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# The Conundrum of Iran: Strengthening Moderates without Acquiescing to Belligerence

By  
JOHN BRENNAN

After nearly three decades of antagonistic rhetoric and diplomatic estrangement between the United States and Iran, the next president has the opportunity to set a new course for relations between the two countries. When the next president takes up residence at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Iranian officials will be listening. The president must implement a policy of engagement that encourages moderates in Iran without implying tolerance for Tehran's historic support of terrorist activities. This strategy will require patience and sensitivity to the complex political realities inside Iran. To successfully chart a new course for U.S.-Iranian relations, the next president must (1) tone down rhetoric; (2) establish a direct dialogue with Tehran, including comprehensive, private discussions and deployment of a special envoy; (3) encourage greater assimilation of Hezbollah into Lebanon's political system; and (4) offer carrots in addition to sticks, including consideration of legitimate Iranian concerns on regional security issues.

*Keywords:* Iran; Hezbollah; United States; state-sponsored terrorism; Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps; IRGC; Shia Islam

Iran will continue to be a major player on the world stage in the decades ahead, and its policies and activities will have a significant and enduring impact on a wide variety of near- and long-term U.S. interests, including efforts to stabilize Iraq and Afghanistan. With a population of more than 70 million, control over more than 10 percent of the world's proven oil reserves and 15 percent of the natural gas reserves, the potential to restart a nuclear weapons program, and a capability to instigate trouble throughout

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the region, Iran is a country with which the United States must reckon. Regime activities have the capability to seriously disrupt U.S. foreign policy aims, particularly in the Middle East, as well as U.S. economic prosperity, given rising global competition for energy. At the same time, however, the Iranian government must come to terms with the United States, as Washington can effectively stymie Tehran's ability to realize its key political and economic objectives, such as improving its relations with moderate Arab governments and the West and increasing its trade and commercial ties worldwide. After nearly thirty years of diplomatic estrangement, the United States and Iran remain on a collision course and risk further confrontation, which neither country can afford.

Numerous hurdles stand in the way of improved U.S.-Iranian relations, but none is more daunting than Tehran's record of direct and indirect involvement in terrorism and other forms of subversion to advance its revolutionary theocratic agenda. Iran's proclivity to promote its interests by playing the terrorism card undermines its standing as a responsible sovereign state and calls into question virtually all of its actions, even when pursuing legitimate political, economic, and strategic interests. While any acts of terrorism are reprehensible and of serious concern irrespective of the source, the sponsorship of terrorism by a state like Iran is particularly worrisome and insidious, as a government can apply its full complement of instruments of national power to support, conceal, facilitate, and employ terrorist violence. In contrast to nonstate actors, sovereign governments have the ready means to provide the logistical requirements—for example, the fabrication of official documentation, explosives, and weapons; the protected use of diplomatic facilities, staff, and pouches; and the provision of expertise, training, funding, and targeting intelligence—that can be used to great effect to plan and carry out successful terrorist attacks. Too often, and for too long, Iran has excelled at such activities.

Despite Iran's indisputable responsibility for and involvement in terrorist attacks in the 1980s and 1990s, it is also important to recognize that the regime's more recent terrorism record is murkier. In fact, the nature and scope of Iran's terrorist activities have evolved significantly over the past twenty-five years. Notwithstanding the fiery rhetoric coming from Iranian officials such as President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Iranian theocracy has made much more limited use of terrorism over the past decade than it did in the first twenty years of its reign. This evolution may reflect recognition in Tehran that the brutish application of terrorist violence was undermining its broader geostrategic objectives, even in the absence of solid evidence of Iranian culpability. The blatant thuggery that characterized Iranian actions in the immediate aftermath of the Islamic Revolution—for example, the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and the holding hostage of American diplomats—has given way to a more nuanced strategy that emphasizes political, financial, and paramilitary support to select proxy clients with agendas that advance Iranian interests. It is the terrorist and paramilitary activities of these clients—notably Hezbollah, extremist Islamist Palestinian groups, and Shia militia groups in Iraq—for which the Department of State labeled Iran as “the most active state sponsor of terrorism” in 2006 (U.S. Department of State 2007).

