

IRAN: CONSEQUENCES OF A WAR

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Executive Summary

An air attack on Iran by Israeli or US forces would be aimed at setting back Iran's nuclear programme by at least five years. A ground offensive by the United States to terminate the regime is not feasible given other commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan, and would not be attempted. An air attack would involve the systematic destruction of research, development, support and training centres for nuclear and missile programmes and the killing of as many technically competent people as possible. A US attack, which would be larger than anything Israel could mount, would also involve comprehensive destruction of Iranian air defence capabilities and attacks designed to pre-empt Iranian retaliation. This would require destruction of Iranian Revolutionary Guard facilities close to Iraq and of regular or irregular naval forces that could disrupt Gulf oil transit routes.

Although US or Israeli attacks would severely damage Iranian nuclear and missile programmes, Iran would have many methods of responding in the months and years that followed. These would include disruption of Gulf oil production and exports, in spite of US attempts at pre-emption, systematic support for insurgents in Iraq, and encouragement to associates in Southern Lebanon to stage attacks on Israel. There would be considerable national unity in Iran in the face of military action by the United States or Israel, including a revitalised Revolutionary Guard.

One key response from Iran would be a determination to reconstruct a nuclear programme and develop it rapidly into a nuclear weapons capability, with this accompanied by withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty. This would require further attacks. A military operation against Iran would not, therefore, be a short-term matter but would set in motion a complex and long-lasting confrontation. It follows that military action should be firmly ruled out and alternative strategies developed.

Introduction

In November 2002, four months before the Iraq War started, Oxford Research Group published a report, *Iraq: Consequences of a War*,¹ that examined the possible outcomes of military action to terminate the Saddam Hussein regime. Two of its conclusions were that regime termination was certainly feasible but that the occupation of Iraq by coalition troops would increase support for radical elements in the region and also incite an insurgency.

The United States has sufficient forces to ensure regime destruction but the regime's replacement by occupying forces or by a client regime, even if the war is not greatly destructive, should be expected to increase regional opposition to the US presence. It is likely, in particular, to increase support for organisations such as al-Qaida and to prove counter-productive to peace and security in the region.

and:

It is also possible that a paramilitary movement could develop from within Iraq. While there is abundant evidence of the unpopularity of the Saddam Hussein regime, it is certainly possible that internal opposition to US occupation and the subsequent installing of a client regime would result in an evolving insurgency. Internal opposition to the current regime does not equate with the future acceptance of foreign occupation.

At the time of writing that report, war with Iraq seemed increasingly likely. By contrast, at the present time war with Iran over the latter's presumed nuclear weapons ambitions may be rather less likely, but this may change. A diplomatic solution to the profound differences between Washington and Tehran is still possible, but is becoming progressively less likely. As major difficulties persist and possibly intensify, the possibility of military action by the United States or Israel increases. Even at this stage, therefore, it is appropriate to analyse what kind of military action might take place and what might be its outcome and aftermath. If there are valid arguments that military action might have severe consequences, perhaps even worse than the problems now being experienced in Iraq, then such a conclusion would imply that much greater emphasis on alternative solutions is both essential and urgent.

This paper takes as an assumption that any military action by the United States or Israel would have as its function the inflicting of severe damage on Iran's nuclear installations and medium range missile programmes, while, in the case of the United States, endeavouring to pre-empt any damaging Iranian response. It also does not investigate the possibility that the United States would take the kind of military action necessary to terminate the current regime in Tehran. That would require major deployments of at least 100,000 ground troops, either by the United States on its own or in coalition with other states. At the present time, the United States does not have such spare capacity, mainly because of the need to maintain up to 150,000 troops in Iraq, up to 30,000 in West Gulf states and around 18,000 in Afghanistan. There is no other state that has both the capacity to provide such numbers of troops and is remotely supportive of such a level of US military action. Regime termination as a military aim is not therefore examined in this report.

