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Fueling the Superpowers

What Role for Iran?

This article by Hossein Askari is taken from the proceedings of the EPIIC Symposium at Tufts University, February 2005

Let me begin by stating some myths about Muslims and Iranians, taking a brief look at the history of U.S. relations with Iran and then giving you five building blocks for moving forward.

Some of you here have said that the Middle East is unstable. A majority of people in the United States think it is something about Muslims. We are unstable folks, as Bernard Lewis has led you all to believe. And we are deviants. There is something wrong with our religion. We Muslims are, somehow, not to be trusted. These are all myths. Myths that are propagated by people who don't know Muslims, have amnesia when it comes to history, and, in the case of Iran, people who do not go regularly to Iran and interact with all segments of society. Hopefully you will agree with me when I am done.

Now let me tell you a little bit about this unstable part of the world and in particular about Iran. After the Second World War, Northern Iran was occupied by the Soviet Union. America was wonderful and got the Russians out. Iranians were very, very grateful. But then something happened — now you must understand that people in the Middle East are not fools, we get degrees, we understand what goes on in this world — but America conspired with Great Britain to oust the democratically elected prime minister of Iran, Mohammed Mossadegh, to obstruct Iran's nationalization of its oil, something it had the right to do under international law. America did this and yet America preached and continues to preach the benefits of democracy.

We Iranians went our way for the next few years and the United States brought the Shah back in 1953. (Norman Schwarzkopf, by the way, spent

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his youth in Iran where his father came to train the Iranian police. He has spoken of his very fond memories of growing up there.) And then for quite a long time the Shah was America's greatest ally in that part of the world. Of course, there were people who grumbled about some of the things that the Shah did. People used to go to jail, but nobody cared about that. That was all democratic! Interestingly, the United States and the Europeans at that time blessed Iran's acquisition of nuclear power with the German company Siemens taking the lead. Why was nuclear power okay then? Iran was in the U.S. camp and it did America's bidding. The answer is that simple.

Then, if you recall, a revolution occurred, and in that revolution Iran did a horrible thing — Iran took hostages. This was a terrible mistake on Iran's part. But, you know, I don't believe one American died in Iran. Perhaps there was one who died in an oil field, but that death was unrelated to politics.

Again, let me emphasize that it was a horrible thing what this little, insignificant country did to the United States by taking hostages. But then Iraq invaded Iran, if you recall. Now, you have something called the United Nations and we mustn't undermine that. Absolutely. But if we want to also stand for the rule of law, we should say that what Iraq did was not right. But we didn't. The United States wanted Iran threatened, humbled, and punished and so it was okay to undermine the UN. Any thinking person should have said that this would have ominous implications for the UN and for Iran's relations with its neighbors and with the U.S. The results were predictable. The UN lost its credibility in Iran. Now the UN Security Council has no moral sway in Iran. It is an instrument of U.S. policy. That's it. You cannot turn the credibility tap on and off.

But, no, the government did not exactly care about the rule of law and the UN because there were those fifty-two hostages. And so the United States allowed Iraq to invade Iran, and over 500 thousand Iranians died. I'm not going to go through what happened to the Iraqis and all the others. I will just speak about one little country, Iran. Over 500 thousand Iranians died.

Then, if you recall, the Iraqis got pushed back and Iran was very close to taking over Basra in 1982–83. When the United States saw that this was happening, the United States looked the other way and encouraged Saddam Hussein to use outlawed biological and chemical weapons to push back the Iranians; all other sorts of U.S. support, including battlefield intelligence, was given to the Iraqis. And the United States looked the other way when chemical weapons were sold by Germany to Iraq, then by France and Great Britain; yes, the U.S. even has the receipts! Chemical and biological weapons hurt more Iranians than any other group since the Second World War. Today there are many, many Iranians breathing from oxygen tanks (over four thousand in Tehran alone according to the *New York Times*) and seated in wheelchairs. You see the misery of war in the streets of all major

Iranian cities. Do you see why and how the United States has lost the moral high ground?

A wonderful thing about the Iranian people is they don't hold it against the Iraqis at all. They blame it all on Saddam Hussein. I am proud that Iranians reacted to the war in that fashion. They don't blame it on the Iraqi people, but on Saddam Hussein. And, of course, as you will see in my conclusion, they blame some of it on the United States. The United States sold and allowed the Germans and others to sell Iraq chemical and biological weapons. The U.S. could have even stopped the war from getting started, but it did not. Is it realistic for Iranians over thirty years of age to trust U.S. intentions and believe in U.S. propaganda for the rule of law and its drive for democracy?

