

IRAN – THE NEXT TARGET

*"I am a firm believer in the people. If given the truth, they can be depended upon to meet any national crisis. The great point is to bring them the real facts."
Abraham Lincoln*

September's announcement by President Barack Obama and his French and British counterparts about Iran's covert nuclear activities had all the ingredients of a blockbuster, three heads of state, the international press corps, a dramatic revelation, and stark warnings about the consequences facing Tehran.

Indeed, the President's disclosure that Iran has constructed a covert uranium enrichment facility represented a dramatic effort to increase the pressure on Iranian leaders on the eve of highly anticipated talks between the Islamic state and major world powers on the nuclear issue.

But where Iran is concerned, actions often have an equally thorny reaction. While the Presidential press briefing succeeded in gaining headlines, it is hardly certain that it will have the intended impact on next week's talks between Iran and the P5+1 in Geneva. Rather than unnerving Tehran and inducing a more cooperative approach to the nuclear negotiations, today's blockbuster may only further entrench the regime's recalcitrance and leave Washington with no more viable alternatives for curbing Iran's nuclear ambitions.

At first glance, the timing of today's announcement may seem like an ideal way to force Tehran's hand. But in reality, the decision to go public today was prompted by the Iranians themselves, who provided a belated and incomplete disclosure earlier in September to the International Atomic Energy Agency after learning of its discovery.

Beyond next negotiations, the real question about Obama's announcement is its impact on decision-makers in Moscow and Beijing, whose posture will make or break any efforts to impose rigorous sanctions on Iran.

Here too, it would be a mistake to leap to optimistic conclusions. Washington reportedly has known of the facility's existence for years, and if this information was shared with the other members of the P5+1, then its existence has not yet persuaded their capitals to support serious sanctions. More to the point, the difficulty with assembling international support for robust economic measures against Iran has never involved doubt over Iran's intentions or differences over the desirability of preventing Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold.

Rather, the long track record of Russia and China on this issue has made it clear that neither capital will fully jettison its strategically and economically valuable relationship with Tehran in order to curtail Iran's nuclear ambitions.

The Obama administration is laying plans to cut Iran's economic links to the rest of the world if next talks over the country's nuclear ambitions founder, according to officials and outside experts familiar with the plans.

While officials stress that they hope Iran will agree to open its nuclear program to inspection, they are prepared by year's end to make it increasingly difficult for Iranian companies to ship goods around the world. The administration is targeting, in particular, the insurance and reinsurance companies that underwrite the risk of such transactions.

Officials are also looking at ways to keep goods from reaching Iran by targeting companies that get around trading restrictions by sending shipments there through third parties in Dubai, United Arab Emirates; Hong Kong; and other trading hubs.

The administration has limited options in unilaterally targeting Iran, largely because it wants to avoid measures so severe that they would undermine consensus among countries pressing the Iranian government. A military strike is also increasingly unpalatable because, officials said, it probably would only briefly delay any attempt by Iran to produce a nuclear weapon.

Whatever steps are taken, officials said, their goal would be to disrupt the Iranian economy across many sectors, particularly businesses that help support Iran's military and elite.

As a practical matter, the effort would build on efforts during the Bush administration that targeted leading Iranian banks and the key Iranian shipping line.

In many cases, rather than impose new sanctions, they would need only to tighten enforcement of existing rules and regulations. Indeed, the key architect of President George W. Bush's effort, Treasury Undersecretary Stuart Levey, was retained by President Obama to ensure continuity in a possible squeeze on Iran.

In the case of the insurance industry, the administration would extend a prohibition against providing the "transfer of financial resources or services" to aid Iran's nuclear and missile programs, currently enshrined in U.N. Security Council Resolution 1737, to include insurance companies, export credits and the like.

On the beginning of October 2009, Iran has raised tensions in the region with two days of missile tests, which were previously scheduled but came just days ahead of last 1st October's meeting in Geneva between Iranian diplomats and representatives of major powers, including the United States.

The US administration is pressing for Iran to provide international inspectors immediate access to a second uranium-enrichment facility that was made public last week and to agree to serious talks to rein in its nuclear ambitions.

"Towards the end of the year, we'll be able to calculate how much progress" has been made in those talks, State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said and "If they continue to fail to answer the questions, then obviously there will be implications and consequences to that, as well."

The administration has sought to display a united front with its partners in the talks, Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China. But Russia and China are especially wary of imposing more sanctions beyond those contained in three U.N. Security Council resolutions aiming at deterring Iran.

Russian officials began backing off from statements made on September by President Dmitry Medvedev suggesting that Russian resistance to sanctions was weakening.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told Russian news agencies that the missile launches were "worrisome" but added, "I am convinced restraint is needed." Similarly, a Foreign Ministry source told Russian news agencies that Western powers needed to restrain themselves.

Both Russia and China have veto power on the U.N. Security Council, and reluctance by either to support additional sanctions would make it extremely difficult and time-consuming to erect additional international measures.

But many European and Asian countries demand the cover of a U.N. resolution before taking economic action against another country. As a result, administration officials are focused on measures that they can argue are already authorized under existing resolutions

Ninety percent is enforcement," said Patrick Clawson, deputy director for research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "Ten percent is new rules. They have the mechanisms in place."

Already, more than 80 banks around the world have been pressured to cut their ties to Iran, saying that any cost-benefit analysis would show that the business is not worth the risk of unwittingly assisting groups such as the Revolutionary Guard Corps.

The U.S. government has also backed the message with tough fines against some foreign banks. The Dutch bank ABN Amro in 2005 agreed to pay \$80 million for violating U.S. sanctions against Iran and Libya, and Lloyds this year paid a \$350 million fine for secretly channeling Iranian and Sudanese money into the American banking system.

