

RELEASE IN FULL

To the Secretary of State  
From: Ambassador Robert Hunter  
March 2, 2012

Dear Mme. Secretary, Dear Hillary –

It was good to see you in Munich. Your presence and your words did a lot to reassure the allies about our continued commitment to NATO, despite the US force and budget drawdown and European uncertainties about the "tilt to Asia."

I am writing today because of my concerns about the course of events regarding Iran, to urge a root-and-branch review of US interests and policies, and to suggest some specific steps to secure US interests, prevent a war, maximize the chances that you and the President can keep control of the crisis, and chart a way forward.

We are now in a difficult place: where our capacity to avoid a war – which I believe would have severe consequences for us, for Israel, for other friends and allies, for the global economy, and for the entire Middle East – depends less on what we intend and do than on the actions of at least two other countries: Israel and Iran. We depend on both to be “sensible” – which may be a good bet – but we also depend on Iran to be able to exercise positive command-and-control over all of its forces, which is not a good bet.

*No major power, in my judgment, should ever willingly get itself into such a position of dependence on others to prevent severe consequences for its own national interests.*

I write from a background of more than 40 years of involvement in Middle East affairs, in and out of government, including as director of Middle East affairs for two years at the Carter NSC, during which time I took the lead in creating the Carter Doctrine for the Persian Gulf, was the White House representative on the US negotiating team for the West Bank and Gaza, and was NSC liaison to the American Jewish community leadership (working with Ed Sanders and then Al Moses, as well as for Fritz Mondale). In the last-named role, I was charged with doing what was necessary to protect President Carter against the anti-Israeli "Arabists" in the State Department. Further, when Governor Bill Clinton faced his first "test of fire" before the AIPAC annual convention in 1989, Sandy Berger brought me in to coach the Governor on what he had to say (and not to say) in order to be successful on the issues of deepest concern to Israel and its US supporters. As you know, since that time I have also been a strong and active "Clinton supporter."

After long study of the Iranian issue and US strategic interests and policies in the entire region, I have come to believe that the way this issue has developed now leaves us with a very narrow

range of options, none of which we can desire to see played out and some of which are clearly unacceptable: to see Israel attack Iran (leading to our inevitably being drawn in), to initiate attack ourselves, to face the need at some point of living with an Iranian nuclear bomb (or a “turn of a screwdriver” distance from a bomb), or to see the issue continue to fester with all of the attendant uncertainties and risks.

In considering circumstances and our options, we also need to recognize four realities:

- *First, sanctions do not work*, at least not to the degree we are trying to have them work. Indeed, I cannot think of one serious instance in which they have produced the desired result, certainly not when the target country sees some critical security interest at risk or the regime in power believes its rule to be in jeopardy. The greatest value of sanctions is for domestic political purposes: to “feel good” that we are “doing something,” and to help avoid more serious, more risky, and less desirable steps, such as war, or, in the current case, also to try containing domestic political pressures in an election year. Further, if anything, sanctions lead a population to cleave to its leadership, whether out of “patriotism” or dependence. *Sanctions are, in fact, a form of warfare.* This may be manageable unless sanctions reach a “tipping point” where the regime being sanctioned, in this case Iran, calculates that it is better off responding in ways we would find unacceptable, including asymmetrical attacks (hence Iran’s “shot across the bow” – a message of possible consequences – by “threatening” to close the Strait of Hormuz, a “threat” which, absent US/Israeli-initiated warfare, was not serious, given that Iran would suffer as much as any other country from pursuing that course.) We are now running the risk that the Iranian regime may reach such a “tipping point,” *which we ourselves cannot calculate with any precision.* We also need to understand that *virtually all of our European allies support sanctions against Iran, not primarily to try forcing a change in Iranian behavior but rather to forestall a US attack on Iran* and to provide us with political ammunition in our efforts to forestall an attack by Israel. Perhaps your counterparts in Europe do not tell you that directly; my European colleagues, from NATO and elsewhere, are candid – and unanimous -- on that point.
- *Second, what we are doing – or could do – will not produce a change in regime in Iran;* in fact, our sanctions policy and other demonstrations of hostility (e.g., supporting subversion in Baluchistan, tolerating MEK activities in Iran, and repeatedly stating that “all options are on the table”) are a godsend to the regime, even though the Iranian people, as a whole, are better disposed to the United States and the American people than are the people of any other Middle Eastern country. Even if there were a new Iranian regime, the chances that it would a) abandon all enrichment activities and b) conform to all of our other desires for Iranian actions, including in its foreign policies, are sufficiently small as to mean that “regime change” is not a serious option.

