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Introduction

Washington watched as 2007 came to a violent and inglorious end. US wars raged in Iraq and Afghanistan; the US-backed Israeli occupation suffocated Palestinians; US-allied governments in Pakistan and Kenya faced national explosions over false democratization and stolen elections; the policies of US corporations fueled poverty and resource wars across Africa. Powerful forces in the US had already begun to critically reassess what they saw as the diminishing value of the Bush administration's reckless global interventionism.

By the end of the year, that elite divide—with the Bush White House increasingly isolated and discredited—had shown up in a leaked story of how Bush's CIA hid and then destroyed videotapes documenting the interrogation-by-torture of detainees in the so-called global war on terror. There was an explosive story documenting how Bush's billions of dollars in "anti-terrorism" military aid to Pakistan had completely failed to help stabilize that war-wracked country. Another leak exposed widespread damning views that the US and its allies were losing the war in Afghanistan, the invasion and occupation that were supposed to shine as Washington's "good war"—the war that no one could criticize because of September 11.

But the most important evidence of the split within the powerful elites came on December 3, 2007, with the release of a new National Intelligence Estimate on Iran. The NIE, reflecting the consensus view of all 16 US intelligence agencies, made clear that Iran did not have a nuclear weapon, did not have a program to build a nuclear weapon, and was less determined to develop nuclear weapons than US intelligence agencies had earlier claimed.

When the NIE was released there was a sigh of relief from many quarters—in the US and around the world. How could anyone now claim there was any legal or moral pretext for threatening Iran? But somehow the NIE did not stop Washington's talk of war. Two days after the NIE was released, the *Washington Post* headline read "U.S. Renews Efforts to Keep Coalition Against Tehran."¹ The White House, the president, and especially the vice president continued ratcheting up the rhetoric. In fact, the president had been told of the NIE's overall conclusions months earlier, back in the summer of 2007.

When Bush arrived in the Middle East in January 2008 for his first trip to Israel as president, Iran remained on the top of the agenda. One of his primary goals was to reassure Israel that the NIE had not changed US policy toward Iran, and that despite the intelligence agencies' consensus that Iran was not building a nuclear weapon, "all options" remained on the table. According to *Newsweek*, "in private conversations with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert last week, the president all but disowned the document, said a senior administration official who accompanied Bush on his six-nation trip to the Mideast. 'He told the Israelis that he can't control what the intelligence community says, but that [the NIE's] conclusions don't reflect his own views.'" *Newsweek* went on to recognize that

Bush's behind-the-scenes assurances may help to quiet a rising chorus of voices inside Israel's defense community that are calling for unilateral military action against Iran. Olmert, asked by *Newsweek* after Bush's departure on Friday whether he felt reassured, replied: "I am very happy." ... Bush told Olmert he was uncomfortable with the findings and seemed almost apologetic. Bush's national-security adviser, Stephen Hadley, told reporters in Jerusalem that Bush had only said to Olmert privately what he's already said publicly, which is that he believes Iran remains "a threat" no matter what the NIE says. But the president may be trying to tell his allies something more: that he thinks the document [the NIE] is a dead letter.²

Just a couple of days before President George W. Bush's first trip to Israel—in January 2008, in the last year of his presidency—the Pentagon reported an "incident" in the Strait of Hormuz. Iranian speed boats had allegedly swarmed between three large US warships heading into the Persian Gulf, broadcasting threatening messages that the US ships were about to explode and dropping small box-like objects into the seas. Just as the sailors were aiming their guns at the provocateurs, we were told, the Iranian boats reversed course and sped away.

Reuters described how the boats "aggressively approached" the US ships. The Pentagon called the boats' actions "careless, reckless and potentially hostile,"³ the White House "reckless and provocative."⁴ Numerous Persian speakers pointed out that the voice making the threats did not sound as though it had a Persian accent. The US Navy itself acknowledged that they had no idea where the voice making the threats had actually come from. Quickly the words "Tonkin Gulf incident" were on many lips. Many remembered August 4, 1964, the "attack on a US Naval ship" that Lyndon Johnson used as a pretext for sending troops to Vietnam. Years later the world learned that the alleged attack had never occurred at all; it was cooked up. Would the "swarming boat incident" in the Strait of Hormuz serve as George Bush's Tonkin Gulf?

Not immediately. But the rhetorical escalations continued. In March 2008 Admiral William Fallen, chief of Central Command, resigned from the military following his highly public disagreement with Bush administration threats of a military attack on Iran. A day later, Vice President Dick Cheney went to the Middle East, ostensibly to encourage Israeli and Palestinian negotiators, but clearly aiming at pressing allies in the region to accept Washington's escalations against Iran. The likelihood of a military strike increased again.

In early April General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker, top commander and US envoy in Iraq respectively, reported to Congress that their "surge" strategy of sending 30,000 additional US troops to occupy Iraq was succeeding. But the enemy in Iraq was changing, they said: no longer is al-Qaeda the main problem; now Iran has emerged in that role. Bush administration officials began talking of a "proxy war" in Iraq, in which Iran is arming and training various Shi'a militia, including "special groups" within Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, as a way of attacking the US.

The media drumbeat soon followed. On April 12, just a few days after the congressional hearings, the *New York Times* headline, referring to an interview with Crocker, read "Iran Is Fighting Proxy Battle in Iraq, U.S. Diplomat Says."⁵ The lead front-page article in the *Washington Post* the same day was titled "Iran Top Threat to Iraq, U.S. Says." It began: "Last week's violence in Basra and Baghdad has convinced the Bush administration that actions by Iran, and not al-Qaeda, are the primary threat inside Iraq, and has sparked a broad reassessment of policy in the region, according to senior U.S. officials."⁶ The next day the lead editorial warned that "the proxy war in Iran is just one front in a much larger Iranian offensive," and went on to link activities of Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah within the Lebanese parliament, and Iraq's own nuclear power enrichment activities as equally the responsibility of Iran's "offensive."⁷ The same day the *New York Times* ran an op-ed by a leading Israeli strategist calling for the US to recognize Israel's right to attack Iran independently.⁸

President Bush accepted Petraeus and Crocker's recommendations and embraced their claims regarding Iran's "malign" role, saying, "Iraq is the convergence point for two of the greatest threats to America in this new century: Al-Qaeda and Iran." He then sent Petraeus and Crocker back to Iraq—but ordered them to stop off in Saudi Arabia. He sent other diplomats on simultaneous visits to other Arab capitals, supposedly to encourage greater engagement with Iraq, but clearly primarily to urge support for the rising US threats against Iran.

And to broaden further the US crusade against Iran, on April 17, 2008, Republican and Bush-supporting Florida Congressman Mario Diaz-Balart introduced a new amendment to the just-passed "jubilee" bill that would provide debt relief to two dozen impoverished countries. The amendment, supported by 291 members of Congress, stated that countries—any countries, including the two dozen desperately poor ones most in need of debt relief— "that have a business relationship with Iran are not eligible to be considered under this debt relief program." That would likely eliminate most of the countries eligible, since Iran is a major global oil supplier, and "south—

south" commercial ties have been a longstanding feature of Iranian trade. Potential beneficiaries of debt relief would be forced to choose between accepting US assistance and continuing trade with Iran. How much real "free choice" do we think would be reflected in that decision?

It was going to be a long campaign. Despite the NIE confirming Iran did not have and was not building a nuclear weapon, despite the reports of "backdoor" discussions between US and Iranian representatives, it remained clear that neither intelligence estimates nor actual facts on the ground in Iran or the region would determine Bush administration policy towards Iran. The possibility of a US military strike on Iran remains a very real threat.

Part One The Current Crisis

Is Iran a threat to the United States?

The Bush administration has claimed, almost since coming into office, that Iran is a "threat" to the US. Even US intelligence agencies agree that Iran doesn't possess nuclear weapons or a nuclear weapons program, and that it is very unclear whether Iran even wants to build such a weapon. Iran has never threatened the United States. (And unlike many countries in its neighborhood, Iran has not invaded another country in over a century.)

In 2007, according to the CIA, Iran spent about \$5.1 billion on its military—about 2.5 percent of its GDP. The US, on the other hand, spent \$626 billion on the military that same year, amounting to 4.5 percent of its GDP of \$13.7 *trillion*. More relevant, perhaps, the US spent almost half of the total of global arms spending—about 46 percent. So Iran does not represent a strategic military threat to the United States or to Americans.

In 2005 Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the populist former mayor of Tehran, was elected president of Iran. His rhetoric, aimed primarily at his younger and poorer supporters, remained fiery, often even offensive, including questioning whether the Nazi Holocaust had really happened. But his overall populist, anti-Western approach brought him significant public support at home, where unemployment was high and opportunities few.

Not surprisingly, US and other Western media and political figures exaggerated his actual rhetoric. Ahmadinejad's political opposition to Israel has never been in doubt, but still his statements were distorted. Outrage erupted across the US and Europe in October 2005 following the claim that Ahmadinejad had threatened to "wipe Israel off the map." Israel's then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon called for Iran to be expelled from the United Nations; a few months later Israeli Vice Prime Minister and Nobel Peace Laureate Shimon Peres said, "the president of Iran should remember that Iran can also be wiped off the map."⁹

But as it turned out, Ahmadinejad had not said those words at all. "Ahmadinejad did not say he was going to wipe Israel off the map because no such idiom exists in Persian," Juan Cole, a Middle East expert at the University of Michigan told the *New York Times*. "He did say he hoped its regime, i.e., a Jewish-Zionist state occupying Jerusalem, would collapse." Cole went on to note that since Iran has not "attacked another country aggressively for over a century, I smell the whiff of war propaganda."¹⁰

Just as the NIE, which would debunk Bush's favorite claims about Iran as a nuclear threat, was being finalized, new assertions began to emerge from the White House that Iran was directly responsible for killing Americans in Iraq, ostensibly through providing Iraqi resistance forces with some of the powerful explosives used in the roadside bombs that were killing significant numbers of US troops. No evidence of Iranian involvement was ever made public; from their origin in early 2006 the claims were limited to unsubstantiated assertions by military and government officials. But the notion of Iran as a direct threat to the US began to spread.

