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Countdown to War on Iran

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U.S. Foments Unrest and Spurns Overtures

Silently, stealthily, unseen by cameras, the war on Iran has already begun. Many sources confirm that the United States, bent on destabilising the Islamic Republic, has increased its aid to armed movements among the Azeri, Baluchi, Arab and Kurdish ethnic minorities that make up about 40% of the Iranian population. ABC News reported in April that the US had secretly assisted the Baluchi group Jund al-Islam (Soldiers of Islam), responsible for a recent attack in which some 20 members of the Revolutionary Guard were killed. According to an American Foundation report (1), US commandos have operated inside Iran since 2004.

President George Bush categorised Iran, along with North Korea and Iraq, as the "axis of evil" in his State of the Union address in January 2002. Then in June 2003 he said the US and its allies should make it clear that they "would not tolerate" the construction of a nuclear weapon in Iran.

It is worth recalling the context in which these statements were made. President Mohammed Khatami had repeatedly called for "dialogue among civilisations". Tehran had actively supported the US in Afghanistan, providing many contacts that Washington had used to facilitate the overthrow of the Taliban regime. At a meeting in Geneva on 2 May 2003 between Javad Zaraf, the Iranian ambassador, and Zalmay Khalilzad, Bush's special envoy to Afghanistan, the Tehran government submitted a proposal to the White House for general negotiations on weapons of mass destruction, terrorism and security, and economic cooperation (2). The Islamic Republic said it was ready to support the Arab peace initiative tabled at the Beirut summit in 2002 and help to transform the Lebanese Hizbullah into a political party. Tehran signed the Additional Protocol to the Non-Proliferation Treaty on 18 December 2003, which considerably strengthens the supervisory powers of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) but which only a few countries have ratified.

The US administration swept all these overtures aside since its only objective is to overthrow the mullahs. To create the conditions for military intervention, it constantly brandishes "the nuclear threat". Year after year US administrations have produced alarmist

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reports, always proved wrong. In January 1995 the director of the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency said Iran could have the bomb by 2003, while the US defence secretary, William Perry, predicted it would have the bomb by 2000. These forecasts were repeated by Israel's Shimon Peres a year later. Yet last month, despite Iran's progress in uranium enrichment, the IAEA considered that it would be four to six years before Tehran had the capability to produce the bomb.

What is the truth? Since the 1960s, long before the Islamic revolution, Iran has sought to develop nuclear power in preparation for the post-oil era. Technological developments have made it easier to pass from civil to military applications once the processes have been mastered. Have Tehran's leaders decided to do so? There is no evidence that they have. Is there a risk that they may? Yes, there is, for obvious reasons.

During the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, Saddam Hussein's regime, in breach of every international treaty, used chemical weapons against Iran, but there was no outcry in the US, or in France, against these weapons of mass destruction, which had a traumatic effect on the Iranian people. US troops are deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Iran is surrounded by a network of foreign military bases. Two neighbouring countries, Pakistan and Israel, have nuclear weapons. No Iranian political leader could fail to be aware of this situation.

How to prevent escalation?

So how is Tehran to be prevented from acquiring nuclear weapons, a move that would start a new arms race in a region that is already highly unstable and deal a fatal blow to the non-proliferation treaty? Contrary to common assumptions, the main obstacle is not Tehran's determination to enrich uranium. Iran has a right to do so under the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty but it has always said it was prepared to impose voluntary restrictions on that right and to agree to increased IAEA inspections to prevent any possible use of enriched uranium for military purposes.

The Islamic Republic's fundamental concern lies elsewhere. Witness the agreement signed on 14 November 2004 with France, Britain and Germany, under which

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Iran agreed to suspend uranium enrichment temporarily on the understanding that a long-term agreement would "provide firm commitments on security issues". Washington refused to give any such commitments and Iran resumed its enrichment programme.

The European Union chose not to pursue an independent line but to follow Washington's lead. The new proposals produced by the five members of the Security Council and Germany in June 2006 contained no guarantee of non-intervention in Iranian affairs. In Tehran's reply to the proposals, delivered in August, it again "suggest[ed] that the western parties who want to participate in the negotiation team announce on behalf of their own and other European countries, to set aside the policy of intimidation, pressure and sanctions against Iran". Only if such a commitment was made could negotiations be resumed.

If not, escalation is inevitable. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election as president in June 2005 has not made dialogue any easier, given his taste for provocative statements, particularly about the Holocaust and Israel. But Iran is a big country rich in history and there is more to it than its president. There is much tension within the government and Ahmadinejad had severe setbacks both in the local elections and in elections to the Assembly of Experts in December 2006. There are substantial challenges, economic and social, and forceful demands for more freedom, especially among women and young people. Iranians refuse to be regimented and the only strong card the regime has to win their loyalty is nationalism, a refusal to accept the kind of foreign interference suffered throughout the 20th century.

Despite the disaster in Iraq, there is no indication that Bush has given up the idea of attacking Iran. This is part of his vision of a "third world war" against "Islamic fascism", an ideological war that can end only in complete victory. The demonisation of Iran, aggravated by the attitude of its president, is part of this strategy and may culminate in yet another military venture. That would be a disaster, not only for Iran and the Arab world, but for western, especially European, relations with the Middle East.

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(1) Sam Gardiner, "The End of the 'Summer of diplomacy': Assessing US Military Options on Iran" (in .pdf), Century Foundation Report, Washington, 2006.

(2) See Gareth Porter, "Burnt Offering", The American Prospect, Washington, June 2006.

This article first appeared in the excellent monthly Le Monde Diplomatique, whose English language edition can be found at mondediplo.com The full text appears by agreement with Le Monde Diplomatique and CounterPunch will feature one or two articles from LMD every month.

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