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Sanam Vakil

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## WAR WITH IRAN—AVOIDABLE OR INEVITABLE?

Sanam Vakil\*

Our topic here is war with Iran, is it inevitable or is it avoidable? There is nothing comforting about Iran today. I just got back from Iran; I was really searching for a ray of light. Unfortunately, I can tell you that I returned with little optimism. I am going to explain to you why.

The regime had projected its power quite effectively through missile tests, confrontational rhetoric, regional grandstanding witnessed through President Ahmadinejad's pan-Muslim agenda, aggressive anti-Zionist rhetoric, false projection of democracy, flagrant abuses of human rights domestically in Iran, and ultimately, and most importantly, an economic morass that has pervaded Iran. When we look at Iran, what are most visible are signs of a regime's struggle to balance its nuclear ambitions against clear pressure of a demographic struggle and pressure of strains on the regime from within. More clearly, it also seems that Iran and the United States, despite twenty-seven years of hostility and lack of diplomatic relations, are on a collision course over the nuclear issue and the future of regional power in the Middle East. I have been told by many people in the Bush administration that this is the year of Iran, and indeed it is. Ironically, as we well know, some interesting policies have been pursued against these axis of evil countries. We are seeing the ramifications of these policies today. So what are Iran's ambitions with its nuclear program? This is what I hope to discuss today.

At the same time, I would like to discuss some of the broader contextual issues about Iran's regional ambitions and domestic problems because they are interconnected. These issues are also connected with U.S. policy and its administration's ambitions in the Middle East because such ambitions are colliding with those of Iran. Indeed, most of the problem stems from the collision of communication and cultural understanding after twenty-seven years of hostility.

As I keep mentioning, twenty seven-years ago, at the inception of the Islamic republic, the population in Iran was hovering a little below thirty million. It took an Islamic revolution, war, and Ayatollah Khomeini's encouragement for the population to go forth and multiply such that Iran's population today is somewhat below seventy million. These evidence strains are demographic and they entrench the regime, presenting us with

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\* Assistant Professor of Middle East Studies, Johns Hopkins University. Speech given October 12, 2006 at the University of Florida.

one obvious sign. The regime is under siege from within. It really shows that the youth population in Iran, which numbers seventy percent of the population, neither recall nor embrace the revolution. Many long for the reform of its political system.

A reform was born, and many of you might remember that. It began under the auspices of former Iranian President Mohammed Khatami. The emergence of this reform movement sprang out of the factional political landscape that emerged in the 1990s after the failure and disappointment of the government's ability to deliver on its core promises of equality and social justice.

In the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war and years of economic isolation, many of the Iranian political elite, among them many who were supporters of the revolution and its ideology, came to refashion their vision. Thus, the election of President Khatami served as a catalyst for change in Iran. To make it very simple, Khatami challenged the status quo in his presidential campaign in many ways. He demanded the reappraisal of Islam within the political sphere, social liberalization, political tolerance, increased rights for women, rule of law, and what has become very catchy here—a dialogue of civilization.

In outlining these goals, he targeted Iran's youth population. These young people, that neither embraced nor participated in this revolution, have only experienced the social and economic frustrations due to twin weaknesses, or the Achilles' heels of this revolution today: unemployment and inflation. Housing shortages are among other problems as well as inability to get into universities, and the list goes on.

This is a revolution that is experiencing a strain due to the demographics of the nation. So, indeed, Khatami's election was a surprise and a challenge to the conservative clerical elite. He was elected the first time in 1997 with sixty-nine percent of the vote and again in 2001 with an eighty-one percent mandate. To complete this reformist sweep, it is important that a reformist Parliament came in to power in 2000. These institutional challenges are important to consider in the grand scheme of things because they have greatly impacted the conservative elements within the factional system of the Iranian government. What took place was basically a conservative empire, if you will, striking back.

In essence, factional rivalries intensified within the political sphere, and hardliners and conservatives set out on a decisive campaign to restrict the movement and success of both the President and his reformist cadre. Once vibrant and integrated, the regime under President Khatami, that was engaged in active and international relations and having emerged from the shroud of isolation into the warmth of the international community,

became isolated once again. You might remember that Tehran, from 1997 to 2001, experienced, what we call, a Tehran Spring.

This reform movement motivated the youth movement, the women's movement, and the student movement to bask in this Tehran Spring. The press blossomed; thousands of dailies and magazines opened in Tehran, and people began to freely write and criticize the government. Innate civil society also grew during these years of the reform movement. However, this flourishing was contained as these regime hardliners were threatened by the prospect of any regime transformation.

