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Nuclear Iran?

Victor Davis Hanson

Senior Fellow, Hoover Institution



VICTOR DAVIS HANSON is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, a professor emeritus at California State University, Fresno, and a distinguished visiting fellow at Hillsdale College. He has a B.A. from the University of California, Santa Cruz, and a Ph.D. in classics from Stanford University. He is a nationally syndicated columnist for Tribune Media Services and has written for several newspapers and journals, including the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Times*, *Commentary*, the *New Republic*, the *Claremont Review of Books*, the *Weekly Standard* and National Review Online. He serves on the editorial boards of *Arion*, the *Military History Quarterly* and *City Journal*. His books include *The Soul of Battle*, *Carnage and Culture*, *Mexifornia: A State of Becoming*, *Ripples of Battle* and, most recently, *A War Like No Other: How the Athenians and Spartans Fought the Peloponnesian War*.

The following is adapted from a speech delivered on February 13, 2007, in Fort Myers, Florida, at a Hillsdale College National Leadership Seminar on the topic, "National Security: Short- and Long-Term Assessments."

“The skirmishes in the occupied land are part of a war of destiny. The outcome of hundreds of years of war will be defined in Palestinian land. As the Imam said, Israel must be wiped off the map.” So rants Iran’s President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

It is understandable why Ahmadinejad might want an arsenal of nuclear missiles. It would allow him to shake down a constant stream of rich European emissaries, pressure the Arab Gulf states to lower oil production, pose as the Persian and Shiite messianic leader of Islamic terrorists, neutralize the influence of the United States in the region—and, of course, destroy Israel. Let no one doubt that a nuclear Iran would end the entire notion of peaceful global adjudication of nuclear proliferation and pose an unending threat to civilization itself.

In all his crazed pronouncements, Ahmadinejad reflects an end-of-days view: History is coming to its grand finale under his aegis. In his mind, he entrances even foreign audiences into stupor with his rhetoric. Of his recent United Nations speech he boasted, “I felt that all of a sudden the atmosphere changed there. And for 27-28 minutes all the leaders did not blink.” The name of Ahmadinejad, he supposes, will live for the ages if he takes out the “crusader” interloper in Jerusalem. As the Great Mahdi



come back to life, he can do something for the devout not seen since the days of Saladin.

For now, however, Ahmadinejad faces two hurdles: He must get the bomb, and he must create the psychological landscape whereby the world will shrug at Israel's demise.

Oddly, the first obstacle may not be the hardest. An impoverished Pakistan and North Korea pulled it off. China and Russia will likely sell Tehran anything it cannot get from rogue regimes. The European Union is Iran's largest trading partner and ships it everything from sophisticated machine tools to sniper rifles, while impotent European diplomats continue "ruling out force" to stop the Iranian nuclear industry. Meanwhile, Moscow and Beijing, for all their expressed concern, will probably veto any serious punitive action by the United Nations.

As for the United States, it has 180,000 troops attempting to establish some sort of democratic stability in Afghanistan and Iraq, not to mention a growing anti-war movement at home. An unpredictable President Bush has less than two years left in the White House, with a majority opposition in Congress that is calling for direct talks with Ahmadinejad and urging congressional restraints on the possible use of force against Iran. It is no surprise that so many in Iran see no barrier to obtaining the bomb.

But the second obstacle—preparing the world for the end of the Jewish state—is trickier.

Ahmadinejad and the Holocaust

True, the Middle East's secular gospel is anti-Semitism. State-run media in Syria, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan broadcast endless ugly sermons about Jews as "pigs and apes." Nor do Russia and China much care what happens to Israel, as long as its demise does not affect business. But the West is a different matter. There the history of anti-Semitism looms large, framed by the Holocaust that nearly destroyed European Jewry. Thus the Holocaust is now Ahmadinejad's target just as much as downtown Tel Aviv.

Holocaust denial is a tired game, but Ahmadinejad's approach is slightly new and different. He has studied the Western postmodern mind and has devised a strategy based on its unholy trinity of multiculturalism, moral equivalence and cultural relativism. As a third world populist, he expects that his own fascism will escape proper scrutiny if he can recite often

enough the past sins of the West. He also understands the appeal of victimology in the West these days. So he knows that to destroy the Israelis, he, not they, must become the victim, and Westerners the aggressors who forced his hand. "So we ask you," he said recently, "if you indeed committed this great crime, why should the oppressed people of Palestine be punished for it? If you committed a crime, you yourselves should pay for it."

