

Iran regime: Regional superpower or a theocracy on the demise?

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By Mohammad Mohaddessin

Paris - The recent euphoria over the outcome of upcoming talks between Washington and Tehran, scheduled for May 28 in Baghdad, has given the die-hard proponents of conciliation with the Iranian mullahs a glimmer of hope. As illusory as they are, these expectations reveal a blurred understanding of the state of affairs in Iran and the essence of the Iranian mullahs' foreign and domestic policy.

A fundamental question needs to be answered in order to see through the fog that hangs over the policy on Iran: are we witnessing the emergence of a regional power or the demise of a troglodyte theocracy?

For those baffled by Iran's recent saber rattling this question may seem strange; it is nevertheless warranted. One only needs to recall the days when it only took a year for the Shah's dynasty - the "Light of the Aryans" - to collapse after being hailed as an "island of stability" by President Jimmy Carter on New Years Eve in Tehran in 1978.

Behind all the smokescreen and political brinkmanship from Iran, lies the stark reality that the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Tehran's consequent nuclear defiance, meddling in Iraq, the visceral enmity to peace in the Middle East and stepped-up clampdown at home are all the throes of a disintegrating and faltering regime.

Tehran's unscrupulous apologists, however, continue to project it as a stable and powerful state. The all too familiar argument is that the mullahs would inevitably give priority to their pragmatic interests and retract from their aggressive posturing, that they have every interest in a stable, unified Iraq and that the radical rhetoric belongs to the extremist Ahmadinejad faction and is not representative of the regime as a whole. This logic leads only to one policy implication: any firm action would rally Iranians around the radicals and weaken the position of pragmatists and reformers in the country. So, the most palatable alternative would be to engage the mullahs in dialogue and encourage the regime to change its behavior.

There is a failure to heed the lessons of history in this rationale. In the case of Iran, an ideological regime erected on the doctrine of the velayat-e faqih (supremacy of clerical rule) is by definition incapable of initiating reform and bringing prosperity. This explains why despite growing demands for basic services and minimum rights on the part of the Iranian citizenry, successive administrations have been unable to deliver. To the contrary, the power elite has failed to make any investment in industrial, agricultural, communication and transportation infrastructures, neglected to streamline a paralyzing bureaucracy, promoted a pervasive culture of corruption and crushed democratic institutions and dissent.

The Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's decision to propel an obscure, but ruthless, Revolutionary Guards' commander to presidency in 2005 was a shrewd, yet inevitable, attempt to prevent the state as a whole from going down the abyss. The crippling effects of internal divisions, the seismic shift in regional geopolitics which saw the fall of the Iraqi government to the west and Taliban to the east, and, above all, the dangerously rising tide of public discontent made it plain to the Supreme Leader and his retinue that they had to close ranks and shore up their defenses in order to survive.

On the nuclear front and Iraq, Khamenei sprinted forward at full throttle, cognizant that without either, his regime's chances of withstanding the winds of change would be remote at best.

During four years of nuclear talks, Tehran defied at least 12 ultimatums to stop its enrichment program, including Security Council resolutions 1696, 1737 and 1747. It also rejected a very generous package of incentives offered by P5+1 in June 2006, which included, among other things, a recognition of Iran's right to develop a civilian nuclear program, the provision of heavy water facilities, multi-layer assurances to supply nuclear fuel, support for Iran's bid to join the World Trade Organization, permission to purchase badly-needed air craft and spare parts and finally a series of security guarantees. For its part, the United States announced that it was prepared to alter its 28-year policy of no contact and engage in direct and wide-ranging negotiations with Tehran in return for a suspension in uranium enrichment activities.

One would have assumed that if the mullahs had solidified their hold on power and gained a degree of permanency, they would have used this golden opportunity and agreed to negotiate. That would have seemed particularly plausible considering that the U.S.-led coalition had eliminated Tehran's two primary external nemeses, Saddam Hussein and the Taliban, and caged its main internal threat, the opposition People's Mojahedin (PMOI).

Yet, the problems the US administration has been facing in the Iraqi theatre and in the Democratic-controlled Congress, as well as the Europeans' utter cowardice in facing up to Tehran's persistent recalcitrance did nothing to persuade the mullahs to soften their aggressive posture. Keenly aware of the regime's vulnerability, the ruling clerics adamantly refused to bargain. Nowhere was this more evident than in remarks by the Supreme Leader in March 2006. "Any retreat will be followed by other chalices of poison. Our path is an irreversible one," Khamenei insisted.

Tehran's adamant refusal to resolve the nuclear stand-off confirms the view held by many that for the Iranian leadership obtaining nuclear weapons is a strategic decision and a key accomplishment that would empower the regime to emerge as the hegemon in that part of the world. Maj. Gen. Mohsen Rezai, the current secretary to the powerful State Expediency Council and former commandant of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, said last summer, "If we acquire nuclear technology, within a short period of time the West will wake up and see us as a regional superpower."

On the home front, the new round of crackdown nationwide has been the fiercest of its kind in recent history, depicted in the harrowing photos of beatings of women and youths in Tehran in recent days. It ironically reflects the regime's growing isolation inside the country. The citizenry's daring defiance of the mullahs, including the bloody uprising in Eqlid, southern Iran, in late April, and protests by hundreds of thousands of workers, students and women in Tehran and elsewhere in May, are particularly significant considering that in the Persian calendar year ending March 21, nearly 5,000 protests and strikes erupted across the country, prompting senior officials to express trepidation over losing control of the situation.

