

# ENGAGING

## IRAN



The British left must face up to the truth: Iran could still develop a nuclear bomb in the next few years. This can only be avoided, says **Malcolm Chalmers**, by engagement and diplomacy



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Fears that a pre-emptive military strike in Iran would be the last foreign policy adventure of the Bush administration have overshadowed much of the last year. Many saw the intense diplomatic activity over Iran's nuclear programme as simply a repeat of the lead-up to the Iraq war in 2003 – a charade invented in order to justify a predetermined US commitment to regime overthrow.

Fortunately they were wrong. The lesson of this crisis is that international diplomacy can make a difference. The effort, led by the UK, France and Germany, has now been credited by US intelligence with playing the decisive role in persuading Iran to halt its weapons programme in autumn 2003. That has frus-

trated Washington's hawks, taking a military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities off the agenda for now.

Yet there is no room for complacency. The issue of Iran's nuclear ambitions is far from resolved, and further intelligence revelations could return military options to the table as rapidly as they have banished them in recent weeks. Other Iranian activities in the region (for example in Iraq and Lebanon) are also potential sources of conflict. Europe therefore needs to redouble its efforts to break the current deadlock in nuclear talks, opening the way for a wide ranging engagement between Iran and the international community.

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## Dangers of a nuclear Iran

Iran could restart its weapons programme at any time (indeed US intelligence only has 'moderate confidence' that it has not already done so) And an Iranian bomb remains a real possibility over the next five to ten years. The greater the stockpile of enriched uranium that Iran builds (without nuclear power stations that can use it), the more rapidly it could 'break out' of the Non Proliferation Treaty (the NPT) and build a nuclear weapon if it so chose. It would be folly, in these circumstances, to give up diplomatic efforts to persuade Iran to slow or freeze its enrichment activities.

We should be under no illusions about the difficulties involved in living with a nuclear-armed Iran. The danger is not that a future Iranian leader will suddenly decide, out of the blue, to obliterate another country in the region. Deterrence

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probably works pretty well to deter straightforward aggression of this sort. Rather, the risk is one of miscalculation, where Iranian leaders – or those of other states – misunderstand each others' 'red lines', become enmeshed in escalatory processes over which they have little control, and suddenly find themselves faced with horrific choices. The history of today's nuclear weapons states is fraught with examples of crises that came uncomfortably close to nuclear war – from the Cuban missile crisis to the India/Pakistan nuclear standoff. True believers in nuclear deterrence will argue that the outcome of these crises proves that the system works, and that we should not get too worried by an Iranian bomb. Others may be less sanguine.

Moreover, as Iran will be fully aware, its acquisition of nuclear weapons would generate enormous pressure on its Arab neighbours. The US would seek to dissuade Saudi Arabia from getting its own nuclear force by deepening its security commitment to the region, for example by deploying missile defences and offering NATO-style nuclear guarantees. But the Saudi Kingdom would have to weigh the political costs – and reliability – of being seen to become even more reliant on US protection. So it might also look at the possibility of acquiring a nuclear weapon of its own, probably from Pakistan. Not only has Pakistan demonstrated its mastery of nuclear weapons technology. It also has an established track record (through A Q Khan's international black-market network) of exporting this technology, including to Iran and North Korea. It might find it hard to deny supplying its closest Islamic ally.

The effects would not stop at an intensified Arab/Iranian arms race. The threat from Iranian, and perhaps Saudi, nuclear weapons would increase the pressure on European governments to invest in their own 'Star Wars' missile shields. If Russia objects – as it is doing to current US plans to deploy ground-based interceptors in Poland – that would be just too bad. Faced with Iranian or Saudi nuclear missiles within range of Europe, popular pressure for protection would be difficult to resist.

Nor could Iran imagine that its withdrawal from the NPT would lead, after a decent interval, to international acceptance of its new status as a nuclear weapon state, as happened with India and Pakistan after their nuclear tests. Neither of these countries had ever been a member of the NPT, and neither had made a solemn pledge that it was not seeking to develop nuclear weapons. An Iranian bomb, by contrast, would be a much greater breach of trust. The most likely reaction to an Iranian bomb, therefore, would be – as in the response to North Korea's nuclear tests – an intensification of sanctions and isolation, renewed efforts for it to reverse its policy, and a continued possibility of pre-emptive war.

