

The Tehran fixation

By Paul Rogers,
Created 2007-11-02 13:34

There is a full year before the United States presidential election of 4 November 2008 [1], but the nomination campaigns are already being run at an intense pace. This, against the background of a situation where the US's military forces are heavily engaged abroad, makes it inevitable that the state's security posture is growing in importance as an issue.

The rooted unpopularity [2] of the Iraq war raises the expectation that a combination of Democratic candidates pursuing an anti-war line and Republicans seeking to distance themselves from President Bush might create a dynamic in favour of a more constructive, multilateral and peace-building foreign policy. This is not the way the campaign is going; on the contrary, its unfolding character carries ominous signs for security in the middle east in the coming months.

A receding concern

The absence of a more vigorous political critique of the US administration's record in the "war on terror" can partly be explained by the fact that the Iraq war has receded, at least for the moment, from the headlines. The decline in both US casualties [3] and insurgent attacks has lent support to claims by the war's more vehement cheerleaders that it may now effectively have been won. More generally, the reduced media coverage of Iraq helps create the sense even among disaffected citizens that the war is less important than it was - and among politicians that there is little to be gained by criticising it or (an important distinction) its conduct.

That may be little comfort for Iraqis, where there are many indices of the grievous state of the country's health and welfare systems, human security and infrastructure. The latest report from the Institute for War and Peace Reporting [4], to take one example, documents the condition of the country's electricity system. After an investment of over \$4 billion into the generating and distribution system, Baghdad's electricity supply is actually worse than in 2003. At the very time that US-sourced reconstruction money is diminishing, the Iraqi government estimates that \$27 billion investment is required (see IWPR/Iraq Crisis Report 235, 25 October 2007 [5]).

Paul Rogers is professor of peace studies at Bradford University, northern England. He has been writing a weekly column [3] on global security on **openDemocracy** since 26 September 2001

A further illustration of Iraq's condition is the deteriorating security situation on the ground in many parts of the country. The chief of police in the southern city of Basra has admitted that his force cannot control [6] a city currently being fought over by rival armed groups, some of whom have infiltrated the police (see Ahmed Janabi, "Iraqi city in the grip of militias [7]", al-Jazeera, 31 October 2007). The militias and their political associates in this region of Iraq particularly covet Basra and the port of Umm Qasr [8], since whoever can wield power over them and their energy exports can acquire considerable political leverage even as far as Baghdad.

A campaign dynamic

From the perspective of a Washington whose political horizons seem at present to be narrowing, such developments in a far-off land barely register. This is unfortunate enough, but the further problem is that when attention is focused on the region it tends to be filtered through a prism of rhetorical belligerence. The latest examples of what has become a routinely punitive attitude is President Bush's announcement on 25 October of further sanctions [9] on Iran; this follows the senate's non-binding resolution of 26 September to designate [10] the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps as a "terrorist" organisation. These moves reflect an important shift in the US focus [11] from Iraq to Iran as the controversy over Tehran's nuclear plans deepens (see "Baghdad spin, Tehran war [11]", 6 September 2006). But they also have an impact on the domestic [12] political debate, in a way that reinforces the point that US electoral discourse is encouraging an unsettling security dynamic.

The evidence for this can be found in the current appeal of the leading rival candidates, who are setting the pace on foreign and defence policy in their respective camps. Hillary Clinton is at this stage the clear frontrunner for the Democrats, notwithstanding intense criticism [13] from rival candidates of her alleged "controlling" style, inconsistency, and indulgence of the administration (as reflected in her support for the 26 September resolution). Her fundraising abilities have been impressive, her campaign has gained substantial momentum and her team is going to great lengths to present her as unstoppable. That judgment may prove premature, as in their own way Barack Obama and a presently well-received [14] John Edwards remain formidable; but what is relevant in respect of security-centred issues is the tough line Clinton is adopting towards Iraq and Iran.

On Iraq, she has been careful [15] to keep open the options on the likely timescale for a US military presence in the country, and on the timetable for even a partial withdrawal. Her delicate combination of criticism of Iran, support for sanctions and reluctance to commit herself over the war option is designed to maximise advantage in a fluid political environment. In the case of Iran, however, there are particular dangers in a situation where the refusal to rule out support for military action could be used in convenient circumstances as effective endorsement by those who advocate such an approach.

Hillary Clinton may be experiencing a familiar and deep-seated Democratic bind [18], whereby fear of being accused of lack of patriotism can lead to an over-compensating (and misdirected) "surplus" of such a quality. This perceived vulnerability can also override the need to speak to and articulate the widespread opposition to the Iraq war (and indeed to the prospect [19] of war with Iran) among Democratic supporters. But Clinton's notably cagey stance on the US's overseas entanglements partly reflects developments on the "other side" - not Tehran, but the Republican campaign, and especially the progress of the former mayor of New York, Rudy Giuliani.

Indeed, Giuliani's unexpected prominence [20] has been one of the surprises of the campaign so far. A figure who holds relatively liberal positions on gun control and abortion, and whose interesting private life includes three marriages, is not self-evidently appealing to a Republican Party that today depends on conservative Christians for so much of its support; yet Giuliani is becoming so influential in the Republican campaign that even some Christian leaders are starting to align [21] themselves with him.