Ahmadinejad also grasps that there are millions of highly educated but cynical Westerners who see nothing exceptional about their own culture. So if democratic America has nuclear weapons, he asks, why not theocratic Iran? "Your arsenals are full to the brim, yet when it's the turn of a nation such as mine to develop peaceful nuclear technology, you object and resort to threats."

Moreover, he knows how Western relativism works. Who is to say what are facts or what is true, given the tendency of the powerful to "construct" their own narratives and call the result "history"? So he says that the Holocaust was exaggerated, or perhaps even fabricated, as mere jails became "death camps" through a trick of language in order to persecute the poor Palestinians. We laugh at all this as absurd. We should not.

Money, oil and threats have gotten the Iranian theocrats to the very threshold of a nuclear arsenal. Their uncanny diagnosis of Western malaise has now convinced them that they can carefully fabricate a Holocaust-free reality in which Muslims are the victims and Jews the aggressors, setting the stage for Ahmadinejad's "righteously" aggrieved Iran, after "hundreds of years of war," to set things right.

In the midst of all this passive-aggressive noisemaking, the Iranian government pushes insidiously forward with nuclear development—perhaps pausing when it has gone too far in order to allow some negotiations, but then getting right back at it. Nuclear acquisition for Ahmadinejad is a win/win proposition. If he obtains nuclear weapons and restores lost Persian grandeur, it will remind a restless Iranian populace how the theocrats are nationalists after all, not just pan-Islamic provocateurs. And a nuclear Iran could create all sorts of mini-crises in the region in order to spike oil prices, given world demand for oil.

The Islamic world and the front line enemies of Israel lost their Middle Eastern nuclear deterrent with the collapse of the Soviet Union; no surprise, then, that we have not seen a multilateral conventional attack on Israel ever since. But with a nuclear Iran, the mullahs can puff themselves up with a guarantee that a new coalition against

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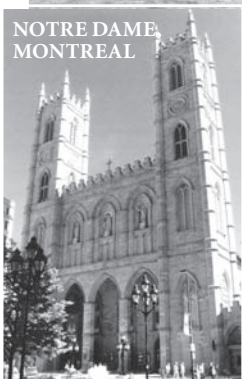
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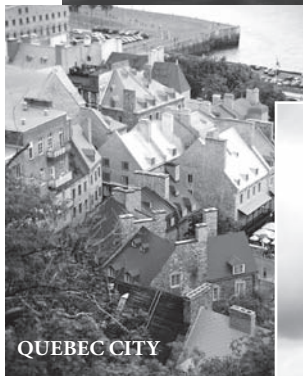
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Israel would not be humiliated or annihilated when it lost—since the Iranians could always, Soviet-like, threaten to go nuclear. And there are always enough crazies in Arab capitals to imagine that at last the combined armies of the Middle East could defeat Israel, with the knowledge that in case of failure, they could recede safely back under an Islamic nuclear umbrella.

Reasons for Action

How many times have we heard the following arguments?

- “Israel has nuclear weapons, so why single out Iran?”
- “Pakistan got nukes and we lived with it.”
- “Who is to say the United States or Russia should have the bomb and not other countries?”
- “Iran has promised to use its reactors for peaceful purposes, so why demonize the regime?”

In fact, the United States has at least six reasons for singling out Iran to halt its nuclear development program—and it is past time that we spell them out to the world at large.

First, any country that seeks “peaceful” nuclear power at the same time it is completely self-sufficient in energy production is de facto suspect. Iran has enough natural gas to meet its clean electrical generation needs for two centuries. The only rationale for its multi-billion-dollar program of building nuclear reactors—and for its spending billions more to hide and decentralize them—is to obtain weapons.

Second, we cannot excuse Iran by acknowledging that the Soviet Union, communist China, North Korea and Pakistan obtained nuclear weapons. In each of these cases, anti-liberal regimes gained stature and advantage by the ability to destroy Western cities. But past moral failures are not corrected by allowing history to repeat itself.

The logic of this excuse would lead to a nuclearized globe in which wars from Darfur to the Middle East would all assume the potential to go nuclear. In contrast, the fewer the nuclear players, the more likely deterrence can play some role. And if Iran were to go nuclear, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt and other Arab autocracies would follow suit in order to preserve the prestige and security of largely Arab Sunni nations. That would ensure, again, that almost any Middle East dispute involv-

ing Shiite-Sunni tension, from Lebanon to Iraq, might escalate to a nuclear confrontation.

