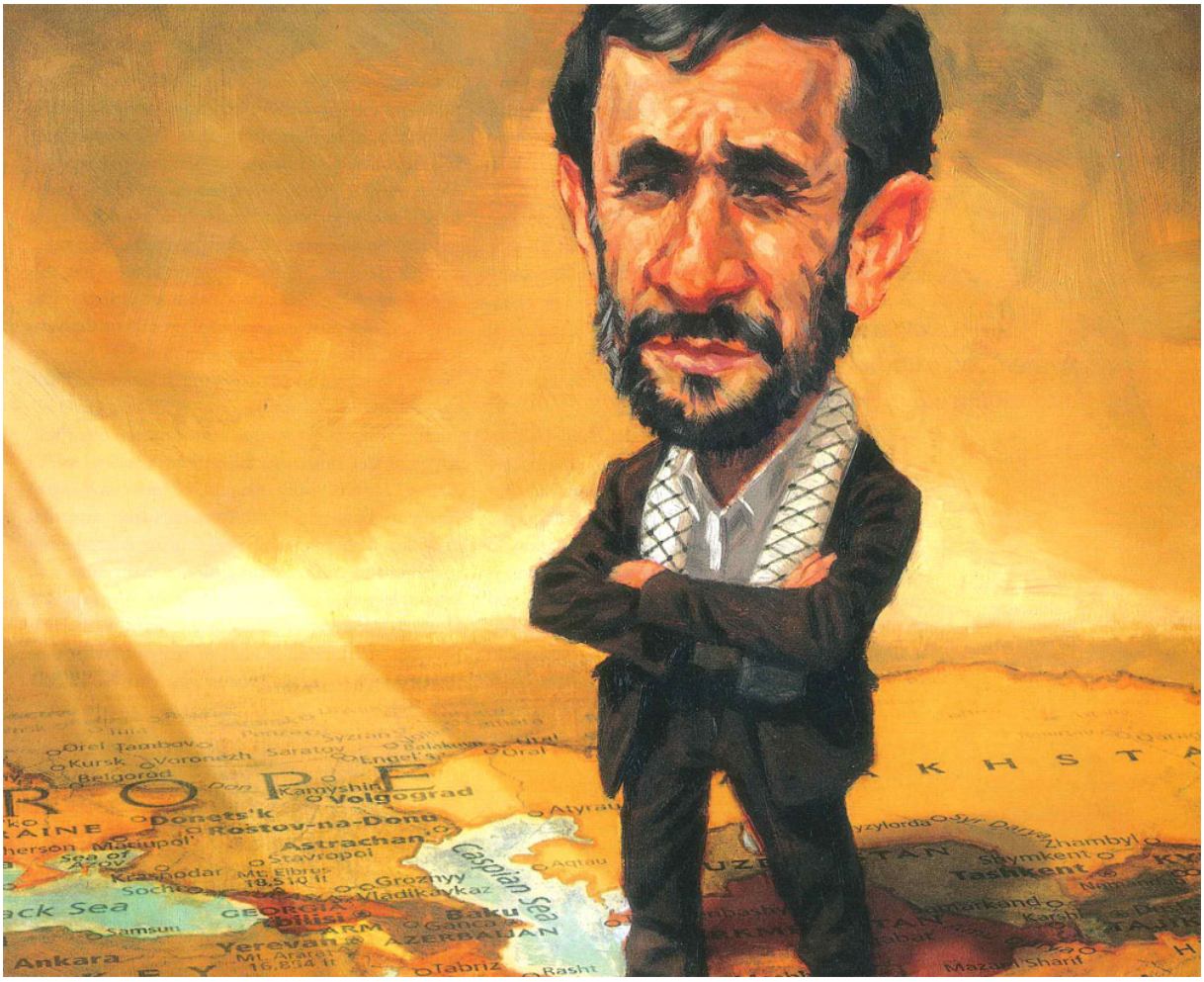
On Campus

The Great Game

With Iran in tatters, the Bush administration has turned its attention to Iran — a country of 70 million people, with nuclear ambitions and an increasingly emboldened leader. The stakes couldn’t be higher.

