

# Re-Reading Iran: A Friend Rather than a Foe

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## ‘Will They or Won’t They Attack Iran?’

This has been the recurring question on everyone’s mind over the past few months as the mass media endlessly recycles the fiction that Iran’s uranium enrichment program is a cover for a nuclear weapons agenda. The frequently cited fears about the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran are that Tehran is months away from a bomb, or that it might use nuclear weapons in a first strike against its adversaries in the region.

How well-founded are these fears and to what extent has the threat of a nuclear Iran been exaggerated? My central argument is that this mass hysteria is entirely unjustified and unwarranted, owing to the fact that, hitherto, the Islamic Republic of Iran has acted as a rational state actor. It is the irrational approach of the international community that has brought us to the brink of World War III.

Ostensibly, the heart of this seemingly intractable conflict is Iran’s nuclear program. The question is, just who actually believes that Iran is building a bomb? Certainly not senior U.S. officials, for they have repeatedly said that there is no substantive evidence that Iran has a clandestine weaponization program. In Senate testimony on 31 January 2012, James R. Clapper Jr., the Director of National Intelligence, stated explicitly that American officials believe that there was no evidence that Iran had made a decision on making a concerted push to build a weapon. David H. Petraeus, [then-]CIA director, concurred with that view at the same hearing.



EIRNS/Christopher Lewis

*Ghoncheh Tasmini: “The road to improved relations will be rocky, however the wall of mistrust must be torn down, brick by brick, before it becomes any denser.”*

Other senior U.S. officials, including Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta and Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, have made similar statements in various television appearances. At the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Clapper concluded, “We don’t believe they have actually made the decision to go ahead with a nuclear weapon.”<sup>1</sup>

Mohammad ElBaradei echoed these misgivings in his memoir, in which he states that he doubted that policymakers in Washington were ever truly interested in resolving the Iranian nuclear issue, but that they sought

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1. “U.S. Agencies See No Move by [Iran](#) to Build a Bomb” (accessed Nov. 18, 2012).



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*Who actually believes that Iran is building a bomb? Senior U.S. officials have repeatedly said that there is no substantive evidence that Iran has a clandestine weaponization program. Shown: Iran's Arak IR-40 heavy water reactor, under construction.*

instead to achieve regime change in Iran. The idea that Iran is determined to build a bomb is intended to generate fear—fear translates into justification for waging a war on Iran. And war is not about destroying Iran's alleged nuclear facilities—it is about toppling the regime. And regime change is not about democracy. The U.S. only stands for democracy and human rights when and where it suits its interests. Iran had a democratically elected prime minister in 1953, but the U.S. orchestrated a coup d'état, and brought in a dictator, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, whom the U.S. supported for 25 years.

Still, Western observers rationalize their antagonistic approach toward Iran by criticizing the nature of the regime. In order to justify the egocentric stance toward Iran, the West has belittled the Presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as an era of revolutionary revivalism with apocalyptic scenarios. The fact is that the West's behavior was no different during reformist Mohammad Khatami's Presidency—a time when Iran offered the world the "Dialogue of Civilizations" as an antidote to Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations, and a time when Iran made wa-

tershed overtures toward the West—only to be branded as a member of an "Axis of Evil" with Iraq and North Korea.

In 2007, the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) disclosed the groundbreaking report that Iran had halted its nuclear program in the Autumn of 2003. Representing the consensus view of 16 U.S. intelligence agencies, the NIE tore up its previous assertions about Iran's nuclear ambitions, and dismantled the myth that Iran is hell-bent on seeking regional hegemony through covert militarization. The report was a testament to the fact that the Iranian leadership has a much more rational sense of self-interest and self-preservation than the mainstream Western

media has led the world to believe.

Herein lies my central argument: We need to stop the drive to a Third World War by adopting an entirely different approach in dealing with Iran. I am not speaking about the "puzzle" or the "paradox" of Iran, or the "rogue state" or the "pariah" Iran, but the Iran that is a pragmatic state actor. However, for the past 33 years, the dominant hegemonic powers have engaged in the same old, tired, and exhausted campaign to vilify Iran. The tempo has stepped up in recent years, but the general tone has been one of hostility.

Albert Einstein said that insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting different results. This is the case in dealing with Iran—the relentless campaign to ostracize Iran has only served to create further polarization and conferences like this—where we are discussing strategies to avert a possible thermonuclear war. If the West wants different results, it needs to employ different methods.

In order for the West to engage Iran more constructively, it needs to first deconstruct the caricature it has construed since the 1979 Revolution; and second, to reconstruct Iran as the rational state actor that it is. We can



U.S. Navy/Armando Gonzales

*The U.S. bases its Naval Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, only 150 miles from Iran. This is roughly equivalent to the Chinese basing a naval fleet in Havana, a battle group in the Caribbean, warplanes in Venezuela and Nicaragua, and more. Shown: Aircraft carrier John C. Stennis steams behind guided-missile cruiser USS Mobile Bay, Fifth Fleet, Arabian Sea.*

begin the deconstruction process of re-reading Iran by moving away from platitudinous depictions of a mad, messianic, revolutionary regime. Then we need to lay out the parameters of a more constructive and integrative strategy of engaging Iran. I shall cite a few facts here that can help reconstruct our perceptions of Iran in a more accurate light.

