

## Iran: Imperialism's second strike

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IRAN has played its diplomatic hand deftly. On the eve of the meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna on September 24, Iran's highest authorities let it be known that in case countries which get their oil and gas from Iran vote against it, they might face retaliation. When India did vote with the European Union troika (E.U.-3) that has been fronting for the United States, the Iranian Ambassador walked up to his Indian counterpart and told him that the \$20-billion gas deal was off. The news got splashed all over the Indian media. After some 24 hours of strenuous diplomacy, Iran simply announced that the deal was still on. The message had been delivered. Even if not for ethical reasons or to save the solidarity of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), India better take into account its own self-interest and its energy requirements when the vote comes up again, in November or later. Or else!

The IAEA Board conventionally acts by consensus, and only twice in its past history has a decision been taken by vote. As this particular meeting approached, it became apparent that there was no consensus whatever. However, it was also clear that the West had enough votes of pliant members to have its resolution passed by a comfortable majority. India's own vote was not going to alter the numbers significantly. Rather, the difference was qualitative and crucial. Iran has been arguing that the escalating "extra-legal" demands of the E.U.-3 (Britain, Germany and France) and the U.S., through the IAEA and beyond, is part of the imperialist coercion of the weaker Third World countries. As Siddharth Varadarajan pointed out in a superb piece in *The Hindu*, the U.S. desperately needed the Indian vote because weak little countries such as Ecuador and Singapore voting with the E.U.-3 make little difference to Iran's argument, but a powerful country like India breaking ranks with NAM and voting with the West undercuts Iran's argument altogether. India's buckling under U.S. pressure forced Iran to start speaking to it the language of its own power. (Siddharth Varadarajan's earlier series of three articles in *The Hindu*, (September 21-23) is the best summation of the Iran nuclear crisis available anywhere and, *inter alia*, relieves us from going over the same details.)

Iran is the key country in Bush's famous "Axis of Evil" (Iraq, Iran and North Korea) and the main prize in the current war on West Asia. If the invasion of broken little Afghanistan was a dry-run for the invasion of Iraq, the occupation of the oil-rich Iraq, which too had been broken quite substantially by 12 years of economic sanctions combined with internal subversion and unrelenting aerial bombardments, was itself conceived as a prelude to the subjugation of Iran. Developments over the past two years, however, have made the quick subjugation of Iran immeasurably more difficult but also, paradoxically, more urgent for U.S. strategy not only regionally but also in global terms. The fiasco of American power in Afghanistan and more crucially in Iraq has greatly strengthened Iran's regional position, to the extent that the U.S. relies on Iran's tacit cooperation in stabilising the Shia-Kurdish right-wing ruling dispensation in Iraq and keeping a modicum of peace in southeast Afghanistan.

In the short run, a full-scale assault on Iran is now less likely than it was two years ago.

In a completely different trajectory, however, initiatives which had been under way for some time have matured sufficiently over the past two years for Iran to emerge as the virtual lynchpin in the making, over the next decade or so, of what China and Russia have come to regard as an absolutely indispensable Asian Energy Security Grid, for breaking Western control of the world's energy supplies and securing the great industrial revolution of Asia. The subjugation of Iran, always considered essential by the U.S.-Israel axis becomes all the more necessary because, to put it in summary terms: if Iran goes, the Asian Energy Security Grid goes. Iran is quite justified in pointing out that the battle over Iran is, in fact, a battle for securing Asian sovereignty against expansionist imperialism. The Americans too are right: Iran is strategically far more important than, say, Iraq or Syria. Unable to invade immediately, the U.S. needs desperately to break Iran through other means. The weapon at hand is that of international sanctions and regimes of surveillance and sabotage, of the kind that broke Iraq. That is what the Vienna meetings are all about. They need the fig leaf of the IAEA Board's resolutions. After that, they may not even go to the Security Council, for fear of Chinese and Russian vetoes, or the Security Council may be eventually ignored, as it was ignored when it came to the invasion of Iraq. High profile Euro-American groups have been assembled already, which are recommending that the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) alliance, or some such combination, can undertake the sanctions anyway in case the Security Council cannot be counted upon to deliver. The U.S. in any case has been saying for several years now that things like the Geneva Conventions and the United Nations Charter have become obsolete in this age of "the war on terror" and that "the West" has to act collectively and pre-emptively to secure its own interests.

