

# PERSIAN PERIL: Making Sense of Iran's Nuclear Program

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In discussing the issues surrounding the US claim that Iran poses a nuclear threat, it is helpful to consider both the historical and technical background to the looming attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. To do so, we need to consider three things: Bush's "Axis of Evil" foreign policy, the requirements of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and the Iran's vulnerability to being destabilized.

## AXIS OF EVIL

Like the lead-up to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the US plans regarding Iran go back to a period *before* 9/11/01, regardless of the frequent reference made to this event in whipping up the obligatory 15-Minutes of Hate. US policymakers have not been so much concerned with individual Middle Eastern countries; rather their focus is on the whole region. As the world passes "peak oil," control of the earth's oil reserves will become an ever-greater strategic issue.

This is the context for the Bush doctrine, announced in the "State of the Union" Address, January 2002, that the US must do battle with the "Axis of Evil." Iran is one of the countries named on this list. The aim, clearly laid out, is, not defense of the US nation from a conventional imminent attack, but "regime change" in the target countries, ostensibly because they harbor terrorists. To this end, the US broadcasts around-the-clock messages to the Iranian people urging them to rise up against the existing regime. In a fair world, this would be condemned as an act of aggression.

Much is made of the Iranian president Ahmadinejad's declaration, on 26 Oct 2005, that the state of Israel ought to be wiped off the map, a comment that was shamefully mis-translated to sound more venomous than it actually was. The Iranian president actually made no reference to the elimination of the nation of Israel, but rather, to the elimination of Israel's present regime. What he said was "this regime occupying Jerusalem must vanish from the page of time." According to Murray Dobbin (*Georgia Straight*, Oct 2006), he was quoting Ayatollah Khomeini, who made the statement in reference to the Shah's regime in Iran.

This is, at most, a very mild version of the regime-change policy of the US establishment. But in the latter case, there is not a ripple of concern that the president of the most powerful military power in the world openly threatens a sovereign nation and fellow member of the UN. The US has, not only the capacity, compared to Iran's ability to carry out its threat, but has also shown a willingness to follow through on its bullying in such countries as Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq, to name only the most recent victims.

As for Israel, it has its own weight to add to the balance-sheet of international threats. Israel has openly announced its determination to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities. It prefers that the US do this, but is prepared to do it themselves, if need be. Quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* (22 Oct 2004), an Israeli official, Yuval Steinitz, said: "We don't want to give the impression that this entire burden rests on Israel's shoulders," echoing another Israeli source who declared, "It's not for a local power like Israel to act – it's a question for a superpower." The article goes on to say, "Preemptive strikes have always been an essential element of Israel's military doctrine."

Compared to any threat from Iran, Israel has already shown it is ready to make good on *its* threats. When, in 1981, Iraq began to build a nuclear research facility in the town of Osirak, Israel took it upon itself to destroy the site with a bombing raid. This act of international aggression was condemned by the Security Council

[see UNSC Resolution 487 (1981)]. In its declaration, the Security Council noted that, *in contrast to Israel, Iraq had been in full compliance with UN-inspected safeguards*, and that Israel owed Iraq full compensation. It is not lost on other countries in the region that Israel has succeeded in ignoring this censure by the UN Security Council with total impunity. No followup, no call for sanctions, no pressure, nothing. Compare that to the incessant badgering of the Security Council by the US in trying to get some action against Iran.

Basically, Israel's policy is that it is to be the only nuclear power in the region. In a little-reported statement by Muhamed El-Baradei, Chair of the UN nuclear watchdog agency, El-Baradei declared that Israel should take steps to ease tensions in the region by eliminating its nuclear weapons facilities as part of a decades-old effort to make the Middle East a Nuclear-Weapons –Free Zone.

### **NPT-IAEA**

The *Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty* grew out of a combination of the Cold War nuclear stalemate between the US and Russia, the increasing number of nations developing nuclear weaponry, and the Eisenhower program of the "Peaceful Atom." This set the stage for the international promotion of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.

