

Published on Saturday, April 29, 2006 by [Foreign Policy in Focus](#)

The United States, Israel, and the Possible Attack on Iran

by **Stephen Zunes**

With even mainstream media outlets like the Washington Post and The New Yorker publishing credible stories that the United States is seriously planning a military attack on Iran, increasing numbers of Americans are expressing concerns about the consequences of the United States launching another war that would once again place the United States in direct contravention of international law.

The latest National Security Strategy document published earlier this year labeled Iran as the most serious challenge to the United States posed by any country. This should be an indication of just how safe the United States is in the post-Cold War world, where the "most serious challenge" is no longer a rival superpower with thousands of nuclear weapons and sophisticated delivery systems capable of destroying the United States, but a Third World country on the far side of the planet which, according to the latest National Intelligence Estimate out of Washington, is at least 10 years away from actually producing a usable nuclear weapon. Furthermore, Iran has no capacity to develop any delivery system in the foreseeable future capable of landing a weapon within 10,000 miles of our shores.

However, despite the fact that there is no evidence that Iran is even developing nuclear weapons in the first place, the Bush administration and Congressional leaders of both parties argue that simply having the technology which would make it theoretically possible for Iran to manufacture a nuclear weapon at some point in the future is sufficient casus belli. As part of his desperate search for enemies, President Bush claimed in January that a nuclear-armed Iran would be "a grave threat to the security of the world," words that echoed language he used in reference to Iraq prior to the 2003 invasion of that oil-rich country. Meanwhile, Vice President Dick Cheney vowed "meaningful consequences" if Iran did not give up its nuclear program and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton claimed there would be "tangible and painful consequences" if Iran did not cooperate.

The Washington Post quoted White House sources as reporting that "Bush views Tehran as a serious menace that must be dealt with before his presidency ends," apparently out of concern that neither a Democratic nor Republican successor might be as willing to consider a military option.

Not that he needs to worry about that. Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, widely seen as the front-runner for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, accused the Bush administration in January of not taking the threat of a nuclear Iran seriously enough, criticized the Bush administration for allowing European nations to take the lead in pursuing a diplomatic solution, and insisted that the administration should make it clear that military options were being actively considered. Similarly, Democratic Senator Evan Bayh, another likely contender for the Democratic presidential nomination, accused the Bush administration of "ignoring and then largely deferring management of this crisis to the Europeans." Taking the diplomatic route, according to Bayh, "has certainly been damaging to our national security."

Despite the hostility of these two Democratic senators toward diplomatic means of resolving the crisis and the similarity of their rhetoric to the false claims they made prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq that Saddam Hussein's government was a threat to global security and that diplomatic solutions were impossible, both Clinton and Bayh are widely respected by their fellow Democrats as leaders on security policy.

Indeed, in May of 2004, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution with only three dissenting votes calling on the Bush administration to "use all appropriate means" -- presumably including military force -- to "prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons."

As with the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq, both Republican and Democratic leaders on Capitol Hill have tended to call witnesses before the relevant committees who would present the most alarmist perceptions as fact. Last month, for example, Patrick Clawson of the right-wing Washington Institute for Near East Policy testified before the Senate International Relations Committee that, "So long as Iran has an Islamic Republic, it will have a nuclear-weapons program, at least clandestinely." None of the senators present, however, bothered to mention the inconvenient fact that under the secular regime of the Shah that preceded the Islamic Republic, Iran also had a nuclear program (which was actively supported and encouraged by the United States.) However, Clawson said that since a nuclear program was inevitable under the Islamic Republic, only by overthrowing the government -- not through a negotiated settlement -- would the United States be safe from the nuclear threat. He insisted, therefore, that "the key issue" was not whether an arms control agreement could be enforced, but "How long will the present Iranian regime last?"

The Risks from a U.S. Attack on Iran

With the ongoing debacle in Iraq, any kind of ground invasion of Iran by U.S. forces is out of the question. Iran is three times bigger than Iraq, both in terms of population and geography. It is a far more mountainous country that would increase the ability of the resistance to engage in guerrilla warfare and the intensity of the nationalist backlash against such a foreign invasion would likely be even stronger.

