

Imagining a Meeting Between David Petraeus and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.

Atlantic correspondent Jeffrey Goldberg continues the discussion of next steps on Iran with scholar Shaul Bakhash and Dr. Satloff.

Read this article on the Atlantic's website.
[\(http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/09/imagining-a-meeting-between-david-petraeus-and-the-iranian-revolutionary-guards/262319/\)](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/09/imagining-a-meeting-between-david-petraeus-and-the-iranian-revolutionary-guards/262319/)

After posting my [interview with Robert Satloff \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/robert-satloff-on-next-steps-in-the-iran-crisis\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/robert-satloff-on-next-steps-in-the-iran-crisis), the executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, on the topic of Iran, Israel and the U.S., the scholar Shaul Bakhash, of George Mason University, e-mailed this to Goldblog:

It seems to me that the question you should have asked at the end of your otherwise deft interview with R. Satloff relates to his own final remarks. When you ask him what policy he advocates and which may cause Iran to suspend or end its weapons program, he replies:

Here, the basic point is that if the Khamenei-led regime were faced with the stark choice -- desist from pursuit of nuclear weapons, with all that it entails, or risk the end of the regime -- there is a much higher likelihood they would buckle and at least slow down their program or suspend parts of it, as they apparently did with weaponization in the wake of the US invasion of Iraq.

But surely, here, precisely, is the rub: how does the American president signal to the Iranian leader that he risks "the end of the regime" without, in effect, threatening war? This is the question that those who criticize the president for not being more forceful and who advocate "red lines" still need to answer.

With Shaul's permission, I forwarded this question to Rob, who sent in this reply (read all the way to the end, in order to see Rob's very bold idea for David Petraeus and Tom Donilon):

Shaul Bakhash -- a scholar of great renown, and deservedly so -- has asked a critical question. Some context is

essential.

The United States has many grievances against the Islamic Republic of Iran, not least of which is the premeditated murder of American servicemen at Khobar, in Iraq, and elsewhere. I hope successive Administrations, including this one, are using all appropriate means to retaliate for these egregious acts, though it is regrettable that retribution -- if it has occurred -- has been shrouded in secrecy, because it lacks the public education value of such actions.

Iran's nuclear program is in a wholly different category. If Iran achieves its objectives, this would be a strategic "game-changer" that makes a troubled Middle East region exponentially more threatening to U.S. interests and those of our allies. That is why successive presidents have specifically vowed it will not happen.

Iran apparently does not seem to take such vows with sufficient concern because it continues to pursue its objectives. And, even more regrettably, the strategy to inject seriousness behind the vow -- imposing incremental though powerful international sanctions, bolstering the military capabilities of allies, dispatching considerable force to the Persian Gulf region, offering Tehran a generous, face-saving diplomatic solution -- has not worked either. If anything, this combination of actions has convinced Iran of the urgency (perhaps, the opportunity) to speed up its nuclear program. Therefore, something is missing from the equation.

There are many reasons that could explain Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons; indeed, the rationale may change or evolve over time. My own view is that "nukes-as-insurance" is high on the list, though surely Iran also intends to use a nuclear weapons capability to enhance its position (and threaten its enemies), not just as protection against outside attack or interference. But if Iran's leaders believe nuclear weapons will ensure the survival of the regime, the most effective way to convince them otherwise is to make clear to them just the opposite will occur if they persist in efforts to develop such weapons.

I don't like to use the word "threaten" -- the United States should not "threaten." We should explain plainly to the Iranian leaders what the consequences of their actions will be. The formula "all options are on the table" has had a good run, but it has outlived its practical usefulness. The time is coming for a latter-day variant of what a colleague of mine calls our "Tariq Aziz moment" (the analogy isn't perfect, of course) -- when David Petraeus or Tom Donilon meets clandestinely with Qasim Suleimani, not to negotiate, but to explain the facts of life. (This should, in my view, be complemented by much greater American effort to hasten the demise of Assad's regime in Syria, where the Iranians have decided to double-down on their man.) That's what a commitment to prevention really means -- and I believe it stands the best chance of achieving a peaceful resolution to the Iran nuclear crisis, which is and should be our goal. If we aren't up to that, then either we should consult immediately with Israel and other allies to create an effective strategy for the "day after" Israel's necessarily more limited military action or we should begin to get used to living with an Iranian bomb. ❖

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