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Iran, Israel, and the US: The Slide to War

By [Conn Hallinan](#)

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Wars are fought because some people decide it is in their interests to fight them. World War I was not started over the Archduke Ferdinand's assassination, nor was it triggered by the alliance system. An "incident" may set the stage for war, but no one keeps shooting unless they think it's a good idea. The Great War started because the countries involved decided they would profit by it, delusional as that conclusion was.

It is useful to keep this idea in mind when trying to figure out if there will be a war with Iran. In short, what are the interests of the protagonists, and are they important enough for those nations to take the fateful step into the chaos of battle?

First off, because oil and gas are involved, a war would have global ramifications. [Iran supplies](#) China with about 15 percent of its oil, and India with 10 percent. It is a major supplier to Europe, Turkey, Japan, and South Korea, and it has the third-largest oil reserves and the second-largest natural gas reserves in the world. Some 17 million barrels per day pass through the narrow Strait of Hormuz, a significant part of the globe's energy supply.

In short, the actors in this drama are widespread and their interests as diverse as their nationalities.

According to Israeli Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#), Iran is building nuclear weapons that pose an "existential" threat to Israel. But virtually no one believes this, including the bulk of Tel Aviv's [military and intelligence communities](#). As former Israeli Chief of Staff [Dan Halutz](#) said

recently, Iran “is not an existential” threat to Israel. There is no evidence that Iran is building a bomb, and all its facilities are currently under a 24-hour United Nations inspection regime.

But Israel does have an interest in keeping the Middle East a fragmented place, riven by sectarian divisions and dominated by authoritarian governments and feudal monarchies. If there is one lesson Israel has learned from its former British overlords, it is “divide and conquer.” Among its closest allies were the former dictatorships in Egypt and Tunisia, and it now finds itself on the same page as the reactionary monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman.

Iran is not a military threat to Israel, but it is a political problem, because Tel Aviv sees Teheran’s fierce nationalism and independence from the United States and Europe as a wildcard. Iran is also allied to Israel’s major regional enemy, Syria — with which it is still officially at war — and the Shi’ite-based Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, and the Shi’ite-dominated government in Iraq.

In the Netanyahu government’s analysis, beating up on Iran would weaken Israel’s local enemies and at little cost. [Tel Aviv’s scenario](#) features a shock-and-awe attack, followed by a United Nations–mandated ceasefire, with a maximum of 500 Israeli casualties. The Iranians have little capacity to strike back, and if they did attack Israeli civilian centers or tried to close the Hormuz Strait, it would bring in the Americans.

Of course that rose-colored scenario is little more than wishful thinking. Iran is not likely to agree to a ceasefire — it fought for eight long years against Iraq — and war has a habit of derailing the best-laid plans. In real life it will be long and bloody and might well spread to the entire region.

Iran’s leaders use a lot of bombast about punishing Israel if it attacks, but in the short run, there is not a lot they could do, particularly given the [red lines](#) Washington has drawn. The Iranian air force is obsolete, and the Israelis have the technology to blank out most of Tehran’s radar and anti-aircraft sites. Iran could do little to stop Tel Aviv’s mixture of air attacks, submarine-fired cruise missiles, and Jericho ballistic missiles.

For all its talk about “everything being on the table,” the Obama administration appears to be trying [to avoid a war](#), but with the 2012 elections looming, would Washington remain on the sidelines? On the “yes” side are polls indicating that Americans would not look with favor on a new [Middle East war](#). But on the “no” side are a united front of Republicans, neoconservatives, and the [American Israeli Public Affairs Committee](#) pressing for a confrontation with Iran.

[Israeli sources](#) suggest that Netanyahu may calculate that in the run-up to the 2012 American elections, an Israeli attack might force the Obama administration to back a war and/or damage Obama’s re-election chances. It is no secret that there is no love lost between the two leaders.

But the U.S. also has a dog in this fight, and one not all that different from Israel’s. American hostility to Iran dates back to Tehran’s seizure of its oil assets from Britain in 1951. The CIA helped overthrow the democratically elected Iranian government in 1953 and install the

dictatorial shah. The U.S. also backed Saddam Hussein's war on Iran, has had a longstanding antagonistic relationship with Syria, and will not talk with Hezbollah or Hamas. Tel Aviv's local enemies are Washington's local enemies.

When the Gulf monarchs formed the GCC in 1981, its primary purpose was to oppose Iranian influence in the Middle East. Using religious division as a wedge, the GCC has encouraged Sunni fundamentalists to fight Shi'ites in Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria and blocked the spread of the "Arab Spring" to its own turf. When Shi'ites in Bahrain began protesting over a lack of democracy and low wages, the GCC invaded and crushed the demonstrations. The GCC does not see eye-to-eye with the United States and Israel on the Palestinians — although it is [careful not to annoy](#) Washington and Tel Aviv — but the GCC is on the same page as both capitals concerning Syria, Lebanon, and Iran.

The European Union (EU) has joined the sanctions, although [France](#) and [Germany](#) have explicitly rejected the use of force. Motivations in the EU range from France's desire to reclaim its former influence in Lebanon to Europe's need to keep its finger on the energy jugular vein. In brief, it isn't all about oil and gas but a whole lot of it is, and, as Counterpunch's [Alexander Cockburn](#) points out, oil companies would like to see production cut and prices rise. A war would accomplish both.

Iran will be the victim here, but there will be some who would take advantage of a war. An attack would unify the country around what is now a rather unpopular government, allow the Revolutionary Guard to crush its opposition, and give cover to the current drive by the Ahmadinejad government to cut subsidies for transportation, housing, and food. A war would cement the power of the most [reactionary elements](#) of the current regime.

There are other actors in this drama — China, Russia, India, Turkey, and Pakistan for starters, none of which support a war — but whether they can influence events is an open question. In the end, Israel may just decide that its interests are served by starting a war and that the U.S. will go along because it is much of the same mind.

Or maybe this is all sound and fury signifying nothing?

The sobering thought is that the three most powerful actors in this drama — Israel, the U.S. and its European allies, and the Gulf Cooperation Council — have many of the same interests and share the belief that force is an effective way to achieve one's goals.

On such illusions are tragedies built.