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I. INTRODUCTION

How can the US convince Iran to refrain from developing nuclear weapons and roll back the aspects of its nuclear program that would allow it to be at a dangerous threshold? The US is currently embarked on a crucial and difficult task of what Alexander George called “coercive diplomacy”—the use of threats and promises to alter the behavior of another country—combined with the somewhat simpler but still daunting task of deterrence.\(^1\) This does not mean that a successful American policy would necessarily lead to an agreement, desirable as that would be. A satisfactory if less stable result would be a form of containment that maintained something like the status quo, with Iran remaining at some distance from a weapon in terms of capability and time.\(^2\) Reaching even this less demanding outcome requires the US to devote more concerted attention to making threats and promises credible—at least I think Iranian leaders have reason to doubt both.

Analyzing, let alone accomplishing, this task is made more complicated by the large role of third parties, most obviously Israel, but also allies and important fence-sitters like Russia and China. Although I will slight them, I should note the obvious possibility that Israel will attack the Iranian nuclear facilities within the coming months, thereby rendering this paper (and much else) moot. Whether and how the US could restrain and reassure Israel is important but peripheral to my subject here, as is the related topic of the inter-war deterrence that wouldloom large in the wake of an Israeli (or American) strike.

While I believe that adaptation and deterrence would allow the US might cope with a nuclear-armed Iran, for now I will put those arguments aside because Obama is committed to seeing that this

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situation does not arise. But these statements were made in the presidential campaign, and he made his strongest commitment in a speech to AIPAC. It would not be out of the question, let alone irrational, for Iran to discount these declamations as merely designed to gain votes.

One question is both central and unanswerable: what are Iran’s motives and goals? (Of course Iran is not a unitary actor, and policy is further complicated by the fact that our knowledge of the working of the Iranian system is sharply limited. This at least provides me with a reason for putting that subject aside, largely treating it as unitary.) By motives and goals I do not mean the question of whether Iran is committed to becoming a nuclear weapons state, is seeking a threshold, or merely wants a robust scientific and technical infrastructure for civilian purposes. The judgment of the American intelligence community that Iran seeks a threshold and has not decided whether to proceed further can be accepted as correct here. But this leaves the fundamental question of why Iran wants this capability and why it might develop nuclear weapons. It is admittedly an oversimplification to say that the reasons could be offensive or defensive, but like many oversimplifications this has some utility. Is Iran seeking weapons or the threshold in order to protect itself from what it sees (understandably, I believe) as an imminent threat from the West? Is Iran deeply insecure and the driving impetus fear for the survival of the regime? Or does Iran seek to expand its influence both regionally and world-wide? Does it see nuclear weapons as an instrument to embolden Hamas and Hezbollah, or to destroy Israel? Of course more complex combinations of motives are possible, and indeed it is common for countries to believe that the only way to protect themselves is to expand their influence.

In an ideal world, one might sketch out quite different policies that would follow from accepting either one of these diagnosis. But in fact great uncertainty must remain, and so it is more productive to develop analysis and prescriptions that are hedged in the sense of being relatively insensitive to Iranian motives. The objective is to seek policies that maximize the chance of a negotiated solution without putting the US in a worse position if this proves impossible.

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The recent historical record is not encouraging. Although the combination of sanctions, inspections, and threats did lead Saddam Hussein to freeze his WMD programs, a long-term solution eluded us, and what we have learned about his motives and perceptions shows the magnitude of the problem. Not only did he seek regional dominance and the destruction of Israel, but he saw his survival in the wake of the Gulf War as a victory over the West and was so suspicious of the US that a real rapprochement probably was beyond reach. Even well crafted threats probably would not have been effective; promises of a reasonable settlement would also have fallen on deaf ears. Unfortunately this is not a rare exception. Several other times in the post-Cold War world the US has seen its coercion fail even though it had overwhelming power and did all it could to make it clear that it would use it if the other did not comply. But in Panama, Kosovo, the Gulf War, and Afghanistan in 2001 in addition to Iraq in 2003 compliance was not forthcoming and force had to be used, in Haiti in 1994 Cedras agreed to leave only when he learned that American planes were in the air, and the US has yet to be able to get North Korea out of the nuclear business or even to be sure that it will not repeat its Syrian venture.5

