



Can Iran Be Trusted?

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Disputes over Iran's nuclear program have become a primary focus of not only White House attention, but of international concern as well. While the Bush administration initially let Berlin, London, and Paris--the so-called European Union Three--take the lead in negotiations with Tehran on May 31, 2006, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice offered more direct U.S. involvement and a package of incentives should Iran agree to suspend enrichment. But while policymakers promote diplomatic engagement with Iran, few question how the Iranians themselves approach and understand diplomacy.

Diplomacy to resolve concerns over Iran's nuclear program continues with no clear resolution in sight. Most officials seek to avoid military confrontation. After receiving Iran's refusal to demands that it suspend

uranium enrichment, both Moscow and Paris urged Washington not to escalate the dispute.[1] Serious U.S. analysts agree with the costs of military action. The Iranian government could ratchet up its sponsorship of terror, U.S. troops in Iraq could be vulnerable to Tehran's proxy militias, ordinary Iranian citizens could rally around the nationalist flag, and targeted bombing of Iranian facilities could delay the Islamic Republic's program, not end it.

But will diplomacy be enough to stop the Islamic Republic's acquisition of nuclear weapons? What enables diplomacy is trust that the opposing side will honor its commitments. Tehran's track record does not create confidence. In its formative revolutionary years, the reformist heyday, and even today,

the Iranian leadership has had a consistent record of antipathy toward diplomatic convention and violation of agreements.

The Embassy Seizure

It has become fashionable to blame the United States for poor relations with Iran, but within months of the Islamic Revolution, Washington was willing to reestablish diplomatic relations. On November 1, 1979, Iranian foreign minister Ibrahim Yazdi met with Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Jimmy Carter's national security advisor, in Algiers to discuss resumption of relations. Three days later, in reaction, Iranian students "following the link of the Imam [Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini]" attacked the U.S. embassy in Tehran, taking fifty-two diplomats hostage. The day after the hostage seizure, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini gave their actions a ringing endorsement. Even Warren Christopher, at the time deputy secretary of state and a dove on Iran, regarded such action as a "flagrant violation" of the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and the 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations.[2]

U.S. officials sought to let cooler heads prevail. On November 6, 1979, National Security Council officials leaked to the *Washington Post* that there would be "no change in the status quo--no military alert, no movement of forces, no resort to military contingency plans." [3] Any effort to give diplomacy a chance backfired. Both Khomeini's son and Khomeini's future successor and

current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, visited the embassy soon after its seizure, underscoring official contempt for international protocols.[4]

But can poor decisions more than a quarter century ago be applicable to Iranian diplomacy today? Not by themselves. While the Iranian leadership often demands apologies for transgressions both real and imagined,[5] it continues to uphold the righteousness of hostage seizure, underscoring the prevalent attitude in Tehran toward diplomatic convention. Photographs taken earlier this year inside the former U.S. embassy in Tehran show bound mannequins dressed in U.S. military uniforms and a banner quoting Supreme Leader Khamenei celebrating Iranian "neutralization" of "arrogant plots." Individual trees in the embassy garden are draped with banners calling for America's demise.

Broken Promises

In the aftermath of the hostage situation, the Reagan administration took a pragmatic approach toward engaging Iran. While the Iran-Contra Affair is remembered today for the Reagan administration's illegal attempts to circumvent the Congressional prohibition of the funding of the Nicaraguan resistance, from a diplomatic perspective, the duplicity of Iranian politicians--many of whom still wield significant power in Tehran--is also important. A week after former U.S. national security advisor Robert McFarlane's secret

1986 trip to Tehran, Mehdi Hashemi, the son-in-law of Khomeini's deputy Hossein Ali Montazeri, leaked word of secret talks in pamphlets distributed at the University of Tehran. Six months later, Montazeri or his immediate aides--there were conflicting admissions--leaked word of McFarlane's meetings in the pro-Syrian Lebanese news magazine *Ash Shira'a*. [6] On November 4, 1986, the seventh anniversary of the embassy seizure, former president and Expediency Council chairman Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani confirmed the meeting to the international press. [7] Regardless of questions over the wisdom of the arms-for-hostages negotiations, the episode represented a serious, sensitive, and covert attempt to reach out to the Iranian government. U.S. authorities trusted the Iranians to keep their silence. Regardless of the reason, Iranian officials--and ultimately Rafsanjani--broke their word.