By
Paul Hond
|
Spring 2007



Darren Gygi

As the war in Iraq continues, tensions between the U.S. and Iran have been on the rise, particularly over Iran's nuclear program. But what's really going on behind the ratcheted-up rhetoric and political posturing? Is a U.S. attack on Iran's nuclear facilities imminent? Should Iran be engaged or isolated? Can diplomacy work? And what about the threat to Israel? To find some answers, *Columbia Magazine*'s Paul Hond visited with Columbia senior research scholar Gary Sick at his Morningside Heights home. A prominent Iran expert and author who was a National Security Council adviser to Presidents Ford, Carter, and Reagan, Sick spoke at length about the Bush administration's Iran strategy, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and the risks of military action.

What's Going On?

In recent weeks, the United States has met with Iranian representatives to discuss Iraqi security. American officials have softened their references to Iran, and the talk of military threats has subsided. Some insiders say that President Bush has been persuaded by Secretary of State Rice to devote his last two years in office to finding negotiated solutions to the situations in North Korea, Iran, and the Palestine-Israel dispute. Whether or not that is true, I welcome the change in tone and regard it as a hopeful sign, though only time will tell whether it is more than a temporary tactical shift. In any case, there are still people in Washington who would dearly love to launch some kind of attack against Iran.

My own view is they're not going to get away with it; the president cannot just wake up one morning and say, "Hey, I'm going to go bomb Iran today." I believe that the Iraq experience has had a sobering impact on his thinking.

It's not easy to go to war with Iran. You've got to have the military, you've got to have the secretary of defense on your side, and almost certainly you're going to need some kind of approval from Congress. Will the United Nations Security Council look the other way? None of this is possible. The same applies in Iran. If Ahmadinejad truly intends to "wipe Israel off the map," and if he is actually determined to develop a bomb and a missile to deliver it, there are a lot of things that have to happen before he does that, including the fact that he needs to get the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, to support him. And he needs support from the other power centers in Iran. How's he going to control the military and get

them to launch that missile, which everybody knows is suicide?

Of course, Ahmadinejad doesn't control the military. That's Khamenei's job. Not only that, but Ahmadinejad is now coming under attack within Iran itself because people are saying, "This guy is an idiot and he's making all these crazy statements." But we ignore that, because it suits our purposes to focus on him.

Shifting the Focus: Iraq to Iran

Last summer's war in Lebanon led to a kind of crystallization in which the Bush administration saw a chance to change the subject from Iraq. Iran was suddenly portrayed as the puppet master, pulling the strings and making everything happen. How do you explain Hezbollah's kidnapping of Israeli soldiers? It must have been Iran that planned it. How do you explain Hezbollah's surprisingly effective fighting? Iran must have trained them. How do you explain what's going on in Iraq where we're getting blown up by Sunnis? Somehow, Iran is responsible for that, even though they have nothing to do with the Sunnis; they are actually defending the Shi'a part, and the Shi'as are not killing Americans in very large numbers, if at all. Yet it's Iran that's behind it since they've got intelligence agents working there, and so forth.

