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American Enterprise Institute Admits The Problem With Iran Is Not That It Would Use Nukes

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Suddenly the struggle to stop Iran is not about saving Israel from nuclear annihilation. After a decade of scare-mongering about the second coming of Nazi Germany, the Iran hawks are admitting that they have other reasons for wanting to take out Iran, and saving Israeli lives may not be one of them. Suddenly the neoconservatives have discovered the concept of truth-telling, although, no doubt, the shift will be ephemeral.

The shift in the rationale for war was kicked off this week when [Danielle Pletka](#), head of the American Enterprise Institute's (AEI) foreign policy shop and one of the most prominent neoconservatives in Washington, [explained what the current obsession with Iran's nuclear program is all about](#).

The biggest problem for the United States is not Iran getting a nuclear weapon and testing it, it's Iran getting a nuclear weapon and not using it. Because the second that they have one and they don't do anything bad, all of the naysayers are going to come back and say, "See, we told you

Iran is a responsible power. We told you Iran wasn't getting nuclear weapons in order to use them immediately." ... And they will eventually define Iran with nuclear weapon as not a problem.

Hold on. The "biggest problem" with Iran getting a nuclear weapon is not that Iranians will use it but that they won't use it and that they might behave like a "responsible power"? But what about the hysteria about a second Holocaust? What about Prime Minister Netanyahu's assertion that this is 1938 and Hitler is on the march? What about all of these pronouncements that Iran must be prevented from developing a nuclear weapons because the apocalyptic mullahs would happily commit national suicide in order to destroy Israel? And what about AIPAC and its satellites, which produce one sanctions bill after another (all dutifully passed by Congress) because of the "existential threat" that Iran poses to Israel? Did Pletka lose her talking points?

Apparently not.

Pletka's "never mind" about the imminent danger of an Iranian bomb seems to be the new line from the bastion of neoconservatism.

Earlier this week, one of Pletka's colleagues at AEI said pretty much the same thing. [Writing](#) in the *Weekly Standard*, Thomas Donnelly explained that we've got the Iran problem all wrong and that we need to "understand the nature of the conflict." He continued:

We're fixated on the Iranian nuclear program while the Tehran regime has its eyes on the real prize: the balance of power in the Persian Gulf and the greater Middle East.

This admission that the problem with a nuclear Iran is not that it would attack Israel but that it would alter the regional balance of power is incredibly significant. The American Enterprise Institute is not *Commentary*, the Republican Jewish Coalition, or the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, which are not exactly known for their intellectual heft.

It is, along with the Heritage Foundation, the most influential conservative think tank. That is why it was able to play such an influential role in promoting the invasion of Iraq. Take a look at [this page](#) from the AEI website from January 2002 (featuring, no surprise, a head shot of Richard

Perle). It is announcing one of an almost endless series of events designed to instigate war with Iraq, a war that did not begin for another 14 months. (Perle himself famously [began promoting a war with Iraq](#) within days of 9/11, according to former CIA director George Tenet.) AEI's drumbeat for war was incessant, finally meeting with success in March 2003.

And now they are doing it again. On Monday, Sen. Mark Kirk (R-IL) — [AIPAC's favorite senator](#) — will keynote an event at AEI, with Pletka and Donnelly offering responses. It will be moderated by Fred Kagan, another AEI fellow [and Iraq \(now Iran\) war hawk](#). The event is built on the [premise](#) that "ongoing efforts to stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons have failed."

We all know what that means. AEI will, no doubt, continue to host these "it's time for war" events through 2012 and beyond, or until President Obama or his successor announces either that the United States has attacked Iran or that Israel has attacked and we are at her side.

If you didn't know any better, you might ask why — given that Pletka and Donnelly are downgrading the Iranian nuclear threat — AEI is still hell-bent on war. If its determination to stop Iran is not about defending Israel from an "existential threat," what is it truly about?

Fortunately, Pletka and Donnelly don't leave us guessing. It is about preserving the regional balance of power, which means ensuring that Israel remains the region's military powerhouse, with Saudi Arabia playing a supporting role. That requires overthrowing the Iranian regime and replacing it with one that will do our bidding (like the Shah) and will not, in any way, prevent Israel from operating with a free reign throughout the region.

This goal can only be achieved through outside intervention (war) because virtually the entire Iranian population — from the hardliners in the reactionary regime to reformists in the Green Movement working for a more open society — [are united in support of Iran's right to develop its nuclear potential](#) and to be free of outside interference. What the neoconservatives want is a pliant government in Tehran, just like we used to have, and the only way to achieve this, they believe, is through war.

At this point, it appears that they may get their wish. The only alternative to war is diplomacy, and diplomacy, unlike war, seems to be no longer on the table.

At a fascinating [Israel Policy Forum \(IPF\) symposium this week](#), Barbara Slavin, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and a [longtime journalist and author](#) who specializes on Iran, noted that the Obama administration has spent a grand total of 45 minutes in direct engagement with the Iranians. Forty-five minutes! Just as bad, the administration no longer makes any effort to engage.

This is crazy. Of course, there is no way of knowing if the Iranian regime wants to talk, but what is the harm of trying? If they say no, they say no. If we talk and the talks go nowhere, then at least we tried. But we won't try out of fear of antagonizing campaign donors who have been told that the alternative to war is the destruction of Israel. (Thanks to those same donors, Congress is utterly hopeless on this issue.)

So, instead of pursuing diplomacy, we are inching closer toward war.

At [IPF](#), Slavin predicted what the collateral results of an attack on Iran would be:

What's the collateral damage? Oh my lord. Well, you destroy the reform movement in Iran for another generation because people will rally around the government; inevitably they do when country is attacked.

People always talk about the Iranians being so irrational and wanting martyrdom. That's bull. They're perfectly happy to fight to the last Arab suicide bomber. But they don't put their own lives on the line unless their country is attacked.

So, you know, they would rally around the government and that would destroy the reform movement. And of course the price of oil would spike. The Iranians will find ways to retaliate through their partners like Hezbollah and Hamas. I think the Israelis would have to attack Lebanon first, to take out Hezbollah's 40,000 rockets. It's not just a matter of a quick few hops over Saudi Arabia and you hit Natanz, you know, and a few other places.

That's why the Israelis want the United States to do it, because they can't do it, frankly. U.S. does it? Okay, the remaining U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan are sitting ducks. Iran is already

playing footsie with the Taliban in Afghanistan. That will become much more pronounced. They will perhaps attack the Saudi oil fields.

Slavin continues, but the point is clear. An Iran war would make the Iraq war look like the "cake walk" neoconservatives promised it would be.

And for what? To preserve the regional balance of power? How many American lives is that worth? Or Israeli lives? Or Iranian? (It is worth noting that this week, Max Boot, the Council on Foreign Relations' main neocon, [wrote](#) that an attack on Iran, which he advocates, would only *delay* development of an Iranian bomb.)

Nonetheless, at this point war looks likely. Under our political system, the side that can pay for election campaigns invariably gets what it wants. There is, simply put, no group of donors who are supporting candidates for president and Congress based on their opposition to war, while millions of organized dollars are available to those who support the neocon agenda. Pundits used to say: As Maine goes, so goes the country. It's just as simple today: As the money goes, so goes our policy.