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SNAPSHOT

## Don't Go Baghdad on Tehran

How to Avoid Repeating the Iraq Debacle

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*Courtesy Reuters)*

*Shock and awe over Baghdad, 2003. (Faleh Kheiber /*

The Iraq War might seem a thing of the past. But nearly ten years after combat began, the United States and its allies are using policies to address the Iranian nuclear challenge that are eerily similar to those it pursued in the run-up to Operation Enduring Freedom. Just as they did with Saddam Hussein, concerned governments have implemented economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and low-level violence to weaken the Iranian regime and prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons, with the long-term objective of regime change. In Iraq, and seemingly now in Iran, diplomacy and inspections became a means to an end: building up a *casus belli*. The strategy failed miserably in Iraq a decade ago. It probably will in Iran, too.

This is not to suggest that Iran poses no threat. Tehran has reached the threshold of having a nuclear weapons capability. In August, an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report stated that the country has 2,100

centrifuges in an underground site and has intensified production of nuclear fuel. To curb the Iranian nuclear program, concerned states have applied increasingly severe economic sanctions on the Iranian central bank and its crude oil sector, carried out cyber attacks on Iranian centrifuges, and attempted targeted assassinations of Iranian scientists and engineers. Meanwhile, in Jerusalem and Washington, decision-makers appear to be aligning their time frames for a preventive attack [<http://nyti.ms/QphdvD>]. At the United Nations in early October, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu argued for instituting a redline on Iran's nuclear proliferation: Should Iran enrich uranium beyond a certain point, he urged, the world would agree to attack. European diplomats characterized his speech as reminiscent of former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell's to the United Nations in 2003, albeit with lower-quality graphics.

But calling for war while intensifying pressure on Iran, without also clearly defining steps Tehran could take to defuse the tension, removes any incentives for Iran to change its behavior. In the short term, the hostility of Western nations is likely to make it more difficult for Iranian moderates to rein in the nuclear program. And in the longer term, Tehran will increasingly question whether Iran ought to remain within the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in the face of economic sanctions, violence, and isolation. Without eyes on the ground, moreover, it will grow ever more difficult to assess Tehran's actual progress toward the nuclear weapons threshold. The world could miss the emergence of an Iranian breakout capability, or else blunder into another unjustified war.

## DISARMING SADDAM

At the end of the Persian Gulf War in 1991, the UN Security Council outlined the terms of a cease-fire between Iraq and the U.S.-led coalition. Resolution 687 obliged Iraq to accept the destruction of all of its chemical and biological weapons, all related components and facilities, and all nuclear weapons material under the supervision of international inspectors. Iraq also had to accept the establishment of an international inspection regime that could verify that Iraq did not retain or acquire nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons. In return, once the Security Council had determined that Iraq had lived up to its promises, it would lift the financial and trade (including oil) embargoes that UN Resolution 661 had imposed in August 1990. Iraq formally accepted the deal.

Between 1991 and 1997, Iraq moved steadily forward with disarmament. Even as it did so, of course, Iraqi leaders tested the resolve of the international community by frequently obstructing the inspectors. But the regime was determined to get the United Nations to lift the sanctions and realized that the international community remained committed to enforcing the cease-fire terms. So between 1995 and 1997, Iraq cooperated more thoroughly. By the first few months of 1997, Iraq had completed the disarmament phase of the cease-fire agreement and the United Nations had developed a monitoring system designed to detect Iraqi violations of the nonproliferation requirement.

At this point, several members of the Security Council argued that it was time to conduct a full review of Iraq's progress in preparation for lifting the sanctions. But the United States took a different view. In the spring of 1997, former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright gave a speech at Georgetown University in which she stated that even if the weapons provisions under the cease-fire resolution were completed, the United States would not agree to lifting sanctions unless Saddam had been removed from power.

