

The Middle Eastern Powder Keg Can Explode at Anytime

By [José Miguel Alonso Trabanco](#)

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Historically, some great powers have originated in the Middle East: The Persian Empire, the Islamic Caliphate and the Ottoman Empire. Following the collapse of the latter as a result of World War One, no great power indigenous to the Middle East has emerged,

The aforementioned meant that, from that point onwards, outside powers became the most important players in Middle Eastern geopolitics. That was not necessarily a new reality because both the Romans and the Mongols had invaded a considerable portion of the Middle East.

Indeed, after World War One, France and Britain forged the secret Sykes-Picot agreement in order to establish mutually recognized influence zones there. The region became more strategically important when it was discovered that the Middle East possessed the world's largest oil reserves.

For both Paris and London, an outcome of World War Two was the loss of their colonial possessions in the Middle East. Thus, this area of the planet, located in Eurasia's rimland, became one of the main battlefields during the Cold War rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States.

Right after World War Two, both the Americans and the Soviets supported the creation of Israel hoping they could gain the new State's geopolitical loyalty. In the early years of the Cold War, US (and British) intelligence instigated a *coup d'état* to overthrow Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mosadegh, who had previously masterminded the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, an ancestor of today's British Petroleum. As a result of that intrigue, the Shah of Iran took over the country's government.

Washington also forged an understanding with Saudi Arabia's ruling elite: The House of Saud. Riyadh thus agreed to ensure that oil supplies for the West would be uninterrupted in exchange for American military and diplomatic protection.

The Soviet Union also became heavily involved in regional affairs. Moscow welcomed the arrival of a friendly regime in what was known as the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. The Soviets obtained access to naval facilities there. The Kremlin was also the main backer of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Back then, Egypt was a recipient of Soviet financial, military, technical and political aid. Nasser established a close relation with Syria and promoted the creation of an Arab United Republic, which would be willing to challenge both Western and Israeli interests. However, Nasser's plans were shattered when American-backed Israel inflicted a crushing defeat on Cairo. Egypt would eventually be

disengaged from the Soviet orbit and embed into the Pro-American camp.

Furthermore, Western and Israeli intelligence apparatuses covertly encouraged Radical Islamic movements, bearing in mind the geopolitical objective to tackle secular Pan-Arab governments and political forces. Some groups like Hamas, al-Qaeda, the Taliban or even the Muslim Brotherhood flourished as a result of the American (and also Western and Israeli) needs to counter organizations which were or that could be prone to align with the Kremlin. Geopolitics makes strange bedfellows indeed.

The Iranian revolution was a huge geopolitical earthquake whose shockwaves heavily reverberated in both Washington and Moscow. The fall of the Shah and the empowerment of the Ayatollahs was a major cause of concern. The US feared that some of its allies (think of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and so on) could be the targets of similar uprising due to their populations' discontent for lack of economic progress and governmental corruption among other reasons. That scenario was utterly threatening for the West because it could potentially endanger their oil supplies.

The Kremlin regarded this situation as extremely dire because a growing contagion of Islamic-inspired unrest, if not dealt with, might have very well reached deep into the Soviet Union's Central Asian Republics, all of them inhabited by populations predominantly Muslim. There was another concern for Moscow. The triumph of radical Islamic forces in Iran could enhance the *Muhadjin's* determination to fight the Soviet-friendly government of Afghanistan. The Americans supported those 'Holy Warriors', hoping it could lure Moscow into a war of attrition there.

In short, both the US and the USRR saw the Iranian revolution as a problem that needed to be taken care of. They knew (and their successors still do) that, historically Persia has been a large Empire which was feared by the Greeks, the Romans and the Ottomans and that Teheran's rulers (weather its government was Zoroastrian, Secular, Royal, or Shiite) had envisioned and embraced the idea of a 'Greater Iran'. Such unfulfilled agenda, coupled with a high dose of Islamic fundamentalism, could spell a recipe for disaster if unattended.

History does not lack a certain dose of irony. Both the Americans and the Soviets supported Saddam Hussein's Iraq as a counterweight against Iran. Nevertheless, the US was not willing to afford an Iraqi victory over the Ayatollahs in the Iraq-Iran war. The balance of power had to be preserved while at the same time containing the Iranians. So America (with some Israeli help) decided to sell weapons to Iran and then invest those profits in funding anti-Soviet covert operations all over the world. Israel's main motivation was to prevent Iraq from becoming a regional power. That is what the Israeli attack launched on Iraq's Osirak nuclear testing was all about.

The American invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq generated an interesting byproduct. Two of the most antagonistic regimes toward Iran had been militarily crushed. The Iranians saw this as an opportunity to enhance their power and extend their influence throughout the Middle East and even beyond. The Persians have resorted to its Sunni as well as Shiite militant proxies (Hamas and Hezbollah) to challenge Israel, a hostile power not too far from Iranian soil. Teheran has also forged closer links with mostly-Sunni Syria. Mahmud Ahmadinejad's victory also meant that Teheran began seeking a convenient relation with Beijing and Moscow.