Since such technology could be re-directed to military use, it was necessary to set up an international watchdog to ensure the technology was confined to peaceful uses. Thus, through the UN, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was established.

The basic rule was, for any country to qualify for the acquisition and use of nuclear technology, it had to sign on to the NPT and agree to regular inspections by the IAEA.

It is significant that Israel is not a signatory of the NPT and is not subject to IAEA inspection. Beginning with the revelations by Mordechai Vanunu in the 1980s, it is now widely acknowledged that Israel is a nuclear weapons state. It had acquired the technology and materials for its nuclear program through clandestine channels – especially through operatives in North America, thus escaping the requirements of the NPT.

As Ray McGovern, a 21-year CIA veteran, writes in *Truthout* (March 2005), "The Iranians also remember how Israel was able to acquire and keep its nuclear technology. Much of it was stolen from the United States by spies for Israel. As early as the late-1950s, Washington knew Israel was building the bomb."

In the resolution mentioned earlier [487 (1981)], the Security Council noted that "Israel has not adhered to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons." As El-Baradei said in reference to Israel's weapons stockpile, it is "not sustainable in any region or even globally to have some rely on nuclear weapons and others being told they should not have nuclear weapons."

Iran has been a signatory of the NPT, and subject to IAEA inspections, since the reign of Shah Pahlevi, whose government was a puppet of the US. On this, McGovern puts a wry perspective when he writes, "In 1975 President Gerald Ford's chief of staff Dick Cheney and his defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld bought Iran's argument that it needed a nuclear program to meet future energy requirements. This is what Iranian officials are saying today, and they are supported by energy experts who point out that oil extraction in Iran is already at or near peak and that the country will need alternatives to oil in coming decades." (*Truthout*, Feb 2006)

Another factor to keep in mind is that nuclear power promised to free up Iran's petroleum for export, bringing in the much-coveted US dollar (in the form of the "petrodollar"). Subsequent Iranian governments have continued to honor the terms of the NPT, and, for a time, to sign on to a more invasive program of inspections called the "Additional Protocol." But they were confronted with such bad-faith provocation by the US, that they pulled out of the Additional Protocol.

Ultimately, matters stand as expressed by Albright and Hinderstein in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (Sept 2006): "Although the U.S. government and Israel have stated for years that Iran has a nuclear weapons program, they have not provided the IAEA or the public with the location of any nuclear weapons sites or any direct evidence of such activities."

**So, does Iran have a nuclear program?** Obviously, the answer is *yes*; just like a host of other countries, including Japan, South Korea, Canada, and Israel.

**Does Iran have nuclear *weapons* program?** According to the IAEA, whose job it is to monitor for such things, the answer is *No*. In their April 2006 report to the Security Council, they verify this, although they note several gaps in their knowledge which they ask Iran to help remove. Such gaps are not unusual, for it is a commonplace occurrence in respect of other nations subject to IAEA inspections. The present flap over Iran's nuclear program has been initiated, *not* by the agency specifically set up to monitor for diversions to military use, but by the US, in a move that serves to undermine the authority of the IAEA. Just as its nose-thumbing of UN inspections regimes for Iraqi WMD served to denigrate the work of UN agencies, the US now challenges the credibility of those who monitor the situation on-the-ground by claiming superior "intelligence" that contradicts what the IAEA reports.

So the case against Iran comes down to this:

***Iran has a program of "enriching uranium."*** True. But this is permitted under the rules of the NPT and IAEA. Uranium enrichment is a legitimate part of the "peaceful atom" protocol. Iran cannot be faulted on this score.

The literature on how uranium is used in the process of generating electricity reveals how shamefully the media have glossed over a fact that has a central bearing on how we understand the nature of the nuclear enrichment issue.

