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## Avoiding Iranian nuke terror

**BYLINE:** By **Yonah Alexander**, SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

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Almost a century and a half ago, on hearing of the clash between the Monitor and the Merrimac, the American historian Henry Adams warned, "Some day science may have the existence of mankind in its power; and the human race will commit suicide by blowing up the world."

Tragically, the net balance at this time and the foreseeable future is tilting toward the risk of suicide by nuclear terrorism. This shift should be a matter of urgent concern to the international community.

Can we prevent such an unconventional catastrophe, particularly since Iran, foremost state sponsor of terrorism, is more actively than ever engaged in mass destruction programs, such as developing nuclear capabilities and their delivery systems? The short answer is definitely yes, if responsible nations can agree on the intensity of the threat and immediately craft realistic policies designed to minimize the looming dangers from nuclear terrorism.

More specifically, Iran's lawless record of the past 25 years in sponsoring terrorism at home and abroad is rather transparent. It includes violating its own citizens' fundamental human rights; establishing, directing and supporting indigenous and foreign terrorist groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the al-Asqa martyrs; setting up cells and networks in the Middle East, Europe, the U.S., and elsewhere; cooperating with various jihadist movements; sabotaging the Israeli-Palestinian peace process; and undermining efforts to stabilize Iraq.

What is particularly alarming about Iran's integrated strategy of systematic and carefully orchestrated terrorism are two intensifying trends. The first is related to Tehran's propagation of "Jihad" (holy war) and "Shahada" (self-sacrifice), assuring the centrality of the suicide weapon in the arsenal of terrorism.

For instance, in Iraq. Last year, Iran's leader Ali Khamenei praised the culture of Sahada and called the young generation of students to follow the path of martyrdom because "this is the most beautiful human value."

The second clear trend is indicated in Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's recent statements denying Israel's right to exist, expressing doubts about the Holocaust, and seeking to achieve the late Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary Islamic goals, while apparently pushing ahead with a quest for nuclear arms. These are signs the world might be headed toward the most serious challenge to its existence since the dark days of the Cold War. The question is when and under what circumstances Iranian terrorism might escalate to an unconventional level.

As a start, consider the following scenario: Hezbollah, in response to US policies and actions, activates cells in several large U.S. cities that simultaneously detonate the most primitive of terrorist nuclear devices - "dirty bombs," made of stolen radioactive sources embedded in conventional explosives. In each city, a cloud of radioactive dust spreads downwind and settles over tens of square miles in densely populated areas. Only the suicide terrorists setting off the explosions and a few bystanders are killed, but the long-term effects will be substantial in cancers and the costs of evacuation and the decontamination of tens of square miles. There is immediate widespread panic as first responders and officials try to quell fear and face dealing with months or years of psychological, economic and social disruption.

And this is only the beginning. Should efforts fail to rein in Iran's nuclear ambitions, within several years it will be able to promote its political aims in the Middle East with nuclear weapons that could kill hundreds of thousands of people, fueled with highly enriched uranium and perhaps plutonium and delivered by terrorist means to cover up any fingerprints.

Can the U.S. unilaterally or in concert with other nations, deny Iran nuclear capabilities and their use as terrorist weapons? What realistic options are available to U.S. decision makers?

Several courses of action are recommended in the short term:

(1) The U.S. should prevail on Russia and China in the U.N. Security Council to impose sanctions on Iran if Iran does not halt its centrifuge uranium enrichment operations by the next meeting of the IAEA Board of Governors on March 6.

(2) Only concerted diplomacy by the U.S. in concert with Russia, China, India and the EU-3 can dissuade Iran from following its nuclear weapons course. Attacking Iranian nuclear facilities as a last resort may be unwise, but it should not be doubted that a limited air attack could penetrate Iran's defenses and severely disable its nuclear infrastructure.

(3) India, Russia and China, countries with growing economic ties to Iran as a market for technology and a source of oil and natural gas, need to take the threat of Iraqi civil war as an opportunity to urge Tehran to halt exporting terrorism to its neighbor, as well as indigenous uranium enrichment and the construction of a reactor for plutonium production.

In sum, nuclear terrorism is a threat to the very survival of civilization, including Iran. It would be prudent for all nations to heed the Persian proverb, "Even with the strength of an elephant and the paws of a lion, peace is better than war."

**Yonah Alexander** is director of the Inter-University Center for Terrorism Studies. Milton Hoenig, a physicist, is a Washington consultant. They co-edited "Super-Terrorism: Biological, Chemical, and Nuclear" (transnational).

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