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Hillary Mann Leverett

School of International Service, American University

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**HOW PRECIPITOUS A DECLINE?:
U.S.-IRANIAN RELATIONS AND THE
TRANSITION FROM AMERICAN
PRIMACY**

*Hillary Mann Leverett**

The present essay is grounded in two basic propositions. The first is that the greatest strategic challenge facing the United States is extricating its foreign policy from a well-worn but deeply counterproductive quest for hegemonic dominance in critical areas of the world, especially the Middle East. The second is that Washington's handling of its relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran constitutes a crucial test of America's capacity to put its foreign policy on a more productive and realistic trajectory.

On the first proposition, it has been just a little more than two decades since the United States came out of the Cold War with a multi-faceted supremacy in global affairs like the world had not witnessed for centuries, if not millennia. If one compares where America was just twenty years ago to where it is today, in terms of its ability to achieve its international objectives, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the United States is a declining power. It is declining, in part, because of the emergence of new power centers in key regions around the world—China, India, Brazil, Turkey, and even the

* [Hillary Mann Leverett](#), senior adjunct professorial lecturer, School of International Service, American University. With Flynt Leverett, she is co-author of *Going to Tehran: Why the United States Must Come to Terms with the Islamic Republic of Iran* (2013); they also write www.GoingToTehran.com.

Islamic Republic of Iran itself.¹ It is declining because of an economic “triple whammy” of accumulated debt, eroding infrastructure, and lagging economic growth.² In much of the world, it is also declining because of the perceived culpability in the United States for the global financial crisis of 2007-2009.³ More recently, the

¹ For representative discussion from an already vast and burgeoning literature, see, for example, MARTIN JACQUES, *WHEN CHINA RULES THE WORLD: THE END OF THE WESTERN WORLD AND THE BIRTH OF A NEW GLOBAL ORDER* (2d ed. 2012); ZACHARY KARABELL, *SUPERFUSION: HOW CHINA AND AMERICA BECAME ONE ECONOMY AND WHY THE WORLD'S PROSPERITY DEPENDS ON IT* (2009); CHARLES A. KUPCHAN, *NO ONE'S WORLD: THE WEST, THE RISING REST, AND THE COMING GLOBAL TURN* (2012); KISHORE MAHBUBANI, *THE NEW ASIAN HEMISPHERE: THE IRRESISTIBLE SHIFT OF GLOBAL POWER TO THE EAST* (2008); Flynt Leverett & Pierre Noël, *The New Axis of Oil*, NAT'L INT., Summer 2006; Naazneen Barma, Ely Ratner, & Steven Weber, *Report and Retort: A World Without the West*, NAT'L INT., July-Aug. 2007; Christopher Layne, *The Waning of U.S. Hegemony—Myth or Reality?: A Review Essay*, 34 INT'L SEC. 147, 152-57 (2009); NAT'L INTELLIGENCE COUNCIL, *GLOBAL TRENDS 2025: A TRANSFORMED WORLD* (2008), http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Reports%20and%20Pubs/2025_Global_Trends_Final_Report.pdf; and NAT'L INTELLIGENCE COUNCIL, *GLOBAL TRENDS 2030: ALTERNATIVE WORLDS 16-20* (2012), <http://www.scribd.com/doc/115962650/Global-Trends-2030-Alternative-Worlds>.

² The “triple whammy” metaphor is adapted from Stephen Walt, *The End of the American Era*, NAT'L INT., Nov.-Dec. 2011. See also Flynt Leverett, *Black Is the New Green*, NAT'L INT., Jan-Feb. 2008; DAVID P. CALLEO, *FOLLIES OF POWER: AMERICA'S UNIPOLAR FANTASY* 94-125 (2009); STEPHEN S. COHEN & J. BRADFORD DELONG, *THE END OF INFLUENCE: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN OTHER COUNTRIES HAVE THE MONEY* (2010); MICHAEL MORAN, *THE RECKONING: DEBT, DEMOCRACY, AND THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN POWER* (2012).

³ On the “soft power” costs to the United States of the global financial crisis (from various perspectives), see, for example, the following: Dennis Blair, *Intelligence Community Annual Threat Assessment*, Testimony to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Washington, D.C., Feb. 12, 2009, 2-3, <http://www.intelligence.senate.gov/090212/blair.pdf>; Christopher Layne, *The Unbearable Lightness of Soft Power, in SOFT POWER AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY: THEORETICAL, HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES* 51, 65-66 (Inderjeet Parmar & Michael Cox, eds., 2010); Susan Aaronson, *Financial Crisis Hurts U.S. Soft Power*, POL'Y INNOVATIONS (Oct. 29, 2008), <http://www.policyinnovations.org/ideas/commentary/data/000090>; Peter Beinart, *How the Financial Crisis Has Undermined U.S. Power*, TIME, June 21, 2010, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1995884,00.html>; and *U.S.'s soft power is under challenge*, XINHUA, Oct. 20, 2008, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-10/20/content_10224257.htm.

United States' continuing inability to address its fiscal challenges, either in the short- or long-term, prompted China's Xinhua news agency to editorialize about the need to start "building a de-americanized world."⁴

But on top of these factors, American standing and influence in world affairs is declining because of the failure of American political and policy elites, especially since the end of the Cold War, to define clear, reality-based goals and to relate the diplomatic, economic, and military means at Washington's disposal to realizing them soberly and efficaciously.⁵ In the wake of the Cold War, American policymakers in Democratic and Republican administrations have ignored a key lesson that foreign policy realism, balance of power theory, and an even minimally sensitive reading of international history all teach: while global dominance and hegemony seem nice in theory, in the real world they are unattainable; not even a state as powerful as the United States coming out of the Cold War can achieve them. Moreover, pursuing hegemony actually ends up making a state weaker, by dissipating resources and sparking resistance from others.⁶

In the post-Cold War period, the counterproductive consequences of America's hegemonic strategy have been especially acute in the Middle East. As Flynt Leverett and I note in our book, *Going to Tehran*, the temptations of empire have lured great powers before the United States into what the historian Paul Kennedy

⁴ U.S. *fiscal failure warrants a de-Americanized world*, XINHUA, Oct. 13, 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/indepth/2013-10/13/c_132794246.htm

⁵ This is the animating theme of Flynt Leverett & Hillary Mann Leverett, *The Balance of Power, Public Goods, and the Lost Art of Grand Strategy: American Policy toward the Persian Gulf and Rising Asia in the 21st Century*, 1 PENN. ST. J.L. & INT'L AFF. 202 (2012).