- *Third*, despite protestations -- and perhaps self-belief -- to the contrary, *during at least the last two-plus US administrations, including when Khatami was president, we have not in fact been prepared to negotiate seriously with the Iranian regime in terms that have any chance to succeed.* Indeed, from all accounts that I have seen, we have consistently required that Iran yield on critical points regarding its nuclear program before talks start. We have certainly been unprepared to say, much less demonstrate, that we recognize that Iran has legitimate security needs. (By contrast, the US did that with North Korea, beginning in the GW Bush administration.) The US has not been willing to provide such an underpinning for potentially successful negotiations -- even before we determine whether Iran would be prepared to respond positively, which of course is itself far from certain. *Indeed, among the wide circle of people whom I know who have been deeply engaged in these issues over many years, both in the US and among the "EU-3," I know of no one whose judgment I value who disagrees with this summary of the US approach to negotiating with Iran.*

We have set preconditions to negotiations that no country could accept and that no serious diplomat -- or no serious lawyer in a civil suit -- would demand unless the objective were to make negotiations impossible (which, of course, can at times be a valid objective). We have also not explored the possibility of cooperation with Iran, however limited, on other issues where we have important national interests at stake, such as *Afghanistan, Iraq, terrorism, or the drug trade.* (For instance, I learned during a visit with SACEUR to Kabul in 2007 that Iran asked for deployment of NATO troops on the Iranian-Afghan border to inhibit the Afghan drug trade, from which Iran suffers second only to Russia, but that the willingness of other key NATO Allies to do this was vetoed by the US). And we have not been prepared to put on the table, in concrete terms, that we are prepared to consider Iran's legitimate security interests, in ways that can credibly appeal not just to the Iranian regime but also to its people, in exchange for its behaving in ways acceptable to us (including, of course, on issues of concern to Israel).

*In sum, if I were intent on pushing Iran to get a nuclear weapon, I would be following precisely the policy track that we have been on for the last several years.*

- We also have to recognize a *fourth* and even deeper reality: that *the Iranian nuclear issue is only one element of a deep-seated competition for power and influence* being conducted throughout the region of the Persian Gulf and Southwest Asia. *If the nuclear issue were resolved, no doubt others would be cited -- by Israel, Saudi Arabia, and perhaps others -- in opposition to US reconciliation with Iran.* For decades, this competition has pitted Arab states of the Persian Gulf against Iran, beginning well before the advent of the current regime in Teheran. Furthermore, Israel's concerns with Iran are rooted only in part in the nuclear issue, but also derive from *a critical element of its fundamental, decades-old security strategy: always to keep the US strategically tied to Israel in the region -- in major part, at*

*least for the last three decades, through having a common "enemy."* I first gained proof-positive of this point on the day after Israel turned the Sinai over to Egypt in May 1979, at which event I was the White House representative, when Menachem Begin made this point crystal clear to Cy Vance in Jerusalem. With the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty, the risk of a successful Arab assault on Israel had immediately dropped to the vanishing point; as had the risk that such a conflict could escalate to a US-Soviet confrontation. *From that time to this, Israel has needed a substitute means of keeping itself linked to the United States strategically*, as any state in its situation would seek to do. Despite the American people's overwhelmingly positive sentiments toward Israel, no Israeli leader can ground the security of his country on such insubstantial stuff. Ironically, in the process of Israel's seeking to have an enemy in common with the US, for years there was debate in Israeli politics about whether Iraq or Iran would be more useful in fulfilling this purpose: the side of this debate that was prevailing at the time led Israel to be deeply involved in the Iran-contra affair, fostering arms supplies for Iran during the Iran-Iraq War.

