

The Crisis with Iran: Is it just about Iran's nuclear capability?

Executive Summary

In almost every respect, the current crisis over Iran's nuclear capability is a repeat of that which led to the current catastrophic war with Iraq. From the threats and ultimatums, to indications that the US is prepared to engage in "pre-emptive" strikes against Iran, we are witnessing a replay of the script for the Iraq War. What is different, however, is that this time the Bush Administration is considering the possible use of tactical nuclear weapons.

Physicians for Global Survival is deeply alarmed by any suggestion that nuclear sites might be targeted militarily. Whether such attacks are aerial or subterranean, conventional or nuclear, the consequences would be catastrophic not only for Iran and its neighbours, but for the whole world. Research done by International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) and Physicians for Social Responsibility, on the health implications of the use of earth penetrating nuclear weapons, concludes that even a weapon with a yield one-tenth of those used on Hiroshima or Nagasaki could "result in fatal doses of radiation to tens of thousands of victims".

Using Pentagon computer models, the Union of Concerned Scientists has estimated that a one megaton nuclear bunker buster targeting Esfahan would spread radioactivity as far as 1000 miles to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India; killing as many as 3 million people and exposing another 35 million to cancer-causing radiation. The B61-11 bunker buster currently being considered for use, while having a lesser yield, would still result in a significant loss of life. If an attack involved multiple strikes against nuclear sites, the consequences could exceed these estimates. In addition to creating a human health catastrophe, vast regions could be turned into a radioactive wasteland for thousands of years.

As physicians, we decry in the strongest of terms any military action whether conventional or nuclear. No political goal can justify death, suffering and destruction on this scale. We have already witnessed the horrific effects of nuclear weapons use and nuclear technology gone awry. The 1986 accident at the Chernobyl nuclear reactor sent toxic clouds encircling the planet dispersing radiation over people throughout the world.

It is deeply alarming that the current Canadian government has yet to reflect Canada's traditional opposition to nuclear weapons and their use by distancing itself from the US position.

Military strikes must be ruled out. Immediate efforts to establish a dialogue between Iran and the US could take the form of a high level commission under the auspices of the UN Secretary-General. Relations between the two countries have been hostile since they severed ties in 1979 following the revolution that abruptly ended US influence and control in the country. Iran must be urged to place a moratorium on its uranium enrichment efforts in exchange for security assurances from the United States and Israel that it will not be threatened or attacked. Work on the establishment of a nuclear weapon-free zone in the Middle East could create an effective disarmament tool and confidence building measure in that troubled region.

(Full document follows)



The Current Crisis With Iran: We've Been Down This Road Before

The current crisis with Iran over its nuclear program is following a pattern similar to the ultimatums and threats that preceded the current devastating war in Iraq. We all now know that weapons of mass destruction were never found in Iraq, so what is the truth about Iran? Is there any basis for the allegations and threats that are leading to a frightening escalation of this conflict?

According to information leaked by US military sources to New York Times columnist, Seymour Hersh, the US is considering the use of nuclear bunker busters to destroy nuclear facilities in Iran. At the same time, the Iranian government seems determined to provoke continued escalations of the crisis with its inflammatory statements, its missile tests, and its insistence that it will not back down to international pressure and end its uranium enrichment program. So what is really going on?

It is hard to imagine that the US would try to rerun the same script with Iran that it did in the lead-up to the war with Iraq, given that no weapons of mass destruction were ever found there. But there are a number of indications that this may, in fact, be the case. The threat posed by weapons of mass destruction engenders such public fear that it has proven to be an effective means of mobilizing public opinion in favour of war.

There are remarkable similarities between Iran and Iraq: their troubled relations with the United States and Britain, their oil-wealth, and their defiance towards the West. While Iraq was a secular dictatorship under Saddam Hussein, the Iranian regime is a religious dictatorship or theocracy also well-known for its repression and human rights abuses. Since taking office last summer, Iran's new President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has made a number of inflammatory anti-Israeli statements that seem designed to provoke conflict. While these comments are inflaming the current crisis, it is worth pointing out that US President Bush dubbed Iran a member of the "axis of evil" in his 2002 State of the Union address, long before the current President took office.