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The US Context

Although major difficulties have arisen with US military operations in Iraq, there is still a dominant feeling in neo-conservative circles in Washington that Iran is, and always has been, a much greater threat to US regional and global interests than Iraq was. A common view before the start of the Iraq War in March 2003 was that “if we get Iraq right, we won’t have to worry about Iran”. In other words, if military force proved easily able to terminate the Saddam Hussein regime and replace it with a stable client government supported by permanent US bases, then Iran would bow to US policy in the region, causing little trouble. The fact that Iraq was not “got right” and that there is considerable potential for Iranian influence in Iraq is one consequence of the decision to terminate the Saddam Hussein regime.

The perception of Iran as the major threat to US interests in the Middle East stems, in part, from the long-term consequences of seeing the apparently secure, authoritarian and pro-American regime of the Shah so easily deposed in a matter of weeks in 1979. The Shah’s Iran had been seen as the lynch-pin of US security interests in the Gulf – a bulwark against Soviet interference. The sudden regime collapse, followed by the traumatic impotence of the United States at the time of the hostage crisis and the subsequent and bitter antagonism to the US demonstrated by the Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini, meant that Iran was a direct and persistent obstacle to US regional interests.

These were, and are, centred on the Gulf region’s immense oil reserves and the trend of the United States becoming increasingly dependent on imported oil. If the oil factor was important at the start of the 1990s, it is far more so 15 years later, with US oil import dependency increasing year by year, with China in a similar position, and with Gulf fossil fuel resources likely to make the region of profound geopolitical significance over the next thirty years or more.

In such circumstances it is fundamentally unacceptable to the United States for a “rogue” state such as Iran to be allowed to get even remotely near having its own nuclear capability. Such a “deterrent” would greatly limit US options in the region, and would provide a threat to its closest ally – Israel. While Washington may not be implacably opposed to diplomatic options to ensure that Iran does not go down the path of a major nuclear infrastructure, if those fail, then it has to be recognised that destruction of the suspected nuclear weapons infrastructure and associated facilities is likely to be undertaken at some stage.

The Israel Factor

Israel has maintained a nuclear capability since the late 1960s and is believed to have around 200 nuclear warheads, principally for delivery by aircraft or surface-to-surface missiles. It may also be developing warheads for submarine-launched cruise missiles. Even so, Israel regards it as essential to its security that it is the only state in the region with a nuclear capability. Since the Iranian Revolution at the end of the 1970s, successive Israeli governments have regarded Iran as the greatest long-term regional threat.

Units of the Israeli Air Force destroyed the Iraqi experimental Osiraq reactor near Baghdad in 1981, limiting Iraq’s potential to take the plutonium route to nuclear weapons. Baghdad was within range of Israeli aircraft whereas the Iranian facilities were, until recently, at the limit of Israeli Air Force capability. That has now changed with the importing of long-range versions of the US F-15 and F-16 strike aircraft – the F-15I and the F-16I. 25 of the F-15I are currently in service and Israel is building up a force of 102 F-16I aircraft, deliveries having started in 2003.² The Israeli Air Force has also acquired 500 earth penetrating bombs from the United States for use against underground facilities.

Israeli military units have also been involved in a range of operations in Iraq, especially in the Kurdish north-east of the country where, among other activities, they have been training commando units. More generally, the normally close relationship between the US military and the Israeli Defence Force

(IDF) has been greatly strengthened in the past two years as a result of US experiences in Iraq. There has been a substantial exchange of experience, especially between the IDF and the US Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC).³ Israeli arms companies have also provided the US armed forces with a wide range of specialist counter-insurgency weaponry and equipment, much of it developed as a result of Israeli experience in controlling the occupied Palestinian territories. Although not commonly covered in the western media, this relationship is well known across the Middle East and would contribute to an assumption that any Israeli attack on Iran would be undertaken with the knowledge, approval and assistance of the United States. It is certainly the case that an Israeli air attack on Iran would involve flights through air space currently dominated by the United States.

For the purposes of this paper, it is assumed that if the IDF was to engage in actions to seriously damage Iran's nuclear weapons developments, it would therefore do so with the tacit support of the United States, would have access to facilities in North-East Iraq if needed, would be aiming simply to set back any nuclear programme for five years or more, and would also target Iranian missile developments. It would not extend beyond these aims whereas US action would need to do so, for reasons discussed later.

