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## **THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE IRAN CRISIS**

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Over the past three months a sense of impending crisis has developed over the risk of an Israeli military strike on Iranian nuclear facilities. ORG has previously analysed the nature and possible outcomes of a war involving Iran, including a detailed briefing (*Iran: Consequences of a War*, February, 2006) and a more recent assessment specifically concerned with possible Israeli action (*The Long-term Consequences of and Israeli Attack in Iran*, November 2011). It has also examined negotiating options, including the May 2011 paper *Talking to the Enemy: Creating New Structures for Negotiations*. This briefing is concerned more with the political context of the current tensions, with emphasis on three states – Iran, Israel and the United States.

### **Iran**

Iranian political culture is rooted in a view of Iran as a country with a history stretching over four thousand years. It sees itself as a serious regional player with the potential for the further development of its international status and the capacity to become a major economy with a strong technological base, aided by its very large oil and gas reserves. At the same time, an important facet of its political outlook is a history of outside interference. While never colonised by western powers, foreign influence over the last 150 years is seen as evidence of unacceptable external control. Examples include Russian and British involvement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the dominant position from the 1920's of the Anglo-Persian (later Iranian) Oil Company, Soviet and British intervention in the early 1940s, the foreign fomenting of a coup against the nationalist Mossadegh government in 1953 and US influence over the Shah in the 1960s and 1970s.

Although autocratic and repressive, the Shah's regime also focused on industrial development, rooted in a strong scientific and technological base. Of particular significance was the decision to commence an ambitious nuclear power programme, an early example of being the Tehran Research Reactor, a 5-megawatt light-water reactor provided by the United States in 1967. In the following decade and prior to the revolution, construction had started on the German-built Bushehr nuclear power plant, but was unfinished by the time of the revolution and only recently completed with Russian assistance.

Iran may be replete with oil and gas reserves but Iranians point to three specific factors in justifying the civil nuclear power programme – Iran has already invested in hydro-electric power, so why not nuclear power, its oil and gas are valuable export commodities, and other oil-rich states, including the United Arab Emirates, are investing in civil nuclear power. Even so, what is actually more important in this context is that nuclear power is widely seen in Iran as a key symbol of modernity and, as such, an important facet of Iran's overall development and international status. Any external attempt to stop this is seen as an attack on the right of the state to modernise and therefore strikes at the heart of its sovereignty.

Iran claims not to be developing nuclear weapons. There is evidence that weapons research has been undertaken in the past, and there is ongoing external controversy over whether this ceased in the early 2000s. What is clear is that Iran has made great efforts to develop a capability to enrich Uranium to reactor-grade level (about 4%) and has succeeded in doing so,

although with many delays and difficulties. It has further enriched small quantities to 20%, for refuelling the Tehran reactor. It may have the capability to enrich to weapons grade (85+%) but there is little or no evidence that it is doing so. The consensus of western opinion is that Iran is developing the capacity to make nuclear weapons but has not taken the decision to do so. If that decision was taken, then constructing a small experimental device might be done quite quickly, perhaps in less than two years, but producing even a small deliverable nuclear arsenal would take much longer.

Iran is politically complex, with competing civil actors, a very powerful theocracy and a security force - the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps - which is independent of the others, has considerable commercial interests and sees itself as the guardian of the revolution. There is much opposition to the government, and there is also a sense that the Revolutionary Guard has lost status. A serious external threat would have value to the government by increasing support for the government. It might also increase the status of the Revolutionary Guard.

## Israel

Israel and Iran had close diplomatic relations, until the fall of the Shah and the Iranian revolution in 1979 - the year Iran cut diplomatic links. Relations deteriorated in the early 1980's following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and Iran's support for the Hezbollah and Hamas' diplomatic alliance with Syria. The domestic climate also changed in Israel; large scale immigration to Israel from the former Soviet bloc in the 1990s added around one million people to the population, close to a 20% increase in the Jewish population of the state. This large immigrant community came with a sense of insecurity and one major effect has been to move Israel to a rather more hawkish stance, at least in terms of external threats. This sense of insecurity, even in a country with very powerful armed forces, including nuclear weapons, was earlier exacerbated by the experience of the Iraqi Scud missile attacks in 1991, and much more recently by the failure to destroy Hezbollah's missile forces in August 2006. Indeed, the end of that war, with missiles still hitting Israel right up to the ceasefire, and the scenes of dishevelled Israeli soldiers returning across the border from Lebanon, has had a lasting impact, particularly within the Israeli Defence Forces. This has resulted in a determination to be much more effective in ensuring the security of the state.

Israel has been further unbalanced by the Arab Awakening, especially the loss of the Mubarak regime with which it had worked effectively and the electoral success of the Muslim Brother and the Salafist party Al-Nour. The attack by protesters on its Embassy in Cairo last September was deeply shocking for Israelis. 6 embassy staff had to be rescued by Egyptian commandos. The recent success of Hamas in Gaza in linking more effectively with communities across North Africa has been an added worry. Even the threat to the Assad regime in Syria is a cause of concern. While that regime has been a supporter of the Hezbollah movement, it has also been stable and has not pushed too hard on the issue of the control of the Golan Heights.