China has become an important buyer of Iranian petroleum. Both the Chinese and the Iranians have seriously considered the possibility to build an oil pipeline running from Iran to China. There has also been some talks regarding an eventual Chinese military base in Iranian soil. Meanwhile, Russia has become Iran's largest provider of weapons and it is the Russians who are collaborating in building the Busher nuclear plant. It is quite telling that Iran's government has requested full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and has manifested an interest to join the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization. All of the above does not necessarily mean that Beijing and Moscow regard Iran as full-fledged ally. It can be suggested that they use it as a tool of leverage to extract important concessions from the West should the need arise.

Nonetheless, this cooperation has not gone unnoticed in Washington. An American military simulation called Vigilant Shield took place in 2006. Its assumptions were that if the US went to war with '*Irmingham*' (a thinly guised version of Iran), it was possible that '*Churia*' (which stands for China) and Ruebek (read Russia) might become somehow involved.

Although Iran is targeted by American neocons for belonging to the so called 'Axis of Evil', Ahmadinejad's government has been pragmatic enough to engage the Americans in covert negotiations about Iraq becoming some sort of buffer state which does not become a client state of neither America nor Iran. Perhaps that is one of the reasons the US has delayed a strike on Iran even though Washington refuses to dismiss its military threat.

Israel's operation Cast Lead, as Professor Michel Chossudovsky demonstrates in his analysis entitled "War and Natural Gas", was in part motivated by Israel's desire to control gas reserves. It is conceivable that a political factor plays an important role as well. Israeli current government, headed by the Kadima-Labor Axis Ehud Olmert-Tzipi Livni-Ehud Barak can be defeated in the upcoming elections by Likud's Benyamin Netanyahu so perhaps they are trying to demonstrate to Israeli voters that they are not hesitant about using hard power. There is not a huge difference between both factions, but it cannot be denied that Netanyahu is far more hawkish than the Olmert-Livni-Barak trio. If Netanyahu becomes the next Prime Minister, the likelihood of war will increase.

As the Prussian strategist Carl Von Clausewitz warned: "War is a gamble" and Operation Cast Lead might bring about some serious consequences indeed. Whether its outcomes are unintended or deliberate is yet to be seen.

For instance, Israel's military incursion in Gaza has already enraged the Arab Masses all over the Middle East. Some Pro-Western governments in the region are in a rather dire situation (Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia) and their position can become ever more fragile for they can become the target of their own populations discontent because of their rulers' (covert or otherwise) collaboration with the Americans and/or the Israelis.

Those Arab governments are afraid of Iran's using its proxies and allies to fuel unrest and to topple them, thus advancing Teheran's agenda of becoming a regional leader. If those governments are overthrown, their hypothetical successors will surely be much less willing to collaborate with the West, which knows that, if such thing ever happens, the Middle Eastern balance of power would dramatically change, not to mention that the price of oil would skyrocket.

Israel fears a nuclear Iran would mean the end of the Israeli monopoly over nuclear weapons in the region. An Iran armed with nuclear weapons (even if it is ruled by hardline Mahmud

Ahmadinejad) would not be foolish enough to attack Israel first because Teheran is well aware of Israel's menacing stockpile of nuclear weapons.

So what the Israeli government really is scared of is the possibility that any rival of Israel, covered by a hypothetical Iranian nuclear umbrella, would feel less intimidated by Israel. Moreover, such scenario could encourage other Middle Eastern States to develop their own nuclear weapons. So far, the Israelis have implemented a policy of dispensing carrots (negotiation proposals) and sticks (air strikes) to Damascus in an attempt to seduce Syria away from Iran.

On the other hand, the West is not afraid of a nuclear Iran *per se*. One can infer that from their refusal to do anything meaningful to prevent the acquisition of nuclear weapons by States like India, Israel or Pakistan. Rather, the Americans and the Europeans cannot accept a '*Pax Iranica*' in the Middle East because Teheran would, *de facto*, control a zone which contains the world's largest oil reserves, a resource the Western economies have to import because their domestic supplies are not enough to meet their consumption needs.

In case of an Israeli and/or American attack against Iran, Ahmadinejad's government will certainly respond. A possible countermeasure would be to fire Persian ballistic missiles against Israel and maybe even against American military bases in the regions. Teheran will unquestionably resort to its proxies like Hamas or Hezbollah (or even some of its Shiite allies it has in Lebanon or Saudi Arabia) to carry out attacks against Israel, America and their allies, effectively setting in flames a large portion of the Middle East. The ultimate weapon at Iranian disposal is to block the Strait of Hormuz. If such chokepoint is indeed asphyxiated, that would dramatically increase the price of oil, this a very threatening retaliation because it will bring intense financial and economic havoc upon the West, which is already facing significant trouble in those respects.

In short, the necessary conditions for a major war in the Middle East are given. Such conflict could rapidly spiral out of control and thus a relatively minor clash could quickly and dangerously escalate by engulfing the whole region and perhaps even beyond. There are many key players: the Israelis, the Palestinians, the Arabs, the Persians and their respective allies and some great powers could become involved in one way or another (America, Russia, Europe, China). Therefore, any miscalculation by any of the main protagonists can trigger something no one can stop. Taking into consideration that the stakes are too high, perhaps it is not wise to be playing with fire right in the middle of a powder keg.

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