

advantage. This in reality means that the U.S. will lead with its military (war, invasion, occupation). so others have had to develop their military capabilities to stand a chance. And the U.S. has actually lowered the threshold to use nuclear weapons with its threats to use "Tactical Nukes".

**NT:** *What can the President of Iran do militarily? i.e., What are the limits of his office? Isn't the military under the command of the Supreme Leader?*

**Sepehri:** Legally not much. Yes, the military forces are under the control of the Supreme leader.

But the real issue is how much someone like Ahmadinejad is allowed "to secure" the country. His cohorts are given "free reign". So now the nuclear negotiations have been moved to another body (National Security Council) because his ineptitude was becoming a liability.

It is not that different from here in the U.S. The Bush administration had free reign for a number of years. But the failed strategy in Iraq has raised concern among the policy-makers -- the people with power and money, corporations, the ruling class. There are limits put on him. Even alternative policies are being floated, such as the Baker-Hamilton Study Group.

**NT:** *Can you comment further on the Baker-Hamilton study's recommendations that the U.S. should seek to include Iran and Syria in their dealings with Iraq?*

**Sepehri:** There is agreement in the U.S. ruling circles that it is imperative for the U.S. to be the dominant force in the Mideast. But, given what has happened in Iraq, some see it unwise to delve into another military operation now in Iran.

Extracting concessions from Iran, while economically squeezing it (as they have started through the banking and financial system) may be a better approach-some argue. Hence, the need for patience.

**NT:** *Who are Iran's allies? Who are their enemies, besides the U.S.?*

**Sepehri:** Allies: mostly Hezbollah, some Shiite group in Iraq and possibly there is support among the Arab masses. Syria has already distanced itself from Iran.

**NT:** *How much opposition does the general Iranian population have to the current cleric-controlled government? Are they likely to change governments soon? Is Iran capitalist and "free market" friendly?*

**Sepehri:** The majority are opposed to this form of government. Even parts of the ruling apparatus, the reformist faction, think it needs to change if they are to survive. But there is no agreement about what change is needed. The reformists fell apart, not just because of the strength of the conservative faction, but because of the contradictions built into their program. For example, they

raised the slogan of democracy and the need for less control by the clerical government - which everyone supported. But the rich wanted to express their own class interests- privatization, and the free market; whereas the workers, wanted the right to organize independently and better pay.

**NT:** *How do you think the Middle East would respond to the results of a U.S. attack against Iran and how likely / near is it?*

**Sepehri:** 1)The United States, Israel and Arab regimes like Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan (and even Iran's ally Syria) were very concerned about Hezbollah's ability to put up a resistance in Lebanon against the Israeli military. This was not a military question. When Arab regimes had collapsed in the face of Israel's military in the past, it brought their legitimacy (and Syria's) into question with the Arab population in the region . Hezbollah's success boosted that group's popularity (and by extension, Iran's) in the "Arab streets."

Since then, the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Israel have made a concerted effort to foment Sunni/Shiite divisions and sectarianism. They have exploited the violence in Iraq and actually fueled it by the Saudi funding of Sunni groups in Iraq -- not only to counteract the supposed Iranian influence there, but to actually introduce deep Sunni/Shiite divisions. This would break the bond that the Hezbollah resistance created between the Sunni Arab population of places like Egypt and Palestine, with Iran. Unfortunately the U.S. has been somewhat successful in this racist divide- and-conquer strategy. So it is much less clear what the reaction would be. Iran is certainly more isolated than back in August at the height of the Lebanon war.

2) The Gulf Cooperation Council meeting in Kuwait, which Egypt, Jordan and the U.S. attended as guests, sealed the agreement between these countries to isolate, weaken and lay the ground work for an attack in Iran. This was a turning point.

The military hardware is already in the Gulf or will be soon. There are the 2 U.S. carrier groups; there are Patriot missiles being moved into the Gulf States to protect against a possible Iranian attack. The "troop surge" in Iraq is not about securing Iraq. It is for shutting down avenues whereby Iran can retaliate against the U.S.. The "surge" puts military pressure on groups and armed forces that are sympathetic to Iran, so they either submit or decide to sit it out and not be a shield for Iran. This will isolate the forces that remain loyal to Iran and destroy them before any attack on Iran.

As for timing? When the U.S. feels it is to their advantage. The point is not to guess when, but to understand that *a fundamental shift took place in mid-January*. A shift from the "idea" of going after Iran to actually putting all the pieces in place, lining up all their allies, and tightening the noose, so they can go after Iran at anytime they see necessary. Every thing is now falling into place.