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ISRAEL AND IRAN – A RISK OF CRISIS

Paul Rogers

Introduction

Since the start of the Iraq War five years ago, one focus of Oxford Research Group's work has been the risk of that war extending to Iran. As one response to this, ORG published an analysis* of the possible consequences of a war two years ago and has also assessed the level of risk on a number of occasions in these monthly briefings. Most of the emphasis has been on the possibility of a war between the United States and Iran and it is fair to say that while there may have been periods of particular tension, the likelihood of such a war has diminished in the past six months. However, there are indications that there is now a greater possibility of a conflict between Israel and Iran, the consequences of which could be deeply destabilising for the region as well as for the world economy as a whole.

Context

The risks as they appeared last autumn were assessed in the October 2007 briefing in this series (*Drift to War*) and focused primarily on the United States. Strong statements from senior members of the Bush administration were accompanied by proposals for further rounds of sanctions against Iran, while opinion polls within the United States indicated majority public support for a military campaign if that was necessary to prevent Iran developing nuclear weapons. Both of the lead Presidential candidates at that time, Hillary Clinton and Rudi Giuliani, made forceful statements on Iran.

Last October's briefing argued that a war could have many dangerous outcomes. One consequence would be that Iran would put every effort into actually developing nuclear weapons. This would mean further attacks in the months and years that followed in what would amount to the start of a long war. There were also many more immediate ways in which Iran could react. These would include increased influence in Iraq and possibly Afghanistan, causing substantial difficulties for US forces, the use of Hezbollah as a surrogate against Israel since this was a close ally of the United States, and interference with oil supplies through the Straits of Hormuz.

Although the United States had impressive air superiority and would be able to cause severe damage to the Iranian nuclear and missile programmes as well as the economy as a whole, Iranian Revolutionary Guard actions against US ground forces would require a US response that would involve ground forces, at least in Iraq and possibly in Afghanistan. Given the existing pressures on US ground forces, this would severely overstretch the US Army and Marine Corps.

New Risks

The consequences of a war with Iran for the United States appear to be well recognised among senior US military commanders as well as the civilian leadership in the Department of Defense. This is so much the case that the interest in a war with Iran now resides almost entirely with some of the more hawkish elements within the Bush administration, notably around the office of Vice President Cheney, and neoconservative think tanks and commentators. Even so, and although the declared Presidential candidates, John McCain and Barack Obama, have been forceful in their support for Israel, it is unlikely that there will be a deliberate attempt by the Bush administration to confront Iran militarily.

Two other risks remain concerning Iran and the United States. One is that some kind of unintended incident occurs, perhaps on the Iraq/Iran border or in the congested and militarised waters of the

* Paul Rogers, *Iran: Consequences of a War* (Oxford Research Group, 2006).

Persian Gulf, with this escalating to a serious military confrontation. The other is that there is a deliberate provocation by radical Iranian elements, most likely within the Revolutionary Guard. The Guard itself wields considerable political and economic power within the country but has lost status compared with its position as guardian of the Revolution a generation ago. A confrontation with the United States would greatly enhance its standing. Both of these risks are small but what is more significant is the manner in which a potential confrontation between Israel and Iran has come to the fore in the past month.

There were several aspects to this. One was the Israeli air raid deep into Syria earlier in the year which was apparently directed at a potential nuclear site but also demonstrated Israeli Air Force (IAF) capabilities. During June, the IAF staged a substantial exercise across the eastern Mediterranean which demonstrated its capacity to mount long-range air operations with numerous strike aircraft supported by aerial refuelling. Whatever the intention, this showed that the IAF was capable of attacking targets as far distant as the presumed nuclear weapon development sites in Iran.

Furthermore, an intense debate has developed within Israel, with senior politicians arguing that there is no potential for an international diplomatic process of restraining Iran, leaving no option available but military action. The environment is not helped by differing messages coming out of Tehran. These included Mr Ahmadinejad repeating his claim about the need to end the Zionist regime, a claim widely interpreted in Israel as meaning the destruction of the country. While some senior figures in the Iranian government have given an indication of some potential for negotiations on the nuclear issue, there have also been forthright statements that Iran had an absolute right to enrich uranium and that the enrichment programme will be continued and, indeed, accelerated with the construction of more centrifuges.

Perhaps most significant of all was an unusually strong statement at the end of June from Mohamed El-Baradei, the Nobel Peace Laureate and Director of the International Atomic Energy Agency. He gave a forthright warning of the dangers of any kind of military confrontation within Iraq, indicating that he has become seriously concerned at the level of tension developing.

All of the arguments about the dangerous consequences of a war with Iran remain, and have been heightened by two recent developments. One is the deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan, requiring more western troops and further stretching US military resources. Iran's relationship with the Taliban regime in the late 1990s was not at all strong, and the Tehran administration has not sought to create difficulties for foreign forces in the country. However, it has the capacity to do so, and any attack on Iran would almost certainly mean that more emphasis would be placed on providing obstacles to western influence and military power in Afghanistan.