⁶ See also ANDREW BACEVICH, *THE LIMITS OF POWER: THE END OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM* (2008); CALLEO, *supra* note 2, at 1-38; STEPHEN M. WALT, *TAMING AMERICAN POWER: THE GLOBAL RESPONSE TO U.S. PRIMACY* 1-178 (2005); John Mearsheimer, *Structural Realism*, in *INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORIES: DISCIPLINE AND DIVERSITY* (Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, & Steve Smith eds., 2006); John Mearsheimer, *Imperial By Design*, NAT'L INT., Jan.-Feb. 2011.

famously called “imperial overstretch.”⁷ But America’s post-Cold War imperial turn in the Middle East has arguably set a new record for the largest amount of influence and wealth squandered by a great power in the shortest period of time.⁸

An ill-considered posture toward the Islamic Republic has contributed mightily to Washington’s current strategic predicament in the Middle East. Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, America’s Iran policy has emphasized three main elements, all grounded in hostility: first, diplomatic isolation; second, economic pressure, largely through sanctions; and third, barely veiled support for regime change in Tehran. This approach has manifestly failed, even on its own terms.⁹ Today, as Flynt Leverett notes in his contribution to this symposium, the United States is a power in relative decline in the region. In contrast, the Islamic Republic, is a rising power.¹⁰ As we will see, continued U.S. hostility toward Iran only courts further and even more precipitous decline in America’s standing and influence in this vital part of the world.

America’s dysfunctional Iran policy also threatens the long-term sustainability of U.S. influence—or, as American policymakers prefer to say, “leadership”—on the global level. Three issues illustrate this dynamic. First, Washington regularly claims that it is the Islamic Republic which endangers the free flow of hydrocarbons from the Persian Gulf to international markets. Today, however, it is America’s efforts to compel Tehran to surrender its developments of indigenous nuclear fuel cycle capabilities by imposing more and more sanctions on the Islamic Republic and through the continuing threat of U.S.-initiated (or Israeli-initiated and U.S.-supported) military action against it—not Iranian behavior—that are the leading threats

⁷ PAUL KENNEDY, *THE RISE AND FALL OF THE GREAT POWERS: ECONOMIC CHANGE AND MILITARY CONFLICT FROM 1500 TO 2000* (1987).

⁸ FLYNT LEVERETT & HILLARY MANN LEVERETT, *GOING TO TEHRAN: WHY THE UNITED STATES MUST COME TO TERMS WITH THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN 4* (2013).

⁹ *Id.* at 279-82.

¹⁰ Flynt Leverett, *The Iranian Nuclear Issue, the End of the American Century, and the Future of International Order*, 2 PENN. ST. J. L. & INT’L AFF. 240 (2013).

to the security of Persian Gulf hydrocarbon flows.¹¹ For China and other rising powers dependent on the free flow of Persian Gulf energy supplies to international markets, this raises real questions about America's claim to provide the global public good of international energy security by ensuring the physical security of those supplies.¹²

Second, the expansion of Iran-related secondary sanctions to cover not only investment in Iranian hydrocarbon production but also simple purchases of Iranian crude oil and most non-energy-related transactions with Iran is incentivizing China and other rising powers to develop alternatives to established, U.S.-dominated mechanisms for conducting, financing, and settling international transactions.¹³ This, too, has potentially profound, negative implications for America's international economic leadership.

Third, as Flynt Leverett notes in his contribution to this volume, the larger part of the international community—120 of the U.N.'s 193 member states that are part of the Non-Aligned Movement—are already on record in support of Iran's right to pursue safeguarded enrichment.¹⁴ The ongoing efforts of American administrations unilaterally to rewrite the NPT where Iran is

¹¹ Flynt Leverett & Hillary Mann Leverett, *America's Iran Policy and the Undermining of International Order*, WORLD FIN. REV., July-Aug. 2013, at 38, <http://law.psu.edu/file/TWFR%20Jul-Aug%202013America%20Iran-v2.pdf>.

¹² Discussions with Chinese academics, analysts, and officials, Beijing, China, June 2011, June 2012, and July 2013. See also JOHN GARVER, FLYNT LEVERETT, & HILLARY MANN LEVERETT, MOVING (SLIGHTLY) CLOSER TO IRAN: CHINA'S SHIFTING CALCULUS FOR MANAGING ITS "PERSIAN GULF DILEMMA" 3-17 (2009), http://legacy2.sais-jhu.edu/centers/reischauer/moving_slightly_closer.pdf.

¹³ Leverett & Mann Leverett, *supra* note 5 at 229-30. See also Leverett & Mann Leverett, *supra* note 11, at 40-42; Neelam Deo & Akshay Mathur, *Guest post: BRICS 'Hostage' to west over Iran sanctions, need financial institutions*, FIN. TIMES BLOG (June 27, 2012, 11:05 AM), <http://blogs.ft.com/beyond-brics/2012/06/27/guest-post-brics-hostage-to-west-over-iran-sanctions-need-their-own-financial-institutions/#axzz2ZsLPgSNs>.

