A series of events has propelled Iran onto what might prove to be a dangerous collision course with the United States.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a former member of the Revolutionary Guard who runs the Tehran regime, threatened Israel by claiming it should be wiped from the face of the Earth. His remark was followed by a worse provocation—Tehran’s decision to plunge ahead with a program that the West fears could produce a doomsday weapon.

The Islamic Republic sits on the State Department’s list of state sponsors of terrorism—where it has been for years—and offers safe haven to leaders of al Qaeda and other extremist groups. Washington and London complain that Iranian provocateurs
are infiltrating post-Saddam Iraq, fomenting instability.

These actions appear bold in the extreme, given the existence of anti-regime discontent throughout Iran’s own restive population and the collapse of Iran’s conventional military power in the decades since the 1979 revolution. The United States Air Force, Navy, and special operations forces certainly could deal a blow to Iran’s nuclear infrastructure.

Why, many ask, would such a politically unpopular and militarily weak regime run the risk of provoking the American superpower and a nuclear-armed Israel?

**That Was Then**

Indeed, just a few years ago, Tehran’s hard-line mullahs were actually making conciliatory gestures, seeking to placate a superpower on the warpath of the Global War on Terrorism.

At that time, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein’s thugocracy in Iraq had both recently been routed in US-led military campaigns. Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom left Iran bracketed by US forces, east and west.

In just a few years, however, the strategic picture has changed considerably, US officials and other experts report. Few believe that a military attack makes much sense at this time. Indeed, the Bush Administration has followed a patient approach, trying to isolate Iran diplomatically over its nuclear program. The question is, why?

The reason is easy enough to see. Put in simplest terms, American war planners believe that Iran would prove to be a tough military target. Having studied the lessons of Israel’s bombing of Iraq’s Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981, Tehran has taken great pains to disperse its nuclear infrastructure and bury some key facilities underground. (See “Osirak and Beyond,” August 2002, p. 74.)

A heavy attack would seriously damage, but not destroy, the Iranian nuclear program. The disruption might buy the West a few years of delay.

Moreover, the magnitude of the postwar problems that could arise in the wake of a US attack or invasion could dwarf those that Washington has encountered in Iraq. Iran is much larger than Iraq and much more populous, as well as more volatile.

Also, Iran is politically more cohesive. With the success of the rigged August 2005 election of firebrand Ahmadinejad, the hard-line religious leaders and Revolutionary Guard ideologues achieved something close to total consolidation into their hands of Iranian political power.

There are indications that the Iranian leadership views nuclear weapons as the best long-term way to deter or defeat the problem of foreign military and political coercion.

Iran also clearly thinks it can use its oil weapon as a trump card against any American move to isolate the regime. Iran possesses about 10 percent of the world’s known oil reserves and much of its natural gas reserves. The global energy market has tightened in the past few years, giving Tehran greater leverage in its dealings with oil-consuming nations. Today, these include China, one of Iran’s largest customers.

Nor are Iranian officials shy about making threats to retaliate against any military strike on their country with means such as terror, incitement of an already explosive situation in Iraq, or by closing the strategic Strait of Hormuz, through which 40 percent of the world’s oil flows.

In short, Iran is seen as “Exhibit A” for the danger posed by smaller, less-powerful nations that have embraced techniques of “asymmetric warfare” to counter United States dominance in conventional military, political, and economic power.

**The Tehran Triad**

“Iran is pursuing its own military triad of terror, oil, and weapons of mass destruction,” said Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., executive director of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments in Washington.

Iran’s threat to use terror against any nation that strikes it, he said, is implicit in its support for terrorist groups such as Hezbollah, which is widely believed to have executed the June 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia. Nineteen Air Force airmen died in the attack, and hundreds more were wounded, many of them grievously.

Krepinevich spoke for many in the Western defense field when he said, “I think Iran has also looked at North Korea and decided that acquiring a nuclear weapon can be a winning hand in terms of deterring the United States, and they’ve dispersed their nuclear infrastructure geographically and underground as a result.”

Iranian leaders evidently do not believe many countries would line up with Washington in an attack, he asserted, because of the risk that Iran would take its oil off the world market.
“They see our forces already stretched too thin in Iraq to cope with an invasion of Iran,” he said. “So Iranian leaders have adopted an aggressive and bellicose stance ... backed by this triad that has little to do with tank armies or naval fleets. It’s a very asymmetric approach.”

When contemplating hostilities with Iran, US experts generally ignore the Gulf nation’s conventional forces. While the exact size of the force is difficult to determine, most think Iran keeps about 540,000 men under arms, with another 350,000 in the reserves. The Iranian regular Army is thought to have about 350,000 troops, the more-capable Revolutionary Guard about 120,000, and the rest in the naval and air forces.

The force is poorly equipped. Iran is thought to have about 1,600 tanks, though lack of spare parts and sound maintenance has left as few as 1,000 fully operational. Technically, they are no match for US or other Western systems. Roughly half of Iran’s armor force is the export version of the Soviet T72. About 100 are Iranian-made Zulfiqar tanks, having more modern fire-control systems and armor-piercing ammunition.