The second development is the rapid rise in crude oil prices. This does not currently relate to political instability in the region since other factors are far more significant. One is the rapid increase in demand for oil from China and India and another is long-term underinvestment by the world's major oil companies in refining capacity. These, in combination, have resulted in serious short-term shortages and a consequent bull market that has seen oil prices rise, in real terms, to the levels last seen at the end of the 1970s.

In such circumstances any kind of military action would result in immediate speculation in the oil markets, rapidly forcing up the price of oil towards \$200 a barrel. If an early consequence of a war was to include substantial interference in oil tanker movements through the Persian Gulf and the Straits of Hormuz, then the international economic consequences could be at least as serious as the persistent 'stagflation' in industrialised countries and the world food crisis affecting many southern countries that followed the four-fold increase in oil prices in 1973-4.

The Politics of Confrontation

What this all means is that there are very strong arguments for avoiding any kind of confrontation with Iran, the key question therefore being – why is there a risk? It may stem from Israeli rather than US attitudes but would impact hugely on the United States which has a very close relationship and considerable influence with Israel. The answer has much to do with the pervasive Israeli fear of a nuclear-armed Iran, Israeli perceptions of US political futures and some issues of timescales.

Israel has maintained a substantial nuclear monopoly in the Middle East since it first developed a nuclear arsenal towards the end of the 1960s. Most independent analysts credit it with around 200 warheads, including thermonuclear weapons, and it may also have developed earth-penetrating warheads for destroying deeply-buried targets. Most sectors of Israeli political opinion believe that maintaining the regional nuclear monopoly is essential for Israel's security. Iran is a particular concern, not just because of Mr Ahmadinejad's inflammatory rhetoric but because Iran's regional power has been enhanced by regime termination in Iraq and Afghanistan. Furthermore, there is substantial concern that the Bush administration will not now take military action against Iran's nuclear programme, even though it has a much greater air attack capability than that of Israel.

Israeli politicians are also concerned about the evolution of the US Presidential election campaign. While they would be reasonably reassured if Senator McCain were to be elected in November, they are aware that Senator Obama is ahead in the polls and is developing a financial campaign base and an electoral registration organisation that may be unique in US Presidential politics. It is true that Mr Obama went out of his way to support Israel in a speech made to the America Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) earlier in the year, but there is a recognition that he is a highly intelligent and somewhat independent politician who would be more than capable of evolving his own policies towards Iran and Israel once he was in office.

It is also the case that Israel does not have the automatic support that it has long taken for granted within American public opinion. The rise of the Christian Zionists has certainly been useful, but most Americans are too young to remember the Six-Day War and the huge support for Israel that the war engendered in the United States. Put bluntly, there is a generational change under way and it does not work in favour of Israel. The Israeli nightmare is of an independently-minded President Obama, a war-weary America wanting to reduce its presence in the Middle East, a decline in support for Israel and, worst of all, a possible willingness to accept that a nuclear-armed Iran is probable within a few years and that this has to be accepted, however reluctantly.

It is for all of these reasons that an Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear facilities is a possibility before the next US President is sworn in next January. Furthermore, since such an attack would result in Iranian retaliation against US force, the United States would be drawn into the war with all its air power. Not only would much damage be done to Iranian nuclear facilities, but the United States would be at war with Iran in the run-up to the election, a circumstance that would be more likely to favour Senator McCain.

A further element is that any Israeli attack would most probably incite a response from Hezbollah, enabling Israel to use extensive force against an enemy that effectively defeated it two years ago. The Israeli Defence Force (IDF) and intelligence agencies are well aware that Hezbollah has massively re-armed since 2006, both with longer-range missiles and a sophisticated fibre-optic communications system making command and control much easier than two years ago. These improvements will continue and there is therefore a case for taking action in the short-term to prevent an increase in Israel's vulnerability on its northern border.

Finally, the IDF is aware that Iran is in the process of upgrading its air defence systems, including a number of modern Russia missile systems that are expected to be deployed in the early autumn. These could limit the Israeli Air Force's scope for action, not least by increasing the risk of the loss of air crew.

Two points may be made in conclusion. One is that Israeli politicians and military personnel are seriously considering a military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities, and if this was to happen, then it might well be in the next two months. It is by no means certain that there will be an attack – just that the risk has increased substantially in the past three months. Given the potentially disastrous consequences if there was to be a war with Iran, even an increased risk that falls well short of certainty should be sufficient for every effort to be made to ease tensions and argue forcefully for stronger diplomatic engagement with Iran.

Paul Rogers is Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford and Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group (ORG). His international security monthly briefings are available from the ORG website at www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk, where visitors can sign-up to receive them via email each month. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please consider making a donation to ORG if you are able to do so.
