# Diplomacy Redux: Kerry's Opportunity, Obama's Test

A tour of the U.S. position in the Middle East.

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Since he succeeded Hillary Clinton last February as the country's sixty-eighth secretary of state, John Kerry has quickly built on relationships forged with foreign leaders during his Senate years to position diplomacy as the principal tool in addressing some of the most consequential international security challenges currently facing the United States.

It is a big change. While Mrs. Clinton earned plaudits for her tireless travels, the sixty-seventh secretary will be remembered more for talking about diplomacy's importance than for actually using it to great effect. By contrast Mr. Kerry's legacy as Secretary of State is already sure to be defined by the success or failure of major U.S. diplomatic initiatives to secure compromises from parties to the Middle East's most deep-rooted conflicts.

Three simultaneous negotiations now offer the prospect of achieving strategically important objectives: one to produce an Israeli-Palestinian two-state solution; another to rid Syria of its chemical-weapons arsenal; and the third to achieve an accord with Iran under which Tehran would forego developing nuclear weapons.

## If Diplomacy Succeeds

The opportunity is hard to overstate. Officially ending sixty-five years of Palestinian grievance while according Israel universally-recognized borders—issues which, whatever one's views, have soured

Arab attitudes toward the US and complicated US-Israel relations for generations—would fulfill the declared but unmet policy aspiration of every American president since Truman. Eliminating a large chemical-weapons arsenal that has been used repeatedly despite international prohibitions would restore the crucial deterrent effect of the Chemical Weapons Convention, undermined by the Syrian regime's lethal chemical munitions attacks on its own civilian neighborhoods.

Above all, reliably halting Iran's nuclear weapons quest without resort to military force would not only make good on the 'reddest' of President Obama's much-remarked 'red lines,' it would forestall a Persian-Arab nuclear arms race astride the oil-rich Persian Gulf, a scenario made all the more combustible by Sunni-Shia sectarian strife and Israel's unpredictable response to proliferating nuclear threats in its midst.

President Obama has much riding on the outcome of these negotiations. Not only has he staked the credibility of his office on redressing the nuclear and chemical weapons threats posed by Iran and Syria, respectively, but he has courted increased strategic risk in precipitously withdrawing forces from Iraq and (soon) Afghanistan and exhibiting only perfunctory concern over large defense sector cutbacks imposed by sequestration. Achieving significant security benefits through negotiation, while not necessarily compensating for these risks, would enhance U.S. influence at a time when many in the world are questioning America's political and economic vitality and its appetite for continued global leadership.

One could envision the President, with Middle East successes in hand, making high diplomacy a more meaningful dimension of the Asia "pivot," seeking to defuse escalating tensions between China and its neighbors by mediating conflicting territorial claims—as Secretary Kerry proposed in his recent Asia travels—and probing North Korea's Kim Jong-Un for more reliable undertakings than his father and grandfather ever produced.

Recognition is widespread that the U.S. has over-relied on 'hard power' in recent years, and civilian policy tools—not having demonstrated comparable potency since perhaps the 1995 Dayton Agreement that ended hostilities in Bosnia—have lost stature and credibility compared to the military. Congressional funding has reflected the belief that DoD, alone among cabinet departments, has the wherewithal to generate game-changing impact on security challenges overseas. A demonstration that geopolitical dealmaking is not a lost art in Washington would be salutary on many levels.

**Is the US Up to the Challenge?**

To say that success could bring great benefits is not to predict it. Two impediments that Secretary Kerry has—justifiably, in the author's view—chosen to disregard are, first, the perennial penchant of White House advisors to shield the President from political exposure to high-profile endeavors carrying the risk of failure, and second, the potential that congressional partisanship—ignoring the old 'water's edge' boundary—could impede US negotiators' ability to deliver on a major agreement.

The stakes in all three of these arenas justify taking political risk, but as in military endeavors, clarity about the long-term stakes for all concerned parties, and the breadth of planning in support of negotiations, directly affect the prospects for success or failure. Here is where doubts arise about the Administration's readiness to deliver on the promise of the diplomatic tracks it has so vigorously embraced.

While each of these negotiations is underway without undue controversy, questions are already arising in the Syria and Iran tracks as to whether the US may be aiming too low, preemptively limiting its objectives to what it believes could be agreed upon most easily, quickly and with the least resistance from interested parties, including Congress.

