

# “The Folly of Attacking Iran”

## Prepared Statement before the Chicago City Council

John J. Mearsheimer

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There is growing evidence that the United States might launch a military strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities. The main proponents of an attack are essentially the same individuals and groups who pushed for war against Iraq. They include hard-line supporters of Israel here in America and Israel itself, which is deeply committed to preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons.

It would be a profound mistake, however, for the United States to start a war with Iran. I base this conclusion on four main arguments.

**First**, striking Iran will not prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons. Instead, an American or Israeli attack will give Tehran even more reason to acquire a nuclear arsenal as quickly as possible. Nuclear weapons are the ultimate deterrent, because no state would attack the homeland of a nuclear-armed country for fear that the victim would retaliate. This simple logic explains why Israel and the United States have sizeable nuclear arsenals and why neither country has any intention of giving them up. Attack Iran and it will surely acquire nuclear weapons to make sure it never happens again.

One might argue that striking Iran will eliminate its ability to go nuclear for many years to come. One might even see Israel’s destruction of Iraq’s Osiraq nuclear reactor in 1981 as an instructive precedent. But this line of argument is unconvincing. Iran would quickly reconstitute its nuclear program, and make it difficult, if not impossible, for the United States to find the new facilities and destroy them. In particular, Iran would disperse those facilities, hide them, and harden them against a future attack, which is what Iraq did after Osiraq was destroyed. Remember that when the United Nations finally got inspectors into Baghdad in 1991, they were shocked to find that Saddam had an extensive nuclear program and was only a few years away from having nuclear weapons. So, the Osiraq attack did not achieve its aim. Nor would a strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities solve the problem in the long term. At best, we could hope to set back Iran’s nuclear program two or three years.

**Second**, an attack will have dangerous consequences for a future crisis involving a nuclear-armed Iran. Specifically, a surprise attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities today is likely to cause future Iranian leaders to worry greatly about the possibility of that happening again. This kind of fear is sure to give those leaders itchy trigger fingers in a crisis situation. Imagine a future crisis involving a nuclear-armed Israel, where fear of Iran is rampant, and a nuclear-armed Iran that has been attacked by either Israel or the United States. That would be a very dangerous situation, because both sides would make worst-case assumptions about the other’s motives, and both sides would think seriously about striking first. This is a recipe for crisis instability.

**Third**, if the United States chooses to attack Iran, Tehran is bound to retaliate. Iran’s leaders and its people are almost certain to see an attack as a declaration of war, and one can safely assume that they will not surrender. The two most obvious places where they can strike back are Afghanistan and Iraq, where the American military is fighting wars that it has been unable to win. Iran is well-positioned to cause serious trouble for the United States in both places as it shares a border with Afghanistan as well as Iraq, and has allies in each country that it could arm and train to strike at the American military.

It is hard to see how the United States could win its wars in either Afghanistan or Iraq if Iran was committed to seeing us lose. Indeed, as the Iraq Study Group pointed out in December 2006, if Washington has any hope of prevailing in those conflicts, it is going to need Iran’s cooperation, not its opposition. A strike against Iran rules out the former and guarantees the latter.



Of course, Iran would look for other places and other ways to attack the United States, and probably would be looking for those opportunities for years to come. Attacking Iran, in short, is hardly cost-free.

**Fourth**, there is a better alternative. At this point, our best hope is to negotiate a settlement where Iran eventually masters the full nuclear fuel cycle, but does not go all the way and use this capacity to build nuclear weapons. The best way to maximize our chances of getting that outcome is to stop threatening Iran with military attacks and regime change and start negotiating with them. The less we threaten Iran, the less incentive they have to acquire a nuclear arsenal. I might add that this is the policy that the Bush administration has adopted with North Korea, and that it used to persuade Libya to abandon its own nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons programs.

Of course, this strategy might not work. The Iranians might think that the future is too uncertain to forgo developing nuclear weapons. This is certainly the calculation that all of the world's nuclear powers have made – including Israel and the United States – so it would not be altogether surprising if Iran concluded that it needed a nuclear deterrent.

