buy more than \$120 billion in U.S. weapons and services over the next few years, including \$60 billion in airplanes, helicopters, and services for Saudi Arabia.³⁸ Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton has suggested that the U.S. would extend its defense umbrella over the Gulf.³⁹ In practice, therefore, the U.S. and its Gulf allies are already implementing a strategy of containment to deter conventional as well as potential nuclear threats from Iran. The bigger threat to these regimes remains internal. Improving governance and reducing discrimination against Shiites are the best forms of insurance against Iranian subversion.

Arab Uprisings and Iran

As Tunisia's Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali fell and Egypt's ruler Hosni Mubarak tottered in the face of unprecedented popular protests, Iranian leaders initially exulted in the travails of U.S. allies and claimed that Arab protestors were following the template of Iran's 1979 revolution. An "arc of resistance" was rising, they claimed, that would encompass Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Bahrain, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Egypt, and beyond, and would eventually intimidate Iranian adversaries across the region.

Once again, the Iranian regime was taking advantage of external events—and lucky timing. Just at the moment when the international community was intensifying pressure on Tehran to curb its nuclear program, the crises in Egypt, Bahrain, and elsewhere preoccupied U.S. and other Western policymakers. The likelihood of U.S. or Israeli military action against Iran, already remote, shrank to zero as Israel obsessed about the survival of its 1979 peace treaty with Egypt, the bedrock of Israeli-Arab diplomacy, and worried that instability could spread to Jordan and other pro-Western countries. Iran ostentatiously took advantage of the turmoil to send an aged warship and a supply vessel through the Suez Canal for the first time since the 1979 revolution.⁴⁰

Yet the reverberations set off by the uprisings in the Arab world quickly boomeranged back to Iran, where the unrest provided a pretext for opposition leaders to revive their 2009 postelection campaign against the regime—claiming that Iranians were only congratulating their Arab brethren. On February 14—Bahman 25 on the Iranian calendar—thousands took to the streets in Tehran and other major Iranian cities, demanding democracy and freedom. Many of the slogans were directed against Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as in the chant, "Ben Ali, Mubarak, it's Seyed Ali's turn."⁴¹ The Iranian government unleashed plainclothes security forces who fired tear-gas canisters, beat demonstrators, arrested scores, and killed at least two young men

³⁸ Roula Khalaf and James Drummond, "Gulf in \$123 Bn Arms Spree," *Financial Times*, September 21, 2010.

³⁹ Mark Landler and David Sanger, "Clinton Speaks of Shielding Mideast from Iran," *The New York Times*, July 22, 2009.

⁴⁰ Ernesto Londono and Thomas Erdbrink, "Iran Hails Warships' Mission in the Mediterranean," *The Washington Post*, February 23, 2011 (www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/22/AR2011022206595.html).

⁴¹ Brian Murphy, "Egypt Echoes across Region: Iran, Bahrain, Yemen," *The Associated Press*, February 14, 2011 (www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/14/AR2011021403985.html).

in Tehran. More protests erupted at the funeral of one of the victims and again on February 20, March 1 and March 8.

Chas Freeman, a former U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia and an observer of the region, said it is a mistake to see Egypt and Tunisia as Arab dominos whose popular revolts presage the fall of other pro-Western U.S. governments and the rise of new Islamic regimes. In thirty-two years, he notes, no other country has adopted Iran's theocratic system, nor is any likely to do so. "This is an expedient exploitation of confusion among enemies and delight in yet another comeuppance for the United States and in other people's misfortune," Freeman said of the Iranian response.⁴²

Indeed, Iran's official media changed its tone as it became clear that the Egyptian military—not the Muslim Brotherhood—would be supervising Egypt's transition, and that Egypt was not about to renounce the peace treaty with Israel or the alliance with Washington. Even before Mubarak fell, one Iranian newspaper—a conservative organ named *Resalat*—wrote candidly:

One factor that could abort the revolution in Egypt is the passivity of religious scholars. As in the past, the noble Azhar University [a center for Islamic teaching] needs to carry out its historic mission. People have hopes from religious scholars since they started their movement from mosques and Friday prayers. Each revolution, however, is unique in its ways. Egypt will become neither Iran, nor Turkey. Egypt will be revived and regain its role as one of the influential countries of the region.⁴³

The upheaval in the Arab world has discredited both al-Qaeda and Iran and their model of violent revolution in favor of a synthesis of Gandhi meets Twitter and Facebook. According to scholar Olivier Roy, the Middle East has already moved into a post-Islamist phase where personal expression and dignity count for more than religious identity.⁴⁴ This is not to say that Islamic movements are not trying to exploit the new political space in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Bahrain, and elsewhere. But they face competition from secular parties and individuals who can rightfully claim much of the credit for toppling autocratic rulers. A more democratic Egypt, as

the *Resalat* columnist noted, may be a stronger player in the region than Egypt under Mubarak has been for many years. While this transition unfolds, Turkey—a prosperous, democratic NATO member that has diplomatic ties with all its neighbors and a secure place for Islam—is much more likely to be a model for governance than Iran.

