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The Council on Foreign Relations

High Stakes UN Diplomacy on Syria and Iran

Stewart M. Patrick

September 23, 2013 -- Two issues will dominate this week's annual summit of world leaders as the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) kicks off its sixty-eighth session in New York. The first is Syria, whose government must begin to deliver on commitments to eliminate its chemical weapons, even as its civil war grinds on. The second is Iran, whose new president, Hassan Rouhani, has signaled a potential deal with the West over his nation's nuclear program.

These two diplomatic openings offer a tentative, if unexpected, windfall for U.S. president Barack Obama, attending his fifth UNGA opening session. Obama, it should be noted, came to office heralding a new era of global "engagement" after the perceived unilateralism of his predecessor George W. Bush. Under Obama's new approach, military force would take a back seat to diplomacy, including dialogue with U.S. adversaries. Unfortunately for the president, the world's rogue (or "outlier") states often met his open hand with a mailed fist.

Syria, protected by its Russian patron in the UN Security Council, has been engaged in a scorched earth campaign against opposition forces, charged by rights groups and other outside monitors of committing massive atrocities against its civilian population. The Obama administration, backed by Western allies, accuses the regime of Bashar al-Assad of launching a large-scale chemical weapons attack on August 21 that mocked Obama's "red line" rhetoric and finally elicited a White House threat of force to punish Damascus. Iran, meanwhile, has continued its uranium enrichment program even in the face of stringent sanctions, coming closer to nuclear weapons "breakout" capability. In the face of Iranian intransigence, some analysts have said only military force could prevent the mullahs from getting the bomb.

Suddenly, the diplomatic landscape has been transformed. By dint of fortune as much as strategy, President Obama arrives in New York with [tentative diplomatic paths](#) out of these two long-running crises. Look for Syria and Iran to dominate his speech from the podium. Obama will frame them collectively as the primary security challenge facing the UN in the twenty-first century: stemming and reversing the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Ironically, he is likely to echo George W. Bush's

own UNGA speech of September 2002, which challenged the UN Security Council (UNSC) to prove its relevance in an age of WMD.

On Syria, the president will likely cite the thorough [UN inspectors report](#) as providing indisputable evidence of Assad's use of chemical weapons (CW). Echoing the marker [laid down](#) by Secretary of State John Kerry, he will demand that the UNSC pass a robust resolution under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, as promised by the [terms of the Geneva Agreement](#). The president should be adamant that the international inspection team have carte blanche power to inspect any Syrian facility at any time, as well as sufficient physical security to travel safely in a civil war situation. Most importantly, he should insist on a resolution that authorizes coercion if Syria fails to come clean on its CW holdings or begins to play a game of cat and mouse with the weapons inspectors.

President Obama must lay down a clear marker that the United States remains prepared to launch meaningful punitive strikes if the Syrian government balks at surrendering its CW. An unequivocal stance should help concentrate minds in Moscow. President Putin scored a triumph by persuading the United States to give Security Council diplomacy another try. Obama's speech must remind the Russians their victory is contingent on a meaningful UNSC resolution.

The president must also clarify how this effort to eliminate Syria's WMD relates to that country's ongoing civil war and humanitarian catastrophe. Conventional warfare, after all, has already killed more than 100,000 people, injured countless others, and driven a third of Syrians from their homes—with four million internally displaced and more than two million refugees in neighboring countries. Yes, preserving the CW taboo is imperative. But stopping there only ensures that Syrians will continue to die another day, another way.

On the Iranian diplomatic front, Obama has an unexpected second chance to pursue the path of engagement, thanks in part to an exchange of letters with newly elected president Hassan Rouhani. Tehran, seeking relief from oppressive sanctions, has signaled an apparent willingness to curb its enrichment activities. Significantly, Rouhani seems to be operating with [the endorsement](#) of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khomeini. Obama may even meet his Iranian counterpart on the margins of UNGA. But his speech from the podium offers an important public opportunity to describe the U.S.

vision of—and preconditions for—rapprochement between the United States and Iran after thirty-four years of estrangement. Obama’s task will be to balance firmness on the nuclear issue (and Iranian support for terrorism) with the promise of normalization and its benefits if Iran comes in from the cold.

Whenever a U.S. president steps to the podium in New York, the audience that matters is as much domestic as foreign. No gambler by temperament, Obama has laid major wagers on diplomacy with Syria and Iran. The domestic political stakes are high, as are the prospects for failure. Were UNSC diplomacy to collapse over Syria, the president can plausibly claim that he went “the extra mile” for peace before adopting a unilateral (or “coalition of the willing”) approach outside the UN.

The president also faces domestic risks with Iran. Having been burned once before, Obama will be pilloried by critics as a congenital naïf if talks collapse. But it is a wager the president cannot avoid, for it presents the best opportunity for a nuclear deal with Teheran that he is likely to see. And in diplomacy, as in much of life, nothing ventured, nothing gained.

[Stewart M. Patrick](#) - Senior Fellow and Director, Program on International Institutions and Global Governance.

[Article 2.](#)

NYT

Give Iran a Chance

Hooman Majd

September 23, 2013 -- What is striking about traveling to Iran these days, less than a couple of months since the inauguration President Hassan Rouhani, is how little seems to have changed since the latter years of the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was perhaps the most destructive force in Iranian politics in a generation, reviled in the West for his anti-Semitic remarks and at home for his vainglory and destruction of the nation’s economy.

