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Iran's nuclear diversion

By Ray Takeyh

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As the Obama administration grapples with the conundrum of Iran, it must balance its proliferation concerns with its moral responsibilities. Iran's post-election tremors have hardly subsided; in fact, the regime is systematically eviscerating its democratic opposition. Amid their merciless efforts to consolidate power, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his allies see discussion of the nuclear program as a means to silence the criticism that their domestic behavior merits. In the coming months, Iran will no doubt seek to prolong negotiations by accepting and then rejecting agreed-upon compacts and offering countless counterproposals. The United States and its allies must decide how to approach an Iranian diplomatic stratagem born out of cynical desire to clamp down on peaceful dissent with relative impunity.

International scrutiny remains trained on Iran's nuclear program, but outside that glare, the structure and orientation of the Revolutionary Guards are changing dramatically. The regime in Tehran is establishing the infrastructure for repression. The leadership of the Guards and the paramilitary Basij force have been integrated and are much more focused on vanquishing imaginary plots by a (nonexistent) fifth column. Indeed, the commander of the Revolutionary Guards, Mohammad Ali Jafari, warned in a speech last month that the structural changes were intended to "take on cultural divisions and the opposition to the soft war." To oversee the new campaign of repression, Mohammad Reza Naqdi, formerly deputy director of the Quds Brigades intelligence apparatus, has been appointed head of the Basij. Hossein Taeb, the notorious former commander of the Basij, has assumed leadership of the Guards intelligence bureau. Both have a history of involvement in torture and assassination campaigns at home and abroad, and they have imprisoned journalists and reformist politicians on trumped-up charges.

A peculiar trait among Iran's younger generation of conservatives is the extent to which they idealize the early 1980s. Most objective observers of Iran see those years as a time of foreign invasion, ethnic separatism and social division. But the leaders of Iran's security forces and many politicians today, including Ahmadinejad, see a time when the Islamic Republic salvaged its mandate from heaven through devotion and steadfastness. To fend off the forces of secularism and liberalism, their thinking goes, the Republic of Virtue unleashed its reign of terror and, with violence and a cultural revolution, managed to cleanse the nation.

Similar measures are being contemplated. Consider that in recent months, former presidential candidates Mehdi Karroubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi have been threatened with arrest; universities targeted by "purification" campaigns; civil society activists given harsh prison sentences after contrived judicial proceedings. The callow followers of the supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, are mobilizing the machinery of state for a ruthless purge of the system.

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Yet as the regime seeks to restore its grip on power, the Islamic Republic is once again moving in contradictory directions. On the one hand, the clerical state is busily impugning its critics as agents of the West while simultaneously expressing a desire to engage those foreign powers. The masters of the theocracy have learned from the protests that followed the June presidential election; they appreciate that in the era of social networks and other electronic communications, their unsavory practices are vulnerable to international exposure. Images of protesters being beaten and university dormitories stormed can trigger international calls for sanctions and further ostracize an already isolated theocracy. To mitigate such calls, Tehran will sporadically offer to discuss the nuclear issue to whet the appetite of Western powers -- before moving against its remaining domestic detractors. The powers that be in Iran hope that a prolonged and inconclusive negotiating process will cause the West to recoil from criticism, much less impose sanctions over Iran's human rights abuses.

Dealing with Iran has always been a complicated enterprise with moral hazards. The persistent mistake that the West has made is to place the nuclear issue above all other concerns. The Iran problem is not limited to illicit nuclear activities, and it is somewhat incomprehensible that the United States and other nations can contemplate nuclear transactions with a regime that maintains links to a range of terrorist organizations and engages in brutal domestic repression. Western officials would be smart to disabuse Iran of the notion that its nuclear infractions are the only source of disagreement. Iran's hard-liners need to know that should they launch their much-advertised crackdown, the price for such conduct may be termination of any dialogue with the West. Only through such a policy can the United States advance its strategic objectives while standing up for its moral values.

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