

# *Iran*

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The *Iran Regional Forum* series discusses the place of Iran in the wider region. It gives the floor to experts from all over the world, especially from Iran's neighboring countries, Central Asia, South Caucasus, Turkey, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Russia, and China.

## **Debating the Impact of the Iranian Nuclear Crisis in Central Asia**

**Murat Laumulin** (Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies), **Vafo Niyatbekov** (Tajikistan Center for Strategic Studies), **Guli Yuldasheva** (formerly at the Tashkent State Institute of Oriental Studies)

*Do you think there is a real risk of a US or Israeli military attack against Iran in the forthcoming months?*

### **Murat Laumulin**

Over the recent months the situation around the Iranian nuclear program has been exacerbated. It is clear that Tehran raises the bar for the confrontation with the West, the United States and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). For their part, the United States and Israel are openly discussing the possibility of a preemptive strike on the nuclear facilities of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Currently, the likelihood of an armed conflict between Iran and America is greater than ever since the events of 1980-1.

The West has already taken covert attempts to stop Iran's nuclear program. Cyberattacks, like

the Stuxnet computer virus of the nuclear management system, were successful in halting Iran's uranium enrichment program. In addition, some members of the Iranian nuclear community and its nuclear scientists are being physically eliminated (probably by Israeli intelligence) and missile bases could be bombed.

The Washington-based Council on Foreign Relations in collaboration with the Pentagon has already developed a strategy for action against Iran: the United States should conduct an extremely precise and well-conceived operation, where it should destroy Iran's nuclear facilities, withstand the inevitable response of Tehran, and then try to quickly reduce the degree of confrontation.

An attack on Iran would have disastrous consequences for international security, global econo-

my and Iran's domestic politics, and all these factors must be considered. As noted by some experts, US military actions could also ignite a full-scale war in the Middle East. Of course, Tehran is behaving provocatively, for example by announcing the imminent start of a new uranium enrichment plant, which annoys everyone, including traditionally moderate Russia.

It is possible that the Iranian leadership will act through its agents abroad, provoking clashes between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq, undermining the outcomes of the "Arab Spring," as well as sponsoring terrorist attacks against Israel and the United States. Israel and other nations will then be drawn into an armed confrontation, which would encourage the US in response to escalate the conflict further.

Iran can hit Israel or US military bases in the region and oil fields in the Gulf. Iranian ballistic missiles do not represent a threat for the American warships but we could see small speedboats packed with explosives on board and led by a crew of suicide bombers trying to reach US tankers in the Persian Gulf.

In response to US military action, Iran will also attempt to block the Strait of Hormuz, through which more than 20 percent of all oil is supplied to various countries around the world. Even if Tehran does not realize these threats, market speculators, fearing possible disruption of supplies, will raise oil prices, causing more devastating global economic consequences at a time when the world is struggling to overcome the economic recession.

### **Vafo Niyatbekov**

It is too early to speak about a possible military attack by the United States and Israel on Iran's nuclear facilities. Today, the West is carrying out a well-conceived strategy, aimed primarily at weakening the Iranian economy. In particular, a number of sanctions have been taken against the Islamic Republic of Iran. In principle, this policy has had a positive result with respect to Iraq. Years of sanctions on Bagdad led to the increase of public discontent with socio-economic policies, which at a time of military undertakings resulted

in local support for the Western troops. However, there is an important difference between present Iran and Iraq. In the former, elections are held and take into account the will of the people, while Saddam Hussein's regime was a dictatorship.

Another important point, which delays or questions the beginning of a military operation against Iran, is the upcoming elections in the United States, as well as domestic political problems in Israel. If the Republicans win the elections in the US, they will escalate the policy towards Iran, which would be more hardline and would not rule out military intervention in resolving the issue of Iran's nuclear policy. But in the coming months, this is unlikely, as domestic political and economic priorities will dominate the US scene.

### **Guli Yuldasheva**

I do not think so. First, there is not enough domestic support for a US military attack against Iran, with the exception of war hawks in Congress. With the widening US budget deficit and growing public discontent with socio-economic situation, President Barack Obama sees it is more important to keep the internal political balance and win the presidential election than to get involved in another military adventure.

