

Patrick Clawson is deputy director for research at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the co-author of *Eternal Iran: Continuity and Chaos* (Palgrave, forthcoming), which provides insight on the historical roots of Iran's threat to American interests in the Middle East. Clawson recently talked to NER about the current regime in Iran and its efforts to develop atomic weapons. Following is the full text of the interview.

NER: What role does Iran play in supporting international terrorism?

Patrick Clawson: For Iran, terrorism has been a visible way for it to expand its influence into the Arab world and indeed into the larger Muslim world without having to pay much of a price. Terrorism is an effective way for the Islamic Republic to advance its goal of presenting itself as the leader of the world's radical Islamic forces, without having to suffer from retaliation or even diplomatic penalties from countries other than the United States. So terrorism has been quite an effective instrument of national power for the Islamic Republic, and therefore it is not surprising that they are vigorously using it.

One of the ways that they have been able to get away with this is through their usually indirect approach to terrorism. That is to say that they will fund, support and train the terrorist groups, which then carry out the acts in their own names, and Iran's hand is not directly involved with the terrorist act.

That is characteristic of their approach with Hizballah in Lebanon. Their approach with Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) in the West Bank and Gaza is the closest we have seen them working with a group that is directly created by them and pretty much run by them until now. And that is more directly involved than they usually have been.

Hizballah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad are the two groups that are most likely to act directly on the behest of Iran as distinct from some other groups like the al-Qaida people accused of the attacks in Saudi Arabia who are now living freely in Iran. Iran is providing the broad support for these groups but would probably rarely have the direct operational control of one issue versus another. With Hizballah and PIJ, groups that Iran really founded, it has a much greater direct role.

NER: In what ways is Iran interfering with U.S. efforts in Iraq?

PC: Iran and Iraq have been historical enemies. The great divide between the Persian civilization and the Arab civilization has deep, deep historical roots. We tend to think of them all as being Muslim, but there is really a profound difference between their cultures and histories. The Iran-Iraq War is the first time in a long time that this erupted into a bitter armed conflict, but it had been simmering for a long time.

It is not surprising that, given this longstanding, historically radical difference, Iran is taking advantage of Iraq's current status to influence Iraq. It would be naive on our part to not think this would happen. Iran is doing this with the usual overkill, which leads them to have initial successes before they really annoy people, and that is what I think we are beginning to see in Iraq.

Iranians are going to be much more adroit in [interfering in Iraq] than the Syrians are and keep things indirect. So it will be much more the case of them providing weapons and financing that cannot be traced back to Iran quite as directly.

In part, that is also because there is so much interaction that is going to take place between Iran and Iraq because of the pilgrimages that many Iranians are going to be making now to Iraqi holy cities. Iranians can hide a heck of a lot in that. After all, the Iraqi government wants to limit the number of Iranian visitors to these sites to 3,000 a day. That's a million a year. You can hide one heck of a lot of interaction with terrorists under that kind of enormous flow of traffic.

It is inevitable that there is going to be an enormous amount of interaction between Iranians and Iraqis and within that interaction it will be easy to hide a certain amount of terrorist activity, so that it is not possible to point to the Iranian lack of control of the border the same way it is to point to the Syrian lack of control of its border.

NER: What impact will Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's recent call for Israel to be "wiped off the map" have on Iran's standing in the international community?

PC: I would think that Ahmadinejad's statements are reminding people that there is still this ideological core of Iran's government that is a serious problem, and therefore there is a grave risk in making any compromise regarding the Iranian nuclear fuel cycle.

Now, my personal view is that Western governments think that we've got time because we have been reasonably successful at slowing them down, so I don't think that they feel under a great rush to act at the November IAEA meeting. And, in particular, they want to create a consensus between the Russians in particular and also the Chinese and Indians so that there is a grand international coalition.

