

**Group of 78 Annual Policy Conference 2012
“Military Intervention: Lessons from Afghanistan”**

Presentation by

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Ottawa, September 2012

Iran: Current crises and the regional context.

For the observer looking at modern Iran, there is a temptation to focus on one aspect of the country and to define the total reality more or less in terms of that one aspect. This tendency is the source of a great deal of the controversy that one sees today among external observers.

Iran is this educated, cultured, fascinating nation – the fruit of a very long history (including a great empire) – composed of an increasingly educated people proud of that history, proud of their traditions (including their religious traditions), and in particular of, if I may use the word, a womanhood more educated and far more assertive than the female population of other Moslem countries of the region. It is a nation groping towards greater freedom and economic prosperity through an eventual republic ruled by people be it though a secular vision of the people as final arbitrary power or, still for many, by people themselves expressing God’s genius and exercising that political sovereignty in His name. Incidentally, there has been much talk of American exceptionalism in recent years and many observers have added France and China to the list of those societies that see themselves as unique, as uniquely blessed by God and as having a unique role to play in history. I would add Iran to that list.

Moreover, Iran represents a genuine attempt to bring the heavenly city to earth – to create a state – not with the guidance of the people but with the guidance of God as that guidance is understood by a relatively small group of Shia theologians who interpret, apply and enforce holy law to modern life.

Iran is also a state that can be described, as a prison state, a garrison state, a Mafia state and a terrorist state – a state that has, since 1979 penned its people into a much restricted compound, tortured and murdered tens of thousands of its citizens, oppressed and imprisoned tens of thousands more, sponsored terrorism throughout the region (and beyond), raised corruption and cronyism to dizzying heights, pursued for essentially ideological reasons a further eight years a horrible war which although started by Iraq could have been ended much earlier, delivered on very few if any of its original promises (beyond a certain safety net for the poorest sector of its population) and built a entire state which continues to run the economy into the ground.

In looking at the regional context, it has to be noted that as Ayatollah Khomeini developed his vision he took as a target not just Iran but the whole Moslem world. He himself said later that “we don’t recognize Iran as ours, as all Moslem countries are a part of us”. The constitution of the IRI recognized him as the “Imam of the Moslem Umma” and part of the constitutional responsibility of the IRGC is to export the revolution.

As a result an integral aspect of Iran’s foreign policy and thus by definition its regional policy was and is its export to the world and particularly to the Moslem world. During the lifetime of the IRI this has waxed and waned to the degree that it has clashed with Iran’s more prosaic and more pragmatic national interests. Moreover it has throughout the years made it very difficult for Iran’s interlocutors to determine what are Iran’s policies and to what degree that they can be trusted and relied upon. The regime could spend years castigating the governments of its neighbours as “evil” and do its best to get rid of them through terror and intimidation and then turn around and call for cooperation with them on regional, economic and security issues (as President Rafsanjani did after the first Gulf War). When I was in Iran, President Khatami did much to improve relations with Iran’s neighbours, including Saudi Arabia, and I would submit that this was one of the most successful of his policies. He had more latitude from the Supreme Leader and his acolytes in this area than in many other areas, perhaps as a result of a pragmatic recognition that even the execution of Khomeini’s vision required, if nothing else, an ordering of priorities. As relations with Russia and China have shown, the Iranian regime can be very pragmatic in sacrificing the interests of Moslems in those countries if it is seen to be in its interest.

On the other hand I would submit that pragmatism is in short order today in Tehran in the determination and execution of its policies in Syria. I assume, perhaps wrongly, that the major reason why the IRI continues to support President Assad in such an unconditional fashion is that the most important political investment that it has made abroad is in Lebanon with, as its goal, the pursuit of its policies of destroying Israel. That investment is endangered if the Syrian regime goes down.

I have chosen to focus on only two regional issues: Afghanistan and Israel. However, there is no lack of other regional issues that are important and deserve attention: Iraq, the Persian Gulf and Syria all spring to mind and all have as a principal focus the role of Iran.

