

## **A nuclear Iran will be the top international security issue in 2006**

By Bob Bergen

Nothing sends a chill up a rational person's spine faster than the spectre of nuclear war, but the world should brace itself for an icy blast of reality experts are predicting will become the pre-eminent international security issue in 2006: a nuclear-armed Iran.

"They (Iran) are a threat" said a Canadian Foreign Affairs Department official who spoke from Ottawa on the condition of anonymity.

"We (Canada) have had a hard line on it for well over a year. We've been one of the ones who would have referred it to the Security Council quite a way's back.

"Not being on the Security Council, we're not going to be able to drive it, but in our view it (Iran) should go before the Council as soon as possible," he said.

The concern is this:

"Just in recent weeks I've been hearing reports out of Israel that the Israeli air force is planning on bombing the Iranian nuclear reactor," says Tami Jacobi, a Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI) Fellow and widely published expert on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

"It depends how it evolves. I can only say that there has been a precedent with Israel's bombing of the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1982 and everyone was very upset about that," Jacobi said from New York where she was completing a sabbatical at New York University.

It is expected the Iranian reactor at Bushehr, which Iran claims is for peaceful purposes, will be completed by the Russians by 2007.

The threat of pre-emptive strikes against it by Israel or possibly the United States prompted Iran to sign a contract with Russia in early December for the sale of 29 Russian anti-missile systems worth some \$700 million for self-defence.

The Tor M-1 surface-to-air missile systems are capable of neutralizing cruise missiles, aircraft; precision weapons and unmanned aerial vehicles.

In addition, thanks to supplies and expertise from China, North Korea and Russia, Iran is well on the way to becoming self-sufficient in the manufacture of ballistic missiles capable of reaching targets in Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia; U.S. Forces in the Middle East; and perhaps beyond, according to the Wisconsin Project on nuclear arms control.

Another concern is Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's widely reported quoting of the late-Ayatollah Khomeini that Israel "Israel must be wiped from the map of the world." Ahmadinejad also said: "And God willing, with the force of God behind it, we shall soon experience a world without the United States and Zionism." He further said that the Holocaust was a "myth."

"The man is the next Hitler and rapidly acquiring the capability to do a lot of damage to a lot of people within a circle of at least 3,000 km from any centre point in Iran. That covers a lot of territory," says Dr. David J. Bercuson, the CDFAI Director of Programs.

If anyone knows first-hand what tensions are like in the Middle East, it is Canada's former ambassador to Iran from 1996 to 1999 Michel de Salaberry.

"God preserve us against an Israeli strike against Iran," de Salaberry said from Ottawa.

"An uncoordinated attack by Israel would be quite destabilizing. Israel's capacity is something very sensitive throughout the region," he said.

"I think quite a few people in the region would react by thinking that Iran is probably right in preparing that kind of defence against an Israeli attack."

de Salaberry's explained that his concerns about an Israeli strike stem from his experience as second-in-command of the Canadian Embassy in Israel during the 1991 Persian Gulf War when Iraq launched Scud missiles at Israel.

"The thing we feared most during the first Gulf war was an Israeli attack against Iraq because that would have made it much more difficult for the Arab members of the coalition to stay with the coalition," he said.

In the same way, he said, an Israeli strike now would worsen already strained Israeli-Arab relations in the region.

"I would say the statements of the regime over the last month or two months in many ways play into the Israelis' hands by confirming to many members of the international community Israel's position that this (Iranian) regime can't be trusted with nuclear weapons," says CDFAI Fellow Andrew Richter, a University of Windsor expert in nuclear weapons and proliferation

"In Iran's case, the best intelligence is that they are still a couple of years away from nuclear weapons – somewhere between two and four years. You should use best intelligence in quotes in the aftermath of Iraq. I'm not sure what 'best intelligence' is anymore," Richter says.

In a perfect world, Iran would care far more about international opinion on non-proliferation. In perfect world France, Britain and Germany would have had far greater success in the past year convincing Iran to halt uranium enrichment, comply with the International Atomic Energy Agency and agree to transparency with its nuclear program in exchange for technological support and co-operation.

If only this were a perfect world.

*Bob Bergen, Ph.D., is a Research Fellow with the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI) in Calgary. The opinions expressed in this document are those of the author and not necessarily those of CDFAI, its Board of Directors, Advisory Council, Fellows or donors.*