¹⁴ Jason Ditz, *Non-Aligned Movement Unanimously Backs Iran's Civilian Nuclear Program*, ANTIWAR.COM (Aug. 31, 2012), <http://news.antiwar.com/2012/08/31/non-aligned-movement-unanimously-backs-irans-civilian-nuclear-program/>; Leverett, *supra* note 10.

concerned is extremely troubling to Brazil, South Africa, Turkey, and other rising powers in the Global South, further undermining the perceived legitimacy of American international “leadership” and feeding a growing unwillingness in much of the world to tolerate such hegemonic assertions by the United States.

On the second of my two basic propositions, Flynt Leverett and I lay out in *Going to Tehran* what is at stake for the United States in its relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Just as Washington’s dysfunctional approach toward the Islamic Republic is a crucial element in America’s strategic decline, in the Middle East and globally, America’s capacity to recast its policy toward Iran will be critical to its strategic recovery. In the Middle East, the United States—for its own interests and on classic balance-of-power grounds—needs to pursue strategic rapprochement with the Islamic Republic. On a global level, too, putting America on a more positive and productive strategic trajectory requires a thoroughgoing revision of its Iran policy.

But, as the U.S.-Iranian competition for influence over the Middle East’s regional order intensifies, Washington’s approach to Tehran has grown ever less receptive to serious, strategically-grounded engagement and ever more oriented toward coercive options, including the militarized prevention of Iranian nuclearization and the assertive rollback of Iranian influence. These options raise the risk of another U.S.-initiated war in this vital region. Moreover, by pursuing them, the United States condemns itself to a future as an increasingly flailing, and failing, superpower—and as an obstacle to, rather than a facilitator of, a rules-based international order.¹⁵

I. THE PERILS OF DEMONIZATION

Washington’s antipathy toward the Islamic Republic is grounded in unattractive, but fundamental, aspects of American strategic culture. They include: difficulty accepting independent power centers; hostility to non-liberal states, unless they subordinate their foreign policies to U.S. preferences (as Egypt did under Sadat

¹⁵ Leverett & Mann Leverett, *supra* note 11, at 42.

and Mubarak); and an unreflective but deeply rooted sense that U.S.-backed norms, rules, and transnational decision-making processes are meant to constrain others, not the United States itself.¹⁶

These features of American strategic culture are both conditioned and reinforced by the hegemonic thrust of American foreign policy. In the Middle East, America's imperial turn has prompted it to demonize would-be challengers to its primacy there. One of the more significant manifestations of this practice has been Washington's persistent refusal to understand and accept the basic model underlying Iran's postrevolutionary order—the integration of participatory politics and elections with principles and institutions of Islamic governance and a strong commitment to foreign policy independence.

This refusal has real consequences for America's Iran debate. Instead of recognizing the dysfunctionality of their country's Iran policy and correcting course, American political, policy, and media elites have preferred, and continue to prefer, looking to “regime change”—whether “hard” or “soft”—in Tehran to solve America's Iran problem. To justify such a posture, these elites go on depicting the Islamic Republic as an illegitimate system so despised by its own population as to be in imminent danger of overthrow. American elites have been doing this for more than thirty years, virtually since the Islamic Republic's founding out of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. And for more than thirty years, the Islamic Republic has consistently defied their relentless predictions of its collapse or defeat.¹⁷

The Islamic Republic has survived because its basic model (participatory Islamic governance and foreign policy independence) is—according to polls, electoral participation rates, and other indicators—what a majority of Iranians living inside their country want. They do not want a political order grounded in Western-style secular liberalism. They want an indigenously-generated political order reflecting their cultural and religious values—as the reformist

¹⁶ Flynt Leverett & Hillary Mann Leverett, *Consequences of western intransigence in nuclear diplomacy with Iran*, AL JAZEERA, May 10, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/05/2013589151459212.html>.

¹⁷ LEVERETT & MANN LEVERETT, *supra* note 8, at 142-46.

President Mohammad Khatami wrote, “freedom, independence, and progress within the context of both religiosity and national identity.”¹⁸

This was the vision of Grand Ayatollah Seyed Ruhollah Khomeini, the Islamic Republic’s founding father. It is embodied in the Islamic Republic’s constitution; it is what the Islamic Republic, with all its flaws, offers Iranians the chance to pursue, on their own terms. Even most of those Iranians who want the Islamic Republic to evolve in significant ways still want it to be, at the end of the day, the Islamic Republic of Iran.¹⁹ Impressive developmental outcomes since the revolution reinforce Iranians’ sense of the Islamic Republic as a genuinely national project that is theirs to build and own. Under the Islamic Republic, Iran has diversified its economy to a greater extent than any other major oil-exporting country in the Middle East. This means, among other things, that Iran today is less dependent on oil revenues to cover both its government budget and its imports than Saudi Arabia or any of the smaller Gulf Arab monarchies on the other side of the Persian Gulf.²⁰ Contrary to deeply rooted but ill-informed Western stereotypes, the Islamic Republic has achieved far more progressive outcomes in alleviating poverty, delivering health care, providing educational access, and (yes) expanding opportunities for women than the Shah’s regime ever did.²¹

Notwithstanding the Islamic Republic’s staying power, foreign policy pundits who, in many cases, have no direct connection to on-the-ground reality inside Iran continue telling us that the system is on the verge of collapse. This message is reiterated by America’s so-called Iran “experts,” many of whom are Iranian expatriates or Iranian-Americans whose families fled the Revolution

¹⁸ The quote is from “Letter for Tomorrow,” an open letter published by Khatami in May 2004.

¹⁹ LEVERETT & MANN LEVERETT, *supra* note 8, at 177-87.

²⁰ See, for example, the data presented in Mehran Kamrava, *The Political Economy of Rentierism in the Persian Gulf*, in *THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE PERSIAN GULF* 39, 42-47 (Mehran Kamrava, ed., 2012), showing that Iran now covers 50-60 percent of its imports with non-oil exports.

