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# CSS Papers

*The War of Words and  
the National Intelli-  
gence Estimate Puzzle:  
A Wider Perspective  
on the US Confronta-  
tion with Iran*

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## *Abstract*

This study aims to assess the impact of the December 2007 National Intelligence Estimate on tensions between Iran and the United States. Taking the approach that public diplomacy is being used as a political tool by the United States, Iran, and other concerned parties to the issue, we explore public diplomacy and strategy in order to yield insight into the motivations of the various actors and the possible outcomes of the crisis.

## Introduction

On a wide range of issues, the United States finds its interests, policies, and goals in significant opposition to those of Iran. Concerns including the Global War on Terror (GWOT), US hegemony in the Middle East, nuclear proliferation, and the occupation of Iraq implicate both countries in an unhappy struggle. Various developments, including the labeling of Iran as a member of an “axis of evil” in 2002, have led observers to conclude that war between the two nations is now likely, primarily in order to prevent the Iranian regime from acquiring nuclear weapons. The release of the NIE in December 2007 has caused many to speculate that the potential for war has lessened. This study aims to assess what impact, if any, the NIC report has had on the developing confrontation between the United States and Iran.

Our approach is partly based on the assumption that rhetoric and public diplomacy form part of the strategy of the United States and other concerned parties on this issue<sup>1</sup>. For example, a united show of support for the American position from the international community is much more likely to elicit a constructive response from Tehran, while ambivalence over the potential for an Iranian nuclear weapon may lead to a failure to institute sanctions. If sanctions were to fail, international and/or domestic distaste for further war may well discourage the United States from strikes against Iran’s nuclear facilities. Thus, comments from Bush Administration officials form a key part of the US confrontation with Iran. Our approach is careful not to take official pronouncements as literal statements of internal calculations. Rather, we see them as actions in themselves, designed to work towards goals that may be discerned through careful and properly contextualised analysis.

A major concern for the United States since 9/11 has been the GWOT, and the need to curtail terrorist activity has been invoked in order to justify (both domestically and internationally) the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the continuing confrontation with Iran. The full extent to which Iran deserves US censure on this front is difficult to discern. While Iran has openly funded Hamas<sup>2</sup>, and provided rhetorical support for Hezbollah in its conflict with Israel<sup>3</sup>, Tehran denies US allegations that it has provided weapons to Hezbollah and has connections with Al Qaeda<sup>4</sup>. For many in the US, such denials only seem to perpetuate and deepen their suspicions about Iranian intentions<sup>5</sup>, with the recent Hezbollah-Israel conflict even being popularly identified as a proxy war between Iran and the US. In Iraq, “Iran has built an impressive network of allies and clients, ranging from intelligence operatives, armed militias, and gangs to, most visibly, politicians in various Iraqi Shiite parties” since the US-led invasion in 2003<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> See the Editorials & Opinions in *The Wall Street Journal*, Monday February 11th 2008. The article articulates how in front of the Senate Intelligence Committee, the Director of National Intelligence, Admiral Michael McConnell, defended the ‘integrity and professionalism’ of the Intelligence Community following the ‘key judgments’ made by the NIE of 2005, which since the release of the 2007 NIE, have been established as inaccurate. In being described as a ‘PR fiasco’, the article highlights how the first NIE was an attempt to undermine US policy in so much that it could actually be dictated to go in a certain direction.

<sup>2</sup> BBC (22 February 2006). “Iran Offers Hamas Financial Aid Wednesday”.

<sup>3</sup> Sciolino (19 July 2006). “Iran Backs Hezbollah in Lebanon,” *International Herald Tribune*.

<sup>4</sup> Muir (25 May 2003). “Analysis: US-Iran Rift Widens,” BBC.

<sup>5</sup> Sciolino (19 July 2006). “Iran Backs Hezbollah in Lebanon,” *International Herald Tribune*.

<sup>6</sup> Nasr (2006). “When the Shiites Rise,” *Foreign Affairs*.

While the American perspective understandably sees Iranian intervention in Iraq as a major obstacle in the GWOT, it is possible to view Iranian policy on Iraq as having a strong defensive element. In the light of hostile rhetoric from the United States, and the recent invasion and occupation of two of its neighbours, the American threat appears to have prompted Iran to “regard Iraq as its first line of defence”<sup>1</sup> and sponsor insurgent activity in its neighbour “as a way to keep the U.S. government bogged down and so dampen its enthusiasm for seeking regime change in Iran”<sup>2</sup>. At the time of publication, Iranian co-operation with the insurgency in Iraq appears to have been suspended, an issue which we will explore later in the study.