In addition to his weekly **openDemocracy** column, Paul Rogers writes an international security monthly briefing for the Oxford Research Group; for details, click here [16]

Paul Rogers's latest book is *Global Security and the War on Terror: Elite Power and the Illusion of Control* [17] (Routledge, July 2007). This is a collection of papers and essays written over the last twenty years, with two new

There is an element of crude political necessity (even desperation) in this: anyone but Hillary, anyone but a Democrat in the White House. But again, the global-security factor cannot be ignored. Giuliani has of late adopted a particularly hardline stance on terrorism, Iraq and Iran. This reflects the recruitment to his campaign team or circle of advisers of some of the most hawkish of the United States's analysts and opinion-formers on the middle east; they include Norman Podhoretz [22] (a fervent advocate [23] of military action against Iran), Michael Rubin [24] of the American Enterprise Institute, and Daniel Pipes [25] of the Middle East Forum (see Michael Cooper & Marc Santora, "Mideast Hawks Help to Develop Giuliani Policy [26]", *International Herald Tribune*, 25 October 2007).

The "internal" linkage in the Giuliani project seems to be that his strategists have responded to the political downside for Republican voters of some of his liberal views on domestic concerns, by seeking to sharpen his profile on international issues. Giuliani's authoritative handling of the 9/11 tragedy during his New York mayoralty may be an asset here, but there are clearly elements of a wider repositioning towards a macho, "patriotic" stance.

The early signs are that this may be working [27]. The trouble is that what "works" for an aspiring presidential candidate has consequences for the campaign as a whole, and ultimately perhaps for the world. At present, Giuliani's strategy appears to be warping the entire argument over the next presidency [28] in the direction of a hawkish foreign policy, and that the ripple-effects include a subtle but definite impact on Hillary Clinton's campaign.

A political alignment

Nothing, yet, is set in stone. Hillary Clinton has not yet received a single vote, and a bad early primary result could upset all calculations; Rudy Giuliani is even less secure among the Republicans' ostensibly more open field. At the same time, there are clear indications that the Republicans could increase their political opportunities if they can exploit the "fear factor [29]" that is one of the most potent weapons in their armoury.

This, precisely, is where the attitude to Iran of the George W Bush administration and the interests of the wider Republican cause may - after a period of some disassociation - yet reconverge. If, as seems likely, the key figure of vice-president Dick Cheney [30] and his immediate affiliates continue their present policy of focusing on Iran as the arch-enemy, then they may indirectly be aiding the Republican presidential effort. The renewed influence of their conservative equivalents in Iran itself may act as a reinforcement (see Omid Memarian, "Iran: prepared for the worst [30]", 30 October 2007).

It is almost certainly still the case (as several columns in this series [30] have argued) that the greatest risk of war with Iran comes from a provocation [31] that precipitates a crisis that in turn tips over into armed confrontation - rather than from a sudden, unforeseen attack by the United States or even Israel (see "America and Iran: the spark of war [31]", 20 September 2007). The worry is that the manner in which the US presidential election campaign is developing may come to mean that there will be no senior, authoritative voice of reason arguing coherently against the war option. That alone serves to make a war against Iran more likely.

Source URL:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/conflicts/global_security/iran_war

Links:

[1] <http://www.politics1.com/calendar.htm>

- [2] http://www.angus-reid.com/polls/view/28826/majority_in_us_calls_for_iraq_war_timetable/
- [3] <http://icasualties.org/oif/>
- [4] <http://www.iwpr.net/>
- [5] http://iwpr.net/?p=icr&s=f&o=340105&apc_state=henpicr
- [6] http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20071031/ap_on_re_mi_ea/iraq_britain
- [7] <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/8E7B6E54-EBE1-4B7B-811D-DB98DE1C4F14.htm>
- [8] <http://www.thepersiangulf.org/cities/ummqasr.html>
- [9] http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article2741488.ece
- [10] http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2007/11/01/rivals_differ_on_effect_of_iran_measure/
- [11] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/10/25/AR2007102502606.html>
- [12] http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20071026/ts_alt_afp/usvote2008iran
- [13] <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/10/31/america/NA-POL-US-Democrats-Debate.php>
- [14] http://news.yahoo.com/s/realclearpolitics/20071031/cm_rcp/edwards_shines_but_clinton_sti
- [15] http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2007/11/01/clinton_on_the_issues/
- [16] <http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/paulrogers.htm>
- [17] http://www.routledge.com/shopping_cart/products/product_detail.asp?sku=&isbn=9780415419383&parent_id=&pc=/shopping_cart/search/search.asp?search%3Dpaul%2Brogers
- [18] <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/1101/p02s01-uspo.html>
- [19] http://www.angus-reid.com/polls/view/americans_chide_iran_but_say_no_to_new_war/
- [20] http://www.angus-reid.com/polls/view/28816/republicans_2008_giuliani_27_thompson_17
- [21] http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/opinion/balance/stories/DN-balance_1030edi.ART.State.Edition1.41faf49.html
- [22] http://www.hudson.org/learn/index.cfm?fuseaction=staff_bio&eid=PodhNorm
- [23] <http://norman%20podhoretz/>
- [24] <http://www.aei.org/scholars/filter.,scholarID.83/scholar.asp>
- [25] <http://www.danielpipes.org/>
- [26] http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/25/us/politics/25giuliani.html?_r=1&oref=slogin
- [27] <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1007/6617.html>
- [28] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/5006788.stm>
- [29] <http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5j-xAejXEIGw59RJx9F0feuXdlKgg>
- [30] <http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5heE937QM6QzE9T5U7wFrft0XfTmA>
- [31] http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5hdVphwtHPpy9Q9tjjJ_nrCbbPG3gD8SKH6CO0



This article is published by Paul Rogers, , 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.