

NATIONAL REVIEW ONLINE

December 19, 2011

Iranian End Game - The U.S. must settle for nothing less than checkmate

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For almost a third of a century, the Islamic Republic of Iran has confounded American presidents. It has taken hostages, conducted terrorism, undermined the Middle East peace process, and worked unrelentingly to become a nuclear power and develop missiles with global reach. Tehran might frustrate American officials, but its tactics and its efforts to bolster its strategic position are both predictable and reflective of Iran's sense of its history and culture, as well as the late Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary ideology and his profound disdain for the United States.

Every president since Jimmy Carter, with the exception of Bill Clinton, has faced Iranian hostage-taking, either in Iran or in Lebanon. Even the reformists with whom Clinton and President Obama have sought to engage unapologetically endorse this practice. Mohammad Khatami, best known for his rhetorical calls for a dialogue of civilizations, penned an article in the hard-line daily Kayhan praising the embassy hostage-takers. Upon becoming president, he appointed their spokeswoman, Masoumeh Ebtekar, to be his vice president.

During President Obama's term, Iran has seized and released Roxana Saberi, a former Miss North Dakota working as a freelance reporter, and three naïve American hikers as well. Retired FBI agent Robert Levinson, who disappeared in Iran almost five years ago, is alive; he remains America's longest-kept hostage.

Every president since Jimmy Carter has also faced a terrorist challenge from Iran. Long before a Drug Enforcement Administration informant blew the whistle this year on an Iranian plot to kill the Saudi ambassador in Washington, D.C., the Iranian embassy hired the radical black nationalist Dawud Salahuddin, an American convert to Islam, to kill a Shah-era diplomat in Bethesda, Md. When President Reagan ordered peacekeepers into Lebanon, Tehran responded by ordering an attack on their barracks, killing 241. In 1996 Iranian-trained Saudi terrorists detonated a truck bomb at the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, killing 19 U.S. airmen billeted there. And while critics say George W. Bush exaggerated the Iraq?al-Qaeda link, the 9/11 Commission Report details considerable Iranian assistance to the militant Sunni group beginning in 1991. In the decade since 9/11, Iran's Quds Force has been responsible for the deaths of hundreds of American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Neither the Islamic Republic's behavior nor its defiance should surprise. While Obama hopes that the Islamic Republic will unclench its fist, Iranian behavior simply reflects the worldview underpinning the regime. The Islamic Republic cannot reform and become a responsible member of the international community, because the ideology that defines its revolution places it in perpetual opposition to Western notions of liberal democracy.

The Islamic Revolution is inseparable from Ayatollah Khomeini. Its roots lay in his radical reinterpretation of Islamic jurisprudence. While traditional Shiites dismissed clerical rule as a usurpation of the messiah's role, Khomeini had, since 1970, argued that an ayatollah could act as the deputy on earth of the Mahdi -- Shiism's messianic figure.

Many American diplomats welcomed Khomeini's Feb. 1, 1979, return to Iran. As national-security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski explained in his memoirs, "The lower echelons at State, notably the head of the Iran Desk . . . were motivated by doctrinal dislike of the Shah and simply wanted him out of power." Journalists took Khomeini at his word when he assured them that he had no interest in personal power.

When a referendum two months later overwhelmingly confirmed the Iranian people's desire for an Islamic republic, Khomeini declared it to be "the first day of God's government." He defined the new system to be radical in every way: "It should transform our education and judicial systems, as well as all the ministries and government offices that are now run on Western lines or in slavish imitation of Western models."

Iranian rejection of the West was not Khomeini's creation. In 1962, Iranian writer Jalal Al-e Ahmad condemned the Iranian association of the West with modernity as "Westoxification," a sickness. Khomeini's xenophobia therefore appealed not only to a religious constituency, but also more broadly to Iranian intellectuals.

Today's most prominent Iranian dissidents reflect this paranoia. Such dissidents as Akbar Ganji, upon whom the Cato Institute last year bestowed its Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty, may condemn the Islamic Revolution's excesses, for example, but they reserve their true vitriol for the United States, which they view at best through the writings of Noam Chomsky, and at worst through the same conspiratorial lens as Pres. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The Iranian regime cheered when, in 2006 and 2007, Ganji thumbed his nose at White House invitations and American efforts to help Iranian civil society.

Ahmadinejad, for his part, reflects the thinking of the Revolutionary Guards when he repackages the Westoxification obsession into dire warnings about a "Cultural NATO." The deep-rooted belief that Western culture reflects a deliberate military strategy targeting Muslim youth may sound bizarre, but it has theological consequences. Within the Sunni world, it was this same notion that Palestinian theologian Abdullah Azzam, mentor to Osama bin Laden, embraced. Scholars may assure us that jihad is defensive in nature, but Azzam preached to bin Laden that the Islamic world had suffered a preemptive attack. Bin Laden, therefore, saw 9/11 as an outgrowth of legitimate, defensive jihad.