Afghanistan

Certainly after 9/11 Iran cooperated with the US in Afghanistan, facilitating over flights, agreeing to perform search and rescue missions for downed American air crew who bailed out over Iran and other measures to indirectly aid the US military effort to overthrow the Taliban. Iran also played a part in supplying arms to the Northern

Alliance and , at the Bonn conference, in helping the US to establish the Karzai Government including pressuring Rabbani to step aside. They also reportedly offered to help train the Afghan Security forces and indicated that they were ready to cooperate fully in the task of rebuilding Afghanistan..

Interestingly, both the US and Iran allowed other issues to get in the way of developing the cooperation that had proved useful in Afghanistan. The Iranians initially sheltered Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, one of the major Afghan Mujahiden leaders who opposed the settlement in Afghanistan – they later threw him out. A number (and the estimates here vary wildly) of al-Qaida fighters were given shelter in Iran. More to the point the US problems with the Iranian nuclear program and its stance on Middle Eastern issues , particularly Israel, probably doomed any development of the cooperation that had been evident in the months after 9/11. The Axis of Evil designation not only returned the US-Iranian relationship to the status quo ante but signaled a significant deterioration in the relationship. I was present in Tehran when President Bush made that speech and I can attest as to the very negative effect of that designation, particularly among the reformist faction and those who supported it (many of the conservatives reveled in it, seeing it as proof of the bankruptcy of Katami's policies). Whether it was made because of the capture in the Red Sea of the boat, the Karine A, loaded with Iranian arms destined to Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip or because US officials did not want to so stigmatize Iraq alone, and as an afterthought threw in North Korea and Iran, the fact remains that the designation "Axis of Evil" had no discernible benefit to American interests and in fact hurt them. During days following the speech there was much talk in Iran of the belief that the IRGC had initiated the shipment of arms to put an end to any further cooperation. Moreover one should not forget that for many years the Iranian regime had designated the US as the source of all evil, so to be so designated themselves should not have been an unwelcome surprise.

After Karzai and the Americans concluded a strategic partnership agreement in 2005 the Iranians asked the Afghan Government to conclude one. Reportedly the US Gov did not allow Karzai to conclude such an agreement. It seems that from 2007 onwards Iran took a different approach, supplying arms to the Taliban and to members of the Northern Alliance and it has since continued this approach, apparently with the twin ideas of making life difficult for the Americans and keeping the American forces in Afghanistan off balance to the extent that there would be no question of using those forces to effect "regime change" in Iran. Indeed the very fact that the US was becoming increasingly bogged down in both Iraq and Afghanistan meant that a US invasion of Iran was less realistic. There was thus room for Iranian authorities to return to their traditional hostility to and confrontation with the US – space that was greatly expanded in late 2007 when a US National Intelligence estimate concluded that Iran had put a stop to its nuclear weapons program some years before. It should be noted however that the growing Iranian involvement in making things difficult for the Americans and for ISAF seems to have been carefully calibrated. The military assistance seems to have been

limited to training, money, explosive material, small arms, rockets and mortars. More recently a shipment of rockets seized by ISAF in Feb 2011 allegedly were Iranian in origin and last month the Afghan NDS indicated that insurgents involved in suicide attacks in Nimroz Province were Iranian citizens.

Since 2007 Iran has spent a great deal of money in Afghanistan – by some accounts over \$100 million a year on media, civil society and religious schools, clearly attempting to counter American influence. They have been clear about their opposition to the Strategic Agreement signed earlier this year with the US and have threatened to force the return of some one million Afghan refugees in Iran. By some estimates over half of the TV stations and other media outlets in Afghanistan are funded by Iranian sources and there has been a concerted campaign against the strategic agreement.

Yet as Iran has stepped up its anti coalition activities in Afghanistan it must, I assume, be mindful that its interest is in a stable Afghanistan after the departure of the US, Nato, and other foreign troops in 2014. And there is plenty of evidence to suggest that this is so. It would be natural to detect some ambivalence in how the Iranians comport themselves in Afghanistan and it is perhaps this that explains the tenor of recent comments of the senior allied commander in Iran, General John Allen, in which he noted that Iran continued to “fuel the flames of violence” in Afghanistan. “Our sense is that Iran could do more if they chose to,” General Allen said. “But they have not, and we watch the activity and the relationships very closely.” It also explains what seems to be the relatively qualitatively low level of the military assistance it gives to the insurgents.

