



# THE CAIRO REVIEW INTERVIEW

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## STRATEGIC PATIENCE

*American Ambassador Ryan Crocker reviews the consequences of U.S. interventions in the Islamic World*

He's a diplomat's diplomat, seen far around the globe as one of the finest of his generation. Ambassador **Ryan Crocker** concluded his last posting in July, as envoy to Afghanistan, capping a four-decade career. President Barack Obama awarded Crocker America's highest civilian award, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, in 2009, and two years later called him out of retirement (as dean of the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University) to dispatch him to Kabul. President George W. Bush had conferred on Crocker the rank of Career Ambassador, the highest in the U.S. Foreign Service, in 2004. The honors recognized Crocker for his handling of some of the toughest assignments in the most trying times—largely in the Islamic World.

Crocker served as ambassador in Lebanon, Kuwait, Pakistan, Syria, and, most recently, in Iraq as well as in Afghanistan. Those posts often put him in the middle of political battles over U.S. policy back in Washington. In 2002, he co-authored a memo to Secretary of State Colin Powell titled "The Perfect Storm," which reportedly warned that a U.S. invasion of Iraq could set off internal and regional conflicts—an assessment then sharply at odds with the optimism of the war's promoters. Crocker understood conflict zones better than most; as a political officer in Lebanon in 1983, he survived a bombing of the U.S. embassy that took sixty-three lives—and took out the entire CIA Station. Much was at stake in Crocker's later challenges in Baghdad and Kabul: how to wind down American wars that would leave Iraq and Afghanistan intact and allow U.S. forces an honorable exit. Though out of official government service, in October he participated in so-called Track II talks in Istanbul on the Syria crisis. *Cairo Review* Managing Editor **Scott MacLeod** interviewed Crocker on October 26, 2012, in New Haven, Connecticut, where he is the Kissinger Senior Fellow at Yale University's Jackson Institute for Global Affairs.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Have Iraq and Afghanistan turned out to be wise wars? Is the world better off?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** Ultimately, we don't know. Afghanistan and its meaning will depend on whether

◁ Ambassador Ryan Crocker, Capitol Hill, Washington, DC, Sept. 10, 2007. *Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images*

it can stabilize into a state and society that protects the rights its citizens have gained and ensures there is no return of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, or their cousins. That, we can't predict. I think Iraq is doing OK. I don't see a back slide into civil war. I don't see major internal upheavals. Iraq has very little history of violent sectarianism. They've been there, done that. As you know, there was no appetite ever for going back to it. They'll be buffeted by the region. Just talking to some Iraqis in Istanbul, Iranians, too, for that matter, there's a lot of worry about what regime change in Syria could mean for Iraq. They hate the Assads [the Al-Assad family dynasty that has ruled Syria since 1970]. But a radical Sunni state on their border is not very appetizing, either. Yet, I don't think they feel they're existentially threatened by anything that happens in Syria. And there is a certain *je ne sais quoi*, the bastard is finally going to get it in the neck. Iraq is Iraq. The toughest sons of bitches on the block. They will move toward increasing stability and increasing economic development. How they align themselves, I don't think they know. Vis-à-vis the Levant, vis-à-vis the Gulf. That is still a work in progress. I certainly hope we don't lose interest because how that comes out is pretty important to all of us, given Iraq's post-1958 history of hostility to the U.S. and the West.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Lessons we have learned about war and diplomacy? Are there any big-picture conclusions we can draw from Iraq and Afghanistan?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** There are. Whether we draw them or not is another matter. Interventions have consequences. They have twentieth and thirtieth order of consequences, not just second and third. The consequences can't be predicted at the outset. No one could have predicted at the time we launched the invasion that Iraq, today, after nine and half years, would be what it is. The criticism is over poor planning, and God knows that's justified. But there is *no* amount of planning that is going to prepare you for all the contingencies that come along once you are in. You've got to do a calculus that involves the unknown. How much "unknown" are you willing to assume for the goals you seek or the dangers you wish to avert? I don't hear much discussion about that. A second conclusion is, look before you leap. Look at this from a regional perspective, and a local perspective. What's the history of the region, what's the history of the country, as it is seen in its own terms? We don't do that very well, either. We see ourselves as liberators, we're the anti-imperialists. That's not how we're seen in the region. We're seen as the successors to the British, and the Russians, and the French. That's life. You have got to understand it. Understand the risks you're assuming, understand the context in which you are going to be operating. And have a set of goals and things to avoid that line up with those. In Afghanistan, I think the problem is not that we're doing too little.

