



# National Iranian American Council

PROMOTING IRANIAN-AMERICAN PARTICIPATION IN AMERICAN CIVIC LIFE

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## SEVEN MYTHS ABOUT IRAN

Iran will be the top foreign policy challenge for the United States in the coming years. The Bush Administration's policy (insistence on zero enrichment of uranium, regime change and isolation of Iran) and the policy of the radicals around President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (unlimited civilian nuclear capability, selective inspections and replacing the United States as the region's dominant power) have set the two countries on a collision course. Yet the mere retirement of George W. Bush's neocons or Ahmadinejad's radicals may not be sufficient to avoid the disaster of war.

The ill-informed foreign policy debate on Iran contributes to a paradigm of enmity between the United States and Iran, which limits the foreign policy options of future US administrations to various forms of confrontation while excluding more constructive approaches. These policies of collision are in no small part born of the erroneous assumptions we adopted about Iran back in the days when we could afford to ignore that country. But as America sinks deeper into

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the Iraqi quicksand, remaining in the dark about the realities of Iran and the actual policies of its decision-makers is no longer an option.

A successful policy on Iran must begin by reassessing some basic assumptions:

### **1. Iran is ripe for regime change.**

Not true. Although the ruling clergy in Iran are very unpopular, they are not going anywhere anytime soon. (A distinction obviously needs to be made here between the electoral survival of the Ahmadinejad government and the survival of the system as a whole.) The Iranian people certainly deserve a better government --

one that provides Iran's youthful population with a better economic future and respects human rights -- but the current choice Iranians face is not between Islamic tyranny and democratic freedom. It is between chaos and stability. The increased tensions with the United States over the past year have only strengthened the government's hold on power by limiting the space for pro-democracy activists (much as the 9/11 attacks paved the way for the passing of the Patriot Act and the weakening of Americans' civil rights). Whatever we think of the clergy in Tehran, we cannot afford wishful thinking about their imminent departure.

### **2. Iran is irrational and cannot be deterred.**

Not true. Iran's foreign policy behavior is highly problematic for the United States, but a careful study of Iran's actions -- not just its rhetoric -- reveals systematic, pragmatic and cautious maneuvering toward a set goal: decontain-

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ment and the re-emergence of Iran as a pre-eminent power in the Middle East. Iran often conceals its real objectives behind layers of ideological rhetoric, with the aim of confusing potential enemies and making its policies more attractive to the Muslim nations it seeks to lead. At times it even simulates irrationality as an instrument of deterrence, the calculation being that enemies will be more reluctant to attack Iran if Tehran's response can't be predicted and won't follow a straight cost-benefit analysis. (Richard Nixon used the same strategy during the cold war, in what he called the "madman theory"; he sought to deter the Soviets by making them think he was slightly mad and unpredictable.) In reality, the United States -- and Israel -- have a long history of deterring Iran.

During the Lebanon war of 2006, Israel signaled Tehran's leaders that it would retaliate against Iran if Hezbollah struck Tel Aviv with long-distance missiles. Tehran got the message. Despite many promises by Hezbollah leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah to hit Israel if the Jewish state continued the bombardment of Lebanon, Iran prevented Hezbollah from using its long-range missiles. Deterrence worked, and an uncontrollable escalation of the war was avoided.

### **3. Iran is inherently anti-American.**

Not quite. To Iran anti-Americanism is a means, not an end. Iran believes that its size and power position it to play a major role in regional affairs. This aspiration, however, clashes with America's aim of isolating and containing

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Iran. As long as public opinion in the Middle East remains largely critical of the United States, and as long as Washington continues to seek a regional order based on excluding Iran, Iran will likely play on anti-Americanism to make Washington's policy of exclusion as costly as possible and to rally existing anti-American sentiment around Iranian objectives. But if the strategic environment in the region changes -- with a different relationship between Tehran and Washington as a result -- the utility of anti-Americanism will fade away.

### **4. Enrichment equals a nuclear bomb.**

Not necessarily. The current nuclear impasse is partly rooted in the questionable assumption that zero enrichment is the only route to avoid an Iranian bomb. While the optimal situation is one in which Iran does not enrich, this goal is no longer possible. But that does not mean

that a small-scale Iranian enrichment program is tantamount to a nuclear bomb. According to nuclear experts like Bruno Pellaud, former deputy director general and head of the International Atomic Energy Agency's Department of Safeguards, intrusive inspections is the best tool to ensure that Iran doesn't divert its civilian program into a military one. Yet these inspections can only take place as part of a package deal with Iran that includes some level of enrichment. This makes reassessment of the zero-enrichment objective all the more important.

### **5. Iran seeks Israel's destruction.**

False. As I explain in my book *Treacherous Alliance*, the Iranian clergy have strong ideological antipathy toward Israel, but ideology is not the primary driving force of Iranian foreign policy. The major shifts in Israeli-Iranian relations, from pragmatic entente in the 1960s and '70s to strategic rivalry in the 1990s, have occurred because of changing strategic -- not ideological -- realities. Whenever Iran's ideological and strategic imperatives have clashed -- as was the case in the 1980s, when the common threat from the Soviet Union and Iraq prompted Iran and Israel to pursue clandestine cooperation -- realpolitik has prevailed.

Today, Iran's ideological and strategic imperatives largely coincide. Israel is seen as a strategic and an ideological threat, and as a result Tehran has actively confronted Israel. But Iran does not seek Israel's destruction, nor does

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its attitude toward Israel lack pragmatism. In 2002 Iran signaled that it was prepared to adopt a "Malaysian profile" on Israel in return for an end to Israeli and American efforts to isolate Tehran.

