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On Iran, pay no attention to mushy-headed “experts”
By Lawrence J. Haas

The West is entering a particularly dangerous period in its confrontation with Iran, but due less to rising tensions between the two sides than to a concerted push by mushy-headed “experts” on how to defuse them.

In its efforts to convince Iran to abandon its nuclear weapons pursuit, the West remains in a race against time. Tehran continues to make progress, announcing recently that it is enriching uranium at a second site – one, by the way, that’s better protected from potential attack – while the International Atomic Energy Agency reported that Tehran has conducted tests that suggest its desire for a nuclear weapons capability.

Western nations, meanwhile, have imposed new sanctions on Iran to squeeze its oil revenue and curtail its participation in the global economy. Tehran threatened to retaliate by closing the Strait of Hormuz, the United States made clear that it will not allow such action, and a growing number of experts now predict that a U.S., Israeli, or joint attack on Iran’s nuclear sites may not be far off.

With matters coming to a head, we should not be surprised that a band of worried Iran watchers have suggested paths to defuse tensions and avoid a larger confrontation. Their motives may be pure but, if taken seriously, their arguments could prove counter-productive – if not downright dangerous.

In a January 15th *New York Times* op-ed, for instance, the University of Maryland’s Shibley Telhami and Steve Kull argued that, rather than letting Israel choose between accepting a nuclearized Iran or attacking Iran to prevent it, a more viable solution lies in convincing Israel to give up its own nukes.

“If Israel’s nuclear program were to become part of the equation, it would be a game-changer,” they wrote. “Iran has until now effectively accused the West of employing a double standard because it does not demand Israeli disarmament, earning it many fans across the Arab world. And a nuclear-free zone may be hard for Iran to refuse.”

Ah, yes, that’s the driving force behind Iran’s refusal to abandon its nuclear pursuit – global inconsistency.

The authors suggest that Tehran can be deterred from using nuclear weapons after developing them, that Iranian leaders would worry about the millions of Palestinian and Iranian deaths from an Israeli counter-attack, and that, consequently, a nuclear Iran is less of an “existential threat” for Israel than many war-hawks argue. Moreover, they argue that the Israeli-Iranian “stalemate” over nukes “could actually delay or prevent peace in the region.”

Thus, by loading one dubious assumption on top of another, the authors seek to transform a global concern about Iran's nuclear pursuit – which most Arab states share – into a bilateral dispute between Tehran and Jerusalem in which the Jewish state is culpable. That's breath-taking on almost any level.

But, if Telhami and Kull have silly new ideas about how to solve the Iran nuclear issue, a host of other Iran watchers have weighed in from the other end of the spectrum – arguing that potential success still lies in the well-worn approaches that have brought only failure to date.

On January 13th, the Council on Foreign Relations' Ray Takeyh took to the *Washington Post's* op-ed page to disparage the recent murder of an Iranian nuclear scientist (presumably at Israeli, U.S., or joint hands) because “such actions are self-defeating in the sense that they do little to slow Iran's nuclear program and [are] playing into the regime's hands as it seeks to fracture the international community.”

“The best means of holding the coalition together,” he wrote, “is to stress that it is Iran's behavior that remains outside the parameters of legality so long as Tehran continues to enrich uranium in defiance of U.N. resolutions and threatens to imperil peaceful maritime traffic. Any action that distracts attention from Iran's illegal behavior only retards the efforts to disarm the Islamic Republic.”

Yes, the mysterious murder of a scientist can ruffle international feathers. But, as Takeyh himself notes, the focus on Iran's “illegal behavior” and the sanctions that it has generated have done little to slow Tehran's nuclear pursuit. Quite the contrary, Iran is enriching more uranium, at higher levels of purity, and developing better centrifuges that will enable more enrichment – in essence, “breaching Western red lines while avoiding the type of crisis that could outright endanger its nuclear program if not its regime.”

Yet, Takeyh cautions against action that threatens the “coalition” that has engendered such failure. That, too, is breathtaking.

While Takeyh cautions against high-stakes assassination, the *New York Times* editorial page eschews talk of military action to prevent a nuclear Iran, calling a potential strike against Iran's nuclear sites “a disaster.”

“We don't know whether any mix of sanctions and inducements could persuade Tehran to abandon its nuclear ambitions,” the *Times* notes helpfully, before offering an old idea and pretending that it's a new one.

“There is another option besides force: negotiations with the United States and other major powers over curbing Iran's nuclear program in exchange for ending sanctions and diplomatic isolation,” the *Times* suggested. “Iran's fractured leadership so far has not committed to serious talks, but President Obama and his allies have not paid enough attention to that alternative.”

One wonders whether the *Times'* editorialists have memories, or at least research assistants. The United States and its allies have pursued this formula – negotiations to “curb” the nuclear

program “in exchange for ending sanctions and diplomatic isolation” – relentlessly ever since an Iranian dissident group revealed Iran’s clandestine nuclear program to the world about a decade ago.

President Bush tried it, allowing British, French, and German leaders to negotiate with Iran over its nuclear program. Then President Obama tried it, offering the prospect of economic incentives and more global integration if Iran abandoned its nukes. Bush and Obama failed, and not because they did not try hard enough. Instead, Iran’s radical regime was (and remains) far more interested in developing nuclear weapons than it is concerned about the global fall-out from pursuing them.

To be sure, the *Times* called for stronger sanctions. But, in ruling out a military strike, America’s “newspaper of record” offered the world no serious back-up plan if stronger sanctions prove no more consequential than weaker ones have proven to date.

Also offering nothing new was the Brookings Institution’s Suzanne Maloney. In a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed a week earlier, she complained that new U.S. sanctions on Iran “signal the demise of the paradigm that had guided U.S. Iran policymaking since the 1979 revolution: the combination of pressure and persuasion.”

The good news: Maloney acknowledges that Washington has been pushing negotiations with Iran for a long time indeed. The bad news: she provides no compelling reason why we should stay the course.

As Iran continues to make progress on the nuclear front, the United States and its allies face a stark question: what else should they consider, including military force, to prevent the horror of a nuclear Iran?

In considering that question seriously, Western leaders would be well-advised to ignore the advice of weak-kneed Iran watchers who offer nothing more than silly new theories or tired old ones.

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