

Testimony of Colonel Lawrence B. Wilkerson, USA (Retired)
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Iran: Realities, Options, and Regional and Global Consequences of U.S. Military Action

Mr. Chairman, members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Your hearing's title suggests the challenge America confronts with respect to the damage it has done in destroying the balance of power in the Persian Gulf—for that is clearly what we have done however unwittingly. That is the ultimate strategic "reality" we confront. It is one of the principal reasons that in 1991, at the close of the first Gulf War, a decision was made to cease hostilities at the successful fulfillment of the United Nations mandate to eject the Iraqi Army from Kuwait, and not to continue on to Baghdad.

Iran has no enemies of consequence remaining. America has eliminated Iraq, Iran's enemy number one; and we have eliminated—or more precisely, we and NATO are now tying down—Iran's enemy number two, the Taliban. We have not finished off that enemy nor does it appear likely we will do so in the near future, so in a long-range sense Iran probably feels a little disquiet in that direction.

Some would ask, What about Israel? I believe that Iran does not and should not consider that country a threat. Israel has every reason to seek good relations with Iran and few reasons to create strained or bad relations. The same can be said for the Persians with respect to Israel, were the U.S. to get out of the way and use its best diplomatic tools rather than its bombs and bullets. The harsh words of a virtually powerless President in Teheran constitute a rhetorical shield for a concerned leadership, not a predetermined future for Israel. This assessment begs the question of Hezbollah: is it not Israel's enemy and is it not supported by Iran?

Hezbollah's capabilities far outstrip those of al-Qaeda and some of its assumed objectives are antithetical to Israeli interests. Yet here too—particularly with the political leadership of the organization—resides rationality. Were deft moves to occur—in Lebanon, Syria, vis-à-vis Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian situation—the political leadership of Hezbollah and the leadership in Damascus and in Teheran could effect ameliorative change. In short, this challenge too can be met through astute diplomacy.

If eliminating Iran's principal enemies were not enough, we have also driven Syria straight into the embrace of Iran, an embrace I have no doubt that that Arab country finds at least slightly uncomfortable. But we have offered Damascus no opportunity to escape, laying down impossible ultimata for Syrian leaders like those we lay down for Teheran.

All of this strategic ineptitude on our part flies in the face of one of the basic tenets of international relations—*the conservation of enemies*. A nation never wants any more enemies than it can handle. National leaders who do not appreciate this axiom are strategically naïve. "Bring 'em on" is precisely the sort of leadership rhetoric that displays such naïveté.

Moreover, not only is this strategic imbalance in the Persian Gulf our own fault, in its immediate wake we have inserted our own armed forces onto the fulcrum. In doing this, we may have temporarily set a check on any major Iranian move to exploit the imbalance but we have at the same time tied up our ground forces, much of our air mobility forces, and quite a lot of our other air power forces in what may at best be described as imperial overstretch, at worst sheer strategic lunacy. In short, we are caught in a perfect storm of our own making in Iraq. Moreover, in asymmetric ways, Iran can strike at our ground forces almost at will with guerrilla-style actions.

Meanwhile, America has real, identifiable, substantial strategic interests in the Persian Gulf and in the wider region and we are malpositioned to protect these interests because we are so bogged down in the civil war in Iraq.

There is the Strait of Hormuz and the critical oil line of communications that traverses it. There are friends such as Kuwait, Oman, the UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. There are Jordan and Egypt. There is Israel. There is today not the Soviet Union seeking a warm water port—something I spent years planning and exercising to prevent; but there is the potential Moscow-Teheran linkup that could establish a natural gas monopoly that would make OPEC pale in comparison. That link's combined petroleum assets would not be a subject of humor on Wall Street either. At present, our bellicose policies toward Iran make Russia's strategic task in this regard all the simpler to accomplish.

In addition, there is America's intrinsic and critical strategic interest in attracting and persuading the significant part of the Muslim world that we need to combat the real terrorists in the world who would do us harm. By our continued boots-on-the-ground presence on Arab soil, we alienate that population from India to Indonesia and make it impossible to further our strategic interest in the only way that will sustain success in the conflict with radical Islamists.

We must reposition our military forces as rapidly as possible—over the horizon, in prepositioned stocks, able to exercise with regional powers—so that we can protect these other strategic interests. I imagine that the shape and timeliness of such repositioning occupies a great deal of Admiral William J. Fallon's thoughts these days at U.S. Central Command. Such thoughts must keep that very fine warfighter on pins and needles.