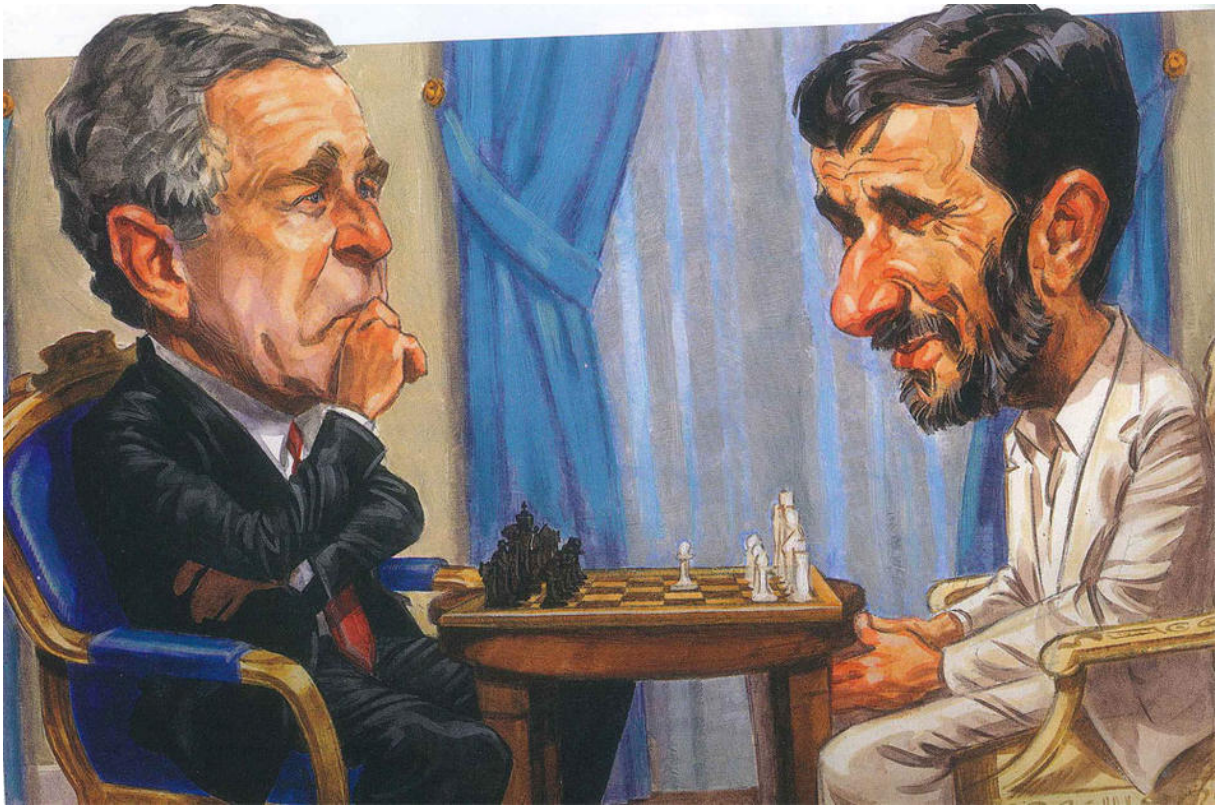
Now, Iran is hardly blameless, but what this depiction of Iran does above all is give the United States a golden opportunity to get out of the unilateral hole that we've dug for ourselves in Iraq and create a new coalition that is much more comfortable for us.

How do you get yourself out of that hole? Well, if you're the Bush administration, you say to the Arabs, "Iran is really the enemy now, and we're going to cooperate with you to make sure that they don't become too strong." If the Arabs have a problem and you're helping them solve it, that is an attractive way of diverting attention from the fact that you created the problem for them in the first place. So the United States can move aircraft carriers into the Persian Gulf, it can bring Patriot missiles and set them up at U.S. bases and oil-loading ports that could be hit by Iranian missiles if something happens. And bring additional troops into Baghdad to try to keep the situation from totally exploding. More troops might not work, but at least it's reassuring to the Saudis and others who see Iraq just blowing apart and see the

real possibility that the Sunnis there are going to be slaughtered. They want to prevent that. Saudi Arabia has private volunteers filtering into Iraq who are killing American troops, blowing up innocent civilians, and funneling private money to the Iraqi Sunnis. Most of the killings of Americans are being done by Sunnis in Anbar Province, and there has yet to be any evidence of an Iranian suicide bomber. So believe me, the Iranians are not supporting the Sunni militias, who despise the Shi'a and who hate Iran. But to make the Sunni militias our point of reference for what's going wrong in Iraq doesn't help the White House a bit. Because who's supporting the Sunnis? The Saudis, Egypt, Jordan — in short, all of America's Arab friends. Thus the focus has shifted to Iran.

The Risks of Escalation

The United States basically made Iran what it is today. We got rid of their enemy, the Taliban, to the east, we got rid of Saddam to the west, and then we installed an Iran-friendly Shi'a government in Baghdad. So we shouldn't be terribly surprised that Iran is behaving as much more of a power than it was in the past. The fact is, Iran is going to be playing a role in Iraqi politics for the foreseeable future. There is nothing anybody can do about that. Iran is right next door to Iraq, and draws a certain amount of sympathy from Iraq's majority Shi'a population. The two countries fought a war for eight years, and Iran wants to make sure that doesn't happen again. Therefore the Iranians are going to take whatever measures they think are necessary to protect their interests. Does that mean that they have to send troops across the border? No. And I see no evidence that they are thinking in those terms.



Darren Gygi

So just as I am not persuaded that the United States is getting ready to launch a war against Iran, I also don’t think that Iran is getting ready to launch a war either against Israel or against Iraq. But accidents happen, and the fact that we’re both on a hair-trigger alert, sort of facing off against each other rhetorically, means that it would be very difficult to stop the cycle once it started to escalate.