Insurance is the lifeblood of the shipping industry, but often insuring cargo consists of several layers. One critical aspect is reinsurance, in which an insurance company spreads the risk of a deal to dozens of other companies around the world. If the pool of potential reinsurers for Iranian goods shrinks because of international pressure, shipping would become increasingly difficult and costly for Iran.

Last year, as an example of the emerging strategy, the Treasury Department designated Iran's national maritime carrier, Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL), as engaging in deceptive activities such as repeatedly changing its ships' names in an effort to shroud its involvement in illicit commerce and proliferation activities. The action essentially warned U.S. financial firms not to engage in any business with it or its subsidiaries.

Officials expect the European Union to follow suit if talks with Iran fail to make progress this year, which would make it difficult for such companies as Lloyds or Munich Re to continue providing re-insurance for Iranian business.

Early this year, an IRISL-chartered ship, the Monchegorsk, was stopped at Cyprus carrying weaponry allegedly headed for Hezbollah, an incident that U.S. officials said highlights the dangers of reputable financial firms dealing with Iranian entities.

Even so, the effort is not likely to produce instantaneous results.

"The idea of targeting insurance and reinsurance is a good one," said David F. Gordon, a former State Department official who is director of research at Eurasia Group, a political risk and consulting firm. "It is the only potential game-changer around. But I am not sure it will be enough to move the Iranians and do it in a timely fashion. The Iranians are very committed to the program."

Clearly, there are numerous risks regarding neoconservative strategy towards Iran. First, unlike Iraq, Iran has a robust military capability.

Secondly, a repeat of any "Shock and Awe" tactics is not advisable given that Iran has installed sophisticated anti-ship missiles on the Island of Abu Musa, and therefore controls the critical Strait of Hormuz.

In the case of a U.S. attack, a shut down of the Strait of Hormuz, where all of the Persian Gulf bound oil tankers must pass, could easily trigger a market panic with oil prices skyrocketing to \$100 per barrel or more.

World oil production is now flat out, and a major interruption would escalate oil prices to a level that would set off a global Depression. Why is the US administration willing to take such risks? Simply stated, their goal is U.S. global domination.

The CIA and DIA have war-gamed the likely consequences of a U.S. pre-emptive strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. No one liked the outcome; the war games were unsuccessful at preventing the conflict from escalating.

Despite the impressive power of the U.S. military and the ability of the intelligence agencies to facilitate interventions, it would be perilous and possibly ruinous for the U.S to intervene in Iran given the dire situation in Iraq.

The Monterey Institute of International Studies provided an extensive analysis of the possible consequences of a preemptive attack on Iran's nuclear facilities and warned of the following: "Considering the extensive financial and national policy investment Iran has committed to its nuclear projects, it is almost certain that an attack by Israel or the United States would result in immediate retaliation.

A likely scenario includes an immediate Iranian missile counterattack on Israel and U.S. bases in the Gulf, followed by a very serious effort to destabilize Iraq and foment all-out confrontation between the United States and Iraq's Shi'i majority. Iran could also opt to destabilize Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states with a significant Shi'i population, and induce Lebanese Hizbullah to launch a series of rocket attacks on Northern Israel." And to add on this scenario, Europe, China and Russia will be also affected by an US-Israeli attack on Iran. An attack on Iranian nuclear facilities could have various adverse effects on U.S. interests in the Middle East and the world.

Most important, in the absence of evidence of an Iranian illegal nuclear program, an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities by the U.S. or Israel would be likely to strengthen Iran's international stature and reduce the threat of international sanctions against Iran. Such an event is more likely to embolden and expand Iran's nuclear aspirations and capabilities in the long term, one thing is for certain, it would not be just another Osirak.

The US administration could undertake a desperate military strategy to thwart Iran's nuclear ambitions while simultaneously attempting to prevent the Iranian oil Bourse from initiating a euro-based system for oil trades.

The later would require forced "regime change" by creating internal disorders and the U.S. occupation of Iran. Obviously this would require a military draft. Objectively speaking, the post-war debacle in Iraq has clearly shown that such Imperial policies will be a catastrophic failure. Alternatively, with President Obama and a more enlightened U.S. administration could undertake multilateral negotiations with the EU and OPEC regarding a dual oil-currency system, in conjunction with global monetary reform. Either way, U.S. policy makers will soon face two difficult choices: monetary compromise or continued petrodollar warfare.

To date, one of the more difficult technical obstacles concerning a euro-based oil transaction trading system is the lack of a euro-denominated oil pricing standard, or oil marker as it is referred to in the industry.

The three current oil markers are U.S. dollar denominated, which include the West Texas Intermediate crude (WTI), Norway Brent crude, and the UAE Dubai crude. However, since the spring of 2003, Iran has required payments in the euro currency for its European and Asian/ACU exports, although the oil pricing for trades are still denominated in the dollar.

Therefore, a potentially significant news development was reported in June 2004 announcing Iran's intentions to create of an Iranian oil Bourse. (The word "bourse" refers to a stock exchange for securities trading, and is derived from the French stock exchange in Paris, the Federation Internationale des Bourses de Valeurs.) This announcement portended competition would arise between the Iranian oil bourse and London's International Petroleum Exchange (IPE), as well as the New York Mercantile Exchange (NYMEX). It should be noted that both the IPE and NYMEX are owned by U.S. corporations.

The macroeconomic implications of a successful Iranian Bourse are noteworthy. Considering that Iran has switched to the euro for its oil payments from E.U. and ACU customers, it would be logical to assume the proposed Iranian Bourse will usher in a fourth crude oil marker, denominated in the euro currency.

Such a development would remove the main technical obstacle for a broad-based petroeuro system for international oil trades. From a purely economic and monetary perspective, a petroeuro system is a logical development given that the European Union imports more oil from OPEC producers than does the U.S., and the E.U. accounts for 55% of imports into the Middle East in 2007.