In fact as the foreign troops leave Afghanistan there is a convergence of interest between Iran and the NATO countries, in particular the US, upon which one could foresee the possibility of considerable cooperation (the stability of the Afghan regime itself, narcotics, refugees, cross border trade and others). As was the case in 2001, the US has other strategic concerns that make cooperation with the IRI difficult and the Iranians themselves are pulled hither and yon by the tension between the still living ideological vision of Khomeini and the practical interests of the state and people of Iran. Indeed it goes deeper than this. Iranian hostility to the US is a bit like US hostility to Castro’s Cuba – it has a very important domestic component. During my years in Iran I came to believe that as other aspects of the revolution fell by the wayside, hostility to and hatred of, the USA (and of course, Israel) was the glue that held the ideological basis of the regime together. Scott Peterson of the Christian Science Monitor in his most interesting book “Let the Swords encircle me” reported a conversation with Amir Mohebian, a very influential conservative newspaper editor in which the latter noted that while some people felt that it was time to solve the problem with the USA in a balanced way, others “think the hostility against the US after thirty years is a main element of our identity, and if we solve it we will dissolve ourselves”. While all this sounds a bit melodramatic, the degree to which this is true has a lot to do with

finding a solution to how Iran conducts itself in Afghanistan. The same applies to the Israeli/nuclear issue.

The dilemma the Iranians are facing was also evident in the remarks that Foreign Minister Salehi made to the media at the Istanbul Conference last November. He deplored NATO and US troops in Afghanistan, suggested that that presence was linked to terrorism and instability and underlined Iran's commitment to strong regional security cooperation as an alternative to the western strategy. One is tempted to think that in the leadup to 2014 and beyond there is room for working together with the west (at least in a de facto fashion) for the transition of security responsibilities to the Afghan authorities and for an inter-Afghan political settlement. It would be much easier to believe in this possibility and to take the Iranians at their word if they were not themselves linked to the terrorism and instability that they ascribe to the foreign military presence.

Israel

As I have indicated earlier, from its very early days the Iranian regime has projected the destruction of Israel. In that regard Amadinejad's remarks questioning the right of Israel to exist were not new as he himself in fact noted. What was really new was President Khatami's earlier indication that Iran could accept an Arab settlement with Israel if it was acceptable to the Palestinians. It was a major change at least in the tenor of Iranian discourse on Israel as was the comment in his inaugural speech in 1997 that Iran was prepared to accept an agreement predicated on UN Resolutions. How much this seeming change of official policy could be relied upon as a real change in policy was another matter (even though, as Hooman Majd reported in his book "The Ayatollahs" Democracy", the Supreme Leader, Mr Khomeini, has seemingly publically echoed the same point that Mr Khatami made earlier).

Iranian policy regarding Israel has now become so tied up in the nuclear issue that the latter is, in effect a regional issue (despite talk of delivery systems that might reach Europe and even farther). Moreover, others here have a far better knowledge of the relationship than I have and of how the thinking is developing in Israel.

The nuclear issue is also a regional issue in another way which is seldom referred to. As someone who has lived several years in Egypt and several months in Saudi Arabia, my guess is that if the Iranians develop nuclear weapons there will be a very strong push in these two countries to follow the same path and it would not easily be headed off or stymied by the US and the West.

When the extent of Iran's interest in developing an indigenous capacity across the nuclear fuel cycle was revealed in 2002, it was noteworthy that pride in what Iran was doing was one of the very few developments that resonated across the entire political spectrum.

