



## The End of Nuclear Diplomacy

By Reuel Marc Gerecht

*Would an Obama or McCain administration have any idea how to contain a nuclear-armed, oil-rich theocracy willing to deploy terrorism and guerrilla warfare to ensure that “justice” is brought to the Middle East and Afghanistan? And how will Israel react as it contemplates its future near a hostile Iran? It is time to breathe new life and urgency into a united Western front against Tehran.*

On July 30, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei demolished what was left of George W. Bush’s Iran policy. Iran’s clerical overlord also ended Senator Barack Obama’s dreams of tête-à-tête, stop-the-nukes diplomacy. Ten days earlier, the Americans, British, French, Germans, Russians, and Chinese had gathered in Geneva hoping to convince Tehran to suspend uranium enrichment. True to form, Khamenei told them all to stick it, saying the Islamic Republic will not cease and desist. “Taking one step back against the arrogant powers [the West] will lead them to take one step forward,” Khamenei replied. So much for the “significant” presence of William Burns, the under secretary of state for political affairs, who went to Geneva to show Tehran and the Europeans the willingness of the United States to have senior-level contacts with the clerical regime. If Khamenei had even once sent a secret senior emissary to Washington expressing his *conditional* willingness to restore diplomatic relations, we would now have an embassy in Tehran. George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George H. W. Bush all would have leapt at the opportunity.

The mission by Burns, an accomplished “realist” diplomat, is exactly what Obama’s campaign had in mind when they said that as president, Obama would approve “preparatory” meetings

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with Iranian officials before he sought to have a face-to-face with a worthy counterpart, which, given the Iranian political system means either Khamenei, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, or Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani—the head of Iran’s Expediency Council and the cleric who got the clandestine nuclear weapons program rolling. Since Obama first broached the idea of personal diplomacy during a Democratic primary debate, Khamenei has unleashed a barrage of speeches against “Satan Incarnate,” “the Great Enemy,” and “the Enemy of Islam and all Islamic peoples”—all shorthand for the United States. Ahmadinejad, a more spiritual man than Khamenei, suggested to NBC’s Brian Williams in late July that all the problems between the United States and Iran could be eliminated if Americans would just learn to live according to the dictates of the biblical and postbiblical prophets, who are all, according to Islamic theology, Muslim. Williams did not appear to realize that Ahmadinejad was calling for America’s religious conversion. If he had realized it, he probably would have ignored it as perfunctory rhetoric of little real-world relevance.

But it is helpful to imagine the reverse: suppose Barack Obama, George W. Bush, or John McCain called on Iranians to accept the teachings of Christ as practiced by America’s Christians. Religiously, culturally, and politically the idea is, of course, unthinkable. This ought to give us some

idea of the chasm separating Americans and Europeans from the leadership of the Islamic Republic. This ought to tell Obama and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that face-to-face “preparatory” meetings with Iranians are irrelevant: American diplomats could talk for years to Saeed Jalili, the Iranian nuclear negotiator who is in the entourage of Ahmadinejad, and it would not disturb the universe in which Jalili lives and prays.

This gap is not just with Ahmadinejad, who some on the American left like to depict as a man without real power in Tehran. It is with the entire oligarchy that runs the Islamic Republic. Look at the use of the word *dushman* (enemy) in the speeches of Khamenei and Ahmadinejad. The usage is constant and nearly identical. The intensity of its use equals anything that ever came from Ruhollah Khomeini’s anti-American pen, which was vastly more elegant. Ahmadinejad has done well in Iran’s clerically dominated political system for a variety of reasons, but chief among them is the fact that he is Khamenei’s soul mate. Khamenei has not had one since he became the *rahbar*, or the guide for the Islamic Republic, on Khomeini’s death in 1989. Rafsanjani and Khamenei—who have depended upon each other since the early days of the revolution and who are in many ways brothers-in-arms—do not appear to be spiritual kin in the way that Khamenei and Ahmadinejad are.

Iran’s current president and the *rahbar* are very different men with dissimilar backgrounds—no layman can ever truly be one with an *alim* (mullah)—but they are very close in how they judge right and wrong, in the way their Islamic-Iranian identity wraps around them, and in their perception of threats—particularly the cultural threat of the United States and the West. If anything, it is Khamenei who is the more hard-core and whose spiritualism is less colorful, less peasant-playful, and more overtly and crudely political. Ahmadinejad can happily imagine women playing and enjoying soccer; with Khamenei, the image is more of women in chadors with assault rifles on their shoulders shouting anti-American slogans. Ahmadinejad probably does not mind this image either, but he would allow the women time off to play soccer.

