Which Path to Persia?

Options for a New American Strategy Toward Iran
Which Path To Persia: Overview

• Assess U.S. policy options toward Iran in objective fashion
• An in-depth “options memo”
• Does not advocate for any policy
• Collective work - Does not reflect authors’ personal preferences
• Six authors: Pollack (lead and editor), Byman, Indyk, Maloney, O’Hanlon, Riedel
• Between us, about 120 years of experience working on Iran inside the U.S. government and out
• Comments from a wide range of experts and partisans to ensure options were treated fairly
**Purpose**

- Assess the Obama Administration’s current policy toward Iran
- Assess the alternatives, in particular as fallback options and contingency plans in case the current policy fails
- Describe all of the options in a way that an informed citizen could understand them
- Allow readers to compare the different options to better understand the causes of the divergences in the policy debate
A Standardized Template

• Goal
• Timeframe
• Overview of the Policy
• Requirements
• Pros and Cons

➢ All of the options had far more “cons” than “pros”
Persuasion

• Current Obama Administration policy
• Goal: Halt nuclear program, end aggressive anti-American Iranian policies
• Timeframe: 6-36 months
• Overview: bigger carrots, bigger sticks
  — (But keep quiet about the sticks!)
  — Tactical engagement could lead to strategic engagement
• Requirements: International Support
• Pro: Widely seen as right approach, at least to start
• Con: Even if international support is forthcoming, Iran may still refuse
Engagement

• Goal: Halt Iranian nuclear program, aggressive behavior
  – Possibly change the regime
• Timeframe: Years to decades
• Overview: Kill them with kindness
• Requirements: Enormous patience
• Pro: Avoids threatening Tehran
• Con: Hard to avoid a victory for Iranian hardliners in short-term
  – Iranian behavior may get much worse before it gets better
**Invasion**

- **Goal:** Overthrow Iranian regime, end Iranian nuclear program and aggressive behavior
- **Timeframe:** 6-12 months to invade, years or decades to occupy and rebuild
- **Overview:** OIF II, then apply lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan
  - Start with the “surge,” don’t try everything else first
- **Requirements:** American public support
- **Pro:** Third time is the charm!
- **Con:** Will any American support yet another massive military intervention in the Middle East?
**U.S. Air Strikes**

- **Goal:** Destroy the Iranian nuclear program
- **Timeframe:** Weeks
- **Overview:** Not Osiraq, Desert Fox (if not Desert Storm)
  - Hundreds or thousands of sorties over days or weeks
- **Requirements:** Regional support, superb intelligence
- **Pros:** U.S. air forces are mostly unemployed and could do a lot of damage
- **Cons I:** Unclear how much even successful attacks would set back Iranian nuclear threat
  - Maybe only 1-2 years, and would likely consolidate hardline control
- **Cons II:** Does nothing about other problematic Iranian behavior, and cannot be constantly repeated
  - But international support for sanctions would evaporate
Enable or Encourage Israeli Air Strikes

- **Goal:** Destroy the Iranian nuclear program
- **Timeframe:** Days or weeks
- **Overview:** A mini-me version of U.S. strikes
  - A hundred, or maybe just dozens, of sorties
- **Requirements (from the U.S.):** A wink and a nod.
- **Pros:** Plausible deniability?
  - Israelis have the gumption we lack
- **Cons:** Even less likely to accomplish goals with all of the same costs and risks as a U.S. strike
  - Probably requires a major Lebanon operation too
The Velvet Revolution

- **Goal:** Topple the regime
- **Timeframe:** Impossible to predict
  - A week ago?
- **Overview:** The people rise against the regime
- **Requirements:** The Right Proxy (or nothing at all)
  - Military intervention if the revolution is in danger?
- **Pros:** Who can argue with people power?
- **Cons:** Impossible to predict revolutions
  - Require the regime to lose the will or the capacity to employ violence
  - How does the “Great Satan” promote revolution in Iran?
Insurgency

• **Goal:** Topple the regime
• **Timeframe:** Years or decades
  – Although we can start applying pressure much faster
• **Overview:** Support an ethnic or opposition group (the MEK?) in waging a guerrilla war against the regime
• **Requirements:** A capable insurgent group with widespread appeal
  – Regional support, particularly a safe-haven
• **Pros:** We know how to do this
• **Cons:** It takes a long time if it works at all
  – No insurgent or opposition group has all of the necessary ingredients
Military Coup

• **Goal:** Topple the regime
• **Timeframe:** Impossible to predict
• **Overview:** Convince disgruntled military officers to oust the regime
• **Requirements:** Superb intelligence
  – Including the ability to meet, vet and aid would-be coup plotters
• **Pros:** Someone else does all the dirty work
• **Cons:** Iran is paranoid about its military
  – What do we do in the (likely) event of a Bay of Pigs scenario?
Containment

- **Goal:** Prevent Iran from destabilizing the Middle East and otherwise threatening American interests
- **Timeframe:** As soon as we like
- **Overview:** A more robust version of what we have been doing for 30 years
  - Preferably with harsher sanctions
- **Requirements:** Security guarantees for our allies?
  - A more sustainable U.S. military presence in the region for decades longer
- **Pros:** We did it with the Soviets for 45 years...
- **Cons:** Assumes we can deter a nuclear Iran
Devising an Integrated Policy

- So many more risks and costs than benefits to each option
- Calls for a strategy that tries to integrate elements of many
- Example:
- Persuasion sets up two follow-on policies:
  - Engagement if Iran is interested
  - Containment if they are not
- Could also set up military action (what Iranians fear)
- Might include elements of regime change as a form of pressure