



Robert Baer spent decades in the Middle East as a CIA spy, and he has been portrayed on screen by George Clooney. Now into his second career as an author, he tells **Cameron Stewart** why the US would be better off befriending Iran.

**R**OBERT Baer is no stranger to danger. During a 20-year career as a CIA spy, he lived and worked in the hot spots of the Middle East and Central Asia, carrying out some of America's most secret dirty work, including attempts to overthrow the former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.

His spying exploits formed the basis for the Academy Award-winning 2005 film *Syriana*, in which Baer's character was played by George Clooney. In his second career as an author, Baer's third book, *The Devil We Know*, veers fearlessly, if not recklessly, into the foreign policy quicksand of the Middle East and confronts the hot-button question of US engagement with Iran. Baer describes it as the product of "30 years of notes on Iran". Most were taken during his time as a spy, "some of which was from very inside information which I could not source", he says.

Baer doesn't take a conventional approach to Iran, which looms as one of the most pressing foreign policy dilemmas facing President Barack Obama. He doesn't address the issues within the

standard framework of debate on the Middle East. Subtlety and nuance are not for him. Instead, he embraces a provocative thesis written breathlessly in the style of a Hollywood thriller.

Baer argues that Iran is the new superpower of the Middle East, with expansionist ambitions to control the world's oil and conquer its neighbours. "Iran has certainly acquired an appetite for hegemony, a belief that it's powerful enough to challenge the United States for dominance of the Persian Gulf: not just for control of Iraq but of the Gulf's oil, which is 55 per cent of the world's reserves," he writes. However, instead of urging America to fight or otherwise contain this emerging giant, he argues that the US must accept and engage Iran, possibly even co-opt it as a future ally. "Iran is the most powerful and stable country in the Middle East, a country the United States must either fight in a new 30-year war or engage with," he writes.

He says the US has gravely misjudged Iran and has failed to notice its transformation into a rational player on the world stage. "When Americans think about Iran, we see the black-



turbaned, long-bearded, scowling Ayatollah Khomeini, a dark spectre bent on vengeance," he writes. "Or the American diplomats in 1979, blindfolded, hands tied behind their backs. It's nearly impossible to get past those images."

But the truth, he says, is that Iran's star is rising inexorably. "It's now a rational actor, coldly and methodically pursuing its national interests."

Baer's central claim — that a defiant and expansionist Iran should be tolerated if not embraced by the US — has led critics in the US to savage him. "Baer can rarely resist a supercharged, exaggerated assertion," a reviewer wrote in *The Washington Post*. "[He] not only attributes to Iran ambitions of breathtaking scope but also suggests it is capable of achieving them."

Baer says reviews such as this and an equally hostile one in *The New York Times* have led to his book being largely ignored in the national debate over Iran. "There is a way of thinking in both Washington and New York that Iran is somehow irredeemable," he says, the frustration evident in his voice. "My book is so far out beyond the pale that people have ignored it."

Which is a shame because, despite the palpable flaws in his book — including absurd calls for the US to condone any Iranian takeover of Saudi Arabia and to accept any annexation of parts of Iraq by Iran — Baer makes some interesting and relevant points.

Cut to its core, his argument is that a powerful and influential Iran is a reality that the US and the West must accept and deal with rather than try to destroy. Baer points out that Obama is at least acknowledging this reality by moving to open up a backroom dialogue with Tehran instead of openly demonising it, as George W. Bush did. "I don't think Bush could deal with Iran rationally," he tells *Review*. "I feel a lot better that they are now talking about opening up dialogue with Iran."

He argues that as the US moves into a period of foreign policy isolationism after its failures in Iraq, there will not be the will, much less the ability, for any sustained military containment of Iran. "Open-ended containment of Iran, with an American fleet and army perpetually in the Gulf, is too expensive for the US to continue indefinitely," he writes.

