

The New War in the Gulf

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We are at war in the Gulf. The United States is not only at war with various factions and groups in Iraq. We are also at war with Iran. It is a long war, this conflict with Iran, a foolish and destructive war. And we must carefully parse its meaning, and consider ways to end it.

If war is politics by other means, in the famous phrase, then we are at war with Iran because we have abandoned politics as a method to cope with our differences. The meaning of this, and its implications, is what I will explore this evening.

One could readily say we have been at war with Iran since the 1979 Islamic revolution. In fact, the United States and the West have aggressively attempted to control Iran for many decades, going back to the 19th century, long before oil was discovered in southern Iran. Nikki Keddie, the eminent historian of Iran, has described the mid-19th century as a period of repeated military pressures on Iran, particularly by Britain and to a lesser degree Imperial Russia, with enormous economic concessions as one prize of the belligerency. The list of favors Britain gained is astounding, including the lowering or elimination of tariffs and other taxes that Iranian merchants still had to pay, and meant that Britain could flood the markets there with cheaper goods that drove the locals out of business. Such history not only explains the deeply held perception by many Iranians of Western exploitation of their country, but these episodes preview the period of globalization we have entered in which military muscle is applied to guarantee American and European access, unfettered access, to open markets. Some analysts have explained the interest in deposing Saddam Hussein and transforming the region—essentially all of Western Asia, including Iran, in precisely these terms.

The American meddling took its first major step with the CIA coup to oust the nationalist leader Mohammed Mossadeq in 1953. This infamous action was requested by the British precisely because Iranians felt like the oil concession signed in the 1930s was

discriminatory, as indeed it was, paying only a fixed amount while oil prices climbed in the postwar period. The oil concession brought with it undue British influence, even as the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, now British Petroleum, refused even to open its books to the Iranian government. So Mossadeq, who was no ragtag rebel, being the nephew of the last Qaddjar prince of Tehran, sought to nationalize the industry to reclaim, on behalf of Iran, the resources lost to British imperialism. This the British could not stand, and they appealed successfully to the American government to undertake action; in fact, it was that great hero of Western myth, Winston Churchill, who eagerly authorized the destruction of one of the first democratic states in the Muslim world. The CIA, with Eisenhower's approval, obliged and took down Mossaddeq.

The shah of Iran, the son of the military officer, a Nazi sympathizer, who seized power in 1925, was provided with American backing for expanded autocratic rule that lasted until he abdicated in late 1978 and in effect paved the way for the mullahs who now rule Iran. The shah not only seized the reins of power, he made sure, with Washington's encouragement, to destroy the communist and non-communist left, which then meant that the only residual nodes of opposition in Iran were the clerics, considered pitifully weak and anti-modern and therefore easy to ignore.

After the shah's demise, the long siege began—economic sanctions and other such measures, support for Iran's mortal enemy, Saddam Hussein, during the eight-year war he started in 1980, pressure on Europe, Russia, and others not to trade with Iran, including investments in or purchases from Iran's energy sector.

A short period of potential rapprochement began with the unexpected election of the liberal reformer, Mohammed Khatemi, in 1997. The Clinton administration and the Khatemi government attempted a very slow reconciliation, which never quite got traction.

Then came 9/11. At first, the attacks, planned in Afghanistan, presented another occasion for improved U.S.-Iran ties, since al Qaeda and the Taliban were enemies of Iran as well as America. Iran had more than 2 million Afghan refugees living in its eastern provinces, and al Qaeda's Sunni radicalism was at odds with Shias. Khatemi cooperated on the U.S. operation in Afghanistan, and sought a further accommodation with Washington, but was rebuffed—indeed, branded as part of the “axis of evil.”

This verbal assault had its consequences instantly in Tehran. Even our allies recognized the foolishness of such a gratuitous insult. Chris Patten, the Tory diplomat, described it as "absolutist and simplistic."¹ It is generally acknowledged that this harsh rhetoric, combined with the invasion of Iraq a year later, contributed directly to what Vali Nasr calls the “conservative consolidation” in Iran—the triumph of the militants over the reformers in Ahmedinjad's election as president in June 2005.

