

Will Iran Be Next?

Ken Coates

In his State of the Union speech in January 2002, President Bush set out a prospectus for the conduct of his war on terror. The destruction of the Twin Towers had exploded into universal shock, as, all around the world, people expressed their spontaneous sympathy with the victims who had perished in the World Trade Centre. There was genuine and widespread support for action against terrorism. But the United States Government chose to present its policy not as a police action, but as a 'war'. In the State of the Union address, President Bush began by saying:

'As we gather tonight, our nation is at war, our economy is in recession, and the civilised world faces unprecedented changes. Yet the state of our Union has never been stronger ... The American flag flies again over our Embassy in Kabul. Terrorists who once occupied Afghanistan now occupy cells at Guantanamo Bay. And terrorist leaders who urged the followers to sacrifice their lives are running for their own.'

Of course, the war on terrorism was not a war within the conventional use of that term, as the American administration itself attested whenever it spoke, in equivocal terms, about 'military' action or when it established the prison camp of Guantanamo Bay, or devising an *ad hoc* justification for disregarding all the Geneva Conventions on the treatment of prisoners of war, and in the process denying due process to its captives. These detainees were to be interrogated, without any of the customary protections afforded to prisoners of war. From the moment of their original detention until the present day, in June 2003, few have been released, and none have had the protection of lawyers. Elaborate plans have been made to extend the facilities in Cuba, including the construction, in the Guantanamo Bay camp, of a 'death row' to handle the dispatch and disposal of those victims who are expected to be arbitrarily sentenced to death. President Bush's first priority in defining the

*Ken Coates is editor of
The Spokesman and
Chairman of the Bertrand
Russell Peace Foundation.*

State of the Union was to take his war to persons accused of terrorism in other countries from Bosnia to the Philippines, and from Somalia to Pakistan.

But his second goal was

‘to prevent regimes that sponsor terror from threatening America or our friends and allies with weapons of mass destruction. Some of these regimes have been pretty quiet since September the 11th. But we know their true nature. North Korea is a regime arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction, while starving its citizens.

Iran aggressively pursues these weapons and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people’s hope for freedom.

Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror. The Iraqi regime has plotted to develop anthrax, and nerve gas, and nuclear weapons for over a decade. This is a regime that has already used poison gas to murder thousands of its own citizens – leaving the bodies of mothers huddled over their dead children. This is a regime that agreed to international inspections – then kicked out the inspectors. This is a regime that has something to hide from the civilized world.

States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic.’

Iraq has certainly been decisively dealt with. Although the whole country has been occupied, the alleged weapons of mass destruction have not yet been found, and the UN Inspectors who asked for more time to look for them have expressed the opinion that they may not be found. But the occupying armies have announced that they themselves now need more time to look.

This article is concerned to explore whether the prospectus of the axis of evil implies a succession of future wars. Today, as occupiers of Iraq, the USA adjoins both Iran and Syria. Given the public warnings, and the new opportunities, must we expect a military attack on Iran? The situation in North Korea is certainly fraught, but so are American relations with the neighbouring countries in the Far East. North Korea will have to be considered separately, and is no doubt already being considered separately by the planners in the Pentagon and the State Department. But Iran shares more than a frontier with Iraq, including not only what the Americans deem to be ‘evil’, but also many other attributes which they regard as unalloyed ‘goods’. In particular, Iran is a major oil power, and control of its resources has already been a matter of contention with the United States over much of its recent history.

There are not a few signs that the American administration is readying itself for the next phase of its war. Ari Fleischer, the press secretary to the President, recently accused Iran of failing to take appropriate steps to detain Al Qaeda terrorists who were said to be hiding out within its territory. The CIA has let it be known that it does not believe this claim. Nonetheless, Fleischer insisted:

‘The future of Iran will be determined by the Iranian people, and I think the Iranian people have a great yearning for Government that is representative of their concerns.’

Simultaneously, Western media began to present long interviews with the son of the deposed Shah, in which he protested his undying commitment to democracy and human rights. Of course, a long time has elapsed since the revolution which deposed the Shah, but perhaps it may be doubted whether this will prove long enough to have erased the memories of the Shah's phenomenal cruelties, and the bloodthirsty operation of his secret police, the Savak.

A long running allegation by the Americans against Iran has been the charge that their nuclear programme is designed to produce materials for nuclear weapons. Instead, the Iranians maintain it is designed to generate fuel for civilian reactors.

Not far behind the Americans stands the presence of Israel, a nuclear power which has already been responsible for the classic pre-emptive strike against an Iraqi nuclear power facility, and which might be tempted, if the circumstances were right, to repeat the experience against Iran. The American predilection for 'counter-proliferation', as opposed to non-proliferation, which gives them a self-nominated role as world policeman, does mean that the Iranian nuclear programme could figure as the trigger for a military collision.

At the end of May *The Times* reported that the Bush administration was deeply split about how to make the next move on Tehran. On May 26th, Defence Secretary Rumsfeld announced that Tehran 'should be on notice' that the United States will not permit Iran to try to remake neighbouring Iraq in its Islamic image.

