

THE WEST'S POLICIES TOWARDS IRAN: WHAT EXACTLY WENT WRONG?

A review of Dore Gold's most recent book: The Rise of Nuclear Iran: How Tehran Defies the West, Regnery, 2009, 256 pp.

By Matthias Küntzel

Dore Gold, former Israeli ambassador to the United Nations, has used his expertise to describe the challenges of our times and call policymakers to action. For example, in his bestseller *Hatred's Kingdom: How Saudi Arabia Supports the New Global Terrorism*, he challenged American policy toward Saudi Arabia. "The scope of diplomacy must be broadened," he wrote, to provide early warning of the "incitement and hatred emanating from mosques and featured in textbooks or on national television networks."^[1]

In the present book, Gold's judgment of Western diplomacy is even more severe. "It is imperative," he asserts, "to understand how Iran managed to defy the efforts of the West to halt its nuclear program for at least a decade or more.... It is critical to...establish what exactly went wrong."^[2] One could hardly think of a more urgent topic.

The sources of this study may be found in more than eight hundred footnotes, which cite news reports, studies by various institutes all over the world, and publications from the last thirty years. Gold's account begins with the birth of the Islamic Republic in 1979 and describes in retrospect why time and again the policies of the West have failed.

A History of Failure

The first section of the book, titled "The Anatomy of Diplomatic Failure," offers an introduction to the subject, based on the recent negotiations over Iran's nuclear program. Part 2, "The History of Misreading Iran," examines

the chronology of the West's failed Iran diplomacy. The author reminds readers of the already forgotten attempts by several U.S. administrations to launch a dialogue with the mullahs' regime.

Gold also surveys the Carter administration's grave miscalculations about Ayatollah Khomeini, which guided its policy during the months before and after the Islamic Revolution. He addresses U.S. Iran policies of the 1980s under Ronald Reagan, dwells on the Iran policy under Bill Clinton, and examines the issue of whether there may have been a real chance for a normalization of relations in the aftermath of 9/11.

The third section, "Why Western Dialogue with Iran Failed," systematically analyzes the reasons for why the West's policies were unavailing. In addition, it discusses the current Iranian regime and the presidency of Ahmadinejad, as well as the opportunities that the new Iranian democracy movement may bring.

The former ambassador soberly recounts the terror attacks that Tehran initiated in 1983 and 1984. In April 1983, the bombing of the U.S. embassy in Beirut claimed sixty lives. In October 1983, 241 died in an attack on the U.S. marine base in Beirut, and fifty-eight French paratroopers were killed in an attack on the French compound. In November 1983, sixty were killed in a detonation at an Israeli military base in southern Lebanon. In December 1983, there were six bomb attacks at the U.S. and French embassies in Kuwait. In April 1984, an assault at a U.S. military base in Spain claimed eighteen lives.

Subsequently, Gold describes the American reaction. In October 1983, President Reagan noted in his diary: "We all believe Iranians did this bombing just as they did with our embassy last April." Nevertheless, "in a meeting with the NSC [National Security Council] Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger was adamant: the United States did not have specific knowledge of who actually attacked the Marine barracks, and therefore he was not prepared to authorize air strikes on any suspected target."^[3]

In 1983, the American public likewise could only speculate about Iran's responsibility for the attacks. In the meantime, however, documents that had been available to the U.S. government from the autumn of 1983 have become known. They prove that the evidence for Iran's responsibility was "overpowering." Hindsight reveals a breathtaking asymmetry: while the Islamic Republic inflicted some of the worst losses on the United States since the Japanese kamikaze attacks, the White House shied away from naming the perpetrator.

Thirteen years later the pattern repeated itself. In June 1996, Iran was behind an attempt to bomb the Khobar Towers in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia - the housing facilities of American GIs. Nineteen soldiers were killed and 372 injured. The following day, the NSC, the CIA, and National Security Adviser Anthony Lake identify the "Saudi Hezbollah," which is financed by Tehran, as responsible. "But in public," Gold notes, "the United States did not want to tie Iran too directly to Khobar Towers, probably because that would build public pressure for a major military action against Tehran."^[4]

With such examples, the author illustrates one of the fundamental errors of Western policy: "Iran never once paid a serious price for engaging in overt terrorism against the United States and other western countries."^[5] Whoever refuses to articulate the obvious, however, runs the risk of actually ending up believing in this minimization of the Iranian threat. "If there was a core error that repeated itself over the years," Gold states, "it was the tendency to underestimate the true hostile intentions of Iran's revolutionary regime."^[6]

From this "core error" results another miscalculation of Western politics: whenever an Iranian leader was sending out seemingly pragmatic signals, the West tried to convince itself that he could gradually lead the regime toward moderate, nonrevolutionary policies. Thus, in Reagan's time Iranian president Hashemi Rafsanjani was regarded as a pragmatist who favored national interests over ideological ambitions. In order to strengthen Rafsanjani, the Reagan administration in 1985 was willing to transfer more than five hundred rockets to Iran in what would become known as the Iran-Contra Affair.

