

# Iran vs. the West:

## The View from Israel

May 19, 1997



### Brief Analysis

In early 1995, few were inclined to try to refute the wisdom of Europe's policy of "critical dialogue" with Iran. The belief that benevolent, rational dialogue could reform Iran—even in the face of brazen aggression and unbridled political effrontery—seemed too compelling to pass up. Nevertheless, the policy was then, and continues to be now, nothing more than appeasement akin to that which failed miserably before World War II.

The best evidence of the policy's fundamental flaw manifests itself in Iran's increasingly roguish behavior since the onset of "critical dialogue," both at home and abroad. The Iranian regime has accelerated development of its weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) program and other non-conventional capabilities with all available means, at the expense of the welfare of its people. The ayatollahs have stepped up the financing and training of a cadre of international terrorists, who consider Tehran to be the headquarters of a new "Comintern of Extremist Islamic Terror." In particular, the regime actively pursues the destabilization of the Middle East and the collapse of the peace process, daily terrorizing Israel and moderate Arab states (especially in the Gulf) by lending financial, military, economic, and social support to Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah. Moreover, Iran's naval build-up in the Gulf threatens the free flow of oil through the Straits of Hormuz. Finally, in the field of human rights, Iran continuously flouts the norms of the international community with impunity, terrorizing poets, writers, intellectuals, and Kurdish freedom fighters. All evidence points clearly to the failure of Europe's dialogue to change this behavior.

One shortcoming of critical dialogue is its premise that there exists in Iran any desire or willingness to reverse its aggressive tendencies, at least among a more "moderate" faction in the regime. But there is no such thing as "moderates" or "extremists" in Iran. Iran's policies are defined solely by the leadership of the Supreme Guide, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. In that light, the upcoming elections in Iran are unlikely to produce any real change. The expected assent to the presidency of current Majlis Speaker Ali Akbar Nateq Nuri—"anointed" as Khamenei's choice—will, if anything, redound to the benefit of extremist, anti-Western elements in the Iranian regime, since conventional wisdom aligns Nateq Nuri with the radicals.

Europeans have long blamed the absence of a "smoking gun" of Iran's role in terrorism for their reticence to abandon critical dialogue and confront the Iranian regime. But Europe's weak response to the Mykonos verdict, failing to do more than slap Iran on the wrist when faced with unquestionable proof of Iran's guilt, reveals that Europe is determined to "ignore the facts" and pursue appeasement, with little regard for the consequences. All evidence, spelled out even in the very words of Iranian leaders, suggests that Europe's policies extend the life of the regime, by providing the financial support the ayatollahs would otherwise be denied. Critical dialogue can now really be called two monologues: Europe criticizing Iran and Iran denying the charges, with neither actually engaging the other. Meanwhile, the clock is ticking on Iran's pursuit of a nuclear capability.

### U.S. Policy: A More Effective Lever

On the other hand, the United States, acting alone, has courageously pursued a more successful, meaningful, and

practical policy toward Iran, no matter how limited. Economic sanctions and political isolation to cripple the ayatollahs are the only means of dealing with them. Winning over the Iranian people-the "critical mass" in the equation-is the key to accelerating the current regime's demise. Discontentment is rampant and growing, thanks to deepening economic privation; the goal of the West should be to feed this popular discontentment with the regime. The explosive nature of a discontented Iranian populace could prove the critical tool in defeating the ayatollahs. With vigilance and perseverance, such a policy will eventually bring about a change in Iran's leadership.

Military confrontation or any other form of violence should not be considered as a means of dealing with Tehran because it likely will prove counterproductive, rallying the Iranian population around the regime in the face of an attack. Building on Mykonos and perhaps even proof of an Iranian role in the al-Khobar towers bombing, the United States should strengthen its resolve to contain Iran. Washington should increase efforts on several fronts: it should make a concerted effort to persuade Russia and China, in particular, to refrain from providing Iran with dual-use and sophisticated technologies, and it should redouble its attempts to convince Europe to join in a campaign of international isolation of the Tehran regime.

#### Israel, Lebanon, and the Iranian Regime

Israel is convinced that there exists no hope for fruitful dialogue with the Iranian regime and is therefore prepared to undertake whatever measures are necessary to defend itself. Jerusalem is not looking to "pick a fight" or initiate any form of military confrontation with Iran. Israel will "do its utmost," however, to prevent Tehran from gaining nuclear capability, and is inclined to confront the Iranian regime in various ways when necessary.

Israel has a number of issues in the Iranian file. First, Israel is convinced that Ron Arad is alive and that the Iranians know of his whereabouts and have the ability to provide for his safe return to Israel. Second, Israel confronts Iran daily in Lebanon, where Iran is the principal financial and military patron of Hezbollah. Some have suggested that Israel unilaterally withdraw from its security zone, commonly known as the "Lebanon First" option. But Israel cannot, because the Lebanese army is incapable of disarming Hezbollah- especially while supported by Iran-and securing the border. Syria actually calls the shots in Lebanon and although Damascus could contain Hezbollah if it wanted to, this would strain Syrian relations with Iran. Syria's unwillingness to accept Israel's stated offer to resume negotiations without preconditions indicates that Syria is not now interested in making peace with Israel. However, in the past, when prospects were ripe for a Syrian-Israeli agreement, Damascus has shown a willingness to distance itself from Iran in pursuit of peace with Israel. In such circumstances, Israel could feel confident that the border with Lebanon would remain quiet. Thus, Israel should not unilaterally withdraw from its security zone, but the "Lebanon question" should be the first issue discussed when Israel and Syria do eventually resume peace talks.

The Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Greg Saiontz.

Policy #249

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