

Facing Down Iran

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Ilan I. Berman, *Tehran Rising: Iran's Challenge to the United States* (Lenham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 224 pp., \$24.95.

THIS CONCISE book represents a well-integrated compilation of Ilan Berman's writings on Iran, supplemented with new arguments and information. Its main thesis is that the United States lacks a coherent policy to thwart Iran's nuclear ambitions. Although the analysis is deliberately stark, *Tehran Rising* makes an essential contribution to the ongoing debate about how the United States should respond to the Iranian challenge.

Mr. Berman, vice president for policy at the American Foreign Policy Council and the editor of the *Journal for International Security*, begins by reviewing Iran's support for international terrorism since the advent of the Islamic Republic in 1979. Berman stresses the unswerving commitment of the regime's leaders since Ayatollah Khomeini to providing such assistance. Like the early Bolsheviks, they have seen exporting revolutionary principles (albeit Shi'a Islamic fundamentalism rather than Marxism-Leninism) as their core mission. Like Moscow during its heyday, Tehran has hosted myriad would-be revolutionaries and provided them with military training, financial assistance and other support. The regime's closest terrorist ally, Hizballah, drove Western and Israeli military forces from Lebanon and became an influential player in Lebanese national politics. The text underplays, however, the weak performance

of Iranian-trained revolutionaries in most other countries, and the negative blow-back Tehran has experienced from its subversive policies—including protracted pariah status, a paucity of allies during its eight-year war with Saddam Hussein, and now the apparent spill-over of violence from post-Saddam Iraq into Ahvaz and other Iranian cities. Only in recent years have Iran's leaders, by renouncing their external revolutionary ambitions, largely succeeded in mending overt relations with Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern governments.

Berman then moves on to present a comprehensive summary of Iran's extensive nuclear-related activities. He cogently argues that Iranian behavior fits a country seeking nuclear weapons, rather than one exclusively developing a civilian nuclear energy program. In their complex negotiations with Britain, France and Germany, Iranian officials have given the concept of a "phase transition" a bad name by constantly freezing and unfreezing their uranium enrichment program. One fact suggesting Iranian interest in nuclear weapons that the text does not mention is the nature of Iran's ballistic missile programs. Thus far Tehran has devoted resources toward improving their range rather than their accuracy, making these missiles most suitable for carrying nuclear, rather than conventional, warheads. While Berman does highlight the assistance that foreign states and non-state actors have provided to Iran's nuclear program, he makes it clear that Tehran could soon possess the indigenous capacity to manufacture nuclear weapons even without such help.

Still uncertain is whether some Iranians, now or in the future, would have both the interest and the ability to transfer nuclear weapons, radiological materials or related items to terrorist groups. Prudent American policies should aim not only to prevent such a transfer, which would threaten the United States even more than an Iranian national nuclear deterrent, but also to respond effectively should it occur.

Berman then addresses a topic that typically has received much less attention: the recent improvements in Iran's relative political-military positions in the Persian Gulf, the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus. He notes how the U.S.-led invasions and occupations in neighboring Afghanistan and Iraq have provided Tehran with geopolitical openings in those countries. Besides these developments, the author ascribes much of Iran's regional resurgence to the soaring price of energy, which has resulted in an exponential increase in the petrodollars at the regime's disposal. By 2000, Tehran had become the third-largest purchaser of Russian arms exports and had acquired weapons from China, North Korea and other sources (including private dealers) as well. The country also continues to develop its indigenous defense industry. Together, foreign and domestic arms suppliers have enabled Iran to improve its navy and shore-based defenses near the sensitive Strait of Hormuz and to deploy ballistic missiles that could threaten targets such as Israel more than a thousand miles away.

ALTHOUGH BERMAN convincingly dissects Iranian intentions, he exaggerates Iranian capabilities. For example, the third chapter (entitled "Suddenly a Superpower") speaks of Iran's "massive defense acquisitions", "far-reaching military maneuvers" and alleged transformation into the "preeminent military power in the Persian Gulf." With

the recent decimation of Iraq's military, Iran's armed forces clearly enjoy superiority over its Persian Gulf neighbors, but they would not long survive a clash with the American military. Its U.S.-supplied warplanes possess 1970s-era avionics and sensors; its ground forces lack mobility; its command-and-control technologies lag decades behind those found in most advanced Western militaries. Politically, Tehran's influence in most of Central Asia and the Caucasus remains much less than that of Russia, China or the United States. Iran is not a full member of any of the four multilateral security institutions most active in its neighborhood—the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Gulf Cooperation Council or NATO—and must rely on a disparate array of underdeveloped and frequently conflicting bilateral relationships to advance its regional interests.

Berman's analysis also may underestimate the American government's commitment to countering Tehran. His general view is that for many years U.S. policymakers have not taken the Iranian challenge sufficiently seriously and that their response has therefore proven inadequate. A passage from the introduction summarizes much of the author's critique:

Embroiled in a worldwide war on terrorism, the United States has not yet turned its attention to Tehran. Instead, it has ceded leadership to the international community on the most prominent aspect of the global threat posed by Iran: its nuclear capacity. And it has remained silent on Iran's mounting adventurism in the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, and the Caucasus, as well as its persistent support for international terrorism.