The close links between Israel and the United States are far more widely recognised across the Middle East than in the US or Europe. As a result, any Israeli military action against Iran would be seen as essentially a joint operation, with Israel acting as a surrogate and doing so with direct US support.

The Iranian Context

The Iranian context comprises a self-perception of Iran as one of the world's historic powers and a belief that a high-technology future is an essential part of its place in the world, coupled with a strong feeling of current vulnerability. As with China, Iran looks back to several thousand years of notable history and believes that greatness is once more feasible given the combination of massive fossil fuel resources, a young population, a large and well-populated country and a geographical position that puts it at the heart of an immensely significant region.

“It is clear that a range of opinion formers from across the political and religious spectrums believe that Iran has every right to develop a nuclear fuel cycle.”

Although the Iranian socio-political environment is complex and markedly changeable, there is a general belief in the value of advanced technology, and a perception of nuclear power as a symbol of modernity. When faced with the argument that a country so well endowed with oil and gas does not need nuclear power, the immediate reply is to point to a fifth of electricity already generated by hydro-electric power, and the argument that oil and gas are too valuable to be used for electricity generation, especially given Iran's indigenous reserves of uranium ores. In terms of public attitudes, it is clear that a range of opinion formers from across the political and religious spectrums believe that Iran has every right to develop a nuclear fuel cycle. It is also the widespread view that Iran has the right to develop nuclear weapons should the country's security require it.

Although Iran was in breach of some aspects of the Non-Proliferation Treaty in the 1990s, it is, at the time of writing, abiding by the terms of the treaty. It is therefore allowed to develop a civil nuclear power programme, including uranium enrichment activities, and could remain within the terms of the treaty until such time as a decision was taken to develop nuclear weapons in which case, as with North Korea, it could withdraw. Given the US view of Iran as part of the “axis of evil”, this is not acceptable to the current administration in Washington. It is just possible that Washington might entertain the continued development of a civil nuclear power programme that did not involve domestic uranium enrichment, but even this is not certain.

On the question of Iranian perceptions of security, while there is considerable self-belief in the capabilities of Iran, there is also a certain sense of insecurity. In the past four years, Iran has seen the

regimes to the east and west of it terminated by large-scale military action by a superpower that has implied that regime termination in Iran is a desirable option.

Immediately to the west of Iran, the United States has close to 150,000 troops in Iraq and is building permanent military bases there. It has extensive deployments in Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar and has its Fifth Fleet that controls the waters of the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea and is overwhelmingly powerful in contrast with the small Iranian Navy. To the east, Iran sees the United States firmly ensconced in Afghanistan, with two permanent bases now established at Bagram near Kabul and at Kandahar (see Appendix 1). Moreover, a large new military base is being developed near the western Afghan city of Herat, close to Iran's eastern border with that country. Finally, the United States has developed close military links and, in some cases, basing facilities in a number of countries to the north and east of Iran, especially those close to the Caspian Basin oil fields or pipelines that bring such oil through to Black Sea or Mediterranean ports.

Current Circumstances in Iran

These factors all make it reasonable to assume that there is a strong motivation for Iran either to develop nuclear weapons or to have the ability to do so at short notice should it be decided that national security makes such a decision essential. However, motivation does not equate with an inevitability of such a decision. Furthermore, this context is complicated by the current political environment. The relatively reformist administration of President Khatami failed to instigate sufficient reforms to satisfy a young, ambitious and often frustrated population, partly because the conservative theocracy could block many initiatives without difficulty. The Khatami government also failed to address deep socio-economic divisions, and its double failure, coupled with the blocking of reformists standing for power by the theocracy, limited choices in the 2005 elections, both for the Majlis and the Presidency. The surprise election of Mr Ahmadinejad, with strong Revolutionary Guard support, came about partly because he was thought to speak for the poor.

President Ahmadinejad's policies since coming to power have been somewhat unpredictable. They have included strident public attacks on Israel, the replacement of moderates and technocrats in key ministries and diplomatic missions and the removal from office of those previously engaged in negotiations with the EU3 on nuclear issues. These are all moves likely to cause further tensions with Washington. They are not necessarily popular across the Iranian political spectrum, and that may include substantial elements of the powerful theocracy. It is possible that the Ahmadinejad administration may soon experience serious problems of stability, but that could lead to a hardening of policies, hastening a crisis with the United States.