Now, all of this is not terribly unusual in U.S. foreign policy. We have had similarly belligerent attitudes toward Cuba after 1960, toward Vietnam from 1975 until recently, and occasionally toward others. The methods are typically the same: isolate a country politically and economically; raise the level of invective to describe the regime and its threat to America and others; triangulate with regional partners in these campaigns; supply weapons to neighbors, and generally castigate at every opportunity a country's place in the global community. As it happens, the strategy rarely if ever works as hoped. But it remains a staple of U.S. foreign and military policy, a blunt arrow in our quiver.

This set of actions and policies have been applied to Iran for 27 years, and today Iran is stronger perhaps than ever. But the policies have not stopped with the usual instruments. And this is where we cross over from mere harassment or vituperation to warfare.

It is widely believed that the invasion of Iraq was only a step in a broader purpose: to transform the entire Middle East, and the main targets in that transformation, apart from Iraq, were Syria and Iran. A senior Bush official said in May 2003, "Anyone can go to Baghdad. Real men go to Tehran," a boast that reflects the self-delusion of the time, but is nonetheless wholly revealing. No one seriously believed Saddam threatened the U.S., even if he had some incipient nuclear or biological weapons capacity.

All along, the purpose of the invasion was to alter the political topography of the region once and for all. The display of power—the shock and awe U.S. military superiority would stir—was aimed to convince Tehran and Damascus and even our putative friends in the Arabian desert that America was finally serious about bringing the region to heel. So the war in Iraq was, above all, a war not simply to change one regime, but three or more, in one swift dash to Baghdad.

At the same time, the United States has been involved, according to several reports, in fomenting ethnic strife in Iran as a means to put pressure on the regime or to bring it down. According to Seymour Hersh, the respected investigative journalist, last spring reported,

The Bush Administration . . . has increased clandestine activities inside Iran and intensified planning for a possible major air attack. Current and former American military and intelligence officials said that Air Force planning groups are drawing up lists of targets, and teams of American combat troops have been ordered into Iran, under cover, to collect targeting data and to establish contact with anti-government ethnic-minority groups.²

Last week (November 27) in *The New Yorker*, Hersh returned to the subject. He writes:

In the past six months, Israel and the United States have also been working together in support of a Kurdish resistance group known as the Party for Free

Life in Kurdistan. The group has been conducting clandestine cross-border forays into Iran, I was told by a government consultant with close ties to the Pentagon civilian leadership, as “part of an effort to explore alternative means of applying pressure on Iran.” (The Pentagon has established covert relationships with Kurdish, Azeri, and Baluchi tribesmen, and has encouraged their efforts to undermine the regime’s authority in northern and southeastern Iran.) The government consultant said that Israel is giving the Kurdish group “equipment and training.” The group has also been given “a list of targets inside Iran of interest to the U.S.”³

Hersh is famous for his sources inside government, and the fact that he has returned to this is a confirmation of its accuracy. It is not the first time I heard this story. At a workshop we sponsored in May 2005, a distinguished academic who is Iranian first brought my attention to the U.S. strategy, and I began to notice news reports of ethnic strife in Iran—among Kurds and Azeris in particular. There have been sizable killings and protests among Baluchis and Arabs in Iran.⁴ A Kurdish man from Iran told me at a conference in London last June that Kurdish leaders were meeting with President Bush that day. Iranian officials such as national security advisor Larijani have publicly complained about U.S. backing of such ethnic militants.

So a regime change strategy toward Iran is now active and underway. This set of actions, in effect, represents an act of war. It is amplified by the president’s repeated threats that he will not allow Iran to develop a nuclear weapon. It is this issue that now draws the most attention in U.S. policy circles, and I will turn to it momentarily. But the nuclear ambitions of the mullahs is but one reason for the regime-change strategy. Perhaps just as important in the public mind and that of the administration is Iran’s support for Hizbollah in Lebanon and militant groups in Palestine, and indeed the overall hostility toward Israel; and second, the growing specter of victory for Shias in Iraq, again, with Iran’s support.

