

[Iran Nuclear Program Creates a Furor Likely to Be Futile](#)

Having already successfully fooled most of Congress and the American public into believing that Saddam Hussein's Iraq had an active nuclear weapons program, the Bush administration is now claiming that Iran has an active nuclear weapons program.

If we decide to once again believe such claims, do we risk being drawn into another disastrous military confrontation based upon false allegations? Or, if we reject such claims, will we — like the villagers in the famous fable of the boy who cried, “Wolf!” — find out too late that the alarm this time was for real?

With the acumen of an experienced trader in a Persian bazaar, the Iranians have — for the time being — been able to avert a crisis through negotiations with representatives of the European Union. Iran agreed to suspend its uranium enrichment and processing programs until a permanent deal is reached, which the Iranians hope would include political and economic concessions from the Europeans.

The Bush administration has not been supportive of the European negotiating efforts and has instead advocated a more confrontational approach, which would include U.N. sanctions for Iran's apparent earlier violations of agreements with the U.N. International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Such American efforts have not received much support, however, in part because of U.S. double standards: The United States has blocked enforcement of previous U.N. Security Council resolutions calling on Israel to place its nuclear facilities under an IAEA trusteeship as well as resolutions calling on Pakistan and India to eliminate their nuclear weapons and long-range missiles.

Indeed, whatever the extent of Iran's nuclear ambitions and whatever the outcome of the ongoing talks, the United States is in a poor position to take much leadership in the cause of nonproliferation.

Throughout the 1970s, the U.S. government encouraged American companies to sell nuclear reactors to the Iranian government, then under the dictatorial rule of the shah. Even more so than the mullahs now in power, the shah's megalomania led many to fear his ambitions to divert the technology for military purposes.

Despite the subsequent rise of an anti-American regime in that country, the United States is still obligated under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty to allow signatory states in good standing to have access to peaceful nuclear technology.

At the same time, given Iran's enormous reserves of oil and natural gas, valid questions can be raised as to why it would need a nuclear energy program, particularly given the enormous expense and serious environmental risks of such technology.

Even if we are to assume that Iran desires nuclear weapons, however, it would be a mistake to assume that the Islamic Republic would use them for aggressive designs. Indeed, the Iranians may have good reasons to desire a nuclear deterrent: In early 2002, Iran was among three countries — the others being Iraq and North Korea — labeled by President George W. Bush as part of “the axis of evil.” Iraq, which had given up its nuclear program over a decade earlier and later allowed IAEA inspectors back in, was invaded and occupied by the United States. By contrast, North Korea, which reneged on its agreement and has apparently resumed production of nuclear weapons, has not been invaded. The Iranians may see a lesson in that.

In addition, soon after coming to office, the Bush administration decided to unfreeze its nuclear weapons production and launch a program to develop smaller tactical nuclear weapons for battlefield use. It is important to remember that the only country to actually use nuclear weapons in combat is the United States, in the 1945 bombings of two Japanese cities, a decision that most American political leaders defend to this day.

Furthermore, the U.S. government is allied with Pakistan, which borders Iran on the east, and possesses nuclear weapons and sophisticated delivery systems. The United States is also a strong ally of Israel, located just 600 miles to the west, which has the capability of launching a nuclear strike against Iran with its long-range missiles in a matter of minutes.

This is not to say that a nuclear-armed Iran would not be a matter of concern. Over two decades ago, America's Catholic bishops recognized that possessing nuclear weapons, even for the sake of deterrence, was immoral. Many Islamic scholars have reached similar conclusions.

It is important to note, however, that Iran has called for the establishment of a nuclear-free zone for the entire Middle East, where all nations of the region would be required to give up their nuclear weapons and weapons programs and open up to strict international inspections. They have been joined in that effort by Syria as well as by U.S. allies Jordan and Egypt.

The Bush administration has rejected such a call, however, insisting that the United States has the right to decide which countries get to have such weapons and which ones do not, effectively demanding a kind of nuclear apartheid.

Not only are such double standards unethical, they are ineffective: Any effort to impose a regime of haves and have-nots from the outside will simply make the have-nots try even harder.

The only realistic means of curbing the threat of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East is to establish a region-wide program for disarmament in which all countries — regardless of their relations with the United States — must be a part.

And, ultimately, the only way to make the world completely safe from the threat of nuclear weapons is the establishment of a nuclear-free planet, for which the United States, as the largest nuclear power, must take the lead.

<http://www.commondreams.org/views05/0224-24.htm>