Although it would represent a significant act of domestic political courage, U.S. national security would be best served if Washington publicly acknowledged and explored the roots of this shift in Iranian state support for terrorist activities. Taking this step is significant, because dealing effectively—and ultimately successfully—with Iran on security matters requires a much more thorough understanding of how and why Iran pursues its geostrategic interests and how it is likely to pursue its goals in the coming years. While it may serve some narrow political agendas to lump together a wide variety of Iranian policies and actions that are antithetical to U.S. policy aims under the rubric of state-sponsored terrorism, U.S. strategic interests require a more nuanced analysis of and less absolutist approach to this problem. While some Iranian officials might be forever wedded to the use of terrorist violence to achieve political ends, many more Iranians are not. The challenge for the United States, therefore, is to pursue policies and to take actions to strengthen and even embolden those Iranians willing to eschew the use of terrorism, including by Iranian proxy clients, and to pursue diplomatic initiatives and rapprochement with the West.

## Iranian Support for Terrorism: The Historical Context

One key to deciphering Iranian motivations and actions is to understand the Iranian regime's current worldview. Tehran's present attitudes have to a large extent been shaped by the evolution of Persian power across the Middle East, Iran's Shia heritage, and regional events of the past half century. Although only slightly more than half of the population of modern-day Iran is ethnic Persian, the wide expanse of the Persian Empire under Cyrus the Great (sixth century B.C.E.), which stretched far into southwest and central Asia and across to Egypt and north Africa, established an Iranian mind-set of far-reaching influence and engagement that remains an inspiration to this day. The Persian identity was further molded more than a millennium later, when Shia Islam established deep roots in the region, making Persian leaders the protectors of the Shia faithful, even those beyond the Persian Empire, in their confrontations with Sunni Arab and other adversaries.

The world wars of the twentieth century and their aftermath made Iran a frequent pawn of global politics, as illustrated by the CIA-engineered overthrow of Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadegh in 1953, which allowed the pro-U.S. Shah to return to power and rule with an iron fist for the next twenty-five years. When the Shah was ousted in 1979 and the Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini was established, it was all but inevitable that the new Shia theocracy in Tehran would assert itself by lashing out against its enemies and by supporting its Shia coreligionists in other countries. The United States, in particular, became an immediate target of Iranian revolutionary ire. Not only was Washington viewed as responsible for the Shah's repression, but long-standing U.S. support to Israel and Washington's tilt toward Baghdad during the Iran–Iraq war helped cement anti-U.S. sentiments in Tehran. Conveniently, Tehran found that it could

simultaneously hurt the United States and advance its own interests by reaching out to extremist Shia groups in other countries that were willing to take both Iranian largesse as well as direction.

In the fifteen years following the Islamic Revolution, Tehran showed no compunction in planning terrorist attacks against its enemies, either directly or through its proxies. Usually, such activities were conducted directly by regime elements such as the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) or the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—specifically, the IRGC's al-Quds Force—and through Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad Organization in Lebanon. Both the MOIS and the IRGC made frequent use of Iranian diplomatic missions in carrying out their terrorist activities against regime opponents, Arab neighbors, and Israeli and U.S. interests. Hezbollah received Iranian materiel and training support in its activities against similar targets.

The more notable Iranian-backed terrorist attacks between 1979 and 1996 include

- bombings of the U.S. Embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983;
- gunboat and floating mine attacks against commercial shipping in the Persian Gulf during the Iran-Iraq war;
- assassination of Iranian oppositionists (including former Iranian prime minister Shapur Bakhtiar), Kurdish separatists, and members of the oppositionist (and terrorist) group Mujahedin e-Khalk (MEK);
- bombings of the Israeli Embassy and a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1992 and 1994; and
- bombing of a U.S. Air Force housing complex in al-Khobar, Saudi Arabia, in 1996.