The choice for India is stark. It can join China, Iran and Russia; help erect a new kind of non-alignment suitable for our times; secure its own economic interests and industrial future, and be part of Asia's great forward march. Or, it can become a U.S. client under the smokescreens of Alliance, strategic partnership, civilian nuclear cooperation, and so forth. On September 24 India acted as a U.S. client. It does not have to.

AS India repudiates the consensus of the NAM and instead joins the U.S. and the E.U. troika in subjecting Iran to an infinite regime of surveillance, threat of sanctions and possible military action in the future, it is best to recall that the programme for the development of nuclear energy in Iran was originally a gift of the U.S. to the Shah whom they had restored to the throne in a CIA-led coup in 1953. That coup was followed by the CIA-supervised creation of SAVAK, one of history's most murderous internal security services, as well as a reign of terror against communists and secular nationalists alike, which paved the way for the clerical establishment to emerge as the only surviving and viable anti-monarchical opposition.

Eisenhower's Cold War America and the Shah's monarchical Iran then signed their first civil nuclear agreement in 1957. Over the next two decades, right up to the Islamic revolution, the U.S. provided Iran not only technical assistance and training but also its first experimental nuclear reactor, enriched uranium and plutonium with the fissile isotopes. The Shah was never required to furnish any guarantees, not even a verbal commitment, that Iran would not use this technology for the development of nuclear weapons. Even so, and not anticipating the Islamic revolution, the Ford administration approved in the mid-1970s the sale to Iran of up to eight nuclear reactors (with fuel) and then cleared the sale of lasers

with known capability for uranium enrichment. No one made the argument, now made so commonly, that with its vast reserves of natural gas and petroleum, Iran had no need for nuclear energy for civilian purposes. The possibility that the Shah may actually move to develop nuclear weapons in pursuit of his megalomaniacal imperial dreams were ruled out because he was a loyal ally and a friend of Israel.

These assessments and decisions were made for President Gerald Ford by three key members of his administration: Donald Rumsfeld, who was then, as he is now, the Secretary of Defence; Dick Cheney, Ford's Chief of Staff then and Bush's Vice-President now; and Paul Wolfowitz, who was then heading the non-proliferation section of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. A friend of the Shah before the Islamic revolution, Rumsfeld, of course, re-emerged as a friend of Saddam Hussein as the U.S. began instigating Iraq to invade Iran after the revolution. This same gang then invaded Iraq and now wants to invade Iran as well. The irony of it is that all those reactors and related equipment for uranium enrichment were offered to the Shah, who had refused to sign the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and the Islamic regime, which has signed the NPT and has thus voluntarily submitted itself to international inspections, is now being required to surrender, quite literally, the rights that NPT itself gives to its signatories and will most likely be subjected to economic and political sanctions in the not-too-distant future.

INDIA'S own conduct in this whole affair has been at best paradoxical. India did not sign the NPT on the grounds that the treaty itself is discriminatory, thus avoided international inspections and, under the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government, proceeded in a clandestine manner to become a "nuclear power", that is, to test and presumably manufacture nuclear weapons. The other two countries which have done the same are Israel and Pakistan – not a very nice company to keep. Against this backdrop, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh himself urged his Iranian counterpart in a telephonic conversation, well before the recent vote in Vienna, that Iran "cooperate" in fulfilling the demands now being made. In other words, India has insisted on a 'transparency' in Iran's conduct on the nuclear issue which India itself never offered or observed; it has urged Iran to abide by a treaty that it itself finds discriminatory; and it has urged Iran to meet demands that go far, far beyond the terms of the treaty and are, in the Iranian representative's precise word, "extra-legal". In short, the Prime Minister required Iran to abide by the coercive demands made unilaterally by the E.U.-3, fronting for the U.S., which had not been agreed upon by Iran and which have no basis in international law. Having tendered that advice at the highest level of government, India logically proceeded to break ranks with the NAM countries and voted in favour of a resolution pushed through by the E.U.-3 under U.S. guidance.