Second, the United States does not have enough international support for this action. The events of recent years surrounding Iran, Afghanistan and the Middle East along with the growing economic problems have changed political preferences in most European countries. Therefore, it is doubtful that the European Union (EU) will support any military action against Iran. Furthermore, as the results of six-party negotiations with Iran indicate, the EU is more inclined towards a compromise settlement of the issue. Israel remains the only supporter of military action. Yet, on the one hand, there is no unity on this matter within Israel itself, on the other hand, there are also tactical and strategic disagreements on the Iran issue between the US and Israel.

Third, the United States seeks to promote long-term economic projects in the region with its 'New Silk Road' strategy. The strategy tries to consolidate the political and economic transfor-

mations of Afghanistan, to partner with the Central Asian countries and Pakistan on transit of goods, and has fostered the signing of an agreement on the Turkmen-Afghan-Pakistani-Indian gas pipeline (TAPI). This regional strategy contradicts any war logics. Thus, a military conflict with Iran is unlikely to happen until the end of the year.

***What would be the impact for the whole Central Asia of an attack against Iran?***

### **Murat Laumulin**

The development of such events could seriously complicate the strategic situation around Central Asia. The escalation of military conflict with Iran threatens to undermine stability in the vast region of Central Asia, Caspian Sea and both the North and South Caucasus. An armed operation against the Islamic Republic of Iran and the possible responses of Tehran would greatly decrease security and stability in Central Asia, hitting a blow for political and economic interests of Kazakhstan.

### **Vafo Niyatbekov**

In the analysis of the relationship between Iran and Central Asia, it should be noted that Iran has the most active cooperation in the region with Tajikistan, which is explained by the historical, cultural and linguistic relations between the two countries. Today, Tajikistan has a number of joint projects with Iran, which have a great significance for the country's development, namely the construction of the hydropower station Sangtuda-2, the construction of tunnels, and a large number of joint ventures in the trade sector.

As a consequence of military action against Iran, Tajikistan might lose the projects for which agreements have been already signed such as the electricity project 500-kV Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Iran; the gas pipeline project from Iran to Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and China, passing through the territory of Afghanistan; a railway project from China to Iran, running through Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan; and imports of Iran's pe-

troleum products by Tajikistan. These projects are important for the Republic of Tajikistan because it currently faces continuous transportation blockade and gas cuts by Uzbekistan.

### **Guli Yuldasheva**

If some unforeseen actions are undertaken by individual states and even short-term military operations are launched by Israel or by the United States in alliance with Israel, radical Islamic groups would immediately intensify their activities along the Iranian border (primarily, with Afghanistan and Pakistan). In the Central Asia region itself, groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Haqqani network and the Taliban would be strengthened. As conservative Muslim population dominate in rural Central Asia, it is possible that some attempts might be taken to challenge the existing governments and establish Islamic regimes. We are already witnessing a strengthening of political Islam in the Middle East. There is also a risk of civil war and ethno-national conflicts, such as the Uzbek-Kyrgyz confrontation, that may spread beyond the region into neighboring countries. Armed conflicts will worsen the already difficult socio-economic situation in the region, leading to numerous victims among the population, migration, and an influx of refugees into neighboring countries.

***Do you think Iran will organize retaliation measures against your country, and if yes, of what nature?***

### **Murat Laumulin**

No, Iran will not organize retaliatory measures against Kazakhstan. However, Astana (together with its allies) has capabilities and diplomatic tools to stabilize the situation and develop it in a positive direction. These tools include current chairmanship of Kazakhstan in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), consultations within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), as well as bilateral and multilateral negotiations with Iran.

As regards towards the Iranian crisis, Kazakhstan should proceed from the existing imperatives that serve as a basis for many international settlement plans. There are a number of primary and explicit requirements for Tehran, which have been repeatedly voiced by Kazakh allies (especially Russia), as well as by competent international organizations (notably, IAEA).

These requirements include the following steps: 1) a broad and undisputable cooperation of Iran with the IAEA; 2) a withdrawal of the demands for Iran to abandon its uranium enrichment program, which is unrealistic; 3) a UN Security Council resolution on the inadmissibility of the use of force or threat of force (including cyberattacks) against any nuclear facilities in the Middle East under IAEA safeguards; 4) Iran's voluntary action to temporarily freeze its level of uranium enrichment, as well as to freeze the number of centrifuges at current levels, and abstain from installing new cascades and spinning centrifuges; 5) the decision of the UN Security Council to suspend sanctions against Iran, subject to satisfactory cooperation between Iran and the IAEA and if all issues of "the Iranian file" at the IAEA are resolved, all sanctions should be lifted; 6) the establishment of a climate of trust in the Gulf region and possibly in the entire Middle East as regards nuclear safety; 7) the launch of a Middle Eastern regional dialogue on a whole range of nuclear issues, from the formation of a zone free of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East, with the participation of all Arab states, Iran and Israel, to the creation of the "Middle Eastern IAEA," on the model of Euratom.

