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Iran's Nuclear Impasse: The Next Steps

More than any other issue, the nuclear question has exposed the divisions within the clerical establishment's over Iran's international orientation. To be sure, Iran's contending factions are united on the need to sustain a vibrant nuclear research program, but the prospect of actually crossing the nuclear threshold in defiance of the international community and in violation of Iran's long-standing treaty commitments has generated a subtle yet robust debate.

The War Generation Comes to Power

After 27 years, the complexion of the Iranian regime is changing. An ascetic "war generation" is assuming power with a determination to rekindle revolutionary fires long extinguished. For Ahmadinejad and his allies, the 1980-88 war with Iraq defined their experiences, and it conditions their political assumptions. The Iran-Iraq War was unusual in many respects, as it was not merely an interstate conflict designed to achieve specific territorial or even political objectives. This was a war waged for the triumph of ideas, with Ba'athi secular pan-Arabism contesting Iran's Islamic fundamentalism. As such, for those who went to the front, the war came to embody their revolutionary identity. Themes of solidarity, sacrifice, self-reliance and commitment not only allowed the regime to consolidate its power, they also made the defeat of Saddam the ultimate test of theocratic legitimacy.

Suddenly, in August 1988, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini declared the conflict to be over. After eight years of brutal struggle and clerical exhortations of the inevitability of the triumph of the armies of God, the war ended without achieving any of its pledged objectives. For veterans like Ahmadinejad, there was a ready explanation for this turn of events. It was not the inadequacy of Iran's military planning or the miscalculations of its commanders, but the West's machinations and its tolerance of Saddam's use of chemical weapons that had turned the tide of the battle. And although many Iranians wanted to forget the war, for people like Ahmadinejad the war, its struggles and its lessons are far from being a faded memory: They are constantly invoked. In his much-discussed speech in front of the UN General Assembly in September, Iran's new president used the platform offered to him to pointedly admonish the gathered heads of state for their shortcomings:

For eight years, Saddam's regime imposed a massive war of aggression against my people. It employed the most heinous weapons of mass destruction, including chemical

weapons, against Iranians and Iraqis alike. Who, in fact, armed Saddam with those weapons? What was the reaction of those who claim to fight against WMDs regarding the use of chemical weapons then?

A pronounced suspicion of the United States and the international community would come to characterize Ahmadinejad's perspective. After all, neither America's human rights commitments nor the many treaties prohibiting the use of weapons of mass destruction saved Iran's civilians and combatants from Saddam's wrath. The lesson that the veterans drew from the war was that Iran's independence and territorial integrity could only be safeguarded by its own initiatives and not by international legal compacts and Western benevolence.

Ahmadinejad's Foreign Devils

As the face of Iran changes and the elders of the revolution recede from the scene, a new international orientation is gradually beginning to surface. A combustible mixture of Islamist ideology, strident nationalism and a deep suspicion of the international order comprise Ahmadinejad's global perspective. As an uncompromising nationalist, Ahmadinejad is unusually sensitive of Iran's national prerogatives and sovereign rights. As a committed Islamist, he continues to see the Middle East as a battleground between forces of sinister secularism and Islamic authenticity. As a suspicious ruler, he perceives Western conspiracies and imagined plots where none may in fact exist.

Nowhere has this new ideological determinism been more evident than in perceptions of America. For the aging mullahs such as Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the more pragmatic head of the Expediency Council, Hashemi Rafsanjani, America remained the dominant actor in Iran's melodrama. For the those hardliners, the United States was the source of all of Iran's problems, while for the older generation of more pragmatist conservatives it was the solution to the theocracy's mounting dilemmas. In either depiction, America was central to Iran's affairs. Given that this cohort came into political maturity during the reign of the shah and his close alliance with the United States, was engaged in a revolutionary struggle that was defined by its opposition to America, and then led a state often in conflict with Washington, it was natural that they were obsessed with the United States.