But even if that happens, Tehran cannot use those nuclear weapons against either Israel or the United States, because Iran would suffer devastating retaliation if it did. President Ahmadinejad's hostility toward Israel notwithstanding, there is no evidence that he or any other senior leaders in Iran are suicidal. The fact is that nuclear weapons are ideally suited for discouraging other states from attacking you, but they have hardly any offensive capability when your rivals have their own survivable nuclear weapons.

One sometimes hears the argument that Iran might give nuclear weapons to a terrorist group. But that is extremely unlikely, in part, because Iran could not be sure that the nuclear handoff would go undetected. Furthermore, Iran would have little – if any – control over that terrorist group, which might use its nuclear weapons against Israel or the United States. Terrorist groups, after all, are much harder to deter than states. If that happened, Jerusalem or Washington would almost certainly order nuclear strikes against Iran, even if they just suspected Iran of giving the weapons to the terrorists. No state – including Iran – is going to place its survival in the hands of a group that it does not control.

There is no question that it would be best for the United States if Iran did not acquire nuclear weapons. However, to achieve that goal, it does not make sense to threaten Tehran, and certainly not to attack its nuclear facilities. The smart strategy is to remove the threat of war and engage Iran diplomatically. If that approach fails and Iran builds a nuclear arsenal, which might happen, Washington has a reliable fallback strategy. It can rely on deterrence to contain Iran, as it did with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. If the United States was able to contain the mighty Soviet Union, with its massive nuclear arsenal, it surely can contain a nuclear-armed Iran. Thank you.



## Thinking globally, acting locally

### With the Bush administration angling for war with Iran, the city of Chicago is considering going on record opposing it

Michael Lynn

May 9, 2008 9:00 PM

More than 7,000 miles separate Chicago and Tehran. But on May 14, the city council of the American city will consider whether to take a stand on an event that would have far reaching consequences for residents of both: a US attack on Iran.

A resolution introduced into the council by one of its members, Alderman Joe Moore, would put the city on record as opposing a preemptive strike against Iran by the US. The resolution urges all congressional representatives whose districts include parts of the city to “clearly express the will of the people of Chicago in opposing any attack on Iran, and urging the Bush administration to pursue diplomatic engagement with that nation.”

The resolution is the result of an initiative launched by Chicago’s No War On Iran Coalition, a broad-based grouping of local anti-war, social justice and faith organisations. Ranging widely in viewpoints, the goal that unites us all is preventing the United States from launching another elective war that we believe would prove even more disastrous than the five-year-old one next door in Iraq.

Recent events have added urgency to the goal. In April, General David Petraeus, the commanding officer of American forces in Iraq, and Ryan Crocker, US ambassador to that country, testified to several congressional committees. In their testimony, both struck a common theme: the role of Iran in promoting insurgent attacks in Iraq. Both men accused so-called “special groups” of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards of being responsible for the deaths of American troops and rocket strikes on the Green Zone.

That testimony flies in the face of the opinion of the American intelligence community, expressed in a 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (pdf) that Iran “is not likely to be a major driver of violence” in Iraq. It nevertheless allowed the Bush administration to assign blame for the Iraq debacle to Iran and provide the rationale for military action if they so chose. The president issued a thinly veiled threat in insisting that Iran cease supplying weapons in Iraq or “America will act to protect our interests, and our troops.”

Signs of war go beyond rhetoric. April also saw the forced resignation of Admiral William Fallon as chief of Central Command, responsible for Pentagon operations in the Middle East. Fallon had been quoted a month earlier in an Esquire article as being opposed to attacking Iran. His replacement will be Bush’s favourite general - Petraeus, whose congressional testimony so carefully mirrored Bush administration talking points.

No War on Iran Coalition members are prepared to answer those who suggest that local government bodies have no business involving themselves in matters of foreign policy. We point to the enormous burden the Iraq occupation has placed on the city, in terms of lives disrupted and what economists refer to as ‘opportunity costs.’

The occupation has cost the citizens of Chicago roughly \$5.5bn (and counting). That translates to \$105m for each of the city’s 50 Wards (districts), each represented by a member of the city council. Those funds could have bought 112,543 public safety officers for one year;



365 elementary schools; 39,567 units of affordable housing; 84,067 elementary school teachers for one year; and so on.

