

Editor: **Mark A. Heller**

December 4, 2002

IMPLICATIONS FOR IRAN OF AN AMERICAN ATTACK ON IRAQ

Ephraim Kam
Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies

The terrorist attack of September 11 and subsequent events have produced important changes in Iran's strategic environment. The American declaration of war on terror and of a campaign against radical regimes has indirectly implicated Iran, which was defined by President Bush as part of the "axis of evil." To the east, in Afghanistan, the Americans have overthrown the Taliban regime, with which Iran had a tense relationship, but replaced it with a regime under American aegis. And to the west, in Iraq, the possibility of another change of strategic significance has emerged if the United States launches a major military operation with the aim of overthrowing the regime of Saddam Hussein. An American attack on Iraq, particularly if it leads to Saddam's downfall, has both positive and negative ramifications for Iran. On the positive side, the overthrow of the Ba'ath regime and the elimination of its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) potential would remove the most serious strategic regional threat to Iran. Despite Iraq's military and economic weakness since the 1991 Gulf War, Iran remains concerned about the prospect of Iraqi rearmament, especially with WMD. And despite the improvement in Iran-Iraq relations over the last decade, Iran still views Iraq under

Saddam as an enemy. The scars of the Iran-Iraq War, in which Iran lost over 200,000 dead, are far from healed. American military action could tip the balance of forces in Iran's favor for a long time to come and leave Iran as the dominant regional power in the Gulf. In short, it could solve most of Iran's regional security problems, without Iran having to lift a finger to produce that result.

At the same time, an American attack might well culminate in the emergence of a pro-Western regime in Iraq, tied to the U.S. and hosting American forces for quite some time. In that case, Iran would be practically encircled by a ring of regimes connected with the U.S., in one way or another, and American troops would be deployed in most of Iran's neighbors. That would strengthen America's standing in the region and intensify what Iran, for the last decade, has perceived as a direct American threat to it. Iranians are also apprehensive about the prospect that, as a consequence of American military action, Iraq will become a focus of regional instability that could impinge on them. For example, disorder in Iraqi Kurdistan could well lead to unrest among Iranian Kurds and precipitate a major inflow of refugees.

Moreover, after Afghanistan, the very fact of

Published by TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies & The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies
www.tau.ac.il/jcss/

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another American military operation against a neighboring Muslim state with the aim of overthrowing its regime, particularly against the backdrop of its efforts to develop WMD, would be a clear warning to Iran. In fact, all the elements that incline the U.S. Administration to act militarily against Iraq are also present in Iran, to an even greater degree. Since 1984, the U.S. Government has officially and consistently defined Iran as the most egregious state sponsor of terrorism. Iran directly supports the Lebanese Hizbullah, designated by the Bush Administration as one of the organizations to be targeted in the next stage of the war on terror. Iran has a stockpile of chemical weapons, and apparently biological agents, as well, its nuclear weapons program is more advanced than Iraq's, and it is developing long-range ballistic missiles that the Americans view as a threat. True, the American Administration has not yet defined Iran as a target of possible military action. But in the post-September 11 environment, the possibility of an eventual attack on Iran, as well, has become somewhat more conceivable, certainly to the Iranians themselves. Bush's inclusion of Iran in his "axis of evil" only augmented this concern. In this context, prominent Iranian leaders issued some unusually blunt warnings to the United States about the consequences of attacking their country.

Within this matrix of opportunities and risks, Iran has adopted a two-track approach to the question of an American campaign against Iraq. On the one hand, like most Arab states, it expresses its principled opposition to an American war. At the same time, it also demands that Iraq comply with Security Council resolutions concerning the dismantling of its WMD. That demand reflects Iran's interest in preventing the rehabilitation of Iraqi strategic

power, though without the dangers implicit in the prosecution and aftermath of an American attack. Beyond that, Iranian spokesmen indicate that Iran will pursue a policy of neutrality in case of an American attack on Iraq.

American action against Iraq could also affect the prospects for a U.S.-Iran dialogue. No such dialogue has really developed despite American expectations of a better relationship between the two countries following Muhammad Khatami's election as President in 1997. One of the main reasons why any dialogue was stillborn was the opposition of the radical establishment in Iran, which controls most of the levers of real power. As long as the internal Iranian balance of power between radicals and reformists does not change, no significant interaction is likely to develop.

Nevertheless, the U.S. and Iran do have issues of common concern with respect to Iraq, including the character of any future regime there, the stabilization of the post-Saddam environment, the future of the Shi'ite and Kurdish communities in Iraq, and the elimination of Iraq's WMD capabilities. These common concerns apparently form the background to occasional reports of working-level contacts between the United States and moderate elements in Iran. Moreover, the elimination of Iraq's WMD would remove a central threat to Iran, which constituted the main stimulus to Iran's own WMD development programs. It therefore seems logical that the elimination of the Iraqi threat, in possible combination with the intensification of the American threat and the future strengthening of the reformist current in Iran, could, in the longer term, encourage a more substantive interchange between the U.S. and Iran covering, among other things, an end to Iran's own WMD programs.