

Time Is Running Out

Jan 1, 2007



Articles & Testimony

In early September, as Kofi Annan passed through the Middle East on a farewell journey as United Nations secretary general, he made a stop in Tehran. There, in a meeting with Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad, Iran's president, he heard something startling.

As later recounted to the New York Times by an Annan aide, Ahmadinezhad told Annan that though Britain and the United States had won the last world war, Iran would win the next. "It wasn't the tone and the content that stunned us," the aide told the Times. "It was the fact that he talked like he meant it and believed it." After all, Annan and his colleagues hadn't realized there would be a next world war.

In the eyes of the Ahmadinezhad and his supporters, however, that war has already begun. In their way of thinking, radical Islamists have already brought the collapse of one superpower (the Soviet Union, which they believe fell because of the Afghan war) and are on route to victory in Europe. America is next.

The good news about the Iranian Ahmadinezhad's wild rhetoric is that he is not a particularly important figure in Iran's peculiar system in which the revolutionary institutions matter more than the state. Real power is wielded by the hardline clerics, especially Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, whose title accurately reflects his unchecked authority.

The bad news is that Khamenei and the other hard-line clerics entirely agree with Ahmadinezhad's dangerous views. They are just more careful about letting Westerners know what they really think.

To audiences in the Middle East, Khamenei is more open. He has long met with Holocaust deniers and warmly endorsed their disgusting lies. In Persian, he regularly calls the state of Israel a "cancer" that must be cut out and urges Muslims never to accept the existence of the Jewish state. He has been the force behind Iran's longstanding arms supplies to Lebanon's Hezbollah terrorist group, and he has constantly urged that group to keep up the fight against Israel no matter what concessions Israel might make. He has pushed Iran to provide more support for Hamas in the West Bank and Gaza because of the group's refusal to accept the state of Israel. Iran has pledged to give Hamas \$250 million this year, about half of which has been delivered, making Iran by far the largest funder of the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority.

The even worse news is Iran's revolutionary leaders deeply believe they can carry out their ambitious agenda. To us, that sounds bizarre because we see Iran as a middle-sized country that causes an amazing amount of trouble. Things look very different to Iran's hardliners. They see themselves as the leaders of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims who are destined to dominate the world.

To their conviction that God is on their side, Iran's hardliners add a strong dose of nationalism. Iran's history is 2,500 years old; by contrast, Islam has been around for a mere 1,300 years. For most of that time, Iran (the ancient Persia) has been a much larger country than it is today. After all, the Bible tells us that it was the Persian Emperor who ended the Jews' Babylonian captivity, freeing them to return to build the Temple in Jerusalem and giving them the money with which to do so. Coming to a more recent time, only 200 years ago, Iran was more than twice its

present size. No wonder Iran expects to be the regional superpower, especially when its population is three times that of Saudi Arabia and all the other Gulf Arab monarchies combined.

While its self-conceit may be impressive, Iran's only real chance to be able to dominate its neighborhood, much less to accomplish its often stated goal of eliminating Israel, is through its nuclear program. That is why U.S. policy toward Iran has appropriately focused on the nuclear issue. President Bush and his top officials have made many strong statements about the dangers from Iran, calling a nuclear-armed Iran unacceptable. But the sad reality is that over the last year, Iran has made slow but steady progress with its nuclear program, creating facts that will be hard to reverse. Perhaps diplomacy can rescue the situation, but only stronger pressure can produce results.

To date, diplomacy has not produced much. U.S. policy about Iran has focused on the U.N. Security Council ever since Iran's clandestine nuclear activities were first revealed in 2003. The Bush administration felt it made a great leap forward when, in September 2005, it was finally able to persuade a reluctant Europe to take Iran to the U.N. However, the Security Council has lived up to its reputation as being a place for much talk and little action.

Russia and China, who have so far blocked Security Council action on Iran, are hard to read. The pessimistic view is that they do not care much about a nuclear Iran: yes, a militant Islamist Iran could threaten them (both have large Muslim populations), but a nuclear Tehran's greater threat to the West would be welcomed by some in Moscow and Beijing.

Under the best of circumstances, the Security Council may in the near future adopt some largely symbolic measures, threatening to progressively ratchet up the pressure if Iran does not cooperate. This incremental approach will allow Iran to adjust at each new rung in the sanctions ladder, ensuring that U.N. resolutions have little effect.

At the moment, Tehran's hard-line mullahs think America is weak while Iran is on top of the world, so they will not halt their nuclear program. To them, the West, especially the United States but also Israel, is a paper tiger, unwilling and indeed unable to act forcefully. America's problems in Iraq and Israel's mixed record in the summer war against Hezbollah reinforced its hand.

But we may be able to turn that around. Iran has fundamental weaknesses and we have abiding strengths, and if we can delay the Iranian nuclear program long enough, that reality may become clearer. If the price of oil were \$30 a barrel; if there were so much spare oil-production capacity that Iranian oil was not needed; if the United States was not bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan; if Hezbollah, Hamas and other Iranian allies had been set back in their drive for power, then Iran would not be so cocky. We may not succeed, but it is worth the effort. It is not yet the time to bomb.