²¹ LEVERETT & MANN LEVERETT, *supra* note 8, at 187-94.

and want to see the Islamic Republic overthrown, perhaps even violently overthrown.²²

A good example of this came in 2009, when, in a collective act of analysis-by-wishful-thinking, American elites widely anticipated a victory by former Prime Minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi over incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in that year's Iranian presidential election.²³ Many Western analysts and commentators saw a Mousavi victory as the key to solving America's strategic problems in the Middle East. Some—including senior Obama administration officials—even posited what they called an “Obama effect,” through which the United States would be able to effect “soft” regime change in Iran, achieved much more effectively than through the heavy-handed and overly militarized approach applied by neoconservatives in Iraq.²⁴

When, in June 2009, Ahmadinejad won re-election in the Islamic Republic's presidential contest, American analysts and elites almost universally condemned the outcome as a fraud.²⁵ They did so even though every methodologically sound poll conducted in Iran before and after the election—including polls conducted by Western polling groups (14 polls in all)—showed that Ahmadinejad's re-election with roughly two-thirds of the vote (which is what the official results show that he got) was eminently plausible.²⁶ And

²² See *id.* at 285-326, for a discussion of this point.

²³ *Id.* at 228-31, 232-38.

²⁴ See, e.g., Athena Jones, *Obama Administration Has Eye on Iran*, MSNBC, June 12, 2009; Howard LaFranchi, *Wildcard in Iran Election: Obama*, CHRISTIAN SCI. MONITOR (June 11, 2009), <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Foreign-Policy/2009/0611/p06s28-usfp.html>; Paul Brandeis Raushenbush, *The Obama Effect in Iran and Lebanon - Role Model Instead of Straw Man*, HUFFINGTON POST, June 8, 2009, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-raushenbush/the-obama-effect-in-iran_b_212399.html; Michael Slackman, *Hopeful Signs for U.S. in Lebanon Vote*, N.Y. TIMES, June 8, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/09/world/middleeast/09lebanon.html?_r=0; Simon Tisdall, *Lebanon Feels the Obama Effect*, GUARDIAN, June 8, 2009, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/jun/08/lebanon-elections-obama-effect>.

²⁵ LEVERETT & MANN LEVERETT, *supra* note 8, at 231-32.

²⁶ *Id.* at 238-43. On Iranian public opinion in connection with the Islamic Republic's 2009 presidential election, see also Ben Katcher, *LIVE*

American elites embraced a narrative of election fraud even though neither Mousavi nor anyone else ever presented any evidence of how the election was stolen.²⁷ This never-demonstrated but fervently-espoused narrative also conditioned American and Western elites' romanticization of the Green Movement, widely portrayed in the West as a mass popular uprising poised to sweep away the Islamic Republic, perhaps within just a few months. But it was evident to anyone prepared to look soberly at reality that, even at its height, the Green Movement did not represent anything close to a majority of Iranians and that, within a week of the June 2009 election, the movement's social base was already contracting.²⁸

STREAM: What Does the Iranian Public Really Think?, RACE FOR IRAN (Feb. 3, 2010), <http://www.raceforiran.com/live-stream-what-does-the-iranian-public-really-think>; Steven Kull et al., *An Analysis of Multiple Polls of the Iranian Public: The June 12 Election, The Perceived Legitimacy of the Regime, and the Nature of the Opposition*, WORLDPUBLICOPINION.ORG (Feb. 3, 2010), http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/feb10/IranElection_Feb10_rpt.pdf; Steven Kull et al., *An Analysis of Multiple Polls Finds Little Evidence Iranian Public Finds Government Illegitimate*, WORLDPUBLICOPINION.ORG (Feb. 3, 2010), <http://worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brmiddleeastnafricara/652.php?lb=brme&pnt=652&nid=&id=>; SEYED MOHAMMAD MARANDI, EBRAHIM MOHSENI, AND MAHMOUD SALAHI, MARDOM VA ENTEKHABAT DAHOM [PEOPLE AND THE TENTH ELECTIONS] (2012).

²⁷ LEVERETT & MANN LEVERETT, *supra* note 8, at 245-56. On the election, see also Flynt Leverett & Hillary Mann Leverett, Op-Ed., *Ahmadinejad won. Get over it*, POLITICO (June 15, 2009), <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0609/23745.html>; Flynt Leverett, Hillary Mann Leverett, & Seyed Mohammad Marandi, *Will Iran be President Obama's Iraq?*, POLITICO (June 24, 2009), <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0609/24099.html>; Eric Brill, *Did Mahmoud Ahmadinejad Steal the 2009 Iran Election?*, RACE FOR IRAN (June 11, 2010), <http://www.raceforiran.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/IranArticle-060110/pdf>; Reza Esfandiari and Yousef Bozorgmehr, *A Rejoinder to the Chatham House Report on Iran's 2009 Presidential Election Offering a New Analysis of the Results*, in Flynt Leverett & Hillary Mann Leverett, *Persistent (and Game-Changing) Myths: Iran's 2009 Presidential Election, One Year Later*, RACE FOR IRAN (June 11, 2010), <http://www.raceforiran.com/persistent-and-game-changing-myths-iran%E2%80%99s-2009-presidential-election-one-year-later>.

²⁸ LEVERETT & MANN LEVERETT, *supra* note 8, at 259-72. On the Green movement, see also Flynt Leverett & Hillary Mann Leverett, Op-Ed., *Another Iranian Revolution? Not Likely*, N.Y. TIMES, Jan 5, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/06/opinion/06leverett.html?_r=1&.

And yet the myth of the Islamic Republic's illegitimacy and instability did not die as a result of the Green movement's failure. Indeed, it got a new lease on life in early 2011, when the Arab Awakening began. Through the pro-Green lens that continues to shape most Western commentary on Iranian politics, it seemed inevitable that the waves of popular discontent breaking across the Arab world would soon engulf the Iranian government. Most of the pundits who had jumped on the regime-change bandwagon in 2009 hopped back on for another ride.