Furthermore, current circumstances in neighbouring Iraq are broadly favourable to the present administration in Tehran and unfavourable to the United States. Progress towards wider representation within Iraq invariably means more power for the Shi'a community, many elements of which have close connections with Iran. In spite of regular claims of Iranian support for some of the Shi'a militias in Iraq, there is little evidence of substantial official Iranian involvement, but the potential is certainly there.

The UK has made more particular claims of Iranian involvement in the spreading of some weapons technologies, but Iran, in turn, blames Britain and the US for supporting dissidents, even to the extent of their being involved in some manner in some of the recent bombing incidents within Iran.

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The Nature of US Military Action

“Any military action would, in practice, have to involve more than just a series of attacks on a small range of directly nuclear-related sites.”

From a US perspective, there would be two main reasons for taking action against Iranian nuclear facilities. One would be to damage the overall programme to the extent that any plans to produce nuclear weapons could be set back at least five years and preferably longer, but a second would be to make it clear that the United States is prepared to take significant preventative military action in this regard, and would, by implication, take action against other Iranian activities that it might find unacceptable, not least any Iranian interference in Iraq.

The core problem is that any military action would, in practice, have to involve more than just a series of attacks on a small range of directly nuclear-related sites. Moreover, once such action started, it would be virtually impossible to maintain any relationship with Iran except one based on violence.

Apart from anything else, all the available evidence suggests that any military action would have a very powerful unifying effect within Iran, bringing a wide range of political and religious opinion behind the administration, increasing both its power base and its stability. Even the current administration could be expected to be a focus of support. Those elements of the theocracy that are at present suspicious of Mr Ahmadinejad and may still resent his unexpected electoral success, would not stand in the way of a united Iran faced with US military action.

Although the United States has a major problem of overstretch affecting its Army and Marine Corps, an attack on Iranian nuclear facilities would be undertaken almost entirely by the Air Force and the Navy. To have the maximum impact, it would be done by surprise, utilising land-based aircraft already in the region, long-range strike aircraft operating from the United States, the UK and Diego Garcia, and naval strike forces involving carrier-borne aircraft and sea-launched cruise missiles.

At any one time, the US Navy keeps one aircraft carrier battle group on station in or near the Persian Gulf. Such groups rotate, and there are periods when two are on station, providing over 150 aircraft, together with several hundred cruise missiles.⁴ Similar numbers of land-based aircraft could be assembled with little notice, given the range of US bases in the region, and B-1B and B-2 bombers could operate from outside the region. In particular, the specialised facilities required to operate the stealth B-2 aircraft are now available at Fairford air base in Gloucestershire.⁵

Air strikes on nuclear facilities would involve the destruction of facilities at the Tehran Research Reactor, together with the radioisotope production facility, a range of nuclear-related laboratories and the Kalaye Electric Company, all in Tehran. The Esfahan Nuclear Technology Centre would be a major target, including a series of experimental reactors, uranium conversion facilities and a fuel fabrication laboratory. Pilot and full-scale enrichment plants at Natanz would be targeted, as would facilities at Arak (see Appendix 1).⁶ The new 1,000 MW reactor nearing completion at Bushehr would be targeted, although this could be problematic once the reactor is fully fuelled and goes critical some time in 2006. Once that has happened, any destruction of the containment structure could lead to serious problems of radioactive dispersal affecting not just the Iranian Gulf coast, but west Gulf seaboard in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. As well as the direct human effects, since these comprise the world's most substantial concentration of oil production facilities, the consequences could be severe.⁷

All of the initial attacks would be undertaken more or less simultaneously, in order to kill as many of the technically competent staff as possible, therefore doing the greatest damage to longer-term prospects. This would be a necessary part of any military action and would probably extend to the destruction of university laboratories and technology centres that indirectly support the Iranian nuclear scientific and technical infrastructure.

