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James C Moore: Why shouldn't Iran have nuclear weapons? Israel has American warheads ready to fire

Iranians see only hypocrisy from the world's nuclear powers

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As international political powers seek Iran's capitulation on nuclear weapons development, little notice is given to what the Americans and the British have done to create this crisis nor what steps the Israelis might eventually take to make it profoundly more complicated.

Iran's antipathy toward the West did not spontaneously generate out of the crazed rhetoric of radical mullahs. It has been spurred by what Iranians see as hypocrisy on the part of members of the world's nuclear community, and the bumbled meddling of the US and UK in Iranian affairs for more than a half century.

Iran is dangerous, but the British and the Americans have helped to make it that way. And the situation is even more precarious than it appears.

Shortly after the Gulf War in 1991, Germany gave Israel two of its diesel-powered Dolphin-class submarines. The Israelis agreed to purchase a third at a greatly reduced price. In November 2005, Germany announced that it was selling two more subs to Israel for \$1.2bn (£660m).

Defence analysts have suggested the Dolphin-class boats are a means for Israel to have a second-strike capability from the sea if any of its land-based defence systems are hit by enemy nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, the Bush doctrine of pre-emptive war is geopolitically afoot: Israel and the American president might not be willing to wait until after the first shot is fired.

Initially, Israel was expected to arm its submarine fleet with its own short-range Popeye missiles carrying conventional warheads. At least three mainstream publications in the US and Germany, however, have confirmed the vessels have been fitted with US-made Harpoon missiles with nuclear tips. Each Dolphin-class boat can carry 24 missiles.

Although Israel has not yet taken delivery of the two new submarines, the three presently in its fleet have the potential to launch 72 Harpoons. Stratfor, a Texas intelligence business, claims the Harpoons are designed to seek out ship-sized targets on the sea but could be retrofitted with a different guidance system.

According to independent military journalist Gordon Thomas, that has already happened. He has reported the Harpoons were equipped with "over the horizon" software from a US manufacturer to make them suitable for attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities. Because the shallow waters of the Persian Gulf make the Israeli subs easily detectable, two of them are reported to be patrolling the deeper reaches of the Gulf of Oman, well within range of Iranian targets.

If Israel has US nuclear weaponry pointed at Iran, the position of the country's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, becomes more politically supportable by his people. Despite the fact that Israel has been developing nuclear material since 1958, the country has never formally acknowledged it has a nuclear arsenal. Analysts have estimated, however, that Israel is the fifth-largest nuclear power on the planet with much of its delivery systems technology funded by US taxpayers. To complicate current diplomatic efforts, Israel, like Pakistan and India, has refused to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty even as it insists in the international discourse that Iran be stopped from acquiring what Israel already has.

Before Ariel Sharon's health failed, Der Spiegel reported that the then Israeli prime minister had ordered his country's Mossad intelligence service to go into Iran and identify nuclear facilities to be destroyed. Journalist Seymour Hersh has also written that the US military already has teams inside Iran picking targets and working to facilitate political unrest. It is precisely this same type of tactic by the US and the UK, used more than a half century ago, which has led us to the contemporary nuclear precipice.

In 1953, Kermit Roosevelt led the CIA overthrow of Mohamed Mossadeq, Iran's democratic-ally elected prime minister. Responding to a populace that had grown restive under imperialist British influence, Mossadeq had plans to nationalise the vast oil fields of his country.

At the prompting of British intelligence, the CIA executed strategic bombings and political harassments of religious leaders, which became the foundation of Mossadeq's overthrow. Shah Reza Pahlevi, whose strings were pulled from Downing Street and Washington, became a brutal dictator who gave the multinational oil companies access to Iranian reserves. Over a quarter of a century later, the Iranian masses

revolted, tossed out the Shah, and empowered the radical Ayatollah Khomeini.

Iran has the strength needed to create its current stalemate with the West. Including reserves, the Iranian army has 850,000 troops - enough to deal with strained American forces in Iraq, even if US reserves were to be deployed. The Iranians also have North Korean surface-to-air missiles with a 1,550-mile range and able to carry a nuclear warhead.

America cannot invade and occupy. Iran's response would likely be an invasion of southern Iraq, populated, as is Iran, with Shias who could be enlisted to further destabilise Iraq. There are also reported to be thousands of underground nuclear facilities and uranium gas centrifuges in Iran, and it is impossible for all of them to be eliminated. But the Israelis might be willing to try. An Israeli attack on Iran would give Bush some political cover at home. The president could continue to argue that Israel has a right to protect itself.

But what if Israeli actions endanger America? Israel cannot attack without the US being complicit. Israeli jets would have to fly through Iraqi air space, which would require US permission. And America's Harpoon missiles would be delivering the warheads. These would blow up Iranian nuclear facilities and also launch an army of Iranian terrorists into the Western world.

But George Bush is still without a respectable presidential legacy. He might be willing to risk everything to mark his place in history as the man who stopped Iran from getting nukes. The greater fear, though, is that he becomes the first person to pull the nuclear trigger since Hiroshima and Nagasaki - and then his place in the history books will be assured.

James C Moore is the author of three books about the Bush administration. His latest, 'The Architect', will be published in September by Random House of New York

Alan Watkins is away

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