In some instances, the United States has had difficulty determining the extent of Iran's actual role in an attack, as Iranian intelligence and security officials have gone to great lengths to conceal Tehran's involvement. Sometimes, only fragmentary evidence is uncovered. For example, following a five-year U.S. and Saudi investigation of the attack in al-Khobar, a U.S. grand jury in 2001 found that the perpetrators of the attack "reported their surveillance activities to Iranian officials and were supported and directed in those activities by Iranian officials" (U.S. Department of Justice 2001). However, the indictment stopped short of alleging Iranian instigation or direction of the attack.

Nevertheless, while courtroom-quality evidence of Iranian culpability in attacks such as al-Khobar may be lacking, most Iran watchers concur that Tehran has a great deal of terrorism-related blood on its hands. (For a more in-depth discussion, see Sick 2003.)

In contrast to active operational involvement in terrorist attacks, Iranian materiel support to client groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shia militia groups in Iraq, and Palestinian extremist organizations such as Hamas and Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ) has allowed Iran to keep the title of "most active state sponsor of terrorism" over the past decade. Iranian support to Hezbollah runs the gamut from funding and training to the provision of arms, explosive ordnance, and long-range rockets and ground-to-ground and ground-to-air missiles. Most of Hezbollah's annual budget, estimated at around \$100 million, is believed

to come from Iran. Most Iranian-supplied weaponry is smuggled into Lebanon through Damascus International Airport, from which they are smuggled overland to Hezbollah in Lebanon (Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center 2006).

Iranian support to Sunni Palestinian terrorist groups appears to be limited primarily to funding and some training that takes place in Lebanon and to be motivated by the regime's desire to be perceived as at the forefront of anti-Israeli activity and the effort to seek the return of Jerusalem to Muslim control. It is estimated that on an annual basis, Iran provides Hamas with \$20-\$30 million (Council on Foreign Relations 2007) and PIJ about \$2 million (Terrorism Knowledge Base 2007). Hamas claims these funds are for political purposes and are used to support its social welfare activities. Iranian funding to Palestinian groups reportedly is funneled through Iranian bank branches in the Persian Gulf and Islamic charity organizations (McGirk 2007).

While Iranian support to these client groups undoubtedly strengthens their ability to carry out terrorist attacks, it is unclear what role Iranian officials play, if any, in the operational decisions made by these groups. Moreover, while many of these groups' activities are labeled as "terrorism," most of the attacks carried out by Iranian Shia proxies are paramilitary in nature and are directed against combatant targets, either Israeli soldiers along the Lebanese border or coalition forces in Iraq. See Figure 1 for key events related to Iranian terrorism and U.S. Iranian relations since 1979.