A little below the surface, of course, there are differences, from the less conspicuous presence of the gasht-e-ershad, the morality police, to a

gradual easing of some social restrictions. But wariness remains, as if the political clouds and the rumble of thunder auguring calamity are permanent fixtures in the Iranian sky — winds of change, stiff breezes really, notwithstanding.

There is little of the laughter and joy and celebration that the world witnessed when Rouhani defeated the favorites of the Islamic system in the presidential election this summer; instead, there are questions. Can he, or will he be allowed to, deliver on his campaign promises? Can he fix the economy without a rapid rapprochement with the West? Is the West even interested in engagement, or would it prefer to bring Persia to its knees, for the second time in a hundred years?

Rouhani campaigned, much like his American counterpart five years ago, on a platform of hope and change. But few Iranians are naïve enough to believe that change will be easy, not in the Islamic Republic, where bureaucratic entropy butts heads with a political system seemingly designed to confound not just foreigners but any attempts at real reform. But Iranians remain guardedly hopeful, and so should we who do not have to live under the strictest sanctions regime imposed on Iran since the birth of the Islamic republic, or with an economy in tatters, sky-high unemployment and severely restricted civil liberties. Hopeful that what they — and we — are witnessing, from Rouhani's speeches challenging the status quo, to his cabinet members' breaking of taboos, to the apparent and sudden willingness of the regime to engage in reasonable behavior, is not a chimera but a sign that the Islamic Revolution has finally grown up. In Rouhani many Iranians see a man they need not revere, but rather a man they must support because he echoes the desires of the people. That he enjoys, as he has declared and as his top advisers affirmed to me in his office in Tehran, the full support of the one center of power — the supreme leadership — that could silence that voice, is apparent to any thinking Iranian. The only caveat is that the Rouhani administration believes that the time for comprehensive engagement with the West, and for closing the wounds of hostility, is limited — and that it is now.

It is tempting to believe that Iran's sudden openness to compromise on its nuclear program, its easing of social restrictions, and even its surprising openness to sitting down with the Great Satan is due solely to escalating pressure and threats. But the Obama administration should be mindful that

even if that were true a continuation of a strict policy toward Iran could derail a negotiated settlement on the nuclear issue but also the Rouhani presidency.

The wolves in Tehran may have retreated into their dens, but they remain ready to pounce at Rouhani's first misstep. As the president intimated recently, in essence there is only one thing he now requires for an eventual conclusion to negotiations over the scope of Iran's nuclear program — and that is “respect” from the West.

Of course to Iran respect is not just abandoning the “language of threats,” as he said at his inauguration, but a prerequisite for fulfilling the hopes of his people and enshrining the change he has promised. What respect means in relation to Iran's “rights” is what will be on the table at the next negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 countries: the United States, Russia, China, Britain, France, plus Germany.

For almost 35 years, rhetoric from the United States and Iran has played a far too important role in determining relations between them, to the detriment of their people. It is unnecessary, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel worries, for President Obama or any other leader for that matter, to believe Rouhani's words. It is unnecessary for any Western leader to personally like Rouhani, or to like the Islamic republic's political ideology. But during a week when two presidents who both embraced hope and change as candidates will cross paths (if not shake hands) at the United Nations, it would surely be a tragedy for one president who has already seen some of his own hopes evaporate to not give the other, and his people, at least a chance to keep theirs alive. Obama has nothing to lose, really, except hope itself.

Hooman Majd is author of “The Ayatollahs’ Democracy: An Iranian Challenge,” and of the forthcoming “The Ministry of Guidance Invites You to Not Stay: An American Family in Iran.”

[Article 3.](#)

Bloomberg

How Obama Was Checkmated by Iran

Fouad Ajami

Sep 23, 2013 -- "Down is up and up is down. I feel like we have passed through the looking glass and are looking back at a backwards world," a military historian of the modern Middle East wrote in a recent note to me about the hectic diplomacy over Syria and Iran. "Where did all the realists go? It's as though the Cold War never took place."

The logic of familiar things has been overturned. Iran President Hassan Rohani comes to New York for a meeting of the United Nations General Assembly preceded by a brilliant publicity campaign. There was an interview with NBC, with a female correspondent at that. There was an op-ed article under his [name](#) in the Washington Post. His foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, sent Rosh Hashanah greetings to Jews worldwide via Twitter.

The Iranian president stepped forth in the nick of time, right as the [Barack Obama](#) administration was reeling from the debacle of its Syria policy. We have been here before with the skilled and tenacious guild that runs the Iranian theocracy.

An attractive cleric with a winning smile, Mohammad Khatami, cultured and literate, preaching the notion of a "dialogue of civilizations," was elected president in a landslide in 1997; he was re-elected four years later. Great hopes were pinned on Khatami. He delivered an oration at the Washington National Cathedral, and his ascent was seen on both sides of the Atlantic as evidence of the mellowing of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's revolution of 1979.

But the hopes invested in Khatami were to no avail. [Iran](#) pushed on with its nuclear weapons program and with its bid for greater power in neighboring states. At home, a student rebellion animated by unmistakable liberal sentiments that broke out in 1999 was crushed without mercy.

Recalling Khatami

Khatami was either a man powerless to defend the movement or a faithful son of the Khomeini order who was given leeway by the regime's powers that be. He couldn't defy the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, or run afoul of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard.

The case is now being made that Rohani is no freelancer, that he is a player of standing in the regime, and that the olive branch he carries with him has the consent of the supreme leader himself. The regime has been humbled, brought low by draconian sanctions, this line of argument goes, and has

come to a reckoning with its weaknesses. There are serious and obvious flaws in this view.