Such an aspect of the attack is not widely recognised outside of military planning circles but would be an essential component of the operation. Given that the aim is to set back Iranian nuclear potential for as long as possible, it would be essential to go well beyond the destruction of physical facilities that could be replaced quite rapidly. The killing of those with technical expertise would have a much more substantial impact on any efforts to redevelop nuclear capabilities. Furthermore, since such expertise is known to include foreign nationals, the killing of such people already working in the country would serve as a deterrent to the involvement of others in the future.

Iran currently has limited air defences and a largely obsolete and small air force. Even so, defence suppression would be a major aspect of military action, primarily to reduce the risk of the killing or capture of US aircrew. It would involve the targeting of radar facilities and command and control centres, as well as Western Command air bases at Tehran, Tabriz, Hamadan, Dezful, Umidiyeh, Shiraz and Isfahan, and Southern Command air bases at Bushehr, Bandar Abbas and Chah Bahar.⁸ A particular concern for US forces is the continued deployment by Iran of 45 or more of the American F-14A Tomcat interceptors and their long-range AWG-9 radar equipment. 79 planes were originally procured before the fall of the Shah and around 30 are available operationally at any one time out of those still deployed.⁹

Research, development and production facilities for Iran's medium-range ballistic missile programme would be priority targets, as would bases at which these mobile missiles are deployed. Because of their mobility, surprise would once again be essential.

US forces have already used reconnaissance drones to map Iranian facilities and these, combined with satellite reconnaissance and a range of forms of electronic surveillance, have provided considerable information on the nuclear infrastructure and more general defence forces.

The attacks described so far would involve a strong element of surprise in relation to the core nuclear infrastructure and the air defence system, with these undertaken in a matter of hours. Up to a hundred sorties by strike aircraft, backed up by several hundred additional sorties by aerial refuelling, defence suppression and reconnaissance aircraft would be accompanied by two hundred or more cruise missile sorties.

Following immediate bomb damage assessment, major targets would be revisited in the following days in parallel with attacks on less time-urgent targets. For US forces, the main period of intense military activity might extend over 4-5 days but could continue for several days more, depending on Iranian responses.

Pre-empting Iranian Responses

In addition to the substantial programme of air strikes and missile attacks on nuclear, missile and defence facilities, US military operations would also be aimed at pre-empting any immediate Iranian responses. Most significant of these would be any possible retaliatory Iranian action to affect the transport of oil and liquefied natural gas through the Straits of Hormuz. On the assumption that this would be an obvious form of retaliation, it would be necessary to destroy coastal anti-ship missile batteries and Iran's small force of warships. The main base and dockyard is at Bushehr; the operational headquarters is at Bandar Abbas which is also the base for Iran's small flotilla of Russian-built Kilo-class submarines, although Chah Bahar is due to become the new base for these three boats. Other bases for light naval forces include Kharg Island at the head of the Gulf and islands in the Abu Musa group south-west of the Straits of Hormuz, these being heavily defended and well supplied.¹⁰

The small Iranian Navy suffered severe losses in its exchanges with the US Navy at the end of the “tanker war” in April 1988, and it is probable that the main emphasis will be on fast light forces, including speedboats crewed by those prepared to die. These would be Iranian Revolutionary Guard (IRG) forces and they would most likely place the greatest emphasis on attacking tanker traffic rather than US naval units. Operating bases for these forces would be priorities for attack.

It would also be assumed that IRG elements would move into some parts of Iraq to link up with sympathetic militia. To demonstrate that any such moves would incite retaliation, it is probable that military action would target forward-based ground force units both of the IRG and of the regular army. Of the numerous Iranian Army bases, those close to the border with Iraq at Abadan, Khorramshahr, Ahvaz, Dezfuland and possibly Mahabad would be the most likely targets, as would major IRG centres. A range of logistical support facilities would be targeted, with this possibly extending to destruction of bridges. Given the porous nature of the border, this latter action would be primarily symbolic.

