

The power, and threat, of Iran

Contributed by Alastair Crooke, LATimes
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The nuclear issue may be a distraction from the larger strategic implications of Tehran's growing regional influence.

Writing From Beirut - It was pure drama: The leaders of the United States, Britain and France stepped onto the stage at the G-20 meeting in Pittsburgh last week to unveil Western intelligence that showed Iran had a second nuclear fuel enrichment facility under construction, a fact Iran had declared to the International Atomic Energy Agency the preceding Monday.

The Western leaders implied that their revelation was devastating for Iran as a credible player. U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates subsequently pronounced Iran to be "boxed in" and "in a very bad spot now." But anyone who listened to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's interview with Time magazine the day of the presentation, and to subsequent Iranian statements, will be clear that Iran, at least, does not see itself as boxed in.

Far from it. Ahmadinejad exuded confidence and simply -- and nonaggressively -- counseled President Obama not to go down this route. It might seem counterintuitive to most Americans and Europeans, but Ahmadinejad's advice might be worth pondering.

The Pittsburgh dramatics, in a sense, signal the culmination of three pivotal events that took place in the Middle East 20 years ago. The first was the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1989; the second was the 1991 Persian Gulf War; the third was Yitzhak Rabin's victory in the 1992 Israeli elections. The consequences from these momentous events are coming to a head for Obama now. His course of action may determine whether this region is about to enter a new phase of bitter conflict or a new era of strategic change.

The first two events hobbled Iran's traditional foes on its frontiers. Neither the imploded Soviet Union nor Sunni Iraq at war with a U.S.-led coalition was in a position any longer to contain an emergent Iran. As a consequence, Iran's place as a preeminent -- if not the preeminent -- power in the Middle East was guaranteed.

The third event -- the arrival of a Labor government in Israel -- was pivotal to Iran becoming "the nuclear threat." In a dramatic change of policy in 2002, Israel abandoned the Ben-Gurion doctrine of allying Israel with the regional periphery (Turkey, Ethiopia and Iran), an Israeli policy that persisted beyond the Iranian revolution, and began to engage with its Arab "vicinity."

To manage such a radical shift of talking peace to the former Arab "enemy," a U-turn that bitterly split the Israeli electorate and alienated Israel's supporters in the U.S., the Labor government began, from 1993 onward, to identify Iran to its supporters in the U.S. as the new existential "threat" -- in place of the former threat of the "never-changing Arab inability to reconcile" with Israel. Subsequently, the West would absorb the Iranian "threat" as its own, for very different reasons.

The significance of this for Obama is that he is not facing just the issue of Iran's nuclear program. This program is rolled into a more substantive and sensitive issue, one at the heart of the Iranian approach to negotiations: whether Israel and the U.S. -- nuclear weapons issue apart -- are able to come to terms with an Iran that is, and will be, a preeminent power in the region.

At present, these two issues have been conflated. Iran has signaled on various occasions that the nuclear issue could be resolved, but first it wants to know the answer to the wider issue: Can the U.S. bring Israel to accept Iran as a principal regional power? Can the U.S. accept such an outcome?

All here in the region understand the significance of this question: It is not just the nuclear weapon possibility that concerns Israel; it is the fact of Iranian conventional military power too. Already it is the conventional military power of Iran and its allies that is circumscribing Israeli conventionalmilitary freedom of action in the region. What we are dealing with is whether Israel and, by extension, the U.S., can accept that Israel will no longer enjoy its hitherto absolute conventional military dominance in the region.

This is, at bottom, the choice facing Obama: He can pursue a real solution, one that will have to acknowledge painful new realities and accept new forces arising in the region that inevitably will shift strategic balances. Or he can continue to try to contain them and risk a polarized and unstable Middle East.

The U.S. is slowly reducing its options through the Pittsburgh elevation of the nuclear file to an "ultimatum" choice. Perhaps Obama believes that in this way he will relieve pressure from Israel for unilateral military action. Perhaps he sees a powerful, conventionally equipped Iran as a threat to Arab allies.

To insist that Iran abandon altogether the nuclear fuel cycle is now probably unrealistic. Iran already has it. To set as an objective that Iran must never acquire the technology that would allow it to speedily move to weapons capacity at some future point in time is also unrealistic. But to bomb is even less a solution.

It seems, then, that we are heading to increasing sanctions on Iran. But these too are likely to be ineffective, as most specialists already admit. Such a policy will again polarize the region, split it, increase tensions and contribute to further isolating America and Europe in the Muslim world.

Despite the rhetorical stance of some Arab governments, the Arab and Muslim street -- and a number of states faced with Western escalation against Iran -- are more likely to perceive the conflict as one in which the West is seeking to weaken a Muslim rival in order to maintain Israel's military hegemony. Sentiment will turn against the West and Israel.

In short, the U.S. will again be boxed into an ineffective and unpopular policy. Already, the nonaligned majority and most Muslim states support Iranian rights under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. For the U.S. to elevate the nuclear issue to an ultimatum, while ignoring the new strategic reality of a powerful Iran, is, as Ahmadinejad hinted, a course of action that Obama may come to regret. The Pittsburgh theatrics may prove to have been shortsighted.

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