

No to a Nuclear Iran

The negotiations being conducted by the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (the U.S., the U.K., France, China, and Russia) and Germany with Iran over the Iranian nuclear program have assumed a very high importance in American domestic politics, even as the subject becomes steadily more urgent in the Middle East. The principle that the United States would not negotiate with terrorists, though it has been allowed to lapse from time to time, is being left in tatters as these discussions drag endlessly on while Iran's status as the world's leading sponsor of terrorism is intensified, as indicated by the success of the faction it sponsors in Yemen, the Houthis. (They are allied to the local al-Qaeda, which claims responsibility for the *Charlie Hebdo* murders in Paris that brought on a march of 2 million French led by representatives of 60 countries, including the leaders of three of the countries in the talks with Iran, and the foreign minister of one.)

It seems hard to believe, but President Jimmy Carter fired Andrew Young as the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations in 1979 for conducting clandestine negotiations with the Palestine Liberation Organization, whose almost imperishable leader, Yasser Arafat, was received by President Bill Clinton, with Israeli leaders Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres (Nobel Peace Prize winners all, with, eventually, Carter, Al Gore, and Barack Obama), in 1995, though Arafat, despite being heavy-laden with peace laurels, had not allowed his terrorist activities to abate at all. When terrorism persists as it has, respectable countries have either to obliterate the terrorists (as the Obama administration claimed to have done, causing the reprehensible effort of the president and then-secretary of state Hillary Clinton to say that the murder of the U.S. ambassador in Benghazi, Libya, was the result of anger against a crank Islamophobic video-maker); or ignore them, no matter

the scale of their outrages; or negotiate with them. Whatever the failings of George W. Bush, including rather mindlessly promoting democracy in unfertile ground where it produced pro-terrorist results, as in Gaza and Lebanon and Egypt, his deeds were consistent with his words. This regime has talked the talk but stumbled and crawled from the path, and will negotiate with everyone on a no-fault, equal-opportunity basis.

The agreement being contemplated with Iran disturbs almost everyone. The ostensible outline of an agreement is to bring the number of centrifuges (which are the means of enriching uranium to nuclear-fission purposes) down from around 20,000, which is about ten times as many as are required to pursue the civilian nuclear potential that Iran claims to be its goal, to between 7,000 and 9,000 centrifuges. While it is, to say the least, discreditable that the negotiating powers are apparently content with such an arrangement (which also includes handing over a large quantity of processed material to Russia), it is to some degree comprehensible, as all of them except Germany are nuclear powers with retaliatory capacities far beyond anything Iran could conceivably aspire to; and though Germany does not have such a capability, the Iranian leadership, in the full efflorescence of its lunacy, could not possibly imagine that it could threaten Germany, much less act on a threat, without bringing down on its thickly clad heads the maximum military response of some of the other contracting powers.

Evidently, Iran's neighbors, and especially Israel – whom Iran has not ceased to threaten in the most blood-curdling terms since the day after the Shah's departure (a departure that occurred owing in large measure to the hostility of Nobel laureate Carter) in 1979 – see a militarily nuclear Iran differently. Israel sharply disagrees with the United States and the other negotiating countries about the level of nuclear capability it is safe to leave in Iranian hands. So also do

Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and even Turkey, though Turkey does so very quietly given its posturing around the Middle East as co-avenger of Islam against the impudent Jewish interloper-state (whose greatest ally outside Western Europe and North America and Australia Turkey was until the onset of the Erdogan regime). None of them can be so abstractedly theoretical about Iran's arrival at the nuclear threshold as the five Security Council powers. Obviously, Shiite Iran is at daggers drawn with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, which are the chief Sunni powers in the great dispute and rivalry between the two major branches of Islam (to which is added the ancient Persian-Arab animosity). Iran could dangerously threaten its Sunni adversaries, including Turkey. Egypt and Saudi Arabia would feel themselves much more threatened than Israel, which, whatever the genocidal and sectarian polemics of the deranged theocrats in Tehran, possesses a very sophisticated anti-missile defense and a retaliatory capacity that could obliterate Iran. This has chiefly caused Saudi Arabia to tank the oil price and lay the rod of potential national bankruptcy on Iran, and has warmed Egypt and Saudi Arabia up to Israel, as the only country that has both the ability and the will to take down Iran's nuclear capacity.