None of these measures, however, offers lasting solutions to the terminal crisis from which the ruling clique suffers: The crisis of legitimacy. Indeed, the Iranian regime, weakest-ever in its 28-year rule, finds itself at an international and domestic impasse with no way out. The book "Conceptual Basic Elements and Documents of the Fourth Progress Plan", published by the Organization of Management and Planning, which is comprised of former and present government officials, echoed the mullahs' anxiety and desperation: "The Islamic Republic is engulfed in internal and external crises, which have been brought about by the widening gap between the state and the citizens." This, they warned, presents the "biggest political challenge as Iranian society is in the midst of a major social upheaval."

Tehran's outward reach, manifested in the export of firebrand ideology of vengeance and terror to Iraq and beyond, is designed to offset its complete isolation at home and represents a last ditch effort to forestall the inevitable change that is on the way. In like vein, its continuing intransigence in the nuclear face-off aims to keep an increasingly anxious West at bay.

What are the options?

The West, in search of lucrative commerce with Tehran, spared no effort in engaging the so-called pragmatic, business oriented Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who became president after the death of the arch-patriarch, Khomeini, and embracing even further Rafsanjani's successor Mohammad Khatami. This policy, dubbed "critical dialogue," "constructive engagement" and "human rights dialogue" after each ran aground, was justified under the veneer of strengthening the illusory moderates. Central to 16 years of conciliation was hobbling Tehran's only effective and organized opposition, the People's Mojahedin, by branding it terrorist. Another crucial piece of this policy was the European Union's acquiescence to Tehran's demand to shelve its traditional initiative to table censure resolutions at the now-defunct United Nations Human Rights Commission, and terminating the mandate of a special representative who had been monitoring the situation of human rights in Iran since the mid-eighties.

This policy netted billions for the Europeans and gave the ever-cunning mullahs the opportunity to make giant strides in their nuclear ambitions and spread their fundamentalist tentacles in the Middle East. The Iranian people, meanwhile, suffered both in terms of their livelihood and liberties at home and abroad.

With this misguided policy dead in its tracks, the alternative is not a foreign military intervention as that would be neither feasible nor desirable with calamitous regional and global repercussions. That said, engaging in endless talks, a euphemism for appeasement, would make war inevitable as it gives Tehran the opportunity to master the art of making the A-bomb. Similarly, the suggestion that the West should reach out to nameless and faceless Iranians, members of civil society and NGOs is implausible because in a repressive environment, no such channels of communications could be established without being contaminated by the state security apparatus. In some ways, the proponents of this approach naively apply the East European model to a medieval theocracy that is intolerant even of its own internal factions which step out of line. All such overtures during Mohammad Khatami's eight-year presidency - advertised as the era of Islamic renaissance - failed miserably. Any such initiative under the extremist Ahmadinejad would be a non-starter and amount to squandering resources that could otherwise be used much more effectively elsewhere.

A third option, which entails reaching out to Tehran's organized democratic opposition as the catalyst for change, offers the only effective and viable approach. By way of experience, for any popular upheaval to coalesce into a mass movement, similar to the one which resulted in the toppling of the Shah's regime, it must revolve around a nucleus of organized opposition that can mobilize and advance it against a theocracy far more ruthless than its predecessor and with the propensity to use overwhelming force in crushing dissent. Commenting on antigovernment protests a couple of years ago, a Tehran-based European diplomat made a remarkably accurate observation. "The pent-up anger is still there, beneath the surface. But for it to seriously take off you need a catalyst, you need a cause, you need organisation and leadership. It's a big task," he said.

The empowerment of the Iranian people, therefore, requires an end to policy of hampering the main opposition in order to allow this movement to utilize its full potentials in bringing about change to Iran. In placing the shackles of a terrorist

designation on the principal component within the Iranian Resistance, the PMOI, the Clinton administration and the European Union did exactly the opposite as that policy helped maintain the status-quo by denying the democracy movement in Iran a highly-organized and effective catalyst. Instead of engendering "behavioral change" it gave rise to the most radical and belligerent faction in the ruling elite, and effectively made the West and the Middle East vulnerable to the Iranian regime and Islamic fundamentalism.

Because it espouses a moderate and tolerant Islam and, at the same time, envisions a secular, democratically-elected and republication system of governance, this movement has not only made a break with the old order, but also retains the unique and unparalleled advantage of being the antithesis of the mullahs' fundamentalist theocracy. With a Muslim woman, Maryam Rajavi, as its President-elect, the Iranian Resistance has presented the misogynist clerics with a formidable political, cultural and ideological challenge and rekindled hope for democratic change among Iranians at home and abroad.

The annulment of the terrorist designation of the People's Mojahedin by the Court of the First Instance of the European Communities last December rendered the terror tag on the PMOI illegal and illegitimate. The West should now move swiftly to rectify a colossal policy blunder. It could ill afford to let this opportunity slip away by continuing to engage in fruitless dialogue with Tehran.

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