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SPEAKING FREELY

Nukes and double standards

By Deborah Campbell

Speaking Freely is an Asia Times Online feature that allows guest writers to have their say. [Please click here if you are interested in contributing.](#)

An acquaintance of mine, an Israeli physicist in his 30s, likes to joke about his annual mandatory military service. It involves guarding "the nuclear weapons Israel doesn't have", he tells me, at the site of Israel's undeclared nuclear arsenal in Dimona. The code name for the Dimona reactor is "the chocolate factory" - another "secret" that everyone seems to know.

The "don't ask, don't tell" policy toward Israel's nuclear-weapons



program emerged from negotiations between US president Richard Nixon and Israeli prime minister Golda Meir - the same prime minister who also denied the existence of the Palestinian people. John F Kennedy was the only US president to demand greater accountability of Israel, a nation that has consistently refused to sign the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which would subject the country to inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Talk to average Iranians these days and they are full of such facts. Why, they want to know, is Iran being singled out by the United States when they are surrounded by far worse offenders whom no one confronts? Iran is, after all, a signatory to the NPT, which permits member states to pursue peaceful uses of nuclear technology, as Iran's government claims it's doing.

At a time when Iran's foray into nuclear-power development has come under the international microscope, with the assumption that the "mad mullahs" are busying themselves to get the bomb, Pakistan has thus far avoided such scrutiny, despite the fact that it's an unstable military regime that could easily turn from a nuclear-armed US ally to a nuclear-armed enemy in the time it takes to say "coup d'etat". And what about India? Like Pakistan and Israel, it has a nuclear arsenal and refuses to sign on to the NPT. Yet India is being rewarded for this behavior by US assistance with its civilian nuclear program, an act that is undermining non-proliferation efforts and the treaty itself.

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All but forgotten are the provisions of the NPT that require current nuclear states to begin dismantling and liquidating their own weapons system. Instead, the US has begun developing new-generation nukes, violating the very treaty it claims to be defending and potentially setting the stage for another nuclear arms race.

In the case of Iran, the stark double standards of US foreign policy have become more pronounced than usual, and potentially more dangerous to global security. Since 2002 - long before the election of Iran's current president whose scruffy beard, sunken cheeks and provocative outbursts against Israel have all the hallmarks of a villain straight from central casting - Iran was already marked as a member of the "axis of evil". This was at a time when its president was the gentle reformist-philosopher Mohammad Khatami, who pressed for an international "dialogue of civilizations" in hopes that it might melt the long-standing Iran-US cold war and mitigate rising tensions between Islamic nations and the West.

Khatami's overtures were largely ignored. As the elected president of Iran, he was portrayed in the West as a mere figurehead who lacked any real power over the direction of the nation. It's a view that seems more contradictory than ever as the new president, Mahmud Ahmadinejad, is being portrayed as the all-powerful leader of Iran, when in fact he is subject to the same limitations as his predecessor. The same political system, two opposing interpretations from the White House.

A similar about-face can be observed in the case of Iran's original attempts to develop its nuclear capacity in the late 1970s. Iran was then led by Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the dictator whom the US had placed in power after its Central Intelligence Agency overthrew Iran's democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, who had moved to nationalize Iran's oil.

At the time the shah began pursuing his nuclear ambitions, Richard Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz and Donald Rumsfeld held key national-security portfolios within the administration of president Gerald Ford. Though Iran's argument for seeking nuclear energy was the same then as it is now (Iran argues that it requires nuclear energy to meet the demands of a growing population), the Ford administration approved the sale of nuclear enrichment and reprocessing technology despite intelligence reports indicating that the shah intended to develop nuclear weapons. The deal would have allowed Iran to complete a full nuclear-fuel cycle - the same capability the Bush administration, with many of the same figures in power, is opposing today.