Iran is a signatory to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). It has nuclear facilities for its civilian nuclear power production that could be diverted for weapons production. Much of the current concern surrounds Iran's uranium enrichment program that could be diverted to produce weapons-grade material.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has reported that Iran has at times failed to abide by its non-proliferation obligations by failing to fully disclose all of its nuclear activities and to provide open access for inspections and monitoring. However, following the 30 day ultimatum issued by the UN Security Council on March 31st, 2006, the head of the agency, Mohamed ElBaradei, stated that Iran's nuclear program was "not an imminent threat". He said that while questions remain about Iran's nuclear activity, there is no firm evidence that it is developing nuclear weapons and he called on all parties to calm the debate. He stated that,

“There is no military solution to this situation. It’s inconceivable. The only durable solution is a negotiated solution.”(1)

It will be remembered that similar mixed reports came from UN weapons inspectors prior to the war with Iraq and, like Iran, Iraq maintained its innocence, insisting that it had destroyed all its weapons of mass destruction.

Despite the threats and ultimatums that appear to be leading to war, Iran continues to insist that it will proceed with its uranium enrichment program. And, in an act of further defiance, it has since announced that it has successfully mastered the enrichment process. So why would Iran take such a dangerous stand? To understand the apparent intransigence of the Iranian government it is essential that we understand both Iran’s past history and its perspective on the world.

The United States in Iran

Ongoing hostilities between the United States and Iran date back to the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Prior to that, in 1953, Iran became the target of the CIA’s first major covert operation. After Iran’s highly popular and democratically elected leader, Mohammed Mosaddeq, nationalized Iran’s oil resources, the CIA orchestrated a coup and replaced Mosaddeq with the pro-American Shah of Iran. With the help of Israeli intelligence officials, the CIA created and trained Iran’s brutal police force, SAVAK, to quash the resistance and maintain the Shah’s hold on power.(2) The US maintained control of Iran for the next 26 years. With the revolution in 1979, US influence and control in Iran came to an abrupt end, ushering in a period of strident anti-Americanism that remains evident today.

Following the revolution, the US quickly changed its allegiance and threw its support behind Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War – no doubt hoping that the new Iranian regime would collapse. The war raged for almost a decade with a million casualties on both sides. The largest weapons suppliers to both sides during the conflict were the five permanent members of the UN Security Council: the US, UK, France, Russia and China. All five sold weapons to both Iran and Iraq during the war. (3)

The Problem of Non-Proliferation

Understanding the history of American and British interference in Iran and Iraq throughout the 20th-21st century, sheds light on why Iran and Iraq have in recent years refused to bow to Anglo-American pressure or, for that matter, to the UN Security Council.

In their eyes, as well as those of many other non-western countries, the failure of the UN Security Council members, who are endowed with the responsibility to maintain international peace and security, to uphold their own commitments to dismantle their nuclear arsenals as specified under Article VI of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, has undermined their moral authority to enforce the rules on other nations.

They argue that the treaty was not so much an agreement to protect the world from the spread of nuclear weapons, as an effort to maintain the power and the monopoly of the few over the many. They tend to see the US and the other nuclear powers as abusing their power and their exclusive nuclear monopoly to exploit other countries, and are angered by the double standards that accord some countries special treatment.

Israel's Nuclear Arsenal

As a close ally of the US, Israel has been permitted to secretly develop its arsenals of Jericho I and Jericho II nuclear missiles, and remains the only country in the Middle East that has not signed and ratified the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The presence of Israel's nuclear weapons in the conflict-ridden Middle East is both a source of great insecurity and a constant reminder of these double standards. This is particularly true because Israel is viewed by countries like Iran, and by many Arabs, as a US outpost in the Middle East. Given historical hostilities, the special treatment accorded to Israel is a source of great antagonism. Israel has been permitted to build and maintain nuclear weaponry under western protection, and received little more than a slap on the wrist after it bombed Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981 to prevent Iraq from acquiring the same technology.

A Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone in the Middle East

The concept of establishing a nuclear weapon-free zone (NWFZ) in the Middle East to address this inequity was first proposed by Iran and sponsored by Egypt in a resolution that went before the United Nations General Assembly in 1974. It called upon all states in the region to eliminate their nuclear weapons, to accept inspections and monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency, and to agree not to transfer or accept nuclear weapons technology from other states. This issue has been raised consistently throughout the years. Adoption of a resolution on a NWFZ in the Middle East was presented as a condition for indefinitely extending the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1995. It was once again pushed forward as a priority when the treaty was reviewed in 2000 but there has been no progress to-date. (4)

Efforts to move forward on this issue have been complicated by demands for the inclusion of biological and chemical arsenals – which would, in essence, mean establishing a “weapons of mass destruction free zone” in the Middle East. This would involve more complex negotiations and adding additional mechanisms beyond the IAEA to oversee the destruction and verification of these additional arsenals (5).

But an even greater stumbling block is that of Israel's current nuclear arsenal. Both Israel and the United States believe that Israel should be accorded special protection due to its hostile neighbours. However, the presence of Israel's nuclear arsenal poses a security threat to all countries in the region, including Israel itself. By insisting on retaining its own nuclear arsenal, Israel is in fact increasing the danger that other nations, like Iran, will abandon their own non-proliferation commitments.

Establishing a nuclear weapon-free zone in the Middle East is viewed as a potentially important instrument for reducing tensions and insecurity in the region and preventing crises like the current one with Iran. To address the challenges of creating a NWFZ in this troubled region, it has been suggested that such an instrument might vary from the traditional NWFZ and resemble more of an arms control agreement with provisions for disarmament as well as the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. With concerted multilateral effort and tailoring to the specific needs of the region, the creation of a NWFZ could help to de-escalate the tensions in the region. (6)

Global Double-Standards

Israel is not the only country that has been afforded special treatment when it comes to a nuclear weapons capability. Double standards are also apparent in the dealings with other states. In 1998, when India and Pakistan exploded nuclear devices and both officially entered the nuclear weapons club, there were no serious threats of military action against them. And, although North Korea is purported to have achieved a nuclear weapons capability, and has a regime that is equally extreme and repressive to that of Iran, the US has insisted the matter can be settled through negotiations.

Singling Out Iran and Iraq

So why the special treatment for countries like Iran and Iraq? There are a number of factors that may be at play. Both Iraq under Saddam, and Iran, have been openly hostile towards Israel and supported the Palestinians in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Recently, the United States has been frustrated by Iran's influence on the Shia in southern Iraq and has accused Iran at different times of providing weaponry and other support to Iraqi groups. Some analysts have focused on Iran's plan to establish an oil stock exchange in euros in March, 2006 – further diminishing the US dollar as the major currency in global trade - as a major irritant behind the current crisis. (7)

The Oil Factor

But most significantly, for most of the last century, both Iran and Iraq have been the target of ongoing western interference because of their enormous oil resources. Iran has the second largest proven crude oil resources in the world. The US and Britain enjoy great influence with almost all the other non-democratic governments in the oil-rich Gulf states. Iran and Iraq are obvious standouts, having thrown off the cloak of western influence that dominated much of the 20th century, and closing their nations, their economies, and their resources to foreign influence and control.

There are many indications that we are now much closer to the end of global oil reserves than previously thought. In November, 2005, the Kuwaiti Oil Company announced that its Burgan Oilfield – the second largest oil field in the world – had passed its peak oil production and was on its way to depletion.(8) This news, never reported in the mainstream media in the West,

sent shockwaves through the global oil industry with speculation that the world's remaining reserves have been significantly exaggerated.