The Rushdie Rules

Yet another incident demonstrates just how poorly the Iranian government fares in keeping its promises. On February 14, 1989, Iranian Supreme Leader Khomeini issued a declaration calling for author Salman Rushdie's death. Four months before Khomeini's death, then-president Khamenei demanded that Rushdie apologize in exchange for cancellation of a religious edict ordering his murder. Rushdie apologized, but the Iranian government nevertheless kept the bounty in place. [8] To Iran's hard-

line clergy, Rushdie's apology became further evidence of his guilt. Outright Iranian lying should not surprise us; what *should* is how Western governments repeatedly fall prey to such deceptions. On September 24, 1998, the Iranian government said it would do nothing to harm Rushdie, acceding to the British Foreign Office's chief condition for the restoration of diplomatic relations. [9] But on February 14, 1999, Iranian security officers reaffirmed their intention to carry out Rushdie's death sentence. [10] On May 19, 1999, a day after London and Tehran agreed to once again exchange ambassadors, the Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran radio commentary called Rushdie an "apostate," making his murder lawful under Islamic law. The incident is not forgotten in Iran. On February 12, 2005, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps issued a statement declaring, "The day will come when they will punish the apostate Rushdie for his scandalous acts and insults against the Koran and the Prophet." [11]

The Business of Deception

Iranian diplomatic promises are especially unreliable when made in the course of deals that involve commercial enrichment or incentives. On November 8, 1996, Iranian deputy prime minister Mahmoud Vaezi promised to help locate Ron Arad, an Israeli airman lost over Lebanon a decade earlier and captured by a pro-Iranian militia. "It is not a political but a humanitarian question," an Iranian

member of Vaezi's delegation explained.[12] But after the French and Iranian governments concluded a deal for Iran to purchase ten Airbus jumbo jets and \$500 million in communications satellites, and agreed that the French company Total would develop Iran's oil fields, the Iranian foreign ministry reversed its position on Arad.[13] While Vaezi may have intended his statements to help pave the way for a deal, the incident shows how, rather than build goodwill to achieve a solution for longstanding problems, granting carrots or commercial incentives may undercut Iranian cooperation.

The Iranian government has also shown that it subordinates its contracts and commitments to the efficacy of official ideology. On May 8, 2004, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps rolled tanks onto the runway at the new Imam Khomeini International Airport to prevent the Turkish-Austrian consortium TAV from taking over operation of the facility.[14] Contractual and diplomatic obligations meant little. The airport remained closed for much of the following year. Finally, on March 3, 2005, Iranian transport minister Mohammad Rahmati said, "We have separated the fate of Imam Khomeini Airport from that of TAV."¹⁵ The Revolutionary Guard won. Later that year, the intelligence ministry and hard-line parliamentarians helped scuttle a signed \$3 billion agreement with the Turkish cellular phone company Turkcell because, they said, the Turkish company was insufficiently opposed to Israel.¹⁶ Most

importantly, it is these military and security forces, and not the diplomatic corps, which hold the files on advanced weaponry and the military nuclear program. Even if Iran's diplomats were sincere, they would not necessarily know about--let alone have the power to negotiate on behalf of--these other bureaucracies.

Afghanistan and Iraq: Saying One Thing, Doing Another

Perhaps all diplomats spin or mislead to put the best face on their country's actions. Iranian diplomats, though, often go further and fabricate. Despite promises of noninterference and, indeed, cooperation, officials in Tehran have sought to undermine stability in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

Afghanistan is often lauded as a successful model for U.S.-Iranian cooperation. While United Nations secretary general Kofi Annan praised Iran's "great support"[17] to Afghanistan, and a former National Security Council staffer lauded Iranian cooperation with Washington over Afghanistan,[18] the reality was less rosy. Both former parliamentary speaker and leading cleric Ali-Akbar Nateq-Nuri and Hussein Ibrahim, Khamenei's personal representative for Afghanistan, urged Afghan clerics to resist U.S. plans and goals for Afghanistan.[19] On March 8, 2002, Afghan commanders intercepted twelve Iranian agents and proxies who were organizing armed resistance among Afghan commanders.[20] Iranian assurances of noninterference were false.

