The World; Nuclear Ambitions Aren't New for Iran

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BEFORE he was overthrown by an Islamic revolution in 1979, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi of Iran said that his country would have nuclear weapons "without a doubt and sooner than one would think."

In the late 1970's, in fact, Iran and Israel discussed a plan to adapt for Iranian use surface-to-surface missiles that could be fitted with nuclear warheads, according to documents discovered in Tehran after the revolution. The documents described conversations between Israeli and Iranian officials about the plan, which was kept secret from the United States.

So if the monarchy had lasted longer, Iran might have become a nuclear power years ago. As George Tenet, the director of central intelligence, testified to Congress early this year, "No Iranian government, regardless of its ideological leanings, is likely to abandon" programs to develop weapons of mass destruction "that are seen as guaranteeing Iran's security."

This sounds as if the American government does not expect Iran's intention to become a nuclear power to change, no matter who runs the country. But that expectation can only make the United States more concerned about who is in control.

Iran has been blessed and cursed with a strong national identity, bountiful natural resources, an ancient intellectual and cultural tradition, and a strategic location. It shares borders with Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkey and the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, and has a 1,570-mile coastline on the Persian Gulf. It has long seen itself as a regional superpower. So an American campaign to persuade or coerce Iran to abandon nuclear weapons that does not consider its security concerns risks appearing unrealistic and futile.

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These days, Iran's Islamic rulers are feeling vulnerable. Last week President Bush said the United States would not tolerate a nuclear Iran. International pressure on Iran to submit to stricter inspections of its nuclear program coincides with protests in several Iranian cities challenging the government's legitimacy.

The current protests were ignited initially by student opposition to a plan to charge tuition at state-run universities. As has happened before, the protests spread to nearly a dozen cities, with students demanding more

freedom and economic opportunities.

This time, however, the students have been joined on occasion by older people and even by families who have come out with their children and honked their horns in support. This time, in contrast to the period of the first pro-democracy demonstrations in 1999, the reform efforts led by President Mohammad Khatami no longer have the credibility to convince the students that a more nonconfrontational approach would better achieve their goals.

Last Sunday, President Bush praised the protesters, calling their actions "the beginning of people expressing themselves toward a free Iran." But what does a "free Iran" mean, and who would lead it?

The students themselves still have no identifiable leader and no platform beyond their rejection of authoritarian rule. The army and Revolutionary Guards are split, and workers and the bazaar merchants have stayed off the streets. Reformists within the Parliament continue to demand change, but they lack the power to make it happen.

Who else, then? There is Reza Pahlavi, the son of the late deposed shah. But the younger Pahlavi enjoys more support among royalist exiles in Los Angeles than among the people of Iran.

After all, the Pahlavi "dynasty" was invented by the younger Pahlavi's grandfather, Reza Shah, an army colonel who became king in 1925. Iranians still remember the coup, backed by the Central Intelligence Agency, that reinstated Reza Shah's son nearly half a century ago to assure that Iran would be anti-Communist. Young Iranians express nostalgia for the man ousted in that coup, the nationalistic prime minister Mohammad Mossadegh.

One group certain not to be a factor is the Mujahedeen Khalq. A cult-like movement based in Iraq that seeks to overthrow the Islamic Republic, the Mujahedeen Khalq is on lists of terrorist organizations compiled by the United States and the European Union. (Paradoxically, its political arm, the National Council of Resistance, is allowed to operate in Washington, Paris and London.)

Last week, the French, who had let the group function here without much fuss for more than two decades, cracked down on it. Some 1,300 French policemen attacked the group's operations, arresting more than 150 members and sympathizers and seizing several million dollars.

The crackdown was aimed at neutralizing the group's ability to create a base of operations in Europe, now that the United States has disarmed the group's military in Iraq. The move also probably sent a signal to Iran -- intended or not -- that even though the European Union, the United States, Russia and the International Atomic Energy Agency are all pushing for Iran to accept tighter monitoring of its nuclear work, France (which is in the European Union) is committed to the stability of the Islamic Republic.

Iranian officials claim that their intentions are peaceful, although some have begun to use the nuclear advances as a bargaining chip. In an interview in Le Monde in March, Iran's Atomic Energy Organization chief said that before Iran agrees to demands that it sign an additional inspections protocol, Western countries must drop sanctions on imports of material for developing nuclear energy.

With no evident intention of trying to check or control Iran's nuclear program through negotiation, however, the United States appears to have been left with an approach based only on threats.

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