

Talk of another preventive war in the Middle East is folly

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James Baker will have heard many views as he prepares his much awaited report on Iraq. But he is unlikely to have heard anything as strikingly original as the suggestions offered to him by Ali G when Mr Baker gave the comedian an interview a couple of years ago.

The self-styled spokesman for youth suggested to Mr Baker that it might be problematic that Iran and Iraq had such similar names. Wasn't there a real danger, he asked, that an order might be issued to an American pilot and "the geezer don't hear it properly and bomb Iran not Iraq"? "No danger," replied the former secretary of state evenly.

But now, as he settles down to draft his report, Mr Baker might reflect that perhaps Mr G was on to something. It turns out that there is a country in the Middle East that is bent on developing nuclear weapons, which is funding terrorism and de-stabilising the region and which has a dangerously erratic president. But that country's name is Iran - not Iraq. Maybe America and its allies invaded the wrong place by mistake?

Some of the neo-conservatives who pressed hardest for the invasion of Iraq seem to have reached this conclusion. In an article for Foreign Policy magazine that is almost as surreal as an Ali G interview, Joshua Muravchik of the American Enterprise Institute acknowledges a whole string of errors and misapprehensions that lay behind the decision to invade Iraq. But then - with scarcely a pause for breath - he urges President George W. Bush "to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities before leaving office".

It would be easy to dismiss these views as ravings from a discredited ideological sect. But that would be a mistake. In recent months, I have heard senior British and French diplomats also discuss the possibility that Iran's nuclear ambitions might ultimately have to be dealt with by military action. The problem is that most people who follow the issue closely believe that Iran is, indeed, intent on developing nuclear weapons - and some argue that it is only a year or so away from crossing the threshold at which possession of the bomb becomes inevitable.

America could well make a big new effort to negotiate with Iran in the wake of the Baker report. If that fails, sanctions could be wheeled out. But, realistically, neither course is likely to divert Iran away from its nuclear ambitions.

The rise of President Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad has also darkened the outlook. Even Kofi Annan, the United Nations secretary-general, was unsettled by a meeting with the Iranian president in Tehran last August. According to one person present at the meeting, Mr Ahmadi-Nejad explained that the US and Britain were still enjoying the benefits of winning the second world war and then added: "We will cut them down to size."

By combining Holocaust denial with talk of a world without Israel or the US and a determination to develop nuclear weapons, Iran's president has put his country into considerable danger. President Bush has said that: "You have got to assume that leader, when he says he would like to destroy Israel, means what he says." Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, has compared Mr Ahmadi-Nejad's rhetoric to that of Hitler, adding that: "In the early 1930s, many people said that it is only rhetoric."

But there is a problem with the oft-stated argument that the Iranian president must be taken at his word. For if you were to take Mr Ahmadi-Nejad literally, you would have to believe that Iran does not have a nuclear-weapons programme - for that is what he says. The Iranian president can hardly be accused of explicitly threatening to nuke Israel, given that Iran denies having a nuclear-weapons programme in the first place.

So we are back to the balance of probabilities. The Atlantic Monthly recently ran a poll of 38 of America's leading foreign policy experts, ranging from neo-cons to liberals. One of their questions was whether they "thought it likely that Iran would use its nuclear weapons offensively, either by directly attacking other countries or by passing the weapons to terrorist groups"? The majority - 86 per cent of the sample - said

they thought this unlikely.

But even if the risk that Iran would actually use a nuclear weapon is very small, some argue that it cannot be lived with. This argument is what Dick Cheney, vice-president, has called "the 1 per cent doctrine". If there is a 1 per cent chance that America's enemies might use a nuclear weapon, the US must act as if it was a 100 per cent certainty.

It sounds like a tough-minded way of preventing the very worst from happening. But on many occasions in the past 60 years, the US and its allies have had to live with a more than 1 per cent chance that their adversaries might use nuclear weapons - the Cuba missile crisis for example. On all these occasions, the Americans wisely steered away from preventive war. Even Winston Churchill, the neo-cons' hero, spent the 1930s arguing for re-armament - not for a first strike on Nazi Germany.

One influential advocate of bombing Iran accepts that it is very improbable that the Iranians would actually use nuclear weapons. His concern is that, once Iran had nuclear weapons, it would embark on an uninhibited pursuit of regional hegemony - supporting terrorism and insurgencies across the Middle East and seeking to control the global oil market.

These are all serious and worrying possibilities. If they could be averted by the fabled "surgical strike" on Iranian nuclear facilities, modelled on the Israeli raid on Iraq's nuclear programme in 1981, such a course would be worth considering. But almost nobody thinks that it would be possible to dispose of Iran's nuclear facilities so easily. They are thought to be dispersed widely around the country and buried underground. Military experts talk of the need for hundreds or thousands of bombing raids, stretched over many days - and even that might merely set back Iran's nuclear programme a few years.

Iran would also certainly retaliate. It could unleash Shia militias on allied troops in Iraq, encourage Hizbollah and Hamas to stage new attacks on Israel and block the Strait of Hormuz, through which 40 per cent of the world's oil flows. So military strikes that were launched because of the fear of the destabilising effects of a nuclear Iran would have created the very instability and bloodshed that they were meant to avert. If Iraq has taught America and its allies anything, it is that it is much easier to start a war in the Middle East than to finish one.

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