### Fueling the Nuclear Fire

So far, the international community has only succeeded in conjuring up a “nuclear bogeyman.” By contaminating Iran’s international image, the West is itself provoking a regional arms race. Proliferation begets proliferation (as does imagined proliferation).<sup>2</sup> Increasingly, regional countries are bracing themselves for the materialization of a monolithic nuclear giant—a caricature of Iran—that the Western powers have dangerously and irresponsibly drawn up. Fear and insecurity are factors that drive states to develop their own strategic deterrence capabilities.

The frequent and menacing provocations aimed at

2. Joseph Cirincione, “Deadly Arsenal—Tracking Weapons of Mass Destruction,” Washington, D.C., 2002. S 256.

Iran have only intensified antagonism and resentment. Earlier this year, at the instigation of American lobbyists, the U.S. government removed from its list of terrorist organizations the notorious anti-Iranian opposition movement known as Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MeK). The U.S. had designated the MeK as terrorists as a result of killings they had carried out against Iranians and Americans.<sup>3</sup>

Another recent provocation was Congressman Dana Rohrabacher’s [R-Calif.] nefarious initiative to divide Iran along ethnic lines. He introduced this idea as a Congressional resolution. Congressman Rohrabacher is aware that playing on

ethnic tensions is a recipe for the worst kinds of violence. In fact, the Congressman has admitted that he supports the terrorist group MeK over peaceful opposition groups because of the Mujahedin’s willingness to use violence.<sup>4</sup>

Aside from other chronic threats like economic and cyber-warfare and regime-termination efforts, there are other strategic threats: The U.S. bases its Naval Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, which is only 150 miles from Iran. It has an aircraft carrier-led battle group in the Persian Gulf, as well as warplanes and thousands of U.S. troops stationed in Kuwait and Qatar. One analyst has said that, in terms of provocation, this is roughly equivalent to the Chinese basing a naval fleet in Havana, a battle group in the Caribbean, warplanes in Venezuela and Nicaragua, and troops in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras.

Even against the background of a chorus of high-octane threats, Iran has said it will only engage militar-

3. MeK carried out terrorist attacks in the 1970s and 1980s against the Shah and the clergy. In the 1980s, the MeK allied with Saddam Hussein, who permitted them to operate from Camp Ashraf.

4. “Stop Rep. Rohrabacher’s Resolution Calling for Dividing Iran Along Ethnic Lines” (accessed Nov. 18, 2012)



ily if it is attacked. Brig. Gen. Hossein Salami of the Revolutionary Guards recently said: “We will not start a war. But if someone wages war against us, we will launch continuous offensives.” What is important to note here is the phrase, “We will not start a war.”<sup>5</sup> Even in the most irrational of circumstances, Iran speaks with a rational voice. After the barrage of existential threats and provocations issued against Iran over these past few years, it is almost irrational of Iran not to have withdrawn from the NPT [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty] by now.

### Saddam’s Victims

On the whole, Iran has demonstrated careful calculation and calibration in its foreign policy. It is not the fanatical regime depicted by the media. Iran has no record of military adventurism or aggression against any of its neighbors in modern history, and it has demonstrated a sophisticated level of diplomacy in its foreign policy. Often, national interests and strategic calculations have taken precedence over ideology.<sup>6</sup> Tehran has responded to inducements and pressures pragmatically and reasonably: so reasonably that despite the fact that the country is surrounded by nuclear powers (Russia, Israel, Pakistan, India, and China), it has systematically denounced weapons of mass destruction (WMD). This can be explained by the fact that Iran was one of the first victims of biological and chemical warfare. Innocent Iranian civilians became victims of Saddam’s greatest chemical experiment during 1980-89 Iran-Iraq War. Nearly 100,000 Iranians were affected by nerve and mustard gases during the war. Thousands of victims are still receiving medical treatment today.

Even though Iran was a victim of WMDs, Ayatollah



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*Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has issued a fatwa (religious edict) against the production, stockpiling, and use of nuclear weapons. “There is no winner in a nuclear war and entering such a war is irrational and inhuman,” he said.*

Khomeini unequivocally denounced non-conventional weapons. Iran has adhered to this policy ever since—deviation would suggest an unthinkable departure from the fundamental tenets stipulated by the Father of the Revolution. Iran’s current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has even issued a *fatwa* (religious edict) declaring that the production, stockpiling, and use of nuclear weapons are all *haram* (prohibited in Islam). He has said that, “There is no winner in a nuclear war and entering such a war is irrational and inhuman.”<sup>7</sup> All of these statements have fallen on deaf ears. Likewise, various conciliatory measures on Iran’s part have gone unnoticed.