And if you think the costs of the occupation are horrendous, the costs associated with an attack on Iran, both in terms of lives and dollars, would be much worse.

Support for the resolution comes from diverse ideological quarters, as a glance at those testifying in support attests. Scott Ritter, a 12 year veteran of US Marine intelligence and former UN chief weapons inspector in Iraq; John Mearsheimer, a realist international relations expert from the University of Chicago who voted for Bush in 2000; veteran New York Times foreign correspondent (and CiF contributor) Stephen Kinzer. They represent the breadth of opposition to further military adventurism in an unstable part of the globe.

No one harbours any illusions that the resolution will stop a US attack on Iran. Rather, the measure is seen as a vehicle to raise the profile of the issue - right in the country's heartland - and demonstrate broad opposition to a wider war. Several US cities have passed such resolutions, but Chicago would be by far the largest and most prominent to do so. A Chicago success could inspire activists in other cities to press their local governments to pass similar measures.

The goal is to influence policy by showing there would be serious political consequences to any attack. With an American leadership seemingly indifferent to (if not contemptuous of) its record-low approval ratings, activists are shifting their sights to representatives closer to home. Hopes are that pressure rising from below will curb the bellicose rhetoric and ominous manoeuvres of the Bush administration in the short run and thwart the impulse to seek security through wars of aggression in the longer run.

Will the local strategy work? An answer may begin to emerge on May 14. Stay tuned.

[http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/michael\\_lynn/2008/05/thinking\\_globally\\_acting\\_locally.html](http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/michael_lynn/2008/05/thinking_globally_acting_locally.html)



## Taking a Stand Against War

May 11, 2008

By Scott Ritter



As someone who has been urging focused citizen activism for some time now, I find it heartening that there are those in the United States who put action to words and seek to lead by example. This is the case with Chicago Alderman Joe Moore, who, together with seven of his 49 colleagues (Toni Preckwinkle, Sandi Jackson, Eugene Schuler, Robert Fioretti, Freddrenna Lyle, Ricardo Munoz and Mary Ann Smith), has prepared a resolution for the Chicago City Council opposing war on Iran. By itself, this resolution most probably will not serve to alter the policies currently being pursued by the Bush administration. But when a great American city such as Chicago takes the lead in expressing its rejection of irresponsible national policy, other cities should, and will, take notice.

I have been asked to be a witness, together with other experts on Iran and U.S. Middle East policy, before the City Council as it considers this resolution. I think it is of great importance that the representatives of the people of Chicago vote to adopt it in its entirety. I would also encourage other municipalities to consider similar resolutions opposing war on Iran, and to express their concern through the adoption of resolutions which, collectively, might serve as a notice to the United States Congress, as well as the administration of President Bush, that a war with Iran would not be supported by the citizens of this land.

In preparing for my role as witness, I carefully considered the Chicago resolution in its entirety, and offer my analysis of its content as a primer for interested parties. I sincerely hope that the leadership and courage exhibited by the Chicago council members can be replicated across America in a timely fashion, and that the resultant will of the people is recognized by the Congress in time for effective legislation to be drafted and passed which reduces the threat of U.S.-Iranian conflict.

*“WHEREAS, The Bush Administration and its Congressional allies are engaging in a systematic campaign to convince the American people that the Islamic Republic of Iran poses an imminent threat to the American nation, American troops in the Middle East and U.S. allies.”*

The propaganda war being waged by the Bush administration in this regard has been as intense and relentless as any in recent memory. Either directly or through proxy, the administration has painted a one-sided portrait of Iran which is inaccurate and misleading in the extreme. To have a nation of nearly 80 million people, possessing a history and



culture several thousands of years old, suddenly personified in the image of a single individual, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is a gross misrepresentation. Imagine if one tried to characterize the entire American people in the form of George W. Bush. Iran is a diverse nation, with numerous political and social constituencies which compete across a broad spectrum of forums, governmental and nongovernmental alike. To take the words and deeds of one man, out of context in some cases and inaccurately in others, and use them to paint a picture of national policy is as wrong as it is deceitful.

