

A Dangerous Delusion

WHY THE WEST IS WRONG ABOUT NUCLEAR IRAN

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CHAPTER ONE

THE OFFER THE WEST TURNED DOWN

It was the early spring of 2005 and a team of British, French and German diplomats were arriving at the magnificent French foreign ministry at the Quai d'Orsay on the left bank of the Seine.

But the splendour of the Second Empire building did not match their mood. The negotiating team, which included high-flying John Sawers (now head of the British Secret Intelligence Service), had been fruitlessly searching for a solution to the Iranian nuclear stand-off for more than a year.

There seemed no solution. The European negotiators, under massive pressure from the United States, were adamant that Iran must give up its uranium-enrichment programme.

For the Iranians these demands seemed an intolerable humiliation for a sovereign state, and a classic manifestation of the western imperialism that had humiliated their ancient country for centuries.

The meeting had been under way for approximately 20 minutes, with no progress, when suddenly the face of the leader of the Iranian negotiating team, Javad Zarif, was wreathed in smiles.

‘We have a proposal to show you,’ he said. ‘It is an entirely unofficial idea. It has not been discussed or approved by our masters in Tehran. But perhaps it might be something we can talk about.’

After these preliminary words, the Iranians delivered a PowerPoint presentation which amazed the European negotiating team. It was the basis of a deal and one, moreover, that offered genuine benefits for both sides, though both sides would have to make compromises as well.

Briefly, in the gilded nineteenth-century Parisian salon, a resolution of the nuclear stand-off between Iran and the west felt entirely possible.

The Iranians explained that they were not prepared to abandon their plans to develop centrifuge enrichment technology on Iranian soil. But in return for carrying on with their enrichment programme they proposed unprecedented measures to provide guarantees that

they would never divert peaceful nuclear technology for military use.

They offered a solemn pledge that Iran would remain bound by the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) – which obliges member states to subject their nuclear facilities to external inspection – for as long as it existed.

They said that Iran's religious leaders would repudiate nuclear weapons.

They put on the negotiating table a series of voluntary restrictions on the size and output of the enrichment programme.

And they offered inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA) improved oversight of all nuclear activities in Iran.

The European diplomats allowed not a trace of emotion to show on their faces. But one official recalls thinking that 'what we had just heard was a most interesting offer. We realised that what we had just heard was a valid and coherent proposal that was in full conformity with relevant international treaty provisions.'

This diplomat adds today that 'trust was not an issue, because over the preceding 18 months we had got to know our Iranian counterparts and had acquired confidence in the Iranians' ability to honour their commitments'.

When the Iranians had finished their presentation, the Europeans asked for a break so that they could discuss the proposal among themselves. Once on their own they agreed that there was no way that the Iranian offer would be acceptable to their political masters in Europe. One witness puts the problem like this: 'There was not the faintest chance that President George W. Bush's Republican advisers and Israeli allies would allow him to look benignly on such a deal. On the contrary, if the Europeans were to defy American wishes, they would be letting themselves in for a transatlantic row to end all rows.'

So when they came back to the negotiating table one hour later they were studiously non-committal. They spoke highly of the Iranian offer, but asked for time so that their governments could consider it.

And when John Sawers took the Iranian offer back to London it was very quickly forgotten. According to Foreign Office sources, Tony Blair intervened to make sure that it went no further. Later Sawers explained to Seyed Hossein Mousavian, spokesman of the Iranian nuclear negotiation team, why the offer could not be taken up. 'Washington would never tolerate the operation of even one centrifuge in Iran,' he said.*

* Seyed Hossein Mousavian, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir*, p173

So the peace proposal from the Iranian negotiators was killed stone dead even though the European negotiating team realised that it was both very well judged and in full conformity with international law. 'This was an extraordinary sleight of hand by the EU,' says one European diplomat close to the negotiations today.

The purpose of this short book is to dispel some of the myths and falsehoods which have distorted the view of Iran in America and Europe. We will show how Iran has often been ready to deal reasonably with the rest of the world over its nuclear ambitions. Iran was one of the original signatories to the NPT on 1 July 1968, and has for the most part obediently respected its provisions, and continues to do so today. As required by the NPT, it has not acquired nuclear weapons and its nuclear facilities are subject to IAEA inspection.

By contrast, the United States (and its client states in Europe, including Britain) has stood in the way of a settlement by refusing to accept Iran's right to uranium enrichment under the NPT. Moreover, the west has repeatedly made unjust demands, and at crucial moments showed bad faith at the negotiating table.

Western politicians have nevertheless issued a barrage of partial and misleading statements about the Iranian position. These statements have very rarely

been exposed in the western media, which as a whole shows little interest in finding out the truth about Iran. More commonly, western newspapers and television channels have disseminated fabrications which have fuelled hatred and suspicion, and sowed misunderstanding. We will supply examples of this malevolent public discourse, and seek to put the record straight.

As a result of these misrepresentations, most people in the west can be forgiven for believing that Iran is an aggressive and malevolent power hell-bent on the acquisition of nuclear weapons. We concede that it is indeed possible that the Iranians are secretly pursuing a nuclear bomb. However, we can show that there is at present no convincing evidence for this belief. Any western politician or propagandist who claims otherwise (and there are plenty of them) is either ignorant of the facts, or lying.

Nor is that all. The United States knows with reasonable certainty that Iran has no nuclear weapons programme, let alone a nuclear bomb. This also seems to be the position of the IAEA, which is responsible for monitoring the activities of the signatories of the NPT.

So what is going on? Why all the anger, the endless barrage of rhetoric and the ruthless drive to isolate

Iran, which has led to the sanctions that are reportedly driving millions of Iranians to the brink of poverty and despair? We will suggest that a different agenda is at work, which has little or nothing to do with Iran's non-existent nuclear weapons. We will argue that the United States and its European clients are driven by a different compulsion: the humiliation and eventual destruction of Iran's Islamic regime.

The central purpose of this book, therefore, is to make the argument that confrontation with Iran is unnecessary. As the settlement proposed by the Iranians at the Quai d'Orsay suggests, Iran is prepared to deal with the west. It is the west that has repeatedly refused to accept the peace entreaties of the Iranians, that is refusing to deal with Iran on reasonable terms.

So we will make the urgent case that America and the west should return to the negotiating table to strike a deal with Iran. The alternative is yet more of the aggression and brinkmanship repeatedly shown by western negotiators: and ultimately the risk of an unnecessary and pointless war.