Third, it is simply a fact that full-fledged democracies are less likely to attack one another. Although they are prone to frequent fighting—imperial Athens and republican Venice, for instance, were in some sort of war about three out of every four years during the 5th century B.C. and the 16th century, respectively—consensual governments are not so ready to fight each other. Thus today there is no chance whatsoever that an anti-American France and an increasingly anti-French America would, as nuclear democracies, go to war. Likewise Russia, following the fall of communism and its partial evolution to an elected government, poses less of a threat to the United States than before.

It would be regrettable should Taiwan, Japan, South Korea or Germany go nuclear—but not nearly as catastrophic as when Pakistan did so, which is what allows it today to give sanctuary to bin Laden and the planners of 9/11 with impunity. The former governments operate with a free press, open elections and free speech, and thus their warmaking is subject to a series of checks and balances. Pakistan is a strongman’s heartbeat away from becoming an Islamic theocracy. And while democratic India is often volatile in relations with its Islamic neighbor, the world is not nearly as worried about its nuclear arsenal as it is about autocratic Pakistan’s.

Fourth, there are a number of rogue regimes that belong in a special category: North Korea, Iran, Syria and Cuba. These are tyrannies whose leaders have sought global attention and stature through sponsoring insurrection and terrorism beyond their borders. If it is frightening that Russia, China and Pakistan are now nuclear, it is terrifying that Kim Jong Il has the bomb, and that Ahmadinejad might soon. Islamic fundamentalism and North Korean Stalinism might be antithetical to scientific advancement, but they are actually conducive to nuclear politics. When such renegade regimes go nuclear, they have an added edge. In nuclear poker, the appearance of derangement is an advantage.

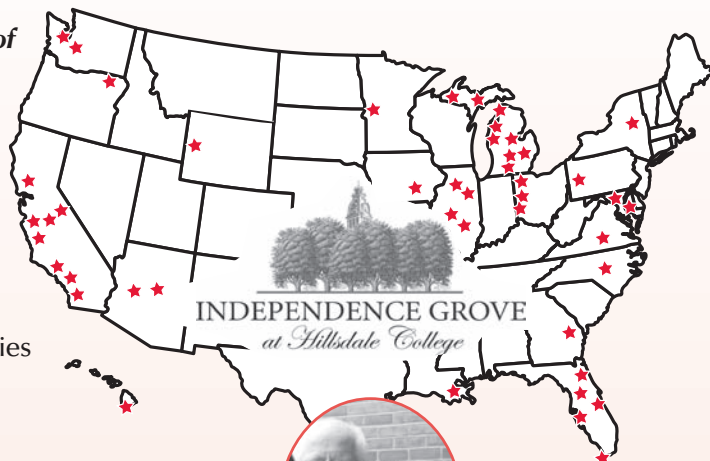
Fifth, Iran presents a uniquely fourfold danger: It has enough cash to buy influence and exemption from sanctions; it possesses oil reserves to blackmail a petroleum-hungry world; it sponsors terrorists who might soon be enabled to find sanctuary under a nuclear umbrella and to be armed with dirty bombs; and it has a leader who talks as if he were willing to take his entire country into paradise—or at least back to the

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7th century amid the ashes of the Middle East. Just imagine the recent controversy over Danish cartoons in the context of Ahmadinejad with his finger on a half-dozen nuclear missiles pointed at Copenhagen.

Sixth, the West is right to take on a certain responsibility to discourage nuclear proliferation. The existence of such weapons grew entirely out of Western science and technology. In fact, the story of global nuclear proliferation is exclusively one of espionage, stealthy commerce, or American-and European-trained native engineers using their foreign-acquired expertise. Pakistan, North Korea or Iran have no ability themselves to create such weapons, any more than Russia, China or India did. And any country that cannot itself create such weapons is probably less likely to ensure the necessary protocols to guard against their misuse or theft.

What Is To Be Done?

We can argue all we want over the solution. Would it be wrong to use military force? Are air strikes feasible? Will Iranian dissidents rise up, or have most of them already been killed or exiled?

Will Russia and China help us or sit back and enjoy our dilemma? Is Europe our ally in this matter, or is it simply triangulating? Will the UN ever step in, or is it more likely to condemn the United States than Tehran?

Clearly a poker-faced United States seems hesitant to act until moments before the missiles are armed. It is certainly not behaving like the hegemon or imperialist power so caricatured by Michael Moore and his ilk. Until there is firm evidence that Iran has the warheads ready, no administration will wish to relive the nightmare of the past three years, with its endless hysterical accusations of arrogant unilateralism, preemption, inaccurate or falsified intelligence, imperialism, and purported hostility towards Islam.

