



WAR WITH IRAN IN 2008?

John J. Hamre

From the earliest days of the Bush presidency, Iran has been one of the target states in the president's "axis of evil." Early administration thinking had it that Iran would collapse of its own weight if only the United States could establish a vibrant democracy on its border in Iraq. Of course, it has not worked out that way.

Iran has been a festering problem in U.S. foreign and security policy for years. We have long suspected that Iran is carrying out a covert program to build nuclear weapons, hidden within an explicit effort to develop commercial nuclear power. We knew that Iran was having (and may indeed continue to have) serious difficulties with various technical stages in converting natural uranium into reactor-useful material. Iran has continued to work at this steadily, however, and in 2007 claimed to have enriched small amounts of U235 (the active isotope in nuclear reactors).

Iran's ongoing work on nuclear energy has not been the only problem. In addition, Iran's new political leadership has taken a darker (even revisionist) outlook toward America's ally Israel, going so far as to question the reality of the Holocaust and to call Israel an illegitimate state. Such provocative statements coupled with a pugnacious approach to the nuclear question have set Iran and the United States on a collision course.

Although the nuclear weapons program is the underlying cause of tension, during the past year a more tactical problem has surfaced as a more plausible basis for war. U.S. military authorities are convinced

that Iranian intelligence and paramilitary organizations are actively collaborating with insurgents and rejectionists in Iraq to target U.S. military personnel. During the past several years, the lethality of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in Iraq has improved substantially, suggesting that superior design and materials have been introduced by covert outside sources. Forensic diagnosis of IEDs has uncovered designs and materials that the United States believes demonstrate Iranian involvement.

It is increasingly argued in the Department of Defense and in Bush administration circles that the United States cannot blunt the IED attacks in Iraq until it goes after the supply sources in Iran. But covert supply channels used by intelligence operatives tend to be borrowed facilities and little more than nondescript depots. Attacking such facilities is unlikely to seriously disrupt Iranian supply efforts. As a result, others within the Pentagon argue that it would be preferable to attack Iran's nuclear infrastructure because it is massive and fixed and thus easier to target.

Will the United States attack Iran during the coming year? War talk is building in Washington again, but it is substantially different from the talk in town five years ago about war with Iraq. Back then, the war talk was being led by the neoconservatives, with the rest of Washington mumbling rather incoherently about the issue. The fear caused by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, created a climate that made an attack on Iraq plausible. And, to be honest, no one offered a coherent opposing view.

This time the war talk is different. Now the debate is robust. For every individual making the case to attack Iran, there are equally strong arguments why an attack would unhinge an already dangerous situation in the Middle East.

No one should discount the possibility of an accident that could get out of control. Still, open conflict is not likely during the next year. President Bush has declared flatly that a nuclear Iran is “unacceptable,” but he has not delineated explicit redlines that define the threshold of unacceptable developments. Overall, the administration is continuing to put diplomacy at the forefront of its approach to Iran. To make real progress, however, President Bush must keep pressure on the international community, which would far prefer to ignore the situation.

Washington is frustrated with the process of trying to get tighter economic sanctions blessed by the United Nations Security Council. Security Council members Russia and China (who thus hold vetoes) are decidedly cool to tougher sanctions. The administration therefore has decided to try to shift the campaign for tighter sanctions away from the UNSC to the Group of Eight, an institutionalized coalition of the willing where global matters are discussed by friendlier big powers (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, United Kingdom, United States) and no one has an official veto. It is thought that the G-8 will genuinely be willing to pursue tougher economic sanctions, tightening the rope around Iran. Whether this is true is unclear. France has been decidedly more hawkish in recent months following the election of President Nicolas Sarkozy. British enthusiasm for war is diminished under Prime Minister Gordon Brown, however, and the departure of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan takes another hawk out of the picture.

War talk in Washington cuts two ways when it comes to the sanctions debate. Most countries prefer to ignore the situation with Iran, so heightened talk of alarm and “unacceptability” about Iran is necessary to motivate reticent nations to deal with the issue. But, equally strongly, many nations fear a repeat of Iraq 2002–2003, when Saddam’s intransigence throughout

a year of tighter sanctions was used as part of the rationale to justify regime change in Baghdad. European diplomats openly say that they will not support tighter sanctions because they see that as just a first step on a path that leads inevitably to war.

The Bush administration is therefore caught in a dilemma. It firmly believes that Iran is behaving in dangerous and unacceptable ways. It wants diplomacy to work and must issue threats of force as a backdrop to make diplomacy more attractive. But those threats undercut the diplomacy because of the United States’ earlier history with Iraq.

The greater problem is that the United States *cannot* invade Iran. The Pentagon is seriously winded now after four and a half years of conflict in Iraq and six years of conflict in Afghanistan. The U.S. military lacks the depth to support the surge in Iraq past April. Using ground forces against Iran is out of the question. Attacking Iran with airplanes—the only plausible course of action—presents the challenge of efficacy, especially against covert supply networks of people and small items of equipment. Attacking suspected warehouses will not likely staunch the flow of materiel and personnel. And U.S. intelligence forces believe that Iran can introduce far more serious weaponry into Iraq (shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles, for example) to complicate our mission there considerably.

In addition, widening the conflict in Iraq by attacking Iran does not fit the current strategic thinking. The leadership in the Defense Department believes that we are currently on a more positive trajectory in Iraq. We must withdraw 5 of the 20 U.S. brigades during the first six months of 2008, and the Pentagon hopes to withdraw another 5 brigades during the second half of the year. The first withdrawal is solid. The second withdrawal depends on progress in Iraq. With this overarching objective, attacking Iran only seems to add oxygen to a fire we hope is dying out.

So, on balance, war with Iran during 2008 is not likely. Obviously all bets are off if we have some accident or military provocation. But ongoing diplomacy and economic sanctions are the safe bet. ■