

Why doesn't Iran back down? Iraq, Oil and Deterrence

Written by Graeme Davies

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GRAEME DAVIES, AUG 22 2008

In this piece I will argue that Iran is unlikely to give in to US and Israeli threats because the political elite in Tehran have staked their reputation on the nuclear issue and the Iranian's do not believe that either the United States or Israel has either the ability or the willingness to attack their facilities. If Iran has miscalculated then there is the potential that the Middle East may erupt into an enormously damaging international conflict that will have significant ramifications for the international economic system.

In the first week of June 2008, Israel conducted a major military exercise in the Mediterranean, ostensibly to practice refuelling military planes and rescuing downed pilots. Many observers believed this exercise to be a dry run for attacking Iran's nuclear facilities which are roughly the same distance away. If this was the case then the exercise was designed to signal to Iran that Israel had both the capabilities and the willingness to use force against Iran's nuclear program. Approximately one month later Iran test-fired several missiles including the Shahab-3, which could easily reach Israel, indicating that they had the capabilities to respond to an Israeli attack. These actions took place against the background of an Iranian nuclear program, which many in the west are convinced will be used to develop nuclear weapons, but Iran claims is for peaceful civilian use. The United States wants Iran to stop developing nuclear technology but the Iranians are resisting. Currently, the United States, Israel and Iran are engaged in a high-stakes game of coercive diplomacy and deterrence. The United States and Israel need to convince the Iranians that by not backing down they will suffer unacceptable costs, while the Iranians must attempt to convince the United States that any use of force will incur unacceptably high costs.

The United States has unparalleled military might in the international system. Its defence spending is larger than the military budgets of all other countries combined. It has stealth technology, Inter -Continental Ballistic Missiles, spy satellite networks, enormous naval firepower and ultimately nuclear weapons. Israel is the predominant military force in the region, with access to a considerable amount of US technology. Iran is not yet anywhere equal to matching the overwhelming firepower that these two countries can direct towards it. Iran can't hit the United States with missiles; it has no nuclear capability and would be unlikely to be able to defend itself against a major US assault. So the puzzle is, why does Iran not back down and give up its nuclear programme?

I think that there are two basic reasons why the Iranians are unwilling to give in to US demands.

- 1) Domestic Politics.
- 2) Deterrence.

Domestic Politics: Briefly, if all politics are local then President Ahmadinejad has several domestic political reasons to carry on with this nuclear program. Having attached both his own and his nation's prestige to the development of a nuclear program, it will be difficult for him to back down. In mid-2009, elections will take place in Iran and he needs to show that he is strong in the face of US pressure. The economy is performing poorly and there is considerable domestic discontent, so the nuclear program seems to be one area he can improve his image with the Iranian people. Likewise, the factional structure of Iranian politics reduce Ahmadinejad's options for accommodating US demands, if concessions are made then he can be attacked by hardliners for being weak. While the Supreme Leader Khomeini is ultimately in charge of the programme it is unlikely that he can back down without being humiliated as the program has been widely lauded as being a major national achievement. So there is a strong domestic political motivation for

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maintaining the nuclear program which means that the US and the international community will have to increase the costs on Iran to make the program untenable. The Iranian government, by indicating to its domestic political audience that the nuclear program is a vital national interest, have made the likelihood of compliance with international demands very low. Governments may be likely to give in when only their peripheral interests are at stake, but they are very unlikely to comply when they believe the issue is of vital importance.

Deterrence: The framing of the nuclear program as being one of vital national interest and one of national pride already means that the Iranians will be strongly disinclined to end the program, making the job of coercion extremely difficult. Likewise, the Iranian's don't believe that the United States will use force to remove their nuclear program. Why?

1) Iraq: The United States needs Iranian help in Iraq. Attacking Iran opens up another front in the Middle East, can lead to further disruption in Iraq if the Iranians add their resources to the insurrection. The US military, already overstretched by its commitments in Iraq, may not be well placed to deal with a strike on Iran.

2) Oil: As the United States is entering a recession, or at least an economic slowdown, a war in the Middle East could have an enormous impact on global oil prices, which would seriously destabilise the West's economy. The Iranians have indicated that if attacked they would close the Straits of Hormuz which would damage the world economy.

3) US public opinion: Democracies are generally transparent and targets of US threats can examine the political incentives that the US President has to use force. Iranian diplomats I have spoken to believe that the US public has no stomach for war.

4) Russia and China: Are vociferously opposed to war with Iran. They have continually undermined US attempts to implement economic sanctions and the Iranian's believe that these two countries will be influential at preventing US use of force.

5) Nuclear program is dispersed: Unlike the attack on the Osirak nuclear facility in Iraq, Israel and the United States will be unable to destroy Iran's nuclear program. It is widely dispersed and placed in underground bunkers which put in doubt the efficacy of any attack.

The United States has the capability to attack Iran but the costs that Iran can place on that attack undermine US credibility. In the face of economic disruption and further instability in Iraq the Iranians believe that the US would be unwilling to use force against them. The threats that the US make are thought to be 'cheap talk' without substance.

Iranian intransigence in the face of US and Israeli coercion is not particularly surprising. The interaction of domestic politics and the issue of national pride make it difficult for the Iranian's to back down. In fact President Ahmadinejad may believe that a confrontation with the West could significantly improve his electoral chances and that US threats are playing into his hands. Iran's missile tests are designed to show that they have the capability to hit US interests if not the United States itself. Unlike situations of deterrence during the Cold War where both sides signalled that they could destroy the other if attacked, Iran is practising an indirect deterrence strategy. If the United States attacked, it knows it would not be destroyed by the Iranian response, but it is unsure what damage Iran could do to US interests in Iraq, and I would say more importantly to global oil prices. If Iran were to use its missiles and naval forces to prevent oil from being transported and perhaps even produced then the United States and the West would be in serious trouble. The United States and Israel may calculate that a nuclear armed Iran is just too great a risk and so be willing to use force to destroy a considerable portion of Iran's nuclear program. They may signal that any disruption to the oil supply would be responded to with overwhelming force hoping that the Iranians would make a rational calculation and not target oil. Currently the situation is extremely tense and it is unclear as to whether the United States or Israel will use force against Iran. I think the Iranians feel it is unlikely, but with a President who is about to leave office and will not have to pay the direct political costs of an attack on Iran there always has to be suspicion that one last strike might take place. It is far from certain that the situation will be resolved peacefully; however, it does seem likely that the US, Israel and Iran will continue to confront one another for many years to come.

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