At that time I found that people, even those who opposed the regime on most if not all other issues, were proud that Iran had a nuclear program. During the so-called “Green Revolution” in 2009, Mr. Mousavi indicated that if he formed a government it would continue the uranium enrichment program and would continue with the existing nuclear program and again when Ahmadinejad in late 2009 appeared to agree to a western proposal to send its stock of LEU abroad for fabrication and have it returned in the form of reactor fuel rods, he was denounced by Conservatives and reformers. Many people may not have made the distinction between fuel cycle development for peaceful purposes and the creation of a nuclear weapons capability but at a time of considerable political tension, they could unite in support of the indigenous development of this important modern technology and their right to develop it. (Many of the themes, indeed even the actual words, recalled the pre-Three mile Island, pre Chernobyl days in countries like Canada, the US and Western European nations when development of nuclear power was thought by almost all to be an essential criteria of a modern state and the key to its continuing economic development. Many Iranians also ask why Iran should receive qualitatively different treatment than India, Israel and Pakistan.

It is not surprising therefore that for many in Iran, a country intensely conscious of its history, parallels have been made between the current situation and that that existed in 1951 when Iran’s national oil production was nationalized by the Mossadegh Government only to have that Government overthrown in a coup d’etat in which American intelligence services played an important part. During the war with Saddam Hussein, the latter’s original aggression, his targeting of civilians and his use of chemical weapons were all more or less ignored by the outside world. This could only reinforce the importance of self sufficiency for Iranians, including an independent nuclear fuel cycle.

It is also not surprising that, given the nature of Iranian politics, the issue was immediately used as a political weapon for domestic political purposes in both a positive and negative sense. In particular President Ahmadinejad has embraced the development of nuclear energy as a natural right to consolidate his own position and build support among his power base. The President and the people around the Supreme Leader and the President have also used the issue as a factional weapon to castigate their opponents and to condemn those who would seek any compromise. Indeed Ahmadinejad has on a number of occasions characterized domestic critics of his nuclear policy as “traitors” or as “not part of the Iranian nation”

This is not to say that there are no nuances in Iran’s policy. Those around the Supreme Leader and the President see the nuclear issue as an equalizer in Iran’s relationship with the USA – a weapon to safeguard the revolution in the face of the supposed American wish to dismantle it. There is an echo of this in Rafsanjani’s much noted remarks at Friday prayers in late 2001 when he noted “If a day comes when the world of Islam is duly equipped with the arms Israel has in its possession, the strategy of colonialism

would face a stalemate because the exchange of atomic bombs would leave nothing of Israel, while only damaging the Moslem world". While these remarks, as a number of people at the time noted, sounds like a doctrine of MAD for the Middle East, the fact that for the Iranian Regime, Israel's existence is an integral aspect of Western colonialism led to much alarm, particularly in Israel and all the more so as the remarks came from Rafsanjani.

The more pragmatic elements of the ruling elite see the issue as a bargaining chip with the USA – something that can be used to both safeguard the revolution through accommodation with the modern world and thus help, through economic development, Iran escape many of the problems that have developed since 1979 and which carry their own danger to the revolution.

We are all here very aware of the gorilla in the room and that relates to Israel's reaction and a possible attack by Israel (or even by the USA) on Iranian nuclear and command and control facilities. When in 1981 the Israelis destroyed the Iraqi nuclear reactor, they made it very clear at the time that the prospect of Iraq gaining nuclear weapons was an existential issue for Israel. There is no reason to believe that an Iranian nuclear weapon capacity is any less existential in nature and Mr Neytanatu has so described it on numerous occasions. In this regard President Ahmadinejad with his pronouncements on the holocaust and on Israel's right to exist plays into the hands of those who believe that a military attack (and, possibly accompanying regime change) are necessary to deal with Iranian nuclear weapons program. Indeed an Iranian conspiracy theory (and there are a great many of them in Iran) is that Ahmadinejad is an Israeli agent!! On the other side of the ledger it should be remembered that President Ahmadinejad does not control Iranian foreign policy. Moreover, a nuclear attack on Israel would probably kill as many if not more Moslem Arabs than Jewish Israelis, not to speak of leading to overwhelming retaliation from Israel and probably the USA. And too much emphasis should not be given to the "Mahdaviat thinking" of President Ahmadinejad and some of his followers and there so-called desire to hasten the day of judgment and the return of the Mahdi. Such thinking is not confined to this generation of Iranian thinkers and is not that unique (Two of the Shah's titles were "Pivot of the Universe" and "Shadow of God"). The Iranian regime has on several occasions proved that it can be quite pragmatic when its fundamental interests and its existence are threatened.

