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WE SHOULD PERSUADE IRAN WITH BARGAINS NOT BOMBS

By Theodore Adam Harris

America is still in a cloudy haze of the aftermath of what happened on September 11, 2001. The dust may have settled, but fear and itchy trigger fingers are still present. We are currently fighting the “War on Terror” both in Iraq and in Afghanistan. There is growing concern over Iran’s decision to resume uranium enrichment directly challenging the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and quite frankly, the entire global community. Iran’s recently elected president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, basically told the world to “get lost”, claiming that their nuclear activities are for peaceful purposes. He has also made very inflammatory remarks such as “Israel should be wiped off the face of the earth”. Both President Bush and Vice President Cheney have made it clear that our country will “not allow the world’s most dangerous regimes to possess the world’s most dangerous weapons” (Daalder, 2006, p.1). “The threat posed by weapons of mass destruction (WMD), with the associated risk that terrorists might get their hands on WMD, is emerging as the worldview...replacing the unifying scheme of containment which governed American and Western policy during the Cold War” (Russell, 2004, p.31). The wars currently being waged in Iraq and Afghanistan represent a paradigm shift in American foreign policy; no longer are we focusing on containment, instead, pre-emptive strikes have become the order of the day.

Introduction

American and Iranian leaders are talking a great deal about each other when they should be spending more time talking to each other. Iran’s defiance of the IAEA has raised questions about Tehran’s desire to build nuclear weapons and this in turn has put that country squarely into the cross-hairs of the hawks in Washington. This case study reflects my search to answer a logical question stemming from the current backdrop; *should we bomb Iran* in order to prevent Tehran from obtaining nuclear weapons? I am a U.S. Marine Corps combat veteran from the first gulf war where I acted as an Iranian linguist signals intelligence and crypto-logic

technician. It is impossible for me not to be passionate about our policies in the Middle East. My interpretation of this research tells me that the United States should begin direct communications with Iran. The social and behavioral sciences play a huge role in determining a policy outcome. Predicting how Iran and the rest of the world will react to our actions is of great importance. Just as a chess player tries to look at every future move, so to do we need a predictable strategy. This study will express the reasoning I have used to arrive at my claim that *we should try to persuade Iran away from building nuclear weapons with bilateral talks and bargains not bombs*. We, the United States, have not had a diplomatic relationship with Iran since

the revolution in 1979. Twenty-seven years of not communicating. That is a long time to hold a grudge. In essence, I have discovered that now is the time to “burry the hatchet”.

Methodology and Theory

I have limited my research to only certain nation states as entities of interest. I have obtained an understanding of the major stakeholder’s positions, namely, the United States, Europe and Iran. It is from this understanding that I have formed an opinion as to what the best foreign policy decisions with respect to Iran obtaining nuclear weapons should be. I have used a heuristic approach, examining both previous literature and particular case studies concerning American responses to an atomic Iran. I have read articles, speeches, books, journals, and websites on the topic at hand. I have thoroughly examined and annotated each source, asking questions about their validity, audience, peer review, if they are current, objective, et cetera.

I have incorporated Edward Said’s theory concerning Orientalism and Jurgen Habermas’s ideas related to “ideal speech”, using them as an overall lens to help me uncover answers to this enormously real and important debate. Edward Said proposed that before there could be Western colonialism there must be this idea of a distinction between the “East” and the “West”. “If the East was viewed as despotic and backward, and the West as worthy and noble, expanding Western power into these regions could be rationalized” (Seidman, 1994, p. 266). He called this phenomena “Orientalism”. I argue that there is a re-emergence of this happening today; it can be found in the language. They call us the “Great Satan” and in turn we have

labeled them as part of the “Axis of Evil”. It is a classic struggle between “Us” and “Them”. This rhetoric demonstrates a form of Orientalism, which could be used to rationalize American military action against Iran; after all, not long after Iraq was labeled as being part of the “Axis of Evil”, we invaded that country.

While thinking about how difficult talks with Iran would be, I latched on to Jurgen Habermas’s ideas concerning “ideal speech situations”. Seidman explains this as “a social condition in which the parties to public discourse are in a situation of equality and autonomy” (Ibid, p.126). My interpretation is that in order for real dialogue to occur, resulting in real exchanges of compromises, both parties must recognize each other’s true concerns, and any hint of coercion on the part of one side undermines the communication completely. Using this as a lens, I was shocked to discover the absence of any real dialogue or “ideal speech” between the United States and Iran dating back to before the Islamic revolution in 1979.

Discoveries and Discussion

Witnessing combat first hand has opened my eyes to the devastating social effects caused by the sheer death and destruction associated with modern day warfare. One of the best scholarly sources I found that advocates a military strategy is Richard Russell’s article entitled: *Iran in Iraq’s Shadow: dealing with Tehran’s nuclear weapons bid*. This article provides a clear and decisive look at the exact issue I am wrestling with. It is an extensive overview and analysis of American reactions to Iranian nuclear efforts. The most alarming thing is that American military action is purportedly not just necessary, but that it

should be preformed before Iran obtains a nuclear bomb. After which, the retaliatory threat might pose to be an even greater risk for America. He acknowledges that diplomacy may have some running room left but really dismisses the idea in favor of derailing the Iranian nuclear program with force. Russell argues: "the prospects for the transfer of nuclear weapons to non-state actors is greater in the case of Iran than it was for Saddam's regime, because Tehran has been much more active than Baghdad had been in the sponsorship of terrorist operations, particularly those orchestrated by Hezbollah, against the United States" (p.42). This article was written in 2004, it is incredibly up to speed, almost foreshadowing current events. The audience seems to be the US military as it was published by the US Army War College. It acts as an in depth analysis and risk assessment.

