

UNDERSTANDING THE US-IRAN CRISIS

Phyllis Bennis - October 13, 2008

Is Iran a threat to the United States?

The Bush administration has claimed, almost since coming into office, that Iran is a "threat" to the US. Even US intelligence agencies agree that Iran doesn't possess nuclear weapons or a nuclear weapons program, and that it is very unclear whether Iran even wants to build such a weapon. Iran has never threatened the United States. (And unlike many countries in its neighborhood, Iran has not invaded another country in over a century.)

In 2007, according to the CIA, Iran spent about \$5.1 billion on its military — about 2.5 percent of its GDP. The US, on the other hand, spent \$626 billion on the military that same year, amounting to 4.5 percent of its GDP of \$13.7 trillion. More relevant, perhaps, the US spent almost half of the total of global arms spending — about 46 percent. So Iran does not represent a strategic military threat to the United States or to Americans.

[Iranian President Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad's political opposition to Israel has never been in doubt, but still his statements were distorted. Outrage erupted across the US and Europe in October 2005 following the claim that Ahmadinejad had threatened to "wipe Israel off the map"...But as it turned out, Ahmadinejad had not said those words at all. "Ahmadinejad did not say he was going to wipe Israel off the map because no such idiom exists," Juan Cole, a Middle East expert at the University of Michigan told the New York Times. "He did say he hoped its regime, i.e., a Jewish-Zionist state occupying Jerusalem, would collapse." Cole went on to note that since Iran has not "attacked another country aggressively for over a century, I smell the whiff of war propaganda."

[In April 2006] Bush repeated..."we've agreed on the goal, and that is the Iranians should not have a nuclear weapon, the capacity to make a nuclear weapon, or the knowledge as to how to make a nuclear weapon." The significance of that language lay in the uncontested reality that Iran already had, indeed has had for many years, "the knowledge as to how to make a nuclear weapon." Not only because much of that knowledge is available on the Internet, but because the basic technology needed to enrich uranium for nuclear power is the same as that required for nuclear weapons. Of course it is easier to carry out the 3-5 percent enrichment needed for nuclear power than the 90-plus percent enrichment necessary to produce weapons-grade uranium. But the technology is the same. Once you have the knowledge to build and run the centrifuges to enrich uranium, you just need time and money and practice to enrich enough for a bomb. You also do need missile technology, but like many countries around the world, Iran already had that, too. Bush's bar for bombing Iran could hardly get any lower.

Does Iran have nuclear weapons or a nuclear weapons program?

No. Iran does not and has never had a nuclear weapon — and no-one, not even the Bush administration, claims it has. Despite claims by the Bush administration and others, there is also no evidence Iran has a military program to build nuclear weapons. And even the Bush administration's own intelligence agencies acknowledged in the December 2007 National Intelligence Estimate that the weapons program they claim once existed had been ended by 2003.

What about Iran's support for terrorism?

Since the 1979 overthrow of the US-backed Shah of Iran, the accusation of Iran being a "state supporter of terrorism" has been a hallmark of US policy. The State Department's 2007 Country Reports on Terrorism ... states that "Iran remains a threat to regional stability and U.S. interests in the Middle East because of its continued support for violent groups, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, and its efforts to undercut the democratic process in Lebanon, where it seeks to build

Iran's and Hezbollah's influence to the detriment of other Lebanese communities." There is no evidence and little detail provided, beyond the broad claim that Iran is providing "extensive funding, training, and weapons" to those groups. The report does not acknowledge that both the most important "Palestinian group with leadership in Syria," Hamas, and Hezbollah in Lebanon are important political parties that have been democratically elected to majority and near-majority positions in their respective parliaments. Both, while certainly maintaining military wings, also provide important networks of social services, from clinics and hospitals to schools, daycare centers, food assistance and financial aid to the impoverished, disempowered, and (in the case of Hamas in Gaza) imprisoned populations of Lebanese and Palestinians. Some of the actions carried out by the military wings of Hamas and Hezbollah have in fact targeted civilians in violation of international law, and thus might qualify as "terrorist" actions. But the majority of their actions have been aimed at illegal Israeli military occupations: of south Lebanon in the case of Hezbollah, and of Gaza and the West Bank in the case of Hamas. The notion that Iran's support for these elected organizations, if it exists, somehow puts Iran at the top of the list of states supporting terrorism, let alone gives the US the right to attack, has no legitimacy.