An attack by air and sea-launched missiles and bombing raids by fighter jets would be a more realistic scenario. However, even such a limited military operation would create serious problems for the United States.

The Washington Post, in a recent article about a possible U.S. strike against Iran, quoted Reuel Marc Gerecht, a former CIA Middle East specialist, as noting how "The Pentagon is arguing forcefully against it because it is so constrained" by ongoing operations in neighboring Iraq and Afghanistan. Similarly, the Post quoted a former Pentagon official in contact with his former colleagues as observing how "I don't think anybody's prepared to use the military option at this point." Given that the growing opposition to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's handling of the war in Iraq within the leadership of the armed services, as expressed by a number of prominent recently-retired generals, would make a major military operation without strong support from America's military leadership particularly problematic.

Fears expressed by some opponents of possible U.S. military action against Iran that the Iranians would retaliate through terrorist attacks against American interests are probably not realistic. Indeed, Iran's control over foreign terrorist groups and its role in terrorist operations has frequently been exaggerated by American analysts.

However, there are a number of areas in which the United States would be particularly vulnerable to Iranian retaliation: One would be in the Persian Gulf, where U.S. Navy ships could become easy targets for Iranian missiles and torpedoes.

Perhaps more serious would be in Iraq, where American troops are currently operating against the Sunni-led insurgency alongside Iranian-backed pro-government militias. If these Iranian-backed militias also decided to turn their guns on American forces, the United States would be caught in a vise between both sides in the country's simmering civil war with few places to hide. It would be difficult for the United States to label militias affiliated with the ruling parties of a democratically-elected government fighting foreign occupation forces in their own country as "terrorists" or to use such attacks as an excuse to launch further military operations against Iran. (Given that the Iraqi government is ruled by two pro-Iranian parties, recent charges by the Bush administration that Iran is aiding the anti-government Sunni insurgency are utterly ludicrous and have been rejected by the Iraqi government.)

A U.S. air strike would be a clear violation of the United Nations Charter and would be met by widespread condemnation in the international community. It would further isolate the United States as a rogue superpower at a time in which it needs to repair its damaged relations with its European and Middle Eastern allies. Even Great Britain has expressed its opposition to military action. Pro-Western Arab states, despite their unease at Iran's nuclear program, would react quite negatively to a U.S. strike, particularly since it would likely strengthen anti-American extremists by allowing them to take advantage of popular opposition to the United States utilizing force against a Muslim nation in order to defend the U.S.-Israeli nuclear monopoly in the region.

As a result, the negative consequences of a U.S. attack may be strong enough to convince even the Bush administration not to proceed with the military option.

Israel as Proxy

Though direct U.S. military action against Iran is still very possible, it is more likely that the United States will encourage Israel to take military action instead. In such a scenario, U.S. officials believe that the United States would gain the perceived benefits of a military strike against Iran while limiting the damage to the United States by focusing the world's wrath on Israel. Fox News reported that Bush administration officials effectively told the Israelis that "we are doing the heavy lifting in Iraq and Afghanistan ... and that Israel needs to handle this themselves."

Israel has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to violate international legal norms and -- with U.S. veto power blocking the UN Security Council from imposing sanctions, and the United States providing vast sums of unconditional military and economic assistance to their government -- its ability to get away with doing so. The Israeli government is convinced that the U.S. occupation of Iraq has radicalized the Iranian clerical leadership and that Iran, unlike Iraq in the final years of Saddam Hussein, poses a risk to Israel's national security interests. However, for reasons mentioned above, Israeli leaders have been reported to believe that the United States will not move militarily against Iran and that they will end up using their own forces instead.

An Israeli strike is not inevitable, however. Public opinion polls show that a majority of Israelis oppose the idea of an Israeli strike against Iran. Policy analyst Steve Clemons was quoted in the Washington Monthly as saying, "I have witnessed far more worries about Iranian President Ahmadinejad's anti-Holocaust and anti-Israel rhetoric in the U.S. than I did in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem ... Nearly everyone I spoke to in Israel who ranged in political sympathies from the Likud right to Maretz left thought that ... Israel thought it wrong-headed and too impulsive to be engaged in saber-rattling with Iran at this stage." He added, "Israeli national security bureaucrats -- diplomats and generals -- have far greater confidence that there are numerous potential solutions to the growing Iran crisis short of bombing

them in an invasive, hot attack.”

