

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Published on *The National Interest* (<http://nationalinterest.org>)

Source URL (retrieved on Apr 11, 2011): <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/how-close-did-the-united-states-come-launching-war-against-i-5141>

How Close Did the United States Come to Launching a War against Iran?

| [More](#)^[1]

| April 11, 2011

| [Christopher A. Preble](#)^[2]

As early as 2005, Israel determined that it could not deliver a knockout blow against Iran's nuclear facilities, [Ha'aretz reported](#)^[3] over the weekend. Documents obtained through Wikileaks reveal that Israeli officials informed U.S. diplomats in December 2005 "that there is no chance of a military attack being carried out on Iran." The story continues, based on a telegram sent in January 2006:

"[Dr. Ariel Levite, then deputy chief of Israel's Atomic Energy Commission] said that most Israeli officials do not believe a military solution is possible,"... "They believe Iran has learned from Israel's attack on Iraq's Osirak reactor, and has dispersed the components of its nuclear program throughout Iran, with some elements in places that Israel does not know about."

[...]

Levite told the Americans that Iran could obtain nuclear weapons within two to three years, but admitted the estimate could be inaccurate as "Israel does not have a clear or precise understanding of Iran's clandestine program."

These revelations by themselves are not particularly newsworthy. Most knowledgeable observers concluded years ago that Israel lacked the firepower to definitively demolish the Iranian nuclear program, noting publicly the same arguments made privately by Levite above. Given the Iranian government's wide dispersal of facilities around the country, including near population centers, and their skill in concealing sites from foreign intelligence services, even the most optimistic estimates anticipated that air strikes would only set back the Iranian program by a few years, time that would allow the country's religious leaders—and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's thugs—to consolidate their hold on power. A bombing campaign by either Israel or the United States would rally the Iranian people to support an otherwise unpopular and incompetent regime, as even targeted strikes would have resulted in a large number of civilian casualties. It is for these reasons, among others, that Iranian pro-democracy advocates and

regime opponents have consistently argued against a U.S. or Israeli military attack on Iran.

But while this weekend's report might fall under the "common sense" category, it is useful to recall the tension and uncertainty swirling during the first part of George W. Bush's second term. There was also a fair share of fear mongering. On August 8, 2006, Bernard Lewis noted ominously that August 22, 2006, coincided with a particularly important date in the Islamic calendar, and wrote that it would be "an appropriate date for the apocalyptic ending of Israel and, if necessary, of the world." When August 22nd came and went, and Israel and the world were, indeed, still a going concern, Lewis reverted to claims that Iran's leaders are impervious to the basic survival instincts that deterred mass-murderers such as Joseph Stalin and Chairman Mao. He anticipated that Tehran would choose some other future date to bring about the end of days. AEI's [Reuel Marc Gerecht](#) ^[4] casually dismissed claims that the task would be difficult, arguing instead "The issue isn't feasibility, but the determination to strike whenever required since the assessment of risk does not allow any other course of action." And, of course, John McCain is remembered for having said that [the only thing worse than war with Iran was a nuclear Iran](#) ^[5] (and joked to the tune of the Beach Boys' Barbara Ann that we should "[bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb, Iran](#)" ^[6].)

Those of us here at Cato took the threat of war with Iran very seriously. We published two papers in a four-month period in late 2006, followed by a 16-city speaking tour in 2007 and 2008. We argued strongly in favor of [diplomatic carrots and sticks](#) ^[7] to convince the Iranians to open up their nuclear program to international inspections. If those efforts failed, we called for [containment and deterrence](#) ^[8], not another war in the region that would claim countless lives, and make America's struggle in Iraq and Afghanistan look like a "cakewalk" by comparison.

I think our concerns were justified. The advocates of war with Iran were untiring in their efforts to build public support and pressure the Bush administration to act, and they reacted swiftly to discredit those who would cross them. Recall that not long after CENTCOM head Adm. William "Fox" Fallon told Al Jazeera that a "constant drumbeat of conflict" out of Washington about war with Iran was "not helpful and not useful" he was shown the door.

Why did President Bush ultimately forego military operations? And how close did the Bush administration come to following the advice of Sen. McCain and his friends at *The Weekly Standard*? We may never know. Gerecht scorned the Bush administration's supposed timidity as an outgrowth of Iraq. Others point to the [National Intelligence Estimate \(NIE\)](#) ^[9] from November 2007, which concluded that "Tehran [had] halted its nuclear weapons program" in the fall 2003. Although the NIE went on to say "that Tehran at a minimum is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons," that judgment didn't make headlines. By cutting the legs out from under the leading case for war—that an Iranian nuclear weapon was imminent, and that it would soon thereafter be used against Israel or the United States—the NIE likely helped slow the march to war.

If the threats of war were no more than an elaborate bluff designed to frighten the Iranians to capitulate, then they clearly failed. But the wisdom that Levite and others displayed behind the scenes reveal an understanding of the enormous costs and dubious benefits that would derive from yet another war in the Middle East. Let's hope that there is more to this story, and that it points in a similarly sensible direction: that despite all the bluster, U.S. and Israeli officials know that while an Iranian nuclear bomb would be bad, war with Iran would be worse.

More by

Source URL (retrieved on Apr 11, 2011): <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/how-close-did-the-united-states-come-launching-war-against-i-5141>

Links:

[1] <http://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=250&username=nationalinterest>

[2] <http://nationalinterest.org/profile/christopher-preble>

[3] <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/haaretz-wikileaks-exclusive-israel-ruled-out-military-option-on-iran-years-ago-1.355024>

[4] <http://www.cato-unbound.org/2006/07/09/reuel-marc-gerecht/cognitive-dissonance-the-state-of-americas-iran-policy/>

[5] http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/c9f32294-d241-11df-8fbe-00144feabdc0,dwp_uuid=be75219e-940a-11da-82ea-0000779e2340.html#axzz1JEOo17uv

[6] <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=9688222>

[7] http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=6690

[8] http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=6790

[9] http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/20071203_release.pdf