



Is It Nuts to Let Iran Go Nuclear?

Tehran, already furious at the latest attempt by the United States and her allies to impose sanctions on Iranian oil exports, immediately accused the CIA and Israel of being behind the killing. Against a backdrop of economic sanctions and Iranian threats to close the Strait of Hormuz, Iranian-U.S. relations have probably reached a low not seen since the 1979-1981 hostage crisis. Suddenly a war between Iran and the West, long threatened but not seriously contemplated, is looking more and more likely.



Low-level conflict with the Iranians is certainly nothing new. During the 1980s, while Iran was locked in a protracted struggle with Saddam Hussein's Iraq, the Reagan administration provided military escorts for oil tankers to protect them from the Iranian navy. In a number of skirmishes, Iranian boats were sunk and oil rigs destroyed by the American military. In one tragic accident, the American guided missile cruiser *USS Vincennes* shot down Iran Air flight 655 on July 3, 1988, killing all 290 civilians aboard.

More recently, Iran has been plagued by assassinations and other suspect incidents that have taken the lives of a number of prominent scientists. Two years to the day before Roshan's death, Masoud Ali Mohammadi, an Iranian nuclear scientist, was killed outside his home by a remotely controlled bomb hidden on a parked motorcycle. Four months later another nuclear scientist, Majid Shahriari, was killed by an attacker on a motorcycle using a magnetic bomb. Another prominent Iranian nuclear scientist, Feyredoan Abbasi-Davani, narrowly escaped the same fate in a separate attack that day. Still another, Darioush Rezaeinejad, was gunned down last July as he and his wife waited to pick up their child from kindergarten. In addition, two separate blasts last year inflicted heavy damage on two Iranian missile sites, one of them also killing the architect of Iran's missile program, Major General Hassan Moghaddam, along with 16 other men.

Less lethal but still damaging was the computer worm Stuxnet, which infected the Natanz facility in late 2010, forcing a temporary shutdown. The worm is widely regarded to be a deliberate cyber attack carried out by the United States and/or Israel.

And the more than 30-year war of words between the United States and Iran continues apace, with U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta warning on January 8 that any attempt by Iran to close the Strait of Hormuz — through which roughly 20 percent of the world's oil supply passes — would be tantamount to



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crossing a “red line.” Another “red line” that Iran would not be permitted to cross, Panetta added, was developing nuclear weapons. American policy toward Iran — with which we have had no diplomatic relations since 1979 — has become a prominent issue during the 2012 presidential campaign, with most candidates (Ron Paul excepted) advocating some type of military action.

Rights, Wrongs, and Reasoning

But how much of a threat does Iran pose to the United States? Is there any justification for yet another “pre-emptive war” in the Middle East?

While the former chief of the United States Central Command in the Middle East, General John Abizaid, characterized Iran’s military as the strongest in the region, it is important to put his claim in context. In absolute numbers, the armed forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran, with roughly 545,000 active personnel, are indeed without peer in the region.

But size doesn’t always matter in modern military affairs. There was, for example, widespread trepidation in the United States, including Congress, in the run-up to the Gulf War, on account of Saddam Hussein’s massive “million-man army.” But Hussein’s legions, supposedly battle-hardened from years of war with Iran and rendered invincible by religious fanaticism, were easily vanquished by vastly superior American military machinery.

A more reliable measure of military strength is cost. The United States, the world’s dominant military power, also spends a lion’s share of total annual global military expenditures (roughly 43 percent as of 2010, or nearly three times as much as China, the U.K., and France *combined*).

In the Middle East, Iran is far behind many of her neighbors in military spending. In 2010, Iran spent just over \$7 billion on her military — half what the United Arab Emirates spent that year, and only one-sixth what Saudi Arabia spent. Israel spent twice as much as Iran — 6.3 percent of Israel’s GDP, as contrasted with only 1.8 percent of Iran’s (and 4.7 percent for the United States). Globally, Iran’s military expenditures rank it about 25th — hardly a first-rank military power.

