

The Next Quagmire

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The most effective diplomats, like the most effective intelligence officers and foreign correspondents, possess empathy. They have the intellectual, cultural and linguistic literacy to get inside the heads of those they must analyze or cover. They know the vast array of historical, religious, economic and cultural antecedents that go into making up decisions and reactions. And because of this—endowed with the ability to communicate and more able to find ways of resolving conflicts through diplomacy—they are less prone to blunders.



Iranian female paramilitary militias (Basiji)

But we live in an age where dialogue is dismissed and empathy is suspect. We prefer the illusion that we can dictate events through force. It hasn't worked well in Iraq. It hasn't worked well in Afghanistan. And it won't work in Iran. But those who once tried to reach out and understand, who developed expertise to explain the world to us and ourselves to the world, no longer have a voice in the new imperial project. We are instead governed and informed by moral and intellectual trolls.

To make rational decisions in international relations we must perceive how others see us. We must grasp how they think about us and be sensitive to their fears and insecurities. But this is becoming hard to accomplish. Our embassies are packed with analysts whose main attribute is long service in the armed forces and who frequently report to intelligence agencies rather than the State Department. Our area specialists in the State Department are ignored by the ideologues driving foreign policy. Their complex view of the world is an inconvenience. And foreign correspondents are an endangered species, along with foreign coverage.

We speak to the rest of the globe in the language of violence. The proposed multibillion-dollar arms supply package for the Persian Gulf countries is the newest form of weapons-systems-as-message.

U.S. Undersecretary of State

R. Nicholas Burns was rather blunt about the deal. He told the International Herald Tribune that the arms package "says to the Iranians and Syrians that the United States is the major power in the Middle East and will continue to be and is not going away."

The arrogant call for U.S. hegemony over the rest of the globe is making enemies of a lot of people who might be predisposed to support us, even in the Middle East. And it is terrifying those, such as

the Iraqis, Iranians and Syrians, whom we have demonized. Empathy and knowledge, the qualities that make real communication possible, have been discarded. We use tough talk and big weapons deals to communicate. We spread fear, distrust and violence. And we expect missile systems to protect us.

"Imagine an Iranian government that was powerful, radical, and in possession of nuclear weapons; imagine the threat that would pose to Israel and to the American-led balance of power, which has been so important in the Middle East since the close of the Second World War," Burns said in a speech at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston last April 11. "That is our first challenge."

"Our second challenge is that Iran continues to be the central banker of Middle East terrorism," he went on. "It is the leading funder and director of Hamas, Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine general command. Third, Iran is in our judgment a major violator of the human rights of its own people; it denies religious, political, and press rights to the people of a very great country representing a very great civilization. And so we see a problem that is going to be with us for a long time, and we are trying to fashion a strategy that will work for the long term."

George W. Bush's latest salvo, on Aug. 28, was more of the same.

"Iran's active pursuit of technology that could lead to nuclear weapons threatens to put a region already known for instability and violence under the shadow of a nuclear holocaust," he said. Bush warned that the United States and its allies would confront Iran "before it is too late."

These kinds of words, pouring out of the administration, send a clear message to any Iranian: You are in trouble. Bend to our will or we destroy you. These were the same words, with a few minor changes, that the Bush administration delivered to Saddam Hussein, who, despite numerous compromises, including letting the U.N. inspectors back into his country, was overthrown and put to death during a U.S. occupation.

And the Iranians know that without the bomb, which no intelligence agency thinks they can produce for a few years, they are now probably going to be attacked.

The Pentagon has reportedly drawn up plans for a series of airstrikes against 1,200 targets in Iran. The air attacks are designed to cripple the Iranians' military capability in three days. The Bushehr nuclear power plant, along with targets in Saghand and Yazd, the uranium enrichment facility in Natanz, a heavy-water plant and radioisotope facility in Arak, the Ardekan Nuclear Fuel Unit, and the uranium conversion facility and nuclear technology center in Isfahan, will all probably be struck by the United States and perhaps even Israeli warplanes. The Tehran Nuclear Research Center, the Tehran molybdenum, iodine and xenon radioisotope production facility, the Tehran Jabr Ibn Hayan Multipurpose Laboratories, and the Kalaye Electric Co. in the Tehran suburbs will also most likely come under attack.

But then what? We don't have the troops to invade. And we don't have anyone minding the helm who knows the slightest thing about Persian culture or the Middle East. There is no one in power in Washington with the empathy to get it. We will lurch blindly into a catastrophe of our own creation.

It is not hard to imagine what will happen. Iranian Shabab-3 and Shabab-4 missiles, which cannot reach the United States, will be launched at Israel, as well as American military bases and the Green Zone in Baghdad. Expect massive American casualties, especially in Iraq, where Iranian agents and

their Iraqi allies will be able to call in precise coordinates. The Strait of Hormuz, which is the corridor for 20 percent of the world's oil supply, will be shut down.

Chinese-supplied C-801 and C-802 anti-shipping missiles, mines and coastal artillery will target U.S. shipping, along with Saudi oil production and oil export centers. Oil prices will skyrocket to well over \$4 a gallon. The dollar will tumble against the euro. Hezbollah forces in southern Lebanon, interpreting the war as an attack on all Shiites, will fire rockets into northern Israel. Israel, already struck by missiles from Tehran, will begin retaliatory raids on Lebanon and Iran. Pakistan, with a huge Shiite minority, will reach greater levels of instability. The unrest could result in the overthrow of the weakened American ally President Pervez Musharraf and usher into power Islamic radicals. Pakistan could become the first radical Islamic state to possess a nuclear weapon. The neat little war with Iran, which few Democrats oppose, has the potential to ignite a regional inferno.

We have rendered the nation deaf and dumb. We no longer have the capacity for empathy. We prefer to amuse ourselves with trivia and gossip that pass for news rather than understand. We are blinded by our military prowess. We believe that huge explosions and death are an effective form of communication. And the rest of the world is learning to speak our language.

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