On February 20, 2011, billionaire financier George Soros, appearing on CNN's *GPS* with Fareed Zakaria, offered a bet that "the Iranian regime will not be there in a year's time."²⁹ Two days later, in *Foreign Policy*, Flynt Leverett and I took Soros up on his wager.³⁰ We even bet that not only would the Islamic Republic still be Iran's government in a year's time but that the balance of influence and power in the Middle East would be tilted even further in its favor. More than two years have elapsed since Soros made his wager; we are eager to collect on it.

Today the myth of the Islamic Republic's illegitimacy and fragility comes in two interlocking versions: one, that sanctions are now finally "working" to undermine the Islamic Republic's basic stability; and two, that the Arab Awakening has left the Islamic Republic isolated in its own neighborhood.

On sanctions, Flynt Leverett and I made our most recent visit to Iran in October 2013. No one who has walked the streets of Tehran recently, as we did, seen that Iran's economy is not collapsing, and talked with a range of Iranians living in Iran could possibly think that sanctions are "working" in a way that will compel either the Islamic Republic's implosion or its surrender to American demands on the nuclear issue. There is no constituency—among conservatives, reformists, or even what is left of the Green

²⁹ Fareed Zakaria GPS, *Interview with George Soros*, CNN (Feb. 20, 2011), <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1102/20/fzgps.01.html>.

³⁰ Flynt Leverett & Hillary Mann Leverett, *Obama Is Helping Iran*, FOREIGN POL'Y (Feb. 23, 2011), http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/02/23/obama_is_helping_iran.

Movement—prepared to accept such an outcome. Those arguing to the contrary have never explained why Iran’s economy is so much worse that it was in the 1980s, when the Islamic Republic lost half its GDP while defending itself in its eight-year war with Iraq—and yet, even then, its population did not rise up to force fundamental change or concessions to hostile powers.

Indeed, there is no precedent *anywhere* for a sanctioned population mobilizing to overthrow its government and replace it with one that would adopt the policies preferred by the sanctioning foreign power.³¹ In the Iranian case, moreover, the Islamic Republic has over years demonstrated its capacity to adapt dynamically to sanctions, in ways that do not just stave off collapse but, in some instances, actually benefit its economy.³²

³¹ Even in Iraq, where severe sanctions were imposed for over a decade, killing more than one million Iraqis (half of them children), the population did not rise up to overthrow Saddam Hussein. In the end, Saddam was displaced only by a U.S. invasion—and, even after that, Iraqis did not set up a pro-American, secular, liberal government ready to subordinate Iraq’s sovereignty and national rights to Washington’s preferences. For critical discussion of Western commentators’ exaggerated claims about sanctions’ impact on popular attitudes and official decision-making in the Islamic Republic, see Flynt Leverett & Hillary Mann Leverett, *Time to Face the Truth About Iran*, THE NATION, Feb. 25, 2013, <http://www.agenceglobal.com/index.php?show=article&Tid=2965>, MIDDLE EAST ONLINE, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=56911>; Sune Engel Rasmussen, *Tight Times in the Grand Bazaar*, FOREIGN POL’Y (Jan. 16, 2013), http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/01/16/sanctions_iran_daily_life; Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, *Understanding the Rial’s Freefall*, LOBE LOG FOREIGN POL’Y (Oct. 4, 2012), <http://www.lobelog.com/understanding-the-rials-freefall/>; and Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, *Is Iranian Hyperinflation a Mirage?*, AL-MONITOR (Jan. 23, 201), <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/01/hyperinflation-iran-manti-teo.html>.

³² See, e.g., LEVERETT & MANN LEVERETT, *supra* note 8, at 281 (discussing how sanctions can encourage greater self-sufficiency in Iran, citing how, in response to the 2010 enactment of U.S. secondary sanctions targeting gasoline exports to Iran, the Islamic Republic accelerated the expansion of its refining capacity to a point that, in 2011, it became a net exporter of gasoline, with Afghanistan as one of its biggest customers); Leverett & Mann Leverett, *supra* note 30 (discussing how the realignment of the *rial*’s nominal value with its real value has boosted Iran’s non-oil exports); William Yong & Alireza Hajihosseini, *Understanding Iran Under Sanctions*, OXFORD ENERGY COMMENT FROM THE OXFORD INSTITUTE FOR ENERGY STUDIES (Jan. 2013), <http://www.oxfordenergy.org/wpcms/wp->

Recently, some commentators have claimed that Hassan Rohani's victory in the Islamic Republic's 2013 presidential election proves U.S.-instigated sanctions are finally "working" by fueling popular discontent with nuclear policies that have prompted escalating international pressure. Such discontent supposedly drove Iranians to elect a candidate inclined to cut concessionary deals with the West. This "analysis," badly misreads Rohani's views on the nuclear issue.³³ Furthermore, a close examination of the 2013 presidential election—including, once again, analyses of high-quality polling data from methodologically-sound surveys—demonstrates that, in fact, it was not sanctions but a functioning political system that worked to produce Rohani's election.³⁴

On the Arab Awakening, the same pundits who say that sanctions are working advise Americans and others to embrace the logic-defying proposition that the same political and social currents that deposed pro-American leaders in Tunisia and Egypt and are empowering Islamists in countries across the Arab world will, in Iran, somehow transform the Islamic Republic into a secular liberal state. This is truly analysis-by-wishful-thinking. In Tehran, policymakers and analysts see the Arab Awakening as hugely positive for the Islamic Republic's regional position. They judge—correctly, in my view—that any Arab government which becomes more representative of its people's beliefs, concerns, and preferences will, virtually by definition, become less enthusiastic about strategic

content/uploads/2013/01/Understanding-Iran-Under-Sanctions-Oil-and-the-National-Budget.pdf.

³³ See Flynt Leverett & Hillary Mann Leverett, *How Washington Should Engage Iran's New President*, HUFFINGTON POST, June 17, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/flynt-and-hillary-mann-leverett/iran-new-president_b_3456007.html; Flynt Leverett & Hillary Mann Leverett, *What Rouhani's Election Should Mean For Washington*, THE HINDU, June 18, 2013, <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/what-rouhanis-election-should-mean-for-washington/article4823926.ece>.

