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## ON BALANCE, OBAMA READY TO NEGOTIATE, EVEN AS SAUDIS WAGE ANTI-IRAN PROXY WAR

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**[Saudis' Proxy War Against Iran:](#)** Joseph Braude, *Tablet Magazine*, Nov. 12, 2012—Following the logic that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” a few influential policymakers in Washington and Tel Aviv have argued for years that support for the aspirations of non-Persian Iranians—like Arabs, Baluchis, and Kurds—would be both morally right and strategically useful as a means to destabilize the regime.

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## THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION PUTS ITS TRUST IN NEGOTIATIONS WITH IRAN

*Barry Rubin*

*[PJ Media](#), Nov 12, 2012*

The most important foreign policy effort President Barack Obama will be making over the next year is negotiating with Iran. The terms of the U.S. offer are clear: if Iran agrees not to build nuclear weapons, it will be allowed to enrich a certain amount of uranium, supposedly for purposes of generating nuclear energy (which Iran doesn't need) and other benefits, supposedly under strict safeguards.

Will Iran accept such a deal? The Obama Administration and others argue as follow: Sanctions have taken a deep bite out of Iran's economy and frightened the regime with the prospect of instability. Iranian leaders are concluding that nuclear weapons aren't worth all of this trouble. They are interested in becoming wealthy not spreading revolution and this includes even the once-fanatical Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) which is steadily gaining power in the country.

In a few months, June 2013, Iran will have elections to choose a new president to replace Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Perhaps, goes the argument, they will pick someone more flexible and less provocative, a signal that they want to stand down from the current confrontation. Thus, a deal is really possible and it could be implemented.

I won't dismiss this altogether. The truth is that despite extremist statements and radical tactics, the Iranian regime is by no means ideologically or theologically mad. The rulers want to stay in power and they have been far more cautious in practice than they have in rhetoric. Despite the claims that the Iranian regime just wants to get nuclear weapons to attack Israel as soon as possible, a serious analysis of this government's history, its leaders and factions, indicates otherwise.

A key factor here is that Iran wants nuclear weapons for "defensive" purposes. By this I do not mean that a poor Tehran regime is afraid that it will be attacked for no reason at all and thus needs to protect itself. Not at all. It is Iran's aggressive, subversive, and terrorist-sponsoring positions that jeopardize the regime. Like it or not, if the Tehran government got on with the business of repressing its own people without threatening its neighbors the world would be little concerned with its behavior. But it has refused to take that easy and profitable choice.

Rather, Iran wants nuclear weapons so it can continue both regime and behavior without having to worry about paying any price for the things it does. The situation has, however, changed in two respects.

First, the "Arab Spring" has put an end to any serious hope by the regime of gaining leadership in the Middle East or in the Muslim world. Two years ago it was possible that Arabs would dance in the street

and cheer Iran having a nuclear weapon as the great hope of radical Islam. Today, though, the Sunni Islamists are on the march and have no use for rival Shias, much less ethnic Persians.

They want to make their own revolutions, destroy Israel, expel the West, and seize control of the Middle East for Sunni Arabs and not under the leadership of Persian Shias. Iran's sphere of influence has been whittled down to merely Lebanon, Iraq, and a rapidly failing Syrian regime. Under these conditions, getting nuclear weapons will not bring Iran any great strategic gain.

Second, sanctions have indeed been costly for Iran, though one could exaggerate the extent of this suffering. Additional internal problems have been brought on by the rulers own mismanagement and awesome levels of corruption. In other words, to stay in power and get even richer Iran's leaders, along with disposing of Ahmadinejad, might seek a way out of their ten-year-long drive for nuclear weapons.

Thus, it is not impossible that Iran would take up the Obama Administration on the proposed deal either because the leaders now seek riches rather than revolution or because they intend to cheat or move far more gradually toward getting nuclear weapons or at least the capability to obtain them quickly if and when they decide to do so.