These begin with Rohani's biography. As [pointed out](#) by Sohrab Ahmari in the Wall Street Journal, Rohani, who was secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council for 16 years, starting in 1989, "led the crackdown on a 1999 student uprising and helped the regime evade Western scrutiny of the nuclear-weapons program."

Indeed, from 2003 to 2005, Rohani was Iran's chief negotiator over the nuclear program. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, who once proclaimed that he hadn't become the king's first minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the empire, Rohani hasn't risen to the presidency of Iran to barter away the regime's nuclear assets.

The assertion of the Obama administration and its chorus that the theocracy is now at a low point in its fortunes can be turned on its head. Iran has been fighting a proxy war with the U.S. over [Syria](#), and can be said to have prevailed in that contest.

The regime of Bashar al-Assad hasn't fallen; in a moment of peril for the Syrian dictatorship, Iran dispatched the fighters of the Hezbollah militia deep into the war. They and the Revolutionary Guard turned the tide of war in Assad's favor.

Syria Rescued

The supreme leader and his lieutenants watched an American leader draw a "red line" in Syria, only to blink when it counted. Masters of chess -- didn't they invent the game? -- they had an exquisite sense of Obama's dilemma.

Rohani had the indecency of shedding crocodile tears for Syria in his Washington Post article, speaking of it as a "jewel of civilization" that had turned into a "scene of heartbreaking violence, including chemical weapons attacks." So much of this violence, he doubtless knew, has been the work of the Revolutionary Guard and Hezbollah, its Lebanese satrap. Iran's clerics have nothing to lose from [the diplomacy](#) entrusted to Rohani. They bought time for their nuclear program and for their client regime in Damascus. The theocracy has erected a deep structure of power. Men such as Rohani are dispensable. There is a tenaciousness to the theocracy's bid for power and to its survival instincts.

Let Obama have his boast about the efficacy of the economic sanctions imposed on Iran. The theocracy can live with that. Since its conquest of power in 1979, it has had the perfect level of enmity with the U.S. -- just enough to serve as the ideological glue of a regime built on paranoia and xenophobia without triggering a military campaign that could do it damage.

American officials now say that Iran can't draw comfort from the reticence of Obama on Syria, that American vigilance would be greater on Iran's nuclear assets than had been the case thus far over Syria's chemical weapons.

But on that diplomatic chessboard, and before a big crowd that has gathered to watch the protagonists in a standoff with high stakes, it is easy to see the American player being decisively outclassed. There is cunning aplenty in Persia, an eye for that exact moment when one's rival has been trapped.

Fouad Ajami is a senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution. He is the [author](#) of "The Syrian Rebellion," published by Hoover Press.

[Article 4.](#)

The National Interest

Beware the Smiling Cleric

[Michael Miner](#)

September 24, 2013 -- There are a few reasons to be optimistic about Iranian president Hassan Rouhani coming to New York. Fresh off a major electoral victory this summer, there is no time like the present for a reformist to meet and greet the Great Satan. Likewise, a face-to-face meeting with a card-carrying member of the Axis of Evil could be a Nixonian moment for President Barack Obama. Groundbreaking political discourse and a thawing of relations might be the first step toward a changed relationship that could remake a Middle and Near East torn asunder by a decade of war, conflict and intense political rhetoric. President Obama would be wise to explore any diplomatic options for Washington. But he should do so carefully and pragmatically, and consider the underlying drivers pushing Tehran to seek détente. Beneath the surface

are dynamics that more aptly define the political reality: deep economic and political fissures eroding Iran's carefully orchestrated system of government. Unlike in most democratic systems, President Rouhani is the constitutionally elected leader of a system that gives little to no real power to the Office of the President. As Khomeini did before him, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has the final say on all affairs of state, with the president relegated to being a steward of day-to-day affairs, with symbolic influence only as far as Khamenei allows. This backdoor approach bears little resemblance to the ideals of any modern republic. Iran's leadership has consistently favored the tools of authoritarianism, with less and less support for the democratic elements within this hybrid system of government. Yet they continue to utilize democratic tools of statecraft at times and places of their choosing. Indeed, no modern state could send a theocratic dictator to the United Nations and expect any weighty support beyond that from hardbought clientele. An elected individual, however, might be regarded as a palatable representative of the people of Iran and a legitimate leader with whom the West can do business. Rouhani is a consummate insider of the Iranian establishment. With experience in all aspects of foreign policy and wide bureaucratic support from regime loyalists and centrists like Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, there is no question he represents the interests of the system. This is a system bent on self-preservation, a system that was deeply shaken in the 2009 electoral protests and that has been focused on stabilization and empowering its guardians ever since. Political instability at home and economic pressure from sanctions are pushing them to the brink. Domestic and regional interests demand a half-hearted détente with the West to reinforce the system's weakening legitimacy in the eyes of its people at home and around the world. No system of government fundamentally based on either a monarchical or theocratic legal framework can last in the long-term. A track record suggesting otherwise will not stop the clerical establishment from trying.

