



European Attitudes toward Iran

A Summary of International Opinion Research

Smart power draws on both hard and soft power.

It is an approach that underscores the necessity of a **strong military**, but also invests heavily in **alliances, partnerships, and institutions** at all levels to expand American **influence** and establish the **legitimacy** of American action.

-Richard L. Armitage & Joseph S. Nye
Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

Executive summary

This document summarizes international attitudes toward Iran and the Iranian nuclear program. It draws from high-quality public opinion survey resources to highlight European, Israeli, Turkish, Arab, and Iranian perspectives.

- The Obama Administration is using *smart power*¹ to counter the Iranian nuclear threat; successful use of this strategy hinges upon engaging and influencing allies, particularly regional partners in Europe.
- Awareness of international public opinion can help EUCOM frame engagement dialogues, and may foreshadow the level of cooperation likely to be offered by strategic partners.

| Country/region | Public opinion survey results | Contextualization |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| EU (European Union) Nations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Attitudes toward Iran in EU nations are consistently unfavorable (i.e., low rates of favorable opinions, and high rates of unfavorable opinions from 2006-2011). ➤ While majorities of Europeans are concerned about a nuclear Iran, few favor taking military action to prevent this outcome. ➤ EU nations express support for imposing an oil embargo on Iran until it halts its nuclear program. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Although there is little European tolerance for a nuclear Iran, EU nations, especially Greece, Italy, Spain, and Turkey are highly dependent upon Iran for energy resources. ➤ The EU supports, in principle, an oil embargo against Iran. Europe's reliance upon Iran for oil complicates prospects for sustained commitment to economic sanctions against Iran. ➤ The IMF predicts that EU nations will face oil price increases of up to 30 percent if Iranian oil imports are banned;² there is also the potential for energy shortages unless alternatives to Iranian oil can be secured. |
| Turkey | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Turkish approval of Iran varies in time, reflecting an uneasy relationship between the nations. ➤ There is little public support in Turkey (20 percent) for imposing economic sanctions on Iran. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Recent statements from Ankara confirm "special relations" between Turkey and Iran; this and other diplomatic overtures suggest that improved ties may be possible in the future. |
| Russia | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Russian opinion of Iran is more positive than that of any other nation surveyed in the EUCOM AOR; Iranian public opinion toward Russia is negative. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Russia seeks to build a strategic business partnership with Iran to reinforce economic and natural resource interests. ➤ Collectively, Iran and Russia control more than 20 percent of the world's oil reserves, and nearly half of the world's gas reserves. A strong strategic and economic partnership between Iran and Russia might change the dynamics of the Middle East. |
| Israel | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ In Israel, where support is highest, public opinion is evenly split on taking military action against Iranian nuclear facilities; less than half support and nearly the same percent oppose (41/39 percent) military action. ➤ In Israel, there is widespread public support (65 percent) for a nuclear-free Middle East, even though this means that Israel must also give up its nuclear weapons. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The logic of current policy response to the Iranian issue is being questioned by the Israeli public and security experts alike. ➤ Recently, the idea of breaking the Iranian nuclear impasse by establishing a "nuclear-free-zone" in the Middle East has begun to gain international political momentum. |
| Iran | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Iranian attitudes toward EU nations, the US, and Russia are negative; Iranian approval of Turkey is higher than that of any other European nation, the US, or Russia. ➤ Less than a quarter of Iranians consider nuclear weapon development to be a top governmental priority; "improving the economy" is a much higher priority. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ One third of Iranian attitudes toward the international community are undecided; effective use of diplomacy, strategic messaging, and other soft power strategies could significantly improve public perceptions of the US and EUCOM nations. ➤ The nuclear weapons program is not a top priority for the majority of Iranians, even though it is for the Iranian government. |

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The US is using *smart power* to isolate a nuclear Iran

The US has adopted security policy that emphasizes multilateral economic sanctions and defense cooperation to deter Iranian nuclear weapons development. If consistently and internationally enforced, diplomatic and economic sanctions are likely to reduce Iran’s social, economic, and political stability and weaken its regional influence.³ The intent of this smart power strategy is clear; Iran will be isolated from the global system until it abandons its nuclear program.

Survey resources used in this document

The German Marshall Fund - Transatlantic Trends, 2011

University of Maryland & Zogby International - Arab Public Opinion Survey, 2010

Gallup, 2011

Haaretz-Dialog, 2011

Program on International Policy - Attitudes Polling Iranian Public Opinion, 2007

Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2011

Levada Center, 2006

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Success of this multilateral security strategy hinges upon engaging and influencing allies, particularly regional partners in Europe and across the EUCOM AOR. Awareness of international public opinion can help EUCOM decision makers frame the engagement dialogue, and may foreshadow the level of cooperation that can be possible with strategic partners.