II. THREATS AND PROMISES

Coercive diplomacy requires the use of both threats and promises. As Thomas Schelling pointed out 50 years ago, threats to harm the other side unless it does something we want will be ineffective unless they are paired with the promise not to do this if the other complies. The case here is more complicated because the US needs to couple the threats to increase pressure on Iran and to use force if need be with the communicated willingness to reach an agreement. In principle, this is easy enough in that the threats and promises are not inherently incompatible because they are conditional—the US will stop Iran if it proceeds, but will settle if it is willing to seek common ground. Working in tandem, threats and promises can reinforce each other as the former pushes and the latter pulls the other side toward an agreement. But as the dreary history of coercive diplomacy shows, not only is each of the relevant tasks difficult, but combining them is much more so. All too often, threats and promises undercut rather than reinforce each other. Because so much depends on the other side’s preferences, perceptions, and internal politics, much is beyond American control, and nothing guarantees success. But consideration of this problem can help guide policy.

5 Libya did give up its WMD programs in the face of long-standing pressures and perceived threat in 2003. There may be lessons here, but it seems clear that Gaddafi had come to realize that despite the purchases from the A.Q. Khan network nuclear weapons were beyond his grasp. For the general issue of the impact of pressures and promises, see Bruce Jentleson and Christopher Whytock, “Who ‘Won’ Libya: The Force-Diplomacy Debate and Its Implications for Diplomacy,” International Security, vol. 30, Winter 2005/06, pp. 47-86 and Peter Viggo Jakobsen, “Reinterpreting Libya’s WMD Turnaround—Bridge the Carrot-Coercion Divide,” Journal of Strategic Studies, vol. 35, August 2012, pp. 489-512.
Even the intended effects of threats can be troublesome since they work by reducing the state’s freedom of action by locking it in to acting if the adversary does not comply. As long as this represents its true preference (a warning, as Schelling puts it), the US has not given up anything of value. But if American preferences are different or in flux it could find itself in a position in which it would feel it has to do what it would otherwise prefer not to do. President Kennedy was largely but I think not completely joking when he said on learning that Khrushchev had put missiles into Cuba: "Last month I said we weren't going to [allow it]. Last month I should have said we don't care."6

More importantly, although common sense tells us that increasing pressure on Iran increases the likelihood that it will comply, it can have the reverse effect as well. Although inflicting pain and making threats explicit increase credibility, it may simultaneously deepen Iranian doubts that the US is serious about a deal. For Iran, making concessions under great pressure is likely to be more costly than making them in a more benign atmosphere. More than "face" is involved, although the importance of Iran's feeling that it is not being treated with respect should not be underestimated. Threats may solidify the adversary's belief that the state is deeply hostile and that giving in will only lead to increased demands and be a prelude to regime change. To stress that the US is willing to bomb if need be is to imply that it believes that the costs of doing so are tolerable, and while this increases the credibility of the threat, it also could lead Iran to conclude that the US sees the costs as sufficiently low so that bombing would be an attractive alternative to anything other than complete Iranian surrender. Even more, if Iran's nuclear program is driven largely by the desire to be able to protect itself against the United States – an easily understood fear – then threats are likely to heighten the perceived danger and so increase Iran’s need not to be swayed from its course.