Given this self-induced strategic imbalance of power and the malposition of forces in the Persian Gulf region, what are America's options?

First, the deterioration of our land power, particularly our Army, will soon demand a foreclosure on any option other than withdrawal of substantive landforce structure from Iraq.

By December 2008, at least half of the current land forces in Iraq must be on the move, already withdrawn, or getting ready to do so. The alternative is that our already severely strained land forces will be broken almost completely. So, whatever option we adopt, this reality must be a central pole around which the rest is built.

I believe this reality alone means that using military force against Iran is a fool's gamble. That said, to act thusly is a commonplace in military history. In fact, to do so would replicate once again one of the oldest failures in military history—that is that when a leader encounters strategic failure, his first inclination is to reinforce that failure. From the Persian to the British empires, there exist enough examples to give one pause. From Xerxes to Mark Anthony, from Napoleon to Hitler, from World War I to Vietnam, history is replete with leaders who simply could not say "Enough!" and instead chose to deepen their failure—and sacrifice more blood and treasure—by adding to it.

Second, in order to salvage some success from the strategic mess we have created—and perhaps even move ahead a positive agenda of stability and peace in the region—we need to convene serious talks with all of the regional leaders, including Iran and Syria. Turkey needs to be there as well, as all of you can certainly understand. These region-wide talks should occur concurrently, or nearly so, with U.S. bilateral talks with all of the central players, *starting with Iran*. Moreover, what Dr. Rice has already started—meaningful Israel-Palestinian talks—must be continued and must be perceived as leading to a final settlement, and in the end, *must actually lead there*.

Mr. Chairman, let's assume for a moment that all of this diplomatic—and inevitably, economic, political, and financial—effort fails ultimately and, despite the lack of a substantial and ready land component, military force is the only option left on the table. What would be the consequences of using such force—limited to air and naval power perhaps complemented by a few special operating forces—to prevent Iran's possessing a nuclear weapon? For that latter purpose is the only ultimate objective of which I can conceive with regard to using force against Iran.

This objective assumes that the U.S. cannot tolerate Iran's possessing a nuclear weapon, which to me, as a strategist, is an illogical position to take because Iran is deterable. So long as Israel and America have nuclear weapons, Iran will use its own against neither.

But will Iran provide fissile material, or even an intact weapon, to a terrorist group? That too would seem to me to be deterable. Israel would never wait to strike back should such a weapon be used against it, nor would America abstain (and I am quite confident "proof" would be readily available). I find no irrational mullahs in Teheran with power to do

things unilaterally. Therefore, I must conclude that Teheran is deterrable—in any scenario.

But what if we had to use force?

The result of such use in my view would be disastrous.

Land-based airpower, coupled with sea-based airpower, and small special operating forces deployed in Iran, would conduct a network-centric campaign. That is, using highly-developed target maps, they would devastate the existing grids in Iran—rail, road, air, electricity, gas, information/communications, command and control, and so forth. Or, in a more limited way, these forces would concentrate and eliminate Iran's air defenses in order to go after the known nuclear sites, and leave it at that.

My question in both cases, widespread strikes and strikes only at nuclear facilities, is simply this: To what ultimate purpose?

At best, the limited strike scenario would set back Iran's nuclear program a year or two, perhaps a little longer. More likely, it would spur the Iranians—as strategic bombing did the Germans in WWII—to round-the-clock, determined efforts that would swiftly make up for lost time. We may recall that German production actually *increased* after the massive bombing raids by the Allies in WWII.

The more widespread strikes, while devastating, would solidify a nation of 70-plus million people, a great number of whom are under 35 years of age—a nation that is anything but solidified in its views at present. The uniting factor would be nationalism and a visceral hatred for America.

The ranks of the Revolutionary Guards would swell and asymmetric warfare, at a time, a place, and with a means of Iran's choosing, not ours, would break out wherever U.S. forces are vulnerable, particularly in Iraq, Qatar, Kuwait, and elsewhere in the Gulf region.

And, at the end of the day, what would America have gained?

Very little is the answer—except that we would have fallen into one of military history's most common traps: we would have reinforced strategic failure.

Unless we are prepared to invade Iran with sufficient ground forces, thoroughly defeat the hundreds of thousands of guerrillas we would then encounter, occupy the country for at least a decade or longer—more and deeper failure is the most likely consequence.

Mr. Chairman, members of the subcommittee, thank you for allowing me to speak. I would be pleased to try to answer any questions you may have.