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"We Don't Speak to Evil":
The Dynamics of US-Iranian Mistrust

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The current uncertainties about Iran's motives and intentions reflect the interplay of the psychological and material dimensions of the security dilemma in international politics. In this article Nicholas Wheeler shows how the ideological fundamentalism that animates the Bush White House and its fellow travellers has led the administration to replace the uncertainties about Tehran's nuclear intentions with the certainty that Iran has aggressive motives and intent. The problem with ideological fundamentalism is that it closes down the possibility that others might be acting out of fear and mistrust rather than malevolence, and crucially, it disregards the role that one's own actions might play in provoking that fear.

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Once again the storm clouds of war are gathering over a country in the Middle East suspected of covertly developing nuclear weapons. The United States has imposed its toughest sanctions on Iran since the Iranian revolution of 1979 in response to Tehran's defiance of UN Security Council resolutions demanding a halt to its nuclear programme. As the war of words heats up between the White House and the government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, it is necessary to ask whether there is an alternative way to resolve this crisis that does not rely on coercion, including ultimately the use of force.

There are justified uncertainties about whether Iran is developing a nuclear weapons capability. But what has to be challenged is the assumption that because of the Islamist character of the present leadership in Tehran, Iran has malign motives towards the West, and that it will seek a nuclear weapons capability to prosecute these hostile intentions. To make such an assumption is to demonstrate ideological fundamentalism* on the part of observers, leading to the belief that Iran must be cheating on its obligation not to develop nuclear weapons under the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty of which it is a signatory.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) based in Vienna exists to reassure states that others are not secretly developing nuclear weapons under the guise of peaceful nuclear programmes. For those who perceive Tehran as implacably opposed to Western interests and values, the IAEA cannot be relied upon to detect — let alone respond to — Iran's non-compliance with its non-proliferation obligations. Instead, policing the spread of nuclear weapons requires the major powers, preferably through the agency of the UN Security Council, to sanction those who transgress non-proliferation norms. If such collective UN action is not possible, concerned Western states will have to consider acting without UN legitimation, as the United States and its allies did in invading Iraq in 2003.

The Security Dilemma
As suggested above, one helpful way of thinking about the dynamics of recent US-Iranian relations is the concept of the security dilemma. The starting point for such theorising is that all human relations take place in an existential condition of uncertainty about the motives and intentions of others. This is what philosophers call the "other minds problem". In relation to the biggest and most violent stage of all — international politics — this means that governments (their decision-makers, military planners, foreign policy analysts etc.) can never be one hundred per cent certain about the current and future motives and intentions of those able to harm them in a military sense. Those responsible have to decide whether a state's actions — especially its military behaviour — signal that they have defensive or self-protection purposes only (to enhance security in an uncertain world) or whether they are for offensive purposes (to seek to change the status quo to their advantage). Decision-makers then need to determine how to react. Should they signal, by words and deeds, that they will react in kind, thereby building up a capability in the event that the other's intentions prove to be hostile? Or should they seek to signal reassurance?

These psychological dynamics are compounded by the problem of ambiguous symbolism. The term refers to the difficulty (many would say the impossibility) of safely distinguishing between "offensive" and "defensive" weapons. Even if states profess that their weaponry is only to be used in self-defence after an attack, others will worry that such capabilities might be used for offensive purposes. This was the security dilemma that confronted NATO and the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War. Each side professed defensive intent, but both alliances had offensive military strategies that led policy-makers and planners on each side to question the others peaceful intentions.

The problem of ambiguous symbolism arises in relation to deployed weapons, but in the case of Iran's nuclear programme our interest lies in the dual-use character of civil nuclear technology. The boundary between "peaceful" and "military" uses of nuclear tech-

nology throws up a particularly vexing dilemma for policy-makers because the boundary itself is blurred, yet once crossed it gives the transgressor immense weapons potential. The UN Secretary General's High-level Panel on "Threats, Challenges and Change" warned in 2004 that, as a consequence of the diffusion of civil nuclear technologies to more and more states, at least forty governments were in the position to move quickly to nuclear weapons status should a political decision be taken. The problem of ambiguous symbolism has been graphically illustrated in the Iranian case by the uranium enrichment activities at its Natanz plant. These were ostensibly compliant with Article IV of the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) which entitles signatories to the peaceful benefits of nuclear energy, but the decision to hide the facility from the IAEA inspectors aroused suspicions about Tehran's motives and intentions.

