



What if Iran is Attacked?

*Arabinda Acharya and Tom Quiggin **

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TEHRAN'S dogged stance over its nuclear weapons programme and disregard for the United Nations sanctions is inching Iran towards a potential armed confrontation with the United States and possibly with Israel. A military action to pre-empt Iran's nuclear weapons capability is obviously fraught with a number of rather unfavourable consequences for the international community.

Forcing a rewrite

An unintended consequence could be a virtual rewriting of much of what is currently known about transnational terrorism in general and jihadi extremism in particular. An attack on Iran is sure to galvanize the already agitated Muslim community to an unknown extent leading to new configurations and new strategies in the global jihadist movement. Given a number of strategic advantages that Iran enjoys at present in the Muslim world's conflict with the West, the attack on Iran could transform the nature, spread and lethality of jihadi terrorism.

Additionally, there is the perceived double standard in US policy whereby Israeli and American nuclear weapons are seen as "stabilizing" in the Middle East while an Iranian nuclear weapons programme is grounds for an attack. The irony on many in the Muslim world is not lost when it is remembered that it was the American-controlled Shah of Iran who first started Iran's nuclear programme.

Iran holds the cards

Iran has been playing a multi-pronged game in the Muslim world's conflict with the West. Its dealing with Al Qaeda, for example, has been less than transparent. On the one hand, Iran, primarily a Shi'a state, does not approve of, nor support Al Qaeda. Many of the "missing" senior Al Qaeda figures are most likely languishing in Iranian jails – and not having a good time there. If Iran is attacked, it is highly probable that the Iranians, having anticipated this, would use their knowledge and leverage with Al Qaeda members to retaliate. A ban on Iran's oil export is unlikely to hurt the country in the short-term. More importantly, Tehran appears to be having an interest in the destabilization of Iraq and Afghanistan, the resilience of Hizbullah and probably Hamas, the proverbial thorns in the US Middle East policy.

An attack on Iran could bridge the sectarian divide

So far, the jihadi extremism is sustained by a radical discourse in the Sunni strand of Islam. Traditionally the Sunni and Shi'a sects have kept themselves apart on religious issues. Nevertheless, the jihadists the world over draw strength from Islam's revival in late 1970s led by Iran. On political issues such as Palestine there has been a broad agreement among the leaders from rival sects. Many groups have also cooperated on logistical matters despite the

sectarian divide. This cooperation, albeit on the level of the discursive, was evident during Israel's attacks on Hizbullah in August-September 2006, when groups like Al Qaeda and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood pledged support to Hizbullah. Jihadists would perceive an attack against Iran as another example of the West's global war on Islam and would rally with support to counter it.

Despite the global spread of the idea of jihad, the vast majority of Muslims in the world are still not prone to political violence and had spurned the militant revivalist movements spearheaded by groups like Al Qaeda. But there are indications that more and more Muslims, especially in seemingly integrated societies, are now getting increasingly sensitized about global incidents such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the cartoon controversy, to name a few. All these crises are being received as part of the global conspiracy to destroy Islam. It is most likely that the Muslims on the fringe would perceive the attack on Iran as yet another attack on Islam, even if the targeted population is primarily the Shi'as. This would lead to increasing levels of support from a cross-section of the Muslim community, the sectarian divide notwithstanding.

New alignments; new actors

There is thus the possibility that the Shi'a and the Sunni groups may find an accommodation with each other. While it remains unlikely that there will be an outpouring of brotherly love between the two sects, there is already evidence that they recognize and leverage on each other's areas of interests and capabilities. Jihadists are adept at constructing a discourse to justify almost every operation. For example, when Al Qaeda's number two, Ayman al-Zawahiri, was criticized for his professed support for Hizbullah during the 2006 Israeli attacks, he managed to change the rhetoric by contextually distinguishing the enemy. Al-Zawahiri drew a distinction between Shi'as fighting against the Zionists and the crusaders under the banner of groups such as Hamas and Hizbullah and the Shi'as in Iraq, who have traded their religion for power and authority. The wider Muslim community would view Iran's resistance to Western pressures as a struggle against the Zionists and the crusaders.

Hizbullah is an older and more established organization than Al Qaeda. It has a global reach from the Middle East to Europe, North and South America and South Asia. While it has chosen to not operate "out of area" with only minor exceptions, it would have a built-in global capability to launch attacks on virtually every continent. If its support and logistics cells are required to morph into operations cells, the timeline for such a transformation could be very short. At the same time, many radical, but not necessarily violent, individuals who would not have supported Al Qaeda in the past, may now then move to pick up the struggle.

Need for even-handedness

It is for the international community to judge Iran on the nuclear issue. However, given the evolving nature of the jihadist movement, the impact of its actions needs to be considered carefully. We do not propose to be apologists for Iran's nuclear programme. There is no argument about the international community's concerns about security both from traditional and non-traditional threats. But the Muslim world's unhappiness with the failure of the US to deal with Israel in the same way that it is treating Iran now over the nuclear question should not be taken lightly.

In the context of the current predicament of the international community in the war on terror, the need for an informed and balanced decision about how to deal with issues with global ramifications, such as Iran's nuclear weapons programme, can hardly be overemphasized.

** Arabinda Acharya is Manager (Strategic Projects) at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. Tom Quiggin is a Senior Fellow and Programme Coordinator for Risk Assessment and Horizon Scanning, Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), RSIS.*