

Title:

Neo-Containment for a Nuclear Iran

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Summary:

What can the United States do about an Iran seeking nuclear technology? The government and the media contemplate sloppy and broad economic sanctions or clumsy and bloody military operations. I suggest an alternative: neo-containment. Let's reinvent our strategy against the Soviets for the 21st century threat from Iran.

Keywords:

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Article Body:

As anyone who has opened a newspaper or watched the news over the past few years knows, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been pursuing nuclear capability. Iran's government insists its only goal is to develop nuclear power plants that would not threaten anyone. The United Nations, though, is concerned Iran might instead covet nuclear weapons. The United States is convinced that is the case. In any event, for an aggressive and fanatical theocracy such as Iran to research nuclear technology is worrisome. This is especially true in light of statements by Iran's current president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, declaring he would share nuclear capability with other repressive Muslim nations and wishing for the destruction of Israel.

So, what can the United States do about the situation? To answer that question, knowledge of Iran's historical circumstances, as well as of the history of its nuclear program, is essential.

I. Historical Background

To predict how Iran will react to an American or UN stratagem, one must consider the history that will inform Iranian actions. This history is one of both foreign exploitation and increasing clerical power. The 19th century would be a good point at which to begin telling the tale.

Fath 'Ali Shah, the first sovereign of the Qajar dynasty, ruled from 1797 to

1834. His realm had suffered through decades of warfare, leaving his government's coffers unable to pay operational costs. Therefore, Fath turned to the British to help fund government activities, which gave the British Empire influence in the country. Meanwhile, after more wars that resulted in the Treaty of Golestat in 1813 and the Treaty of Turkmanchay in 1828, Iran had to cede the Caucuses to Russia. The Turkmanchay treaty also opened Iran to Russian merchants and diplomats. This development sparked nearly a century of diplomatic feuding between Britain and Russia, with the two nations vying for dominance in Iran, that would have dire consequences for Iran in the 20th century.

Even before then, though, Iran slipped more and more under the umbrella of the West, and not to Iran's benefit. As European influence expanded and transportation systems developed, tying Europe and the Middle East more closely together, Iran's economy shifted in the process. The economy became more susceptible to "global market fluctuations and... periodic famine." But the shahs of the Qajar dynasty did nothing to slow the pace of European encroachment. Instead, to raise money, they sold land to wealthy capitalists, hindering customary patterns of land usage and harming the economy even more. To raise more money, Naser al-Din Shah, who ruled from 1848 to 1896, granted "excessive concessions" to foreigners over trade issues in exchange for hard cash. This, he did not spent on his people or his country, but on his court and his luxurious vacations to Europe. The shah's behavior, in collaboration with foreigners, enraged many Iranians. [1]

The Tobacco Riots of 1890 constituted the start of backlash against the shahs. Naser al-Sin had given the British massive concessions on tobacco trading in Iran. Angry protests and a boycott of tobacco forced Naser to rescind the concession. The events of 1890 showed:

1. Iranian merchants could organize and whip up public support.
2. The Iranian people could curtail the power of the shah.
3. The Shi'a clergy, men to whom Iranians traditionally turned for guidance for hundreds of years, who had helped agitate the people against the tobacco concession, were increasing in power.[2]

With these factors at work, the Tobacco Riots would serve as a preview of future events, including the Islamic Revolution nearly a century later, as well as something much sooner...

Concurrently with Iran's increasing interaction with the West, newly arisen Iranian intellectual circles interested themselves in democratic procedures. These intellectuals found solace in the 1905 Russian Revolution[3] during which popular uprisings convinced Tsar Nicholas II to substitute Russia's absolutist

state with a constitutional monarchy.[4] After the shah's government beat some Iranian merchants, the intellectuals united with the merchants and the clergy to stage colossal strikes and protests against the government. Eventually, to appease the Iranian masses, the shah allowed for the writing of a constitution in 1906. (This was the first alignment of all these forces that would prove strong in 1978-1979.)

