

FOCUS ON IRAN

GRASPING THE NETTLE: IF DIPLOMACY FAILS IN IRAN



Julia Vaskar

SHOULD DIPLOMACY FAIL TO DEAL WITH THE THREAT OF A NUCLEAR IRAN, POLICYMAKERS WILL HAVE TO CHOOSE BETWEEN PREVENTIVE WAR AND DETERRENCE.

By JUSTIN LOGAN

On May 31, 2006, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice held a press conference to announce that the United States would be open to joining the European Union Three (the U.K., France and Germany) in negotiations on Iran's nuclear program. This statement represented a shift away from Washington's narrower attempts to pressure and isolate Iran, and increased the chances for a peaceful solution to the conflict over Iran's nuclear program.

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A year later, despite some movement, Washington's approach to the Iran issue still has a good chance of failing. President Bush added a potential "poison pill" precondition — that the Iranians suspend uranium enrichment — before talks could take place. Ultimately, Tehran responded by rejecting any preconditions, defying the U.S.-led demand. At the time of this writing, the United States is pushing for further U.N. sanctions against Iran.

Unless Washington offers to put security guarantees and overall diplomatic and economic normalization on the negotiating table, it is unlikely that Iran will decide that the benefits of a diplomatic deal will outweigh the costs. Given the likelihood of failure, then, it is worth evaluating America's options should the diplomatic approach prove fruitless. The question comes down to this: Would it be better to use military force in an attempt to stymie Iran's nuclear program, or to accept its acquisition of a nuclear weapon and prepare for a policy of deterrence?

The Preventive War Option

One possible approach would be to start a war in order to attempt to delay Iran's acquisition of a nuclear capability. However, there are a host of problems with such a policy.

The first problem is intelligence. A presidential commission concluded in 2004 that the U.S. intelligence community had "disturbingly little" information on Iran's nuclear activities, and there's little reason to believe the picture is any clearer today. It is quite difficult to gather credible data on a country with which America has not had diplomatic relations for more than a quarter-century, and a successful attack against a nuclear program as dispersed and effectively hidden as Iran's apparently is would require very good intelligence. The United States learned of startling advances in Iran's nuclear program in 2002 only after revelations regarding the Natanz and

Arak facilities were made very publicly by the opposition Mujahedeen-e-Khalq's political arm, the National Council of Resistance in Iran. Given that these facilities obviously would rank highly on any list of potential targets, we must assume that the Iranians expect that they would be the first targets of any U.S. air strikes.

As Jeffrey Record of the U.S. Air War College has pointed out, "an effective strategy of counterproliferation via preventive war requires intelligence of a consistent quality and reliability that may not be obtainable within the real-world limits of collection and analysis by the U.S. intelligence community." Even the MEK has issued a slew of "false positive" intelligence reports. The disadvantages of relying on information from exile groups with a vested interest in regime change should have been illustrated in Iraq.

Although the analysis in this paper is based on open-source reporting, and it is possible that the classified materials contain a systematic intelligence picture of the Iranian nuclear program, it is far from clear that that is the case. Given our apparent information-gathering shortcomings inside of Iran, a preventive-war-as-counterproliferation policy in that country would be unlikely to produce a decisive outcome.

The Question of Escalation

Supporters of air strikes simplify a complex situation by assuming that we know where the relevant Iranian nuclear facilities are. Some analysts explicitly point to Israel's 1981 strike against Iraq's Osirak reactor as a model. This analogy is strained at best. The attack against Osirak was a targeted strike at one above-ground facility located roughly 10 miles outside of Baghdad in open desert terrain. By contrast, Iran's known and suspected (to say nothing of unknown and unsuspected) nuclear facilities number as many as 70, some of which are in or around civilian population centers.

Unlike the Osirak reactor, Iran's nuclear facilities are widely dispersed. As Anthony Cordesman and Khalid al-Rodhan of the Center for Strategic and International Studies note, "many of Iran's research, development, and production activities are almost certainly modular and can be rapidly moved to new sites, including tunnels, caves and other underground facilities." Again, targeting these sites would require an excellent intelligence picture, which no one appears to have.

Uncertainty about the scope of the Iranian program,

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coupled with the question of the regime's willingness to escalate the conflict, could well lead to a full-blown war. Put another way, if the United States initiated air strikes against Iran's known nuclear facilities, would it stop there, or would it carry on to suspected nuclear as well as chemical and biological weapons sites? Would an air campaign attempt to eliminate Iranian air defenses, which have been piled up around the known nuclear sites? What about Iranian command and control nodes? The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps? Ultimately, once Iran responded to a U.S. attack, would Washington target the Iranian leadership?