In recent years, Iran has made significant strides in domestic arms manufacturing. Her air force, once dependent on aging U.S. planes acquired before the Iranian Revolution, is now bolstered by indigenous products like the Saegheh fighter jet. Iran manufactures tanks (the Zulfiqar, modeled after the American-made M-60), miniature submarines (the Ghadir and the Nahang), and even a full-sized submarine (the Qaaem class, not yet in service). Iran also possesses three Kilo-class Russian submarines that patrol the Persian Gulf (and would, presumably, be instrumental in any attempt to blockade the Strait of Hormuz).

Iran has garnered much press recently for the progress of her domestic missile program. No longer reliant on the import of obsolete ballistic missiles like the Soviet Scuds used in the war with Iraq, Iran now manufactures and regularly tests a variety of modern short- and medium-range missiles, including the Shahab-3 with a range of 800-1,200 miles. Iran — like Saddam Hussein’s Iraq of yesteryear — certainly has the capability of striking enemies like Israel and Saudi Arabia with missiles.

The battlefield utility of ballistic missiles, however, is limited at best, as both the Gulf War and the war between Iran and Iraq amply demonstrated. Saddam Hussein rained Scud missiles on Israel and on coalition forces during the Gulf War, but inflicted very few casualties, except for one missile that struck a tent filled with U.S. military personnel — and that one, aimed at a different target, had been shot down. During the Iran-Iraq War, each side lobbed ballistic missiles at the other’s cities, inflicting civilian casualties and sowing terror, but having little effect on combatants. And even were such



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missiles a force to be reckoned with locally, Iran is very far away from having any ability to strike the United States or her allies in Western Europe with missiles.

In fact, Iran's military development would probably attract no more notice than Saudi Arabia's were it not for her alleged pursuit of nuclear weapons. Since the completion of Iran's nuclear enrichment facility at Natanz, the Islamic Republic has begun enriching uranium, although not to anywhere near the 90-percent levels required for weapons-grade uranium. But with centrifuge cascades whirring nonstop day and night, it is at least theoretically possible for Iran to eventually stockpile enough enriched uranium to allow them to begin building nuclear weapons. Iran, the most dire warnings predict, could conceivably be only months away from having "the Bomb." There is no way to ensure, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported last November, that Iran will not in fact go nuclear, since the Iranians are believed to be working on nuclear trigger technology (another tricky part of building nuclear weapons that actually work) and on modifying their missiles to accommodate nuclear warheads. One think tank, the Institute for Science and International Security, now estimates that Iran could build a nuclear weapon within six months of deciding to do so.

But are such claims credible? The evidence from other countries' efforts to develop nuclear weapons is anything but clear. Developing nuclear weapons requires mastery of a number of intricate technologies, among them engineering centrifuge cascades that can run for months and even years without stopping, the manufacture of intricate, high-speed switches known as krytrons that — properly placed and synchronized — can create the implosion that will condense fissible nuclear material to a critical mass, and the miniaturization of warheads so that they can be delivered by plane or (preferably) by missile. Such technology is enormously expensive and difficult to develop, as the experiences of China, India, Pakistan, and North Korea all attest. China detonated its first nuclear device in 1964 and its first hydrogen bomb test three years later. Yet as of the mid-1990s, China was not believed to have the capacity to deliver nukes, either by missile or long-range bomber, to any U.S. targets. All of that changed, of course, during the Clinton administration, when American missile technology found its way into Chinese hands (thanks, it was alleged at the time, to crooked campaign deals brokered by Bill Clinton in exchange for reelection campaign monies from China). Yet even today, with China openly pursuing offensive military technology such as aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines, China still lags far, far behind the United States in military development.

India tested its first nuclear device in 1974, and conducted no further tests until May of 1998, when it claimed to have successfully detonated five nuclear weapons, including both fission and thermonuclear devices. In other words, it took India nearly a quarter-century to go from its first nuclear test to the actual production of nuclear weapons — and this in a country rich in scientific and mathematical talent.