### The Forgotten Bonn Talks

In the spirit of partnership in the “War against Terror,” Iran played a significant role in providing military and intelligence assistance to the Northern Alliance Afghan troops that succeeded in driving the Taliban out of Kabul in late 2001. At the Bonn talks that followed, U.S. special envoy to Afghanistan James Dobbins affirmed that Iran played a “decisive role” in

5. “[Strike on Iran](#) Would Trigger World War III” (accessed Nov. 18, 2012)

6. For instance, in the dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, Iran tilted more in favor of Christian Armenia than Muslim Azerbaijan. Tehran’s position stands in contrast to the view that Iran’s foreign policy is primarily driven by zealous ideological considerations. Another example was Iran’s policy of giving priority to its strategic ties with Russia. Iran kept silent over the suppression of Muslim separatists by the Russian army in Chechnya, arguing that it was an internal Russian affair.

7. “World Should Seize [Opportunity](#)” (accessed Nov. 18, 2012)

persuading the Northern Alliance delegation to form a government with the other opposition groups. Moreover, it was the Iranian envoy who noted that the interim constitution made no mention of democracy or Afghani cooperation against international terrorism; the language of the document was modified accordingly.

Instead of seeing this occasion as a window of opportunity for rapprochement, the White House denied that Iranians had made any significant contributions on the battlefield or at the Bonn talks.

### **Voluntary Suspension**

During his Presidency, Khatami devoted much energy to allaying the international community's fear about Iran's nuclear dossier. On 18 December 2003, Tehran made a pledge of sustained transparency by volunteering to sign the Additional Protocol to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Iran's Ambassador Ali Salehi signed an Additional Protocol to Iran's NPT safeguards agreement, granting to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors greater authority in verifying the country's nuclear program. The Additional Protocol required states to provide an expanded declaration of their nuclear activities and granted the IAEA broader rights of access to sites in the country.<sup>8</sup>

Another overture was Iran's temporary suspension of its nuclear fuel cycle—deemed as a “voluntary” and “temporary confidence-building” measure under the Paris agreement of November 2004. None of these gestures were recognized by the international community, and more sanctions were slammed on Iran.

### **Missed Opportunity**

The U.S. had another opportunity to normalize relations with Iran in June 2003, when Tehran made a sweeping offer addressing the range of issues dividing the two countries. The document was authored by Iran's ambassador to France, Sadegh Kharrazi, with the help of the Swiss ambassador to Iran, Tim Guldemann, and Mohammad Javad Zarif, an Iranian deputy foreign minister. The Swiss transmitted the Iranian agenda for talks offering “full transparency for security that there are no Iranian endeavors to develop or possess WMD,” joint decisive action against terrorists, coordination on

a stable Iraq, coordination on nuclear matters, the end of any material support to Palestinian opposition groups ( Hamas, Jihad) resisting Israeli occupation, and a normalization of relations.

The [George W.] Bush Administration, feeling triumphant after the toppling of the Iraqi regime, did not reply to what could have been a grand bargain. The moderate camp in Iran was discouraged and discredited as a result, and the snub generated resentment among the more hard-line elements, and can explain why Iran's stance became somewhat hardened throughout the years. Even if a grand bargain could not have been achieved, a limited one certainly could have.

### **Dialogue Revisited**

I have tried to substantiate the claim that the Islamic Republic of Iran, although a revolutionary and ideological entity, attempts to pursue a pragmatic and calculated foreign policy based on national and security interests. Thus, the West needs to re-read Iran and reconstruct Iran as a rational actor. Never before has the world needed a new logic of engagement for dealing with Iran. The dominant North Atlantic and Western European powers can no longer resort to coercion to affect change in the political area—change that invariably reflects their interests—interests that have brought us to the brink of thermonuclear war.

It is high time the West treated Iran as a partner rather than as a foe with the higher aim of preventing the looming humanitarian disaster.

For this, a robust and substantive dialogue is required. However, we are all aware that dialogue is fraught with many difficulties and possible derailments. The historical baggage in the Iran-U.S. relationship dynamic is a major source of contention that has bred mistrust and suspicion over the past three decades; past grievances need to be aired out and put to rest. Even if the nuclear impasse is overcome, a bridge of trust needs to be built through meaningful dialogue, a dialogue carried out in a spirit of goodwill and partnership.

Most importantly, it must be free of prejudice or the impulse to dominate, to assimilate, to threaten, or to coerce. Dialogue must take the form of a truly dialogical exchange, free from ethnocentrism or egocentrism. The road to improved relations will be rocky, however the wall of mistrust must be torn down, brick by brick, before it becomes any denser.

8. “Iran Signs Additional Protocol on [Nuclear Safeguards](#)” (accessed Nov. 21, 2012)