The politics of the Middle East is like a mess of eels constantly twisting and turning under the floorboards; in such an environment, Israel, for the Muslims (and Christian Lebanese and Palestinians) who can chin themselves on the existence of the Jewish state at all, is an anchor of stability and a military beacon of hope. Obama has abdicated, taking Western Europe with him into the pastures of enervated lassitude to join with the Russians and Chinese in the adjoining grasslands of cynical quiescence. With the endless retreat of the Obama administration, in which all attempts to disguise the withdrawal from Europe and the Middle East as a "pivot to Asia" have stopped, and with the continued Pavlovian

refusal of the Germans to take up the Bismarckian torch of Europe's greatest responsible power, there has resulted a valley of the weak, in which fierce little Israel stands tall and looms almost messianically in the self-preserving thoughts of its erstwhile Saudi enemies and unenthused post-Sadat Egyptian neighbors.

The domestic American scene is roiled, and not just with the majority of Americans who do not like an unending spectacle of American weakness in the world and do not accept that it is merely, or even, the avoidance of "stupid stuff." Even before any outline of a bill has emerged, the president has promised to veto any bill that comes from Congress that threatens Iran with enhanced sanctions if it does not sign on to the prospective porous agreement. This is preemptive appeasement of Iran. It is unprecedented that Obama has dragooned floundering British prime minister David Cameron, who will be facing his voters in three months, into lobbying several U.S. senators in favor of the emerging nuclear agreement. Obama has thus made himself, as the distinguished Canadian commentator George Jonas recently wrote, "Chamberlain cubed."

The president has stated that the prospective agreement with Iran, like many other inter-governmental agreements, does not require congressional ratification: an arguable case constitutionally, but in these circumstances a red flag to Congress. This pending bill is the only glance at the issue that Congress may have, before the stroke is committed and Iran gets the green light to become a threshold nuclear power only about three months away from the joys of nuclear saber-rattling. Congress has only a limited role in foreign policy (though the Democrats claimed much more in Vietnam and Central America), but it can't be shut out completely in a matter of such international-security importance as the nuclear-arming of the Iranian ayatollahs. The impasse is highlighted by reciprocal breaches of normal protocol: Obama put up Cameron to lobby individual senators, which is totally improper, and

the Congress has invited Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu to address a joint session of the Congress on March 3, two weeks before the Israeli general election, without consulting the administration. It is to this absurd and churlish depth that the conduct of the foreign policy of the world's greatest power has sunk.

This may be the last stop for the nonproliferation regime, which was never more than a club that anyone could join who would pay the scientists' and uranium miners' bills. It would be replaced by security based on retaliation and a vast increase in the number of nuclear powers. Massive retaliation kept a relative peace between the superpowers until the end of the Cold War, but the ayatollahs and those who emulate them are less worthy of confidence in their sanity and judgment than were Stalin and Mao and their heirs. (There was never the slightest question that the democratic nuclear powers – the U.S., the U.K., France, Israel, and even India – were interested only in deterrence.) Perhaps Winston Churchill was again prescient when he said in 1955, of the spread of nuclear arms: "Safety might be the child of terror and life the twin of annihilation." But perhaps not.

There is no longer any purchase on the disorder of events, and the Great Powers are not acting like Great Powers. The best that can be hoped is that the Senate will override Obama's veto and that the combination of Saudi oil-price reductions and the explicit, if discreet, threat of Israeli destruction of Iranian nuclear facilities from the air will patch the world through to the installation of more purposeful governments in Washington and London. There are signs of hope in Paris after the *Charlie Hebdo* outrage, and German chancellor Angela Merkel might be disposed to play a stronger hand if she could regain a more determined coalition partner. It is too much to expect less mischief from the Kremlin or anything from Beijing except China's immutable, bemused disdain for everything that happens at any distance from its

borders. A little leadership would go a long way.

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