

## Interview with Robert Baer, Author of *The Devil We Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower*

Michael Mylrea

The ongoing showdown with Iran is one of the greatest US foreign policy challenges of this century. Iran’s ambition to become the region’s superpower has been bolstered by its large oil and gas supply, Shiites gaining control in Iraq, Hezbollah—an Iranian proxy army—fighting Israel to a standstill, and, its defiant move to become a nuclear power. Bold messages from Iran, such as that it will retaliate against the West and its allies if they try to impede its rise to power, are challenging to interpret.



*Michael Mylrea is a recent MALD graduate of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts, where he is Co-Editor-in-Chief of al Nakhlah. Mr. Mylrea is a research director for oil and gas at a private think-tank and conducts research at MIT Lincoln Lab.*

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Few people have more experience interpreting Iranian actions, than Mr. Robert Baer. Drawing on his knowledge and sources inside Iran, Baer, known as one of the best field operatives in CIA history, spent his twenty-year CIA career in the region. Mr. Baer is considered a top authority on the Middle East and regularly writes for a number of major publications. Mr.

Baer is the author of two *New York Times* bestsellers: *Sleeping with the Devil: How Washington Sold Our Soul for Saudi Crude*<sup>1</sup> and *See No Evil: The True Story of a Ground Soldier in the CIA’s War on Terrorism*,<sup>2</sup> which was the basis for the acclaimed film *Syriana*.<sup>3</sup> In his most recent book, *The Devil We Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower*,<sup>4</sup> Mr. Baer meets with key Middle

Eastern players—everyone from an Iranian Ayatollah to top Hezbollah leaders to the head of Israel’s internal security—painting a picture of Iran in stark opposition to that of the mainstream media. Mr. Baer joins *al Nakhlah* for a conversation to illuminate and unravel the complexities of the current situation in the Middle East, offering his firsthand insight from over 30 years of working in the region.

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 US POLICY AND IRAN
 

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**In your book you mention that there is another side of Iran not covered in mainstream media that is difficult for US policy makers to understand. What are some of the major misunderstandings? Through what lens should policy makers view Iran?**

Let me preface the question by saying I can't cite my sources, because I've got national security [complications]. But I picked some of the sources because I know they're right. So what I've done is I've taken a look at Iran's national security policy, which I've narrowed down to the periphery of the country. So that's my bias. I look and see when the Iranians were killing the Americans and when they stopped. So I'm not looking at Iran the country. I've spent years running the Iranian opposition. We know about exile groups—they're not to be trusted. The ones in this country and even the ones in Iran that talk to Americans aren't to be trusted because they've been pre-selected.

So, I look at the guys actually on the front lines, who are seeking to establish what I call an empire by proxy, and those are the heads I want to get into—what do they accomplish and what do they want? They want an empire by proxy. They look at Lebanon and say, "It's ours for the taking." They look at Syria and say, "The Alawites cannot get along without us. That's good." And then they look at the Palestinians, Hamas, the Islamic Jihad and say, "These guys need a brain. They don't have one on their own, and we're going to provide that brain." And "hey guys, if you blow yourselves up in a restaurant in Tel Aviv, that's not going to get you anything, but if you get some strategic rockets, you're really going to have something."

So I see this mentality, this Iranian plan spreading through the Middle East. What's so difficult for us is that we're not talking about a sovereign nation occupying sovereign territory.

We're talking about proxies. We're talking about smart guys with a plan, and those are the Iranians. It's been a fairly consistent core group that's carried out this foreign policy. They're not public but we know their names; we know who they are. Khomeini the spiritual leader, he's been a part of this going way back to the fights within the family, and he had a much more rational, coherent policy. We're so distracted by guys like Ahmadinejad who have no power over the security services or the military that we've missed Iran's core rationality. We've also missed the transformation because Iran wasn't always rational. I mean, Khomeini really thought that he could spread an Islamic revolution, with him at the head, as opposed to letting an Arab proxy do it.

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**Did we miss signs from Iran because we weren't listening to the right people or because we weren't talking?**

You know the problem is that the policy makers tend to be driven by *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and by institutes or Israeli politics. If you're dealing with Iran today, you have to listen to the Israelis because the Israelis have a voice in American politics. Their survival is a part of our core national interest. So if they say we're in trouble because of a nuclear bomb, American politicians have to put the argument in those terms; they have no choice. It's like global warming: until the United Nations and 2,000 scientists said there's global warming, we dismissed it. They still dismiss it. But we can't dismiss an Israeli politician saying, "Hey, if you don't do something about the bomb we're [in a whole lot of trouble]." And that's the reality and feeling in Washington.

**If that is the feeling in Washington, what is the feeling in Tel Aviv toward Iran getting a nuclear weapon? What is the feeling in Tehran? What are you hearing from your sources? What's next?**

The worst-case scenario for the Israelis would be if Hezbollah were to be given a nuclear warhead and they made some horrible blackmail on Israel, and Hezbollah fired this thing. Secondly, there is the possibility that Iran could obtain nuclear warheads and put them on rockets, but they'd have to test them, and this would become known. There's a feeling among people who follow Iran that the Iranians aren't suicidal. Alright, they're going to get one or two bombs, or ten bombs, but is it worth it if the Israelis and the Americans and Europe and probably even Russia and China come down on you to this degree? The answer is no. But what they want to do is poke us in the eye enough to get our attention, which is not easy to do. What Iran is really saying is that we're essentially partners in Iraq; we don't want a Sunni extremist government in control of Baghdad. We don't want Afghanistan in a civil war. We want to be treated as a power in the Gulf and you're ignoring us and imposing pre-conditions. We're a very proud people with a long history.

