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IRAN

AND THE

"Great Satan"

By MARK J. ROBERTS

America continues to represent the "great Satan" to the Islamic Republic of Iran. President Hashemi Rafsanjani charged that the United States has been poisoned by Zionist propaganda. One Ayatollah, in blaming America for bloodshed around the world, said that, "this satanic superpower will never be successful against the Islamic Republic."¹ The United States is Iran's all-purpose demon.

U.S. policymakers must resist the temptation to reciprocate by depicting Iran as its own demon. If it were not for terrorism, Iran's infamy could be reduced to inflated rhetoric, unrealistic designs, and high levels of defense spending. A workable strategy should be developed toward the Iranian regime that is not based on competitive demonization.

Iran is only one of our many security concerns in the greater Middle East. Continuous state sponsorship of terrorism led the Clinton administration to issue an executive order in May 1995 to ban trade and investment with

Iran. While this affected some American businesses, the economic impact on Tehran may be more lasting. Yet Iran has largely avoided blame for supporting acts of terrorism, despite its continued involvement in planning and conducting such violence.

In addition, internal problems threaten to fracture Iran. Broad-based support for the regime has diminished to a level where it faces a breakdown of its politico-religious legitimacy. Economic and political crises have resulted in urban rioting and calls for autonomy from centralized control. This threatens Iran's stability and emphasizes the fact that while it exports ter-

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rorism, that is not the answer to the aspirations of the Islamic world.

Iran's ability to engage the United States can be indirect and handled through diplomacy, sabre rattling, and in the worst case force. But Iran will endeavor to impede American policy by rhetoric, posturing, and perhaps terrorism. To counteract this, the United States must maintain its presence in the Gulf, engage in confidence building measures with regional allies,

demonstrate the resolve to engage potential aggressors, and simultaneously be open to rapprochement with Iran.

The Regional Dimension

Tehran's perspective on security was changed little by the outcome of the Gulf War, the breakup of the Soviet Union, and the advent of a new world order. Historically, its interests have been fixed between the Persian Gulf and Central Asia, where a lack of borders offered freedom of movement. The demise of the Soviet empire enabled Iran to establish relations with Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

The Iranian desire to play the dominant role in Central Asia clashes with Turkish intentions. In addition, despite a claim of regional solidarity,² Iran's ambition of manipulating a counterpart to the Arab League is not attainable absent regional homogeneity and common purpose. Moreover, Khomeinism is unpopular among Central Asian elites with Soviet-style technocratic educations.

Since the ascension of Reza Shah to the Peacock Throne in 1925 and through the regime of the Islamic Republic, Iran's goal of becoming the hegemonic power in the Gulf has been a constant feature of its security policies. Before the revolution, Iran had the largest, most powerful forces in the region and perhaps the greater

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Middle East. However, the military suffered from shortages of spares, lack of technical expertise, and an inability to operate equipment without foreign assistance.

The revolutionary purges and subsequent eight-year struggle with Iraq depleted the edge in manpower and technology formerly enjoyed by the military. Since the mullahs believe that military power is basic to shaping the strategic environment, Iran seeks a military-technological advantage over

of an attack on aviation or maritime routes has kept Iran under international observation.

Current U.S. policy toward Iran stems from Clinton administration concern over Tehran's conventional and nuclear programs, including the acquisition of submarines and ballistic missiles. Iranian criticism of our policy of "dual containment" grudgingly acknowledges American presence in the region but views it as a step backward. As described by National Security Advi-

The Nuclear Club

Iran has an aggressive overt and covert nuclear and ballistic missile program with the intent of acquiring nuclear weapons. China has provided its favorite client in the region with both a small reactor and a separator for producing radioactive isotopes as well as a promise of more advanced technology. Despite claims to the contrary, there is no such thing as dual-use technology transfer to Iran. Unless constantly inspected, dual-use technology will find a military use whenever it suits the recipient, and all the nuclear, chemical, biological, and missile technology that advances Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons will be applied to that end.

Interest in nuclear power on the part of Tehran is hard to explain unless linked to a plan to acquire nuclear weapons. Nuclear power plants do not make sense for Iran, which has the world's second largest reserves of natural gas—fuel that is not easy to sell and is thus suitable for domestic consumption. Generating power from natural gas requires a low capital investment, whereas nuclear plants would cost billions of dollars in foreign exchange, capital which Iran does not have.

Iran may be trying to acquire nuclear weapons from the former Soviet republics of Central Asia. There are also indications that Russian military personnel in Iran provide guidance to Tehran's nuclear program. According to former Director of Central Intelligence James Woolsey, Iran is attempting to buy fully fabricated nuclear weapons. After the disagreement which surfaced at the May 1995 summit over Russia's sale of a light water reactor to Iran, Moscow broke ranks with Washington. Russia does not share concern over Tehran's pursuit of nuclear weaponry.

While entering the nuclear club opens a new era for a country, Iran's interests are manifold. Many of its neighbors either have or are rumored to have nuclear weapons—Israel, Iraq, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, and India. Iran's quest for nuclear weapons, however, is motivated by political rather than security reasons, its drive for status being a greater



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its neighbors, especially Iraq, somewhat heedless of the consequences of this policy.

