



ICRD Monthly Update

Nov. 30, 2013

Fatwas, Philosophers, and Common Sense

Dear Friends,

As the U.S. Congress considers a further tightening of the economic sanctions against Iran, thereby placing at risk the hard-won diplomatic agreement with the West relating to its nuclear program, it becomes appropriate to take a detached look at the bigger picture.

First of all, the agreement itself is totally in keeping with the requirement of Just War Doctrine that the military use of force only be considered as a court of last resort, i.e. after all realistic diplomatic options “have been shown to be impractical or ineffective.” Despite the fears of the naysayers, pressing ahead with non-violent options as the Western Powers are currently doing (with eyes open and verification at every step of the way) is absolutely the right thing to do.

Twice in recent history, Iran has made diplomatic overtures to the United States to open discussion on all issues standing in the way of a cooperative relationship. On neither occasion did we respond, since it was regime change that we were after. Well, by not responding, we effectively achieved that goal by undermining the reformist regime of President Khatami (which made the overtures), and paving the way for the hardliners’ ascension to power under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. It is axiomatic that unless one is willing to engage and make at least a cursory attempt to view the problem through the other’s cultural lens, the chances of reaching a mutually acceptable settlement short of war are meager at best.



In dealing with the highly charged topic of Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons, for example, it would be useful to contemplate more seriously the significance of the *fatwas* issued by both of Iran’s Supreme Leaders – Ayatollah Khamenei and, before him, Ayatollah Khomeini – against weapons of mass destruction (on the basis that such weapons are inherently un-Islamic because of their indiscriminate nature, i.e. they cannot be used without killing innocents). Buttrussing this line of thinking is Iran’s claim that it consciously chose not to respond in kind when attacked with chemical weapons by Iraq during the first five years of the Iran-Iraq War. Also of note is a poll taken in 2008 of Iranian attitudes toward nuclear weapons, in which more than 70 percent of those polled expressed opposition to developing them, regardless of whether the respondents

were conservatives, moderates, or reformists.

From a *realpolitik* standpoint, it is easy to see why Iran might want a nuclear weapons capability, if only to deter its neighbors who already have them (i.e. Israel, Pakistan, India, Russia, and China). In view of the *fatwas*, however, and the fact that such edicts are taken seriously in a country where religion allegedly trumps all else (and constitutes the very glue that binds in a theocracy), it seems entirely plausible that Iran might want to be perceived as having the potential to develop nuclear weapons without actually developing them. One should also take Ahmadinejad's earlier, seemingly suicidal pronouncements on the imminence of the "end times" with a grain of salt. Iran is a highly advanced culture with more philosophers per square hectare than any other country on the face of the planet. Such people do not value life lightly.

Yet another reality worth considering is the fact that Iranians tend to trust religion far more than they do politics. Accordingly, it could be helpful to formulate a potentially helpful Track Two initiative around Iran's openness to religion as a precursor to discussing important secular issues. One possibility that comes to mind, especially if the current negotiations lead to further openness, is what one might call a "peace game." Since Iran has been the focus of any number of war games, this would represent a peacemaking counterpart. However, rather than a scenario-driven exercise as most war games tend to be, a peace game would be more akin to facilitated brainstorming.



The basic concept would call for bringing participants from Iran and the United States together for a week (probably more than once) to discuss what the Iranians proposed earlier, i.e. how to overcome the obstacles that stand in the way of a cooperative relationship. Participants for the game would be chosen from the ranks of respected religious, political, academic, and professional figures who (1) are not in government, (2) are known to be spiritually minded, and (3) have views that would command serious consideration by their respective governments. A religious framework for the discussions would be established at the outset, a world-class expert on negotiations would facilitate the "game," and the final recommendations would be presented to both governments for appropriate consideration.

In short, the opportunities for moving ahead are limited solely by our imagination and willingness to engage.

With best wishes,

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