There is no indication that Iran would ever contemplate a first strike against Israel or any other country. Iran, like other Islamic governments in the region, has used Israel's repression of the Palestinians for propaganda purposes, but has rarely done anything to actually help the Palestinians. It is inconceivable that the Iranians would ever consider launching a nuclear attack on Israel -- which possesses at least 300 nuclear weapons and sophisticated missiles and other delivery system that could totally destroy Iran -- for the sake of the Palestinians, many thousands of whom would die as well. However, an Israeli attack could give Iran grounds for retaliation.

Despite these dangers, Israel -- with U.S. encouragement -- has long considered the possibility of an attack against Iran.

In the mid-1990s, prior to the election of the U.S.-backed Likud government of Benyamin Netanyahu to office, the peace process with the Palestinians was progressing steadily, a peace treaty had been signed with Jordan, and diplomatic and commercial ties with other Arab states was growing. With the prospects of a permanent Israeli-Arab peace, American arms exporters and their allies in Congress and the Clinton administration, along with their hawkish counterparts in Israel, began emphasizing the alleged threat to Israel from Iran as justification for the more than \$2 billion worth of annual U.S. taxpayer subsidies for U.S. arms exporters for them to send weapons to Israel. Among these was an agreement to provide Israel with sophisticated F-15 fighter bombers. As the peace process faltered due to increased repression and colonization by Israel and increased terrorism from radical Palestinian groups and as reformists appeared to be gaining momentum in Iran, Israel began focusing upon more immediate threats closer to home, though deliveries of the F-15s continued through 2001.

Last year, however, the United States unexpectedly provided Israel with an additional thirty long-range F-15s at a cost of \$48 million each. The United States has also recently provided Israel with 5000 GBU-27 and GBU-28 weapons, better known as “bunker busters,” warheads guided by lasers or satellites which can penetrate up to ten meters of earth and concrete to destroy suspected underground facilities. Reuters reported a senior Israeli security source as noting, “This is not the sort of ordinance needed for the Palestinian front. Bunker busters could serve Israel against Iran ...” Israel also has at least five submarines armed with sea-launched missiles which could easily get within range of Iranian targets.

One scenario reportedly has Israel sending three squadrons of F15s to fly over Jordanian and Iraqi airspace, currently controlled by the U.S. air force, to strike at major Iranian facilities. The United States would provide satellite information for the attack as well as refueling for the Israeli jets as they leave Iranian air space for their return to Israel. The Sunday Times has reported that the Israelis have been “coordinating with American forces” for such a scenario. That same article described Israeli commando training operations at a full-sized mockup of Iran's Natanz nuclear facility at a military facility in Israel's Negev Desert and the dispatch of clandestine Israeli Special Forces units into Iran. Meanwhile, the Israeli Ofek-6 spy satellite is now reported to have been moved to an orbit over Iranian facilities.

As far back as April 2004, President Bush exchanged letters with Sharon in which he stated, in reference to Iran, that, “Israel has the right to defend itself with its own forces.”

Despite the widely-held tail-wagging-the-dog assumptions, history has shown that the United States has frequently used Israel to advance its strategic interests in the region and beyond, such as aiding pro-Western governments and pro-Western insurgencies, keeping radical nationalist governments like Syria in check and engaging in covert interventions in Jordan, Lebanon, and now Kurdistan. During the 1980s, Israel was used to funnel arms to third parties the United States could not arm directly, such as the apartheid regime South Africa, the Guatemalan junta, the Nicaraguan Contras, and, ironically, the Iranian mullahs. Israel's bombing of Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981--despite formal criticism -- was enthusiastically supported by the Reagan administration.

