

International Affairs Forum Interview

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By Dimitri Neos

Ilan Berman is a Vice President for Policy at the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, DC. An expert on regional security in the Middle East, Central Asia and the Russian Federation, Mr. Berman's writings have appeared in such publications as the Asian Wall Street Journal, the Wall Street Journal Europe, Middle East Quarterly, the Washington Times, the Jerusalem Post and Strategic Review. Mr. Berman holds a Masters in International Politics from the American University in Washington, DC and a Juris Doctorate from the Washington College of Law. He is an adjunct professor at the American University's School of International Service.



International Affairs Forum: Let's talk about your latest book: Tehran Rising...

Mr. Ilan Berman: Let me give a thirty second snapshot...there's really two parts to the book. The first is a birds-eye view of the threat posed by Iran. The conclusion that winds its way through the book is that we're asking the wrong questions about Iran. For the last two and a half years we've been very preoccupied about the nuclear issue which is obviously very important and is coming to a head now. But there are many other things Iran is doing that really belies a much broader, more aggressive strategic direction. This includes troublemaking in Iraq, supporting terrorist groups, to a new sort of anti-coalition activism in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The nuclear issue is clearly part of that but what Iran is trying to do is more ambitious, is more sweeping.

The conclusion of the first part of the book is Iran has positioned itself as a spoiler for American strategy. It looked around the region and saw this as a period of great crisis and great opportunity. If Iran manages to grind the democratization process to a standstill in Iraq, prevents coalition building in the Gulf, prevents coalition having a deep foothold, or tries to erode the American foothold in Central Asia and the Caucasus, Iran becomes the inheritor of the post-Saddam Hussein Persian Gulf. The

strategies they've been employing have been very successful so far and Iran is emerging as a very important strategic challenge to the West.

The second part of the book is what we can do about it. The fundamental problem confronting the U.S. is that the clock is ticking down until Iran has nuclear capability and its moving very fast. At the same time, the clock is ticking down any political transformation is moving very slowly. The starting point for any serious strategy is to make the nuclear clock tick slower and the regime change clock tick faster. On the first part, all types of things may be done like more aggressive counter-proliferation and coalition building in the Gulf, providing hedges to prevent Iranian nuclear blackmail, etc. But the hard part of this is – when a window of opportunity is there, a coherent vision is needed of what Iran is to look like in five years. At that time, they'll probably be nuclear so the question is who's going to have their finger on the trigger when they do go nuclear. Is it going to be a pluralistic regime or will it be like this one that considers it at war with the West?

IA-Forum: To what degree does Iran create and support terrorist organizations in the region? And what effect have they had, specifically in Iraq?

Mr. Berman: For over decade and a half, the State Department has listed Iran as the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism. Iran created and drives Lebanon's Hezbollah, is the principal driver of certain segments of the Shiite insurgency, and the Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ) terrorist group is a wholly owned subsidiary of the Islamic Republic. In fact, there have been federal findings that the PIJ only receives money from Iraq. Iran also provides Hamas with ten percent or more of Hamas' annual operating budget that has purportedly increased since the Palestinian elections in late January.

At the least, Iran has a tactical partnership with Al Qaeda that goes back about a decade and a half. We know this from people like Ali Mohamed, an Al Qaeda operative who turned state's evidence in the late 90s in connection with the Kenyan and Tanzania bombings. He disclosed that Al Qaeda had been training with Hezbollah and with Iranian operatives since at least 1994. It's a relationship that's been around for a long time and it's going strong even now. We know that Iran has an extensive relationship with the chief Al Qaeda lieutenant in Iraq, al Zarqawi. He has sought haven in Iran at least twice and perhaps as many as four times during coalition operations over the last couple of years. We know that his group, an Al-Qaeda affiliate, has had to relocate to Iran and is active in their Kurdish region.

That is just a snapshot but presents the idea that Iran uses terrorism as a foreign policy tool the way other countries use economics or energy. Iran sees terrorism as a very low cost initiative, asymmetric initiative,

against Israel and increasingly against the U.S., especially since we're increasingly involved in the region, and against European countries.