To protect and promote its own national interests, Kazakhstan could build its policies with Iran as follows:

- Discourage the bellicose rhetoric of Tehran at bilateral and multilateral level, restraining the participation of the Islamic Republic of Iran within the Caspian States Conference and the OIC;
- Use its international influence and the potential of international organizations to pursue peaceful resolution of Iran's nuclear problem;

- Maintain regional stability in Central Asia. In case of conflict around Iran, Kazakhstan, under the agreement with Russia and China, could seek to bring into action regional security mechanisms such as those proposed in the SCO, CSTO and OSCE frameworks;
- Bring to Tehran's attention that Kazakhstan will support Moscow's efforts to strengthen security of the Russian Federation and its allies within the CIS and CSTO, which also includes actions on the basis of a possible US-Russian compromise (Moscow's refusal to support Iran in exchange for Washington's refusal to deploy missile defense);
- As regards to Iran's nuclear program itself, Astana can join efforts with Russia to build a nuclear fuel bank as an alternative conflict resolution;
- In case of the destabilization of Iran involving ethnic conflicts, Kazakhstan will not engage in (moral or political) support to some Pan-Turkic nationalist forces inside Iran, in which Turkey and Azerbaijan might be interested;
- In case of a large-scale conflict between the West and Iran, Kazakhstan should distance itself from it and take all the necessary military and political efforts (together with Russia and allies within the CSTO) to ensure its own national security.

#### **Vafo Niyatbekov**

There will be no retaliation measures against Central Asia countries from Iran because it is unlikely that Central Asia countries will support military action against Iran. Dushanbe did not support the request of its American counterparts made by Robert Blake, US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, on March 27, 2012, in which he urged the Central Asian countries to support sanctions against Iran and stop business relations with it.

#### **Guli Yuldasheva**

It is unlikely that Iran will take any action against Tashkent because of the latter's geostrategic importance and historical, cultural, and religious affinity. Uzbekistan, including the whole Central

Asia region, is a zone of vital geopolitical and economic interests of Iran, and the region is perceived as part of Tehran's geo-economic and socio-cultural sphere of influence. In the worst-case scenario, it may only be possible that trade and diplomacy are restricted and borders shut down.

*Do you think this US-Iran crisis impacts the negotiation of a peaceful solution for Afghanistan by marginalizing Tehran?*

### **Murat Laumulin**

A military operation scenario looks as follows. First, Iranian air defense system will be suppressed and radars knocked out. With bases in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Americans will encircle Iran, and they have ideal conditions for a radar reconnaissance. After the suppression of air defenses missile, bomb strikes will be carried out on nuclear facilities. Large-scale land operation is virtually ruled out, sabotage raid groups may be sent in, but this is unlikely. It is possible that in the event of the conflict Iran's role and influence in Afghanistan and generally in the region will increase.

### **Vafo Niyatbekov**

Today's situation in Afghanistan does not depend in any way on the crisis in relations between Iran and the United States. Allegations that Iran might support the Taliban have appeared often recently but are not true. If Taliban win and get back into power, the influence of Tehran in Kabul will be reduced.

### **Guli Yuldasheva**

It is almost impossible that the role of Iran in Afghanistan can be reduced due to its territorial, historical, cultural and religious affinity with part of the Afghan population. As far as the regional security is concerned, issues of drug trafficking and Afghan refugees cannot be addressed without Tehran's involvement. In addition, the Islamic Republic has objective reasons to increase Shiite influence in Afghanistan, and especially in the parliament.

Moreover, Iran has well-grounded economic interests in the region, which it pursues with some success. In April 2012 it signed a memorandum on a road construction project to Afghanistan and Tajikistan, and an agreement on transit trade with Kabul. There are also negotiations underway on the feasibility of a Pakistan-Iran gas project. Any attempt to suspend Iran's current engagement in Afghanistan and limit Tehran's role there will inevitably lead to destabilization of the region, impeding the interests of Central Asian states and challenging realization of the US long-term 'New Silk Road' strategy. Thus, the Iranian-American confrontation is, in fact, one of the major obstacles to a peaceful resolution in Afghanistan.

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