

“Iran: Bombing Into Submission Has Never Worked”

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(translated by Miriam Schive)

Expert roundtable on the nuclear crisis: Tehran is in the stronger position

America is in a state of war – not only factually, but also in a deeply-engrained (profound) psychological sense: Every weekend CNN airs “This Week at War”, a mixed bag of the war and terror events, which by now seem as normal as the nightly news.

The most recent topic: the nuclear threat to the US – in particular by freight ships that are carrying concealed nuclear bombs.

In light of this, it can hardly be a coincidence that the UN Security Council is meeting next week to impose new sanctions on Iran – the country that the US claims is intent on using its nuclear program to build a bomb and, moreover, that Iran could also use this as a means of terror. At the same time that the UN considers new sanctions, US naval forces in the Persian Gulf have been strengthened.

How will this crisis play out? Can Iran be deterred from militarizing its civilian nuclear program? Austrian Wolfgang Danspeckgruber, the Director of the Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination at Princeton University, invited a number of diplomats, political scientists, historians and military experts to a high level round of talks. *Die Presse* was allowed to participate in the meeting in the university town near New York – under the condition that the “off-the-record” and occasionally controversial conversation topics remain anonymous. Following are a few of the core statements of the talks that were approved for publication:

The current status of Iran’s nuclear program: Relatively poor. Iran is producing sub par quality source materials for the fuel rods, and, as the case may be, for nuclear weapons. The expansion of the Natanz uranium enrichment plant is taking longer than expected: While there should have been 3000 centrifuges by now, there are currently only about 600. Thus, at current production levels, they could have the capability to build a bomb within two years. By this assessment, Iran is by no means “only three months” away, as “countless Israeli pundits have claimed in the last 15 years.” But, that Tehran will attain the capability to build a bomb is deemed to be inevitable.

Ahmadinejad in crisis: The skepticism in Iran in regard to President Ahmadinejad is growing. The first reason is economic policy: “He is doing everything to ruin Iran. He is distributing billions to the poor, and they are spending it. The consequence is massive inflation.” And then, “He lowers interest rates. As a result, the poor are taking even more money out of the bank and spending it; the rich as well – or they take it to Dubai. Now, tomatoes are basically so expensive that everybody is revolting.”

The second reason is foreign policy: “Iran hates isolation. They want to communicate with the world; they want to be respected by the world. It bothers many people that Ahmadinejad actively attracts problems.” Russia and China, who are protecting Iran from tough sanctions, are not viewed as reliable friends: Iranians want to be on good terms with Europe. Ahmadinejad’s search for friends in South America is viewed as being truly ludicrous: “They are great for coffee-chats, but not for our national interest,” complained one Iranian representative.

Reason number three: Ahmadinejad’s mentor Ayatollah Khamenei is apparently on his death bed. His passing would strengthen the pragmatists.

Are sanctions effective? There are two camps on this issue: Some argue that the Iranians have suffered in the past and could endure sanctions for years. On the other hand, Iran is a merchant society and economic sanctions would hit this powerful merchant class hard: “Many people have a lot to lose.” In the most extreme case, a coup d’etat might be thinkable.

Is there a threat of war? There is some concern that US President Bush might still sound the trumpets for an attack before the end of his term, in order to slow down Iran’s nuclear program. “He thinks that he owes it to history and that Jesus is whispering in his ear,” murmured one US officer. But, anything more than air strikes will hardly be possible. Moreover, “One has never been able to bomb someone into submission.”

The consequences: “Iran would build the bomb.” There would be terrorism. Consider the wave of attacks in 1985/1986 in Paris, after the news broke that France had loaned Iraq fighter jets during the Iran-Iraq War. And, “Iran could then start its big strategic game, namely, the instigation of regime change in Arab countries in order to bring down the ‘corrupt’ regimes.”

Options for the West: “At the moment, it appears that there are no very satisfying options.” Some played with the following policy option: (1) Wear down Iran with economic and political sanctions and, thereby, stir up domestic conflict; (2) Bring Syria – Iran’s only regional friend – into the Western camp; (3) Normalize relations with Iran and treat it as an equal partner - “They want to sit at the table with the other big boys.”

But, in order to accomplish the latter option, the US would need to overcome its neurosis over the Tehran Hostage Crisis and have normal relations with Iran. “The Iranians would be willing to pay a lot for that.” For example, they might give up their aspirations for the bomb.