IA-Forum: And all these initiatives supported by oil money...

Mr. Berman: It's a fascinating thing that we just assume that the war on terror is going to drain financial resources that support terror. But in fact, the opposite has happened. Iran's publicly disclosed federal budget for 2004 and 2005 is \$127B. Based on a prediction of \$19.90 per barrel, half of that is estimated to come from oil revenue, So they're looking at unforeseen revenue. One would hope they would spend it on social services, education, etc. but we know they're going to spend it on asymmetric terrorism, particularly in Iraq; subsidies to groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad; or they're going to spend it to facilitate qualitative and quantitative leaps in WMD technology like we're seeing now.

IA-Forum: What does the current Iranian regime really want? Domination of the region? As Khomeini's stated in 1979: "death to the great Satan America", is it inflicting damage to the U.S.? Israel?

Mr. Berman: I think it's a mixture of all of them. Iranian leadership over the last several years has made it increasingly clear that historically, culturally, and strategically, they see themselves as the center of gravity for the Middle East. In fact, Iran has always considered itself that way to a degree. Iran is not an Arab country; its history and culture go back much further. Five hundred years ago, the Sufavid empire stretched across parts of Central Asia and the Caucasus and all of Iraq. So when they feel like they are destined for at least regional greatness, it has a lot to do with historical context.

But this regime has managed to harness that. They've looked at events in the region and have seized upon the fact that, in the post-Cold War era, the way to achieve a measure of parity with the United States and attain some sort of regional superpower status is you have to talk the talk the U.S. is talking. Capabilities like nuclear weapons. At least since this past June, we've seen a rise in a different strain of Iranian politics. Iran's new President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is not only an advocate of Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution, he's talked publicly about creating a confrontation with the West to facilitate the second coming of the Islamic messiah, known as the Mahdi. This is very ominous. Ahmadinejad is seen by many as crazy but he's not crazy, he's a believer – and he believes in the ideology that necessitates Iran taking a leading role in the clash of civilizations between Islam and the West.

IA-Forum: Iran recently threatened the United States with 'harm and pain' before the UN Security Council over its disputed nuclear program. What would they consider?

Mr. Berman: It was phrased ambiguously enough to let our imaginations do the walking. They've talked about a whole range of things. We know that they can make life in Iraq much worse if they want to and we'll probably be seeing quite a bit of that. They've also threatened to make the price oil skyrocket to \$100 a barrel by doing things like closing parts of the Strait of Hormuz. I suspect that, for practical reasons, that's not probable. In the long run, given that their economy's dependence on oil exports, it's is not a win-win situation for them. Also, there's nothing as clarifying as a major fluctuation in the energy market to make countries like China and Russia to become proponents of regime change in Iran.

But they have a lot of asymmetric capabilities they can throw at us. We have troops that are exposed and extended in the Gulf and we also know that the Iranians have conducted a fair amount of hi-def surveillance of U.S. homeland targets. So the Iranian regime is playing this very close to the vest and they're saying that 'we have lots of things we can throw at the U.S. if it wants to go down this road'. It can become a game of nuclear chicken.

IA-Forum: What are the chances of sanctions being imposed against Iran by the UN?

Mr. Berman: I think that's entirely up in the air because the main players are Russia and China. Both of those countries, over the years, have been supporters of the Iranian nuclear effort. What we're heading towards in the next several weeks is a situation that could look like the run-up to the Iraq war where you have certain interests, in this case – China and Russia, that are trying to lobby or slow the process because they have considerable interests that are implicated.

On the Russian side, there's a lot of reason for optimism. The Russians are diplomatically extended because they're the new chairs of the G8 and they've invested enormous amounts of diplomatic resources and political capital in becoming a legitimate European foundation. The G8 Summit in July is a unique opportunity to pressure Russia to come closer to the US and Europe on foreign policy.