Spiralling Mistrust
Ideological convictions have often been decisive in how policy-makers have resolved uncertainties about the motives and intentions of others. Ideological fundamentalism is a mindset which assigns enemy status because of what the other *is* — its political identity — rather than how it actually behaves. The Bush Administration's version of the democratic peace theory (the belief that democracies do not fight each other) has led it to engage in the foreign-policy equivalent of "criminal profiling". What determines a state's propensity for aggression, according to the White House, is its internal character. And it follows that if the "rogue" regimes can be removed from power, the underlying source of security competition will be eliminated. The violent overthrow of the Iraqi regime in 2003 represented the high-water mark of this strategy — to this point.
   In his 2002 State of the Union Address, President Bush described Iraq, Iran and North Korea as the "Axis of Evil". Believing that the domestic nature of these so-called "rogue" states committed them to the export of aggression and terror, and that there could be no long-term coexistence between the United States and such regimes, the Bush Administration defended a policy of preventive war and regime change. Bush warned, "I will not wait on events, while dangers gather. I will not stand by, as peril draws closer and closer. The United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons." It is this mindset that has shaped the Bush Administration's policy towards Iran's nuclear programme, leading the administration to interpret Iran's development of fuel cycle capabilities as an offensive move, even when the latter claimed to be compliant with its NPT obligations. Despite the ambiguous symbolism of Iran's nuclear programme, the ideological fundamentalists in the White House have imputed malign motives and intentions regarding Tehran's determination to master the technology of uranium enrichment.

Iran has been less than transparent in its nuclear dealings. Mohamed ElBaradei, the Egyptian Director of the IAEA, reported in September that "the agency remains unable to verify certain aspects relevant to the scope and nature of Iran's nuclear programme."* However, in a move that has put himself and the agency on a clear collision course with Washington, ElBaradei maintains that Iran is being cooperative in resolving the outstanding issues, and that he is confident that the existing IAEA system of safeguards can provide the necessary reassurance that the Islamic Republic is not secretly building a bomb. Here, the Director-General is placing his hopes in Iran ratifying and implementing the "Additional Protocol" which it has signed. This provides the Agency with widened powers of physical access to make it more difficult for states to conceal illicit activities. ElBaradei has reluctantly accepted that Iran will not stop its uranium enrichment activities at the Natanz plant, and achieving Iranian mastery of the complete nuclear fuel-cycle seems to be a goal that unites all the factions across the Iranian political spectrum. Yet it does not follow from acceptance of this political reality that Iran will necessarily expand its pilot plant at Natanz into a full-scale industrial programme of enrichment. Iran might join that growing group of states with the technological capability to go nuclear, but which show no signs of translating this into a weapons programme (e.g. Brazil, Japan, Germany, and Canada).

Allowing Iran to reach a technological position where it could develop the bomb is anathema to those driving US policy towards Tehran. Not only does Washington fear that a revolutionary Iran equipped with weapons of mass destruction (WMD) would be a regional threat, especially to Israel, they also fear the spectre of current or future Iranian leaders providing fissile materials to Islamist groups using terror tactics. Those regimes that are not acceptably democratic to the United States will never be trusted with nuclear weapons, or even indigenous fuel-cycle capabilities claimed to be for peaceful purposes only. The conviction guiding US policy is that the internal nature and character of the Islamic Republic makes it determined to acquire nuclear weapons, and that as a result any large-scale programme of uranium enrichment represents an unacceptable security threat to Washington and its allies. Consequently, regime change (with Iran becoming a democratic ally) is the only policy that will satisfy Washington that Tehran can be trusted with indigenous control over the nuclear fuel-cycle.

The danger of ideological fundamentalism in fuelling security competition is compounded when both sides exhibit the same mindset. President Ahmadinejad has viewed the world in no less Manichean terms than President Bush. He even went so far as to call for Zionism to be "wiped off the face of the Earth" in a speech to a conference on a "World Without Zionism" in Tehran in 2005, insisting that there could be no accommodation with Israel or its US spon-

*Greg Webb, "ElBaradei Defends Nuclear Plan with Iran", Global Security Newswire, 10 September 2007, http://204.71.60.35/d_news wire/issues/2007_9_10.html, accessed 15 October 2007.

sor. Such inflammatory language has weakened the position of those in the West who have argued that far from Iran posing an implacable threat to the West, both Tehran and Washington are trapped in a spiral of mistrust where each is reacting to the negative behaviour of the other.