Acknowledging that many of the oil contracts for Iran and Saudi Arabia are linked to the United Kingdom's Brent crude marker, the Iranian bourse could create a significant shift in the flow of international commerce into the Middle East.

If Iran's bourse becomes a successful alternative for oil trades, it would challenge the hegemony currently enjoyed by the financial centers in both London (IPE) and New York (NYMEX).

So if Iran is to launch an oil trading market for Middle East and OPEC producers that could threaten the supremacy of London's International Petroleum Exchange and Nymex.

Some industry experts have warned the Iranians and other OPEC producers that western exchanges are controlled by big financial and oil corporations, which have a vested interest in market volatility.

While the US is uncertain how much of the attack plans were leaked to Iran, it could change some of the invasion tactics, but the broad parameters would be kept intact.

Regardless of the potential U.S. response to an Iranian petroeuro system, the emergence of an oil exchange market in the Middle East is not entirely surprising given the domestic peaking and decline of oil exports in the U.S. and U.K, in comparison to the remaining oil reserves in Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

Member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, Iran is the producer group's second-largest producer behind Saudi Arabia, as well as oil producers from the Caspian region would eventually participate in the exchange.

Along with several other members of OPEC, Iranian oil officials believe crude trading on the New York Mercantile Exchange and the IPE is controlled by the oil majors and big financial companies, who essentially benefit from market volatility.

One of the Federal Reserve's nightmares would be, when it appears international buyers will have a choice of buying a barrel of oil for \$70 or \$ 80 dollars on the NYMEX and IPE, or purchase a barrel of oil for €50 to €60 euros via the Iranian Bourse. This assumes the euro maintains its current 20-25% appreciated value relative to the dollar and assumes that some sort of "intervention" is not undertaken against Iran. The upcoming bourse will introduce petrodollar versus petroeuro currency hedging, and fundamentally new dynamics to the biggest market in the world, global oil and gas trades

There are three pivotal events that would facilitate an OPEC transition to euros :

- (1) if and when Norway's Brent crude will be re-dominated in euros,
- (2) if and when the U.K. will adopts the euro,
- (3) and whether or not the euro will gains parity valuation relative to the dollar, and the EU's proposed expansion plans were successful. (Note: Both of the later two criteria have transpired: the euro's valuation has been above the dollar since late 2002, and the euro-based E.U. enlarged from 12 to 27 countries).

In the meantime, the United Kingdom remains uncomfortably juxtaposed between the financial interests of the U.S. banking nexus (New York/Washington) and the E.U. financial centers (Paris/Frankfurt).

The implementation of the proposed Iranian oil Bourse (exchange) if successful in a near future and in utilizing the euro as its oil transaction currency standard, essentially negates the necessity of the previous two criteria regarding the solidification of a "petroeuro" system for international oil trades.

It should also be noted that last year, Russia and China have both increased their central bank holdings of the euro currency, which appears to be a coordinated move to facilitate the anticipated ascendance of the euro as a second World Reserve currency.

This situation could also be unstead of a nuclear military program, an argument to bomb Iran nuclear's facilities and to destabilize the country.

In 2005, the United States, Russia and China joined the European countries in trying to press Iran with a combination of sticks and carrots. But Iran repeatedly said the carrots, economic and political incentives, were not good enough, and it shrugged off the sticks, which came in the form of three U.N. Security Council resolutions demanding that it halt enrichment activities.

The initial package of incentives offered by the six countries in 2006 included only a vague reference to Iran's security concerns because the Bush administration insisted that that section of the offer be largely gutted.

By contrast, a revised package put forth in 2008 and reaffirmed by the Obama administration this year, pledges to negotiate extensive security commitments, including supporting Iran in "playing an important and constructive role in international affairs."

The Obama administration, like the Bush administration, has also supported Solana's concept of a "freeze for a freeze," a six-week period for preliminary talks that blurs the lines between suspension and discussion. Under Solana's plan, talks could begin as long as the allies halt efforts to increase sanctions and Iran does not expand its nuclear program. Then formal negotiations would start as soon as Iran suspended enrichment. Bush drew a line at formal U.S. participation until Iran suspended enrichment, but Obama dropped that requirement.

In any case, the Iranians repeatedly insist that they will never suspend their enrichment activities. U.S. officials said last september that they are open to other ideas for jump-starting serious negotiations, but suspension remains a goal.

But at present time, the situation is under the supervision of top diplomats from the 5+1 countries, the US, UK, France, Germany, Russia and China, which met with representatives from Iran on last 1st October 2009 to discuss that country's controversial nuclear program.

What gave special urgency to this meeting, as opposed to most of the previous ones, was first, US success under the new administration to build an international case for new punitive sanctions, and second, the revelation, in days leading up to the meeting, that Iran was operating a clandestine second facility for enriching uranium near the holy city of Qum.

Unexpectedly, and to the surprise of most experts and diplomats, this first round of meetings seems to have borne some tangible, though provisional, results for both sides. To the UN's nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the 5+1, Iran made three promises.

It pledged to open the gates of the hitherto-secret Qum center to IAEA inspectors; it set a date for a follow-up meeting; and, significantly, it promised to

turn over nearly 75 percent of its known enriched uranium stockpile to France and Russia for supervised re-processing.

In turn, Iran managed to broaden the talks to include political and regional issues; to engage the US at the highest levels in 30 years; and, at least temporarily, to weaken the case for sanctions.

The meeting did not get off to an auspicious start. On 21 September, Iran reluctantly admitted to the world the existence of the secret enrichment center in Qum. This was necessitated only after it had become clear that the US, UK and France were about to make a public announcement on the issue at the UN General Assembly.