Foreign intervention would spell the doom of the constitutional government. First, in 1907, the almost century-old squabbles between Britain and Russia culminated in the Anglo-Russian Convention. This Convention carved for the two empires "exclusive spheres of influence in Iran, Afghanistan, and Tibet." In Iran, as per the treaty, Britain controlled areas "along the Persian Gulf," and Russia regions "in northern Iran and the Caucasus." As a result of the agreement, then, both Russia and Britain had large stakes in the internal politics of Iran.[5]

Four years later, in 1911, Iran's constitutional regime paid an American consultant, William Morgan Schuster, to advise the government regarding finances. Schuster recommended aggressive means to obtain funds from all over Iran. This upset the British and the Russians, from whose spheres the Iranians would also acquire money under Schuster's plan. Russia demanded the Iranian government fire Schuster; upon said government's refusal, the Russians deployed soldiers to march on Tehran. Facing this threat, the shah sent Schuster home and terminated the constitutional regime.

Until World War I, the Russians acted as the de facto masters of the Iran outside its official sphere of influence. The Great War, however, forced the withdrawal of Russian soldiers from the country. Unfortunately for Iran, its respite did not last long. The Russians soon came back, along with the British, the Germans, and the Turks, who fought battles amongst themselves in Iranian territory.

In 1917, though, the new Soviet Union ended Russia's claims in Iran, engendering much Iranian love for the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (despite the elites' dread of Communist ideas spreading to their country). A few years later, in 1921, the British also abandoned their spheres of influence in Iran, after "international pressure." Britain did not leave Iran without a parting gift: It supported an Iranian military officer, Reza Khan, who in 1920 had been crucial in suppressing a Communist revolt. Reza Khan seized control of the Iranian military and eventually overthrew the last Qajar shah, after which he anointed himself Reza Shah Pahlavi, the first shah of the Pahlavi dynasty.[6]

Reza secularized Iran somewhat through educational and judicial changes. He

shifted jurisdiction over many issues from Shi'a religious tribunals to state courts or government agencies. He instituted secular schools. But the new shah was not a liberal dedicated to the welfare of his people. His government censored the media and prohibited unions and political parties. The shah also renewed trade concessions for oil, which would inflame Iranian wrath for decades.[7]

Iran's shah was not a complete stooge of the West, although he chose an unethical way to show it. In the 1930's, afraid of the Soviet Union and desperate for more commerce, Reza increased trade and enhanced relations with the Third Reich. When Reza would not renege on his deals with the Nazis, the British and the Russians invaded Iran in 1941 and deposed him. The familiar conquerors elevated Reza's son to Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi.

Ironically, during World War II, foreign rule increased media freedom, political liberty, and economic prosperity. New political parties and trade unions arose. At the same time, the Shi'a clergy enhanced their strength, with the dissolution of the previous shah's secularization initiatives. After the war, when the foreign occupiers withdrew, moderate leftists, Iranian nationalists, and some clergymen loosely coalesced into the National Front, under the leadership of Mohammed Mosaddeq. The purpose of the National Front was to limit the shah's and the clerics' power (although the latter goal caused tensions in the political alliance). Another objective of the National Front was to achieve Iranian control of Iranian natural resources, ending "foreign exploitation" of them.[8]

Toward that end, after Mosaddeq became prime minister in 1951, he nationalized all of Iran's oil. Britain, the primary recipient of Iran's oil largesse, hated Mosaddeq's action and, ergo, placed trade sanctions on Iran. Subsequently, former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and current British Prime Minister Anthony Eden advocated a combined United States-United Kingdom operation to topple Mosaddeq. Nothing quite that grandiose occurred. Despite that, August 1953 saw the end of Mosaddeq's administration. Mosaddeq's grip on the state's helm had been loosening because his social democratic programs had been alienating his clerical supporters. Following the shah's hasty departure from Iran after a political conflict with Mosaddeq, the Iranian prime minister lost his already tenuous position to a Central Intelligence Agency-sponsored coup. Mohammed Reza resumed his position within a week of his flight.

Thanks to American intervention in Iran—not even to contain the Soviet Union, but to protect business profits—any chance for Iran to become a progressive republic vanished. The resurgent shah, to avoid another Mosaddeq, stifled all further political deviation from his agenda. Israel's Mossad and the CIA assisted Mohammed Reza in this regard by helping him in 1957 to forge his own

Gestapo, the Organization of National Security and Information, also known as Sazman-e Amniyyat va Ettela'at-e Keshvar (SAVAK). This secret police cemented the shah's ruled for decades, causing Iranians to quake with fright. (As Yoda said, fear leads to anger...)

