
Getting Serious About Iran: A Military Option

Arthur Herman

AS THE IMPASSE over Iran's nuclear-weapons program grows inexorably into a crisis, a kind of consensus has taken root in the minds of America's foreign-policy elite. This is that military action against Iran is a sure formula for disaster. The essence of the position was expressed in a cover story in *Time* magazine this past September. Entitled "What War with Iran Would Look Like (And How to Avoid It)," the essay focused on what the editors saw as the certain consequences of armed American intervention in that country: wildly spiking oil prices, increased terrorist attacks, economic panic around the world, and the end to any dream of pro-American democratic governments emerging in the Middle East. And that would be in the case of *successful* action. In fact, *Time* predicted, given our overstretched resources and an indubitably fierce Iranian resistance, we would almost certainly lose.

Thus, in the eyes of *Time's* experts as of many other observers, military action against Iran is "unthinkable." What then can be done in the face of

ARTHUR HERMAN, a new contributor, has taught history at George Mason University and Georgetown University. He is the author of, among other books, *The Idea of Decline in Western History*, *How the Scots Invented the Modern World*, and, most recently, *To Rule the Waves: How the British Navy Shaped the Modern World (2004)*, nominated in 2005 for the Mountbatten Prize in naval history. Mr. Herman thanks Chet Nagle and J.R. Dunn for help and advice in the writing of this essay.

the mullahs' implacable drive to acquire nuclear weapons? Here a variety of responses can be discerned. At one end are those who assure us, in the soothing title of a *New York Times* op-ed by Barry Posen of MIT, that "We Can Live with a Nuclear Iran." (*Newsweek's* Fareed Zakaria is similarly sanguine.) Others, like Senator Joseph Biden, insist that we have at least ten years before we have to worry about Iran's getting a working bomb. According to Ashton Carter, who served as an assistant secretary of defense in the Clinton administration, we at least have enough time to explore every possible diplomatic avenue before contemplating any direct military response.

Taking a more openly appeasing line, critics of the Bush administration like Ray Takeyh of the Council on Foreign Relations and Chatham House's Ali Ansari urge us to enter into extended engagement or "dialogue" with Iran, with an eye toward persuading the mullahs to end or at least to modify their nuclear program. This is essentially the tack that has been followed by European and European Union diplomats for the past three years, with notably little success.

Finally there is the tougher solution preferred by the Bush administration: economic sanctions imposed by the UN. The problem here is that the more effective such sanctions are designed to be—proposed measures include freezing Iranian assets abroad and suspending all business and financial ties—the more reluctant have been France, Russia,

and China (our partners on the Security Council) to go along. Sanctions that do pass muster with these governments, whose aggregate business dealings with Iran far outstrip those of the United States, are precisely the ones with little or no bite. And even watered-down sanctions, as U.S. Ambassador John Bolton admitted in a recent interview, are “by no means a done deal.”

To a greater or lesser extent, all of these recommendations fly in the face of reality. Despite Iran’s richly developed repertoire of denials, deceptions, and dissimulations, there is ample evidence that it has no intention whatsoever of relinquishing its aim of becoming a nuclear power. Moreover, this aim may be achievable not within a decade (as Senator Biden fancies) but within the next two to three years. In September, the House Intelligence Committee reported that Iran may have already succeeded in enriching uranium; some intelligence analysts believe that it may already have access to fissionable nuclear material, courtesy of North Korea. If that is so, no diplomacy in the world is going to prevent it from acquiring a bomb.

But neither are nuclear weapons the only threat posed by the Islamic Republic. While the international community has been preoccupied with this issue, the regime in Tehran has been taking steady steps to achieve hegemony over one of the world’s most sensitive and economically critical regions, and control over the world’s most precious resource. It is doing so, moreover, entirely through conventional means.

TO PUT IT briefly, the Islamic Republic has its hand on the throttle of the world’s economic engine: the stretch of ocean at the mouth of the Persian Gulf known as the Straits of Hormuz, which are only 21 miles wide at their narrowest point. Through this waterway, every day, pass roughly 40 percent of the world’s crude oil, including two-thirds of the oil from Saudi Arabia. By 2025, according to Energy Department estimates, fully 60 percent of the world’s oil exports will be moved through this vital chokepoint.

The Straits border on Iran and Oman, with the two lanes of traffic that are used specifically by oil tankers being theoretically protected by international agreement. Since 9/11, a multinational force comprising ships from the U.S., Japan, six European countries, and Pakistan have patrolled outside the Straits, in Omani waters, to make sure they stay open. But this is largely a token force. Meanwhile, the world’s access to Saudi, Qatari, Kuwaiti, and Iraqi oil and gas, as well as other petroleum prod-

ucts from the United Arab Emirates, depends on free passage through the Hormuz Straits.