Might Rouhani be viewed as a vital emissary of the stakeholders within this system? That is certainly the hope for diplomats and key decision makers congregating in New York. Despite all the negative elements of Iranian government, they hope that this still could be a breakthrough for relations. If both parties can put aside their own domestic politics and focus

on mutual interests at the international level, perhaps this common ground can lead to consensus on a host of issues that could benefit both states. This is a hopeful and positive approach, but one that should not be embraced absent careful consideration of the historical record. Reformist former president Mohammad Khatami spoke of a grand dialogue between civilizations, with little to show for it. Even the firebrand Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, arguably the most divisive figure in Iranian politics since 1979, could not make his boldest moves absent approval from Khamenei and his clerical brethren. If Rouhani can manage a more effective foreign policy without the consent of the system and Khamenei, it would be a revolutionary action in its own right.

There is little reason to believe Rouhani will be dramatically more effective than were Khatami or Ahmadinejad. He may be more active than Khatami and less combative than Ahmadinejad, but the final word still rests with Khamenei and his inner circle. They would not support any agenda that did not reinforce their position and strengthen allies on the home front. The system and its protectors are primarily concerned with self-preservation, and any American approach should zero in on that driving factor in their negotiations and remember that Tehran is playing to win the long game, not a short window of political opportunity. There is far more leverage available than any single issue suggests, and President Obama would be wise to consider all factors shaping the debate. Iran needs to make a deal and they need to make a deal now—otherwise economic and political vulnerabilities will come full circle. Historical lessons suggest that systemic interests are driving the decisions in Tehran, and any diplomat should be wary in their approach, as the stakes are much higher for Iran than for the United States. The clerics and their bureaucratic allies understand that time is not on their side, and any breathing room afforded to them at this moment can only strengthen their dominance over the Iranian people. President Obama should pursue all available diplomatic options with Rouhani and support agreements favorable for the United States, but also remember that if friends are indeed to be friends, they must be honest with each other.

Michael Miner is a Teaching Fellow at Harvard University, a member of the International Society for Iranian Studies, and the author of "The Coming Revolution: An Improbable Possibility – Systematic Governance in the Iranian State."

The Guardian

Iran: This time, the west must not turn its back on diplomacy

Mohammad Khatami

September 24 - As Hassan Rouhani, the president of the Islamic republic of Iran, prepares to deliver a speech on Tuesday to the UN general assembly, advocating "constructive engagement" with the world, I reflect on my own experience as president of this great country, and my attempts to promote dialogue among nations, instead of hostility.

At my suggestion, 2001 was named the UN Year of Dialogue Among Civilisations. But despite reaching a global audience, the message of dialogue barely penetrated the most intractable political dilemmas, either at home or abroad.

More than at any other time in history, events in the Middle East and north Africa have taken on global significance, and there is a great shift in the importance of this region. This transformation, which began with Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution – a surprise to many in the international community – intensified with the end of the cold war.

Today the Middle East has become a centre for new political, social and ideological forces as well as a site of collaboration and conflict with powers beyond the region. Almost all the problems facing the Middle East and north Africa today have international implications. Iran's nuclear issue is but one of these, and certainly not the biggest; but in addressing the Middle East's other problems, much depends on the manner in which this one is resolved.

In order to be successful, any dialogue must use the language of politics and diplomacy. President Rouhani's platform of prudence and hope is a practical translation of the idea of dialogue among nations into the realm of politics. And this is more necessary than ever at a time when a range of overlapping political crises are threatening global catastrophe.

With the initiative of Rouhani, who enjoys widespread support from almost all segments of Iranian society, I hope this country will succeed in steering

a path towards global dialogue.

The opportunity to diplomatically resolve differences between Iran and the west, including the impasse over the nuclear issue, presented itself many years ago during my presidency. That opportunity was missed, for reasons that are now public knowledge.

To understand why, one only needs read the memoirs of Jack Straw, then British foreign secretary, or Mohamed ElBaradei, then secretary general of the International Atomic Energy Agency – or indeed the memoirs of Rouhani, who was then the chief negotiator of the Iranian nuclear delegation.

More than a decade ago, although agreement appeared possible, diplomacy failed. After 9/11, the US initiated costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, with Iraq invaded on the false pretext that it was developing weapons of mass destruction. It is no surprise that, in this political atmosphere, diplomacy with Iran ended in failure.

Israel, too, sabotaged the chance for the west to reach an agreement with Iran, by injecting scepticism and doubt at the time. On the eve of Rouhani's speech at the UN, Israel has again begun a campaign to discredit him because it fears the end of tension between Iran and the west.

Those who are trapped by bitter experience make every effort to disrupt the progress of diplomacy once again. These people fail to realise a simple point about the relationship between domestic and foreign policy.

President Rouhani's government was elected by a society seeking positive change, at a time when Iran and the wider region was desperately in need of prudence and hope. This vote was not limited to a specific political camp; as well as many reformers, many political prisoners and a significant body of conservatives had a share in Rouhani's victory. For the first time there is an opportunity to create a national consensus above and beyond partisan factionalism – one that may address the political predicaments of the country, with an emphasis on dialogue and mutual understanding globally.

Explicit public support from the supreme leader of the Islamic republic provides Rouhani and his colleagues with the necessary authority for a diplomatic resolution of a number of foreign policy issues with the west, not just the nuclear issue.

A peace-seeking Iran can contribute as a willing partner not only to solving its own differences with the global powers, but also to overcoming some of the region's chronic political disputes. But it requires a degree of courage and optimism from the west to listen to the voices of the Iranian people who have been painfully targeted by unjust sanctions, which have threatened the very fabric of civil society and democratic infrastructures. Failure now to create an atmosphere of trust and meaningful dialogue will only boost extremist forces on all sides. The consequences of such a failure will be not only regional, but global. For a better world – for the Iranian people and the next generation across the globe – I earnestly hope that Rouhani will receive a warm and meaningful response at the United Nations.

