

A View From Tehran: War and the Challenges in the Post-Saddam Middle East

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Brief Analysis

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Iran is facing its most acute crisis since the 1979 revolution. Over the past six years, political institutions have played a key role in opening the path to reform. Yet, the success of President Muhammad Khatami's efforts to involve the Iranian people in electoral processes and political institutions has led to a conservative backlash. A coalition of hardliners has been successfully implementing a strategy for retaining power, namely, fostering popular apathy by controlling public discourse, imprisoning reformers, and negating the deliberations of elected institutions. This strategy reached its apex during local and council elections in February in which only 30 percent of eligible voters went to the polls.

The reformists have recently reevaluated their strategy of incremental reforms, which largely relied on the use of legislation and the popular press in an attempt to make Iran's theocracy more liberal. Instead, reformist parliamentarians are now threatening to abandon the institutions of the Islamic Republic, which would undermine the legitimacy of elections and the republic itself. Similarly, student and labor movements are beginning to switch from electoral politics to protest.

Regardless of the outcome of the war in Iraq and U.S. attempts to move toward a post-Saddam detente with Tehran, the Iranian domestic situation will become increasingly polarized. Four different scenarios are possible. In the first scenario, reformists attempt to use external threats to stimulate internal reforms, believing that democratization can deter the United States. In the second, conservatives continue to undermine participation in popular institutions; as a result, external war and internal protest force a renegotiation of the national contract, leading to the marginalization of the conservatives. Yet, this can happen only if the student movement takes to the streets and sparks great violence and disorder. In the third scenario, the conservatives use external threats to legitimize a call for a national emergency and a solidarity government. In the fourth, the conservatives succeed in alienating the people from the political process. This would lead to an Iran that resembled the Soviet Union in the 1970s: a regime

characterized by stagnation cloaked in rhetoric. Although none of these scenarios may occur, any of them are more likely than maintenance of the status quo.

In any event, Tehran should be feeling more secure. Over the past year and a half, the United States has launched military campaigns to topple two of Iran's most unfriendly neighbors: the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussayn's regime in Iraq. Yet, the more Iran's actual security is enhanced, the more insecure it feels. Tehran often claims that instability in the region forces it to pursue nuclear weapons, when in fact it is Iran's possession of such weapons that would increase instability. Iran risks making itself the object of increased U.S. attention, potentially even a preemptive strike. Yet, a more effective (and more likely) U.S. response to the threat of Iranian nuclear proliferation would be a concerted effort to form a coalition with the leverage needed to retard the Iranian nuclear program.

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Iran thinks it is being helpful to the United States during the current conflict in Iraq. For example, Tehran refused access to Ansar al-Islam militants and refrained from complaining about U.S. missiles falling in Iranian territory. Moreover, the Iranian-backed Shi'i militia in Iraq, which the United States had hoped would stay off the battlefield, has shown relative restraint. On this basis, Tehran seems to expect that after the Iraq war is over, the United States will be obliged to reward the Islamic Republic.

Washington sees the situation quite differently, however. The Bush administration defines the primary threat facing the United States as the nexus between weapons of mass destruction and terrorism, and Iran is doing its best to pose a problem in each of these areas. In particular, the Iranian nuclear program has made extraordinarily visible progress over the past year. The uranium enrichment facility visited in February by International Atomic Energy Agency director Mohamed ElBaradei is huge: the centrifuges being installed can produce enough fissile material for more than one nuclear weapon per year, and each of the two buildings under construction is as big as ten football fields, with conspicuous shielding against aerial attack. Later this year, Iran is scheduled to receive low-enriched uranium fuel from Russia for the Bushehr nuclear power plant; there is no agreement to return the spent fuel to Russia, despite reports to the contrary.

Iran seems to be drawing the wrong lesson from the dichotomy between U.S. policy toward Iraq and toward North Korea. The correct lesson would be that a government which offers to negotiate with Washington can get much and avoid harsh U.S. action, while one that refuses to cooperate except when threatened with force will pay a heavy price. The wrong lesson is that the United States treads delicately in dealing with countries with nuclear weapons but feels free to attack those without them.

Failure to curtail the Iranian nuclear program would put the Bush administration in the difficult position of explaining why it took the nation into a war to stop Iraqi proliferation of weapons of mass destruction but is not acting more forcefully against Iran's clearly visible nuclear program, especially since Tehran has been a much more active state sponsor of terrorism than Baghdad. In this atmosphere, the administration could decide to consider preemption as an option for dealing with Iranian proliferation, on the theory that preemptive action would delay the nuclear program sufficiently that the present hostile regime would collapse before the program could be rebuilt. But that seems a dubious proposition.

A more fruitful policy would be to present Tehran with two alternative paths for security in the post-Saddam Persian Gulf. In the first path, the regional threat level increases as the Iranian nuclear program grows and as the United States increases its military presence and helps Iraq build a powerful military equipped with modern U.S. weapons. In the second path, the threat level decreases as Iran ends its nuclear enrichment program and enters into negotiations with regional states and outside actors (including the United States) on a cooperative threat reduction

program similar to that in the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty (e.g., countries send observers to each other's military exercises and limit heavy military units near borders). Although worthwhile, U.S. efforts to encourage Iran to choose the second path are unlikely to succeed.

At a minimum, governments that engage Tehran should make clear that Iran would face serious consequences if it were to take explicit steps toward nuclear weapons. The region would be better off if the Iranian nuclear program remained well short of final assembly and testing of a weapon, similar to the state in which the Pakistani program existed for many years before the 1998 nuclear tests. That would not be enough to avoid a crisis in U.S.-Iranian relations, but it would still be much better than the alternative.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Katherine Weitz.

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