Casualties

It is very difficult to predict the level of Iranian military and civilian casualties, but two points may be made. The first is that, as in Iraq during the first three intense weeks of war, early civilian casualty reports will be incomplete and the full extent of casualties unlikely to come to light for several months. However, any reports of civilian casualties which do emerge would be widely disseminated by the Iranian media and by commercial media networks such as al-Jazeera elsewhere in the region. The second is that any surprise attack will catch many people, be they civilian or military, unawares and unprotected. There will be no opportunity for people to move away from likely target areas as was possible in the days and weeks leading up to the invasion of Iraq.

Military deaths in this first wave of attacks against Iran would be expected to be in the thousands, especially with attacks on air bases and Revolutionary Guard facilities. Civilian deaths would be in the many hundreds at least, particularly with the requirement to target technical support for the Iranian nuclear and missile infrastructure, with many of the factories being located in urban areas. If the war evolved into a wider conflict, primarily to pre-empt or counter Iranian responses, then casualties would eventually be much higher.

Iranian Responses

Given the small size and largely obsolete nature of the Iranian Air Force and air defence systems, Iran would be able to offer little direct opposition to the kind of US attack outlined above. Moreover, US action would have been designed to destroy what limited capability might be available.

US action to pre-empt obvious Iranian responses, such as affecting tanker traffic through the Straits of Hormuz or moving Revolutionary Guard elements into parts of Iraq, could well mean that there would be immediate if apparent indications of comprehensive US military success in doing serious damage both to Iran’s presumed nuclear weapons development potential and in countering immediate Iranian responses. This could turn out to be as misleading as the early apparent successes in Iraq following regime termination within three weeks of the start of that war in March 2003. In fact, Iran has many options available in response, even if they are not options of immediate effect.

Redevelopment of nuclear programme. However badly Iran’s nuclear infrastructure was damaged in an attack, an immediate response would be to reconstitute the infrastructure and work rapidly and in secret towards a clear nuclear weapons capability. This would probably involve giving formal notice of

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“US action would almost certainly guarantee an overtly nuclear-armed Iran for decades to come.”

withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty, followed by the immediate reconstitution of the nuclear infrastructure, developing it wherever possible in a more survivable manner. This would include systems redundancy, dispersal of research, development and production capabilities and the use of deep underground facilities for future work wherever feasible.

Furthermore, there may already be elements of redundancy built in to the current Iranian civil nuclear programme and there may be elements of which the United States is unaware. If so, this would aid the reconstitution of capabilities. More generally, any hope of negotiating away Iran’s suspected nuclear weapons programme in the years after a US attack would vanish, undermining global non-proliferation efforts. Rather than living with an Iran that had the potential to produce nuclear weapons, the US action would almost certainly guarantee an overtly nuclear-armed Iran for decades to come or, alternatively, further instances of military action.

Hezbollah. Iran would be likely to encourage more militant action by Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon. Given that Hezbollah now has large quantities of surface-to-surface missiles of a range sufficient to reach Haifa and other population centres in the north of Israel, a vigorous Israeli response should be expected, further adding to an atmosphere of crisis. It is true that Hezbollah is currently undergoing a period of substantial political transformation, moving more firmly into the social and political arenas, so that major military action against Israel would be a regression to previous patterns. This is to be expected, though, given the likely extent of the popular support for Iran resulting from US military action.

Any action from Hezbollah would result in substantial Israeli military responses. At the very least these would involve air strikes, the use of artillery and battlefield missiles and naval bombardment. They might extend to cross-border operations by infantry and armoured units.

Straits of Hormuz. While one major aim of any US military action would be to forestall Iranian interference with Gulf oil exports, this would have to be near total in its effect on Iranian capabilities. This would be difficult if not impossible to achieve, leading to a fear of attack which alone would have a formidable impact on oil markets.

West Gulf oil facilities. Furthermore, it would be possible for paramilitary units linked to Iran to develop the ability to sabotage oil export facilities in western Gulf states such as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. High levels of security would undoubtedly be maintained in these states, yet determined paramilitary groups would be difficult to control with certainty. Even one or two incidents of sabotage would raise tensions and further affect oil markets.