The benefits of narrowly crafted agreements resulting in the dismantling of Syria's chemical weapons and a monitored pullback of Iran's nuclear enrichment activities would be deemed by many in the US as preferable to no agreement with a corresponding increased likelihood of resort to military force. For Syria, Russia and Iran, modest concessions would represent a price worth paying if this meant the US would refrain from challenging their larger, more strategic and longer-term objectives in the region.

US negotiators, therefore, could encounter surprisingly little pushback from Syria and Iran, respectively, and have Moscow's support, if the goals pursued are tightly drawn and do not entail much if any political discomfiture for those parties. The one mystery emerging from this diplomatic blitz is the Administration's own view of long-term US national interests in the Middle East, and whether the current negotiations are aligned with a coherent strategy to pursue them.

**Israeli-Palestinian Talks on Course, but what about the spoiler?**

Start with the track that is best-positioned: the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. US negotiator Martin Indyk brings the expertise and the diplomatic and bureaucratic credentials necessary to hold his own

in a negotiation where required compromises can be brokered only by maintaining the complete trust of the parties. Ambassador Indyk has assembled a quality team and kept a low media profile—all steps consistent with a productive negotiating approach.

Unfortunately, neither party to the talks—Israeli or Palestinian Authority representatives—has the capacity to address what has in recent years become the greatest (if not the sole) source of insecurity in their midst, namely heavily armed nonstate actors equipped and funded by Iran. The range, accuracy and quantity of rocket and missile threats against population centers in Israel from Hizballah across the Lebanese border and Hamas in Gaza have steadily increased.

Any confusion about Israel's overriding security preoccupation should have been dispelled by Prime Minister Netanyahu's October 1 address to the UN General Assembly. While pledging his readiness to make "an historic compromise with our Palestinian neighbors," Mr. Netanyahu spent the majority of his speech articulating a detailed warning about the dangers posed by Iran's fundamentalist regime. Notwithstanding Ambassador Indyk's wide policy mandate, it very likely does not extend to US policy on Iran.

**Syria—Understandable Reluctance but Troubling Missteps**

The Syria crisis—admittedly a dauntingly violent and complicated conflict where American interests are less than obvious to the public—has revealed the Administration to have a penchant for reacting to rather than shaping events. Much has been said about the sudden lurches in the President's approach. He postured to use force and then paused, belatedly submitting the issue for congressional authorization, only to pull back in the face of insufficient support.

Secretary Kerry's seemingly spontaneous response to a London press query about conditions under which the US might refrain from attacking Syria prompted a stunningly quick Russian initiative to negotiate the removal of Syria's chemical weapons, challenging Washington to take 'yes' for an answer—which it did. While officials tout President Obama's effective threat of force in compelling Syria to forfeit its chemical weapons, the UN Security Council resolution adopted with US support would require a second resolution before punitive action under Chapter VII is authorized—a precedent the George W. Bush administration famously resisted on Iraq. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Secretary Kerry so readily welcomed Russia's offer of a negotiated dismantlement of Syria's chemical arsenal precisely because of Mr. Obama's unreadiness to authorize military action.

Even assuming that the Syria chemical weapons disarmament process fully succeeds, major questions remain. Yes, Mr. Obama will have recouped a measure of presidential credibility by backing up his declared 'red line' on Syria's use of chemical weapons, albeit months after their use had been confirmed by intelligence. But what of the President's other Syria 'marker'—his August 18, 2011 declaration that "the time has come for President Assad to step aside"? That declaration, although repeated as recently as October 14 by Secretary Kerry, shows no sign of being pursued, much less fulfilled, notwithstanding administration pronouncements that the eleven-country "Geneva process" will effect a governmental transition in Damascus.

The Atlantic Council's Fred Hof has posed a question that many Syrians are surely asking as well: has the US made Bashar al-Assad "an irreplaceable party to a long-term contract" to fulfill its chemical weapons agreement? President Obama appears as indifferent about whether his demand to rid Syria of its homicidal dictatorship will ever be carried out as he is ardent about having his red line restored on chemical weapons.

Having gained this reprieve, President Assad can be forgiven for doubting that the threat of US military force remains a realistic danger to his regime's survival, or to his armed forces' freedom of action against the domestic opposition. It is Mr. Assad's good fortune that, with the military strikes options pulled back from the brink, the Obama national-security team left itself with no other levers of influence at hand to contain the spreading Syria crisis.

