



Iran Means What It Says

By Michael Rubin

U.S. and European diplomats need to take seriously the rhetoric used by Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad regarding nuclear programs and the destruction of Israel. Tehran has proven itself to be an insincere diplomatic partner. Engagement has backfired. Instead of continuing failed diplomatic efforts, world leaders should work together to help the Iranian people create a truly representative government.

On February 2, 2006, the International Atomic Energy Agency will meet in Vienna to discuss the nuclear crisis in Iran and, in all likelihood, refer Iran to the United Nations Security Council for being in breach of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty's safeguards agreement. Such a referral will mark a turning point in a decade-long saga. Europe's engagement with Iran has failed. The United States and its European allies have been resolute in their condemnation of the Iranian government decision to resume uranium enrichment. In contrast to previous diplomatic impasses with Tehran, neither Washington nor its European allies appear willing to make further concessions. On January 23, U.S. secretary of state Condoleezza Rice said, "I don't see much room for further discussion in any format [with Iran]." At a January 13, 2006, press conference with German chancellor Angela Merkel, George W. Bush condemned Iran. "Iran, armed with a nuclear weapon, poses a grave threat to the security of the world," Mr. Bush said. "We will not be intimidated," Ms. Merkel added. Already, though, there has been one casualty of the diplomatic crisis: the European Union's policy of engagement.

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While Iranian diplomats met with their British, French, and German counterparts in Vienna and Geneva, Iranian technicians toiled to ready Iran's uranium enrichment capability. European officials discussed a China model for Iran, in which they could use trade to catalyze political liberalization. Between 2000 and 2005, EU trade with the Islamic Republic almost tripled. But rather than moderate, Iranian authorities used the hard currency to enhance their military. They built secret nuclear facilities and blocked inspections. They failed to explain why there were traces of weapons-grade uranium on Iranian centrifuges, and they refused to detail what assistance Tehran received from Pakistani nuclear scientist A. Q. Khan.

Still, diplomats and doves hold out hope. After a January 12 phone conversation with Ali Larijani, Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, Kofi Annan assured reporters that Tehran was interested in "serious and constructive negotiations." As Mr. Bush met Ms. Merkel, British foreign secretary Jack Straw told the BBC that military action was "not on the agenda" and insisted that the crisis "can only be resolved by peaceful means." But while Mr. Bush and his European allies may agree to refer Iran to the UN Security Council, traditional diplomacy will not work for a simple reason: Iran's quest for nuclear weapons has nothing to do with the United States or Europe. The crisis with Tehran is ideological, not political.

Take Ideology Seriously

The destruction of Israel is a pillar of the Islamic Republic's ideology. Soon after leading the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini declared, "Every Muslim has a duty to prepare himself for battle against Israel." President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's call for Israel to be "wiped off the map" may have shocked Europe, but his statements mark only a change in rhetorical style, not ideological substance. Ahmadinejad is not unhinged. He knows exactly what he is doing. It takes skill and sophistication to become mayor of Tehran, a city of more than 12 million, let alone president. When Ahmadinejad threatens to destroy Israel, he is deadly serious.

When it comes to Israel, there is no difference between hard-liners and reformers. While Kofi Annan honored Mohammad Khatami for his "dialogue of civilizations" idea, the reformist president's instructions to the Iranian people were less high-minded. "We should mobilize the whole Islamic World for a sharp confrontation with the Zionist regime," he told Iranian television on October 24, 2000. "If we abide by the Qur'an, all of us should mobilize to kill."

Khatami's comments were hardly the exception. Expediency Council chairman and former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani is often described by Western officials as a pragmatist. On December 14, 2001, he took the podium at Tehran University to deliver the Friday sermon, the official weekly policy statement of the Iranian government. In what should have been a wake-up call, Rafsanjani declared, "If one day, the Islamic world is also equipped with weapons like those that Israel possesses now, then the imperialists' strategy will reach a standstill because the use of even one nuclear bomb inside Israel will destroy everything. . . . It is not irrational to contemplate such an eventuality." U.S. and European analysts rationalized Rafsanjani's remarks, suggesting that he referred to self-defense only. Tellingly, though, many Iranian parliamentarians understood the Expediency Council chairman to mean what he said: threatening the offensive use of a nuclear weapon. Two years later, authorities displayed a Shihab-3 missile during a military parade draped with a banner reading, "Israel must be uprooted and erased from history."