In 1960-1963, Mohammed Reza introduced the White Revolution. As part of this Revolution, the shah liberalized laws to convey more equality to women and began economic reforms that increased Iranian incomes. These measures angered the Shi'a clergy, whose power the economic reforms eroded and who wanted to continue subjugating women as per Islamic tenets. Soon, ordinary people became discontent as well with the White Revolution, as the economic reforms backfired. Failing farms compelled an Iranian rush to the cities, where Iranians found "high prices, isolation, and poor living conditions." An ever-decreasing standard of living accompanied rampant inflation. During all this misery, Iranians had no political outlet through which to vent their dissatisfaction. No political freedom existed, with SAVAK arresting and torturing anyone who dissented from the shah's policies. Only bloody rebellious actions could serve as channels for the people's rage.[9]

Supporting the shah while this was happening was the United States of America. Ever increasing numbers of American consultants assisted Mohammed Reza with economic planning and military strengthening. With American aid, the Iranian military emerged as the strongest in the region and one of the biggest on Earth. The shah's reliance on Americans tarnished both him and them in the eyes of the Iranian people.

Finally, in the 1970's, Iranian intellectuals tired of Mohammed Reza's tyrannical maladministration. They joined forces with Shi'a clerics loyal to the exiled philosophy professor Ruhollah Musawi Khomeini. Khomeini had condemned the White Revolution in 1963, for which government agents stormed Khomeini's madrasah, "killing several students," and arrested him. Eventually, the government forced Khomeini into exile. This did not stop Khomeini from constructing doctrines for the maintenance of a Shi'a Muslim state and disseminating them to the Iranian people, thereby fortifying and gaining allegiance.[10]

The alliance of intellectuals and clerics fomented a revolution in 1978-1979 that forced the shah to abdicate and allowed Khomeini to return home. Iranians voted for the institution of an Islamic Republic by a large margin. Ayatollah Khomeini (of whom current Ayatollah Khomeini is the successor) and his Shi'a clerics and mullahs brutally crafted this Islamic Republic, eliminating whatever Western influence they could along the way. The ayatollah and his cronies have dominated Iran from 1979 until today, exhibiting as much barbarism as the shah

ever did. Iran's democratically-elected president serves as a figurehead. He possesses little authority to thwart the designs of the Shi'a theocrats.[11]

All this history reveals a Western proclivity for harmful interference in Iranian affairs extending back 200 years. One could defend the intervention in World War II as necessary to constrict German trade and ensure the flow of Lend-Lease materiel to the Soviet Union.[12] Every other intrusion into Iran was an imperialistic endeavor to protect Western business interests. After two centuries of detrimental foreign exploitation, Iranians would have little reason to trust in the good intentions of the United States and Europe. This distrust, in concert with Iranian hostility toward foreign interference in political life and usurpation of natural resources, could make UN attempts to command Iran backfire. Iran could perceive such ultimatums as yet more Western efforts to dominate Iran's future.

The Shi'a clergy emerges in the history as a force that, after embedding themselves into Iranian culture for centuries, have exercised rising societal influence over the past century, until they took over the country outright in 1979. Shi'a clerics have entrenched themselves in the local ways and traditions. These clerics will not disappear as a concern anytime soon. Domestic rulers in ivory towers could not rid themselves of Shi'a clergy as a potent social influence; foreign soldiers definitely will not be able to accomplish that.

With cognizance of the broad historical context of Iran, description and analysis of the current nuclear crisis with Iran is now proper.