When President Obama initially solicited options to exert leverage on Syria in this crisis, his national-security staff turned straight to the Pentagon, which dutifully generated kinetic strike packages and target sets. Nowhere did that process reflect the Administration's forward-looking doctrinal approach to international-security challenges tying success to the integration of "all of the tools of American power" in a whole-of-government operation. The President also ignored the counsel of his top military advisor, General Martin Dempsey, who had publicly cautioned that in Syria "you need a strategy to tie military options with other instruments of power."

It is a rare spectacle to find the Arab League Foreign Ministers formally calling for war crimes prosecutions against a fellow Arab leader and his inner circle, yet even more striking that US government—which sports a full Office of Global Criminal Justice led by an Ambassador-at-Large, solely for this purpose—apparently has not seen fit to lead on this issue or even consider the threat of war crimes prosecution as a potential tool of leverage on Mr. Assad's regime.

While Hezbollah and Iran's Revolutionary Guards have invested heavily in television and other media outlets as a means of shaping public opinion to their advantage, the administration apparently sees no opportunity in the Arab world's information domain to expose the cynical and illegitimate misdeeds of those directly responsible for this crisis. And while President Obama's June decision to arm and train the Syrian opposition has translated into what the *Washington Post* describes as a "minuscule" clandestine program, Moscow and Tehran continue a robust flow of heavy arms, fighters and funds into Syria to sustain the Assad regime.

In sum, Washington shows no evidence of mustering either military or nonmilitary tools of influence that would offer a credible prospect of rescuing what remains of Syria's largely defenseless population from the ravages of Bashar al-Assad's conventional forces. With well over 110,000 killed and an estimated seven million displaced, one third of them overflowing refugee camps in neighboring countries, one finds no inclination within the Administration to invoke—as it had in Libya—the humanitarian intervention doctrine known as Responsibility to Protect. Indeed, the US-Russia-Syria chemical weapons disarmament project has become, *pace* the Nobel Committee, the ethical antithesis of Responsibility to Protect, veritably a License to Ignore.

These policy foibles obscure the larger strategic landscape at play in Syria's conflict. Russia's opportunism in seizing upon Secretary Kerry's press remark to offer full partnership in eliminating Syrian chemical weapons was clearly motivated less by the fear of civilian casualties from "one stiff breeze" of toxic vapors than by its interest in keeping the Assad regime in power. Having no other major clients for its arms-export industry since the fall of Muammar Qadhafi, no other port of access for its navy in the Levant, and an affinity for a secular regime—however brutal—that bills itself as a bulwark against Sunni Arab religious extremism, Russia has deftly kept America from getting in the way of its core interests in the region.

If the Administration sees advantage in giving Moscow a pass over its weapons being used by the Syrian military to lay waste to populated cities and towns, its passivity toward Iran's regional activities demands explanation. Iran and its proxy force Hezbollah have massively supported the Assad regime, revealing an historically rare condition of vulnerability to prospective regime change in Damascus.

Hezbollah, which has the blood of US Marines on its hands and has become so heavily armed that it sustained hostilities with Israel for several days in 2006, is now politically exposed back home in Lebanon and throughout the Arab world for fighting and killing fellow Muslims in a neighboring

Arab country on behalf of a secular dictatorship. Its operations, today as thirty years ago, are wholly dependent on continued support from Tehran.

The Iranian cleric leading an organization charged with countering the "soft war" against the fundamentalist regime in Tehran, Hojjat al-Islam Mehdi Taeb, explained the vital importance of Syria to the survival of the mullahs' regime, in remarks to student loyalists in February:

**"*Syria is the 35th province [of Iran] and a strategic province for us. If the enemy attacks us and wants to appropriate either Syria or Khuzestan [in southern Iran], the priority is that we keep Syria.…If we keep Syria, we can get Khuzestan back too, but if we lose Syria we cannot keep Tehran.*"**

As with the Israel-Palestinian negotiations, a proper US understanding of Syria's crisis must factor in an Iranian role animated by nothing short of a belief that preserving the Assad regime is an imperative, linked to the fundamentalists' own survival in power in Tehran. And yet, the Obama Administration appears strangely indifferent to the parlous circumstances of perhaps the most anti-American regime in the world for the past 35 years, and uninterested in the leverage on Iran now potentially within Washington's grasp after decades of enduring terrorist, nuclear and missile threats from Tehran's security services.