In any case, a U.S. attack is unlikely to lead to regime change in Iran. On the contrary, it will strengthen the hard-liners. Moreover, if we do something to them, they will hit us twice for every time they are hit. We’re going to have to be prepared: We really underestimate what Iran can do, and not just in Iraq. Anybody who damages the oil-loading ports in Saudi Arabia, for instance, can do immense harm to the world economy almost overnight. So Iran does have ways of hitting back at us. People I’m talking to in Iran who are not pro-Ahmadinejad at all say, “We’re told that Iran is putting together a network in Iraq that could be used if the United States attacks, and it’ll be activated.” The threat to the United States, then, is not that Iran is killing so many Americans; it’s that they could if we do something.

A War of Words?

Ahmadinejad is the greatest gift that the Iranian hard-liners have ever given to the American hardliners. The American hard-liners had a really difficult time when Khatami was president [1997–2005]. Same role, same office as Ahmadinejad, and when he was making friendly statements, many Americans dismissed it, saying “The presidency has no power, it has no real influence on anything, it doesn’t get involved in the decision-making process, so ignore him.” But when Ahmadinejad comes along and says all kinds of stupid things, the same people say, “He’s the president of Iran, listen to what he’s saying!”

Look at the whole business about wiping Israel off the map. Ahmadinejad says that the way he’s going to “wipe Israel from the map” is with a referendum in which all Palestinians and all Israelis can have a free vote and they can decide what they want. If they want to have Israel there, that’s fine, but he’s confident that if they have such a vote (which of course they never will), Israel will lose and as a result it will turn into a unitary state — a Palestinian state in which indeed Jews would be free to live. That’s what he says. But that never gets mentioned. People only hear that Ahmadinejad says “Israel must be wiped off the face of the map,” and that he’s in favor of a nuclear program. What more do you need to know?

That said, I think Ahmadinejad has been more damaging to Iran’s foreign policy, position, and image than has anybody in recent history. Iran had Rafsanjani for eight years, and then Khatami for eight years. For all their failings, these men were actually focused very much on the idea of bringing Iran back into the international community, improving its image so that people would know that Iran is not a crazy, radical place and that it would learn to cooperate. Ahmadinejad has come in and said, “That was all a mistake. We’ve moved away from the roots of the revolution and from our fundamental beliefs, and we’ve got to restore that.” He is returning to Ayatollah Khomeini’s fiery words from the early 1980s. Khomeini made exactly the same remarks about Israel in 1979 and 1980. That was a time when Israel was trying to develop better relations with Iran, was selling them arms, and maintaining close contact with them at every stage. Do you remember hearing back then that *that* was genocidal? Was that an existential threat to Israel? Now Ahmadinejad is using the same words, and the words are stupid and wrong, but they sound dangerous. The Holocaust conference held in December in Tehran was also a huge mistake, and I really feel sorry for the people in the foreign ministry who were

required to go through that charade. I can’t tell you the number of people in Iran I’ve talked to who say that the conference was a tragedy and a farce, and they should have had nothing to do with it.

Defeat at the Polls

In the December 15 municipal elections in Iran, the conservative slate supported by Ahmadinejad received only a tiny percentage of the vote. Elections in Iran are important. They’re all rigged to some degree, because Iran doesn’t have a primary system, and basically anyone who applies can run. The Assembly of Experts sorts out the candidates, which means that the conservative, pro-religious, pro-leader candidates are the ones who survive the cut. They’re quite blatant about it, and it’s been really awful. But they do let some people through who have very different views about things, especially at the municipal level. Well, the elections were extremely one-sided, and Ahmadinejad proved that although he may go around making fiery speeches, his political skills are not very great. A friend of mine who knows him quite well says that Ahmadinejad was always number one in his class, and he’s really a very smart guy. He is extremely confident of his own views and his own judgement and often feels that he doesn’t need any experts around to tell him what to do. He’s not a dummy, but he’s very unsophisticated, though he doesn’t know it.