Effectively, Khatami and his ambitions were slowly restricted to foreign policy pronouncements. The student movement was crushed and contained. The press was restricted and the dailies were shut down. Editors were arrested, and journalists were imprisoned. Throughout this time, Khatami was relegated to foreign policy pronouncements, and he maintained diplomatic links with the international community using his foreign ministry to broker the nuclear negotiations that had begun, really, in 2003.

Jumping forward, President Ahmadinejad's 2005 election led to a reversal of fortune domestically in Iran. This is a hotly contested election, probably one of the most turbulent with regards to both domestic and foreign politicking. For those of you who are not aware, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was a former mayor and a devout loyalist to the regime, and he has worked his way through the rank and file.

Ahmadinejad is from the second generation nationalist populist movement. He sought to roll back corruption and return Iran to "Khomeini's" ideology, meaning a true revolutionary position that had become corrupted during this twenty-seven year period. Ahmadinejad also had core supporters in the military revolutionary guard and was also backed by the Supreme Leader. So, he had a strong mandate coming to power.

This election is particularly important for a number of reasons. It pertains to our discussion because it led to a change in policy with regards to the nuclear program, to domestic policy and regional policy. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad used a confrontational approach to advance his position in these three arenas. He was not elected on a very strong mandate, and he transitioned into a foreign policy arena to advance himself and gain more legitimacy within the Iranian streets.

I was recently in Iran, and I can tell you that the President today has more support than he did a year ago. This is because a year of successful confrontation against the West and against the United States has proved to be successful for the President. The Presidency in Iran is not a very strong position both historically and constitutionally, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

has jockeyed within this factional system and has made himself more relevant within this system by advancing his confrontation approach.

How did this happen? He wanted to transition from a position of weakness to strength, and confrontation proved to be more successful than the position of Detente that was pursued under the administration of Khatami. Acquiring nuclear weapons capability, though not necessarily bombs, is most important for Iran. Since Ahmadinejad's ascent to the presidency last August, Iran has hardened its refusal to suspend uranium enrichment and to resume negotiations of long term conditions. So each time the IAEA or the Security Council and other major powers have threatened Iran with consequences for proceeding, Iran has countered very brazenly.

This has worked very effectively for Iran because the international community has not known how to respond. Iran has used different counterbalancing measures in order to push its allies, economic partners, commercial partners, and security partners quite effectively in order to draw out this negotiating process.

Let me just give you a little bit of background about the nuclear process since 2003. Iran first agreed in 2003 to suspend uranium enrichment in order to induce the IAEA not to report Iran's violations of nuclear rules to the U.N. Security Council. However, Iranian engineers soon started to work on centrifuge components, prompting sterner warnings from the IAEA. Quickly thereafter, Iran, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom, who were the primary negotiators and proxied by the Bush administration, were busy in Iraq to deal with Iran.

To clarify matters, in November 2004, an agreement was signed in which Iran would once again volunteer to suspend all activities relating to uranium enrichment, and they would begin to explore a long-term package of incentives. In August 2005, just as the EU3 proposed these incentives to Iran, Tehran broke the suspension and resumed uranium conversion at Esvahan, its conversion facility. In early 2006, Iran abandoned the pretense that it was not going to negotiate any further and, thereafter, operated centrifuges to enrich uranium, daring the international community to finally respond severely. The international community sent Iran's docket to the Security Council, but Russia and China held off sanctioning Iran in order to present Tehran with an enhanced incentive package. Iran recently responded with a counteroffer but has continued to maintain that it has an indigenous right to enrich uranium under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. So what is to be done? Military action is the ultimate recourse for enforcing rules and norms.

Yet, these past years' events in Iraq, Afghanistan, and now Lebanon have dissipated; clearly, Iran's fear that military enforcement is

forthcoming. Before the Lebanon war, Iranian leaders said that U.S. military attacks on nuclear sites would unleash reprisals throughout the Middle East and that Israel would be the first to suffer. Hezbollah's arsenal of Iranian supplied rockets and missiles was the leading edge of this deterrent backed by Iran's capacity to escalate violence in Iraq and Afghanistan.