In August 2002, an Iranian dissident movement accused the theocratic government of operating in the city of Natanz a uranium enrichment facility and in the city of Arak a heavy water plant. In December 2002, while on its weapons of mass destruction allegations binge, the United States proclaimed Iran's guilt of "across-the-board pursuit of weapons of mass destruction." Unlike with Iraq, American declarations about Iran turned out to be at least partially true. The IAEA examined Arak and Natanz in February 2003, and it declared a few months later Iran had broken the Non-Proliferation Treaty. [13]

Iran promised the European Union Three—Germany, France, and Britain, who had taken the lead in diplomacy with Iran—in October 2003 it would cease all research into the enrichment of uranium, an essential procedure in constructing both nuclear power plants and nuclear weapons. That December, Iran pledged it would cooperate with surprise inspections of its nuclear installations. Iran did not keep that oath, though, as the IAEA chastised Iran in June 2004 for insufficient cooperation. To strike back, Iran announced it would start researching and making centrifuges, vital to uranium enrichment, again. But Iran

reversed course several months later, in November 2004, assuring the Europeans it would halt "all nuclear fuel processing and reprocessing work." Iranian President Mohammed Khatami seemed to negate this the next year, in February 2005, when he said no Iranian government would surrender Iran's right to nuclear technology.[14]

The frothing hard-liner Ahmadinejad replaced the moderate Khatami in the middle of 2005.[15] With Ahmadinejad as its spokesman, Iran dropped all pretense of cooperating with the Europeans. On September 15, 2005, Ahmadinejad told the world his country would spread nuclear technology throughout the Muslim world. Nearly four months later, on January 1, 2006, Iran revealed it had discovered how to extract uranium from ore. Ten days later, on January 10, Iran restarted its research on nuclear fuel. This finally compelled the Europeans to give up their efforts to negotiate. They recommended the United Nations Security Council take up the matter.

On January 13, Iran threatened to toss the IAEA out of the country if the Security Council itself involved itself in the situation. Regardless, in a rare occurrence of agreement between the United States, Germany, France, Britain, China, and Russia, all six nations wanted the Security Council to take action.[16] This produced a Security Council resolution on March 29 demanded Iran totally cooperate with the IAEA within 30 days. The Security Council's declaration was not "legally binding," however, because Russia and China were reluctant to impose sanctions or start war in the event of Iranian noncompliance.[17]

Afterward, on April 11, Ahmadinejad said Iran had learned how to enrich the uranium after they had extracted it. The Iranian Atomic Energy Organization announced the Natanz facility had accomplished the feat. Because of this, on April 28, the IAEA declared Iran in defiance of the March 29 Security Council requests.[18] That is where the nuclear confrontation with Iran stands now.

II. Problem Statement

Iran, a barbaric theocracy whose president has wished for Israel's destruction and indicated he would disseminate nuclear technology, has been researching such technology. The Iranian government claims it only wants peaceful nuclear energy. (Plenty of oil sits beneath Iran, and lots of desert that could accommodate solar collectors lies across the country. One could wonder why Iran would need nuclear technology for energy production.) The United States and its diplomatic partners worry Iran desires nuclear weapons for its own use and to give to terrorists. Hence, the United States wants Iran to end its nuclear program.

III. A: Policy Options—Diplomatic (Political)

The United States has been seeking a diplomatic solution to the crisis with Iran for the past several years. Washington, D.C., has not negotiated directly with Tehran, with which Washington has no diplomatic relations. Instead, the administration of American President George W. Bush stepped back to let Britain, France, and Germany attempt to convince Iran to terminate its nuclear program. This constitutes an exception to normal American foreign policy; the US government, especially under Bush, has preferred to address what it perceives to be security threats by itself or as a leader of an alliance. Relying completely on other countries in this instance means the US government is not in ultimate control of what happens. If the president says jump, the leader of another country will not necessarily say, how high. Still, with the American commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq, the US government might not have wanted to stretch itself further by tackling the Iranian problem.

The Europeans did not accomplish their objective. Iran continued its nuclear research while not taking its negotiations with Europe seriously. Iran was always ready to go with another nuclear transgression for any imagined slight. Eventually, the Europeans conceded defeat, so the Security Council has now taken charge of the issue.

The Security Council has not had any more success than the Europeans did alone so far, though. It has only managed a toothless resolution on March 29 that Iran ignored altogether. Furthermore, nearly a month after the Security Council issued its commands, Iranian President Ahmadinejad speechified regarding the Security Council: "The Iranian nation won't give a damn about such useless resolutions... Today, they want to force us to give up our way through threats and sanctions but those who resort to language of coercion should know that nuclear energy is a national demand and by the grace of God, today Iran is a nuclear country." [19] UN diplomacy does not appear to be a winning strategy.