The Bush administration began to use the language of the earlier 2005 NIE as the basis for its escalation against Iran, despite the fact that the report provided at best tenuous support for Washington's aggression. The NIE's conclusion focused on the dangers of Iran "*acquiring and mastering technologies* that could be diverted to bombmaking. "The bar had been dramatically

lowered. No longer would the Bush administration threaten military strikes only to prevent Iran from building a nuclear weapon. Now, according to the president, the strikes would be legitimate and even necessary to prevent Iran from even acquiring knowledge of nuclear technology. In April 2006 Bush ominously warned that "the world is united and concerned about their [Iran's] desire to have not only a nuclear weapon, but the capacity to make a nuclear weapon or *the knowledge as to how to make a nuclear weapon*, all of which we're working hard to convince them not to try to achieve." And in the same press conference he repeated, just in case anyone missed it the first time: "we've agreed on the goal, and that is the Iranians should not have a nuclear weapon, the capacity to make a nuclear weapon, or *the knowledge as to how to make a nuclear weapon*."¹¹ The significance of that language lay in the uncontested reality that Iran already *had*, indeed has had for many years, "the knowledge as to how to make a nuclear weapon." Not only because much of that knowledge is available on the internet, but because the basic technology needed to enrich uranium for nuclear power is the same as that required for nuclear weapons. Of course it is easier to carry out the 3—5 percent enrichment needed for nuclear power than the 90-plus percent enrichment necessary to produce weapons-grade uranium. But the technology is the same. Once you have the knowledge to build and run the centrifuges to enrich uranium, you just need time and money and practice to enrich enough for a bomb. You also do need missile technology, but like many countries around the world, Iran already had that, too. Bush's bar for bombing Iran could hardly get any lower.

Does Iran have nuclear weapons or a nuclear weapons program?

No. Iran does not and has never had a nuclear weapon— and no one, not even the Bush administration, claims it has. Despite claims by the Bush administration and others, there is also no evidence Iran has a military program to build nuclear weapons. And even the Bush administration's own intelligence agencies acknowledged in the December 2007 National Intelligence Estimate that the weapons program they claim once existed had been ended by 2003.

Iran does have an active nuclear power program, including a program to enrich uranium to fuel the program. Iran was one of the original signatories to the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and like all other "non-nuclear weapons states" that signed the treaty, Iran has a legal right to produce and use nuclear power for peaceful purposes.¹² But although Iran has a legal right to nuclear power, the US still doesn't like it, and Washington has pressured other countries to impose UN Security Council sanctions against Iran for exercising that internationally guaranteed right.

The stance of the IAEA, the UN's nuclear watchdog agency, has remained consistent: despite what it identified as some ambiguities and the need for greater transparency regarding Iran's past nuclear programs, the IAEA has repeatedly stated from the beginning that its inspectors on the ground have never found evidence that Iran is diverting nuclear facilities to military use.¹³

There is a sharp irony in history, in that the US once actively supported Iran's nuclear ambitions. From the mid-1970s the US government was engaged in urging Iran, then ruled by the US-backed shah, to build nuclear power plants with the specific goal of expanding Iran's energy base beyond oil. In his history of Iran's nuclear program, professor of chemical and petroleum engineering at the University of Southern California Mohammad Sahimi described a 1977 announcement by the State Department that Iran was going to purchase eight nuclear reactors from the US. The two countries signed the US—Iran Nuclear Energy Agreement in July 1978, just months before the overthrow of the shah, to facilitate nuclear energy cooperation and to expedite export and transfer of technology and equipment to Iran's nuclear program. Sahimi reports that according to the memoirs of the shah's close confidant and long-time Imperial Court Minister Asadollah Alam, the shah had envisioned possession of nuclear weapons. And at that time, according to the founder of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, the country's scientists did carry out experiments extracting plutonium from spent reactor fuel.¹⁴

In August 2002, the Iranian opposition military organization known as the Mujahedin el-Khalq (MEK), which had fought for years against the Iranian government while operating in Iraq under the protection of sequential Iraqi governments from Saddam Hussein to the US occupation forces,

announced that Iran was much further along in uranium enrichment than had previously been known. Specifically, MEK identified then-undeclared Iranian nuclear facilities in Iran: a centrifuge-based uranium enrichment plant at Natanz and a heavy-water production plant at Arak. The evidence was shaky and the original source unreliable (the MEK had long been designated a terrorist organization by the US and European governments, and many still view them as an unstable cult). But within six months the Bush administration officially accused Iran of building a secret nuclear weapons program. The IAEA initiated six months of inspections in the facilities, and determined that the claim of a covert nuclear program was true. The UN's nuclear inspectors at IAEA criticized Iran for the lack of transparency in reporting the activities, but they did not accuse Iran of any substantive violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.¹⁵

The IAEA's assessment wasn't good enough for the US. In June 2003 the US had refused to rule out a military attack on Iran; in September of that year, while claiming Iran was in fact violating its non-proliferation obligations (thus challenging the IAEA position), Bush agreed to back a European initiative designed to pressure Iran.¹⁶ Tehran suspended its enrichment activities as a goodwill gesture, and accepted the additional, intrusive IAEA inspections demanded by the US and Europe. Following the new inspections, the IAEA again reported there was no evidence Iran was building a nuclear weapon. The US dismissed the IAEA report as "impossible to believe."¹⁷

Throughout late 2003 and into 2004 the US continued to ratchet up pressure on Europe and other countries. The Bush administration succeeded in getting the IAEA to censure Iran, despite the report denying any evidence of an Iranian nuclear weapons program, and eventually got the issue referred to the Security Council, which, unlike the IAEA, has the power to impose sanctions. In March 2004, the US pressured the Council to pass a resolution condemning Iran for its lack of complete transparency. Later that year, and into 2005, US pressure led both the IAEA and the Security Council to pass resolutions demanding that Iran halt its enrichment activity; the European negotiating team, acceding to US pressure, issued a similar demand. In February 2005 Condoleezza Rice, newly confirmed as secretary of state, stated that a military attack on Iran was not on Washington's agenda "at this point in time."¹⁸ Bush was even more explicit: "This notion that the United States is getting ready to attack Iran is simply ridiculous," he said. "And having said that, all options are on the table."¹⁹

But the Bush administration was concerned about keeping the increasingly skeptical Europeans onboard the anti-Iran crusade. As a result there was a brief shift in US strategy, as Bush announced the US would back the more nuanced negotiating approach of the EU3 partnership of Germany, France, and the UK. He sweetened the deal a bit further, adding that the US would call off its ten-year-long effort to keep Iran out of the World Trade Organization, and allow Iran to buy US-made parts for its civilian airliner fleet.

By August 2005, however, this brief respite was over, and Bush was already repeating the litany that he would not rule out a military attack on Iran. It was in August that the 2005 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) would "assess with high confidence that Iran currently is determined to develop nuclear weapons despite its international obligations and international pressure. ..." The *Washington Post* headlined a frontpage article "Iran Is Judged 10 Years From Nuclear Bomb" and until the December 2007 NIE that stated unequivocally that Iran did *not* have a nuclear weapon, it was assumed that the 2005 intelligence document was proof of Iran's dangerous intention and capacity to build a nuclear weapon. (In fact, even the Post recognized that the earlier NIE's assessment was far from definitive. It acknowledged that while the NIE referred to "credible indicators that Iran's military is conducting clandestine work." it found "no information linking those projects directly to a nuclear weapons program. What is clear is that Iran, mostly through its energy program, is acquiring and mastering technologies that could be diverted to bombmaking."²⁰ But Washington's intense drumbeat of war continued, whipping up fear of an allegedly almost-nuclear-armed Iran.

The Bush administration's belligerent rhetoric escalated, threatening US military strikes on Iran as the only response. It was as if the NIE, theoretically the most credible intelligence available, had provided unequivocal proof of an existing Iranian nuke being readied on the launch pad. And nowhere in the debate was any discussion of Iran's rights and obligations under the Nuclear Non-

Proliferation Treaty—let alone any broader discussion of the context of international law and the NPT overall. The big contradiction of the NPT—the 800-pound gorilla that no one mentions—is that every country that enriches uranium to fuel its nuclear power plants has the knowledge to build a nuclear bomb. Because it's the same technology, it just needs to be done more— better, faster, and longer. No other NPT-signatory country is prohibited from enriching all the uranium it wants, building all the nuclear power plants it wants. (Of course many of us wish that the NPT prohibited *all* nuclear power and enrichment—it's *all* too dangerous. But the NPT doesn't do any such thing.) So Washington's fiat, in which Iran is denied the rights it has as an NPT signatory simply because the US doesn't trust its government, represents a breathtaking kind of nuclear double standard. Especially when compared to Washington's quick acquiescence not only to Israel's huge unacknowledged and un-inspected nuclear arsenal, now three decades old, but also to the brazen nuclear weapons testing by India and Pakistan in 1998—all of which were carried out outside the strictures of the NPT and all of which have been quickly accepted, even welcomed, and in the case of India perhaps legalized, by the US.