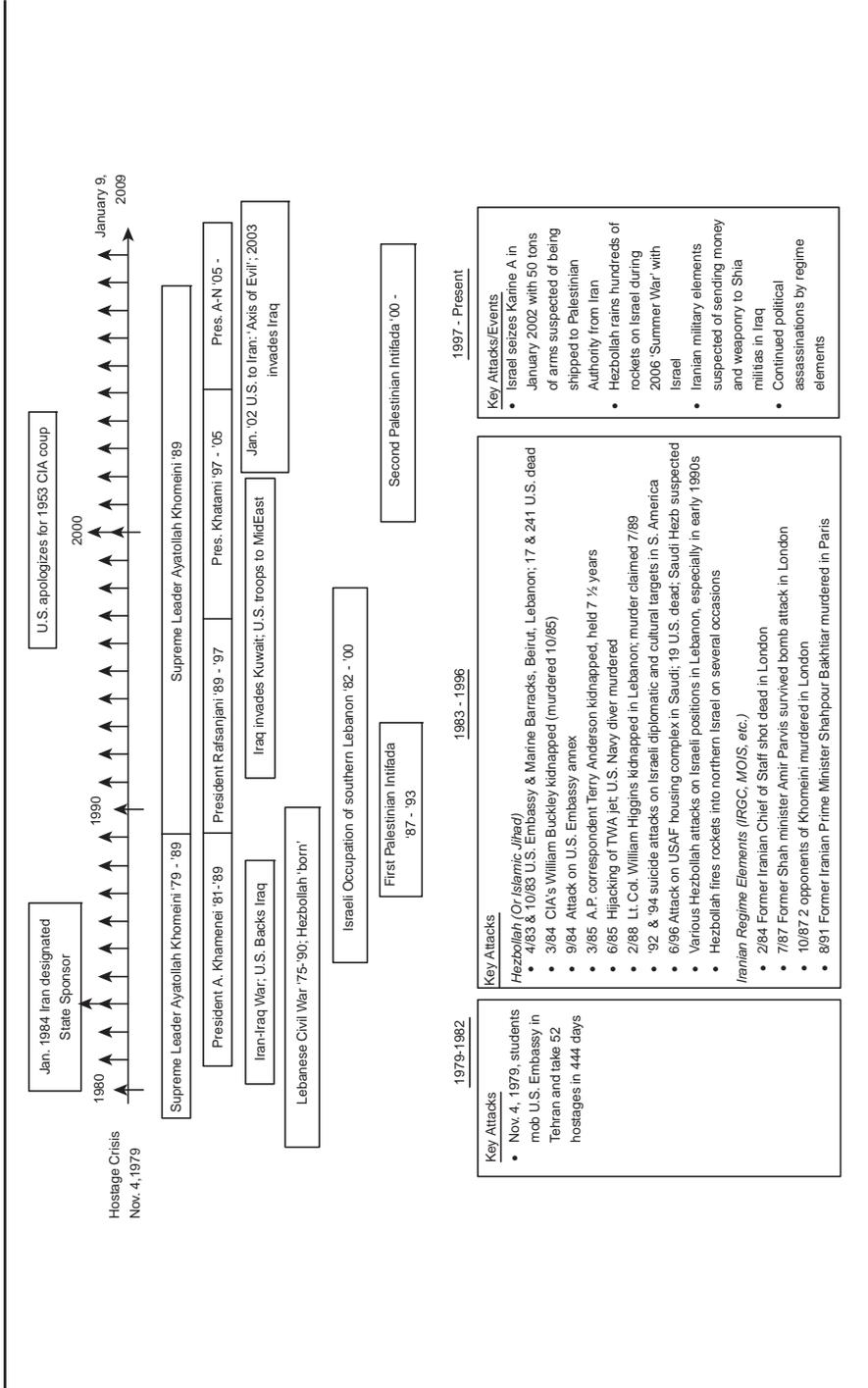
### *The U.S.-Iranian Chessboard*

U.S.-Iranian relations have grown increasingly strained over the past several years, with each side publicly hurling bombastic rhetorical broadsides against the other. In response to the 2001 attacks against the United States by al Qaeda, the George W. Bush administration launched a sweeping, rhetorically charged campaign to eradicate the sources and sponsors of terrorism. Iran was understandably among the nations of great concern. However, instead of pursuing a nuanced strategy that could have allowed flexibility in U.S. policy, the Bush administration regrettably opted to conduct its activities under the overarching banner of "The Global War on Terrorism" and declared it would make no distinction between terrorist operatives and their state sponsors.

The president's January 2002 State of the Union address was a defining moment in U.S.-Iranian relations. In that speech, President Bush branded Iran as part of a worldwide "axis of evil" with Iraq and North Korea. This brash labeling, combined with aggressive administration rhetoric about a suspected Iranian nuclear weapons program and Iranian meddling in Iraq, created the perception in Tehran that Washington had embarked on a course of confrontation in the region that would soon set its kinetic focus on Iran.