This does not mean, of course, that pressure is in all ways counterproductive, and the Iranian “halt” of 2003 was presumably largely caused by the threat created by the overthrow of Saddam. What an American diplomat said of North Korea probably applies to Iran: “The North Koreans do not respond to pressure. But without pressure they do not respond.”7 Although I do not want to be melodramatic, what Khrushchev told Kennedy at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis can be true of other threat-laden encounters: "Mr. President we and you ought not now to pull on the end of the rope in which you have tied the knot of war, because the more the two of us pull, the tighter the knot will be tied. And a moment may

7 Quoted in Robert Litwak, Outlier States, p. 172.
come when that knot will be tied so tight that even he who tied it will not have the strength to untie it. And then it will be necessary to cut that knot."\(^8\)

It is even more obvious that promises, even conditional ones, and the expressed willingness to negotiate can undercut threats and pressure. History provides numerous examples of where doing so led the other side to believe that the state was weakening and that continued intransigence would pay high dividends. Concessions designed to show good will may simply be pocketed; talking about the benefits of an agreement can lead the other side to believe that the state will give up a great deal in order to reach it.

If this were not bad enough, we also have to contend with 5 complicating factors. First is Israel. While the fear of an Israeli attack may provide useful pressure, the Iranian perception of a Israeli-US axis may make American signaling more difficult and, most importantly, the need to reassure Israel that US policies will protect Israel as well as serve its interests is an added constraint.

Second, knowledge of Iranian perceptions and domestic politics is sharply limited. It is generally agreed that nuclear decisions rest in the hands of the Supreme Leader, but it is extraordinarily difficult to know his goals and how he perceives American messages or even which of them are being accurately conveyed to him.\(^9\) If other cases provide any guidance, it is almost certain that he interprets many of the American messages and much of its behavior in ways we would find utterly bizarre.

Third and related, the effects of current and future pressure are mediated by politics within Iran. Presumably none of the actors welcomes the pain inflicted by the sanctions, but for some they may contain a silver lining in increasing their power and profit. Central might be their beliefs about the extent to which the public is blaming the US rather than the Iranian regime, but even if we knew the answer to this question, we would not know how Iranian decision-makers are answering it. Similarly, while it is unlikely that the major players in Iran would welcome American or Israeli bombing on the grounds that this would solidify support for the regime at home and weaken the anti-Iranian coalition abroad, it is possible that some key groups and individuals would believe that these effects would occur, greatly mitigating the perceived costs of such an attack.


Fourth, in parallel it is hard to know what would be taken as a reward by Iranian leaders and various factions. Removing sanctions would not be in the interest of those who have built fortunes and political power around adapting to these measures. Most importantly, the ultimate reward the West can offer is the normalization of relations and the integration of Iran into the world community. But such an outcome could conflict with the worldview of dominant actors in Iran, undercut their power, and be seen, quite possibly accurately, as leading to regime change.

Finally, the history of US-Iranian relations after the fall of the Shah is not only deeply conflictful but highly contested. The stories each side tells itself—and almost surely believes—are vastly different. The US of course has to act on the basis of what it has learned over the years, but it also has to realize that Iran has learned very different things.

III. HOW TO MAKE THREATS CREDIBLE

Although my discussion will focus on the threat to bomb Iranian facilities if it continues progress towards nuclear weapons past an acceptable point, this is not the only form of pressure the US is exerting. A lesser threat is to continue the current sanctions and close remaining loopholes. A third and implicit threat is to conduct covert actions, presumably predominately of a cyber nature, to slow down the Iranian program. (I would guess that Iran also sees the US as complicit with if not responsible for the Israeli program of assassinating important Iranian nuclear scientists.) As I will discuss more below, the credibility of a threat does not automatically translate into its effectiveness. Some threats can be credibly yet will not move the adversary to comply; in other cases much less than 100 percent credibility can be sufficient to reach the desired ends.