Nuclear proliferation is a related concern. While it is beyond question that Iran has made some efforts towards the development nuclear weapons, Iran publicly argues that its intentions are peaceful, and oriented towards nuclear energy rather than nuclear missiles. The US rhetoric often goes to the other extreme, many within the Bush Administration being reluctant to acknowledge any non-military objectives of Iran’s nuclear activity. While the truth is likely to be somewhere in between the two positions, fear amongst Iran’s neighbours over its nuclear ambitions seems to be damaging US counter-proliferation goals in the Middle East<sup>3</sup>.

The overall effect of confrontation in these areas is the widespread perception within the US that Iran is consistently and deliberately working against U.S. interests in the region on everything from Israel to Iraq<sup>4</sup>. That Iran should be seen as a major obstacle to US hegemony in a region which remains vital to both its energy and security policies makes the US approach to Iran a major concern for American policy-makers.

Following 9/11, Iran made significant overtures to the United States with the aim of improving their relationship. After large numbers of Iranians had participated in public events designed to express sympathy for the victims of 9/11, and Iran had offered logistical support for the United States in its invasion of Afghanistan, it was hoped by some within the Iranian regime that a new basis for co-operation now existed between the two countries, hope which was significantly undermined by the 2002 “axis of evil” comments from President Bush<sup>5</sup>. Following the successful invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran initially responded to its perceived vulnerability by making a more direct attempt to develop healthier relations with the US. In a 2003 letter to the United States, “Iran appeared willing to put everything on the table - including being completely open about its nuclear programme, helping to stabilise Iraq, ending its support for Palestinian militant groups and help in disarming Hezbollah”<sup>6</sup>, a potential opportunity which was again passed up by the United States. Thus, while the NIE Report appears to have lessened the tensions between the United States and Iran, longstanding grievances indicate that perhaps some of the recent optimism over the US-Iranian confrontation needs careful consideration. We will proceed firstly by reviewing and examining the NIE report, before moving on to analyse its impact on the confrontation between the United States and Iran.

<sup>1</sup> Ehteshami (2003). “Iran-Iraq relations after Saddam,” *The Washington Quarterly*.

<sup>2</sup> Nasr (2006). “When the Shiites Rise,” *Foreign Affairs*.

<sup>3</sup> Reynolds (25 September 2006). “Concern over Middle East Nuclear Plans,” BBC.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance former Democratic Vice-Presidential Nominee Joseph Lieberman’s views on the issue. Lieberman (6 July 2007). “Iran’s Proxy War. Tehran is on the Offensive against Us throughout the Middle East. Will Congress Respond?,” *The Wall Street Journal*.

<sup>5</sup> Corera (25 September 2006). “Iran’s Gulf of Misunderstanding with US,” BBC News.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*.

## *Assessing the Assessment: The Motives and Implications of the National Intelligence Estimate*

It began to emerge in late 2002 that Iran had been operating a uranium enrichment program without the knowledge of the International Atomic Energy Agency. Although Iran claims only to be developing nuclear power, uranium enrichment technology could contribute to the development of nuclear weapons, and Iran's secrecy over the issue has aroused international suspicions over the nature of the program. Led primarily by the United States, there has been a gradual build-up of tension on this issue: two rounds of sanctions against Iran have been passed by the United Nations, in addition to unilateral sanctions enacted by the United States, and the US has officially declared Iran's Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist organization. However, the release last December (2007) of a declassified United States intelligence report by the National Intelligence Council (NIC) claiming that Iran had put its nuclear weapons program on hold in 2003, seemingly weakened the arguments that Iran represented an nuclear threat. This section offers an analysis of the NIE, aiming to provide insight into the motives of the Intelligence Community (IC) and the impact of the report it produced. To these ends, we assess the reactions of the US Administration and the International Community, and explore the IC perspective on the future outcomes of the Iranian nuclear crisis.

The NIE (2007) report was, as it states, "an extensive re-examination of the issues raised in the May 2005 assessment"<sup>1</sup>, and there are both similarities and differences between the two reports. The 2007 report presents a more equivocal view of Iranian nuclear proliferation, using words such as "assess, judge, etc." which may indicate a lack of complete confidence in the estimate. This might reflect a sense within the IC that a reversal will be needed. Alternatively, this may be the result of a change in the process of producing the NIE: it now requires some of its members to submit "formal assessments" of the credibility of the sources upon which "critical judgements" have been based<sup>2</sup>.