³⁴ Flynt Leverett, Hillary Mann Leverett, & Seyed Mohammad Marandi, Op-Ed., *Rouhani won the Iranian election. Get over it*, AL JAZEERA, June 16, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/06/201361681527394374.html>.

cooperation with the United States, let alone Israel, and more open to the Islamic Republic's message of foreign policy independence.³⁵

More particularly, over the last two and a half years Washington commentators have regularly intoned that, because of the Arab Awakening, Tehran is going to “lose Syria,” its “only Arab ally,” with “dire consequences” for Iran's regional position and internal stability. These observations underscore how deeply American elites are in denial about basic political and strategic trends in the Middle East. They highlight how slow American elites have been to grasp that, today, the Islamic Republic's most important Arab ally is not Syria, but post-Saddam Iraq the first Arab-led Shi'a state in history, an outcome made possible by the U.S. invasion and occupation. Besides this, Tehran's assessment that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad will not be overthrown—at least not by Syrians—has proven, against Washington pundits' confidently dismissive critiques, correct.³⁶

Looking ahead, any plausibly representative government in Syria will not be more pro-American or pro-Israel than the Assads have been. That is why Tehran has strongly endorsed negotiations between the Assad government and oppositionists aimed at a political settlement; it is oppositionists and their external backers (including the United States) that refuse to deal with Assad. The Islamic Republic strenuously resists the Assad government's replacement by a Taliban-like political structure. But it is external support for opposition forces, in which foreign *jihadis* play an increasingly prominent role, that generates this risk—a risk that, perversely, also threatens the security interests of the United States, which has foolishly called for Assad's removal. Iranian decision-makers—and their allies in Lebanese Hizballah—judge that they are on the right side of history in resisting efforts to use Syrian

³⁵ LEVERETT & MANN LEVERETT, *supra* note 8, at 97.

³⁶ On this point, see also Leverett & Mann Leverett, *supra* note 30.

international legitimacy.³⁹ There will be no United Nations Security Council resolution authorizing such action; growing Russian and Chinese disaffection with the thrust of American Middle East policy and distrust of America's long-term intentions in the region preclude this.⁴⁰ The Non-Aligned Movement is already on record that it would consider an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities illegal; the United States would have no allies for the purpose, save Israel and—perhaps—the United Kingdom.⁴¹

The use of force against the Islamic Republic to destroy non-existent nuclear weapons would ratify America's image, in the Middle East and beyond, as an outlaw superpower. This prospect is even more dangerous to America's strategic position today than it was after the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Just a few years ago, the United States was effectively still an unchallenged superpower. The views of publics—or even many elites—in most other countries did not matter much to American decision-makers; especially in the Middle East, Washington could usually impose its requirements on compliant governments whose foreign policies were largely unreflective of their own peoples' opinions. Today, as more Middle Eastern publics seek both a larger voice in political processes and greater independence for their nations, their views on regional and international issues matter much more. The utter rejection, internationally and in the United States, of President Obama's publicly announced intention to attack Syrian government targets earlier this year raises a serious question whether—after strategically failed military interventions in

³⁹ Leverett, *supra* note 10; Mary Ellen O'Connell and Reyam El Molla, *The Prohibition on the Use of Force for Arms Control: The Case of Iran's Nuclear Program*, 2 PENN. ST. J. L. & INT'L AFF. 315.

⁴⁰ Multiple discussions with Russian and Chinese officials and analysts since 2006 confirm this point.

⁴¹ Britain's attorney general formally advised Her Majesty's Government in 2012 that a preventive attack on Iran would violate international law; on this basis, London has reportedly declined to support U.S. contingency planning for military strikes against the Islamic Republic. See Nick Hopkins, *Britain rejects US request to use UK Bases in nuclear standoff with Iran*, GUARDIAN, Oct. 25, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/oct/25/uk-reject-us-request-bases-iran>.

Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya—America can still even credibly threaten the effective use of force in the Middle East.⁴²

In this context, Washington needs better relations with Tehran to save what is left of the U.S. position in the Middle East. At this point in the evolution of the Middle Eastern balance of power, the United States cannot achieve any of its high-priority goals in the region absent a realignment of relations with Tehran. Iran is a critical player for shaping the future not only of Iraq and Afghanistan, but Syria as well. America needs Iranian help to contain the rising tide of *jibadi* terrorism and, more generally, Sunni-instigated sectarian agitation and violence in the region—phenomena fueled by Saudi Arabia and Washington's other ostensible Arab allies in the Persian Gulf. More broadly, U.S. foreign policy must adapt itself to and accommodate the rising demand for participatory Islamist governance in the Middle East. Coming to terms with the Islamic Republic is an essential step in such a process.

On a global level, too, rapprochement with Iran is vital to America's long-term strategic recovery. U.S.-Iranian realignment is necessary to ensure the future adequacy and security of hydrocarbon flows from the Persian Gulf to international energy markets—something that will continue to be a high-order economic and foreign policy interest for the United States, regardless of how far the shale revolution ends up pushing it toward a (strategically artificial)

⁴² This was an important theme in Russian President Vladimir Putin's *New York Times* Op-Ed in September 2013, in which he wrote, "It is alarming that military intervention in internal conflicts in foreign countries has become commonplace for the United States. Is it in America's long-term interest? I doubt it. Millions around the world increasingly see America not as a model of democracy but as relying solely on brute force, cobbling coalitions together under the slogan 'you're either with us or against us.' But force has proved ineffective and pointless. Afghanistan is reeling, and no one can say what will happen after international forces withdraw. Libya is divided into tribes and clans. In Iraq the civil war continues, with dozens killed each day. In the United States, many draw an analogy between Iraq and Syria, and ask why their government would want to repeat recent mistakes." Vladimir Putin, *A Plea for Caution from Russia: What Putin Has to Say to Americans About Syria*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 12, 2013, at A31,

standard of “energy independence.”⁴³ Furthermore, there are huge prospective costs that will accrue to America’s interests and strategic standing, globally as well as in the Middle East, from continued U.S. hostility toward Iran.⁴⁴

