



## Nuclear Fallout from US Mid-East Policy: The Rise of Iran

*Robert Matthews\**

The US started a war with Iraq but Iran may have already won it. Although the news this week in Washington is centered on the troop “surge” in Iraq, Iran remains perhaps an equally complex and difficult policy issue for the Bush administration. In 2001, notwithstanding Iran’s mutual interest with the US in removing the Taliban regime in Afghanistan after the Al Qaeda-sponsored terrorist attacks of September 11, and its initial support for the US war there, Washington missed an opportunity to build the relationship. The Bush administration believed Iran was weak, threatened with democratic reform movements and despite, its initial intelligence and logistical support in countering Al Qaeda, tied to Middle Eastern terrorism. It did not help that administration rhetoric has often ranged from clumsy to belligerent. In 2002, Bush administration hardliners placed Iran in its tripartite “axis of evil” (with Iraq and North Korea) and viewed it as the next target after Iraq. The invasion of Iraq, which Iran opposed, and the toppling of the government, removed its foremost regional enemy while tying down its Western nemesis in an unwinnable war. At the same time it had the effect sharpening the antagonism with the US.

Today, Iran is not in an accommodating mood. Its oil wealth and size (three times the land mass and population of Iraq), together with the Bush administration’s blundering in the region have empowered a new regional hegemon. The disaster in Iraq and Washington’s failure to seize opportunities to engage Iran created a vacuum for Iran to expand its role in the region. Today, this includes significant leverage with Hamas in the Palestinian territories and Hezbollah, which Iran arms, in Lebanon. Hezbollah’s strong showing against the vaunted Israeli military in Lebanon last summer only enhanced the prestige of Iran in the Islamic world. The increasing influence of Iran with Shia factions in southern Iraq, which it mentors and trains, and with the sectarian, Shia-dominated government in Baghdad, whose militias it is helping to arm, evokes the eventual possibility of powerful, confederated, and Shiite-dominated petro-state. Finally, as the Iranian and Afghan governments share an interest in defeating the Taliban, Teheran has been increasing its clout with Kabul where the rift between Afghanistan and Pakistan over the Afghan insurgency has created a tempting opening for Iran. Recent overtures include Iranian aid proposals for energy and economic infrastructure projects.

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The government of President Mahmood Ahmadinejad now feels confident enough to threaten Israel by calling for it to be "wiped off the map" and to resume nuclear research. In part Iran's nuclear program, like its meddling in Iraq is derived from the circumstance of a hostile, aggressive and diplomatically rigid superpower on its borders and that of Iraq, a country that was easily occupied precisely because it did NOT have weapons of mass destruction. In restarting its uranium enrichment activities, Iran has contemptuously rejected both the hard-line US approach and the Europeans' policy of offering economic incentives in return for an Iranian commitment to end their nuclear weapons programs. Iran has all but ignored the UN demand that in accordance with its obligations under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, it suspends all uranium enrichment-related and reprocessing activities and submits to international verification.

Teheran's intransigence seemed vindicated by the mild sanctions passed by the UN Security Council on December 23, 2006 which related only to prohibiting the import or export of nuclear materiel and equipment and freezing the financial assets of those supporting Iran's sensitive nuclear activities or nuclear weapons delivery systems. Abbas Milani, director of Iranian studies at Stanford University summed up Washington's position: "I believe the West has played this game too late and played into Iranian hands," said "At this stage, they are convinced that the more hardball they play, the more the West will collapse."

Most observers believe that Iran is still five to ten years away from developing a nuclear weapon. This does not, however, immunize them from an attack on their nuclear facilities. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has called the possibility of an Iranian nuclear bomb an "existential threat" to Israel and Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom said, "Israel cannot live in a situation in which Iran has the atomic bomb." In December 2005, German newspapers reported that both the US and Israel have formulated plans for a military strike against Iran and investigative reporter Seymour Hersh wrote in *The New Yorker* later year of the Pentagon's and Israel's plans for multiple strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities. Telaviv has the capacity to launch attacks against Iranian sites with fighter jets, in a reprise of the Israeli 1981 bombing of Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor, or with submarine-based cruise missiles.

*The Sunday Times* of London reported on Jan. 7, 2007 that plans for attack include tactical nuclear weapons. The paper indicated that two Israeli air squadrons are training for the mission and "if things go according to plan, a pilot will first launch a conventional laser-guided bomb to blow a shaft down through the layers of hardened concrete [at Natanz]. Other pilots will then be ready to drop low-yield one kiloton nuclear weapons into the hole." It is likely that Israel may be leaking details of its plans as a way to intimidate Iran into accepting international controls on its nuclear program. But the militarization of both countries' foreign policies in the past five years should at least give pause to skeptics of a wider Middle Eastern war and those hopeful of a diplomatic solution.

On the other hand, a US-backed attack on Iran seems unlikely given the situation in Iraq and domestic political considerations in the US. A direct or covert attack would likely provoke retaliation among Iraq's Shiites. Moreover, Iran's nuclear installations are scattered across the country and not completely known to US intelligence. Teheran's first response would likely be against Israel against which it can retaliate from missiles it has cached in Lebanon. And even if successful, the US, already with its hands full in Iraq, can hardly afford to

confront a military response by Iran, a violent reaction of Iran's Shiite allies in Iraq and the destabilization of regional allies like Pakistan's Pervez Musharaff.

For some U.S. foreign policy experts, this potential for disaster from a U.S.-backed Israeli air strike on Iran is so great that they ultimately don't believe President Bush and Prime Minister Olmert would dare implement such the plan.

Moreover, there is no guarantee that such an attack would effect a regime change. In fact, with the rise in Iranian nationalism over the past decade the consequence would probably be counterproductive, rallying the populace to the government and a defense of the country, and solidifying their support for acquiring nuclear weapons. While clearly a serious hypothetical, the tough talk and dark hints are probably designed more to cause Teheran to think twice about pursuing its aggressive course. Hence, there is an emerging sentiment that the best course would be one designed to delay Iran's nuclear bomb-making ability, and use the time to try to encourage political change or at least political moderation within Iran.

Iran sees itself as a great power, and has historic reasons for believing so. Today, it is pursuing a nuclear capability that would ratify its role as a global player. President Ahmadinejad firmly believes that Iran can play this expanded role, is entitled to it, and expects to be treated as a peer by the United States. Teheran wants Washington to recognize this, even though there are no signs that the Bush administration is willing to talk directly with the Iranians—even about their interests in Iraq. Yet, should President Bush's last-ditch gambit to reverse the disintegration of Iraq by adding more troops fail, as many predict, Iran will be its chief beneficiary and increase its stake in that country's somber future.

Iran is a serious and growing challenge to US diplomacy and the issue may end up defining the Bush presidency as much as Iraq. At this juncture there are simply no appealing options available to the Bush administration for curtailing Iran's nuclear and geopolitical ambitions and much risk in taking ill-considered or precipitate action.

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