Ahmadinejad's speech at the World Without Zionism Conference in no small part is something that the Iranian people don't agree with. Many Iranians, probably most Iranians, don't like Israel, but they certainly have no interest in being more Palestinian than the Palestinians. There is no enthusiasm for this bloodthirsty talk; quite the contrary, the mood of the Iranian people is much more for presenting Iran as a great civilization. They want to be seen as the homeland of the greatest culture in the Middle East. Historically, they are so proud of their poetry. It is the rare taxi cab driver in Iran that cannot quote you at great length poets who died hundred of years ago. Therefore this kind of crude, bloodthirsty talk offends Iranians who see themselves as a great civilization.

NER: What role will Ahmadinejad play in the developing political scene in Iran?

PC: Ahmadinejad is representative of the generation that went through the Iran-Iraq war. As with many countries that have gone through an extremely bloody war, the veterans of that war feel that they have a moral right to govern that country because they are the ones that saved it. They feel that they saved the country from horrible errors, which is a reasonable reading of what happened.

These war veterans feel that they saved the country, and therefore they feel that they have the moral right to run this country. It is this group which is in between the generation of the revolution and the generation of young people who are so interested in democracy and were behind the democratic reform movements of the past 10 years. This war generation is a very dangerous group. They have a lot of nostalgia for the revolutionary ideas of the early previous time, and Ahmadinejad is part of this group.

Many ordinary Iranians don't like them. In many cases they come from less sophisticated backgrounds. Iranians pride themselves in being very sophisticated, literary people. Iran is a civilization which gives a great deal of importance to academics.

There are several million people that fought in the war, and now feel disrespected by both the young and the revolutionaries. On the whole, they're right; they are regarded as country hicks who do not uphold the intellectual traditions of the country. For instance, Ahmadinejad's first nominee to be the oil minister was turned down by the parliament because he had no background in the oil industry. So Ahmadinejad appointed a second oil minister, and he has never been in an oil field in his life. His university degree is from a web-based diploma service.

These revolutionaries are dangerous; they don't know much about the outside world and are proud nationalists. We tend to forget that 200 years ago Iran was more than twice the size that it is now. As far as many Iranians are concerned, this shrunken size of Iran is a temporary accident that will eventually be reversed. They expect to have more influence than they currently have. Iran expects to have more influence in the region than its neighbors would like it to have. That is why Iran's nuclear program is so concerning – because the nature of its program is such that it can have that kind of influence in what it sees as its natural sphere.

For the generation that made the revolution, they think anything is possible. We have lots of records from the revolutionaries themselves that indicate that during the year of the revolution, they thought this would be a decades-long, generational struggle. They did not anticipate that they would achieve the overthrow of the monarchy so quickly.

They see that they have already overthrown a major superpower, because that is how they see their support for the *mujahadeen* in Afghanistan that led to the end of the Soviet Union. So, when they talk about a world without Zionism and without America, they are serious, they really think that's possible. Now, many people would say that we're not going to kill everyone there – we're going to convince them to convert or leave. After all, Iranian newspapers treated the Million Man March as the Million Muslim Man March against the U.S. government.

NER: What role can the United States play in helping democracy come to Iran?

PC: If the younger generation, through democratic change, were to come to power, they are still going to want to have influence throughout this whole area around Iran, but they are going to recognize that nuclear weapons are a bad way to achieve this. It turns the world against you, and Iran would do much better to compete culturally and economically than it would through force of arms. Iran has much opportunity to compete when it comes to culture and economics.

Responsibility for changing the system has clearly got to be with the Iranians themselves, because outside change is neither practical nor desirable. Ideally, the change would happen out of evolution rather than revolution, because if Iran is ever going to have social peace, it has got to find a way to reconcile its proud nationalism with its important religious traditions. The best way of doing that is through evolution, not through a dramatic change. What the outside world can do best is to insist that Iranian leaders follow through with the commitments that they have made with regards to things like human rights, to take seriously Iran's claims to be a leader in the modern world and insist they behave that way.

NER: Do you think the United States should try to reach the Iranian people through means such as the media?

PC: It is embarrassing that the Dutch Parliament approved an increase of \$18 million for Dutch broadcasting to Iran while the United States' current budget is a \$3 million increase. I would like to see our budget be \$1 per Iranian per year. That would be about \$65 million, which is about the level of \$1 per person. That would allow us to have a satellite television network in the area and expand the popular broadcasting that we have.

