

Allowing Iran to Fail: A “hands-off” approach to dealing with the threat of a nuclear Iran

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THE BATTLE HYMN of the Islamic Republic is fading, and the only thing that can bring about its resurrection is the United States. Taking into account the effects of a half-century of U.S. meddling with Iran’s foreign and domestic affairs, it is time for the U.S. to consider a “hands-off” approach. By allowing Iran’s ruling hard-line minority to fail on its own, a favorable political outcome will emerge.

An Iraq-style “invade, occupy, and pacify” intervention is doomed to fail. In Iraq, it is arguable that only military intervention could have created auspicious grounds for reform. Iran, however, needs no intervention; it is not a rogue state led by a tyrannical dictator, nor is it a state that has been overtly hostile beyond its borders, even taking into account its activities in the Persian Gulf over the past two decades and its support of Hezbollah in the Levant.

A state should suffer its own failures in order to carve a realistic path to success. Iran is on the verge of imploding, and it must be granted the opportunity to fail on its own. An intervention by the “Great Satan” will only serve as an excuse for further repression. If left alone, the Iranians will soon realize the folly of their quest to become a nuclear power. Furthermore, they will abandon the deluded notion that any state with a Supreme Leader and a constitution that mandates his absolute divine power can actually call itself democratic. U.S. hostility will only delay the regime’s collapse and strengthen its hard-line elements.

The half-century of U.S. interference in Iranian affairs commenced with the CIA organized coup in 1953 that removed the democratically elected leader of Iran, Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq. The U.S. objected to Mossadeq’s nationalization of the Iranian oil industry. Furthermore, in the 1950’s, U.S. foreign policy experts saw Mossadeq as too weak to resist Soviet overtures. The American-installed Shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi,

led an oppressive regime in his efforts to modernize Iran—efforts defined in part by the U.S.-inspired White Revolution. The goals of the White Revolution were not objectionable from a Western perspective, but they were not organic to Iran. Wholesale societal changes must be achieved through an internal grassroots struggle; they cannot be forced, fabricated, or imposed by a U.S.-led intervention. Though many Iranians welcomed the Westernization, conservative forces viewed Western culture with suspicion and saw it as impinging on Iran’s traditional Islamic values. There are countless other events that occurred in Iran, and between Iran and the West,

which complicate the legacy that serves as the great divide between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States today.

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Iran and the U.S. find their interests diametrically opposed with regard to the nuclear dilemma, yet one must remain acutely aware of the fact that this is a conflict of value systems. The value system of those who wield power in Iran is something they feel so strongly about that they justify the violation of human rights in the name of its preservation. The value system

of the United States is such that it will force democracy upon a country in order to preserve an international system of governance that secures its place on top. Both of these concepts address the preservation of interests, be it the continuity of an Islamic state and the contentious defense against Israel, or a globalized financial system that works best when all states have open, capitalist economies. They are vital, legitimate interests, regardless of one’s ethics and opinions. Interests inevitably trump ideals; the moral dilemma posed by this reality is for others to debate.

Iran’s hyper-religious political system has painted itself into a corner. Its behavior has provoked debilitating international sanctions. Iran’s economy is essentially closed. Its moral code has alienated the majority of its population from the conservative clerics. Every copy of Microsoft Windows in Iran is pirated. Iran’s unemployment rate, officially estimated at 16%, is closer to 25%, according to independent economists I met in Iran. The unemployment rate is greatest for those under 30 years of age, Iran’s largest population segment. Tehran’s streets are filled with young, university-educated taxi drivers. This generates unrest and inspires revolution. During

my trip to Iran in the summer of 2004, I met many young, intelligent, and well-educated men and women who yearn for the opportunity to go, and remain, abroad—not because they dislike their homeland, but because there is nothing there for them aside from joblessness and an oppressive, antiquated regime on its last legs.

Iran's President Khatami was elected on a platform of reform, but the pace of his reforms has been torpid. To his credit, Khatami wants to end the hostility between his country and the U.S., but given his subservience to the clerical elites, he can do nothing without the blessing of the Council of Guardians and Ayatollah Khomeini. The youth of Iran are the driving force of real reform. Iran's first revolution was fairly nonviolent, and its second could also be peaceful. The people need not take up arms; they need only force the conservative leadership to decide between what is best for the mosque and what is best for the people—at this juncture they are mutually exclusive. There is an irreparable divide inside the Islamic Republic. The “Death to America” and “Death to Israel” chants are tied to the organizing principles of a generation of Iranian leadership that has run its country into the ground. The younger, more educated and internationally oriented segment of the Iranian population no longer takes these cries seriously.