Apparently, the three governments had learned about the Qum complex as early as 2006 but had kept mum about it for fear that without an airtight case of Iranian duplicity, they could be accused of torpedoing the negotiations, much the same way the Bush administration was seen as acting in months prior to the Iraqi invasion. Iran has claimed that it built the clandestine facility because it feared Israeli air strikes on its other facility.

There are two theories as to how foreign intelligence services first found out about the center. Publicly, it is claimed that aerial photos of the area had shown air defense batteries near the vicinity of the site; a suspicion that was later corroborated by unusual construction activity nearby. This seems rather implausible since Iranians are not apt to build air defense systems during the construction period, particularly since the site happens to be located deep inside a mountain.

The more likely scenario is that information had been obtained from recent defections from Iran. Two recent such cases are Ali Rza Asgari, a brigadier Iranian general, and an Iranian nuclear physicist, Shahram Amiri, who defected recently to Saudi Arabia while supposedly making the hajj pilgrimage.

What gives further credence to this hypothesis is that last August (two months before the UN General Assembly meeting), Iran inexplicably introduced a motion at the IAEA's Non-Aligned Movement caucus to prohibit air attacks directed at nuclear facilities. The motion, which failed to pass, seems to have anticipated the possibility of information handed over to the US and its allies and the need for a plausible explanation for the Qum center once the facts were revealed.

The news of the existence of a secret nuclear center operating outside the eyes of IAEA inspectors was potentially quite damaging to Tehran. By Iran's own admission, the Qum center was too small for civilian purposes, yet it was not too small to accommodate the needs of a nuclear weapons program.

Russia and China, de facto allies of Iran and the two countries that have resisted new sanctions the most, were informed on 23 and 24 September 2009, respectively.

At this point, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev had no choice but to say that sanctions were inevitable. "The construction of a new uranium enrichment plant contradicts the US Security Council's repeated demands," he was quoted as saying.

US President Barack Obama, French President Nicolas Sarkozy and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown made a special point of the development by jointly addressing the opening of the G20 summit on 25 September in Pittsburgh.

This was done apparently when it was learned that Iran was preparing to go public with the information and it had already by that time informed the IAEA.

As for Iran, the government reiterated its position that it would not tolerate the introduction of harsh new sanctions and vaguely threatened to retaliate if and when they were imposed.

The next two important milestones are the arrival of the IAEA inspectors in Iran and the degree to which Iran would allow freedom of activity to them and also the results of the next round of meetings in Geneva, both scheduled for later in October.

It is impossible to predict with any degree of certainty how the situation will unfold in the next few weeks.

On the one hand, both sides are anxious to avoid a breakdown of talks and to continue with the momentum thus gained. Iran is politically and economically at its worst state in decades and it could ill-afford to have new sanctions, especially on its gasoline imports and its energy sector imposed on it.

The Obama administration, which will be the undisputed leader in the anti-Iran coalition, is grappling with several domestic and foreign policy problems simultaneously, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Arab-Israeli peace and the US economy.

Yet, there are several factors that could abort this early experience in amicability. First, Iran desperate as it is to ease tensions is determined to reach the 'breakout' option, apparently, with little regard for the costs incurred.

The breakout option is the ability of a country to move to nuclear weaponization in a short order of time, if it so desires.

For example, as important and symbolic as the present agreement is, Iran has not pledged to send all its present and future stockpile of enriched uranium abroad, nor is it expected to accede to that demand later on when the Geneva talks reconvene.

Additionally, Iran, in the next two and half weeks before IAEA inspectors reach Qum, is expected to clean up much of the activities that had been carried out in there. Moreover, nuclear experts do not rule out that the Qum complex may be only one in a string of clandestine facilities yet to be discovered in the months and years to come.

The only way to find out about the foregoing is for Iran to allow unfettered access to its nuclear scientists, equipment and records. Iran has already indicated it considers these demands infringements on its sovereignty and would resist them strongly.

Still, the recent transfer of enriched uranium buys some time for the US and its allies by reducing Iran's stockpile, while other non-threatening measures could be contemplated. The US and Iran may also accept an interim solution before the crisis really reaches the boiling point and Iran might throw in other limited concessions, like notching up IAEA monitoring a bit, and the US might allow some enrichment by Iran.

But in the worst case, likes said by a former US defense secretary, Israel will opt to take military action against Iran before Tehran makes a major nuclear breakthrough. William Perry, the US Secretary of Defense under president Bill Clinton, said last January that a conflict between Israel and Iran is highly likely to happen during US President-elect Barack Obama's first year in office. "It seems clear that Israel will not sit by idly while Iran takes defiant steps toward becoming a nuclear power," said Perry.

Tel Aviv accuses Tehran of developing a nuclear military program. Iran, a signatory to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), insists its program is poised for the civilian applications of the technology.

His comments came at a time when Israel was moving forward with its full-scale incursion into the Gaza Strip, which had sparked universal condemnation.

Some 783 people have died since the start of the Israeli operation on December 27, while 3,300 others are reported wounded in Gaza.

UN humanitarian chief John Holmes said that Israel's actions in Gaza were "shocking" violations of the laws of war, putting more than 20,000 people in a critical state of emergency. The humanitarian situation in Gaza was spiraling to a critical state as water and sewage systems were collapsing, hospitals were running on backup generators and access to the wounded remains very restricted.

As an indication of a potential bombing of the Iranian's nuclear facilities in last June, Israel carried out military exercises over the Mediterranean involving more than 100 F-16 and F-15 fighters in what was interpreted as a rehearsal for an attack on Iran's nuclear plants. At the time, *The New York Times* reported that as well as sending a warning to Tehran, the exercise was intended as a message to the US that Israel was prepared to act militarily if diplomatic efforts to stop Iran from producing bomb-grade uranium faltered.