Axis Spin

The one time that the United States and Iran actually made progress was when we had real dialogue. That was during talks about Afghanistan, in late 2001. For years, Iran had been supporting the Northern Alliance warlords who were fighting against the Taliban. The United States had nothing to do with the Northern Alliance at that point; but when we decided to go in against the Taliban we needed allies, and Iran’s help with the Northern Alliance was very important, even during the 2001 invasion and the aftermath. Iran and the United States then worked hand in hand to get the government of Hamid Karzai installed in Afghanistan, cooperating in what was called the “six-plus-two” process, because it was created by the U.N. with all of Afghanistan’s neighbors plus two outsiders: Russia and the United States. But what

happened in those meetings was that everybody else would leave, and the Iranians and the Americans would be left sitting at a table talking to each other. Real progress was made, and American diplomats actually praised Iran at the time. But only weeks later, in January of 2002, President Bush took the opportunity of the State of the Union message to identify Iran as part of the “Axis of Evil,” and all that hard-won progress just went down the drain.

The Roadmap Not Taken

The Baker-Hamilton Commission, known as the Iraq Study Group, released its report in early December, providing a roadmap for Bush to start digging us out of the hole of Iraq and to calm the regional situation. Part of that involved creating a dialogue in which the members of various governments of countries in the region would participate. That would include Iran and Syria. And the administration looked at it, and according to reports I’ve seen, Bush’s reaction was, “They gave us a flaming turd.” Not only did he say no; he said we’re going to go in exactly the opposite direction — we’re going to simply use coercion, impose more sanctions, form a coalition against Iran, harass them inside Iraq, and threaten military force. We’re going to do all these things as a way to change Iran’s behavior. Well, we’ve tried that for 25 years, and it never changed Iran’s behavior. If you really want to exploit the alternatives inside Iran, you need to begin by giving Tehran something to work with. But when we come in with a position that says, “You’re a crazy state, and the only way we’re going to deal with you is by force and by threats,” then the Iranian people, including many who are very sympathetic to us, have nothing to work with. Because then they’re identified as American lackeys.

There are different ways of dealing with international problems. The kinds of things Condi Rice has been doing make me think that she’s very much aware that the carrot-and-stick approach — actually offering something — is a good thing. At the same time, there are people in and around the White House — and you just have to listen to Cheney’s recent interviews to get a sense of where he’s coming from — who would really love to go to war with Iran regardless of the consequences. It’s this whole idea of shaking things up and creating chaos, and not really caring if a lot of people get killed and the situation collapses.

The Chance for Progress

Over the past decade, as concern about Iran's nuclear program has grown, the U.S. has increasingly resorted to political pressure and military threats. We have rejected opportunities to discuss the subject with Tehran, on the grounds that this would be rewarding bad behavior. But this policy is producing exactly the opposite of what we want: By driving Iran into a corner we are encouraging them to develop an independent nuclear capacity. It is time to sit down with Iran — as we did with the Soviet Union and more recently with North Korea — and begin to address our common concerns and interests. There is no other way to bridge the chasm of mistrust that divides us.

I would hold out the possibility of some payoff for Iran. Up until now, our negotiating position has been, "You know what you need to do. What are we going to do for you in return? We'll talk about it later." That's not a negotiation, that's coercion. It's just dumb. We've had these sanctions in place for more than a decade, and we use them as a club instead of as a negotiating tool. We ought to say, "If there's some progress made here, we're prepared to lift X, Y, Z. We're prepared to assist Iran to resolve some of its oil-field problems under certain circumstances. Let's talk about that."

Spelling out the framework for that kind of approach is remarkably easy, but it's been looked at and flatly rejected by this administration so far. The recent turnabout on North Korea suggests that the door to such negotiations may not be permanently closed, but thus far all discussions with Iran have been strictly limited to issues of Iraqi security. If we choose to expand the agenda to nuclear issues, there are several interesting proposals that Iran has offered in the past that deserve to be dusted off and reexamined. I would like to think that we are ready to get serious about this, but given the past record it is hard to be optimistic.

An Existential Threat?

In defiance of the U.N. Security Council, Iran continues its uranium enrichment program for what it claims are the peaceful purposes of developing nuclear power, in accordance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. At the same time, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has made inflammatory remarks about Israel and hosted an international conference questioning aspects of the Holocaust. Does a nuclear Iran

pose a threat to Israel's existence? Four Middle East watchers weigh in.