Iran's Oil Deals With China and India

With heightened global concern over dwindling oil resources, it is of no minor significance that in October 2004, Iran signed a memorandum of understanding on a US \$100 billion energy deal with China. This deal is expected to expand to as much as US \$250 billion in the future. Iran has also signed a significant oil deal with India – essentially shutting out US access to a significant portion of the remaining global oil reserves. (9)

When one takes into account all of these factors – former British and American control of Iran and Iraq, the double standards in addressing weapons issues, the fallacy of US claims against Iraq, the global oil crisis and the significant oil-wealth of these two nations, and the crisis created by Iran's switch to the euro, it is difficult not to conclude that the US and Britain are motivated by concerns beyond the weapons programs of these two nations.

The Impact and Repercussions of an Attack on Iran

Like Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq, the current regime in Iran does not enjoy the support of the majority of the Iranian people. It is a repressive dictatorship that has executed and tortured countless Iranians who have opposed its rule. Its human rights violations are well-documented and, according to Amnesty International, it "has one of the highest number of recorded executions of any country in the world." (10)

But like Iraq, which also had strong anti-American sentiments as a result of years of US interference, it does not follow that Iranians would welcome intervention from the country they view as having stolen their chances for democracy in 1953 and ushering in decades of repression, executions and torture. A military strike on Iran by the US would likely increase the regime's shaky hold on the country and some analysts believe that this may be a factor in the regime's defiant posture – they see the current situation as working to their advantage in strengthening their hold on power.

At the same time, with a history that is so similar to that of Iraq, with major wars on two borders (Afghanistan and Iraq), and US bases throughout the Gulf, Iran is increasingly isolated and insecure.

Islam Under Attack – Fanning the Flames of Anti-Americanism

A US attack on Iran would fan the flames of anti-Americanism and fuel the perception that Islam is under attack from the West. Although Iran is not an Arab country and has an uneasy relationship with many of the neighbouring Arab states, they are all Muslim. As a result of US support for Israel and its policies towards the Palestinians, and years of sanctions and war in Iraq, most peoples throughout the Middle East share a common view of the United States. .

Just as the war in Iraq reinforced negative perceptions of the United States and the West, a similar foreign policy blunder in Iran would further alienate and enrage Muslims throughout the world. Rather than making the world a safer place, it would likely result in new levels of terrorism that would further engulf our world in violence and instability. It would also likely lead to a greater determination on the part of Iran and other countries to secretly develop nuclear weapons to level the playing field and to deter a US attack.

Catastrophic Consequences for Human Health and the Environment

The death, destruction and environmental damage that would be caused by a US bombardment of known Iranian nuclear facilities would be catastrophic. According to the US National Research Council, “earth-penetrating nuclear weapons cannot go deep enough to avoid casualties at ground level, and they could still kill up to a million people or more if used in populated areas”. (11)

Both International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) and Physician for Social Responsibility have examined the medical consequences of even low-yield tactical nuclear weapons. According to IPPNW, “Neutron and gamma rays are capable of penetrating shielding and therefore causing radiation injuries at considerable distances from their source. Doses of radiation greater than a few sieverts (hundred rems) can cause radiation sickness characterized by serious illness, disability, or even death. Smaller doses of neutron and gamma radiation may lead to subsequent cancers, as documented by the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission and its successor, the Radiation Effects Research Foundation, in long term follow-up studies of the survivors of the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.” (12)

The Union of Concerned Scientists has used a Pentagon model to estimate that a single one-megaton nuclear device detonated in Esfahan could spread radioactive contamination to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India killing as many as 3 million people and exposing as many as 35 million to cancer-causing radiation. (13) The B61-11 nuclear bunker buster considered for use by the US has a lesser yield reported to be of 0.3 kilotons to 340 kilotons but this would still result in a significant loss of life and a devastating human health crisis. If several of these weapons were used in multiple strikes against nuclear installations, the consequences could far exceed these estimates.

Even if nuclear weapons are not used, a conventional attack on nuclear facilities would still probably result in massive venting of radioactive material and very high numbers of casualties. In addition to the aboveground release of radioactive material, there is a very real danger of radioactive contamination leaching into water tables and ground water, contaminating both drinking water and the food chain.