The 2007 report directly contradicts the 2005 NIE, which assessed with "high confidence" that Iran was determined to have a nuclear weapon and was working hard towards this end. The 2007 report is less certain about the intentions of Tehran, acknowledging its desire for nuclear power, but calling into question its desire for nuclear weapons: Iran's

*"decision to halt its nuclear weapons program suggests it is less determined to develop nuclear weapons than we have been judging since 2005. Our assessment is that the program probably was halted primarily in response to international pressure and suggests Iran may be more vulnerable to influence on the issue than we judged previously."*

Contrary to previous suspicions, then, Iran "is not immobile," i.e. is susceptible to international pressures.

<sup>1</sup> NIC (November 2007). "National Intelligence Estimate. Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities".

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*

While the 2007 NIE acknowledges a non-military Iranian nuclear program (against previous US reluctance to do so), and confirms that the weaponisation program has been suspended, the 2007 report agrees with its predecessor in an important respect. According to the IC, Iran “probably would be technically capable of producing enough [highly enriched uranium] for a weapon sometime during the 2010-2015 time frame”, but is unlikely to achieve this goal before 2013 “because of foreseeable technical and programmatic problems”<sup>1</sup>.

Since the report, the IC have been accused of overstepping their non-political role and consciously attempting to delegitimise an attack on Iran in order to prevent war (US Ambassador to the United Nations, John Bolton was amongst this number)<sup>2</sup>. It is true that the NIE has had an impact on US thinking over the Iran confrontation. As Farhi stated, “the NIE has changed everything, in light of the assessment, any reference to Iran as an imminent threat simply reminds everyone of the false allegations about Iraq and its WMD programme”<sup>3</sup>. However, if the NIE have crafted the document with a view to its potential impact, then this may not necessarily indicate that the IC is opposed to war. A report which distances the IC from the Bush Administration line on Iran may go some way towards restoring the credibility it lost over the Iraqi *Weapons of Mass Destruction* issue, while the public release could mean the IC has lost trust in the Administration’s use of intelligence.

Despite the IC’s reassuring comments on the potential for an Iranian nuclear weapon, the US has retained valid reasons to continue its firm stance towards Iran: although the report states that the nuclear weapons program was halted in fall 2003, it could easily be restarted. The US remains committed to emphasising that strikes remain an option, even as the report challenges pre-existing assumptions about Iran’s development of nuclear technology. US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates is representative of the Bush Administration when he declares that “with a government of this nature, only a united front of nations will be able to exert enough pressure to make Iran abandon its nuclear aspirations...with this regime, we must also keep all options on the table”<sup>4</sup>. However, when we carefully examine the stated positions of US officials, it is possible to discern a measured, but significant, change in approach. In the next chapter, we seek to demonstrate this and assess the implications.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid

<sup>2</sup> Bolton (6 December 2007). “The Flaws In the Iran Report,” Washington Post

<sup>3</sup> Farhi (December 2007). “The U.S. and Iran After the NIE,” MIT.

<sup>4</sup> Petersen (18 October 2007). “Russia, Iran Harden Against West,” The Christian Science Monitor.

## *The Impact of the NIE on the US Position*

In speeches given during his nine-day visit to the Middle East in January 2008, the Iranian nuclear issue was high on the agenda of US President George W. Bush. Reiterating the American view of Iran as the “world’s leading state sponsor of terror”, Bush declared that “Iran’s actions threaten the security of nations everywhere”, and urged American allies to take the threat seriously<sup>1</sup>. These remarks are characteristic of the dramatic, hostile nature of US rhetoric on the issue of Iran over the last several years. However, we argue that a distinct change has occurred in the public position of the United States in the wake of the NIE report which may reflect an underlying change in strategy.

### *Before the NIE: Escalating Tensions*

While the tone of Bush Administration pronouncements on Iran has been hostile for some time, the extent to which diplomatic versus military options have been emphasized has varied over the course of the confrontation. In September 2006 near the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, at a speech on the War on Terror President Bush stated that “the international community has made a reasonable proposal to Iran’s leaders, and given them the opportunity to set their nation on a better course. It’s time for Iran’s leader to make a different choice. And we’ve made our choice. We’ll continue to work closely with our allies to find a diplomatic solution”<sup>2</sup>. A year later in October 2007, key figures within the Bush administration are more inclined to emphasise the urgency of the danger represented by Iran, which, according to U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, “constitute[s] perhaps the single greatest challenge for American security interests in the Middle East”. Washington’s preparedness to impose serious consequences on Iran was again echoed in December by US Defence Secretary Robert Gates, who argued that Iran could start its nuclear weapons programme “at any time”, and remains a serious threat to the region. Such statements form part of an effort to increase diplomatic pressure on Tehran, and for many in the Bush administration such remarks may also serve to prospectively legitimise, domestically and internationally, future military action against Iran.