Both the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency have conducted war games on Iran; and, as *Newsweek* magazine reported in September 2004, "no one liked the outcome." Retired General Barry McCaffrey went so far as to argue on NBC's "Meet the Press" that "the notion that we can threaten them with conventional air attack is simply insane." The essential problem is that even if the strikes began as targeted, it is unlikely that Washington would be able to prevent or even control the escalation of such a conflict.

Iran holds a number of cards to play against the United States in response to a military attack. First among them is the prospect that Iran's political and military penetration of Iraq could lead to a rapid escalation of violence in that country, and might well plunge the entire Persian Gulf region into chaos.

Iran's Cards

In particular, both the political and the security situations in Iraq could become nightmarish if the United States were to attack Iran. In January, powerful Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr announced that if Iran were attacked, Sadr would throw his support behind Iran. Although it is possible to overstate Iran's influence in Iraq (and, in particular, Iraqi Shiites' degree of fealty to Iran), it is important to recognize the influence that Tehran has cultivated in Iraq, and the implications that a U.S. assault on Iran could hold for the stability and viability of the Iraqi government.

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There is also the potential for a U.S. military meltdown in Iraq. As the old military adage holds, "Amateurs talk strategy. Professionals talk logistics." American supply lines through southern Iraq would be highly vulnerable to sabotage and attack, which could quickly imperil the entire occupation. Nearly all of the supplies that come into Iraq are transported from Kuwait through southern Iraq, in supply trucks driven by foreign civilians. As Patrick Lang, former head of the Near East bureau at the DIA, has pointed

out, it is a difficult and resource-consuming endeavor to protect supply convoys over hundreds of miles of hostile territory.

Another risk inherent in a U.S. attack against Iran is the potential for Tehran to lash out against Israel. Mohammad-Ebrahim Dehqani, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, stated in May 2006 that "wherever America does something evil, the first place that we will target will be Israel." It is no secret that both the Iranian leadership and public see Israel and the United States as close allies, and would look upon an attack by one of them as an act of war by both.

Last summer's violence in Lebanon and northern Israel underscored one potential Iranian tactic in such a situation: the use of proxies such as Hezbollah to attack Israel. Even in that limited conflict between Hezbollah and Israel, the former was able to achieve surprising tactical successes against hard Israeli targets. Forty-seven Israeli tanks were struck by anti-tank missiles, and 15 or 16 of them were completely destroyed. More notably, Hezbollah's ability to use a radar-guided missile to disable an Israeli warship on patrol in the Mediterranean Sea indicated a new level of sophistication in its attacks.

Even attacks inside the United States are not inconceivable. Terrorism analyst Daniel Byman says that Iranian attacks against the U.S. homeland are "less likely" than attacks against U.S. interests overseas, but "far from impossible." A former chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Bob Graham, stated after the 9/11 attacks that Hezbollah was the terrorist group with the largest presence inside the United States. An attack

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against Iran would likely clarify any uncertainties about Hezbollah's reach.

Squeezing the Oil Pipeline

Another concern is that Iran could attempt to use mines or small dhows armed with anti-ship weapons, or rigged for suicide attacks, to impede oil shipments in the Strait of Hormuz, through which roughly 40 percent of the world's oil flows. Vice Admiral Lowell E. Jacoby, director of the DIA, testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee in March 2005 that "Iran can briefly close the Strait of Hormuz, relying on a layered strategy using predominately naval, air and some ground forces."

An Iranian attempt to close off the strait would be a risky gambit, both diplomatically and militarily. Doing so would invite wide opprobrium from the international

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community, because it would cause oil prices to skyrocket. Moreover, disruptions could affect Iran's oil shipments, as well. As Secretary Rice has commented, "I think something like 80 percent of Iran's budget comes from oil revenue, and so obviously it would be a very serious problem for Iran if oil were disrupted on the market." Although the actual figure is closer to 60 percent, the logic stands.

Military shenanigans in the strait could also expose Iran's limited naval capabilities to the vastly superior U.S. Navy. (When Iran attempted to cause mischief in the strait in 1988, during the "tanker war," U.S. naval forces showed near-total dominance in the water, disabling six Iranian vessels and attacking two oil platforms used by Iran for intelligence monitoring.)

Still, Iran has surely attempted to determine the

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weakest points of the U.S. Navy. The 2000 attack on the USS *Cole*, in particular, has no doubt been a topic of interest for Iranian strategists. Although the Navy has since increased countermeasures to guard against a similar attack, U.S. Admiral Vern Clark remarked after the *Cole* attack that “it would be extraordinarily difficult to have ever observed [the attacking boat] in time to do anything to have stopped it.”