Is Regional Cooperation with Iran Possible?

Given all the turmoil in the region and within Iran, it is likely that the Iranian government will remain risk-averse when it comes to dealing with the United States in the near future. However, Iran does share some goals with the U.S. that could be explored through creative diplomacy to advance American interests. Among them:

1. Iran does not want the Taliban to control Afghanistan again, and also wants to profit from transit trade from Central Asia and Afghanistan via Iranian ports, to India in particular.
2. Iran wants to stem the flow of opium and heroin from Afghanistan, which has helped to turn Iran into one of the most addicted nations in the world.
3. Iran seeks to contain Sunni militancy in its Baluchistan region bordering Afghanistan and Pakistan.
4. Iran wants U.S. troops to withdraw from both Iraq and Afghanistan, but may be willing to accept a continued small U.S. presence that shores up stability.

Since its early effort to reach out to Iran, the Obama administration has focused almost exclusively on the nuclear issue, to the detriment of regional matters. On the issue of Afghanistan, the United States has put most of its eggs in the "Af-Pak" basket, and has discouraged the United Nations from reconstituting regional diplomacy. Examples include the "Six-Plus-Two" talks of the late 1990s, which grouped Afghanistan's neighbors plus Russia and the United States, and the Bonn process of 2001, which created Afghanistan's first post-Taliban government and provided cover for bilateral U.S.-Iran diplomacy. Regional ambassadors used to meet routinely in Kabul after the Taliban government fell in 2001.

⁴² Telephone interview with the author, January 30, 2011.

⁴³ *Resalat* newspaper, February 7, 2011 (translation by Mideast Mirror).

⁴⁴ Olivier Roy, "This Is Not an Islamic Revolution," *New Statesman*, February 15, 2011 (www.newstatesman.com/religion/2011/02/egypt-arab-tunisia-islamic).

Staffan di Mistura, the current UN senior representative in Afghanistan, has only just recently convened the first meeting of regional ambassadors in Kabul in five years.⁴⁵ U.S. ambassadors in Kabul have not met their Iranian counterparts alone since 2005.

The tragic death of Richard Holbrooke, who devoted so much energy and creativity to the Afghan-Pakistan challenges, and the appointment of a new “Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan”—retired career diplomat Marc Grossman—offer an opportunity to reexamine that mission. Under Holbrooke, Iran participated in a forty-eight-nation “contact group” on Afghanistan, but that is far too large and unwieldy to provide a venue for serious talks. The U.S. should invite Iran to a smaller meeting, or seek one-on-one consultations. At a minimum, it should authorize routine U.S.-Iran diplomatic contacts in Kabul, Baghdad, and New York. At a recent “Track Two” meeting between Iranian officials and U.S. foreign policy experts in Sweden, the Iranians said they would like to see an increased role for the United Nations and the establishment of a core group of nations to discuss Afghanistan. The American participants urged the Iranians to continue to take part in the contact group as well as a conference planned in the fall to mark the tenth anniversary of the Bonn conclave that put together a post-Taliban Afghan government.⁴⁶ This all must be done without undermining the coalition the U.S. has put together to present a common front against Iran’s nuclear ambitions and its repeated violations of UN Security Council resolutions.

Ultimately, the United States will need to decide whether its desire to squeeze the Iranian economy to pressure Iran to curb its nuclear program requires that it take steps that threaten Afghanistan’s potential economic prosperity and stability by discouraging energy and other trade through Iran. Secretary of State Clinton recently seemed to recognize the importance of a greater focus on regional diplomacy that includes Iran when she told the Asia Society:

Beyond Pakistan, all of Afghanistan’s neighbors and near-neighbors—India and Iran, Russia and China, the

Central Asian states—stand to benefit from a responsible political settlement in Afghanistan, and also an end to al-Qaeda’s safe havens in the border areas and the exporting of extremism into their countries. That would reduce the terrorist and narcotics threat to their own citizens, create new opportunities for commerce, and ease the free flow of energy and resources throughout the region. It could also help move other regional conflicts toward peaceful resolution.⁴⁷