What about Iran's support for terrorism?

Since the 1979 overthrow of the US-backed shah of Iran, the accusation of Iran being a "state supporter of terrorism" has been a hallmark of US policy. The State Department's 2007 *Country Reports on Terrorism* claims that "Iran remained the most active state sponsor of terrorism."²¹ But even if all the allegations were true (very uncertain, since no evidence is provided), they would not provide a legitimate basis for US threats, sanctions, or attacks against Iran.

The State Department report claims that

Iranian authorities continued to provide lethal support, including weapons, training, funding, and guidance, to some Iraqi militant groups that target Coalition and Iraqi security forces and Iraqi civilians. In this way, Iranian government forces have been responsible for attacks on Coalition forces. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-Qods Force, continued to provide Iraqi militants with Iranian-produced advanced rockets, sniper rifles, automatic weapons, mortars that have killed thousands of Coalition and Iraqi Forces, and explosively formed projectiles (EFPs) that have a higher lethality rate than other types of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and are specially designed to defeat armored vehicles used by Coalition Forces.

The report also states that "Iran remains a threat to regional stability and U.S. interests in the Middle East because of its continued support for violent groups, such as Hamas and Hizballah, and its efforts to undercut the democratic process in Lebanon, where it seeks to build Iran's and Hizballah's influence to the detriment of other Lebanese communities."

There is no evidence and little detail provided, beyond the broad claim that Iran is providing "extensive funding, training, and weapons" to those groups. The report does not acknowledge that both the most important "Palestinian group with leadership in Syria," Hamas, and Hezbollah in Lebanon are important political parties that have been democratically elected to majority and near-majority positions in their respective parliaments. Both, while certainly maintaining military wings, also provide important networks of social services, from clinics and hospitals to schools, daycare centers, food assistance, and financial aid to the impoverished, disempowered, and (in the case of Hamas in Gaza) imprisoned populations of Lebanese and Palestinians. Some of the actions carried out by the military wings of Hamas and Hezbollah have in fact targeted civilians in violation of international law, and thus might qualify as "terrorist" actions. But the majority of their actions have been aimed at illegal Israeli military occupations: of south Lebanon in the case of Hezbollah, and of Gaza and the West Bank in the case of Hamas. The notion that Iran's support for these elected organizations somehow puts it at the top of the list of states supporting terrorism, let alone gives the US the right to attack it, has no legitimacy.

The State Department listing goes on to accuse Iran of pursuing policies in Iraq that appear inconsistent with its own stated objectives regarding stability in Iraq, and inconsistent with the

objectives of the Iraqi government and the US-led occupation forces in Iraq. Given the wide disparity of objectives and even definitions between the US view of "stability in Iraq" and the Iranian view, it is hardly surprising that the US might judge Iranian actions, or even its presence (since no actual actions are detailed) as "inconsistent with its stated objectives." But to equate such "inconsistency" with "support for terrorism" requires an enormous stretch.

The Bush administration also accuses Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps of being "increasingly involved in supplying lethal assistance to Iraqi militant groups, which destabilizes Iraq." It is not clear why the State Department includes that alleged support (for which no evidence has been shown), in their report on "terrorism." The unsubstantiated US claim has consistently been that Iran is providing assistance in the production of "explosively formed penetrator" bombs used against US military patrols in Iraq. The State Department's own definition of terrorism starts with the recognition that it means an attack on noncombatants,²² which certainly does not apply to wartime military attacks against armed occupation soldiers on patrol.

The State Department report goes on to condemn Iran for remaining "unwilling to bring to justice senior al-Qa'ida (AQ) members it has detained, and has refused to publicly identify those senior members in its custody. Iran has repeatedly resisted numerous calls to transfer custody of its AQ detainees to their countries of origin or third countries for interrogation or trial." Given more than six years of the Bush administration's own "unwillingness to bring to justice senior al-Qaeda members it detained in 2003" and even earlier in Guantanamo, and the US's "refusal to identify publicly these senior members in its custody" and its continued resistance to "numerous calls to transfer custody of its al-Qaeda detainees to their countries of origin or to third countries for interrogation and/or trial" the hypocrisy of claiming this as evidence of support for terrorism is astonishing.

The US has a history of blaming Iran for a host of nefarious deeds, most of the time with little or no evidence to back its claims. This strategy succeeds in portraying Iran as part of what President Bush called the "axis of evil," although it predates the Bush administration. (During the 1993 Oslo negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, President Clinton reportedly promised Israel that the US would step up efforts to isolate Iran.) In June 2001, Bush's newly installed Justice Department alleged that unnamed Iranians had "inspired, supported, and supervised" the bombing of the US military barracks, Khobar Tower, in Saudi Arabia five years earlier.²³ But according to then Assistant Secretary of State Martin Indyk, "We have not reached the conclusion that the Iranian Government was involved or responsible for the attack."²⁴

In 1994, a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires was bombed, resulting in 85 deaths. Claims of Iranian involvement were made by anonymous Clinton administration officials, but never proved; twenty Argentines were acquitted in a long trial in the 1990s. In 2007 a new 800-page indictment was issued by Argentine government prosecutors identifying top Iranian officials allegedly responsible for the bombing. In response, an Argentine judge requested that the international police agency Interpol issue arrest warrants for the named Iranian officials, which Interpol voted to do in November 2007. But even the judge who had made the request admitted to the BBC that "he had no doubt that there was pressure on the Argentine authorities to join in international attempts to isolate the regime in Tehran." And the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the Interpol vote was a result of pressure from the Bush Administration, along with Israeli and Argentine diplomats. And James Cheek, the US ambassador to Argentina at the time of the bombing, admitted that "to my knowledge, there was never any real evidence [of Iranian responsibility]. They never came up with anything."²⁵

Is Iran a threat to Israel? What about the other way around?

Israel has been a key player in the US campaign against Iran, both in cheerleading for more intensive US military escalation and in gearing up for the possibility of its own military strike should the US not take what it deemed necessary steps. While Israel and the pro-Israeli lobbies in the US strongly backed the US invasion of Iraq, Israeli security officials and public opinion had long claimed that Iran, not Iraq, represented an existential threat to Israel.²⁶ Iran, not Iraq, has been a

primary target of Israel's constant state of both military and ideological mobilization. On September 8, 2004, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said that the international community had not one enough to stop Iran from developing a nuclear weapon and warned that Israel would take its own measures to defend itself. More recently, Israel announced its rejection of the December 2007 US National Intelligence Estimate—which indicated that Iran did not have a nuclear weapons program—less than 24 hours after its release. Iran remained a threat, the Israeli government said, and their mobilization would remain unchanged.

In 2005 the London *Sunday Times* reported that "Israel's armed forces have been ordered by Ariel Sharon, the prime minister, to be ready by the end of March for possible strikes on secret uranium enrichment sites in Iran, military sources have revealed. The order came after Israeli intelligence warned the government that Iran was operating enrichment facilities, believed to be small and concealed in civilian locations."²⁷ Throughout the 2006—2007 build-up of rhetoric, provocation, sanctions, and threats against Iran by the US, Israel both pushed the US to go further and added its own threats. By January 2007 Israeli Prime Minister Olmert made direct and public threats that Israel might launch a military strike against Iran.²⁸

The threats were (and are) not idle. In 1981 Israel carried out a unilateral military attack against Iraq, destroying the half-finished French-built Osirak nuclear power reactor. The action was unanimously condemned internationally, and even President Reagan deemed it illegal. Israel appears to believe it can replicate that attack, this time against Iran—in 2004, Likud Knesset member Ehud Yatom said, "The Iranian nuclear facilities must be destroyed, just as we did the Iraqi reactor." That same year Israel acknowledged it had purchased 500 BLU-109 bunker-buster bombs, using funds from a \$319 million US military assistance program. The bombs are designed to penetrate up to seven feet of reinforced concrete and could destroy Iran's specially built underground nuclear power facilities.²⁹

The analysts at the authoritative website GlobalSecurity.com asserted that

It would be difficult for Israel to strike at Iran without American knowledge, since the mission would have to be flown through American [formerly Iraqi] air space. Even if the United States did not actively participate with operations inside Iranian air space, the US would be a passive participant by virtue of allowing Israeli aircraft unhindered passage. In the eyes of the world, it would generally appear to be a joint US—Israeli enterprise, any denials notwithstanding.³⁰

And Israel's powerful lobbies in the US have embraced Israel's approach to Iran. By the end of 2007, the influential pro-Israeli think tank the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP) had issued a report calling for an intensive US—Israeli dialogue on how to respond to what they claim are Iran's nuclear plans, including ways to attack Iran's nuclear facilities.³¹ The report was issued weeks after the release of the NIE that expressed the US intelligence agencies' consensus that Iran did not have a nuclear weapons program. In Congress, longstanding pro-Israeli positions among both parties remain a stumbling block to efforts to build coalitions to prevent a US military strike against Iran.

In early June 2008, every major candidate for the US presidential elections, a host of members of Congress, President Bush, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and a raft of other US officials, policymakers, and others came to reassert their support for Israel and vie to be the "most supportive" of Israel at the Washington, DC conference of the powerful pro-Israel lobby group the American—Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Virtually all the officials who spoke used the opportunity to escalate their anti-Iran rhetoric. Within days after the conference ended, Israeli politicians also began ratcheting up their rhetoric—perhaps to match that of their US backers, perhaps in anticipation of their own looming electoral fights.