China is a different matter entirely. The Iranians understand that Chinese economic growth necessitates a widening quest for energy resources. The Iranians have brought themselves to the front of the line with all sorts of energy development and cooperation accords. Depending on how you calculate them, over the last year and a half, \$100M or \$200M over the next twenty-five years. That's a huge disincentive for China to take Iran off the table as source of energy,

which is what sanctions would do. What Iran is really trying to do is to buy a Chinese veto of the UN Security Council.

IA-Forum: If Iran gets nuclear capability, would effect would that that on the U.S., the Middle East?

Mr. Berman: Assuming that Iran, for whatever reasons, becomes a nuclear power, you can expect all sorts of bad things to happen. We're already beginning to see them. There's a massive investment of troops and personnel in the Persian Gulf over the last three and a half years in support of the Operation Iraqi Freedom and the war on terror. Over the same period, you've seen a whole number of countries including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman begin to sign bilateral military accords with Iran. The writing's on the wall: these countries are ready for Iran to go nuclear and they don't think we'll be around in the long term. What you're going to see is the Persian Gulf is going to become more and more inhospitable to the U.S. as these countries begin to figure out some way of accommodating a nuclear or near-nuclear Iran.

The other thing to be concerned about is an Iranian nuke will let the genie out of the bottle and spark a regional arms race. We're already seeing countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt that are beginning to make noises about the need for some sort of capability to counterbalance a nuclear Iran. So there are signs that other countries are already moving in the direction of conducting clandestine nuclear research or increasing their ballistic missile arsenals. That should give us an indication of the fact that the closer Iran gets to nuclear capability, the more likely it is that it'll touch off a very dangerous domino effect in the region: everybody begins scrambling for nuclear technology or ballistic missile technology. If nuclear non-proliferation is one of our key goals, it's not something we want to encourage.

The closer Iran comes to a nuclear capability, the more diminished prospects for Iranian democracy become. Iranians have watched very closely what's happened over the last decade and a half; particularly over the last couple years and they've discovered that the key to regime longevity is to have these sort of capabilities. They've looked at the Iraq and North Korean situation and realized that the regime in Iraq was overthrown because they didn't have WMD and North Korea conducted a nuclear breakout in the fall of 2002 and they're still around. So they don't want to be an Iraq, they want to be a North Korea.

But they also will be able to parlay that ability, once they have it, into increased repression of domestic elements. From empirical, sociological, and economic data, the Iranian people are enormously discontented. Fifty million people – two-thirds of the country – are under the age of 30 and for them, the Islamic revolution has been a wash. GDP is hovering around pre-revolutionary levels and unemployment is at 20-25 percent

and rising. All these statistics suggest that there are hearts and minds to be won in Iran. But the Iranian regime has clearly understood that having nuclear capability, the international community will have much less say about what goes on within their own borders. China demonstrated in 1989, if you are a nuclear possessor, you can pretty much repress your population with impunity without worrying about lasting international consequence.

The big problem over the long term is that a nuclear Iran will mean that this regime in Iran – if it's still around when Iran gets nuclear capability – is going to be around for an extra decade or two unnecessarily.

IA-Forum: So you propose regime change...

Mr. Berman: Admittedly, regime change has become such a loaded phrase in Iraq that one almost hesitates to use it. But the real thing to understand is that talking about Iran almost solely in the nuclear context, like we've been doing over that last two and a half years is almost self-defeating. It almost presupposes that if the nuclear issue is fixed, then Iran no longer becomes a problem or a threat. But Iran has acted on a number of fronts: the Gulf, Central Asia, the post-Soviet states with regards to support for terrorism – and that's going to continue even if the nuclear issue is taken out of the equation.

The way to make Iran an accountable, mature country in the international arena, will require a more fundamental transformation in government - not necessarily behavior modification, but a change of regime from a radical revolutionary state that it has been for twenty-seven years. There's no indication that they're willing to give up the tenets of Khomeini's revolution. Assuming they go nuclear, if we're really interested in making sure that a nuclear Iran, in a lasting sense, is not a problem, that Iran ceases to be the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism, there's something more fundamental needed than just telling the Iranians that political or diplomatic sanctions are coming. You're going to need to remove this regime.

