

WAR WITH IRAN, OR WAR WITH THE FACTS?



PJ Longhran

EFFORTS BY THE BRITISH, FRENCH AND GERMANS OFFER HOPE THAT THE DAY TEHRAN ACQUIRES NUCLEAR WEAPONS CAN BE PUT OFF INDEFINITELY.

BY HENRY PRECHT

Are those war drums tuning up again, this time for Iran? An exiled opposition group spreads “intelligence” about nukes, while respected Secretaries of State front for neocon hawks. As the president and vice president hint of an attack to come, other officials lash Iran, and pundits voice their support for strong measures. Meanwhile, as Washington blusters, Europeans take a softer line. And on and on to a repeat of the Iraq invasion?

Yes, it all sounds familiar, but I don’t think so. The Bush administration may be ideologically motivated, but it

isn't stupid. For if the Iraq War has proved costly, hostilities against Iran would make it seem like a church supper. Here are some reasons why.

- Iran is about four times the size of Iraq and its cities are isolated across vast deserts. (Recall the lost helicopters of Desert One.)

- Its population, almost three times that of Iraq, has the same three large factions: Sunni, Shia and Kurds. But unlike its western neighbor, Iran is 90 percent Shia, and its people have historically remained united in times of great stress.

- Although a majority of the country certainly wants reform of the ruling clerical regime, Iranians are intensely proud nationalists. Decades of British, Russian and American domination have left them fearful that outsiders seek their oil and want to weaken their sovereignty.

- The country has tens of thousands of experienced and fanatical fighters organized into small cells committed to defend their homeland. An American invasion would drive many more citizens to join that defense.

For all these reasons, fighting Iran would be bloody and never-ending. Oil prices (already at record highs) would skyrocket, U.S. debt would soar and the dollar would plunge. Washington (and Israel) would stand alone in the world without the dubious "coalition of the willing" President Bush boasts of in Iraq.

Nor would the fighting be limited to Iranian territory. Heretofore, Iran (which, unlike some of its neighbors, has not invaded another country in over 200 years) has been largely passive in response to American initiatives in the region. It has even been helpful in sta-

Henry Precht, a retired Foreign Service officer who was country director for Iran during the Iranian Revolution and subsequent hostage crisis, has followed Iranian affairs for over 30 years. He is the author of A Diplomat's Progress: Ten Tales of Diplomatic Adventure in and around the Middle East (Williams & Company, 2005).

***While an invasion would be
madness, precision attacks
on suspected Iranian
nuclear facilities would be
almost as damaging to
American interests at home
and abroad.***

bilizing Afghanistan and Iraq. But in the event of a U.S. invasion, that stance would likely morph into subversion and even active support for insurgents in Iraq and elsewhere. Those who are concerned about Iranian-backed terrorism could see their worst conjectures come to life.

Other Means of Pressure?

While an invasion would be madness, precision attacks on suspected Iranian nuclear facilities would be almost as damaging to

American interests at home and abroad. If, as Vice President Cheney foreshadowed earlier this year, Israel decided to repeat in Iran its 1981 attack on the Iraqi nuclear reactor at Osirak, the U.S. would be totally identified with its ally even if Jerusalem acted completely on its own.

Furthermore, some observers think the Israeli bombing actually spurred Saddam Hussein to accelerate and hide his program to develop nuclear weapons. Certainly that would be a predictable reaction in Tehran as well, driving it to seek a deterrent against pre-emptive action by Washington and Jerusalem.

As for other pressure tactics, we already know that a quarter-century of American sanctions only produced Iranian resentment without changing Tehran's behavior. As CEO of Halliburton, Vice President Cheney understood that history, and opposed unilateral sanctions.

But maybe the administration is just talking tough, playing bad cop to the Europeans' good cop. Or perhaps the White House has learned that heightening tensions and fear at home bolsters perceptions of presidential leadership. Whatever the explanation, the tactic is badly chosen. Threatening Tehran could have unforeseen consequences.

Let's step back in this argument. Having discussed problems inherent in responding violently to a feared Iranian nuclear weapon, we should examine what lies behind those fears. But first, the context: Nukes are one of the litany of four charges Washington has leveled at Tehran for decades. The other three — abuse of human rights, support for terrorism and opposition

F O C U S

to an Arab-Israel peace — receive prominence seriatim. Although there is truth in each, none stand up to the regional hypocrisy test.

Human-rights abusers populate the Middle East. Iranians who oppose a fair and lasting peace settlement resemble Israeli and Arab extremists. Other regimes assassinate opponents as Tehran did, give women few of the rights granted in Iran, and permit only staged elections, if that. You will never hear that comparison out of Washington, however. Instead, for our friends, the U.S. reaction to offenses ranges from an occasional rebuke through silence to generous aid. At the core of the American position is a strong antipathy toward Iran that shuts out other considerations.