In almost all existing reactors, uranium cannot be used in its "raw" natural state, but must be "enriched" before it is "burned" in the reactor (see Box on "Enrichment"). Thus, unless a country has one of these exceptional reactors that can run on "un-enriched" uranium (the CANDU heavy water type is one of them), it requires a steady supply of enriched uranium, which it must either enrich domestically or import from elsewhere. *Without enrichment, Iran cannot run its reactors.* Therefore, enrichment has become an integral part of that country's nuclear program. Furthermore, the ability to enrich one's own ore is a measure of the security of access to the fuel.

The most efficient method of enrichment is called "gas-centrifuge." This is why Iran has acquired centrifuges. In fact, it is the method used by a European consortium, URENCO, to enrich uranium for the world's nuclear industry.

The enrichment process can also be applied to the uranium which is "spent" in a burn cycle. Some of it can be re-enriched to be burned again. This reduces somewhat the need to secure fresh stores of mined uranium.

### **What “Enrichment” entails**

Raw uranium ore contains a number of isotopes, the main ones being U-238, U-235, and U-234. The “Heavy” uranium isotope, U-238, accounts for 99.3% of the raw ore, while U-235 is present at 0.7% and U-234 accounts for less than 0.01%. To sustain the chain reaction needed for a continuous release of heat, a critical quantity of the “lighter” U-235 is needed. The 0.7% proportion is not sufficient, making it necessary to increase the percentage of U-235. The more common nuclear reactors require about 5% of the uranium to be U-235. The process of increasing the proportion from 0.7% to 5% is called “enrichment.” Note that *weapons-grade uranium needs an enrichment to 90% U-235*. Iran’s facilities produce a much less rich proportion, reported as 4.8% by the *Globe and Mail* (3 May 2006). This is a percentage suitable to reactor use, *but not weapons*. Indeed, it is not even suitable for “research” reactors, which require between 12% and 20% U-235. The “tailings” left from the enrichment process are called “depleted” uranium, almost all of it U-238, with less than 0.25% U-235.

The most commonly used enrichment process is the “gas-centrifuge” method, and this is the reason Iran needs centrifuges. The uranium ore is combined with fluorine to form the gas, uranium hexafluoride (UF<sub>6</sub>). This gas is run through numerous stages of highly delicate centrifuges, rotating at extremely high speeds in a vacuum. It is a process that takes advantage of the miniscule difference in density between the U-235 and U-238 isotopes. The “heavier” U-238 tends to collect at one end of the centrifuge, leaving the “lighter” isotopes, like U-235, at the other end. Re-enrichment involves running the depleted uranium through the enrichment process once again. Needless to say, this involves considerably more input than the first run with raw ore. Furthermore, the immensity of the physical layout required for a *weapons-grade* enrichment facility would make it almost impossible to conceal, especially from on-the-ground inspections as practiced under the IAEA regime.

European negotiators had sought to de-fuse the situation by offering to guarantee a supply of enriched uranium to Iran. But, as one Iranian pointed out, “What guarantees are there? Will they supply us one day, ...and stop supplying us another day?”

It is a sentiment which was reiterated by Hassan Rohani, an Iranian official, who said, “Iran is intent on producing nuclear fuel domestically for reasons both historical and long-term economic. The US and some Europeans argue they cannot trust Iran’s intentions.” Instead, “they want Iran to accept their promise to supply it with nuclear fuel.” So, while the West refuses Iran’s verifiable word, Iran is required to accept a promise which they deem unenforceable. (*Time*, 9 May 2006)

This is no idle worry. Back in 1994, North Korea had an “Agreed Framework” with the US. In this agreement, the US pledged to supply North Korea with oil, while it converted its nuclear technology to one that did not involve uranium enrichment. At a critical juncture, the US reneged on its promise, leaving North Korea, not only starving for energy, but starving.

Nevertheless, there was a report that Iran had come close to finalizing an agreement to enrich their uranium in Russia. Perhaps we are witnessing a tug-of-war between Russia and Europe over this rather lucrative concession, weighed against Iran’s desire to have sovereign control over enrichment. The picture is not clear.