The willful averting by the Administration of its gaze from these and other core dynamics at play in and around Syria is certain to shape regional perceptions of American power for years to come. Funding copious humanitarian assistance, already $1.3 billion and counting, for the fleeing victims of Russian-armed Syrian forces or Iranian-armed fighters, worthy as that is, will not indemnify the US against the erosion of its superpower reputation.

**Negotiations with Iran—How to Avert War and Build American Influence**

American politicians, including President Obama, have been justified in pledging to do whatever it takes to keep Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. Cold War notions of 'containment' may offer no assurance of stability in the volatile Middle East, where in contrast to Kremlin leaders during the Cold War, surviving a nuclear exchange may not be a priority for many extremist aggressors. As recently as September 30, the State Department reiterated the official US view that "We're not going to allow Iran to create a nuclear weapon."

The carefully engineered June election of Hassan Rouhani as president of Iran, and this regime stalwart's genial pursuit of détente with the US and normalized foreign relations with others, have

challenged Washington to respond with comparable tactical skill and strategic purpose. Some observers—press photographers, at the very least—were disappointed when President Obama's opportunity to greet President Rouhani personally at the UN in September did not materialize. Mr. Obama's telephone call to Mr. Rouhani as the latter headed for the airport to return to Iran was a hospitable gesture regardless of one's policy view of Iran, a privilege US presidents can exercise as a consequence of hosting the United Nations on American soil.

Yet the ensuing press statements by White House aides promoted the disturbing theme that, just as Secretary Kerry had met with Iranian foreign minister Zarif in New York, President Obama had made a connection with his own "counterpart," talking 'president to president' with Hassan Rouhani. President Obama would have been well advised to initiate a call the next morning to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Not only would that have tested the sincerity of Tehran's apparent warming to the United States, it would have dispelled the damaging misimpression that an unelected religious autocrat holds a superior protocol rank to the president of the United States.

That Mr. Obama, in his September 24 speech to the UN General Assembly and subsequently, cited a *fatwa* by the Supreme Leader without irony or caveat, as though this carried some recognized legal effect, only underscored the uncertainty about the new Iranian President's own authority to set national policy on the very matter to be negotiated.

US and European diplomats emerged from the initial mid-October nuclear talks in Geneva remarking on the change in Iran's posture from previous negotiations. Foreign Minister Zarif reportedly engaged in detailed, substantive discussions about the nuclear program, and told the press afterward that "serious give-and-take has taken place." It is a welcome change, and administration officials are now seized with two entirely predictable tasks: eliciting from the Iranian side a set of commitments that the US and allies persuasively believe will prevent a future nuclear weapons "breakout;" and offering Iran in return a commitment to deliver an agreed level of sanctions relief.

Lead US negotiator Wendy Sherman, in congressional hearings before the initial Geneva session, assured legislators that the President is pursuing a comprehensive agreement, not interim steps wherein a partial lifting of sanctions could deflate international solidarity to pressure Iran economically before a satisfactory nuclear deal is reached. It is the correct approach. Yet the Administration now, predictably, finds itself caught in a two-front negotiation, needing to overcome deep skepticism and a backdrop of troubled relations not only with Tehran but with Capitol Hill.

As Congress plays its customary 'bad cop' role in support of a satisfactory nuclear deal by proposing still tighter sanctions—the one factor Washington experts seem to agree has prompted Tehran's conciliatory turn—it is unclear how the US negotiators can elicit from Mr. Zarif and his masters a sufficient Iranian compromise that will not look to all the world like a capitulation. And if the US side cannot bring to the table assurances of sanctions relief sufficient to seal an acceptable deal, its predicament may induce paralyzing caution on other policy fronts deemed important to Tehran, lest the collaborative spirit at the nuclear talks be spoiled.

All three negotiations underway, regarding Israel-Palestine, Syria, and Iran's nuclear program, are inescapably attached to larger region-wide dynamics that will frustrate American objectives if not addressed by US foreign policy. President Obama needs a strategy.

**American Interests, American Principles, American Influence—an American Strategy**

Policy veterans in Washington cannot point to any prior case where economic sanctions have "kicked in" strongly enough to produce the desired result—until now. Sanctions against the regimes led by Slobodan Milosevic, Saddam Hussein and Bashar al-Assad produced scarcity and hardship for the poorest of their citizens but enriched the leadership circle, who exacted higher rents on the basic commodities they alone could smuggle in.