It is a good guess that both of these men *really* want to tell the West, in earthy language, that they are going to get a nuclear weapon and there is nothing the Americans, the Europeans, and the Israelis can do to stop them. When both men talk about justice, and they mention it constantly, they are thinking of the imbalance in the world between devout Muslims, who follow the true path of God, and infidels, with their damnable technical

superiority. By acquiring nuclear weapons, these men intend to restore that balance, allowing real Muslims, especially the faithful Iranian vanguard, to recapture the high ground throughout the Islamic world. Ahmadinejad was glad to see Burns at the Geneva meeting not because he wants to reach a compromise with the United States and welcomes the new, post-axis-of-evil “flexibility” of the Bush administration, but because he sees the Geneva meeting as another step in the West’s process of conceding a bomb to Iran. Ahmadinejad’s triumphalism, which is the mirror image of Khamenei’s more tight-lipped glee, overwhelmed Brian Williams, who was reduced to repeatedly asking the same questions. When you think you have won, you do not need to pretend with an American news anchor that you might, just possibly, compromise and give the West hope that diplomacy can continue.

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There is a slight chance the Europeans can revive the Bush/Obama diplomatic track. But the Europeans would have to do what they have so far refused to do and may no longer be able to do, since Tehran has been rapidly moving its financial assets out of Europe: immediately impose economy-crushing sanctions on the Islamic Republic. Russia, China, and India—the key states in developing a suffocating, worldwide sanctions regime—are unlikely to help since they all seem to have concluded that a clerical Iran brought to its knees by the West is worse than an oil-rich, nuclear-armed, and grateful Islamic Republic. With their dogged efforts to increase centrifuge production—two years ago, Iran had one cascade of 164 centrifuges; now it may have six thousand spinning—Khamenei and Ahmadinejad act as if they will soon have a weapon. And once the Iranians get the bomb and put, or just imply that they are putting, nuclear-tipped warheads on their ballistic missiles, how much resolve will the Europeans have to confront Tehran? Given contemporary European sentiments and habits, is not an effort to placate Tehran more likely?

Even under Angela Merkel, a relatively pro-American chancellor, the Germans are much more

comfortable with a policy of *ostpolitik* toward Tehran, which satisfies both Germany's enormous commercial appetite and its pacifist sensibilities. And what about the Spanish and the Italians, who have substantial commercial dealings with Tehran? They have military bases in Herat province in Western Afghanistan, and we have caught them quietly negotiating with the Taliban in an effort to avoid casualties. Imagine if Iran, which is just over the border, were to put military pressure on them. Would they be inclined to look at the big picture or the small one, which has more Spanish and Italian body bags being flown home? And if the Germans cave, the French, who have been the most farsighted in discerning the fearsome strategic ramifications of a nuclear clerical regime, will probably go with them.

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It is now entirely reasonable to conjecture that Tehran will have nuclear-armed missiles before the United States is able to install a missile defense system in Eastern Europe. A year ago, the Bush administration, despite its rhetoric on the issue, had a rather uncoordinated and lackadaisical approach to advancing European missile defense—the State Department and the Pentagon seemed to be representing two different countries. Public diplomacy on the issue in Poland and the Czech Republic has been abysmal. The placement of interceptors in Poland may not happen because of differences that have arisen between Washington and Warsaw;\* putting these interceptors in Lithuania may prove more difficult than many in Washington imagine; and the required radar base in the Czech Republic may not happen either, as the parliamentary vote in November on the deal signed this July is in danger of failing. The Czech government needs 101 votes for the radar base to open; it has exactly 101 votes. Obama has certainly not helped the cause of the Atlanticists in Prague who have put their political necks out on this unpopular issue—the Czechs's neutralist bent rivals that of the Swiss—by his refusal to back the radar installation. Support from Obama might prove crucial in maintaining left-wing Czech support for the radar sites. For a presidential candidate who spends so much time

talking about the growing Iranian threat, his failure to back European missile defense—a position the Democratic party will eventually embrace since it will have nowhere else to go short of preemptive strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities—shows the strategically underdeveloped nature of the Obama political team. Trumping McCain with a loud endorsement of missile defense is also not a bad domestic political maneuver.