I think we're doing too much. Afghanistan for millennia has been a rural society, based on small villages, and consensus-chosen leadership of those villages. I don't think it makes sense for us to try and do a Made-in-America complete restructuring of politics and society in that country. And what we do do, you know, talk to the villagers. What do they want, why do they want it, and how are they going to maintain it? And see if that makes sense. Countries will go on being what they have always been, in terms of political culture. And to be modest therefore in what we can assume to do, and be cautious about doing it. Overreach is a highly, highly dangerous thing. Rajiv's book [*Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan* by Rajiv Chandrasekaran]—I think he misses the point. Our real mistakes are not doing large-scale projects and not getting them right, or whatnot. It is even trying in the first place. They don't fit the landscape. [The] Kajaki [dam project] didn't fit in the fifties. And it doesn't fit today.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Is that a prescription for isolationism?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** My goodness, not at all. Nowhere here did I wish to suggest that we not intervene. But if we are going to intervene, we have got to be very careful in measuring our aims against risks, make our aims modest and achievable, worth the cost. And proceed accordingly. And I hope implicit in what I said is work with others, particularly in the region. We spent '02 basically lecturing the region on how they should support us in Iraq. We didn't listen to them. We are not good at that. Afghanistan, even more complicated, with the Pakistan factor. Understand how the Pakistanis are going to react and why. And to have a strategic dialogue that is more than the president telling [Pakistani President Pervez] Musharraf, "You are with us or against us." We don't do nuance and subtlety well. But these are nuanced and highly subtle places, and also highly dangerous places. We seem to have an oblivious ignorance of said dangers.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *What is America's stature in the world after these wars?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** Our status and weight is undiminished. Again I just heard over and over last weekend, everybody in the region is waiting to see what the outcome of the election in the U.S. is. And whoever wins, what policies are then set in motion toward the region. Are we going to follow through with a sustained policy of engagement, with resources commensurate to the task? Or are we going to do this on an ad hoc basis and try to diminish our engagement? Both our adversaries and allies are keying on us. We haven't really lost influence and won't unless we choose to give it away. It would require us to say, "Eh, it's all Asia, it's all rebalancing. We're just going to forget about you guys." No administration, frankly, is going to do that.

Even a simplistic reading of history shows how if you don't pay attention to them, things are going to get away from you. Or they are going to start paying attention to you in ways that don't work well for you.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Has this decade in Iraq and Afghanistan changed the way U.S. policymakers look at the American role in the world and this region? You mentioned some lessons to be learned.*

**RYAN CROCKER:** I worry that we are not learning them terribly well this time. Washington works in real time. It is what's going on this minute. And as you'd know better than most, the change in news cycles—there is no news cycle. It's all instantaneous. So Washington is constantly reacting. Just watching the [Ambassador] Chris Stevens assassination [in Libya, on September 11, 2012] was pretty discouraging but fairly educational. I kind of worry that we continue to make this up as we go along. If there has been a change, it is that we are reactive and not proactive. Maybe that's not such a bad thing. But there are a lot of questions in the region. Obama gave that Cairo speech, and then what? There wasn't a "then what." What are we going to do? The speech was overcome by the revolutions, and the region thinks we still don't know what we're going to do. But it's very important that we figure it out. Because they see us as the indispensable player, for better or for worse.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *What did you mean, "educational," referring to the killing of Ambassador Stevens?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** The way both [political] parties responded to it. How there was no interest in establishing what may actually have happened. Done by whom, and what that told us. And then that from the Republicans: let's just hold some hearings and have a witch hunt. And then on the part of the administration to stick to that denial of who was behind the assassination was ludicrous. They just didn't want to say, "Oops, we didn't have it right." Well, nothing wrong in not having it right the first time in a complex environment. What is important is to be able to see change, acknowledge it, and adjust. Educational in the sense I don't see either party having learned a great deal about how you deal in complex contingencies, and a lack of will to actually do that learning. I don't want to sound overly negative, because there are some extremely good people on the ground, in Libya, for example. Chris, of course, their leader. [Chargé d'affaires] Larry Pope started out in Libya, he knows his stuff. From a variety of agencies, you get some really good people, making assessments, making recommendations. I just hope that what they are doing is taken aboard. I think we have a window right now. We have got a brilliant NEA [Near Eastern Affairs] assistant secretary in Beth Jones. I don't know