The desire for regional primacy—and a growing arsenal—could fuel one of Iran's enduring ambitions—control of the Strait of Hormuz and, along with it, the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman. Through these waters transit more than 90 percent of all Iranian government revenues, including all of the country's petroleum. Of great concern are its Hawk missiles, SA-6 batteries, 155- and 122-mm artillery, missile boats, Silkworm missiles, and mines near vital choke points. The possibility

of an attack on aviation or maritime routes has kept Iran under international observation. Current U.S. policy toward Iran stems from Clinton administration concern over Tehran's conventional and nuclear programs, including the acquisition of submarines and ballistic missiles. Iranian criticism of our policy of "dual containment" grudgingly acknowledges American presence in the region but views it as a step backward. As described by National Security Advi-

sor Anthony Lake, dual containment seeks to work with regional allies to "maintain a favorable balance without depending on either Iraq or Iran" to "counter the hostility of both Baghdad and Tehran."³

For Iran the goal of being predominant in the Gulf received new impetus with the defeat of Saddam Hussein and the acquisition of over 100 combat aircraft from Iraq. It should be noted that the purchase was comprised of hardware only—no spare parts, technical manuals, or maintenance.

incentive than any particular threat. Nuclear acquisition thus is seen by Iran as a means of achieving compara-

U.S. planning must ensure that the Iranian military remains a peripheral concern

ble status with some of its neighbors while gaining military dominance vis-à-vis the Gulf states. On another level, nuclear acquisition would exhibit self reliance and technological progress while turning attention from internal social and economic difficulties.

Domestic Upheaval

Empty mosques across the country reveal a pervasive distrust of the ruling mullahs, whose credibility and power are waning. After years spent painting the West, and America in particular, as scapegoats, the clerical fever pitch has diminished to a point where religious radicals are finding it difficult to maintain their legitimacy. It is ironic that the stature of the mullahs—the guardians of a theocracy—is tarnished in this way.

Thus far, Tehran's nuclear program has been determined but not very advanced. However, Iranian possession of nuclear weapons would also fundamentally alter the framework within which we approach Gulf security. Washington will keep abreast of developments to pro-actively direct the course of events or respond appropriately. At the very least, American strategists must prepare for a possible Iranian nuclear threat and its ramifications.

Currently, Iran is engaged in an ambitious conventional weapons program. In the next few years, it will purchase from 250 to 350 advanced combat aircraft, 320 surface-to-surface missiles, 2,000 SAM launchers, and 2–4 Kilo class submarines. Though these numbers are daunting, Iran's ability to procure spare parts, maintain and operate equipment, field it for prolonged periods, and employ it in an integrated fashion are suspect, calling into question the utility of these acquisitions. While a full-scale confrontation with

the United States is not a likely option, Iranian military power can constitute a threat to all Gulf states except Iraq.

U.S. diplomacy and military planning must therefore ensure that the Iranian military remains a peripheral concern.

The intensity of this arms buildup is in part a reaction to the long embargo that followed the Islamic revolution. As a result, it disregards the fact that Tehran can ill afford the weapons because of dire economic conditions, social and religious dilemmas, and overburdened infrastructure. Seen in this light, undue attention has been placed on conventional arms purchases since Iran is no more than a nuisance, lacking the ability for power projection and sustained military operations.

In addition, the build-up will in all probability not be able to overcome the chronic lack of spares that has plagued the country, rendering many of its combat systems inoperable. More than an arms buildup, Iran's internal difficulties pose the greater threat to regional stability because they may serve as a pretext for the mullahs to undertake a campaign of terrorism to divert attention. High inflation and a migration of professionals have damaged prospects for economic, social, and educational renewal. Moreover, domestic upheaval could spill over into neighboring countries.

Iran's security interests have remained constant since the revolution and might be furthered by limited regional integration (although probably not within the framework of an alliance) in a bid for acceptance into the community of nations. Cooperation with its Arab neighbors and America to maintain the security of Gulf waters, albeit unlikely, is a valuable contribution that Iran could make toward regional stability. The United States should seize

any opportunity to achieve this, although there may have to be superficial concessions to appease some Iranian face-saving interests.

A dialogue with Iran might convince other Islamic movements such as those in Egypt and Algeria that the United States is not hostile to Islam. If there are talks, Washington and Tehran will have to deal with the Islamic Republic's position that its political legitimacy is based on rejecting America and



U.S. Navy

Iranian C-130.

its values totally. Iranian support for terrorism must also end without preconditions. If such obstacles are surmounted, the door could open for dialogue and perhaps lead in due course to mutual recognition.

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NOTES

¹ "Senior Ayatollah Warns of U.S. 'Plots,'" *Tehran IRNA* in English, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, 1644 GMT, 4 Nov 94 (LD0411192394) November 7, 1994, p. 66.

² "Editorial Says Talks with U.S. Ruled Out," *Tehran RESALAT* in Persian, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, 1 Nov 94 (NC1111211794), November 16, 1994, p. 69.

³ Anthony Lake, "Confronting Backlash States," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 73, no. 2 (March/April 1994), pp. 48–52.