The credibility of the American threat to bomb faces daunting obstacles. Most obviously, it would be costly for the US to bomb, which is why it has not done so already. As Iran surely understands, the US knows that the likely results include at least a small war in the region, deepening hostility to the US around the world, increased domestic support for the Iranian regime, legitimation of not only a nuclear program, but a nuclear weapons program, and the need to strike again if Iran reconstitutes it. An Iran that believes that the US is rational could easily conclude that the threat is a bluff. There are additional complicating factors as well. Ironically, the success of economic sanctions can diminish the credibility of the threat to strike if Iran comes closer to a bomb. Not only might Iranian leaders judge that the US would see continued sanctions as the better course of action, but it would be reasonable for them to think that the US would
worry that a strike would lead the Europeans to ease the sanctions in order to contain the conflict. The wide range of uncertainty about what would happen after bombing allows people to impose their own ideas and desires on this scenario. Iranians may also fall into the trap of basing their predictions of what the US would do on their own expectations rather than on an estimate of what consequences the American leaders foresee. If they do not, they will also have to estimate how the US views a world with Iran having nuclear weapons or being very close to them. Here the more aggressive Iranian leaders may take the threat more seriously—i.e., those who expect the US to suffer greatly if Iran gains nuclear weapons should expect the US to be willing to take extreme actions to avoid this outcome. Those with more benign intentions, on the other hand, should expect that it would be much easier for US to live with a nuclear-armed Iran. The former might also see the US as if not bloodthirsty then at least as out to dominate the Middle East and destroy Muslim (or perhaps Shia) civilization, and so to be likely to strike at the centers of the regimes power in addition to nuclear targets. On the other hand, leaders of all stripes might believe that the US has lost its stomach for a fight. The main point remains, however, that the obvious reluctance of the US to bomb can lead Iranian decision-makers to doubt that it would actually do so.

The history of US policy towards Iran over the past ten years is also likely to give Iran a mixed impression of American credibility. On the one hand, it has not only imposed unilateral sanctions, but skillfully mustered support from the Europeans for the current and very severe round. Many observers were surprised by this, and my guess is that the Iran was as well. On the other hand, over the years the US has not bombed despite continuing Iranian defiance of UN resolutions and American policies prohibiting many of the steps Iran has taken. Iran may also have noticed that we did not attack North Korea despite having made quite strong threats and did not even respond when it built a nuclear reactor in Syria and has refrained from giving much aid to the rebels in that country.

Four general points about credibility should be kept in mind. First, as with all aspects of communication, the key is the other side’s perceptual predispositions. How they estimate what the US will do is very strongly influence by the expectations that have been formed over the years, their image of the US, and (even more difficult for us to estimate), their political needs to see us and the world in certain ways. Those who are already prone to believe that the US will strike if need be will need much less evidence in order for them to conclude that the threat is credible than will those who expect us to back down. There is much that the US can manipulate, of course, but unfortunately not everything.
Second, as the US reacts to Iranian moves, enhancing credibility requires it to do more than they expect. If and when they take actions we oppose, such as building a greater stockpile of uranium enriched to 20% or deploying a new generation of centrifuges, they presumably have taken into account the expected American reaction. In order to deter them from moving forward, or to reach the more ambitious goal of rolling them back, the response has to be stronger and more painful than what they anticipated. Needless to say, however, it is difficult to ascertain how they will have expected us to react. (Related to this is the fact that the commonsense view that pressure will increase as sanctions inflict more pain is incorrect. Iran proceeded in the expectation that sanction would inflict some level of pain, and only if this is proving to be an underestimate will Western leverage grow as sanctions continue.)

Third, a sense of urgency if not an ultimatum must be conveyed. Ironically this is easier in a crisis than in a long-festering situation like this. To play on this, Iran presumably will do all it can to avoid dramatic and unambiguous moves toward a weapon, and conversely even if the US eschews public Red lines (see below), it will have to demonstrate that time is running out, which is not easy. As long as the US has not given an ultimatum Iran may conclude that it has time, but issuing one it could lead allies and Third World states to exert counter-pressures on the US, increase domestic opposition, and forego the military advantages of surprise.

Fourth, even a threat that is 100 percent credible will not be effective if the Iran prefers being bombed to making the concessions necessary to avoid this. Of course the US hopes to convince them otherwise by indicating its openness to an agreement (see below), and it might also try to convince them that bombing would have more severe consequences than they now think. Most obviously, the US could try to persuade them that bombing could lead to the regime’s overthrow. Although the difficulties and drawbacks are equally obvious, any doubts that the Iranian have about US willingness or desire to conduct surgical strikes might prove helpful.