Factionalism within Iran's ruling elite is not a reason to discount policy pronouncements, especially those that receive widespread media coverage within the Islamic Republic. Iranian media is state-controlled. Its broadcasts signal the imprimatur of the entire government. Iranian

authorities are precise and sophisticated with messaging. Teachers and other state workers march at carefully choreographed rallies. At the October 2005 "World without Zionism" conference, banners calling for Israel's destruction were in English, not Persian. The intended audience was not only the masses in Tehran, Isfahan, and Shiraz, but rather Washington, Jerusalem, and Brussels.

Nor should Western officials dismiss Ahmadinejad's Holocaust denial simply because other Iranian officials are more polished. On December 14, 2005, four years to the day after Rafsanjani threatened a nuclear first strike against Israel, Ahmadinejad delivered a televised speech in which he called the Nazi murder of 6 million Jews a fabrication. "They have created a myth in the name of the Holocaust and consider it above God, religion, and the prophets. . . . If someone were to deny the myth of the Jews' massacre, all the Zionist mouthpieces and the governments subservient to the Zionists [would] tear their larynxes and scream against the person as much as they [could]." In recent days, the Iranian government has underlined its point by announcing its intention to sponsor a Holocaust denial conference.

Ahmadinejad does not represent the Iranian public at large. Most Iranians are tolerant. Iranians pride themselves on being cosmopolitan. Most Iranians are polyglots, and Iran itself is more an empire than a nation. The Jewish community has long roots in Iran. Iranian Jews still make pilgrimages to Hamadan, a city in western Iran, to visit the tombs of Esther and Mordechai. The prophet Daniel walked through the lion's den in Susa, the ruins of which lie in the province of Khuzistan, not far from the Iraqi border. Even today, Iran boasts the second-largest Jewish community in the Middle East after Israel.

Irrational anti-Semitism has deep roots among Iran's clergy. The Nazi practice of forcing Jews to wear a yellow star had its origins in Iran, when in the ninth century an Abbasid caliph forced his Jewish subjects to wear yellow patches. Various subsequent rulers revived the practice for short periods of time. Shiite clerics long deemed any food touched by Jews to be unclean. While blood libel only took root in Iranian society after the sixteenth-century arrival of European ambassadors, as Iranian society wrestled with modernity, violent anti-Semitism grew. Pogroms wiped out the Jewish community in some towns and villages in Iranian Azerbaijan in the mid-nineteenth century. Serious pogroms also swept through Mashhad, a Shiite shrine city in northeastern Iran in which the current supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, was born and raised. It was also in Mashhad that, despite the oft-cited mantra

that there is no compulsion in Islam, Shiite clerics forcibly converted the remaining Jews to Islam under threat of death. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini made anti-Semitic conspiracies a frequent theme of his speeches.

That most Iranians embrace religious and cultural diversity is irrelevant; the clergy and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—their ideological enforcers—wield the power. It is the stranglehold of ideologues over the Iranian state that makes a nuclear Iran so dangerous.

The Revolutionary Guard Corps consolidated its power in the later years of the Khatami administration when it managed to scuttle contracts allowing Turkish and European firms to operate cell phone networks and the new Tehran airport. It is this ideological and xenophobic core which controls both Iran's nuclear industry and its missile programs. Ahmadinejad's Holocaust denial and threats to "wipe Israel off the map" represent the ingrained ideology of this group. Recent apocalyptic references by Ahmadinejad—who may just believe that he can hasten the return of the Hidden Imam, a Messianic Shiite figure, through violence and war—raise the stakes.

There is ample precedent that the Islamic Republic acts on its ideology, motivated as much by anti-Semitism as by denial of Israel's right to exist. Iranian diplomats and intelligence agents coordinated the devastating 1994 attack on the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, Argentina. In 2002, two years after Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon, Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah told Lebanon's *Daily Star*, "If they [the Jews] all gather in Israel, it will save us the trouble of going after them worldwide." The Islamic Republic remains Hizbullah's greatest supplier of arms and money.

A Pragmatic People

The ideological venom of their leaders carries little weight among the Iranian public. While the Iran-Iraq War killed hundreds of thousands, Iran and Israel have never exchanged a single shot. Many Iranians express pride that Israeli president Moshe Katsav was born in

Iran. Indeed, the real ire of ordinary Iranians is expressed toward their government, not the outside world. In a 2002 labor protest, workers demanding back pay marched through Tehran, chanting, "Forget about Palestine and think about us."

