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THE OPINION PAGES | OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Hurt Iran's Hawks, Not Its People

By ABRAHAM D. SOFAER FEB. 26, 2014

PALO ALTO, Calif. — For decades, American strategy toward Iran has had a deep flaw — failing to respond to outrages by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. In January, however, we got it right. The Obama administration barred Iran from the Geneva conference on Syria because the Revolutionary Guards Corps was in Syria, helping keep its brutal president, Bashar al-Assad, in power. Secretary of State John Kerry tried to press Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif on the issue. But Mr. Zarif, tellingly, said he had no authority to negotiate about Syria, nor to discuss the missile program also run by the Revolutionary Guards.

Meanwhile, however, Iran's government, led by President Hassan Rouhani, continues to negotiate toward a nuclear deal; those talks are to resume in March, on an agenda set last week.

How can we reach a nuclear deal with Iran's elected leaders when the Revolutionary Guards Corps is complicit in genocide in Syria and has enough influence within Iran's competing power centers to prevent the foreign minister from even discussing that outrage?

The answer, in terms of American policy, is that the United States must do

more than keep the nuclear talks going; at the same time, it must push back against the Revolutionary Guards, the force within Iran that most wants to militarize its nuclear program. Both steps should be taken without punishing the Iranian people, since they want inclusion in the wider world. And reaching a deal that effectively bars a military use of Iran's nuclear program would be a severe blow to the Revolutionary Guards' influence within Iran.

The last time the United States reacted forcefully to the Guards' aggression was in 1987. When the Guards began mining the Persian Gulf, the United States Navy boarded and sank one of its mining vessels and destroyed several of its speedboats and oil platforms. Our attacks deterred the Revolutionary Guards Corps; it has never again tried to mine the gulf.

More significantly for today, our hard response didn't diminish Iranian diplomats' desires to negotiate. At the time, I was the State Department legal adviser, negotiating claims between our two countries that dated to the Iranian revolution, at the United States-Iran arbitration tribunal operating at The Hague. After the Navy acted, I assumed Iran's diplomats would not want to talk, but I was mistaken. When I canceled the next scheduled meeting, my Iranian counterpart urged me, instead, to keep negotiating. We did, and went on to settle thousands of claims and political questions. Each time the United States has used force in the Middle East — in Kuwait, Afghanistan and Iraq — Iran has sought to be more, not less, engaged diplomatically.

Iran's 1979 Constitution created the Revolutionary Guards to protect and extend the nation's Islamic character. The organization has its own army, navy, air force, intelligence operations and police, along with extensive commercial holdings and supervision of Iran's nuclear and missile programs. Its influence with Iran's leaders has been enormous, in part because it has played a central role in building an Iranian sphere of influence with Shiite Muslims in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria.

As in Syria today, the Guards' strategic role has always been marked by force and terror. But (except for 1987) the United States has failed to respond to its violence; we mounted no effective response to the deaths of some 1,000 Americans in attacks traced to the Guards over three decades — on the American

Embassy and Marine barracks in Lebanon in 1983, at the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in 1996 and during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Today, Mr. Rouhani's team vies with the Guards for the support of Iran's supreme religious leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The Guards can argue to him that compromising with America is unnecessary — that history shows Iran can get away with anything. So when American inaction reinforces that impression, it sends exactly the wrong message. Instead, we have to respond to the Guards in such a way that Mr. Rouhani and his team can argue convincingly that the force's aggression invites only more trouble, while a nuclear deal holds the key to improving Iran's future.

This is not the first time that American interests could align with those of Iran's more practical leaders. In the Afghan and Iraq wars, Iran occasionally cooperated with the West. But the United States made the mistake of severing those positive contacts when the Revolutionary Guards committed hostile acts, instead of responding against the Guards and continuing to negotiate with those seeking engagement.

The United States now has an opportunity to reverse that pattern. It could apply a stiffer cost to the Revolutionary Guards' aggression. For example, America could assist Syria's moderate rebels; interdict the Guards' shipments of weapons to Lebanon, Syria and Afghanistan; and block activity by the Guards in Iraq, Bahrain and Yemen.

Unlike a pre-emptive military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities, those actions would be widely seen as lawful. And they would likely be welcomed by the many Iranians who are sick of the Guards and its oppressive Basij force, which maintains Islamic order at home.

Punishing the Iranians most culpable for the country's violence and terror, while negotiating effectively with its most pragmatic representatives, would strengthen President Rouhani's position in Iran, weaken those who want a nuclear military program, and increase the likelihood of a sound nuclear agreement.

Abraham D. Sofaer, the legal adviser to the State Department from 1985 to 1990, is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, and

the author of "Taking on Iran: Strength, Diplomacy, and the Iranian Threat."

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