Ironically, in the same month, Iran pledged \$560 million to help repair the post-Taliban political environment in Afghanistan, yet Washington responded with indifference. The U.S. reaction came despite the fact that Tehran's donation was the largest of its kind by any developing country at the Tokyo donors' conference. According to James Dobbins, who represented the United States in those

FIGURE 1  
KEY MILESTONES IN U.S.-IRANIAN RELATIONS AND IRANIAN-SPONSORED TERRORISM, 1997-2007



talks as the Bush administration's first U.S. envoy to Afghanistan, Iranian diplomats made key contributions to the success of U.N.-sponsored negotiations that helped forge the first post-Taliban Government in Kabul. Yet unlike the foreign ministers of other nations involved in those negotiations, Iran's foreign minister did not receive a personal note of thanks from his American counterpart, despite the fact that according to Dobbins, the Iranian foreign minister "may have been the most helpful" (Dobbins 2004).

During its second term, the Bush administration maintained a hard line on Iran. It pointed, with justification, to Iranian involvement in the violence in Iraq, which contributed to the ability of Shia militia groups to attack coalition and Iraqi government and Sunni targets with deadly effect. But the administration also focused heavy attention on Iranian nuclear activities, including an alleged nuclear weapons program. Despite a December 2007 National Intelligence Estimate that assessed "in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program," the administration indicated no interest in easing the pressure on Iran (National Intelligence Council 2007). The day after that assessment was made public, President Bush maintained that "Iran was dangerous, Iran is dangerous, and Iran will be dangerous, if they have the knowledge necessary to make a nuclear weapon."

To be sure, the outrageously jingoistic and vitriolic statements of President Ahmadinejad seem to more than justify U.S. criticism of Iran. But the weight of Ahmadinejad's public statements likely exceeds his ability to steer the course of Iranian foreign and domestic policies. Iranian presidential powers are sharply constrained by supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei, the country's most powerful political actor, as well as by the majles (parliament) and Guardian Council, both of which can block presidential initiatives (International Crisis Group 2007).

Nevertheless, the bellicose volleys coming from the chief spokesmen of both the American and Iranian governments have served to widen the rift that exists between the two countries and to make constructive engagement virtually impossible in the current climate. More fundamentally, the hyperbolic and politically charged statements coming from both sides about the nefarious intentions and inherent evil of the respective governments have tended to demonize the image of each among the other's population. Unfortunately, the statements and actions of both sides have led many to conclude incorrectly that the United States and Iran will be forever locked in a zero-sum "clash of civilizations."

## Recommendations

Whoever takes up residence at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue in January 2009 will need to have an Iran strategy already devised and ready for implementation. Although the new U.S. president will benefit from a lack of direct involvement in the design of recent U.S. policies, Iranian officials will carefully scrutinize the words emanating from the White House to determine whether they reflect a course of continued confrontation or one of potential accommodation with the government in Tehran. The challenge for the new U.S. president, therefore, will be to design a

policy that has the potential to wean Tehran from its terrorist and other troublemaking activities, rather than one of conciliation that implicitly tolerates their continuance.

An improvement in U.S.-Iranian relations will not take place overnight, and the new U.S. administration must be willing to exercise strategic patience. Iranian officials, even those who endorse improved ties to Washington, recognize that political realities inside Iran and in the region make it imperative that Tehran not be viewed as caving to U.S. pressure. The axiom “all politics are local” carries a more dangerous connotation for Iranian leaders than for Americans, as the Shah learned in 1979.

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Some elements of a U.S. policy toward Iran that have the potential to result in improved ties and a return of Iran to the community of nations are given below.

*1. Toning down the rhetoric.* A critical step toward improved U.S.-Iranian relations would be for U.S. officials to cease public Iran-bashing, a tactic that may have served short-term domestic political interests but that has heretofore been wholly counterproductive to strategic U.S. interests. Rather than stimulating a positive change in Iran's behavior, politically charged and wholesale condemnation of Iranian policies has energized and emboldened Iranian radicals at the expense of Iranian moderates. U.S. officials must show restraint in the face of anti-American comments from extremists such as President Ahmadinejad and Iranian officials of similar ilk; their comments are intended to provoke an aggressive and confrontational U.S. response. Moreover, such American rhetoric is often used against the very Iranians who are advocating improved ties with the United States.