Other observers also have accused the current Bush Administration of "outsourcing" to foreigners its policies toward Iran (and North Korea), but it would be more correct to say that, while mem-

bers of the administration share a general concern about Iranian behavior, its various factions have remained divided over how best to respond. The result, as with North Korea, has been deadlock, disjointed and sometimes conflicting policies, and the repeated postponement of difficult decisions in the hope that external developments (such as European or Russian intervention) will in time resolve these problems.

In addition, some material presented in the book's concluding chapters weakens the arguments found in the first part. For example, in making the case that a well-constructed American response could exploit favorable geopolitical trends to overcome the Iranian challenge, the author shows how various developments already are working to check Tehran's influence. Rather than seeking to appease Iran's growing strength, for instance, its neighbors have taken steps such as strengthening their defenses against ballistic missile attacks to counter it. In a recent article in the *International Herald Tribune*, Berman himself notes that Russian policies toward Iran—a relationship the book characterizes as a “strategic partnership”—might be hardening as Moscow comes to appreciate how Tehran could threaten Russian interests in the Caucasus and elsewhere.

Despite the overtly stark description of the Iranian threat found in the initial chapters, the underestimation of the countervailing forces already constraining Tehran, and several ambitious proposals that might prove counterproductive if they lead Washington to hedge prematurely against still-incipient threats, the last chapters offer a coherent set of reasonable recommendations that warrant American policymakers' profound attention. In this respect, *Tehran Rising* provides a valuable counterpart to the influential 2004 Council on Foreign Relations report, *Iran: Time for a New Approach*. The members of the CFR Task Force ad-

vocated abandoning expectations of near-term regime change, selectively engaging the current government on specific areas of mutual concern and using combinations of negative and especially positive incentives to try to shape its behavior (for example, taking steps to reduce the insecurities identified as driving Iran's nuclear weapons program). In contrast, Berman considers attempts to negotiate meaningful agreements with the present Iranian regime as futile, given its unswerving commitment to aggressive revolutionary policies. Instead, he advocates policies that resemble the containment strategy U.S. leaders successfully employed against the previous Soviet threat. The most important components of this approach would include strengthened multilateral initiatives both to impede Tehran's access to WMD-related items and to prevent direct and indirect (that is, through terrorism) Iranian aggression, combined with intensified efforts to accelerate peaceful regime change within Iran.

The author cogently analyzes the weaknesses associated with alternative policies. Attempting to apply military pre-emption would encounter substantial resistance from foreign governments (including Britain) and within both Iran and the United States now that Operation Iraqi Freedom has highlighted the difficulties associated with this option. An effort to destroy Iran's nuclear weapons-related infrastructure through a limited campaign involving precision airstrikes and sea-based attacks and supporting special operations would also likely fail given our poor intelligence regarding Iran's suspected WMD sites. At best, it would merely delay Iran's program by a few years and could prompt asymmetric retaliation in Iraq or elsewhere. Occupying the entire country through an all-out invasion would prove especially problematic given its large size, likely Iranian resistance and the long-term commitment of so many U.S. troops in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere.

On the other hand, attempting to coexist with a nuclear-armed Iran under its current government in the hope that it will pursue moderate policies would entail great risks. Having a nuclear deterrent against the United States might reassure Tehran's leaders about their security and make them more willing to introduce additional domestic reforms and improve ties with Washington. More likely, the regime would seek to hide behind its nuclear shield while it continued to support terrorism and pursue other anti-American policies.

GIVEN THE problems with both coexistence and combat, the best approach until a major transformation occurs either within Iran itself or with its external environment is to employ multilateral policies like those advocated in the book's conclusion to change its behavior. Such a strategy would be more effective, however, if it explicitly ranked the various threats Tehran presents to the United States and allocated resources accordingly. The recommendations also would be even stronger if they more clearly differentiated between policies the United States should pursue now to help shape the international environment and hedging strategies Washington should adopt only if these shaping strategies fail. For example, although the author explains why an Osiraq-like military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities likely would entail more costs than benefits, the text does not specify how the United States should respond if timely regime change does not occur and the current Iranian government actually deploys an operational nuclear arsenal. Mr. Berman points out that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons could embolden Tehran's anti-American-

ism and lead Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt and other countries to seek their own nuclear arsenals. U.S. policymakers need to begin crafting detailed plans to hedge against such adverse developments long before they occur.

Since Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons poses the greatest danger, Mr. Berman's stress on reinvigorating U.S. public diplomacy to empower the government's nonviolent opponents appears misplaced. First, the Iranian people already evince widespread antipathy toward the current regime, with little apparent effect. The recent election of Tehran's mayor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as the next president, like the triumph of the conservatives in the voting for parliament last year, highlights the futility of relying on the ballot to promote substantial political change. Second, the absence of a charismatic leader capable of uniting the opposition will impede its influence and contributes to widespread popular apathy about political affairs. Third, the substantial domestic support for pursuing the nuclear option means that any successor regime probably would continue to develop a civilian nuclear power industry, with its inherent military potential, even if it curtailed support for terrorism. Although regime change will hopefully occur at some point, for the time being the strongest forces that could avert a nuclear-armed Iran emanate from outside the country—especially from Russia, China and Europe. Working with (and on) these governments therefore should absorb the bulk of American policymakers' attention. □

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