I think that more democratic contacts are an important step. We have a real problem right now, unfortunately, because some of the people who are interested in more democracy for Iran are also some of the same people that are sympathetic to the Islamic Republic and want to see a normalization of relations with the government of Iran.

Mixing together those two things is a very bad idea, because it leads to the impression that you are either for Iran or against Iran. We have to change that debate and say that there are some people sympathetic to the government and there are some people sympathetic to the people of Iran. We are all in favor of people-to-people contact, but that is totally different than government-to-government contact. We have to reach out to the people in the Iranian-American community and the non-governmental organization community who have been interested in contact with Iran and tell them that there is a fundamental difference between the people of Iran and the government of Iran. We totally agree with you about contact with the people of Iran, but you have to separate out that from your political agenda.

NER: How would you describe the current status of Iran's nuclear program?

PC: The optimist in me would like to think that the Western intelligence reports are correct when they say that well, yes, Israel may be right that Iran is close to or may have already acquired the knowledge to build nuclear weapons, but that's not such a big problem because that's only theoretical knowledge. It's kind of like my knowledge of tennis after five years of lessons. I think I have a pretty good idea of what I would have to do to win Wimbledon, but I don't think Roger Federer has to be quaking in his boots that I will be defeating him next year, because I can't put it into practice. So the optimist in me would like to say that's true.

The pessimist in me says that after a record of being systematically wrong about how close Iraq was, Libya was and North Korea was – maybe it turns out that it's harder than we thought to know how close a country is in the nuclear process, and so maybe we should be more cautious about saying definitely that we have a good understanding about how advanced Iran is with its nuclear program.

Iran does have a peaceful nuclear program, but it also has a lot more than that. So yes, it's true that Iran has a peaceful nuclear energy program, which is a waste of its money and is a stupid idea. In addition, they have other ambitions, and that's very obvious.

At the moment, the nuclear fuel cycle is possessed by the nuclear weapons states and Japan. They're the only countries that have it. Frankly, I'm not even very happy that Japan has it. Mohammed elBaradei [the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency] has proposed that no additional countries be allowed to acquire the nuclear fuel cycle and that any new nuclear facilities must be multi-national and controlled by a consortium of international countries. He's right; I don't think there should be any additional countries with the cycle. These nuclear fuel cycles that Iran is trying to develop would be extremely troubling even in the hands of another government. But in the hands of a government that acknowledges that it has lied for more than 18 years about its nuclear activities – forget it, out of the question!

NER: What can the United States do to help prevent Iran from achieving the know-how to build nuclear weapons?

PC: The best thing that the United States can do is bring along the rest of the West. We need to mobilize the Russians, the Chinese and the rest of the non-aligned in saying this is not allowed – no nuclear fuel cycle. Iran acknowledges that it is trying to develop a nuclear fuel cycle, and so we don't need to discuss whether or not it wants the nuclear weapons. We should just focus on the nuclear fuel cycle.

I think there is quite a decent chance that we will be able to do that. Israel has played a constructive role in saying, in particular, to the Russians that they need to worry about this. Forty years ago, when Russia pulled out of China's nuclear program, the Russians thought the Chinese would never be successful and if they were, it wouldn't be pointed at the Russians. But within five years, the Chinese had nuclear weapons, and four years later, they were aiming it at the Russians and threatening a nuclear war over a border dispute. Well, if Iran got nuclear capabilities, can the Russians really be certain that Iran wouldn't take the position toward the events in the Caucasus or in Central Asia? Iran might decide that those areas – which were part of Iran 200 years ago – should be theirs again.

So, as a result, I'm pretty certain that we can persuade the Russians that this nuclear program is a really bad idea. I was recently in Moscow, and I was pleasantly surprised about how broad the consensus was that Iran's nuclear fuel cycle was a grave threat to Russia's national security. The Russians have differences with the West about what to do about this, but they have at least stepped forward with some ideas about how to solve this. I think we should encourage that, saying that solving this has to mean no fuel cycle, no conversion and no enrichment in Iran.