Certainly, the mullahs' record on human rights is abysmal, and constitutes the major reason for widespread popular discontent. Yet, as Iranian Nobel Peace Prize Winner Shirin Edbadi has written: "Respect for human rights can never be imposed by foreign military

might and coercion. Foreign military intervention in Iran is the surest way to keep the goal [of getting Iran to adhere to international human rights laws] out of reach." Continuing to bad-mouth and threaten will only drive all Iranians together, weakening opposition to the clerical regime. Talk about unintended consequences! Shades of Iraq!

Countdown to Nukes?

But back to nukes. So far, no aluminum tubes, Niger yellow cake or mobile labs have been produced. There is, however, the assumption that Iran has long intended to develop nuclear weapons and could do so easily once its civilian program was established.

Perhaps the best statement of the "evidence" was given by Christopher de Bellaigue in the *New York Review of Books* of Feb. 24, 2005. He wrote that beginning in the summer of 2002, the International Atomic Energy Agency "brought the Iranian program under

Get Your Finances In Line With SDFCU Online

You can depend on State Department Federal Credit Union for the ultimate in security and convenience with SDFCU Online banking. This FREE service allows you to access your Credit Union accounts via the Internet anytime, from anywhere in the world. Just go to www.sdfcu.org and click the SDFCU Online logo. You can conduct the following Credit Union business:

- ▶ Transfer funds between accounts
- ▶ View your account history over the last 15 months
- ▶ View and pay your credit card bill online
- ▶ Check current account balances
- ▶ View check images
- ▶ Pay Bills and much more!*

See just how easy SDFCU Online is! Visit us at www.sdfcuonline.org and check out the easy demo!

If you're interested in becoming a member of State Department Federal Credit Union, give our Member Service Center a call at **703-706-5000**, or outside the D.C. Metro area at **800-296-8882**. You can also email us at sdfcu@sdfcu.org.

SDFCU Online puts us at your service, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, whenever you need us the most. Sign up today!

*The Bill Payer service is available at no charge for Capital Club members. Otherwise, there is a low monthly fee of \$3.95 for unlimited transactions.



State
Department
Federal
Credit
Union

close scrutiny. It has since established that Iran has egregiously breached the safeguards agreement which was designed to keep its nuclear activities transparent and limited to peaceful purposes. These breaches include Iran's failure to report the purchase of nuclear materials and to declare the existence of several of its nuclear sites."

Confirming this information, IAEA chief Mohammad ElBaradei said in a *Washington Post* interview last spring, "Iran has clearly cheated in the past. Corrective action was taken. Now they say they are embarking on a new path of cooperation, and since then they are cooperating. If they are still cheating, we haven't seen any evidence of that." ElBaradei has also stated that the hidden activities were not related to a weapons program, that any nuclear program could be used to make bombs, but the development of nuclear energy makes economic sense and is perhaps inevitable in Iran and elsewhere (and, I might add, to the West's benefit by freeing up oil for export).

Incidentally, the Bush administration tried to prevent Mr. ElBaradei from being elected to a third term as head of the agency, but abandoned the campaign when no other candidates came forward.

Iran admits it acquired nuclear equipment on the black market from the Pakistan-based A.Q. Khan network, but says it declined offered guidance for assembling a bomb. Tehran insists it is only seeking nuclear power for peaceful purposes as guaranteed under the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Although hiding purchases on the black market and nuclear sites from the IAEA is plainly a violation worthy of suspicion, does it merit the threats coming from Washington? One could argue that sanctions, threats and reports of U.S. spying — and memory of the Israeli bombing of Osirak — are understandable reasons for trying to keep nuclear activity hidden from Pentagon eyes.

In late February, to the great displeasure of Washington, Iran and Russia signed an agreement for the provision of nuclear fuel for the power plant at Bushire beginning next year and continuing for 10 years. The agreement stipulates that spent fuel would be returned to Moscow so that it could not be used for weapons.

Later, Secretary Rice offered support to the European

***Washington's continuing
pressure bolsters the
clerical regime and sours
ordinary Iranians
on the U.S.***

negotiations by agreeing to remove the block to Iranian membership in the WTO and to consider provision of spare parts for civil aircraft. The initial Iranian reaction was dismissive as insufficient, but talks continued. In August the Europeans made their final offer to Iran: economic incentives, including a "guaranteed" supply of enriched uranium for its power

plants, if Iran permanently gave up the NPT-authorized right to enrich its own uranium. Iran, having repeatedly made plain that it insisted on controlling all stages of nuclear power production from mining uranium to power generation, dismissed the European proposal and has taken steps towards resuming enrichment.

