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A nuclear Iran dooms peace talks
By LAWRENCE J. HAAS

On the very day Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that the United States would lead a renewed Israeli-Palestinian peace effort, Iran boasted that it had test-fired a surface-to-air missile.

A day later, Iran began loading fuel rods into its Bushehr nuclear reactor, marking further progress on its quest for nuclear weapons.

A day after that, Iran's leaders unveiled the nation's first home-built unmanned, or "drone," bomber, with a range of more than 600 miles and which President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said could serve as a "messenger of death" to hostile outside forces.

These developments illustrate a big problem with the U.S. peace effort – it will divert U.S. time and attention from the far more pressing challenge of containing Iran's regional hegemonic ambitions, which threaten our allies, our role in the region, and our ongoing efforts in Iraq, Afghanistan and other hotspots.

The issues of Israeli-Palestinian peace and Iran's rise are closely intertwined, but not in the way the Obama administration thinks. From the administration's standpoint, Israeli-Palestinian peace will set the stage for progress on larger regional issues – such as Iran – by eliminating a sore point that inflames the region and hampers U.S. prestige.

Quite the contrary, the road to Israeli-Palestinian peace runs through Tehran. That is, the more that the United States can weaken Iran, the greater will be Washington's chances to secure peace in the region.

That's because, at the moment, Iran can essentially guarantee that peace will neither come nor, if it came, stick. Tehran equips its terrorist clients – Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon – with thousands of rockets to fire at Israel and, thus, disrupt any negotiations that seem to be getting serious.

The stronger that Iran grows, the more it can disrupt such peace efforts. An Iran with nuclear weapons, which is perhaps six months to two years away, will be better placed to protect its terrorist clients and de-stabilize Iraq, Afghanistan, and other states where its military and intelligence agents now operate.

But let's assume, as the White House would argue, that it can both contain Iran and promote Israeli-Palestinian peace, with one not detracting from the other. Its decision to push for peace, and set a one-year goal, was wrong-headed anyway because the prerequisites for peace do not exist.

Hamas, which remains committed to Israel's destruction, denounced the peace talks as "a new attempt to deceive the Palestinian people." That Hamas, which rules Gaza, remains at war with the Palestinian Authority, which rules the West Bank, makes it hard to see how any deal could apply to the Palestinian community writ large. Hopes that the Palestinian people or Arab states will convince, or successfully pressure, Hamas to fall in line in the aftermath of a deal are fanciful.

Nor are conditions ripe in the Jewish state. A nation that withdrew from Gaza only to see it become a base for Hamas and its rockets largely opposes a similar move from most of the much larger West Bank.

Were he inclined, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu might be just the hawkish leader to sell Israeli-Palestinian peace to a wary public – in the very unlikely event that he and PA President Mahmoud Abbas could resolve the issues of a Palestinian "right of return" to Israel and the final status of Jerusalem.

But Netanyahu's governing coalition, which includes skeptics of the peace effort, would collapse over any deal that Abbas could accept – and that would leave both the government and the Israeli people opposing a deal.

Thus, the United States has put its prestige on the line with little chance of success and huge potential to hamper its already-inadequate efforts to face down its far more serious regional challenge. That's a fool's errand – at best.

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