Iranian mechanized forces are filled out by an estimated 1,500 armored fighting vehicles, backed in indirect-fire support by an estimated 3,200 artillery pieces.

The Iranian Air Force consists of some 300 combat aircraft, though they are a mishmash of models and makes. Iran is known to have purchased between 30 and 40 advanced MiG-29 aircraft from Russia and is thought to have between 30 to 40 Chinese F-6s and F-7s. The Iranian Air Force also includes a handful of French Mirage F-1s flown over by Iraqi pilots when they fled the USAF onslaught during the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

Experts estimate that Iran can actually operate only 10 or fewer of the F-14 Tomcats that the former Shah of Iran purchased from the United States in the 1970s.

Though it has made some upgrades, Iran also is thought to lack a state-of-the-art command, control, communications, computer and intelligence system, the nerve center of a modern military force.

Down From the Shah

Anthony H. Cordesman, a defense scholar at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., concluded his 2005 book, Iran’s Developing Military Capabilities, with this assessment: “Iran is a far less modern military power, in comparative terms, than it was during the time of the Shah, or during the Iran-Iraq War.” Nevertheless, he added, the nation is “improving its conventional forces, and is now the only regional military power that poses a serious conventional military threat to Gulf stability.”

The United States could certainly launch highly accurate and destructive air strikes against Iran’s nuclear facilities, even though targeting would
be complicated and a large number of sites would have to be hit. Most experts believe that US air and ground forces could easily defeat their Iranian counterparts at the tip of the spear. It is the aftermath of any invasion, however, that gives them pause.

“The problem is what happens next,” observed Joseph Cirincione, a non-proliferation expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace who visited Iran last year. “The unpredictable regime in Tehran has a broad set of options that it could pursue in response to an air strike, from simply turning off its oil spigot and sending world oil prices spiking ... to inciting an insurrection among Shiites in neighboring Iraq.”

When asked whether an Iraqi-style invasion could topple the Iranian regime with acceptable risks, a knowledgeable Army planner in the Pentagon shook his head, indicating no.

The United States “certainly couldn’t roll into Tehran as easily as we rolled into Baghdad,” he said. “You’re talking about a nation of 67 million Persians who are very nationalistic and unlikely to sit still for an invasion.”

He added that Iran has for several years observed how a relatively small insurgency in Iraq has tied down US forces.

Iranian ground forces aren’t particularly good, “nor would their air force be difficult for US forces to defeat,” said Michael E. O’Hanlon, defense analyst with the Brookings Institution. While American forces could probably reach Tehran much like they did Baghdad in 2003, “the approach to Tehran from the Iraqi border is longer than the distance from Kuwait to Baghdad,” O’Hanlon noted, “and there is mountainous terrain and a number of potentially problematic chokepoints to negotiate.”

Even if US forces were able to achieve a quick and decisive victory, however, the bigger challenge would be maintaining order among millions of likely hostile Iranians after the war.

Iran’s population is 26 million; Iran has nearly 70 million residents. O’Hanlon noted that even if the US invasion force were to mirror the relatively light force-to-population ratio used in the invasion of Iraq, a much more populous Iran would require an invasion force of nearly half-a-million US troops.

“The United States military simply doesn’t have that kind of force structure,” O’Hanlon said. “I think the lesson of Iraq is that occupation is something that an all-volunteer force can only accomplish in small to midsize countries. Unless you’re willing to restart the draft and put millions of Americans back in uniform like we had during World War II, I don’t think it would be practical to try and occupy Iran.”

**An Asymmetric Threat**

In keeping with the philosophy behind its own “military triad,” Iran has focused military modernization on areas that might allow it to exact a disproportionate price for US or Israeli action—air defenses, missiles, and naval forces tailored for a “sea denial” mission.

In a major December 2005 arms deal that was denounced by the US and Israel, Iran agreed to pay $700 million for 29 Russian Tor-M1 air defense systems. Tehran and Moscow are reportedly also in talks about Iran’s potential purchase of the longer-range S-300 air defense missile system. (See “The Double-Digit SAMs,” June 2001, p. 48.) That will add to an Iranian air defense system that already reportedly includes 10 to 15 Russian SA-5 surface-to-air missile batteries, up to 100 Russian ZSU-23-4 radar-guided anti-aircraft guns, and up to 180 Bofors 40 mm guns. All of this is in addition to roughly 1,700 anti-aircraft guns of various types.

In testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence last year, Vice Adm. Lowell E. Jacoby, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency until his retirement in November, said the Iranian capability that most worries military planners is its own version of long-range strike capability. The nation has the means to strike at Israel or at American bases throughout the Persian Gulf region with a growing arsenal of surface-to-surface missiles.