**Iran has ambitions to build nuclear weapons.** Possibly true, although there is no evidence of such a program. But this, too, is permitted by existing NPT-IAEA rules. A country subject to the NPT is allowed to build a nuclear arsenal if it is in danger of a potential nuclear attack from another country. Article X of the NPT states:

Each party shall in exercising its national sovereignty have the right to withdraw from the Treaty if it decides that extraordinary events, related to the subject matter of this Treaty [e.g., dangers of nuclear attack], have jeopardized the supreme interests of its country.

Iran has been threatened by two nations in possession of nuclear weapons, the US and Israel. The US plans on delivering 500 “bunker-buster” bombs to Israel. What use might Israel have for these bombs? Against the Palestinians? Hardly. The obvious target is a country they have already ear-marked for a bombing raid, Iran. Now, Iran’s nuclear facilities are buried deep underground, and US “targeteers” are openly discussing the ways in which they can destroy these sites.

According to the *Washington Post*, Pentagon thinking is that they can do this only with nuclear weapons. “The targeteers honestly keep coming back and saying it will require nuclear penetrators to take out those tunnels.” (April 2006 article on Pentagon planning for an attack on a key nuclear site in Iran). It is very likely that the “bunker busters” are nuclear devices.

So, Iran has every reason to believe that an attack on its deeply-buried facilities would constitute a nuclear attack, and can readily invoke the opt-out clause of the NPT. Add to this the widely reported policy of the Bush administration to develop “tactical” nuclear weapons, and we have a scenario for the nuclear vulnerability of *any* country in the world that Uncle Sam targets for “regime-change.” To quote Ray McGovern again: “Preaching to Iran and others about not acquiring nuclear weapons is, indeed, like the village drunk preaching sobriety.”

As matters now stand, Iran has not formally pulled out of the NPT. Worries that it might escalate its enrichment program to produce weapons-grade uranium rest on a refusal to believe the IAEA can do its job. This forebodes the death of the whole Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which absolutely requires a dependable inspections program.

The situation is summed up by an unnamed former Iranian ambassador who said, the US is “pushing Iran to become a nuclear state. Iran just wants to be a supplier of nuclear fuel,” but, with the US threatening its facilities, “they are pushing it further.” There is little doubt that the Bush Administration has destroyed the NPT and has set the stage for an ominous and volatile proliferation of nuclear weaponry. Developments in Israel, India, Pakistan, North Korea and Iran promise to be just the beginning.

So, there is no evidence of a nuclear weapons process in Iran. No doubt there are people who will agree with US Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, that “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.” This is a clever but very dangerous way of thinking. If lacking “evidence of absence” is a warrant for attack, no one, no group, no nation, no region is safe. We are then at the mercy of every malicious neighbor who feels powerful enough to subdue us. Indeed, that is precisely where US policy has led the world, and it fits very well with the *Project for a New American Century*.

With petroleum shortages predicted by “peak-oil” looming, the world economy will likely invest heavily in nuclear as the dominant energy source. Should this happen, the NPT will be dead just at the time when it is desperately needed, because civilian and military uses of nuclear technology will become virtually indistinguishable. The world community will become vulnerable to the unverifiable accusations of the more

powerful nations, with a resulting misery that is almost unimaginable. Happily (!) nature may come to the rescue by producing “peak uranium” before all life is wiped off the face of the earth.

## THE BALKANIZATION OF IRAN

We now need to ask, is the US Administration simply insane, or is there some cunning behind their rattling saber?