In 1994, the Clinton administration came to the conclusion that no positive change could be expected from Rafsanjani. Thus, President Clinton started to employ sanctions to pressure Iran in the hope of curtailing terror and arresting its nuclear program. During his second term, however, Clinton repeated Reagan's mistakes. The administration began to view the new Iranian president Mohammad Khatami as the new harbinger of hope, and ignored the fact that the true power in Iran was vested in the Supreme Leader and his Revolutionary Guards. On 17 May 2000, Foreign Minister Madeleine Albright extended her hand to Iran in a carefully crafted address. She expressed regret for the role the United States had played in Iran between 1953 and 1979 and at the same time praised Khatami's policies: "The democratic winds in Iran are so refreshing, and many of the ideas espoused by its leaders so encouraging."^[7]

How did the Iranian leadership respond to this flattery? As Gold points out, "Albright's speech did not strengthen Khatami's allies. The very next month, the Judiciary, under the control of Supreme Leader Khamenei started arresting leading journalists and putting them in prison."^[8]

This episode demonstrated that the accepted patterns of dialogue do not pertain to Iran's revolutionary regime. Normally, one would expect one's partner in a negotiation to repay generosity in kind. But this does not work in a negotiation with the Iranians. This regime considers kindness a proof of weakness, and this effectively provides it with extra latitude.^[9] Yet, in 2009, President Obama assumed he could obtain from Ahmadinejad what nine years earlier Albright failed to obtain during Khatami's presidential term.

Then as now, contrite apologies for former American policies have prompted nothing but mockery in Iran and actually strengthened the regime. Even worse, "[b]y accepting at face value the repeated Iranian declarations about the direct responsibility of the West for Mosaddeq's fall,...analysts in Washington and European capitals were [also] diverted from looking into the real source of friction between the two sides after 1979: Iran's aggressive revolutionary ideology and its ambitions for dominating the Middle East."^[10]

A Strategy of Deception

Iranian diplomacy, however, makes it hard for the West to recognize this aggressive ideology. Gold describes in detail the traditional techniques of deception that the Shiite leaders employed - techniques that Western leaders do not grasp. Among these are the "tactic of *khod'eh*, 'tricking one's enemy into a misjudgment of one's true position,'" and "the Shiite doctrine of *taqiya* - displaying one intention while harboring another."^[11]

At times the regime even openly boasts about such tricks. For instance, Abdollah Ramezanzahdeh, the government spokesman under President Khatami, described the Iranian nuclear diplomacy: "We had an overt policy, which was one of negotiation and confidence building, and a covert policy, which was a continuation of the activities."^[12] While Western diplomats were led to believe that they could achieve an agreed suspension of Tehran's nuclear endeavor, the negotiations had in fact only one goal: to speed up the nuclear program. And yet this ambiguity forms only one part of the Iranian deception. In addition, Tehran pursues a broader, sophisticated strategy of dividing the West.

The regime leaves no doubt that it considers itself a revolutionary and expansive force, striving to overcome the "world of arrogance" in its entirety. The term "world of arrogance" refers to all liberal societies and democracies, arrogant enough to establish their own laws instead of submitting to divine sharia law. Gold quotes the commander of the Revolutionary Guards, Mohammad Ali Jafari: "Our Imam did not limit the movement of the Islamic Revolution to this country. Our duty is to prepare the way for an Islamic world government."^[13]

In pursuit of that goal, the regime foments dissension within the Western alliance. First, it strives to separate Israel from the rest of the West. The Iranian leadership would like to see "that America and Europe agree to sacrifice the Western imperialist 'enclave' or 'outpost,' known as Israel...on the altar of Muslim-Christian rapprochement."^[14] Second, the regime promises the Europeans a privileged cooperation if they distance themselves

from the United States. Last but not least, it endeavors to separate Muslim Turkey from its Western NATO allies, as well as Catholic Brazil and other South American countries from the rest of the Christian world.

In the past, this approach has succeeded surprisingly well. Already in 1979, the then European Community rejected collective Western sanctions meant to protest the occupation of the U.S. embassy in Tehran and the hostage-taking of its staff. In the 1990s, according to Gold, "the gap between the United States and its European allies" widened significantly.[15] As the Clinton administration intensified its pressure on Tehran in 1995, the European Union countered these efforts with its concept of "critical dialogue."

