

Santorum: Iranians' 'Principle Virtue' To Die For God 'Is An Encouragement For Them To Use' Nukes

By Eli Clifton

January 09, 2012 "Think Progress" -- GOP presidential candidate Rick Santorum has staked out ground as one of the most hawkish candidates in the Republican field. Over the past several months, Santorum has promised to order air strikes on Iran if they don't immediately give in to his full list of demands, declared that the Iranians "will not and cannot be negotiated with," and threatened to target Iranian nuclear scientists for assassination as "enemy combatants" like al Qaeda.

But in the following exchange from the New Hampshire Republican debate on Sunday, Santorum's Iran policy appears to be framed, in no small part, by his extremist views on Islam and a belief that the Islamic Republic's leadership is inherently irrational and suicidal:

DAVID GREGORY: I wonder why it is, if America has lived with a nuclear Soviet Union, we have come to live with a nuclear North Korea, why is it that we cannot live with a nuclear Iran?

And if we can't, are you prepared to take the country to war to disarm that country?

RICK SANTORUM: **They're a — they're a theocracy. They're a theocracy that has deeply embedded beliefs that — that the afterlife is better than this life.** President Ahmadinejad has repeatedly said the principle virtue of the Islamic Republic of Iran is martyrdom.

So when your principle virtue is to die for your — for Allah, then it's not a deterrent to have a nuclear threat, if they would use a nuclear weapon. It is, in fact, an encouragement for them to use their nuclear weapon. And that's why there's a difference between the Soviet Union and China and others and Iran.

While legitimate concerns can be raised about the IAEA's findings that Iran is conducting experiments "specific to nuclear weapons," the assertion that Iran is inherently suicidal or irrational is a right-wing trope in regular rotation with those seeking to portray the Iranian leadership as incapable of engaging in diplomacy.

Indeed, there is little to suggest that Iran is either suicidal or unmotivated by traditional political and security incentives.

Moreover, hawks in the United States during the Cold War didn't share Santorum's argument that the Soviet Union was a rational actor. Many claimed back then that the irrationality of Soviet leadership was one of the reasons why Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) would not work against the Kremlin's elite.

Much as in the case of the Cold War, asserting the irrationality of one's enemies is a useful meme for politicians pushing for military action. But both the history of the Cold War and scholarly examinations of Iranian leadership would all suggest that the "martyr state myth" is poorly grounded in the facts.