

## On the brink: the Great Satan vs the Axis of Evil

By Kaveh Ehsani,  
Created 2006-05-02 23:00

The rhetoric of confrontation between the United States and Iran over Iran's uranium-enrichment programme (seen by Washington as a cover for the development of a nuclear-weapons capability) has brought the world to a dangerous point. This face-off is a grave threat to international peace. It should be defused politically, through direct negotiations, and without the grandstanding on both sides which derails any hope of developing normal relations between the two countries.

This is not a pious hope: it is in fact the very course of action being proposed by prominent dissenting voices in Tehran, Washington, and other world capitals. The trouble is that none of those calling for direct negotiations between the two main parties are in a position of power. This allows the current leaderships on both sides to escalate the tension [1], with the ever-present possibility of a dangerous tipping-point in which aggressive words translate into armed deeds.

**This article forms part of the openDemocracy debate "Iran: how to avoid war?"**

For an overview of the debate, click [here](#) [2]

---

Kaveh Ehsani is research scholar at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and a member of the editorial boards of *Middle East Report* ([Merip](#) [3]) and the Tehran-based *Goft-o-gu* (Dialogue)

Also by Kaveh Ehsani in openDemocracy:

["Iran's referendum movement](#) [3]" (April 2005)

### The cost of obsession

The American sabre-rattling may well be a psychological ploy to intimidate Iran and persuade its leadership to back down. But the Bush administration's reckless unilateralism, and the unrestrained influence of neo-conservative ideologues and militant nationalists [3] on its policies, mean that no one can rule out the possibility that it is seriously considering an attack.

Iranian intransigence, by contrast, stems from a belief by the country's own conservative ruling elite that the US is hell-bent on destabilising [3] it; the elite believes that its very survival depends on not capitulating to pressure until it can guarantee one of two outcomes: receiving direct security assurances from the US, or attaining some form of deterrence that would protect it from annihilation.

The bellicose and ideologically-inclined character of the governments in Washington and Tehran makes it quite possible that this situation could get out of hand [4].

The Bush administration's obsession with the Iranian nuclear programme [5] has obfuscated the larger picture: that of the real motives behind Iran's insistence on pursuing its nuclear researches against all odds, and of America's true agenda for Iran and the region. By targeting Iran the US aims to eliminate any challenge to its regional hegemony over the oil resources of the Persian Gulf – not just by Iran, but by its global rivals Russia, China, and even the European Union.

The Bush administration seems to believe that cutting Iran down to size will also allay the fears of shaky Arab regimes that fear the rising profile of the Iraqi Shi'a [6] and Kurds. This barely hidden agenda is the reason why the US is failing to get solid support for its efforts to persuade the United Nations Security Council to impose sanctions on Iran, despite widespread international misgivings about the consequences of Iran becoming a nuclear power.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's outrageous comments about the holocaust [7] and empty threats against Israel cannot conceal a simple fact: as a conventional military power, Iran is no threat to the US or its neighbours. In fact, the reverse is true. The US state department estimates that Iran's annual military expenditure [8] is around \$4 billion, a puny figure compared to countries it borders: Turkey (\$10 billion), Saudi Arabia (\$20 billion), and the tiny city-states of the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain (\$9 billion in all); the figure is only slightly ahead of nuclear-armed Pakistan (\$3.3 billion). All of these states, it should be recalled, are under the protective umbrella of the awesome US military [9].

The issue of quality as well as of spending is relevant. Many prominent American military experts regard Iran's conventional military as ill-trained and its equipment obsolete. In this light, the Iranian regime's overdependence on its domestic missile programme can only be understood as the search for a minimal deterrent; and Iran's dogged pursuit of its uranium enrichment programme can be seen as a defensive response to mounting US threats, especially since President Bush's infamous "axis of evil" [10] speech of January 2002.

### **American militarism and Iranian democracy**

Meanwhile, the US tilt toward a strategy of regime destabilisation or change in Iran has had dire consequences for the democratic movement in the country. It convinced even the reformist president Mohammad Khatami [11] (1997-2005) and his followers that US threats posed an existential national threat that could not be ignored, and led to their *de facto* surrender in the face of a mounting conservative onslaught. The Clinton administration extended some timid openings to Iran in the 1990s, but it never directly addressed the unelected conservatives who wielded real political power in Iran; this led the latter to believe they were being targeted by a rapprochement between reformers and the Americans that would bypass them.

The domestic balance of power was tipped after the parliamentary elections of 2004 and the presidential election [11] of June 2005, when Iran's military-conservative forces gained ascendancy over all branches of the state for the first time since 1979. But the significance of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's [12] victory is often missed: he was not elected on a platform favouring an ideological confrontation with the west, but rather [12] on promises to fight corruption and improve the lot of unemployed and impoverished Iranians.

