

Iran in the “Axis of Evil”

By

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In my first two articles, I discussed the wars that are already happening in Iraq and Palestine. Next I showed how Syria fit into an emerging pattern. Now I turn to Iran and the possibility of an extension of war there.

To put developments of Iran into context, two sequences of actions must be mentioned. First, America has had a long involvement in Iran. Its most important act was to overthrow Iran’s elected and relatively democratic government under Mohammed Mossadegh fifty years ago. Angry because Mossadegh had nationalized Iranian oil and fearing that his government might fall under Soviet influence, the Eisenhower administration authorized the CIA to topple it. The coup was carried out,¹ the Shah was reinstated and then, for years, the American government poured money into Iran, trained its army and built its air force. The results were economically spectacular: Iran had the fastest rate of growth in the world. But, politically, the people of Iran grew to hate the shah’s repressive government.

The Kennedy administration briefly and half-heartedly urged the Shah to allow more popular participation, but increasingly rich – oil revenues went from \$1 to \$17 billion from 1970 to 1974 -- and seemingly powerful – with the best equipped army in the Middle East -- he rejected the advice.² Proud of his achievements and blind to the already-evident threats, he kept on buying what turned out to be irrelevant military equipment while he further narrowed his political base. As predicted, he lost the allegiance of enough of his people that he was overthrown in 1979 by the Iranians he had most despised, the religious establishment, what he had called “the unwashed *mullahs*,” while his powerful army and his dreaded political police stood by impotent.

Pent-up angers were guided by narrow-minded, archaic religious fundamentalists into a blood-bath not only of the supporters of the former regime but also of its secular critics. Everything to do with modernization, even everything inherited from the non-Islamic Persian past, was to be purged from the “born-again” society. That society was being reshaped to fit the particular brand of Islam that had amalgamated the ancient Iranian mystery religion, Zoroastrianism, *Shiism*. Long popular among the poor and uneducated, *Shiism* became the ideology of the new Iran with its “priesthood” the ruling establishment. This was the second sequence of events that set the modern stage.

¹ The coup was carried out by CIA Assistant Director for the Middle East Kermit Roosevelt who also planned and promoted the similar coup for Syria described in the previous article. His account is *Countercoup: The Struggle for Control of Iran* (New York, 1979); a summary of the official CIA account, written by Donald Wilbur, was published in *The New York Times* of April 16, 2000. Stephen Kinzer’s *All the Shah’s Men* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley, 2003) is an excellent new account.

² As an American government official, I was involved in his effort and was singled out by the Shah as his major American critic. We met several times before the revolution and discussed his policies at length.

From a Western or even a “modern” Iranian point of view, there is much to criticize about the clerical regime. As its more conservative members feared, it has been corrupted by power and wealth. It is repressive and brutal. Many, particularly younger, urban Iranians wish it would change or be replaced. It is this regime that President Bush included in his January 2002 “Axis of Evil” speech. While the phrase was his, the desire to bring about “regime change” in Iran was set forth by the Neoconservatives years before.

So, how vulnerable is the Iranian regime, why is it so prominent on the Bush administration’s enemy list and what is likely to happen? These are the questions I will attempt to answer here.

Those who seek “regime change” in Iran face a far more formidable opponent there than in Iraq. It is a country with a population about four times as large as Iraq’s. Like fundamentalists in other religions, its leaders feel absolutely certain of their God-given authority. In this belief, they are confirmed by the adherence of their clerical colleagues who now number upwards of a hundred thousand and who inhabit every village and neighborhood in Iran. And, having forged alliances with a new class of entrepreneurs and merchants, this pervasive network has built upon popular devotion to form a powerful and deeply supported regime. Unlike most Middle Eastern governments, it is not just a small clique gathered around a military leader. Moreover, its military forces are equipped and trained precisely for what America has been unable to defeat in Iraq, guerrilla war. It is not very vulnerable.

The Iranian regime began making enemies in the West by allowing its radical youthful supporters to invade the American embassy in 1979 and take its staff hostage. It then began to support anti-Israeli and anti-American terrorist movements among fellow *Shiis* in Lebanon. Some strategists fear that it will use its influence with Iraqi *Shiis*, that country’s majority population, to turn Iraq into an anti-Western base. And, finally, Israelis and Americans fear that Iran, which has a talented and educated elite, will soon join the “nuclear club.”

Having been singled out as the pivot of the “Axis of Evil” having seen American military power demonstrated in neighboring Iraq and Afghanistan and certainly knowing of the public statements of President Bush’s Neoconservative advisers, the Iranians are justifiably apprehensive. Even if they discount American pronouncements, they know that senior officials of Israel, which has an estimated 400 nuclear weapons as well as a full range of chemical and biological weapons and rockets and fighter-bombers capable of reaching Iran, have openly threatened that they might attack it. Given this threat and President Bush’s proclamation, as a professor at the Hebrew University in Israel recently wrote,³ “Had the Iranians not tried to build nuclear weapons, they would be crazy.”

Reacting to criticism for its development of enriched nuclear fuel, Iran agreed with India, holding that any state has as much “right” to nuclear weapons as any other.

³ Martin van Creveld, “Is Israel planning to attack Iran?” *International Herald Tribune*, August 21-22, 2004.

Its position was backed up on September 22 when the foreign ministers of Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa and Sweden pointed out that “The Nonproliferation Treaty cannot be complied with a la carte...In 2000, the nuclear powers made an unequivocal undertaking to eliminate their nuclear arsenals [but] very little progress has been made.”⁴

If Iran is in the process of developing nuclear weapons, it is seeking security from perceived threats – just as Pakistan, India, China, North Korea and Israel have done. Getting weapons was dangerous, but once they were obtained, the existing nuclear powers accepted it. Iran today is in that dangerous period when other states may try to stop them. The Bush administration says it will. As Under Secretary of State John Bolton proclaimed, “We are determined that they are not going to achieve a nuclear weapons capability.” With its own forces stretched thin, America announced that it is giving Israel 500 one-ton “bunker buster” bombs, for which the only identified target is Iran, and 102 long-range F-16i fighter-bombers capable of delivering them.⁵ Presumably, the Bush administration hopes that these moves will deter the Iranian leaders, but they may rather push the Iranians to move as fast as possible to acquire weapons. The latter seems to be their answer. It was the answer of all the nuclear powers from the Soviet Union to the present.

A time of danger is upon us. The International Atomic Energy Agency set a November 25 deadline for Iran to halt its enrichment program. What America or Israel will do if it cannot prove it is not building them is anyone’s guess. But, if either attacks, Iran’s response is likely to be firing its few “Shihab 3” missiles which can reach Israel, armed perhaps with chemical or biological weapons, and to urge its protégé, the Lebanese based *Hizbollah*, to attack Israel with the several thousand short-range rockets it is said to possess. This sequence of events would surely trigger an Israeli attack also on Lebanon and perhaps on Syria, potentially engulfing the whole Middle East in war. As *The Financial Times* observed,⁶ “What [President Bush’s advisers from the] neo-conservatives foresee as a generational struggle with the Islamic world could start or finish with the regime in Tehran.”

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⁴ Craig S. Smith, “Tehran reasserts right to enrich uranium,” *The International Herald Tribune*, September 23, 2004.

⁵ Also included were 4,000 other powerful bombs, guidance equipment as reported in *The International Herald Tribune*, September 22, 2004.

⁶ March 17, 2004.