

GUEST ESSAY

In the case of Iran: look before you leap

By Dilip Hiro¹

¹ **Dilip Hiro** was born in the Indian sub-continent and educated in India, Britain and America, where he received his Masters degree. After settling in London, he became a full time writer and commentator. An acknowledged authority on Iran, he is author of 25 books – his most recent of which are *Iran Today* (2006) and *Secrets and lies: the true story of the Iraq war* (2005), both published in paperback by Politico's Publishing, London.

‘Look before you leap.’ This is the adage that should be dinned into the ears of the Western leaders considering their options on tackling the Iranian nuclear issue.

More specifically, it should be directed at the leaders of the United States and the United Kingdom, the countries which, in violation of the international law, invaded and occupied Iraq in 2003, a monumentally disastrous adventure, which has cost their combined public treasuries \$500 billion, caused deaths of tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians, and which has brought the standing the US administration of President George W Bush to dangerously low levels in the Muslim world and elsewhere.

The Bush administration has five options on Iran:

1. increasing support for proxy opposition groups to destabilise the regime;
2. constructive engagement following the European approach;
3. tightening economic and military sanctions through the United Nations;
4. pinprick strikes against specific nuclear and military targets; and
5. outright invasion.

It is an open secret that Washington has been vigorously pursuing the policy of funding Iranian opposition groups to destabilise the Islamic regime. This follows from the statement of US secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that Iran is an ‘outpost of tyranny’ – along with Burma, Belarus, Cuba, North Korea and Zimbabwe.

Now, in this outpost of tyranny, there were seven serious candidates for presidency last year. The victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is universally described as ‘unexpected’ or ‘surprising’. How can an electoral result in ‘an outpost of tyranny’ be a surprise?

Since the Islamic revolution of 1979, there have been nine presidential, seven parliamentary, four experts assembly, and two local government elections – with voters always provided with a choice of candidates. The presidential and parliamentary polls were held on time even during the 1980- 88 Iran-Iraq War. By contrast, Britain postponed the general election due during the Second World War. Of the six elected presidents only three have been clerics, and since the first parliamentary poll in 1980, the percentage of mullahs in the parliament has decreased from 51 to 11.

The proceedings of the parliament (the oldest in the region) in this ‘outpost of tyranny’ are broadcast live, and they frequently include strong criticism of the President and robust questioning of ministers.

Little wonder that Washington’s clandestine efforts to destabilise the Iranian regime have so far failed.

Contrast with North Korea

While the Bush White House has joined the Europeans in their pursuit of diplomacy to resolve Iran’s nuclear issue, the US President never tires of repeating that the ‘military option’ remains on the table. When it comes to dealing with North Korea’s nuclear programme, Bush fails to mention the military option. This is the case when North Korea claims to have assembled an atom bomb, and, according to the US Central Intelligence Agency, it has plutonium for half a dozen atom bombs. It also has the most advanced missile system in the world after America and Russia.

While working with Russia and China, which have ruled out United Nations sanctions against Iran, both Bush and Rice continue to mention economic and military sanctions against Tehran. In case the US and its allies do not get their way on the subject at the UN

Security Council, they have the option of imposing such sanctions by their governments. As it is, Washington has maintained a series of tough economic and financial sanctions against the Islamic regime since 1980. Nobody can deny a country taking such a bilateral, non-military step.

Consider the origins of the nuclear option in Iran. It was the US administration of President Richard Nixon which in 1972 convinced the pro-American Shah of Iran to build 22 nuclear power plants. Work on the first such power station near Bushehr started in 1974. Following the 1979 revolution, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini stopped the construction, calling it 'unIslamic'. During the Iran-Iraq War the unfinished plant was demolished by the Iraqi warplanes. It was after Khomeini's death in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, that Russia showed interest in reviving the abandoned Bushehr project. In 1994 it signed a contract with Iran to rebuild the plant. It is yet to be commissioned.

