



## **Dangerous Illusions. Peace-processing our way to disaster**

(Published in [\*The Weekly Standard\*](#), June 11, 2007)

[Reuel Marc Gerecht](#)

Colaboraciones n° 1765

June 15, 2007

American foreign policy in the Middle East can produce severe cognitive dissonance. Take Palestine and Iran. The White House's evolving policies toward the Palestinians and the clerical regime in Tehran show how easy it is for history to take a back seat to process, for reality to give way to illusions, and for hope in diplomacy to obscure the need to make serious decisions. The difficulties in Iraq can be blamed for much of this: The administration has been reeling since 2005, first crippled by the hapless strategy and tactics of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and General John Abizaid, and now plagued by self-doubt about the war itself and the possibility of maintaining political support at home. Former Democratic senator Bob Kerrey, a member of the 9/11 Commission, made the case for the Iraq war simply and eloquently in the *Wall Street Journal*. Yet the new secretary of de-

fense, Robert Gates, a member of the Iraq Study Group, increasingly reveals that he cannot argue for wars--the one in Iraq and the broader one against jihadism--that he does not appear to understand or believe in.

The administration is tired. Arguments for the war on terror and Iraq that once came easily (if seldom eloquently) are rarely heard now. So we are left to parse the administration's actions for thematic content. It's not a happy task. We'll take the depressing first, leaving Iran, which is with the possible exception of Sunni jihadism the greatest menace confronting the United States, for last.

The West Bank and Gaza are increasingly convulsed by civil strife--in Iraq such violence is sometimes called "civil war"--yet many people, in government and out, think that

an Israeli-Palestinian deal is still possible, provided Washington has the will to force Jerusalem to make concessions. Yet the Islamic fundamentalist movement Hamas has grown powerful electorally and militarily by advancing an uncompromising hostility to the existence of Israel. Fatah, the backbone of the now-defunct Palestine Liberation Organization and the political base on which the Bush administration and the Europeans want to build a Palestinian state living in peace with its Jewish neighbor, has grown noticeably more anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic. Competition with Hamas, more popular and more religious, now defines Fatah's themes. Not just on the West Bank and in Gaza, but throughout the Sunni Muslim world, fundamentalism has eclipsed virtually every other rallying cry. Born in anger at the unstoppable bulldozer of the West's seductive and deracinating modernity, Islamic fundamentalism shows no signs of receding in Sunni lands, let alone in Palestine, where the faithful live right next to rich, technically accomplished, and militarily powerful Westerners.

Peace-processing has become an institution in Washington. Among many Democrats and Republicans, it's a reflex. Normally historically sensitive people will quickly affirm the centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian imbroglio to the spread of religious radicalism in the Islamic world and its now nervous offshoot, Europe. Yet the dynamic unfolding in Palestine--Islamic fundamentalism gobbling up the decaying corpse of secular dictatorship--is what

we've seen almost everywhere in the Arab world. In Algeria, Syria, and Iraq, the process has been even more violent than in the West Bank and Gaza.

Israel is basically irrelevant to this ongoing collision of modernity and Islam. Still, it is entirely likely that a majority of Palestinians, perhaps a decisive majority, do not want to live peacefully next to a "Western, Jewish-colonial settler state." There is a reason Fatah has moved closer to Hamas ideologically. Religious Muslims, let alone fundamentalists, *loathe* the idea of a Western, Jewish state in what they see as the Muslim Middle East. As fundamentalism has gained strength in the region, the U.S.-backed dictators and their clientele--the Middle East's peace-processing establishment--have become an ever smaller minority among a more politically faithful majority who are deeply offended by the idea of Israel. What the Bush administration is now halfheartedly and wearily trying to do is restore the *ancien régime* *after* 1789.

Fortunately, with the Palestinians, the administration's search for a new policy can't be too detrimental to the United States. The Palestinians have enthusiastically rejoined the mad rush of modern Islamic history. They are no longer a separate, special people. The Palestinians are in the early stages of their "civil war," and it's impossible to know where it will finish--though one could make a decent guess that in these early rounds, Hamas will win and the illusion of a Palestinian partner for peace will end, even for

the most committed Americans and Europeans.

What America can actually do in the Israeli-Palestinian imbroglio is now irrelevant. What is sad, however, and worrisome, is the extent to which the administration's actions reveal its philosophical crack-up. Where once the administration tried to understand the spread of Islamic radicalism (the president's vivid allusions to American support of autocracy in the Middle East were path-breaking), the administration is now defaulting to language and priorities typical of the decades that the president once criticized. The State Department, a profoundly conservative and cautious institution that, like all foreign ministries, exists to fortify government-to-government relations, has always been waiting to bring back the familiar, comparatively manageable world of Israeli-Fatah negotiations.

The White House, under fewer illusions, may simply want to maintain the appearance of peace-processing for the benefit of transatlantic ties. There is an argument for this, given the essential European role in imposing serious sanctions against an Iran that is pursuing nuclear weaponry. Just a little sop to keep the Palestinian-focused BBC and Bundestag happy. And the Europeans don't require much since the undeniable popular power of Hamas, its hard-to-conceal ugly ethics, and its blatant revulsion for Israel have severely tarnished the once romantic Palestinian cause.

But no more than a sop is justified. The sooner Washington gets beyond the peace process, the sooner both Democrats and Republicans can think more seriously about how to deal with rising Islamic radicalism in the Middle East and the threat it poses to the West. Returning to the pre-9/11 preference for stable Muslim autocracies and the peace process is a dangerous cul-de-sac.