Iran today poses no threat to the American nation, its allies (including Israel) or American troops in the region. To the extent that U.S. service members are threatened in Iraq, one must consider the reality of a genuine popular resistance by Iraqis to a brutal and illegitimate occupation. It should also be noted that Iran is primarily interested in securing a stable Iraq in the post-Saddam period, a policy requiring Iran to back the current Iraqi government, a Shiite-dominated government which the United States helped empower and which the United States currently supports.

The fact that the current Iraqi government is drawn primarily from two political entities (the Da'wa Party and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq) that are closely allied with the Iranians not only belies the U.S. claim that Iran seeks to undermine security in Iraq (since to accept this proposition one would have to embrace the premise that Iran is fighting itself), but also illustrates the inherent inconsistency of the U.S. position in Iraq, which is to oppose the one regional power which supports the stated U.S. objective of empowering the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad. The reality is that it is bad U.S. policy, not any concerted action on the part of Iran, which serves as the greatest threat to U.S. forces in the Middle East.

*“WHEREAS, This campaign bears a strong resemblance to that waged during the lead-up to the Iraq War and occupation, with the use of unreliable sources, exaggerated threat assessments, the selective use of information, unsubstantiated accusations about Iran’s nuclear program and its supply of weapons to Iraqi forces as centerpieces of their case to the American people for aggressive action against Iran.”*

If the current war in Iraq has taught the American people anything, it is that we can never again have our nation led to war based upon unsubstantiated data, rumor and speculation. Effective congressional oversight could have retarded the Bush propaganda on Iraq, especially concerning the WMD issue and the allegations of ties between Saddam’s regime and al-Qaida. The fact that Congress accepted, without question, every negative story produced by the Bush administration, and that the product of this abrogation of constitutional mandate was parroted as fact by a too-compliant media, should serve as a wake-up call that past patterns of behavior are repeating themselves today, this time in the case of Iran.

If one replaces Ahmed Chalabi and the Iraqi National Congress with Alireza Jafazadeh and the Mujahedeen Khalq, and “Curveball” (the disgraced INC-planted intelligence source cited by then-Secretary of State Colin Powell in his infamous February 2003 presentation before the U.N. Security Council) with the “magic laptop computer” (provided by the MEK to U.S. intelligence, and cited by the U.S. as the sole source for many of its claims concerning an ongoing Iranian nuclear weapons program), it is clear that there is much to be suspicious of regarding the Bush administration case against Iran.

When the United States cites the capture of alleged Iranian “Quds Force” officials as proof of Iranian perfidy inside Iraq, and then releases these same individuals months later, citing a lack of intelligence value and the fact that these prisoners pose no security threat, it becomes clear that the U.S. case against Iran is built primarily upon ideologically motivated smoke and mirrors. The Congress must never again allow itself to be used as a rubber stamp for unnecessary war, but it will act only when pushed to do so by an alarmed and awakened constituency.

*“WHEREAS, Iran has not threatened to attack the United States, and no compelling evidence has been presented that Iran poses a real and imminent threat to the security and safety of the United States that would justify an unprovoked unilateral pre-emptive military attack.”*



In fact, there is overwhelming evidence that Iran, rather than conspiring against the U.S. in the Middle East, has actively reached out to Washington in an effort to normalize relations. Iran was the first Islamic nation to condemn the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attack on the United States, and Iran coordinated with the U.S. military on certain aspects of the American military response in Afghanistan. Likewise, Iran was supportive of the U.S. drive to remove Saddam Hussein from power.

In May of 2003, Iran made a bold diplomatic approach to the United States which sought to resolve outstanding issues such as the Iranian nuclear program, Iranian support for Hamas and Hezbollah, and Iran's relationship with Israel. It was the United States which rejected this outreach, not Iran. The fact is that it is the unilateral policy objectives of the Bush administration, which revolve around regime change in Iran, which serve as the principal threat to regional peace and security in the Middle East today. Iran poses a threat to no nation, least of all the United States.

