

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

The Iran Problem

by Jon B. Alterman

As the world works to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, there is widespread agreement on what failure looks like: an Iranian bomb—or more likely, a number of Iranian bombs—that emboldens the Iranian government, threatens the Middle East and prompts many of Iran’s neighbors to develop their own weapons, destabilizing the most energy-rich part of the world.

It is harder to define success. For some, success can only come when the Iranian nuclear problem is “solved.” That is, success comes when the government of Iran convincingly renounces any effort to develop nuclear weapons, opens all of its nuclear facilities to international inspection, and reveals the sources for its technology and materials. Anything short of that, they argue, represents a failure, and failures happen every day until success is achieved.

Defining success narrowly and failure broadly makes it difficult to achieve success on several levels. Few countries have openly renounced their covert nuclear programs, and even fewer have done so under a combination of intense international pressure and what they see as enduring existential security threats. Deep and enduring international differences about the goals of shared non-proliferation efforts also make any success harder to achieve.

The maximalists have a precedent for their ambitions. In essence, what they seek is to have Iran “pull a Gadhafi.” After more than a decade of harsh international sanctions, and following demonstrations of U.S. resolve following September 11, 2001, the Libyan government began exploring ways to end Libya’s pariah status. In 2004, a deal was inked, and it largely held. Gadhafi believed this would insulate him from America’s wrath.

There are at least two problems applying Libya’s lessons to Iran. The first is that Libya had a single dictator rather than a diverse and bickering ruling oligarchy. Gadhafi’s move did not generate bitter internal politics, but a similar deal in Iran would unleash a nasty political struggle. The second is Gadhafi’s fall, which the United States and other Western powers helped abet. The broad message it sent

(continued on page 2)

No Dumping

Yemen’s location near Somalia has subjected fishermen and other sailors to increasing danger. Yemeni coastal patrols protect against piracy, but in doing so they may be allowing another problem to emerge.

An increasing number of Yemenis are worried about toxic dumping into the sea. A cargo ship recently discovered a potentially radioactive lead ballast off Yemen’s Red Sea port of Hodeida. In 2010 and 2011, Maltese and Caribbean-flagged ships were caught dumping radioactive materials in the Gulf of Aden.

The trend could have serious implications. As Yemen begins to grapple with growing water scarcity, desalinated sea water could be an important source of sustenance for coastal populations. Radioactivity in the water would not only affect fish populations, but could also make it even harder for Yemenis to find drinking water.

These may be hard problems to fix. In order to raise scarce resources, Yemeni forces are renting themselves out to private companies, providing enhanced piracy protection for a fee. The fee effectively means that law enforcement can be hired by unscrupulous businesses, who may believe that their security payments give them immunity from the laws against dumping hazardous waste.

Public scrutiny is growing. After the most recent dumping incident, Yemeni fishermen complained that the coast guard had turned a blind eye to what has become a frequent practice. Yemen has gone through a tumultuous year of problems on land; it now may find equally vexing problems emerging offshore. ■ GC

VADM Robert S. Harward Talks Strategy at CSIS

Vice Admiral Robert S. Harward, Deputy Commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), addressed a small group of guests at an off-the-record briefing at CSIS on February 23. Harward outlined CENTCOM’s understandings of the risks and opportunities facing the United States in the Middle East, focusing especially on a range of issues related to Iran. He noted that many other events unfolding in the Middle East may affect the U.S. relationship with Iran, and Iran could affect a wide range of events in the rest of the region as well. Harward emphasized that while the United States was not seeking war, it would be prepared if war came. Harward is a decorated Navy SEAL who went to high school in Tehran, and he spoke warmly of his time there. You can learn more about VADM Harward by clicking [HERE](#). ■

to authoritarian leaders was that a deal with the West provides little additional security.

Some see the real prize of an attack—from the United States or otherwise—as tempting Iran to enter an escalating battle with the United States. If a battle were truly devastating, and some claim that the United States has plans for a three-week campaign that would be, it might remove the government of the Islamic Republic once and for all. Yet, it would do little to shape the post-conflict environment. Even if one assumes widespread opposition to the Iranian government, the recent history of the Middle East illustrates how quickly battles for spoils turn bloody. The new government might pursue the Islamic Republic’s nuclear efforts, just as the ayatollahs pursued the efforts the Shah started.

Among the worst military outcomes is a partially successful strike, which would likely solidify rather than blunt Iranian nuclear weapons ambitions, seeing as no country with nuclear weapons ever has been attacked. Iran could push forward its own program, or it could purchase technology and materiel overseas. If nuclear facilities allowed under the Non-Proliferation Treaty were attacked, Iran would likely withdraw from it, loosening constraints still further and diminishing any visibility into the program. Such an attack would also threaten to shatter international efforts to press for a change in Iranian behavior. A strike could also unleash a range of contingencies that would spike oil prices, drive the fragile global economy into a tailspin, and unleash a trail of death from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean.

Others argue that it is necessary to constantly threaten a strike. Such talk creates its own dilemmas. For one, it boosts oil prices, which blunts—if it doesn’t completely eliminate—the cost of sanctions to the Iranian government. Constantly talking of war but not delivering one also undermines the credibility of the threat itself. Over time, the logic of an enduring and often-repeated threat leads to at least some conflict in its effort to avoid war, with unpredictable results.

In other words, there are many ways a military option could fail, and even more ways that its outcome would be impossible to judge. By contrast, an Iranian nuclear program that has more intrusive inspections and narrower areas of uncertainty puts the United States in a better position than it is in now. Despite more than a decade of drama after the U.S.-led war on Iraq in 1991, the resultant inspections regime was enough to stymie any Iraqi nuclear ambitions. What was left was mostly smoke and mirrors and public relations, intended to bolster the regime rather than threaten its neighbors.

There is substantial international support for such an approach, ranging from governments who want to bolster multilateralism to those that fear a disruption in energy supplies. While Russia and China in particular seem reluctant to promote a U.S. victory, successful U.S.-led management of Iran is preferable to these countries than chaotic conflict. One way that the United States can sustain international unity is quietly to remind that it retains a war option, while doing everything possible to find diplomatic alternatives to it.

Such an outcome would fall short of full success, and regional tensions would remain—and some say they would remain intolerable. Iran would be an enduring problem that needed to be managed. For those seeking a “solution” to the Iran problem, the middle ground would count as a failure.

Yet, achieving complete success is both unlikely and unverifiable. With no agreed starting point and no clear ending point, and a host of contingencies in between, there seems little way to avoid at least some period of deeper uncertainty in efforts to change Iranian behavior.

Few view collective action as the most desirable course or have much appetite for it. Over the next five to ten years, however, it is likely to provide the best route to prevent Iran from acquiring the bomb. ■ 3/27/2012

Links of Interest

Bloomberg quoted Jon Alterman in [“Iran Ambitions Dominate as Netanyahu Heads to White House Talks With Obama.”](#)

The *Financial Times* quoted Jon Alterman in [“U.S. faces first test of Iran sanctions resolve.”](#)

The *Washington Post* quoted Jon Alterman in [“U.S. to resume aid to Egypt.”](#)

Haim Malka published [two papers](#) on health issues in the Palestinian Territories, in collaboration with the CSIS Global Health Policy Center.

The Middle East Notes and Comment electronic newsletter is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and non-proprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions; accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s). © 2012 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The CSIS Middle East Program

Jon B. Alterman
Director

Haim Malka
Deputy Director

Michael Dziuban
Research Assistant

Dan Holodnik
Program Coordinator and Research Associate

Geoffrey Curfman
Ian Garner
Interns