More than ever before, American interests require rapprochement with the Islamic Republic. Flynt Leverett and I argue that, for its own interests, the United States must therefore take a fundamentally different approach in its Iran policy—an approach captured in the title of our book (*Going to Tehran*) and in its subtitle (*Com[ing] to Terms with the Islamic Republic of Iran*). America needs to come to terms with the Islamic Republic—not as a favor to Iran, but to save its own strategic position and avert the catastrophe of another U.S.-initiated Middle Eastern war, with all that would flow from such a conflict. Coming to terms with the Islamic Republic means accepting it as a legitimate political order representing legitimate national interests—and as a rising regional power unwilling to subordinate its foreign policy to Washington. No American president since the Iranian Revolution—not even Barack Hussein Obama—has been prepared to do this. But it is a key argument in our book that this is not just the only basis on which diplomacy with Iran can succeed—it is the only way for the United States to forestall strategic implosion.⁴⁵

III. THE CHINA MODEL

There is an important precedent in recent American history for this kind of strategically-grounded, genuinely transformational diplomacy. Accepting a rising regional power as a legitimate entity pursuing its interests in a fundamentally rational and defensive way is

⁴³ On this point, see also Leverett & Mann Leverett, *supra* note 5, at 210-11.

⁴⁴ Leverett, *supra* note 10.

⁴⁵ LEVERETT & MANN LEVERETT, *supra* note 8, at 1-11.

how President Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger enabled the historic opening to China in the early 1970s.⁴⁶

Nixon and Kissinger's achievement was not to "talk" to Beijing; Washington had been doing that for years in ambassadorial-level discussions in Geneva and Warsaw. As Kissinger himself has noted, the United States and the People's Republic held one hundred and thirty-six iterations of these talks, over sixteen years, before the Nixon-Kissinger opening. They were narrow in scope, focused overwhelmingly on grievance, and, as Kissinger describes it, served only to institutionalize stalemate.⁴⁷ Nixon and Kissinger's achievement was not to talk to Beijing. Rather, it was to accept—and to persuade Americans to accept—the People's Republic as, in Nixon's words, "[a nation] pursuing [its] own interests as *it* perceive[s] these interests, just as we follow our own interests as we see them."⁴⁸

Nixon came to office with a deep understanding that the United States needed to realign relations with the People's Republic. For twenty years, from the time of the Chinese Revolution, the United States had worked to isolate and undermine the People's Republic of China. Washington did not just pursue a "regime change" policy toward the People's Republic; it recognized a whole other political structure based on Taiwan as the "real" government of China.⁴⁹ The results of these policies were terrible for the United States and its strategic standing. Trying not to "contain" but to suppress and undermine China ended up undermining the U.S. position in Asia, and got America into the draining quagmire of Vietnam.

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 369-87 (providing a comprehensive discussion that draws lessons from the experience of Sino-American rapprochement for U.S. diplomacy with the Islamic Republic of Iran).

⁴⁷ HENRY KISSINGER, *DIPLOMACY* 722 (1994); HENRY KISSINGER, *ON CHINA* 221-24 (2011).

⁴⁸ Richard Nixon, U.S. Foreign Policy for the 1970s: A New Strategy of Peace, First Annual Report to the Congress on United States Foreign Policy for the 1970s 119 (Feb. 18, 1970), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2835>.

⁴⁹ For rich and insightful discussion, see especially JAMES PECK, *WASHINGTON'S CHINA: THE NATIONAL SECURITY WORLD, THE COLD WAR, AND THE ORIGINS OF GLOBALISM* (2006).

In this challenging context, Nixon saw that rapprochement with the People's Republic was a strategic imperative for the United States. Suggestions that Nixon's outreach to Beijing was motivated primarily by an interest in "triangulating" with China against the Soviet Union define his vision—and, ultimately, his achievement—too narrowly.⁵⁰ On a tactical level, extricating America from Vietnam figured far more prominently in Nixon's diplomatic calculations *vis-à-vis* China.⁵¹ On a strategic level, Nixon apprehended that realigning Sino-American relations would, as Kissinger later put it, allow Washington "to regain the diplomatic initiative while the war in Vietnam was still in progress."⁵²

To be sure, realigning relations with the People's Republic meant that the United States would have to give up its failed quest for hegemony in Asia. This quest, though, had already proven grossly counterproductive for American interests, in Asia and globally, while the strategic benefits of an opening to China would, in Nixon's judgment, be enormous. At a time when the People's Republic was a rising regional power, but far removed in many respects from the status of global economic powerhouse it holds today, Nixon understood that, as Kissinger later wrote, "excluding a country of the magnitude of China from America's diplomatic option meant that America was operating internationally with one hand tied behind its back."⁵³ In the end, their initiative to realign relations with China saved America's position in Asia after the tragedy-cum-strategic stupidity of Vietnam and restored Washington's global leadership.

Nixon did not just grasp the need for U.S. rapprochement with China; he also recognized that achieving it would require two fundamental changes in Washington's posture toward Beijing. First,

⁵⁰ KISSINGER, ON CHINA, *supra* note 47, at 213-15; HENRY KISSINGER, WHITE HOUSE YEARS 189-90 (1979); MARGARET MACMILLAN, NIXON AND MAO: THE WEEK THAT CHANGED THE WORLD 56-57, 122-23, 162 (2007).

⁵¹ Discussions with Chas Freeman (the veteran U.S. diplomat who worked on China policy intensively during the early years of his career and served as Nixon's interpreter on his historic 1972 trip to Beijing; KISSINGER, DIPLOMACY, *supra* note 47, at 707; KISSINGER, ON CHINA, *supra* note 47, at 214; MACMILLAN, *supra* note 50, at 4-5.