Public opinion research offers an important signal of international attitudes

This document draws from multiple, high-quality survey resources to summarize international public opinion toward Iran and the Iranian nuclear program. These survey data also identify concerns and interests that are representative of the popular constituencies of many EUCOM partner nations; awareness of these national perspectives may provide signposts that suggest the contours and borders of future strategic cooperation.

International attitudes toward Iran

Graphs below display attitudes toward Iran in select EUCOM nations.⁵ Blue lines represent favorable attitudes; red represents unfavorable. Although the spans of these time series are relatively short (2006-11), these graphs present public attitudes toward Iran that are consistently unfavorable (i.e., low rates of favorable opinions, and high rates of unfavorable opinions).

| | | |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| <p>EU Nations</p> | <p>Figure 1. Attitudes in EU Nations</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Attitudes toward Iran are consistently negative in EU Nations over time. ➤ From 2006 to 2011, public approval of Iran averaged 18 percent in EU nations; disapproval averaged 72 percent. |
| <p>Turkey</p> | <p>Figure 2. Attitudes in Turkey</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Attitudes toward Iran are negative in Turkey, but the time trend is unclear. ➤ Turkish approval ratings of Iran are far less negative than in the EU, but they are variable and reflect an uneasy relationship between the two nations. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Although opinion becomes less positive over time (i.e., approval tends to decrease; disapproval tends to increase), recent statements confirming “special relations” between the nations suggest that improved ties may be likely in the future.⁴ |
| <p>Russia</p> | <p>Figure 3. Attitudes in Russia</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Russian perception of Iran is the most positive of any other nation in the EUCOM AOR (approval and disapproval ratings average 39 percent). ➤ Russia’s approval rating may be reflective of the proposed strategic business partnership articulated by the Kremlin in which Iran and Russia mutually reinforce their economic (i.e., natural resource) interests. |
| <p>Israel</p> | <p>*Israeli attitudes were not available for the full time series range presented in Figures 1-3; results for Israel reflect attitudes for a single year, 2011, only.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Attitudes toward Iran are extremely negative in Israel; in a 2011 public opinion poll, Israeli approval of Iran was the lowest of any nation in the EUCOM AOR, at 6 percent. Disapproval was extremely high, averaging 91 percent. |

Iranian opinion of the international community

Just as international attitudes toward Iran tend to be mainly negative, the reciprocal is also true: Iranian attitudes toward the EU, Turkey, and Russia are negative (see Figure 4 below).⁶

| <p>Iranian attitudes toward EU nations are negative</p> | <p>Iranian opinion of EU nations is strongly negative. Individual disapproval ratings for the UK and Germany (62 and 57 percent, respectively) are much higher than the average for EU nations (49 percent).</p> | <div data-bbox="966 472 1494 1087"> <p>Figure 4. Iranian Attitudes toward the International Community (2011)</p> <table border="1"> <caption>Data for Figure 4: Iranian Attitudes toward the International Community (2011)</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Entity</th> <th>Approve (%)</th> <th>Disapprove (%)</th> <th>Don't know (%)</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>EU</td> <td>12</td> <td>48</td> <td>38</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Turkey</td> <td>24</td> <td>34</td> <td>41</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Russia</td> <td>13</td> <td>52</td> <td>35</td> </tr> <tr> <td>US</td> <td>8</td> <td>65</td> <td>27</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> </div> <p><small>*Iranian opinion of the US is included in this chart to provide an additional reference point for comparison.</small></p> | Entity | Approve (%) | Disapprove (%) | Don't know (%) | EU | 12 | 48 | 38 | Turkey | 24 | 34 | 41 | Russia | 13 | 52 | 35 | US | 8 | 65 | 27 |
|--|---|---|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----|----|----|----|--------|----|----|----|--------|----|----|----|----|---|----|----|
| Entity | Approve (%) | | Disapprove (%) | Don't know (%) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| EU | 12 | | 48 | 38 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Turkey | 24 | 34 | 41 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Russia | 13 | 52 | 35 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| US | 8 | 65 | 27 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <p>Iranian attitudes toward Turkey are negative, however Iranians are more approving and less disapproving of Turkey than any other nation in the EUCOM AOR</p> | <p>Turkish and Iranian opinions of each other are largely balanced; each nation reports a 24 percent approval rating of the other in 2011. Overall, Turkey scores the highest approval rating (and the lowest disapproval rating, at 34 percent) of any other European nation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Barring a major political gaffe, positive sentiment between Turkey and Iran is likely to continue and/or increase, especially in light of ongoing efforts between the two nations to deepen economic linkages. | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <p>Iranian attitudes toward Russia are negative, even slightly more so than toward other EU nations</p> | <p>In Russia and Iran, mutual perception is uneven; Iran is viewed favorably by nearly one half (42 percent in 2011) of Russians, whereas just 13 percent of Iranians view Russia positively (and more than half of the population disapproves of Russia).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Russia’s approval rating may be reflective of the proposed strategic business partnership articulated by the Kremlin in which Iran and Russia mutually reinforce their economic (i.e., natural resource) interests. ➤ The reason for Iran’s low opinion of Russia is less obvious, but may be linked to Russia’s historical treatment of Muslims and Muslim interests in Azerbaijan and Georgia, and current policies toward Chechnya and other Muslim nations in the Russian sphere of interest. | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Although Iranian public opinion is critical of EU nations, Russia, and Turkey, these negative attitudes coexist with a large number of “undecided” or “refused” responses (ranging from 25 to 41 percent). This non-response is not inconsequential; recent work in the fields of psychology and neuroscience finds that undecided respondents are not unable to make clear comparisons between choices, but rather are often more willing than others to take their time when deliberating among options.⁷ Undecided responses may, therefore, represent opportunities to use diplomacy, strategic messaging, and other soft power strategies to improve Iranian perceptions of the international community.