The Tehran regime has made no secret of its desire to gain control of the Straits as part of its larger strategy of turning the Gulf into an Iranian lake. Indeed, in a preemptive move, it has begun to threaten a cut-off of tanker traffic if the UN should be foolish enough to impose sanctions in connection with the Islamic Republic’s nuclear program. “We have the power to halt oil supply,” a senior Iranian official warned the European Union last January, “down to the last drop.”

In April of this year, as if to drive the point home, Iranian armed forces staged elaborate war games in the Gulf, test-firing a series of new anti-ship missiles capable of devastating any tanker or unwary warship. In the boast of one Iranian admiral, April’s “Holy Prophet war games” showed what could be expected by anyone daring to violate Iran’s interests in the Gulf. A further demonstration of resolve occurred in August, when Iran fired on and then occupied a Rumanian-owned oil platform ostensibly in a dispute over ownership rights; in truth, the action was intended to show Western companies—including Halliburton, which had won a contract for constructing facilities in the Gulf—exactly which power is in charge there.

A 30-page document said to issue from the Strategic Studies Center of the Iranian Navy (NDAJA), and drawn up in September or October of last year, features a contingency plan for closing the Hormuz Straits through a combination of anti-ship missiles, coastal artillery, and submarine attacks. The plan calls for the use of Chinese-made mines, Chinese-built missile boats, and more than 1,000 explosive-packed suicide motor boats to decimate any U.S. invasion force before it can so much as enter the Gulf. Iran’s missile units, manned by the regime’s Revolutionary Guards, would be under instruction to take out more than 100 targets around the Gulf rim, including Saudi production and export centers.

The authenticity of the NDAJA document has been vouched for by at least two defectors from Iranian intelligence. Of course, it may not be authentic at all. And military contingency plans are just that—contingency plans; the file cabinets of defense ministries around the world are full of them. Nor do all analysts agree that the Straits of Hormuz can be effectively mined in the first place. Nevertheless, even the *threat* of mines or suicide boats would likely be enough to induce Lloyds of London to suspend insurance of ships passing through the Straits, causing tanker traffic to cease,

oil markets to rise precipitously, and Asian and European economies to reel.

Something like this very nearly happened in 1987 during the Iran-Iraq war, when only direct U.S. intervention kept the Straits open and the world's oil flowing. For the United States is hardly the only country with a stake in keeping the Gulf and Straits free of Iranian control. Every country in Western Europe and Asia, including those that complain most bitterly about American policy in the Middle East, depends on the steady maintenance of the global economic order that runs on Middle Eastern oil.

But—and herein lies a fruitful irony—so does Iran itself. Almost 90 percent of the mullahs' oil assets are located either in or near the Gulf. So is the nuclear reactor that Russia is building for Iran at Bushehr. Virtually every Iranian well or production platform depends on access to the Gulf if Iran's oil is to reach buyers. Hence, the same Straits by means of which Iran intends to lever itself into a position of global power present the West with its own point of leverage to reduce Iran's power—and to keep it reduced for at least as long as the country's political institutions remain unprepared to enter the modern world.

WHICH BRINGS us back to the military option. That there is plentiful warrant for the exercise of this option—in Iran's serial defiance of UN resolutions, in its declared genocidal intentions toward Israel, another member of the United Nations, and in the fact of its harboring, supporting, and training of international terrorists—could not be clearer. Unfortunately, though, current debate has become stuck on the issue of possible air strikes against Iran's nuclear program, and whether such strikes can or cannot halt that program's further development. Optimists argue they can; pessimists, including those highlighted in *Time's* cover story, throw up a myriad of objections.

The most common such objection is that the aytollahs, having learned the lesson of 25 years ago when Israel took out Saddam Hussein's nuclear reactor at Osirak, have dispersed the most vital elements of their uranium-enrichment project among perhaps 30 hardened and well-protected sites. According to *Time's* military sources, air sorties would thus have to reach roughly 1,500 "aim points," contending with sophisticated air-defense systems along the way. As against this, others, including the strategic analyst Edward Luttwak in COMMENTARY ("Three Reasons Not to Bomb Iran—Yet," May 2006), argue convincingly that it is hardly necessary

to hit all or even the majority of Iran's sites in order to set back its nuclear program by several years.

But, as I have tried to show, the most immediate menace Iran poses is not nuclear but conventional in nature. How might it be dealt with militarily, and is it conceivable that both perils could be dealt with at once? What follows is one possible scenario for military action.

