
Going Soft on Iran

The temptation of America's foreign policy "realists"

BY REUEL MARC GERECHT

According to the newspapers and the CIA, Iranian “hard-liners” dealt their country’s reform movement and fledgling democracy a heavy, perhaps lethal, blow on February 20. With over 2,000 candidates “disqualified” before the parliamentary elections even took place, the ruling clerical elite ensured that the reformers, who’ve won office and national attention since the presidential election of Mohammad Khatami in May 1997, would no longer dominate the parliament, or Majles, which has become a forum for public discontent and frustration with the ruling mullahs. With a majority of seats in the next parliament, and already firmly in control of the country’s internal security organizations and courts, the “hard-liners” will be able to fracture and silence, so the reporting goes, the political parties, newspapers, and organizations that left-wing clerics, like Khatami, had used to create a national movement for change.

According to many American “realists”—the school of foreign policy most often associated with such men as former national security advisers Brent Scowcroft and Zbigniew Brzezinski, former diplomats James Baker, Richard Murphy, Thomas Pickering, and Richard Haass, and institutions like the Nixon Center and the Council on Foreign Relations—there may be a silver lining in the bad news. Iran’s “hard-liners” may in fact be “pragmatic conservatives,” to borrow a phrase often heard now in the colloquies of Washington’s think tanks where the intellectual laborers of American realism are trying to devise a new strategy for Iran and the Greater Middle East. In the post-9/11 world, the fear of weapons of mass destruction in the wrong hands dominates public policy debates, and a growing number of American realists

believe that Iran’s “pragmatic mullahs”—in Persian translation, this means former Iranian president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the major-domo of the clerical establishment, and Ali Khamenei, the “spiritual leader” of the country—are the men to cut a deal to halt Iran’s WMD programs.

There is even a sense in certain quarters that we might actually be lucky that Khatami and the parliamentary reformers have been whipped. Rafsanjani and Khamenei may play a very rough game domestically—Hezbollah thugs beat dissidents, “rogue” intelligence agents knife and run down liberal intellectuals, the judiciary jails any dangerous political opposition figure too prominent to off, and the Council of Guardians preemptively disqualifies troublemakers from office—but externally they are, so the theory goes, responsible, rational actors who are principally motivated by geopolitics and economics (and, in the case of Rafsanjani, lucre). They are, in other words, real men, not distracted by all the leftist intellectual debates that consumed so many on the Khatami side of the political house.

It’s worthwhile to remember that not that long ago prominent American realists made a different argument. In May 2001, just before President Khatami won his second term, Brent Scowcroft wrote in the *Washington Post* that we should unilaterally engage the Islamic Republic by lifting sanctions—specifically those targeted against the energy sector—even before talking about the clerical regime’s fondness for terrorism, its development of nuclear arms and other weapons of mass destruction, or its unrelenting hostility to a peace process between the Israelis and Palestinians. According to Scowcroft, such a unilateral move was not to be viewed as “a sign of weakness in light of continued predations by an obnoxious and repressive regime.” Such a charge would “miss the central point, which is that an active struggle is underway to determine the future course of Iran. The key is to speak to the people of Iran, not to their oppressors.” Thus, for the Bush administration to give “a signal from

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the United States showing the desire for a better bilateral relationship might provide encouragement and impetus to reformers and the people who so eagerly seek change.”

Of course, Scowcroft didn't explain how exactly an oil deal with Conoco or ExxonMobil would empower Iran's democratic forces. (One wonders whether Scowcroft, who has been a paid consultant to U.S. energy companies, would have made this argument to the shah of Iran, or whether American oil executives have ever made this case to the energy-rich princes and dictators of the Middle East, post-Soviet Central Asia, or the Caucasus.) Neither he nor the other heavy hitters who co-chaired a major review of U.S.-Iran policy in 2001 (former secretary of defense James Schlesinger and Democratic congressman Lee Hamilton) explained why Rafsanjani and Khamenei, two clerics who have excelled at *machtpolitik*, would not view unilateral American concessions as unilateral American concessions.