Eric Cantor '89APP. United States Representative (R-VA, 7th District). Chief deputy whip. Serves as chairman of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare:

There is absolutely an existential threat to Israel, and that also should send an alarm throughout the Western world. You could have another Holocaust on your hands the minute that Iran decided to launch [a nuclear weapon]. There are extremists who are very effective and active in the Iranian government, and they intend to do some very drastic things. That's what they're saying publicly, so we ought to be ready to deal with it. There is not any track record to believe that the regime in Iran will live up to its obligations under international law, which is why we need to keep all options on the table and continue to push to isolate Iran in as many ways as we can.

Lila Azam Zanganeh '02SIPA. Writer and cultural critic. Editor of *My Sister, Guard Your Veil; My Brother, Guard Your Eyes: Uncensored Iranian Voices*, a collection of narrative essays on contemporary Iran:

The Iranian civilian population is rather pro-American and really not too concerned about Israel at all. In fact, they're tangentially more anti-Palestinian than anti-Israel. They're not happy that Iranian government money is going out to Hezbollah. Generally speaking, I think the Iranians couldn't care less about the Arab world. There is a sense, including among some in the government, that the natural allies of Iran are Israel and Turkey, because they're both non-Arab countries. Iran was invaded in the seventh century by Arabs, and Islam was imposed on them, and that has left a trace in the collective unconscious. We also have had a very ancient relationship with the Jewish people. The reconstruction of the Temple 2500 years ago was the result of Cyrus the Great telling the Jews, "You will not be persecuted. Go back to Jerusalem and rebuild your temple." During the Iran-Iraq war, Israel was the only country to help Iran with spare parts for American arms that Iran had. So we've had a long, long relationship with the Jewish people, and to this day, there are 25,000 Jews in Iran. It's the largest Jewish population in the Middle East outside of Israel. We still have one member of Parliament who's Jewish, Maurice Motamed.

Michael B. Oren ’77CC, ’78SIPA. American-Israeli historian and writer. Senior fellow at the Shalem Center in Jerusalem. Author, most recently, of *Power, Faith and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present*:

Nobody knows the extent of Ahmadinejad’s power, and those who tell you they do are kidding themselves. From an Israeli point of view, the analysis of one Iran expert or even of a group of Iran experts is too little leeway on which to gamble Israel’s existence. In dealing with a nuclear Iran, Israel has to take into account the worst-case scenario, which is that Ahmadinejad exerts a tremendous amount of influence, and that what he says is what he means. One thing I’m afraid of is that the Iranians will not think twice about blowing up Jerusalem with all of its 200,000 Arabs, since they’re all Sunni Arabs, and because the Dome of the Rock is a Sunni mosque. The notion that because it’s a mosque makes it holy doesn’t necessarily hold. Sunnis will blow up a Shiite mosque. That will not stop them. The Mossad thinks that the Iranian leadership is willing to risk 50 percent of its own population in this. Mutually assured destruction on the old Soviet-American model is not so much a deterrent for them as it is an inducement. Once you have a theology based on martyrdom, then the notion of human cost takes on a whole new dimension.

Richard Bulliet. Professor of history at Columbia. Author of many books and articles on Iran and the Muslim world:

The idea that Iran is an existential threat to Israel borders on hysteria. Let’s suppose Iran has two or three nuclear weapons, and let’s suppose they’ve tested one, so they know it works, at least under test conditions. Let’s suppose they have a missile that can reach Israel and that they can put a warhead on that missile. If they fire that missile at Israel first, they’d have to assume that Israeli antimissile capability, or American antimissile capability, would not destroy that missile. So to start a nuclear war and absorb the retaliation from a country like Israel that has, we think, somewhere around 200 warheads — or to start a nuclear war, and have your bomb fail to blow up — is really national suicide. Then there’s a question of how many Palestinians would be killed, especially when you consider that the prevailing winds in Israel blow all over the West Bank. Iran has gained so much credit in the Muslim world by supporting the Palestinians that the idea that Iran would forgo that credit in order to kill some Jews, and that it would make no difference to them how many

Palestinians were killed, is absurd. So I think that even if the Israelis say that they can’t live with Iran having nuclear weapons, it doesn’t mean they aren’t going to live with them. It’s sort of like they always say, “We never negotiate with terrorists,” and then from time to time, they negotiate with terrorists.

Read more from ***Paul Hond***



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >

Read more from ***Paul Hond***