

Clerical Iran—The Threat—Congressional Testimony

By Reuel Marc Gerecht

Before I describe the serious and growing problems we have with clerical Iran, let me state the obvious: America's foreign policy toward the Islamic Republic since 1979 has largely been successful. America certainly should not take a lot of credit for the failure of Iran's revolution—and let us be perfectly clear, for the vast majority of Iranians, including the clergy—the *inqilab*, as the revolution is known in Persian, has been a bust.

Credit should go first and foremost to Ayatollah Khomeini who established a theocracy at odds with Shi'ite history and the sensibilities of most Iranians, including those who are quite devout. Credit goes to the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War that eventually broke the back of Iran's legions of die-hard holy warriors. But the United States, too, deserves credit for its consistent opposition to the regime. Although not all American administrations have been equally committed to countering the Islamic Republic and hammering it for its support of terrorism—both the first Bush administration and especially the Clinton administration wanted at one time to “engage” Iran's ruling clergy—all American administrations since 1979 have overall realized that confrontation and containment were the only viable policies toward Tehran because the clerical regime gave them no choice. And like I said, this policy has been a success: We, not the Western Europeans, who've often wanted to engage the Islamic Republic even when Iran's assassins and contracted-bombers were striking Western Europe in the 1980s, are the Westerners most admired. We are admired in great part because we have been seen

by the people of Iran, and by the mullahs that rule over them, as the only serious antagonist to clerical power.

It is worthwhile to recall how badly the Clinton administration—in particular President Clinton—wanted “to give peace a chance” with Iran during the first term of President Mohammad Khatami. Both the President and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright tried to turn apologia into foreign policy: Secretary of State Madeleine Albright apologized for the 1953 coup d’etat (an odd position given how many clerics, including Khomeini, were quite pleased to see Prime Minister Mohammed Mosaddeq fall from power) and President Clinton apologized for the supposedly bad behavior of the entire Western world toward Iran for the last 150 years in an effort to get Tehran to extend a friendly hand. If former FBI Director Louis Freeh is to be believed, President Clinton even tried to avoid confronting the Islamic Republic for its culpability in the attack on US forces at Khobar Towers in 1996 in an effort not to spoil the possibility of a dialogue with President Khatami. I don’t mention the Clinton years to embarrass the President or Secretary Albright—I suspect both still firmly believe they did nothing embarrassing; I mention it to underscore how awful official analysis of clerical Iran has often been in the United States government. American apologies in revolutionary clerical eyes means only one thing—weakness. And showing weakness to power-politic-loving Iranian clerics is not astute. This is 101 in Iranian political culture. Yet I’m willing to bet that most analysts dealing with Iran at the State Department and the CIA probably thought American soul-searching was a good thing, that the political elite in Tehran would respect us more.

The mirror-imaging of Western, especially Western European ethics, onto Iranians has been a constant problem in the EU3 nuclear negotiations with Tehran. I'm not going to spend much time on this affair—I consider the whole process now damaging to the United States since it should be obvious to all concerned—let us be frank, it was obvious when this process first started—that the British, French, and Germans are not going to implement crippling sanctions against Iran (the modern European idea of a sanction is to deny something you have not yet promised). Modern Western Europeans simply cannot play power politics anymore—they have, as Robert Kagan has trenchantly written, evolved beyond such things. The EU3 negotiations with Iran remain as they started: For the Americans it is a vehicle for transatlantic dialogue and for the Europeans it's a means of controlling George W. Bush, the potentially Mad Bomber.