If we can stall Iran's nuclear program, if Iran's situation weakens and ours strengthens, if the international community's resolve can be demonstrated with sufficient credibility, then Iran's hardline leaders may possibly draw back from the path of confrontation with the world. To make this strategy work, the main change needed is less reliance on the Security Council. The United States should augment steps taken at the U.N. with parallel measures taken outside that body. Here are several examples of the steps which could be taken in concert with the U.N. process to make Iran's choices starker and to slow Iran's nuclear program.

Financial Pressure

Already this last year, the U.S. Department of the Treasury has been warning banks about doing business in Iran to great effect: Iranian businessmen complain they are having problems arranging a way to pay for goods they want to import. While financial sanctions will not bring Iranian hardliners to their knees, economic problems could contribute further to popular discontent with the government. While Iranians may always want nuclear weapons in their heart of hearts, we want them to decide that nuclear weapons come at too high a price to be worthwhile.

Proliferation-Proofing

Iran's nuclear program has moved forward at a snail's pace; after all, its clandestine work began 19 years ago. The basic reason is that the world community has actually been pretty good at blocking Iran's access to dangerous nuclear technology. The only real breach was Pakistan's provision of some designs and centrifuge machines, and that was a decade ago. Since then, Iran has been on its own, sweating out solutions for tricky technical problems. The one step the Security Council is likely to take is to ban Iranian access to the most dangerous nuclear technology. The challenge is to turn those words on paper into reality. That will require gathering intelligence on Iran's procurement activities and working with countries where Iran may be shopping for apparently innocuous materials that are actually destined for its nuclear program.

Inducements

Inducements are worth offering to Tehran to test the potential for diplomatic progress and to persuade public opinion—in Iran, in the United States and around the world—that Washington is making every reasonable effort to settle the dispute diplomatically. Appropriate inducements should be mutually beneficial, rather than looking like bribes that reward bad behavior. One potential inducement would be for the United States to offer Iran what it has provided some other countries that gave up their nuclear program, namely an assurance that the United States will not attack Iran if Iran does not attack the United States. Such a commitment is very different from Tehran's demand that the Bush administration recognize the legitimacy of the unpopular and autocratic Islamic Republic.

Deterrence and Dissuasion

The United States should step up its security presence in the region so as to show Iran that its nuclear program is starting an arms race that Iran will lose. On this issue, we may get some modest cooperation from Saudi Arabia and other Arab monarchies in the Gulf. They are worried about the Iranian threat, especially in light of Iran's breakthroughs in the Arab world in Iraq and Lebanon, where pro-Iranian forces have made great gains. The Arab monarchs have agreed to more active military cooperation with the United States, such as an October exercise in the Gulf, which practiced inspecting ships suspected of carrying nuclear materials. But more can be done; for instance, exercises to protect the Strait of Hormuz, which Iran regularly threatens to shut if any actions are taken against Tehran's nuclear program.

Military Planning

Iran's leaders seem to believe that the United States lacks the will and the capacity to take preventive military action. Washington should consider identifying "red lines" that would prompt preventive action should lastminute diplomacy fail. That moment has not yet arrived. If the United States or Israel acted militarily now, most of the world would see them, rather than the Iranians, as the warmongers.

Only when Iran has sufficiently scared the Arab Gulf States, the Europeans and hopefully the Russians will the United States or Israel be able to act without provoking outrage. How the world views a military attack on Iran's nuclear program matters because that will influence the post-strike environment. If the world tells Iran that the strikes were its fault, it may dissuade Iran from rebuilding the nuclear program. At the least, a supportive international reaction could lay the groundwork for further strikes if Iran does rebuild.

Besides stepping up the pressure, perhaps the next most important step is, first, do no harm. Many proposals are currently circulating on accommodating Iran. The Iraq Study Group, led by James Baker III and Lee Hamilton, recommended engaging Iran about the future of Iraq. Since Iran has for years been arming and funding those fighting the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq, it is hard to see why Iran would change that policy unless Washington offered something in return. Iran's U.N. ambassador, Javad Zarif, is reported to have told Baker and Hamilton that Tehran would demand an end to pressure on the nuclear program before it would help in Iraq. That would be a heavy price

indeed. And the benefits would be very limited; as the Baker-Hamilton group's own report shows, the instability in Iraq has become homegrown, with Iran and all other outside players only playing a minor supporting role.

Realistically, diplomacy may not work. But Washington has to make its best effort, if for no other reason than to show the publics in Iran, the United States and around the world that every peaceful option was being explored. Then, the U.S. hand will be strengthened if it is forced to resort to more severe measures.

Patrick Clawson is deputy director of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. This essay owes much to Michael Eisenstadt, who is the co-author with Dr. Clawson of The Washington Institute's recent Policy Focus, [Forcing Hard Choices on Tehran: Raising the Costs of Iran's Nuclear Program](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=257) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=257>). ♦

World Jewish Digest

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

TOPICS

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

Proliferation (/policy-analysis/proliferation)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)