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Leave the Nukes, Take Out the Mullahs

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To think clearly about how best to remove the looming threat of a nuclear-armed Iran, just keep in mind the National Rifle Association's much maligned – but perfectly sensible – old slogan: *Guns don't kill people. People kill people.*

It's the same with nuclear weapons. The threat isn't from the warhead, but from the individual who controls it. For example, right now several countries whose governments aren't always friendly to the US – China, Russia, France – each have enough nuclear warheads, and the means to deliver them, to obliterate our country. But we don't lose one minute's sleep over this prospect because, although the leaders of these countries are surly, petulant, sometimes vicious and often anti-American – they are also sane. There isn't the slightest chance that any of these leaders actually will press the nuclear button and launch Armageddon.

The president of Iran, on the other hand, is nuts. (The tip-off came a while back when, as mayor of Teheran, Ahmadi-Neshad Amadinejad ordered separate elevators for men and women. His insanity became more obvious – and more serious – when he demanded last month that Israel be “wiped off the map,” and then “clarified” this call to genocide by insisting that the Holocaust never happened, and adding that he had only meant to suggest that Israel be re-located somewhere in Western Europe.) Moreover, it's clear that at least several of the mullahs who rigged the election that brought Amadinejad to power earlier this year are also dangerous fanatics. Allowing Amadinejad and these mullahs to get their hands on nuclear weapons is a risk the civilized world simply cannot take. It would be like allowing a bunch of escaped lunatics to roam the halls of your childrens' school, armed with rifles, in hopes that maybe they really aren't as crazy as they seem to be and won't, after all, start firing into the cafeteria.

With this weekend's [report](#) in *The Times of London* that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has ordered his country's armed forces to be ready by the end of March for a possible strike on Iran's nuclear facilities, the technical complexities of such a strike are starting to get attention. James Lewis' recent [analysis](#) in *The American Thinker* provides a superb overview of just how difficult such a strike would be to execute.

A Better Option

But if the problem is the individual rather than the weapon, why not expand our thinking a bit?

More precisely, why not consider whether it might make more sense to defuse the Iranian threat by leaving the nukes, but removing Amadinejad and the mullahs from power? In other words, perhaps the US – and even some of our European so-called allies – could get cracking and start organizing, or at least supporting, a *coup d'etat* or a revolution.

Despite what you may have read in spy novels or seen at the movies, pulling off a *coup* or a revolution is a very hard, very risky thing to do. (A *coup d'etat* means the government is overthrown from within, for instance by a group of military officers or a group of politicians who have the military's support. In a revolution, the government is overthrown from the outside, by the people, as happened recently in Georgia and Ukraine.) All sorts of things go wrong: the *coup* leaders lose their nerve, or the government uncovers their plot before it's launched, or the revolution ends in disaster when the government orders the military to fire into the crowds and hundreds or even thousands are killed in the streets.

On the other hand, sometimes everything goes right and a *coup d'etat* brings to power a new leader who, however imperfect, is better than the one he replaced. For example, Pakistan's Pervez Musharraf, who seized power in October 1999, is a vast improvement over the man he pushed aside, Mhamed Fafiq Tarar. Moreover, in just the last few years the percentage of revolutions that succeed has started to rise. (To learn why, read [A Revolutionary Change](#).) Georgia and Ukraine are the two best-known examples, and the turmoil now in the streets of Lebanon looks very much like a revolution; it may well succeed in breaking that country free of Syria's grip.

Without access to secret intelligence from inside the government in Teheran – for the sake of this discussion, let's just assume the CIA has some – we cannot really judge how good may be the prospects for a *coup*. As a general rule, in all dictatorships there are factions, and factions within factions, and the internal struggle for power among the top three dozen leaders never stops. And the people who rise to power in dictatorships don't play nicely in the sandbox; they tend to kill each other from time to time. If the jockeying for power inside the Teheran government right now isn't vicious, that would be unusual. So it's reasonable to assume that a *coup d'etat* that would replace Amadinejad and some of the mullahs with people who are less dangerous is, at least, possible.

Here Comes the Revolution

What is clear is that the prospects for a genuine people's revolution in Iran are excellent. Indeed, if ever there was a country primed for revolution, this is it. As Michael Ledeen has reported in a [brilliant series of essays](#) for *National Review Online*, Iran today is in a classic pre-revolutionary state. Iran's population is Muslim, but not Arab, and its people are weary of the fundamentalist regime that overthrew the Shah in 1979 and has held power ever since by turning that country into the kind of police state the Shah himself never came close to building. Despite its oil revenues, Iran's economy is a mess. And the government's recent responses to several devastating earthquakes have been inept.

Today, by every credible measure the Iranian population hates its government. And within the population, nowhere is this hatred of the government greater than among the young people – and

fully 70 percent of Iran's population is under the age of 30. These young people have been risking their lives by demonstrating against the regime – week, after week, after week – for at least two years. Moreover, the kids never miss an opportunity to make clear their desire for friendly relations with – of all countries—the United States.

Given the extreme nature of the Iranian nuclear threat – and given the widespread reluctance among so many of our allies to use military force, even to save their own lives – working together to organize or at least support a *coup* or a revolution in Iran may be the one thing everyone can agree is worth doing. The very nature of this sort of endeavor – making contact with top-echelon insiders, providing student and worker groups with communications equipment, the wherewithal to produce posters, newspapers and the like, and of course enough money to keep the pot boiling – means that it's done in secret, by intelligence services. This means our nervous allies – some of whom have first-rate intelligence services – can help quietly, without paying the political price of being seen to be working with the Americans and, from their viewpoint even worse, with the Israelis.

...Or Maybe a Coup

The obviously-leaked report that Ariel Sharon has given orders for the Israeli military to prepare for a strike on Iran will give a huge push forward to the idea of a *coup* or a revolution. For one thing, it will concentrate minds in Teheran itself. That country's military leaders – unlike its political leaders – aren't nuts. The last thing they want is an Israeli, or an Israeli-American, air strike on their weapons plants. If some of the top military people weren't thinking of a *coup* before word of Sharon's orders was leaked, they are now. Moreover, among Iran's political leaders are at least a few men who aren't crazy. They know that a military strike – even if it fails to completely destroy Iran's nuclear plants – will be a disaster for that country. And at least a few of them will now be pondering the thought that the Israelis have shown a real talent for “targeted assassinations” – that if the Mossad doesn't know today where they live and what cars they drive, it soon will. (If you were an Iranian politician, how willing would you be right now to sit next to Amadinejad at some outdoor ceremony – or accept his offer of a lift back to the office?)

Of course, there's no way to predict whether a coup or a revolution in Iran would bring to power leaders who would dismantle that country's nuclear capabilities. It may well be that whatever government comes to power will continue the present course and – more likely sooner rather than later – turn Iran into a nuclear power. That will be worrisome, to say the least – but not nearly as terrifyingly dangerous as having these weapons in the hands of crazy people.

As events in Iran unfold during the coming weeks, never forget the first rule of projecting the future of dictatorships: keep your eye on the guys with the guns. At the end of the day, it's the military leaders – not the politicians – who decide what happens. If the military throws its support to the leader of a prospective coup, that coup usually succeeds. And if a revolution starts to build and the military leaders refuse the dictator's orders to fire into the crowd, that revolution usually succeeds. Given the alternative of a massive attack by Israel, with or without help from the US Air Force, a *coup* or a revolution may not strike at least a few of Iran's political and

military leaders as such a bad thing.

Which is why that leaked story in *The Times of London* is so very interesting. It may mean the ball has already started to roll....

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