The first step would be to make it clear that the United States will tolerate no action by any state that endangers the international flow of commerce in the Straits of Hormuz. Signaling our determination to back up this statement with force would be a deployment in the Gulf of Oman of minesweepers, a carrier strike group's guided-missile destroyers, an Aegis-class cruiser, and anti-submarine assets, with the rest of the carrier group remaining in the Indian Ocean. The U.S. Navy could also deploy UAV's (unmanned air vehicles) and submarines to keep watch above and below against any Iranian missile threat to our flotilla.

Our next step would be to declare a halt to all shipments of Iranian oil while guaranteeing the safety of tankers carrying non-Iranian oil and the platforms of other Gulf states. We would then guarantee this guarantee by launching a comprehensive air campaign aimed at destroying Iran's air-defense system, its air-force bases and communications systems, and finally its missile sites along the Gulf coast. At that point the attack could move to include Iran's nuclear facilities—not only the "hard" sites but also infrastructure like bridges and tunnels in order to prevent the shifting of critical materials from one to site to another.

Above all, the air attack would concentrate on Iran's gasoline refineries. It is still insufficiently appreciated that Iran, a huge oil exporter, imports nearly 40 percent of its gasoline from foreign sources, including the Gulf states. With its refineries gone and its storage facilities destroyed, Iran's cars, trucks, buses, planes, tanks, and other military hardware would run dry in a matter of weeks or even days. This alone would render impossible any major countermoves by the Iranian army. (For its part, the Iranian navy is aging and decrepit, and its biggest asset, three Russian-made Kilo-class submarines, should and could be destroyed before leaving port.)

The scenario would not end here. With the systematic reduction of Iran's capacity to respond, an amphibious force of Marines and special-operations forces could seize key Iranian oil assets in the Gulf, the most important of which is a series of 100 offshore wells and platforms built on Iran's conti-

mental shelf. North and South Pars offshore fields, which represent the future of Iran's oil and natural-gas industry, could also be seized, while Kargh Island at the far western edge of the Persian Gulf, whose terminus pumps the oil from Iran's most mature and copiously producing fields (Ahwaz, Marun, and Gachsaran, among others), could be rendered virtually useless. By the time the campaign was over, the United States military would be in a position to control the flow of Iranian oil at the flick of a switch.

AN OPERATIONAL fantasy? Not in the least. The United States did all this once before, in the incident I have already alluded to. In 1986-88, as the Iran-Iraq war threatened to spill over into the Gulf and interrupt vital oil traffic, the United States Navy stepped in, organizing convoys and re-flagging ships to protect them against vengeful Iranian attacks. When the Iranians tried to seize the offensive, U.S. vessels sank one Iranian frigate, crippled another, and destroyed several patrol boats. Teams of SEALs also shelled and seized Iranian oil platforms. The entire operation, the largest naval engagement since World War II, not only secured the Gulf; it also compelled Iraq and Iran to wind down their almost decade-long war. Although we made mistakes, including most grievously the accidental shooting-down of a civilian Iranian airliner, killing everyone on board, the world economic order was saved—the most important international obligation the United States faced then and faces today.

But the so-called “tanker war” did not go far enough. In the ensuing decades, the regime in Tehran has single-mindedly pursued its goal of achieving great-power status through the acquisition of nuclear weapons, control of the Persian Gulf, and the spread of its ideology of global jihad. Any effective counter-strategy today must therefore be predicated not only on seizing the state's oil assets but on refusing to relinquish them unless and until there is credible evidence of regime change in Tehran or—what is all but inconceivable—a major change of direction by the reigning theocracy. In the meantime, and as punishment for its serial violations of UN resolutions and of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Iran's oil resources would be impounded and revenues from their production would be placed in escrow.

Obviously, no plan is foolproof. The tactical risks associated with a comprehensive war strategy of this sort are numerous. But they are outweighed by its key advantages.

First, it would accomplish much more than air strikes alone on Iran's elusive nuclear sites. Whereas such action might retard the uranium-enrichment program by some years, this one in effect would put Iran's theocracy out of business by depriving it of the very weapon that the critics of air strikes most fear. It would do so, moreover, with minimal means. This would be a naval and air war, not a land campaign. Requiring no draw-down of U.S. forces in Iraq, it would involve one or two carrier strike groups, an airborne brigade, and a Marine brigade. Since the entire operation would take place offshore, there would be no need to engage the Iranian army. It and the Revolutionary Guards would be left stranded, out of action and out of gas.

In fact, there is little Iran could do in the face of relentless military pressure at its most vulnerable point. Today, not only are key elements of the Iranian military in worse shape than in the 1980's, but even the oil weapon is less formidable than imagined. Currently Iran exports an estimated 2.5 million barrels of oil a day. Yet according to a recent report in *Forbes*, quoting the oil-industry analyst Michael Lynch, new sources of oil around the world will have boosted total production by 2 million barrels a day in this year alone, and next year by three million barrels a day. In short, other producers (including Iranian platforms in American hands) can take up some if not all of the slack. The real loser would be Iran itself. Pumping crude oil is its only industry, making up 85 percent of its exports and providing 65 percent of the state budget. With its wells held hostage, the country's economy could enter free fall.

