

DIGITAL DIGNITY

In the last two years, the U.S. Army has shaken up the electronic game industry with the introduction of highly realistic "serious games" geared toward attracting young males into military service. Millions of young potential recruits have played free games like "America's Army" on the Internet.

Now a Syrian company is trying to capture a similar Arab audience with its second game in three years that casts players as Palestinian fighters. Afkar Media's first game, "Under Ash," reportedly sold tens of thousands of copies in Syria and throughout the Arab world despite relatively crude graphics and high rates of software piracy in the region. The company seeks to release "Under Siege" before the end of the year, with later plans to translate the game into English, Hebrew, and other languages.

Like "America's Army," the Syrian games stress realism through restricted rules of engagement, accurate geography, and discrete mission goals. The climax of "Under Ash," for example, is the destruction of an Israeli radar station in southern Lebanon. Putting players in the first-person shooter perspective is thought to make them identify with—or even train for—the larger struggle.

The ultimate goal of such games is not merely to win. For many players, the more important goal may be to restore their "digital dignity." ■ - JJ

IRAN ON THE BRINK

By Jon B. Alterman

In a series of increasingly urgent meetings over the last year, European diplomats have sought to steer Iran away from a confrontation over its nuclear program. Despite small successes, victory is unlikely. Distrust among all interested parties, combined with the Iranian leadership's ambitions, suggest that it will be virtually impossible to dissuade Iran from developing a nuclear capability. The good news, if there is any, is that a nuclear Iran is likely to be less destabilizing than many think.

Iran's nuclear program began under the Shah in the 1970s and was revived after the 1979 Revolution. While Iranians have claimed that their efforts are purely peaceful, Iran's startling abundance of oil and natural gas, combined with the presence of potential enemies on virtually every border, suggest otherwise. In recent years, Iran has engaged in a kind of brinkmanship with regard to its obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, often antagonizing the International Atomic Energy Agency, but it has never openly flouted obligations.

The discovery of previously secret nuclear facilities in Natanz and Arak in 2002, along with revelations of greater uranium enrichment capacity than had previously been suspected, has galvanized Europe, especially Britain, France, and Germany. Talk of "critical engagement" has hardened into tough negotiations. Europe has come to see Iran as a test case, arguing that incentives and diplomacy promise far better prospects for managing an Iranian nuclear program than bluster and firepower. To many Europeans, the U.S. experience in Iraq highlights the futility of military solutions to proliferation challenges.

But a vigorous distrust underlies not only Tehran's relations with its interlocutors, but also relations among the interlocutors themselves. Iranians will almost certainly seek to play those parties off against one another.

The first element of distrust is between the United States and its European allies. Many Europeans believe the United States to be too quick on the trigger, and

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NEW ADMINISTRATION'S FOREIGN POLICY

Earlier this month, a panel of CSIS experts examined the effects of U.S. elections on geopolitics and global perceptions. CSIS Senior Vice President and Director of Studies Patrick Cronin said, "Unless we find a way to convert American power to influence and leadership, the transaction costs will be so high that we're going to be further polarizing the world, and America will not be meeting its basic national interests." Middle East Program Director Jon Alterman suggested that the administration will push on with an agenda of reform in the Middle East, and would seek success stories to "embody the Administration's hopes for the kind of political change in the region that can lead to a reduction of tensions over time." For a full transcript, go to

http://www.csis.org/events/041104_Administration.pdf ■

many Americans believe the Europeans to be hopelessly soft. Europeans also complain that their inducements are relatively meager without U.S. backing, while U.S. officials feel Europeans are rushing to appease Iranian bad behavior. These fundamental differences are unlikely to be resolved by transatlantic discussions. Indeed, they demonstrate how hard it is to use a good cop–bad cop strategy in the face of basic disagreements over justifications for the use of force and acceptable inducements.

There is also remarkable distrust between these parties and the Russians, who are helping the Iranians to build a light-water reactor at Bushehr. The project is not only a source of Russian pride, but also a source of income. Closer relations with Tehran are attractive to Moscow, which seeks an outlet for Russian nuclear expertise and a diplomatic relationship with Iran that can serve as a useful counterweight to Western hegemony. If played correctly, Moscow can profit from Tehran in the short term, while exploring the option of being bought off by Washington, London, Paris, and Berlin in the longer term. Joining the Western team at the outset is a far less attractive option than being wooed by both sides.

China is the other wild card in this equation. While Chinese diplomacy has often seemed cautious, Iran is an attractive ally for China. Iran is full of the energy that the Chinese economy needs. In addition, in a region full of governments with close military ties to the United States, Iran stands out as a diplomatic opportunity. Adding to the appeal, China's economic performance in recent years is an inspiration to Iranian officials who seek to promote growth without widespread political openness.

While many nations rush to affirm their support for nonproliferation, many also would not mind a curb on U.S. hegemony. Were Iran's case to be referred to the UN Security Council, it is unlikely that U.S. views would hold sway.

Yet war is not inevitable. Iranians persistently dangle the interest in a "grand bargain" with the United States that would resolve all outstanding issues: proliferation, support for terrorism, frozen assets, trade and investment restrictions, and a host of others. Yet, they seem intent on delaying such an agreement until a time when their hand is stronger. That time is presumably when they have nuclear weapons. In the eyes of many, if Iran is on the brink of developing such weapons, it would be foolish to make a deal now.

For some, a nuclear Iran is a nightmare scenario. They fear that Iran could threaten neighbors near and far, or hand off the weapons to clients in Lebanon and beyond. But the Iranian record is one of caution, not recklessness. While the Iranian government has certainly been linked to violence against civilians, it has scrupulously avoided interstate conflict (outside of the war Iraq initiated with them). Iran's proxies have never used the unconventional weapons that are surely in the Iranian arsenal.

A nuclear Iran is not a welcome prospect, but it increasingly appears to be an unavoidable one. Slowing Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons is a noble goal, but vigorous thought must be given to managing longer-term relations with a nuclear Iran. ■

Links of Interest

Information on Iranian weapons programs from the Nuclear Threat Initiative

http://www.nti.org/e_research/profiles/Iran/index.html

A paper entitled "Iran's Evolving Military Forces" by CSIS Burke Chair in Strategy Anthony Cordesman

http://www.csis.org/features/0407_IransMilForces.pdf

Afkar Media's web page (in Arabic)

<http://www.afkarmedia.com/arabicmain.html>

Home page for America's Army, a U.S. military-sponsored computer game

<http://www.americasarmy.com/>

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