

What If Iran Had Invaded Mexico?

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Unsurprisingly, George W. Bush's announcement of a "surge" in Iraq came despite the firm opposition to any such move of Americans and the even stronger opposition of the (thoroughly irrelevant) Iraqis. It was accompanied by ominous official leaks and statements — from Washington and Baghdad — about how Iranian intervention in Iraq was aimed at disrupting our mission to gain victory, an aim which is (by definition) noble. What then followed was a solemn debate about whether serial numbers on advanced roadside bombs (IEDs) were really traceable to Iran; and, if so, to that country's Revolutionary Guards or to some even higher authority.

This "debate" is a typical illustration of a primary principle of sophisticated propaganda. In crude and brutal societies, the Party Line is publicly proclaimed and must be obeyed — or else. What you actually believe is your own business and of far less concern. In societies where the state has lost the capacity to control by force, the Party Line is simply presupposed; then, vigorous debate is encouraged within the limits imposed by unstated doctrinal orthodoxy. The cruder of the two systems leads, naturally enough, to disbelief; the sophisticated variant gives an impression of openness and freedom, and so far more effectively serves to instill the Party Line. It becomes beyond question, beyond thought itself, like the air we breathe.

The debate over Iranian interference in Iraq proceeds without ridicule on the assumption that the United States owns the world. We did not, for example, engage in a similar debate in the 1980s about whether the U.S. was interfering in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan, and I doubt that Pravda, probably recognizing the absurdity of the situation, sank to outrage about that fact (which American officials and our media, in any case, made no effort to conceal). Perhaps the official Nazi press also featured solemn debates about whether the Allies were interfering in sovereign Vichy France, though if so, sane people would then have collapsed in ridicule.

In this case, however, even ridicule — notably absent — would not suffice, because the charges against Iran are part of a drumbeat of pronouncements meant to mobilize support for escalation in Iraq and for an attack on Iran, the "source of the problem." The world is aghast at the possibility. Even in neighboring Sunni states, no friends of Iran, majorities, when asked, favor a nuclear-armed Iran over any military action against that country. From what limited information we have, it appears that significant parts of the U.S. military and intelligence communities are opposed to such an attack, along with almost the entire world, even more so than when the Bush administration and Tony Blair's Britain invaded Iraq, defying enormous popular opposition worldwide.

"The Iran Effect"

The results of an attack on Iran could be horrendous. After all, according to a recent study of "the Iraq effect" by terrorism specialists Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, using government and Rand Corporation data, the Iraq invasion has already led to a seven-fold increase in terror. The "Iran effect" would probably be far more severe and long-lasting. British military historian Corelli Barnett speaks for many when he warns that "an attack on Iran would effectively launch World War III."

What are the plans of the increasingly desperate clique that narrowly holds political power in the U.S.? We cannot know. Such state planning is, of course, kept secret in the interests of "security." Review of the declassified record reveals that there is considerable merit in that claim —

though only if we understand “security” to mean the security of the Bush administration against their domestic enemy, the population in whose name they act.

Even if the White House clique is not planning war, naval deployments, support for secessionist movements and acts of terror within Iran, and other provocations could easily lead to an accidental war. Congressional resolutions would not provide much of a barrier. They invariably permit “national security” exemptions, opening holes wide enough for the several aircraft-carrier battle groups soon to be in the Persian Gulf to pass through — as long as an unscrupulous leadership issues proclamations of doom (as Condoleezza Rice did with those “mushroom clouds” over American cities back in 2002). And the concocting of the sorts of incidents that “justify” such attacks is a familiar practice. Even the worst monsters feel the need for such justification and adopt the device: Hitler’s defense of innocent Germany from the “wild terror” of the Poles in 1939, after they had rejected his wise and generous proposals for peace, is but one example.

The most effective barrier to a White House decision to launch a war is the kind of organized popular opposition that frightened the political-military leadership enough in 1968 that they were reluctant to send more troops to Vietnam — fearing, we learned from the Pentagon Papers, that they might need them for civil-disorder control.

Doubtless Iran’s government merits harsh condemnation, including for its recent actions that have inflamed the crisis. It is, however, useful to ask how we would act if Iran had invaded and occupied Canada and Mexico and was arresting U.S. government representatives there on the grounds that they were resisting the Iranian occupation (called “liberation,” of course). Imagine as well that Iran was deploying massive naval forces in the Caribbean and issuing credible threats to launch a wave of attacks against a vast range of sites — nuclear and otherwise — in the United States, if the U.S. government did not immediately terminate all its nuclear energy programs (and, naturally, dismantle all its nuclear weapons). Suppose that all of this happened after Iran had overthrown the government of the U.S. and installed a vicious tyrant (as the US did to Iran in 1953), then later supported a Russian invasion of the U.S. that killed millions of people (just as the U.S. supported Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Iran in 1980, killing hundreds of thousands of Iranians, a figure comparable to millions of Americans). Would we watch quietly?

It is easy to understand an observation by one of Israel’s leading military historians, Martin van Creveld. After the U.S. invaded Iraq, knowing it to be defenseless, he noted, “Had the Iranians not tried to build nuclear weapons, they would be crazy.”