At the same time, let us not forget that President Ahmadinejad has embarked on an infamous propaganda campaign designed to enhance his power, both within Iran as well as across the Muslim world, by taking on key Arab and Muslim issues such as Israeli occupation. Ahmadinejad has been successful in winning Muslim hearts and minds. His famous statement about wiping Israel off the map was designed to win regional support, both in the battle for regional hegemony that is playing out in the Middle East and secondly, in getting that regional support to back Iran in the global or international battle between the EU, United States, and Tehran for its nuclear ambitions. What is important to note is that Ahmadinejad is clearly succeeding. He has been likened to the historical Malabdul Naser and is considered to be a hero in capitals as foreign and far-reaching as Cairo and Jacaida.

In recent polls, Admadinejad is considered to be the second most popular leader behind Hassan Nasrallah. These are issues that the United States must consider when thinking of Ahmadinejad today and how the United States deals with him. So where does the United States stand today? Resolution 1696 lies in wait at the Security Council, and the United States is pressing its partners, the P5 +1 and the Security Council, to begin sanctions negotiation against Iran.

I look at Iran's ambitions and I see that they want to emulate a country like Japan. Japan is about six months away from assembling a nuclear weapon. Perhaps today, thanks to North Korea, Japan might assemble that nuclear weapon a little faster, who knows, but Iranians look at Japan and want to emulate that Japanese model. In fact, the speaker of the Iranian Parliament once said he wanted Iran to become an Islamic Japan. Iran's nuclear ambitions are tied to its desires to be modern and to have modern technology. Its ambitions are also tied to its historical desires to be an independent nation.

Moreover, the more Iran is denied the opportunity to have these so-called nuclear programs, the more it will resist and continue to fight for a nuclear program. Iran has a history of resistance and it feels a sense of discrimination, and this discrimination is capitalized on by this regime as it plays on nationalistic ambitions of the people and plays on colonial historical sentiments that have been reproduced. Perhaps you might remember the 1951 nationalization oil crisis under Dr. Mohammed

Mossadegh, when the British wanted to deny Iran its right to nationalize oil.

These kinds of same sagas are being emulated again in Iran today. So resistance, discrimination, independence, modernization—this is how the government is trying to seize on these ideas of nuclear nationalism. What I also impress upon you is that Iranians do not wake up every morning and say “wow, I really want to have a nuclear program in our country.” The average Iranian probably wakes up and thinks of their livelihood because those are the pressing concerns in Iran—that is why Ahmadinejad was elected. Iranians do not know the difference between uranium conversion and enrichment.

Iranians do not know what nuclear energy is, but what they do know is that there are double standards that exist when they are applied to Iran. That is what the government has been quite effective at capitalizing on and why there is this sense of nationalism within the country. When I say Japan is six months away, that is perhaps the model that I see the Islamic republic replicating. Remember that this is a regime that already has the knowledge, and it has the ingredients. Everything is in place to pursue its program.

The elements that we are uncertain of are perhaps Iran’s timing, intentions, and capabilities. What are we to do? I think from the U.S. perspective, when we look at this country, we have to recognize that twenty-seven years of lack of communication, understanding, diplomatic contact, awareness, and language differences have deeply impacted our ability to communicate with Iran and has caused the resulting demonization. It deeply impacts our relationships, not only with Iran but with many other countries in the region.

This impact is clearly evident in an example that we hear often in Washington—this concept of two clocks. The Bush administration constantly talks of two clocks. There is the nuclear clock and the regime change clock, and the administration would like to stall Iran’s nuclear program long enough for a new regime to come into power in Tehran. This is a little counterintuitive because if you are trying to stall the nuclear program long enough for a new regime to come in power, then you are only going to perpetuate Tehran’s security concerns at the same time. So that frame of reference is not going to work with regards to Iran.

In addition, Washington does not understand that it is legitimizing Iran’s need for nuclear weapons to protect the regime. Secondly, Washington does not understand that this is an entrenched regime, that this is a regime under siege, willing to do whatever it needs to do to protect its security. It is an entrenched regime from within, but also, it is a regime

that has never been recognized from the outside and never recognized from the United States.

There are important dynamics to also consider. There are three options: the military option, containment option, and engagement option. So let us talk about the military option. An all out war has more or less been ruled out, so I hear, so let us cross our fingers. However, we speak of surgical strikes on Iran, will they be effective? Most likely not. Any sort of surgical strike on Iran will more or less retard its weapon program only two or three years. So if this is a country that already has the ingredients and the knowledge, you are more or less going to have to invade the country and kill the scientists in order to stop this program from evolving again and getting off the ground eventually in the future—that is one problem.