Iran could not acquire any weapons. And what Iranians had to do — I know that first hand. The people who were involved told me about it — they had to engage third parties to buy conventional weapons. And 80 percent of the time they got cheated because you can't go to somebody and say the equivalent of, "I wanted to buy cocaine from this guy," and then complain "but he didn't deliver."

Iranians fought. And they lost all these people. It was U.S. national policy to do that. Iran complained about the use of outlawed weapons to the UN. But again the United States did not stand up for the rule of law. The U.S. argued that there was insufficient evidence when it had the receipts of biological and chemical weapons sales to Iraq!

The Iran-Iraq War is etched into the psyche of Iranians over thirty years of age who lived in Iran during those eight terrifying years. Iran was bullied and massacred because they had taken fifty-two hostages and because U.S. interests appeared to be threatened in the Persian Gulf. Do you see why Iranians feel insecure?

Then Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. Iran opened its borders to Kuwaitis to flee Saddam's wrath, Kuwait the country that along with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates had bankrolled Saddam's invasion of Iran. Iranians were magnanimous in Kuwait's hour of need. Iran was also generally cooperative with the coalition forces because admittedly it was also in Iran's interest.

Then after the war, the United States said, "Let's have national security for the Gulf Region, but we'll bring in Egypt and leave Iran out." The Iranians said, "Egypt? What has Egypt got to do with this? Has the world map changed?" But the United States said, "Look, these are evil people, these Iranians. There are 70 million of these guys. We've got to do something about it. We must keep the Iranians out and bring in Egyptians to neutralize them." And you will see what the future implication of this is for the United States in a moment.

Then came 9/11. Iranians held spontaneous demonstrations in sympathy for the U.S. Then the U.S. went into Afghanistan. And that was a wonder-

ful, interesting example of another U.S. policy. Who created Osama bin Laden? But you all know that, so I'm not going to go over it again. And, of course, the Saudis helped.

And here were these Iranians, these terrible folks who helped the Northern Alliance. Now everybody has conveniently forgotten about that. But when the United States went in there, who helped? The Northern Alliance did most of the on-ground fighting. The U.S. relied on them, these allies of Iran. Instead of reaching out to Iranians, Mr. Bush labeled them as a founding member of the "Axis of Evil." That was Iran's reward! The United States seems to have a convenient memory loss at critical times. Zalmay Khalilzad wrote an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, I think that is where it was, praising the Taliban, the good guys. Then he became the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan (and later to Iraq)!

Then we have the invasion of Iraq. Now add this up in the mind of an Iranian and other Middle Easterners. When somebody comes to you before the invasion of Iraq and says, "We're for democracy. We're against this man Saddam, the mad man, having chemical weapons." Are they credible? There is something that doesn't quite ring true. Now that things have gone wrong in Iraq, who is to blame? Call out the usual suspect. Put the blame on Iran's doorstep!

Now we are saying that these Iranians are acquiring nuclear weapons. For a nation that has got the United States on its left, on its right, to its south, to its north . . . just put yourself in their position. A nation that is threatened every which way by the United States on a constant basis. The long and the short of it is this: Iranians feel insecure. The underlying reason for their insecurity is the history of U.S. aggression, the fact that the U.S. and the UN do not uphold the rule of law, the U.S. has surrounded Iran on every side and the U.S. threatens Iran with regime change, invasion, and more. What would you do?

But let's first face the nuclear issue head on. The Non-Proliferation Treaty is clear about the rights and obligations of its signatories. Signatories that were not nuclear powers when the treaty was adopted have the right to peaceful nuclear power development, including: enrichment, research, and light- and heavy-water reactors. Moreover, signatories would receive technological and safety-related support in their quest to develop peaceful nuclear power. In return, the signatories agreed to forego nuclear weapons and to open up their facilities to IAEA inspection and safeguards. In turn, the nuclear powers agreed to reduce their nuclear arsenal and in time to eliminate all such weapons. In the case of Iran, the United States has argued that Iran has lost its rights and privileges under the NPT for the following reasons: in the past it did not fully disclose its nuclear program, it is pursuing nuclear weapons, it has so much oil and gas that it does not need nuclear power, and the regime in Tehran cannot be trusted and is dangerous.