Those within the Bush Administration who favoured military action appeared to be winning the argument last August 2007, when the US designated the Revolutionary Guards Corps as a terrorist organization. This was the first time the United States government had classified the military of a foreign government as a terrorist organization<sup>3</sup>. Its classification allows the government under American law to freeze assets and obstruct funding of any foreign businesses that support it. More significantly, the declaration, which passed through Congress, prospectively legitimises an attack, and sends a signal that the United States wishes to see quick progress from Iran.

<sup>1</sup> Gulf News (13 January 2008), “Iran Worlds Leading State Sponsor of Terrorism, says Bush”.

<sup>2</sup> “Iran was dangerous, Iran is dangerous, and Iran will be dangerous if they have the knowledge necessary to make a nuclear weapon?” The White House (5 September 2006). “President Discusses Global War on Terror,” Capital Hilton Hotel Speech.

<sup>3</sup> DPA (24 October 2007). “Iran Poses Biggest Threat to U.S., Rice Says”.

Remarks from General David Petraeus and others elaborating on Iran's involvement in Iraq may also be designed to legitimise potential military action. According to Petraeus, "there is no question about the connection between Iran and these components"<sup>1</sup>. The US has directly accused Iran of providing training and weapons, especially missiles and sophisticated roadside bombs known as explosively formed penetrators (EFPs) to Iraqi Shi'ite militia. Moreover, Petraeus recently identified the Iranian ambassador to Iraq as a Quds force member, declaring that "there should be no question about the malign, lethal involvement and activities of the Quds force in this country"<sup>2</sup>.

Comments emphasising Iranian involvement in Iraq appear especially calculated after opinion polling which indicated that this may be one of the only issues which would engender sufficient domestic support for military action against Iran. There is little appetite for another war in the Middle East, and domestic support for President Bush is low: a recent Washington Post poll<sup>3</sup> found that nearly 60% of Americans felt that the war in Iraq was not worth fighting and that only 33% approved of the job that Bush was doing. Moreover, only 23% of Americans felt that President Bush was taking the country in the right direction. On the specific issue of Iran, there is a general lack of urgency over the threat it represents, even while polls indicate a lack of trust of Iran's intentions. A large majority of Americans (nearly 77%) believe that Iran is trying to acquire nuclear weapons, 80% believe that Iran's pursuit of nuclear energy is motivated by military and not peaceful means, and 82% of Americans believe that Iran is directly supporting the insurgency against American forces in Iraq. Despite this high level of correspondence between Washington's line and public attitudes, only 29% of Americans currently support direct confrontation. Polls indicate that in the event that Iran was proven to be supporting insurgents in Iraq, this figure would rise to 55%<sup>4</sup>.

Last October, Washington again escalated its confrontation with Tehran when they imposed strict economic sanctions on Iran - the harshest American sanctions against Iran since the 1979 revolution. Rice justified the sanctions with a long list of perceived Iranian transgressions: "Iran was pursuing nuclear technologies that could lead to a nuclear weapon, building dangerous ballistic missiles, supporting Shi'a militants and terrorists in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories... [and] denying the existence of a fellow member of the United Nations"<sup>5</sup>. While the sanctions also add to the pressure on Iran, they come amidst Washington's frustration at the unwillingness of the international community to agree upon what it sees as sufficiently severe action against Iran. In that sense they are a measure of US diplomatic weakness on the issue of Iranian nuclear proliferation as well as a signal of the seriousness with which the United States approaches the issue of Iranian nuclear proliferation.

<sup>1</sup> Carrels (7 October 2007). "Gen. Petraeus Steps Up Accusations Against Iran," NPR.

<sup>2</sup> BBC (7 October 2007). "US Accuses Iran's Envoy to Iraq".

<sup>3</sup> Balz and Cohen (4 November 2007). "Poll Finds Americans Pessimistic, Want Change," The Washington Post.

<sup>4</sup> See CNN/Opinion Research Corporation (Poll, 12-14 October 2007). "Iran", and NBC/Wall Street Journal (Poll, 2-5 March 2007). "2003-2007 Polls and Surveys of Americans and Iraqis on the U.S.-Iraq War and Related Issues. Polls Taken of Americans".

<sup>5</sup> Harnden and McElroy (25 October 2007). "U.S. Imposes Strict Economic Sanctions on Iran," The Telegraph.