Iran's youth no more want to live under theocracy than do Americans or Europeans. Iran Institute for Democracy telephone polls sampling opinion in every Tehran neighborhood suggest that only 10 percent of the population believes in Ahmadinejad's vision. These are

the true believers, akin to the die-hard Stalinists who opposed reform to the end. Another 10 percent see themselves as reformists. These are the Iranian equivalent of Mikhail Gorbachev's followers. They support the system, but want to fix its implementation. The remaining 80 percent have lost faith in the Islamic Republic. This vast majority is analogous to those in the Soviet Union who did not merely want glasnost but rather sought an end to Communist domination.

But the Iranian people have little say in their leadership. The supreme leader wields autocratic power and reigns for life. The Guardian Council selects who can run for office. Before the 2005 elections, this clerical council disqualified more than 1,000 candidates, allowing the public to choose from only eight, all of whom endorsed theocracy and opposed far-reaching reform. Ordinary Iranians ignore the sham: while the Iranian government claims 50 percent voter turnout, Iranian pilgrims in Iraq say it was less

than 20 percent. Contrast that with Iraq, where 70 percent of the population braves bombs and bullets to vote.

The Iranian religious leadership recognizes that demography is against them. Reform is a slippery slope, democracy a theocrat's hemlock. For the ayatollahs, there can be no Orange, Rose, or Cedar Revolutions. Popular will is irrelevant. Legitimacy comes not from the people, but from God as channeled through a cabal of religious leaders. While Western analysts divide Iran's politicians into hard-liners and reformists, the difference is one of style, not belief. Take Mr. Khatami: viewed by diplomats as a reformer, he nevertheless demonstrated disdain for popular sovereignty. "Knowledge of God's commandment must be the foundation of . . . life," he

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wrote in the state-run daily *Kayhan*. "People are not able to comprehend God's will through the explanations contained in the Quran and Sunna. Acquiring such comprehension requires several years of studies and much effort." Democracy is fine, but only clerics should be able to participate fully. Khomeini's successor and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei called liberal democracy "the source of all human torment."

Such statements ring hollow among the Iranian people. This year marks the 100th anniversary of Iran's constitutional revolution. Many people wonder why they no longer have rights they had a century ago. Since the 1999 student protests, they have taken to the streets with increasing frequency to demand real reform. Iranians are losing their fear of the Islamic authorities. State control is eroding. Televised confessions once broke dissidents, now they build them. A stint in Tehran's notorious Evin Prison has become a badge of honor. In the summer of 2005, dissident author Akbar Ganji shook the Islamic Republic with a two-month hunger strike that captivated his countrymen. "I have become the symbol of justice in the face of tyranny," he wrote from prison, "my emaciated body exposing the contradictions of a government which has reversed justice and tyranny."

The ideological guardians can suppress wildfires of dissent, but Iran remains a tinderbox. Demography pours fuel on the fire. The leadership is following a different China model: only with a nuclear deterrent can the ayatollahs launch the Cultural Revolution that will ensure their survival without fear of outside interference. The Revolutionary Guards are preparing for not one, but dozens of Tiananmen Squares.

As they cleanse their home front, the theocrats may use their nuclear capability to act upon their ideological imperative to destroy Israel. The West once ignored Saddam Hussein's threats against Kuwait, but dictators often mean what they say. Even if Iran does not use its bomb, a nuclear deterrent will enable it to lash out conventionally without fear of consequence. With an ideology promoting the export of revolution and the destruction of a regional state, Iran is not a status quo power.

Diplomacy can only work when both sides are sincere. Like an abused spouse, Western policymakers blame themselves rather than understand the fault is not theirs. There is no magic formula waiting to be discovered. To Tehran, the West is naïve. More diplomacy will only give the Islamic Republic time to achieve its nuclear goal. The only solutions that can rectify the

problem are those that deny the Islamic Republic its nuclear arsenal or those that enable Iranians to cast aside theocracy and its aggressive ideology and instead embrace freedom.