Sam Ghandchi, editor and publisher of *IranScope*, writes that while the world was progressing towards a post-industrial society, Iran fell to forces that offered a reactionary retrogression for its people as the means of coping with the challenge of modernity. There were no social and political organizations strong enough to compete with the mosque, the center of the revolution. Iran is imploding because the Islamists went unchallenged for such a long period. The international community has given Iran two decades to experiment with an Islamic Republic and patience is wearing thin, both within and outside the Republic.

The current U.S. administration must not help perpetuate the regime that it helped create. The Shah, whose authority the U.S. underwrote, is responsible for the lack of organized, secular political machines in Iran. We have come this far as a spectator in Iran's failing experiment; we must let their continued failures evolve into a system that works. The will is there. The obstacles are withering and will eventually be overcome. Many of the Iranians with whom I spoke were able to make the distinction between Americans and the American government. Americans need to make this same distinction. It is imperative that the U.S. avoid confusing the Iranian populace with the government that, in 1999, held proceedings to impeach culture minister Ayatollah Mohajerani for excessive media freedom. The U.S. needs to have faith that those who currently have no voice in government

will eventually make themselves heard. Furthermore, one should not ignore the reality that the ongoing conflict next door can be perceived as, and surely fits within the paradigm of, a proxy war. If the electoral process continues successfully in Iraq, due to the war the U.S.-led coalition waged to make it happen, the world will witness the emergence of another Islamic state. If the training wheels of American intervention exist throughout the process of a Shi'ite government's ascension to power, the Iranians will have

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a front-row seat to the formation of an Islamic Republic that would not be overly authoritarian—another clear threat to Iran's internal stability. Additionally, the U.S. should not see a contradiction in terms when the term "Islamic Republic" is used. A state can be guided by the principles of Islam, but it need not be subject to them.

Nuclear proliferation and deterrence deserve examination in this discussion. Iran's quest for nuclear capability, which began in the mid-1980s, exists not only for security purposes but also as a very intelligent manipulation of American rhetoric. The powers in Iran know

perfectly well what the U.S. stance on their nuclear program would be—could it be that they are creating a new source of unification against their perceived enemy? The Iranians I met were all very pro-America. They were not, however, interested in being told what to do by America. If we employ missiles to enforce our words, we will validate two decades of internal failures and unwittingly extend Iran's authoritarian theocracy.

Anyone who thinks that the United States could not, at this very moment, wage war on Iran to destroy its nuclear sites is dead wrong. As a former soldier trained in intelligence analysis with the United States Army, I can assure you that there are scenarios that exist in which the U.S. could employ its Navy and Air Force to cripple certain elements of the Iranian infrastructure, both civil and military, with shocking speed. War with Iran would not be as easy as the pre "mission accomplished" war in Iraq, but it is doable nonetheless. Iran knows that. Skeptics who doubt this claim should be careful not to confuse what the Department of Defense says about troop

strength and the reality of U.S. offensive capabilities beyond the scope of the overextended Army. The consequences of military action would be severe, and the U.S. would soon find out how much political will a unified Iran could muster if attacked. This would all be a waste of time, money, and lives.

Iran, as a nuclear entity, brings more negative to itself than positive. Not only does the program drain its already limited resources, it also makes it a target for everyone else, principally Israel, another nuclear power. Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) is still in effect. The United States has evolved into the lone superpower, and it is in a position to broker who is or is not permitted to be nuclear. Though the threshold for acceptable risk has dropped significantly since 9/11, Iran clearly does not fall into the group of rogue states that would either present a significant threat to American interests or to homeland security.

Peter Preston of *The Guardian* recently wrote that the prevailing theory of nuclear deterrence today is far different from decades past. It is integrated into the current U.S. president's lectures on democracy and freedom. It says that only the real superpower can be trusted to upgrade and hone its nuclear arsenal—that true safety means leaving everything to the White House. While the international community may not all be in agreement on this point, the Iranian government is counting on it. It sees an opportunity to reunite its people against the “Great Satan,” and be recognized as the regional authority it yearns to be. If the United States manages, somehow, to simply leave it alone, we will see Iran fail at both initiatives. The people of Iran will be much closer to self-determination, and the United States might find a new, truly democratic state and potential ally in the region. Only then could the Iranian government learn that there are better, more effective ways to become a regional authority.