

Looking Ahead

Dilly-Dallying on Iran

Iran is the world's leading sponsor of terrorism. It funds and arms both Hamas and Hezbollah, and has provided lethal assistance to the Taliban in Afghanistan and insurgents in Iraq. Its rulers have for three decades reviled the United States as the "Great Satan." And it is now months away from having the ability to produce a nuclear weapon.

A widely-misinterpreted 2007 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate helped propagate the misconception that Iran will not have nuclear weapons imminently and that the world can put off facing the profound problems posed by a nuclear-armed terrorist regime. That certainly seems to be the impression of the Obama administration. The new president's advisors have indicated that he may not begin to fulfill his campaign pledge of dialogue with Iran until after that country's June 2009 presidential elections, in the hope that the election of a moderate may give negotiations a better chance of success.

By then it may be too late. According to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Iran is rapidly producing low-enriched uranium (LEU) on thousands of centrifuges—in defiance of repeated sanctions from the U.N. Security Council. At its current pace, it is likely that Iran will have produced the equivalent of one weapon's-worth of LEU by mid-2009. This LEU would need to be further enriched into highly-enriched uranium (HEU) for use in a weapon, but the production of LEU is a large part of the work required to produce HEU. Mohamed ElBaradei, director of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), has said that if Tehran wanted "to turn to the production of nuclear weapons" it could kick out the IAEA's inspectors and have a bomb built in perhaps "six months to one year." And even that prediction assumes that Iran has not been hiding aspects of its nuclear program from inspectors, as it has in the past.

Iran's covert nuclear program, supposedly halted in 2003, included R&D for deploying a nuclear warhead atop a Shahab-3 missile. Since assuming office nearly four years ago, Iranian President Ahmadinejad has frequently spoken of wiping Israel off the map, and the range of the Shahab-3 is sufficient to reach Israel—and, for that matter, most of the Arab world and parts of Europe.

In short, this is a critical moment. It seems unlikely that U.S. engagement with Iran will bear fruit. Its regime implacably hates America and her allies, its nuclear project is at the core of its regional and global aspirations, and it has a long history of deceit. But if President Obama indeed intends to engage Iran, he should begin now, not wait six or twelve months in the hope of a more moderate Tehran—now, before Iran can hold its enemies and neighbors hostage; now, before Iranian nuclear technology falls into the hands of Tehran's terrorist puppets; now, before Israel feels compelled to act alone. If engage you must, engage now.