Operationally, this is a huge question. We don't have the political will or resources to actually do this. What I find very encouraging is over the last few weeks, it's seemed that the State Department has come to the same conclusion and they're beginning to now funnel money into soft power options like broadcasting and political warfare and possibly even covert action that could bring about a soft regime change so we don't have to put troops on the ground.

IA-Forum: Do you think the U.S. experience in Iraq has been/will be a stumbling block for gaining international support regarding Iran?

Mr. Berman: Absolutely. On a conceptual level, the case for involvement in Iraq has had a lot to do with global threat potential. That had to do with Iraq allegedly having weapons of mass destruction, being a nexus with terror groups – those were the signposts that the administration staked out in the run up to the war. As it turns out, there wasn't much by way of WMDs in Iraq and that absence has undermined for preemption moving forward. So now we're in a situation where we're involved in Iraq, our troops are overextended, morale is low at home; and we're facing a situation that makes Iraq look very simple by comparison. The international community and the American public are not going to tolerate the same type of arguments without substantiated proof and the burden of proof has become considerably higher for the United States.

This is why, among other things, the US has spent so much time the last two years engaging the Europeans, UN, International Atomic Energy Commission on a multilateral process on Iran's nuclear potential because they know that their credibility is in short supply and they need international allies on this. The real point of departure as we move forward is whether the international community is as concerned as we are and whether that will translate into anything actionable. I'm not sure that that's possible in the UN context. That means that the U.S. really needs a Plan B, meaning building a coalition outside the confines of the UN.

IA-Forum: Any chance of a limited strike against a nuclear reactor like Israel did against Iraq in 1981?

Mr. Berman: I think it's quite possible. It's much more likely that if that does occur, it will come from Israel rather than the US. That brings up an important point we always need to keep in the back of our minds. As we begin to have discussions about Iran strategic and formulating policy, we have to remember none of this is occurring in a vacuum. The pace of our strategy can't reflect solely what our intelligence community thinks or what our elected officials think. It has to be geared towards being responsive to the most skittish member of our coalition. Israel is that country and the Israelis think a nuclear Iran is right around the corner. If Iran crosses whatever red line the Israelis have set out, and they won't always articulate what that line is – and they look at us and we're not doing anything serious to curb Iran's nuclear threat potential, the Israelis are going to feel like they need to do it themselves.

IA-Forum: Does Iran look up to North Korea as a big brother figure, standing up to the US/West?

Mr. Berman: Absolutely. Publicly, when Iranian officials take trips to Asia, they talk about how North Korea has managed to withstand American bullying because they're a nuclear power, how North Korea's

managed to assert itself as an independent regional player because of nuclear power. All this gravitates back to the notion that the North Korean model of clandestine acquisition of nuclear capabilities would work well for Iran. By all indications, the Iranian regime is pursuing that North Korean model when it comes to their own nuclear program. There are a lot of overt indicators of Iranian nuclear activity. We know of over a dozen sites. What the intelligence community will tell you immediately is that we are not sure that we know where every site is. It means that Iran not only has an overt nuclear program but a covert one. This is one that I think must be watched when we look at whether Iran is moving quickly and unverifiably towards a nuclear capability.

IA-Forum: Any final thoughts?

Mr. Berman: The key is that for nearly a decade, US administrations have seen Iran as an irritant rather than a threat. We haven't had an Iran policy to speak of, we've had an Iran attitude – we think Iran is bad, destabilizing – which is all true – not none of that is at a level enough to make anything actionable. What Iran has done over the last three years has been remarkable. They've looked around the region, they've seized upon a period of great crisis and opportunity, and positioned themselves as a spoiler for American policy. As you move forward on the nuclear front, in regard to terrorism, it's becoming clear that what we do with regard to Iran will have very far reaching implications for whether we're successful in a number of our initiatives in the region: democratization, the war on terror, etc. The thought that should be animating American policy makers forward is that Iran is a central part, not only of what we're trying to do in the Middle East but the war on terror. How we confront Iran is going to have all sorts of implications for our success in other arenas such as Iraq.

IA-Forum: Thank you, Mr. Berman.

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