The new U.S. administration needs to establish this new tone and attitude toward Iran very soon after its inauguration if a new chapter is to be opened in U.S.-Iranian relations. More evenhanded U.S. statements on Iran—such as public recognition of legitimate Iranian national interests and positive Iranian engagement in places like Afghanistan—would have the dual benefit of bolstering the position of those Iranians who advocate improved ties with the United

States and of allowing Iranian radicals to claim that their revolutionary ideals had forced a change in the U.S. position. As long as the outcome is an environment that opens the door to a productive discourse with Washington and more constructive Iranian behavior, it is inconsequential which Iranian political circle claims credit for normalizing ties with the United States.

In late 2007, Efraim Halevy, the former head of the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad, actively encouraged just such a change in U.S. policy toward Iran. He assessed that Tehran's ability to follow through on its public threats to annihilate Israel was minimal. However, in a nod to the domestic Iranian political dangers of climbing down from past statements about Israel, Halevy correctly advocated helping Iranian officials "escape their own rhetoric" (see Ignatius 2007). With forty years of experience on Iranian issues under his belt, Halevy believes that despite Ahmadinejad's fiery rhetoric, there is a deep split in Iran about the country's future and that "sensible Iranians are not in short supply."

2. *Establishing a direct dialogue with Tehran.* Iran's importance to U.S. strategic interests and to overall stability in the region necessitates the establishment of a direct and senior-level dialogue between Washington and Tehran. Using third parties such as the Swiss to convey messages between the two capitals in the absence of diplomatic relations is wholly insufficient. Moreover, a direct U.S. dialogue with Tehran should not have a narrow focus, as the array of issues of most concern about Iran—Tehran's engagement in terrorism and support to subnational "extremist" groups, as well as its proliferation activities and regional ambitions—are inextricably intertwined. Washington must push for a comprehensive framework for discussing these issues. These discussions must take place in private, not in the blinding glare of a public spotlight that limits the political maneuvering room of each side.

A direct dialogue with Iran would allow the United States to identify several specific actions that Iran could take on terrorism-related issues that could lead to a more accommodating U.S. policy vis-à-vis Iran. Initially, Washington should press Iranian officials to cease their vitriolic anti-American and anti-Israeli rhetoric and to condemn publicly acts of violence that clearly are terrorism. Iran can also take some more tangible steps. For example, Iranian financial and military support to Hezbollah gives Tehran significant leverage over its Lebanese ally, and Iran has the ability to direct Hezbollah to refrain from carrying out *any* attacks against civilian targets, such as settlements in northern Israel. Another signal of Iranian cooperation would be for Tehran to turn over to the United States or a U.S.-allied government any al Qaeda members who are being "kept" in Iran under the watchful eye of the Iranian government, according to a wide variety of press reports.

Over the past several decades, experience has shown that seemingly intractable foreign policy challenges for the United States have been best handled by the appointment of a presidential envoy with the experience, gravitas, and authority to deal effectively not only with non-U.S. interlocutors but also with U.S. officials who have the potential to stand in the way of progress. The

appointment of a U.S. presidential envoy to Iran is long overdue. The argument that such an appointment would be inappropriate as long as Iran is on the Department of State's list of state sponsors of terrorism is without merit and foundation. After all, the United States has diplomatic relations with another current member of that list, Syria, and has appointed presidential envoys to North Korea and Sudan. Appointing a senior-level presidential envoy to Iran should not be viewed as U.S. capitulation to Iranian troublemaking. Rather, it should be viewed as an important practical step to deal with one of the most vexing—and potentially dangerous—foreign policy challenges faced by the United States.

An ideal candidate for presidential envoy to Iran is former secretary of state Colin Powell, who retains wide prominence and respect throughout the region. Secretary Powell has an in-depth understanding of the politics and history of the region, and he knows well the equities as well as the concerns of both Washington and Tehran. Other potential candidates for presidential envoy include former vice president Al Gore; former secretary of state Madeline Albright; and former national security advisors Tony Lake, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Brent Scowcroft.