It is a challenge for the left – particularly in the UK – to take up a coherent position here. It would be very strange if European social democrats, who believe in curtailing proliferation and multilateral disarmament, were not to take the threat of a nuclear Iran very seriously indeed.

## Grounds for hope

Since 2003, the UK, France and Germany – together with the EU – have taken the lead in negotiating with Iran, and in agreeing a package of incentives (if Iran suspends enrichment) and sanctions (if, as at present, Iran refuses to do so). Working closely with the US, China and Russia (the 'E3+3'), they have ensured a united international front, skilfully thwarting Iranian efforts to split off China and Russia, while helping to ensure that the US remains committed to a diplomatic track.

The process has often appeared frustrating, with one meeting after another apparently producing little except an agreement to continue talking. Yet the recent US National Intelligence Estimate concludes that diplomacy has actually been rather effective:

'Iran halted the program in 2003 primarily in response to international pressure... Tehran's decisions are guided by a cost-benefit approach rather than a rush to a weapon irrespective of the political, economic and military costs. This, in turn, suggests that some combination of threats of intensified international scrutiny and pressures, along with opportunities for Iran to achieve its security, prestige, and goals for regional influence in other ways, might – if perceived by Iran's leaders to be credible – prompt Tehran to extend the current halt to its nuclear weapons program.'

The more moderate voices in the Iranian establishment have been surprised and dismayed at the international unity against them. They are concerned that a policy of confrontation with the West may threaten the long-term survival and prosperity of the Islamic Republic. They appear to want to find ways of negotiating some compromise settlement with the international community, although it remains unclear how far they would be prepared to go in relation to existing enrichment activities.

Since 2005, the election of President Ahmadinejad, together with the rapid rise in Iran's oil revenues, has strengthened the hand of more radical elements, who believe that Iran had already made enough concessions to international pressure. But the nuclear issue continues to be the subject of lively debate in Iran. When Dr Larijani (himself a candidate in the last

Presidential elections) was removed as the country's lead nuclear negotiator in October, 183 members of the Majlis (the Iranian parliament) signed a protest letter. If Majlis elections scheduled for March 2008 show a weakening in support for the radical forces that support the President, moderate forces might be further strengthened.

### Breaking the nuclear impasse

At the heart of the current impasse in negotiations is Iran's refusal to suspend enrichment, and the US's refusal to be involved directly in top-level nuclear negotiations until it does so. Yet the recent US acceptance that Iran has (at least for now) halted its nuclear weapons programme may provide a new opportunity for breaking this deadlock, while avoiding loss of face on both sides.

The ultimate aim of this process should be to persuade Iran that it does not need to retain an indigenous capability for uranium enrichment, and that an alternative system could instead be agreed for guaranteeing supplies of fissile material for its future nuclear power programme. The E3+3 has offered to provide civilian reactors, if Iran wants them. Saudi Arabia has suggested a regional consortium might be formed for this purpose, drawing on a production facility in a neutral country such as Switzerland. These options are compatible with Iran's

repeated declarations that it is only seeking civil nuclear power. They could also save it considerable amounts of money.

It may be too much to ask for the current Iranian government to immediately agree to such measures as a precondition of negotiations, since they would require it to abandon even the option of nuclear weapons for the foreseeable future. But other interim possibilities could be explored that would retain some Iranian enrichment capability but still reassure the international community that

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Iran's capacity for bomb-making remains severely constrained. For example, Iran could agree to freeze the number of centrifuges at current levels, and to limit the total amount of stockpiled enriched uranium to a level below that required for building a weapon. This would allow it to continue 'research and development' activities with existing centrifuges, but hold off from expanding centrifuge production until civil nuclear power plants are ready to take the fuel they produce. In addition, it could be asked to reinforce international confidence in the civil character of its programme by implementing the enhanced inspection regime (the 'Additional Protocol') to which it had agreed in 2003, but subsequently suspended.