Following India's 1974 test, Pakistan's Premier famously announced that the people of Pakistan might have to "eat grass," but Pakistan would acquire nuclear weapons of their own. True to their word, the impoverished Pakistanis conducted nuclear tests of their own in 1998 — the fruits of 26 years of work and untold economic hardship.

The decades-old North Korean nuclear program finally bore fruit in October 2006 with the detonation of a small, probably flawed nuclear device that appeared to be significantly weaker than the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. A second, marginally stronger device — but still far from the "city-busting" strength of thermonuclear weapons wielded by major nuclear powers — was conducted by the North Koreans in May 2009. Despite belligerent claims by the North Koreans to have a functional nuclear arsenal, it is far from clear whether they actually have working nuclear weapons.



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For as the experience of every nuclear power from the United States onward shows, there is a very big difference between having a nuclear “device” and having nuclear weapons. The United States in the early 1940s enjoyed an extraordinary talent base — greatly enhanced by brilliant European immigrants who had fled Nazism and Fascism, such as Hans Bethe, Wolfgang Pauli, Niels Bohr, and Enrico Fermi — and very deep financial resources on which to draw. France and Great Britain, both of whom developed nuclear weapons after the war, reaped the benefit of prior U.S. experience, while the Soviet Union was able to steal nuclear technology from the West. It is unclear the extent to which Israel has been able to rely on Western technology in developing her own nuclear forces, but even today, the size and effectiveness of Israel’s nuclear deterrent are unclear, since Israel has neither declared itself a nuclear weapons state nor conducted a single atomic test.

Of today’s nuclear states, only Russia, China, France, and Britain appear to have the capability to deliver a nuclear weapon to a U.S. target, and only the former two can be realistically considered potential belligerents.

All of which helps to bring the nuclear debate on Iran into perspective. Even if Iran’s mullahs managed to touch off a tiny nuclear device (and it would be tiny, given how long it takes to produce enough weapons-grade material for even one small warhead) in a year or so, they would still be many years away from creating a deliverable nuclear weapon that could threaten Saudi Arabia or Israel, and probably decades away from creating an ICBM or submarine-launched missile that could menace the American mainland. And by that time, military technology in the United States would be far advanced over what it is now. In sum, like Iran’s underfunded, backward conventional forces, any Iranian nuclear device would have little near-term military value except (as with North Korea) as a deterrent.

Seeing a Substantial Threat

And it is this, rather than some bona fide threat to the West, that has American power elites in a lather of apprehension. *Foreign Affairs*, the flagship journal for American foreign policy, made its recommendations very clear in the January/February issue of this year. Matthew Kroenig, an assistant professor of government at Georgetown University and a Stanton Nuclear Security Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations (the elite New York-based group that publishes *Foreign Affairs*), in an article entitled “Time to Attack Iran,” argues unapologetically that the time has come for the United States to launch a war against Iran, in order to prevent Tehran from acquiring nukes:

With the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq winding down and the United States facing economic hardship at home, Americans have little appetite for further strife. Yet Iran’s rapid nuclear development will ultimately force the United States to choose between a conventional conflict and a possible nuclear war. Faced with that decision, the United States should conduct a surgical strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities, absorb an inevitable round of retaliation, and then seek to quickly de-escalate the crisis. Addressing the threat now will spare the United States from confronting a far more dangerous situation in the future.

Kroenig, speaking for a vocal clique of self-anointed foreign policy elites, believes that the long-term costs of containing an eventual nuclear Iran far outweigh the risks and costs of near-term military action:

A nuclear-armed Iran would immediately limit U.S. freedom of action in the Middle East. With atomic power behind it, Iran could threaten any U.S. political or military initiative in the Middle East with nuclear war, forcing Washington to think twice before acting in the region. Iran’s



regional rivals, such as Saudi Arabia, would likely decide to acquire their own nuclear arsenals, sparking an arms race. To constrain its geopolitical rivals, Iran could choose to spur proliferation by transferring nuclear technology to its allies — other countries and terrorist groups alike. Having the bomb would give Iran greater cover for conventional aggression and coercive diplomacy, and the battles between its terrorist proxies and Israel, for example, could escalate... These security threats would require Washington to contain Tehran. Yet deterrence would come at a heavy price. To keep the Iranian threat at bay, the United States would need to deploy naval and ground units and potentially nuclear weapons across the Middle East, keeping a large force in the area for decades to come. Alongside those troops, the United States would have to permanently deploy significant intelligence assets to monitor any attempts by Iran to transfer its nuclear technology. And it would also need to devote perhaps billions of dollars to improving its allies' capability to defend themselves. This might include helping Israel construct submarine-launched ballistic missiles and hardened ballistic missile silos to ensure that it can maintain a secure second-strike capability. Most of all, to make containment credible, the United States would need to extend its nuclear umbrella to its partners in the region, pledging to defend them with military force should Iran launch an attack.

We've heard all these arguments before (*mutatis mutandis*) regarding Iraq's Saddam Hussein and his non-existent stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction. Kroenig's premise — that the United States ought to enjoy essentially unlimited "freedom of action" in the Middle East — is pure imperial hubris. Since the Persian Gulf War, we have chosen to inject ourselves militarily into the unending broils of the Middle East, at extraordinary cost in both lives and treasure. In occupying Iraq and overthrowing its dictator, former U.S. ally Saddam Hussein, we managed to create a power vacuum into which Iran has obligingly stepped. The entire region is now convulsed by revolution whose outcome, so far, is decidedly mixed, despite energetic involvement by the United States and other Western powers. Egypt has managed to replace one military dictatorship with another, Yemen has done nothing to dislodge its odious ruler, and Syria continues to hemorrhage under the iron fist of the monstrous Bashar el-Assad, a mild mannered former ophthalmologist intending to maintain his family's brutal rule at any cost. Libya is well rid of Moammar Gadhafi, but it remains to be seen whether that country can avoid sliding into civil war along tribal lines. Bahrain's peaceful protesters were brutally crushed with the help of Saudi troops.

And oil is more expensive than ever, despite our "freedom of action" in the Middle East. The latest threat to global oil supplies comes from unrest not in the sands of Libya or Iraq, but from Nigeria, a country we have not yet garrisoned.

All of this has come about in the first place because of the insistence of U.S. elites on trying to micromanage a part of the world that we understand very little, and in whose millennia-old quarrels we have no stake. Our "interests" in the Middle East supposedly boil down to two things: oil and Israel.

The first is hard to accept at face value, given that U.S. government policy elites have done everything they can to prevent the development of domestic petroleum reserves. Most of Alaska's North Slope and the east and west coasts of the United States are off-limits to oil drilling (this despite the fact that the Canadians have discovered and are exploiting substantial oil reserves off their Atlantic coast). The Athabasca tar sands of northern Alberta — the world's second largest oil reserves — were on the verge of supplying the United States with a lion's share of needed crude oil, but on January 18 President Obama rejected a permit to expand the proposed Keystone XL pipeline, which would have conveyed



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vast amounts of oil from Alberta down to Texas refineries. America's political leadership apparently prefers the added costs (political and military as well as economic) of continuing to ship in our oil from hostile countries on the other side of the world.

The other justification for American meddling in the Middle East (and withal for starting a war with Iran) is the protection of our ally, Israel. Yet no military treaty of any kind exists between the United States and Israel — unlike U.S. allies such as Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Australia, and the members of NATO, all of whom we are treaty-bound to defend in the event they are attacked.

In more than 40 years of independence, Israel has more than demonstrated her ability to take care of herself. In 1981, the Israeli Air Force destroyed an Iraqi nuclear reactor under construction at Osirak, and did the same with a clandestine Syrian nuclear facility in 2007. In three major wars fought against large enemy coalitions (in 1948, 1967, and 1973), Israel has emerged the victor. In any engagement with Iran, limited or unlimited, there can be little doubt what the outcome would be.