For US analysis, it is critical to understand two points: 1) that the "existential" concerns on the part of the most serious Israeli analysts are not only with developments in Iran but also -- and perhaps even more important -- with their fear that, for whatever reason, at some point in the future Israel might not be able to count on the United States. That now includes fear of a backlash on the part of many Americans if Israel were credibly seen as leading the US into yet another Middle East conflict; and 2) that *however much US and Israeli interests may on most occasions be compatible, they are not always identical and may at times -- potentially now on policy toward Iran -- in fact be at variance.*

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President Obama is clearly looking for every way possible to avoid a war with Iran. From my current vantage point, I have also seen this directly in the activities and statements of US military leaders. I draw this conclusion even though so much administration rhetoric points in the opposite direction (e.g., "all options are on the table;" "we will prevent Iran from getting the bomb") -- obviously both to increase pressures on Iran and to reassure Israel. Yet despite all efforts, *it is far from clear that the administration will be able to control events, to prevent an unwanted conflict with Iran.*

The President faces the difficulty in the coming months of threading a needle: avoiding war while also not paying a heavy price in US domestic politics -- a combination of pressures from the Israel lobby and from the Republican presidential candidates. By this logic, US calculations on the Iranian nuclear issue can be quite different after our presidential election. *Notably, the capacity of the administration to consider policy solely (or even primarily) from the perspective of US national interests is today more compromised by domestic political pressures than has*

*been true at least since the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq and perhaps since the decades-long freezing of policy toward China that was imposed by the "China lobby."*

These pressures, along with a fixation on the Iranian "nuclear file," have also inhibited us in considering – or exploring through diplomacy – areas where Iranian and US interests are at least compatible. This is most obvious regarding Afghanistan, where there was valuable Iranian cooperation after 9/11, based not on Khamanei's love for the US but on Iran's own self-interest. This cooperation was scotched by President Bush's designation of Iran as a member of an "Axis of Evil." Yet as we shift our strategic posture in the region, we will pay a heavy penalty in our efforts to construct a viable security structure and to promote political stability and modernization in Afghanistan and Southwest Asia -- and we may even fail in the attempt -- unless we are prepared to deal with *all* of the regional countries. Refusing to deal with Iran (or, if we were to refuse to deal with any other major regional country) vastly complicates our situation.

To help us get out of our current dilemma, I suggest the following 7 steps:

1. *A root-and-branch revisiting of US interests in the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, and Southwest Asia, in general, and with regard to Iran in particular.* This review needs to go far beyond the "nuclear file" to consider a full range of regional issues, especially those involved 1) as a consequence of the reduction of US engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan; 2) with the interests and roles of all other regional countries, notably Pakistan, India, and Saudi Arabia, plus the interests and roles of Russia and China and the European allies (including a special focus on Turkey); and 3) with the impact of developments in Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, and elsewhere in the region, including those basic shocks to old patterns of politics and society that shelter under the rubric "Arab spring" and will be a long time in playing out.
2. *Consideration of a broad range of policy alternatives* and potential interactions among policies, not just about Iran but also regarding the entire region – in effect, a "*holistic*" approach to Middle East and Southwest Asia policy which does not now exist; of course, this analysis needs to include the demands of a "containment and deterrence" strategy if 1) Iran does move toward getting the bomb; or 2) efforts to prevent its doing so (without war) do not succeed. This consideration of alternatives should proceed with US domestic political factors sidelined, to be reintroduced into the balance only after objective analysis has been completed.
3. In order for the analysis above to be truly useful to you and the President, *I suggest that you engage a small number of people from outside the government* who, together, are able 1) to provide in-depth understanding of all the countries, cultures, histories, politics,

and other factors involved in the Middle East/Persian Gulf/Southwest Asia region; 2) to “think strategically,” beginning with clear-sighted analysis of US interests across the region and their interconnections; and 3) to design a variety of options for your consideration that go far beyond the current range of policy choices. I believe there can be value for you in drawing, on a systematic basis, upon the counsel of seasoned, regionally-knowledgeable, and strategically-adept American experts and former officials from outside and who have much to contribute.

