

Nuclear Issue - Iran

Iran may not wa

Iran isn't a dictatorship. It is certainly not a democracy. It might be best described as an



By Fareed Zakaria

EVERYTHING you know about Iran is wrong, or at least more complicated than you think. Take the bomb. The regime wants to be a nuclear power but could well be happy with a peaceful civilian programme (which could make the challenge it poses more complex). What's the evidence? Well, over the last five years, senior Iranian officials at every level have repeatedly asserted that they do not intend to build nuclear weapons. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has quoted the regime's founding father, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who asserted that such weapons were "un-Islamic". The country's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, issued a fatwa

in 2004 describing the use of nuclear weapons as immoral. In a subsequent sermon, he declared that "developing, producing or stockpiling nuclear weapons is forbidden under Islam." Last year Khamenei reiterated all these points after meeting with the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed ElBaradei. Now, of course, they could all be lying. But it seems odd

has big benefits. The country would remain within international law, simply asserting its rights under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, a position that has much support across the world. That would make comprehensive sanctions against Iran impossible. And if Tehran's aim is to expand its regional influence, it doesn't need a bomb to do so. Simply having a clear "breakout" capacity — the ability to weaponise within a

shrewd, calculating manner, advancing its interests when possible, retreating when necessary. The Iranians allied with the United States and against the Taliban in 2001, assisting in the creation of the Karzai government. They worked against the United States in Iraq, where they feared the creation of a pro-US puppet on their border. Earlier this year, during the Gaza war, Israel warned Hezbollah not to launch

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for a regime that derives its legitimacy from its fidelity to Islam to declare constantly that these weapons are un-Islamic if it intends to develop them. It would be far shrewder to stop reminding people of Khomeini's statements and stop issuing new fatwas against nukes.

Following a civilian nuclear strategy

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Iranians aren't suicidal. In an interview last week, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu described the Iranian regime as "a messianic, apocalyptic cult." In fact, Iran has tended to behave in a

rockets against it, and there is much evidence that Iran played a role in reining in their proxies. Iran's ruling elite is obsessed with gathering wealth and maintaining power. The argument made by those — including many Israelis for coercive sanctions against Iran is that many in the regime have been squirreling

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away money into bank accounts in Dubai and Switzerland for their children and grandchildren. These are not actions associated with people who believe that the world is going to end soon.

One of Netanyahu's advisers said of Iran, "Think Amalek". The Bible says that the Amalekites were dedicated enemies of the Jewish people. In 1 Samuel 15, God says, "Go and smite Amalek, and utterly

Iran isn't a dictatorship. It is certainly not a democracy. The regime jails opponents, closes down magazines and tolerates few challenges to its authority. But neither is it a monolithic dictatorship. It might be best described as an oligarchy, with considerable debate and dissent within the elites. Even the so-called Supreme Leader has a constituency, the Assembly of Experts, who selected him and whom he

initially the favoured candidate of the Supreme Leader in the 2005 election. Even now the mullahs clearly dislike him, and he, in turn, does things deliberately designed to undermine their authority. Iran might be ready to deal. We can't know if a deal is possible since we've never tried to negotiate one, not directly. While the regime appears united in its belief that Iran has the right to a civilian nuclear programme — a position with broad popular support — some leaders seem sensitive to the costs of the current approach. It is conceivable that these "moderates" would appreciate the potential benefits of limiting their nuclear programme, including trade, technology and recognition by the United States. The Iranians insist they must be able to enrich uranium on their own soil. One proposal is for this to take place in Iran but only under the control of an international consortium. It's not a perfect solution because the Iranians could — if they were very creative and dedicated — cheat. But neither is it perfect from the Iranian point of view because it would effectively mean a permanent inspections regime in their country. But both sides might get enough of what they consider crucial for it to work. Why not try this before launching the next Middle East war? COURTESY NEWSWEEK

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destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass." Now, were the president of Iran and his advisers to have cited a religious text that gave divine sanction for the annihilation of an entire race, they would be called, well, messianic.

has to keep happy. Ahmadinejad is widely seen as the "mad mullah" who runs the country, but he is not the unquestioned chief executive and is actually a thorn in the side of the clerical establishment. He is a layman with no family connections to major ayatollahs — which makes him a rare figure in the ruling class. He was not