Given the current situation sanctions seem to be the only realistic channel to follow. While some people may see sanctions as a necessary prelude to be gotten out of the way before more radical steps are taken, and others may see sanctions as in effect ineluctably leading to war, many see sanctions as the only realistic alternative to an attack on Iranian facilities. Moreover they believe that those sanctions are starting to have an effect on Iran and that they could therefore soon have an effect on Iranian comportment. The belief in the efficacy of sanctions or at least the eventual efficacy of sanctions drives the continuing process of ratcheting up those sanctions. But so too does the realization that if sanctions fail and Iran continues to develop a nuclear

weapons capacity, then the voices of those who favour a military solution will become louder and more influential. One hopeful note: there seems in recent days to be increasing attention paid to two issues. First, would a so-called surgical strike on Iranian facilities significantly delay an Iranian effort to develop nuclear weapons? (From my limited perspective the answer to this question would be no). Second, what would be the implications of an attack on Iran for wider Western/American interests? (The answer is that the implications would be major and wholly negative in nature).

If there is uncertainty as to what the Iranians would do and what the Israelis would do there is also a problem for those driving the sanctions process. It is not clear what they want. Do they want zero enrichment of uranium or would they be prepared to allow appropriate enrichment under international supervision? Moreover, a related question is whether sanctions are one arrow in the quiver or will they be accompanied by a readiness to pursue the path of negotiation.

Despite the foregoing, the reasons for the international community (led by the USA) and Iran to cobble together an agreement that would involve some enrichment in Iran coupled with comprehensive safeguards (including the additional protocol), are compelling. Moreover, the regime in Tehran flinched once before – in 1988 when a realization that a continuation of the war with Iraq was endangering the very existence of the regime or, more positively, it has acted responsibly when its interests dictate as it demonstrated during the two Gulf Wars since 1990.

I do believe that to convince the Iranians to eschew the path towards establishing a nuclear capability, the US would have to convince them that the idea of forcible regime change is definitely off the table. Given the situation it would be very, very difficult for such a commitment to be made prior to a negotiation or even prior to an actual agreement. It could only be part of a package that would also include recognition of Israel's legitimate right to exist (even if it was accompanied by caveats along the lines of those articulated by former President Khatami and reportedly by the Supreme Leader himself), a commitment to withdraw Iran's military aid to various elements in the region including Hamas, recognition of Iran's right to an enrichment capacity for its reactors (as noted above), and a (short) timetable for the end of sanctions. Ironically this is not so very different from the package proposed by the Iranians in May of 2003. That package included the following elements: Iran would agree not to pursue nuclear weapons and open up its nuclear program to true transparency; Iran would cut support for Hamas and Islamic Jihad and pressure them to stop violence against Israeli civilians; Iran would disarm Hezbollah and push it to evolve into a purely political organization; and, Iran would not object to a two state solution. In return the US would end sanctions; it would recognize Iran's legitimate security concerns, it would permit use of peaceful nuclear technology under comprehensive safeguards; and, it would take decisive action against MEQ in Iraq.

It is true that this proposal was made at a time when the Iranian leadership was frightened silly at how quickly the US was able to dispatch an Iraqi Regime which Iran had taken a decade to fight to a standstill. But it is also true that with the same considerations in mind, the US was not prepared to seriously consider the proposition. Thus the genuineness of the Iranian proposal was not truly tested. One is reminded, unfortunately, of the striking comment made by Barbara Slavin in her book "Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, the US, and the Twisted Path to Confrontation" to the effect that Iran was the Bermuda Triangle of American diplomacy for swallowing up good faith efforts to end the hostility. We can only hope that the dangers of the situation today might be sufficiently evident for all involved to bring them to the table.