Still, U.S. and British officials sought to obtain an agreement that Iran would not interfere prior to the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom. British foreign secretary Jack Straw elicited a promise from Iranian foreign minister Kamal Kharrazi, who pledged Iranian noninterference. Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran's ambassador to the United Nations, repeated this pledge to Zalmay Khalilzad, then President George W. Bush's envoy to the free Iraqis. But Iran's diplomacy was a diversion. Soon after Saddam's fall, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, with the acquiescence of the Islamic Republic's supreme leadership, moved to infiltrate into the country 2,000 fighters, militiamen, and Qods Force personnel replete with radio transmitters, money, pamphlets, and supplies.[21] Whether Kharrazi and Zarif knew of the duplicity or not is irrelevant. Either they lied outright or they revealed themselves to be out of the decision-making process and, therefore, not credible negotiating partners. If they were not sincere, they revealed how ill-advised entering into diplomatic agreements with Tehran is. It was not long before the White House acknowledged concerns over the infiltration.[22] By October 2003, coalition forces had detained more than a hundred Iranians in Iraq.[23]

Again, the Iranian foreign minister promised good behavior. On November 18, 2003, Iran's official news agency reported that Kharrazi had promised Jalal Talabani, leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and rotating president of the Iraqi

Governing Council, that Iran would not interfere in Iraqi affairs. This time Kharrazi, aware of Iranian activities in Iraq, lied outright. Ali Nurizadeh, an Iranian reporter in London often viewed by analysts as close to former president Mohammad Khatami and the "reformist" camp, subsequently reported on a growing Iranian intelligence and Qods Force network across Iraq.[24] The following week, Nurizadeh reported on the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps's involvement with Iraqi firebrand Muqtada al-Sadr's militia.[25] Nevertheless, the top Iranian diplomat in Baghdad--himself a member of the Qods Force--insisted that "Iran will not accept anything that destabilizes Iraq." [26] Four months later, Iraqi forces captured thirty Iranians fighting alongside Sadr's militia,[27] and Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, secretary of the powerful Guardian Council, praised Sadr's resistance. "I should really thank and praise those who are resisting the blood thirsty wolves," he said as guest orator at Iran's official Friday sermon.[28] U.S. officials in Iraq say that such Iranian duplicity still continues there.[29]

A Nuclear Iran?

Iran's track record of deceit would not matter so much if the stakes to U.S. national security were not now so great. But a nuclear Iran would represent a fundamental shift in strategic balance. Iranian officials often say that their nuclear program is peaceful. On August 27, 2006, Kazem Jalali, the rapporteur of the

parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission, said, "No one in Iran defends production of atomic bombs or use of the nuclear technology for non-peaceful purposes." [30] That is not quite true. Statements by regime ideologues and insiders give reason to doubt this.

On December 14, 2001, Rafsanjani, arguably the second most powerful man in Iran, declared, "The use of an atomic bomb against Israel would totally destroy Israel, while the same against the Islamic world would only cause damage. Such a scenario is not inconceivable." [31] *Iran Emrooz* (Iran Today) quoted Ayatollah Mohammad Baqer Kharrazi, secretary-general of Iranian Hezbollah, as saying in a February 14, 2005, speech, "We are able to produce atomic bombs and we will do that. We shouldn't be afraid of anyone. The U.S. is not more than a barking dog." [32]

On May 29, 2005, Hojjat ol-Islam Gholam Reza Hasani, the Supreme Leader's personal representative to the province of West Azerbaijan, declared possession of nuclear weapons to be one of Iran's top goals. "An atom bomb . . . must be produced as well," he said. "That is because the Qur'an has told Muslims to 'get strong and amass all the forces at your disposal to be strong.'" [33] Hasani's unpopularity among many Iranians is irrelevant. As a confidant of the Supreme Leader, Hasani provides a window into his thinking. In February 2006, *Rooz* (Day), an Iranian website close to the Islamic Republic's reformist camp, quoted Mohsen Gharavian, a

Qom theologian close to Ayatollah Mohammad Taghi Mesbah Yazdi, one of the Islamic Republic's staunchest ideologues, as saying it was only "natural" for the Islamic Republic to possess nuclear weapons. [34]

Distrust over Iranian intentions is not based solely upon Iranian statements, but also upon Tehran's actions. In December 2002, satellite photos confirmed reports that the Iranian government was building an undeclared uranium enrichment plant at Natanz, about 130 miles south of Tehran, and a heavy water plant at Khondab, about thirty-two miles northwest of the town of Arak. [35]

In February 2003, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) sent a team of inspectors to confirm Iranian statements that "the activities of the Islamic Republic are totally transparent, clear, and peaceful." [36] Their subsequent report showed the depth of Iranian subterfuge. Iran had completed 164 centrifuges, was working on 1,000 more, and had designed the facility to house at least 50,000. Furthermore, the inspection revealed that Tehran had not acknowledged import of almost a ton of uranium from China, nor could the Iranian nuclear agency account for some missing processed uranium. [37]