On June 6, in the most explicit threat yet seen from the Israeli government, the Israeli newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth* reported that Israeli Transportation Minister Shaul Mofaz, a former army chief of staff and former defense minister, had claimed that an Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear sites was "unavoidable" because sanctions had failed to deny Tehran nuclear technology with bomb-making potential. "If Iran continues with its program for developing nuclear weapons, we

wall attack it. The sanctions are ineffective," he said. "There will be no alternative but to attack Iran in order to stop the Iranian nuclear program." He said that such an attack could only be conducted with US support.³² (On the next day, the *New York Times* reported that "oil prices had their biggest gains ever on Friday, jumping nearly \$11 to a new record above \$ 1 38 a barrel, after a senior Israeli politician raised the specter of an attack on Iran and the dollar fell sharply against the euro."³³)

Is Iran fomenting a nuclear arms race in the Middle East?

For decades prior to the US—Iran nuclear crisis, real nuclear armament and proliferation in the Middle East have remained a serious problem. While neither Iran nor Iraq possess nuclear weapons or even active nuclear weapons programs, and even putting aside the dangerous nuclear arsenals in the nearby volatile India and Pakistan theater, there was (and is today) a powerful, dangerous, unmonitored, and provocative operational nuclear arsenal in the very center of the Middle East. It belongs not to Iran, but to Israel.

US claims regarding the escalating danger of a nuclear arms race in the Middle East have largely failed to take into account the provocative nature of Israel's unacknowledged but widely known nuclear arsenal of 100—400 high-density nuclear bombs, produced at its Dimona nuclear center in the Negev desert. Israel's nuclear weapon was first tested jointly with apartheid South Africa in 1979; its existence was made public by whistleblower Mordechai Vanunu in 1986. Israel, with US support, maintains a policy of "strategic ambiguity," officially neither confirming nor denying the existence of its nuclear weapons. (This policy was weakened substantially in December 2006, when then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert publicly named Israel in his list of countries with nuclear -weapons.³⁴)

There is little question that as long as Israel remains the Middle East's sole nuclear power, other countries in the region will continue seeking nuclear parity, particularly while Israel continues to violate international law and provoke its neighbors with its occupation of Palestinian, Lebanese, and Syrian territory. Alternatively, some countries may seek cheaper and more easily hidden chemical or biological weapons of mass destruction, often termed the "poor countries' nuclear weapons."

Egypt, which considered but ultimately abandoned the creation of a nuclear weapons program, signed the non-proliferation treaty in 1980. For more than 25 years Cairo has attempted—so far unsuccessfully—to win support for a nuclear weapons—free zone throughout the Middle East. Israel, with US backing, has opposed it every time. In February 2006, in the IAEA debate that led to the resolution that sent the Iran issue to the Security Council for consideration of sanctions, Egypt and others pressed the US to accept compromise language supporting—sort of—such a nuclear-weapons—free zone as the price for keeping the Europeans and most of the non-aligned developing countries on board. The resolution states that solving the Iranian issue would contribute to "realizing the objective of a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction, including their means of delivery."³⁵

The US had resisted this language, claiming Iran might use it in propaganda against Israel. The *New York Times* described how "the Americans backed down and accepted compromise language."³⁶ But in fact the language was identical to that of a famous UN Security Council decision the US itself had written— Resolution 687, which ended the 1991 Gulf War against Iraq—which said that disarming *Iraq* would be a step "towards the goal of establishing in the Middle East a zone free from weapons of mass destruction and all missiles for their delivery." The US had done nothing to implement that goal, of course; a State Department official involved in the original drafting of 687 said years later that it was never meant to be taken seriously, that it was only included "as a sop to the other countries."³⁷

In December 2006 Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert let slip that Israel in fact *did* belong on the list of nuclear weapons states—which he identified as "America, France, Israel and Russia. "Whether or not Olmert's statement was intentional, he made it just a few days after Robert Gates, during his confirmation hearings as the Bush administration's new secretary of defense, said that

one of the possible motives for Iran's nuclear program was the fact that Israel had nuclear weapons.³⁸

What about international law? Is Iran in violation? Is the US?

Under Article IV of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Iran as a "non-nuclear weapons state" signatory has the right to produce and use nuclear power for peaceful purposes, including for energy production. Signatories to the NPT that do not have nuclear weapons (all but the US, the UK, France, Russia, and China) agree not to build or obtain nuclear weapons; in return they are promised access to nuclear technology and the right to produce and use nuclear power. Indeed, throughout the 1970s the US pushed the shah of Iran to build nuclear power plants to enable Iran to use more of its abundant oil supplies for export. So Iran's production of nuclear fuel and its construction of nuclear power plants is well within its rights under the NPT. The US-orchestrated decision of the UN Security Council to strip Iran of those rights and impose sanctions if Iran continued to exercise them has no grounding in international law; it is based solely on the US claim that it doesn't trust Iran.

Article VI of the NPT also commits the five nuclear weapons powers to move toward complete nuclear disarmament—and the US and the other four nuclear weapons states all remain in violation of this article. More immediately, the United States is also in violation of the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice, which ruled in 1996 that "*the threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict, and in particular the principles and rules of humanitarian law*" (emphasis added)." As early as spring 2002, more than a year before the invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration's new Nuclear Posture Review" already included military preparations to use nuclear weapons against seven countries, including Iran.⁴⁰ (The others were Iraq, China, Russia, Syria, Libya, and North Korea.) That threat and others—more recently through hints and anonymous administration, think-tank, or journalistic sources—stand in clear violation of the International Court of Justice, the UN's highest judicial body. The violation is particularly serious because as a "non-nuclear weapons state" that is a signatory to the NPT, Iran has the right to absolute protection from nuclear attack by the five "official" nuclear-weapons states, including the US.

In addition to its specific nuclear violations, the United States is in violation of the UN Charter and all the principles of international law that prohibit preventive war. The 2002 National Security Strategy (NSS) document reflected the neoconservative goals of global domination and willingness to use preventive attacks to maintain power:

We must adapt the concept of imminent threat to the capabilities and objectives of today adversaries. The greater the threat, the greater is the risk of inaction—and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy's attack. To forestall or prevent such hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively.⁴¹

In fact, what the 2002 NSS called for was not at all preemptive, but rather the *preventive* use of military force, without even the claim of an imminent threat (generally understood to mean missiles being loaded onto a launch pad or a similarly urgent and immediate danger). It was the same false claim used to justify the invasion of Iraq—there was nothing "preemptive" about it. The war's initial pretext was the claim that Iraq might *someday* possess the means to create a nuclear weapon—which even if true would have remained a purely preventive, and thus illegal, move. As the *Washington Post* reported, the NSS's new military policy would go even beyond legitimating Washington's conventional military force to include, in explicit violation of the NPT, allowing the US to use nuclear weapons preventively against non-nuclear weapons states—such as Iraq and Iran.⁴²

What could Iran do in response to a US military strike?

In April 2006 a *New Yorker* article by renowned investigative journalist Seymour Hersh cited key military sources who claimed that the US was already planning a military strike against Iran's underground alleged nuclear sites—using nuclear weapons. Washington officially denied the claim, but did little to tamp down the resulting rise in speculation that a preventive US nuclear strike was in fact under serious consideration, maybe already in preparation. Among members of Congress, even among some committed to ending the war in Iraq and trying to prevent war in Iran, there was a tendency toward a kind of relief that the Bush administration appeared to be considering "only surgical strikes" against Iran, rather than a full blown invasion. But those same members of Congress acknowledged that they had no idea what level of US escalation—perhaps even including calls for invasion despite troop shortages due to the war in Iraq— might follow Iran's likely retaliation for a US attack.

A wide range of possibilities would be open to Iran. While US officials might call a military attack "only a surgical strike," Iran would certainly call it an act of war—which would indeed be an accurate term. Iran could send troops across its borders to attack US troops in Iraq or shoot missiles into occupied Baghdad's US-controlled Green Zone. Iranian troops could invade and occupy southern Iraq. Iran could attack US troop concentrations in Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, or elsewhere in the region, or go after US ships in Bahrain, home of the Navy's Fifth Fleet. It could attack Israel. It could retaliate against US or allied oil tankers in nearby shipping lanes, and even sink a tanker. It could close the Strait of Hormuz, through which 45 percent of the world's oil passes. The impact in the world economic system would be swift and devastating.

In conventional terms, Iran's military is no match for the US. Iran has faced years of military sanctions, and its military strategy is focused primarily on training troops to defend the homeland against invasion and foreign military occupation. But the assortment of possible retaliatory options for Iran represents only the easy ones, those Iran could carry out with hardly a second thought. Certainly Iran's government might choose to respond to an illegal US or Israeli military strike by non-military means. Tehran might decide to take the moral/political high ground, to respond with a legal challenge in the International Court of Justice or with a request for a special session of the UN Security Council. It might choose not to respond militarily at all.

But while Iran might choose not to respond militarily, a military response is certainly likely, not only because of the wide range of military alternatives it is capable of carrying out, but because Iran in fact would have a legal right to use force against a US attack. Under the terms of Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, Iran has "the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security." Should the US, Israel, or anyone else launch a preventive attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, that attacking country, not Iran, would stand in violation of international law and the UN Charter. Article 2, Sections 3 and 4 of the Charter require that "All Members shall settle their international disputes by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security, and justice, are not endangered. All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations."

