

# The Leveretts Get Iran All Wrong

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Articles & Testimony

Just as he is being criticized by those to his right for his emphasis on engagement with Iran, President Obama came under attack from the left, in the op-ed pages of the May 23 New York Times, for just the opposite. Unlike critics from the right who largely concur with the president's stated objectives but disagree with his tactics, Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett argue for a full about-face on Iran policy. Obama's current policy, they assert, is doomed to fail unless he repudiates pressure and instead accommodates the Iranian regime and its nuclear aspirations, ostensibly in order to improve U.S.-Iran relations. The Leveretts both misread the Iranian regime and misapprehend U.S. interests; as a result, their proposed policy would neither lead to the rapprochement they seek nor prevent Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

The premise of the authors' analysis is that the lack of progress toward a U.S.-Iran rapprochement is the result of U.S. belligerence, which they believe makes Tehran unreceptive to U.S. overtures. In so arguing, they suffer from solipsism; in an inversion of Newton's Third Law, for the authors, every Iranian action must be a reaction to something the United States has done. So Roxana Saberi's arrest is a "fundamentally defensive" action taken in response to U.S. policy, Supreme Leader Khamenei's speeches railing against the West are a reflection of "legitimate concern," and so forth. This line of thinking neglects the possibility that the Iranian regime is acting according to its own calculation of its interests, foremost among which is regime survival. The Saberi arrest may have less to do with the United States than with the regime's longstanding repression of journalists, activists (such as advocates for women's and labor rights), minorities (such as the Bahai), and anyone else it deems a threat. Iran's two-decade pursuit of nuclear weapons may have objects other than the United States as well. Likewise, the authors fault Obama for failing to pursue a "grand bargain," but few observers of Iran believe that the regime is interested in such an arrangement.

Furthermore, the authors' suggestion that forgoing pressure will yield progress toward U.S.-Iran reconciliation stands at odds with the historical evidence. While the Clinton administration's series of unilateral concessions to the Khatami government met with no response, Iran's suspension of both nuclear weapons efforts and uranium enrichment in 2003 is widely believed to have been a response to U.S. military action in Iraq. Similar arguments could be made for other policy shifts made by Tehran. The authors cite post-9/11 negotiations with Iran as evidence of the regime's interest in productive negotiations, but fail to note that these talks also took place in the shadow of U.S. military activity in states bordering Iran, or that Iran cooperated against its longstanding enemies -- the Taliban and Al-Qaeda -- while continuing unabated its pursuit of nuclear weapons and support for terrorism.

As for policy recommendations, the authors modestly suggest that the United States eschew cooperation with Israel, provide the Iranian regime a security guarantee, accept an "increasingly sophisticated" Iranian nuclear program, and learn to accept Iranian support for Hamas and Hizballah. This amounts to achieving one's objectives by redefining defeat as success. It is worth examining each of these suggestions in turn (I leave it to Michael Mandelbaum to address the frequent but inappropriate use of the Nixon-to-China analogy invoked by the authors).

First, in dismissing the notion of a coalition between Israel and the Arab states to counter Iran, the authors fail to

understand that this is not a policy prescription but a description of fact. Because they harbor mutual concerns over Iran's behavior, Israel and its neighbors have been pursuing complementary policies aimed at countering Tehran. Indeed, one could argue that this ad hoc coalition -- galvanized by Iran's own belligerence -- extends well beyond the region. There would be many obstacles, as the authors assert, to transforming this state of affairs into an explicit, formal alliance, but fortunately there is also no practical need to do so.

Second, the notion that Iran would be placated by security guarantees is questionable. There is little to suggest that Iran is interested in such guarantees. They would more likely underscore the regime's vulnerability than its strength, given that stable governments rarely seek foreign assurances of their stability. The regime is also likely canny enough to understand that the only trustworthy guarantors of security -- external and internal -- are alliances based on shared, enduring interests, or effective forceful deterrents. Absent a change in Iran's behavior, it is unlikely that any U.S. assurance would lead the regime to forgo its quest for the ultimate deterrent, given Iran's testy relations with its neighbors and others.

Finally, a sophisticated nuclear program that stops one turn of the screwdriver away from a nuclear weapon is strategically no different for U.S. interests than actual Iranian possession of an atomic bomb. To accept the former is to say that you accept the latter. Given the potential consequences of a nuclear Iran -- whether the emboldening of its militant proxies, the sparking of a regional nuclear arms race, or the realization of an existential threat to Israel -- acquiescence should not be an option considered by the United States.

Ultimately the authors argue not for changing Iranian behavior, but rather for accepting it and adapting U.S. policies accordingly in hopes of better bilateral relations. They take as given that Iran shares our desire for reconciliation, but as I have argued previously on this blog, it is unlikely that the regime does so. Thus, in sacrificing strategic objectives for cordial relations, the United States would ultimately achieve neither -- we would earn scorn, not respect, for abandoning our allies and abdicating our interests.

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