*“WHEREAS, We support the people of Iran who are struggling for freedom and democracy, and nothing herein should be construed as supportive of their government, the Islamic Republic of Iran, but a unilateral, preemptive U.S. military attack on Iran could well prove counterproductive to the cause of promoting freedom and democracy in that country.”*

We should never forget that while Iran functions as a theocracy in terms of ultimate constitutional authority, both its legislative and executive branches are a product of democratic processes. The best course of action American policy could take would be to create the conditions inside Iran where the genuine will of the people can be expressed through the existing democratic structures. This is best accomplished by creating increased opportunities for interaction between Iran and the rest of the world. Such interaction would go far to moderate the theocratic structures inside Iran. The current policies of economic sanctions and political isolation of Iran are counterproductive in this regard, and serve to strengthen the political power of those conservative institutions that Americans hope would be undermined by an Iranian population moderated by international interaction.

*“WHEREAS, A 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), representing the consensus view [of] all 16 U.S. intelligence agencies, concluded that Iran froze its nuclear weapons program in 2003, and an earlier NIE concluded that Iran's involvement in Iraq “is not likely to be a major driver of violence there.”*

While the United States has been plagued by the increasing politicization of intelligence—prime examples being the October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq and the creation within the Pentagon of a special intelligence entity (the Office of Special Programs, under the guidance of Douglas Feith) whose sole purpose was to introduce into the policymaking body data and information which had been rejected by the intelligence community as unfounded—the entire work of the intelligence community cannot be dismissed out of hand, especially when it publishes a major finding which clashes with the position held by an activist administration. The fact that the U.S. intelligence community and the Bush administration do not agree on the specifics of how Iran constitutes a threat to America in and of itself begs intervention in the form of congressional oversight. It is not unpatriotic for Congress to hold hearings for the purpose of discerning the facts surrounding a given policy. When such policies involve war or the threat of war, the need is even more imperative, and the failure of Congress to act accordingly represents a dereliction of duty which must not be ignored by the American people, whom Congress purports to represent.

*“WHEREAS, an attack on Iran is likely to cause untold thousands of American and Iranian casualties, lead to major economic dislocations, and threaten a much wider and more disastrous war in the Middle East.”*

While it is currently in vogue for ideologues and proponents of neoconservative ideology to promote a “limited airstrike” against Iran, anyone with any military experience will point out that no plan survives initial contact with the enemy. The Iranian government will have a say in how it will choose to respond in case of an unprovoked American military strike, however limited it might be. Any Iranian retaliation might prompt an American counter-



retaliation, and one might find a limited strike quickly spiraling out of control and threatening full-scale conflagration. The American economy has been bankrupted by the war in Iraq, and the American military, especially the Army and Marines, is stretched to its breaking point. While an argument can be made that any limited strike would rely primarily on the resources of the Air Force and Navy, if the conflict escalates, this will no longer be the case. Given the fact that any attack on Iran would represent an elective war rather than a war of national security, there is no compelling reasoning which cites the so-called national interest for the United States to consider any military action against Iran, either now or in the future.

*“WHEREAS, a pre-emptive U.S. military attack on Iran would violate international law and our commitments under the U.N. Charter and further isolate the U.S. from the rest of the world.”*

Most Americans remain ignorant of the laws which govern our nation, and the document which serves as the foundation of these laws. The United States Constitution, in Article 6, declares that international treaties and agreements ratified by a two-thirds vote in the Senate become the supreme law of the land. The United States is a signatory to the charter of the United Nations, and the charter has been ratified by the U.S. Senate. As such, the United States is bound by international law and its own Constitution to not only reject pre-emptive warfare (a notion cited by the Nuremberg tribunals as the greatest of all war crimes, since it is from pre-emptive war of aggression that all other war crimes are born), but note that the United States can justify going to war only as a result of legitimate self-defense (i.e., in response to an attack), per Article 51 of the U.N. charter, or as a result of a Chapter VII resolution of the United Nations Security Council authorizing the use of military force.

The Bush administration violated every legal principle the United States claims to represent, internationally and domestically, when it pre-emptively invaded Iraq in 2003, without provocation and void of any Chapter VII authorization. Two wrongs do not make a right, and it is imperative that the Congress take action to make sure that the administration is not permitted to embark on a similarly illegal and illegitimate course of action regarding Iran.