On the other hand, for those in the Iranian leadership who think that bombing would be extremely unfortunate, much less than 100 percent credibility would be sufficient to lead them to urge that Iran moderate its program and/or seek an agreement with the US. How much credibility is enough was hotly disputed during the Cold War, and the answer is not clear in this case either. But we should at least understand that credibility is not a matter of either/or.
Ways to Increase Credibility

The US has seven instruments to influence credibility. First, although the history of the interaction is not manipulable, the Iranian reading of it may be, at least to a slight extent. The US might work to convince Iran that it did not bluff in the past or, more promisingly, that the circumstances that led it to do so no longer apply. The understanding that the previous halt was caused by American pressure is useful here because it shows that the US sees that the Iran can in fact be moved.

Second, the US may be able to bolster its military capabilities in a way that shows seriousness, including undertaking expensive preparations to deal with Iranian retaliation after an American attack, although of course it is hard to demonstrate although of course it is hard to show Iran that these are things that the US would do only if it were not bluffing.\textsuperscript{10}

Third and related, the US could undertake military maneuvers that had some risk of provoking Iran and leading to an escalation.\textsuperscript{11} Here the lack of professionalism of the IRGCN may be helpful.

Fourth, the US might undertake preparations for a strike that could be picked up by Iranian intelligence. Most credible would be measures that the Iranians believe that the US thought they could not detect—i.e., measures they could not discount as designed to impress them. Needless to say, this is tricky and while the principle is sound it is probably to clever by a half in practice. The US tried it on a number of occasions in the Cold War, such as when war plans covering Berlin were sent to the penetrated West German government in 1961 and President Nixon staged a secret nuclear alert to convey seriousness to the Soviet Union and North Vietnam in the fall of 1969, which apparently had no effect.

Fifth, in principle the US could use third parties to convey its message. The Iranians may pay more attention if it was one of their few remaining friends, such as Russia or PRC, who told them that we would strike. Of course these countries would have to see that doing so would be in their interests, which is a challenge but perhaps not impossible if they were to believe that conveying the message would greatly decrease the chance of the threat having it to be carried out (and that bombing would harm their interests).


\textsuperscript{11} Schelling’s “threat that leaves something to chance.”
Their willingness would presumably be increased if they could carry a message of a possible settlement as well.\textsuperscript{12}

Sixth, the US could turn the problem of an unintended message around. We usually think that enhancing defenses will bolster coercive diplomacy, but the current efforts by the US to increase defense capabilities against Iranian missiles in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf may tell the Iran that while gaining nuclear weapons would not allow it to intimidate or attack its neighbors, the US is prepared to live with a nuclear-armed Iran. Why else would it be spending billions of dollars and creating conflict with Russia? Fortunately, two factors may inhibit this perception. First, Iranians may see a great deal of the money going to the defense sector, which they may believe exercises an inordinate influence over the US. Second--and this is a perception the US could reinforce—Iran may see the deployments as providing a shield against conventional and chemical attacks that would be expected after an American strike. Even more dramatically, cancelling the deployment would be a very strong signal that we will strike rather than allow Iran to develop nuclear weapons.

Finally and perhaps most obviously, the US can make private and public statements. At this point, private threats would add little, and if conveyed might only succeed in closing down the channel of communication. Public statements may then be more efficacious. President Obama has already gone quite far, and the question is first whether repetition of the threat would strengthen or weaken it and, second, whether there is anything else he could say that would seem clearer and stronger. Although I believe the attentive public fully understands the administration’s stance, it is doubtful that much of the rest of the public does. So if the confrontation continues a broader campaign to inform the public might be not only necessary, but could enhance credibility. It could and should be capped by a Congressional resolution approving the use of force if that becomes necessary. The US also would have to estimate the impact of any stronger statements on other third parties, especially the Europeans. But European displeasure with an even tougher American stance could ironically enhance deterrence by showing Iran that the Europeans were convinced that a strike was likely and that the US felt so strongly that it was willing to pay the cost of European opposition in order to prevent Iran from gaining nuclear weapons. On the other hand, more frequent or more extreme statements could be taken as “saber rattling”—i.e., as a substitute for rather than a prelude to military action.