Conclusion

The Islamic Republic of Iran became strategically less pivotal to U.S. interests when the Cold War ended and the West no longer had to worry about Soviet hegemony in the Persian Gulf. Iran has regained some of that importance because U.S. dominance in the Middle East has been undercut by missteps in Iraq and elsewhere; however, Iran has failed to secure prosperity for its people or the international recognition it purports to seek. Like a porcupine, it has projected an image of bristling strength out of proportion to its internal vulnerabilities. Despite its ties with non-state actors such as Hezbollah—and to peripheral nations such as Venezuela—Iran remains a strategically lonely nation, lacking membership in any significant defense alliance. It even failed last year to gain membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization that includes Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Iran remains only an observer because the body adopted membership rules that bar admission to countries sanctioned by the UN Security Council as Iran has been over its nuclear program.⁴⁸

Iran’s government clearly has put a priority on regime survival and may be able to go on for years as an outlier to the international system—as long as the price of oil remains high. Plagued by domestic divisions, the current leadership may decide that it is too risky to jettison a three-decades-long policy of demonizing the United States. Iran rejected an outstretched U.S. hand in the first year of the Obama administration when the U.S. was trying to deal with Iran’s

⁴⁵ Author interview with Afghan expert Clare Lockhart, January 19, 2010.

⁴⁶ Author interview with participant in the Track Two meeting, February 22, 2011.

⁴⁷ “Remarks at the Launch of the Asia Society’s Series of Richard C. Holbrooke Memorial Addresses,” U.S. Department of State, February 18, 2011 (www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/02/156815.htm).

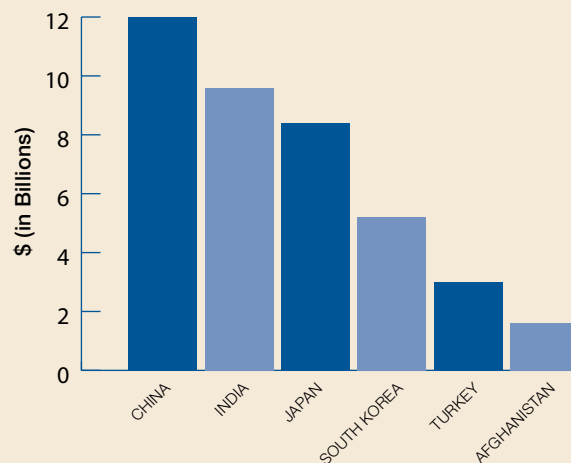
⁴⁸ Kenneth Katzman, “Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses,” *Congressional Research Service*, January 19, 2011, p. 44 (<http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL32048.pdf>).

nuclear ambitions. It may do so again, on regional issues. However, it remains in the interest of the United States to test the proposition that change is possible if Iran is presented with a proper mix of incentives and penalties—including the continuation of sanctions against its nuclear program—and if Iran is consulted on regional matters that affect the national security interests of both countries. This was the model used in dealing with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Not every encounter between the United States and Iran must inevitably be a zero-sum game—even with Iran’s current government. In the interest of Iran’s neighbors in particular, it is important to try to lay the groundwork for regional cooperation. This could provide a basis for better relations in anticipation that the long enmity between the U.S. and Iran will eventually end. If Iran once again rejects any cooperation—this time on regional issues, including Afghanistan—it will further seal Tehran’s isolation.

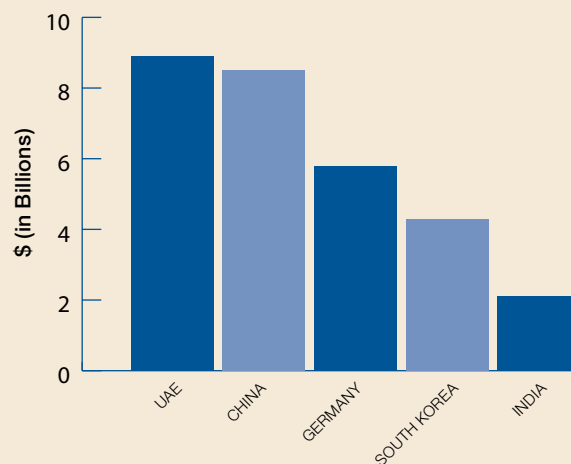
March, 2011

Iran’s Trading Partners

Exports



Imports



Data retrieved from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), as of 2009

Iran and Its Neighbors



To access a high-resolution version of the “Iran and Its Neighbors” map, please go to: http://www.acus.org/files/u403/Iran_Map_clear.jpeg

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The Iran Task Force, co-chaired by Ambassador Stuart Eizenstat and Senator Chuck Hagel, seeks to perform a comprehensive analysis of Iran's internal political landscape, as well as its role in the region and globally, to answer the question of whether there are elements within the country and region that can build the basis for an improved relationship with the West and how these elements, if they exist, could be utilized by U.S. policymakers. Launched in February 2010, the Task Force has hosted four workshops with experts addressing key issues such as "Iran's Regional Role," "Foreign Policy Choices Within Iran," "Iran's Nuclear Capabilities and Strategic Goals," and "Negotiating with Iran in an International Context."

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