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OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS

What We Can Learn From Britain About Iran

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THROUGH the capture of and subsequent announcement that it would release 15 British sailors and marines, the Islamic Republic of Iran sent its adversaries a pointed message: just as Iran will meet confrontation with confrontation, it will respond to what it perceives as flexibility with pragmatism. This message is worth heeding as the United States and Iran seem to be moving inexorably toward conflict.

The timing of the Britons' capture was no accident. The incident followed the passage of a United Nations resolution censuring Iran for its nuclear infractions, the dispatch of American aircraft carriers to the Persian Gulf and the American sanctioning of Iranian banks. Although the Bush administration has been busy proclaiming its increasingly confrontational Iran policy a success, Tehran's unsubtle conduct in the Persian Gulf suggests otherwise.

Had the British followed the American example, once the sailors and marines were seized, they could have escalated the conflict by pursuing the matter more forcefully at the United Nations or sending additional naval vessels to the area. Instead, the British tempered their rhetoric and insisted that diplomacy was the only means of resolving the conflict. The Iranians received this as pragmatism on London's part and responded in kind.

The United States, meanwhile, has pursued its policy of coercion for two months now, and one is hard-pressed to find evidence of success. Beyond even the symbolic move of apprehending the British sailors, Iran's intransigent position on the nuclear issue remains unchanged. To underscore that point, Iran has scaled back cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency and released a new currency note adorned with a nuclear emblem.

Moreover, although Iran has proved willing to talk to Saudi Arabia, especially regarding Lebanon, it has yielded no new ground. In fact, Saudi Arabia's concerns, relayed to Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, Ali Larijani, during his visit to Riyadh in January, went unanswered. And if the March 10 meeting of neighbors in Baghdad was supposed to bring a chastened Iran to the table, the opposite happened. Far from being accommodating, Iran boldly asked for a timetable for the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq. But the meeting was noteworthy in making a show of Iran's regional influence and its importance to the future of Iraq.

The United States faces a stark choice: it will have to either escalate its confrontational policy or adopt a policy of engagement. Far from arresting the Iranian danger, escalation would most likely present the United States with new perils. Given the balance of power in the region, a continued confrontational course with Iran would saddle the United States with a commitment to staying in the Persian Gulf indefinitely and deploying to other conflict areas in an environment of growing radicalism. It would place

the United States at the heart of the region's conflicts, leaving it all the more vulnerable to ideological extremism and terrorism at home and abroad.

Beyond such concerns, a continued policy of confrontation will also complicate America's Iraq policy. Just as Iraqi Sunnis have cultural and political ties with Sunni Arab states and look to them for support, Iraqi Shiites trust and depend on Iran. An Iraq policy that allies the United States with Sunni Arab governments to eliminate Iranian influence in Iraq will be construed as biased against the Shiites. Such a policy will not win the support of the Shiite-dominated government on which the success of the new American strategy depends.

Since the United States entered Iraq in 2003, Washington has complained about Iran's meddling, and about its involvement with radical groups and militias. Still, Iran, far more than any of the Sunni Arab regimes, has also supported the Shiite-dominated government and the Iraqi political process that brought it to power. If Iraq were to exclude Iran and seek to diminish its regional influence, Iran would have no further vested interest in the Iraqi political process, and it could play a far more destabilizing role. Therefore, the current policy will not reduce the Iranian threat to Iraq but rather increase it.

An American conflict with Iran would also undermine regional stability, jeopardize the economic gains of the Persian Gulf emirates and inflame Muslim public opinion. Persistent clashes with the United States will radicalize the Iranian theocracy and, more important, the Iranian public.

Iran today sees regional stability in its interest. It abandoned the goal of exporting its revolution to its Persian Gulf neighbors at the end of 1980s and has since acted as a status-quo power. It seeks influence within the existing regional power structure. It improved its relations with its Persian Gulf neighbors throughout the 1990s, and in particular normalized relations with Saudi Arabia. Iran supported the stabilization of Afghanistan in 2001 and that of Iraq during the early phase of the occupation. Conflict will change the direction that Iranian foreign policy has been following, and this will be a change for the worse and for the more confrontational.

A judicious engagement policy will require patience and must begin with a fundamental shift in the style and content of American diplomacy. The breakthrough in American-Chinese relations during the Nixon administration followed such a course. Beijing responded favorably to engagement only after two years of unilateral American gestures. As part of a similar effort toward Iran, the United States should try to create a more suitable environment for diplomacy by taking actions that gradually breach the walls of mistrust.

Washington can begin by ending its provocative naval deployments in the Persian Gulf, easing its efforts to get European and Asian banks to divest from Iran and inviting Iranian representatives to all regional and international conferences dealing with the Middle East. Along this path, the language of American diplomacy would also have to alter. The administration cannot propose negotiations while castigating Iran as part of an "axis of evil" or the "central banker of terrorism" and forming a regional alliance to roll back Iranian influence.

Once a more suitable environment has been created, the United States should propose dialogue without conditions with the aim of normalizing relations. For too long, proposed talks with Iran have focused on areas of American concern: nuclear proliferation and Iraq. A more comprehensive platform would involve

the totality of disagreements between the two countries and also address Iran's regional interests.

On the nuclear issue, Iran would have to accede to a rigorous inspection regime to make certain that its nuclear material would not be diverted for military purposes. In the meantime, more cooperative relations between the two parties could benefit stability in Iraq, where both Tehran and Washington support the same Shiite-led government.

After 28 years of sanctions and containment, it is time to accept that pressure has not tempered Iran's behavior. The announced release of the British captives shows that the Islamic Republic is still willing to mitigate its ideology with pragmatism. A policy of patient engagement will change the context, and that may lead Iran to see relations with America to be in its own interest. Only then will Tehran chart a new course at home and abroad.

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