Doubts that Tehran would close the Strait of Hormuz should not remove fears about the potential Iranian responses to an attack. The essential truth is that Iran has a variety of tactics at its disposal that range from undesirable to quite dangerous.

Unintended Consequences

The longer-term and unintended consequences of attacking Iran are important to examine as well.

First, there is the issue of proliferation. Since the Cold War ended, the United States has embraced a foreign policy that is seen as inherently dangerous to many countries. Observers point to U.S. military action against Serbia and Iraq and our support for regime-changing “color revolutions” in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. In addition, after the Sept. 11 attacks, President Bush singled out Iraq, Iran and North Korea as members of an “axis of evil.” Of the axis members, the one country Washington suspected had nuclear weapons, North Korea, has remained essentially untouched, while the one country we were certain did not have nuclear weapons, Iraq, was invaded. As Kenneth Pollack of the Brookings Institution notes, “the Iraq example coupled with the North Korea example probably is part of the motivation for some in Iran to get a nuclear weapon.”

Bombing Iran would only further underscore the dilemma faced by states that find themselves on Washington’s hit list. Without nuclear weapons, there is no assurance that the United States will *not* attack — other than supine acquiescence to Washington’s various demands. As Nobel laureate Thomas Schelling has pointed out, the perverse fact is that America’s counter-proliferation policy is a prime driver of proliferation.

Other unintended consequences would include the effect of Iranian civilian casualties on our diplomatic

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standing and the hatred of America that it would amplify in Islamic countries. Any decision to attack Iran should be evaluated in terms of how it would affect the “war on terror.” Footage of civilian casualties would be aired again and again in Arab and Muslim media, providing fodder for anti-American demagogues. And starting a war with a third Islamic country in less than than a decade surely would be used as evidence that Osama bin Laden’s

predictions about U.S. intentions were correct.

As a number of recent U.S. government reports have admitted, the main driver of Islamic extremism is American foreign policy. The Government Accountability Office concluded in May 2006 that “U.S. foreign policy is the major root cause behind anti-American sentiments among Muslim populations.” Two years earlier, the Pentagon’s Defense Science Board made the point even more forcefully: “American direct intervention in the Muslim world has paradoxically elevated the stature of and support for radical Islamists, while diminishing support for the United States to single digits in some Arab societies. ... Muslims do not ‘hate our freedom’ but, rather, they hate our policies.”

If we are going to fight a war against Islamic terrorism, it would be wise to take into account the factors that feed it. Policy choices that worsen public opinion of the United States in the Muslim world are strategically relevant, and would be detrimental to the war on terrorism.

Undermining the Reform Movement

Finally, the implications of a U.S.-Iran war for the prospect of gradual political and economic liberalization — the factors most relevant to the eventual erosion of the clerical regime in Tehran — would be dire. “Any attack on Iran will be good for the government and will actually damage the democratic movement,” Iranian dissident Shirin Ebadi has warned.

This issue of undermining the reform movement in Iran is (or should be) at the center of the debate about whether or not to bomb. The logic behind bombing relies on a series of assumptions about the results: first, that it would delay Iranian acquisition of a bomb; second,

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that during the delay Washington could somehow effect regime change; and third, that the new regime would be so appealing that fears about its nuclearization would vanish, or else (optimally) the new regime would forswear nuclear weapons. The problem with this logic is that the likely effect of bombing Iran would be to shore up the hard-liners within the current regime, not cause their demise. In addition, if bombing has the effect of entrenching the current leadership, any delay in Iran's nuclear program would be offset by the strengthening of the current regime.

The prospect of targeted air strikes eventually escalating to regime change also raises a whole host of questions about the postwar environment, and these questions have not been addressed by war proponents. Who would take power in Iran? Would the deep ethnic and sectarian fissures that are touted as such a source of weakness for the Iranian regime bubble up to the surface and create a low-level civil war as they have in Iraq? What would be the medium- and long-term strategic implications?

Similar questions were either not asked or were answered with propaganda and wishful thinking before the Iraq War, and America is still paying the price. We should not repeat the same mistakes in Iran.

The Deterrence Option

Although the preventive war option for dealing with Iran's nuclear program is remarkably unappealing, the prospect of deterrence raises a host of undesirable consequences, as well. These also warrant thorough consideration.