Berlin was particularly persistent in seeking to become a partner of Iran. Thus, the American sanctions effort was undermined by an intensified German export drive to Iran. Iran's former ambassador to Germany, Hossein Mousavian, records the great delight this caused in Teheran: "Iranian decision-makers were well aware in the 1990s of Germany's significant role in breaking the economic chains with which the United States had surrounded Iran.... Iran also saw the potential acquisition of German technology, in the context of the impositions of sanctions by the United States, as vital to the development of the Iranian economy."[16]

According to Mousavian, the German-American conflict of interests reached a climax in 1996. Previously, employees of the U.S. embassy in Germany had conducted research on the German-Iranian economic relations and identified those German firms "that were engaged in exporting advanced technology to Iran." Subsequently, the Americans presented their research findings to the German Ministry of Commerce. The federal government expressed its gratitude in a unique way: it demanded the deportation of a staff member of the U.S. embassy for engaging in espionage.[17]

The Logic of Appeasement

This German and European bias in favor of Iran did not soften the regime. In fact, Gold illustrates that the opposite was the case: in July 1994, a Tehran-ordered attack on a Jewish community center (AMIA) in Buenos Aires killed eighty-five civilians. That same year, Hamas established its office in Tehran. In the summer of 1995, Tehran attempted to kill Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and to topple the leadership in Bahrain. In the same year, new arms were regularly transported from Iraq to Bosnia and delivered to two thousand Revolutionary Guards who were stationed there. Finally, in 1996 the Khobar attack took place.

Why did the Europeans stick to the so-called "critical dialogue" despite all these provocations? Why did they expand their trade with Iran, even after the secret Iranian nuclear program had been revealed in 2002?[18]

The documents that could give a precise answer are not yet available. One thing, however, is certain: European policies cannot be explained by a lack of information. Warren Christopher, the U.S. secretary of state from 1993 to 1997, recounted how he pressed the Europeans on the issue: "In private meetings, we shared with them evidence gathered by our intelligence agencies, showing Iran's links to such Middle East terrorist groups as Hamas and Hezbollah.... Unfortunately, the struggle to stop our allies from doing business with Iran has not...succeeded."[19]

Instead, another factor may have played a role: a connection between wishful thinking and fear - or in other words, the psychology of appeasement. Mousavian, the former Iranian ambassador to Germany, explicitly refers to this aspect of the "critical dialogue": "The maintenance of links with Tehran was also seen...more as a way of sheltering Europe from Iranian-government-sponsored terrorist activities than as a principled policy."[20] Winston Churchill is said to have defined an appeaser as someone who feeds a crocodile in the hope that it will eat him last. The less predictable an adversary is, the stronger is the inclination to appease it. Thus, in the logic

of appeasement, terror and the willingness for dialogue do not contradict, but rather intensify each other.

Even while the nuclear negotiations were continuing, the mullahs boasted of their ability to turn international terrorism on or off at will. Thus, in June 2004, a general of the Revolutionary Guards praised 9/11 as an operation in which limited tactical resources had produced major strategic results. He made this statement in a speech to the first conference for registering volunteer suicide bombers.[21] According to another Revolutionary Guards strategist, Dr. Hassan Abasi, twenty-nine sensitive sites in the West had been identified that could sooner or later be blown up.[22] Even if such threats turn out to be mere bragging, they still fulfill their objective.

The Europeans' behavior can also be explained in terms of geostrategic interests. That is, European policymakers do not fear the Iranian regime as a serious adversary but view it as a potential ally.

Thus, as late as January 2006, the director of the German Foundation for Science and Research, Volker Perthes, advocated a "strategic partnership" and "far-ranging forms of cooperation" between Germany and Iran.[23] This is based on attempting to restrict U.S. influence in the region. In 2007, that aim was openly acknowledged in a publicly funded German security-policy information sheet: "The power that is able to bring Iran over to its side would not only be 'sitting pretty' in energy-security terms, but could also behave in a different way toward the Americans."[24]

In the past, various governments, motivated by tactical considerations, made numerous attempts to exploit Islamism. For example, Israel tolerated Hamas in order to weaken the PLO. Anwar Sadat bolstered the Muslim Brotherhood in order to fight communist students in Egypt. The Americans funded Osama bin Laden to confront the Soviets in Afghanistan. Why should Europeans not use this approach to restrain American influence?