The State Department report goes on to condemn Iran for remaining "unwilling to bring to justice senior al-Qaeda (AQ) members it has detained, and has refused to publicly identify those senior members in its custody. Iran has repeatedly resisted numerous calls to transfer custody of its AQ detainees to their countries of origin or third countries for interrogation or trial." Given more than six years of the Bush administration's own "unwillingness to bring to justice senior al-Qaeda members it detained in 2003" and even earlier in Guantánamo, and the US's "refusal to identify publicly these senior members in its custody" and its continued resistance to "numerous calls to transfer custody of its al-Qaeda detainees to their countries of origin or to third countries for interrogation and/or trial" the hypocrisy of claiming this as evidence of support for terrorism is astonishing.

What false claims has the Bush administration made about Iran?

On the nuclear weapons issue, it is false to claim that Iran is violating the Non-Proliferation Treaty by enriching uranium for its nuclear power plants. The NPT (Article IV) allows every country that signs on as a non-nuclear weapons state, including Iran, the inalienable right "to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination." Further, the treaty actually encourages its signatories to spread the development of nuclear power, and states explicitly that all its signatories "have the right to participate in the fullest possible exchange of equipment, materials and scientific and technological information for the peaceful uses of nuclear energy" (emphasis added). So much for Iran breaking the law through knowledge. The NPT's enforcement agency, the International Atomic Energy Agency, has consistently reported that it has no evidence of Iran diverting nuclear materials or programs to military purposes. While [the UN's nuclear watchdog agency] the IAEA has been concerned about insufficient transparency in some of Iran's reports, that does not constitute a violation of the NPT. (Iran has rejected the Security Council's demand that it halt all nuclear enrichment activities; those resolutions themselves stand in contradiction to the guaranteed right to produce nuclear power that is central to the Non-Proliferation Treaty.)

It is false to claim that Iran is responsible for the deaths of US troops in Iraq. There is no question that Iranians - businesspeople, diplomats, aid workers, others - are operating in Iraq; they share a long border and a longer history. But there has been no direct evidence - only assertions - presented to back up the claim that the Iranian government has provided Iraqi militias with "explosively formed penetrators" (EFPs) or any other weapons.

Another set of false claims concern President Ahmadinejad. Certainly much of his rhetoric, clearly designed to bolster his populist domestic base, has been inflammatory and offensive - particularly his questioning of the reality of the Nazi Holocaust. (He has also become well known for his remark at Columbia University denying that there are homosexuals in Iran - although this

appeared to be a one-off reference, not part of his ordinary discourse, it is still horrifyingly homophobic, as well as preposterous.) But instead of criticizing the real outrages, US political and media figures have made exaggerated and false claims to rebut and created straw men to knock down.

What could Iran do in response to a US military strike?

A wide range of possibilities would be open to Iran. While US officials might call a military attack "only a surgical strike," Iran would certainly call it an act of war - which would indeed be an accurate term. Iran could send troops across its borders to attack US troops in Iraq or shoot missiles into occupied Baghdad's US-controlled Green Zone. Iranian troops could invade and occupy southern Iraq. Iran could attack US troop concentrations in Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, or elsewhere in the region, or go after US ships in Bahrain, home of the Navy's Fifth Fleet. It could attack Israel. It could retaliate against US or allied oil tankers in nearby shipping lanes, and even sink a tanker. It could close the Strait of Hormuz, through which 45 percent of the world's oil passes. The impact on the world economic system would be swift and devastating.

In conventional terms, Iran's military is no match for the US. Iran has faced years of military sanctions, and its military strategy is focused primarily on training troops to defend the homeland against invasion and foreign military occupation.