Although the resemblance to the run-up to the Iraq invasion is very close, the situation is more like the prologue to the attacks on Yugoslavia and Afghanistan. In both these countries, the US and its lap-dogs were able to tap – and intensify – internal divisions. This was the case with the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in Yugoslavia, and the “Northern Alliance” in Afghanistan. Both proved pivotal in the quest for “regime change.” What the US strategists seem to be banking on is a similar breakup of Iran. Four groups threaten the stability of Iran, the Mujaheddin E Khalk, comprising expatriate Iranians committed to toppling the present regime, and three ethnic enclaves that have strong affiliations with adjacent countries. These are the Azeris, the Kurds, and the Arabs.



## **Mujaheddin E Khalk**

An important group of Iranian insurgents is the Mujaheddin E Khalk (MEK). With offices in London, they operate from camps in Iraq, from where they harass Iranian towns and cities. By any fair calculation, these are terrorist activities. It should not surprise anyone to learn that US forces are launching joint expeditions with the MEK to sabotage facilities and secure “intelligence.” Interestingly enough, the MEK is (or was) listed by the US State Department as a “terrorist” organization, an honor awarded the KLA before the need to enlist their co-operation in the humanitarian bombing of Yugoslavia. An ideal group for US “black ops.”

## **Ethnic Divisions**

There are three noteworthy ethnic enclaves in Iran, all in the Western part of the country along the border with Iraq. The Azeris, in the North, the Kurds, further South, and the Arabs in the Southern section west of the Zagros Mountains, in a Province called Khuzestan. Each has its own ethnic rationale for separation from Iran. What is especially significant is that within these areas all the oil fields of the country can be found. Should these regions secede, they would be taking all of Iran’s oil wealth with them. (On this, especially the Ethnic Arabs, and the descriptive map reproduced here, see the article by Zoltan Grossman in *Z Magazine* Jan 2006).

### **Azeris**

In the far Northwest corner of Iran, the Azeri population is ethnically identified with the adjacent nation of Azerbaijan. This is reminiscent of Kosovo and the ethnic Albanians who wanted union with a “Greater Albania.” The US could coax aid from the government of Azerbaijan in calling for protection of ethnic Azeris in Iran.

### **Kurds**

Artificially established boundaries carved the aboriginal lands of the Kurdish-speaking peoples into segments of three nations, Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Since the partition, each nation has suppressed Kurdish independence movements with consummate brutality. Since the US-led invasion and occupation, the Iraqi Kurds are making a very strong move towards separation and independence. If accomplished, this could easily bring Iranian Kurds into a bid for a “Greater Kurdistan.” The only US misgiving here is the effect it might have on Turkish anxieties over their own Kurdish minority.

### **Arabs**

Although Khuzestani Arabs are Shi’ites, and thus share the same sectarian religious beliefs with the dominant Iranian group, ethnically they are closer to the Shi’ite Arabs in Southern Iraq. As far back as 1897, Khuzestan was a British Protectorate known as “Arabistan.”

In all of these regions, the US has worked through “black ops” to stir up ethnic violence. We can expect a reprise of Kosovo, in which the US will champion “oppressed” minorities by a program of “humanitarian bombing.”

## **THE BOURSE**

An additional irritant for the US is the on-again, off-again Iranian plan to establish a petroleum “bourse” to facilitate the sale of its oil in *euros*, rather than US dollars. It is well known that the US dollar would be in

even more serious trouble than it presently is, were it not for the fact that all countries that want to import oil must have US dollars with which to purchase it, the celebrated “petrodollar.” The only way to secure sufficient amounts of petrodollars is have an export economy that can trade in US currency. This, ultimately, requires that these countries maintain an economy that defers to US policy. In particular, we should note that it also puts these countries’ dollar reserves in danger of being “frozen” by order of the US. Thus, it is no surprise that, looking for a more secure venue for its oil wealth, Venezuela is also considering a plan to adopt the euro as its petroleum currency. Any move along this line is bound to invite much wrath from Uncle Sam.

*So, if Iran had not envisaged a nuclear weapons program before the US began snarling its way through the UN Security Council, just how irrational is it for Iranians to feel that they now need a deterrent?*

### **SOME REFERENCE LINKS**

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