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Hemphill: Iran may be bluffing, but ...

By Alan Hemphill

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Whoever sits in the Oval Office will soon have to make some very unpalatable decisions regarding Iran. The "drop-dead date" may come during the current administration or the next one, but even a non-decision will be a decision – and ANY decision carries terrible consequences.

Iran may be bluffing...or the Mullahs and Ahmadinejad may believe they are further along than is reality. Certainly Saddam and some of his generals believed Iraq had "weapons of mass destruction" and that could again be the case.

Libya, and perhaps even North Korea, have found that actually producing nuclear weapons is not worth the candle, and Iran may find itself in a similar position. Iran has the advantage of Russian help in nuclear energy, and Iran may have paid under the table for some "extra help" in nuclear weapons. Certainly Russia has little interest in Iran getting a nuclear weapon because then the Chechnya rebels could get one.

Our assets on the ground were decimated by Congressional action decades ago, and our intelligence services have had to rely on electronic intelligence for a very long time. It places us at a huge disadvantage, and we do not know what we do not know.

In the end, we must act with caution but we may well have to act. Democratic rhetoric in the pre-election phase is not dispositive of how a Democratic administration will act when the responsibility is actually theirs. When the nation, or a special partner such as Israel, is at risk, there will be only marginal differences between the defensive reaction of Democrats and Republicans, antiwar activists to the contrary notwithstanding. (At least I hope so.)

Certainly Israel is not going to permit Iran to test their first bomb in Tel Aviv, and Israel is not subject to international censure because Israel simply does not care. It is censured so often, and it is the one most directly involved in supportable self-defense.

An American president may feel that it is best to provide intelligence and support such as refueling and combat air support for Israel as it overflies hostile nations, or it may be that the president may decide to solve the problem and take the international censure. No one knows what signals are being sent by winks and nods from other governments.

There are many leaks of current contingency plans, which may be legitimate or may be warning leaks designed to scare the Iranians. The problem is that people who wish to die for their cause do not easily scare.

Israel is already testing the Syrian air defense system installed by the Russians, which happens to be the same Russian air defense system that

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Iran uses.

Regardless of who eventually “solves” the Iranian nuclear threat, the Middle East may erupt – but that has always been the challenge when Israel or the United States does anything in the Middle East. Sunni states and Shiite states could form collective action, but standard Middle Eastern extreme rhetoric is more likely. Still, a general revolution in the Middle East cannot be discounted.

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