

## Attacking Iran on the Agenda?

Iran is back at the top of the news. Almost every day, we hear denunciations by U.S. government officials of the misdeeds of Iran, with a clear subtext that the military option is near. We read of the increased readiness of U.S. air and naval forces for an attack. The blogosphere is replete with messages protesting against such an attack. Is it about to happen? And would it be "rational"?

Rationality depends on one's objectives. So let us analyze first what might be the objectives of those who seem to be proposing such an attack, as well as those in power who are against the idea. And then let us look at the probable consequences of an attack, were it to happen. There seem to be two principal groups of proponents of an attack - Vice-President Cheney and his friends; the present government of Israel and its friends.

The Israelis have made no secret of the fact that they have believed for a long time that Iran is proceeding rapidly to obtaining nuclear armaments and that this represents an enormous danger for the state of Israel. They wish someone to bomb Iranian installations. They would prefer that it be the United States that does this rather than they themselves, both because the United States has more airpower at its disposal and because this would be less damaging politically for Israel. But they have threatened to do it themselves, if the United States doesn't do it soon. From the Israeli point of view, this would be a repeat of what they consider their successful bombing of the Iraqi installation of Osirak in 1981. This objective is so important for the Israelis that it has come to public notice recently that, in 2002-2003, Israel was urging the United States to attack Iran before they attacked Iraq.

Cheney probably has a different objective. He and his friends may be less confident that an attack on Iran would be as successful as the Israeli attack on Iraq in 1981. Cheney's objective is less what would happen as a result in Iran than what would happen in the United States. Cheney probably expects that an attack on Iran would increase Republican prospects in 2009, advance the internal militarization of the United States, strengthen further the presidency, and weaken further civil liberties. If this is the objective, then limited advantage in Iran itself would be irrelevant.

It is clear that there are powerful forces opposed to such an attack. Within the U.S. government, the neo-con presence is much diminished. It seems that Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff all think it is a bad idea. It is probable that important corporate leaders think so too, and that probably means that Secretary of the Treasury Henry Paulson also is opposed. United States allies, including the British, also seem to be opposed to military action. And it is obvious that the Iraqi government is opposed to the idea. So it is Cheney and the Israelis versus all the rest.

The reasoning of the opponents is largely based on an analysis of what would be the consequences of an air attack. The first question is how effective it would be. It is clear that the Iranians have drawn the lesson from the Israeli air attack on Iraq. They have dispersed their nuclear sites, which seem to be multiple, and placed them well underground. U.S. intelligence about the sites is probably quite limited, and it is not at all certain that U.S. aircraft could even locate all of the sites, or destroy all that they could locate. And if the United States can't send in ground forces, then it could be a military flop. But it can't send in ground forces because it simply doesn't have them.

Secondly, it is probable that the Iranians would engage in military/political action in response of some kind, either in Iraq or Afghanistan or both, which could be quite negative for the United States. In Afghanistan, the United States and Iran have been working more or less in tandem, and the United States is in no position to lose tacit Iranian support.

Thirdly, the impact on Iraq is hard to predict in detail. But it will surely not help the already weak political position of the United States in Iraq to force the al-Maliki government to take a position in this matter. If forced, it is highly unlikely that the main Shia parties would do other than support Iran, at least tacitly.

Fourthly, the reaction of the other world major powers would be at best reserved. Perhaps western Europe would say little publicly, but they surely would not acclaim a bombing. And Russia and China would probably denounce it. However much various so-called moderate Arab regimes might be fearful of Iranian strength, it seems unlikely that they could afford to applaud aggressive action against a Muslim country. For those with significant Shia minorities, there would be danger of popular demonstrations, which the governments might find it difficult to suppress.

Finally, it is probable that the present diplomatic negotiations between North Korea and the United States would fall apart as an immediate consequence of a U.S. bombing of Iran, because it would confirm North Korea's worst fears.

In short, it would be a diplomatic mess and a risk of extensive further violence in the Middle East. And if there were no clear military benefits, the advantage to Israel might be very limited indeed. All this is no doubt what people are saying in the debates within the U.S. government at the moment. The only weakness of the opponents to military action within the U.S. government is that all they have to offer instead is further diplomatic efforts and perhaps further economic pressures. Cheney is surely arguing that this won't work either. And he is probably right.

Would it be "rational" therefore for the United States to bomb Iran? Almost surely not, not only from the point of view of the present U.S. government but even from the point of view of Israel. It might be "rational" if the major objective is to change the present political atmosphere within the United States, but then at a very great price.

There are many commentators from the world left who are saying that the United States in the end could get away with a bombing, since the reactions of which I have been speaking would in the end be more languid than I have been suggesting. And some say that the actions of desperate people (which is what they consider both Cheney and the Israeli government to be) is not constrained by the kind of analysis of consequences that I have put forth here. Perhaps! But in my view the likelihood of such "desperate" action to prevail is quite low, if not entirely impossible.

by Immanuel Wallerstein