

# An October Surprise?

President Bush says Iranians are behind the more lethal IEDs, the roadside bombs killing our troops in Iraq. Rumsfeld warns the Iranian Revolutionary Guard may

now be in Iraq. Cheney says Iran will not be allowed to have a nuclear weapon. McCain says, “the military option is on the table.”

And Israel is getting impatient. Writes Yaakov Katz in the March 10 *Jerusalem Post*, “The United States has until now not done enough to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, a senior Defense Ministry official has told the *Jerusalem Post* ...”

Katz quotes the senior man directly: “America needs to get its act together. Until now the [Bush] administration has just been talking tough but the time has come for the Americans to begin to take some tough action.” Only one person is quoted by name in Katz’s piece, the hawkish Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz. This tells me Mofaz is using Katz to send Bush a message: “Stop dithering and get off your duff on Iran.”

The official wants Bush to impose severe sanctions to shut down Iran’s economy to convince Iranians to get rid of their regime. But if sanctions do not work, bombs away. “This option may be needed but it should only be used as a last resort,” said the “senior official.”

But while Bush is pushing for Security Council sanctions, Russia and China are balking. France, Britain, and Germany may go along with diplomatic and mild economic sanctions, but there is no stomach there for air strikes. Thus, if Iran’s nuclear program is to be dismantled, the Americans will have to go it alone with Stealth and B-2 bomber strikes.

Or Bush will have to answer to the Israeli Defense Ministry.

While there seems no sense of urgency in Washington, the Bush Doctrine and Cheney ultimatum have painted us into a corner. Either Iran’s nuclear program is shut down, or the Bush Doctrine will have been defied by Tehran and Pyongyang, leaving Iraq as the Bush legacy.

All this has led to speculation that this summer or fall, Bush, his options having been exhausted, will order the air strikes.

What would be the benefits of such an October surprise?

Rather than appearing a retreat, Bush’s pullout from Iraq would look like that of a defiant gunfighter backing through the swinging doors of a Tombstone saloon with both guns blazing.

Bush’s rating could soar 20 points. Republicans would rally at the return of the 9/11 president. Democrats would be loath to attack a president who acted forcefully to remove what they themselves say is an intolerable threat. The neocons and Christian Right would hail Bush as the new Churchill. Bush would hold onto both houses in November, costing Democrats their best chance in a decade of recouping power.

What would Hillary do? Nothing but wait and see what the fallout was from Bush’s newest pre-emptive war.

And the risks? Iran could push its Shia allies to attack British and U.S. troops and send Revolutionary Guard “volunteers” in, which could mean a U.S. debacle, unless we responded with more American troops. Tehran could make us pay a price in blood in Afghanistan.

Tehran could also send its agents into the emirates, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia to attack U.S. installations, setting the Near East ablaze and oil prices soaring to \$200 a barrel, plunging the West into recession.

Thus a pre-emptive war on Iran, while a political triumph for the president this fall, could, like the invasion of Iraq, prove a long-term disaster.

To some of us, this would be another unnecessary war. For, according to the *New York Times*, Iran’s nuclear program is plagued by failures and Tehran could be five or ten years away from mastering the technology even to produce fissile material for one bomb.

According to the *Washington Times*, Iran’s clerical and political elites want no war with America and are moving to curb the power of President Ahmadinejad. As one Tehran editor told the *Washington Times*, “if they [the Bushites] keep piling on the pressure, Ahmadinejad will become a national hero. ... Let the Iranians deal with him. If you leave him alone he will become a bankrupt politician within a year.”

Cal Coolidge counseled that when you see ten troubles coming up the road, sometimes the best thing to do is nothing because nine of them will fall into the ditch before they get to you.

Bush is the commander in chief, not King George. He has no power to launch U.S. air strikes on Iran, an act of war, unless Congress authorizes war. Before we wake up to an October surprise, Congress should do its duty and Rumsfeld and Rice should appear and make the case for a war some of us believe Iran neither wants nor threatens.

Forget the Feingold Resolution. Undeclared presidential wars are the real stuff of impeachment. ■

[one war at a time]

# *Iran: The Logic of Deterrence*

Tehran's quest for nuclear weapons is a rational response to a real threat, which makes diplomacy a more prudent option than regime change.

**By Christopher Layne**

AT THIS WRITING it is not known if the United Nations, when it receives the report of the International Atomic Energy Agency on the status of Iran's compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, will impose sanctions on Tehran or whether a last-minute diplomatic compromise will avert—at least for the time being—the need for punitive measures. Neither outcome, however, will bring about a definitive resolution of the deepening crisis between the U.S. and Iran. Washington and Tehran will remain on a collision course that could eventuate in military conflict.

The main source of conflict—or at least the one that has grabbed the lion's share of the headlines—is Tehran's evident determination to develop a nuclear-weapons program. Washington's policy, as President George W. Bush has stated on several occasions in language that recalls his pre-war stance on Iraq, is that a nuclear-armed Iran is “intolerable.”

Beyond nuclear weapons, however, there are other important issues that are driving the U.S. and Iran toward an armed confrontation. Chief among these is Iraq. Recently, Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, accused Tehran of meddling in Iraqi affairs by providing arms and training to Shi'ite militias and by currying favor with the Shi'ite politicians who will likely domi-

nate Iraq's new elected government. With Iraq teetering on the brink of a civil war between Shi'ites and Sunnis, concerns about Iranian interference have been magnified. In a real sense, however, Iran's nuclear program and role in Iraq are merely the tip of the iceberg.

Clashing interests and a tangled history have left the United States and Iran estranged for more than a quarter of a century. Since the 1940s, the U.S. has had important strategic interests in the Persian Gulf and Middle East, a region where Iran sees itself as the dominant power. Iranians remember—and still resent—the 1953 CIA-sponsored coup that overthrew the nationalist prime minister Mohammed Mossadegh because he threatened Anglo-American oil interests in Iran. Following the coup, during the reign of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, Iran aligned with the United States in the Cold War and served as America's strategic surrogate in the Persian Gulf. While the Shah's authoritarian regime served the U.S. geopolitically, the close American relationship with him boomeranged when he was overthrown in the 1978 Islamic Revolution. Washington's association with the Shah fanned widespread Iranian resentment against the U.S.

From the American standpoint, relations with Iran never have recovered

from the crisis of 1979-1980, when Iranian militants seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and held its staff hostage. The hostility between the United States and Iran and U.S. fear that Iran would export its Islamic Revolution were underscored during the Iran-Iraq War (1981-1988), when Washington tilted toward Baghdad and covertly aided Saddam Hussein's regime. From 1987 to 1988, American forces actually waged a low-intensity naval conflict against Iran, a consequence of which was the shoot-down of an Iranian civilian Airbus passenger jet by an American naval vessel, which heightened Iranian ire at the United States. Also contributing to American distrust of Iran are Tehran's longstanding support for Hamas and Hezbollah and its involvement in the attack on the Khobar Towers.

Since the Shah's overthrow, there have been several tentative attempts to thaw relations between Washington and Tehran. These have failed because domestic political considerations in both capitals prevented anything approaching détente—much less rapprochement. The rockiness in Washington's relations with Tehran long predated the Bush administration.

During the 1990s, however, Iran and the U.S. were not drifting toward war. The obvious question, then, is what has