Needless to say, the realist case has evolved with events, and now it is time for the United States to engage “an obnoxious and repressive regime” since Iran's nuclear program, which is much more advanced than we'd guessed, gives us no choice. Thomas Pickering, the perennial ambassador and former undersecretary of state for political affairs, has also underscored Iran's “capacity for making life uncomfortable and messy for the United States and its allies in Iraq” as a reason to seek a *modus vivendi* with Tehran's clerical overlords.

From the realists' perspective, the reformers had their day, they lost, and now America must deal with the facts on the ground. And, fortunately, Iran's rulers are corrupt divines who no longer believe in their hearts they have a mandate from heaven. First and foremost, they want to stay in power, within secure borders, unthreatened by the United States, Israel, or its neighbors, recognized as a legitimate regional power with accepted interests in Iraq and the Persian Gulf. If we let them be a member of the club, if we make Rafsanjani and Khamenei feel safe, in their own country and in others', then they might give up the bomb.

This realist American diplomacy would be complemented by the efforts of the British, French, and Germans—the “E.U. three” who are responsible for the European Union's Iranian relations. Simultaneously, the Europeans would suggest to Tehran that they might bring the Islamic Republic before the United Nations Security Council for censure for its nuclear prevarications. And if the Iranians continue to misbehave, the Europeans would hint with increasing frankness the possibility of economic sanctions against Tehran—the type of sanctions that American realists want first to lift as a carrot to induce better clerical behavior.

Though not known for using economic sanctions as political tools—Paris just announced a \$2 billion oil exploration deal with the Islamic Republic even though its diplomats and spooks have long known that the clerical regime has been blatantly lying to the International Atomic Energy Agency about its nuclear “research” program—the Europeans will, this time, so the theory goes, get serious. After all, they, too, dread the spread of nuclear weapons. They, too, view the Non-Proliferation Treaty as a cornerstone of the liberal internationalist order. Perhaps most of all, they wouldn't want George Bush untethered from adult European supervision, possibly inclined to bomb Iran to keep Rafsanjani and Khamenei from getting a nuclear weapon.

Of course, none of the above makes much sense. Not the understanding of what happened in Iran on February 20. Not the realist position on the ruling clerical elite. Not the likelihood of effective joint action between the Americans and the Europeans. What does make sense, however, is the coming realist assault on President Bush's post-9/11 foreign policy. The realist temptation in the American foreign-policy establishment is always powerful, principally because it is the path of least resistance and least action, and it dovetails nicely with the status-quo reflexes of the State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the military brass at the Pentagon. Senator John Kerry appears to have embraced the realist cause.

But if the Bush administration opts for a variation of the realist approach to Iran—and fatigue from rebuilding Iraq certainly reinforces the administration's hitherto pronounced preference to avoid gaming out worst-case contingency plans for dealing with Iran's nuclear weapons programs or the clerical regime's “detention” of senior members of Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda—it will gut what is left of its post-9/11 “axis of evil” doctrine. It will effectively deny the primary transcendent lesson that President Bush has drawn from 9/11: that the Middle East is politically dysfunctional, that U.S.-backed tyranny in Muslim lands was an essential element in the development of the holy-warriorism of al Qaeda, and that the spread of democracy in the Muslim Middle East remains the only cure for the sacred terror of 9/11.

American realists want none of this. Even after 9/11, they don't really want to be involved in other people's “internal affairs.” By nature, they hate Promethean missions. They don't like for America's transatlantic relations—and most realists are pretty devout transatlanticists—to be roiled by a terrorist threat so defined that it mandates a doctrine of preemption. Ideological combat

is always an ugly, unmanageable affair, which is why many realists tried so hard to read ideology out of the Cold War. If the Bush administration is serious about transforming the Muslim Middle East—and the jury is still out on whether it is—it will inevitably unsettle, if not alienate, every single “pro-American” king, emir, and dictator in the region.

