

The pernicious myth that Iran can't be deterred

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Rumblings about possible war with Iran have grown louder in Washington and other Western capitals in the past few months. Speculation has centered on the likelihood that Israel will launch preemptive air strikes against Iran's nuclear installations, but there is also considerable talk that the United States might join in such strikes or even take on the primary mission to make certain that the key sites are destroyed.

Most advocates of military action against Iran contend that the system of international economic sanctions against the clerical regime is not halting progress on the country's nuclear program and that the world simply cannot tolerate a nuclear-armed Iran. President Obama has stated repeatedly that it would be "unacceptable" for Tehran to have nuclear weapons, and Mitt Romney, the President's likely opponent in the November election, says flatly that he will never allow the emergence of a nuclear Iran on his watch.

The reason that a growing number of politicians and pundits embrace the war option, even though most of them concede that such a step could create dangerous instability in an already turbulent region, is that they explicitly or implicitly believe that Iran is undeterrable. The typical allegation is that if Iran builds nuclear weapons, it will use them - certainly against Israel, and possibly against the United States or its NATO allies. Most realists dispute that notion, pointing out that the United States has several thousand nuclear weapons and successfully deterred such difficult actors as the Soviet Union and Maoist China. They also note that Israel has between 150 and 300 nuclear weapons - an extremely credible deterrent.

None of that matters, hawks contend, because the Iranian leadership is not rational and, therefore, the normal logic of deterrence does not apply. Several war advocates stress Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's obsession with the return of the "12th Imam," an event in Islamic lore that is to be accompanied by an apocalypse. Clifford May, the head of the neo-conservative Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, argues that "more than a few of Iran's rulers hold the theological conviction that the return of the Mahdi, the savior, can be brought about only by an apocalypse." He goes on to cite ultra-hawkish Middle East scholar Bernard Lewis, who asserts that for those who share Ahmadinejad's vision, "mutually assured destruction is not a deterrent. It's an inducement."

There are several problems with that thesis. First, Ahmadinejad is hardly the most powerful figure in the Iranian political system. That's why the all-too-frequent comparisons of Ahmadinejad to Adolf Hitler are especially absurd. The real power in Iran is held by the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and his inner circle of senior clerics. And members of that leadership elite have publicly rebuked Ahmadinejad for devoting too much time and energy to the issue of the 12th Imam.

Second, the return of the Mahdi in the midst of an apocalypse is scarcely a unique religious myth. Most major religions have an "end of the world" mystic scenario involving a savior. Christianity, for example, has the Book of Revelations, with the appearance of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, Armageddon, and the second coming of Jesus Christ. Given the influence of Christianity among American political leaders, foreign critics could make the case that the United States cannot be trusted with nuclear weapons, because a devout Christian leader who believed Revelations would be tempted to bring about Armageddon.

The reality is that leaders in any political system usually prefer to enjoy the riches and other perks of this life rather than seek to bring about prematurely the speculative benefits of a next life. There is no credible evidence that the Iranian leadership deviates from that norm. And those leaders certainly know that a nuclear attack on Israel, the United States, or Washington's NATO allies would trigger a devastating counter-attack that would end their rule and obliterate Iran as a functioning society.

It is appropriate to demand that hawks produce evidence - not just allegations - that deterrence is inapplicable because Iranian leaders are suicidal. But one will search in vain for such evidence in the thirty-three years that the clerical regime has held power.

There is, in fact, an abundance of counter-evidence. Meir Dagan, the former head of Israel's Mossad intelligence agency, has stated that he considers Iran's leaders - including Ahmadinejad - "very rational". Tehran's behavior over the years confirms that assessment. During the early stages of the Iraq-Iran war in the 1980s, the Ayatollah Khomeini said that he would "never

make peace" with Saddam Hussein. But when the war dragged on for years and the correlation of forces turned against Iran, the country's military leaders persuaded Khomeini and the clerical elite to conclude a compromise peace. That's hardly the behavior of an irrational, suicidal political system.

Indeed, there is strong evidence that Iranian leaders understand that there are red lines that they dare not cross. One of the specters that Western hawks create is that Iran would transfer nuclear weapons to non-state terrorist groups. But Iran has had chemical weapons in its arsenal since the days of the Shah. There is not a shred of evidence that Tehran has passed on such weapons to any of its political clients, including Hezbollah and Hamas. Given the visceral hatred those organizations harbor toward Israel, it is nearly certain that they would have used chemical weapons against Israeli targets if Iran had ever put them in their hands. Again, it certainly appears that deterrence neutralized any temptation Tehran might have had to engage in reckless conduct.

A more rational fear than the notion that Iran would commit suicide by launching a nuclear attack against adversaries who have vast nuclear arsenals, or even that Iran would court a similar fate by supplying terrorist groups with nukes, is the thesis that Tehran would exploit a nuclear shield to then bully its neighbors. But even that fear is greatly exaggerated. As Cato Institute scholar Justin Logan points out in the April issue of *The American Conservative*, Iran's conventional forces are weak and the country's power projection capabilities are meager. A nuclear Iran likely would be capable of deterring a US attack on its homeland - attacks that the United States has a habit of launching against non-nuclear adversaries like Serbia, Iraq and Libya - but such a capability would not translate into Iranian domination of the Middle East. That nightmare scenario is only a little less overwrought than the other theories about the "Iranian threat."

A counter-proliferation war against Iran is profoundly ill-advised. At a minimum it would create even more instability in the Middle East. At worst, it could trigger a regional conflagration. That would be an unspeakable tragedy, and it is certainly not a risk that should be undertaken because of faulty - if not ludicrous - assumptions that the logic of deterrence would not apply to Iran.