From Provocation to Trust
At the same time as imputing malign motives and intentions to another state, policy-makers with a peaceful/defensive self-image fail to appreciate that their own actions might be seen as threatening by that state. The British historian Herbert Butterfield was the first to capture how these psychological dynamics can work to exacerbate conflict. Diplomats, he wrote, "may vividly feel the terrible fear that [they] have of the other party, but [they] cannot enter into the [others] counter-fear, or even understand why [they] should be particularly nervous." He went on to say that it is "never possible for you to realise or remember properly that since [the other] cannot see the inside of your mind, [they] can never have the same assurance of your intentions that you have."* There is strong evidence that Washington and Tehran are trapped in spiralling mistrust of this kind. Both see themselves as on the defensive against an implacable foe, and each fails to appreciate that its own actions might be provoking fear and insecurity on the part of the other. Developing and elaborating Butterfield's work, Robert Jervis in the 1970s had described these dynamics as the "spiral model".* Jervis argued that what fuelled spirals was the inability of policy-makers to appreciate that they were ensnared in one. I illustrate these dynamics below in relation to US-Iranian interactions.

Washington does not give credit to the extent its past behaviour has created fear in the minds of Iranian policy-makers as to future US motives and intentions. Here, it is important to realise how far suspicion and mistrust are fed by historical memories. From Tehran's perspective, Bush's policy of regime change in his "Axis of Evil" speech — and the US led attack against Iraq the following year — only served to reinforce fears that go back to the coup that the United States and Britain orchestrated against Mohammad Mosaddeq, the democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran which brought the Shah to power in 1953.

The inability of US policy-makers to put themselves in the shoes of their Iranian counterparts is mirrored in the failure of the latter to understand that their past behaviour creates fear in Washington about Iran's motives and intentions. Here, the event which is seared in the collective US memory is Iran's kidnapping of the hostages after the Iranian Revolution. Iran's continuing support for Islamist groups using terror tactics — notably Hamas and Hizbollah — and its antipathy towards Israel reinforces US perceptions that Tehran is determined to export its revolution by violent means, and that a

Herbert Butterfield, *History and Human Relations* (Collins, 1951).

*Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton University Press, 1976).

confrontation with Iran is unavoidable.

There will always be uncertainty (and historical disagreement) as to whether observers and policy-makers were correct in their imputing of motives and intentions to others. But if the leaders of the United States and Iran are trapped today in dynamics (ideological fundamentalism and peaceful/defensive self-images) that have generated mutual fear and mistrust, escaping this situation will require very different policies to those currently being pursued by both Washington and Tehran. It will require leaders, who are prepared to act on the assumption that their state's actions have provoked legitimate fears on the part of the other, and to make corresponding moves that signal reassurance. Such a realisation seems unlikely today as the ideological fundamentalists in Washington and Tehran stake out seemingly irreconcilable positions on the nuclear issue, believing that any concessions will be exploited by their adversary as a sign of weakness. As US-Iranian relations become increasingly tense, it is worth remembering that Iran had made a highly significant move aimed at building trust with Washington in 2003.

Despite the ideological fundamentalists in the White House making Iran one of the targets in the "Axis of Evil" speech, the then Iranian President Mohammad Khatami was able to enter into the counter-fear of his US counterparts and appreciate that Iran's actions might be seen as threatening by the United States. To reassure Washington of Iran's peaceful intent, Iranian negotiators in a dramatic move proposed, in Gordon Corera's words, to "put everything on the table — including being completely open about its nuclear programme, helping to stabilise Iraq, ending its support for Palestinian militant groups and help in disarming Hezbollah." What Iran wanted in return, according to Corera, was a US statement that "Iran did not belong to 'the axis of evil', and steps leading to the normalisation of relations." But the Bush Administration had just toppled Saddam Hussein and was in a state of ideological and military hubris, believing that the time was right for regime change in the Middle East. Larry Wilkerson, Chief of Staff to US Secretary of State Colin Powell, said in an interview in 2006 that the hardliners' response to the invitation to talk to Tehran was "We don't speak to evil".*

