

Iran Options

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Articles & Testimony

The controversy over U.S. statements regarding Iranian arms in Iraq reflects the deep skepticism about how well the Bush administration understands the world. The intelligence briefers in Baghdad got into trouble by making the natural human error of assuming that all right-thinking people would come to the same conclusion as they did after reviewing the evidence: since Iran's Al-Quds force is under the direct control of Iran's supreme religious leader and since senior Al-Quds officers were detained in Iraq carrying false identities and plans for attacking U.S. forces, then it must be the case that Iran's top leaders are behind the attacks on U.S. forces.

Likely? Yes. Proven? No. And making the claim has taken attention away from the well-established fact that sophisticated Iranian weapons are being used to kill American soldiers in Iraq.

In contrast to this overreaching, the U.S. approach to Iran's nuclear program has more often stuck to what can be completely proven. And that explains its greater success at building a broad international coalition and creating bipartisan support at home, compared to the skepticism about the Iraq claims. In December, the United Nations Security Council unanimously -- with Russia and China approving -- voted to impose sanctions on Iran's dangerous nuclear "fuel cycle" activities. That came after three years of patient diplomacy concentrating on what is not in dispute, namely Iran's pursuit of a nuclear fuel cycle and its 18 years of concealing its nuclear activities. Iran proudly trumpets its progress on the fuel cycle, giving tours of the massive facilities it is building. And Iran acknowledged that it hid its activities, claiming only that these were minor mistakes.

By concentrating on what is clearly established, Washington has been able to accomplish much more than if it had emphasized the intelligence that strongly suggests Iran already has an active nuclear weapons program. The international inspectors have found a lot of suspicious indications Iran is working on a bomb, but there is no smoking gun. Explaining why to worry about Iran's nuclear fuel cycle is complicated; it is much simpler to warn that Iran is building a nuclear bomb. But it is worth taking the extra effort to explain that if Iran completes the fuel cycle facilities it shows off to the world, then it will be on the brink of having a bomb. The Nobel Peace Prize-winning director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohammed El-Baradei -- no fan of President George W. Bush -- says that if Iran completes the facilities now being built, Tehran would be "a few months" away from having a bomb.

While the United States has been quite successful at building a broad coalition opposed to Iran's nuclear ambitions, Tehran continues to claim it is making great progress with its nuclear program. So has the U.S. effort been a triumph of appearance over substance? No, because the Iranian claim is not true: Iran has encountered many technical problems in its nuclear program, largely because it has been blocked from access to foreign assistance. The task now is to secure vigorous enforcement by all countries of Security Council Resolution 1737, which forbids Iranian access to dual-use technologies, that is, civilian technologies that can be applied to the nuclear program.

The more Iran's nuclear program can be slowed, the more time for Iran's fundamental weaknesses and the West's abiding strengths to become apparent to the Islamic republic's hard-line leaders, who have recently been overconfident because of temporary factors in their favor, such as a tight oil market and U.S. problems in Iraq. Already,

the more business-minded Iranian leaders are realizing the high price that the country is paying for its nuclear program, especially since the U.S. Treasury has led a worldwide campaign to shut off Iran's access to international banks. A vigorous debate is occurring inside Iran about the wisdom of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's confrontational stances. If the West hangs tough and steps up the pressure on Tehran, Iran may well in the end agree to suspend its nuclear program, though admittedly the near-term outlook is not good.

In addition to pressing Iran, the United States needs to reassure its friends in the region that they are well protected against any threat from Iran. America does this not to be nice to oil-rich Arabs but because of U.S. interests in preventing Middle Eastern countries from starting their own nuclear programs. Nine regional countries -- all U.S. allies, such as Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates -- have announced they are re-examining their nuclear options in reaction to the Iranian program. If all of them went the whole way to nuclear weapons, the world would be a much more dangerous place. The best way to forestall further nuclear proliferation is for the United States to take concrete steps to shore up the defenses against Iran. That explains why President Bush ordered the deployment to the Persian Gulf of a second aircraft carrier and additional Patriot anti-missile defenses.

One should hope the additional military assets sent to the Gulf will also persuade Iran's leaders that their nuclear program is hurting Iran's security by starting an arms build-up that will leave Iran worse off. The Cold War offers instructive examples of how strong responses can bring better results. When the Soviet Union deployed nuclear-tipped SS-20 missiles in Eastern Europe, NATO answered by stationing similar missiles in Western Europe, despite massive demonstrations against what protesters saw as Reagan administration provocative saber-rattling. In fact, the NATO deployment dissuaded Moscow, which agreed to dismantle the SS-20s if NATO did the same to its missiles. We can hope that strong preparations to defend against Iranian nuclear-protected strong-arming of its neighbors will similarly dissuade Iran, such that Tehran agrees to stop its nuclear program in return for creation of a regional framework that protects Iran's security.

The second aircraft carrier deployed to the Gulf also increases the U.S. capability to pre-emptively strike Iranian nuclear facilities. But there are no reasons to carry out such a strike so long as Iran's nuclear program faces difficult technical barriers and diplomacy offers good prospects of resolving the crisis.

At the same time, the United States cannot rule out pre-emptive military force, because some in the Iranian revolutionary leadership with an apocalyptic world view might relish the opportunity to declare that Iran is about to explode a nuclear bomb, without clarifying if it was going to be inside Iran or on a Western or Israeli target. If they were to make such a threat, then pre-emptive military force would be well worth considering. Given that reality, the U.S. military certainly had better be preparing detailed plans now, so that America does not get caught flat-footed a la Iraq, not knowing what bad things could happen the day after the use of force. Such military planning would inevitably be misread by some as signs that an attack is near. But that is the price to be paid when so many in American society do not understand how the military works, including the importance of detailed contingency planning.

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