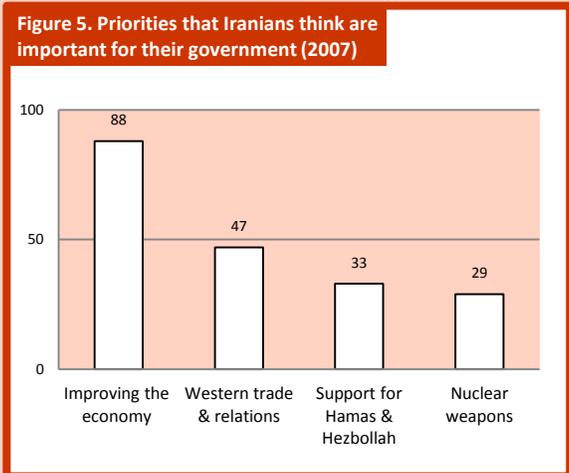
- A large percentage of Iranians report undecided opinions of Russia; Russia’s continued economic and diplomatic efforts have the potential to considerably improve the nation’s reputation with the Iranian public.
- A similarly large percentage of Iranian respondents are also undecided in their appraisals of Turkey. Similar to efforts in Russia, diplomacy may boost positive sentiment, increasing opportunities for future cooperation and partnership between the two nations. Balancing allegiances with the West and the East, however, often precludes taking a diplomatic position. Turkish policy decisions that are Western-leaning may send undecided public opinion in the other direction.

- The margin is smaller than with European nations, Turkey, and Russia, but a large number of Iranians also hold undecided opinions of the US. Use of diplomacy, strategic messaging, and other soft power strategies (especially economically-oriented opportunities) could significantly improve Iranian public perceptions of the US.

Global attitudes toward the Iranian nuclear development program

Europeans, like Americans, Israelis, and Russians, are opposed to the prospect of a nuclear Iran. In Turkey, Iran, and the Middle East, however, perspectives are different; attitudes toward the Iranian nuclear weapons program range from indifference (Turkey) to moderate public support (Iran), to strong belief in Iran’s right to pursue nuclear weapons (Arab opinion in the Middle East). Global attitudes toward Iran’s nuclear development program are presented below.⁸