Iran today is different from the Iran of years ago, and the consequences of the Islamic revolution are still playing out. Our positive and negative experiences of the past 16 years have added another dimension to the reforms that Rouhani is conducting at both domestic and international levels; they have enriched the Islamic republic's democratic capacities and added, I very much hope, to the experience of the international community. The Iranian people's vote for Rouhani and his agenda for change has provided an unrivalled and possibly unrepeatable opportunity for Iran, the west and all local and regional powers. With a foreign policy based on dialogue and diplomacy at the heart of the Middle East, we can imagine a better world for the east and the west – including the diplomatic resolution of Iran's nuclear issue, which is utterly feasible if there is goodwill and fairness.

Mohammad Khatami was president of the Islamic Republic of Iran from 1997 to 2005.

[Article 6.](#)

The Washington Post

Is Syria moving its chemical weapons?

[David Ignatius](#)

September 23, 2013 -- A high-level Syrian defector has provided a disturbing new account of Syrian chemical weapons operations — including an allegation that some of these weapons have been moved since Russia proposed [an international monitoring scheme](#) to destroy the toxic munitions.

The revelations came in a lengthy telephone interview Sunday with Brig. Gen. Zaher al-Sakat, who was a chemical-weapons specialist for the Syrian army until he defected to the rebels in March. Sakat spoke by Skype from a city in Jordan; he said he believes he is a target for assassination by the regime because of his disclosures.

U.S. officials appear to be skeptical of allegations that chemical weapons have been moved outside Syria, to Iraq or Lebanon, as claimed by Sakat and others. So it's best to treat those reports with caution. But Israeli officials are said to believe that the Syrian regime has been moving weapons in the country to areas of greater regime control, for reasons of security or, perhaps, concealment.

Sakat's most compelling information was his account of being ordered to use the toxic chemical phosgene in the Daraa area of southern Syria, a stronghold of rebel support, last year. The Syrian defector said that at the time he supervised chemical weapons for the Syrian army's Fifth Division, based in Daraa. He had been considered as a chemical weapons supervisor for the Damascus area, but that job was given to another officer.

Sakat was summoned last October by his commander, whom he named as Maj. Gen. Ali Hassan Ammar, and told to use phosgene to attack a region north of Daraa that included the villages of al-Sheikh, Maskin, al-Hrak and Buser al-Harir.

Sakat said that according to standard procedures, any such order for using toxic gas would have originated with top military and intelligence commanders, who make up what he called the "crisis management cell." The chain of command passes through Gen. Jamil Hassan, the chief of air force intelligence, whose bases Sakat said are often used to store the chemical stocks. The chain then passes to a group known as Unit 450, which coordinates logistics for chemical weapons, and to individual geographic commands, such as Unit 416 for Aleppo and Unit 417 for Damascus.

When handling the weapons, Sakat said he was instructed to use a simple word-substitution code, known as the “Khaled 4” template. An order to transport, say, sarin gas to a particular place would be conveyed with a phrase such as “Go bring the milk to Mohammed.”

Sakat, a Sunni Muslim, said he didn’t want to carry out the order to use phosgene against Sunni rebel civilians. So he said he dug a pit and buried the odorless toxic gas and dispersed a non-toxic substitute that was mostly a bleach-like compound. His commanders thought he had performed the mission as ordered.

After the feigned October attack, Sakat said he was summoned by his commander, Ammar, who proclaimed to a group of senior officers: “This is our hero who launched the chemical attack.” Sakat named a half-dozen Syrian officers who were present to hear this accolade.

It’s impossible to verify another claim made by Sakat that during the past two weeks the regime has sent chemical weapons east toward Iraq and west toward Lebanon. Sakat said planning for these movements began just before Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov’s Sept. 9 proposal for international control of Syrian chemical weapons, when Hafez Makhlouf, the Syrian chief of intelligence, met with representatives of Iranian and Iraqi intelligence in the Yafour district of Damascus.

Soon after the meeting, Sakat said, rebel intelligence sources spotted a convoy of specialized Mercedes and Volvo trucks moving east from Homs toward a village near Syria’s border with Iraq. The intelligence was provided by Syrian army defectors and an operative known as “Abu Mohammed the Octopus,” who briefly joined us by phone. The interview was arranged through representatives of the Syrian Support Group, a U.S.-based advocacy organization.

Sakat charged that another possible transfer of chemical weapons was made by a convoy of 22 trucks from Mezze military airport, southwest of Damascus, toward Lebanon. Just before reaching the frontier, the trucks veered north to the village of Kfer Yabous and then west along a smuggler’s route said to be used by Hezbollah. There’s reason to be skeptical that this transfer took place, since it could probably be monitored by Israel and would immediately make Hezbollah a target for attack. Sakat said chemical weapons had also been transferred recently to four other locations inside the country, but he didn’t identify them.

In a separate Skype conversation Sunday, a Syrian source inside the country said that chemical-weapons equipment had been moved recently from the Bahous Center for Scientific Research, in the area known as Berzeh, northeast of Damascus. The source, code-named “Ali,” said he didn’t know the destination.

[Article 7](#)

Tablet Magazine

Could the Failure of the Oslo Process Doom Israel’s Friendship With Jordan?