### *After the NIE Report: Subtle Changes in the American Approach*

The American press and public appeared generally relieved after the release of the NIE. The revelation that Iran suspended its nuclear weapons programme four years ago indicated that it remains frozen gave many the impression that the possibility of war had receded. Bush Administration statements immediately following the NIE welcomed the finding, the President's national security advisor Stephen Hadley declaring the NIE to be "positive news rather than reflecting intelligence mistakes"<sup>1</sup>. Most prominently, however, US officials emphasised those aspects of the report which gave support to their hawkish position on Iran. Hadley was one of a number of US officials who argued that Iran's decision to halt its nuclear weapons program was in direct response to international pressure and proves the success of the Bush Administration's Iran policy. President Bush also asserted that the NIE, in confirming that Iran had attempted to develop nuclear weapons, supported his position that Iran represented a global threat:

*"We know that they're still trying to learn how to enrich uranium. We know that enriching uranium is an important step in a country who wants to develop a weapon. We know they had a program...I think it is very important for the international community to recognize the fact that if Iran were to develop the knowledge that they could transfer to a clandestine program it would create a danger for the world. And so I view this report as a warning signal that they had the program, they halted the program. And the reason why it's a warning signal is that they could restart it"<sup>2</sup>.*

In spite of these responses, the NIE report has in the short term undermined the position of those in the Bush administration who would prefer to see decisive military action on the Iran issue, undermining the legitimacy of a pre-emptive strike. Furthermore, there is evidence to indicate that the NIE (in addition to intelligence indicating a decrease in Iranian involvement in Iraq) may have encouraged the US administration to carefully begin to modify its position on Iran. While aggressive and alarmist public statements regarding Iran from US officials continued, important US officials also began to speak of the possibility of more normal relations between the two countries.

Approximately one month after the NIE report, General Petraeus approved that Iran's leaders were no longer supplying weapons or training to Islamic militants in Iraq. He believed that Iran had followed through on assurances it made to Iraqi and U.S. officials last during 2007 not to assist extremists in Iraq. Col. Steven Boylan, adding to this, claimed that other U.S. officials have noted declines in Iranian weapons and funds to Iraqi insurgents: "We are ready to confirm the excellence of the senior Iranian leadership in their pledge to stop the funding, training, equipment and resourcing of the militia special groups"<sup>3</sup>. David M. Satterfield, Iraq coordinator and senior adviser to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, concurred, noting that "the decline in overall attacks [on coalition troops] has to be attributed to an Iranian policy decision." Crocker said that the decision, "should [Tehran] choose to corroborate it in a direct fashion," would be "a good beginning" for a fourth round of talks between Crocker and his Iranian counterpart in Baghdad.

<sup>1</sup> Mazzetti (3 December 2007) "US Says Iran Ended Atomic Arms Work," The New York Times.

<sup>2</sup> The White House (4 December 2007), "Press Conference by the President".

<sup>3</sup> Carter (3 January 2008), "Iran No Longer Aids Iraq Militants," The Washington Times.

Described as having articulated “some of the warmest language Washington has employed Iran” by the Washington Post<sup>1</sup>, Crocker also suggested that Iran may be behind a “ceasefire by Iraqi Shi’ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, and furthermore, that the ceasefire had stuck”. This is a significant development given the centrality of Iranian involvement in Iraq to the perceived legitimacy of a pre-emptive strike against Iran.

Condoleeza Rice also sounded a positive note in the same month, affirming that the US does not want Tehran to be a “permanent enemy”, stating: the “Iranians are a proud people with a great culture, and we respect the contributions they have made to world civilisation...we could begin negotiations, and we could work over time to build a new, more normal relationship”<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> DeYoung (23 December 2007). “Iran Cited In Iraq’s Decline in Violence Order From Tehran Reined In Militias, U.S. Official Says,” The Washington Post.  
<sup>2</sup> Press TV (24 January 2008). “Rice: Iran not a ‘permanent enemy’”.

## *Assessing the Responses of Other Actors: Iran, Israel and the UN Security Council*

*Before the NIE: Constructing an Image of Defiance*

Tehran's responses to repeated accusations that they are seeking to develop nuclear weapons are often forceful, portraying Iran as unwaveringly defiant and united in the face of US aggression, and declaring that should the US invade there will be dire consequences for its interests. The Revolutionary Guard Corps' joint staff operational officer Ali Fazli declared on October 30, 2007 that

*"the achievements resulting from the progress of Iran's military cannot be compared to previous; Iran has the capability to manufacture, and launch, missiles with a range of 2,000 km. America lacks the courage to attack Iran, but if it does carry out such a silly act and launches an attack of any kind, Iran's response will break its teeth, and the U.S. will no longer be the one to finish the incident."*<sup>1</sup>

Khameini's chief armed forces advisor, Yahya Rahim Safavi, was more explicit, declaring that in the event of an American attack, Iran would strike U.S. forces stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan and reiterating that despite the "great deal of political and diplomatic pressure [being applied] to Iran... they must know that Iran will never surrender"<sup>2</sup>.