Of the latter we can safely say that a war that was conducted in part to intimidate Tehran is now working to Tehran’s advantage, and that this was predictable—as many did predict in advance. Among many others, I wrote about this as the war was just getting started:

So it is likely that U.S. administrators and soldiers will soon come into conflict with the Shiites who comprise 60 percent of Iraq. Whether this is peaceful political competition or something nastier is difficult to say. But sooner or later, the Shi’ite clergy will vie for power, not just in the south, but for the entire country. Only a strategy of divide and conquer will keep an Iran-friendly regime out of Baghdad.⁵

So the difficulties we have created for ourselves in Iraq were directly related to our intentions vis a vis Iran—that is, fighting a war in one country to control another. This proxy warfare is what got us into trouble in SE Asia in the 1960s and ‘70s,

where Vietnam was viewed as a front against Chinese and Soviet influence, and Cambodia and Laos were victimized along with the Vietnamese.

Iran's "meddling" in Iraq was not only predictable but natural—imagine what the United States would do if a major civil war were raging in Mexico, with, say, China as one of the antagonists. In fact, one might regard Iran's actions in Iraq as their Monroe Doctrine, their self-perceived right to protect their interests, their coreligionists, and their region against Western intervention and imperialism. The blindness in Washington to this eventuality has led to a series of blunders that may very well, and very soon, lead to the ascendancy of Moqtada al-Sadr, the most anti-American of Iraq's leaders, and apparently one with Tehran's support.

So the bitter irony will be that the longstanding American strategy of containing and isolating Iran results in Iran's triumph as the leading power in the region and with an oil-rich country as its very close ally, a country that was its enemy and has been turned into its friend by U.S. military intervention. In Washington, this sequence is now converted into another complaint against Iran for which it must be punished.

Iran's support for Hezbollah has long festered as a reason for hostility. It's a complex topic, and I will say just two things about it. The first is that Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon for nearly twenty years was the reason Hezbollah came into being, and the U.S. did little to prevent that occupation. Second, Hezbollah was evolving into a more-or-less normal political organization and Iran, under Khatemi, was pulling away from it. The conservative consolidation in Iran and Israel's inability to come to terms with its Palestinian issues then combined like volatile liquids to cause the eruption of last summer. Clearly, the situation for politically violent groups across the region has favored the militants in organizations like Hezbollah and Hamas when they believe they are confronted with anti-terrorist policies that punish them even when they are playing by the civil rules of international politics. I am a strong supporter of Israel and of the kind of social democracy Israel has at its best tried to be. But Israelis have failed to be accommodationist when it was in their interests to be so. And Washington has driven them along the belligerent path time and again, as it has since 9/11.

Iran's support for Hezbollah brings us back to the nuclear question, because the potential development of nuclear weapons by Iran is so often framed as a mortal threat to Israel. Potentially, it could be, of course, as it could be a threat to many others, and so we must take it seriously.

I take it as a given that Iran is pursuing a path of nuclear development that could lead to nuclear weapons capability. The plain fact is that the nuclear bargain

struck by the major powers 40 years ago—that nuclear energy development was acceptable, but nuclear weapons development was not—has always smacked of hypocrisy and futility. All new nuclear weapons states got there through their civilian nuclear program, and that is the path for future nuclear wannabes. So if you promote nuclear energy, which the United States has avidly all along, then the risks of nuclear weapons proliferation are enormously greater than if nuclear energy were de-emphasized in favor of other options.

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, or NPT, signed in 1968, reified that bargain. The NPT also obligated the five nuclear powers at that time to pursue nuclear disarmament. That the U.S. (indeed, all five) have not done so as completely as the language of the NPT obligates them to is rarely mentioned in the hot-tempered discourse over Iran. In fact, the legal premise of proposed sanctions against Iran for its nuclear program is the NPT, to which it is a party; Iran's secrecy about its nuclear program is a violation of the treaty. Note that India is now a nuclear power and is being rewarded with nuclear trade from the U.S., and Pakistan is a new nuclear power and is an ally and beneficiary of U.S. military assistance, and Israel is a nuclear power as well.