Explanations emanating from the Foreign Ministry are at best bewildering. We are told that India's was a "conditional vote". Well, in reality, there is no such thing as a "conditional vote". Between "Yes" and "No" there is only abstention; we said "Yes". We are given a list of objections the Indian government had, but the logical corollary to such grave objections is to vote "No" as Venezuela alone had the honour to do, or at least abstain, as even Pakistan did. Having acted in a manner more abject than even Pakistan, famous for being a client of the U.S., South Block takes recourse to arguments even more spurious: we have been in constant dialogue with all the important countries of Europe, the Prime Minister himself conferred with French President Jacques Chirac, India got a "big concession" from the E.U.-3 in persuading it not to insist on reporting Iran immediately to the Security Council, and India could after all not vote with those who had given the concession and so on. Nonsense. India voted to say that Iran was "not in compliance" with the NPT, and with this vote in hand, Iran

can be reported to the Security Council as early as November this year, if the U.S. and the E.U.-3 so wish. Six weeks? And India changed its vote for that? And, for that paltry non-concession India not only broke with its NAM friends but also repudiated the basic principles of the undertaking its government had given at home: that it will do what it can to protect Iran's rights under the NPT and to ensure that matters shall be dealt with inside the framework of the IAEA and its tradition of consensual decision-making?

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Anyone even vaguely familiar with those so-called "negotiations" knows that the E.U.-3 never budged from its position because its stock answer to every Iranian proposal or counter-offer was always the same: "Americans will never accept that!" E.U.-3 was not negotiating; it was relaying to Iran, and to all and sundry, what the U.S. was demanding and threatening to report Iran to the Security Council if the latter did not comply. Everyone knows that Iran had closed its Isphahan facility voluntarily, as a confidence-building measure, expecting some reciprocity, and then re-opened it, in retaliation, after having waited for reciprocity for many months and not getting it - indeed, receiving only escalated demands. India must have known that Iran could not possibly accept the demands it was urging it to accept, that the resolution for which it voted, with its will to punish, shall lead to hardening of positions: "Threats beget more threats," as the Iranian delegate said.

WHAT were the demands made on Iran, and in what context? Here, we turn to the strange case of Mohammad El-Baradei, the chief of the IAEA, who has been spearheading the inspections in Iran and playing pretty much the role that Hans Blix played in the years and months leading up to the invasion of Iraq: the same pattern of more and more inspections, the same failure to find anything indicating a weaponisation programme, the same pattern of escalating demands, up to a point of infinity - and the same kind of double-speak.

The charge that Iran has a clandestine nuclear weapons programme has been around for many years. Once the "war on terror" was declared, Iran was upgraded as one of the three countries (along with Iraq and North Korea) comprising the "Axis of Evil" - with a variety of other countries - Libya, Syria, Cuba, and so on - coming in and out of the "second tier". By the time George Bush delivered his State of the Union speech in January, this charge had become a frequent theme in the writings of the neocons and was duly repeated in that speech. Dick Cheney, the Vice-President then, made it a commonplace in U.S. policy formulations. In 2003, after the invasion and swift occupation of Iraq, and before the scale of the resistance and consequent U.S. quagmire there was apparent, there was palpable fear that the neocons' declared objective of "first Baghdad, then Damascus, Teheran, Riyadh" was being pursued with great determination and alacrity. It was in that prolonged moment of uncertainty that El-Baradei made his first appearance in Teheran, as one of the many emissaries persuading Iran to submit itself to international inspections in order to avoid unilateral U.S.-Israel action. In a domestically controversial decision, Iran signed the NPT at the end of that year.

Those opposing such a decision argued what India had always argued, namely, that the treaty was discriminatory and Iran had the sovereign right to decide, now and in the future, what its energy and defence requirements were; these tended to be also the people who argued that since Israel, an arch-foe only 600 miles away, had a huge arsenal of nuclear

weapons including nuclear-armed submarines, sophisticated long-range missiles as well as large number of U.S.-supplied F-15 aircraft capable of carrying nuclear warheads, Iran should at least keep the option of actually developing nuclear weapons. They, and the Teheran establishment as a whole, have called for the establishment of a nuclear-free zone throughout West Asia whereby all countries, including Israel, would give up their nuclear weapons and open themselves up for international inspection. Such zones already exist in Latin America, Africa and Southeast Asia, and Iran was joined in this call by Egypt, Syria and Jordan. This call gained enough momentum to materialise in the form of a draft resolution for the consideration of the Security Council in December 2003, which was then withdrawn because the U.S. threatened to veto it.