Revolutionary Guard. The Revolutionary Guard remains a strong if largely free-standing component of the Iranian defence system. While its facilities on the Persian Gulf coast and close to the border with Iran might be damaged in the early waves of US attacks, there would also be a very substantial base of support for the Guard, expressed by immediate improvements in morale, a greatly enhanced ability to recruit, and a determination to respond. Although US military action against Guard facilities might be undertaken to “warn off” the Guard from interfering in Iraq, the effect would almost certainly be short-lived, and the numerous links which already exist between Guard units and Iraqi Shi’a militias would be activated rapidly. Such demonstrable Iranian involvement in the Iraqi insurgency would result in an escalating US military response involving cross-border attacks on Iranian logistics. This would increase Iranian civilian casualties, cause economic disruption and also further increase internal Iranian support for the current regime.

Overall, and given the nature of the Iran/Iraq border, Iran would be in a very strong position to aid elements of the Iraqi insurgency in numerous ways, providing a wide range of armaments as well as personnel. This would give a substantial boost to an insurgency that, even three years after the termination of the old regime, is as active as ever.

International support. Given recent major long-term economic agreements between Iran and China, and also between Iran and India, as well as close links with Russia, a US attack would attract major criticisms, including from two of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council – China and Russia. The current Russian administration might prefer privately to see US military action avoided, but it would be in a very difficult position in relation to many of its neighbouring allies if it were not to condemn US military action against Iran most strongly, especially if this escalated to a protracted conflict.

Wider Responses

“Any attack on such a significant Islamic republic would inevitably increase the anti-American mood in the region and beyond.”

The consequences described above relate to the immediate responses from within Iran or from associates in Lebanon. Probably the most difficult response to predict would be the effect of a military confrontation with Iran on the attitudes and reactions from within wider Islamic communities. Although there is an uneasy relationship between Iran and the al-Qaida movement, and between Iran and the Arab world, any attack on such a significant Islamic republic would inevitably increase the anti-American mood in the region and beyond, giving greater impetus to a movement that is already a global phenomenon.

One of the most significant developments of the past four years has been the ability of the al-Qaida movement and its associates to survive and thrive in an intensely antagonistic environment. Since 9/11, the movement has experienced the loss of many key leadership elements, either killed or detained, has lost its main operating areas in Afghanistan and has seen over 70,000 people detained for lengthy periods. Even so, the level of activity in those past four years has actually been substantially higher than in the four years prior to the 9/11 attacks.

Of particular significance has been the evolution of suicide bombing. Historically, this phenomenon has been widespread and has not been restricted to radical Islamist groups, but individual campaigns involving suicide bombing have been narrow in their geographical focus. These have included the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, Kurdish separatists in Turkey, Hezbollah supporters in Southern Lebanon and Palestinian radicals in Israel/Palestine. These have all been directed at responding to occupation and perceived oppression in a localised region.

For the first time, at least on a substantial scale, suicide bombing has gone transnational, often involving well-educated individuals who are motivated to respond not to their known immediate circumstances but to the wider circumstances of co-religionists. They are aided by the huge increase in information now available through satellite TV news channels and the internet, and may be prepared to travel substantial distances to undertake their actions.

If the United States is prepared to extend its current military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan to Iran, this trend should be expected to get a substantial further boost, with consequences that are difficult to predict. It will certainly be yet another example of a reaction that will serve to damage US security interests in the region and beyond.

Israeli Military Action

If action against Iranian nuclear facilities was undertaken by Israel rather than the United States, it would be on a smaller scale although still far more substantial than the Israeli attack on the Iraqi Osiraq nuclear reactor in 1981. Israeli military action would be concentrated on all of the nuclear research, development and support facilities, especially personnel, and on the Iranian missile forces, their production and development. There would be less concern with the Revolutionary Guard or with protection of Gulf oil facilities.

Iran, on the other hand, would see any Israeli action as being done in close collaboration with the United States, and would respond against US and Gulf oil interests in much the same way as if the attacks had been conducted by the United States itself. This would, in turn, bring US forces into the confrontation as the United States reacted to such moves. Any such escalation of the war would be of value to Israel as it would tend to weaken the wider military capabilities of Iran. Thus, Israeli action would be intended to severely damage Iranian nuclear potential while being likely to bring the United States into the conflict.