Surely no sane person wants Iran (or any nation) to develop nuclear weapons. A reasonable resolution of the present crisis would permit Iran to develop nuclear energy, in accord with its rights under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, but not nuclear weapons. Is that outcome feasible? It would be, given one condition: that the U.S. and Iran were functioning democratic societies in which public opinion had a significant impact on public policy.

As it happens, this solution has overwhelming support among Iranians and Americans, who generally are in agreement on nuclear issues. The Iranian-American consensus includes the complete elimination of nuclear weapons everywhere (82% of Americans); if that cannot yet be achieved because of elite opposition, then at least a “nuclear-weapons-free zone in the Middle East that would include both Islamic countries and Israel” (71% of Americans). Seventy-five percent of Americans prefer building better relations with Iran to threats of force. In brief, if public opinion were to have a significant influence on state policy in the U.S. and Iran, resolution of the crisis might be at hand, along with much more far-reaching solutions to the global nuclear conundrum.

Promoting Democracy — at Home

These facts suggest a possible way to prevent the current crisis from exploding, perhaps even into some version of World War III. That awesome threat might be averted by pursuing a familiar proposal: democracy promotion — this time at home, where it is badly needed. Democracy promotion at home is certainly feasible and, although we cannot carry out such a project directly in Iran, we could act to improve the prospects of the courageous reformers and oppositionists who are seeking to achieve just that. Among such figures who are, or should be, well-known, would be Saeed Hajjarian, Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi, and Akbar Ganji, as well as those who, as usual, remain nameless, among them labor activists about whom we hear very little; those who publish the Iranian Workers Bulletin may be a case in point.

We can best improve the prospects for democracy promotion in Iran by sharply reversing state policy here so that it reflects popular opinion. That would entail ceasing to make the regular threats that are a gift to Iranian hardliners. These are bitterly condemned by Iranians truly concerned with democracy promotion (unlike those “supporters” who flaunt democracy slogans in the West and are lauded as grand “idealists” despite their clear record of visceral hatred for democracy).

Democracy promotion in the United States could have far broader consequences. In Iraq, for instance, a firm timetable for withdrawal would be initiated at once, or very soon, in accord with the will of the overwhelming majority of Iraqis and a significant majority of Americans. Federal budget priorities would be virtually reversed. Where spending is rising, as in military supplemental bills to conduct the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it would sharply decline. Where spending is steady or declining (health, education, job training, the promotion of energy conservation and renewable energy sources, veterans benefits, funding for the UN and UN peacekeeping operations, and so on), it would sharply increase. Bush’s tax cuts for people with incomes over \$200,000 a year would be immediately rescinded.

The U.S. would have adopted a national health-care system long ago, rejecting the privatized system that sports twice the per-capita costs found in similar societies and some of the worst outcomes in the industrial world. It would have rejected what is widely regarded by those who pay attention as a “fiscal train wreck” in-the-making. The U.S. would have ratified the Kyoto Protocol to reduce carbon-dioxide emissions and undertaken still stronger measures to protect the environment. It would allow the UN to take the lead in international crises, including in Iraq. After all, according to opinion polls, since shortly after the 2003 invasion, a large majority of Americans have wanted the UN to take charge of political transformation, economic reconstruction, and civil order in that land.

If public opinion mattered, the U.S. would accept UN Charter restrictions on the use of force, contrary to a bipartisan consensus that this country, alone, has the right to resort to violence in response to potential threats, real or imagined, including threats to our access to markets and resources. The U.S. (along with others) would abandon the Security Council veto and accept majority opinion even when in opposition to it. The UN would be allowed to regulate arms sales; while the U.S. would cut back on such sales and urge other countries to do so, which would be a major contribution to reducing large-scale violence in the world. Terror would be dealt with through diplomatic and economic measures, not force, in accord with the judgment of most specialists on the topic but again in diametric opposition to present-day policy.

Furthermore, if public opinion influenced policy, the U.S. would have diplomatic relations with Cuba, benefiting the people of both countries (and, incidentally, U.S. agribusiness, energy corporations, and others), instead of standing virtually alone in the world in imposing an embargo (joined only by Israel, the Republic of Palau, and the Marshall Islands). Washington would join the broad international consensus on a two-state settlement of the Israel-Palestine conflict, which (with Israel) it has blocked for 30 years — with scattered and temporary exceptions — and which it still blocks in word, and more importantly in deed, despite fraudulent claims of its commitment to diplomacy. The U.S. would also equalize aid to Israel and Palestine, cutting off aid to either party that rejected the international consensus.

Evidence on these matters is reviewed in my book *Failed States* as well as in *The Foreign Policy Disconnect* by Benjamin Page (with Marshall Bouton), which also provides extensive evidence that public opinion on foreign (and probably domestic) policy issues tends to be coherent and consistent over long periods. Studies of public opinion have to be regarded with caution, but they are certainly highly suggestive.

Democracy promotion at home, while no panacea, would be a useful step towards helping our own country become a “responsible stakeholder” in the international order (to adopt the term used for adversaries), instead of being an object of fear and dislike throughout much of the world. Apart from being a value in itself, functioning democracy at home holds real promise for dealing constructively with many current problems, international and domestic, including those that literally threaten the survival of our species.

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