
Iran

Author(s): Christopher de Bellaigue

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By Christopher de Bellaigue

IRAN

Tehran's desire for a nuclear bomb has put it in Washington's cross hairs. But neither President George W. Bush's repeated condemnations of Iran's clerical rulers, nor the threat of military force will advance the cause of democracy there. When Iran reforms, it will happen because its youth—not the United States—demands it.

“If Iran Gets a Nuclear Bomb, Iran Will Use It”

Very unlikely. Let's assume that the Iranians have a nuclear weapons program. What do they intend to do with it? Iran almost certainly does not intend to brandish a nuclear bomb in an attempt to intimidate its regional enemy, Israel, or its global nemesis, the United States. Such belligerence could be catastrophic for the Islamic Republic. Iran's clerical leaders govern a country with little revolutionary zeal and a fundamentally unsound economy dependent on oil revenues. Iran's economy cannot withstand the sanctions that would come with nuclear gunslinging. Furthermore, the clerics have blessed a partial *détente* with their Arab neighbors and with the European Union (EU), whose major powers (Britain, France, and Germany) are engaged in delicate negotiations with Iran. The clerics are in

no mood to give up the economic and diplomatic benefits of these relationships.

If Iran wanted nuclear technology for peaceful uses, it is fair to ask, why did it hide efforts to get that technology? The Iranians argue that alerting the world to its nuclear acquisitions would have allowed the United States to block its supply lines. That may be true, but there is another possible explanation: Iran hid its interest in nuclear technology because that interest was military in nature. There is plausible circumstantial evidence—most of it collected by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)—to suggest that Iran's nuclear program is not purely civilian. For more than 10 years, Iran concealed important changes to its nuclear inventory and maintained a clandestine procurement effort. Some of Iran's actions violated the explicit terms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT); others flouted its spirit. The IAEA's failure to find hard evidence that Iran is trying to weaponize its nuclear technology does not mean that there is no such effort.

Christopher de Bellaigue covers Iran for The Economist and is author of In the Rose Garden of the Martyrs: A Memoir of Iran (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

But Iran's nuclear ambiguity is calculated, a reaction to the vulnerability it feels. Iran probably intends to gather all the elements necessary for bomb making, so that it can go nuclear the moment that it feels a U.S. or Israeli attack is imminent. In the meantime, Iranian officials brag—speciously,

some argue—of their “mastery” of nuclear fuel-cycle technology. As one senior State Department official put it, “The Iranians don't necessarily have to have a successful nuclear program ... they merely have to convince us, others, and their neighbors that they do.”

“Iran Has No Use for Nuclear Power”

False. Iran is the second-largest oil producer in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and has the world's second-largest natural gas reserves. But its energy needs are rising faster than its ability to meet them. Driven by a young population and high oil revenues, Iran's power consumption is growing by around 7 percent annually, and its capacity must nearly triple over the next 15 years to meet projected demand.

Where will the electricity come from? Not from the oil sector. It is retarded by U.S. sanctions, as well as inefficiency, corruption, and Iran's institutionalized distrust of Western investors. Since 1995, when the sector was opened to a handful of foreign companies, Iran has added 600,000 barrels per day to its crude production, enough to offset depletion in aging fields, but not enough to boost output, which has stagnated at around 3.7 million barrels per day since the late 1990s. Almost 40 percent of Iran's crude oil is consumed locally. If this figure were to rise, oil revenues would fall, spelling the end of the strong economic growth the country has enjoyed since 1999. Plugging the gap with natural gas

is not possible—yet. Iran's gigantic gas reserves are only just being tapped, so Iran remains a net importer.

The main goal of Iranian foreign policy is to counter U.S. efforts to isolate it. This partly explains the ambitious agreement that Iran and China signed last year, under which China may buy as much as \$70 billion of Iranian liquefied natural gas over the next 30 years, while developing a large Iranian oil field. It is no accident that the agreement was with a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, which the United States would like to use to sanction Iran for its nuclear activities. Iran is also schmoozing other influential Asian countries with energy deals, particularly Japan and India. It makes sense for Iran to free up its hydrocarbons for export, but why pour money into a hugely expensive nuclear fuel-cycle program when other nations have said they will sell Iran the nuclear fuel that it needs? Iran contends that the United States may pressure foreign sellers into stopping the flow. This is unconvincing: Those very same foreigners buy its oil and pledge to buy its gas in the face of American disapproval. Iran's desire for a complete fuel cycle is the most suspicious aspect of its nuclear program.

“The Iranian People Support Their Leaders' Nuclear Program”

Not really. Iranians who vocally support their country's nuclear ambitions tend to be strong supporters of the Islamic Republic, and they are a minority. In today's sullenly depoliticized Iran, it is the mundane issues that animate people: the price of staple products, for instance, or changes in the terms of required military service. In the four and a half years that I have lived in Iran, I have been present at impromptu debates by normal Iranians on these and

other humdrum topics, but only rarely have I heard discussions about national strategy or Iran's geopolitics. I have never witnessed a spontaneous discussion of the nuclear program among average Iranians.

