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IT'S TIME TO PURSUE REGIME CHANGE IN IRAN

January 5, 2015

By John Hannah

There are lots of reasons to be skeptical that 2015 will see a diplomatic breakthrough in efforts to end Iran's nuclear weapons bid. But one of the more compelling is that there's virtually nothing in the historical record to suggest that the Obama administration's current negotiating strategy can succeed.

Though rarely referenced, the United States actually has substantial experience in successfully curbing the nuclear ambitions of states, like Iran, that to varying degrees can be described as authoritarian, anti-American, and rogue. The number of cases isn't huge, but there's certainly enough to offer policymakers useful food for thought on what has worked in the past.

Currently out of favor in many circles, regime change has a proven track record in helping put a number of bad actors out of the nuclear weapons business. In Latin America in the 1980s, the crucial factor that terminated bomb-making programs in Brazil and Argentina was democratization and the transition from military dictatorship to civilian rule. In South Africa, the looming collapse of apartheid provided the government of F.W. de Klerk with the necessary incentive to dismantle the country's small nuclear arsenal. So, too, in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse, fledgling new states in Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus saw it as in their best interests to rid themselves of large nuclear stockpiles that they'd inherited.

Also rarely acknowledged in polite foreign-policy circles is the success that military action has enjoyed in keeping at bay the nuclear ambitions of some of the world's worst states. Israel's 1981 attack on the Osirak reactor short-circuited Saddam Hussein's plutonium pathway to a bomb, and 10 years later, the American military's overwhelming victory in the first Gulf War paved the way for the dismantling of Iraq's crash program to enrich uranium. And heresy though it may be, I'll say it anyway: For all the subsequent problems that may have flowed from Operation Iraqi Freedom, the

removal of Saddam's regime put to rest forever the legitimate fear that the "Butcher of Baghdad" would one day find a way of getting his hands on the world's most dangerous weapons.

Of course, we also have the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to thank for sparing us the nightmare of Syria's Bashar al-Assad with nuclear bombs. As you contemplate the all-too real horrors of the Syrian conflict to date, just think for a moment about that particular danger averted. The 2007 strike on the Al-Kibar reactor – undertaken, it's worth reminding, against U.S. advice – should, in retrospect, be viewed as one of history's great counter-proliferation successes.

Finally, short of an actual military attack, a credible threat to use force laced with the prospect of regime change has also produced important results in denuclearizing rogue states, with Libya being the prime example. Opponents of the Iraq war may hate to admit it, but rest assured that the confluence of a bedraggled Saddam Hussein being pulled out of his spider hole and Moammar Gadhafi's ultimate decision to pack up his nuclear weapons infrastructure lock, stock, and barrel and ship it off to the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee was no mere accident.

Libya wasn't alone in taking note of America's crushing 2003 defeat of the Iraqi military. Iran noticed, too.

Less than three weeks after the start of the campaign, U.S. tanks were sitting in downtown Baghdad, and Saddam's regime was on history's ash heap – something Iranian forces hadn't come close to achieving in more than eight years of bloody war with Iraq in the 1980s. The Iranians took seriously their place on President George W. Bush's "Axis of Evil" and acted smartly to lay low and limit their exposure – publicly, by agreeing temporarily to suspend their enrichment of uranium, and more covertly, we now know, by mothballing aspects of their nuclear program most flagrantly aimed at weaponization.

Of course, Iran's decision to put the brakes on its nuclear program didn't last. Truth be told, among the other serious lapses in the Bush administration's Iraq war planning, you can add the failure to give serious thought to how the presence of a victorious American military on Iran's doorstep might be exploited to advance U.S. strategic goals vis-à-vis the mullahs, particularly with respect to nukes. Before too long it became clear that the U.S. would have its hands full fighting the Iraqi insurgency and that any inclination that might have existed to engage in coercive diplomacy with the Iranians had largely vanished. The moment passed, the pressure eased, and Iran's centrifuges eventually started spinning again.

Nevertheless, the 2003 experience with Iran is still suggestive. First, it was entirely in keeping with the historical pattern indicating that dictatorial, rogue regimes are only likely to be moved off their nuclear agendas when confronted with a very powerful stick – whether regime change, military attack, or an acute form of pressure that is perceived to put regime's survival at risk, preferably including a highly credible threat of force.

Second, Iran's behavior in 2003 was also consistent with the Islamic Republic's own pattern of decision-making, and with the limited information available about the circumstances that have triggered other important shifts in Tehran's policies. Most recently, in 2013, crippling Western sanctions brought the Iranian economy to its knees, spurring a dramatic revamping both in Iran's politics (calling President Hassan Rouhani) as well as its willingness to engage Washington and its partners in nuclear negotiations. Hardly a coincidence that this strategy to stave off regime instability by blunting escalating pressure was orchestrated by Rouhani and now-Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif – both of whom were key architects of Iran's nuclear gambit in 2003.

But perhaps the most striking instance of Iran undertaking a policy reversal of truly strategic proportions came in 1988. After waging holy war against Iraq for eight years, vowing to achieve total victory, the Islamic Republic's founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, was suddenly forced to drink from what he termed the "poisoned chalice" and at long last accede to a ceasefire that he had always rejected. Political, economic, and military threats had mounted throughout 1988, putting the Islamic Republic's survival in growing peril. But the final straw almost certainly came in early July when a U.S. Navy ship accidentally shot down an Iranian civilian airliner, killing all 290 people on board. Convinced that the incident signaled that the United States was on the verge of openly entering the war on Iraq's side, Khomeini, in less than two weeks, made his decision to sue for peace.