[Assaf David](#)

September 23, 2013 -- The two-decade-old formula of “two states for two peoples” is dead, and the Arab Spring witnessed its funeral. What seemed, less than three years ago, a powerful show of citizen agency throughout the region has instead devolved into uncertainty, bringing chaos to the doorstep not just of Israel but of the West Bank and Jordan as well.

Stuck in the eye of the storm, the Israeli-Palestinian-Jordanian triangle has weathered it in relative calm. Indeed, the crisis in Syria has driven Jordan and Israel back to each other’s arms—for now. More than at any time since the 1950s, Jordan’s Hashemite monarchy now depends on the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel for its security. However, the Syria contingency only conceals the harsh reality: A serious wedge—the collapse of the two-state solution—has widened the gap between Jordan and Israel to a point where the two states are ultimately locked in a zero-sum game. Since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, and up until Jordan’s disengagement from the West Bank in 1987, the two countries have shared the job of “managing” the Palestinian issue. Now, as leaders on both sides begin to internalize the death of a Palestinian state under the Oslo process, the critical observer realizes that the next confrontation will necessarily have to be between these two states. The winner will be the one who survives the resolution of the Palestinian “problem”—Israel, as a Jewish and democratic state, or Jordan, as a constitutional monarchy under Hashemite rule.

It hasn't always been like this. In fact, Israel and Jordan have shared interests since their establishment: Western leanings and mutual objection to the idea of Palestinian nationalism and sovereignty. The Israeli-Jordanian strategic partnership has survived numerous tests, including Arab-Israeli wars and repeated Palestinian uprisings. However, the relationship between the two states has lately deteriorated for a number of reasons, the main one being the recurrent failure of the Israelis and the Palestinians to move forward with a peace settlement.

For years, it's been widely accepted that the Oslo framework remains the best means of securing durable statehood for both Jews and Arabs between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean. However, the failure of the Camp David talks in 2000, the second Palestinian uprising, the aftermath of Israel's disengagement from Gaza in 2005, and the widening Hamas-Fatah rift rendered the two-state solution unlikely to materialize in the eyes of many in Israel, no matter how crucial it is to securing the Jewish-democratic nature of the country. The eruption of the Arab Spring has prompted Israel's political and military elite to hunker down, with a "wait-and-see" attitude. Increasingly, for the Palestinians in the West Bank, ending Israel's military occupation is much more pressing than establishing a "state," per se. Demilitarized and completely dependent on its neighbors, a Palestinian state would in any realistic circumstance look more like upgraded self-rule rather than true sovereignty. In other words, Israel needs the two-state solution in order to secure its vital interests but won't move forward with it, and the Palestinians can secure their vital interests without a state on only 22 percent of Mandatory Palestine. That leaves the Jordanians at risk of ending up the biggest losers.

Jordan today is a long way from where it was in 1993, or 1999, or even 2008, the last time negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians appeared to be going anywhere. The regional and the domestic challenges that it faces are enormous, and the Hashemite regime depends on the dedicated support of Saudi Arabia, the United States, and to some extent Israel in order to survive.

The biggest challenge to the country's stability today is the influx of [refugees](#) [1] from Syria. An estimated 550,000 refugees have crossed the border so far, swamping the country's already-fragile civic infrastructure. The Al Za'tari refugee camp, containing only a small portion of these

refugees, is the second-largest refugee camp in the world and the fourth-most-populous city in Jordan. It is a humanitarian nightmare for its dwellers and a focus of criminal and terrorist activity in the eyes of the Jordanian authorities.

The bigger question for the Hashemites is what will happen if these people remain permanently in Jordan, changing the makeup and balance of Jordan's population and turning the Transjordanians, the historic backbone of the regime, into an even smaller minority. Previous waves of refugees—the Palestinians in 1948, 1967, and 1990-1991 and Iraqis from 2003 to 2007—have made the Transjordanians highly apprehensive of the dangers to their socioeconomic status and even national identity. Rather than strengthening support for the Hashemite monarchy, their anxiety has fed existing resentment toward the regime, which has been deadlocked over necessary political and economic reforms proposed by King Abdullah. So, Jordan desperately needs a Palestinian state in order to preserve its own “Jordanianness”—an issue that is not, in the end, of much concern to the Israelis. The Hashemites know that and cannot be comforted by the thought that in the event a Palestinian state fails to materialize, Israel may eventually have to choose between being Jewish or democratic. If no Palestinian state is created and worse comes to worst, Israel will take care of its own interests even at the expense of its Hashemite allies.

In fact, there are signs that this is already happening. A growing number of Israeli conservatives believe the solution to the Palestinian issue lies in officially recognizing Jordan as the Palestinian state. Naftali Bennett, who chairs the conservative HaBayit HaYehudi party, [called](#) prior to the 2013 elections for annexing parts of the West Bank to Israel and leaving the rest for Jordan to grapple with—the idea being that it puts the onus on Jordan, and its Arab supporters, to accommodate the Palestinians, rather than on Israel. The general idea has become so acceptable that even [former top politicians](#) and [military generals](#) of the political mainstream are openly suggesting that Jordan at least take part in the administration of the Palestinian territories in order to help Israel end the occupation.

Jordan, at its own insistence, hasn't been party to the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations at all; indeed, its government routinely insists that only Israel and the Palestinians be at the table, even though the outcome affects its own vital interests, particularly where the borders, the question of refugees,

and the final status of Jerusalem are concerned. The regime's sensitivity to the confederation debate in Israel only reflects the questions it faces domestically: Can Jordan secure its interests in the final status agreement without being part of it? Can it secure the stabilization of the West Bank without taking part in its administration? Isn't the kingdom already a de facto Jordanian-Palestinian confederation given that at least half its population is of Palestinian origin, and that these people will remain in Jordan under any conceivable settlement with Israel? These questions are constantly debated in Jordan, suggesting that the very idea of a Jordanian-Palestinian path to resolution of post-1967 issues isn't entirely out of the question.