The issue of weapons of mass destruction is thus an ideal wedge for the realist camp. If Libya can become, as the British Foreign Office is obviously hoping, the template for approaching the rulers of the Middle East—that is, if stopping WMD trumps spreading democracy—then the realists have an excellent chance of stifling the Bush administration’s post-9/11 rhetoric. President Bush’s pro-democracy speeches have been driving U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. They have been driving the efforts, feeble though they may be, by the rulers of the Middle East to open their political systems. The national dialogues of Saudi Arabia’s Prince Abdullah are a direct result of President Bush’s words and actions (the invasion of Iraq and the inevitable empowerment of Iraq’s Shiites certainly encouraged Prince Abdullah to have his first dialogue about Saudi Arabia’s oppressed Shiites, who happen to live on top of Saudi Arabia’s oil in the Eastern Province). Silence those Reaganite speeches, and the foreign affairs bureaucracies will take over.

Then Bush II could start looking like Bush I a lot faster than Brent Scowcroft or Zbigniew Brzezinski has ever dreamed. Because Iran’s nuclear weapons program is so damnably hard to delay without preemptive American or Israeli airstrikes, and the Bush administration remains understandably loath to contemplate military action against another Middle Eastern state, the realists within the administration and without could lock the White House into exploring some kind of dialogue with Rafsanjani and Khamenei, who would, of course, approve of any American effort to lift unilaterally economic sanctions on the Islamic Republic. (They know, even if the realists do not, that these sanctions have seriously cramped Iran.)

There is a big hurdle coming up for those who want to believe (or to pretend to believe) that diplomacy offers a solution to Iran’s WMD aspirations. The International Atomic Energy Agency must issue another report on Iran’s compliance in June—the same time the Bush administration is supposed to release its Greater Middle East Initiative, which will show how serious the administration is about pushing democracy in a region where the leaders hate it. It has become obvious to all concerned that the Iranians have been willfully trying to deceive IAEA officials and the European diplomats who

are responsible for maintaining the WMD dialogue with the clerical regime. European officials, including the French, don’t bother even in private to deny Iran’s nuclear weapons objectives, its continuing deceit, and the difficulty they are going to have in verifying Iranian compliance.

The clerical regime has yet to sign the more intrusive protocol to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, despite its promise to do so. (The Europeans, of course, have not yet seriously threatened the clerics with any penalty for their failure to sign.) Hassan Rohani, the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council—a long-time bastion of power for Rafsanjani—recently declared, in one of those delightful and not infrequent moments when Iranian hubris betrays the revolutionary clergy’s bent for mendacity and deception, that the Iranian use of polonium, an element applicable in both power-generation and weapons, and P2 centrifuges, which are designed for enriching uranium, “is not the only research we are doing. . . . We have other projects which we have not declared to the IAEA and we see no need to do so.” It is very likely that the Europeans, including the British, will be able to walk round Rohani’s prevarications.

Anyone who has dealt with the Europeans involved in this process, particularly the French, knows that the odds of Paris agreeing to threaten Tehran with sanctions that would truly hurt—for example, an oil embargo—are virtually nil. In all probability, nuclear proliferation in Iran, or elsewhere, will not prove to be an issue where Western Europeans can collectively agree to use force. Ethically they are simply operating, as Robert Kagan has very politely pointed out, in a different realm. And as the Nixon Center’s Geoffrey Kemp has remarked, “the Europeans have to play their part” for a realist foreign policy to be credible. However, the Bush administration is hoping to punt this problem down the road, at least until after the November elections. The Europeans will have at least one more chance to devise “imaginative diplomacy” to dismantle Iran’s nuclear weapons program without threatening the use of force.

But the Europeans won’t be the only ones working against the Americans who desperately want to find a “credible” diplomatic process for dealing with Iran’s quest for nuclear arms. The Iranians are very unlikely to play the roles realists envision for them. Rafsanjani and Khamenei may well be “pragmatic” mullahs—I have certainly long argued that they are. But they have also been among the godfathers of Iranian terrorism. From Beirut to Buenos Aires to Paris to Berlin and to the Khobar Towers barracks in Saudi Arabia, Rafsanjani and Khamenei put terrorism into the foreign policy lexicon of the Iranian clergy. When Iranian intelligence officials

or their surrogates surveilled American diplomatic facilities and personnel around the world in the 1990s, it was on their orders. (Whatever these exercises were for, it is unlikely they were innocent in intent.)