The Iranian government's initial claims that its program was indigenous and entirely peaceful were false. As the IAEA noted, "The role of uranium metal in Iran's

declared nuclear fuel cycle still needs to be fully understood, since neither its light water reactors nor its planned heavy water reactors require uranium metal for fuel." [38]

After inspectors caught Iran in a lie, Iranian officials changed their story. They abandoned previous statements about the indigenous nature of their program and blamed the presence of highly enriched uranium traces on contaminated equipment imported into Iran, [39] most likely from Pakistan. Patrick Clawson, coauthor of *Checking Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, observed, "If true, that means Iran has in fact had substantial foreign assistance and has been effective at concealing that assistance." [40]

Iranian scientists later acknowledged experimenting with the chemical separation of polonium. Polonium-210 is used to initiate the chain reaction leading to the detonation of a nuclear bomb. [41] Although Iranian officials then assured the IAEA that they would shortly stop enriching uranium, they did not. [42] Again, Tehran had lied to win short-term diplomatic goodwill. On August 10, 2004, Kharrazi said that Iran would not resume uranium enrichment unless there was a significant change in national interest. [43] The pause in enrichment lasted just seven weeks more, even though there had been no significant change; if anything, with U.S. forces engaged in a bloody counterinsurgency in Iraq and gasoline prices at records highs, Tehran's geopolitical position had

grown more secure. Whether Kharrazi intended to deceive should be irrelevant from the Western perspective. In April 2004, the IAEA again found traces of bomb-grade uranium at other sites. [44] Iran had lied again. On September 24, 2004, the IAEA Board of Governors met in Vienna, Austria, and after recalling a litany of Iranian mistruths, found that "Iran's many failures and breaches of its obligations to comply with its NPT [Non-Proliferation Treaty] Safeguards Agreement . . . constitute non-compliance." [45]

If not lying outright, Tehran also continues to violate the spirit of the NPT by signing--albeit refusing to ratify--the Additional Protocol. In effect, this means that the Iranian government gains the advantages of access to technology sharing, but does not adhere to the more rigorous inspection demanded by the agreement. [46] Iranian authorities also broke their pledge to uphold the Additional Protocol's standards pending ratification. [47] Earlier this year, according to the Associated Press, the Iranian government turned away IAEA inspectors from the nuclear facility at Natanz, a violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. [48]

Conclusions

On August 26, 1987, President Ronald Reagan defended his nuclear diplomacy and deal-making with the Soviet Union. Speaking at a town hall meeting in California, he declared, "We are near an historic agreement that could eliminate a whole class of missiles. If it is

signed, we shall rely not on trust, but on the evidence of our own eyes that it is being implemented. As the Russians themselves say, *doveryai no proveryai*--trust but verify. And that we shall do." [49]

Reagan's diplomacy was successful. The Soviet Union, at the time, was a far more powerful adversary. Rather than engage in diplomacy for its own sake, the White House ensured that mechanisms were in place to make sure Moscow kept its word. With regard to Iran's nuclear program, the reverse is true. Tehran has repeatedly promised, but never verified.

While diplomacy necessarily involves talking to adversaries, it is dangerous to assume that both Washington and Tehran operate from the same set of ground rules. From its very inception, the Islamic Republic eschewed the convention of international relations and diplomacy. Khomeini sought to establish a theocracy on Shi'ite religious principles. As such, his writings are illuminating. In several essays, he spoke of the Shi'ite concept of *taqiya*, religious dissimulation. Railing against the

plots of the West in a series of lectures delivered in Najaf in 1970, Khomeini spoke of the necessity to engage in such religiously sanctioned lying. [50] While many analysts are unaware of *taqiya* and many academics stigmatize discussion of its extent and derivations for fear of portraying Iran in a negative light, the concept nonetheless influences Tehran's diplomacy. If the Islamic Republic perceives itself as under threat, [51] its leaders may not only feel compelled to lie, but may also feel justified in so doing. From a religious and political perspective, the ends justify the means. Hence, Khomeini saw nothing wrong with his statement to the *Guardian*, shortly before the Islamic Republic: "I don't want to have the power of government in my hand; I am not interested in personal power." [52] Tehran may still conduct diplomacy to fish for incentive and reward--and they may demand apologies and use the rhetoric of victimization to win further concessions and position--but, at its core, Iranian diplomacy is insincere. The Iranian leadership will say anything and do anything to buy the time necessary to acquire nuclear capability.

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