Indeed, in 2005, Abdul Salam al-Majali, Jordan's former prime minister and a signatory to the 1994 peace agreement with Israel, presented a detailed plan for a Jordanian-Palestinian confederation that would encompass both banks of the Jordan River. Majali even [discussed](#) his plan with political figures in Israel and the Palestinian Authority, with the tacit approval of King Abdullah. The plan stirred a heated debate in Jordan, leading Abdullah to believe that it was still too sensitive; he subsequently killed it but could not kill the public debate. However, in Israel, the proponents of Israeli-Palestinian peace are deaf to the Jordanian domestic debate, and the opponents of such peace simply want to throw the Palestinian problem into Jordan's yard. Therefore, no real dialogue exists between Israeli and Jordanian intellectuals and NGOs, not to mention governments, on the confederation issue.

A future confederation between a Palestinian entity and Jordan is neither futile nor impractical, especially not when compared to the complications obviously presented by the two-state "solution." It seems that all the parties involved might, under some circumstances and preconditions, entertain it. The most important of these for Jordan and the Palestinians is that the confederation would not be the dream scenario of the Israeli right wing: unilateral annexation of parts of the West Bank to Israel and de facto presumption that Jordan will be drawn into managing the remaining Palestinian territory to preserve order. That scenario would make both Jordan and the Palestinians Israel's worst enemy—something Israel's leaders don't really want, either.

A confederation would not be an easy way out for any of the three parties. To get Jordan in, Israel would likely have to agree to something close to the 1967 borders, potentially with a land swap on a one-to-one basis, which would mean evacuating Jewish settlers from the West Bank and giving up on East Jerusalem. However, the confederation might be easier for all the parties to accept at this point than any of the various scenarios involving an independent Palestine.

Since the problem has always been an Israeli-Palestinian-Jordanian one, the solution will have to be trilateral too—but all three parties are practically paralyzed. No effective outside pressure looms in the foreseeable future. Conservative political parties in Israel, as well as the Israeli government, live under the false impression that the status quo ante is tenable and at the moment have the comfort of knowing that the Palestinian problem is relatively less urgent than Syria, Iran's nuclear program, and the ongoing merry-go-round of post-Arab Spring turmoil in Egypt and elsewhere. Israeli conservatives hardly give a second thought to the immorality of the occupation—and hardly worry about the inevitability of forced solution in the event that no action is taken by the parties. Does this mean that catastrophe is imminent for Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinians? Hopefully the answer will be no.

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[Article 8.](#)

The Atlantic

Malcolm Gladwell: Guru of the Underdogs

Tina Rosenberg

[David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants](#)

By Malcolm Gladwell

Little, Brown

Sep 18 2013 -- So David had the advantage all along. His victory was not a miracle; the slingshot was the superior weapon. Goliath's size and heavy armor—his assurance of victory in a close-contact battle—guaranteed that

he couldn't lumber out of the way of a rock traveling 34 meters a second. David won by turning Goliath's great advantage into his undoing. Therein lies an exhilarating moral, says Malcolm Gladwell, and he proceeds to spin illustrative tales about "underdogs, misfits, and the art of battling giants," as the subtitle of his latest book puts it.

Gladwell, who half a decade ago brought us tales of top dogs in [Outliers: The Story of Success](#), is still worrying the same bone: Who gets ahead, and how? His own story exemplifies one tried-and-true formula: keep asking that question and offering inspirational anecdotes as answers. In *Outliers*, he promoted what he has called "an amazingly hopeful and uplifting idea." Don't be fooled by the meritocratic myth that success is the product of God-given qualities such as intelligence and talent. In fact, Gladwell argued, the achievements that we chalk up to natural ability or individual resolve owe a great deal to factors we underappreciate: historical timing, the career paths seized by immigrant parents, family wealth, the opportunity to put in thousands of hours of practice. Society has more control over who succeeds than we imagine; our talent pool could be much bigger than it is.

As plenty of reviewers pointed out, there was a flip side to Gladwell's upbeat message. For genetic determinism, he swapped in cultural determinism—hardly the liberation it seemed. The hidden factors he played up in his account of success are distributed, if anything, even less fairly than talent and intelligence. And the income and class distinctions that govern their allocation are rapidly becoming more inequitable.

But Gladwell is not one to be daunted. In *David and Goliath*, he's armed with fables chosen to dispel such fatalism. What we assume to be entrenched advantages, he says, don't always offer the edge we may expect: top dogs beware. What's more, personal hurdles, family troubles, social inequities—though they may look like disadvantages—can propel misfits further than risk-averse meritocrats dream. In his pages, the underdogs win, mostly by dint of the sort of upstart individual agency he downplayed in *Outliers*. Of course they do. That's why Gladwell includes their stories. Yet you'll look in vain for reasons to believe that these exceptions prove any real-world rules about underdogs. In life, it's hard to turn obstacles into blessings, and giants are by now adept at the art of battling insurgents.