TO BE SURE, none of these considerations is likely to impress those who object in principle to any decisive action against Iran's mullahs. To some, the scenario I have proposed will seem just another instance of rampant American imperialism or “gunboat diplomacy.” To others, a war of this kind will surely appear calculated further to inflame anti-Americanism in the Middle East, arousing the fury of the dreaded “Arab street.” Still others will point with alarm to the predictably angry reaction of Iran's two great patrons, Russia and China. And many will worry that decisive U.S. action will boomerang politically, by alienating Iran's democrats and dissidents and thus jeopardizing the hoped-for eventuality of a pro-Western government emerging in Tehran.

Let me address these concerns in turn. In the colonial era, gunboats were used to intimidate helpless peoples, not countries bent on intimidating

tion themselves and actively underwriting global terrorism. Nor does America's immediate self-interest, "imperial" or otherwise, enter the picture; it is Europeans and Asians, not Americans, who rely on Iranian oil and natural gas. By safeguarding that supply, and keeping the Hormuz Straits open to other shippers, we can prevent a world-wide crisis of the sort that might well be triggered by Tehran itself in the face of economic sanctions or air strikes against its nuclear sites. Predictably, those complaining the loudest about American "imperialism" would be its most direct beneficiaries.

As for anti-Americanism in general, the specter of the Arab street has proved itself to be a chimera. If the forcible removal of an Arab dictator (Saddam Hussein) failed to produce the incendiary reaction predicted by many experts, war on a non-Arab regime is hardly likely to do so. To the contrary, it is by dragging out the crisis, and by appearing weak in the face of Tehran's blustering and deception, that we help to consolidate the formation of a radical Shiite Crescent in the heart of the Middle East. By finally removing the head of the radical Islamic monster, the military campaign contemplated here would perform a service both for neighboring Sunni regimes and for moderate Shiites in search of political breathing room, even as groups like Hizballah in Lebanon and Moqtada al-Sadr's militia in Iraq would begin to find themselves politically and militarily orphaned and incapable of concerted action.

Then there are Moscow and Beijing. What these two regimes want out of Iran is a return on their investments there—and, in China's case, oil. No doubt their first choice would be to have everything stay the way it is; but clearly their second choice is to prevent Iran itself from becoming the dominant player in the region. By ensuring a continuous flow of oil from the Gulf, and leaving untouched Russian and Chinese investments in the development of Iran's Caspian Sea fields, an aggressive military strategy could actually work to those countries' advantage.

Would U.S. action permanently traumatize Iranian national pride and alienate its democrats for generations to come? This is the worry of analysts like Michael Ledeen of the American Enterprise

Institute, who on these same grounds also opposes air strikes on Iran's nuclear installations. If anything, however, the current American policy—namely, pursuing economic sanctions—would seem likelier to produce that long-term damaging effect than would a short, sharp war to neutralize and perhaps even to topple a hated regime.

THAT THE regime in Tehran is indeed hated, and also radically unstable, is a point on which both advocates and opponents of American action can agree. In this connection, it is important to bear in mind that Iran is rent by ethnic divisions and rivalries almost as fierce as those that divide Iraq or such former Soviet republics as Georgia and Russia itself. Almost half of Iran's population is made up of Kurds, Baluchis, Azeris, Arabs, and Turkomans. Unlike the Persians, who are Shiites, most of these minorities are Sunni. Thus, Iran is a country ripe for constitutional overhaul, if not re-federation. Unless the current regime and its backers are willing to change course, decisive military action could open the way for an entirely new Iran.

The key word is "decisive." What has cost us prestige in the Middle East and around the world is not our 2003 invasion of Iraq but our lack of a clear record of success in its aftermath. Governments in and around the Persian Gulf region are waiting for someone to deal effectively and summarily with the Iranian menace. Saudis, Jordanians, Egyptians, and others—all feel the pinch of an encroaching power. The longer we wait, the harder it will be to stop the Iranian advance.

In 1936, the French army could have halted Hitler's reoccupation of the Rhineland with a single division of troops, but chose to do nothing. In 1938, Britain and France could have joined forces with the well-armed and highly motivated Czech army to administer a crushing defeat to the German Wehrmacht and probably topple Hitler in the bargain. Instead they handed him the Sudetenland, setting in motion the process that in 1939 led to the most destructive war in world history. Do we intend to dither until suicide bombers blow up a supertanker off the Omani coast, or a mushroom cloud appears over Tel Aviv, before we decide it is finally time to get serious about Iran?