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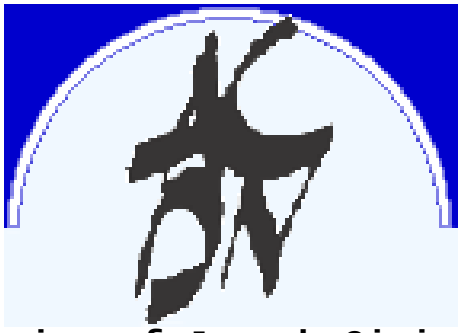

Interview of Joseph Cirincione

Time For Clear Public Understanding of Iranian Threat

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Publication date: Friday 7 April 2006

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Joseph Cirincione, director of the Non-Proliferation Project at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, says that if the UN Security Council does not impose sanctions on Iran, "at least some in the administration have already made up their minds that they would like to launch a military strike against Iran." Cirincione says of the possibility of air attacks: "I can't think of any more counterproductive move if you have the goal of enabling the Iranian people to choose their own government, than to launch a military strike against Iran now."

He called on the Bush administration to make public its intelligence analyses, which he says argue that Iran is far from having the ability to build nuclear weapons. "Let's get all the facts out on the table," Cirincione says. "Let's examine this evidence in public, as to what Iran's capabilities are and what various estimates are as to the nuclear timeline. If those intelligence estimates are wrong, let's find out why."

Interviewee: Joseph Cirincione

Interviewer: Bernard Gwertzman, Consulting Editor

April 4, 2006

Question: Concern over Iran's nuclear program has now led to the issue coming before the Security Council. There's a period of about a month now for the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] to try to negotiate a solution to this question. If it fails to do so, what do you think will happen in the Security Council? Will Russia and China continue to block sanctions?

Answer: Well, the fear is that the Security Council may have reached its high water mark of consensus, and that the current resolution may be as much as the five permanent members can agree on. Russia and China seem to be firm in their position; they do not want this to go to sanctions, which is the next logical step. The United States very much wants it to go to sanctions and may want to go beyond that, actual authorization for military strikes against Iran. The Europeans are torn over this, and they seem to be in the position of trying to bridge the gap, one hand on the Russians and the Chinese and the other on the United States. I'm afraid that if we don't see some give from either the United States or Iran over the next thirty days that this will devolve into a sort of a free for all, with the United States striking off on its own, giving up on the Security Council process, and Iran perhaps digging in their heels even more, daring the United States to strike them.

Question: You've written an article in Foreign Policy in which you say you now think that a U.S. military attack is a major likelihood in the minds of some U.S. planners. What makes you so sure about this?

Answer: Well, I'm not sure about this. In fact, I previously dismissed talk about U.S. military strikes as left-wing conspiracy theory and the kind of stuff that bloggers are chattering about on the Internet. But in just the past few weeks I've been convinced that at least some in the administration have already made up their minds that they would like to launch a military strike against Iran. What convinced me were conversations with some of my friends who have close connections with the White House and the Pentagon who tell me that there is already active discussion and even planning of such strikes. I've also been convinced by some of the reports in the papers about discussions with the Israelis, for example, or even articles in the British press of leaked documents that indicate that the British believe

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that a military strike against Iran is inevitable. And finally it's been the statements of the administration officials themselves.

Question: You mean the statements where they say, "Nothing's ruled out?"

Answer: It's not just that the officials are saying that everything is still on the table; you can understand officials saying that. It's beyond that. It's very reminiscent of the coordinated campaign that we saw before the Iraq war. You have cabinet officials, the president, and the vice president giving major speeches on the subject. They're labeling Iran the central or main threat. They try to link Iran to the war on terror, even to 9/11 itself, by talking about Iran as the central banker for terrorism, or the main state sponsor for terrorism. Officials have leaked information to the press just in the last couple of weeks that claims that the Iranian nuclear program is further advanced than it really is.

And there seems to be a concerted effort to convey this threat as imminent, without using that word, and that action will soon have to be taken. And, finally, you hear a drumbeat from both the neoconservatives and the Israeli lobby arguing for military action on Iran. None of this is conclusive in and of itself, but together they really present a very ominous picture. And it is now my working hypothesis that at least some members of the administration, including the vice president of the United States, have made up their mind that the preferred option is to strike Iran and that a military strike will destabilize the regime and contribute to their longtime goal of overthrowing the government of Iran.

Question: You really can't, I guess, comment on how strong the regime in power is in Iran, but it seems like a risky plan.

Answer: I believe a military strike would consolidate the hold of the Islamic government, not loosen it. If you want to keep President [Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad in power for the next five years, launch a strike on an Iranian facility. There is no doubt in my mind that the Iranian people would rally around the government and would become convinced that what the government has been telling them is true, that the main threat to the Iranian people comes from the United States or the U.S.-Israeli alliance. I can't think of any more counterproductive move if you have the goal of enabling the Iranian people to choose their own government, than to launch a military strike against Iran now.