In terms of their international perspective, Ahmadinejad's generation of conservatives does not share its elders' preoccupation with America. Their insularity and their ideology-laden assumptions about America as a pernicious, imperial power lessen their enthusiasm for coming to terms with a country long depicted as the "Great Satan." Even a cursory examination of the younger hardliners' speeches reveals much about their view of international relations: that power in the international system is flowing eastward. As a stalwart of the new conservatives, the current mayor of Tehran, Muhammad Qalibaf, declared, "In the current international arena we see the emergence of South Asia. And if we do not take advantage of that, we will lose." From the perspective of the new Right, globalization does not imply capitulating to the United States but cultivating relations with emerging power centers on the global landscape. It is hoped that such an "eastern orientation" might just obviate the need to come to terms with the United States.

In a stark contrast to their elders, the war generation displays a unique degree of indifference and passivity toward America. Ahmadinejad emphasized this point, stressing, "Our nation is continuing in path of progress and on this path has no significant need for the United States." The notion that Iran should offer concessions on important national priorities for the sake of American benevolence has a limited appeal to Iran's new leaders. After a quarter of a century of hostility, war and sanctions, Iran's emerging leadership class is looking east, where its human

rights record and proliferation tendencies are not particularly disturbing to its commercial partners.

A mixture of wariness and nationalism is driving the new regime's approach to the nuclear issue. The bitter experience of the war has led to cries of "never again", uniting the veterans-turned-politicians behind a desire to achieve not just a credible posture of deterrence but potentially a convincing retaliatory capability. After decades of tensions with America, Iran's reactionaries perceive that conflict with the United States is inevitable and that the only manner by which America can be deterred is through possession of the strategic weapon. Although today the United States may seem entangled in an Iraqi quagmire that tempers its ambitions, for Iran's rulers it is still an aggressive state whose power cannot be discounted and whose intentions must not be trusted.

Given their suspicions and paranoia, the hardliners insist that American objections to Iran's nuclear program do not stem from its concerns about proliferation, but its opposition to the character of the regime. They argue that should Iran acquiesce on the nuclear portfolio, the perfidious Americans would only search for another issue with which to coerce Iran. "The West opposes the nature of the Islamic rule. If this issue [the nuclear standoff] is resolved, then they will bring up human rights. If we solve that, they will bring up animal rights", emphasized Ahmadinejad. Given such views, there appears no sufficient incentive to compromise on such critical national issues, since acquiescence will not measurably relieve American antagonism.

As Iran plots its nuclear strategy, the American demands that it relinquish its fuel-cycle rights granted to it by the NPT have aroused an intense nationalistic uproar. As a country that has historically been the subject of foreign intervention and the imposition of various capitulation treaties, Iran is inordinately sensitive of its national prerogatives and sovereign rights. The new rulers of Iran believe they are being challenged not because of their provocations and previous treaty violations, but because of superpower bullying. In a peculiar manner, the nuclear program and Iran's national identity have become fused in the imagination of the hardliners. To stand against an impudent America is to validate one's revolutionary ardor and sense of nationalism. Thus, the notion of compromise and acquiescence has limited utility to Iran's aggrieved nationalist.

Iran's Realists

In the Islamic Republic's informal governing structure, the national security decisions are subject to input by many figures, even those not necessarily with a portfolio. For instance, the former prime minister Mir Hussein Mussavi, who has been out of power for nearly two decades, is nevertheless consulted intimately about Iran's nuclear course. It appears that despite Western perceptions that the nuclear issue is decided by a narrow band of conservatives, Ayatollah Khamenei has broadened the parameters of the debate and has included relevant elites from across the political spectrum in the nuclear deliberations. Thus, reformers out of power, moderate conservatives struggling against their reactionary brethren as well as professionals from key bureaucracies are allowed to stress their point of view. Given the provocative nature of the nuclear program, Khamenei seems to be hoping that the burden of any ensuing international confrontation would be assumed by all political factions, as opposed to being the responsibility only of the conservatives. Thus, the systematic consolidation of power by the conservatives over the state does not necessarily mean that voices of restraint have been excised from the decision-making process.