Kudos to the US Treasury Department for locating and constricting the key transactional nodes through which Iran's economy connects to the world. Yet the tool of economic sanctions against Iran, while more potent than any previous instance, should be troubling to US policymakers. With the exception of the clerical regime, Iran's 79 million people ought to be the target of American goodwill, not collective punishment for the acts of their dictators. Sustaining the US economy as the world's strongest depends on free trade; a latter-day 'blockade' of any country by the United States should be a rare exception, for policy and moral reasons.

One consequence of the Iran sanctions that mirrors past cases, as Fareed Zakaria has pointed out, is that Iran's Revolutionary Guards "profit from the sanctions because their businesses have become the only path for trade and smuggling."

For these reasons, President Obama should strengthen his negotiating hand with Iran by collaborating with Congress to make clear, not just what further economic pain and isolation will result from Tehran's refusal to accept a verifiable end to its nuclear weapons program, but the relief and rewards that a comprehensive nuclear concession by Iran's leaders will produce. Every citizen of

Iran should become aware that the US is offering an end to those sanctions that were created for the purpose of pressuring Iran on the nuclear issue—whether via executive order or legislation. The Congress could also indicate its readiness in principle to support the lifting of UN Security Council sanctions relating to the nuclear issue.

This step would place the onus for compromise back on the Iranian side of the negotiating table, forcing the regime to explain to its people why it would not accept a deal codifying what it has already said is its policy, namely that it does not seek to build nuclear weapons that it wants sanctions relief in order to secure an immediate upsurge in the entire country's standard of living. Assuming Iran can say yes to comprehensive nuclear restraints for comprehensive sanctions relief, the Revolutionary Guards' lucrative smuggling business would be over. More importantly, the terrible choice between war with Iran or a regional nuclear arms race would be averted.

Reciprocating President Rouhani's expressed desire for improved relations, the Congress and administration should even consider fattening Iran's 'prize' for an acceptable nuclear deal with a package of increased student visas, cultural and sporting exchanges and the like. Steps to empower Iranian civil society economically, counter internal censorship and propaganda, and spread goodwill between the two countries' populations are all consistent with US security interests once the nuclear weapons threat is reliably controlled.

What President Obama should avoid, however, is encumbering the nuclear negotiation with other issues complicating US-Iran relations. "We are not seeking regime change," Mr. Obama declared at the UN in September. This statement cleverly spoke to two audiences—the clerics in Tehran whose singular priority is remaining in power; and the president's domestic political allies who associate 'regime change' with neoconservative attitudes favored in the previous administration.

A more appropriate formulation in the President's speech would have made clear that if his Administration does not seek regime change, it carries no particular brief to maintain this regime in power either. The principle of popular sovereignty should be at the heart of US policy, and given the storied history of US meddling in Iranian politics, Iranian leaders would be hard-pressed to complain if an American president said that the Iranian people should have the ultimate say in how they are governed.

The fact is that Hassan Rouhani and the Iranian Foreign Ministry do not represent the Islamic Republic on some major issues relevant to negotiations in the Middle East. The commander of the

elite Qods Force atop the Revolutionary Guards organization, Qassem Suleimani, is leading the effort in Syria to train and resupply Lebanese Hezbollah fighters in defense of the Assad regime—a vital interest to the Tehran regime, as noted. Suleimani also appears to run the "Iraq" account for Tehran, coordinating with Prime Minister Maliki in support of extralegal killings of defenseless Iranian dissidents inside Iraq by a special unit of Iraqi forces attached to the Prime Minister's office.

The paramilitary campaigns supported by Iran's Revolutionary Guards in Syria and Iraq are not unconnected to American interests. In Iraq, five armed attacks since mid-2009 by Iraqi military units, or by Iranian-supplied militias passing through their lines, against more than 3,000 unarmed Iranian dissidents place the United States in breach of its obligations under the Fourth Geneva Convention. A promise of protection, formally given by the US to every one of these individuals in 2004, remains an American duty today because the Iraqi government has repeatedly violated its 2009 commitment to provide protection for these people, engaging instead in lethal attacks against them in coordination with Tehran.

The US understandably wants a robust and lasting security assistance relationship with Iraq's armed forces after so much sacrifice by American forces in Iraq. Yet it is compromised by its failure to live up to not only international humanitarian law, but Section 3 of the Arms Export Control Act prohibiting arms transfers to militaries that misuse them, and the so-called Leahy Human Rights laws prohibiting training for any military units implicated in gross human rights violations.