That inventory is thought to include between 200 to 300 Shahab-1 missiles (also known as Scud-Bs) with a range of roughly 186 miles; 100 to 150 Shahab-2 missiles with a range of roughly 311 miles; and 25 to 100 Shahab-3 missiles with a range of roughly 808 miles.

The Shahab-3s bring most of Israel within the potential Iranian target area. Iran also may be developing missiles with a range of 2,175 miles—based on long-range cruise missiles it imported from Ukraine a few years ago.

In recent years, Iran has also significantly upgraded its naval and antishipping capabilities with an aim to hold at risk oil tanker traffic in the Persian Gulf. Those upgrades include the purchase from North Korea of roughly 20 fast-attack patrol boats armed with Chinese C-802 antiship cruise missiles, said to have a 60-mile range.

Iran has Chinese HY-2 Silkworm antiship cruise missiles. In the 1990s, Tehran also purchased three Russian Kilo-class diesel submarines that are armed with torpedoes and capable of laying underwater mines.

In what some experts see as a likely sign of its intentions in the event of a conflict, Iran also occupied the disputed Persian Gulf island of Abu Musa.
in the 1990s. According to published reports, Iran placed Silkworm and Seersucker antiship cruise missiles on the island, where it has deployed Revolutionary Guard forces. Also present are SA-6 and US-made Hawk anti-aircraft missile batteries obtained in the 1970s.

Tellingly, Abu Musa sits within range of the Strait of Hormuz, the strategic chokepoint in the Persian Gulf.

They Have It Now

“Do the Iranians have the ability to close oil tanker traffic through the Strait of Hormuz, either through direct action or intimidation? Yes they do,” said Ronald O’Rourke, a longtime naval analyst at the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service.

The Navy would undoubtedly be able to reopen the strait, but the endeavor would take “significant effort and fighting,” O’Rourke said.

During the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, for instance, the Navy was forced into difficult tanker convoy duty, to protect oil traffic from both belligerents. Despite its efforts, 30 million tons of shipping was damaged by either Iraq or Iran, more than three dozen ships were declared total losses, and 11 were sunk outright.

USS Stark was badly damaged and very nearly sunk by an Iraqi air-to-ship missile; USS Samuel B. Roberts was nearly cut in two by an underwater mine in the Persian Gulf during the operation; and USS Vincennes mistakenly shot down a civilian Iranian airliner during a battle with Iranian fast-attack boats in the Strait of Hormuz.

Iran has since pursued a classic sea denial anti-access strategy.

Iran has significantly upgraded its antishipping capability, especially with the purchase of the three Russian submarines,” said O’Rourke. “As the British learned during the Falklands War, even one enemy submarine proficiently operated can take a lot of time and effort to counter.”

In the near term, Iran’s ability to influence and potentially inflame a already volatile situation in neighboring Iraq causes experts most concern.

In a recent trip to Tehran, for instance, renegade Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr publicly pledged to come to Iran’s defense if Iran were attacked by any outside force. Sadr and his “Mahdi Militia” were central to an April 2004 insurrection that sparked the worst crisis of the US tenure in Iraq, according to former Coalition Provisional Authority head L. Paul Bremer. Sadr is now a major political force in the Iraqi government elected last December.

Also of concern are indications that the Iranian-backed terror group Hezbollah is stepping up its activities inside Iraq. There are indications that Hezbollah, considered the master bomb-makers in the terrorist pantheon, may already be supplying sophisticated explosive devices to the Iraqi insurgency. That may help explain the increased lethality of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) used over the past year against US and coalition forces.

All of the Earmarks

At a news conference last year, British Prime Minister Tony Blair said a bomb that killed eight British soldiers in Iraq bore the hallmarks of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards or possibly Hezbollah. “What is clear is that there have been new explosive devices used not just against British forces but elsewhere in Iraq,” said Blair. “The particular nature of those devices leads us either to Iranian elements or to Hezbollah.”

In the past, Tehran has carefully kept its provocations and support for terrorists just below the level likely to invite a direct US or Israeli military response. If Iran is really determined to acquire nuclear weapons, the Bush Administration is equally adamant that it cannot be allowed to succeed.

“No one believes that the United States military is in the position to invade Iran, and it’s unlikely that we could decapitate the Tehran regime simply with air strikes because its hold on power is not fragile,” said Cordesman.

But that does not mean the United States is without options. If war planners know where the “smoking guns” are in terms of Iran’s nuclear infrastructure—and no one, including the Iranians, can be sure whether they do or not—then Cordesman believes air strikes could do that program great harm.

“Should we launch a massive air strike, however, Iran may well be willing to sacrifice a lot to demonstrate that they can’t be attacked with impunity,” he said. “In that case, we can expect the kind of asymmetric warfare that Iran has long focused on and organized for. This response could manifest itself through Iranian threats to the world’s oil supply or by Iran striking out in ways that create problems in Iraq and Afghanistan.”

Although they are generally cautious, the hard-liners and Revolutionary Guards of Iran have shown themselves to be risk takers on occasion. All of this conspires to make the outcome of the colliding American and Iranian interests highly uncertain.