True, the few opinion polls that have been commissioned, mostly by organs close to Iran's conservative establishment, found strong public support for the country's declared goal of becoming a nuclear fuel producer. But there is good reason to be skeptical

about their findings. It would be quite remarkable if a populace increasingly disengaged from politics were suddenly energized by something as arcane as nuclear fuel and its byproducts. Iran's educated urbanites are mostly aware of the nuclear issue, but they are emphatic in their disdain for politics and politicians.

It's unlikely that many Iranians would be willing to put up with the economic and diplomatic isolation that would likely result if Iran insisted on enriching uranium. And the Islamic Republic would hesitate to ask them to do so, for it is the regime, not the international community, that would feel the backlash.

"Only the Threat of Force Can Dissuade Iran from Advancing with Its Nuclear Plans"

Doubtful. The threat of imminent force might cause Iran to back down, but it could also have the opposite effect, encouraging Iran to leave the NPT and to develop a nuclear weapon as fast as possible.

The United States and Israel have reacted aggressively to official Iranian statements suggesting it will never abandon its goal of achieving a nuclear fuel cycle. But these countries do not have official relations with Iran and have little opportunity to judge the sincerity of the statements. In private, both Iranian and foreign officials acquainted with the European negotiations say that Iran is more flexible than it appears. In the words of one well-connected Iranian conservative, "The

fuel cycle is not an article of faith, but a card to play."

What does Iran hope to gain from playing this card? According to Iranian officials I have spoken with, Iran would revise its nuclear plans if the United States abandoned its policy of undermining the Islamic Republic and its clerical rulers and started lifting economic sanctions. Ultimately, the Islamic Republic might refuse to publicly relinquish its nuclear goals, preferring instead to extend the current negotiations indefinitely. If major incentives accompanied a credible threat of severe consequences, however, it is hard to imagine the clerics actually carrying out their threat to restart their enrichment activities.

"U.S. Military Action Would Embolden Dissidents to Topple the Islamic Republic"

Wrong. Six or seven years ago, when free speech was flourishing, it was plausible that a group of radical thinkers in Iranian universities would crystallize into a dissident movement. No longer. A few dozen student leaders have been jailed, tortured, or otherwise silenced, and the rest have been bludgeoned by the hard facts of Iranian economic life—high unemployment, raging inflation, and state dominance of labor. Some 80 percent of Iran's economy is state controlled. Naturally, workers tend to pick up their paychecks quietly, keeping their heads down and mouths shut.

When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, some young Iranians told journalists that they hoped Iran would be next. Today, that sentiment is less often expressed. One reason is that Iranians don't want Iraq's wretched conditions to be replicated in Iran. A second

is that Iranians opposed to the Islamic Republic lack a unifying ideology. Support for the two traditional opposition groups, the monarchists and the People's Mujahideen, is weak. The obvious challenge to the Islamic Republic is liberal democracy, but the state does not permit discussion of what that would entail or how to get there.

It is possible that some Iranians would cheer a U.S. invasion, but not for long. The first Iranian body bag would galvanize anti-American sentiment, especially if that bag contained the corpse of an unsuspecting young conscript or an innocent civilian. This message seems to have been absorbed by Reza Pahlavi, the former shah's exiled son. "Iranians are not willing to buy freedom at any cost," Pahlavi said recently. "They do not want the freedom of an American general marching in."

“Criticizing the Islamic Republic Helps Dissidents Inside Iran”

No. President George W. Bush’s repeated statements of support for the Iranian people do not help normal Iranians. In the summer of 2003, the last time major riots took place in Tehran, Bush’s expression of solidarity with the rioters forced the reform-minded parliament to condemn American interference. At least one student leader, Abdullah Momeni, lamented that Bush’s statement had given the state “an excuse for repression.”

The Clinton administration, on the other hand, quickly grasped that publicly defending beleaguered Iranian reformists simply allowed the clerics to accuse reformers of being American lackeys. President Clinton also learned the cost of criticizing Iran’s unaccountable, clerical elite. During an otherwise quite conciliatory speech in 1999, then Secretary of State Madeleine Albright contrasted the elected and unelected branches of Iran’s government, and any

potential benefits of her speech were drowned in a barrage of Iranian invective.

American criticism has a perverse effect because the United States has no diplomatic or economic relations with Iran, and hence no leverage. The United States is a declared enemy of the Islamic Republic, and Iran reflexively does the opposite of what it advises. The EU, on the other hand, as well as the United Nations and some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), are engaged in Iran and do not (publicly, at least) seek the downfall of the Islamic Republic.

That gives the EU and others some modest leverage with Iran’s clerical rulers. Most recently, some foreign governments and NGOs joined Iranian activists to press for the release of bloggers and Internet journalists arrested on the suspicion of espionage. They succeeded.