Where does oil fit into the US policy towards Iran?

Oil has always been central to US relations with Iran, despite the US ban on purchasing Iranian oil since 1979. For a global power such as the US, the issue is not so much direct access to Iran's oil - the US doesn't need to import that much Iranian or indeed Middle Eastern oil in general for its own use. Far more important is maintaining control of Iran's and other countries' oil supplies: the ability to determine price and to guarantee access to oil to favored friends and deny it to competitors.

The crusade to gain control of strategic resources, especially oil, remains a hallmark of the so-called global war on terror, the Bush administration's banner covering its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, attacks on Somalia and expansion of military bases across the Middle East.

Do US sanctions against Iran work? What are the costs?

Sanctions and isolation of Iran were Washington's strategy throughout the 1990s. Although the US sanctions against Iran were not nearly as extreme as those the US imposed on Iraq in the name of the United Nations, the Iranian people still have paid a steep price. Much of Iran's infrastructure - particularly its oil infrastructure and civilian airlines - was created during the Shah's regime, so most spare parts required are of US make and thus unavailable under the sanctions. In June 2005, a report prepared for the International Civil Air Aviation Organization "warned that US sanctions against Iran were placing civilian lives in danger by denying Iranian aviation necessary spare parts and aircraft repair..." Six months later, a US-made military transport plane crashed, killing 108 people.

When imposed by the biggest economy in the world, "unilateral" sanctions invariably take a multilateral toll, since other countries and financial institutions are eager to stay on Washington's good side. Even so-called smart sanctions, designed only to target those tied directly to Iran's nuclear industry, end up affecting large numbers of people. Designating Iran's entire Revolutionary Guard Corps as a "terrorist entity," as the Bush administration did in late 2007, imposes sanctions on tens or perhaps hundreds of thousands of Iranians whose family members have ties to that huge bureaucracy within Iran's official military.

Oil sanctions diminish Iran's ability to rebuild and improve its seriously eroded oil-refining capacity, thus reducing the amount of gasoline and other oil-based products available for domestic use. And, ironically, the sanctions themselves cause more Iranians to believe that their country needs nuclear power, despite its massive oil reserves, because of the sanctions-drive shortages of refined oil-based fuels.

What could - and should - US relations with Iran look like?

Any serious effort to minimize tensions and normalize relations between the United States and Iran must recognize that negotiations and diplomacy, not sanctions, military threats, or military attacks, must be the basis of the US posture toward Iran. The United States should also recognize that the United Nations, through the International Atomic Energy Agency (not the Security Council), should be the central actor in orchestrating international negotiations with Iran. The United States should agree to be bound by international legal prohibitions as well as the global consensus against any military strike against Iran.

Any negotiations between the United States and Iran must recognize what Iran actually wants: a security guarantee (guaranteeing no invasion, no attack on nuclear facilities, and no efforts at "regime change"), recognition of Iran's role as an indigenous regional power, and reaffirmation of Iran's rights under the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Once those rights are internationally affirmed, it will be up to Iran itself to determine whether and with whom they will negotiate on how those rights are to be implemented.

The consequences of the United States having severed all diplomatic ties with Iran since 1979 should be recognized and Washington should move urgently to re-establish full diplomatic relations with Tehran.

What can we, the people, do to prevent a US war on Iran?

We must increase the political cost for any politician or policy-maker even considering or threatening the use of a military strike against Iran.

Active mobilization against an attack on Iran is crucial. Certainly such mobilization will be challenging, but we must confront and overcome the skepticism about the value of antiwar protest that has been created by years of Washington's rejection of the demands of the even larger and longer-standing movement opposing the Iraq war.

The strong majority agreement across the United States, and the near unanimity in the rest of the world, that the Iraq war has been a disaster for Iraq, for the US, for the region and for the world, means that there is even less support for launching another, equally or even more disastrous war in Iran. There is still time. We have a powerful movement experienced in mobilizing and we have seven years of success in changing public opinion. We can do it again. We must.

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