Secondly, this is a regime that has quite astutely built all of its nuclear facilities near very large population centers. So, the fall out from any sort of surgical strikes would be quite devastating. Needless to say, we would lose further hearts and minds. More hearts and minds would be lost and something to consider is that technically the Iranian streets in the Middle East are actually more pro-American, relatively more pro-American, ironically, than all of the Arab world. In fact, they are the most pro-American streets. Any sort of bombing would ultimately make us lose this pro-American constituency that we have. That would be disastrous for the United States.

A third reason that we should consider is that we would be actually legitimizing and doing Ahmadinejad the greatest favor in the world. He is dreaming of becoming a war president. He is begging for the United States to bomb Iran.

Basically, we should not do it. This would strengthen his hand domestically. There is nothing like a war to further consolidate a regime's power. In the same way that any American would rally and defend the territorial integrity of the United States in the event of a military strike, I guarantee you the same thing would take place in Iran. We are not talking about suicide bombers. We are just talking about people who are going to defend Iranian territory in the event of a military strike whether they like the government or not. I interviewed over a hundred people, and I received over a seventy percent response in favor of defense of territories—nationalism at its best. I definitely do not think a military strike is a good option. Although Ahmadinejad has been pandering to Muslim and Arab citizens, let us not forget that Muslim and Arab streets would definitely not be happy if we bombed Iran.

Would containment be effective? Further containment—further sanctioning. I argue no because we have been containing this regime for twenty-seven years. Where has it gotten us? Pretty much nowhere. This is



a regime that is further emboldened, they are strengthened, and they now have a populist, messianic, and more revolutionary president in power. Therefore, sanctions are probably not going to be very effective. On top of that, we cannot seem to build a coalition for sanctions. In fact, it is looking like we are going to have to have a coalition of those willing to enact sanctions and that seems very reminiscent of three years ago, last I checked. If we are starting to build a coalition of the willing for sanctions, I think maybe further along the way we might have to build a coalition of those willing to take another stance. That leaves me with my third scenario—engagement.

Engagement is possibly the only alternative left. There have been increasing demands for engagement all around Europe and in Washington, all throughout the United States in fact. Now there have been several attempts to engage throughout these years: Clinton in 2000 and the Iranians reaching out in 2003. They were supposed to meet quite recently to discuss Iraq, which did not happen, but timing never seems to be on either country's side.

Of course, in domestic politics the old adage is: domestic policy influences foreign policy matters. Hardliners are conservatives, if you will, and both administrations never want it to happen. Needless to say, I think that if either administration would like to be pragmatic, or salvage its interests, this would be the only solution, and before we think of the most extreme solution and think of bombing or war or further casualties, you must try engagement.

Nixon went to China, so why can Bush not go to Iran? Think of it this way, we have a country with a demographic crisis and also a legitimacy crisis in Iran, and this nuclear program in Iran must be couched as a tool for legitimacy and distraction from within. At the same time, this is a regime that has never been recognized and legitimized internationally.

Iran feels emboldened today. It has a greater power and persuasion than ever before. The nuclear program in Iran has become a tool for bargaining and deterrence. It is also argued that this is a regime that looks to be the vanguard of the region and needs modern technology to demonstrate its independence, as I mentioned, its resilience, and its legitimacy as it challenges the United States. The Arab and Muslim street admirers are challengers of the West because their own regimes do not do it. They look at Iran's confrontational stance and are inspired.

Ultimately, the Islamic Republic of Iran is trying to perpetuate its own power. This comes into conflict with U.S. interests and this is our impost today. It is necessary for the Bush administration to consider these options in light of American overextension in Iraq and Afghanistan, our two unfinished wars, our over commitment in the Middle East, domestic

apathy towards the war, and of course, increased calls for diplomacy which is an option that has never actually been fulfilled.

The Bush administration, however, does not always listen to calls for moderation. There are increasing rumors that Bush will try to enter Iran to right his wrongs in the region and take aim at this regional menace, the other member of the axis of evil (the true member of the axis of evil). Therefore, when two nations have not communicated and connected diplomatically, culturally, and politically for so long, for the conflict often times seems inevitable.

Often times both countries use each other to promote and project each other as evil for their own domestic interests. In this vein, when I look to the future, I would like to tell you that conflict is avoidable. Perhaps it will be inevitable if we do not look to the rational choice of moderation and engagement. That is what we should be pressing our governments to do, because if we do not we will see the inevitable choice of another war.