These same gentlemen have, of course, always wanted to buy American. Conoco, ExxonMobil, Boeing, GE—it would be hard to find an American firm that Rafsanjani wouldn't welcome. It also beggars the imagination to believe that these two gentlemen don't control the fate of al Qaeda inside Iran. The Bush administration has chosen to play down the issue of al Qaeda in the Islamic Republic. The Pentagon and State Department remonstrated with the Iranians when they first realized that al Qaeda forces had fled into Iran after the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan. News leaks about worrisome intercepts surfaced. And then the subject disappeared until official leaks again surfaced in 2003 suggesting that al Qaeda was in Iran and had possibly plotted from there attacks into Saudi Arabia. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Republic again returned to the back burner.

This was a serious mistake. Regardless of whether al Qaeda members in Iran were operationally involved in terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia or elsewhere, these individuals are among the most wanted men in American history. We have never had worse enemies, yet we did nothing when Iran prevaricated about whether they were in the country when we clearly knew they were. Remember, Rafsanjani and Khamenei are master chess players of power politics. If Americans don't rise in righteous indignation over the "detention" of possibly active al Qaeda members—and the key component of President Bush's Axis of Evil doctrine is that countries that harbor terrorists will be treated as terrorists—why shouldn't Rafsanjani and Khamenei, with their nuclear weapons, tempt America's wrath?

Khamenei and especially Rafsanjani have nurtured Iran's nuclear program from its infancy. More than anyone else, they are the will and mind behind this program. It is not unreasonable to conjecture that their very identity—who they are as leaders, clerics, and Muslims—is wrapped up in Iran's bomb program. And they are supposed to give it away to Americans, who don't threaten them over al Qaeda, and to Europeans, who keep offering the Iranians more time after the clergy has blatantly lied to them? If you were a "pragmatic" mullah who had beaten the shah, survived the American-aided legions of Saddam Hussein, and eaten alive your revolutionary colleagues-turned-enemies, would you be intimidated by such folks?

And the realists shouldn't count out the fallen cleri-

cal left in Iran. Neither the clerical left nor the vastly greater number of ordinary Iranians who are disgusted by the ruling clergy are likely to remain quiescent. They may not go into violent counterrevolution—the Iranians still remember the violence of the first revolution and the Iran-Iraq war, and many obviously hope that they can find some peaceful way to real democracy. But patience is not a well-known Iranian virtue. Sooner or later, the discontent will boil forth. Rafsanjani and Khamenei know that many Iranians have more backbone than Khatami. Iranian prisons are full of such men. The Special Clerical Court, where the regime discreetly intimidates dissident mullahs, remains a busy place. The left-wing clergy were right to believe that they were riding an unstoppable democratic wave in Iranian history. They were wrong to think that their erstwhile brethren, who cling more tightly to the notion that the nation will go to hell without an indomitable clerical vanguard, would simply roll over when confronted with devastating election results.

But the die is now cast. The anti-climactic nonelection on February 20 at least confirmed that. The clerical opposition that has more fire in its belly—and the numerous disciples of Grand Ayatollah Hosein Ali Montazeri, Iran's premier dissident cleric, certainly appear to be made of sterner stuff than Khatami—won't make the same mistake twice. Neither will the students and other young Iranian men of the streets who've grown disgusted with the regime.

The ideas of constitutional government and democracy have been driving Iranian political thought for a hundred years. Rafsanjani, if not Khamenei, is sufficiently educated to know that he is a product of this movement. More protests are inevitable. They will undoubtedly be enough to make it politically unacceptable, if not morally distasteful, for even the most true-blue American realist to deal with such "an obnoxious and repressive regime."

The realist vision of Iranian politics and U.S.-Iranian relations has zero chance of providing a solution to the WMD conundrum. The Bush administration needs to hang tough and be guided by the golden rule of Iranian clerical politics: Do unto them before they have a chance to do unto you. Give the Europeans a chance—several chances—to prove themselves serious. Let the French ruin the Non-Proliferation Treaty. And then decide whether you want Rafsanjani and Khamenei to have the bomb. In the end, only democracy in Iran will finally solve the nuclear and terrorist problems. Ditto for the rest of the Middle East. Whether the Bush administration understands this come June is, of course, a different matter. ♦