*“WHEREAS, An attack on Iran is likely to inflame hatred for the U.S. in the Middle East and elsewhere, inspire terrorism, and lessen the security of Americans in Chicago and worldwide.”*

The reputation of the United States has been severely harmed by the irresponsible actions of the Bush administration in Iraq. Without condoning the actions of groups such as al-Qaida, it is important to understand that irresponsible American action abroad does manifest itself in a backlash, and that often this backlash comes in the form of terrorism. Any U.S. attack on Iran would only reinforce the opinions of those in the world already disposed against the United States, and draw many more into their ranks. The only way to truly win the war on terror is to identify the point at which an individual decides to embrace terror as a means of achieving an objective, along with the means for which such a decision was made, and then to take actions to prevent that point from ever being reached. To operate as if American policy and actions in Iraq, and the potential of similar actions and activities in Iran, do not influence this equation is simply to ignore reality and embrace ignorance.

*“WHEREAS, The Iraq war and occupation has already cost the lives of over 4,000 American soldiers, the maiming and wounding of over 38,000 American soldiers, the death and maiming of over one million Iraqi civilians.”*

The war in Iraq has already killed far too many people, American and Iraqi alike. This war is widely recognized as being unsustainable. The key question that must be answered by those who champion a “stay the course” approach is, “How big do you want the Iraqi War Memorial to be?” It is already 4,070-plus names too big. Expanding the conflict to include Iran would not only extend this unwinnable (and unjustified) war, but it would also expand the size of whatever memorial is eventually built to commemorate this national folly. And while America will probably never construct a memorial to the Iraqi people we are responsible for killing and



wounding, it should be understood that these people will never be forgotten by their fellow Iraqis, and indeed the rest of the world. To extend this human suffering and tragedy into Iran would be to create a level of suffering for which America can never, and should never, be forgiven.

*“WHEREAS, According to the nonpartisan National Priorities Project, the Iraq War and occupation has cost American taxpayers more than \$500 billion, the citizens of Chicago nearly \$5.2 billion, and the citizens of each of Chicago’s 50 wards an average of \$104 million, and*

*“WHEREAS, Any conflict with Iran is likely to incur far greater costs and divert more precious national resources away from critical human needs in Chicago and its 50 wards.”*

As the American economy continues to suffer under the strains of the second most expensive war in U.S. history (after World War II), and as the Pentagon continues to consume national treasure which is sorely needed for domestic programs involving the health, education and general welfare of the people, it must be recognized that, in going to war against Iraq, President Bush actually declared war on the American people. Any military action against Iran would only magnify the economic consequences of this criminal folly.

*“BE IT RESOLVED, That the City Council of the City of Chicago does hereby urge the Illinois Congressional delegation to clearly express the will of the people of Chicago in opposing any U.S. attack on Iran, and urging the Bush Administration to pursue diplomatic engagement with that nation, and*

*“BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That suitable copies of the resolution be forwarded to President George W. Bush and all members of the Chicago Congressional delegation.”*

America claims to be the greatest functioning democracy in the world today. While our system is in reality a democratic republic, the will of the people is in fact expressed through those whom they elect to represent them in higher office. The resolution of the Chicago City Council opposing war on Iran is as strong a statement as can be made by a free people outside of an election. For this resolution to have any real meaning, it must be made clear to those in the Illinois congressional delegation, especially those representing the people of Chicago, that this resolution is not simply a collection of words, but rather a collection of political will, and that any representative who fails to act in a manner reflective of the serious intent of this resolution will be held to account. Such accountability is what completes the cycle of representative democracy, and if those whom the citizens of Chicago elect to represent them in Congress fail to respond to the collective resolve of their constituencies, then they must do so at their own political peril if this resolution is to have any meaning.

I am proud of the City Council members for standing up in defense of the ideals and values of not only the citizens of the great city of Chicago but also for setting an example that all cities, towns and villages across America should follow in the coming weeks so that the collective will of the people can resonate within the halls of Congress, and a senseless and illegal war with Iran can be averted. I have always believed that the true strength of America is best measured by the principled action of its people. Chicago is leading the way by taking a principled stand. It is now up to the rest of America to follow suit.