The question of how to deal with the Islamic Republic would change dramatically if one were to accept the assumption that the regime acts not according to rational calculations, but theological and ideological ones. The allegation that Iran is fundamentally undeterrable has become common. For some, the situation is akin to that of Europe in the 1930s, with Ahmadinejad in the role of Hitler. Bernard Lewis, the Princeton historian who has advised Vice President Cheney, has gone so far as to

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claim that Ahmadinejad and the Iranian government “clearly believe” that “the cosmic struggle at the end of time ... ending in the final victory of the forces of good over evil” has begun.

Are the Mullahs Crazy?

Because accepting these notions would lead almost invariably to a war with Iran, such claims deserve deep scrutiny. Hawkish commentators seize upon Pres. Ahmadinejad’s bizarre and reprehensible statements about the Holocaust, and the Iranian government’s stated desire to “wipe Israel off the map.” Although the comments have gained new currency in the context of the nuclear dispute, it is important to recognize that such rhetoric has been a part of Iranian boilerplate for years. Similar statements have been uttered by a broad swath of political figures, including Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the former president

While not particularly reassuring in itself, this consistency does demonstrate that there has not been a noticeable shift in policy in Tehran that has thrown the levers of power to a madman who acts outside the standard (admittedly poisonous) political rhetoric. Moreover, many knowledgeable commentators, including Kenneth Pollack, Judith Yaphe and Charles Lutes of the National Defense University, have argued that there is no reason to believe that Iran’s leadership would take the suicidal step of initiating a nuclear war. Reuven Pedatzur, a political scientist at Tel Aviv University and Israeli Air Force veteran, puts it bluntly: “Past experience shows that the radical Iranian regime, headed by the most extreme of them all, Ayatollah Khomeini, behaved with absolute rationality at the moment of truth.”

Iran’s record during the Iran-Iraq War, for example, shows that the clerical leadership is sensitive to costs, but will press for advantage where it can. Tehran’s rhetoric was uncompromising initially, but once it became clear that the country was in danger of losing outright, its leadership sued for peace. In the words of the late Ayatollah Khomeini, he was forced to accept the advice of “all the high-ranking political and military experts” in Iran, who

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had apparently told him that the prospect of victory was at least five years away and that Iran would be fighting a defensive war and attempting to rebuild its forces over the entire five years. This shift in policy would seem to reflect a fundamental rationality.

Further, it is hard to believe that Israel or the United States would wait for a court-of-law degree of certitude after absorbing a nuclear attack to retaliate against the most likely country of origin: Iran. Nor would the transfer of weapons out of control of

the Tehran government to a non-state group be viewed as anything less than an act of war by the United States. Either development would bring an immediate end to the ruling regime. Although no one can prove a negative, in the case of Iran there is little evidence that the clerical regime would bring about its own immolation in pursuit of ideological or religious goals.

The Regional Response

Another major concern is the potential response of other states in the region. Iran would likely feel emboldened by its acquisition of a nuclear weapon, and could make a play for regional hegemony. That, in turn, could cause neighboring countries to seek nuclear deterrents of their own, or to bolster their own militaries generally in an attempt to deter the Iranians from any mischief.

This concern is probably legitimate, but overstated. Those who fear the prospect of an arms race in the Middle East argue that it would increase the likelihood of war. But, in fact, war becomes more likely if neighboring states do *not* arm themselves. If neighboring states maintain their current, insufficient military efforts, and allow Iran to build power based on its nuclear capability, that would increase the likelihood of war by lowering the perceived cost to Iran of provoking conflict. As it happens, there is evidence that neighboring states do recognize the threat of a nuclear Iran and are beginning to consider appropriate countermeasures.

At the IDEX 2007 arms trade fair in February, Arab countries went on a buying spree, spending billions of

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dollars on advanced weapons platforms. The *New York Times* reported that the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman and Saudi Arabia brokered deals that would raise their total defense expenditures in 2007 to nearly \$60 billion, dwarfing Iran's defense budget.

In March, the *Boston Globe* reported that the State Department and Pentagon were pressing for congressional approval for further increases in arms sales to Arab countries that have prickly relations with Tehran. One former Arab official told the *Financial Times* that the Arabs are now looking at themselves and saying they have to deal with their own problems. Iran is at or near the top of the list of those problems. Although recent reports indicate that Israel is pressuring the administration to back away from arms sales to the Gulf states, Washington should ignore such pressure. Fostering balance in the Persian Gulf is sound policy.

