

Iran's Nuclear Energy: A Cheney Casus Belli?

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

"First Iraq; then come Syria and Iran." So runs the agenda of numerous neo-conservative think-tanks in the United States, planning the radical redrawing of the map in the entire region of the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. Whether it be Michael Ledeen of the American Enterprise Institute, or a wild-eyed ideologue at the Hudson Institute, among the many "rogue nations" in the world that make up so many "axes of evil," the Islamic Republic of Iran is high on the list.

Now that Iraq has been attacked, invaded and occupied, the neo-con juntas in Washington, London, and Tel Aviv have been gearing up for a strike on Iran. Mirroring the debate that preceded the Iraq war, the Iran debate is illustrated by several military scenarios, ranging from a military operation, to an internal subversion, each aimed to effect regime change. Another option foresees a single Israeli air assault on Iran's soon-to-be-operational nuclear power plant at Bushehr.

Also echoing the earlier drumbeat for war against Baghdad, the ongoing propaganda barrage is focussing on the issue of Iran's presumed programs for the development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), particularly nuclear arms. Here, too, Washington's strategists have welcomed "intelligence" about Iran's supposed WMD from utterly discredited sources in the Iranian opposition. Just as Ahmed Chalabi and his Iraqi National Council fed cooked intelligence to the State Department and Pentagon—about Saddam Hussein's deadly weapons, missile delivery systems, and mobile laboratories—so the Mujaheddin al Khalq (MKO/MEK), a terrorist outfit which has been operating against Iran for years from Iraqi soil, has been feeding Washington's institutions and press, with "detailed reports" on Iran's nuclear weapons production facilities.

The material presented, though not more convincing than Colin Powell's Feb. 5 Iraq slide show at the United Nations, has helped fuel the campaign depicting Iran as the next Islamic nuclear threat to Israel and the world.

Iran's Nuclear Program

Unlike Iraq, Iran does have an advanced nuclear energy program, which it is pursuing in cooperation with Russia. This is the real issue. The first plant, at Bushehr, is scheduled to become operational next year.

Iran's nuclear program was started under Shah Pahlavi, who announced in 1974 that he intended to pursue an ambitious nuclear plan, installing 23,000 Megawatts (MWe) by the

year 1994. Financial limitations as well as internal opposition prevented the original plan from being realized, and, by 1978, it had been whittled down, such that only the four reactors then under construction were to be completed on schedule. There had been plans to buy 4 from Germany and 6-8 units from the United States, but they were abandoned. Shahpur Baktiar, prime minister briefly in January 1979, cancelled plans for two reactors that the French had begun work on. Iran, as a result, had only two German reactors at that time, of 1,190 MWe each. One was half built and the other, 80% completed. They were located at Halikeh, near Bushehr, on the Persian Gulf, and were slated to become operational in 1980. However, massive strikes stalled the work in 1978, and numerous foreign technicians, fearing political upheavals, left the country. The Iran-Iraq war, which lasted from 1980 to 1988, effectively eliminated the last traces of Iran's nuclear energy dreams.

Only in 1995, was Iran able to revive its nuclear program. On Jan. 8 of that year, the country signed a \$1 billion contract with Russia, to complete the 1,000 MWe plant at Bushehr within four years. Progress was hindered by the refusal by the Germans, who had initiated the construction, to deliver parts and equipment. Germany later revealed that it had been under massive pressure of "other Western states" not to fulfill the terms of its original contract with Iran.

The Russian contract was different from the one signed with Germany, regarding technology transfer and training. According to Iranian press reports at the time, "the Russians have undertaken to train Iranians to make up the personnel required and [by March 1995] 500 or so Iranian engineers and technicians [were] in Russia, receiving instructions and being trained in various Russian nuclear power plants. At the same time, they [were] supervising the manufacture of the parts that [would] ultimately make up the plant at Bushehr."