Unlike such revolutionaries as Gamal Abdel Nasser, however, Khomeini would not allow Iran to be a Cold War battlefield. "We are at war with international Communism no less than we are struggling against the global plunderers of the West, headed by America, Zionism, and Israel," Khomeini explained. "Neither East nor West -- Islamic republic!" became Iran's defining slogan.

Never did Khomeini envision a revolution contained within Iran's borders. Addressing pilgrims in Qom just 40 days before the seizure of the American embassy, he thundered, "Dear sisters and brothers, in whatever country you may live, defend your Islamic and national honor! Defend fearlessly and unhesitatingly the peoples and countries of Islam against their enemies -- America, international Zionism, and all the superpowers of East and West." Shortly after, Khomeini inaugurated a constitution that required Iran to support and protect "the just struggles of the oppressed and deprived in every corner of the globe." Indeed, the constitution cites the Koranic call to "prepare against them whatever force you are able to muster, and horses ready for battle, striking fear into God's enemy and your enemy, and others beyond them unknown to you but known to God."

In effect, Iranian leaders interpret the call to export revolution as an endorsement of violence. When, in 2008, Khatami suggested that Khomeini had sought only to transform Iran into a soft-power Mecca, and that Iran should therefore refrain from the more violent aspects of revolutionary export, 77 members of parliament demanded that the intelligence ministry

prosecute him. Ayatollah Mahmoud Heshemi Shahroudi, the head of Iran's judiciary and a close associate of the current supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, quashed any further debate when, against the backdrop of the controversy, he emphasized that the export of Iran's revolution was a military strategy, telling the Revolutionary Guards, "You are the hope of Islamic national and Islamic liberation movements."

To understand the Islamic Republic's mentality, it is important to understand Iran's sense of its place in the world. Iranians have internalized the notion that, as their kings once declared, they are the pivot of the universe. In a region replete with 20th-century nation-states that rose from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, the Great Game, or European colonial endeavors, Iran has a near-continuous history going back millennia. Perhaps only China can compare with Iran in its self-perception as the inheritor of a great empire. Yet the 19th century did not treat it kindly, and today Iran is only half the size it was at its 17th-century apex.

While perhaps only a quarter of Iranians still believe in the clerical system that Khomeini inaugurated, most are fiercely nationalistic. Iranians look at their lost territory as a "near abroad," in much the same way Russian nationalists see Ukraine, Georgia, and perhaps even Poland. Iran's clerical leaders often try to rally Iranians around the flag by playing to their nationalist heartstrings.

Hence the Iranian leadership encourages outrage at what it interprets as Western attacks on Iran's legacy. Tehran scuttled the George W. Bush administration's efforts to establish a "red phone" hotline in the Persian Gulf, for example, after the State Department referred to the Persian Gulf as simply "the Gulf." And whenever public discontent grows inside Iran, Iranian leaders embrace expansionist rhetoric. On July 9, 2007, for example, Hossein Shariatmadari, the editor of a hard-line daily widely seen as the voice of the supreme leader, raised regional anxiety when he penned an editorial suggesting that the island nation of Bahrain -- home to America's Fifth Fleet -- should return to Iranian control after almost five centuries of separation. Two decades after Arab leaders unwisely ignored Saddam Hussein's description of Kuwait as Iraq's 19th province, none are willing to shrug off Iran's description of an independent Arab state as merely a renegade province.

The Iranian leadership interprets Iran's conflict with the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan through the lens of religious warfare as well as a perverse Persian-nationalist Monroe Doctrine. Hence the Tabnak News Agency, most closely affiliated with "pragmatist" former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, accuses the United States of seeking to transform Afghanistan into a "new Andalusia," a reference to the expulsion of Muslims from Spain, by "converting the Afghans to Christianity . . . and corrupting the Afghans morally."

While both Bill Clinton and Barack Obama extended olive branches to entice Iran to the table, the Iranian regime filters all American actions through Tehran's deep-rooted sense that it is locked in a proxy war with the United States. Hence, when Clinton's secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, apologized for the CIA-sponsored coup in 1953 against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, the Iranian regime responded by demanding that the United States pay reparations. The irony here, of course, is that the clerics opposed the left-leaning premier as much as the Eisenhower administration did. More recently, when Obama lifted Bush-era preconditions on direct dialogue, Khamenei responded by imposing conditions of his own, first and foremost the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Middle East.

It was in the context of proxy war that Khamenei, upon hearing that American forces would withdraw from Iraq, declared, "Today America has been defeated in Afghanistan and Iraq, and it has no choice but to leave these two countries." Two weeks later, on November 16, Mohammad Reza Naqdi, the commander of the paramilitary Basij, elaborated. "The result of the heavy casualties and disgrace the United States experienced in Iraq led to the emergence of a pro-Islamic Republic government," he explained, adding that American forces would face the

same fate in Afghanistan. "I say with certainty that the United States is so weakened that if we attack them today, they not only will lack the ability to counter us, but they will also beg Iran for negotiations," he concluded.

