

After The National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran: Let The Great Debate Begin!

"Preemptive surgical strike by the intelligence community against the war party"

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The issuance of the National Intelligence Estimate on Dec. 3, could be compared to the historic "shot heard round the world;" but, perhaps the characterization given by Barbara Slavin, author of a new book on Iran, is more to the point. As she put it in mid-December at a conference of the Center for American Progress in the U.S. capital, the NIE report was "a preemptive surgical strike by the intelligence community against the war party" of Dick Cheney et al, those who have been building for a military attack against Iran.

Since the publication of the report's findings, that the Islamic Republic of Iran has not had a military nuclear program at least since 2003, a plethora of reports and leaks have appeared, relevant to the process leading to its publication. Among the most clamorous was the account that, faced with the commitment by Vice President Dick Cheney and others, to block release of the report, members of the intelligence community expressed their willingness to go to the press to leak it, even if that meant they could end up in prison as a result ("Behind the Annapolis Meet and the Iran NIE Shock," EIR, 12.12.07). The French newsletter Reseau Voltaire hinted that the timing of the release of the report had to do with a brief visit by Cheney to the hospital for his recurring heart disorders (www.voltairenet.org/article153871.html).

Be that as it may, the point is that, not only has the war party been dealt a hopefully mortal blow, but, even more important, a process has unfolded in Washington, a most healthy process of serious debate on the failures of U.S. foreign policy in Iran to date, and the need for a radical revision and new definition of the same.

In this contest, two important books are circulating in the U.S. capital, which have fed into the debate. One is "Traacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran and the U.S.," by the Iranian-American scholar Trita Parsi, and the other is "Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, the U.S. and the Twisted Path to Confrontation," by USA Today journalist Barbara Slavin. Both books were conceived and written over the past 18 months, i.e. in the same time frame in which the NIE report was being prepared. Although the two books are very different, Parsi's being more scholarly and Slavin's, a more journalistic account, both drive home important points. As the two authors stressed in a public forum at the Center for American Progress in mid-December, the image that most Americans (including many lawmakers) have of Iran is utterly distorted. The country and its people are neither anti-American, nor irrational, nor belligerent. The problem lies in Washington.

As Parsi has most scrupulously documented, Iran has, time and again, acted in ways to aid

the U.S., albeit indirectly, only to be systematically rebuffed. This was the case in the first U.S. war against Iraq in 1991, when Iran remained neutral, and passed up the opportunity to exploit an Iraqi Shi'ite uprising against Saddam Hussein. Yet, what was Iran's reward? When George Bush senior convened the Madrid conference in December 1991, Iran was conspicuous by its absence. Presaging what would occur at Annapolis in November 2007, the U.S. ostentatiously excluded the regional power Iran, while courting Syria, in hopes of breaking the alliance between Damascus and Tehran. The foreseeable result was enhancement of those hardliners in Iran, who opposed rapprochement with the U.S.

When, in 1997, the political leadership in Iran shifted to the reform camp, and Seyyed Mohammad Khatami was elected president by an overwhelming mandate, again Tehran reached out to Washington. Not only did Khatami offer detente to the Arabs and the European Union, but, in an unprecedented interview to CNN, he addressed the American people in the spirit of reconciliation. Khatami later indicated his government's willingness to accept a two-state solution in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, in that he stated that Iran would support whatever the Palestinian leadership agreed to. His groundbreaking proposal to the U.N. General Assembly, for a dialogue of civilizations, put the offer of collaboration on a conceptually and morally higher level. Although that was fortunately welcomed by the U.N., there were no loud celebrations in Washington.

Few may remember it, but in those dramatic hours following the attacks of September 11, 2001, it was the government and people of Iran who perhaps most spontaneously and demonstratively manifested their solidarity with the American people. When, then, the Bush Administration waged war against the Taliban in Afghanistan, Iran did not stand in the way, but de facto facilitated the military operations against a force which had been its own enemy. The thanks Iran got for its role in the Afghan war, were expressed, as ever, uneloquently, by President Bush, who, in his January 29, 2002 State of the Union message, said: Iran was nothing but a member of the "axis of evil," together with Iraq and North Korea.

