

## **A Lose-Lose Situation with Iran**

**By Trita Parsi | December 29, 2006**

British Prime Minister Tony Blair has been touring the Middle East with a clear message: To make peace in the Middle East, Iran must be isolated.

The war of words between the West and Iran was heated by Blair's call for an "alliance of moderation" consisting of Arab dictatorships to quell the challenge posed by "extremists" supported by Tehran.

There is little new about Blair's strategy. Though it contradicts his initial support for the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group to open talks with Syria and Iran—a position he quickly backed away from after having been corrected by President George W. Bush—it fits well with the approach of Blair's predecessors when it comes to creating momentum for peacemaking between Israelis and Palestinians.

In late 1991, a flood of articles surfaced in Israeli media that depicted Iran as Israel's greatest strategic threat. This new perspective stood in stark contrast to Israel's traditional view of Iran as a strategic non-Arab ally—a view that had survived both the Islamic Revolution and the end of the Iraq-Iran War.

Months before the discussions between Israeli and Palestinian officials on Oslo were revealed to the public in 1993, the late Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin began to argue that Iran's fundamentalist ideology had replaced communism as an ideological threat to the West. Iran was "fanning all the flames in the Middle East," and Israel's "struggle against murderous Islamic terror" was "meant to awaken the world which is lying in slumber" of the dangers of Shiite fundamentalism, according to Rabin.

Like Tony Blair, then-U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher adopted this rhetoric in Washington's efforts to advance the Oslo process. "Wherever you look," he told reporters in March 1995, "you find the evil hand of Iran in this region."

The emphasis on Iran's Shiite ideology served, among other things, to convince Sunni Arab monarchies that they faced a greater threat from Iran's political revisionism than from Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands. Consequently, so the argument went, the Arabs should opt for peace with Israel in order to combine their strength to push back Iran.

A decade later, Blair seems to follow the same blueprint. In the mid-1990s, many were receptive to this message due to Iran's extensive support for Palestinian rejectionist groups using violence and terror against Israel (which, incidentally, began after the Oslo process).

Today, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's excessive rhetoric, Iran's uranium enrichment program, and the recent historical revisionism at Tehran's Holocaust conference are all helping to make the region more receptive to Blair's repetition of Rabin and Christopher's old message.

But promoting Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking by building alliances to isolate Iran failed in the 1990s and is likely to fail again. Back then, Washington stood at the apex of its power. The Soviet Union had collapsed, and in the "New World Order" that was forming, the United States was the world's sole superpower.

Diplomatically, Washington's stocks were equally high. Then-Secretary of State James Baker had compiled a broad coalition—including numerous Arab states—to expel Saddam Hussein from Kuwait, and he had kept Washington's word that Arab cooperation against Iraq would lead to a push for Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking.

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Iran, on the other hand, was weak. It was still recuperating from the Iraq-Iran War, and its relations with the Arab states and with Europe remained frosty. Still, isolating Tehran proved far more difficult than Washington had envisioned. Despite its extensive efforts, the policy of containing Iran proved a huge failure.

Today, the tables have turned. Washington and London's credibility is at an all time low. The U.S. military is overextended in Iraq, and the raging civil war there has removed any doubt that the neoconservative experiment in the Middle East has been anything but an utter failure. Israel's conflict with Lebanon this past summer has done little to buy it new friends in the Arab world, and the pro-Western Arab governments' impotence in influencing Washington has increased the rift between these regimes and their peoples.

Iran, on the other hand, is ascending. Forces allied with it are winning elections throughout the region; it has so far successfully defied U.S. and EU pressure to halt its enrichment program, and the strength of its allies' deterrent forces in Lebanon during the summer skirmishes with Israel surprised even the leadership in Tehran. In addition, the clerics in Tehran are swimming in record-high oil revenues.

Yet Iran may sooner or later overplay its hand. Its excessive rhetoric against Israel and the United States has already backfired to a certain extent. While the tough talk may have signaled that the cost of U.S. military intervention against Iran would

be devastating and have major regional repercussions, it has also increased anxiety among Iran's Arab neighbors and made them more inclined to seek Iran's isolation and containment.

Still, a strategy that failed under far more favorable circumstances is unlikely to succeed under the current more challenging conditions. Instead, rather than increasing stability in the region, many believe that pursuing this course risks bringing the confrontation between the West and Iran to a climax, with a regional war as its ultimate outcome. Disturbingly, some elements in Saudi Arabia seem to prefer such a conflict to an Iraqi democracy with Shiites at the helm.

So far, Bush and Blair have resisted the one policy that could both avoid regional war and help stabilize Iraq—a holistic approach that would give all regional states a stake in the region's future and stability. Confrontation and balance of power politics still seem to be preferred over consensus building.

But it remains to be seen who will lose the most—and who can afford to lose the most—in the lose-lose situation that the continuation of this policy would likely lead to. Though no side is immune to miscalculation, some would argue that so far, Bush and Blair far outdo their competitors in this field.

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*Trita Parsi is a writer for the Inter Press Service and the author of Treacherous Triangle—The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States (Yale University Press, 2007).*

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