Iran has periodically agreed to freeze its program, and that is more than I thought that they would do. More level-headed people, unlike Ahmadinejad, recognize that there is great danger to Iran if they proceed and so may be willing to freeze their overt program. I think almost everybody would agree that Iran would continue with a covert program, but if we can put enough restrictions on Iran, then hopefully we can force Iran's program to be so slow and so small that in fact, democratic change would come to Iran before that program reaches fruition.

I think we want to isolate Iran, and so targeted, diplomatic sanctions are probably a good idea. I would be all in favor of a wide variety of sanctions against Iran if they do not cooperate.

Some of these hard-liners that are so negative about the West are the same people that go to the West all of the time. So to ban their travel to the West would have a real impact. I would also be in favor of symbolic sanctions like forcing the Iranians to lessen their diplomatic missions abroad. We should also consider stronger steps, such as enforcing a ban on participation in international sporting events. Iran has qualified for the World Cup.

NER: What are the risks if Iran does develop nuclear weapons?

PC: We have two great fears. One great fear is that Iran would in fact want to have more influence in the region than its neighbors want it to have. Iran would want to use nuclear weapons as a protective barrier behind which it could take provocative actions within the region. That would be with regard to Israel, other Gulf States and conceivably even the United States.

The other great fear is that Iran's actions would start off a nuclear arms race and if Iran achieves nuclear capabilities then other states in the region would want to match that. We could imagine a

number of other countries being concerned about how to protect themselves from a nuclear-armed Iran. If the region becomes nuclearized, that's *really* bad news. No matter how reassured you are about the current governments, all it would take is for some ambitious fool to come to power and we could have a very unfortunate escalation of tensions.

NER: What can the United States do to help the spread of democracy move quicker in Iran?

PC: The single most important thing that the United States can do is to help break down the information embargo that faces Iranians. We can help bring them more information. Iranians would love to be able to have serious Internet learning courses that they could take; they would love to have satellite broadcasting of a decent quality unlike the garbage that is currently available to them.

Iran is a much more open society than even Syria. So while Iran is a particularly oppressive place to live if you're a woman, the biggest problem facing most Iranians is economic. The per capita income is dramatically less than it was 25 years ago, the prospects are not good and therefore the people's expectations of what should be their standard of living are not met. There is a real sense of frustration that the country could be doing much better, were it not for the political problems of inappropriate policies at home and isolation abroad.

NER: What do you think about proposed sanctions in the Iran Freedom Support Act?

PC: What is truly ironic is that when the Europeans thought about what sanctions they might support against Iran, they came to the very same conclusion that the people at AIPAC came to 10 years ago – namely, that blocking business to Iran's oil and gas sectors would be the most effective thing to do in order to reduce the Iranian government's revenue.

I would start, though, with how to isolate Iran diplomatically and not how to inflict pain on Iran economically. So we should consider whether or not this ban on trade is the best way to isolate Iran compared to some of these other steps.

NER: Why did you decide to write this book about the history of Iran?

PC: We decided to write this book because of a sense that many in the United States do not appreciate how Iran has been one of the great civilizations of the world and has nothing to do with the Arab civilization. It has been a powerful influence in the region and, even in the modern period, this proud nationalism of the Iranian people has erupted into demands for more power. For instance, our image of Iran usually doesn't include the 1906-1911 constitutional revolution in which the Iranian people rose up in a four-year bitter struggle to develop a constitution—there was nothing comparable in the Arab world.

Iranians, like Israelis, have their roots in a civilization that was around 2,500 years ago. They are deeply aware of these connections to the ancient civilizations.

Also, there is little appreciation for the profound social transformations that Iran has undergone, beginning under the Shah. We don't think about the Shah as the guy that broke the back of the landlords and brought nearly universal literacy to Iran.

NER: What is the main theme of your new book that we should come away with?

PC: The proud nationalism of Iranians is the main theme of our book. This great pride in their civilization, there are ways that we can take advantage of that. We should say to Iranians that being isolated is a bad idea and there are ways that we can say to Iran that if they are a fuller participant in the international economy and affairs, then they will have greater weight than they do at the moment.