It is a strategy which involves a calculated risk. Measures of this sort would not remove Iran's option for resuming a weapons programme at a later date. Indeed they will allow it to continue to build experience in enrichment technology. But they will make it slower and more difficult than would otherwise be the case. Given this, they might be enough to persuade the E3+3 to recommend the suspension of further sanctions, allow the US to resume direct diplomatic contact with Iran for the first time since the 1979 revolution, and to open up discussions across the wide range of issues which divide the two

countries (including an end to Iran's national enrichment programme in return for multilateral fuel guarantees).

### Historical roots

The sooner that such discussions can take place the better. Iran's problems in its relations with other countries, both in the region and elsewhere, have never been only about nuclear weapons. They have deep roots in its history as a regional power, as well as in the more recent experience of foreign attempts to undermine nationalist regimes in Tehran.

In the modern era, Iran's best opportunity for creating a modern democracy was crushed by British and US sponsorship of the Shah's 1953 coup against democratically-elected Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh, after the Iranian parliament voted in 1951 to nationalise the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Responding to Mossadegh's observation that the British Labour government had itself recently nationalised coal and steel, a British diplomat was reported to have said 'we English have had hundreds of years experience on how to treat the natives. Socialism is all right back home, but out here you have to be the master.'

Subsequently, after the overthrow of the Shah in 1979, and with considerable support from Saudi Arabia and (it is widely believed) the US, Saddam Hussein's Iraq launched an invasion of Iran in 1980 that resulted in eight years of trench warfare. The international community stood by, refusing to condemn Iraq's aggression.

Iranian fears of US-supported aggression were confirmed when, only weeks after Iran had played a key role in facilitating the Bonn agreement on a new post-Taliban government in Afghanistan, President Bush made his infamous 'axis of evil' speech, strengthening Iranian fears that the US was bent on regime change. Most recently, many Iranian leaders believe that the US is seeking to undermine it from within, both through open attempts to fund NGOs (seen as the vanguard of the 'colour revolutions' in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine) and through alleged covert support for separatists in Iranian Kurdistan and Khuzestan.

If Iran has justifiable concerns over US support for regime change, however, both the US and Iran's Arab neighbours also have their own well-grounded complaints over Iran's efforts to undermine pro-western regimes in the region. The overthrow of Saddam immeasurably strengthened the Iranian position in Iraq, where most of the key Shi'a parties have close links with Tehran. Rather than support the consolidation of Iraqi government authority, however, Iran's Revolutionary Guard continues to provide training and weapons to rogue militia that undermine that authority and pursue ethnic cleansing of Sunni populations. There are credible reports of supplies of weapons to the Taliban in Afghanistan, despite Iran's historic antipathy for the group. Iran has actively supported Hamas in Palestine, and Hizbollah in Lebanon, urging them to oppose efforts at conflict resolution. Not least, Iran continues to be seen as a threat to the internal stability of the Arab Gulf states, many of which contain significant Shi'a and Iranian communities.

Any broader move to ease tensions with Iran will therefore have a very full agenda. It will not be possible to overcome decades of mistrust, and very real ideological differences, overnight. Nor can governments alone be responsible for the confidence-building that is necessary if relations between Iran and the rest of the world are to be put on a sounder footing.

Civil society and business play a critical role here. But governments can start a process, stepping back from the brink and allowing wider processes to take hold. The drumbeat of war in Washington has faded for now. This opportunity should be used to see whether it is possible to move towards a more stable relationship between Iran, its Arab neighbours and the Western powers.

### Time to talk

The sooner that the US and Iran can begin direct and wide ranging discussions the better. But talking will not be enough. Success in improving relations between the two countries, and between Iran and the wider international community, will depend on whether both sides are prepared to listen to the concerns of the other, and to reflect on what they need to do to address past policy failures.