Even with a functioning antiballistic missile system in place to stiffen European spines, the mullahs may well be able to split the alliance once they have nukes. The allure of Iranian oil and gas is just too great. With Tehran suggesting that the Europeans have nothing to fear as long as they distance themselves from the United States in the Middle East and in Afghanistan, an American containment strategy on Iran—which necessarily has to involve the Europeans if it is going to have any economic teeth—may well be stillborn.

Thoughtful Democrats have realized the havoc the Iranians could cause in the Middle East once they obtain nuclear weapons. But few Democrats—or Republicans, for that matter—have awakened to the potential for Iranian nuclear arms to destroy the very transatlantic ties that both Obama and McCain say need to be strengthened to confront the many problems before us. When he was president of Iran, Rafsanjani began a divide-and-conquer strategy toward the West, trying to bring in the Europeans for investment and trade while confronting the United States and lethally attacking dissidents at home and abroad. This approach was especially important to the development of Iran's then entirely clandestine nuclear weapons program, since Rafsanjani did not want the West lining up against the regime at a time when it needed to build up its program to a "breakout" potential. Khamenei and Ahmadinejad abandoned Rafsanjani's and his successor Mohammad Khatami's cautious and slow approach to developing nuclear weapons. For a time, this abrupt change caused concern in Tehran that the United States and Europe might actually deploy economy-crushing sanctions or, even worse, that the Bush administration might order a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities before the enrichment process had sufficiently advanced.

But the fear of Bush has vanished. And we will now see whether Khamenei and Ahmadinejad have a correct understanding of Europe—whether it really still matters. Ironically, Khamenei and Ahmadinejad's confrontational strategy could prove more effective at dividing the Europeans from the Americans than did the wry

smile of Rafsanjani or even the warm, soft handshakes of Khatami.

Yet the Europeans might still surprise themselves and us. Concern about the Islamic Republic's nuclear quest is palpable in Paris, London, and Berlin. Senior French diplomats who have been party to the EU-3 talks like to relate how Iran's European embassies are now paying their bills with big wads of cash, since they can no longer transfer the required monies through embargoed banks. The Europeans might still be able to unleash a tsunami of sanctions—sanctions that even the Italians could be shamed into supporting. And it is possible that Bush might again follow his better instincts and ramp up the bellicose language, suggesting that he will indeed strike before leaving office. It is even possible that Obama could come to appreciate that his Iran policy has utterly collapsed. With Khamenei, loudly advertised *machtropolitik* is an indispensable inducement to a peaceful suspension of uranium enrichment. Perhaps the contemplation of his administration having to figure out a containment strategy against a nuclear-armed Iranian theocracy might convince Obama of the need now for a bit of eloquent bellicosity.

And McCain, who has been curbing his more aggressive instincts for fear of sounding too warlike for an electorate spooked by Iraq, might again powerfully suggest that diplomacy without the threat of force has no chance against mullahs who view the Lebanese Hezbollah as their beloved children. The Bush administration can have as many “one-time meetings” as Rice wants with Iranian officials—there is nothing wrong with these encounters or the discussion of an American-manned interests section in Tehran, so long as no one believes

that they reveal latent moderation among Tehran's ruling elite. In the containment of the Soviet Union, the United States often made the cold war quite warm. Apply the same logic: bring back the aircraft carriers to the Persian Gulf.

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A betting man would, of course, go the other way. More likely, we will get to see whether an Obama or McCain administration has any idea how to contain a nuclear-armed, oil-rich theocracy willing to deploy terrorism and guerrilla warfare to ensure that “justice” is brought to the Middle East and Afghanistan. This is assuming that the Israelis—increasingly desperate as they contemplate their future opposite nuclear-armed Muslim militants who see the Jewish state as an insult to God—do not strike first and change everyone's planning. Perhaps it is not too late to breathe new life and urgency into the critical need for a united Western front against Tehran.

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\* On August 20, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski signed an accord allowing the United States to base part of a missile defense system on Polish soil. But the point remains about public diplomacy on the issue.

## Also by Reuel Marc Gerecht:

*The Weekly Standard*

### **Countering Iran**

By Reuel Marc Gerecht, May 12, 2008

What are we going to do about Iran? When Hillary Clinton surreally promised to obliterate the Islamic Republic if the mullahs nuked Israel, she at least recognized that a nuclear-armed clerical regime is a serious menace and that successful diplomacy with Tehran without the threat of force is fantasy. How to handle Iran may well be the decisive foreign policy question of the 2008 presidential campaign—especially if Tehran continues to exploit the vacuum left by the collapse of the Bush administration's Iran policy and the general listlessness of the U.S. presence in the Middle East outside of Iraq.

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