In public statements, the Iranian president has attempted to play down the likelihood of a Western attack or of additional sanctions on Iran; saying that "if they want to attack Iran, they must know that they are the ones who will be hurt by doing so...The Great Iranian Nation is not worried about their angry faces and their sanctions"<sup>3</sup>. That the President does not wish to take seriously, in public, the idea of an American invasion, is somewhat unsurprising. To encourage an interpretive frame of a strong, proud, unified Iran that stands up to its more powerful enemy may help to rally support for the government from within the country. Ahmadinejad's statements may be inaccurate, however, as the President is increasingly seen by the Iranian public as having failed to deliver on the populist platform<sup>4</sup> on which he won the 2005 Presidential election and he may not be re-elected in 2009.

<sup>1</sup> Sepah Bozorgtar Az Tassavore Amrikast (27 August 2006). "The Guard Is Greater than the United States Imagines," Sobh-e Sadeq (Tehran).

<sup>2</sup> Mansharof and Savyon (23 September 2007). "Iran's Response to Western Warnings: <First Strike> <Preemptive Attack> <Long-Range Ballistic Missiles, <Asymmetric [Guerrilla] Warfare>," MEHR news agencies interview.

<sup>3</sup> Mansharof and Savyon (7 November 2007). "Iran's Response to Western Warnings," MEHR news agencies interview with the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

<sup>4</sup> Burke (29 July 2007). "A President Under Pressure," The Guardian.

Portraying Iran as a unified actor whose government enjoys popular legitimacy also provides a disincentive for countries considering taking action against it. To portray Iran as susceptible to coercive diplomacy is merely to provide encouragement to those parties who are considering taking such action, even if pronouncements such as “the Iranian nation could not care less about the sanctions...the Iranian nation will never back down, even one iota”<sup>1</sup> may appear overly dramatic.

### *After the NIE Report*

Iran’s attempts to frame the conflict have been both helped and hindered by the recent National Intelligence Estimate report on Iranian nuclear proliferation. Tehran has attempted to frame the NIE as a complete vindication of its nuclear policy, Iranian Government Spokesman Gholam Hoseyn Elham even calling the NIE a “US Government confession of its mistakes”<sup>2</sup>. Though the Iranian reaction has been triumphant (with one regime figure claiming “if you want to negotiate with us as an enemy, the Iranian people will resist and will conquer you”<sup>3</sup>), it is on two points highly inconsistent with Iran’s self-portrayal. Firstly, despite Tehran’s insistence upon its own intransigence, the report claims that Iran’s change of direction in 2003 was a response to diplomacy. Secondly, the report identifies Iran as having made concrete moves towards the development of nuclear weapons, rather than simply nuclear power.

Despite these problems, Iran has pursued its own strategic advantage in the wake of the NIE report. In hailing the report as “a victory for the Iranian nation in the nuclear issue against all international powers”<sup>4</sup>, and proudly hailing the progress of Iran’s non-military nuclear program President Ahmadinejad appears to be attempting to derive domestic legitimacy from the report. In addition, Tehran has tried to dampen appetites for confrontation within the US and international community, specifically urging European nations to “adopt fair approaches, make just judgments, and choose logical solutions”<sup>5</sup>. Iran clearly recognises that it would now be difficult for the US to justify immediate military action towards Iran and appears to wish to consolidate its position.

1 Blair (11 August 2007). “Ahmadinejad: Nuclear Programme <Irreversible>.” The Telegraph.

2 Cole, (5 December 2007) “International Reaction to the NIE: OSC,” Informed Comment

3 BBC (5 December 2007). “Nuclear Report a Victory – Iran”.

4 Transcript available from BBC (5 December 2007). “Nuclear Report a Victory – Iran”.

5 Cole, J. “International Reaction to the NIE: OSC,” Informed Comment, 5 December 2007

## *Israel*

After repeated calls from President Ahmadinejad for Israel to be wiped off the map<sup>1</sup>, it is unsurprising that the Jewish state considers Iran a major threat to its security. Israeli and American officials have met several times to consider military action, and the Israeli government has warned repeatedly that it will never allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons, even if it has to act unilaterally on the issue. Responding to the NIE report, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said that his working assumption would not change: "Iran is continuing its uranium enrichment policy which will enable it to acquire the knowledge required to produce nuclear weapons." For Israel, Iran was and remains dangerous and Olmert has advised that the threat remains very serious, arguing that the international community must still apply pressure on Iran: "even according to the NIE report, it is likely to accumulate sufficient amounts to create nuclear weapons by 2010. There is no disagreement regarding these facts, and therefore there is no reason to change the assessments Israel has made the entire time regarding the danger involved in the continuation of these activities"<sup>2</sup>.