“If Iraq Becomes a Democracy, so Will Iran”

Wishful thinking. This theory, peddled by some American neoconservatives, should never have left the matchbox on which it was scribbled. Iran and Iraq are neighbors, but a border is about all they share.

Iran is a mostly Persian-speaking nation inhabited by ethnic Persians (albeit with sizeable, dispersed minorities), inside logical borders, and on the site of ancient Persian empires. Nearly all Iranians are Shias. In Iraq, on the other hand, Shia Arabs, Sunni Kurds, and Sunni Arabs live inside borders drawn up with imperial carelessness less than a century ago. Few Iranians, even those opposed to the Islamic Republic, question Iran’s integrity within its current borders. The same is not true in Iraq.

It is true that in the mid-20th century, there was a brief, superficial convergence when both Iran and Iraq had Western-backed monarchies. But as Iraq slid from Baathist socialism to Saddam Hussein’s atheistic, Sunni-dominated totalitarianism, Iran experienced a revolution. Following a year

or so of anarchic pluralism, Iran set up a semi-democratic, anti-Western, Shia theocracy. Having suffered under the Baathists, many of Iraq’s Shia clerics today enjoy considerable prestige in their country. But in Iran the people have been alienated by the appetite many clerics have shown for worldly power. Neither these manifest differences nor the horrendous Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s has deterred successive U.S. administrations from classifying Iran and Iraq together. They were twin targets of Clinton’s “dual containment.” They are two thirds of Bush’s “axis of evil.”

If Middle Eastern countries are prone to drop like dominoes, why didn’t Iran follow the course of Turkey in the 20th century? The two nations share a long border and much common history. Like Iran, Turkey entered that century as an ailing monarchy threatened by incipient democracy. Both countries were transformed after World War I by strong, modernizing leaders. Today, Turkey stands at the threshold of the EU; Iran fears attack by the United States.

“Iran Cannot Be Reformed from Within”

Wrong again. Iran can and will be reformed from within. Demographics make that course inevitable. Some 70 percent of Iran’s 70 million citizens are under the age of 30, and young Iranians are more reform-minded than older groups. That was made clear in a survey conducted by Iran’s Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, whose initial findings were released in 2001. The survey confirmed that young people resent existing political restrictions more than their elders, and that they are less religiously observant. Thirty-one percent of people aged 15 to 29 favored a “fundamental change in the state of affairs”—a euphemism for making the constitution more democratic. Given continuing dissatisfaction with clerical rule, those figures have likely risen since the survey was taken in 2001.

From Tehran’s well-heeled uptown to its poorer areas, the spread of material values and sexual freedom is palpable, as is a desire for smaller families. Universities are increasingly dominated by women, and female university graduates already outnumber their male counterparts. Young people display little animus for the once hated United States. Of course, it is true that six

years of conservative pressure on President Mohammad Khatami’s government have taken their toll on his movement and those Iranians who support it. Iran’s reform-minded millions lack a common ideology and leadership. And it is likely that, by disqualifying reformist candidates, a conservative vetting body will decide June’s presidential election in advance.

Yet, the Islamic Republic today is more responsive to the popular mood than it likes to admit. In big cities such as Tehran, social freedoms and their attendant distortions cannot be stamped out, so the authorities do not really try. In the upcoming elections, all conservative candidates will pay lip service to the importance of individual, even political, freedoms. A new generation of Iranians will, despite Khatami’s failure, spur further reform. The process would benefit from a critical dialogue with the United States, rather than the current, glowering standoff. As long as Iran fears America’s intentions, and the United States vilifies the Islamic Republic, Iran’s authoritarian leaders will have an excuse to suppress dissent and to label reformers as traitors. **FP**

[Want to Know More?]

For an account of life in Iran since the Islamic Revolution, read Christopher de Bellaigue’s *In the Rose Garden of the Martyrs: A Memoir of Iran* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005). Other portraits of modern Iran include “Dateline Tehran: A Revolution Implodes” (FOREIGN POLICY, Summer 1996) and *The Last Great Revolution: Turmoil and Transformation in Iran* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 2000), both by Robin Wright. Nikki Keddie’s *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) and the more recent *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) are classic studies of Iran’s last 100 years. Sir Percy Sykes wrote the authoritative English-language history of Persia to the 20th century in two volumes, *A History of Persia* (London: MacMillan & Co., 1915).

James Traub questions whether the Bush administration and its allies can keep Iran from enriching weapons-grade uranium in “The Netherworld of Nonproliferation” (*New York Times Magazine*, June 13, 2004). In *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2004), former National Security Council staffer Kenneth M. Pollack reviews the troubled relationship and cautions against U.S. military action. Franklin Foer examines Iran’s impact on the neoconservative agenda in “Identity Crisis: Neocon v. Neocon on Iran” (*The New Republic*, Dec. 20, 2004).

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