Beyond these issues, though, the most serious long-term threat to the state of Israel is seen as Iran, especially its nuclear weapons potential. Israel takes a harsh view of Iranian intentions, a view exacerbated by Holocaust-denial rhetoric from Mr Ahmadinejad. Furthermore, Israeli sources believe that Iran is determined to develop nuclear weapons and is far closer to doing so than western analysts and intelligence agencies believe. The Israeli political leadership does not believe that sanctions against Iran will work. At the same time, the leadership faces a problem in that it has argued for many years that Iran is no more than one or two years away from having a nuclear weapons capability, leading to a "crying wolf" view of Israeli attitudes.

Even so, three factors remain which are relevant. One is that Iran is undoubtedly enhancing its ability to enrich Uranium, and the second is that its newer facilities are being developed underground, with very high levels of protection. As a result, there is a common Israeli view that a window of opportunity for military action is closing and that within a year, it will be well-nigh impossible to do serious damage to Iranian nuclear potential by military action. Defence Minister Ehud Barak has warned of Iran entering a “zone of immunity.”

The third factor is that the Israeli Defence Forces have worked determinedly in recent years to develop a capability to take action at long range. Any attack on Iranian nuclear facilities prior to 2005 would have been extremely limited, but recent changes include the deployment of over 120 F-15I and F-16I strike aircraft together with earth-penetrating bombs, improved aerial-refuelling, development of long-range armed drones and the seeking of forward operating bases in countries close to Iran. Because of this, there is a belief within the IDF that serious damage could be done to Iran’s nuclear potential. It is recognised that such action could well incite a Hezbollah response, but that this might provide an opportunity to severely damage the organisation in a manner that Israel singularly failed to do in 2006.

In spite of the sense of gathering crisis, it should be emphasised that some significant actors within Israel are opposed to military action against Iran, with this including former senior intelligence officials and retired armed forces officers. They point partly to the logistic problems but more to the consequences of military action. The key point here is that an attack on Iran will unify that country and make it determined to develop a nuclear deterrent force, occasioning the need for further attacks in the years to come. These views resonate with some sectors of Israeli society but it must be said that since the start of 2012 there has been a notable increase in the Israeli media in the rhetoric concerning the need to act against Iran.

### **United States**

US-Iranian relations worsened hugely at the end of the 1970s. Prior to the Islamic Revolution of 1979-80, the Shah had been a key regional ally of the United States in the Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union. That changed radically when the Shah was deposed in 1979, a situation made far worse by the hostage crisis of 1979-81 when 52 US diplomats were detained for 444 days. This experience had a long-term negative impact on the US diplomatic and foreign policy community. Moreover, revolutionary Iran became widely regarded as the most substantial problem for US security interests in the Middle East, a problem exacerbated by the attitude towards Iran of its closest ally – Israel.

This mutually antagonistic relationship persisted through to the 2000s, with the George W Bush administration seeing Iran as part of an “axis of evil”, supporting terrorism and developing weapons of mass destruction and therefore deserving of regime termination. Among supporters of the Bush administration, many saw the “War on Terror” as a means of limiting Tehran’s power by terminating the Afghan and Iraqi regimes, and thereby constraining Iran’s regional influence. In 2006 there was a particular period of crisis when it looked possible that US forces would act against Iran, but the election of Barack Obama in November 2008 resulted in some easing of tensions.

By 2010, President Obama had determined on a large-scale military withdrawal from Iraq, which was largely completed by late last year, and by early 2012, it was clear that his administration had accepted the need for a phased withdrawal from Afghanistan, whatever

progress had been made in negotiating with the Taliban and other armed opposition groups. Both the Iraqi withdrawal and the partial Afghan drawdown have majority public support in the United States, even though Obama's political opponents argue strongly that this is allowing Iran much greater regional influence, especially in Iraq.

The Obama administration's attitude to a possible Israeli strike on Iran is complicated. At the military level there is a real fear that it would be counterproductive. Substantial US forces may have been moved into the region, including a potential naval presence of three carrier battle groups and reinforcing of troop levels in Oman and elsewhere, but these appear primarily to be available at a time of crisis started by others, rather than in any way precipitating a war.

The race for the Republican nomination is proving long and hard, and whichever candidate wins will have a problem in attacking Obama in the Republicans' chosen arena – the economy – in the light of recent improvements which have given Obama a polling boost. It is therefore likely that the Republicans will focus particularly on foreign policy, with some emphasis on the need to face down Iran. In spite of support for Obama's policies on Iraq and Afghanistan, there is currently a majority in favour of action against Iran. The Republicans will be helped in this by domestic support for Israel, which stems partly from the American Jewish community but also from the much larger number of Christian Zionists - several tens of millions of them - who regard the preservation of Israel as central to God's plan for the "End Days" of humankind.

There are two further electoral considerations. If Barack Obama is re-elected in November, he will have a 2-year period in which he can make considerable demands on Israel in its approach to peace with the Palestinians. He may also be forcefully opposed to Israeli action against Iran. Meanwhile, Israel faces an election in September, and there is an argument that a pre-election war with Iran would strengthen the current leadership.

## Conclusion

While there is much uncertainty, given the complexities of the political context in all three countries, it is reasonable to conclude that there is a particular risk of some kind of military confrontation in the six months to September. This is in spite of the many voices in the United States, Western Europe, and even Israel, that are calling for restraint. It is certainly likely to be a time of considerable tension, and in such circumstances the so-called "AIM" factor becomes important – Accidents, Incidents and Mavericks. Any one of these factors might exacerbate a crisis, and this means that it is particularly important to work for an easing of the tensions. If that happens and a conflict is avoided in the coming months, then there is a good chance that negotiations in a calmer atmosphere next year might meet with success.

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