how long she'll stay, whether she will stay into a new administration. But given the volatility and significance of events, people make a difference. She is positioned, having done a lot of hard field time, she knows the region. She now sits at a high level in Washington, and I think could get us set right. Whether she'll have the opportunity or not, I don't know.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Is the U.S. enacting policy based on its principles, on pure realpolitik, its national interests, or on just politics and political reaction to events?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** It's a great question. It's all of the above. We are virtually unique in the world in having principles that shape policy rather than simply interests. It goes back to the foundation of the Republic. Jeffersonianism. Hamiltonism. Wilsonianism. We are a land of isms as much as the Middle East. And it makes it harder. I think our approach to foreign problems and foreign opportunities, in other words to foreign policy, is always going to involve a combination of principles—call it idealism, if you will—plus pragmatics. Other countries don't really operate that way. But we have always have and I think we always will. And it's who we are. I would not decry it. I would try to manage it in the most rational possible way, to be sure that your principles don't take you somewhere that your sense of reality would cause you to avoid. That's why you have, still, the debate over Rwanda. Did we betray our principles by not intervening in Rwanda? Part of the Syria debate. And again I don't see it as a bad thing. But like everything else, you've got to be smart about it. And the third point, yeah, we may be the "A City on the Hill." But we're also an intensely political society, and you don't keep politics out of governance. The question is, again, how you balance and manage that third factor with the other two. Here I think many thoughtful Americans are deeply concerned. The House has always been pretty fractious. But the Senate is becoming more so over time. And an awful lot of very good congressional leaders even statesmen are just saying, "Hey, I don't want to do this anymore," and not running for reelection. Or in the case of [Republican senator from Indiana] Richard Lugar, getting beaten in the primary. I worry a little bit about our legislative capabilities. Because even as a lifelong member of the executive branch, the legislative interest and involvement in sound foreign policy is indispensable. Just last week I was in Boise, Idaho, for the annual Frank Church conference on international affairs. It was a moment to remember what giants we had. Frank Church, obviously. But his contemporaries: in my state of Washington, Scoop Jackson and Warren Magnuson. In Montana. These are not places you see as foreign policy drivers, but they reflected a capacity of the country to generate foreign policy leadership that we simply do not have any longer. [J. William] Fulbright coming out of Arkansas. Who knew? Yet we

gave these giants a stage, and they were very effective in defending our interests. That element is kind of receding.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *In favor of what?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** In favor of increasingly polarized politics. That, if you stand for this, it's got to be wrong. In other words, we no longer have issue-based politics. It's individual. If you are not of my party and my persuasion, I cannot work with you and will do my level best to derail whatever it is you are working on, almost without regard to what that agenda might actually be. We are a self-righting mechanism. In time, extremes like the like Tea Party are going to be if not totally rejected by the American people I think they are going to be moderated. But in the interim, we could be in for a bad patch, because Congress is simply not playing a role of advise and consent that we need.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Big historical question: how do you explain the huge turmoil, so many wars, for so many years, in this region that lies between Morocco and Afghanistan?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** It's the arc of empire, principally the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East. Middle Easterners have never quite gotten over the failure of their empire to stand against the West. And the centerpiece would be the struggle between the Ottomans and the West, 1683, the failure to take Vienna. That conflict, that contest, has never stopped for Middle Easterners. It's a Great Game played over and over and over again, with new rules, new tactics, and new players. But the contest is what the contest was. I point out to students that you need to remember if you look at the broad sweep of geography from Morocco to Pakistan, with its multiplicity of languages and cultures, they all have one thing in common: they have all been occupied by one or more major Western powers since 1798 when Napoleon landed in Egypt. So the Middle Eastern sense is that, "Yeah, we are societies in conflict, because you keep bringing conflict to our society. You won't leave us alone. Never mind that often we don't want you to leave us alone. That is another story." But again: history, history, history. As you look at Syria right now, for example. Of all of the complex, sensitive, Western-influenced areas of a complex region, Syria I think is at the top. I was going through Philip Hitti's *History of the Arabs* just to see what that great man had to say about Syria. That was published in '37 or '38, just before World War II. Syria referred to the entire Levant, you know? What Lebanon? What Palestine? It was all Syria. As you know, a lot of people out there still think that way. As the situation in Syria evolves, that may be a part of the inter-mixture or play. So the incredibly complex relationship between the West and the Middle East is not replicated anywhere else in the world either in terms of