What, then, should the United States do, other than keep offering meaningless platitudes about “dialogue”? There are actually several measures that, taken together, might work to exploit Iran's weaknesses and maintain a nuclear-free Gulf.

First, keep pushing international accords and doggedly work to ratchet up the watered-down United Nations sanctions. Even if they don't do much to Iran in any significant way, the resolutions seem to enrage Ahmadinejad. And when he



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rages at the politically correct United Nations, he only loses further support.

Second, keep prodding the European Union, presently Iran's chief trading partner, to apply pressure. The so-called EU3—Britain, France and Germany—failed completely in its recent attempt to stop Ahmadinejad's nuclear plans. But out of that setback came a growing realization in Europe that a nuclear-tipped missile from theocratic Iran could hit Europe just as easily as Israel. Next, Europeans should adopt a complete trade embargo to prevent all Iranian access to precision machinery and high technology.

Third, keep encouraging Iranian dissidents. We need not ask them to go into the streets where they would be shot. Instead we should offer them media help and access to the West. Also highlight the plight of women, minorities and liberals in Iran—the groups that traditionally appeal to the Western left.

Fourth, we should announce in advance that we don't want any bases in Iran; don't want its oil; and won't send American infantry there. That would preempt the tired charges of imperialism and colonialism.

Fifth, and crucially, we must complete the stabilization of Iraq and Afghanistan. The last thing Iran wants is a democratic and prosperous Middle East surrounding its borders. The sight of Afghans, Iraqis, Kurds, Lebanese and Turks voting and speaking freely could form a critical mass of democratic reform to overwhelm the Khomeinists.

Sixth, keep reminding the Gulf monarchies

that a nuclear Shiite theocracy is far more dangerous to them than to the United States or Israel—and that America's efforts to contain Iran depend on their own to rein in Wahhabis in Iraq.

Seventh, say nothing much about the presence of two or three carrier groups in the Persian Gulf and Mediterranean. Iran will soon grasp on its own that the build-up of such forces might presage air strikes, at which the United States excels.

Eighth, make it clear that Israel, as a sovereign nation, has a perfect right to protect itself. The United States should keep reminding Iran that 60 years after the real Holocaust, no Israeli Prime Minister will sit by idly while 7th century theocrats grandstand about wiping out the state of Israel and obtain the nuclear means to do it.

Ninth, keep the rhetoric down. Avoid threats to bomb many who could be our friends—while at the same time ignoring therapeutic pleas to talk with those who we know are our enemies.

Finally, Americans must gasify coal, diversify fuels, drill for more petroleum and invent new energy sources. Only that can collapse the world price of petroleum. At \$60 a barrel for oil, Ahmadinejad is a charismatic third world benefactor who throws cash at every thug who wants a roadside bomb or shoulder-fired missile—and has plenty of money to buy Pakistani, North Korean or Russian nuclear components. But at \$30 a barrel, he will be despised by his own people, who will become enraged as state-subsidized food and gas prices skyrocket, and as scarce Iranian petrodollars are wasted on Hezbollah and Hamas.



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In conclusion, let me offer a more ominous note of warning. Israel is not free from its own passions, and there will be no second Holocaust. It is past time for Iranian leaders to snap out of their pseudo-trances and recognize that some Western countries are not only far more powerful than Iran, but in certain situations and under particular circumstances can be just as driven by memory, history—and, yes, a certain craziness as well.

The same goes for the United States. The Iranians, like bin Laden, imagine an antithetical caricature—which, like all caricatures, has some truth in it—whereby we materialistic Westerners love life too much to die, while the pious Islamic youths they send to kill us with suicide bombs love death too much to live. But what the Iranian theocrats, like the al-Qaedaists, never fully fathom is that if the American people conclude that their freedom and existence are at stake, they are capable of conjuring up things far more frighten-

ing than anything in the 7th-century brain of Mr. Ahmadinejad. The barbarity of the nightmares at Antietam, Verdun, Dresden and Hiroshima prove that well enough. In short, there are consequences to the rhetoric of Armageddon.

So far the Iranian leader has posed as someone 90 percent crazy and ten percent sane, hoping that in response we would fear his overt madness, grant concessions, and delicately appeal to his small reservoir of reason. But he should understand that if his Western enemies appear 90 percent of the time as children of the Enlightenment, they are still suffused with vestigial traces of the emotional and unpredictable. And military history shows that the irrational ten percent of the Western mind is a lot scarier in the end than anything Islamic fanaticism has to offer.



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