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Iran's Sacrificial Bomb

By [Stanley Kober](#)

A game of high stakes chess is being played in the Middle East, with Iran at one side of the board and Israel (joined by the United States and other countries negotiating with Iran) at the other.

In this chess game, the Iranian nuclear program is like a pawn Tehran relentlessly pushes forward. In chess, a pawn that reaches the end of the board can be exchanged for a more powerful piece - a queen. But that almost never happens. No skilled player would allow an opponent to advance a pawn that far.

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So it is with Iran's nuclear program. As the negotiations proceed, the pawn steadily advances. The United States and Israel watch warily. They do not want the pawn to become a queen; they do not want to see Iran in possession of a nuclear weapon.

All options are on the table, both governments aver. One way or another, the pawn will be stopped. The use of military force is implicit, and that threat is underlined by the example set by Israel's military strikes against nuclear facilities in Iraq and Syria.

But in chess, there is another strategy. The player advancing the pawn does not expect it to reach the end of the board. Rather, a trap is set. The pawn is a sacrifice; its loss initiates a series of responses that lead to victory. Having focused on the threat posed by the advancing pawn, the losing player does not see the moves being set up that will determine the outcome of the game.

Could that be Iran's strategy? Could the nuclear program be a sacrificial pawn, designed to provoke an attack, which Tehran hopes would then set in motion a series of events that would lead to its triumph? The idea seems fantastic. Nevertheless, it deserves some consideration, especially since there is a recent precedent that may be relevant.

In the 2006 war in Lebanon, Hezbollah stunned Israel when it fired an anti-ship missile at an Israeli gunboat that

had been shelling Beirut. Significantly, Hezbollah did not use the anti-ship missile to deter an attack. It did not tell the Israelis: You keep your ships away from Beirut because we can sink them.

Instead, it kept the presence of this weapon secret - not an easy thing to do. It lured the ship into a trap, and almost succeeded in sinking it.

But to do that, it made a conscious decision to sacrifice, albeit to a limited degree, the people of Beirut. Hezbollah allowed the ship to shoot first, taking advantage of Israeli overconfidence, and then unleashed its response.

Could the nuclear program be following the same pattern? Certain aspects of Iran's behavior suggest the idea needs to be considered.

First, there is the very provocative Iranian program of Holocaust denial. One would think that if Iran's leaders were serious about getting the bomb, they would stay quiet until they had the bomb.

Instead, they are behaving in a way bound to antagonize those sitting on the other side of the chess board. The Israelis, in particular, view the campaign of Holocaust denial as an implicit threat, which reinforces their determination that Iran should not get the bomb.

In addition, Iran has been engaging in a vast conventional arms buildup- at least according to the Iranian press, which regularly reports on new weapons and military exercises. Iran has also re-supplied Hezbollah, which now is better equipped than it was in 2006.

Iran cannot win a nuclear war; it would be destroyed in retaliation. A conventional war holds no such danger, and any attack would likely unite the Iranian people in defense of their country.

The political impact in the region could also be profound. This would be the third attack by a Western country on a Muslim one in just a few years. Whatever the justifications for each war, three in such a short time would almost certainly enhance the impression that Islam itself is under siege.

That impression could be bolstered by developments in Jerusalem. In the past few weeks, there have been confrontations around the holy sites.

If there is an incident in Jerusalem at the same time there is an attack on Iran, it is difficult to see how a regional explosion could be avoided. Israel might then truly face an existential threat.

In attempting to prevent the crowning of the Iranian pawn, we should also be conscious of the dangers of a sacrificial pawn. That is, after all, what any good chess player would do.

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