Aside from the feasibility and legality of military strikes and the range of possible responses, the actual effects of a US attack would be devastating. First and most important, huge numbers of Iranians would die. Estimates vary: some of the alleged nuclear facilities are in the midst of cities; other locations are not even publicly known. According to the Pentagon-connected Rand Corporation, "While the US could probably knock out many of the Iranian nuclear facilities using bunker-busting munitions, there would be heavy civilian casualties—probably in the thousands."⁴³ Another study conducted by Oxford Research Group researcher Paul Rogers compares likely civilian deaths in Iran with those in Iraq:

The civilian population in that country [Iraq] had three weeks to prepare for war in 2003, giving people the chance to flee potentially dangerous sites. But... attacks on Iranian facilities, most of which are in densely populated areas, would be surprise ones, allowing no time for such evacuations or other precautions. Military deaths in this first wave of attacks would be expected to be in the thousands. Civilian deaths would be in the many hundreds at least, particularly with the requirement to target technical support for the nuclear and missile infrastructure, with many of the factories being located in urban areas. The death toll would eventually be much higher if Iran took retaliatory action and the United States responded, or if the US took pre-emptive military action in addition to strikes on nuclear sites.⁴⁴

Politically, there is little doubt that a US or Israeli military strike on Iran—on nuclear targets or any other—would also consolidate broad public support for Iran's nuclear program. While anti-nuclear opinions and small-scale opposition do exist in Iran, they have dwindled in the face of US and Israeli threats to Iran's NPT-guaranteed right to nuclear technology. A strike would strengthen the most hard-line elements within Iran's multifaceted diverse polity.

It is certainly possible that Iran would respond to a US attack without resorting to military force. In April 2008, there was a terrible explosion at a revered Shi'a mosque in Shiraz, in which at least twelve worshipers were killed and more than 200 injured. Iranian officials vacillated in the following months between asserting that it was an accident and claiming that it was a terrorist bombing and that Iran held Washington responsible for supporting the terrorist forces that had carried it out. Significantly, Tehran did not threaten military retaliation, but instead said it was considering bringing charges against the US in the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the world court that has jurisdiction to judge conflicts between countries.⁴⁵ Whether or not either the original accusation of US involvement or Iran's statement of intent regarding the ICJ was true, its actions indicate that Iran does see the multilateral institutions of international law as potential venues for dealing with its grievances. That viewpoint, of course, is not shared in Washington. To the contrary, earlier efforts to hold the US accountable in the ICJ for violations of international law (such as charges brought by Nicaragua in the 1980s regarding US responsibility for mining harbors and other attacks on civilian targets) led to a US rejection of the ICJ's jurisdiction even to hear the case.

Part Two

A Short History of Recent US-Iran Relations

Wasn't Iran once an ally of the US?

US involvement in Iran has a long history, beginning back in the 1920s when the US collaborated with Great Britain to exploit Iran's vast oil riches. (See "Where does oil fit into US policy toward Iran?") In 1951, Great Britain and the US faced the possibility of losing control of Iran's oil when the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh announced his intention to nationalize his country's key natural resource.

In response, in 1953 the CIA orchestrated a coup that overthrew Prime Minister Mossadegh, and installed Mohammed Reza Pahlavi on the throne as the shah of Iran, backing his claim to absolute power. The shah immediately set about consolidating a vast apparatus of repression, torture, and control, centered in the SAVAK secret police and bolstered by uncritical and unlimited US military and police assistance. In return, the shah reversed Mossadegh's nationalization policies and put in place an arrangement in which Iran's oil industry and its profits would be shared with a new consortium of US and British oil companies. For the next 25 years the shah of Iran would serve, alongside Israel, as one of the key pillars of US strategy in the Middle East. The people of Iran, who faced widespread assassination, arrest, torture, and denial of virtually all political rights, would pay the price.

For example, in 1963 the shah announced his "White Revolution," a package of US-backed pro-Western privatization and other economic reforms. The new economic policies were devastating to Iran's population, particularly the working class and the poor. Protests and strikes resulted. One of the largest of that year's many uprisings erupted in response to the arrest and

imprisonment of one of the leaders of the religious sector of the anti-shah mobilization, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, then still living in Iran. When he was released eighteen months later, Khomeini broadened his critique of the shah to oppose the US directly; soon after, the shah forced Khomeini into exile in Iraq, where he spent most of the next fifteen years.

During that time, a huge anti-shah movement took shape across Iran, led by forces as diverse as the conservative Islamist clerical supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini, to the communist-led oil workers' unions, to the wide array of leftist Iranian student organizations. By January 1978, labor strikes and huge demonstrations against the escalating human rights violations—arrests, torture, and executions were common—brought a majority of the Iranian people into motion against the shah's regime. The shah's backers in Washington were getting very worried. In the summer of that year, despite reports by other officials that the shah was collapsing and that some kind of revolution was unstoppable, then National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and Energy Secretary James Schlesinger were continuing to tell the shah that the US would provide military support, and Brzezinski was still advocating direct US intervention to "stabilize" Iran.⁴⁶ President Carter opposed military intervention, but it was unclear what the US could do as its strategic ally collapsed. In September, after the shah declared martial law, a month-long oil workers' strike largely paralyzed the country.

It was clearly too late for any US intervention. On January 16, 1979, the shah fled, first to Egypt and later to several other countries. On February 1, 1979, Khomeini returned home to a tumultuous welcome in the streets of Tehran.

What happened after the US-backed shah was overthrown?

The shah's army, once armed and trained by the US, quickly made clear that it would not challenge the anti-shah guerrillas and popular forces in the street, and the military's neutrality brought about the final collapse of the shah's regime. By April 1979 a national referendum was held, in which Iranians approved the transformation of their country into an Islamic republic to be based on a theocratic governing system led by a religious Council of Guardians. And just as quickly, the collaboration between Islamist and leftist political forces deteriorated, as Khomeini's regime consolidated its rule based on a harsh interpretation of Islam that left little room for progressive secular influence. The students and workers that had played such key roles in the anti-shah mobilization were sidelined, many facing renewed repression under the new regime.

In the meantime, the Carter administration was faced with increasing demands from the deposed shah of Iran to come to the US for medical treatment. After frantic US diplomatic efforts failed to find him refuge somewhere else, the shah was welcomed to the US in October 1979.

Regardless of his illness, many Iranians believed the shah's entry into the US presaged a US campaign to return him to power, and it was largely in outraged response that Iranian student militants occupied the US embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979, in what would become the famous hostage ordeal. Fifty-two US diplomats and others in the embassy were taken captive and held for 444 days. They were released just after the new President Ronald Reagan was inaugurated on January 20, 1981. President Jimmy Carter's inability to secure the hostages' release—particularly the events surrounding the deaths of eight US soldiers in a failed helicopter rescue effort in April 1980—was widely viewed as the critical factor in his losing reelection in November 1980. The Carter administration carried out the negotiations that led to the hostages' release, and in the Algiers Agreement that codified the arrangements the US agreed it would not intervene in the internal affairs of Iran and would lift its trade sanctions and assets freeze against Iran. But the timing of the actual release—only minutes after Reagan repeated the oath of office—was interpreted as a deliberate slap against President Carter, and the opening to the new Reagan administration may have set the stage for its engagement with Iran in the years following, including in what became known as the "Iran—Contra affair," the covert and illegal arms sales to Tehran carried out by Reagan administration operatives throughout the mid-1980s to gain cash for the Nicaraguan Contras.

The US lifted the earlier sanctions as required under the Algiers Agreement, but the Reagan administration reimposed the sanctions in 1984, and they have remained in place, continuing to create economic problems for Iranians today.

US policy has consistently claimed the "right" to control strategic resources, especially oil, across the globe. In his January 1980 State of the Union address, President Jimmy Carter made clear that he deemed Persian Gulf—including Iranian—oil part of "the vital interests of the United States of America," and that any attack on that oil "will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."⁴⁷ This was at the height of the Cold War and following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and Carter was referring primarily to a threat to US hegemony from the Soviet Union. But the implications of his policy extended far beyond Afghanistan to the rest of the region.

After the overthrow of the shah in 1979, Iran emerged as a key target of the new "Carter Doctrine," which took shape following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that same year. In the same State of the Union speech in which Carter threatened military force to maintain control of Persian Gulf oil, he announced the creation of a Rapid Deployment Force and the opening of new military bases prepared for action in the Persian Gulf area. He also called for reinstatement of mandatory military draft registration for eighteen-year-old men.

When Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980, beginning the long Iran—Iraq war, the disastrous situation presented a new opportunity for US policymakers. The two countries in the Middle East with the greatest potential capacity to challenge US hegemony in the region were now at war with each other—spending their national treasure, killing each others' young men in the hundreds of thousands, and strategically weakening each other. The US moved quickly to weigh in on the side of Iraq, the weaker party, with the goal of keeping the fighting going for as long as possible and maintaining US power in the region. The Reagan administration also secretly sold arms to Iran (in the Iran—Contra scandal), but the main US military and financial backing went to Iraq, and the US was seen around the world as backing Saddam Hussein's regime in Baghdad.

The US pressured the UN Security Council to issue its first call for a ceasefire while Iraqi troops under Saddam Hussein still occupied huge swathes of Iranian territory in the first week of the Iraqi invasion of Iran. In 1984, Iraq tried to expand the conflict, including by attacking Iranian ships. In response, Iran's navy began to threaten the oil tankers of Kuwait and other Gulf countries supporting Iraq as they traveled in the Gulf.