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| EU Nations | Most Europeans (75 percent) are concerned about Iran acquiring nuclear weapons and are reluctant to accept the prospect of a nuclear Iran. |
| Turkey | Opinion in Turkey does not match that of the EU and US; only 38 percent of Turkish respondents express concern about Iran’s nuclear ambitions; 51 percent of respondents were unconcerned about the issue. In a related question, 25 percent of Turkish respondents supported taking a passive stance that accepts a nuclear Iran (see also Figure 6). |
| Russia | The majority of Russians (63 percent) express concern about Iran’s nuclear weapons program. |
| Iran | <p>A majority of Iranians (52 percent) also favor the development of nuclear weapons and believe that the people of Iran would live in a safer world if Iran possessed nuclear weapons.</p> <p>However, popular opinion and governmental priorities are mismatched with respect to the importance of the nuclear program. While the Iranian regime appears committed to pursuing its nuclear program, only 24 percent of Iranians consider nuclear weapon development a top governmental priority; “improving the economy” and “Western trade and relations” are much higher priorities, at 88 percent and 47 percent, respectively.</p> |
| Middle East | Arab public opinion provides a starker contrast. An overwhelming majority (77 percent) of Arabs in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Morocco, Lebanon, and Jordan support Iran’s right to pursue its nuclear program, and more than half (57 percent) believe that Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons would be “positive” for the Middle East. |



Public support for policy options in response to the Iranian nuclear program

On the one hand, the prospect of responding militarily to the Iranian nuclear threat is universally unpopular, but on the other, there is little international tolerance for a nuclear Iran. Few Europeans and Americans (6 percent and 8 percent, respectively) support taking a passive stance that “accepts that Iran could acquire nuclear weapons.” Instead, Europeans and Americans prefer economic incentives and economic sanctions to halt Iran’s nuclear ambitions. International attitudes toward responses to Iran’s nuclear research program are presented below.⁹

| | | |
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| | <p>EU Nations</p> <p>While a majority of Europeans are worried about a nuclear Iran, very few (6 percent) favor taking military action to prevent this outcome.</p> <p>Few Europeans (6 percent) support taking a passive stance that “accepts that Iran could acquire nuclear weapons.”</p> | <p>Figure 6. Response to Iran's Nuclear Program (2011)</p> |
| | <p>Turkey</p> <p>In Turkey there is very little support for a military response to Iran (4 percent). One quarter of Turkish respondents (25 percent) support taking a passive stance that accepts a nuclear Iran. In a follow-on question that imagined total failure of non-military options, an even higher percentage of respondents (33 percent) favored accepting a nuclear Iran.</p> | |
| | <p>Russia</p> <p>The military option is also unpopular among Russians; few (7 percent) support a US military response to stop Iran's nuclear program.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Russian political posture mirrors this popular opposition, as evidenced by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov's strongly worded warning that “a military operation against Iran would be a grave mistake, a brutal miscalculation, [with] far-reaching [consequences] for regional and global security.”¹⁰ ➤ More pointedly, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov predicted that a military attack would cause instability, both internally in the form of massive refugee flows entering Russia from Iran, and regionally as a strike would “fan the flames” of sectarian tension in the Middle East.¹¹ | |
| | <p>Israel</p> <p>In Israel, where support for military action is strongest, public opinion is evenly split; less than half (41 percent) of Israelis support, but nearly the same rate (39 percent) oppose, taking military action against Iranian nuclear facilities.</p> | |
| | <p>US</p> <p>In the US, support for taking military action against Iran is similarly low, but comparatively higher than EU nations at 14 percent.</p> | |

European dependence on Iranian oil tests the limits of multilateral sanctions

Throughout Europe, economic incentives and economic sanctions are preferred policy strategies to halt Iran's nuclear program. Europe's reliance upon Iranian energy resources highlights the difficult path required to ban Iranian oil imports. While Iran is likely to find other buyers for its excess energy resources, the IMF predicts that European nations will face oil price increases of up to 30 percent due to the Iranian embargo; there is also the potential for energy shortages unless alternatives to Iranian oil can be secured.