its longevity, its violence and its complexity. You know, any wonder that the Palestine issue has eluded solution, when it became the not twice but thrice promised land? Between the British and the French, the Balfour Declaration, Sykes-Picot, the Hussein-McMahon correspondence, all within two years, all making different undertakings to the Arabs. So to say, “Oh, get over it, it’s a new century.” Well, new century, old conflict. And I don’t think there are many out there in the region who think that it’s going to be a lot different this time as the Arab Spring plays out in terms of Western nations seeking out Western interests.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Is this a “Clash of Civilizations”?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** You could call it that. The point I was making is that in Middle Eastern eyes, the clash is precipitated by one side.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Fair?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** Well, all the games seem to be played on their court. With the exception of Al-Qaeda, the West has always been the away teams. And there again, it goes back to your earlier question, we decide to engage and intervene in these countries without making a serious effort to understand ground rules.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *In your long experience in this region, is the arc going in a better or worse direction?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** The interesting thing is, for all the problems and complexities we’ve been discussing, and the opposing viewpoints and the history of conflict and turmoil, I think U.S.-Middle Eastern relations will continue to be fundamentally sound. When you look at what we’ve gone through, like Iraq. You know, that didn’t break the bowl. A lot of Arabs were mightily unhappy about it. But it didn’t lead them to say, “Well, that’s it. We’re not going to deal with you any more.” So the dialogue continues. Cooperation and coordination continue. That doesn’t mean you can take it for granted. I do believe that a very serious set of consultations is vital with regional allies and indeed adversaries as we look at Syria. Understand their perspectives, their viewpoints, what they fear, what they seek, their vision of how that might be brought about. Again, we’re better at sending than receiving. This would be a great time to do some receiving. Overall, they may be tired of us, frustrated with us, angry at us, but I think for most Middle Eastern states, the U.S. for a variety of reasons is seen as the indispensable power.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Why is the United States so involved in the Middle East? What are American interests, and are they changing?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** They certainly have changed. We became involved in the Middle East as you know to serve as a bulwark against Soviet expansion. At the behest of the British, who no longer had the means to do it. The Soviet Union is gone, but we learned immediately with its demise that we would continue to be challenged in the Middle East. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait arguably never would have happened if the Soviet Union was still in a position to exercise its influence. So the non-polar world post-Soviet Union of the Middle East, if anything poses even greater challenges. So that takes one back to your basic question: what are our interests? Arguably they are centered on stability: a stable region that does not export unrest, violence, terrorism, and that as a corollary to that, continues to be a stable and reliable supplier of hydrocarbon resources, I think becomes essential. Stability also in the sense of a U.S. interest in stable states that have their own identity, if you will. In other words, its OK for us to be deeply involved, but not others. Not that the Middle East is our backyard or playground, by any means, but when we do operate in concert with others in the region, we should do so as partners with a shared agenda, and not see the Middle East devolve again into an area of international rivalry and conflict.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *What's the outlook for Afghanistan after a decade of change there? Is it better off? Can it survive the departure of NATO troops in 2014?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** That is a story as yet untold. The elements for a stable Afghan state are very much present. They include the outcomes of conferences in Bonn, in Chicago and Tokyo, in which the international community pledged political support, military support and economic support at very substantial levels. But the question is follow through. Will the international community follow through? And will the Afghans live up to their undertakings, particularly those made in Tokyo? Unknown. Will the United States retain effective engagement even as the means for that engagement change? Also an absolutely critical and I'm afraid unresolved question. Those who have benefitted most from our presence have been women, girls, minorities, the younger generation: communities that can write a far brighter history for Afghanistan than its past. But they need our support. Not only against the Taliban resurgence, but also against reactionary elements within the country. They can't do it without us. What we did in both Iraq and Afghanistan as you know was to establish binding strategic agreements that provided for our long-term engagement in support of development, institutional and political growth. Will we make those truly operational remains to be seen. But the structure is there, the framework is there. Whether it is Afghanistan or Iraq, the raw materials are in place for I think some very positive outcomes. But it requires political will and it