The next, crucial step was the U.S. war against Iraq in 2003. Once the U.S. had ostensibly "won," in the sense that it had overthrown the Saddam Hussein regime, the Iranians, though shedding no tears for the defeat of the regime they had waged a deadly eight-year war against, saw themselves increasingly encircled by American forces, in Afghanistan and now Iraq. It was in this context that the Tehran government made its boldest offer to date to the U.S., to overcome hostilities and reestablish normal relations. The famous 2003 offer by Tehran, which both Parsi and Slavin reprint as appendices, should be required reading for every American, emphatically every member of Congress. That document, which was delivered to the U.S. government through Dr. Tim Guldemann, then Swiss ambassador to Iran, and thus official liaison between Iran and the U.S., was a bombshell. In it, Iran said, essentially, it was ready to put {all} issues on the table: terrorism, Al Qaida, MKO, relations with Palestinian rejectionist groups, Iran's nuclear energy program, and so on and so forth. The response from Washington, which had received the documents also by fax, was zilch. There was no response. When asked recently about the issue, Secretary of State Condi Rice responded that she "could not recollect" ever having heard of such an offer. One is reminded of the classic Mafia response to similar queries: "Non c'ero, e se c'ero, non ho visto niente" ("I wasn't there, and if I was, I didn't see anything").

The point made by Parsi, as well as Slavin, in their Washington forum, was that the U.S. has repeatedly been offered opportunities to engage with Iran, indeed, to reestablish normal diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic, but has willfully rejected any such

opportunity. Why? Parsi is most forthcoming with his analysis that the most powerful brake on U.S. policy towards Iran has been the so-called Zionist lobby. This should not be misread as some sort of cheap anti-Zionist or, worse still, anti-semitic, approach. It is nothing of the sort. In fact, Parsi's book documents also on the Israeli side of the equation, over the years since the time of the Shah, how there have been tendencies in Israel in favor of relations with Iran, just as there have been tendencies utterly opposed.

A most useful concept presented by Parsi in his book, to explain Israel's otherwise incomprehensible behavior towards the U.S. and Iran over the last three decades, is that of the "periphery." Ben Gurion had elaborated this doctrine, which "held that the improbability of achieving peace with the surrounding Arab states forced Israel to build alliances with the non-Arab states of the periphery—primarily Iran, Turkey, and Ethiopia—as well as with non-Arab minorities such as the Kurds and the Lebanese Christians." This certainly was the case during the reign of the Shah, and, even following the 1979 revolution, the Israelis hoped to maintain a presence there. Ariel Sharon had even proposed sending Israeli paratroopers to save the Shah. In the deadly Iran-Iraq war, Israel feared Saddam Hussein would prevail, and therefore leaned towards Iran, and most conveniently bombed Iraq's nuclear power plant at Osirik on June 7, 1981 at the start of the hostilities. This anti-Iraqi posture, which was also behind the arms deals blown in the 1986 Iran-Contra scandal, prevailed, even though the head of the Israel's Foreign Ministry, David Kimchee, stated, "Our big hope was that the two sides would weaken each other to such an extent that neither of them would be a threat to us." Parsi does not mention it, but this was of course the reigning doctrine of geopolitical manipulators like Henry Kissinger: let them destroy each other.

Once Iraq had been forced to its knees, Israel, afraid that the U.S. might seek better relations with regional power Iran, put forward the doctrine of the "New Middle East," which would see Israel as the regional hegemon. In pursuit of this, Shimon Peres's aim, Israel had to make some sort of peace with the Palestinians (Oslo 1993), and, Parsi wrote, "turned the periphery doctrine on its head," by focussing on Iran as the new regional threat. This, as developments have shown, has continued.

As for U.S. attitudes towards Iran, every time there appeared to be the hope (or, from Israel's viewpoint, the danger) of cooling tensions and even broaching de facto cooperation, the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), together with the U.S. neocons, shifted into high gear, to renew sanctions about to expire, or to push for new ones against Tehran. In response to the cooperation against the Taliban in late 2001, bolder steps were taken, and Israel intercepted the Karine A ship, claiming it was transporting "Iranian weapons" to the Palestinians. That was January 3, 2002, just weeks prior to Bush's infamous "axis of evil" speech.

Now that the intelligence community has broken a major taboo, by taking the argument of Iran's purported nuclear weapons program off the agenda, the question posed to an embarrassed U.S. Administration, the members of the Democratic majority in the Congress (newly famed for their tendency to cave in at every opportunity), and political figures worldwide is: what can and must a new, rational foreign policy towards Iran look like?

The response of President Bush to the NIE was reminiscent of the famous Jewish joke about one night in a European couchette. A male passenger, trying to sleep in his bunk on the night train, was prevented from doing so, by the sound of a woman's frail voice, emanating from another bunk, saying "Oy, am I toisty, oy, am I toisty...." The man climbed down from

his bunk, hurried to purchase a bottle of water, and returned to the compartment, to give the woman the water. After hearing her swallow several glugs, and readying himself for sleep, he was soon greeted by the same frail voice, this time saying, "Oy, vas I toisty, oy vas I toisty..." Thus, Bush, speaking to the press after the release of the NIE report, could only say, "Iran was dangerous, Iran is dangerous, and Iran will continue to be dangerous...." Nothing more could have been expected. Nor should it have come as a surprise that Israel dispatched a delegation to Washington, to try to undo the damage the NIE had done.

