

Iran's Nuclear Ambitions

by

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Nine months ago, three European Union foreign ministers returned from a mission to Tehran with a "peace-in-our-time" sheet of paper that they hailed as a triumph for soft-power diplomacy.

The paper that British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, France's Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin and his German counterpart Joschka Fischer brought back was presented as a solemn accord committing the Islamic Republic to strict limits to its ambitious nuclear program.

Now, however, we know that this was not the case. The mullahs thought they were signing a purely procedural agreement to allow more inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency. They had no intention of giving the EU or the IAEA a droit de regard on a key aspect of the Islamic Republic's energy policy and defense doctrine.

The "three wise men of Europe" have only themselves to blame for their real or feigned disappointment at what they see as "erratic Iranian behavior." How they came to believe that a regime that violates its own constitution every day might honor an agreement signed with the "infidel" remains a mys-

tery. Tehran cannot but regard the recent IAEA resolution rebuking it for being uncooperative as a diplomatic fig leaf to cover an absence of policy on the part of the "soft-power" trio.

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As far as the "Iranian nuclear challenge" is concerned, we are back where we were nine months ago -- while Iran's nuclear program has advanced by nine months. A string of statements from the ruling mullahs in Tehran shows that the Islamic Republic no longer feels committed to a moratorium on its uranium enrichment program. Nor will the new Islamic Majlis (assembly), dominated by radicals, be in a mood to approve additional protocols to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) of which Iran was one of the first signatories three decades ago. Despite recent statements to the contrary by the "supreme leader" Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the talk from Tehran is that the Islamic Republic should be accepted as the latest member of the "nuclear club."

So what is to be done? To answer that question we must first recall what cannot be done.

Iran cannot be forced to unlearn knowledge accumulated since the 1950s. Iran was one of the first developing countries to acquaint itself with the awesome universe of nuclear science. Iran's first nuclear reactor was installed in Tehran in 1955 and the first batch of Iranians sent to Europe and the U.S. to study nuclear physics and related subjects were back home by the early 1960s. By the mid-1970s, Iran had a well-educated and motivated corps of nuclear scientists who, backed by substantial financial resources from the government, undertook research into all aspects of the new technology, including its military applications.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 forced many Iranian scientists into exile and threw the nation's nuclear program into a hiatus that lasted until 1990. Since then, Iran, having revived aspects of its nuclear program, has enticed some scientists back and trained new ones.

The second thing that cannot be done is to deny Iran the right to develop and use nuclear energy. The need for such energy was felt as early as 1970, when projections showed that Iran -- its economy growing at an average annual rate of 8% at the time -- might need all of its oil production for domestic consumption by the year 2010. Iran's subsequent economic decline, caused by revolution, war and the flight of millions of skilled Iranians, has changed those projections.

But there is no escaping the fact that were Iran to return to the path of economic growth it would need other sources of

energy in order to keep its oil exports as a means of earning foreign currency. Developing nuclear energy is one option. It was adopted by the former regime and has been the policy of the Islamic Republic since 1989. Although opposed by some Iranians, mainly on environmental grounds, the nuclear energy option has enjoyed steady popular support for more than three decades.

The third thing that we cannot do is force Iran to cut the nuclear technology circle into two halves, one civilian and one military. This is simply not possible. All nations with a civilian nuclear base are capable, if they so decide, of moving into the military sphere of nuclear technology as well. This fact was well known to policy makers in the Shah's regime. The Iranian strategy at the time was aimed at creating what is known as a "surge capacity," that is to say to have



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The murder, in two weeks ago, of an Iranian atomic scientist and three others in the past years, who were patriots and truly noble and spent years studying and becoming experts in their respective fields, is, like the murder of any young man in the world, a hideous and inhuman act. This act is not forgivable and I condemn it strongly and this is a terrorist act.

the know-how, the infrastructure and the personnel needed to develop a nuclear military capacity within a short time without actually doing so. No firm time frame was established

then. But the assumption within the policy-making elite was that Iran should be in a position to develop and test a nuclear device within 18 months. Under the Shah, however, Iran

was genuinely committed to working for nuclear disarmament. Iran campaigned for a "nuclear-free zone" in the region covering the Caspian Sea Basin, the Persian Gulf and the broader Middle East. Iranian efforts, erratically supported by the U.S., ran into opposition from the Soviet Union, which did not wish to withdraw nuclear weapons from its territories that neighbored the region.

At the time, both Moscow and Washington manifested a benign attitude towards Iran's nuclear program because they knew the Shah's regime was not one to manufacture atomic

bombs, let alone use them against anyone in a war of aggression. (The last time Iran had initiated a war was in the 1850s when it tried, unsuccessfully, to regain the city of Herat, which it had lost to the Afghans.) Anyone with any knowledge of Iranian politics would know that the present regime in Tehran is strategically committed to developing a nuclear "surge capacity" if not a full arsenal of nuclear weapons. The real question, therefore, is whether the region, and the rest of the world, feel comfortable with the idea of a revolutionary regime, claiming a messianic mission on behalf of Islam, arming itself with nuclear weapons.

A peaceful Iran with no ambitions to export an ideology or seek regional hegemony would be no more threatening than Britain, which also has a nuclear arsenal. The real debate on Iran, therefore, can only be about regime change. And this is precisely the issue that the Europeans are loath to acknowledge as a legitimate topic of discussion.

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Iran is passing through a crisis caused by what could only be described as a historic schizophrenia. One half of Iran's split



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personality represents the Khomeinist revolution which still dreams of conquering the world for its version of Islam. This Iran is determined to have a nuclear arsenal if only to insure itself against military pressure and action by its foes in the region and beyond.

The Islamic Republic will not openly cross anyone's borders, because its strategy is based on "exporting" its revolution through low intensity warfare, largely conducted by local

militants in targeted countries, as we now see in Iraq. The Islamic Republic needs a nuclear capacity to raise the stakes if and when anyone -- the U.S. or Israel for example -- decides to take punitive military action to check its ambitions. This is precisely the strategy adopted by North Korea since the mid-1990s.

The other half of Iran's split personality represents a nation-state that is trying to absorb its revolutionary experience and re-emerge as a normal player in mainstream international life. If and when this half wins, it would make little difference whether or not Iran has a nuclear "surge capacity." The question is what kind of Iran could the world live with.

Mr. Zahedi was Iran's foreign minister between 1967 and 1971 when he signed the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty on behalf of his country.