With regime change now a stated U.S. objective and the easing of economic sanctions off the table, Saddam lost his appetite for cooperation. He foiled the inspectors at every turn and finally ousted them after a 1998 U.S.-British bombing campaign targeting Saddam's headquarters, air defenses and security organizations that was allegedly intended to weaken Iraq's ability to produce weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The UN Security Council could not rally together in support of the inspection regime or reform the sanctions, and misinformation about Iraqi weapons capabilities spread. In 2003, the George W. Bush administration used faulty assessments of the country's WMD program to make the case for war. Due to the information vacuum that followed the four-year absence of inspections, those allegations could not be easily countered. If monitoring had remained in place, the international community would have been confident in the fact that Iraq's ability to make WMD had not been reconstituted. A costly war could have been avoided.

## BREAKING THE BREAKOUT

The West's approach to Iran today mirrors the way it handled Iraq. Then, as now, the emphasis is on force, pressure, and uncovering evidence of an ongoing weapons program. However, the stakes are different in Iran. Already, continued pressure and isolation are making Iran less willing to cooperate. Following failed talks earlier this year, Iran has not been willing to engage in high-level negotiations. The head of the IAEA now expresses hope that Iran will return to the negotiating table. However, Iranian officials have delayed setting a new date for talks. They believe that they are facing a covert war. Recently, Iran has voiced concerns that IAEA inspectors pass intelligence information from sensitive military sites to their governments. With escalating pressure and open debate in Israel and the United States about an eventual attack, it is unlikely that Iran will be prepared to make unilateral concessions.

Letting diplomacy fall further prey to talk of war will undermine efforts to detect -- and hopefully prevent -- Iran's nuclear breakout. Last winter, Israeli leaders took to the airwaves with an information campaign trying to make the option of striking Iran seem more mainstream. Netanyahu attempted to discredit the IAEA's assessments that the Iranian nuclear program had not been resumed. Last winter, he indicated that intelligence reports suggested a more acute threat. But there is no evidence to prove his point.

So what should the United States and its allies do? In recent years, Iran has developed the capability to enrich uranium to 20 percent and has explored aspects of weaponization. The most recent IAEA report shows that Iran's enrichment capability is increasingly diversified and robust. Faced with these new facts on the ground, the United States will have to rethink making an agreement with Iran. The alternatives are worse. Military strikes will effectively remove the domestic constraints on the effort to develop nuclear weapons. Iran's weapons program will go from dormant to overdrive.

Two years ago, Iran agreed to a Brazilian-Turkish fuel-swap proposal under which Iran could develop nuclear power without accumulating raw material for nuclear weapons. Last year, Russia put forth a plan imposing a number of restrictions on Iranian enrichment and facilitating more intrusive IAEA inspections. Neither proposal was supported by the United States, as the Obama administration's top priority was to intensify international pressure on Tehran. Now, given Iran's progress toward building the bomb, any new proposal should include an intrusive monitoring system with an early-warning mechanism inside Iran's nuclear establishment. Such a requirement would help prevent a breakout program, as Iran would recognize that evidence of such activities would lead to military strikes and additional severe economic sanctions. The agreement would also have to be

accompanied with a list of clearly defined steps that Iran could take to achieve the lifting of sanctions.

Iran has repeatedly offered to host an intrusive inspection regime that would go beyond the IAEA's current program. Seyed Mousavian, a former senior Iranian negotiator, has suggested capping enrichment at five percent and agreeing not to store any excess enriched uranium on Iranian soil. In return, the United States and its allies would recognize Iran's sovereign right to enrichment technology and gradually lift sanctions. This appears to be a sensible way to move forward from the current crisis. However, for the past three years, the United States and Europe have stubbornly refused to seek a negotiated solution with Iran. The failed talks this spring and summer illustrated that when the West has nothing to offer, Iran withdraws.

Cooling down overheated U.S.-Iranian relations requires sound diplomacy, rather than a war of words. The Iraqi model, as outlined in the UN cease-fire resolution, contained sanctions linked to an initial inspection regime, followed by an ongoing monitoring arrangement in parallel with an assured lifting of the sanctions. To be effective, any sanctions regime must contain clear and reasonable steps toward the lifting of the sanctions. In Iran, such a program could prevent the emergence of a breakout nuclear capability. Perhaps, then, the world would avoid finding itself in another quagmire in the Middle East.

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