Economic sanctions will also have minimal influence on Tehran's behaviour, so the US might as well accept that, like it or not, it needs to deal with Tehran. Although critics rightly point out that Baer has overestimated Iran's strategic clout and underestimated its economic fragility, he says recent events in the region have strengthened Iran. "It's not hard to understand where Iran got the confidence, misplaced or not, that it can beat the West," he writes. "In the 34-day Lebanon war in 2006, the Israeli army was in fact beaten by Iran's proxy Hezbollah. Iran's star is rising and now, with a friendly Shia government in Baghdad, it will rise a lot faster."

Baer says Iran's influence is growing inexorably in Lebanon, Gaza, Syria, in Kurdish enclaves,

and most significantly in Iraq, where he says Tehran already enjoys de facto control over chunks of the country.

"No Iranian regular troops entered Iraq, because they didn't need to," he writes. "Iran needed only proxies, money and commerce. In the long term Iran plans to use Iraq as a platform for dominating the Persian Gulf." He says Iran may have long-term ambitions to take over Saudi Arabia and could bully the Gulf states to effectively take control of the Persian Gulf.

Baer maintains that Iran's growing influence in the region is not the result of good luck and American misadventure in Iraq but a product of cool, calculated policy by Tehran.

This analysis imbues Iran's mullahs with foresight and long-term strategic thinking, which many other experts are quick to dispute.

"[This argument] ignores the fact that Iran's leadership sometimes behaves in unpredictable ways," wrote Elaine Sciolino, a *New York Times* expert on terrorism, in a review.

"Iran is a country of raw, often raucous politics where different points of view — within the ruling elite — are expressed, debated and accepted or rejected."

Such is Baer's faith in Tehran's rational pragmatism that he largely dismisses the threat of Iran's nuclear weapon ambitions, believing it would not jeopardise its recent gains by pursuing the bomb. "The Iranians see a nuclear bomb as nice to have but not crucial to their survival," he writes. "The Iranians are too smart to risk the gains they've made in Iraq and Lebanon by forcing the issue."

"Iran definitely knows that a nuclear confrontation with Israel isn't winnable. The Iranians know that Israel would massively retaliate with [its] own nuclear weapons and everything Iran has worked so hard to win would be lost."

Baer says US interests are best served by embracing Iran, not isolating it. He argues that the US could seek Iranian help in dividing Iraq along ethnic lines, offering Tehran the parts of the country it already controls through proxies. And it even should consider co-opting Iran as a partner in the Middle East. "As an ally, would Iran be more reliable and more reasonable than the Sunnis, the sect we've so long placed blind trust in?" he asks.

He says the US could guarantee Iran's security and conduct joint patrols with its navy in the Gulf.

"Why shouldn't the Americans grant the Iranians what we're asking them to grant us? Besides, a stable Iran makes its leadership less paranoid, less susceptible to listening to radical factions, less prone to stumble into confrontation with the West. In return, Iran would stop sending arms and money to Hamas and Islamic Jihad."

Baer is aware that many of his proposals are politically impossible now and into the foreseeable future. He concedes that Israel would "absolutely hate" any US move to befriend a country whose leadership has called for Israel's destruction.

For Washington to embrace Tehran in the



**Weekend Australian**  
**14/02/2009**  
**Page: 8**  
**Section: Review**  
**Region: Australia Circulation: 307000**  
**Type: National**  
**Size: 405.00 sq.cms**  
**Word Count: 1336**  
**Contains Photo: No**



manner he suggests would require a fundamental realignment and downgrading of America's relationship with Israel: an unthinkable development in the context of present Middle East politics. Equally, as long as Iran continues to sponsor the terrorist groups Hezbollah and Hamas, the new Obama administration is unlikely to offer it anything more than tepid diplomatic overtures.

Baer is undaunted by the unimaginable.

"Few thought Mao's China would ever become the US's partner in East Asia, or even one

of our main trade partners, or that it would be our two countries that eventually drove a wedge into the Soviet Union," he writes. "The Middle East we grew up with has already vanished in all but name. Anticipating the consequences rather than futilely trying to stop them is the easiest — and ultimately surest — way forward."

*The Devil We Know is published by Scribe.*

*Robert Baer will speak at the Perth Writers Festival at the end of this month.*