

Iran – Lessons Unlearnt

Brian Jones

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Press reporting of the possibility of military strikes against Iran because of its probable (but unproven) nuclear weapons programme, and likely UK involvement, is particularly relevant to Iraq Inquiry Digest because, for many of us, the situation in which 'lessons learned' from Iraq might be significant was always most likely to be military action involving Iran and its weapons of mass destruction. Although the UK aspect – rightly criticised for lack of substance in one *Guardian* reader's letter – should be treated with extreme caution, reporting in the US press of statements by those keen to talk-up the potential problem demand attention.

Given the present rumblings and comments on this made by Tony Blair in his evidence to the Iraq Inquiry, there can surely be few acceptable excuses for the Inquiry's continued leisurely pace. The silence of Parliament on this suggests that the efforts of Sir John Chilcot and co are sliding dangerously close to irrelevance.

The uncertain intelligence and half-baked justification offered in *Guardian* background pieces for a US/UK attack on Iran's probable (nuclear) weapons of mass destruction programme sound all too familiar. Fortunately, its leader articles are much more rational – as was Richard Norton-Taylor's Comment is Free piece, although I would be less concerned than he about the Iranian leaders' supposed irrationality. In my view, military strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities would be unlikely to eliminate its likely weapons programme and would only serve to stiffen the resolve of all sides in Iran.

In general terms, I think a couple of

points should be noted. This problem continues to be cast in nuclear terms. We hear no mention of any capabilities that Iran may have with biological or chemical weapons capabilities (i.e. WMD). I would be very concerned about provoking a biological weapon-capable Iran that has an extended global reach, not with missiles, but through links with terrorists. Unlike with Iraq, this particular nexus might be far more feasible. And, for this and more direct practical reasons, I'm afraid the dream of disarmament (global or regional) is too distant to guide medium term policy. Thus, as undesirable as it is, the world has to come to terms with an expanding number of states which possess, or are on the threshold of possessing, not only nuclear but biological and chemical weapons as well.

But why should we, rather than France or Germany, find ourselves embroiled in all this? It is because we have a government dominated by a Tory party that, whilst repeatedly taking Labour to task for its 'dodgy' dossier, still, in retrospect and without further explanation, continues to support the decision to go to war in Iraq. I have heard a serving minister include the impossibility of not supporting the US as one element in his explanation. Furthermore, many of the senior civil servants involved in the Iraq deception have achieved promotion and are advising the present government on security matters.

It is very difficult to see that even a nuclear armed Iran need be a significant threat to our national security in a timescale that precludes the consideration and development of a more coherent security policy on weapons of mass destruction. Central to that policy may be a re-evaluation of our policy with the United States, including its implications with respect to Israel and the Middle East problem in general. I would like to think Chilcot would kick start a debate on this issue. His committee has had time to think about it.

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