requires strategic patience. And on the latter in particular, “patience” and “America” don’t fit easily together in the same sentence.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *If the U.S. is nation building in Afghanistan, doesn’t it make more sense for the troops to stay in Afghanistan in larger numbers?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** A question I can’t answer. As I tried to say earlier, we have to be very judicious on the issue of nation building. You know, to attempt it without a thorough understanding of the culture and environment in which we are operating is going to be at least counterproductive, and in the case of Afghanistan I’m not sure that the villagers of Afghanistan really want their villages rebuilt and tied into a center of which they have historically been suspect. Going back to your lessons learned, I would hope that one of them is: why don’t we listen to the people of the countries with regard to what they want, what do they seek, why, how does that fit with their own visions, and then move forward. Rather than come up with grandiose schemes on our own. In terms of ongoing U.S. military presence, a couple points. First, there is nothing in any of our agreements that requires a full U.S. or international withdrawal by the end of 2014. Lisbon simply says that by the end of 2014 the Afghans will be fully responsible for security in their country. So I don’t rule out that there will be a request for assistance in certain areas where they are not going to have developed their own capabilities by that time. Then we’ll have to decide how much will we want to meet. But I don’t think they are going to be doing nation building. Talking about air defense, special enablers, special operating capabilities, that kind of thing. Important nonetheless symbolically, and earnest on our commitment to stay engaged. And then the other point I would make, a final point, the graveyard of empires: don’t overstay your welcome. The green-on-blue incidents [of Afghan servicemen killing U.S. counterparts] notwithstanding, I don’t think that’s what that means. I think both governments have taken—touch wood—effective means to get control of those. But as I look at Afghanistan, I see a certain dissonance, if you will, between an increasingly vibrant, resilient Afghan society and a very large foreign troop presence. I don’t think that’s carried to the point of significant friction but again we want to be very careful with it. I would just make a point here too. The Chicago summit and the pledge for long-term sustainment of roughly a quarter of a million set of security forces. Turn again to history. Afghanistan did not descend into civil war when the Soviets withdrew in ’89. It descended into civil war when the money for the Afghan security forces dried up. You know, no paycheck, going home. The Afghans are good fighters. There is a strong streak of nationalism there. If the money continues to flow, I would have every reason for confidence in the ability

of Afghan forces on their own or nearly on their own to be able to maintain order and stability because they have done it before.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *The killing of Osama Bin Laden: how much of a blow to Al-Qaeda? How much of a threat does it still pose?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** A substantial victory. I think perhaps more substantial to the American people than it was a defeat to Al-Qaeda. Bin Laden as we saw had been playing for some years a minimal operational role, for security reasons. Let's face it, the AfPak border area, while it will require constant attention to ensure it doesn't harbor Bin Laden-like capabilities, given that Al-Qaeda is so heavily franchised Al-Qaeda of the Maghreb, Al-Qaeda the Arabian Peninsula, and so forth, operate on their own. They're the ones that really worry me. Chris's assassination at the hands of Al-Qaeda of the Arab Maghreb is a case in point. Libya was a conduit for years for fighters for Al-Qaeda [from] Libya, Egypt, Syria, into Iraq, and also into AfPak. Now that you've got the fundamental disorder that pervades Libya, this is happy hunting for Al-Qaeda. As it was in Yemen, where they almost lost the state, as it may yet be in Egypt. I wonder what [Bin Laden successor] Ayman El-Zawahiri is thinking. Is this his moment to reconstitute Al-Gamaat Al-Islamiyah? They have been through some hard times but they have never given up, never lost their vision. We are looking at a set of circumstances that is a combination of the Arab Spring itself and questions about our staying power that could be combining to make Al-Qaeda a really significant threat to us, and the West, for reasons that have little to do with Osama Bin Laden.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *That doesn't sound like the U.S. has "drained the swamp" very much in the last ten years.*

**RYAN CROCKER:** As I look at the area outside of Afghanistan and Pakistan, I think that the water level is rising. The Saudis had of course significant success against Al-Qaeda, a very concerted security effort. And they arrested and killed a large number. But basically they have displaced them into Yemen, which has far weaker abilities to control them. I think in North Africa Al-Qaeda has really got some opportunities. In Afghanistan or Pakistan, the border area, the gains have been substantial from our perspective, and continue to be, because that's one area where the Pakistanis continue their cooperation. But I would be as bold to say that that is no longer the main front. It could be again, if they they can get it back, if we lose interest and resolve and patience and go home early. If they think they can retake Afghanistan, they would in a heartbeat. For lots of reasons that may be the most amenable venue for their interests.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Tell me about the “Perfect Storm” paper.*