Question: What is your analysis of Iran's nuclear progress so far?

Answer: This is the key point. This is where I believe this whole debate should go over the next six months. The Iranian threat is a serious one but it is not an imminent one. Iran does not have a nuclear weapon; it is not going to get a nuclear weapon this year or even this decade. The Iranians are at least ten years away from the ability to enrich uranium either for fuel rods or a nuclear weapon.

Question: You're sure about that?

Answer: Everything we've seen indicates that that is in fact the case, and this is the consensus opinion of the U.S. intelligence agencies. We have a national intelligence estimate that was done last year and discussed in the Washington Post in August 2005 that reached the conclusion that Iran is five to ten years away. We've had testimony this year from John Negroponte, the director of national intelligence, which confirms that U.S. intelligence agencies believe that Iran will not be able to construct a bomb until "sometime in the middle of the next decade."

Now, what we need to do is declassify that intelligence estimate. Let's get all the facts out on the table. Let's examine this evidence in public, as to what Iran's capabilities are and what various estimates are as to the nuclear timeline. If those intelligence estimates are wrong let's find out why. Are there wild cards in the mix, for example? Could Iran use

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fuel from one of its reactors to feed its centrifuges and produce highly enriched uranium more rapidly than we estimate? Let's examine all those options and have a clear public understanding of what the threat is, and not be conducting this debate with leaks and speeches by leaders that imply things that aren't supported by the intelligence.

Question: Why are the Israelis so convinced a nuclear weapon is around the corner for Iran?

Answer: I don't know that the Israelis actually believe that, I just know that they say it. For Israel, or at least for the former Likud government of Israel, Iran has long been seen as its main challenge and they have often said that a nuclear Iran represents an existential threat to Israel and they cannot tolerate a nuclear weapon in Iran. They have been predicting that an Iranian nuclear weapon was four or five years away since the early nineties. They've always erred on the side of the near term threat. You can understand that that doesn't mean you should believe there is one.

Now of course other countries in this same region I think are very worried about Iran's nuclear program. [CFR Senior Fellow] Rachel Bronson says that the Iranian nuclear program is terrifying the Saudis, for instance.

This is one of the more unappreciated, or underappreciated, parts of this nuclear challenge. The threat from an Iranian nuclear bomb is not that Iran is going to get the bomb and attack the United States, or attack Israel, or that they are going to give it to a terrorist group to wage those attacks. No, deterrence is alive and well. Iran understands that such an attack would be the last attack of its regime. It would be a regime suicide move to actually use the bomb. I believe that some elements of the Iranian government want to get nuclear weapons for the same reason that governments have always wanted them-security and prestige.

They want to deter a United States or possibly Israeli attack, and they want the prestige that such a weapon would give them for their regional ambitions. And it's exactly for those reasons that other countries in the region would react. Saudi Arabia could not tolerate the political, military, and diplomatic power that a nuclear weapon would give Iran. And that's the great danger-that other countries in the region would start exploring their nuclear options.

There are already stories that Saudi Arabia is cooperating with the Pakistanis on nuclear research. We don't know if this is true, but we do know that the Saudis bankrolled the Pakistani nuclear program. My great fear is that the Saudis might take a nuclear shortcut, and invite Pakistan to station some of its nuclear weapons on Saudi territory. This, in fact, would actually be legal under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which Saudi Arabia is a member of, just the way the United States stations nuclear weapons in Europe. Egypt might also react. They used to have a nuclear program in the 1960s; they might decide that they have to beat the Iranian challenge in their own way. So might Turkey.

In fact, if there's a unified government of Iraq within five years, Iraq-long-term foe of Iran-might consider that it needs to balance Iranian power. So that's really the great threat, is that you would go from a Middle East with one nuclear weapons state, Israel, to one with three, four, or five nuclear weapons states with the remaining political, economic, and ethnic conflicts unresolved. That's a recipe for nuclear war.

Question: Well, what is your evaluation then? Back in January, you thought Iran had not made the fateful decision to build nuclear weapons but wanted the capability to do so in case the time arose when they needed it. Is that still your feeling?

Answer: That's still my view. And it makes a great deal of sense from the Iranian point of view. First, the Islamic Republic of Iran has had a nuclear program since about 1985. So they've been playing around with this stuff for over twenty years and they haven't gotten very far. This has got to be sobering to the Iranian leadership and it almost certainly started as a pursuit of a nuclear weapon, during the Iran-Iraq war. When they restarted the nuclear program they probably weren't thinking about nuclear power. But they haven't been able to develop either the capabilities to

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make the nuclear materials or, as far as we know, make nuclear weapons components.