As tensions between the United States and Iran escalate and reports that the US is preparing a military strike on Iran continue to surface, it's helpful to reflect on the lessons of Iraq. When the US, with the cooperation of Britain, invaded in 2003, it was with the stated aim of seeking to contain the development of nuclear weapons that, as everyone now knows, Iraq didn't have.

The consequences, not only for the people of Iraq but in terms of the human and financial costs to the United States, have been enormous. A report written by Joseph Stiglitz, a professor at Columbia University and winner of the Nobel Prize for economics, and Linda Bilmes, a Harvard budget expert, estimates the total financial cost of the war at US\$1 trillion to \$2 trillion. Dr Stiglitz told The Guardian, "Our estimates are very conservative, and it could be that the final costs will be much higher. And it should be noted they do not include the costs of the conflict to either Iraq or the UK." The estimates also don't include the cost in terms of international goodwill or the new crop of enemies the war has inspired, the final tally of which is impossible to calculate.

The war in Iraq would suggest that careful consideration be given before embarking on another costly adventure, particularly one that relies on the same premise that was so discredited in Iraq, namely confronting weapons of mass destruction. Particularly when the US intelligence community admits it knows almost nothing about Iran, and when some estimates state that Iran is 10 years or more away from being able to produce weapons-grade fissile material, should that be the aim (and it may well be, given the advantage that has conferred on fellow "axis of evil" member North Korea). And particularly when the new object of US

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firepower is a country that has three times the population and land mass of Iraq, and has not been "softened up", as Iraq was, through more than a decade of international sanctions.

Indeed, Iran has been the country to benefit most from the war in Iraq. Today it is awash in petrodollars thanks to skyrocketing oil prices that are another side-effect of the Iraq war. (One can only imagine the massive amounts of fuel the war effort itself has consumed, irrespective of the ongoing damage to oil pipelines by insurgents, for everything from Humvees, tanks and aircraft to the never-ending supply lines transporting meals, water, soldiers, ammo and absolutely everything else into the country). And Iran has been able to sit back and watch its two arch-enemies - the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq - be defeated by the United States.

Yet the situation is not exactly comforting for Iran. Today it is surrounded by a nuclear-armed Pakistan, US-occupied Afghanistan and Iraq, and a nuclear-armed Israel that did not hesitate to bomb Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981, despite subsequent condemnation from the United Nations. (It was the lesson of Osirak that led Iran to distribute its nuclear program at various points around the country, in many cases burying it deep underground, so as not to provide an easy target should history repeat itself.) And Iran's leadership understands that the main issue in the minds of US military planners and their Israeli counterparts is not nuclear proliferation, but regime change. To back down or show weakness, they believe, is political suicide.

Stopping nuclear proliferation is a noble goal, one the international community should support. But the double standards applied to Iran only make it more difficult to contain those who wish to join the nuclear club. They can't fail to notice that what distinguishes the white hats from the black ones is not the actions of a nation. Pakistan, Israel and India can do as they please not because there is inherently less risk in their nuclear-weapons programs, but because of their relationship to power.

It is commonly said of Middle Eastern political arrangements that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. The same is true of politics in general. Yet changing times and circumstances indicate that friends can swiftly turn into enemies and enemies back into friends. The best way to deal with such eventualities, when it comes to issues as fundamental to human survival as nuclear weaponry, is to ensure that everybody plays by the same rule book. What is good for Iran is good for Israel and the US and every aspiring member of the nuclear club.

The sheer financial costs of the current path to war should be enough to signal that a new approach is essential. Given the trillion-dollar price tag of the war in Iraq, opening a new front in Iran would be financially disastrous, perhaps even spelling the end of US hegemony and opening new rifts in the relationships with China and Russia, who oppose the use of military force against Iran.

When millions of Americans still have no medical insurance, when millions more make less than a living wage, when tuition costs make higher education off-limits to so many qualified students, the tradeoff in terms of priorities means the casualties of war are not only in a hot, dry country halfway across the world.

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