Israel has carried out two strikes on suspected nuclear sites over the past 30 years. In 1981, its jets bombed Iraq's nuclear reactor at Osirak, and in September 2007, Israeli aircraft bombed a structure in Syria that was alleged to have housed a nuclear reactor.

Any new attack against Iran would be much more complicated, with the country's uranium enrichment plants spread across many sites.

Iran's comparatively sophisticated military and its distance from Israel would present further complications for military planners and risk setting off a full-scale war. Something for sure, an Israeli's bombing on Iranian's nuclear facilities will have dramatic and unpredictable consequences

Even with the horrible results of the past years, Congress is abuzz with plans to change the Iranian government. There is little resistance to the rising clamor for "democratizing" Iran, even though their current president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is an elected leader. Though Iran is hardly a perfect democracy, its system is far superior to most of the Arab allies about which the United States never complain. Already the coordinating propaganda has galvanized the American people against Iran for the supposed threat it poses to the « free world » with weapons of mass destruction that are no more present than those Saddam Hussein was alleged to have had.

It's amazing how soon after being thoroughly discredited over the charges levied against Saddam Hussein the US administration is willing to use the same arguments against Iran. It's frightening to see how easily Congress, the media, and the people accept many of the same arguments against Iran that were used to justify an invasion of Iraq.

Since 2001, United States have spent over \$300 billion, and occupied two Muslim nations, Afghanistan and Iraq. For sure, America is poorer but certainly not safer for it.

United States under the Bush administration invaded Afghanistan to get Osama bin Laden, the ring leader behind 9/11. This effort has been virtually abandoned. Even though the Taliban was removed from power in Afghanistan, most of the country is now occupied and controlled by warlords who manage a drug trade bigger than ever before. Removing the Taliban from power in Afghanistan actually served the interests of Iran, the Taliban's arch enemy, more than the US-NATO coalition.

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 was hyped as a noble mission, justified by misrepresentations of intelligence concerning Saddam Hussein and his ability to

attack the United States and his neighbors. This failed policy has created the current chaos in Iraq, chaos that many describe as a civil war. Saddam Hussein is out of power and most people are pleased. Yet some Iraqis, who dream of stability, long for his authoritarian rule. But once again, Saddam Hussein's removal benefited the Iranians, who consider Saddam Hussein an arch enemy.

The US obsession with democracy, which is clearly conditional, when one looks at the response to the recent Palestinian elections, will allow the majority Shia to claim leadership title if Iraq's election actually leads to an organized government. This delights the Iranians, who are close allies of the Iraqi Shia.

Talk about unintended consequences! This war has produced chaos, civil war, death and destruction, and huge financial costs. It has eliminated two of Iran's worst enemies and placed power in Iraq with Iran's best friends.

Even this apparent failure of policy does nothing to restrain the current march toward a similar confrontation with Iran. What will it take for America to learn from his failures?

Common sense tells us the war in Iraq soon will spread to Iran. Fear of imaginary nuclear weapons or an incident involving Iran, whether planned or accidental, will rally the support needed for Westerners to move on Muslim country #3.

All the past failures and unintended consequences will be forgotten.

Even with deteriorating support for the Iraq war, new information, well planned propaganda, or a major incident will override the skepticism and heartache of a frustrating fight. Vocal opponents of an attack on Iran again will be labeled unpatriotic, unsupportive of the troops, and sympathetic to Iran's radicals.

It's already assumed by many in Washington that Iran is dead serious about obtaining a nuclear weapon, and is a much more formidable opponent than Iraq. Besides, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad threatened to destroy Israel and that cannot stand. Washington sees Iran as a greater threat than Iraq ever was, a threat that cannot be ignored.

Iran's history is being ignored, just as they ignored Iraq's history. This ignorance or deliberate misrepresentation of a recent relationship to Iraq and Iran is required to generate the fervor needed to attack once again a country that poses actually no threat to anybody.

The US policies toward Iran have been more provocative than those towards Iraq. Of course, in 2002, President Bush labeled Iran part of the axis of evil and unnecessarily provoked their anger, but the US mistakes with Iran started a long time before this president Bush took office.

In 1953, the CIA, with help of the British, participated in overthrowing the democratic elected leader, Mohamed Mossadegh. They placed the Shah in power. He ruled ruthlessly but protected their oil interests, and for that they protected him, that is until 1979. They even provided him with Iran's first nuclear reactor. Evidently they didn't buy the argument that his oil supplies precluded a need for civilian nuclear energy. From 1953 to 1979 his authoritarian rule served to incite a radical Muslim opposition led by the Ayatollah Khomeini, who overthrew the Shah and took American hostages in 1979. This blowback event was slow in coming, but Muslims have long memories. The hostage crisis and overthrow of the Shah by the Ayatollah was a major victory for the radical Islamists.

Most Americans either never knew about or easily forgot the unwise meddling in the internal affairs of Iran in 1953.

During the 1980s, America further antagonized Iran by supporting the Iraqis in their invasion of Iran. This made the relationship with Iran worse, while sending a clear message to Saddam Hussein that invading a neighboring country is not

all that bad. When Saddam Hussein got the message from the State Department that his plan to invade Kuwait was not of much concern to the United States he immediately proceeded to do so. They in a way encouraged him to do it almost like they encouraged him to go into Iran. Of course this time the US reaction was quite different, and all of a sudden the friendly ally Saddam Hussein became the arch enemy.

The American people may forget this flip-flop, but those who suffered from it never forget. And the Iranians remember well the meddling in their affairs. Labeling the Iranians part of the axis of evil further alienated them and contributed to the animosity directed toward USA.

For whatever reasons, soon or later, the US administration and most probably the Neo-conservatives might give, they are bound and determined to confront the Iranian government and demand changes in its leadership. This policy will further spread the military presence and undermine the US security. The sad truth is that the supposed dangers posed by Iran are no more real than those claimed about Iraq. Actually, the charges made against Iran are unsubstantiated, and amazingly sound very similar to the false charges made against Iraq.