\textsuperscript{12} In principle the US could seek explicit international support in bombing, but I think this is unlikely to succeed and failed attempts are likely to detract from credibility.
American diplomacy is unfortunately undercut by Israeli statements casting doubt on whether it would in fact bomb rather than see Iran gain weapons (although this is partly a dispute about where the “Red Line” should be drawn), and, conversely, credibility might be fostered if Israel were to say that it is now confident that America would act even if it preferred a faster timetable.

Statements that Iran must not be allowed to gain nuclear weapons will usually be accompanied by an explanation of why this would be so bad. The argument that it would lead to regional proliferation is particularly powerful in this context because it not only fits with the President’s general policy, but associates its interests with those of the regional actors. On the other hand, arguments that Iran could make competitive gains against the US and its allies by going nuclear have the unfortunate consequence of increasing the Iranian incentives to do so by implying that the US would be intimidated if it did.

Credibility is also enhanced to the extent that Iran believes that the US believes that a strike would bring great benefits. More specifically, the US could let it be known that it believes that a strike might lead to revolution, that even if it does not that the Iran nuclear program would be set back for a very considerable length of time,\(^{13}\) that the US could bomb again if and when this is needed, that a strike would persuade other countries not to pursue nuclear weapons, and that although vocal opposition and protest is expected, in the end the American reputation for resolve and strength would be bolstered around the world.

We usually think that enhancing defenses will bolster coercive diplomacy. But here this may not be the case. The efforts by the US to increase defense capabilities against Iranian missiles in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf may tell the Iran that while gaining nuclear weapons would not allow it to intimidate or attack its neighbors, the US is prepared to live with a nuclear-armed Iran. Why else would it be spending billions of dollars and creating political conflict with Russia? Fortunately, two factors may inhibit this perception. First, Iranians may see a great deal of the money going to the defense sector, which they may believe exercises an inordinate influence over the US. Second—and this is a perception the US could reinforce—Iran may see the deployments as providing defense against conventional and chemical attacks as well as nuclear ones. Indeed, the deployment could be seen as building a shield that would greatly reduce the adverse consequences to the US and its allies of an American strike.

We also need to consider what counter-actions or counter-threats American commitments and threats might engender. What strategies and tactics are available to Iran? Perhaps most importantly, what threats would interfere with the credibility of American promises to improve relations if Iran cooperates? Would they inadvertently strengthen the hand of “hard liners” and increase the mistrust of the West?

Red Lines

The much-discussed question of Red Lines bring out a number of complications. I assume that for the US the Red Line is Iran’s getting close enough to producing nuclear weapons that it could do so with sufficient speed and stealth that the US would not be able to undertake the military actions necessary to prevent this. In other words, the US requires the ability to retain timely warning of an Iranian move to gain nuclear weapons. Enriching to HEU levels or expelling the IAEA inspectors would be obvious Red Lines, but measures facilitating Iranian “creep out,” although difficult to specify ahead of time, could also be triggers. The details here are important but beyond the scope of this paper except to note that they involve estimates of Iranian capabilities, American military options, and US intelligence capacities. (This is also linked to the minimum American requirement for a settlement, discussed below.)

The US needs to set the Red Line as forward as possible to gain time for lesser measures to work, to allow maximum scope for diplomacy, and to convince the rest of the world that bombing was indeed a last resort. An obvious problem is that even if Israel believed that the US would carry out its threat, there is likely to be a set of circumstances in which an American attack would buy significant time but an Israeli attack would not, and for Israel to enter this zone would be to sacrifice a significant degree of its autonomy.