Be that as it may, Iran has pursued this option for fairly obvious reasons. It has been invaded numerous times, most particularly in the gruesome war with Iraq from 1980 to 1988, in which one million people were killed. In that war, Iraq repeatedly used chemical weapons against Iran, a war crime that earned little if any rebuke from President Reagan. There is evidence that the U.S. supplied the precursor chemicals used in those weapons, and supplied many other useful military technologies, real-time intelligence, and other assets.⁶ So Iran is suspicious of its longtime rival, Iraq; it is suspicious of Israel; and it is suspicious of the United States. It does not have a sizable conventional military, and, logically, may see nuclear weapons as the best guarantee of security from these nuclear, or would-be nuclear powers.

I believe it is a mistake for Iran to pursue such nuclear development, as nuclear technologies are very costly, present serious problems of safety for workers and environmental impacts. It is difficult to manage well, and politically tends to drive a state toward secrecy, suspicion of internal dissent, and other noxious outcomes, many of which are already problems in Iran.

But Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons, while unfortunate and a likely violation of the NPT, is understandable in terms of their own perceptions of security.

Now, here, we see three choices for dealing with Iran's potential as a nuclear weapons state. The first is negotiation, which has been pursued fitfully by the Europeans and to which the U.S. has given some support. The second is to go to

war with Iran, to bomb their nuclear facilities and perhaps their leadership. The third is to accept Iran as a nuclear power and apply a deterrent, as we did with the Soviet Union.

The second option, going to war, is already underway, though this typically is discussed in much more spectacular terms, such a carpet bombing for weeks to bring down the regime, or more selective bombing to set back its nuclear program. Both are feasible—we have the air power—but very few knowledgeable people regard this as a suitable option. While setting back their nuclear program would certainly be one outcome, there are many other outcomes: Iran could make life much more difficult for U.S. troops in Iraq, for example; for shipping in the Gulf; for Israel, via Hezbollah and other groups; for world economic stability, and so on. Iran has many retaliatory options.

The nuclear program seems to be popular in Iran and an attack might actually strengthen the grip of autocratic forces there. So the specter of bombing, while hardly off the table in the White House, appears to be a very bad idea. Very bad ideas frequently become policy, however, as the Iraq debacle demonstrates vividly, and there are many who believe that the wounded president in Washington is still capable of this. In fact, his record low popularity in a sense liberates him from the shackles of domestic politics. This is a dangerous situation.

It is especially dangerous because so many on the right want badly to attack Iran, and have for many years now, but with special fervency since 9/11, advocated regime change no matter what the costs. Political leaders like John McCain, among others, believe we're not tough enough with Iran. The pro-Israel lobby, which is certainly a strong force in American policy circles, is avid for confrontation. A number of think tanks and strategic analysts map out scenarios for attacking Iran, or detail ways Israel could attack Iran, without a thought for the consequences.

At the more populist level, we see now in America a brewing anti-Muslim sentiment that is troubling in its blatant racism and belligerency. The right-wing blogs devote most of their septic energy to excoriating Islam and Iran in particular. The hope for attacking Iran is a given. More alarming is the space that reputable media outlets devote to this; I'm thinking here of CNN, which has on its Headline News channel someone called Glenn Beck who has called for a nuclear attack on Iran and openly advocates regime change, often several times weekly.⁷ He is on, with his own hour-long show, three times every night on CNN. Fox News, needless to say, is equally bellicose on the topic.

This kind of rabble rousing would be laughable if we had a more sensible establishment discourse on this. Led by the president, however, and buttressed

by several think tanks and academics and newspapers, the alarms about Iran's nuclear program overwhelm debate and consideration. One example among many: the repeated calls from Joshua Muravchik, a prominent thinker at the American Enterprise Institute, to bomb Iran, articulated as recently as three weeks ago.⁸

The president's own intelligence chief, John Negroponte, has said that Iran is perhaps 10 years from developing a nuclear weapon.⁹ In fact, alarms have been raised about Iran's nuclear program for 25 years. There is a very useful chronology of Iran's nuclear program compiled by the Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Monterrey Institute for International Studies, which shows that beginning in March 1980, there have been regular predictions of Iran getting nuclear weapons within 2-5 years. All, of course, false, but one would not know that from the current discussions we have, which repeat the worst-case scenarios.