It is precisely the structural incapacity [12] of Ahmadinejad's administration to deliver on these promises that explains its demagogic, confrontational tone over the nuclear issue. It has also used the mounting US threat as justification to increase domestic repression, including an assault on the democratic rights of women, publishers, religious minorities, civil-society activists [12], journalists, and trade unionists. Meanwhile, the Bush administration's risible allocation of \$85 million ostensibly to aid [13] civil society in Iran – an ill-concealed code for fomenting

political unrest – has given the Iranian state even more ammunition to target any voice of dissent.

**Also in openDemocracy on the developing crisis between Iran and the United States since the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad:**

Trita Parsi, "[The Iran-Israel cold war](#) [13]" (October 2005)

Nasrin Alavi, "[Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's fear](#) [13]" (November 2005)

Paul Rogers, "[Iran in Israel's firing-range](#) [13]" (December 2005)

Paul Rogers, "[The United States, nuclear weapons, and Iran](#) [13]" (January 2006)

Nazenin Ansari, "[Iranians on the freedom path](#) [13]" (February 2006)

Fred Halliday, "[Iran vs the United States – again](#) [13]" (February 2006)

Bahram Rajaee, "[Iran's nuclear challenge](#) [13]" (February 2006)

Paul Rogers, "[Iran: war by October?](#) [13]" (April 2006)

**A different path**

The one certainty in all this is that the consequences of a United States – or indeed Israeli [13] – military assault on Iran would have catastrophic consequences for all concerned. The notion of a limited conflict is simply an illusion, as supposedly surgical strikes to dismantle nuclear facilities would quickly spiral out of control. To make any military strike effective the US would need to strike thousands of targets, causing significant casualties and massive damage to infrastructure. This would enrage Iranian public opinion and mobilise the population behind an unpopular regime [14].

The US might easily suppress any direct Iranian military reprisals. But armed confrontation would be only the beginning of a protracted conflict likely to spill into other countries as Iran continued its retaliation by proxy. This would severely damage what remains of regional stability, and generate further long-term global economic and strategic shockwaves [14] that would be impossible to contain.

The international concern that a nuclear-capable Iran can be a potential proliferation threat is understandable and should be acknowledged. Once Iran crosses that threshold its apprehensive neighbours, primarily Saudi Arabia and Turkey, will certainly follow suit. This would intensify the dangers in what is already the developing world's most militarised region.

However, Iran is far less intransigent over its nuclear programme than rhetoric may lead to believe. The conservatives in Iran, led by the hardline supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei [15], have sent numerous signals – invisible to most of the media, but unmistakable – of a willingness to negotiate with the United States. These are not acts of weakness. It is important to be clear that these conservatives are not willing to capitulate; rather, they want recognition, security assurances, and negotiations on equal terms.

The ideologues of the Bush administration may not be interested in anything less than the demise of the Islamic Republic. But the potential costs of pursuing such a course should be apparent to everyone else by now. The only solution is for the political forces within the United States to resist the Bush administration's tilt toward military confrontation. In the [long run](#) [16], the only hope for progress, for stability in Iraq, and for the revitalisation of the democratic movement in Iran lies in a return to calm, diplomatic normality in the relations between the two countries.

---

**Source URL:**

[http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-iran\\_war/brink\\_3498.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-iran_war/brink_3498.jsp)

**Links:**

- [1] <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/5/1013A0E8-6A60-4664-B261-3B5E2E245041.html> target=\_blank
- [2] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-iran\\_war/issue.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-iran_war/issue.jsp)
- [3] <http://iticwebarchives.ssrc.org/Middle%20East%20Research%20and%20Information%20Project/www.merip.org/mer/mer.html> target=\_blank
- [4] [http://193.41.101.57/conflict/iran\\_3463.jsp](http://193.41.101.57/conflict/iran_3463.jsp) target=\_blank
- [5] <http://www.cfr.org/publication/10438/> target=\_blank
- [6] <http://www.pupress.princeton.edu/titles/5502.html> target=\_blank
- [7] <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/60AE1720-F333-4869-974D-3B69283105BF.htm> target=\_blank
- [8] <http://www.irna.ir/en/news/view/menu-234/0604049171093625.htm> target=\_blank
- [9] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2006/protecting.html> target=\_blank
- [10] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html> target=\_blank
- [11] [http://www.iranchamber.com/history/mkhatami/mohammad\\_khatami.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/history/mkhatami/mohammad_khatami.php) target=\_blank
- [12] [http://www.iranchamber.com/history/mahmadinejad/mahmoud\\_ahmadinejad.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/history/mahmadinejad/mahmoud_ahmadinejad.php) target=\_blank
- [13] [http://www.truthout.org/docs\\_2006/021606B.shtml](http://www.truthout.org/docs_2006/021606B.shtml) target=\_blank
- [14] [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/HD26Ak02.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/HD26Ak02.html) target=\_blank
- [15] [http://www.iranchamber.com/history/akhamenei/ali\\_khamenei.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/history/akhamenei/ali_khamenei.php) target=\_blank
- [16] <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero062405.html> target=\_blank



This article is published by Kaveh Ehsani, , and openDemocracy.net under a Creative Commons licence. You may republish it free of charge with attribution for non-commercial purposes following these guidelines. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Commercial media must contact us for permission and fees. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.