**RYAN CROCKER:** One classified document that actually wasn’t leaked, or at least handed over *in toto*. First, I was not the author. It was done by members of my staff. Second, the purpose was not to be crystal ball-like in our predictions. It was simply to be illustrative. It goes back to my original points: if you are contemplating an armed intervention in somebody else’s part of the world, you better have a clear-eyed view of the threats and risks. An exercise we never really went through in Iraq. It was all just simply going to be a sun-dappled-up land once [Iraqi ruler] Saddam [Hussein] was gone. That was the point of the paper, to try to provoke some senior-level thinking about, well, what is going to happen? What are the likely outcomes? How can we shape, counter and guide them? And so forth.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Did it have any influence?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** I don’t think so.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Did anybody read it?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** I think the secretary of state [Colin Powell] read it, the deputy secretary of state. You remember the dynamics at the time. Their views were not warmly embraced elsewhere in the administration.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *On Iraq, I see your cautious optimism, yet we are seeing authoritarian tendencies in the Nouri Al-Maliki government, and solidification of Iranian influence, Shiite dominance. How serious is this for the U.S.?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** The recipe is for more rather than less engagement. Use the strategic framework agreement to solidify an Iraqi-U.S. partnership that develops the capacities that Maliki and others have said they want developed, particularly in education. The best bulwark for a long-term future in the region that is agreeable to U.S. interests is precisely that, a well-educated population. That is a Maliki priority. It is a key part of our agreement. Let’s get on with it. Let us not obsess over, “Oh my God, they’re going this way, they’re going to do that, they’re close to Iranians!” Embrace ’em. Is Maliki authoritarian? Yes. All Iraqi rulers are authoritarian and always have been. You don’t last in Iraq without the ability to wield authority and sometimes to do so in a pretty ruthless manner. We need to encourage the development of institutions of check and balance. But also understand that Iraqis including Maliki know their own world best. Maliki set up those special operations commands that reported directly to him and bypassed the general staff and the minister of defense because of his reading of Iraqi history. You know, that if the ruler of the country has not got a firm grip on the armed forces at all times, sooner or later

