



## **Give Iran Some Rope What is to be done about a nuclear Iran?**

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The debate in the U.S. over how to contend with Iran as it pursues nuclear weapons goes like this:

Many conservatives worry that the Bush administration – stung by the backlash over Iraq and the president's sinking poll numbers – has sworn off the military option. They argue that endless discussion and attempts at diplomacy have only emboldened the Iranian theocracy.

Liberals counter that Iran's weapons program is over-hyped in the manner of Saddam Hussein's phantom nuclear arsenals. They worry we will soon stage another preemptive attack – if for no other reason than to wag the dog and shore up the president's approval ratings. And even if Iran gets the bomb, they argue, so what? Don't we already live with a nuclear Islamic Pakistan?

Most Americans, though, probably understand the current U.S. position. We are resigned to the fact that Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is both unhinged and eager to get his own nukes – and that we must somehow stop him at the 11th hour.

For Ahmadinejad and Iran's ruling mullahs, there is little downside to pursuing and perhaps eventually obtaining a nuclear weapon. The issue helps divert attention from the country's domestic problems, humiliates Western diplomats and threatens rival Gulf oil producers. Plus, Ahmadinejad can brag that Iran is now the Islamic state that most worries Israel while blackmailing European capitals soon in missile range.

Meanwhile, the United States, for a variety of understandable reasons,

is not eager to take out Iran's nuclear facilities. A current parlor game imagines the nightmares of such a preemptive strike: it would be hard to know whether we eliminated all the centrifuges. Oil prices would get even worse. Some Shiites in Iraq might turn on our troops. Terrorists could be unleashed with dirty bombs in Western cities.

So, in the lull before the storm, the U.S. should pause, and allow its critics a chance to offer some utopian third-party or multilateral solution.

The solutions bandied about so far? Let the "seasoned pros" in Europe play the good, diplomatic cop to the "unpredictable, eager-for-a-fight" American bad cop. Or involve Russia and China in more diplomacy in hopes they will value regional stability over their own economic interests. Then there's the U.N. option — could the international body redeem itself after the oil-for-food scandal with sanctions and embargoes?

But given recent history, and how hell-bent Iran's leaders are on pursuing its nuclear program — for weapons, not, as they so often profess, merely for energy — it is hard to imagine that, on their own, these proposed solutions will amount to much.

The good news is that Iran, like all ossified societies in the current era of globalized communications, is unstable. The eighth-century theocrats in charge there could find their own citizens questioning whether a

bomb is worth international ostracism and the threat of military strikes.

At the same time, what's happening now in Iraq must be of great concern to the Iranian leadership. Jawad al-Maliki, the new Iraqi prime minister, for example, is a nationalist. He, like other Iraqi Shiites, has shown he is not willing to be an Iranian pawn. As Ahmadinejad promotes death, how will Iranians react to images from Iraq of life-affirming free citizens in a new democracy?

In other words, will Iraq's new liberality prove more destabilizing to Iran than Ahmadinejad's agents can to Iraq? As Iraq's 300,000-strong army emerges as a well-trained and equipped force, one suspects the answer is yes.

Notice: George Bush has been relatively silent during the crisis; Ahmadinejad is the one losing his composure on center stage. Nearly daily he shouts to the cameras about wiping Israel off the map or unleashing his Islamic terrorists throughout the globe.

In the brief present window between Iran's enrichment and its final step to weapons-grade production, we must keep calm and give Ahmadinejad even more rope to hang himself. As his present hysteria grows, exasperated Europeans or jittery neighbors in the region may even prod the U.S. to take action — indeed, to be a little more unilateral and preemptive in letting the Irani-

ans know that their acquisition of a nuclear weapon will never happen.

For now, our best peaceful weapon in the little time that we have left is, oddly, our own quiet and hope that a democratizing Iraq stabilizes, and in turn destabilizes undemocratic

Iran. So let the loud Ahmadinejad continue to make our case why such a psychopath cannot be allowed to become nuclear. Meanwhile, give confident multilateral internationalists their long-awaited chance at diplomacy, and prepare for the worst.

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