This too is worth remembering: there is no response from the so-called “international community” to Iran’s call for a nuclear-free West Asia because the U.S., as a protector of Israel and its nuclear arsenal, will not allow it, and other members of the Security Council, including the E.U.-3, will not press for it, thanks to their own collusion with the U.S.-Israel axis. *The Hindu* recently published an op-ed piece jointly written by the Foreign Ministers of Britain, France and Germany plus the E.U. Security Chief, which says that “the goal of creating a WMD-free zone in the Middle East” is “a cause to which we are deeply committed”. Well, what about Israel? Why are these gentlemen and El-Baradei not in Tel Aviv? After all, Israel has never confessed to having any nuclear weapons but Western newspapers routinely describe it as the sixth largest nuclear power in the world, with over 200 nuclear warheads. El-Baradei himself has said that his agency “works on the assumption” that Israel is a nuclear power, and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) recently televised a programme showing that Britain itself provided the heavy water which was used in Israel’s production of nuclear weapons.

In any case, those in Iran who were in favour of signing the NPT argued that since Iran had no weapons production programme, signing the treaty and opening up its facilities would earn Iran a high moral ground and would at least buy time until U.S. intentions and capabilities in the wake of the Iraq occupation became clearer. Thus it is that El-Baradei and his men arrived in Teheran and fanned out to various sites. Soon after starting his inspections, he began arguing that the existing provisions of the NPT did not give him enough authority to inspect thoroughly enough, such limited inspections shall not enable him to arrive at any definite conclusions and Iran must therefore voluntarily sign a much more intrusive Additional Protocol – which Iran did after some argumentation – to demonstrate its good faith and as a confidence-building measure, with the proviso that this additional acceptance of an enlarged jurisdiction was provisional and had no permanent legal status. The E.U.-3, prompted by the U.S., now insists that the protocol which Iran signed only as a confidence-building measure and only for limited time must now be ratified by Iran as a legally binding undertaking.

The farther the inspectors went, the less they found. It was certainly true that Iran was reluctant to part with all its secrets, as any country would be, and provided information only when directly asked for and only to the extent that the inquiry demanded. That is portrayed by the adversaries as Iran’s lack of “transparency” as if the U.S. or Britain or France, or India for that matter, would ungrudgingly part with closely held information about its nuclear plants, army workshops, procurement histories, and so on. The crucial fact, however, is that months and months of inspections yielded no information incriminating Iran’s nuclear programme, so that in a talk on October 3, 2004, El-Baradei straightforwardly said that “Iran has no nuclear weapons programme”. As if saying it once was not enough, he then said,

more elaborately: “Iran has no nuclear weapons programme, but I personally don’t rush to conclusions before all the realities are clarified. So far I see nothing that could be called an imminent danger. I have seen no nuclear weapons programme in Iran. What I have seen is that Iran is trying to gain access to nuclear enrichment technology, and so far there is no danger from Iran.”

What he said next, in this public discourse on Al Jazeera, was pointed and explosive: “Our findings in Iraq proved that the agency was right because we didn’t find anything which indicated the presence of nuclear weapons in Iraq... If we want to take a lesson from Iraq, we should not rush before all realities are clarified, and this is what we want to do about Iran.”

That was just a year ago, and it appeared from such remarks that El-Baradei was getting ready to give Iran a clean enough chit to undercut the U.S.-E.U. pressure. Then strange things began to happen. The U.S. of course let its displeasure be known. It was also well-known that El-Baradei’s second term at the IAEA was to end in 2005 and the U.S., angry at the softness of his remarks, was going to oppose a third term for him, just as, despite all of U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Anan’s cooperation, the U.S. had turned against the renewal of his term as Secretary-General after Anan said that in terms of the U.N. Charter the U.S. invasion of Iraq was illegal. El-Baradei too now became a sitting duck. He seems to have responded to this U.S. pressure by escalating his demands on Iran. Sometime in very late summer this year there was an inexplicable buzz in New York that the U.S. was ready to drop its opposition to him. Then came his report of September 3 in which he sternly listed areas in which Iran had not cooperated and demanded that Iran’s “transparency measures should extend beyond the formal requirements of the Safeguards Agreement and Additional Protocol and include access to individuals, documentation related to procurement, dual-use equipment, certain military-owned workshops and research and development locations”.

