



The West's Hubris: Is the Price of the Iraq War a Nuclear Iran?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The 2003 Iraq War significantly reduced the West's willingness to confront Iran with the credible military threat required to halt its nuclear weapons program. Critics of the Iraq War were correct to point out that the West had no major strategic interest at stake in Iraq, and that the belief that the US could transform that country into a stable democracy quickly and easily was hubris. However, unlike in the Iraqi case, allowing Iran to become a threshold nuclear power does represent a major strategic threat to the West. To believe that Iran can be dissuaded from its course without the credible threat of military strikes, or that a Middle East with a nuclear Iran can be easily be managed, represents an even greater show of hubris.

Right now there is an unprecedented crisis between the United States and its Middle Eastern allies – not only Israel – over a potential interim nuclear deal with Iran. The allies fear that the P5+1 will grant Iran a lessening of sanctions in return for limited concessions that will not prevent Iran's continued advance towards the bomb during ongoing negotiations. In other words, Iran will become a nuclear threshold state that can produce nuclear weapons in a matter of months. Only the French seem to be holding out against such a deal. Given the near-universal agreement in the West that a nuclear Iran is "a very bad thing," why have matters reached such a perilous state? The answer is that despite being many times more powerful than Iran, the West has been unwilling to truly threaten the regime by projecting a credible threat of military action.

Whatever the outcome of the current negotiations, the only way Iran will ultimately accept a deal that genuinely sets back its nuclear program in the

long run is if it believes that the alternative is the further ratcheting up of sanctions to a degree that threatens the survival of the regime, combined with the credible threat of military force.

This does not require the invasion of Iran. The US almost certainly has the means to conduct airstrikes that can significantly set back the Iranian program. Even more importantly, it has the operational capability to repeat these strikes if and when required, thereby sending the message to the Iranians that if they attempt to reconstitute the program – a very expensive proposition – the US will strike again. Israel also appears to have a military option, but its capabilities are far more modest and its operational and diplomatic ability to repeat a strike as and when necessary are very limited.

So why then has the threat of credible force by the US been so sorely lacking? The usual answer is to blame President Barack Obama, with the particular focus on his failure to act on the red line he set in Syria as Exhibit A. But the focus on this *liberal* president is too narrow, and may yet – one hopes – be misplaced. After all, in Britain a *conservative* prime minister yielded to Parliament rather than sanction the use of force in Syria.

The deeper problem goes back to the Iraq War. Following the defeat of Saddam in 1991, Israel was mainly concerned with the potential threat of a nuclear Iran; Iraq was a secondary issue. In contrast, the West focused on Iraq, which was diplomatically isolated and militarily weak. It was relatively easy to target Saddam precisely because he did not constitute such a threat to Middle East security. This was as true of the policy of Clinton administration as of the George W. Bush administration. Tellingly, in 2003 the Israeli defense establishment did not hand out gas masks to the public as it was convinced there was virtually no chance that they would be needed, unlike in 1991.

Immediately following 9/11, there was extraordinary public support in the West for the extensive use of force against terrorist threats, but Iraq was rightly not perceived by many in the West as such a major threat, hence the great opposition to that war. When no WMDs were found, and when the cost of the war in terms of blood and treasure spiraled without any sign of democratization in Iraq, support for the extensive use of force plummeted.

As a result, in the US the more robust strategic approach of centrist Democrats who supported the war became significantly weakened within the party, while the more dovish approach of those who opposed the war became increasingly dominant. Still, a narrow majority of the American public is prepared to use force to stop Iran going nuclear. In Western Europe, the situation is reversed. Political elites burned by Iranian malfeasance over a

potential nuclear deal in 2005, have been more willing to confront Iran, but they lack the ability to act militarily. In any case, their publics are far more dovish than the American public. Furthermore, on both sides of the Atlantic the reluctance to commit to major military operations was reinforced by the economic crisis that began in late 2008.

Even in the 2011 operation in Libya the decision to act was determined primarily by the perception that it was a relatively easy mission, rather than one of strategic significance.

In 2003, President George W. Bush should have spent the extensive political capital then at his disposal on preventing Iran from going nuclear, rather than on bringing down Saddam and trying to democratize Iraq, which was almost certainly doomed before it began. Rumors have circulated that in 2003 the Iranians, awed by the US power in neighboring Afghanistan were willing to cut a nuclear deal with the US. Either way, the marshaling of diplomatic pressure combined with a credible threat of air strikes – well short of the ground invasion carried out in Iraq – could have contained the Iranian program before they even began to enrich uranium. Today, even according the toughest deal imaginable, Iran will continue to enrich some uranium.

It turns out that critics of the Iraq War were right about that conflict, but the lesson they derive from that failure, namely that major military operations should not be conducted in the Middle East, is wrong. The real issue is not the use of force verses diplomacy per se, but rather how the two should be combined and when the threat or use of force should take precedence. It was hubris – an arrogant, exaggerated self-confidence and over-estimation of self-competence – to believe that one could invade Iraq, stabilize it quickly and cheaply, and then democratize it. But it is also hubris to believe that diplomacy alone can prevent Iran going nuclear or that a nuclear Iran can easily be contained and that this can be done without cascading proliferation. Iraq 2003 was hubris, but so was Munich 1938.

The core issue behind the morass over Western policy to Iran is this: policy priorities should not be primarily determined by what is desirable (a democratic Iraq), what is easy (the removal of Gaddafi), or by a preference for a specific methodology (diplomacy or force). Rather, it should be determined by the degree of strategic importance of the issue at hand and the opportunity cost of inaction.

The West had no vital interests at stake in the Iraq War, and the political cost of that war has been the diminution of resolve to confront the threat of a nuclear Iran, which does constitute a threat to the vital interests of the West.

Iraq was not an issue that warranted annoying Arab publics and dividing the Western alliance. Iran, however, is worth confronting even if the price is substantially higher; namely, a major conflagration between Hizballah, Hamas, and Israel in which missiles are fired at Tel Aviv.

If Iran becomes a threshold nuclear state, Saudi Arabia will immediately take delivery of the nuclear weapons that sit waiting for it in Pakistan. Egypt and Turkey will follow suit. An American nuclear umbrella did not stop Britain and France from developing an independent deterrent and it did not stop Japan becoming a nuclear threshold state, so it is highly unlikely that America's Middle Eastern allies will be more compliant.

Proliferation of nuclear weapons in an already unstable region means the chances of a crisis leading to the actual use of these weapons is much greater than during the Cold War. Furthermore, in some of these countries there is a chance that radical groups, unconstrained by the pragmatic calculations of governments' that wish to remain alive and in power, may get hold of these weapons and use them. The idea that the US or Europe can dismiss such eventualities because they will happen in "far-away countries about whom we know little" is hubris. Other than causing unprecedented disruption to the world economy which depends on oil flowing out of the Gulf, it will not take the Iranians and others long to develop long-range missiles – indeed the Saudis already have such missiles and, given the events of the "Arab Spring," who knows how stable that regime is and what might replace it?

To prevent this nightmare scenario, the West must resist the temptation to reach a deal with Iran that allows it to become a threshold nuclear state. But more than that, the West must also make absolutely clear that the failure by Iran to accept a deal that genuinely sets back their nuclear program in a verifiable way will result in a military strike that will be repeated – as and when necessary – until Iran desists.

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