they are going to turn against him, as Abdel Karim Qassem did in '58 against the monarchy. Authoritarianism doesn't fit well into our basket of ideals, but in certain cultures at certain times it may be essential to avoid something far worse. In terms of Iran, no question the Iranians have influence, and will do their best to increase it. The best antidote is not for us to issue press statements decrying it. It's to beat something with something better. And we can be better in Iraq for Iraqis than the Iranians are. Plus we don't start from their huge handicap of being Persian and having fought the horrific eight-year Iran-Iraq War. You know this, many others don't: there's an assumption that because they are all Shiites together, they are all going to make common cause together. That ignores fundamental historical differences between Arabs and Persians over the centuries. And it certainly ignores the enormous impact of the Iran-Iraq War. That will live just as the Great War has done for Western Europeans in the historical memory forever. If you want to know where [Iranian military commander] Qassem Suleimani comes from, it is worth bearing in mind he was in that war for all eight years of it, and for seven years he was in combat. For him, like a lot of other Iranians, like many Iraqis, '88 was a truce. The war is still there.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *How do you read Iran's nuclear intentions? Hell-bent on acquiring a nuclear weapon? Amenable to negotiations?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** They are Iranians, so they will keep as many options open as long as they possibly can. And in the process, will continue the myriad steps necessary to produce a workable nuclear weapon. I think, to do otherwise, they would have to be persuaded that the costs were simply unbearable. I'm not sure that that's what they believe. I'm not sure they believe they would pay an insupportable price. They have had three decades to contemplate [the 1981 Israeli attack on Iraq's nuclear reactor] Osirak next door. And we already know they have constructed hardened facilities and redundant facilities. And they also know we're not and the Israelis are not going to invade them. You're talking about an air assault or an air-mobile assault. The whole intention of their program is to be survivable. Then they have the sympathy of the world. They have a nuclear program. We will have taken our best shot literally. And they are in a pretty good place. So unless we can persuade them otherwise, I'm not sure they see a downside.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *You think they are pursuing a nuclear weapon?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** I do. Look, Iran would pursue a nuclear weapon if the Shah had never fallen. It is consistent with how they see themselves in the region as a great power. Pakistan has nuclear weapons. India has nuclear weapons. It goes with power. Whoever rules in Tehran is going to be seeking nuclear weapons.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Is that an apocalyptic danger to the world?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** Some of the rhetoric may make it apocalyptic. We have been through this before. The Iranians, if they develop a nuclear weapon, are not—I would not be totally certain—then going to use it to attack or threaten neighbors.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *They are not?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** I don't think so. The historical acquisition of nuclear capabilities by non-NPT [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty] states has never run that way. They've got it. Everybody will know they have it. It will heighten their conventional strength. But I don't think you'll hear a whisper of actual nuclear use, let alone actual nuclear use. I'm not trying to downplay it. I think it's a fact and it is supported by recent history. The question is more the reactions. I have noticed that [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu has backed away lately, which is a good thing. Nor does it mean we should be passive. If we can develop computer viruses, and other means of going after them, by all means we should.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *What about negotiations?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** Let's talk away. What I think we should be talking about isn't their nuclear program. We should try to explore areas where we may have some common interests like Afghanistan, and in a more imaginative way, Syria. The Iranians don't want to see disorder, chaos and the loss of their only Arab ally. Well, we don't want to see disorder and chaos. We're fine with the loss of the ally. But they are still on the agenda to be discussed. I don't think we can roll it into a big ball like the Iranians suggest and talk about everything. Let's start with some stuff where we might make some progress and see if that builds some momentum for other steps.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Wouldn't it take a bigger strategic deal to get the Iranians to back off the weapon?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** Yeah, but like a lot of strategic deals you don't get them in one fell swoop. You'd have to build this one piece by piece.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *See any sign of that?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** I'd like to think that just as we did in '01-'02, we could do something with respect to Afghanistan. Particularly with the elections approaching in 2014. Who is going to be postured how? And can we recreate some of the common purpose, that allowed us to reduce the influence of [Afghan warlords Abdul Rashid] Dostum, Ismail Khan, and others? I think the potential is there. Whether the political will is, in their government, or indeed any longer in our own, I'm not sure.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *We often hear about obstacles in Tehran, but is the U.S. really capable politically to seriously engage Iran?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** Well, that's been untested. The Iranians have not picked up our invitation for talks, which I extended when I was there. And it was backed by [Afghan President Hamid] Karzai. They just said, "Eh." So right now they are the rejectionists. And it remains untested whether our political system in its current form would support serious negotiations.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *I'm not just referring to Afghanistan, but to the nuclear negotiations, the P5+1—the five Permanent Members plus Germany.*

