Are the Leaders of Iran “Rational Actors” Or, Can Iran be Deterred?

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1 Rarely are foreign policy deliberations more affected by what seem like academic discussions, matters of definitions, and debates that sound like scholasticism, than when one seeks to determine whether the leaders of a given nation are rational actors. The question I am addressing focuses on Iran; however, the same points apply to the leaders of North Korea, to the behavior of terrorists (especially suicide bombers), and potentially many others.

2 In dealing with Iran, engagement seems not to work. Sanctions seem not to suffice to dissuade Iran from extending its nuclear military drive. Military strikes are said to likely fail. As Secretary Robert Gates stated on April 13, 2009, “Militarily, in my view, it [a bombing of Iran’s nuclear facilities] would delay the Iranian program for some period of time, but only delay it, probably only one to three years.” Hence the growing interest in deterrence; that is, in tolerating a nuclear-armed Iran but keeping it at bay by threatening retaliation in kind should they use their nuclear weapons.

3 Although the Obama administration has not embraced this position, several observers believe that this is the direction it is headed. Retired Gen. John Abizaid, former head of U.S. Central Command, put it as follows: “We need to make it very clear to the Iranians, the same way we made it clear to the Soviet Union and China, that their first use of nuclear weapons would result in the devastation of their nation. I don’t believe Iran is a suicide state. Deterrence will work with Iran.” Fareed Zakaria noted, in his article “Don’t Scramble the Jets,” that Iran’s religious leaders comprise a “canny (and ruthlessly pragmatic) clerical elite,” and that military dictatorships like the one that is now forming in Iran “are calculating. They act in ways that keep themselves alive and in power. That instinct for self-preservation is what will make a containment strategy work.”

4 Among academics, Columbia University professor Kenneth Waltz has written that, “It would be strange if Iran did not strive to get nuclear weapons, and I don’t think we have to worry if they do. Because deterrence has worked 100 percent of the time. After all, we have deterred big nuclear powers like the Soviet Union and China. So sleep well.” All these statements presume that the leaders of Iran are rational actors.

Rational Actors?

5 There is wide agreement that for deterrence to work, the leaders of the nations that command nuclear arms must be rational. The same holds for terrorists who may acquire nuclear arms one way or another. Those who argue that all these actors are rational often draw on the same assumptions as economics, which assumes that people are rational. One way economists protect this assumption from criticism is by using one data point to assess both the intentions and the actions of the person involved. Thus, economists have argued that if a person who never drank wine and had no intention of drinking wine suddenly purchased a bottle of wine, this must have been a rational choice — because otherwise why would he have bought it? And they state that when a person chooses to become a criminal, he “must have” weighed the pros and cons and made a rational decision that being a criminal was the optimal choice. As Nobel Laureate George Stigler pointed out, “A reason can always be found for whatever we observe man to do,” which “turns utility into a tautology.”
This approach violates a basic tenet of science that propositions are to be formulated in ways that can be falsified. Using the same academic sleight of hand, the champions of deterrence maintain that whatever the leaders of a nation do is rational because one can find some reason according to which their actions make sense. However, this line of reasoning would also make dropping nuclear bombs and ignoring the effects of retaliation “rational” because, like Herman Kahn, the leaders believe that their nation will fare better in such a war than their enemy would, or because such bombing would bring about a rapture that provides a shortcut to heaven.

The champions of deterrence further defend their position by suggesting that the only alternative to being rational is to be irrational, which is treated as tantamount to crazy. They then argue that Iran’s leaders, terrorists, and even Kim Jong-il are not insane people. They demonstrate this by showing that these leaders react, in a sensible way, to changes in the world around them. For instance, by far the most concise way to understand how leaders react is to recognize that they act strategically and not irrationally. In an article entitled “Deterring Terrorism: It Can Be Done,” Robert F. Trager and Dessislava P. Zagorcheva observe that “the assertion that terrorists are highly irrational is contradicted by a growing body of literature that shows that terrorist groups... choose strategies that best advance them. The resort to terror tactics is itself a strategic choice of weaker actors with no other means of furthering their cause.” Further, in “Explaining Suicide Terrorism: A Review History,” Martha Crenshaw reports, “There is an emerging consensus that suicide attacks are instrumental in or strategic from the perspective of a sponsoring organization... They serve the political interests of identifiable actors, most of whom are non-states opposing well-armed states. This method is mechanically simple and tactically efficient.”