And it's by no means clear the United States is willing to hit Iran with serious economic sanctions either when oil is around \$60 per barrel. And there is little cultural reason to believe that even if the Americans and the Europeans could devise powerful sanctions over the objections of the Russians and the Chinese—and let us not deceive ourselves, the Russians, and now quite possibly the Chinese, view clerical Iran as a strategic asset (for the Russians, it is their Saddam substitute) in the Middle East—that the ruling clerics would relent. Former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani, the father of the Iranian nuclear-weapons program, whom the Western Europeans, and, I hate to say, more than a few US officials and commentators, surreally viewed as our best bet for stopping the clerical regime's acquisition of the bomb, started this program with broad

clerical support in the late 1980s. As should be blatantly obvious by now, the ruling Iranian clergy intends to see this through to its completion. The only conceivable force that could make the ruling clergy relent is the firm conviction that George W. Bush, the Mad Bomber, WILL bomb them if they don't. And the United States by its firm embrace of the EU3 process and the pretty public signals senior US officials have sent to the Europeans that they really don't want to even conceive of preventive military strikes against the clerical regime have substantially undermined the image abroad that George W. Bush really means it when he says that a clerical bomb is "unacceptable." The situation looks so bad that Patrick Clawson's quip—trying to ban Iran from international soccer is a more serious threat than Western economic sanctions—seems to me like a serious foreign-policy goal. (Patrick Clawson is the always-thoughtful insightful Iran analyst at the Washington Institute for Near Eastern Policy.)

Beyond the nuclear question, Iranian troublemaking will continue and possibly grow. A viable democracy in Iraq, where the Shi'ite clergy is an instrumental force for representative government, is an enormous nightmare in the making for Tehran. Contrary to so much bizarre commentary in the United States and Europe, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, an Iranian by birth and the spiritual leader of the Shi'ite community in Iraq, and other pro-democracy clerics are probably the most serious threat to theocracy in Iran. If Iran can cause trouble in Iraq—and fortunately I think the clerical regime's capacity to do so has been greatly exaggerated (Iran's allies inside the Iraqi Shi'ite community are still limited in their political maneuvering room by Sistani, the

traditional clergy, and the democratic process)—it will certainly try to do so. Increasing Iranian aid to the Sunni rejectionist camp in Iraq is, however, not at all unlikely.

In Afghanistan, Iran again is no ally of the democratic process, but again, fortunately, its allies are not numerous outside of the province of Herat, and even in Herat among the Sunni Persian-speaking Tajiks who in the past took sanctuary in Iran, affection for Persians shouldn't be overrated. Compared to Pakistani troublemaking in Afghanistan, Iranian nefarious activity will likely remain second-rate.

In Lebanon and Syria, Iran will try to cause trouble if it can. Tehran will certainly keep supporting Bashar al-Assad, Syria's ruler, up until that moment it's wise to transfer allegiance to another member of the Alawite ruling clan. In Lebanon, Tehran will back the Shi'ite rejectionist camp and its influence within the Hizbollah, Iran's only true foreign child of the Islamic revolution, should not be underestimated. It will be fascinating to see how the Lebanese Shi'ite community breaks. It appears now that the majority of that community will move toward giving a new democratic Lebanon a chance, toward a new power-sharing relationship with Lebanon's Christian Maronites. Iran has no interest in seeing this succeed, and it will be interesting to see how they try to play their friends among Lebanon's Shi'a.

In Israel and Palestine, you can count on Iran to support whomever bombs the Israelis more. Iran has long supported the Palestinian Islamic Jihad—it could accurately be called a creation if not a tool of the clerical regime. The more violence in Israel the

better. If Iran could get that violence to spill over into the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, which the clerical regime loathes, even better.

Concerning Islamic Sunni militants in general, expect a new ecumenical movement from Tehran. We should be especially sensitive to new dealings between the clerical regime and Sunni groups allied with al-Qa'ida. There is much that Tehran needs to explain about its contacts with al-Qa'ida, in particular with followers behind the Egyptian Ayman az-Zawahiri, al-Qa'ida's number two, and a former Sunni militant poster-boy for the clerical regime in the 1980s. If the United States again intercepts transmissions from members of al-Qa'ida inside Iran to operationally-active members of al-Qa'ida outside Iran, then the Bush administration would be well advised to hit the clerical regime with something sharper than verbal warnings from Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

The low point in discussing the clerical regime—and I have not yet reached the low point—is that the Bush administration hasn't yet developed a coherent strategy for confronting and defeating the mollahs. It could be worse, of course: All we have to do is remember the Clinton administration. It's unlikely George W. Bush will apologize to the clerical regime on behalf of the entire West. In that, at least, we may have some hope.