Mr. Russell paints a scary picture and if coupled with the most recent rhetoric out of Tehran, some could argue that we should start the engines on our B-52 Bombers immediately. Iran's president was just quoted as saying: "Israel resembles a rotten tree which will be annihilated with the onset of one storm" (Olmert, 2006). The risk of a nuclear bomb exploding in an American city, or Israel for that matter can be seen as so great that the idea of bombing Iranian nuclear facilities could easily be rationalized.

The following reasoning clearly states why we should resort to military force, and deserves mentioning: "The difference with any action against Iran is stark: there is hard evidence of genuine WMD in preparation; hard, stated evidence of intent. Also, a clearly defined, containable and comparatively attainable military objective exists; knocking out

the enrichment site at Natanz" (Liddle, 2006, p1). The enrichment site at Natanz is being built underground with thousands of centrifuges. The IAEA found this very alarming because it represents highly irregular activity if in fact the program is merely for peaceful purposes. "Natanz seems an agreeable little town, perched nearly 5,000ft up in the majestic mountains of central Iran, full of dusty relics of Alexander the Great and black-clad peasants scurrying hither and thither. It is a shame, then, that we may soon be obliged to bomb it to smithereens. An even bigger shame, though, if we don't" (Ibid, p1).

It was easier to find examples of why bombing Iran is the wrong policy decision. "A United States attack on Iran would likely cause a spike in the price of oil, alienate Muslims, create a split within the NATO alliance, and lead to an increase in terrorism; it might even draw Iranian forces over the border to attack U.S. troops" (Hunter, 2006, p. 1). These are all unwanted results especially when the action itself may or may not completely destroy Iran's nuclear capabilities. One report suggests "at best it would set back Iran's program by a few years, but it would inflame public opinion there and unify the nation in its determination to go nuclear" (Fareed, Z., 2006, p.31). This opinion is echoed throughout most of my research findings. The idea that even if we disrupted Iran's immediate capabilities, bombing them would only hurt us in the long run because it would rally patriotic fervor against America like never seen before. An example that comes to mind is the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the average American proudly joined up immediately with the national war effort. Most reports that I have read suggest a similar reaction in Iran.

We are faced with two undesirable options. On one hand, we could bomb Iranian nuclear facilities because the threat is great. On the other, we could keep up the same old saber rattling and feeble attempts to go through third parties to negotiate a settlement, in turn, Iran goes nuclear. Both approaches are unacceptable. I argue that there is another avenue of attack. Using my “ideal speech” lens, I feel that it may be possible to persuade Iran with a new and bold move, namely, try to listen to what they are truly concerned about. Of course that would mean that we too would have to vocalize our true concerns in an open and “equally autonomous” forum. That forum does not include the United Nations, how could it if Iran does not possess nearly the same pull as America within its halls? By function alone, America has veto power; Iran on the other hand does not. I am confident that Habermas would suggest something different and not even close to third party negotiations. An ideal speech situation can only occur with direct bi-lateral talks between Iran and the United States.

Throughout my research I found numerous opinions that call for direct communication. Looking through the “ideal speech” lens this situation begs for the next logical question: How do we create such an atmosphere or “ideal speech situation” where both Iran and the United States can really negotiate a settlement? Unfortunately, I have no answer as of yet. I know Iran and the United States have extreme differences and it would be easy to label us as enemies, but that has not stopped America in the past. “Summits with the opposition are a great American tradition. President Richard Nixon went to Beijing even though China was aiding North

Vietnam in its fight against U.S. forces. President Ronald Reagan proclaimed the Soviet Union “an evil empire” but still negotiated agreements with it on arms control and other issues. Currently, the Bush administration talks directly to North Korea, perhaps the most dangerous and delusional regime in the world. America has never limited itself to talking only with its friends abroad.” (Hunter, 2006). I disagree with Mr. Hunter on one point; we *have* limited ourselves, because it has been over twenty-seven years since we have spoken directly to Iran.

President Ahmedinejad wrote a letter to President Bush in May of 2006. This letter represents the first official Iranian communication with an American president in 27 years. He should take the opportunity of this opening and offer to engage in unconditional talks with Tehran aimed at resolving all outstanding disputes, including the nuclear one, with an eye to normalizing diplomatic relations as soon as possible. As loathsome as Americans find Iran’s hatred of the West, we still need to acknowledge their concerns if we have any interest in persuading them to stop building nuclear weapons. I fear that our government might just disregard this letter as hate mail instead of truly attempting to figure out what they are trying to say. Edward Said might claim that the time for tearing down the wall that separates the Occident from the Orient has arrived.

I sought to find out if Ahmedinejad was the right man to bargain with; the decision is still pending. I found the following interactive chart to be educational; it acts as a superb synopsis of the Iranian political power structure today.

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