3. *Being realistic with respect to Hezbollah.* Washington should not expect Tehran to ever sever its ties to Lebanese Hezbollah. The political and religious ties between Iranian and Hezbollah leaders are simply too deeply rooted to be affected by outside pressure, whether from the United States, Israel, or elsewhere. It is similarly foolhardy to believe that Hezbollah will not remain a potent political force within Lebanon for many years to come, as the organization has strong support within the Lebanese Shia community and well-established political and social welfare credentials throughout the country. Hezbollah's growing paramilitary strength and political and social resiliency were clearly demonstrated in 2006, when Israel showed a remarkable inability to inflict strategic damage on Hezbollah despite a major military campaign to do so.

It would *not* be foolhardy, however, for the United States to tolerate, and even to encourage, greater assimilation of Hezbollah into Lebanon's political system, a process that is subject to Iranian influence. Hezbollah is already represented in the Lebanese parliament and its members have previously served in the Lebanese cabinet, reflections of Hezbollah's interest in shaping Lebanon's political future from within government institutions. This political involvement is a far cry from Hezbollah's genesis as solely a terrorist organization dedicated to murder, kidnapping, and violence. Not coincidentally, the evolution of Hezbollah into a fully vested player in the Lebanese political system has been accompanied by a marked reduction in terrorist attacks carried out by the organization. The best hope for maintaining this trend and for reducing the influence of violent extremists within the organization—as well as the influence of extremist Iranian officials who view Hezbollah primarily as a pawn of Tehran—is to increase Hezbollah's stake in Lebanon's struggling democratic processes.

Because Israel views Hezbollah as a serious and lethal adversary, this will not be an easy sell. Washington will need to convince Israeli officials that they must abandon their aim of eliminating Hezbollah as a political force. This previously

employed Israeli strategy did not work with the PLO and Fatah, and Israeli officials have adapted to the reality of engaging in political dialogue and negotiations with Palestinians formerly branded as “terrorists.” A similar change must take place within the minds of Israeli government officials in regard to Hezbollah. One way to help effect this change would be if Iran were willing to press Hezbollah to cease its attacks against civilian targets and to declare so publicly. While insufficient to satisfy many Israelis who view Hezbollah as a serious military threat, it would be a positive first step.

4. *Holding out meaningful carrots, as well as sticks.* Persian carpet merchants in the Qom bazaar have a well-earned reputation for being among the world’s best traders and negotiators, and their cousins working in the government in Tehran are cut from the same cloth. Iranian officials, therefore, will not entertain the notion of making concessions until and unless they believe that the United States is prepared to give serious consideration to what they believe to be Tehran’s basic and rightful national security requirements. Strident and absolutist U.S. dismissals of even crudely constructed and unsophisticated Iranian foreign policy statements are viewed in Tehran as indicators of U.S. unwillingness to engage in a meaningful negotiation. As in the carpet bazaar in Qom, both sides will have no choice but to make concessions throughout the bargaining process to reach a fair agreement. The Iranians, however, are likely to be particularly tough negotiators, especially since they believe it is their “carpet” that is the focus of discussion.

Although it probably would take several years, even under optimistic scenarios, for Iran to be removed from the Department of State’s list of state sponsors of terrorism, the United States has a number of potential “carrots” at its disposal to incentivize Iran. Some current sanctions could be loosened, such as the sale of spare airplane parts, and Washington could agree to discuss with the Iranians the potential to “bring to justice” MEK operatives who are currently being harbored in Iraq. Additionally, the United States plays an important and influential role in key Middle Eastern and South Asian issues—for example, Israeli–Palestinian negotiations, political and economic reconstruction activities in Iraq and Afghanistan, and regional security initiatives—that are of direct concern and consequence to Iran. A serious U.S. commitment to take Tehran’s legitimate geostrategic interests and concerns into account when dealing with such matters would send a powerful message to Iranian officials.

If the United States actually demonstrates that it will work to help advance rather than thwart Iranian interests, the course of Iranian politics as well as the future of U.S.–Iranian relations could be forever altered.

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