THE breadth of these demands is breathtaking. An inspection authority representing a specific agency was demanding rights which are not granted to the agency by the protocols of the agency itself, the terms of the NPT, the various Agreements and Protocols which Iran had signed in good faith and as voluntary steps to build confidence. And the language was extraordinary: “access to individuals” without specifying the individuals. Any and all “individuals” in the Islamic Republic of Iran? Which “military-owned workshops and research and development locations”? Iran was apparently not to keep any military secrets at all. Documentary evidence exists to prove that inspection teams in Iraq included secret service agents who were using the inspections as an alibi for gathering all sorts of defence-related information and passing that information on to the Israelis and the U.S. Was the game being repeated now in Iran as well?

The second, even more alarming aspect of these demands, was that some of them re-appear, verbatim, in the E.U.-3 resolution in the meeting of September 24 for which India too voted. El-Baradei was providing for that board meeting and its resolution the language for demands so excessive that Iran was bound to reject them – “illegal and illogical”, as the Iranian delegate called them. Iran was now bound to retaliate by not acceding to these additional demands, possibly issuing “threats” of its own, thus paving the way for the charge of “non-compliance” to become more aggressive. At any rate, El-Baradei did get his third term, with a unanimous vote, just a couple of days after that decisive meeting. The masters got out of him what they wanted and then re-employed him.

Is El-Baradei a dishonest man? One simply does not know. The charitable view, on the face of it, seems to be that he is the classic international civil servant, enmeshed in the balancing acts of the bureaucracy and caught in an impossible situation. If he conducts his inspections within the rules of the available treaties and protocols and, at the end, declares Iran innocent, the U.S. shall simply shrug off the findings, declare that much remain uninspected, claim superior knowledge, and proceed to do whatever it wished to do in the first place. If, on the other hand, he keeps escalating his demands, to show the U.S. that inspections are still going on, the Iranians are bound to draw a line somewhere, sooner or later, and a case of “non-compliance” gets strengthened, even if Iran is only refusing to comply with demands which have no basis in law or even in normal conventions of diplomacy. In either case, there is no proof that Iran is trying to make nuclear weapons, and what El-Baradei now finds or does not find has little relevance to how the game is going to get played out. Hans Blix, the chief weapons inspector in Iraq, kept saying that he has found nothing but, in complaining that Saddam was not complying fast enough, he too kept providing to the U.S. the ammunition for charges of “non-compliance”. Now, when his word matters little, Blix is often found on Swedish television denouncing the Iraq invasion. El-Baradei seems destined to play the same role in relation to Iran.

It is possible that the E.U.-3, and the U.S. from behind these proxies, would be reluctant to refer the Iran case to the Security Council for consideration of economic and political sanctions, for fear of Russia or China, or both, vetoing such a resolution. Apparently, the Iranians themselves are not counting on such a veto. Iran’s constitution places foreign relations entirely in the hands of its Supreme Leader, and Iran’s former Foreign Minister, Ali Akbar Velayati, who serves as an advisor to the present Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is reputedly of the view that instead of actually taking on the burden of vetoing a resolution brought forth jointly by the U.S. and the E.U., Russia and China are likely to try and only soften the terms of the sanctions. What is also plausible, however, is that the U.S.-E.U. combine may entirely bypass the Security Council mechanism and settle for a combined Euro-American regime of sanctions and then recruit countries around the world to comply with the terms of that sanctions regime, with the understanding that the Euro-American combination has enough clout to gain cooperation from the majority of the countries in the global state system.