Yet American foreign policy agenda-setters appear to believe that Israel is unable to deal with the Iranian threat. According to Kroenig, a U.S. attack on Iran would pre-empt an Israeli attack, which, "given Israel's limited capability to mitigate a potential battle and inflict lasting damage, would likely result in far more devastating consequences and carry a far lower probability of success than a U.S. attack." But Israel managed to blunt Saddam Hussein's nuclear capability with a single air strike, and has repeatedly fended off attacks by numerically superior forces on their own borders — something the U.S. military has not had to face in two centuries.

To the United States, however, Kroenig ascribes a near-divine ability to attack Iran, destroy or seriously degrade its nuclear capabilities, and manage the outcome to avoid another years-long quagmire:

To make sure it doesn't and to reassure the Iranian regime, the United States could first make clear that it is interested only in destroying Iran's nuclear program, not in overthrowing the government. It could then identify certain forms of retaliation to which it would respond with devastating military action, such as attempting to close the Strait of Hormuz, conducting massive and sustained attacks on Gulf states and U.S. troops or ships, or launching terrorist attacks in the United States itself. Washington would then need to clearly articulate these "redlines" to Tehran during and after the attack to ensure that the message was not lost in battle. And it would need to accept the fact that it would have to absorb Iranian responses that fell short of these redlines without escalating the conflict....

Even if Tehran did cross Washington's redlines, the United States could still manage the confrontation. At the outset of any such violation, it could target the Iranian weapons that it finds most threatening to prevent Tehran from deploying them. To de-escalate the situation quickly and prevent a wider regional war, the United States could also secure the agreement of its allies to avoid responding to an Iranian attack. This would keep other armies, particularly the Israel Defense Forces, out of the fray....

Finally, the U.S. government could blunt the economic consequences of a strike. For example, it could offset any disruption of oil supplies by opening its Strategic Petroleum Reserve and quietly encouraging some Gulf states to increase their production in the run-up to the attack. Given that many oil-producing nations in the region, especially Saudi Arabia, have urged the United States to attack Iran, they would likely cooperate.

All of this is a warmed-over think tank version of former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld assistant Ken Adelman's notorious *Washington Post* prediction of a "cakewalk" in Iraq back in 2003. As the



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United States seemingly has to learn over and over again, once the dogs of war are unleashed, no one can predict the outcome.

But what about that ultimate bugbear, nuclear terrorism? Two regimes that actively sponsor terrorism, Pakistan and North Korea, already possess nuclear capability. North Korean agents have blown passenger liners out of the sky, set off bombs at Seoul's Kimpo International Airport, and generally sown terrorist mayhem for decades. Pakistan-based terrorists have carried out atrocity after atrocity against Indian civilians, including a three-day spree of terror in November 2008 in Mumbai by Pakistani gunmen that left hundreds of civilians dead and wounded. Yet neither of these regimes has resorted to nuclear terrorism.

Despite the Soviet Union's long sponsorship of international terrorism, not once did it give a single terrorist cell or Marxist guerrilla army a single nuke. Nuclear weapons, after all, are extremely difficult and expensive to build, but easy to trace. Tom Clancy-esque imaginings aside, the likelihood of an act of nuclear terrorism against the United States (or, for that matter, against India or South Korea) is slight, given the likelihood of immediate annihilation of any regime sponsoring an act of nuclear terrorism.

A war against Iran would likely cost many thousands of lives (since, in the end, as with Iraq, we would end up having to occupy the country to fully impose our will) and trillions of dollars we cannot afford. While Iran arguably poses a threat to Israel, that country is more than capable of taking care of itself.

Nothing about the history of nuclear weapons suggests any likelihood of a nuclear Iran using such weapons for anything but a deterrent. Nothing about the history of U.S. involvement in the Middle East suggests that another pre-emptive war in that region would be anything other than an unmitigated catastrophe. No one forces the United States to spend blood and treasure garrisoning the Middle East; we would be under no obligation to "contain" a nuclear armed Iran other than that imposed by imperial hubris. With the end of the Iraq War and the drawdown in Afghanistan, it is well past time for America to mind her own business and allow the nations of the Middle East — including Iran — to mind theirs.

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