One Israeli analyst was quoted as saying in the Washington Post during the Iran-Contra scandal, “It's like Israel has become just another federal agency, one that's convenient to use when you want something done quietly.” Nathan Shahan wrote in Yediot Ahronot that his country serves as the “Godfather's messenger,” since Israel “undertakes the dirty work of the Godfather, who always tries to appear to be the owner of some large respectable business.” Israeli satirist B. Michael describes U.S. aid to Israel as a situation where “My master gives me food to eat and I bite those whom he tells me to bite. It's called strategic cooperation.”

Just as the ruling elites of medieval Europe used the Jews as money-lenders and tax collectors to avoid the wrath of an exploited population, the elites of the world's one remaining superpower would similarly be quite willing to use Israel to do their dirty work against Iran. That way Israel, not the United States, will get the blame. (In fact, there are those who blame Israel even when the United States takes military action itself, such as the various conspiracy theories now circulating that the U.S. invasion of Iraq was done on behalf of Israel.)

It Won't Work

A military strike against Iran, either directly by the United States or through Israel, will not likely succeed in curbing Iran's nuclear program. Indeed, it will likely motivate the Iranian government, with enhanced popular support in reaction to foreign aggression against their country, to redouble their efforts.

Iran has deliberately spread its nuclear facilities over a wide geographical range, with at least nine major locations. Even the bunker buster bombs may not fully penetrate a number of these facilities, even assuming all the secret sites could be located.

The U.S.-backed Israeli raid of Iraq's Osirak reactor in 1981, according to virtually all accounts by Iraqi nuclear scientists, was at most a temporary setback for Saddam Hussein's nuclear program and ultimately led to the regime accelerating its timetable for the development of nuclear weapons until it was dismantled under the watch of the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency in the early 1990s. Despite this, the Congress passed a resolution in 1991 defending Israel's action and criticizing the United Nations for its opposition to Israel's illegal military attack.

The only real solution to the standoff over Iran's nuclear program is a diplomatic one. For example, Iran has called for the establishment of a nuclear weapons-free zone for the entire Middle East in which all nations in the region would be required to give up their nuclear weapons and open up their programs to strict international inspections. Iran has been joined in its proposal by Syria, by U.S. allies Jordan and Egypt, and by other Middle Eastern states. Such nuclear weapons-free zones have already been successfully established for Latin America, the South Pacific, Antarctica, Africa, and Southeast Asia.

The Bush administration and Congressional leaders of both parties have rejected such a proposal, however, insisting that the United States has the right to unilaterally decide which countries get to have nuclear weapons and which ones do not, effectively imposing a kind of nuclear apartheid. In 1958, the United States was the first country to introduce nuclear weapons into the region, bringing tactical nuclear bombs on its ships and planes. Israel became a nuclear weapons state by the early 1970s with the quiet support of the U.S. government. To Iran's east, Pakistan and India have developed nuclear weapons as well, also with U.S. support: the Bush administration recently signed a nuclear cooperation agreement with India and has provided both countries with nuclear-capable jet fighter-bombers.

Located in such a dangerous region, then, it is not surprising that Iran might be seeking a nuclear deterrent. The United States and Israel do not want Iran to have such a deterrent, however, since it would challenge the U.S.-Israeli nuclear monopoly in that oil-rich region. In other words, what those in the Bush administration, the Israeli government, and the bipartisan leadership in Congress are concerned about is protecting the hegemonic interests of the United States and its junior partner Israel, not stopping the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

Such a policy does not protect the interests of the American or Israeli people, nor does it help the people of Iran and the Middle East as a whole. It remains to be seen, however, whether the American public will once again allow the Bush administration and the leadership of both parties Congress to successfully employ exaggerated stories of potential "weapons of mass destruction" controlled by an oil-rich country on the far side of the world to justify a disastrous war.

Stephen Zunes is Middle East editor for the Foreign Policy In Focus Project (www.fpif.org) where this article first appeared. He serves as a Professor of Politics at the University of San Francisco and is the author of [Tinderbox: U.S. Middle East Policy and the Roots of Terrorism](#) (Common Courage Press, 2003).

© 2006 Foreign Policy in Focus

###