Israel, the one existing (but undeclared) nuclear power in the Middle East, appears to be ramping up efforts to develop a failsafe second-strike capability. This

effort is prudent and justified, but Israel would have a viable land-based second-strike capability even if a potential adversary were to launch an extremely high number of nuclear strikes first. The country is currently thought to possess roughly 200 nuclear weapons, dispersed throughout its (admittedly small) territory. Given that Israel reportedly possesses both nuclear-equipped Jericho-2 missiles in hardened silos and submarines armed with nuclear-tipped cruise missiles (both of which are extremely difficult to destroy, even with highly accurate weapons), it is clear that no conceivable Iranian first strike in the foreseeable future would destroy Israel's retaliatory capability. Furthermore, an Israeli second strike would have a devastating effect on Iran, given that roughly two-thirds of its population is located in urban centers.

It is difficult to believe that the Iranian leadership would bring about the destruction of its own country so that Sunni states like Saudi Arabia could claim the mantle of a victorious post-Israel Islam.



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Cramping Our Style?

Another likely result of Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapon is its use as a deterrent to limit U.S. and Israeli policy options in the Middle East. Clearly, Iran's nuclearization would dramatically raise the costs of a U.S. regime-change effort in Tehran. Analyst Thomas Donnelly of the American Enterprise Institute admits that this is a primary concern: "A nuclear-armed Iran is doubly threatening to U.S. interests not only because of the possibility it might employ its weapons or pass them to terrorist groups, but also because of the constraining effect it will impose on U.S. behavior in the region."

In his groundbreaking work *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons* (co-authored with Scott D. Sagan in 1995), Kenneth Waltz put things still more bluntly: "A big reason for America's resistance to the spread of nuclear weapons is that if weak countries have some, they will cramp our style." This is indisputably true, but it would be less important if America revised its grandiose and radical foreign policy posture.

Analysts like Donnelly fear an Iranian bomb because they favor a revolutionary American foreign policy that attempts to use force to transform regimes Washington dislikes. However, to evaluate the implications of Iranian acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability and the resulting narrowing of America's options, it is necessary to determine where the two nations' interests are likely to clash, and to further evaluate these interests in the context of nuclear deterrence.

The threat of nuclear retaliation is most credible when it is tied to the core interests of any state: government survival and territorial integrity. Thus, while a nuclear capability would take unprovoked regime change off the table, it would not give Iran carte blanche to act as it pleases with respect to all of its foreign policy goals. Threats to use nuclear weapons to secure peripheral interests would be vastly less credible.

In general, Washington's perception of itself as omnipotent has led to excesses in its Middle East strategy, such as the Iraq operation, and a strategic myopia in terms of its diplomatic posture in the Middle East. For instance, Washington has long promoted and encouraged an unrealistic approach to Israeli security. It has consistently refused to stop the expansion of settlements in the West Bank and supported the ill-advised assault on Lebanon's civilian infrastructure in July 2006. American support for Israeli expansion has damaged our reputation

in the world and done little to put Israel on a path to long-term security. A nuclearized Iran will not "cramp our style" in the sense of altering America's fundamental commitment to Israel's existence; what it may preclude is an extension of the present, unrealistic approach to the Middle East generally.

War vs. Deterrence

Ultimately, the benefits of either policy can be defined by the negative outcomes that they preclude. The benefit of the preventive war option is that it could conceivably delay the Iranian nuclear program. As discussed above, however, this prospect is far from certain, given the poor U.S. intelligence on the Iranian nuclear program.

Even if the United States is able to buy a few extra years of time before a nuclear Iran emerges, it is not clear that the delay will ultimately prevent the mullahs from acquiring a nuclear weapon. The policy could yield all of the negative outcomes of a war, and still ultimately fail to prevent what the war was supposed to prevent — the emergence of a nuclear, theocratic Iran. Admittedly, a policy of bombing now could avoid the uncertainties and dangers of a deterrence policy, at least for a few years. Juxtaposed against that potential benefit, however, is an array of negative consequences, varying from merely undesirable to extremely dangerous.

By contrast, embracing a posture of deterrence would prevent the inevitable loss of American life that would result from a war. Moreover, billions, if not hundreds of billions, of dollars would be left in the productive economy, rather than being allocated to attempting to destroy Iran's nuclear program. The mullahs in Iran would remain unpopular, unable to use the American bogeyman to consolidate support internally. We could also avoid a range of Iranian countermeasures: further chaos in Iraq, attacks against U.S. troops in that country or against Israel, and the prospect of sky-high oil prices and volatility in the Strait of Hormuz. The problems of chaos in a regime-changed Iran, should a conflict escalate to that level, could also be avoided.

In the end, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that deterrence is a preferable policy to preventive war under the circumstances. The latter option opens so many uncertainties that are out of the range of control of the American government that it should be looked on as a supremely undesirable policy. ■