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How Barack Obama's Vision of a Nuclear-Free World Weakens America's Security: The Middle East and Iran

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Abstract: *President Barack Obama's nuclear policy will have severe U.S. national security implications in the Middle East and Iran. Fundamentally, the Administration must recognize that different peoples think in different ways. American diplomats emerge from the Foreign Service Institute with a very different understanding of diplomacy than Iranians who spent their youth in the madrasa or in the trenches at the front during the Iran-Iraq War. President Obama may believe that disarmament is a formula for peace, but in the Middle East—and especially Iran—policymakers see such unilateral concessions as encouragement to war.*

President Barack Obama's nuclear policy will have severe U.S. national security implications in the Middle East and Iran. The Islamic Republic likely seeks a nuclear weapons capability. Inconsistencies in Iran's statements about its nuclear program suggest that Tehran's motivation is not simply energy generation.

For example, Iranian officials repeatedly say they need a nuclear program for domestic energy needs. They declare their intention to build eight nuclear stations and say energy security mandates a completely indigenous program. The Bipartisan Policy Center crunched the numbers, however, and found that Iran's own uranium reserves can only supply enough low-enriched fuel to power eight plants for 15 years. An indigenous nuclear program is not their end goal.

Likewise, if Iran's problem was really electricity shortages, they would not connect western Afghani-

Talking Points

- Iran's nuclear development program predates U.S. military involvement in both Iraq and Afghanistan.
- If containment is just rhetorical, both Iran and America's Persian Gulf Arab allies will recognize this. Containment is a military strategy, very difficult and very expensive. The United States hemorrhages its credibility if Washington promises containment but does not prepare for it.
- If the forces in charge of the Islamic Republic's nuclear weapons figure that regime collapse is just a day or two away, they might launch to fulfill their ideological objectives. In such circumstances, the deterrence inherent in mutual assured destruction does not apply.
- President Obama may believe that disarmament is a formula for peace, but in the Middle East—and especially Iran—policymakers see such unilateral concessions as encouragement to war.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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stan and southern Iraq to their power grid. Nor is the Islamic Republic's nuclear development simply a reaction to the presence of U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, for Iran's covert enrichment and war-head design programs predate both Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Over the past decade, a number of Iranian officials have suggested that the Islamic Republic would build nuclear weapons.

- On December 14, 2001, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a former president and chairman of the Expediency Council, warned Israel that Iran could annihilate it with the use of just one bomb.
- Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir Kharrazi, the secretary-general of the Iranian Hezbollah, said 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 no more than a barking dog."
- On May 29, 2005, Hojjat ol-Islam Gholam Reza Hasani, the Supreme Leader's personal representative in the West Azerbaijan province, said that "An atom bomb... must be produced."
- In February 2006, *Rooz*, an Iranian Web site close to the reformist camp, quoted Mohsen Gharavian, a Qom theologian close to Ayatollah Mohammad Taghi Mesbah-Yazdi, as saying it was only "natural" for the Islamic Republic to have nuclear weapons. That Mesbah-Yazdi—President Ahmadinejad's spiritual mentor—wrote in his memoirs of the need for "special weapons" should not surprise.

Containment and the Nuclear Umbrella

Unfortunately, containment will not work. In 1987, the U.S. military launched Operation Ernest Will, reflagging and protecting Kuwaiti tankers. On the first day of that operation, a reflagged Kuwaiti tanker hit a mine, and three months into the operation, an Iranian Silkworm missile struck another reflagged tanker. Containment is very much a military strategy. Operation Ernest Will provides a basis to gauge just how serious the Obama Administration is about containment. A few basic questions:

- Does the United States have enough minesweepers in the Persian Gulf?

- If a U.S. ship should hit a mine, does the U.S. military have access to port facilities to accommodate and repair more advanced ships?
- Have we put in the missile systems to defend those port facilities?
- Do we have bases—beyond simply prepositioning some weaponry—to support this effort?
- If we look at the example of the no-fly zones in Iraq, are we prepared to maintain no-fly zones in the region for decades, with all the expense that entails?