The military option

Given the paucity of spare soldiers, the Pentagon is not in a position to invade Iran as it did Iraq. Nonetheless, ordered by US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, the Centcom headquarters has updated contingency plans for invading Iran, which had hitherto visualised American troops entering Iran along its shoreline.

The Iranian leaders' earlier fear of being surrounded by the American troops in Afghanistan and Iraq had subsided as the Pentagon became mired in Iraq. However, the commander of the Islamic Republican Guard Corps (IRGC) was realistic enough to concede publicly that Iran could resist an American invasion only for a few weeks, and that it would be the guerrilla warfare by the Guards and the Baseej militia that would make it impossible for the Americans to occupy Iran.

Dilip Hiro – In the case of Iran: look before you leap

Peace Conflict & Development, Issue 9, July 2006
available from www.peacestudiesjournal.org.uk

It then emerged that Washington's favoured choice was surgical strikes on Iran.

Revelations in the *New Yorker* and the *Washington Post* in January-February 2005 showed that the Pentagon had been flying drones over Iran since April 2004. They used radar, video, still photography and air filters to test Iranian defences and seek traces of nuclear activity. Iranians noticed drones in the Caspian region, Natanz, Isfahan, and along the Iraq border, and the local press ran stories about Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs). An unnamed Iranian security official told the *Washington Post* that the security chiefs decided not to engage the drones because to do so would give information about the country's air defence capabilities. Iran protested through the Swiss embassy which has an American Interests Section. Iran's Intelligence Minister Ali Yunusi said: 'Most of the shining objects that our people see in Iran's airspace are American espionage equipment used to spy on Iran's nuclear and military facilities,' and added that Iran had shot down some drones and discovered spying devices in them. (*Washington Post*, 13 February 2005; *Reuters*, 16 February 2005)

America's aerial reconnaissance was complemented by ground action. In his mid-January article in the *New Yorker*, Seymour Hersh revealed that undercover American commando groups and other Special Forces units had been conducting clandestine reconnaissance missions inside Iran since at least July 2004.

Another American task force, assisted by Islamabad, had infiltrated Iran to search for underground installations and place remote detection devices to sample the environment for radioactive emissions or other evidence of the uranium-enrichment program. The payback for Pakistan was that Washington would not pressure President General Pervez Musharraf to hand over Abdul Qadeer Khan – 'the father of Pakistan's nuclear bomb', who had sold nuclear secrets to several countries – either to it or the IAEA for questioning. 'Tell us what you know about Iran and we will let your Khan guys go.' That

was the deal between America and Pakistan, according to Hersh's informant, a former high-level intelligence official. It was the American neoconservatives' version of short-term gain at the cost of the long-term goal of eliminating the black market for nuclear proliferation, the official added.

Washington's aim was to gather information on about forty of Iran's declared and suspected chemical, nuclear and missile sites, with about three-quarters to be destroyed from the air, and the rest, being too close to population centres, or buried too deep, to be targeted by commando units. 'The [hawkish] civilians in the Pentagon want to go into Iran and destroy as much of the military infrastructure as possible,' a government consultant with close ties to the Pentagon told Hersh. These civilians argued that the only thing the Iranians understood was pressure and that they also needed 'to be whacked'.

But the attackers could not be sure whether they had hit all the sites or how soon the Iranians could rebuild the destroyed facilities. 'Our nuclear technology comes from our scientists [and] we can transfer our nuclear workshops under mountains and carry out our enrichment where no bomb or missile can be effective,' Hassan Rouhani, the then Secretary General of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), told state TV. 'We are seeking to resolve our issues with America. But they are blocking any chance of resolving the issues.' While pursuing an active military plan clandestinely, Bush 'expressed his preference for' diplomacy in public.

For the Pentagon to do the job thoroughly, it would need to mount 'something in the neighbourhood of 1,000 strike sorties' experts agreed. Its targets would include factories and workshops that made centrifuge parts and yellow cake conversion equipment. There was a strong likelihood that some of the suspect sites would turn out to be innocuous factories or schools. This was all the more likely since, according to Risen's book *State of War*, in early 2004 a CIA officer mistakenly sent information to an agent in Iran – who

was a double agent – which helped the Tehran government to uproot the CIA espionage network in Iran, leaving the agency “blind” in the country.

