

Dempsey, Rational Countries, and the Apocalypse

Yes, Iran is behaving rationally.

by Shoshana Bryen

U.S. Gen. Martin Dempsey caused a minor storm when he pronounced Iran a "rational country." Is it rational to deny the Holocaust, threaten to eradicate another country, and subject your people to devastating economic sanctions in pursuit of nuclear weapons?

Yes.

To be rational is to be able to project cause and effect; act and consequence. It has nothing to do with goals. The United States and most of the civilized world find Iran's goals anathema, but our disapproval doesn't matter. The Iranian government will sacrifice a great deal in terms of (other people's) lives and livelihood to achieve its apocalyptic goals.[\[1\]](#)

The Obama administration took office believing that American policies had pushed Iran into radicalism. The *Christian Science Monitor* reported recently on the president's opening [gambit](#):

Obama chose his words with excruciating care in reaching out to Iran publicly and privately. ... The new president emphasized he wanted a "new beginning" with a country that called the United States "the Great Satan" and was branded by his predecessor as part of an "axis of evil."

[This] was intended to change Iran's mind on the need to acquire nuclear weapons capability. "Obama is still open to an Iranian overture for serious negotiations on its nuclear program," officials say. ... Indeed, that is the ultimate goal of the pressure strategy, they say. "The next step for us is making sure ... there is continued space for the Iranian government to take a different path."

The president and his advisers are not alone in thinking Iran's interest in nuclear capability is subject to change if a "different path" appears.

Following a 2009 Iranian missile test, proliferation expert Joseph Cirincione said perhaps Iran tested the missile as "a show of strength before they make a [concession](#)." With no concession, he now [says](#):

The conditions for containing Tehran's efforts may be better today than they have been in years. The recent disclosure of a secret nuclear facility in Iran has led to an apparent agreement to allow in UN weapons inspectors and to ship some uranium out of the country.

Um, nope.

Israeli professor Ronen Cohen writes:

According to Iran, rationality means achieving nuclear capability to stake its claim as a regional power as an initial step, and, at a later stage, as an international power. ... In Iran's mind though, nuclear weapons are only required to protect the Islamic Republic and for Jihad in protection of the

Muslim world. Iran's aim is to become a [regional superpower](#), and nuclear weapons, in its view, are a means to that end.

Jeffrey Goldberg, in the *Atlantic*:

[Iran pursues nuclear weapons because] the overthrow of Saddam Hussein by George W. Bush ... convinced the Iranian regime that it needs the insurance policy represented by a nuclear weapons program. This is not the only reason, of course: Iran has hegemonic pretensions, and these can be best expressed through the acquisition of a nuclear capability. Iran also [feels](#) that it is surrounded by enemies.

Iran wants to be safe, to prove itself, to be a regional hegemon, and to protect Muslims. Iran has pretensions, might take a different path, will work with the UN, and responds to American foreign policy. All these comport comfortably with the Western sense of what countries could and should do and why. If there are practical reasons for Iran to pursue nuclear capability, there must be practical reasons for it to stop.

But practical is not the same as rational.

Contrary to Goldberg, Iran's pursuit of nuclear capability did not begin with the invasion of Iraq, and any fears Iran had about being next on President Bush's hit list were quickly allayed. The ayatollahs regarded the overthrow of Sunni, militaristic, aggressive, secular Saddam as an opportunity to pursue their own goal of expansionist, transnational Shi'ism.

The revivalist Shi'ite impulse has nothing to do with protecting Iran or regional hegemony. Ahmadinejad says and believes he has been chosen to expand God's realm, and he isn't the only one who thinks this is the time. The important thing is not whether God did or didn't, but that it is, for apocalyptic Shiites, a *positive* impulse — doing God's work — not a negative one. "For the glory of God" precludes abandoning the quest and precludes finding merit or friends in the secular, liberal, decadent West. It precludes democracy at home and tolerance abroad. It demands sacrifice.

Nuclear capability — used or held — will make it harder by orders of magnitude to take action against an Iranian regime that sees itself as the rational center of a new world order.

[1] Is Bashar al-Asad rational as he uses mortars on the city of Homs, kills children in Hama, and cuts off refugee escape routes? Yes. His goal is to survive as Syria's ruler and prevent the massacre of his heterodox Alawite minority. The alliance with Iran serves that end. The Obama administration wasted bloody months appealing to Asad to be a "reformer," and trying to "woo" him from Iran to the West. To permit access to power by the majority would be suicide. To give up Iran would be the same. The U.S. could provide nothing as meaningful as being alive and in control, and he rationally calculated that we would allow him to remain so.