The Failure of Engagement

Talking softly and wielding a big carrot backfires. Iranian officials exploit European openness to further revolutionary aims. On June 17, 2002, for example, European foreign ministers agreed to fast track a new trade pact with Iran. European Union officials like External Affairs commissioner Chris Patten lobbied hard for the deal, arguing, "There is more to be said for trying to engage and to draw these societies into the international community than to cut them off." Less than a week later, Denmark's Police Surveillance Agency intercepted Iranian agents seeking to assassinate several prominent Iranian dissidents and journalists.

Likewise, former European Commission president Romano Prodi spent his tenure seeking to bolster economic ties with Iran. His July 1998 visit to Tehran broke a long-standing taboo; Iran rewarded the Italian national oil company with a \$3.8 billion gas exploitation deal. The erosion of European pressure on Iran coincided not with the empowerment, but rather the demise of the reform movement.

The following July, Iranian security forces and vigilantes sacked a Tehran University student dormitory. The government began shuttering newspapers and arresting journalists. It reversed civil liberties. European governments chastised the Iranian government gently; to take significant action would have endangered commercial contracts. The Islamic Republic's hierarchy, in turn, dismissed European entreaties and continued on its anti-democratic course.

The past two years of EU-3 negotiations with Tehran have followed a similar pattern. European diplomats project desperation. They assume the sincerity of its partners and constantly strive to find the magic formula which will enable the Ayatollah's to abandon their nuclear future. When British foreign minister Jack Straw assures the British public and the Iranian government that under no circumstances will force be used in the current dispute, he emboldens his Iranian adversaries to filibuster. The Iranian government meanwhile associates noncompliance with reward. Not taking Western resolve seriously, they have an incentive not to strike a deal, but rather hold out for greater concession.

Advancing Freedom

When President Bush began his second term, he delivered an inaugural address making freedom the centerpiece of his foreign policy. "For as long as whole regions of the world simmer in resentment and tyranny . . . violence will gather, and multiply in destructive power, and cross the most defended borders, and raise a mortal threat," he declared. "It is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture."

Not only justice, but also national security mandates that the Islamic Republic's ideologues be neutralized.

The military option will have a high cost. Iranians are fiercely nationalistic and will resent any airstrike. The Islamic regime exploits Iranian nationalism. Murals in Tehran depict those killed in 1987 when U.S. forces attacked an Iranian maritime platform in the Persian Gulf in retaliation for an Iranian attack on a U.S.-flagged oil tanker.

There is still much that can be done between symbolic sanctions and military force. The problem in Iran is not the Iranian people, but rather the ideology and grasp on power of an elite few. Besides rhetorical outreach, the Bush administration has done little to advance freedom or liberty in Iran. As the State Department debated how to allocate \$3 million to groups advancing freedom in Iran, the Congress funded a \$400 million bridge in Alaska. More money is allocated to landscaping around Washington's Kennedy Center than on programs to support the Iranian people.

Supporting liberty in Iran need not mean endorsing an external opposition group. Iranians are capable of governing themselves. Iranian bureaucrats are among the first to complain of their government's capriciousness.

Nor should U.S. officials undercut the integrity of the Iranian nation by funding separatist groups. As destabilizing as Iran is now, it has the potential to anchor democracy in the Middle East. Short-term gain should not come at the sacrifice of a long-term ally.

The Gdansk model might find fertile ground in Iran. A quarter century ago, the White House stood firm in its support of an independent labor union despite calls that such support might derail effervescent détente in the Soviet Union. While the move sparked a military crackdown in the short-term, it nevertheless inaugurated a process in Poland and the Warsaw Bloc that led to the collapse of tyranny. Neither the United States nor the European Union should hesitate to provide support to

the Iranian people. European states played a key role in facilitating real democratization in the Ukraine and Georgia; the Lebanese benefited from the cooperation of both Paris and Washington.

Political problems can be resolved through diplomacy, but the ideological underpinnings of a hostile regime cannot. Pol Pot could not be dissuaded from genocidal xenophobia. Gamal Abdul

Nasser would never abandon Arab nationalism. Saddam Hussein defiantly upholds the principles of his rule, even as he faces a tribunal and execution. The Iranian leadership is no different. No amount of diplomacy will convince Iran's clerical leadership to abandon tenets and policies they see rooted in their own interpretation of theology. It is important to base policies upon what Iran is rather than what the West wishes it to be. At the same time, the United States and Europe should work together to empower the Iranian people to create a truly representative government. An Iranian government reflecting the will and beliefs of the Iranian people is not one which will endanger liberty at home, or life and security abroad.

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