The US could engage with Iran directly, but that would necessitate recognizing Iran's government and opening diplomatic relations with it. Washington would be averse to doing that, especially with Ahmadinejad occupying the Iranian presidency. Besides which, Iran already knows the might of the United States forms the backbone of every diplomatic maneuver so far, yet Iran does not seem to care. For the US to open direct negotiations with Iran would, therefore, not help. All it would do is give Iran the status of being a nation the US has deemed fit for recognition, in exchange for nothing, which would bolster Iran and humiliate the United States.

III. B: Policy Options—Economic

In an effort to fabricate a compromise whereby Iran could have nuclear energy

but the rest of the world could feel safe Iran was not gaining dangerous nuclear know-how, Russia offered to enrich uranium for Iran on Russia's own soil and then ship the uranium back to Iran. Nothing has come of this Russian initiative, though.[20] Iran has apparently decided it wants to enrich uranium itself.

If Iran does not start cooperating with the United Nations, the Security Council could meet again and insist Iran alter course for "international peace and security." Iranian noncompliance with such a resolution would permit the Security Council to enact economic sanctions against Iran. China and Russia, however, have been squeamish about such a move.[21] Also, implementing broad economic sanctions against Iran would constrict or prevent the flow of oil out of that country. As the world grapples with high oil prices, across-the-board sanctions could damage everyone's economy even as Iran hurts. The situation could be like Thomas Jefferson's embargo of Britain and France all over again.

Perhaps sanctions could leave alone oil trade with Iran; that would have a better chance of sticking. Because oil is already the lifeblood of Iran's economy, and because oil would become more important with trade in everything else forbidden, Iran could not afford to cut off oil supplies or fiddle with prices too much. So the rest of the world would not hurt for oil, although Iran would still suffer the pain of sanctions. If Iran continues its intransigence, Russia and China might support limited sanctions, as they would not threaten oil supplies, although a lot of skilled diplomacy would be necessary.

III. C: Policy Options—Military

In the April 17, 2006, issue of The New Yorker, Seymour Hersh unveils to the American people secret plans the US government has for war with Iran. The end objective of the war would be the overthrow of the theocracy. To achieve this, the US military would bomb Iran extensively, which planners hope would embarrass the Iranian government, thereby inspiring the Iranian citizenry to revolt and depose the mullahs. Concurrently, the American military would drop bunker-buster tactical nukes on Iranian nuclear facilities, such as the one at Natanz.[22]

That is one of the most idiotic plans in the history of military strategy. The American dream of happy Iraqis valiantly rising against their oppressors and eagerly embracing regime change Washington would like turned out to be fantasy. No reason exists to believe the same American dream would come true in Iran. Two hundred years of Western imperialism in Iran has ensured Iranian revulsion of foreign influence. Most Iranians would stick by their own people rather than act as foreigners attacking their home want. The Shi'a clergy, who have centuries-old traditional claims to Iranian hearts, and not bomb-happy Americans, would find the most supporters in Iran. Because of this, not even Iranian opposition

groups want American intervention, believing it would damage their cause.[23]

Plus, targeted American strikes against Iranian nuclear infrastructure could likely fail. The Iranians have had the Israeli destruction of Iraq's French-supplied nuclear reactor at Osirak, as well as hundreds of American and British sorties across Iraq in the 1990's, from which to learn. They protected against bombing runs by constructing some of their nuclear installations underground. In addition, the US government does not know the locations of a few of Iran's important nuclear assets. A bombing campaign could miss them.[24]

After the United States gained nothing from starting a war, Iran could inflict grievous costs in retaliation. The Shi'a Iranians, through shared faith with Shi'a Iraqis, command enormous influence with them. Many more Shi'a Iraqis than who are insurgents now could become such at the urging of their Shi'a brethren in Iran. Iranian troops could start attacking American soldiers in Iraq. Iran could even capture parts of Iraq. One Pentagon affiliate has said, "The Iranians could take Basra with ten mullahs and one sound truck." Hezbollah could come out of hibernation as well, attacking Israel and American interests in the Middle East.[25] And, deciding it has nothing to lose, Iran could use its oil as an economic weapon to harm Western economies.