Iran's current overconfidence is reflected in other ways. No longer do its leaders describe the state merely as a regional power; rather, against the backdrop of their growing presence in Latin America and the dispatch of ships to the Horn of Africa and the Mediterranean, they call Iran a "pan-regional power." The Iranian leadership believes that the nation is on the threshold of an Iranian century.

While Iran embraces a uniquely Persian worldview, it also masterfully games Western diplomatic culture and the American desire to strike deals. Shortly before he was taken hostage in Iran, Bruce Laingen, the American chargé d'affaires in Tehran, outlined the Persian approach to negotiations. "Perhaps the single dominant aspect of the Persian psyche is an overriding egoism. . . . The practical effect of it is an almost total Persian preoccupation with self and leaves little room for understanding points of view other than one's own." In practice, this meant that "one should never assume that his side of the issue will be recognized, let alone that it will be conceded to have merits." Indeed, never have Iranian authorities recognized the legitimacy of any American or European negotiating position. While American diplomats may seek concession for concession, Iranian authorities interpret concessions as an admission that Washington's previous position was illegitimate, and simply readjust the baseline from which to talk.

Hence, when Obama waived, as a precondition for talks, the demand that Iran cease uranium enrichment, Iranian authorities interpreted the move as an acknowledgement that all previous U.N. Security Council resolutions condemning Iran's enrichment were unjust.

Because Iranian authorities deny any legitimacy to Western concerns, they see no reason to negotiate sincerely. Even Iran's reformists brag about how they dupe Western diplomats. On June 14, 2008, for example, during a debate with an Ahmadinejad aide, Khatami's former spokesman Abdollah Ramezanzadeh criticized Iranian hard-liners for their defiant rhetoric. The content was not the problem, but rather the result. The purpose of dialogue, he argued, was not compromise, but avoiding sanctions. "We had an overt policy, which was one of negotiation and confidence-building, and a covert policy, which was continuation of the [nuclear] activities," he said.

On Oct. 24, 2011, Hassan Rowhani, Khatami's nuclear negotiator, bragged to Iran's largest reformist daily about how he used diplomacy with the West to run down the clock to Iranian nuclear capability. "When I was entrusted with this portfolio, we had no production in Isfahan," he explained. But by the time negotiations broke off, Iran had completed not only its uranium-enrichment facility, but also a heavy-water plant in Arak that can produce plutonium. Rowhani bluntly bragged that Tehran offered talks to European leaders as a way of delaying U.N. sanctions. "The Islamic Republic acted very wisely in my view and did not allow the United States to succeed," he explained. "It managed to oppose the United States and did not allow the nuclear case to be submitted to the Security Council" immediately, he said, adding, "This was my objective."

Iranians famously quip that they play chess while the Americans play checkers. As the Islamic Republic expands its influence and nears nuclear capability, it certainly appears that they seek to checkmate America.

It is possible to turn the tables on Tehran, however. The Iranian leadership has twice before staked out ideological positions that it later abandoned, vowing during the initial hostage crisis that it would not compromise on myriad anti-U.S. demands, and swearing during the Iran-Iraq War that the Iranian military would not stop fighting until it ended Saddam's rule. In both cases,

Khomeini suddenly reversed course. In 1981, after more than a year of fruitless diplomacy, he agreed to release the American hostages. The reason was not any new diplomatic initiative, but rather the outbreak of war with Iraq: As the late national-security expert Peter Rodman pointed out soon after the hostages' release, the cost of Iran's isolation had become too great to bear. Likewise, it was economic pain that forced Khomeini to accept a ceasefire with Iraq in 1988, with Iran's war aims unfulfilled. Declaring his decision as if he were drinking a chalice of poison, he agreed to a ceasefire. The cost of pursuing his revolutionary agenda had simply become too great to bear.

If the next administration aims to make Tehran reconsider its pursuit of nuclear weapons, it must raise the cost of Iran's nuclear program beyond the breaking point. Instead of ratcheting up sanctions bit by bit -- an approach that plays to Iran's strategy of running down the clock -- Western authorities should impose massive and crippling sanctions upon every aspect of the Iranian state. These should include actions against all Iranian banking and rial transactions; oil exports and gasoline imports; aviation; and weapons and technology sales. At the same time, the White House should increase rather than decrease America's military presence in the Persian Gulf.

Only when the Islamic Republic truly links the decisions it makes to the pain it feels can the White House dictate the formula for Tehran to earn the easing or lifting of sanctions. Washington should simultaneously prepare for all military scenarios and encourage regime change. Unless Khamenei is forced to drink from the same chalice that neutered Khomeini, the Islamic Republic will triumph. Compromise is not possible -- only checkmate.