Apparently, it was after this debacle that the CIA resorted to reconnaissance drones from April 2004 onwards.

The consequences of military strikes by America or Israel would be dire. Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki was more specific, warning that any military action against Iran would result in an escalating crisis which could further destabilise the Middle East by ‘intensifying US and British difficulties in Iraq and Afghanistan’.

The response of Iran at the popular and official levels would be as much anti-American as it would be anti-Israeli. Israel would face retaliation by the Lebanese Hizbollah armed with Iranian-supplied short-range missiles as well as drones. That in turn would scupper any chance of peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians. By stopping its oil exports in a very tight market, Iran would cause a steep rise in oil prices.

Overall, military strikes against Iran would raise anti-Israeli and anti-American feelings in the world of Shias at a time when anti-U.S. sentiment is running high among Sunnis in the region due to the Pentagon’s occupation of Iraq. Shias are an important minority in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. In Pakistan most Shias, engaged in commerce and business, are comparatively well off, and they therefore exercise economic and political power beyond their numerical size. In oil-rich Kuwait, Shias are a quarter of the population. In Saudi Arabia, Shias are concentrated in the oil-rich eastern province.

Any military action against Iran, the world's most populous and important Shia country in the world, will inflame feelings in a region which contains three-fifths of the global petroleum reserves.

Finally, given the infiltration of Iranian agents into a wide variety of Iraqi factions, Iran would activate its covert alliances in Iraq, resulting in attacks on the American forces by Shia partisans and a further destabilisation of Iraq.

In any case, the military strikes will merely delay Iran's nuclear program, not eliminate it. And they would alienate Washington's allies in the West and the Muslim world, and turn many Iranians, who dislike the theocratic regime, into America's enemies.

Their immediate impact would be to make the Iranian nation rally round its hard line leaders. Actually, this is already happening.

This is what happened in September 1980 when Iraqi President Saddam Hussein invaded the 19-month-old Islamic Republic of Iran ruled by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Saddam Hussein expected to capture Iran's oil-rich province of Khuzistan in three weeks and induce the overthrow of the Islamic regime. In the event, all Iranians irrespective of their political views rallied round the national government. The war dragged on nearly eight years and ended as the longest conventional war of the 20th century.

Blending nationalism with Shia Islam

As a people with a recorded chronicle of 6,000 years, who were spared European colonisation, Iranians are staunch nationalists. Some would even call them chauvinists. Persian, spoken by a vast majority of Iranians, has a long history as the literary and court language not only of present day Iran but also of the Indian sub-continent and the

Ottoman Empire. It was the Iranian architecture which was refined by the Mughal rulers of the Indian sub-continent and found its apotheosis in the Taj Mahal in the 17th century.

Today's Iran is half the size of India. It has land frontiers with seven countries – ranging from Pakistan to Armenia to Turkey – all of them Muslim except Armenia. It has fluvial borders with Russia and Kazakhstan. It is the only country with shorelines on the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea and the Caspian Sea. It is thus the most strategic country in the world.

If attacked and/or occupied by America, Iran would get popular support from all of the adjoining countries, except Armenia, Russia and Kazakhstan.

Though Iranians were late in switching from Sunni Islam to the Shia sect, founded by Imam Ali, today 90 per cent of them are Shia. A predominantly Shia sentiment finds outlets in mourning Imams Ali (assassinated) and his sons, Hassan (poisoned), and Hussein (killed in a grossly uneven battle and revered as the Great Martyr). The idea of standing up for one's moral and legal rights, even dying for them, is deeply embedded among Shias.

That is what led Iran's leading human rights lawyer and a Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi, and Muhammad Sahimi, petroleum engineering professor at the University of Southern California, to warn in an op-ed in the *International Herald Tribune*: 'Given the Iranians' fierce nationalism and the Shias' tradition of martyrdom, any military move on Iran would receive a response that would engulf the entire region in fire.' ■