The story most likely to resonate with Gladwell's audience addresses the plight of anxious overachievers, rather than the predicament of the truly disadvantaged. Always at the top of her class in her public high school outside Washington, ■■■■■, Caroline Sacks (a pseudonym) had pursued an avid interest in science since childhood. She chose to attend Brown rather than the University of Maryland—and because she went to a great university instead of a good one, Gladwell argues, she ended up abandoning her goal of a science degree.

She “had never not excelled” academically. But at Brown, her organic-chemistry class gave her “just this feeling of overwhelming inadequacy.” Sacks dropped science and switched to liberal arts. If ■■■■■ gone to Maryland, Gladwell says, she would have been spared a crisis of confidence and never would have veered away from a field that she loved—and that promised a more lucrative future.

The moral of the story is not exactly that underdogs will triumph: quite the contrary. To switch to another of Gladwell's favorite metaphors, the point is that being a big fish is very helpful, even when picking the small pond means forgoing the high-status allure of the big pond. Second-rate schools can promote first-rate achievement, whereas more-selective environments can squelch it. For example, Gladwell cites a study showing that, in the first six years after receiving their doctorate, research economists published more, and in more-prestigious journals, if they had been standouts at a bottom-tier school than if they had been not-quite-stars at the best schools. It's a bracing corrective to our hyper-meritocratic obsession with the college rat race. (And if Gladwell's right, I can save myself several hundred grand when application time rolls around for my three kids.) But more to the point, in a book about underdogs, what does Gladwell's discussion of Sacks's story really have to say to those with further to climb? In an endnote, he teases out the implications of the idea for affirmative action—a subject he also addressed in *Outliers*, in a notably different spirit. There he invoked a University of Michigan Law School study that tracked the fates of some of the school's minority students, whose undergraduate GPAs and scores on the LSAT tended to be lower than those of their white peers. Graduates went on to do every bit as well as their white colleagues in the real world—evidence for Gladwell that in elite-school admissions, the academic ranking of qualified applicants is

irrelevant. Here he cites a study comparing two groups of black students who got into elite law schools thanks to affirmative action. One group enrolled, and the other instead ended up at second-choice schools. The students who attended the good-but-not-great schools were far more likely to graduate, pass the bar, and become lawyers, Gladwell reports. Now he emphasizes that special boosts may backfire.

If there is a lesson here, it is to be cautious when deriving neat rules about “the Power of Context,” a phrase from Gladwell’s earlier book [The Tipping Point](#). He doesn’t square Sacks’s story with evidence of the perils of so-called undermatching, when students aim lower than their qualifications would suggest. We don’t learn whether Sacks needed financial aid, but many high-performing, low-income students never consider applying to schools like Brown. Instead they go to nonselective schools close to home. But there they do worse than comparable students do at elite schools, and they drop out at higher rates, largely—though not only—because of cost. Among other things that a place like Brown can offer is an aid package that may make the tuition more affordable than even in-state prices.

Sacks’s tale doesn’t line up with Gladwell’s other stories either, which converge on the opposite theme. She dropped out of her difficult science major at Brown because she felt inadequate. Many successful entrepreneurs, we learn from *David and Goliath*, are dyslexic and felt stupid growing up. But they didn’t quit or lose confidence. They struggled, developing compensatory strategies that spurred them onward. In the same vein, Gladwell reports that a disproportionate number of eminent people—including British prime ministers and American presidents—lost a parent in childhood. It’s yet more grist for the romantic view that early wounds beget winners. Except when they don’t: as Gladwell notes, almost in passing, prisoners are also far more likely than the general population to have suffered that blow as children.

Gladwell calls Sacks’s troubles an “undesirable difficulty ... But there are times and places where struggles have the opposite effect.” Which times and places? How do we distinguish a desirable difficulty from an undesirable one? What turns an underdog into a prime minister rather than a gang member? Gladwell doesn’t attempt to explain—but we know the answer. What can transform a handicap into an advantage is having other advantages. If you are intelligent and blessed with loving parents able to

provide you with the right education, and you find sources of confidence to draw on, then it's possible you could end up like Gary Cohn, one of the dyslexics Gladwell profiles: he's the president of Goldman Sachs. But just because many successful people struggled growing up doesn't mean, alas, that many people who grew up struggling are successful.

As for the art of battling giants, by now the secrets of insurgents' success are more widely known—not least to the giants—than Gladwell gives signs of appreciating in his chapters on armies, governments, and political movements. The moral of the stories he tells may have been lost on the Philistines, but has since sunk in: more is not always more. Gladwell tells how the British Army fueled rather than quelled the Irish Republican Army's defiance with its heavy hand in Northern Ireland in the 1970s. He describes civil-rights activists in Birmingham using political jujitsu—turning an opponent's overwhelming force back against him—when they lured Bull Connor into setting attack dogs on peaceful teenagers, producing photos that appalled the world.

But that was half a century ago, and the tactics have been refined—and countered and codified—since then. “Sometimes, the More Force Is Used, the Less Effective It Is,” says The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual, warning that disproportionate power can undermine political legitimacy. The advice, published by the military in 2006, may not always be followed, but it is a major lesson of the manual—surely the very definition of conventional wisdom. Claiming the political high ground is the goal, which is indeed one that the Davids of this world can achieve with flexibility, creativity, patience, and intense commitment. But it is much easier for the Goliaths to do so. Superior force is a disadvantage only because it often blinds a giant to all other strategies. Deployed without subtlety, it favors the enemy. Yet disproportionate power, guns, and money, when used intelligently and in the service of building legitimacy, are rather effective. The race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong—Gladwell is right about that. Betting on their victory, though, is still the way to go.

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