No sooner had the ink dried on the contract, than an international campaign against both Russia and Iran was launched, aimed at sabotaging the program. The Bush Administration has deployed "arms control" negotiator and prominent neo-conservative John Bolton to Moscow more and more frequently over the past two years, to attempt to persuade the Russian government to cut its nuclear cooperation with Tehran. This was also the subject of U.S.-Russia foreign ministerial talks, and during Bush's most recent summit with President Vladimir Putin.

the Russian side has not only not caved in to U.S. pressures, but has reiterated its commitment to continue and broaden technological assistance to Iran. In July 2002, Russian First Deputy Foreign Minister Trubnikov announced, in Tehran, that Russia was ready to discuss plans for building more nuclear plants in Iran. On July 26, 2002, Russia published the annexes to its nuclear agreement, which showed plans for five more nuclear plants after completion of Bushehr. The program was part of a ten-year cooperation agreement between the two countries, approved by Russian

Prime Minister Kasyanov. The new plants were to be built near Bushehr (three) and at Ahzavaz. Concrete talks on the broader program began in March 2003.

In February 2003, the head of Iran's Nuclear Energy Organization, Gholam-Reza Aqazadeh, announced that Iran would develop the full nuclear fuel cycle. It would mine, process, and enrich uranium for use in reactors. He stated that a plant in Isfahan, for preparing uranium, was almost completely constructed.

Iran and the Bomb

This announcement set off fireworks in Washington, where CIA Director George Tenet gave testimony to Congress on the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction among "rogue states": "The domino theory of the 21st Century may well be nuclear." Since then, the campaign has continued to gain momentum, and explicit accusations have been launched against Tehran, that it is building a nuclear bomb. The *Los Angeles Times* on Aug. 4 ran an alarmist story, "Iran Closes In on Ability to Build a Nuclear Bomb," replete with maps and diagrams purportedly documenting the charges.

In such a climate of hysteria, pressure by the US was exerted on the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), during its Sept. 12 meeting in Vienna, to issue an ultimatum to Iran. A declaration was indeed voted up, demanding that the Iranian government "prove" it has no intentions of building a bomb, "provide accelerated cooperation" with the agency, "suspend all further uranium enrichment activities, including the further introduction of nuclear material," and sign an additional protocol to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). As befits an ultimatum, a date was set: Oct. 31, 2003.

The protocol in question, called the 93+2 Protocol, would require Iran to allow unfettered inspections by the IAEA, on short notice. The government has been in discussion with the IAEA on the matter and has signalled its willingness to cooperate. However, as literally every member of the Iranian leadership has stressed, it will sign only on condition that it receive the technology required for nuclear energy development, as specified in the Non-Proliferation Treaty itself.

Once the IAEA formulated its demands for signing, in an ultimatum, what had been a debate was transformed into a confrontation. All of Iran mobilized. On Sept. 13, Iranian wires and press published statement after statement, by political leaders, condemning the ultimatum as a provocation motivated by America. The Iranian delegate to the IAEA, Ali

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Akbar Salehi, was quoted by western wires, saying, "We will have no choice but to have a deep review of our existing level and extent of engagement with the agency." He went on: "At present, nothing pervades [America's] appetite for vengeance, short of confrontation and war. . . . They aim to re-engineer and reshape the entire Middle East region." Salehi walked out of the Vienna meeting in protest.

Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, former Iranian president and current head of the Expediency Council, called the Vienna talks "unjust, unilateral and bullying." He said the ongoing dispute symbolized the "law of the jungle" that would discredit international institutions. "This is a great insult, and a shame on big powers, as well as the IAEA, since the acceptance of the additional protocol is not obligatory for any [other] country in the world," Rafsanjani said. "Furthermore, the United States, that has the largest nuclear arsenal in the world, has still not signed the protocol itself."

Rafsanjani also made clear that, were Iran to sign, it would then go to the government cabinet for discussion, then to the parliament as a bill. There, it could be stopped by the Guardians Council, which vets legislation. In that case, the Expediency Council (which Rafsanjani heads up), would be called in to have the last word.

Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi denounced the ultimatum, and Iran's permanent representative to the UN, Mohammed Javad Zarif, told the *New York Times* on Sept. 12 that the entire operation showed the "intention to deprive Iran" of nuclear energy. "There are people in Washington," he said, "who do not want to clarify matters—who, in fact, would encourage, invite and welcome negative news from Iran. And if that is the intention, if that is the desire, then they may in fact get what they want."

Later, at the IAEA conference, Iranian Vice President and President of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, Reza Aghazadeh, shocked his listeners when he delivered a critical appraisal of the new security doctrine of the United States, premised on pre-emptive war. He posed a provocative scenario: if Iran, perceiving the threat of hostile acts by the United States or Israel, were to adopt the pre-emptive war doctrine, what would the international response be in that case?

The issue of Iran's tug-of-war with the IAEA was a featured topic at the United Nations General Assembly meeting in September, particularly in discussions on the sidelines of the conference. Russian president Vladimir Putin took the opportunity to reiterate to the press, that his government was confident that Iran would not seek to develop nuclear weapons, and that Russia saw no need to interrupt its cooperation on peaceful energy technology.

Foreign Minister Kharrazi repeatedly stressed, in remarks to the press in New York, that "Iran has no plans to produce nuclear weapons and the country's nuclear activities are for peaceful use." In his address to the UNGA, Kharrazi protested that his country has been put under deplorable pressure to abandon its right to developing peaceful nuclear technology,

while other countries have developed and tested such weapons. He pointed to the Israeli government, and its defiance of calls to sign the NPT. Speaking on ABC's "This Week" program, while in New York, Kharrazi referred to the very real threat that Israel could bomb the Bushehr plant. Kharrazi said, "Israel knows if it commits such an action, there would be a reaction." He added that Iran would not abandon its nuclear program.

Technological Apartheid

There are numerous agenda items on the "Iran dossier" of people like Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, John Bolton and the like. Clearly, the nuclear issue, for them, is a handy pretext to drum up support for a military strike against Iran, in accordance with long-term policy strategies drawn up by this neo-con grouping for the Persian Gulf and Middle East.

But the reasons behind the thrust to stop Iran's nuclear program are deeper. It is not the bomb they fear, but the process of industrialization in Iran and, by extension, in the entire developing sector. The doctrine of technological apartheid—whereby developing sector nations should be deprived of the wherewithal to achieve technological progress by mastering advanced technologies—dates back to the 1974 NSSM-200 policy document drafted by Henry Kissinger. In it, then-National Security Council head Kissinger laid out the doctrine that Third World nations, particularly those with raw materials resources, must be held back in their demographic and economic development; otherwise, their increasing independence and control over their resources would prevent looting of the same, and thus constitute a "strategic threat" to the security of the United States.

It is that thinking which is behind the anti-nuclear tirade. And the Iranians are fully aware of it. When Shah Pahlavi pursued his nuclear energy program, he was supported by the West, which wanted to sell him the power plants, but without sharing the technology and know-how. Now, Iran desires to produce not only the energy, but the technological capability to upgrade its economy and work force.

Iranian President Khatami in mid-September, again stressing Iran's rejection of nuclear weapons, added, "However, we are determined to be powerful. Power has to do with science and technology, while nuclear technology is the most advanced. We are making attempts towards reaching such a goal," he said, "by depending on the capabilities and talents of the Iranian youth." Khatami added: "God Almighty and the Iranian nation will not forgive us if we fail to provide for access to science and technology."

It is to be expected that Iran will decide to sign the designated NPT protocol. No one in the leadership is foolhardy enough to underestimate the determination of the war party in Washington. No one wants the Oct. 31 deadline to be the prelude to an "Iran affair" at the UN Security Council. But they will not give up the right, embodied in the NPT treaty, to master modern technologies.