

Pundits Debate the Inevitability of a Nuclear Iran

By Ali Gharib

At the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations meeting in late October, it wasn't U.S. relations with an Arab country that many were talking about. Rather, much of the focus was on the Arab Middle East's ethnic Persian neighbor to the east: Iran.

The question and answer session of a panel on Iraq and Iran was a microcosm of the chatter around Washington throughout the year about the likelihood of a U.S. bombing run against alleged secret Iranian nuclear sites—a possibility that has seemed to ebb and flow.

No one on the panel—a collection of a statesman, military brass, and experts—thought that an attack on Iran was imminent or even likely to happen in the longer term. Yet that did not prevent debate about the merits and drawbacks of a U.S. strike. A prime issue that needs to be addressed in such scenarios is assessing the threat from Iran, which has had a tense relationship with the West since its 1979 revolution.

"There are two general problems with Iran: Iran in the region and Iran with nuclear weapons," said Brent Scowcroft, a former general in the U.S. Air Force and former national security adviser to two Republican presidents, referring to Iran's growing power and aspirations in the region and its alleged covert nuclear weapons program.

But Scowcroft said that under President George W. Bush's policy (inspired largely by a neoconservative worldview) of isolating countries perceived as "evil," one cannot assess the aims of the Iranian regime in terms of nuclear capabilities or toward neighboring nations like Afghanistan and Iraq, where the United States has committed interests.

The United States has several times walked away from Iran at the negotiating table and in 2003—reportedly at the behest of hawkish Vice President [Dick Cheney](#)—rejected an Iranian overture that could have been the first step to a "grand bargain" comprehensive rapprochement plan.

"What [the United States] can do and can't do with Iran is ... pretty much a mystery because we have not been prepared to explore with them what the possibilities are," said Scowcroft.

The lack of diplomacy since the Bush administration began pursuing its aggressive post-9/11 strategies to remake the Middle East is predicated at least

partially on the neoconservative worldview that talking to enemies gives them credibility and, therefore, puts them in a position of strength. That view often stipulates that pre-talk conditions need to be met before a serious effort at engagement can be made.

Scowcroft was quick to demur from that tack. "Making discussions subject to pre-conditions before you sit down and talk to them is not a recipe for understanding or for finding out what goes on. That is one of the purposes of talking," he said. "[T]alking in itself is not necessarily a concession."

But with strained relations, some view a strike—or at least the threat of one—as a potential way for the United States to bring the Iranians to the table and to gain leverage over them.

"The idea is to use the threat of force or some force to compel Iran to allow this whole inspections, tagging, and shutdown of the program," said Kenneth Katzman of the Congressional Research Service, a government-sponsored group that provides analysis to Congress. "One need not necessarily know where every site is or to strike every site to still potentially be effective."

When discussing merits of a strike on Iran, Katzman couched his talking points as things he had heard from people who "worked on study groups recently."

Indeed, Katzman was a consultant to a task force with the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) that released a report touting a "new, robust and comprehensive strategy" for dealing with Iran that would "incorporat[e] new diplomatic, economic and military tools in an integrated fashion."

The project was directed by BPC's neoconservative foreign policy director Michael Makovsky, and the report, "Meeting the Challenge: U.S. Policy Toward Iranian Nuclear Development," was authored by hawkish Iran expert and neoconservative [American Enterprise Institute](#) scholar [Michael Rubin](#). Other contributors included [Dennis Ross](#), a former Mideast peace negotiator close to President-elect Barack Obama's transition team, and former Senators Daniel Coats and Charles Robb.

The report calls a nuclear-armed Iran a "strategically untenable" situation and has been regarded by some analysts as a bellicose document whose diplomatic recommendations have already been rejected outright by the Iranians, paving the way for U.S. military action against their nuclear program.

Not everyone on the panel, however, was sure that Katzman's attempt at "airstrike diplomacy" would work out in the U.S. favor.

"This may be the best example in recent times of highly coordinated threat of force against a country to bring about diplomatic solution. ... I'm not sure," said Ret. Marine Corps Gen. Joseph Hoar, the former head of U.S. Central Command, the military command responsible for the whole of the Middle East. "For people that think this is serious, I would put it in the utter folly department."

Wayne White, a scholar at the Middle East Institute and a former Foreign Service official, went even further in his warnings of the potential fallout from a strike, even a highly selective and targeted campaign like Katzman's example.

"Once all this has been done—and we're talking about 2,000–3,000 airstrikes over a period of a week—you're not talking about what some people in the media refer to as 'surgically taking out Iranian nuclear sites'; you're talking about war with Iran," he said. "This is going to unleash a titanic crisis."

White speculated that a strike of any size would harden Iranian resolve to develop a weapon by a "crash program"—as happened when Israel attacked an Iraqi nuclear facility in the early 1980s, after which Iraq accelerated its program—because a nuclear weapon would serve as a deterrent.

"If you go in and beat the hornets' nest, and you damage it, then actually you're dealing with a wounded animal—something even more determined that it had ever been before to attain this capability," said White, implicitly hinting at the air of inevitability around a nuclear Iran.

"Even though it might be rather distasteful, we might be able to live with a nuclear Iran," White said, telling the crowd at the conference that Iran is unlikely to be so "incredibly foolish" as to bomb Israel with an assurance of a much more destructive retaliation.

"Quite a number of Israelis would be unhappy, to say the least, living even with that small chance of such a horrific scenario," he said. "However, quite frankly, I'm not Israel, and I must look at this through an American lens and keeping with American national interests."

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