It is, however, equally or more possible that Iran would use the negotiations to wrest concessions from the West without giving anything in return and to stall for time as it steadily advances toward its nuclear goal. As this happens, Israeli concerns will be dismissed by the administration and the mass media. The kinder ones will say that Israel is being unnecessarily concerned; the more hostile that it is acting as a warmonger when everything can be settled through compromise....

Of course, it is worthwhile to try negotiations. But as in all policymaking such endeavors must be entered with a clear sense of the possibilities, alternatives, goals, unacceptable concessions, and a readiness to admit the strategy isn't working. What happens as talks drag on month after month, with Iran demanding a better offer and proof that the West has honest intentions? Certainly, as long as the talks continue the White House would argue for reducing pressure and stopping threats lest Iran gets scared or mistrustful. Already, we are receiving hints that it is Israel's fault for scaring Iran into thinking it needs nuclear weapons, forgetting the fact that Israeli threats result from Iranian leaders' boasts about the genocide they intend to commit once they have atomic arms.

Part of the Obama Administration sales pitch for U.S.-Iran talks is that Obama really will get tough if Iran stalls, uses the time to continue developing nuclear weapons, or cheats. People in positions of authority or influence—including in the mass media as well as governments—claim Obama will attack Iran if it plays him false. The administration's patience is wearing thin we are told, it won't let the Iranian regime make it look like a fool.

For my part, I don't believe that Obama would ever initiate military action against Iran and that he will also do everything possible to prevent Israel from doing so, which means that Israel would also not launch an attack. Personally, I don't favor an attack on Iran (for reasons I've explained in detail elsewhere) but it is a costly error to base a policy of concessions and letting Iran stall based on a false claim of willingness to use force at some later point. In addition, whether or not you think it a good idea, an attack on Iran by either Israel or the United States as a means of stopping the nuclear program isn't going to happen.

I suggest the most likely possibilities are as follows:

If Iran's leaders find the pressures of sanctions so tough, the threat to the regime's survival so great, and their greed for remaining in power and making more money so big they will then make a deal. We will be told that Obama is a great statesman who has achieved a big success and rightly won the Nobel Peace Prize. He will indeed have avoided Iran going nuclear, at least for a while.

Or Iran will use the chance to talk endlessly and build nuclear weapons while the administration's hints of dire retribution will prove to be bluffs as the leaders in Tehran expect. The year 2013 will pass without any deal. During Obama's second term Iran will either get nuclear weapons or have everything needed to do so but will not actually assemble them for a while. U.S. policy will then accept that situation and shift to a containment strategy.

I'd bet on the latter outcome. But we are now going to see a campaign insisting that a peaceful resolution with Iran is at hand and ridiculing anyone who has doubts about this happy ending.

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## SAUDIS' PROXY WAR AGAINST IRAN

*Joseph Braude*

*Tablet Magazine, November 12, 2012*

On the evening of Oct. 23, part of a gas pipeline facility in the western Iranian city of Shush exploded—one of several recent attacks on Iranian infrastructure near the country's borders. In contrast to the clandestine campaign of sabotage against Iran's nuclear facilities, whose perpetrators do not openly claim responsibility—though most suspect it is the work of the United States or Israel—the Shush hit was promptly followed by a press release put out by a group called the “Battalions of the Martyr Mohiuddin Al Nasser.”

The group is comprised of Ahwazi Arabs, one of several non-Persian ethnic groups inside Iran who together number at least 40 percent of the Iranian population. Some of these minority communities, which live mostly in the outlying provinces of the country, are restive and have been for years: The regime in Tehran represses their languages and cultures, chokes the local economy, and limits their movement. Increasingly, these groups have been organizing themselves politically and militarily—and some in Washington and Israel could not be more thrilled with the development.

Following the logic that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” a few influential policymakers in Washington and Tel Aviv have argued for years that support for the aspirations of non-Persian Iranians—like Arabs, Baluchis, and Kurds—would be both morally right and strategically useful as a means to destabilize the regime. Some even see an opportunity to partner with these groups for a ground assault to complement air strikes on Iranian nuclear targets.