It is true that in the past Iran did not disclose all of its nuclear facilities, but Iran gives a credible reason for its nondisclosure: its facilities would have been attacked before they were constructed — a justification supported by Iran's experience with international duplicity (as briefly outlined above). Still Iran has not technically violated the terms of the NPT. Moreover, there is not a shred of hard evidence to support the assertion that Iran is developing nuclear weapons. Further, Iran has now opened up its facilities to IAEA inspection that goes beyond legal IAEA requirements and IAEA inspectors have found traces of highly enriched uranium, which seem to have come from secondhand equipment bought by Iran.

In wake of the Iraq War, the world can hardly believe U.S. assertions on the basis of hard evidence “that cannot be disclosed for fear of harming confidential sources.” Iran's reserves of oil and gas are indeed expansive but this is totally irrelevant to the legal interpretation of the NPT. Interestingly, the United States did not criticize and threaten the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC) — consisting of six countries with one-third of Iran's population and about three times Iran's oil and gas — for its announcement earlier in December to develop peaceful nuclear power.

This naturally leads to the fourth U.S. justification for taking away Iran's right to peaceful nuclear power: that the regime in Tehran is dangerous. But that rationale would, again, contravene the treaty, which does not disqualify certain regimes from its provisions.

Why was Iran's nuclear program under the Shah acceptable, but not under the current regime? Doesn't the right of peaceful nuclear power belong to a people, Iran, as opposed to a particular regime, a shah or a mullah? Moreover, do not regimes change over time, for good or for bad? Would the United Nations allow peaceful development with a regime subjectively considered “good” and then approve of the destruction of facilities when a “bad” regime comes to power? Is Saudi Arabia's regime a “bad” regime? If so, on what grounds? What should the world community do about a country (say, Pakistan) that has nuclear weapons and some consider to be ruled by a “bad” regime? Does a so-called bad regime become, by virtue of some policy alchemy, an accepted nuclear power once it has acquired the weapons and a delivery system?

For the United States and the other nuclear powers that blame Iran for alleged transgressions, we have to ask a simple question: have the nuclear powers kept up their end of the bargain to reduce and eventually eliminate their nuclear weapons as called for in the NPT? The simple answer is no. While that standard was upheld during the Reagan era — as both the United States and the Soviets reduced their nuclear arsenals — under the Bush Administration the United States is building new classes of nuclear warheads; China is still increasing the number of its nuclear weapons; Britain recently announced a new nuclear weapon program; and France has been building new weapons. The United States is affording India, a non-

signatory to the NPT, all the privileges of signatories, although India has developed nuclear warheads outside the NPT and will not have to open all of its nuclear facilities to IAEA inspection. In short, the nuclear powers clearly have not adhered to the NPT and the treaty did not grant the Security Council, or any of its members, the right to deny nonnuclear signatories their rights and privileges on the basis of their oil, gas, or coal reserves — or on the acceptability of their regimes.

If the Bush Administration is sincere in its quest for global nonproliferation, and is not simply trying to leverage legitimate concerns on proliferation to single out a regime it dislikes, then why did it vote against two resolutions, introduced by Arab countries, at the IAEA annual meeting on September 21. The resolutions, both of which were supported by Iran, called for converting the Middle East into a nuclear-free zone, and for all Middle East countries to accept IAEA safeguards. The United States and its allies defeated the first resolution by a vote of 45 to 29, in favor of taking no action. The second resolution passed by a vote of 89 to 2, with the United States and Israel being the odd couple.

Now, if I, this good little boy who left Iran at the age of nine, were running Iran, I would have done things differently. I would have a strong Iranian economy, which the mullahs don't have, and I would already have peaceful nuclear power in place; and with that in place, the outside world would be less likely to resort to Iran-bullying because they might feel that Iran could acquire nuclear weapons if threatened again. It is in Iran's interest to acquire nuclear technology and nuclear power. It is a popular policy in Iran. And if the mullahs had sense, they would acquire nuclear power because the Iranian people want it, and that is a fact. Iranians feel insecure. So if you want to understand Iran, don't get up every morning and bash it, try instead to understand why they feel insecure and deal with that.

One final point before my conclusion: the mullahs are very much like the Republicans. I'm serious. Think about it. You could do business with these guys. You sit around here in the United States and say, "These guys are fanatics." But the fanatics are in Saudi Arabia in Najd, not in Iran. You've got it all wrong. Iranians are not fanatics. The mullahs understand moolah! The United States has got to appreciate that they understand money. They understand business. And I'm not saying that is wonderful for Iran, by no means.