The US's direct military involvement in the war escalated further when President Reagan ordered that the Kuwaiti tankers be re-flagged as American ships, and sent US Navy warships out to protect them from any potential Iranian attack. In July 1988 the US warship *Vincennes* on patrol in the Persian Gulf (having skirmished with Iranian gunboats inside Iran's territorial waters earlier that day) shot down an Iranian Airbus passenger plane, killing all 290 people, including 66 children, on board. The US first claimed that the crew of the *Vincennes* mistook the giant passenger plane for an F-14 fighter jet. But the claim could not be defended, and eventually the US paid compensation to Iran, although it never officially apologized.

The end of the Iran—Iraq war in 1988 did not bring any change in the hostile US relations with Iran. The US's direct military involvement on Iraq's side in the Iran—Iraq War was understood in Iran and throughout the region as consistent with the anti-Iran antagonism which had characterized US—Iranian relations since the overthrow of the shah and the triumph of the Islamic revolution—with no official diplomatic relations and continuing US-imposed economic sanctions against Iran.

What was Iran's connection to "Desert Storm," the 1991 US war on Iraq?

Having chosen its side, Washington continued its supportive partnership with Saddam Hussein after the end of the Iran—Iraq war, but ended it two years later in August 1990 when Iraq invaded Kuwait. That reversal of the US—Iraqi alliance was sudden and, for many, unexpected. In July 1990, just a week before the invasion, in what would be her last meeting with Saddam Hussein, US Ambassador April Glaspie gave Saddam Hussein what amounted to a yellow "caution" light regarding the invasion of Kuwait, telling the Iraqi president that "we have no opinion on the Arab—Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait."⁴⁸ But despite its ambiguous approach

to the escalating Iraq—Kuwait tensions and the clear, imminent threat of war, Washington used Iraq's attack on Kuwait as a pretext to launch a global crusade aimed at reasserting US superpower status even as the Soviet Union collapsed and the Cold War sputtered to an end.

After years of a close US—Iraq alliance, Iraq and especially Saddam Hussein personally (who had, after all, brutally repressed his population throughout that alliance with the US showing no concern) were suddenly demonized and targeted for a new US war, launched in the name of the United Nations.

Iraq was the new target, and Saddam Hussein quickly replaced Ayatollah Khomeini as the bad guy of choice. George H.W. Bush's National Security Directive 54, issued on January 15, 1991 on the eve of his launching Operation Desert Storm, focused primarily on Iraq. But like the Carter Doctrine a decade earlier, it had broader regional implications, and Iran would not be spared. Iran's oil, as well as its potential regional influence and power, remained as challenges to the US determination to maintain domination and control of the strategic Persian Gulf region. NSD 54 opened with the words: "Access to Persian Gulf oil and the security of key friendly states in the area are vital to US national security. Consistent with NSD 26 of October 2, 1989, and NSD 45 of August 20, 1990, and as a matter of long-standing policy, the United States remains committed to defending its vital interests in the region, if necessary through the use of military force, against any power with interests inimical to our own."⁴⁹ Iran was as much a potential target as Iraq.

In 1996, without providing any evidence, the US accused Iran of involvement in the bombing of the US military's Khobar Tower barracks in Saudi Arabia. A month after the bombing, Congress extended the existing economic sanctions against Iran for an additional five years. The US sanctions against Iran were never as devastating to ordinary people as the international economic boycott the US orchestrated against Iraq in 1990—not least because they remained unilateral, and Iran maintained relatively normal economic relations with the rest of the world. But even sanctions by one country can have a damaging impact, when that one country is the biggest player in the world economy and every other country is concerned about maintaining good relations with it. Additionally, after decades of US support for Iran under the shah, virtually all of Iran's infrastructure, including its civilian air fleet, much of its telecommunications and other infrastructure, as well as much of its military hardware, were US-manufactured and US-controlled—meaning that Iran's ability to purchase airplane parts or telephone system components from France wouldn't do much good when the systems they had to repair were from factories in Ohio.

Not surprisingly, as the sanctions hit the civilian population they strengthened public opposition to US policies and the US government even among those Iranians who might otherwise favor cultural ties and international openness, including with Americans. (It should be noted that the US sanctions were not uniformly implemented. Vice President and former Halliburton CEO Dick Cheney acknowledged during the 2000 election campaign that despite the sanctions Halliburton had continued to do "business with Libya and Iran through foreign subsidiaries."⁵⁰)

How has the US been dealing with Iran since September 11 and the Iraq war?

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Iran became a major partner in the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. Iran had long opposed the Taliban government in Afghanistan, both for sectarian religious reasons (the Taliban enforced a rigid version of Sunni Islam, while Iran is adamantly Shi'a) and because Tehran was concerned about instability on its eastern border. So Iran emerged as a major participant in the US-led multilateral coalition that took control of Afghanistan after the overthrow of the government, including the international and UN-backed campaign to create a new Afghan government under US occupation. US diplomats worked closely with their Iranian counterparts within and outside UN frameworks and spoke admiringly of their commitment and collaborative approach to Afghanistan diplomacy. (See "Is diplomacy possible between the US and Iran?")

That cooperation, however, was apparently not enough to satisfy the Bush administration. Just a few weeks after the inauguration of the US-backed Hamid Karzai as president of occupied Afghanistan, something Iran had helped make possible, Bush delivered his 2002 State of the

Union address, in which he targeted Iran as part of the so-called axis of evil. Less than a year later, Bush suspended all bilateral contacts with Iran.

The US-led coalition invaded Iraq in March 2003, and US efforts to isolate Iran escalated dramatically as the occupation of Iraq ground on. In February 2006, after two years of lobbying against Iran in the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the N's nuclear watchdog and the agency responsible for reviewing such issues, the US succeeded in convincing its allies to send the issue of Iran's nuclear power program to the Security Council, with the goal of imposing harsh new international sanctions against Iran. In response, Iran announced it was ending its voluntary special cooperation with the IAEA, a program of rigorous, intrusive inspections Tehran had agreed to for several years in hope of easing pressure from the US.⁵¹

Once the issue of Iran's nuclear program had shifted to the Security Council, the US, backed by the UK, France, and Germany and with reluctant acquiescence from Russia and China, imposed new demands on Iran, insisting that it stop enriching uranium altogether, despite its rights under the Non-Proliferation Treaty. When Iran refused to abandon its right to nuclear power, the US and its allies orchestrated two sets of economic sanctions against Iran. While the specific measures were directed toward individuals and institutions allegedly tied to Iran's nuclear enrichment efforts, the real goal was less about punishing individuals than it was about provoking Tehran and increasing overall pressure on Iran.

The Bush administration has never addressed Iran's legal right under the NPT to produce its own fuel for peaceful nuclear power. Instead it has simply claimed it doesn't trust Iran and therefore can forcibly prevent Iran's exercise of its right.

And the US continued to ratchet up pressure on Iran. By August 2007 Bush was claiming that Iran's "pursuit of technology *that could lead to nuclear weapons* threatens to put [the Middle East] *under the shadow of a nuclear holocaust*" (emphasis added). The US would, Bush threatened, "confront this danger before it is too late."⁵² This rhetoric was particularly dangerous because it was chillingly reminiscent of the orchestrated public statements of 2002, in which the president, vice president, and secretary of state all invoked the false threat of an Iraqi nuclear attack—the infamous "we don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud" remark⁵³ threatening war against Iraq—a nation that, like Iran, had no nuclear weapons program. That time the US had made good on their threat. The question hovered whether they would do it again.

Bush faced a continuing drop in support at home for the war in Iraq and was preparing for the long-expected report of Iraq commander General David Petraeus and Ambassador to Iraq Chester Crocker, to be delivered in September 2007. Despite the so-called surge that had begun earlier that year, Iraq remained in crisis, and the White House decided to shift the blame for the Iraqi failure to Iran, specifically to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Bush accused Ahmadinejad of supporting Shi'a resistance forces in Iraq through both training and weapons supplies, and said: "Iran has long been a source of trouble in the region. Iran's active pursuit of technology that could lead to nuclear weapons threatens to put a region already known for instability and violence under the shadow of a nuclear holocaust." He went on to reaffirm his commitment to "regime change," claiming that what was needed was "an Iran whose government is accountable to its people, instead of to leaders who promote terror and pursue the technology that could be used to develop nuclear weapons." Ahmadinejad responded with heated rhetoric of his own, saying that US influence in the region was collapsing so fast a power vacuum was coming soon. "Of course, we are prepared to fill the gap," he said.⁵⁴

The difference, of course, was that Ahmadinejad, while perhaps rhetorically accurate vis-a-vis US failures in Iraq, did not threaten to attack the United States. In fact, on his own the Iranian president could not threaten to attack the US, Israel, or any other country. Unlike the power-sharing arrangements of the US Constitution, Iran's president is not the commander in chief of the military and does not control its mission. Instead, according to Article 110(4) of Iran's Constitution, the "supreme leader" of the powerful clergy holds "supreme command of the armed forces." The supreme leader also has the power, according to Article 110 (5), to declare war and peace and mobilize the armed forces.⁵⁵ Throughout Ahmadinejad's presidency the supreme leader has been Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who supports the president but is far from uncritical of Ahmadinejad.

Given the well-known disagreements with Ahmadinejad among Iran's powerful elites, his offensive rhetoric has little to back it up.