Iran would, much like Malaysia, be an Islamic state that would not recognize Israel and would occasionally criticize it but would not directly confront the Jewish state. Iran and Israel would simply recognize each other's spheres of influence and stay out of each other's hair. The message was communicated to Israel through various channels, including a presentation by a senior Iranian military figure at a conference in Europe attended by several Israelis. Ze'ev Schiff, the late military affairs editor of Ha'aretz, told me that the consistency of Tehran's message "made it more clear that this was a policy" and not just empty talk.

Though Iran has a new and more radical president today, it is still ruled by the same Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the concept of a "Malaysian profile" still enjoys support in the Iranian National Security Council -- President Ahmadinejad's venomous rhetoric notwithstanding.

### **6. The pressure on Iran is working.**

Questionable. Pressure alone will not resolve the Iranian crisis. Iran has been under comprehensive US sanctions since 1995. These sanctions have

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undoubtedly been effective in hurting the Iranian economy and have made Tehran's pursuit of its foreign policy more costly. But they have not forced Iran to abandon its policies. In fact, after twelve years of sanctions Iran is more powerful and more defiant than ever. Ratcheting up sanctions will be nothing more than a higher dose of a policy already proven to be unsuccessful. The combination of ineffective sanctions and unrealistic demands will get the United States nowhere.

### **7. Stability in the Middle East can be achieved only through Iran's isolation.**

Quite the contrary. History teaches us that an Iran that

isn't part of the region's security architecture will be more destabilizing than an Iran that has been incorporated into the region's political order. In the aftermath of the first Gulf War, instead of pursuing an inclusive security architecture for the Persian Gulf, Washington opted to sign bilateral defense pacts with the Persian Arab Gulf states while pursuing a new order in the region based on Iran's prolonged isolation. The policy was called "dual containment," the idea being that the United States would advance the Middle East peace process by containing both Iran and Iraq.

What Washington failed to recognize was that the policy of exclusion provided Iran with incentives to undermine US efforts. And the weakest link in the American strategy was the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Without successful peacemaking between the Israelis and Palestinians, America's new regional order could not be achieved and Iran would evade prolonged isolation, Tehran calculated. Though Iran wasn't solely responsible for the collapse of the peace process, it did contribute to undermining it by supporting rejectionist Palestinian organizations at a time when the United States was at the height of its power and when Tehran was in a very weak position. Today the tables



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have turned. Iran is rising and the United States is mired in Iraq. Instead of repeating a policy that failed under the best circumstances, we must recognize that Iran's propensity to act as the spoiler will decline when it is included, not when it's excluded.

Iran poses a complicated challenge to America, but not an irresolvable one. Despite the tremendous distrust between the two countries, history shows that negotiations can work. In 2001 Tehran and Washington worked closely together to defeat the Taliban and install a new government in Afghanistan. Without Iranian help, the new Constitution of Afghanistan would not have been achieved, according to US diplomats involved in the effort.

Similar cooperation, but on a lower scale, took place before the invasion of Iraq. In 2003 Iran sent the United States a comprehensive negotiations package, only to be snubbed by the Bush Administration. Clearly, success in negotiations can never be guaranteed. But neither can failure. We will never know whether we can succeed in negotiating with Iran until we try.

And so far, beyond isolated instances, the Administration has not given broad negotiations a fair chance, nor has the United States pursued a policy of inclusion and regional integration. (A policy of sanctions and

confrontation, on the other hand, is a proven failure.)

While hawks are presenting a wide array of arguments as to why we shouldn't talk to Iran -- including the notion that, given the quagmire in Iraq, the hand of the United States is now much weaker than it was several years ago, as well as the idea that Washington doesn't have anything to offer -- only Washington can offer Tehran what it really seeks: decontamination and reintegration in the Middle East. Iran wants a seat at the table and a say as a legitimate player in all regional decision-making. Iran can make it costly for the United States not to recognize it as a regional power, but it cannot gain its seat at the table without American agreement. This is an extremely valuable carrot Washington can offer Tehran in return for momentous changes in Iranian behavior. In fact, unbeknownst to decision-makers in Washington, America holds an ace up its sleeve. But this ace can be used only in the context of real negotiations.

These negotiations cannot be limited to Iraq or to the nuclear issue alone. The problems between the United States and Iran go well beyond these two issues. There is an underlying geopolitical imbalance that must be addressed. The previous order in the region has crumbled as a result of America's defeat of the Taliban and its subsequent failure to estab-

lish a coherent order in Iraq. Even if the nuclear issue and the Iraq calamity were to be resolved, the context that has given meaning to these problems to begin with -- the collapse of the previous order and the absence of an all-inclusive security arrangement -- will remain unresolved. Any agreement with Iran that does not address this fundamental issue is doomed to be short-lived.

Creating a new regional order, in which the carrot of Iranian inclusion is used to secure radically different behavior from Tehran, is neither a concession to Iran nor a capitulation of American (or Israeli) interests. Rather, it is a recognition that stability in the region cannot be achieved and sustained through the current strategy of pursuing an order based on the exclusion of one of the region's most powerful nations. To change Iran's behavior, we must change our own.

*Trita Parsi is the author of the newly released *Treachery: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the U.S.* (Yale), and president of the National Iranian American Council.*