The latest assault, the September 1 execution of 52 defenseless Iranian exiles by Iraqi special forces using handcuffs and silencers, and the abduction of seven others who are still missing, occurred five days after Qassem Suleimani met with Prime Minister Maliki and his aides to plan the operation, according to the exiled group, the MEK. The massacre went largely unreported in the American media, the story overshadowed by the September 2 announcement in Tehran of President Rouhani's plans to travel to the United States.

America's policy lapses in both Syria and Iraq, the portfolio directly overseen by Qassim Suleimani on Iran's behalf, come as well at the expense of Iran's regional strategic rival: the Sunni Arab world and Saudi Arabia in particular. Writes veteran international correspondent Arnaud de Borchgrave, "The longer the fighting in Syria, the more the situation in Iraq deteriorates and the closer Iran's military 'mullahocracy' comes to dominating the entire region."

The Administration's recent move restricting Egypt's military assistance pipeline—a cornerstone of the Israel-Egypt peace treaty that has kept Israel's southern flank quiet for 34 years—only adds to the insecurity felt by America's longstanding Arab allies as well as Israel.

President Obama must separate these wider complications of US-Iran relations from the nuclear negotiations, but without disregarding them. Although Mr. Obama expressed the hope at the UN that a nuclear agreement with Iran can "help serve as a foundation for a broader peace," it should be clear that Tehran's Revolutionary Guards have every intention to continue prosecuting their campaigns, working through extremist non-state actors, to destabilize rival societies to the west.

Until the day comes when no more Iranian arms, money, explosives and training are flowing to client militias, Ambassador Indyk is going to need to point to a regional American security posture that Israelis and Palestinians can believe in should they be otherwise prepared to bring forth an historic final-status settlement. If at the same time Egypt's military is casting about for alternative strategic partnerships, Mr. Indyk's task will be that much more daunting.

The US has every right, and every interest, in pursuing its own interests throughout the Middle East. If success in effecting a transition in Syria to a more acceptable successor government is taken as a setback in Tehran, that should not deter Washington. Nor should the US hesitate any longer to impose a principled, legally correct line with Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki in order that US-Iraq military relations will not be further tainted by dishonor or moral compromise. Should the Obama team see fit to reaffirm its commitment to the security of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arab states, and to Egypt's military, this rebuilding of confidence with the Sunni Arab world should neither surprise Iran nor perturb the nuclear negotiations. 'Peace through strength' has always entailed much more than combat power alone.

**Conclusion—Discrete Deal with Iran, Invest in Syria's Outcome, Restore Regional Confidence, Enable Israeli-Palestinian Settlement**

With congressional support, the president should seize the initiative and give his negotiators the requisite leverage to secure, as soon as practicable, a comprehensive but discrete nuclear-for-sanctions agreement with Iran. Isolating that issue will guard against policy paralysis in other areas deemed to be sensitive for Iran, and empower the Administration to go to work repairing its frayed standing in the Arab world.

The dismantlement of Syria's chemical arsenal will be of little benefit if, thanks to US inaction, Hezbollah emerges strengthened and emboldened, Syria's Kurds break away, and the Sunni majority embraces the only 'help' currently on offer—from radical Sunni religious extremists drawn to the sectarian fight from all over the region. What began as an idealistic 'Arab spring' moment is deteriorating into another potential Afghanistan, placing enormous new security and economic burdens on Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and, by extension, Israel. Rather than letting extremists maintain the initiative, the President should challenge his national-security team to devise a whole-of-government strategy worthy of the name for Syria, one that does not place US forces on Syrian territory or pilots in Syrian airspace.

These regional circumstances will inevitably affect Ambassador Indyk's prospects of success as well. Israel's leaders will be less likely to trust in a settlement with the Palestinians if the surrounding Arab countries are engulfed in crisis. Israeli citizens will find it harder to perceive a peace benefit if they remain in the crosshairs of not only nuclear threats but also ever more deadly mortars, rockets and missiles smuggled to local extremists by Iran's Revolutionary Guards.

With so much invested and so much at stake in the Middle East, it is never too late to step up efforts to advance American interests. The credibility of presidential red lines matters, but only by exercising leadership in taming the dangers clouding the region's future will the US preserve its influence and reputation, which are foundations of American power.

Secretary Kerry's big bet on Middle East diplomacy can pay big dividends if backed by a forceful presidential commitment, a coherent strategic vision, integrated lines of policy, and an active array of interagency tools of influence. The keys to success or failure now rest largely in President Obama's hands.

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