So they need more time. The best way for them to advance their technological capabilities is now in the open, legally within the Non-Proliferation Treaty, so they hope they could get assistance from other countries. This is why they keep talking about joint ventures or limited experimental facilities. They need a good five or ten years to build up the infrastructure. They'd much rather do that within the treaty, and they don't need a nuclear weapon now.

Joseph Cirincione is director for non-proliferation at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

PS:

Fool Me Twice

By Joseph Cirincione

Posted March 27, 2006

I used to think that the Bush administration wasn't seriously considering a military strike on Iran, because it would only accelerate Iran's nuclear program. But what we're seeing and hearing on Iran today seems awfully familiar. That may be because some U.S. officials have already decided they want to hit Iran hard.

DESTINATION: IRAN? Pundits and experts are debating the merits of U.S. airstrikes against Iranian nuclear facilities.

By Sgt. Ken Bergmann/U.S. Department of Defense

Does this story line sound familiar? The vice president of the United States gives a major speech focused on the threat from an oil-rich nation in the Middle East. The U.S. secretary of state tells congress that the same nation is our most serious global challenge. The secretary of defense calls that nation the leading supporter of global terrorism. The president blames it for attacks on U.S. troops. The intelligence agencies say the nuclear threat from this nation is 10 years away, but the director of intelligence paints a more ominous picture. A new U.S. national security strategy trumpets preemptive attacks and highlights the country as a major threat. And neoconservatives beat the war drums, as the cable media banner their stories with words like "countdown" and "showdown."

The nation making headlines today, of course, is Iran, not Iraq. But the parallels are striking. Three years after senior administration officials systematically misled the nation into a disastrous war, they could well be trying to do it again.

Nothing is clear, yet. For months, I have told interviewers that no senior political or military official was seriously considering a military attack on Iran. In the last few weeks, I have changed my view. In part, this shift was triggered by colleagues with close ties to the Pentagon and the executive branch who have convinced me that some senior officials have already made up their minds: They want to hit Iran.

I argued with my friends. I pointed out that a military strike would be disastrous for the United States. It would rally the Iranian public around an otherwise unpopular regime, inflame anti-American anger around the Muslim world, and jeopardize the already fragile U.S. position in Iraq. And it would accelerate, not delay, the Iranian nuclear program. Hard-liners in Tehran would be proven right in their claim that the only thing that can deter the United States is a nuclear bomb. Iranian leaders could respond with a crash nuclear program that could produce a bomb in a few years.

My friends reminded me that I had said the same about Iraq-that I was the last remaining person in Washington who believed President George W. Bush when he said that he was committed to a diplomatic solution. But this time, it is the administration's own statements that have convinced me. What I previously dismissed as posturing, I now believe may be a coordinated campaign to prepare for a military strike on Iran.

The unfolding administration strategy appears to be an effort to repeat its successful campaign for the Iraq war. It is now trying to link Iran to the 9/11 attacks by repeatedly claiming that Iran is the main state sponsor of terrorism in the world (though this suggestion is highly questionable). It is also attempting to make the threat urgent by arguing that Iran might soon pass a "point of no return" if it can perfect the technology of enriching

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uranium, even though many other nations have gone far beyond Iran's capabilities and stopped their programs short of weapons. And, of course, it is now publicly linking Iran to the Iraqi insurgency and the improvised explosive devices used to kill and maim U.S. troops in Iraq, though Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Peter Pace admitted there is no evidence to support this claim.

If diplomacy fails, the administration might be able to convince leading Democrats to back a resolution for the use of force against Iran. Many Democrats have been trying to burnish a hawkish image and place themselves to the right of the president on this issue. They may find themselves trapped by their own rhetoric, particularly those with presidential ambitions.

The factual debate during the next six months will revolve around the threat assessment. How close is Iran to developing the ability to enrich uranium for fuel or bombs? Is there a secret weapons program? Are there secret underground facilities? What would it mean if small-scale enrichment experiments succeed?

Fortunately, we know more about Iran's nuclear program now than we ever knew about Iraq's (or, for that matter, those of India, Israel, and Pakistan). International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors have been in Iran for more than 3 years investigating all claims of weapons-related work. The United States has satellite reconnaissance, covert programs, and Iranian dissidents providing further information. The key now is to get all this information on the table for an open debate.

The administration should now declassify the information it used to estimate how long it will be until Iran has the capability to make a bomb. The Washington Post reported last August that this national intelligence estimate says Iran is a decade away. We need to see the basis for this judgment and all, if any, dissenting opinions. The congressional intelligence committees should be conducting their own reviews of the assessments, including open hearings with independent experts and IAEA officials. Influential groups, such as the Council on Foreign Relations, should conduct their own sessions and studies.

An accurate and fully understood assessment of the status and potential of Iran's nuclear program is the essential basis for any policy. We cannot let the political or ideological agenda of a small group determine a national security decision that could create havoc in a critical area of the globe. Not again.

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