However, all past attempts to engage Islamism for tactical reasons have ultimately backfired. In the case of a nuclear Iran, much more is at stake:

tactical intrigues entail tremendous risks. Whether the European or German policies were aimed at appeasing Iran or leveraging it for strategic reasons, Gold's central accusation applies: the actors "systematically misread Iran's real intentions."^[25]

The failure of Europe's Iran diplomacy makes some aspects of U.S. policy appear mysterious. Why, for example, was American policy adjusted to the European approach in 2006? "Precisely at the time Ahmadinejad had launched a 'Second Islamic Revolution' and made clear his extremely hard-line policies, the Bush administration decided to reverse its policy with a new diplomatic initiative towards Iran," Gold notes. He goes on to quote a statement by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice from 31 May 2006: "We agreed with our European partners on the essential elements of a package containing both benefits if Iran makes the right choice and costs if it does not. As soon as Iran fully and verifiably suspends its enrichment and reprocessing activities, the United States will come to the table with our EU colleagues and meet with Iran's representatives."^[26]

Why did Barack Obama in his 2008 campaign even drop this basic prerequisite and announce that he was ready for negotiations, while the nuclear enrichment was continuing?^[27] For a short time this gesture gained him some acknowledgment from Ahmadinejad. Internationally, however, Washington quickly lost ground. For many months the West's posture was abject, lacking determination, direction, and leadership. In contrast, the leaders in Tehran knew what they wanted and did what they considered necessary to achieve their goal.

With the Iranian nuclear program advancing, the Islamist regime poses a growing threat to global security and peace. "What will happen when a state supporting terrorism...crosses the nuclear threshold is analytically new territory," Gold warns. "There are no precedents to guide a policymaker having to confront this scenario."^[28]

The Rise of Nuclear Iran not only summarizes the West's past mistakes in dealing with Iran but also illustrates the great risks of a strategy that keeps

repeating the same mistakes. Western policymakers should be sure to read this book. Hopefully it could stimulate a badly needed, honest reexamination of their respective approaches, their miscalculations, and the need to forge an effective policy toward Tehran.

Source: Jewish Political Studies Review, Fall 5771/2010, Volume 22, Numbers 3 & 4, pp.145-153.

* * *

Notes

[1] Dore Gold, *Hatred's Kingdom: How Saudi Arabia Supports the New Global Terrorism* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2003), 247.

[2] Dore Gold, *The Rise of Nuclear Iran: How Tehran Defies the West* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2009), 7.

[3] Ibid., 81.

[4] Ibid., 137.

[5] Ibid., 190.

[6] Ibid., 180, 182.

[7] Ibid., 146.

[8] Ibid., 147.

[9] External pressure, in contrast, works in favor of the reformists, not the hardliners. For example, in the spring of 1997, a court in Berlin had identified the Iranian leadership as responsible for the terror attacks at the Mykonos restaurant. As a sign of protest, all European ambassadors to Iran left the country. The "critical dialogue" was brought to a halt. Shortly afterward, the moderate Mohammad Khatami was elected and acknowledged as the new Iranian president.

[10] Gold, *Rise of Nuclear Iran*, 183.

[11] Ibid., 62-63.

[12] Ibid., 15.

[13] Ibid., 213.

[14] Ze'ev Maghen, "From Omnipotence to Impotence: A Shift in the Iranian Portrayal of the 'Zionist Regime,'" *Mideast Security and Policy Studies* No. 78, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 16.

[15] Gold, *Rise of Nuclear Iran*, 122.

[16] Seyyed Hossein Mousavian, *Iran-Europe Relations: Challenges and Opportunities* (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2008), 133.

[17] Ibid., 70.

[18] Between 2003 and 2005, European exports to Iran rose 29 percent to €12.9 billion while German exports to Iran increased by 20 percent in 2003 and another 33 percent in 2004. See Matthias Küntzel, "Berlin, the Ayatollahs, and the Bomb," *Journal of International Security Affairs* 10 (Spring 2010): 42.

[19] Warren Christopher, *In the Stream of History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 442.

[20] Mousavian, *Iran-Europe Relations*, 76.

[21] Matthias Küntzel, *Die Deutschen und der Iran: Geschichte und Gegenwart einer verhängnisvollen Freundschaft* (Berlin: Wolf Jobst Siedler, 2009), 263-64. [German]

[22] Ayelet Savyon, "The Internal Debate in Iran: How to Respond to Western Pressure Regarding Its Nuclear Program," *MEMRI Inquiry and Analysis Series*, 181, 17 June 2004, 3.

[23] Volker Perthes, "Die iranische Herausforderung," *Handelsblatt*, 10 January 2006. [German]

[24] Kinan Jaeger and Silke Wiesneth, "Energiesicherheit für Europa," *Der Mittler-Brief*, 22, Jahrgang, Nr. 3, S. 7. [German]

[25] Gold, *Rise of Nuclear Iran*, 50.

[26] Ibid., 218-19.

[27] Matthias Küntzel, "Obama's Search for Peace in Our Time: The West Goes Wobbly on Iran," *The Weekly Standard*, 7 December 2009.

[28] Gold, *Rise of Nuclear Iran*, 287.