Seymour Hersh, writing in *The New Yorker* in 2008, claimed the Bush Administration had begun a “major escalation of covert operations against Iran” including “support of the minority Ahwazi Arab and Baluchi groups and other dissident organizations.” Citing retired and unnamed intelligence officials, Hersh suggested that the groups were being used to attack Iranian Revolutionary Guards and other regime targets, complementing American covert action against Iran's nuclear program. (Hersh did not respond to a request for comment on his assertions.)

I recently spoke with two former U.S. government officials who had been involved in Iran policy during the Bush years. They opined that Hersh had blurred actual policy with contingency plans that had not been implemented. They also felt that the Obama Administration has had little interest in such strategies, preferring a more limited focus on the nuclear facilities themselves. These competing assertions should all be taken with a grain of salt. As Israelis say of their own Iran policy: “He who knows, doesn't talk, and he who talks, doesn't know.”

But activities in recent months prove that an equally important question is what Iran's minorities and sympathetic neighboring countries are doing on their own. Extensive reporting from local sources in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states reveals that several countries surrounding Iran are beginning to back the

country's ethnic dissidents as a way of waging a proxy war against the mullahs. In Saudi Arabia, media and clerical elites recently mobilized to raise public awareness about the situation of Ahwazi Arabs, frame their cause as a national liberation struggle, and urge Arabs and Muslims to support them. Saudi donors are providing money and technological support to Ahwazi dissidents seeking to wage their own public information campaign, calling on Ahwazis to rise up against their rulers. The Saudi initiatives, in turn, join ongoing ventures by Azerbaijan and Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government to organize and train other dissident groups.

These recently expanded initiatives clearly correlate with the upsurge in violent attacks in Iran's outlying provinces, pointing to a new campaign reminiscent of what Hersh imputed to the Bush Administration—but with local players in the lead. These players seem poised to escalate in the months to come, whether Americans or Israelis attempt to work with them or not.

Ahwaz as defined by Arabs (as opposed to the Persian designation "Ahvaz," which is smaller) is a territory the size of Belarus that borders Iraq to the west and faces Saudi Arabia across the Persian Gulf. Some estimates say it is home to 3 million Arabic speakers, though locals claim the number is much larger. The area contains approximately 80 percent of Iran's oil reserves and nearly all of its gas reserves, as well as a nuclear reactor near the city of Bushehr. Small wonder the regime in Tehran takes harsh measures to discourage separatist tendencies...

Few Westerners follow these happenings, and for decades, few Arabs did either: The region's government media and semi-independent satellite channels barely covered it. Arab disinterest may have stemmed from the fact that the majority of Ahwazi Arabs are Shiite, a despised sect to many in the predominantly Sunni Arab world. "But Arab governments have also been afraid of the regime in Tehran," said Saeed Dabat, an activist with the Movement of Arab Struggle for the Liberation of Al-Ahwaz based in Copenhagen. "None of them was willing to rouse popular sentiments for a cause they wanted nothing to do with."

Then, last summer, something changed. In June, a young Saudi cleric named Abdullah Al Ya'n Allah, hosting a new satellite TV program called Ahwaz the Forgotten (Al-Ahwaz al-Mansiya), castigated Arabs for ignoring the plight of their brethren living under Iranian occupation....

But Saudi support for the Ahwazi opposition is one piece of a larger regional picture. Saudis are also providing more modest funding to non-Arab ethnics in Iran, as are two other neighboring countries. From the Iranian province of Baluchistan, an overwhelmingly Sunni-populated area, a new separatist group announced its establishment on Oct. 11. Ya'n Allah, the Saudi host of Ahwaz the Forgotten, immediately began to publicize the group, both on television and via his Twitter followers. I reached the group's media director in Bahrain last week. (He goes by Ali al-Mahdi, a name with a Shiite ring to it—a caustic joke for a Sunni militant who speaks about Shiites with great hostility.)