So, there is little reason to hope that this Administration will articulate anything approaching a rational policy towards Iran. As Barbara Slavin remarked, when asked whether she thought Iran could renew its famous 2003 offer for reviewing relations, yes, the Iranians could certainly do so, but one would have to have a radically different Administration in Washington, for it to be heard.

The good news is, there will be a new combination coming to Washington after the elections, and that may open the perspective for a significant change. First, for such a change to occur, as both authors stressed, prevailing stereotypes about Iran have to be trashed and replaced by a realistic view of what the Iranian policy establishment, and the nation more broadly, is. Contrary to the notion that Iran is ruled by a gang of "mad mullahs"—a notion Parsi traces back to Israeli sources—, the reality is that the country is rational, even though some of its leaders may indulge in "simulated irrationality" at times. Were they not rational, they would never have made the effort to improve relations with Washington, as they repeatedly have done.

Secondly, Iran must be recognized for what it is: a regional power without whose cooperation no perspective for security or stability in the entire region could be thinkable. This goes for Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria, just to name the leading protagonists. Excluding Iran, as the neocons have consistently done, is comparable to excluding Germany from any post-World War II arrangement. Iran's status as a regional power comes not only from its current role as a force of influence in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon, but, perhaps more importantly, from its role in the history of the region. This is not a podunk also-ran or a banana republic, as neocon loudmouths like Kenneth Katzman might fantasize; it is a nation with a continuous language culture over thousands of years and which, notwithstanding the Arab conquest, has maintained its Persian identity as heir to a rich and in many ways unique cultural heritage.

Thus, in its relations with the U.S. and other governments, Iran demands first and foremost respect, and to be treated as an equal. This is a point that Iranian representatives have stressed repeatedly in discussions with this author: if the U.S. were to deal with Iran as an equal partner, anything and everything would be possible. Steps taken by members of the "Dialogue Caucus," a group of Congressmen led by Rep. Wayne T. Gilchrest and Gregory W.Meeks, open to discussion with their Iranian counterparts, indicate the approach required (www.baltimoresun.com/news/nation/politics/bal-te.gilchrest22dec22,0,7950987,pri... 12/23/2007). Iran is first and foremost interested in stability in Iraq and Afghanistan, its immediate neighbors. Iran knows what it can contribute to establish that security, and has made concrete proposals in this direction during the three tripartite meetings (with Iraq and the U.S.) that have taken place thus far. But, if Iran continues to be excluded, it also has the ability to be a "spoiler factor."

It follows, thirdly, that Iran wants to be reintegrated into the so-called "international community," as a legitimate partner. Acknowledging Iran's role "could turn [the U.S.'s] Iran

foreign policy into a force for stability," Parsi suggests, "by accomodating legitimate Iranian security objectives in return for Iranian concessions on various regional and international issues..." This is a far cry from what the West has thus far offered Tehran. For example, though Parsi does not discuss this, there were great expectations, also in Tehran, that the European Union's EU-3 group (Great Britain, Germany and France) which was conducting talks on the nuclear issue, might come up with an interesting approach in summer 2005. Instead, even after Iran had unilaterally accepted an additional protocol to agreements with the International Atomic Energy Agency, and suspended its uranium enrichment activities, as a gesture of goodwill, what it got in return was an undiplomatic slap in the face. The EU "offer" made that summer paid lip service to promising to assist Iran's peaceful nuclear energy program, etc., etc., but, regarding security-i.e. guarantees that the country would not be given the Iraq treatment-what the Europeans could offer was only promises that no {nuclear power} in Europe (i.e. Great Britain or France) would nuke Tehran! As to what the U.S. or nuclear Israel might do, there was no mention. Nor was there any hint that the great European powers might abstain from a conventional attack. (In parentheses, it should be noted, that following this offer, which the Iranians had no choice but to roundly reject, the new French President Nicola Sarkozy threatened just such attacks.) It was rightly assumed that what the EU-3 proposed had been okayed by Washington.