The mess in Iraq has also allowed the idea of possibly productive negotiations with Iran's mullahs to take hold in Washington. However, only staunch doves and "realists" who are blind to the reality of power politics in the region can look optimistically upon the negotiations between the United States and Iran. We have a clerical regime that has aided and abetted virulently anti-American, radical Iraqi groups, exported to Iraq sophisticated automatic explosive devices designed to kill American and British soldiers, pushed forward defiantly its construction of uranium-enriching centrifuges, and kidnapped at least five American citizens in Iran, four of them Iranian-American dual-nationals. Utterly bogus espionage charges have been hurled at three, including Haleh Esfandiari, the director of the Middle East Program at the Wilson Center in Washington. Like her boss, former congressman Lee Hamilton, a chairman of the Iraq Study Group, Ms. Esfandiari has been an advocate of reconciliation between the United States and her homeland.

Note: The espionage charges were thrown at these Americans, who

had absolutely nothing to do with U.S. intelligence and would have recoiled from any advocacy of "regime change," a day *after* the May 28 meeting between the Americans and Iranians in Baghdad. This isn't rocket science. We have a meeting, and the regime in Tehran wants to make crystal clear its contempt for any suggestion that the mullahs might want to build a bridge or two. The clerical regime hasn't been killing American and British soldiers in Iraq because they think it's counterproductive. They haven't been aiding radical Shiite groups because it's counterproductive. It looks increasingly likely that Iran has also aided Sunni insurgents--which the mullahs apparently don't think is counterproductive. The truth about Iran's revolutionary elite is that they have little regard for the Iraqi Shia, whom they blame for failing to rise against Saddam Hussein during the 1980-'88 Iran-Iraq war. Compromising the Iraqi Shia for the greater goal of hurting the United States and radicalizing the Iraqi Shiite community is undoubtedly seen in Tehran as a price worth paying.

An assumption of the Iraq Study Group was that the clerical regime wants stability next door in Iraq. Hence it might be willing to work with Americans. Yet Iran has benefited enormously from Iraqi instability. Traditional, moderate clerics like Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who have been willing to work with Americans, have been battered and bruised by the violence. The radical Moktada al-Sadr, a little-known and little-admired scion of a famous clerical family, skyrocketed to promi-

nence because of the strife and thanks to critical Iranian aid to him. The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq and its more radical military wing, the Badr Organization, has also benefited enormously from the violence. SCIRI is a key Iraqi player that has received substantial assistance from Tehran. What is particularly regrettable about SCIRI is that the bloodletting has made life more difficult for moderates within the organization. And the violence has made it harder for SCIRI to pull away from Iranian patronage.

Does Iran want to stop this process? Iraq's Arab Sunni community--detested by the Iranians--has been routed from much of Baghdad, badly bloodied, and put to flight by the hundreds of thousands. This is a bad thing in the eyes of Tehran? Where does Iran have the most influence in Iraq? In Basra, where Shiite-versus-Shiite violence is at its worst. This is not a coincidence. Tehran has benefited massively from Iraqi Shiite division and internecine strife. What the United States should expect from Iran is that it will continue to ship its deadly explosives to Iraq and, through violence, feed the radicalization of the Shiite community. Success through Hezbollah in civil-war-torn Lebanon is the model to remember. Until now, it's been Iran's only successful foray abroad. "Stability" in Iraq means only one thing to Tehran: an American success.

It should be clear that the clerical regime now believes it can move rapidly forward with its nuclear

program without much fear of American preventive military strikes. The once palpable fear of George W. Bush seems to have dissipated as America has floundered in Mesopotamia. Everyone can see that Washington, not Tehran, was more desirous of the recent meeting (NSC spokesmen clearly signaled that we wanted this meeting *because* U.S. troops were dying in Iraq). Even the most inept power politician in Tehran saw that America was weak and on the run. What once provoked anxiety (American troops in Iraq) now whets the appetite. The failure of the United States to respond more forcefully to Iranian arms shipments to Iraq has reinforced the message. Ditto the low-volume response to the kidnapping of American citizens in Iran.

The only good news here is that it will be difficult for the clerical regime to continue talks with the United States even though doing so is manifestly in its interest. When Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, recently said, "Those who imagine that the Islamic Republic of Iran will change its established, logical and defensible policy of forswearing negotiations and relations with the United States are seriously in error," he was being understated. It wouldn't be the first time that clerical Iran had refrained from doing what was in its best interests. But it probably wouldn't take much to tie America up in negotiations--or the hope of negotia-

tions--with Iran over Iraq. And the more America is wedded to talks, the smaller the possibility that it will effectively counter Iran's nuclear-weapons program--the ultimate objective guiding the mullahs' foreign policy. What Tehran would surely like to do is convert its discussions with the European Union over its nuclear program from negotiations about stopping the enrichment of uranium to negotiations about managing an actual nuclear-weapons capacity. Iranians know the North Korean model well. It's a good one. Keep America talking on Iraq, and press ahead for the nuclear prize.

Does President Bush understand all this? Probably. Does his administration? The wish to disbelieve the obvious remains great, particularly as Iraq becomes more violent, which will happen this summer even if the surge is working. And although some might still want to put faith in the CIA's estimate that Iran will make a nuclear bomb in 10 years, it's a better bet that Iranians are significantly increasing centrifuge production because they have figured out how to make it work. Most likely, the time for diplomacy and sanctions is shrinking fast. Since the alternatives aren't easy--blockading Iranian oil exports through the Gulf or preventive military strikes--the Bush administration will be tempted to believe in the illusion of negotiations. We can raise the white flag, and call it victory.

*[Reuel Marc Gerecht](#) is a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and a contributing editor to *The Weekly Standard*.*