**RYAN CROCKER:** If there is a nuclear deal to be had, it isn't going to be had to the P5+1. It is really the wrong way about this. It is increasing the Iranian sense of their own importance by saying that the entire P5 is going to engage you on this. I'd move to a bilateral agenda with us, supported in some areas by other actors, and see if you can score some successes, some areas of agreement. And then come to an eventual nuclear understanding. My own view is that the big debate there isn't on this at all. It's on the post-NPT world. The NPT is vital, but it is not sufficient. It has not stopped countries from acquiring nuclear weapons. It does leave them outside NPT safeguards, which is not a good thing. I think our nuclear discussion with Iran might have to rope in India and Pakistan as well. About not a new regime, but an addition to the old regime to accommodate new nuclear states who are prepared to sign up to this or that commitment.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Are you concerned about an Israeli attack on Iran?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** It is hard for me to read. I would hope that that is a saber they rattle but have no intention of actually using, because I don't think it will work. I think they don't think it will work. The kind of softening of the rhetoric may indicate a rethinking of that. I had a senior Israeli official tell me some time ago, "When you look at options for dealing with Iran's nuclear program, two of them begin with an A and neither of them look good: attack and appeasement." So you keep the attack option on the table, make them nervous, keep fiddling around with it, and engage them in a negotiated settlement, while making life as hard as you can for them in actually gaining the capability. Good computer viruses, whatever.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Eventually, there will have to be a war to bring about that high cost you talked about?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** I don't think war is either inevitable, and certainly not desirable. Messy long-term ways of dealing with regional challenges are not exactly new. Sometimes your best investment is just buying time.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Could the U.S. prevent an Israeli attack?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** I don't know that much about the dynamic in the relationship right now. If they perceive that they face an existential national security threat they are going to do what they want. I don't know how they down deep perceive this.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *How do you project the impact on the region of an attack on Iran?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** I'm not sure I see an apocalyptic scenario. I see a scenario in which we lose. We use military force. We did not succeed in ending their nuclear program. So we have looked impotent. We have shot our bolt. They will gain a certain sympathy in the region and the world, and will have no deterrence in developing a nuclear weapon. Is that apocalyptic? I don't really think so. Because I don't think they are going to use it.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *You don't see a scenario for a U.S. attack, do you?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** You get off into the never-never world of almost political fantasy. No, I don't think we're contemplating an attack. Does that mean we never would. No. But again you're getting so far out into speculation it starts to lose meaning, I think.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Is the Arab Spring a positive development, or could the region disintegrate further?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** Too soon to tell. This is Act 1, Scene 1, almost two years into it. But the development of new political societies is complex and lengthy. I worry about the same things in counties of the Arab Spring that I do elsewhere. The institutional basis for viable democracy is exceedingly weak. You don't get viable democracies just because that's a really noble aspiration. You have got to have the structures in place to support, underpin and guarantee it. And they are not there. This is going to be hard, it's going to take a long time, and the outcome is to say the least uncertain. I can't say whether it's a good or a bad thing. Generally speaking, societies that move on from authoritarian leaders to something else you can argue are moving in the right direction. But, again, not so clear. You remember why that fruit vendor set himself on fire? In part it was a total lack of economic opportunity. Well, the economies of these countries have just gotten worse. How long can Egypt sustain a tourist industry that isn't contributing to the economy? I don't know, but probably not forever. Ditto in Tunisia. So, way more questions about the impact and direction of the Arab Spring than I've got answered. We need to understand that. There is nothing easy about this. It is all complicated. There are risks foreseen and as yet unforeseeable. It will take a lot of time, and again strategic patience by the West, to seek to shape events in a positive direction.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *How is Syria going to play out?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** We're not in a good place. The divisions within the international community of course are pronounced, between Russia and China and other members of the [UN] Security Council. And they are badly divided in the region. With the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] led by doughty little Qatar saying it's time to get on with the war, and the only thing holding us back are the American elections and lack of American will. The way forward I think is a process of analysis and deep consultation. You know, who are those guys? Who are the resistance? What are their aims? Agendas? Who supports them? Why? I think we're working hard on that. I'm not sure we have got the answers, but that's where you have to begin. Only then can you have a discussion about post-Assad alternatives that is based on reality. I don't think we're there yet, in part not through our own failings but because these groups don't know who they are. It is not a surprise than in Assad's Syria Nelson Mandelas did not emerge. We have got to figure out who we are dealing with and then make common cause regionally and internationally in how we deal. I think that's absolutely key.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Israel-Palestine now: irrelevant, or crucial to getting all these other things right?*

**RYAN CROCKER:** Somewhere in between. It will always be relevant, and it will always be important, in its own terms, but also because it offers weapons and levers to regional actors who would use the peace process or lack thereof to advance their own agendas. This is not a favorable moment for Arab-Israeli peace. But that doesn't mean you can back away from it entirely. One of the interesting concepts that I heard in Istanbul was the absence of Israeli-Palestinian progress plus the challenges of the Arab Spring may make the old notion of a Jordanian-Palestinian union more palatable to both countries than it has previously been. Interesting idea.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *The U.S. has a responsibility as a sponsor of the peace process, yet we have not seen much American diplomacy since 2001.*

**RYAN CROCKER:** You saw an effort with [Special Envoy George] Mitchell's appointment. I'm not sure I see it as a failing of the U.S. as much as a reflection that the political realities are simply not supportive of advancement let alone a breakthrough in this process. I do think though that we need to be more visible, more engaged, than we have been of late. We got burned by saying and doing some not horribly bright things. That doesn't mean we can afford to back away from it completely, because we can't. I'd have to say, working in the region for all these years, it is hard to remember a time when the Palestinian-Israeli issue has been less center stage than it is right now.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Some think that the 'two-state solution' window is closed.*

**RYAN CROCKER:** It's hard to say. If it's closed, what's open? If you say nothing is open, then you are probably going to force some kind of confrontation.