

# Balance of Power

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Iran's seizure of 15 British sailors dominated international headlines and attention for nearly two weeks. Many wondered whether it would become a long, drawn-out affair like the American hostage crisis in 1980. Others feared that it might lead to an escalation, not just of tension with Iran, but of incidents across Iraq and the Persian Gulf.

From the outset, I saw it as an event that would offer us a window to watch the balance of forces in the Iranian leadership. I had little doubt that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was responsible for the seizure, and I suspected several motivations for acting: First, it prefers confrontation, believing that Westerners tend to back down when confronted and that, domestically, its hand is strengthened in a crisis. Second, it may have believed it could trade the British sailors for the IRGC members the U.S. military is now holding in Iraq. Third, it wanted to scuttle even the possibility of a deal in which Iran suspends its nuclear program (which the IRGC runs) in return for a suspension of sanctions -- an offer that South Africa's president was discussing with Iranian leaders as the U.N. Security Council was getting ready to adopt a second resolution imposing limited additional sanctions.

But the more interesting puzzle was whether the IRGC had the clout among the Iranian elite to determine how Iran's leaders would deal with the crisis. In my mind, if it could be overruled after triggering a crisis, we would learn a great deal about its real political weight and discover whether the major decision-makers are governed more by pragmatism than rigid ideology.

None of this, of course, meant that our problems with Iran -- on the nuclear issue, its support for terrorism, or its opposition to Arab-Israeli peace -- would disappear. The Iranian leadership as a whole wants nuclear weapons and sees its interests in the Middle East largely as opposed to ours. But the non-IRGC segments (the mullahs, their merchant-class backers, and the liberalizers associated with former Presidents Ali Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammed Khatami) are mindful of the costs of isolation, and they don't seek nuclear arms at any price. That is the meaning of pragmatism -- recognizing Iran's interests and not pursuing a path that ultimately costs Iran more than it gains. Our challenge on the nuclear issue has been to develop a strategy -- on our own and with others -- that convinces the Iranians their interests will be harmed more than helped by acquiring nuclear arms.

Since, with any act of statecraft, it is essential to understand reality as it is, knowing whether the IRGC and its

standard bearer, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, hold the upper hand in Iran will tell us a lot about whether we can dissuade the Iranians from going nuclear -- and if so, how best to do it. While some observers like John Bolton declared that, in the crisis, Ahmadinejad "scored a political victory, both in Iran and internationally," the facts suggest just the opposite.

First, note that the Iranian press did not even mention the crisis for several days after the British sailors were seized: This was hardly a case in which the regime was trying to whip the public into a frenzy. On the contrary, it seemed to downplay the issue. Second, after the release of the sailors, Ahmadinejad was roundly criticized in many Iranian newspapers, with several articles making the point that the crisis cost Iran greatly without any corresponding benefit. Third, Ahmadinejad himself acknowledged that the British made no concessions when he said that they weren't big enough to admit mistake; and an article in the Iranian newspaper Aftab e Yazd even suggested that the Iranians were coerced into letting the sailors go: "If we wanted, as the president says, to pardon them while we had the authority to try them, why did we not release them before Blair's ultimatum or three days after it?"

It is hard to escape the conclusion that Ahmadinejad was a loser in the crisis, and that other Iranian leaders decided they needed to cut their losses. Interestingly, I know from speaking to British officials that they were surprised when Ahmadinejad announced the release of the sailors in his press conference. They had expected that there were going to be more quiet talks with the Iranians, in part to work out the details of the release and in part to discuss, without any British apology, how to minimize the possibility of avoiding future such problems. This was how they expected the Iranians to climb down.

And, yet, the Iranians ended the crisis unilaterally. Bear in mind that, early in the crisis, unnamed Iranians were quoted insisting that there must be a British apology and that the British sailors would be tried. They proved to be wrong. Ali Larijani, secretary of the Supreme Council on National Security, later told a British interviewer that there would be no trial and that the issue needed to be resolved peacefully; he proved to be right.

Larijani is known to be close to the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. While Khamenei made no public comments during the crisis, he is the only one empowered by the Iranian constitution to pardon detainees. Again, according to the British officials I spoke with, they believe that Khamenei ordered the sailors released but allowed Ahmadinejad to do it -- giving him a platform to weave his own public story and to bestow medals upon the IRGC soldiers who seized the sailors. Even then, Ahmadinejad wasn't spared public criticism in Iran. (For an overview of the criticism he sustained, [read \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2589\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2589) Mehdi Khalaji's April paper for the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.)

What, if anything, does all this tell us about the Iranian nukes? Without suggesting that the British sailors meant as much to the Iranians as the nuclear program, the arc of this crisis still has some important lessons. The most important is that, notwithstanding Ahmadinejad's declarations about the irreversibility of the nuclear program -- declarations that he made again in announcing his industrial-scale centrifuges last week -- the issue of Iran's nuclear future is not resolved. It is not ultimately in his hands or the hands of the IRGC. It may not be easy to stop or suspend the program, but -- if we could convince those who agreed to cut Iran's losses on the British sailors that Iran's interests can be served better by abandoning their nuclear efforts -- it's not impossible.

In the classic terms of statecraft, the sticks need to be potent enough to concentrate the minds of Iranian leaders on what they have to lose; and the carrots need to be offered at the point when Iranian leaders are both looking for a way out and an excuse for taking it. Are we artful enough to do both?

Dennis Ross is counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of the forthcoming *Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World*.

Read this op-ed at [New Republic Online. \(http://www.tnr.com/doc.mhtml?i=w070423&s=ross042307\)](http://www.tnr.com/doc.mhtml?i=w070423&s=ross042307)

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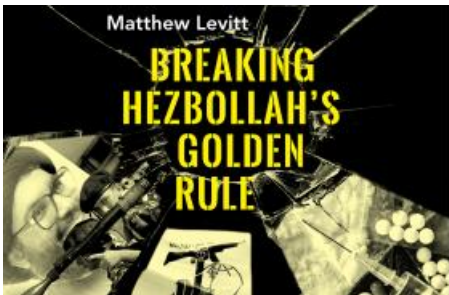
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