Many of Iran’s nuclear facilities, like its nuclear research center, are located within close proximity to large population centers like Tehran, a city of more than 12 million. A uranium conversion facility is located in Esfahan with a population of 1.5 million, a heavy water plant and heavy water reactor are located in Arak with a population of 500,000 and the uranium

enrichment facility is located in Natanz with a population of 40,000. There is also a complex of Russian-built light water reactors located in the province of Bushehr with a population of almost three-quarters of a million. (14)

The danger of a Chernobyl-type scenario resulting in massive venting of radioactive material to the environment should make consideration of attacking Iran's nuclear infrastructure - even with conventional weaponry - beyond contemplation. In addition to the human casualties, radioactive contamination could make vast areas of Tehran and other population centers inhabitable creating an enormous human and environmental tragedy.

The Need to Protect Nuclear Facilities

For decades now, we have operated on the assumption that the five original nuclear weapons states were somehow morally superior, and that nuclear weapons are somehow safer in their hands than in those of other states. But by contemplating any attack on nuclear facilities - let alone an attack using tactical nuclear weapons - the Bush Administration has demonstrated that it doesn't fully comprehend – or flagrantly disregards - the dangers posed by nuclear technology.

Following Israel's bombing of Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981, there was widespread recognition within the international community of the need to protect nuclear facilities against attack. During the 1980's, a working group of the UN Conference on Disarmament considered a prohibition on attacks against nuclear facilities. Although no agreement was ever formally reached, all members of the Conference on Disarmament – which included the US, Canada, and the other Security Council members – recognized these dangers. (15)

By contemplating its own use of nuclear weapons to destroy Iran's nuclear program, the United States is threatening the survival of the fragile non-proliferation regime. The treaty is unlikely to survive an American attack using what is essentially prohibited weaponry. Such use would blatantly defy the 1996 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice that concluded that, under international law, the use or threat to use nuclear weapons against another state is illegal. And by hypocritically enforcing double standards by force, it would help to fuel the extremism and terrorism that are increasingly engulfing our planet.

Canada's Relations with Iran

Since May 2005 Canada has maintained a tightened policy of "controlled engagement" with Iran. This means that Canadian – Iranian relations are restricted to three issues – the case of Iranian-Canadian photojournalist Zahra Kazemi who died while in Iranian custody, Iran's human rights record and Iran's nuclear non-proliferation performance. (16) There is no contact between Iranian and Canadian government officials except on these topics. Canada works through and with the IAEA which states that there is no evidence at this point of diversion of nuclear material for military purposes, but calls on Iran to stop all production of fissile material until confidence in its nuclear program can be rebuilt.

There has been no public comment by the Canadian government on the US plans for a nuclear attack on Iran. The Canadian government has made no effort to distance itself from the US position or plans. At the press conference following his meeting with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Foreign Minister Peter MacKay failed to use the opportunity to call for dialogue between the protagonists. Instead he quoted Secretary Rice, saying “Because as Secretary Rice has said, [Iran] appear[s] to be consistently crossing the line, step by step, and becoming less and less communicative”. (17)

Finding Solutions

A number of steps must be taken to immediately de-escalate the current crisis. We must call upon the Canadian government and all governments to push for the following measures:

- 1) The use of military force must be ruled out. As the head of the IAEA, Mohamed ElBaradei has stated: “There is no military solution to this situation. It’s inconceivable. The only durable solution is a negotiated solution.”
- 2) Press the US and Iran to begin talks, following a ‘cooling down’ period. PGS and other civil society groups have called on the United Nations Secretary General to establish a special high-level commission to bring the United States and Iran together. This commission would seek to establish an immediate moratorium on threats or hostile actions on both sides.
- 3) Negative Security Assurances – including pledges not to attack each other in a first strike and non-interference in each other’s internal affairs – would be a major step towards reducing tensions in the region.
- 4) Middle ground to resolve the issues on both sides must be sought. Urge Iran to place a moratorium on further uranium enrichment processing in exchange for a commitment from the United States and Israel to address its security concerns through the establishment of such instruments as a nuclear weapon-free zone in the Middle East.