The opportunity that had briefly opened up for a breakthrough in US-Iranian relations was lost. The rebuff to Khatami's trust-building initiative strengthened the position of the hardliners in Iran who, in a mirror image of ideological fundamentalist thinking in the United States, believed that Washington's ideology and values posed a fundamental threat to the security of the Islamic Republic.†

Four years later, the United States is prepared to speak to "evil", but only with the precondition that Iran suspends its uranium enrichment programme. From Tehran's perspective, this position is one that fails to accord the Islamic Republic the dignity and respect that

*Gordon Corera, "Iran's Gulf of Misunderstanding with the United States", BBC News, 25 September 2006, http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/5377914.stm, accessed 12 January 2007.

†Ali M. Ansari, *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Roots of Mistrust* (Hurst & Company, 2006), and Corera, "Iran's Gulf of Misunderstanding with the United States".

it feels entitled to. Iran is a proud nation with its history reaching back to the days of Persian supremacy, and it is virtually inconceivable that its current rulers will accede to US demands. Indeed, the fundamentalists in Tehran believe that any concessions on the nuclear issue will be interpreted in Washington as a sign of weakness. According to Omid Memarian, Iranian policy-makers reason that "if the US neo-conservatives have already decided to pursue the military option against Iran, nothing will stop them... by matching Washington's high-profile military manoeuvres and belligerent rhetoric, Iran's hardliners seek to remind the George W. Bush administration that any form of war would carry a heavy military cost to the US."*

The US demand that Iran suspend its enrichment activities is backed up by two Security Council resolutions adopted under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Resolution 1696 was adopted on 31 July 2006 and demanded that Tehran cease all sensitive nuclear activities. This was followed by Resolution 1747 on 24 March 2007 that imposed limited sanctions against the Islamic Republic for its failure to comply with the first resolution. It is clearly essential to the credibility of the Council, as the guardian of international peace and security, that Iran is not seen to have totally disregarded its obligation to comply with these resolutions.

One imaginative way to end the current impasse over the nuclear issue is ElBaradei's idea that the United States and Iran agree to "A double time-out of all enrichment-related activities and of sanctions".* This would allow both sides to agree to talks without losing face. The question is whether the ideological fundamentalists in Washington and Tehran are prepared to engage in a genuine dialogue with their ideological foe.

If the United States and Iran do pull back from confrontation and begin negotiations, the success of these will depend on how far both sides come to understand that their adversary might be acting out of fear and not aggression, including crucially, the role that their own actions may play in provoking that fear. Such awareness is only the first step, and the challenge is to fashion polices that effectively signal a state's peaceful intent. This requires Tehran or Washington to take a "leap in the dark". The phrase comes from Robert Schuman, the French Foreign Minister, in relation to the launching of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the first major act of European integration. As with the ECSC, it refers to a dramatic act which seeks to express and bring about a relationship of trust.

What kinds of "leaps in the dark" would build trust today between the United States and Iran? Can leaders in Washington and Tehran find the courage and imagination to take the moves that might transform US-Iranian relations, and with it the prospects for peacefully resolving the nuclear issue. The best context for addressing the proliferation challenge posed by Iran's nuclear programme would be an agreement on the elimination of all weapons of mass

*Omid Memarian, "Iran: prepared for the worst", Open Democracy, 30 October 2007, www.open-democracy.net/article/democracy_iran/iran_prepared_fir_the_worst, accessed 15 November 2007.

*Greg Webb, 'ElBaradei Defends Nuclear Plan with Iran', Global Security Newswire, 10 September 2007, http://204.71.60.35/d_newswire/issues/2007_9_10.html, accessed 15 October 2007.

destruction in the Middle East. Achieving this goal would clearly require Israel's nuclear weapons to be included, and securing this will, in turn, depend upon building a lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

Unthinkable? Perhaps. Yet are such possibilities any more unrealisable than a suggestion in 1983 that a US President, who had labelled the Soviet Union "the evil empire", would, within a few years, have become a trusting partner with his Soviet counterpart in starting to dismantle the superpower military confrontation of the Cold War? What is all too clearly thinkable is that ideological fundamentalists will continue to dominate policy-making in both Tehran and Washington. If this happens, the prospects for a peaceful resolution of the US-Iranian nuclear stand-off will remain bleak.