In January 2008, Israeli forces carried out what was called a successful test launch of a long-range missile capable of carrying a nuclear warhead, a clear show of strength to Iran. According to Tim Butcher of the Telegraph newspaper, Israel has begun, and apparently finished, a programme to extend the range of its existing Jericho-2 ground attack missiles. The Jericho-3 is planned to have a range of 4000km which brings all of Iran within range. Ahmadinejad's response was to declare that Israel "would not dare attack Iran". and that "the Iranian response would make them regret it, and they know this"<sup>3</sup>.

## *Security Council*

Since the NIE report, UN sanctions have taken a more prominent role in attempts to modify Iran's behaviour. As the United Kingdom, France, and Germany attempt to push for a third round of sanctions, and both the NIC and IAEA conclude that Iran is not currently developing nuclear weapons, threats from the Bush Administration to engage in military action have less credibility. As it has been shown that there is not an imminent Iranian threat, the US has, at present, no legitimate reason to insist upon a pre-emptive strike. With doubts emerging over the legitimacy and wisdom of a military solution, the NIE report has somewhat undermined the US threat of force. While this may encourage the administration to prioritise sanctions, diplomacy and engagement with the International Community as solutions to the conflict, the eventual outcome remains unpredictable. China and Russia gained a much stronger hand after the report and thereafter, were persistent about their objection about a third round of sanctions to be applied on Iran.

<sup>1</sup> See for instance RTT News (30 January 2008). "Iran's Ahmadinejad Says Israel's Days Are Numbered".

<sup>2</sup> MFA (11 December 2007). "Address by PM Olmert to Institute for National Security Studies," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>3</sup> Butcher (19 January 2008). "Israel test-launches nuclear-capable missile," The Daily Telegraph.

## *France and Britain*

The United States has received considerable support from its European allies over the issue of Iranian nuclear proliferation. Britain remains predictably loyal: since the summer, Prime Minister Gordon Brown has pushed for stronger sanctions to target Iran's oil and gas industries, although he has demurred from making dramatic pronouncements on the issue. Less predictably, French President Nicolas Sarkozy has also offered strong backing for the American position. This is a departure from the stance of predecessor Jacques Chirac, who had suggested that an Iranian nuclear weapon would not pose a major threat<sup>1</sup> (although this was later retracted). While Chirac had given less than full backing to the American view on Iranian sanctions, in 2006 suggesting that UN Security Council Action be shelved while negotiations were in progress<sup>2</sup>, Sarkozy's approach has emphasized the need for the international community to unite to take swift action. For Sarkozy, a nuclear-armed Iran would be "unacceptable", and, though the President himself acknowledged that either "the Iranian bomb or the bombing of Iran" would represent disaster, his foreign minister has issued a blunt warning (strongly condemned by Iran) that "Europe must prepare for war if Tehran continues to flout international demands to stop producing nuclear fuel"<sup>3</sup>. As a member of the UN Security Council and a leading opponent of the US-led invasion of Iraq, it is significant that France has joined Britain and the United States in having a firm stance on the issue of Iranian nuclear proliferation.

The NIE report appeared to have little effect on France and Britain. Along with Germany, they maintained, as previously, that until Tehran suspends uranium enrichment, the negotiations for a third UNSC resolution will continue. Official statements called for maintaining international pressure on Iran, pointing to the positive effects of the sanctions to date.

Understandably, relations between Iran and France have suffered due to France's public concern over Iranian nuclear proliferation, a matter which does not appear to have been eased by the release of the NIE report. Weeks before the NIE report, Sarkozy received a belligerent letter from Ahmadinejad claiming he was "blunt and full of veiled threats," as well as "young and inexperienced" and "destroying the long-standing relations between Iran and France and undermining their joint interests, [which] could lead to unfortunate results"<sup>4</sup>. Relations continued to deteriorate after the NIE release. In February 2008, the Iranian ambassador to France was summoned to explain anti-Israeli remarks made by President Ahmadinejad, with Tehran then responding in kind<sup>5</sup>.