All of which brings us to the Obama administration's current efforts to secure a comprehensive agreement that truly ends (rather than merely postpones) Iran's decade-long quest for nuclear weapons. If history strongly suggests that rogue states in general, and Iran specifically, are highly unlikely to take such fateful decisions in the absence of intense, escalating pressure that puts the regime in fear for its survival, Obama and his team today appear to be following the opposite strategy. Having successfully wielded harsh sanctions to coerce Iran back to the negotiating table, it's hard not to conclude that the administration has subsequently played into Rouhani's hands by relenting too soon. The fact is that at least since the signing of the interim deal known as the Joint Plan of Action (JPOA) in November 2013, the U.S. has been steadily easing pressure on Iran across the board.

Politically, Iran's international isolation has all but lifted. High-level politicians, diplomats, and businessmen from around the globe are flocking to Tehran. Rouhani and Zarif are welcomed with open arms in world capitals and hailed as cooperative and courageous partners by their counterparts.

Economically, times may still be tough in Iran, but compared to eighteen months ago things are definitely looking up. From a severe contraction of almost seven percent in 2013, Iran's GDP began expanding at a modest one to two percent rate in 2014 – thanks in no small part to limited sanctions relief and growing market confidence that Iran's economic future is brightening.

Finally, militarily, the prospect of an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities is today virtually non-existent. For their part, U.S.

officials have been somewhat pathetically lining up to reassure the Iranians that we mean no ill will toward their Syrian ally, Bashar al-Assad, lest the mullahs take offense and make life difficult for our forces in Iraq. Given that spectacle, just how worried can they be right now about a possible U.S. attack on Iran itself? As for the Israelis, whose military threat against Iran was always taken more seriously than Obama's, well, the administration has also done its level best to denude an IDF strike of all credibility – exhibit one being the recent boast of a senior U.S. official that the administration had successfully cowed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu from using force, and that, now, "It's too late for him to do anything."

If history is any guide, none of this can be good. There simply is no precedent to suggest that a state like Iran can be disabused of its nuclear weapons aspirations in an environment where the political, economic, and military threats arrayed against it are all steadily declining, rather than intensifying. It's a relentlessly tightening noose, not a gradually loosening one, that has in the past proven the critical ingredient if nuclear diplomacy with a brutal dictatorial regime is to stand any chance of succeeding.

The story of the Iran negotiations since the signing of the JPOA 13 months ago only bears this conclusion out. On the one hand, there has been a growing list of U.S. concessions on a whole host of core issues, including Iran's right to enrich uranium, its research and development efforts on advanced centrifuges, its work to develop long-range ballistic missiles, and the urgency of coming clean on its past weaponization activities. On the other hand, Iran's demands have been escalating, including the brazen insistence that, in relatively short order, it be permitted to build an industrial-size centrifuge program that could expand its capacity to enrich uranium by a factor of 10 to 20.

Unable to secure a comprehensive agreement, the talks have already been extended twice. Increasingly, it looks as if the United States has maneuvered itself into the untenable position of either being forced to accept a bad deal or continuing to kick the can down the road indefinitely through further extensions of the JPOA that de facto consecrate Iran's standing as a threshold nuclear weapons state – slowly but surely strengthening its international standing and economy, while maintaining the option to break out or sneak out to a nuclear bomb at a time of its choosing.

And the United States continued losing leverage.

Whether or not this dynamic can be broken at this late date is in serious question. An awful lot appears to have been given away already, which the Iranians will no doubt insist on pocketing even as they demand more. It remains to be seen whether a new, more hawkish Congress will be able to resurrect its role as a major force for good in the standoff with Iran – a role it played so effectively in 2011 by convincing a reluctant Obama to go along with the crippling sanctions that proved so essential in getting Iran to the table in the first place. The odds would be much higher, of course, if Obama was actually committed to meeting Congress half way to help shape a joint strategy aimed not at blowing up the negotiations, but at strengthening U.S. leverage, bringing along key allies, and bolstering the prospects for coercive diplomacy.

Unfortunately, there is little sign of that happening. Nor is there much chance of the White House taking any of the myriad of other steps that could significantly ratchet up the pressure on Iran, from direct action to bring down the Assad regime, to interdicting Iranian weapons shipments to its terrorist proxies, to bolstering Israel's attack options through the supply of America's most powerful bunker busters and the planes to deliver them.

Rather than seeing such moves as essential elements in a comprehensive strategy to maximize U.S. leverage and the chances for diplomatic success, the administration instead appears to view them all as reckless provocations aimed at destroying diplomacy's chances. As a result, all it has been left with is a toolkit filled with political reassurances, more negotiating concessions, promises of economic sweeteners, and private supplications of friendship from the President of the United States to Iran's Supreme Leader. Is that really the most likely means of convincing a revolutionary theocracy that has been at war with America for 35 years to give up its nuclear ambitions and hegemonic designs? History suggests no. Obama says yes. 2015 should be the year we find out who's right. The stakes are high. Place your bets. Game on.