In contrast to the hardliners, the pragmatic elements within the Islamic Republic insist that Iran's integration into the international order and the global economy mandates accepting

certain restrictions on its nuclear program. Although it is tempting to see this issue as divided between reactionaries and reformers, the coalition pressing for reticence features both conservatives, such as Rafsanjani, who is currently the head of the Expediency Council—officials within the ministries and important elements of Iran’s national security establishment that retain their status irrespective of who is the president. The proponents of this strategy do not call for the dismantling of Iran’s nuclear edifice, but for the development of an advanced capacity within the flexible guidelines of the NPT. Given Iran’s long-term commitment to the NPT and the prevailing international scrutiny, a provocative policy could invite multilateral sanctions and lead Iran’s valuable commercial partners, such as the European Union, to embrace the U.S. policy of isolating and pressuring Iran. Thus, for this constituency, a hedging strategy can sustain Iran’s nuclear program while maintaining its international ties.

By far the most intriguing voice on the emerging security issue is the new head of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Larijani. For Larijani, the Islamic Republic is offered a rare opportunity to establish its sphere of influence in the Persian Gulf. For centuries, Iran’s monarchs and mullahs perceived that given their country’s history, civilizational achievements and geographic location, it should emerge as the preeminent state of the Gulf. However, those ambitions were unjustly thwarted by global empires and local hegemonic powers. Today, as Iran’s leaders gaze across the region, they see a crestfallen American imperium eager for an exit strategy out of its Arab predicament, an Iraq preoccupied with its simmering sectarian conflicts and a Gulf princely class eager to accommodate rather than confront Iranian power. A judicious and reasonable Iran can go a long way toward achieving its long cherished aspiration of dominating the critical waterways of the Middle East.

A careful examination of Larijani’s speeches reveals an insistence on India as a model for aspiring regional powers. India’s détente with America has allowed it to both maintain its nuclear arsenal and dominate its immediate neighborhood. In contrast, a Russian Federation that at times finds itself at odds with America has seen its ability to influence its “near abroad” checked by a skeptical Washington. Although the U.S. presence is bound to diminish in the Middle East, for Iran’s realists, American power can still present a barrier to Tehran’s resurgence. Although this faction does not seek normalization of ties with America, it does sense that a less contentious relationship with the United States may ease America’s distrust, paving the way for the projection of Iran’s influence in the Gulf.

For the realists, the nuclear program has to be viewed in the larger context of Iran’s international relations. Once more, Larijani points to the example of India, namely a country that improves relations with the United States may obtain American approbation of its nuclear ambitions. Although the realists are disinclined to dismantle the nuclear edifice, they do sense the need for restraint and the necessity of adhering to Iran’s long-standing NPT obligations.

What is to be done?

On May 2006, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice took an important step in revising America’s approach toward Iran. In a unique and momentous step, Secretary Rice proposed direct talks with Iran over its nuclear program. The administration judiciously insisted on the suspension of Iran’s ongoing enrichment efforts as a precondition for the commencement of the talks. Despite the fact that this is a bold reconceptualization of American policy, it tends to miscast the disagreement between Iran and the United States as a disarmament dispute. The only manner of resolving this issue is through comprehensive discussions that deal with the totality of US-Iranian concerns.

The United States needs to move still one step further and propose discussions that include not just Iran's nuclear ambitions, but Iraq as well as terrorism. In the meantime, Iranian concerns such as America's sanctions policy should also be on the table. As both parties become satisfied that the content of the negotiations encompass all their concerns, then perhaps an accord can be reached. This diplomatic format views the nuclear issue as a symptom of a larger US-Iranian malady and tries to address the root cause of the animosity. Only through a fundamental transformation of US-Iran relations can we arrive at a satisfactory solution to Iran's nuclear imbroglio.