So attacking Iran more avidly than we are is a very live option, in part due to the weakness of President Bush and an extremely hostile and belligerent base. Another option, as I noted, is to count on deterrence. It has been argued that Iran cannot truly threaten U.S. security even if it has a small nuclear arsenal, because U.S. power is so overwhelming that Iran would suffer incalculable damage if were ever so foolish as to detonate a nuclear weapon. On the face of it, this makes sense. But I worry about taking a paradigm from an entirely different situation—the Cold War—and applying it to these circumstances. The strategic stability achieved with the USSR during the long period of nuclear confrontation—from about 1950 and for the ensuing four decades—was a consequence of several unique factors.

First, and most important, the doctrine of deterrence and the growth of nuclear arsenals grew simultaneously. There was a slow but steady accretion of knowledge and ideas about the threats and dangers. At the same time, a very large, formal system of restraint was also growing—the system of arms control, with its many treaties, negotiations, trading of information, constant contact between antagonists, and so on: vast bureaucracies, intellectual enterprises, and political will dedicated to restraint and indeed to disarmament. There were also enormous social movements in Europe and the United States, from a very early stage of this history, advocating for restraint and an end to the nuclear arms race. There was almost constant political dialogue on other issues, including human rights, economic issues, security in Europe and elsewhere. There were trade relations and intellectual exchanges, including many organizations of scientists—some of them starting here at MIT—dedicated to trying to understand each other and to improve relations. All of these adds up to a web of social and political relationships that imposed very significant limits on what politicians could do; in fact, they stigmatized nuclear weapons as usable military instruments. Very few of these kinds of restraints now exist with respect to Iran and the United States.

Second, the scenarios for a nuclear war beginning are problematic. During the Cold War, there were constant questions about whether the U.S. would engage in a nuclear war with the Soviets should the USSR attack Europe. This problem of who we are defending is even more acute in the case of Iran. What if a nuclear device was detonated in Tel Aviv? Iran would likely be blamed. Would we attack them with nuclear weapons? That's what deterrence would call for. What if a nuclear weapon were launched into Israel from Iran on a missile, but done by a rogue element? Iran may not be able to exercise the command and control of its nuclear weapons that the superpowers did. Wouldn't such a circumstance obligate the U.S. to attack Iran? Is that really in our self interest?

Such problems multiply. They multiply too because of the hyperventilating right wing and pro-Israel lobby in this country, and the absence of popular restraints. There is no social movement to restrain the U.S., and there are few if any politicians who are truly going out on a limb to say Iran can be handled without belligerency. If Iran developed nuclear weapons, the pressure on any president to attack would be enormous and constant. In these circumstances, deterrence is not a recipe for stability.

Which brings us back to politics. If war won't work, is not working, and deterrence is too much of a gamble, we only have one option that has a chance to lower the tensions that exist and enhance human security here and in the region, and that is politics. By this I mean political dialogue with Iran— wide ranging discussions that lead to negotiations, bargaining, and agreements. There is no reason to believe that this cannot succeed, and it has many attractive features, not least because they cost least and are most ethical. Costs and norms matter in global politics, as we can see in Iraq, where the political and security consequences for the United States are magnified by our callousness toward civilian casualties, now numbering in the hundreds of thousands, and our flaunting of international law.

What would a political dialogue look like with Iran? We can imagine a grudging, back-channel process because the Iraq catastrophe demands that it be done. But I recommend a much different approach, an acknowledgement that the hopes for transformation wrought by the invasion of Iraq have failed, and that the United States now welcomes a new approach of dialogue and bargaining. This would necessitate a lot of hard swallowing, but that would pass rather quickly, especially if the diplomatic offensive was very large scale and sincere, encompassing not just Iran but Syria, Hamas, Hezbollah and the others we see as bad actors in the region.

One can start with small agreements and build from there. Lifting sanctions and restrictions on intellectual exchanges, energy production, and the like could come

rather quickly. These are in everyone's interests, and Europe, Russia, Japan, India, and China would be very supportive.