Iran's more direct reaction to Israeli military action might be to put substantial emphasis on encouraging Hezbollah to act against Israel, possibly through missile attacks into Northern Israel. This, too, would be advantageous to the Israeli government of the day, whatever its complexion, as it has military forces that could stage very substantial action against Hezbollah, especially through air strikes into Southern Lebanon. Such strikes would be aimed, in particular, at targeting the stores of the longer-range Katyusha-type rockets recently acquired by Hezbollah.

While Israel would gain in the short term from an attack on Iran, the longer-term consequences would be far less positive. In addition to the problems created for the United States in Iraq, causing tensions between Israel and its closest ally, Israel would be faced with Iran determined to develop a nuclear weapons capability in the shortest possible time in a regional climate in which opposition to the State of Israel would have been substantially enhanced.

Conclusion

A US military attack on Iranian nuclear infrastructure would be the start of a protracted military confrontation that would probably involve Iraq, Israel and Lebanon as well as the United States and Iran, with the possibility of west Gulf states being involved as well. An attack by Israel, although initially on a smaller scale, would almost certainly escalate to involve the United States, and would also mark the start of a protracted conflict.

Although an attack by either state could seriously damage Iran's nuclear development potential, numerous responses would be possible making a protracted and highly unstable conflict virtually certain. Moreover, Iran would be expected to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty and engage in a nuclear weapons programme as rapidly as possible. This would lead to further military action against Iran, establishing a highly dangerous cycle of violence.

The termination of the Saddam Hussein regime was expected to bring about a free-market client state in Iraq. Instead it has produced a deeply unstable and costly conflict with no end in sight. That may not prevent a US or an Israeli attack on Iran even though it should be expected that the consequences would be substantially greater. What this analysis does conclude is that a military response to the current crisis in relations with Iran is a particularly dangerous option and should not be considered further – alternative approaches must be sought, however difficult these may be.

Notes and References

- (1) Paul Rogers, *Iraq: Consequences of a War* (Oxford: Oxford Research Group, 2002).
- (2) *The Military Balance 2005/06* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2005).
- (3) Barbara Opal-Rome, "Seeking Urban Ops Answers in Israel", *Defense News* (14 June 2004).
- (4) A Nimitz-class aircraft carrier typically carries 72 fixed-wing aircraft and six helicopters, including 36 F/A-18E Super Hornet strike aircraft. A carrier battle group may normally include a cruiser, two destroyers and an attack submarine, all equipped with sea-launched cruise missiles.
- (5) Because of the nature of its radar-absorbing surfaces, the B-2A aircraft requires special climate-controlled hangars. These were previously available only at its home base in the United States and at Diego Garcia, the US base on a UK-owned atoll in the Indian Ocean. Two shelters at RAF Fairford were completed and became operational in early 2005. Given the capabilities of the aircraft, both Fairford and Diego Garcia would be essential operating locations for any attack on Iran, thus involving the UK, at least indirectly, in the operation.
- (6) Frank Barnaby, *Iran's Nuclear Activities* (Oxford: Oxford Research Group, 2005).
- (7) This would become more severe with time as the reactor produced larger quantities of radioactive waste products.
- (8) Information from www.globalsecurity.org.
- (9) Michael Knights, "Iran's conventional forces remain key to deterring potential threats", *Jane's Intelligence Review* (Feb 2006).
- (10) *Ibid.*

Appendix 1



Map of the Middle East showing US military locations in the region and the sites of Iranian nuclear facilities

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Iran: Consequences of a War

This briefing paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the likely nature of US or Israeli military action that would be intended to disable Iran's nuclear capabilities. It outlines both the immediate consequences in terms of loss of human life, facilities and infrastructure, and also the likely Iranian responses, which would be extensive.

An attack on Iranian nuclear infrastructure would signal the start of a protracted military confrontation that would probably grow to involve Iraq, Israel and Lebanon, as well as the USA and Iran. The report concludes that a military response to the current crisis in relations with Iran is a particularly dangerous option and should not be considered further. Alternative approaches must be sought, however difficult these may be.

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