

Talking to Iran: Needed: U.S. diplomacy

From the Editors in the [June 13, 2006](#) issue

Martyrdom was part of the founding of the Shi'ite branch of Islam, which presently dominates Iranian life. Following that tradition, children as young as 12 were sent to the front lines during the war with Iraq in the 1980s to clear minefields with their bodies. Thousands of these young soldiers, recruited by religious leaders as part of the Basiji movement, marched to their deaths, eager to die as directed for the glory of God and in expectation of a heavenly reward.

The cult of religious martyrdom remains strong in Iran, and one of its most ardent promoters is President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. A member of the Basiji movement himself and a former soldier in the Revolutionary Guard, he is an apocalyptic thinker who looks for the eschatological coming of the Mahdi, the "hidden imam," who according to Shi'ite tradition will return to establish justice in the world.

Ahmadinejad is also the man who declared that Israel should be wiped off the map. The prospect of this man and those who think the way he does having a nuclear weapon is sobering indeed. The Basiji have shown a willingness to accept enormous casualties in a war against perceived infidels. Israelis and others have good reason to worry that the logic of mutual deterrence would not apply to Iran, which might pursue some mad act of nuclear martyrdom.

In trying to curb Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons, the U.S. and its allies have few good options. Strident denunciation of Iran's behavior may only solidify the position of Iran's hardliners, who revel in standing up to the "arrogant" West. Active support for opposition movements within Iran might end up with them being discredited as tools of the West. A military strike on suspected nuclear facilities would inflame the region, prompt Iran to make more trouble for the U.S. in Iraq, and probably fail to eliminate Iran's weapons.

One source of hope is the diversity within Iran. Though Ahmadinejad holds sway, Iran has a sizable number of Western-oriented intellectuals and business leaders, and many Iranian Muslims do not adhere to Ahmadinejad's brand of Shi'ism. Also, there are pragmatists as well as hardliners among the religious establishment that backs Ahmadinejad, and the pragmatists want to avoid economic hardship and political isolation. Another piece of good news is that there is time. Iran is five to ten years away from having a nuclear weapon. There is a chance for diplomacy to work, especially if it is done quietly and patiently, without headline-grabbing, confrontational rhetoric.