

The Washington Post

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To deal with Iran's nuclear future, go back to 2008

By [Fareed Zakaria](#), Wednesday, October 26, 5:12 PM

Early in the 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama signaled that he was going to break with the Bush administration's Manichean foreign policy. The topic was Iran. He explained repeatedly that the Bush policy of simply pressuring Iran was not working and that he would be willing to [talk to the country's leaders](#) to find ways to reduce tensions and dangers. Two years into his presidency, Obama's Iran policy looks a lot like George W. Bush's — with some of the same problems that candidate Obama pointed out two years ago.

To be fair, the administration started out in 2009 by making overtures to Iran, which were rebuffed by its supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Then it watched as [the Green movement](#) rattled the regime. But the result is that the administration has lapsed into a policy of pressure, pressure and more pressure.

The punitive tactics have paid off in some measure. Iran faces economic problems. But the tactics are also having a perverse impact on the country, as I saw during a brief visit to Tehran last week. The sanctions are stifling growth, though not as much as one might imagine because Iran has oil money and a large internal market. Their basic effect has been to weaken civil society and strengthen the state — the opposite of what we should be trying to do in that country.

“If you need to import anything, it has to be smuggled, which means you have to be in cahoots with the regime. I won't do that, but many thugs will,” said one businessman to me.

By some estimates, Iran's Revolutionary Guard — the hard-line element of the armed forces, supported by the supreme leader — controls 40 percent of the economy. Recall Iraq, where decades of sanctions created a country of gangs and mafia-capitalism, and allowed the regime to create an ever-tighter grasp on the society.

Is that the goal of our policy? In fact, what is our goal? Is it to overthrow the Iranian

regime? Is it to make it cry uncle and give up its nuclear program?

A wholesale revolution continues to strike me as a distant prospect. The regime still has some domestic support, and it uses a mix of religious authority, patronage and force quite effectively. Sanctions have made people somewhat resentful of the West for hurting them more than the regime.

And we keep forgetting the inconvenient fact that, even if the regime changed, the nuclear program — which is popular as an expression of Iranian nationalism and power — will continue. The leaders of the Green movement strongly support that program and have repeatedly criticized President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for making too-generous offers to the West. (All Iranian officials repeat constantly that they would never develop nuclear weapons. And in [a recent interview](#) with Seymour Hersh in the New Yorker, Mohamed ElBaradei, the former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, said he had never “seen a shred of evidence that Iran has been weaponizing, in terms of building nuclear-weapons facilities and using enriched materials.”)

Within the context of Iranian politics, Ahmadinejad is the pragmatist. He has been trying to clip the wings of the clergy. His chief of staff has openly mused about having better relations with Israel. And over the years Ahmadinejad has made several moves on the nuclear front that, while imperfect, are serious opening bids for a negotiation. He proposed the creation of an international consortium to enrich uranium, he accepted a [Turkish-Brazilian deal](#) to have the Russians enrich uranium for Iran, and he has made an offer that would cap Iran's enrichment at the 5 percent level.

Obama should return to his original approach and test the Iranians to see if there is any room for dialogue and agreement. Engaging with Iran, putting its nuclear program under some kind of supervision and finding areas of common interest (such as Afghanistan) would all be important goals.

This might not be possible. Iran has its own deep divisions, and many in the regime feel threatened by any opening to the West. But that is precisely why the administration should keep searching for ways to create that opening.

Strategic engagement with an adversary can go hand in hand with a policy that encourages change in that country. That's how Washington dealt with the Soviet Union and China in the 1970s and 1980s. Iran is a country of 80 million people, educated and dynamic. It sits astride a crucial part of the world. It cannot be sanctioned and pressed down forever. It is the last great civilization to sit outside the global order. We need a strategy that combines pressure with a path to bring Iran in from the cold.

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