4. In assembling a small group of people to render you and the President this service, it will also be critical to choose people 1) who are not just the “usual suspects,” but who have the capacity to provide you with fresh, serious, knowledgeable, and independent counsel; 2) who have no “axes to grind;” 3) who do not have ideological or political perspectives that would inhibit them in providing the most candid advice, based solely on their understanding of the US national interest as opposed to any domestic political interest; 4) who can be relied upon to exercise the utmost discretion; and 5) who will report directly to you.

By contrast, to base the composition of such a group on ensuring the representation of different constituencies -- concerning the area of the world which is *the mostly highly-charged in US domestic politics* -- would be to risk rendering its work of little and perhaps no value as a tool of analysis for you and the President. All the senior US political leaders whom I have advised over nearly a half-century -- including three Presidents and virtually all of the serious Democratic candidates for President during that time, have insisted that I and others provide them with the best facts, analysis, and policy alternatives of which we have been capable. They would then add the domestic politics.

5. There is a wide range of possibilities for discussions/negotiations with Iran, beyond the nuclear file (which itself is much too narrowly-constructed and technocratic) where we have at least compatible interests with Iran. In addition to those listed above (Afghanistan, Iraq, counter-terrorism, and counter-drug trafficking), *we should propose a wide range of mutually-advantageous confidence-building measures (CBMs)*, including counter-piracy; an Incidents-at-Sea Agreement (such as we concluded with the Soviets in 1972 and that is already at times being followed pragmatically by US and Iranian naval vessels in the Persian Gulf); a freedom of shipping agreement, including the Strait of Hormuz; and -- eventually -- regional CBMs, regional arms control, mutual security arrangements, and a new structure of security for the Persian Gulf region (on which I have written extensively). Further, we should be enlisting “honest broker” third parties in our diplomatic efforts (e.g., Oman, which has already provided some informal contacts with Iran for us), and also using third parties to help educate elements of the Iranian elite

on the demands and technicalities of nuclear deterrence, as well as on the net disadvantages to Iran and its security, overall, if it were to acquire nuclear weapons.

6. For the longer-term, we need to begin developing, with Israel, a basis for providing it with security and political reassurances that do not depend on having a common enemy or a distorted perspective of either US or Israeli strategic interests in the region that could lead to damaging consequences for both countries. The intellectual basis for such a revision already exists in Israel; it is witnessed by the concerns expressed by several former heads of Mossad and the IDF, regarding potentially-vital risks to Israel's future if confrontation with Iran turns to conflict.
7. A parallel assessment of the requirements for stopping support by entities in Saudi Arabia in their fostering of radical Islamist fundamentalism and financing some of America's most virulent regional enemies.

Of course, there are myriad tactical and timing issues regarding any new approach to negotiations with Iran; there will be strong objections within the administration (and on Capitol Hill) even to considering fresh analysis and alternative policies; and with all the pressures the administration faces, both foreign and domestic, there may never be a propitious moment, and the nay-sayers will always make this argument in order to try preventing any change in US policy.

But I believe it is critical to do whatever is possible to forestall a conflict by accident or loss of control, from which the United States and Israel will suffer as well as will Iran and others. In my judgment, that effort could well benefit from a fresh, no-holds-barred process of analysis and examination of a full range of alternative courses. Further, *today's short-term tactics* 1) to pressure Iran; 2) to try building international support for punitive sanctions; and 3) to deal with domestic political constituencies *need to be measured against the acute risks that, through no fault of its own, the administration may not succeed in "threading the needle" and that a conflict will still ensue*, with all of the attendant costs in blood and treasure. This would confound what are clearly the best intentions of the President and his team to avoid such an occurrence -- the full results of which would be far worse, I fear, than the damage done to US interests both abroad and at home (including the US and global economies) by the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

With best regards,  
Robert