For its part, the US will need to assess how it can reverse the disastrous effects of the policies it has pursued since 2001, during which time the combination of inaction over Palestine and the bungled occupation of Iraq has undermined US credibility worldwide, and in particular with the people of the Middle

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East. Unless the US can recover that credibility, and align itself with the aspirations of the people of the region, Iranian radicals will be encouraged to believe that time is on their side.

Many US leaders recognise this. Fear of Iran was an important driving force for the Annapolis peace conference, and for the new energy that the US is now giving to promoting an Israel/Palestine peace settlement. If progress can be made on this track, and the hopes of the Palestinian people can begin to be realised, advocates of violence can be marginalised and Hamas rehabilitated. In parallel, efforts to tempt Syria away from the rejectionist camp will be critical, not least to ensuring a resolution of the dangerous political crisis in Lebanon. In Iraq, growing signs of

frustration amongst Shi'a civilians at the criminality and brutality of Iranian-backed militia also provides an opportunity for dialogue with Tehran over the involvement of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard in supporting such groups.

Building such a 'peace campaign' is a big 'ask'. It is far from clear that the Israel government is prepared to make the risks, or that Fatah has the capacity, to take the peace process forward. Many in Hizbollah may be tempted (with Iranian support) to make a grab for power in Lebanon, rather than settling for the compromises of power-sharing with other parties. Syria does not appear to have abandoned its selective assassination of Lebanese politicians. The situation in Iraq remains highly fragile. And the security situation in Afghanistan is worsening, with the Taliban insurgency beginning to spread from the south and east of the country to areas nearer to Iran.

Discussion of these multiple problems with Iran will not provide a magic solution to them. Nor can it be expected to lead rapidly to a convergence of thinking. But it can perhaps begin

to persuade the Iranian leadership that it has more to gain from cooperating in addressing these problems, rather than in acting as a spoiler. Some in Iran may continue to see stable neighbours as a threat. But Iran, as the largest country in the region, with a relatively well-educated but underemployed population, can only gain from greater stability and economic opportunity. And Iran, more than most, stands to lose from conflict and civil war in Afghanistan and Iraq.

### A new détente

The threat of war with Iran, which many had thought would dominate the foreign policy debate for the last year of the Bush presidency, has lifted for now. But Iran's ambiguous nuclear programme remains a major threat to hopes for halting nuclear proliferation. European diplomacy has succeeded in persuading Iran to limit the most clearly military elements of its programme. It now needs to focus on the next step – suspending Iran's efforts to build a fissile material stockpile that could be used for a bomb at a later date, in return for which sanctions could be lifted and the US would move towards resuming full diplomatic relations.

This will not be easy. But Iran would have much to gain from the lifting of sanctions that would result. Not only would it provide an immediate boost to confidence in its troubled economy. It would also significantly strengthen the political élite (although not necessarily President Ahmadinejad), given the legitimisation that formal relations with the US would bring.

The long term implications of détente are less clear. The radicals – most forcibly represented by the President – have gained from fostering a fortress mentality, urging the Iranian population to further acts of sacrifice in defence of national and revolutionary interests. But Iran has undergone massive social changes over the last three decades, with its population becoming increasingly urbanised, educated, and aware of world events. Economic opening will encourage these processes, deepening Iran's integration with its neighbours and with wider global society, not least with rising Asian powers like India and China.

Iranians will have to decide whether this leads to a more democratic form of government. The 'grand bargain' being explored here is that the West would make it clear that it will not export (counter-) revolution to Iran, provided that Iran does not seek to export revolution to the rest of the region. Washington neo-cons who insist on western-led regime change will object. But they are unlikely to prove true friends of Iranian democracy if they ignore how powerfully the history of colonial and US intervention continues to shape attitudes there (and indeed in much of the post-colonial world).

The international community has rightly endorsed its 'responsibility to protect' populations affected by genocide or large scale killing, even by military intervention as a last resort (as in Kosovo in 1999). But this cannot be a licence for forcible intervention in the political affairs of any regime that Western countries don't like. In a region deeply imbued with anti-Western feeling, and as a result the source of increasing anti-Western terrorism, Iran is one enemy we can do without.