

# Stopping an Iranian Bomb

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Articles & Testimony

**H**anging over yesterday's meeting between President Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu was one overriding question: Can the president's strategy of diplomatic engagement persuade Iran to cease its efforts to develop nuclear weapons? Unfortunately, history offers little cause for hope -- especially if the United States remains focused on trying to reassure Iran of America's benign intentions. Successful denuclearization of hostile states is most likely to occur as a result of regime change, coercive diplomacy or military action, not U.S. pledges of mutual respect.

Cases of successful nuclear reversal in the Middle East underscore the importance of coercion. In December 2003, Libya's Moammar Gaddafi accepted an American offer of rapprochement in exchange for giving up his nuclear weapons infrastructure -- after U.S. troops had provided him with the compelling example of deposing and capturing Gaddafi's fellow Arab dictator Saddam Hussein.

Stopping Hussein's own nuclear ambitions required even more extreme measures. In 1981, Israeli jets destroyed Iraq's Osirak reactor just before it began producing plutonium for nuclear weapons. Ten years later, U.S. success in the Persian Gulf War led to the dismantling of Hussein's crash program to enrich uranium for an atomic bomb.

Military force also proved necessary against Syria's rogue nuclear activities. In September 2007, Israeli planes bombed a nearly completed reactor that Damascus had been secretly building with North Korean assistance.

As for Iran, the facts are that America's greatest success in setting back Tehran's nuclear program came not as the result of any negotiation but in response to intense diplomatic and military pressure. The 2007 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate noted that in 2003 Iran halted its nuclear weapons design work (while continuing efforts to enrich uranium and develop ballistic missiles) because of increasing international pressure resulting from exposure of its covert nuclear program. Most observers noticed that Iran's decision coincided with the U.S. invasion of its neighbor Iraq and the toppling of Hussein's regime after three weeks of fighting -- something Iran's military had failed to achieve after eight years of war in the 1980s.

History's lesson for the Obama administration seems straightforward: Short of regime change or military attack, the method most likely to persuade an anti-American, terrorist-sponsoring state such as Iran to cease its nuclear weapons program is credibly threatening the regime's hold on power. While using intense diplomatic engagement with Tehran to make clear the historic opportunity that exists for reconciliation, the United States should simultaneously be working to confront the regime with a crippling combination of diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions and military coercion.

For the time being, at least, the administration seems inclined to pursue another tack. Rather than using engagement as a mechanism to clarify for Iran's rulers the stark choice they face, President Obama appears singularly focused on demonstrating America's intense desire for improved relations. The results so far are not encouraging, with successive expressions of U.S. goodwill reciprocated by a series of Iranian provocations: the launch of an Iranian satellite; the unveiling of a factory to produce nuclear fuel; the arbitrary arrest (and subsequent

release) of an American journalist on trumped-up espionage charges.

Notably, the administration's approach is increasingly at odds with that of U.S. allies in the Middle East that seek to maximize pressure on Tehran. For the past month, Egypt has mounted a courageous public effort to rally America's Arab friends in opposition to an Iranian campaign of subversion that stretches from Iraq to Morocco. Instead of rushing to the defense of distressed allies, Obama has largely remained silent, instead opting to reiterate his interest in reaching some sort of accommodation with Tehran, the source of the region's problems.

Important differences have also emerged between the administration and Israel, particularly over the possible use of force to stop Iran's nuclear program. Both Vice President Biden and Defense Secretary Robert Gates have publicly warned Israel against any attack on Iran. Gates has openly speculated that any American military action would be counterproductive.

Can an approach premised on forgoing such crucial diplomatic and military leverage succeed with an Iran determined to acquire nuclear weapons? Given the stakes, we should all pray that it does. But given the history of tyrannical Middle Eastern regimes seeking nuclear arms, we must also acknowledge that the Obama strategy reflects the triumph of hope over experience.

John Hannah, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, served as national security advisor to Vice President Dick Cheney from 2005 to 2009. ❖

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