He complained of too little backing: "We get support for [families of] martyrs, like from students ... \$500, \$1,000 [at a time]. It's nothing!" For the first time publicly, Mahdi claimed credit on behalf of his organization for the mid-October suicide attack near a mosque in southeastern Iran. "If we get [more] support," he said in response to a question about Gulf donors, "you will see Baluchistan on fire," he said, "like Syria and Afghanistan."...

Meanwhile, as Tel Aviv University's Ofra Bengio noted last month, Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government now provides Iranian Kurdish opposition groups with a safe haven and the freedom to organize, train, and access Iran across its porous eastern border. Thanks to the KRG's warm relations with the United States and Israel, the area may also have served as a connecting point for talks and cooperation between the two powers and Iran's Kurds (or play such a role in the future).

As for Iran's Azeri population, it is better-integrated into Tehran's power structure than the other groups—Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei is Azeri himself—and therefore less likely to form a serious separatist movement. But this has not stopped the neighboring government of Azerbaijan from hoping otherwise: A parliamentary resolution was introduced this year to rename the country “North Azerbaijan,” implying that a “South Azerbaijan” should be carved out of northern Iran. The government's present relations with the United States and Israel have never been better and hostility toward Iran never greater. Aside from the interest in its own co-ethnics in Iran, Azerbaijan also sponsors nationalistic Arabic TV programming and beams it into Ahwaz.

The low-grade assaults this year perpetrated by ethnic minorities receive considerably less coverage than cyber-initiatives like Stuxnet and the assassination of nuclear scientists, but they nonetheless contribute to the bleeding of the regime. This regional proxy war, now escalating, is morally questionable: Should ethnic groups' legitimate political aspirations be exploited for other purposes? Should attacks on civilian targets, such as mosques, ever be sanctioned? It is also strategically questionable: Will some of these dissidents go on to support a radical agenda and attack the West? Is the fragmenting of Iran into several states in the long-term interest of the region and the United States.? For all its tradeoffs, it belongs in both the public discussion and the quieter conversations about our next steps on Iran policy.

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## **ON TOPIC**

**[Did Israel and the U.S. Just Cooperate on a Dry-Run for an Iran Intervention?:](#)** [Jonathan Schanzer](#) *The New Republic*, Nov. 2, 2012—If the U.S. indeed cooperated with Israel in the attack [on Sudan], then this might have been a dry run of an entirely different sort—one that would belie the very public disagreements between the two countries over intervention in Iran.

**[Victim Complex Redux: Iran's Fake Anger:](#)** [Ali Alfoneh](#), *The Commentator*, Nov. 5, 2012 — Should the US embassy ever reopen in Tehran, the visa application line would be longer than any “spontaneous” anti-American rally the regime is capable of organizing. Besides the hollowness of the revolutionary mythology, the “commemoration” should also serve as a sobering reminder to those believing in the normalisation of relations between the United States and the Islamic Republic.

**[Sanctions Have Crippled Iran's Economy, But They're Not Working:](#)** [Christopher de Bellaigue](#) *The New Republic*, November 12, 2012—The assumption is that the more Iranians suffer, the more their leaders will feel the pressure and either change course or be overthrown in a popular uprising. And yet, there is no evidence to suggest that this is probable, and the Iraqi case suggests the opposite.

**[Responding To Iran: It's A Matter Of Trust:](#)** [Amos Yadlin](#), *The Globe and Mail*, Nov.12, 2012 — Israel sees the threat posed by Iran, in part, through the prism of the Holocaust. The Iranian regime's threats to wipe Israel off the map resonate of the propaganda expounded by the Nazi regime. The U.S. trauma, on the other hand, is the highly controversial and costly war in Iraq. Amid its drawn-out war in Afghanistan, the U.S. public and leadership are unlikely to stomach yet another war in a Muslim nation.

**[The Cyber War With Iran:](#)** [Bill French](#), *The National Interest*, Nov. 7, 2012 —As the United States and Iran inch closer to confrontation over Tehran's nuclear program, a little-asked question lurks in the background: are the two countries already at war? In late September, massive denial-of-service attacks targeted five American banking institutions. Soon after, Senator Lieberman attributed responsibility to Iran...

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