One would think promoters of the war against Iraq would be a little bit more reluctant to use the same arguments to stir up hatred toward Iran.

The American people and Congress should be more cautious in accepting these charges at face value. Yet it seems the propaganda is working, since few in Washington object as Congress passes resolutions condemning Iran and asking for UN sanctions against her.

There is no evidence of a threat to America by Iran, and no reason to plan and initiate a confrontation with this country. There are many reasons not to do so, however. Iran does not have a nuclear weapon and there's no evidence that she is working on one, for now it is only conjecture.

If Iran had a nuclear weapon, why would this be different from Israel, Pakistan, India, and North Korea having one? Why does Iran have less right to a defensive weapon than these other countries?

If Iran had a nuclear weapon, the odds of her initiating an attack against anybody, which would guarantee her own annihilation, are zero. And the same goes for the possibility she would place weapons in the hands of a non-state terrorist group.

Pakistan has spread nuclear technology throughout the world, and in particular to the North Koreans. They flaunt international restrictions on nuclear weapons. But the US administration reward them just as they reward India.

They needlessly and foolishly threaten Iran even though they have no nuclear weapons. But listen to what a leading Israeli historian, Martin Van Creveld, had to say about this: "Obviously, we don't want Iran to have a nuclear weapon, and I don't know if they're developing them, but if they're not developing them, they're crazy."

There's been a lot of misinformation regarding Iran's nuclear program. This distortion of the truth has been used to pump up emotions in Congress to pass resolutions condemning her and promoting UN sanctions.

IAEA Director General Mohamed El Baradi has never reported any evidence of "undeclared" sources or special nuclear material in Iran, or any diversion of nuclear material.

Westerners demand that Iran prove it is not in violation of nuclear agreements, which is asking them impossibly to prove a negative. El Baradi states Iran is in compliance with the nuclear NPT required IAEA safeguard agreement.

Let's don't forget that the weapons we feared Saddam Hussein had were supplied to him by the U.S., and we refused to believe UN inspectors and the CIA that he no longer had them.

Likewise, Iran received her first nuclear reactor from United States. Now They're hysterically wondering if someday she might decide to build a bomb in self interest. Anti-Iran voices, beating the drums of confrontation, distort the agreement made in Paris and the desire of Iran to restart the enrichment process. Their suspension of the enrichment process was voluntary, and not a legal obligation. Iran has an absolute right under the NPT to develop and use nuclear power for peaceful purposes, and this is now said to be an egregious violation of the NPT.

It's the U.S. and her allies that are distorting and violating the NPT. Likewise the provision of nuclear materials to India was a clear violation of the NPT.

The demand for UN sanctions was being strongly encouraged by Congress.

The "Iran Freedom Support Act," HR 282, passed in the International Relations Committee on April 27, 2006; and the House passed H Con Res 341, which inaccurately condemned Iran for violating its international nuclear non-proliferation obligations. At present, the likelihood of reason prevailing in Congress is minimal. Let there be no doubt:

Even if the Neo-conservative warriors are not anymore in charge, they are still conditioning Congress, the media, and the American people for a pre-emptive attack on Iran.

Never mind that Afghanistan has unraveled and Iraq is in civil war: serious plans are being laid for the next distraction which will further spread this war in the Middle East. The unintended consequences of this effort surely will be worse than any of the complications experienced in the last six-year occupation of Iraq.

Is it any wonder the Iranian people resent American and the attitude of US leaders? Even though El Baradi and his IAEA investigations have found no violations of the NPT-required IAEA safeguards agreement, the Iran Freedom Support Act still demands that Iran prove they have no nuclear weapons, refusing to acknowledge that proving a negative is impossible.

Some Politicians are telling us that « you can't have freedom in Iran without bringing down the Mullahs. » Sanctions, along with financial and political support to persons and groups dedicated to the overthrow of the Iranian government, are acts of war.

Once again, Westerners are unilaterally declaring a pre-emptive war against a country and a people that have not harmed them and do not have the capacity to do so. And don't expect Congress to seriously debate a declaration of war resolution. For the past 56 years Congress has transferred to the executive branch the power to go to war as it pleases, regardless of the tragic results and costs. Few months ago, Secretary of State Rice recently signaled a sharp shift towards confrontation in Iran policy as she insisted on \$75 million to finance propaganda, through TV and radio broadcasts into Iran.

She expressed this need because of the so-called "aggressive" policies of the Iranian government. They're seven thousand miles from home, telling the Iraqis and the Iranians what kind of government they will have, backed up by the use of their military force, and they call them the aggressors.

They fail to realize the Iranian people, for whatever faults they may have, have not in modern times aggressed against any neighbor. This provocation is so unnecessary, costly, and dangerous.

Just as the invasion of Iraq inadvertently served the interests of the Iranians, military confrontation with Iran will have unintended consequences.

The successful alliance engendered between the Iranians and the Iraqi majority Shia will prove a formidable opponent for US troops in Iraq as that civil war spreads. Shipping in the Persian Gulf through the Straits of Hormuz may well be disrupted by the Iranians in retaliation for any military confrontation. Since Iran would be incapable of defending herself by conventional means, it seems logical that some might resort to a terrorist attack on Westerners countries. They will not passively lie down, nor can they be destroyed easily.

One of the reasons given for going into Iraq was to secure "their" oil supply. This backfired badly: Production in Iraq is down 50%, and world oil prices have more than doubled to \$60 per barrel. Meddling with Iran could easily have a similar result. We could see oil over \$120 a barrel and, and \$6 gas at the pump in the United States.