US efforts to provoke Iran continued throughout 2007 and beyond. The navy increased the number of US aircraft carrier groups and destroyers in the Persian Gulf. US minesweepers were sent to the Strait of Hormuz. In January 2007 US troops in northern Iraq kidnapped five Iranian diplomats working at the request of the US-backed Iraqi government, holding them in violation of their diplomatic immunity. In fall 2006, Bush gave his Iraq commanders explicit orders to kill or capture Iranians in Iraq.⁵⁶

In February 2007 US officials in Baghdad trumpeted that they had proof Iran had provided Iraqi insurgents with weapons that had been used to kill US troops. No evidence was provided. General Peter Pace, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, denied the accusation against Iran. Just a day after high-level US military officials in Baghdad claimed that the "highest levels" in Iran were directing attacks on US troops in Iraq, Pace pulled back: "I would not say by what I know that the Iranian government clearly knows or is complicit," he said on February 12, 2007."

A month later, while the UN Security Council was again debating whether to escalate the sanctions against Iran, British military personnel on patrol in the Persian Gulf engaged in what the British Defense Ministry called "routine boarding operations of merchant shipping in Iraqi territorial waters. "The inspection regime, ostensibly designed to protect Iraqi oil terminals and go after what CBS News described as "smugglers, insurgents and terrorists,"⁵⁸ was carried out under the terms of a UN Security Council mandate. But the British patrol ship was operating in the Shaatt al-Arab waterway, which divides Iran and Iraq, and which is difficult to navigate in the best of times. These were not the best of times. Fifteen British sailors and marines were taken into custody by the Iranian navy, and held under the accusation of having been operating illegally in Iranian territorial waters. After two weeks, the British troops were released unharmed. There was speculation that the Iranian move may have been tied to growing frustration in Tehran with the US's detention of five Iranian diplomats, whom US soldiers had seized in early January in the northern Iraqi city of Irbil and had been holding ever since, even though the diplomats had been operating under the Iraqi government's authorization. What was indisputable was that neither the British nor Iranian governments attempted to ratchet up the volatile situation any further. Fear grew that in the case of a similar incident involving US troops, Washington would not hesitate to turn a controllable situation into a full-blown crisis—with incalculable military consequences.

In August US troops arrested seven more Iranian civilians, this time in Baghdad (though that group was released the next morning with an "apology" from US General Petraeus). Construction began on a large new US military base in Iraq less than five miles from the Iranian border.⁵⁹ And US pressure on its allies began to pay off. In September, French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner, former humanitarian activist and founder of Medecins sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders), warned that the world must prepare for war to oppose Iran's nuclear program.⁶⁰ The newly elected president of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, soon joined the Bush administration and his own foreign minister in calling the Iranian nuclear issue the "worst crisis in the world, and calling for more pressure on Iran to "enable us to escape an alternative that I say is catastrophic: the Iranian bomb or the bombing of Iran."⁶¹

In January 2008, when Bush made his first visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories, he again used the moment to increase pressure on Iran. Bush's trip was officially designated as a follow up on the failed Annapolis Israeli—Palestinian peace conference of the previous month, but the real (and only half-heartedly hidden) agenda had far less to do with Israel-Palestine than with Iran. Bush administration officials stated the trip's goals included the need to "clarify any confusion" regarding the US position on Iran. In other words, the need to "clarify" that the NIE's recognition that Iran did not have a nuclear weapons program would not mean an end to US threats against Iran.

Just 48 hours before Bush left for the Middle East, the high-profile but low-substance "incident" involving the Iranian speed boats in the Strait of Hormuz took place (see page 55). Among the White House officials weighing in on the seriousness of the "incident" was press secretary Dana Perino, who asserted that the boats' action "was not normal behavior." Asked whether the incident

would "bolster [the president's] intent to go over there and rally support against Iran," Perino said it was "just another point of reference for people in the region who are concerned about the behavior of Iran."⁶²

So if Iran doesn't have nuclear weapons, what is the US really so worried about?

US concern about Iran—and resulting efforts to either buy its allegiance, ensure its weakness, or destroy its military and economic capacity—did not begin with the unilateralist, militarist extremism of the George W. Bush administration. Certainly Iran's massive oil reserves make it of interest to all countries dependent on imports of foreign oil to maintain advanced industrial societies. But there are other reasons too, for Iran's centrality in US strategic planning.

Historically, Iran and Iraq were the only two countries in the Middle East with all the prerequisites to become indigenous regional powers: water, oil, and size. Water made them self-sufficient, oil provided wealth, and the size of land and population guaranteed the possibility of power. It is also not coincidental that Iran and Iraq are two of only three Middle Eastern countries (the other being Egypt) with long histories as independent nation-states. With a few border adjustments (Kuwait was once part of Iraq, Iraqi Kurdistan a more recent inclusion) the modern nations—and peoples—of Iraq and Iran grounded their histories and identities in the ancient countries of Mesopotamia and Persia respectively.

For this reason the United States viewed the 1980—1988 Iran-Iraq war as a boon, a means of seriously weakening both potential regional challengers. In 1980, Iran's neighbor and long-time competitor Iraq, led by President Saddam Hussein, eyed the new Islamist government next door, saw what appeared to be weakness, and invaded. For the US, the Iran—Iraq war, which would ultimately last eight years and cost nearly a million lives, provided a strategic opportunity. Wanting both sides to lose—or at least to maintain the damaging combat as long as possible—the US weighed in largely on the side of what appeared to be the weaker of the two, Iraq. US economic and military assistance included satellite technology to help Saddam Hussein's military direct its chemical weapons, and provision of the germs for Baghdad's (later) much-feared biological weapons program. The human toll on both sides was enormous, but Iran's losses were particularly staggering, as it sent much of a generation of young men—and eventually old men, young boys, and some women—by the tens of thousands in human waves straight into better-armed Iraqi positions. But despite its losses in the war with Iraq, Iran would soon surpass its long-time opponent. When Iraq collapsed as an independent country, following its defeat in the 1991 Gulf War, twelve years of crippling sanctions, and the 2003 US invasion and occupation, Iran reemerged as the only potential regional challenge to Washington's domination.

So the claimed US fears and resulting media frenzy over a potentially nuclear Iran must be viewed in the context of far more longstanding US concerns over Iran's decades-long efforts, similar to those of so many countries, to weaken its potential competitors and consolidate its own power and influence in the Middle East. One component of that US concern has to do with economic power and influence; certainly today the struggling US economy provides a strong motivation for unease regarding Iran, which continues to challenge the preeminence of the US dollar in the crucial global oil markets.

Writing in August 2005, oil economist William Clark described what he anticipated would be the US response to Iran's planned creation of a new oil trading market, or bourse, then anticipated for 2006. He wrote that while the official rationale for any US attack on Iran

will be premised as a consequence of Iran's nuclear ambitions, there are again unspoken macroeconomic drivers underlying the second stage of petrodollar warfare—Iran's upcoming oil bourse. ... In essence, Iran is about to commit a far greater "offense" than Saddam Hussein's conversion to the euro for Iraq's oil exports in the fall of 2000. Beginning in March 2006, the Tehran government has plans to begin competing with New-York's NYMEX and London's IPE with respect to international oil trades—using a euro-based international oil-trading mechanism. The proposed Iranian oil bourse signifies that without some sort of US intervention, the euro is going to establish a firm foothold in the international

oil trade. Given US debt levels and the stated neoconservative project of US global domination, Tehran's objective constitutes an obvious encroachment on dollar supremacy in the crucial international oil market.⁶³

Although the launch of the Iran oil bourse was delayed several times, Iran did succeed in eliminating reliance on the dollar for its oil sales. In March 2007 Japan agreed to purchase Iranian oil with yen, and by September China accepted Iran's request to purchase its crude with euros. By December 2007, as reported by the Russian press agency RIA Novosti, "Iran has stopped selling its oil for US dollars, the Iranian ISNA news agency said on Saturday... 'In line with a policy of selling crude oil in currencies other than the US dollar, the sale of our country's oil in US dollars has been completely eliminated,' ISNA reported Oil Minister Gholamhossein Nozari as saying. He also said 'the dollar is no longer a reliable currency.'⁶⁴

Even while hiding its economic concerns, by 2006 the Bush administration was no longer publicly relying solely on claims that Iran was building a nuclear weapon as the basis for its threats. The 2006 edition of the National Security Strategy document repeated the 2002 version's aggressive language in support of preventive war, but then focused more directly on other non-nuclear allegations against Iran:

the Iranian regime sponsors terrorism; threatens Israel; seeks to thwart Middle East peace; disrupts democracy in Iraq; and denies the aspirations of its people for freedom. The nuclear issue and our other concerns can ultimately be resolved only if the Iranian regime makes the strategic decision to change these policies, open up its political system, and afford freedom to its people. This is the ultimate goal of US policy. In the interim, we will continue to take *all necessary measures* to protect our national and economic security against the adverse effects of their bad conduct.⁶⁵

Again, the US was threatening direct force against Iran in the short term.

Where does oil fit into US policy toward Iran?

Oil has always been central to US relations with Iran, despite the US ban on purchasing Iranian oil since 1979. For a global power such as the US, the issue is not so much direct access to Iran's oil; the US doesn't need to import that much Iranian or indeed Middle Eastern oil in general for its own use. Far more important is maintaining control of Iran's and other countries' oil supplies: the ability to determine price and the quantity available, and to guarantee access to oil to favored friends and deny it to competitors.

