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KOBER: Hit Iran in the brain

Strip religious despotism of its future, one student at a time

By Stanley Kober

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The American policy of imposing sanctions on [Iran](#) may have run into a problem: Instead of becoming more accommodating, [Iran](#) seems to be upping the ante. But if sanctions are not intimidating [Iran's](#) leaders, there is one challenge they fear: the brain drain to foreign - especially American - universities.

Recently, the Iranians blocked delivery of fuel to [Afghanistan](#), claiming it was being diverted to the coalition force. On [Christmas](#) weekend, [Afghan First](#) Vice President [Mohammad Qasim Fahim](#) arrived in Tehran on an unannounced visit.

During that visit, [Iran](#) agreed to lift its fuel embargo. Assuming the Iranians were not simply persuaded by [Mr. Fahim's](#) eloquence, it is reasonable to conclude the Afghans gave something in return. Two memorandums of understanding were signed, on education and scientific cooperation, but [Mr. Fahim](#) and Iranian officials hinted something more fundamental was at issue.

According to [Iran's Fars News Agency](#), [Mr. Fahim](#) "urged further expansion of ties and cooperation between the two countries, in defense fields in particular." In return, [Iran's](#) defense minister, [Brig. Gen. Ahmad Vahidi](#), assured his guest that "we are prepared to transfer our experiences and capabilities to [Afghanistan](#) in military grounds."

[Mr. Fahim's](#) visit did not take place in isolation. At the same time he was in Tehran, a senior Iranian official arrive in Damascus.

According the [Islamic Republic News Agency](#), the assistant secretary of [Iran's National Security Council](#), [Ali Baqeri](#), was scheduled to meet not only with Syrian President [Bashar Assad](#), but also with the leaders of [Hamas](#) and [Islamic Jihad](#). "Promotion of solidarity among resistance groups," he told [Mr. Assad](#), "is the Islamic republic's most important priority in its interactions with the regional countries."

It is possible these events are unrelated, but it would seem more likely they are connected, part of Tehran's policy to exert influence in its neighborhood at the expense of the [United States](#).

[Iran's](#) actions reflect the degree to which America's overcommitments have drained its power. Nine years ago, the [United States](#) appeared to have unchallenged - and unchallengeable - control of [Afghanistan](#). Now, despite a surge in [U.S.](#) and NATO forces, the U.N. reports that their hold over Afghan territory is receding.

Similarly, following the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, [Syria](#) appeared isolated, as it was forced to withdraw its forces from Lebanon. But [Iran](#) stood by its ally, and gradually the balance of power shifted. American efforts to split [Syria](#) from [Iran](#) have proved futile thus far, and their joint calls for resistance are a direct challenge to American efforts to broker a peace agreement between Israel and Palestine.

[Iran's](#) recent diplomacy underlines the challenges facing the [United States](#). Despite facing economic sanctions that are provoking dissatisfaction among its people, the Iranian regime is demonstrating an ability to undercut the [Unit](#)

[States](#) in areas where American power seemed unassailable just a short time ago.

Whatever one thinks of [Iran](#)'s current rulers, they have demonstrated an understanding of how to use power. But they do have one vulnerability: Talented young Iranians do not see a future for themselves in their country and see opportunities elsewhere. The problem is so great that Iranian media openly acknowledge the "brain drain," and senior officials even wonder how they can use the large expatriate population to their advantage. As Intelligence Minister Heydar Moslehi hopefully (and somewhat lamely) put it, "All Iranians who live outside of the country are not in the opposition."

The Iranians may not be intimidated by our power, but they are awed by the attractiveness of our universities. And that suggests another strategy.

Tell them, publicly, that we welcome their young people to study here. Whatever differences we have with Iran's government, its youth bears no responsibility.

Indeed, if there is a threat that makes [Iran](#)'s rulers tremble, this would appear to be it.

According to a member of the Iranian parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has informed Iranian ambassadors abroad to take the actions necessary to prevent the children of Iranian officials from studying at foreign universities."

We have it, then, in their own words. Let us issue the invitations, and if they decline, let them explain to their own people - and to the world - what they are afraid of.

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