

# Iran's rulers are true believers

***That is why they are so difficult to deter or constrain***

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During a Senate hearing last week, Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, New York Democrat, told Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth why she is so vehemently opposed to the use of military force to address the threat posed by Tehran: “We did not have any evidence that Iran intended to imminently attack this country in any way, shape, or form!”

How odd of her not to reckon with the fact that by the time we had such evidence, it might well have been too late to do anything about it.

Maybe no evidence would have come to light, and the attack would emerge from a clear blue sky — as happened, literally, on the morning of 9-11- 2001.

Since 1979, “Death to America!” has been the openly stated — and regularly chanted — policy of Iran’s self-proclaimed “Islamic revolutionaries” and their terrorist proxies.

The Islamic Republic of Iran was not even a year old when that policy was first implemented with the seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and the holding of American diplomats hostage for 444 days.

Nearly four years later, Iran’s rulers orchestrated bombings in Beirut that killed 241 American service members who were acting as peacekeepers. In 1996, an Iran-backed attack on American troops at Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia claimed 19 American lives.

During the Iraq War, from 2003 to 2011, the regime manufactured rockets, explosively formed penetrators and improvised explosive devices for use by the Shiite militias it supported in Iraq. At least 603 U.S. service members were killed using those munitions, according to the Pentagon.

After the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel, one of Iran's proxies, the Islamic Resistance of Iraq, struck U.S. forces in the Middle East more than 180 times.

Over the years, there has been only one meaningful response: In 2020, President Trump ordered a drone strike that eliminated Qassem Soleimani, the regime's terrorist mastermind.

Returning to 9/11 for a moment: We knew what Osama bin Laden intended. In 1996, he issued a "Declaration of War Against the Americans." Few analysts took him seriously. Osama? How many army divisions does he have?

Al Qaeda terrorists had used a truck bomb to attack the World Trade Center in 1993 and a boat packed with explosives to strike the USS Cole near a Yemeni port in 2000. It shouldn't have required Carl von Clausewitz to think: "What other vehicles might they use? Could they hijack passenger planes and use them as missiles?"

Before the 12-day war (the June 2025 air campaign against Iran's nuclear sites), Iran's rulers "could have built a nuclear weapon with near certainty in less than six months," said David Albright, founder and president of Institute for Science and International Security.

Is that not imminent enough? Today, thanks to Israeli and American airstrikes, Iran's rulers are believed to be no closer than two or three years away, absent significant foreign assistance. That is a significant achievement, but it hardly justifies complacency.

We now know that last year's conflict didn't curb the ambitions of Iran's rulers. Instead, they immediately set to work building thousands of missiles and drones, which they shielded in subterranean fortresses.

They also began implanting what is believed to be a nuclear weapons facility so deep under Pickaxe Mountain that not even American Massive Ordnance Penetrators dropped from B-2s could destroy it.

For a few generations after World War II, it seemed we had learned that when someone says he intends to kill you, it's essential to take him seriously.

Ms. Gillibrand and so many others on both the progressive left and the isolationist right have forgotten that lesson.

Israelis have not. For them, the clerical dictatorship represents an existential threat. Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, often described in the media as a "moderate," threatened in a 2001 sermon that "the use of even one nuclear bomb inside Israel will destroy everything."

An attack along the lines of 9/11 with a nuclear weapon would not end America's existence, but the U.S. would never be the same. America's other enemies — Chinese communists, Russian neo-imperialists and North Korean dynastic cultists — would find ways to take advantage of a wounded and weakened America.

Mr. Trump has two essential objectives in the current conflict: to ensure that Iran's rulers can never acquire nuclear weapons, and to frustrate the regime's attempts to annex the Strait of Hormuz, an international waterway vital to the global economy.

The regime's occupation of the strait would set a precedent for the Houthi rebels of Yemen, who want to control the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, another major global chokepoint, and for Beijing, which covets the Taiwan Strait and the free people to its east.

Iran's rulers see themselves as jihadis fighting a holy war against the enemies of Allah. They can contemplate temporary ceasefires, periods of calm that allow them to rearm for the next battle, but a serious "peace deal" would be out of the question.

A deeper layer of complexity here is worth noting: Twelver Shiites. They believe the 12th Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, was "occulted," hidden by Allah more than 1,000 years ago, and will eventually return as the Mahdi, essentially the messiah.

Mainstream Twelver theology holds that his reappearance is divinely timed and that believers should wait patiently. Yet followers of Ayatollah Khomeini assert that Muslims must hasten that return through conflict, chaos, bloodshed and martyrdom.

Twenty years ago, Bernard Lewis, the great scholar of Islam, observed that for those who believe mass death accelerates the journey to paradise, "mutual assured destruction is not a constraint; it is an inducement."

American negotiators, in particular, would do well to bear that in mind.

*Clifford D. May is the founder and president of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a columnist for The Washington Times and host of the "Foreign Policy" podcast.*