Historically, it was Britain, before the US, who moved to control Iran's oil. According to analyst Antonia Juhasz,

Having no oil of their own, the British had 'gone global' more rapidly than the Americans, having laid claim to the oil of Iran, then Persia, in 1908. Persia's vast oil wealth formed the basis of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, later called the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, and later still British Petroleum, then BP. At the outset of World War I, Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty of the British Navy, railed against the monopoly power of the world's oil corporations. To overcome the control exercised by the oil companies, Churchill argued, the British government would have to get into the oil business itself. As he told the Parliament, 'We must become the owners, or at any rate the controllers, at the source of at least a proportion of the supply of natural oil which we require.' The Parliament agreed, and in 1914 the British government became majority owner of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company.⁶⁶

US oil companies became involved some years later, and from the beginning control of oil was understood as having political as well as economic advantages for Washington. In the early 1950s when Iran's Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh moved toward nationalization of Iran's oil, Britain—heavily dependent on Iranian oil and still recovering from the devastation of World War

II—was desperate for help from the US. In response, the CIA orchestrated the overthrow of the democratically elected Mossadegh in 1953 and installed the newly created shah of Iran. The State Department announced that "in the cause of defense and in the fight against communism, the five sisters [US oil companies] must be brought to Iran."⁶⁷

Despite the repressive and unpopular shah's dependency on the US for military and political support, Iran joined the OPEC cartel in 1960 and was part of the oil embargo of the early 1970s. When the shah was overthrown and the Islamic Republic of Iran established in 1979, Iran's oil was nationalized once again, and quickly embargoed by the US, although the US oil companies were still benefiting from the higher oil prices then in place around the world.

The crusade to gain control of strategic resources, especially oil, remains a hallmark of the so-called global war on terror, the Bush administration's banner covering its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, attacks on Somalia and expansion of military bases across the Middle East. Antonia Juhasz notes:

Under the rubric of the Global War on Terror, the Bush administration has implemented the greatest realignment of US forces since the end of the Cold War. One needs only a map of Big Oil's overseas operations, the world's remaining oil reserves, and oil transport routes to track the realignment and predict future deployments of the U.S. military. The greatest reserves of oil in the world are found in the Middle East. Accordingly, since taking office, the Bush administration has opened new U.S. military bases and installations in Iraq, Qatar, Kuwait, Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and a major U.S. naval base at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. A contract for a new base has been signed with Djibouti, situated to the north of Somalia across the Red Sea from Saudi Arabia. The U.S. maintains military installations in Egypt, the UAE and Oman. As former Bush White House Speech writer David Frum wrote in 2003, 'the war on terror' was designed to 'bring a new stability to the most vicious and violent quadrant of the Earth—and new prosperity to us all, by securing the world's largest pool of oil.'⁶⁸

While Iraq was the first strategic target in the Bush administration's post-September 11 "war on terror," it was not the only target. With the destruction of Iraq's oil infrastructure in the US invasion and occupation, and 2008's skyrocketing \$140+ per barrel cost of oil, reclaiming control over the oil industry remains a crucial goal for US powerbrokers and policymakers. A decade before 9/11, Paul Wolfowitz—Bush's future undersecretary of defense—outlined what would be the neo-conservative policy toward Iraq, Iran, and maybe other petro-states: "In the Middle East and Southwest Asia, our overall objective is to remain the predominant outside power in the region and preserve US and Western access to the region's oil."⁶⁹

What does Iran have to do with the US war on Iraq?

The 2003 US invasion of Iraq, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist government, and the dissolution of the Iraqi army greatly empowered Iran, by removing the most significant impediment to its quest for regional hegemony. Both Iran and Iraq had oil wealth, water, and large populations—the requisites to become indigenous powers. The two countries had historically competed to win supremacy in the Middle East, most directly and devastatingly in the Iran—Iraq war of the 1980s. The US occupation of Iraq not only destroyed that country's potential, but enabled Iran's emergence as the region's greatest indigenous power.

General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker's September 11, 2007 report on Iraq to Congress had two goals for the Bush administration. One was to shore up public support for the "surge," the 30,000 additional troops that had brought the US occupation force up to 165,000 (plus about 150,000 US-paid mercenaries). The claim that the "surge" was working was presented as "good news." But beyond the "good" news, Petraeus described the counter-balancing "troubling" news: it is increasingly apparent, he said, that Iran is trying to "fight a proxy war against the Iraqi state and coalition forces in Iraq." In answer to a reporter's query, Petraeus denied that his speech was designed to ratchet up pressure against Iran. But there was no question that demonizing Iran

was a central aim of the report. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice joined the campaign, calling Iran "a very troublesome neighbor," and her deputy, John Negroponte, weighed in with unsubstantiated allegations that Iran was providing arms to the resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan.

Petraeus's hearing was designed to fit carefully into the administration's existing anti-Iran crusade. Vice President Cheney was reported to have already proposed launching air strikes at suspected training camps in Iraq supposedly run by Iran. In the months leading up to Petraeus's appearance before Congress, a series of Iraq-based military reports blamed Iran for a variety of consequences of the illegal US occupation. In July, Brigadier General Kevin Bergner, a spokesman for the US occupation troops in Iraq, said members of Iran's Quds force had helped plan a January attack in the holy Shi'a city of Karbala, in which five US troops died.⁷⁰ But the specificity of his allegations was not backed up by any specific evidence.

By the middle of 2007, claims of Iran's "meddling" in Iraq already had become central to Washington's build-up against Iran. This rising focus on Iran and particularly the allegations of its involvement in Iraq were becoming serious concerns for the US-backed Iraqi government. Despite the massive death and destruction caused by the Iran—Iraq war, the two countries share not only a long border but an ancient shared history. The war caused enormous suffering, and inevitably strong antagonisms in both countries, but those longstanding ties appear to remain. Certainly there were always many differences—Iranian Persians speak a different language than Iraqi Arabs, the cultures vary in many ways—but there are many similarities as well. Both are modern countries that trace their roots to the earliest histories of humanity in Mesopotamia and the ancient Persian empires. Both are cosmopolitan and multicultural societies with large and diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities of which the Kurds are only the largest. And aside from the broad ties between the two countries, many Iraqi Shi'a, particularly in the southern part of the country, hold longstanding and deep political as well as personal ties to Iran. Many top officials in Iraq's parliament and government spent their years of exile in Iran during Saddam Hussein's regime, and many had married Iranians. The prominent Iraqi cleric Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who was actually born in Iran, remains perhaps the most influential voice among Iraqi Shi'a, particularly in southern Iraq, and has maintained close ties to Tehran throughout the years of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. In mid-2007, in what was widely seen as a shift away from Iran and toward a more overtly Iraqi national identity, the political party with which Sistani is most closely identified, SCIRI (Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq), changed its name to the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council. But the party remains simultaneously closely allied with Iran and influential within the US-backed Iraqi government, and Sistani is respected throughout Iraq. In August 2007, a senior Iraqi official in Baghdad reported that his government received regular US intelligence briefings about suspected Iranian activities. He worried that the US was "becoming more focused on Iranian influence inside Iraq," he said. "And we don't want Iraq to become a zone of conflict between Iran and the U.S."⁷¹

But Iraq already is part of that "zone of conflict." In a clearly provocative move, the US announced in September 2007 that it was beginning construction on the newest US military base in Iraq, to be built less than five miles from the Iranian border.⁷² US officials often claim, without evidence, that Iran is leading a rising "Shi'a crescent" that threatens the stability of Arab regimes across the Middle East, but there is no doubt that Iran is actually very concerned about the violence and instability in Iraq and the permanent US military deployment on its western border. In fact, with the US occupation of Iraq and the US-dominated NATO occupation of Afghanistan, as well as a massive US troop deployment in Turkey and US special forces operating not-so-secretly in Pakistan, Iran remains largely surrounded by US and allied military troops.

After the December 2007 release of the National Intelligence Estimate that found that Iran did not have a nuclear weapons program, many in the Middle East, even Arab leaders who had been longstanding clients of Washington began to distance themselves from the Bush administration's anti-Iran crusade.

In February 2008 Iranian President Ahmadinejad paid a state visit to Baghdad, the first Iranian president to enter Iraq since the Iran—Iraq war ended twenty years before. Although clearly major security arrangements were in place, Ahmadinejad's drive from the airport to Baghdad and other

cities, his seemingly leisurely strolls through markets and into mosques, were deliberately orchestrated to contrast with the high-security secrecy that characterized all of Bush's brief visits to Iraq, where he huddled in a US military base for a few hours and scurried out. Even pro-government (and thus pro-US) UAE newspapers described how

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad appeared happy and proud during his recent visit to Iraq. It was clearly harvest time for the president, whose visit marked the success of Iran's strategy in the previous five years. Ahmadinejad was the first president, other than US President George W. Bush, to visit Iraq since the US invasion, but the visits of the two presidents could not have been more different. While Bush's three visits to the country were kept secret, the Iranian president's visit was highly publicised. He arrived in Baghdad and toured the city openly. ... Ahmadinejad had a message, which is that politics and strategy can achieve much more than war. His visit to Iraq successfully conveyed his message, and achieved what could not be achieved through an eight-year war between Iraq and Iran that claimed the lives of more than a million people, caused over \$ 1 trillion in losses to the economies of both countries and left behind a legacy of destruction. The visit also established the growing Iranian influence in Iraq... [and] confirms beyond doubt that Iran is the most effective player among Iraq's neighbours.⁷³

Aside from sectarian and broader regional affinities, Iran's \$2 billion annual trade -with Iraq was likely part of the reason for the popularity of Ahmadinejad's tour. The Iranian president's visit also represented a serious challenge to US control of the Iraqi government, reminding Washington that while the officials may have been elected under the protection of the US occupation, many of them have even longer-standing ties to Tehran. Washington has not yet recognized that reality. As it ends the US occupation of Iraq—which remains an urgent necessity—the US will have to come to terms with the close ties between the two nations and the fact that Iran will be involved in and with Iraq in the future.

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