The latter option is being developed by a group comprising high-ranking former and current officials of the U.S. and Europe, including Strobe Talbot, an experienced India hand. That option is also more likely because the only basis in international law for hauling Iran to the Security Council is “non-compliance with the NPT” itself, to which Iran is a signatory. For the rest, the Security Council so far has neither required inspections nor set the terms for them. The sticking point here is Article IV of the NPT which gives any signatory “an inalienable right to develop, research, produce, and use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes”, and to acquire technology to this effect from other countries. Much is being made by the U.S., the E.U. and their corporate media of Iran’s “enrichment” of uranium. The fact is that lower levels of enrichment are actually necessary for the normal functioning of reactors and production of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, and only very high level of enrichment can produce weapons grade uranium. Iran’s bid to “enrich” nuclear fuels is thus within its “inalienable right”. Iran has offered various credible formulas for international supervision of enrichment levels, including the idea of Western corporate investment in Iran’s nuclear facilities, but to no avail so far.

SO, will there be sanctions against Iran, within or outside the Security Council framework?

This question is tied up with the more fundamental question: what does the U.S. want? Rather: what is the long-term policy and strategic objective of the Bush administration with regard to Iran, and what can it realistically hope to achieve at present? These are two different questions and we shall take up mainly the first of these questions here and will come to the complexities of the current situation in a later article.

HERWIG PRAMMER/REUTERS

There is no doubting the fact that in the neo-conservative global vision, and in policies of the Bush administration based on that vision – not to speak of the Israeli calculations which the core thinkers of the neo-conservative stream represent – Iran has always been the main prize. The quip doing the rounds in Washington for some years is: “everyone wants to go to Baghdad but real men want to go to Teheran.” Iran had been the lynchpin of the U.S. empire in Muslim West Asia until 1978, which was then lost to the Islamic revolution; conquest of it would also be a kind of recovery. In resource terms, Iran’s oil deposits are said to be second only to Saudi Arabia and, combined with its gas deposits – said to be by far the largest in the world – it is at the very heart of hydrocarbon power. In the immediate term, much of Iran’s oil goes to China and sanctions against Iran disrupt that supply, aside from destroying prospects for the envisioned Asian Energy Security Grid. Strategically, Iran’s control of the Straits of Hormuz gives it a unique vantage point for controlling the tanker traffic in the Gulf as a whole. Politically, an Iran which has enjoyed peace since the end of the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, and therefore has had the time to refurbish its armed forces and financial stability, is potentially the only real counter to Israel in the region, especially if it can also develop a nuclear instrument; with Egypt neutralised and Iraq fallen, conquest of Iran will leave Israel to do what it will, for decades to come, with no credible adversary.

THE fantasy of conquest has taken many forms. One variant was that the demonstration of overwhelming power in Iraq shall make the ruling clergy in Iran wilt and run for cover; the occupation of Syria would be a cake-walk and the Hizbollah in Lebanon, supposedly mere clients of Iran and puppets of Syria, would disintegrate; a Shia-dominated, Western-oriented democratic republic in Iraq would be an inspiration to the anti-clerical, West-oriented democratic movement in Iran which would be ready to overthrow the Islamic yoke; the Azeri minority in Iran shall play the same role as the Kurdish minority did in Iraq, on the side of the U.S.; the Mujahideen-e-Khalq who have been stationed in Iraq, first under Saddam Hussein and now nurtured by the U.S., will be sent in to soften the ground for U.S. Special Forces, to gather intelligence and to help whip up the popular uprising; the several exile Iranian groups, including the monarchical ones, that the U.S. has been nursing on American soil, shall be flown in, as Chalabi’s men and other exile groups were flown into Iraq; and a blistering U.S.-Israel attack shall secure the country, pacifying it in due course, over a year or two. In other words, the scenario they had prepared for Iraq would be repeated in Iran as well, if they can have their way.

We know that plans for an attack on Iran – Israeli, American, or more plausibly an Israeli-instigated American attack on Iran – have been afoot for quite a while. On January 4, 2002, soon after the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan, Benjamin Netanyahu, the former Prime Minister of Israel, wrote in an article in *The Jerusalem Post*: “American power topples the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and the Al Qaeda network there collapses on its own. The United States must now act similarly against the other terror regimes – Iran, Iraq, Arafat’s dictatorship, Syria, and a few others.” On February 5, 2002, well before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, *The Times* of London wrote that according to Ariel Sharon, the current Israeli Prime Minister, “Iran is the centre of `world terror’, and as soon as an Iraq conflict is concluded, he



[Sharon] will push for Iran to be at the top of the 'to do list'... He sees Iran as 'behind terror all around the world' and a direct threat to Israel." *The New York Times* of February 16, 2002, reported Vice-President Dick Cheney as saying, as if taking his cue from Sharon: "There is a great yearning on the part of the Iranian people to restore and re-establish relationships with the U.S. and the West. By the same token, the government appears to be committed, for example, to trying to destroy the peace process as it relates to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And we've seen all too many examples of their active support of terrorism and their, as the President said the other night in the State of the Union speech, unstinting efforts to develop weapons of mass destruction." These three charges - not accepting Israeli supremacy; support for "terrorism"; "weapons of mass destruction" became a litany in the official pronouncements over the next many months.