It can move to harder issues, including the nuclear program, but Washington must recognize that this is a process of reciprocity, not one of instruction or mandates. The minimum ante from the U.S. will have to be security guarantees—that the United States will not attempt to overthrow the regime in Tehran. Like it or not, as these things go, the Islamic Republic is a legitimate state, has a good deal of popularity, is founded on a constitution, and in many important respects follows democratic practice. So a security guarantee is not asking for the moon. It is asking that the two converse as sovereign equals. We did this with the Soviet Union for 60 years, as James Baker pointed out yesterday, and we have done so with many states we did not like and had less legitimacy than Iran, including, by our standards, most of the sheikdoms in the Gulf and quite a few military-led governments that act in our interest.

Beyond that, the exact shape of a deal on nuclear development is not something that I could speculate about. There are offers from the Europeans on the table that sound reasonable, giving Iran access to nuclear fuel for power reactors. Alternatively, they could develop more advanced systems if they agreed to no-nonsense full safeguards.

Striking a deal on nuclear development would also make it possible to tackle equally fractious issues, such as support for Hezbollah, the U.S. exit from Iraq and longer-term stability there, energy policy for the Caspian and related matters.

But the first thing that is needed, before returning to politics, is refraining from war. That means implementing the following things:

1. Stop any and all covert activities in Iran, and other actions to stir ethnic discord
2. Stop the rhetoric at the presidential level, and from cabinet secretaries, that blames Iran for everything going wrong in the region, from Israel to Lebanon to Iraq
3. Reduce the level of belligerency about the nuclear development activities in Iran; it is hypocritical, and it lends nothing to the resolution of the problem, only strengthening the hardliners in Iran
4. Reduce the limits imposed on intellectual and scientific exchanges; this was a key element in promoting the end of the Cold War

5. Put renewed energy into solving the Palestinian issue, which provides excuses to Ahmadinejad and remains a deep irritant to relations with all Muslim countries; this would mean recognizing Hamas' legitimacy as a political player

Part of a new outlook must recognize the action-reaction syndrome in international relations. This seems particularly true in the Middle East, where U.S. actions and words have enormous importance, more than we often realize. Belligerency merely strengthens the hardliners, the Revolutionary Guard and the most militant mullahs, and serves little purpose in solving problems. Iran has faced down some of the worst imaginable security threats, including its horrific war with Iraq in the 1980s, and many current leaders are veterans of that war. They are not impressed by the bluster of Bush and Cheney and Rice, who not only have never been in war but have blundered catastrophically in Iraq. The more rigid and accusatory we are, the more they will answer in kind. This is clearly the pattern of the relationship, such as it is, and it must be altered dramatically to get the progress we all want.

A more sensible attitude—which is to say, normal politics—can gain most of what we want at very little cost. We could receive cooperation on Iraq, restraint on the nuclear program, and improvement on human rights issues inside an Iran that feels less threatened. Progress on Hezbollah depends more on Israel. But, overall, the fruits of a new approach are discernable, whereas the consequences of the warpath are either inscrutable or appear to be more human catastrophe.

Given what the United States has wrought in Iraq, the completely wrong-headed assumptions and the colossal human cost of that belligerency, we must reconsider, from the bottom up, what we are doing in the other war across the Gulf, and the sooner we do, the more likely we can secure a form of coexistence that upholds our best principles.

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¹ Tarik Kafala, "Analysis: Iran and the 'axis of evil,'" BBC News Online (11 February, 2002)

² Seymour M. Hersh, "The Iran Plans," *The New Yorker*, April 17, 2006.

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⁴ Gareth Smyth. "Iran's spring festival brings spirit of optimism amid ethnic unrest," *Financial Times*, Mar 21, 2006; Amir Taheri, "Iran: Restive Provinces," *Arab News* (online), 27, May, 2006

⁵ "What Lurks in the ruins?" *Alternet*, April 10, 2003.

⁶ Michael Dobbs, "U.S. Had Key Role in Iraq Buildup; Trade in Chemical Arms Allowed Despite Their Use on Iranians, Kurds," *Washington Post* (December 30, 2002).

⁷ Quoted on the web site, Media Matters, <http://mediamatters.org/items/200605120010>. See other attacks on Muslims in the media by the same site, http://mediamatters.org/issues_topics/attacks_on_muslims_islam

⁸ "Bomb Iran," *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 19, 2006.

⁹ Scott Peterson, "Iran's nuclear gambit - the basics," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 9, 2006.