Sometimes, the benefits of military action can outweigh horrendous consequences. World War II stands as the most powerful demonstration of that truth. Attacking Iran as the military plans in Hersh's article suggest would not, however, yield sufficient gains to offset the damage to American interests and operations or to justify the enormous loss of life in Iran, Iraq, and Israel (if not more countries).

IV. Policy Recommendation

I have not seen any policy or strategy under consideration of which I approve, so I will devise my own.

The United States and Europe should continue pursuing diplomatic solutions to the Iranian nuclear issue. I do not think Iran would capitulate to such an approach, though. Iranians, with reason, loathe foreign attempts to influence their politics and control their resources. As a result, I do not believe Iran will voluntarily strike a deal with anyone to limit or eliminate a national program it sees as its right. Meddlesome foreigners can go to hell.

Before I outline my proposal, I must state, I do not believe Iran will use nuclear weapons offensively if it learns how to make them. Any obvious first use of nuclear weapons on Iran's part would invite nuclear retaliation from Israel

and the United States, and possibly from France and Britain. Passing nuclear weapons off to terrorists would not be a viable option for Iran, either, because nuclear forensics could trace a bomb's fissile material back to its source.[26] One might say the so-called "Mad Mullahs" are just that—mad—but Iran's lack of military aggressiveness over the past 20 years, with trigger-happy Americans and Israelis nearby, argues against that. Iran's theocrats are evil but not demonstrably insane or suicidal. They would place their own collective survival above global Islamist revolution. If nothing else, a dead revolutionary movement cannot advance its cause.

With Iran's rationality in mind, I propose what I call neo-containment. In the neo-containment framework, if Iran were to develop nuclear weapons, the United Nations would place limited sanctions, as I described above, on Iran. Food, water, and medicine for the Iranian people, in addition to oil, would be the only exemptions to the sanctions. Limited sanctions would prevent mass starvation and famine while squeezing the Iranian economy. Militarily, the United States would officially point nuclear missiles at Iran and promise it will suffer the missiles' fury if it does use nuclear weapons on anyone. If Iran does not want to struggle under sanctions and squirm under nuclear threat, Iran could dismantle its nuclear weapons and relinquish the capability to create more. If that does not happen, then Iran's economic and technological capabilities can wilt under sanctions, and its psyche can suffer from knowing the world's sole remaining superpower, with an arsenal of thousands of nuclear weapons, might use those weapons on Iran, annihilating it. Iran could never build enough nuclear weapons to combat that threat. From these economic and military coercive devices, frustration and fear could build in the Iranian population, undermining cultural health and thereby national cohesion.

To try to ensure the resulting anger flows to the Iranian government and not the United States, the American government should utilize soft power resources. Washington should emphasize its foe is the theocracy of Iran, not its people. The US should publicly appear not to be interfering with Iran internally, but to be sitting back after promising to recognize Iran officially and extend economic and technological assistance to Iran if the Iranians overthrow their government. Covertly, Americans should spread through Muslim networks messages about the benefits of disarmament and democracy and the evils of nuclear-intent mullahs. When Iranians receive these messages, they should see them as coming from Muslim brothers, not American imperialists. To complement this tactic, Iranian expatriates who know the positives of republican government and the negatives of Shi'a theocracy could tell their stories to the world. This could all inspire hope and desire within Iranians for something better than lives of terror under a repressive theocracy.

Containment worked against the Soviet Union. It took 40 years to do its job, but

the United States avoided a devastating war that would have left the world a worse place than it is now. I believe the similar strategy I described above would handle Iran just as adeptly. Indeed, neo-containment could perform even better. Iran could never threaten the United States with nuclear extinction, so Americans would not have to live with the dread of that again. Since Iran would be incapable of wiping out either the American people or their nuclear capability, no matter what, the Iranian government would be insane to employ nuclear weapons in anything other than clear self-defense. So Americans need not fear even the loss of a city. The risk of such an attack would not be zero, because Iran's government could theoretically defy rationality. But the danger would be minimal, and it would not be anything we do not already face from China, Pakistan, or Russia.

Neo-containment would thus be the least perilous idea, while promising the most impressive results. The strategy would not guarantee complete success: American soft power might not overcome the tinge of "American imperialist dog." Cold War victories argue the US would have a good chance of accomplishing its goals, though.

Endnotes

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