In May 2003, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution which, in effect, authorised a "pre-emptive" attack on Iran, with the resolution approved by a vote 376-3, indicating complete identity of purpose between Republicans and Democrats. Competition for superior credentials in the hate-Iran game between Republicans and Democrats was well indicated when Susan Rice, one of the national security advisers to John Kerry, the Democratic presidential candidate, accused Bush of "standing on the sidelines while Iran's nuclear programme has been advanced". In September 2003, Reuters and the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* reported the U.S. plans to sell to Israel a huge number of air-launched bombs, including 500 "bunker buster" bombs that would be able to penetrate Iran's underground nuclear facilities. According to *The Washington Post* columnist William Arkin, the official U.S. strategic plan (formally known as CONPLAN 8022-02) completed in November 2003, authorized "a preemptive and offensive strike capability against Iran and North Korea".

I cite these few news reports from 2002-03 to illustrate how long the idea of an invasion of Iran has been in the air. I shall skip the intervening period, except to say that all through 2004 there was immense speculation, all around the globe about an imminent Israeli attack on Iran: how Israel had moved its nuclear submarines into the Gulf, how Israel had conducted war games in preparation for a surprise attack on Iran's nuclear installations, and so on. By the summer of 2005, Bush was on Israeli television, saying that the U.S. might itself strike at Iran and would fully understand Israel's own security needs if it were to attack Iran. At the same time, independent sources seemed to suggest that a low-intensity warfare against Iran had already begun, with a variety of U.S. spy aircraft crowding the Iranian air space, client groups of Iranian origin getting infiltrated into Iran, perhaps even some U.S. Special Forces making incursions into the remoter areas, and so on.

Now, it is possible that some of all this is just psychological warfare, to evoke fear in Iran and thus soften Iranian positions in favour of more concessions to the U.S., not just in the nuclear arena, which is in itself insignificant, but in the much more crucial and complex matter of Iran's influence in Iraq, Syria, Southern Lebanon, Bahrain and the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia, not to speak of the southeastern provinces of Afghanistan. In other words, Iran may not be facing the prospect of invasion but may be squeezed between the threat of escalating internal subversion and imminent referral to the Security Council for sanctions. Given the whole historical record of aggressive U.S. design and Israeli insistence, the signs are ominous enough for Tony Benn, the much admired senior figure in British Labour Left, to write: "The build-up to a new war is taking exactly the same form as it did in 2002. First we are being told that Iran poses a military threat, because it may be developing nuclear weapons. We are assured that the President is hoping that diplomacy might succeed

through the European negotiations which have been in progress for some months... This is just what we were told when Hans Blix was in Baghdad talking to Saddam on behalf of the U.N., but we now know, from a Downing Street memorandum leaked some months ago, that the decision to invade had been taken long before that.”

In a sense, we do not even have to wait for that kind of memorandum to surface after the war and tell us how early the war was planned. We have plenty of documents telling us that preparations for the invasion of Iran – with varying scripts and objectives – have been going on for at least three years, not just conceptually but in terms of actual military preparations: war games, positioning of men and materials all the way from Azerbaijan to the Gulf waters, not to speak of Iraqi territory itself, or negotiations for use of Turkish air space for that matter. So far, an actual invasion of Iran has been stalled due to the sheer scale of Iraqi resistance, the internal disarray of U.S. armed forces, and Iran’s own ability to unleash vast forces against the U.S. in Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon. It is in this perspective that subjecting Iran not to a hot war but to a prolonged cold one, in the shape of a regime of economic sanctions and internal sabotage, may be for the U.S. the more feasible option for the present.

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