The obsession of the US administration and particularly the Neo-cons have with remaking the Middle East is hard to understand. One thing that is easy to understand is none of those who planned these wars expect to fight in them, nor do they expect their children to die in some IED explosion.

The clincher in the National Security Strategy document is if diplomatic efforts fail, confrontation will follow. The problem is the diplomatic effort, if one wants to use that term, is designed to fail by demanding the Iranians prove an unproveable negative. The West, led by the U.S., is in greater violation by demanding Iran not pursue any nuclear technology, even peaceful, that the NPT guarantees is their right.

The President states: Iran's "desire to have a nuclear weapon is unacceptable." A "desire" is purely subjective, and cannot be substantiated nor disproved. Therefore all that is necessary to justify an attack is if Iran fails to prove it doesn't have a "desire" to be like the United States, China, Russia, Britain, France, Pakistan, India, and Israel, whose nuclear missiles surround Iran.

Logic like this to justify a new war, without the least consideration for a congressional declaration of war, is indeed frightening.

Common sense tells us Congress, especially given the civil war in Iraq and the mess in Afghanistan, should move with great caution in condoning a military confrontation with Iran.

Unfortunately the Legislative branch of the US government too often defers to the Executive branch, and offers little resistance to war plans even with no significant threat to the US security.

The need to go to war is always couched in patriotic terms and falsehoods regarding an imaginary eminent danger. Not supporting the effort is painted as unpatriotic and wimpish against some evil that's about to engulf them.

The real reason for a militarism is rarely revealed and hidden from the public. Even Congress is deceived into supporting adventurism they would not accept if fully informed.

If we accepted the traditional American and constitutional foreign policy of non-intervention across the board, there would be no temptation to go along with these unnecessary military operations. A foreign policy of intervention invites all kinds of excuses for spreading themselves around the world.

The debate shifts from non-intervention versus interventionism, to where and for what particular reason should United States involve themselves.

Most of the time it's for less than honorable reasons. Even when cloaked in honorable slogans, like making the world safe for democracy, the unintended consequences and the ultimate costs cancel out the good intentions.

One of the greatest losses suffered these past 60 years from interventionism becoming an acceptable policy of both major parties is respect for the Constitution. Congress flatly has reneged on its huge responsibility to declare war. Going to war was never meant to be an Executive decision, used indiscriminately with no resistance from Congress. The strongest attempt by Congress in the past 60 years to properly exert itself over foreign policy was the passage of the Foley Amendment, demanding no assistance be given to the Nicaraguan contras. Even this explicit prohibition was flaunted by an earlier administration.

Arguing over the relative merits of each intervention is not a true debate, because it assumes that intervention per se is both moral and constitutional. Arguing for a Granada-type intervention because of its "success," and against the Iraq war because of its failure and cost, is not enough. We must once again understand the wisdom of rejecting entangling alliances and rejecting nation building. They must stop trying to police the world and instead embrace non-interventionism as the proper, moral, and constitutional foreign policy.

The best reason to oppose interventionism is that people die, needlessly, on both sides. United States have suffered over 20,000 American casualties in Iraq already, and Iraq civilian deaths probably number over 200,000 by all reasonable accounts. The next best reason is that the rule of law is undermined, especially when military interventions are carried out without a declaration of war. Whenever a war is ongoing, civil liberties are under attack at home. The current war in Iraq and the misnamed war on terror have created an environment into the United States that affords little constitutional protection of the citizen's rights. Extreme nationalism is common during wars. Signs of this are now more and more apparent.

In a way, it's amazing there's not a lot more outrage expressed by the American people. There's plenty of complaining but no outrage over policies that are not part of the American tradition. War based on false pretenses, 20,000 American casualties, torture policies, thousands jailed without due process, illegal surveillance of citizens, warrantless searches, and yet no outrage. When the issues come before Congress, Executive authority is maintained or even strengthened while real oversight is ignored.

Economic interests almost always are major reasons for wars being fought.

Noble and patriotic causes are easier to sell to a public who must pay and provide cannon fodder to defend the financial interests of a privileged class.

The fact that Saddam Hussein demanded Euros for oil in an attempt to undermine the U.S. dollar is believed by many to be one of the ulterior motives for the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. Similarly, as discussed above the Iranian oil bourse may be seen as a threat to those who depend on maintaining the current monetary system with the dollar as the world's reserve currency.

The theory and significance of "peak oil" is believed to be an additional motivating factor for the U.S. and Great Britain wanting to maintain firm control over the oil supplies in the Middle East. The two nations have been protecting "their" oil interests in the Middle East for nearly a hundred years.

With diminishing supplies and expanding demands, the incentive to maintain a military presence in the Middle East is quite strong. Fear of China and Russia moving into this region to assume more control alarms those who don't understand how a free market can develop substitutes to replace diminishing resources. Supporters of the military effort to maintain control over large regions of the world to protect oil fail to count the real costs once the DOD budget is factored in.

Remember, invading Iraq was costly and oil prices doubled. Confrontation in Iran may evolve differently, but we can be sure it will be costly and oil prices will rise. There are long-term consequences or blowback from United States militant policy of intervention around the world. They are unpredictable as to time and place. 9/11 was a consequence of the US military presence on Muslim holy lands; the Ayatollah Khomeini's success in taking over the Iranian government in 1979 was a consequence of the CIA overthrowing Mossadegh in 1953. These connections are rarely recognized by the American people and never acknowledged by the US government, like they never seem to learn how dangerous interventionism is to them and to their security.

There are some who may not agree strongly with any of my arguments, and instead believe the propaganda: Iran and her President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, are thoroughly irresponsible and have threatened to destroy Israel.

So all measures must be taken to prevent Iran from getting nukes, thus the campaign to intimidate and confront Iran.