At this writing, there are two possible scenarios: either Iran and the Europeans will resume talks in a further search for a compromise, or the IAEA will condemn Iran and refer it to the U.N. Security Council for a vote on sanctions. There is now little likelihood that the U.S. and Europeans can muster the necessary votes in the IAEA, and less chance that the Security Council will impose sanctions without drawing a Chinese or Russian veto. Should sanctions be imposed, the result could well be that Iran would renounce the Non-Proliferation Treaty and end all inspections. For these reasons, the prospect is for continued talk, despite Washington's preference for toughness.

Washington's continuing pressure bolsters the clerical regime and sours ordinary Iranians on the U.S. — a great loss, as they are among the few Middle Easterners with friendly feelings for America. Virtually all Iranians, bitter opponents and loyal supporters of the regime alike, believe their country must have nuclear power if it is to have a growing economy like India and China. On this, the mullahs are no different from Shah Pahlavi; recall that he successfully wooed American companies and the State Department during the 1970s to work toward that goal.

The Jury Is Still Out

The case against Iran at this stage does not merit a guilty verdict, but rather deferred judgment. Still, let us not allow benefit of the doubt to obscure realism. At some point in the future, Iranian insecurity may well mean Tehran will move from its declared peaceful

nuclear program and seek covertly to make bombs. After all, Iran has an array of potential enemies: Iraq used poison gas and missiles against it; Pakistan, which has the bomb, supported the Taliban who murdered Iranian diplomats; Israel, with an estimated 200 nuclear warheads, regularly threatens Tehran; and American forces surround Iran on all sides. Iran is unlikely to initiate an attack against any of these powers, for example, by killing fellow Muslims, destroying the shrines of Jerusalem and inviting certain and vast retaliation. But, to fearful leaders under threat in Tehran, nuclear weapons could appear a deterrent against potential enemies, following the North Korean model.

An imaginative but unexplored course might be to offer Iran precise security guarantees; for example, a non-aggression pact with neighbors and outside powers. But that would require a dramatic change in the U.S. attitude.

Continuing talks with the British, French and Germans offer some prospect that the day Tehran acquires nuclear weapons can be put off indefinitely.

But in the meantime, tough inspections would be required and meaningful incentives (trade, investment, technical assistance and precise security guarantees) offered to coax Tehran down a peaceful path. The Supreme Leader Ali Khameni (who calls the shots) and new President Mahmud Ahmadinejad are adamant that is where they want to go. Washington should end its hostility and not place obstacles in the way of that goal. After all, Iran and the U.S. share perspectives on global oil supply and some Middle East issues (though not the Arab-Israel conflict).

In time, given a bit of quiet and passive cooperation from Washington, the Europeans might defuse the nuclear issue and refocus Iranian energies on much-needed economic development. If they can be relieved of outside threats, Iranians will in time find their own way to ease the control of their religious masters. That would be the outcome the world needs, though it might not harmonize with the loud ideological drumming of the Bush administration. ■

The Embassy Plan Overseas Insurance Personal Auto & Contents Coverage

Experience that helps you avoid the pitfalls of a highly complex business. Repeat business that results from providing what's best for the customer not the agent nor the insurance company.

Since 1969, Harry M. Jannette International has provided dependable coverage with U.S. carriers with a financial rating of A+ or higher to thousands of Foreign Service Personnel worldwide. Thus you gain the broadest U.S. terms and conditions and flexible value limits often not available from other insurance carriers.

MAJOR CREDIT CARDS ACCEPTED: SEE OUR WEBSITE APPLICATIONS

Harry M. Jannette International, L.L.C.

8111 LBJ Freeway, Suite 585 Dallas, Texas 75251-1334

Toll Free (800) 256-5141

(972) 783-4915 Fax (972) 783-0545

E-mail: hmjintl@jannetteintl.com www.jannetteintl.com



Your Reliable Choice

- **WORLDWIDE COVERAGE**
Fire, theft, comprehensive and collision protection are available at foreign posts.
- **U.S. AUTO LIABILITY**
Available for short term on home leave, change of assignment, and new auto purchase prior to foreign departure. This coverage must be issued in combination with an "Embassy Plan" policy.
- **FOREIGN LIABILITY**
Contact your post for compliance with local laws, Excess liability limits are available over local liability coverage.
- **PERSONAL COVERAGE**
Household goods and transit, valuable articles, personal liability, life insurance.
- **EMPLOYEE ASSOCIATION INSURANCE**
Employee association insurance Including directors and officers.