Iranians have certainly been accused of backing the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, a prominent Shia group. Its leader was in exile for twenty-three years in Tehran. Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir Al-Hamin returned to Iraq after the American – British occupation to a profoundly emotional reception. The Ayatollah led a significant militia, which will no doubt remain an important influence in Iraq unless it is suppressed by the occupying armies. However, the presumption that the Shia communities are looking for a confrontation with the invading forces in Iraq is not at all true. Neither the Iraqi Shia nor their Iranian co-religionists will seek to provoke the Americans, and although they will exercise a serious influence in Iraq, all the evidence up to now has been that this will be orderly, and not disruptive. Present conflicts with the American occupiers are normally found in Sunni districts, not the Shia ones. Of course, if the Americans gratuitously seek to suppress the Shia communities, then all this could change: and another trigger point for threats against Iran could result. But it is not reasonable to assume that Iranians will be looking for such an outturn. The contrary is more likely to be true.

This has not prevented Donald Rumsfeld from reporting to the Council on Foreign Relations that the Iranians must not trespass into Iraq: 'such an effort' he said, 'would be aggressively put down'. However, Defence Secretary Rumsfeld was not averse to a reverse movement in which 'reformist Iranians might some day be able to topple the ruling Islamic leadership' in Iran. Indeed, the Project for the New American Century has long been advising Secretary of Defence Donald

Rumsfeld, on how to dispose of the ruling parties in Iran, Libya and Syria, after victory in Iraq. Of course, the Bush administration has more than one string to its bow, and is not dependent on overt military intervention. There have been many suggestions that it might be possible to foment a popular uprising to overthrow President Khatami. Funds have been established to foster 'democracy' in Iran, and to facilitate radio and television stations broadcasting into the country.

Reports in the British press, based on Rumsfeld's recent statement, gave the impression that Iran might become a target of American military action. This was denied in the *Financial Times* by Victoria Clarke, the Assistant Secretary of Defence for Public Affairs. Ms. Clarke cited Mr. Rumsfeld as saying about Iran:

'It's a country that has been unhelpful with respect to Iraq. It's being unhelpful today with respect to Iraq.'

US policy on Iran was, said Ms. Clarke,

'to recognise the "churning in that country" by the women and the young people and the pressure they are putting on a handful of clerics that control that regime. The Secretary for Defence stated further that US policy was not to engage with the top two layers of Iranian Government. Doing so could legitimate those leaders and discourage the Iranian people.'

No doubt the disagreements in the administration will have been greatly increased by the global reaction against the war on Iraq, and the complete failure of the Americans and the British to find justification for their claims about Iraq's programme of weapons of mass destruction.

This has given rise to a situation in which the *Financial Times* claims that:

'not even America's neoconservatives support an invasion of Iran. Pentagon analysts regard the idea as a dangerous fantasy. However, according to media reports, plans have been advanced for the armed destabilisation of the regime in Tehran by US-backed forces. And there are plenty of historical examples to demonstrate how insurgency in support of regime change can easily lead to full-scale war.'

Anatol Lieven, of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, points out in the same newspaper article (*FT* 9th June 2003), that Iran has a marked capacity to retaliate against any American attempts to destabilise the regime in Tehran, because of its residual influence over Iraqi Shias.

'The extent of Iranian influence among the Iraqi Shias is unclear, but Islamist groups among them have ambitions totally at odds with US aims, and a tremendous capacity for mass mobilisation.'

If the turbulence which confronts Britain and the US in Iraq today continues for a year, pegging both countries down in prolonged and increasingly difficult attempts to pacify the local population, Lieven believes that this can feed back into political turmoil within the occupying powers.

‘That is all the more reason for America’s allies to respond with great reserve to US demands for support. Above all, this is a time for the British government to use its influence in the US to avoid being sucked step by step into a repeat of the Iraq war.’

It would be unwise to assume that the British government is ready to accept such advice. A clear indication of the dangers comes from Tony Blair, as ever a faithful interpreter of his sponsors in the United States. On the 29th May, he was reported in the *Daily Mirror* as ‘telling Iran not to develop nuclear weapons or support terrorists’. On the same day, the *Financial Times* reported that Blair warned

‘Iran’s hard-line clerics not to undermine the process of building a new Government in Iraq or the ‘road map’ to peace between Israel and the Palestinians’.

It was Blair’s office which informed the press that Russia had agreed not to go ahead with plans to help the Iranians develop their nuclear programme. This report was subsequently denied by Alexander Rumyantsev who said:

‘We will continue to fulfil our duties despite the fact that our position on this question is different to Washington’s official view.’

The fact that the British Prime Minister has found it necessary to catch up all of these straws in the wind indicates that he is sensitive to American preoccupations with the number two component of the axis of evil. If the American juggernaut were to move again, Mr. Blair would surely seek a lift on it.

The engagement of the London satellite, no less than the hesitations of the hegemonic Washington power, still leave room for uncertainty about the outcome in Iran. But this should not be taken as evidence that peace movements need do nothing. On the contrary, it should be taken as an invitation to intensify their activities to prevent the bloody chapter which could very easily unwind in the coming months.

The  says

**NO ONE
WINS
WARS
BUT
EVERYBODY
PAYS**



Communication Workers Union
150 The Broadway, Wimbledon, London, SW19 1RX
Tel: 020 8971 7200 Fax: 020 8971 7300
General Secretary: Billy Hayes
www.cwu.org