Setting out Red Lines would enhance credibility, but also has multiple drawbacks. Specifying what was prohibited would mark out what was permitted—Iran would be invited to move right up to the Red Lines. Issuing them in public also would likely alarm third parties, increasing their pressure on us as well as the Iranians. It could also exacerbate the Iranian sense that their country is not being treated with respect and as a sovereign equal in the international system. Publicly demarcated Red Lines could also sacrifice some of the advantages of military surprise.

For all the difficulties of drawing Red Lines, an American commitment to bomb rather than permit Iran to gain nuclear weapons implies that there are Red Lines. Deciding where they are is extraordinarily difficult, but the question whether to go public is separate from the decision on what would actually trigger an attack. We should also realize that with or without declared Red Lines, any strike will have to be
accompanied with if not preceded by information showing with little ambiguity that Iran was building nuclear weapons. Skepticism growing out of the false estimates of Iraq's programs will have to be confronted. To have any chance of being successful, the release will almost surely have to reveal secret intelligence sources and methods, harming subsequent intelligence on Iran and other targets.

III. HOW TO MAKE PROMISES CREDIBLE

A settlement or informal arrangement by which Iran would restrain its nuclear program requires promises as well as threats. Unfortunately, making promises credible is harder than making threats credible both in general and, especially, in this case. One does not have to believe that the interaction is entirely a misunderstanding to conclude that the levels of mistrust between the US and Iran are multiple, deep, and extraordinarily hard to penetrate. Many Iranians doubt that a deal is necessary; my guess is that even more doubt that it is possible. It is far from clear that the US has done as much as needed to convince them that it is. Judging from the public record of the American position, even a non-paranoid Iranian would not be impressed.

The exact shape of a settlement is not relevant to most of my discussion, but for the sake of demystification should be sketched out. Following from the notion of timely warning mentioned above, Iran would agree to refrain from enriching above the 20% level and from warhead design. It could retain only limited stockpiles of 5% and 20% EU, would accept limits on the capacity of its enrichment facilities, host a robust inspection regime, and, perhaps most problematically, could not build facilities that the US could not destroy. This would permit Fordow to remain open, although this would cause Israel difficulties if it could not destroy the plant were Iran to break out or creep out. In return, the US would accept Iran's right to enrich, promise not to try to overthrow the regime (and not to undermine in?), and would lift those sanctions that had been imposed in response to the nuclear program. Perhaps normal diplomatic relations would be restored, although this step and the ending of other sanctions might require a larger grand bargain involving Iran's ending its support for Hamas and Hezbollah, and turning these relations to constructive purposes.

14 See, for example, Todd Sechser, “Goliath's Curse: Coercive Threats and Asymmetric Power,” International Organization, vol. 64, Fall 2010, pp. 627-60.
Obviously there is room for a great deal of debate here, but it is important for the administration to know what it would find acceptable.\textsuperscript{15}

There are at least five major barriers to convincing Iran that a reasonable deal is possible in addition to the normal inhibitions against appearing weak.

First, some measure of Israeli acquiescence would be necessary, not only for American domestic politics, but to convince Iran that the understanding or even formal agreement would not be undercut by Israeli sabotage, assassinations, or even military attack.

Second, the willingness to accept a civilian nuclear program requires violating or repealing Security Council resolutions. The original sanctions were placed on the nuclear program itself, not on Iran coming close to the sort of Red Lines now being discussed.

Third, it will not be easy to convince Iran that drawing it into negotiation is not a way to weaken it and that a settlement would end American efforts at regime change. Security assurances would have to be part of any deal, but are hard to craft and harder to make credible. The fact that the US helped overthrow Gaddafi despite the earlier denuclearization agreement is surely salient to Tehran, and magnifies this problem. The use of covert action is especially hard to foreswear because if successful these operations are hidden and the capability to mount them cannot be readily and visibly dismantled. The question of what the US could do to reassure Iran is as obvious as it is difficult to answer. One can only hope that during the course of negotiations the Iranians would tell the US what it could do reassure them. But the depth of the problem should not be underestimated. The US is fully capable of changing its mind and going back on its word (we should not forget that the US gained its independence by breaking its agreement with France and signing a separate peace with Great Britain), and other countries do not need to be reminded that new administrations often change their predecessors’ policies.