What would a rational U.S. (and Western) foreign policy for Iran look like? It would start from acknowledging the geostrategic-political fact, evident to anyone (unlike President Bush) capable of reading a map, that Iran occupies a very special, indeed, unquie, position in the world. It is the natural bridge for the landlocked Central Asian Republics, to the sea, and worldwide markets. It is also the western "column" of the Eurasian Landbridge, the project for reuniting Asia and Europe through reconstruction of the historical Silk Road transportation networks, with modern technologies, from China, via northern, central and southern routes, to Europe. As a clear sign of its rationality, the Iranian leadership was the first, in 1991, to recognize the independence of the Central Asian Republics following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and has since then defined its foreign policy largely in terms of economic agreements with these and other Eurasian nations. The rail links Mashhad-Sarakhs-Tajan are merely emblematic of this thrust, as are the multiple pipeline agreements Iran has tried to consolidate (despite tremendous sabotage from London and Washington): Turkmenistan-Iran-Turkey (and Europe), Iran-Pakistan-India, among them. Were the U.S. to alter its currently hostile stance towards Iran, which could help stabilize Afghanistan, even a pipeline project across Turkmenistan and Afghanistan might be revived.

Anyone serious about establishing stability in the Southwest Asian region encompassing the Persian Gulf and so-called Middle East, must take as his starting point the economic parameters of the region, and recognize that without a comprehensive regional program for economic cooperation, there can be no stability. World history has documented sadly and frequently enough that "non-aggression treaties" are not worth the paper they are written on. It is agreement on common interests, and initiatives in the common interests in mankind, that establish peace and prevent wars. Happily, it appears that many members of the Gulf Cooperation Council have grasped this point, and have begun to rethink their own relations with Iran from this standpoint.

It is known that Vice President Dick Cheney, the leading protagonist of the war policy against Iran, travelled to Saudi Arabia in November 2006, and again in mid-2007, to organize the Saudis to his tactical plan of mobilizing a "moderate" Sunni Arab force against a presumed "extremist" Shi'ite force in the region. This author has received firsthand

reports, that Cheney made clear to his interlocutors in the GCC countries, as he had done via proxies to conferences at the Gulf Studies Center, that he was planning a war against Iran, and informed them that he was visiting simply to know what their response would be. Whatever they may have said in response, as the diplomatic protocols of politeness may require, it is also known to this writer, that most of the GCC governments (with the exclusion of those few truly subservient to Anglo-American interests) have recognized that their own further existence depends on decent relations with Tehran. It is no secret to anyone that, God forbid, were the U.S. to start a war against Iran, many of the GCC countries would immediately be affected, especially Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait, with their Shi'ite communities, and Kuwait and Bahrain which host U.S. armed forces.

The GCC made clear their rejection of Cheney's war plan, immediately following the Annapolis conference. For the first time ever, the GCC invited an Iranian President to attend the December 3-4 Doha summit. Ahmadinejad welcomed the invitation, and at the conference, put forward a rational proposal for improving relations among the group, including a plan for an Organization of Persian Gulf Economic Cooperation and a security agreement. Although it was not accepted in toto, it established the basis on which relations among the GCC and Iran could proceed. Most significant in this context is also the fact that the GCC countries had issued a call at an earlier summit, in May, for a study on the feasibility of introducing nuclear energy for peaceful purposes in the region. Not only, but they proposed to set up a joint enrichment facility for the GCC and Iran, to provide the fuel for such peaceful nuclear reactors. This was a bombshell in itself, as it signalled to the neocons in Washington 1) that the GCC was not going to be manipulated into an anti-Iran mode because of the threat of nuclear weapons (which the NIE says does not exist); and 2) that it was not going to be bamboozled by the anti-nuclear lobby into believing that nuclear energy were forbidden. Iran reciprocated by offering to share its nuclear technology with the GCC states. A further, unprecedented sign that Iran would be welcomed as an integrated partner among the Arab Gulf states, was the invitation extended by Saudi King Abdallah to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, to take part in the Hajj.

A sane U.S. foreign policy approach would view the region as a whole, extending from the Persian Gulf westwards and northward to include Israel, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey, and consider this Southwest Asian region then as part of the broader Eurasian continent. Economic development of the entire region, vectored on advanced technological infrastructure for transportation, energy and water, should define relations among the constituent states of the area; U.S. support for such cooperation, and participation in such great projects, would transform international relations for the good. Significantly, three of the major Eurasian powers, India, Russia and China, are oriented to precisely such a perspective, and this has been bolstered by clear political support for Iran, especially by Moscow and Beijing. What is missing is the U.S. Were a new Administration in Washington to define a sane approach to Iran, that could all change. And, in such a happy event, as Parsi has recommended, sane forces in Israel would do well to recognize the need to get in on such a shift, instead of trying to thwart it. (Their "periphery" in this event would anyway have been reduced to a fond memory of a failed policy.)

But the main point to be hammered home is: the great debate in Washington opened up by the NIE report and concomitant books, articles, political initiatives and conferences, has placed the need and opportunity for a profound U.S. foreign policy shift on the top of the political agenda. Policy towards Iran is the litmus test.

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