Now in this very brief history of Iran-U.S. relations, I will come to my five, very simple conclusions that might help to understand Iran and to move forward and one prediction.

The first conclusion: you can't have it both ways. There is something called guilt by association: as my grandmamma used to say, "If you sleep with people who have fleas, you will catch fleas." The United States has supported all of these dictators and undermined the rule of law all these years and now says, "We're for democracy and for the rule of law!"

Lesson two: democracy is not a tap that you can turn on. The United States has brought democracy to Iraq, yet supports Musharraf, Mubarak, the Al-Sauds, and many of these guys! And then the U.S. says, “Iran is tyrannical.” I’m sorry, by anyone’s reasonable conclusion, Iranian elections are flawed. I absolutely agree and I’m willing to admit that. But Iran is more democratic than any other Middle Eastern country (let’s leave Israel out as I don’t want to have that discussion). It is a duplicitous thing to bash Iran and call these other guys democratic. Iran has a vice president who is a woman. Women vote. I hate that they force anyone to wear any kind of veil. And yes, I agree with you, in Iran, they do many very restrictive things. In the Arab countries they are way behind on that. So don’t bash Iran and say, “These guys are fanatical.”

The third conclusion: the United States has lost the moral high ground in the Middle East. There is no doubt. It is gone. It is bye, bye. Adios. That’s why the United States is not popular in the Middle East; in this region the United States is most popular in Israel, followed by Iran. Yes, Iran! And when people ask me why this is so I say, “Because the U.S. hasn’t had anything to do with Iran. That’s why.” If the U.S. had anything to do with these guys it would have been the kiss of death. The U.S. hasn’t touched them, hasn’t supported the mullahs, and that is why Iranians like the United States (not the U.S. government).

The fourth conclusion: I firmly believe that economic progress requires stability. And stability requires economic progress. Oil has been a curse. The conflicts in the Middle East over the last twenty-five years have cost that region more than all their oil revenues.

Let that sink in. So we say that the Persian Gulf has had over \$3 trillion dollars worth of oil revenues from 1975 to 2004, yes, but the damage from wars and instability — infrastructure, lost economic output, GDP — has been more than that. And that is why, if you look over the last thirty years, the Middle East has been the worst performing region of the world. This is not my data, but World Bank and World Development Indicators. In terms of real growth, on per capita real terms, the only part of the world that is worse off since 1975 than the Middle East is sub-Saharan Africa.

And conclusion five: Islam-bashing is stupid. The Islam that you get exposed to is not Islam. The two main tenets of Islam are spread the faith and economic and social justice. If you read the entirety of the Koran, that is what it is. I can pick anything from the Bible and make Christianity or Judaism look bad. And you can pick one phrase out of the Koran out of context and do likewise. Economic and social justice is the second most important thing in Islam. Now, tell me which Muslim country has that? None. So don’t blame Islam. Blame the corrupt governments and dictators in the Middle East that the United States has supported. It is not Islam. And let me tell you something, Islam will be there when we are all dead. Islam will be there when oil has run out. Islam will be there when United States becomes a third-world power. So you had better get used to it. Do not try to

say, “We don’t like Islam and we’ve got to do something about it.” Understand what is true Islam and that some people have perverted it, distorted it, and used it for their own legitimacy. That is what has happened in that part of the world.

Now let me give you my prediction. As I’m a betting man, I’m even willing to give you odds that Iraq will, in fact, become stable — it will take time — and Iran and Iraq will become allies. They are natural allies. Yes, they are. They don’t hate each other. This guy from Iraq sitting in the audience is my friend. I love him. I didn’t like Saddam Hussein; nor did my friend. But Iran and Iraq are natural allies. It was Saddam who made all this happen. Iran and Iraq will combine.

And the frightening irony is this, and I’m being serious, that America’s blood and treasure has been spent to make this happen. That is going to be a weird situation. Iraq is said by some to have more oil than Saudi Arabia. And when Iraq and Iran combine, nobody is going to stop them. That was the nightmare of the United States when it thought that Iran would conquer Iraq. But Iran and Iraq are going to become allies and U.S. actions will have joined the two countries! Now that’s a real nightmare for U.S. policymakers!