The fourth difficulty is that, as noted earlier, much of what the US can offer may not be seen as valuable by the Iranian leaders. Although lifting many of the sanctions would certainly be in the interest of the Iranian people and much of the elite, some factions may suffer. And the ultimate aim of most negotiations—the normalization of relations and integration of the other side into the international community—may be repellent, not attractive.

\textsuperscript{15} Both the US and Iran have made public statements about their negotiating positions, but it remains unclear whether either or both are as unyielding in what they have conveyed to the other in secret.
The final obstacle may also be an opportunity. Many observers believe that part of what Iran wants is respect and to be treated as an equal. The problem is that threats and even hard bargaining tactics may conflict with this. The opportunity is that granting these is in the American interest, especially if Iran is willing to change its behavior. Language may matter here and my sense is that talking about “carrots and sticks,” as we often do, is not helpful. It implies that Iran is an animal that the West is trying to manipulate.

IV. HOW TO GET TO SERIOUS TALKS

The US (and its European allies) has had talks with Iran, but they seem to have involved little more than the recitation of each side’s unyielding opening positions. There are few formulas or clear paths to move beyond this. The lack of trust is an especially high barrier to beginning the process, in part because it is only serious negotiations themselves that can reveal that the states are ready for a settlement. Each fears that any preliminary concessions will not only be pocketed, but will be taken as a sign of weakness that will embolden the other side to hold out for more. So being too generous at the start not only may give away valuable bargaining advantages, but can put an agreement further from reach.

There are standard if imperfect devices to deal with this problem such as ambiguity and use of disavowable third-parties. These can float enticing ideas without exposing the state’s position because the only way for the other side to ascertain that the feeler is genuine is probe in a way that reveals something of its own willingness to compromise. But the mistrust here runs so deep as to neuter such tactics. Getting through to the Supreme Leader and convincing him that serious negotiations are in his interests is extremely difficult. Directly appeals, in both public and private, and even the sending of a high-level emissary (yes, this went terribly wrong in 1986) might be effective. But anything along these lines, and especially sending an emissary, could not only be humiliating for the US if it did not succeed but could embolden Iran and so should be reserved until close to the last minute. Even more dramatically, the US might—but almost surely will not—unilaterally suspend some of the sanctions, halt all military preparations, or declare that the option of force is no longer on the table (of course it might still be on Israel’s table). More realistically, the US could try to show that it is ready to implement an agreement, for example by letting it be known that it is studying how to suspending sanctions in stages and developing various forms of security guarantees. It is likely that more creativity than I can muster is required here, but the central

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point is that without unusual efforts (and perhaps with them) the Supreme Leader will not take negotiations seriously.

Although the normal negotiating procedure would be to start with small steps that would serve as confidence-building measures (CBMs) and postpone dealing with the central and most difficult issues, they may not work here, especially because smaller steps are more difficult now that the recent sanctions are in place. Before then, a freeze-for-freeze kind of CBM might have been possible; at this point the US and its allies probably would have to suspend some of its measures, which is more difficult. Even without this added complication, the barriers to getting started are so great that it would probably be necessary to sketch the contours of what a final agreement would look like at the start. Entering serious negotiations will undoubtedly entail high political costs and a major political struggle in Tehran; the endeavor will only be seen as worth the risks if there is a good prospect of an acceptable solution. Of course any agreement would be carried out step-by-step in order for each side to guard against the other reneging, but the US may need to put more of its cards on the table at the start. Most obviously, it will have to convince the Supreme Leader that successful negotiations would greatly reduce the threat from the US and recognize an appropriately safeguarded Iranian civilian nuclear program. It is tempting to believe that these inducements should be reserved for the final stages of the hard bargaining, but to hold them back is to greatly decrease the chance that we will ever get to that point.