If containment is just rhetorical, both Iran and America's Persian Gulf Arab allies will recognize this. Containment is not a diplomatic strategy; it is a military strategy. Containment is a very difficult operation and very expensive. The United States hemorrhages its credibility if Washington promises containment but does not prepare for it.

Besides the irony of relying upon a nuclear deterrent when President Obama has sworn to rid the world of nuclear weapons, tacit recognition that the Islamic Republic will acquire nuclear weaponry will also undermine U.S. credibility.

What about the idea of a nuclear umbrella? Besides the irony of relying upon a nuclear deterrent when President Obama has sworn to rid the world of nuclear weapons, tacit recognition that the Islamic Republic will acquire nuclear weaponry will also undermine U.S. credibility. Why should Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Israel, or any other regional countries accept the idea that the United States will protect them with an absolute commitment to a nuclear umbrella after we have voided the promise, repeated by the last three Administrations, that under no circumstances would Iran get nuclear weapons capability?

Alas, American red lines are too often drawn in dust.

Credibility and Citizen Diplomacy

From a regional perspective, U.S. officials must understand that credibility matters. Many in Washington believe oil causes wars, and it is trendy in

academic circles to say water will be the cause of the next Middle Eastern war. In reality, however, the real cause of war in the Middle East is overconfidence. In an August 29, 2006, interview with Lebanon's New Television, for example, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah said, "If I had known on July 11...that the operation [to kidnap Israeli soldiers] would lead to such a war, would I do it? I say no, absolutely not."

There are many reasons why Iranian decision-makers are overconfident. Iranians surrounding the Supreme Leader and in the upper reaches of government and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have very little exposure to the outside world. They have no concept about how Americans think.

Many in the West put faith in people-to-people exchange, but citizen diplomacy has failed. At the height of the Dialogue of Civilizations, the State Department granted the Iranians perhaps 22,000

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visas, while the Iranian Foreign Ministry gave U.S. passport holders 800 visas. Washington is not very selective in which Iranians it welcomes, but Tehran only welcomes those Americans sympathetic to Iranian policy and hostile to U.S. national security interests. Therefore, Track II dialogue seldom represents the reality of debate. If anything, groups like Search for Common Ground and the American Friends Service Committee further rather than resolve misunderstanding.

The Folly of Mutual Assured Destruction

Many American analysts say that because the Islamic Republic's leadership is not suicidal, mutual assured destruction could be effective against a nuclear Iran. Such belief makes several tenuous assumptions. Too often, analysts talk about reformists and hard-liners when discussing Iranian politics, but it is not the politicians who would have command and control over an Iranian

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bomb, but rather the IRGC. Neither American nor European analysts, however, have any idea about how factions within the IRGC work. No one knows whose finger would be on the button and whether or not they embraced an apocalyptic Shi'i exegesis.

But even if the IRGC was also not suicidal, a situation is possible if not probable when domestic protests erupt, sparked by some outrage sometime in the future after the Islamic Republic develops nuclear weapons. In last year's post-election unrest, the paramilitary Basij and IRGC held their ground against the protestors, but how might those in control of Iran's nuclear arsenal react should they see the security forces stand down or switch sides, a situation analogous to the last days of Nicolae Ceauçescu in Romania?

If the forces in charge of the Islamic Republic's nuclear weapons figure that regime collapse is just a day or two away, they might launch to fulfill their ideological objectives, calculating that no country will retaliate against Iran after the regime is changed. In such circumstances, the deterrence inherent in mutually assured destruction does not apply.

Different People, Different Ways of Thinking

Analysts should not engage in projection and assume that those who control the Islamic Republic think just like Westerners. Multiculturalism is not just about being able to eat sushi as you drink your mojito.

Fundamentally, the Obama Administration must recognize that different peoples think in different ways. American diplomats emerge from the A-100 class at the Foreign Service Institute with a very different understanding of diplomacy than Iranians who spent their youth in the *madrasa* or in the trenches at the front during the Iran-Iraq War. President Obama may believe that disarmament is

a formula for peace, but in the Middle East—and especially Iran—policymakers see such unilateral concessions as encouragement to war.

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