Footnotes:

1. Fleishman, Jeffrey and Alissa J. Rubin. “*Calm is Urged in Iran Debate.*” Times, March 31, 2006.
2. “*Ministry of Security SAVAK.*” Intelligence Resource Program, Federation of American Scientists; and , Langguth, A.J. “*Tortures Teachers.*” New York Times, June 11, 1979
3. “*Iran Arms Imports 1975-2004.*” and “*Iraq Arms Imports 1975-2004.*” Arms Trade Database, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).
4. Stevens, Rebecca and Amin Tarzi. “*Egypt and the Middle East Resolution at the NPT 2000 Review Conference.*” Center for Non-Proliferation Studies, April 2000.
5. *ibid.*
6. Parrish, Scott and Jean du Preez. “*Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones: Still a Useful Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Tool?*” Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission Paper No.6, 2004.
7. Keefer, Michael. “*Petrodollars and Nuclear Weapons Proliferation: the Planned Assault on Iran.*” Centre for Research on Globalization; and, Clark, William R. “*Iran’s euro-denominated oil bourse to open in March: US Dollar Crisis on the Horizon.*” Global Research.ca, February 10, 2006.
8. Cordahi, James and Andy Crichlow. “*Kuwaiti Oil Field, World’s Second Largest, Exhausted.*” Bloomberg, November, 2005.
9. Goodman, Peter S. “*China Rushes to Complete \$100B Deal With Iran.*” Washington Post Foreign Service February 17th, 2006; Afrasiabi, Kavah L. “*China Rocks the Geopolitical Boat with Iran Oil Deal.*” Asia Times, December 2, 2004; and “*China to develop Iran oil field.*” BBC, November 1, 2004.

10. "Iran: Human Rights Concerns." Amnesty International USA, <http://www.amnestyusa.org/countries/iran/index.do>.
11. "Many Deaths Still Expected With Earth-Penetrating Nuclear Weapons." National Research Council, The National Academies, April 27, 2005.
12. Sidel, Victor W, MD, H. Jack Geiger, MD, MSHyg; Herbert L. Abrams, MD; Robert W. Nelson, PhD; and John Loretz. "The Threat of Low-Yield Earth-Penetrating Nuclear Weapons to Civilian Populations: Nuclear 'Bunker Busters' and Their Medical Consequences", Special Report, International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War 2003; Wilk, Peter MD, Sarah Stalick, Martin Butcher, Michael McCally MD, Ira Helfand MD, Robert Gould MD, and John Pastore MD. "Projected Casualties Among U.S. Military Personnel and Civilian Populations from the Use of Nuclear Weapons Against Hard and Deeply Buried Targets", May 2005.
13. "The Nuclear Bunker Buster." Union of Concerned Scientists, http://www.ucsusa.org/global_security/nuclear_weapons/nuclear-bunker-buster-rnep-animation.html
14. Salama, Sammy and Karen Ruster. "A Preemptive Attack on Iran's Nuclear Facilities: Possible Consequence." Center for Non-Proliferation Studies, August 2004 and "Population in Iran." ISTAN, Iran Tourism Agency.
15. Koyakov, Danil and Nicolas Florquin. "Dirty Bomb" Threat Awakens Dormant Disarmament Conference." Center for Nonproliferation Studies, <http://cns.miis.edu/pubs/week/020826.htm> "1983-1992 the Ad Hoc Committee (on Radiological Weapons) was divided into two contact groups with the prohibition of radiological weapons and the prohibition of attacks against nuclear facilities"; and, "Arms Regulation and Disarmament: Other Weapons of Mass Destruction." United Nations – see: <http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/United-Nations/Arms-Regulation-and-Disarmament-OTHER-WEAPONS-OF-MASS-DESTRUCTION.html>
16. FAC News Release May 17 2005, No. 86
17. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/64545.htm>