

# The Iranian Threat Won't Just Go Away

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The Iranian Threat Won't Just Go Away by Shmuel Bar and Peter Berkowitz

Human beings tend, when faced with equally unacceptable alternatives, to rationalize inaction. They either insist that the anticipated evil will not be so bad after all (may even be a blessing in disguise), or posit miraculous solutions.

Lately, this propensity has warped American understanding of the Iranian threat. And this was exacerbated by the U.S. National Intelligence Estimate on Iran released late last year, which, while emphasizing the closing down of weaponization programs in 2003, downplays the regime's unflagging efforts to enrich the uranium that is crucial to nuclear weapons production. Meanwhile, prominent voices in the United States say there is little to worry about. Deterrence theorists assert that a nuclear Iran may actually prove a stabilizing force in the region. They suggest that a nuclear Iran may provide the foundation for a regional order based on the Cold War doctrine of mutually assured destruction --- MAD.

At the same time, proponents of democracy promotion draw a different analogy between Iran today and the Soviet Union in the mid 1980s. They focus on Iran's economic situation and the attraction of the younger generation to Western culture, arguing that American "engagement" with civil society in Iran will generate an Iranian revolution, just as American involvement with the opposition in the USSR contributed to the fall of the Soviet Empire.

Unfortunately, both the deterrence theorists and those who put their faith in the triumph of democracy have pinned their hopes on flawed analogies.

Cold War nuclear deterrence was based not on small nuclear arsenals in the hands of several countries, but on large stockpiles held by two nations (or two alliances) that really did assure mutual destruction. The first years of the Cold War, before the two superpowers developed the capabilities for mutual destruction --- and the command and control mechanism to prevent such a catastrophe --- were the most dangerous. Moreover, the Cold War was, in essence, a bilateral struggle between American and Soviet blocs, which simplified the signaling of intentions and lessened the likelihood of misunderstandings. And public discussion of nuclear weapons in the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War tended to be restricted to experts, so policy makers could develop rational strategies with little public pressure to take more belligerent positions. Crowds in Washington or Moscow never demonstrated, as they have in Pakistan, with models of nuclear bombs and calls to use them.

None of these stabilizing characteristics of the Cold War strategic balance are present in the wider Muslim world. A nuclear Iran will provoke Saudi Arabia and Egypt to acquire their own military nuclear capability, leading to a “poly-nuclear” Middle East in which the potential for nuclear error will be greatly multiplied. The notoriously weak and fragmented autocracies of the Muslim Middle East have shown a much higher predilection for the reckless resort to military force than the United States and the Soviet Union ever did. Religious and nationalistic fervor have led Arab countries to countless military debacles lengthening, for example, Iran’s bloody war with Iraq until both countries were devastated. Religiously inspired confidence in divine providence --- including the Shi’ite belief that the Hidden Imam, in the form of a mahdi, will fight on the side of Allah’s soldiers and protect them --- heightens the risk.

The hopes for imminent democratic transformation in Iran also depend on a misleading comparison. The disparity between the Soviet Union before its collapse and Iran today is vast. The Communist ideology that went bankrupt in the Soviet Union was a secular ideology superimposed on the nation’s root culture and religion. Its abandonment did not entail giving up basic beliefs. In contrast, the Islamic government in Tehran, though lacking popularity, does represent a strong tradition in Iran that existed before the revolution and retains the devotion even of many of those who oppose the regime. Furthermore, the Soviet Union did not fall overnight. Its collapse began with the first stages of détente in the 1970s, followed by a series of destabilizing leadership changes, the ruinous effort to keep up in the 1980s with the U.S. arms build-up, and the demoralizing defeat in Afghanistan. At best, Iran presents weak analogies to these factors.

Even if, despite the substantial dissimilarities to the Soviet Union, one accepts that Iran is tending to a democratic counterrevolution, the timeline makes the transformation largely irrelevant to the nuclear crisis. Even the optimists do not see democratic change happening within the next year or two, the time most experts believe Iran needs to cross the threshold to a military nuclear capability.

So what should be done if Iran refuses to cease and desist from enriching uranium? All options short of the military option should be explored and exploited. But if, as seems increasingly likely, they prove unavailing, the most effective option may well be a full-blown naval blockade of Iran, cutting off supplies of refined oil and other strategic goods. Because of Tehran’s dependence for roughly a third of its refined oil on imports --- and the dependence of its own capacity to refine oil on refined oil --- a blockade will bring the regime to a breaking point within months, if not weeks. The necessary rationing of essential commodities may cause key regime leaders and respected clerics in Qom to question the wisdom of sacrificing the country to acquire nuclear weapons.

If necessary, a blockade will prove a test for the United States and certainly entails major risks, but less of a test and fewer risks than a military strike on nuclear facilities throughout Iran. Moreover, such a course of action has the virtue of facing up to, rather than wishing

away, the Iranian threat.

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