1 Associated Press (1 February 2007). «Chirac Dismisses Iran Nuclear Threat, Then Retracts.» Washington Post.

2 LeFifield and Penketh (19 September 2006). «Chirac calls for threat of Iran sanctions to be lifted.» The Independent

3 Bittermann (18 September 2007). «Iran Anger over French War Warning.» CNN.

4 MEMRI (25 January 2008). «Iranian Journalist to Ahmadinejad: 'You Should Learn from Sarkozy'» citing an article by Al-Sharq Al-Aswat (London), published on 18 November 2007. Footnote 1 further explains: «Ahmadinejad's letter was not published in the media. Hamid Reza Haji Babai, member of the Majlis Presidential Committee and of the Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, objected to the tone of the letter, and to the "personal insults such as 'young and inexperienced'» aimed at Sarkozy. Aftab (Iran), November 17, 2007.»

5 Farmani (3 February 2008). «Iran Summons French Envoy as Relations Chill.» Middle East Times.

## *Russia*

Russian President Vladimir Putin claims that he opposes Iranian nuclear weapons but has seen little evidence that Tehran is pursuing them<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, Moscow argues that since the United States does not invest in or trade with Iran, Russia would bear the brunt of any new sanctions that would interfere with its nuclear trade with Iran and arms sales. When Putin visited Tehran in October 2007, he is reported to have told Iranian Supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini that Russia was ready to “expand ties without limitations”<sup>2</sup>. In a veiled warning to the US not to attack Iran, Putin said “we should not even think of using force in this region”<sup>3</sup>.

In the wake of the NIE report, Russia resumed nuclear fuel shipments to Iran’s main nuclear facility in Bushehr. Under a bilateral intergovernmental contract, Russia is set to deliver a total of 82 metric tons of nuclear fuel divided into eight shipments, monitored by the IAEA. Putin’s recent visit to Tehran adds to the sense that little change can be expected from Russia on this issue.

## *China*

As with Russia, China also have significant economic interests in Iran which appear to be discouraging them from applying strict sanctions against the country. This has led the US to lament that China often seems more intent on blocking U.S. leadership than on containing Iran. China has twice supported UN sanctions against Iran but has been reluctant to support a third, tougher round of sanctions.

1 Griffiths (10 October 2007). “No Evidence of Iranian Nuclear Bomb Plan: Putin” ABC News

2 Radyuhin (7 January 2008). “Russia-Iran Ties on the Upswing,” The Hindu.

3 Petersen (18 October 2007). “Russia, Iran Harden Against West,” The Christian Science Monitor.

## *Conclusion*

The purpose of this work has been to analyse the developing confrontation between the United States and Iran, specifically using the impact of the NIE Report, by examining the responses from, and strategy of, crucial parties to the issue.

We have seen that the US frequently frames Iran as intransigent, irrational, and as a threat, not just to the region or US interests, but to all nations. Iran is equally hostile in its responses to US rhetoric. While American statements emphasising the threat posed by Iran often seem to be aimed at legitimising future military action, we should be careful before taking such statements at face value. They may well be designed simply to convince Iran that a change of course is needed, and/or to encourage the international community to give backing to sanctions. On this front the US has had some considerable success. France and Germany, who opposed the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, have given the US considerable backing regarding the Iran issue, the French President Nicolas Sarkozy himself warning that a failure of diplomacy and sanctions would necessitate war. On the other hand, Russia and China are two key actors who do not appear to wholeheartedly share American concerns.

We have seen that the National Intelligence Estimate has had a significant impact on the issue of Iran's nuclear development, taking considerable momentum away from those within the Bush Administration who insist on military action against Iran. However, although the NIE emphasised that Iran has proved susceptible to international pressure and is not pressing forward as quickly as was previously feared, the report has not created an environment in which military action is impossible. On the contrary, the Bush Administration has emphasised that the report confirms that Iran has attempted to develop nuclear weapons and could develop them within the next decade. Furthermore, the NIE has re-established the credibility of the US intelligence community. If new evidence is discovered, this may well make legitimising a future invasion easier, rather than harder.

While American rhetoric remains hostile, and the military option still a realistic possibility, the NIE report may well have prompted a change in the Bush Administration's internal calculations regarding Iran. The knowledge that international pressure has achieved results should be promising news from the American perspective, although it may encourage a continuation of hostile rhetoric. Furthermore, the US assessment that Iran has reduced its support of insurgents in Iraq appears to have been welcomed by the Bush administration. While these are heartening developments for those who do not wish to see another war in the Middle East, tensions remain high and there remain substantial unresolved concerns between the two countries.

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