[http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/20080511\\_taking\\_a\\_stand\\_against\\_war](http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/20080511_taking_a_stand_against_war)



## Perspective

# A plea to quiet drums on Iran, and try talk

By Stephen Kinzer

May 11, 2008

The ominous sound of war drums is once again echoing from Washington. Hardly a day goes by without new and more vivid threats against America's newest supposed enemy, Iran. It seems almost unbelievable that the United States, so bloodied and weakened by its adventure in Iraq, would contemplate an attack on another Middle Eastern country. Yet some American leaders seem bent on it.

Just a few months ago, the prospect of an American attack on Iran appeared to recede after U.S. intelligence agencies released an "estimate" asserting that Iran is not seeking to build nuclear weapons. In recent weeks, though, the Bush administration has come up with a new argument. The U.S. must consider attacking Iran, it now says, because Iran is stirring up trouble in Iraq.

It may well be true that groups in Iran are training guerrillas to cross into Iraq and fight U.S.-sponsored factions there, even killing American soldiers. Logic also suggests that Iranian leaders, under constant threat from two nuclear-armed powers, the U.S. and Israel, might wish to develop nuclear weapons of their own.

Americans have every reason to fear these developments. An angry, anti-American Iran with nuclear ambitions could gravely threaten Israel and U.S. interests in the Middle East. Attacking Iran, however, would intensify rather than ease those threats.

It is easy to foresee some of the results that might follow an American bombing campaign against Iran. They include a wave of revenge attacks on U.S. soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan; a surge of terrorism against Western targets; a retaliatory Iranian attack on Israel; a closing of the Strait of Hormuz, through which 20 percent of the world's oil passes; and rage in neighboring Pakistan, a frighteningly unstable country that has both nuclear weapons and powerful political factions sympathetic to the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

An American attack on Iran also would greatly strengthen President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who is now so unpopular among Iranian voters that he may not even seek re-election next year. People everywhere rally behind their leaders when their country is attacked. It is contrary to U.S. interests to take steps that would strengthen the Ahmadinejad faction, which makes no secret of its contempt for reason and the rule of law.

In the face of an imminent threat from Iran, and in the absence of alternatives, the U.S. might be justified in risking even these awful consequences. But there is an alternative, one the U.S. has never tried: direct, bilateral, comprehensive and unconditional negotiations.

It is by no means certain that negotiations with Iran would succeed. Before taking military action, however, the U.S. should at least offer to talk. Attacking Iran without exhausting all peaceful alternatives would not only be immoral, it would further isolate the U.S. and thereby weaken its national security.

If negotiations with Iran begin, the U.S. might soon discover that these two countries share many security interests.



Iran can help stabilize Iraq and Afghanistan. Iran is Al Qaeda's bitter enemy. Iran is terrified of instability in Pakistan. Iran wants to limit Russian influence in the Middle East. Iran's oil infrastructure is in a state of collapse and needs billions of dollars in investment, something the U.S. is well-positioned to provide.

Unlike most other countries in the region, Iran, with a constitution that dates back to 1906 and a long tradition of competitive elections, is fertile ground for democracy. Negotiations that draw Iran back into the world community could not only help defuse a crisis that threatens to spiral into catastrophe but might also lead ultimately to the emergence of a peaceful and prosperous Iran. That is why all of Iran's pro-democracy campaigners, from exiled dissident Akbar Ganji to heroic Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi, are pleading with Washington to abandon its snarling threats and test the negotiating option.

Some in Washington, however, evidently believe that the U.S. should do nothing to promote the emergence of nationalist democracies in the Middle East that might be reluctant to do Washington's bidding. This is a terribly short-sighted policy. Iran has always had and will always have influence in the Middle East. The United States should accept that fact and work to create an Iran that pulls the region toward democracy. Otherwise Iran will choose another big-power partner, most likely Russia or China—not a desirable outcome for the U.S.

There are three possible ways for the U.S. to deal with growing threats from Iran. One is to do nothing, which will allow Iran to intensify its nuclear program in ways that could profoundly threaten the region and global stability. The second is to launch a military attack, which would have devastating "blowback" consequences for the U.S., Israel and the Western world. The third is negotiation. This option is so low-cost that it seems folly not to try.

Stephen Kinzer teaches journalism and political science at Northwestern University and is the author of "All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror." He is scheduled to testify Tuesday before a Chicago City Council committee that is considering a resolution urging negotiations with Iran.

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