First, Iran doesn't have a nuke and is nowhere close to getting one, according to the CIA. If they did have one, using it would guarantee almost instantaneous annihilation by Israel and the United States. Hysterical fear of Iran is way out of proportion to reality.

With a policy of containment, The United States stood down and won the Cold War against the Soviets and their 30,000 nuclear weapons and missiles.

If you're looking for a real trouble with a bomb to worry about, North Korea would be high on the list. Yet, they negotiate with Kim Jong Il.

Pakistan has nukes and was a close ally of the Taliban up until 9/11. Pakistan was never inspected by the IAEA as to their military capability. Yet, United States not only talk to her, they also provide economic assistance (1,5 billion / year), though someday Asif Ali Zardari may well be overthrown and a pro-al Qaeda government put in place. Westerners have been nearly obsessed with talking about regime change in Iran, while ignoring Pakistan and North Korea. It makes no sense and it's a very costly and dangerous policy.

In fact, it was the U.S. invasion of Iraq that caused the Iranians to accelerate their efforts to build the bomb. The Iranian leadership watched the invasion and harsh treatment of the non-nuclear Iraq by the U.S. and compared that to the more respectful U.S. negotiations with North Korea, which likely already has nuclear weapons. If you were Iran, what would you do? Certainly, given the possibility of a U.S. invasion, many other so-called "rogue nations" with inclinations to develop such weapons may do exactly what the Iranians have done.

Although the Bush administration probably had difficulty empathizing with an autocratic, fundamentalist Islamic regime, it should consider that Iran might feel threatened by the cordon the U.S. had created around Iran's borders. The United States has a significant military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq, new military bases in Central Asian nations, and a formal alliance with Turkey.

In the wider region, the U.S. also has informal security relationships with Israel, Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf kingdoms. Asked what he learned from the Persian Gulf War in 1991, the Indian Chief of Staff replied, "don't fight the United States without nuclear weapons." Similarly, the Iranians have obviously learned that the only way to ensure that the United States doesn't invade Iran is to develop the ultimate deterrent.

But neo-conservatives who are suppose to be now outside of the actual administration might ask: why not launch an Iraq-style preventative attack before the Iranians can get these weapons? The answer is that according to U.S. military planners, nuclear facilities are now hard to find and target from the air. During Operation Desert Fox in 1998, an air campaign designed to cripple Iraq's capability to produce nuclear weapons, it became apparent that the United States had no idea where such Iraqi weapons facilities were located (later the Bush administration found out the hard way that they didn't have any).

The Iranians have learned from Israel's successful surprise attack on Iraq's Osirak reactor in 1981. They have hidden, hardened, buried or placed their nuclear facilities in heavily populated areas. For this reason, U.S. military planners admit that the Iranian nuclear program is best dealt with by diplomacy rather than by military force.

The only way to find and eliminate Iranian nuclear weapons using military action would be to launch a full-scale invasion of Iran. If the US administration even began to contemplate this course of action, however, the U.S. military would probably be near open revolt. Invading Iran would likely make the bloody quagmire in Iraq look like a picnic.

Iran has nearly four times the territory and three times the population of Iraq. Also, Iran's terrain is much more mountainous than Iraq's and even more ideal for guerrilla warfare. Any U.S. invasion would quickly change the youthful Iranian population from opponents of the governing mullahs to supporters of their efforts to fight off an invading foreign superpower. Rather than facing armed resistance from one faction of the population, as in Iraq, the U.S. military would likely face zealous opposition from the entire population.

Finally, the already overstretched U.S. military has too few forces to pacify Iraq, let alone invade Iran simultaneously. The U.S. military and even the Republican Congress would probably be squeamish about invading yet another country while battling a guerrilla insurgency in one of the invasion's likely launching pads.

With no viable military options, even the aggressive Bush administration will probably be forced to give peace a chance. If the United States can negotiate with the erratic Kim Jong Il in North Korea, it can certainly do so with the authoritarian mullahs in Iran. The secret in both sets of negotiations might be to recognize that these "rogue states" might be genuinely frightened of a U.S. invasion and willing to accept a non-aggression pact with the United States in exchange for a verified elimination of their nuclear weapons. If that doesn't work, the United States and Israel may just have to live with unfriendly nations having nuclear weapons.

The U.S. allowed the Soviet Union to obtain nuclear weapons in the 1940s and radical Maoist China to get them in the 1960s. No matter how quirky or radical a nation's leaders, if a government has a home address that can be incinerated by the most capable nuclear arsenal on the planet, that government can be deterred from attacking the United States.

The conclusion we should derive from this is simple: It's in the United States interest to pursue a foreign policy of non-intervention and with a strict interpretation of the Constitution mandates it. The moral imperative of not imposing westerners will on others, no matter how well intentioned, is a powerful argument for minding our own business.

The principle of self-determination should be respected and strict non-intervention removes the incentives for foreign powers and corporate interests to influence the US policies overseas.

United States cannot afford the cost that intervention requires, whether through higher taxes or inflation. If the moral arguments against intervention don't suffice for some, the practical arguments should.

Intervention just doesn't work. It backfires and ultimately hurts American citizens both at home and abroad. Spreading themselves too thin around the world actually diminishes the national security through a weakened military.

As the superpower of the world, a constant interventionist policy is perceived as arrogant, and greatly undermines the ability to use diplomacy in a positive manner.

Conservatives, libertarians, constitutionalists, and many of today's liberals have all at one time or another endorsed a less interventionist foreign policy.

There's no reason a coalition of these groups might not once again present the case for a pro-American, non-militant, non-interventionist foreign policy dealing with all nations.

Maybe President Obama and also the new Nobel Peace Prize will conduct a policy of trade and peace, and a willingness to use diplomacy, which is far superior to the foreign policy that has evolved over the past 60 years.

It's time to forget the double standard in international relations.

It's time for a change.

N.ZAMMIT Ph.D