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Negotiating with Iran is maddening, but bombing would be a catastrophe

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US military posturing towards Tehran lacks credibility and, in any case, such action would fail in all its purposes

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The favoured season for launching wars used to come when the harvest had been gathered. This year, there is talk of an Israeli strike against Iran in November or December, when it would no longer embarrass the US election process but George Bush will still be in the White House during the presidential transition.

Last year, following a US intelligence submission which stated that Iran was not actively pursuing the creation of atomic weapons, a direct American attack on the country's nuclear facilities became implausible - and remains so. But Jerusalem and Washington are talking seriously about a possible Israeli strike, for which American collusion would be indispensable.

In Washington at the weekend, Shaul Mofaz, Israel's deputy defence minister and a candidate for the premiership, said of negotiations to halt Iran's nuclear programme: "It's a race against time, and time is winning." He repeated the familiar Israeli warning that Iran's possession of nuclear weapons would be "unacceptable".

Optimists welcomed last month's meeting in Geneva, at which the US under-secretary of state, William Burns, met Iranian delegates. This was the highest level contact for decades between the two nations. Yet there remains no sign of Iranian retreat from its longstanding position, that it is entitled to maintain a uranium enrichment programme. Pessimists fear that the Burns trip was designed to highlight Tehran's intractability, in advance of military action.

Last month, Tehran announced that it now possesses 6,000 centrifuges, a dramatic increase in its last declared figure. This was probably an exaggeration for negotiating purposes, but gives no comfort at all to the UN, the EU or anybody else seeking signs of a breakthrough towards a deal.

Most Europeans would like to hear their new American idol, Barack Obama, warn the Israelis against undertaking military action against Iran. Even if Obama does not yet sit in the White House, no Jerusalem government could lightly defy America's likely next president on an issue of such gravity.

But no man who wants to win a US election dares to qualify his support for Israel. Obama's statements during his brief visit to the country last month were indistinguishable from those of Bush. There seem grounds for anticipating that Obama may be less radical, more indulgent towards Israel, than visionaries suppose. A McCain administration, meanwhile, would merely pick up where Bush leaves off.

There is no doubt about the desire of both the Israeli and US governments to destroy Iran's nuclear plants by force. Two years ago, a Washington political guru suggested to me that Bush's last months would be the time to watch, when he became obsessed with his legacy. "Solving" the Iran nuclear issue, said my friend, would be foremost in Bush's mind. So, indeed, it seems today.

The best prospect of averting this disaster - and, of course, many of us would perceive it as such - lies in the intractable practical difficulties. The US military has briefed the president that, with most of Iran's facilities

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underground, only nuclear bunker-busting bombs offer a real prospect of achieving their destruction.

It remains hard to believe that the US could countenance the use of such weapons, by their own aircraft or those of the Israelis. Conventional bombs could inflict some damage. A limited attack would demonstrate Israel's ability to strike at will if the Iranians persist with their programme.

But the economic and political costs of such an exhibition of force would be appalling. Oil prices would soar to dizzy heights. Any possibility of dialogue between Iran and the west would vanish for years to come. The Iranians would probably fulfil their threat, to retaliate with terrorist action against US interests worldwide. Former US air force colonel Sam Gardiner, a respected military analyst, suggests that bombing Iran "would be unlikely to yield the results American policymakers do want, and ... likely to yield results that they do not".

The Iranian government may be reckless - even fanatical - but it is not mad. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, have assuredly made these calculations for themselves. The US is seeking to behave with the outward assurance of a superpower, while crippled by its difficulties in Iraq and Afghanistan. The US wishes to bestride the Middle East as an armoured knight, but its foes know that beneath the plates it is bleeding badly.

The Iranians appear to be gambling that, at the last ditch, the US will flinch from taking military action, or from allowing Israel to do so, because the costs would be unacceptably high. The implacable unhelpfulness of Russia and China about western purposes towards Tehran strengthens Iranian resolve. Moscow and Beijing have no more desire than the Americans to see Iran possess nuclear weapons. But they both gain satisfaction from Washington's embarrassments, and from strengthening their own influence in the Middle East at American expense.

However deep is European distaste for the Bush administration, for the Iraq war and for the excesses of Israeli policy, it seems important not to lose sight of some basics. The Tehran government aspires to regional hegemony, which it would be unlikely to exercise in an enlightened fashion. Iran is an exceptionally nasty elective dictatorship that denies freedoms and represses human rights, not least those of women. It is deplorable that Israel and Pakistan possess nuclear weapons, but the world will become an even less safe place if Iran also acquires them. Its desire to do so seems hard to dispute, even if doubts persist about its proximity to fulfilment.

Thus, America's fundamental objective deserves endorsement, which it receives from the UN and the EU through their backing for sanctions. The difficulty, as usual, is that so many issues are entwined - Iraq and Israel foremost among them. Lawrence Freedman has just published a new book, *A Choice of Enemies*, in which he examines America's relationship with the Middle East over the past 30 years. His conclusion is that today's problems stretch beyond anything that can be dignified as solutions. They can only be "managed or endured".

This is unspectacular, but seems right. The folly of American military posturing towards Iran is its absence of credibility. That is to say, no one doubts Bush's executive power to launch an air attack, or sanction the Israelis to do so. However, it is evident to all but the neocons and some dangerous people in Jerusalem that such action must fail in its purposes, making matters worse rather than better.

The dreadful Bibi Netanyahu, who may soon again become Israel's prime minister, declared that 9/11 was "good for Israel", and so from his viewpoint it was. It left the Muslim world almost friendless in the US, and increased the readiness of Americans to perceive the Israelis as comrades in arms against a common enemy.

Yet the fallout from a putative Israeli attack on Iran - and I hope I am right to use the word only figuratively - should cause even post-Bush Americans to perceive that this is no way to order the world. Negotiating with the Iranians is a

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maddening and frustrating business. But bombing them would be a catastrophe for us all. Many fingers will need to be tightly crossed between now and next January.

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