The trouble with this line of reasoning is that it makes a jump from showing that terrorists and the rulers of countries such as Iran are not irrational to assuming that hence they act rationally and reach the same conclusions as the observers do. Don’t they have clear goals, find means suitable to their goals, and respond to facts and logic? However, leading sociologists, notably Talcott Parsons, have long pointed out that there is a third category of decision-making and behavior, which they called “non-rational.” This may seem at first typical academic hair splitting, a weakness that is rather prevalent among social scientists. However, in this case it points to a major category of human behavior, where people act in response to deeply held beliefs that cannot be proven or disproven; for instance, their sense that God commanded them to act in a particular manner. People have long shown that they are willing to kill for their beliefs, even if they will die as a result. True, they respond to facts and pressures, but only as long as those factors affect the ways they implement their beliefs, not the beliefs themselves. Thus, a fanatically religious Iranian leader who believes that God commands him to wipe out Tel Aviv, may well calculate whether to use missiles or bombers, and what season to attack, but not, whether to heed God’s command to kill the infidels.

In “Can Iran Be Deterred? A Question We Cannot Afford to Get Wrong,” Jason Lee Steorts writes, “[Iran’s] religious zealotry causes it to exaggerate the significance of issues that are, objectively speaking, only tangentially related to its interests. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for instance, has no direct bearing on Iran’s security, but much of the regime sees it as fundamental to Iranian interests and even to Iran’s identity as a Muslim nation.” This is an example of non-rational — not irrational — thinking.

Non-rational behavior is not limited to one faith. The Israelis, for instance, who have been criticized roundly on many accounts, are usually not considered irrational. But they have a strong Masada complex, which led their forefathers to kill each other and commit suicide rather than surrender. This is more than an idle piece of history. Many Israelis still hold to this fatalistic belief, further reinforced by the narrative about Samson, who pulled a building down on himself in order to kill his enemies, and by the strong commitment to “never again” go “like lambs to the slaughter” as Jews did (in the Israeli view) during the Nazi regime. Israelis model themselves after those few Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto who fought the Nazis until the end, despite the fact that they had no chance of winning. Such beliefs might lead Israel to attack Iran even when rational considerations indicate that such an attack would be extremely detrimental. Such an attack would serve their beliefs and be rational in this technical sense, but the beliefs themselves are based on non-rational commitments that one cannot argue with based on facts and logic. Such beliefs cannot be deterred reliably.
Related to the rationality thesis is an argument based on the historical record. Waltz writes, “It is now fashionable for political scientists to test hypotheses. Well, I have one: If a country has nuclear weapons, it will not be attacked militarily in ways that threaten its manifestly vital interests. That is 100 percent true, without exception, over a period of more than fifty years. Pretty impressive.”

This argument fails on several grounds. First, as we learn in Logic 101, the fact that all the swans you have seen are white does not prove that there are no black ones. The fact that so far no nukes have been employed (since 1945, when the deterrence system was instituted) does not prove that no such incident will occur in the future. This is especially true as the number of actors increases to include a considerable number of fanatics.

Moreover, the historical record reveals several occasions when heads of states have shown themselves to be capable of making gross miscalculations that cost them their lives, their regimes, and all they were fighting for — take Hitler, for instance. Similarly, the Japanese, when they attacked Pearl Harbor, believed at least that they would be able to drive the U.S. out of their part of the world. History is further littered with numerous, less grand miscalculations, from Bernard Montgomery’s “a bridge too far,” to Lord Cardigan’s Charge of the Light Brigade in the Crimean War, to Pickett’s Charge in the American Civil War.

The leaders of nations may be more cautious when it comes to dropping nuclear bombs. But they may also not be. It is hence rational to apply here the rule that if the potential disutility is very large, avoiding it must govern the decision, even if the probability of suffering that disutility is very low. A simple way to highlight this point is to note that rational people will readily accept a bet for $1 if the probability of winning is 99 out of 100. They will do the same for $10, and even $100 — but not for $1,000,000. The reason is that although the probability of losing remains the same and is very small, the cost of losing is so high (assuming those who bet will have to pledge all their future income as collateral) that the disutility is so great that it makes sense (it is rational) to refuse such a bet. Only a reckless gambler would accept such a wager. If one argues that, given his preferences, this is a rational act for him, one changes the definition of rationality in such a way that whatever an actor does is rational, and thus there is no way to falsify this proposition. Obviously, the disutility of being attacked with nuclear arms is so high that even if the probability that deterrence will fail is very low, it makes sense to go a long way to avoid it. In plain words, we had better be safe than sorry.

In short, there may be no way to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear arms, or to stop North Korea from expanding its military nuclear program, or to dissuade terrorists from deploying nukes if they can obtain them. However, relying on the assumption that one can deter these actors because they are rational seems to be in itself an irrational act.