

One of the Most Destructive Myths of American Foreign Policy

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Articles & Testimony

On July 16, the State Department showed it just doesn't get it. Less than one month after President Bush outlined a vision of Palestinian Arab democracy, Secretary of State Powell joined his Russian, European Union, and United Nations counterparts in a call for Israel to renew negotiations with Yasser Arafat's corrupt dictatorship. After all, isn't dialogue always the way forward? The answer came later that day. Palestinian Arab terrorists detonated two bombs next to a civilian bus and then mowed down the occupants as they tried to escape. Lest the message be unclear, terrorists detonated two bombs almost simultaneously on a crowded Tel Aviv street the following evening.

That a call for dialogue would lead to violence should be no surprise. The notion that offering concessions can defuse Middle Eastern conflicts is one of the most destructive myths of American foreign policy. While pundits lament the "cycle of violence" in the Middle East, they seldom consider that the suicide bombing phenomenon developed not when Israel occupied the West Bank, but rather after the Oslo accords granted the Palestinian Arabs self-rule. Terrorism accelerated when Israel unilaterally withdrew from southern Lebanon. Seen as a concession by Israel, the Iranian government and the terror groups it finances saw the pullback as affirmation that terrorism had its rewards. Even Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, long a darling of Western intelligentsia, just last November declared, "It is now clear that the joint position of Iran and Syria against the Zionist regime was the correct one."

Lecturing in Jerusalem this past year, I took the bus to the university each day. Whenever Mr. Powell or special envoy Anthony Zinni were dispatched to Israel, colleagues would urge me to stay home until after the suicide bombing occurred.

Prior to moving to Jerusalem, I taught in Iraq for nine months. Cursed with living under Saddam Hussein for more than three decades, Iraqis understand their leader far better than dilettante diplomats rotating through two-year stints in Foggy Bottom. The day after Mr. Powell announced his "smart sanctions" proposal, one illiterate farmer asked me, "Why do they talk about war crimes one day and reward Saddam the next?"

Iraqis realize that sanctions do not cause suffering; while all of Iraq is under sanctions, infant mortality has actually declined in every province not under Saddam's control. While Kurds buy medicine, Saddam builds palaces. But instead of forcing Saddam to comply with Gulf War ceasefire commitments, Mr. Powell offered a deal to ease sanctions. Why comply with international commitments if the State Department responds to the flouting of these commitments by easing the pressure?

Mr. Arafat and Saddam are not alone among dictators exploiting dialogue. Sudan's military regime once feted Osama bin Laden. However, dictator Omar al-Bashir has played his cards masterfully since September 11. For almost two decades, the Sudanese government has offered its Christian population a stark choice: Convert to Islam or die. Two million have perished in the ensuing civil war. But after Mr. Bashir condemned "all forms of violence," America allowed the U.N. Security Council to lift sanctions. Mr. Bashir's government handed over a few low-ranking terrorists but allowed scores to escape. On October 4, Sudanese Vice President Ali Uthman Taha declared, "The jihad is our

way and we will not abandon it and will keep its banner high." The Bush administration's special envoy has pushed for a ceasefire, but it exists on paper only.

American rewards for Mr. Bashir's rhetorical moderation have put millions of dollars at the disposal of his regime. With the pressure removed, did the regime continue reform? Hardly. In April, Sudanese television reported, "Training camps are ready to receive volunteer fighters." Demonstrators at a state-organized rally chanted, "Strike back, Bin Laden!" and "Down! Down with the U.S.A!" Thousands may die because the Bush administration insisted not on accountability and democracy, but upon dialogue instead.

Nowhere has dialogue been so unprofitable as with Iran. Shortly after the Islamic Revolution, the U.S. National Security Advisor met with the Islamic Republic's prime minister. Hardliners were furious and three days later seized the American embassy. Student vigilantes -- many of who now serve Mr. Khatami -- held 52 Americans hostage for 444 days. America's attempt to engage Tehran in order to win the freedom of Americans held by Iranian-backed terror groups ended disastrously.

In 1992, the E.U. inaugurated a policy of critical engagement with Iran, arguing that the Islamic Republic would moderate its policies in response to trade and dialogue. Unfortunately, Iran's leaders interpreted engagement differently. Why cease rogue behavior if the cost of terrorism was just more trade? The track record of engagement was not moderation, but rather assassinations in Germany, bombings in Argentina and Saudi Arabia, murders of Christians and Baha'is, imprisonment of Jews, vigilante attacks on student dormitories, and the dispatch of Intelligence Ministry hit squads against octogenarian intellectuals. Under Khatami, capital punishment has more than doubled.

How has Iran used the money from increased trade? In March 2001, Mr. Khatami traveled to Moscow to sign a \$7 billion arms and nuclear reactor deal, even while state workers marched for unpaid wages. Iran's contribution to Hezbollah now exceeds \$100 million. On June 8, three days after Islamic Jihad killed 17 on a public bus in Israel, the Iranian government bolstered its payments to the group by 70%. Iranian biological weapons labs now stock Swiss, German, Italian, and Spanish lab equipment. While Mr. Khatami speaks to Western audiences of a dialogue of civilizations, his message to Iranians is far different. "In the Koran, God commanded to kill the wicked and to murder those who do not see the rights of the oppressed. If we abide by the Koran, all of us should mobilize to kill," he declared in an October 2000 televised address.

Given the record of dialogue with Iran, it is curious that the State Department so cavalierly threw aside the President's Axis of Evil declaration. During his February trip to the Middle East, the Director of Policy Planning at the State Department advocated engaging Iran. American officials subsequently held secret talks with Iran at Cyprus. Back channel talks continue at Kabul.

Dialogue may work among democracies, but dictatorships at best interpret engagement as a go-ahead for business as usual, and at worst see a weakness to exploit. Saddam Hussein used the West's policy of engagement during the 1980s to develop weapons capable of mass destruction. Iran pursues the same strategy today, facilitated by the West's susceptibility to Mr. Khatami's charm offense. Rather than rely on rhetoric, the Bush administration should look at results. American national security and the war on terror deserve nothing less.

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