⁵² KISSINGER, DIPLOMACY, *supra* note 47, at 713.

⁵³ *Id.* at 720-21.

he realized that it was incumbent on the United States, as the stronger party with a record of stubborn hostility toward the People's Republic, to demonstrate its *bona fides* proactively to Chinese leaders. So, upon taking office, Nixon directed the CIA to stand down from its longstanding covert operations programs in Tibet and ordered the U.S. Navy's Seventh Fleet to stop what Beijing considered aggressive patrolling in the Taiwan Strait.⁵⁴ Nixon did these things so that the Chinese leadership would know his diplomatic outreach was serious.

Second, Nixon astutely assessed that the incremental, step-by-step diplomacy being intermittently pursued in ambassadorial channels would never achieve a real breakthrough. On the basis of this assessment, he took what Kissinger called the "extraordinary" decision "to put aside all the issues which constituted the existing Sino-American dialogue," (where "each side stressed its grievances,") and to instead concentrate "on the broader issue of China's attitude toward dialogue with the United States."⁵⁵ When Nixon did this, Chinese leaders knew they had a serious partner, prepared to accept the People's Republic, and responded accordingly. Two and a half years later, this approach bore rich fruit with the announcement of the Shanghai Communiqué in February 1972.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ TIM WEINER, LEGACY OF ASHES: THE HISTORY OF THE CIA 349-50 (2007); Charles Freeman, *The Process of Rapprochement: Achievements and Problems, in* SINO-AMERICAN NORMALIZATION AND ITS POLICY IMPLICATIONS 3 (Gene T. Hsiao & Michael Witunski, eds. 1983). Additionally, Nixon directed his administration to relax restrictions on travel to and small-scale commercial exchanges with the People's Republic and, when Soviet and Chinese military units clashed along the Sino-Soviet border in 1969, communicated to Moscow that the United States would not quietly acquiesce to a major strategic defeat of the People's Republic. See also U.S. Foreign Policy for the 1970s, *supra* note 48, at 140-42; KISSINGER, DIPLOMACY, *supra* note 47, at 723-24; KISSINGER, ON CHINA, *supra* note 47, at 210-20.

⁵⁵ KISSINGER, DIPLOMACY, *supra* note 47, at 722.

⁵⁶ *Joint Statement Following Discussions with Leaders of the People's Republic of China* (Feb. 27, 1972) IN FOREIGN RELATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES, 1969-1976, Vol. 17, CHINA, 1969-1976, doc. 203, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d203>.

IV. GOING TO TEHRAN

Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei and the four Iranian presidents elected over the course of Khamenei's 24-year tenure as the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader have all said repeatedly that Tehran is open to better relations with America—but only on the basis of mutual respect, equality, and American acceptance of Iran's post-revolutionary political order. These terms are strikingly similar to those that China's communist leaders specified for Sino-American rapprochement. The core argument of *Going to Tehran* is that, today, America must engage Iran on precisely this basis and realign its relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran as thoroughly as Nixon and Kissinger realigned U.S. relations with the People's Republic of China in the early 1970s.⁵⁷

What would it mean, in practical terms, for Washington to accept the Islamic Republic and realign relations with it in this way, particularly with reference to the nuclear issue? On the nuclear issue, it would mean accepting Iran's right to safeguarded enrichment of uranium. Insisting on “zero enrichment”—or even open-ended “suspension—only ensures that negotiations will fail. American recognition of Iran's nuclear rights is a key to diplomatic success. In return for such recognition, the Islamic Republic would ratify and implement the Additional Protocol to the NPT and agree to other more intrusive verification and notification requirements. These steps would give the IAEA as robust a level of access to Iranian nuclear facilities, similar to the access it enjoys to comparable facilities anywhere in the world. Once the terms of the deal were finalized, the United Nations Security Council would lift the multilateral sanctions it has imposed on Iran over its nuclear activities, and Washington would roll back its Iran-related unilateral and secondary sanctions.⁵⁸

Additionally, America and its international partners should lock in a deal on the nuclear issue through expanded nuclear cooperation with the Islamic Republic. Very senior Iranian officials

⁵⁷ For further discussion of Sino-American rapprochement in the 1970s as a model for a comprehensive realignment of U.S.-Iranian relations, see LEVERETT & MANN LEVERETT, *supra* note 8, at 387-92.

⁵⁸ *Id.* at 392.

have said repeatedly, including in conversations with Flynt Leverett and me, that countries concerned about aspects of Iran's nuclear program should send scientists and technicians to work collaboratively on those activities with Iranian counterparts. Tehran has said for years that Iran would be open to associating its nuclear program with multilateral nuclear consortia (including for the production of nuclear fuel) and other joint venture arrangements. The United States and its partners should take up these expressions of openness to international nuclear cooperation.⁵⁹

Accepting Iran's right to enrich is important not only as the key to a diplomatic solution on the nuclear issue. It also implies acknowledgement of the Islamic Republic as a legitimate and enduring political order representing legitimate national interests. Thus, resolving the nuclear issue can and should be used as the basis for a more comprehensive realignment of relations between Washington and Tehran. As part of a broader process of U.S.-Iranian rapprochement, the United States should invite the Islamic Republic into regional negotiations about post-conflict stabilization in Afghanistan and about a prospective political settlement in Syria. America's strategic recovery in the Middle East will necessarily include a reinvention of the "Middle East peace process;" in this vein, Washington should also engage Tehran on the daunting array of issues gathered under the heading "the Arab-Israeli conflict."⁶⁰

Achieving this sort of comprehensive, "Nixon-to-China" rapprochement with the Islamic Republic of Iran is the biggest strategic challenge facing the United States today.

⁵⁹ *Id.* at 392-93.

⁶⁰ For more detailed discussion, see *id.* at 393-95.