

Iran As Part of the Axis of Evil (Part II):

U.S. Policy Concerns

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Brief Analysis

On January 31, following President George Bush's State of the Union condemnation of the "axis of evil," National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice explained, "Iran's direct support of regional and global terrorism, and its aggressive efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction, belie any good intentions it displayed in the days after the world's worst terrorist attacks in history." How accurate is this characterization?

How Helpful Is Iran?

Iran's Foreign Ministry was helpful at the Bonn conference in establishing the new Afghan government under Hamid Karzai, as it was during frequent meetings over the last year between professional U.S. and Iranian diplomats about Afghanistan (disguised as multilateral, the sessions were often, in practice, U.S.-Iranian dialogues). But the Foreign Ministry has less say with regard to Iran's actions in the international arena than do the Ministry of Information and Security (MOIS) and the Revolutionary Guards. This is typical of how the Iranian government is structured: the formal government institutions are less important than the revolutionary institutions.

The MOIS and the Guards have been actively undermining the Karzai government in Afghanistan. On January 23, at a meeting in Iran of 300 Afghan clerics, Supreme Religious Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i's chief advisor Ali-Akbar Nateq-Nouri declared that the Bonn conference was part of a U.S. plot to weaken Islam. Khamene'i's representative for Afghan affairs Hossein Ebrahimi called on the clerics to "disclose the hypocritical role of the U.S." and its "political sedition" of Islam. He complained that the commission organizing the loya jirga (grand council) lacked committed Muslims. On January 18, U.S. special envoy to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad warned that elements of the Revolutionary Guards' al-Qods Brigade -- its main terrorist unit -- were active in Afghanistan's Herat province. Gul Agha Shirzai, governor of Kandahar Province, complained that he had confiscated more than 2,000 weapons recently sent by Iran. And on February 2, U.S. defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld noted that Iran has "been supplying arms in Afghanistan to various elements," undercutting the authority of the central government, and allowing "Al Qaeda and Taliban to move into Iran and find refuge."

It has also been suggested that Iran may be helpful in pressing Iraq. Unfortunately, the evidence suggests the contrary. During Iraqi foreign minister Naji Sabri al-Hadithi's visit to Tehran last week, he had a protracted meeting

with Iranian security minister Ali Yunesi, during which Iran agreed to establish a five-to-ten-kilometer-wide security zone on its side of the border in order to prevent the Iraqi opposition from infiltrating Iraq -- and in return for Baghdad restricting the Iraq-based Iranian opposition. Prominent reformist journalist Ahmed Zaidabadi, only recently released from jail, remarked in response, "What is astonishing is that the Iranian government is pursuing a policy that contravenes the country's own interests by increasing the chances of Iran becoming a target for the United States." This latest agreement comes on the heels of the January accord, heralded by both Iran and Iraq, which would allow Iranian airplanes to fly over Iraq when headed toward Syria; this would effectively permit the acceleration of arms shipments to Hizballah, impeded when Turkey prohibited use of its airspace for suspicious Iranian flights.

Iran's policy regarding Afghanistan and Iraq makes sense from Tehran's perspective. The replacement of an unpopular clerical regime with a pro-American, secular government that rejects foreign policy adventurism would be a profound challenge to the Islamic republic because Iranians would want the same for their country. Indeed, the only thing more threatening to Iran than the Taliban and Saddam Husayn would be the establishment of stable, pro-American governments in Afghanistan and Iraq backed by U.S. troops.

How Dangerous Is Iran?

Some in Europe have argued that there is little evidence to substantiate Iranian government involvement in loading the Karine-A -- the ship intercepted by Israel on January 3 and carrying fifty tons of weapons. The evidence against this European analysis is powerful, but if the Europeans are correct, it would mean that Iran is a country with vast amounts of modern weapons readily available to terrorists without government permission. This is a truly frightening prospect -- one that would merit establishing a maritime blockade of the Iranian coast so as to prevent the world's terrorists from loading up on heavy mortars, advanced explosives, automatic rifles, and the like. It is to be hoped instead that Iran's revolutionary institutions provided the arms; in this case, the United States can rely on diplomatic and economic pressure in lieu of taking military action.

Turning from terrorism to weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation, the evidence is chilling. The CIA's January 30 "Report to Congress on the Acquisition of Technology Relating to Weapons of Mass Destruction and Advanced Conventional Munitions" concluded, "Iran remains one of the most active countries seeking to acquire WMD . . . indicating its desire to develop a domestic capability to produce various types of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons and their delivery systems."

What Can the United States Do?

Rice's characterization of Iran understates the problem, which is that those with power in Iran underwrite terrorism and pursue WMD, irrespective of any good intentions on the part of elected officials. The challenge for the West is how to encourage the forces of democratic reform in Iran while cracking down on the hardliners who control the powerful revolutionary institutions. The European approach, as articulated by UK foreign secretary Jack Straw after his February 1 meeting with Secretary of State Colin Powell, is, "We should stay engaged with the reformist government [and] at the same time, send out strong messages to other parts of the government of Iran about actions and support which we regard as unacceptable."

This approach would be more attractive if there were a broader international consensus to prevent Iran from acquiring WMD and missiles. In that case, Iran's development of dangerous technology might be slowed to a crawl, and one could hope that the hardline revolutionary institutions would be swept away before Iran acquired nuclear weapons or significant numbers of accurate long-range missiles. Unfortunately, Iran has had good access to military and dual-use technology from Russia, China, and North Korea -- while the European Union countries have done next to nothing to press these arms suppliers, leaving the task to the United States.

Tepid international support for containing Iran's WMD and terrorism has forced the United States to make two moves about which Europeans complain: first, imposing strict economic measures to deprive the Iranian government of the financial resources with which it funds its nefarious activities, and second, deterring Iran with the deployment of potent military forces and a robust missile defense system.

A more active U.S. approach would be to encourage Iran's democratic forces to whatever extent possible. Too close an embrace would provoke a nationalist backlash against the reformers, but helping reformers spread their message is worth considering. For example, foreign Persian-language media have become increasingly important as the hardliners crack down on the Iranian press (and keep television and radio firmly in their grip). Radio Free Europe's Persian service has developed a large audience, as have the Los Angeles-based private satellite television broadcasts. These could be funded to expand their hours of service, to overcome Tehran's jamming, and to take broadcast AM radio instead of shortwave.

In the long run, the hardline Islamist revolutionaries are headed for the dustbin of history. But the long run can be very long indeed, and the hardliners can do much damage in the interim -- mostly to Iranians but also to the world at large.

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