| | <p>EU Nations</p> <p>Roughly 35 percent of EU crude oil imports come from Iran.</p> <p>Several countries that are most dependent upon Iran for crude oil (Greece at 16 percent, and Italy and Spain at 13 percent each), are also some of the most affected by the current European economic crisis.</p> | <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>Percent of Iran's exports</th> <th>Percent of Total Crude imported</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>EU</td> <td>18</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Italy</td> <td>7</td> <td>13</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Spain</td> <td>6</td> <td>13</td> </tr> <tr> <td>France</td> <td>2</td> <td>4</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Ger.</td> <td>1</td> <td>1</td> </tr> <tr> <td>UK</td> <td><1</td> <td>1</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Neth.</td> <td>1</td> <td>2</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Others</td> <td>1</td> <td>1</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Turkey</td> <td>7</td> <td>51</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> | | Percent of Iran's exports | Percent of Total Crude imported | EU | 18 | | Italy | 7 | 13 | Spain | 6 | 13 | France | 2 | 4 | Ger. | 1 | 1 | UK | <1 | 1 | Neth. | 1 | 2 | Others | 1 | 1 | Turkey | 7 | 51 |
|--------|---|---|---------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------|----|----|--|-------|---|----|-------|---|----|--------|---|---|------|---|---|----|----|---|-------|---|---|--------|---|---|--------|---|----|
| | Percent of Iran's exports | | Percent of Total Crude imported | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| EU | 18 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Italy | 7 | 13 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Spain | 6 | 13 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| France | 2 | 4 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Ger. | 1 | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| UK | <1 | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Neth. | 1 | 2 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Others | 1 | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Turkey | 7 | 51 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | <p>Turkey</p> <p>Recently, Turkey warned that it would not support a ban on Iranian oil imports.¹³ This response is likely to be more pragmatic than political, as Turkey imports more than half (51 percent) of its crude oil from Iran.</p> <p>Turkey has been seeking alternative energy suppliers in Saudi Arabia, Russia, Azerbaijan, and West Africa to reduce its dependence on Iranian energy imports.¹⁴</p> | <p>Table 1. Iranian crude oil exports, Europe¹²</p> | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Already, realities of energy dependence have necessitated delays in the implementation of economic sanctions to allow heavily dependent European nations to secure alternate energy supplies. As of late January 2012, the EU committed in principle to banning Iranian oil; but, the reality of European reliance on Iranian oil has resulted in an estimated “six-month or more” delay in enacting this action.¹⁵

An EU-wide oil embargo places Russia in a unique and powerful position. As in Europe, public opinion in Russia is strongly supportive of taking a diplomatic approach to the Iranian nuclear program issue (79 percent). Yet, there is far less popular support (23 percent) for sanctioning Iran economically.¹⁶ This popular reluctance to introduce economic sanctions against Iran appears to line up with the Kremlin’s geopolitical and diplomatic pursuits, which emphasize development of a strategic economic alliance with Iran. Iranian isolation from the West presents a host of opportunities to Russia which are likely to increase Russia’s economic interests and counterbalance NATO’s regional, and global, strategic influence.¹⁷

An emergent dialogue: The Middle East as a “nuclear-free-zone”

While a *smart power* policy orientation is likely to slow Iranian weapons development in the short-term, an entirely different strategy may be required to persuade Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions in the long-term. Recently, the idea of breaking the Iranian nuclear impasse by establishing a “nuclear-free-zone” in the Middle East has begun to gain international political momentum. In Israel, there is widespread public support (65 percent) for a nuclear-free Middle East, even though this means that Israel must also give up its nuclear weapons. Similarly, Iranian public opinion overwhelmingly supports (80 percent) the Iranian government providing full inspections and a guarantee not to develop nuclear weapons in return for trade and assistance from other countries.¹⁸ Coupled with this convergence of public sentiment, Israeli leaders, too, are seeking a longer-term solution, both casting doubt on the validity of the often-invoked “existential threat” argument, and acknowledging the dangerous political and economic consequences of using military action to stop Iran’s nuclear program.

Actionable Insight

- As the international debate continues, and as EUCOM develops strategic messages and furthers partner dialogues, public opinion may offer insight and signal EUCOM alignment with the policies, goals, and objectives of European partner nations.
 - Public opinion of Iran is negative in the EU; Turkey and Russia hold more favorable views of Iran.
 - There is little public support in nations in the EUCOM AOR for a military response against Iran if it persists with its nuclear weapons program.
 - The nuclear weapons program is not a top priority for most Iranians.
- Iranian attitudes toward the international community are largely undecided; effective use of diplomacy, strategic messaging, and other soft power strategies could significantly improve public perceptions of the US and nations in the EUCOM AOR.
- The EU supports, in principle, an oil embargo against Iran. However, a ban will hurt Europe economically; the IMF predicts that European nations will face oil price increases of up to 30 percent if it bans Iranian oil imports; there is also the potential for energy shortages unless alternatives to Iranian oil can be secured.
 - Nations in the EUCOM AOR are looking to Saudi Arabia, Russia, Azerbaijan, and West Africa¹⁹ to provide alternatives to Iranian energy.
- Collectively, Iran and Russia control more than 20 percent of the world's oil reserves, and nearly half of the world's gas reserves. A strong strategic and economic partnership between Iran and Russia might change the dynamics of the Middle East, and beyond.²⁰

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Next product in this series: Scenarios for the Iranian Crisis (Available March, 2012)

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