**In your recent book, you mention that, "we're facing a crisis with Iran that will make the sub-prime crisis look like a walk in the park." Can you explain this in a way that would provide insight and direction for future US foreign policy decision-makers on Iran?**

The fact is that every day there's the potential for an accident or action that could put us in a war with Iran. And the Iranians, I think, if you look at Lebanon, if you look at their capability with rockets, they could take out Saudi Arabia's oil facilities. So let's say with Obama in the White

House, the economy's [faltering], and we are in the beginning of a depression, and suddenly oil hits \$200 a barrel--and it would, if we took 17 million barrels off the markets--and if we're not in a depression by next year, \$10 for a gallon of gas will put us into a depression. At those prices we're going to forget about the sub-prime crisis because people won't get food delivered to their grocery stores.

This doesn't mean that Iran is going to send its army into Saudi Arabia and take the country, it just means that they have this enormous deterrent capability, much as the Chinese or the Russians did with their nuclear weapons; we could not afford to invade Russia or China once they got nuclear weapons. Iran's equivalent of a nuclear weapon is to take out the Gulf's oil facilities. Granted, it would be mutual destruction on both sides, but they will use it. I'm quite certain of that.

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**What actions have Gulf countries taken to mitigate this risk? You mentioned the United Arab Emirates building a canal around the Straits of Hormuz and there's also potentially a pipeline in the works to avoid passing through Iran. Will those measures mitigate the risk of Iran controlling their oil supply?**

Ultimately no, because it's too expensive right now; no one has the money for that. But it's not going to work because the Iranians could simply take out Abqaiq which produces 67 million barrels of Saudi oil per day. They could also take out Ras Tenura. The Gulf is a very small place and rocket batteries are very easy to hide; you can't take them out immediately. So the best thing they could do is to appease the Iranians in the hope that we don't [irk] them in a big way.

**And are they doing that now?**

All the time. In statement after statement, they are saying we are not a part of the American-Israeli war on Iran. If a war happens, it's not our idea. We're not going to give over-flight permission for Israeli aircraft. They reassure the

Iranians almost every day. A new basing agreement in Iraq specifically states that we will not use Iraq to launch an attack on Iran. The Iranians insisted on that provision before they would let the legislators go ahead with this in the cabinet. This is what our embassy is saying as well—Iran had a determining influence on this base agreement and the primary condition was that our troops couldn't use Iraq to attack Iran.

So you've got all the Arabs backing away from a weakened United States, you can't do anything about Iran short of full-fledged invasion, you know if you put a million troops in uniform and send them to Iran no one's going to stand for that in this country, and there's nothing the Israelis can do, so it's a Mexican stand-off if you like. It leaves Iran as the decisive, pre-eminent power in the Gulf, after the United States.

### **How much control does Iran currently have over Iraq? How obligated are the Shia Iraqi to Iran?**

You're going to get into a huge argument on that today. A member of the Quds force was arrested recently, and he was turned over to the Iraqis and was released. The Iraqis will tell you that it was the Iranians who got him released. The Iraqi Sunni intelligence people say that no one makes a decision inside the cabinet without going to Tehran. They will also tell you that it was the Iranians who allowed the deployment of the Iraqi army into Basra and Karbala and other places and Sadr City simply because they want to keep a lid on Iraq for obvious reasons. And my bias is stronger than that of most people and I always fall back on our Ambassador, Ryan Crocker, who said it's the Iranians who held up the base agreement, it's the Iranians who demanded these provisions (and got them by the

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way) and that's our ambassador, so I'll leave the last word with him.

### **How will Iran's power structure change if the US withdraws troops from Iraq?**

I think the Iranians are going to demand neutrality at the very least from whatever Iraqi government succeeds when we leave. They will

not allow any hostile power to set up base there, which includes the United States, or Israel or Sunni radicals. I think they will encourage trade. I think they will encourage a voting bloc in OPEC between Iraq and Iran. Iran does not want a heavy-handed presence in Iraq; they do not want to invade nor put troops there. The Iranians, in this quest for empire, have never imposed

Persian culture anywhere they went. I mean you won't even see the Iranian embassy in Beirut because that's not what they're about.

### **How does Iran overcome the Sunni-Shia divisions in its quest for power?**

Iran crushes the Sunni. Any time a Sunni radical sticks its head up it crushes them. It's done that in Iran, it'll do it in Iraq. The Iranians will arm anyone they want to go in and crush them. What scares the Iranians most is to have an unstable state in Iraq—they've got Afghanistan and Pakistan on the other side and they don't want a crazy regime in any of those states. From a CIA perspective, if you want to raise all hell in the Middle East you would encourage this.

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**What's going on in the minds of the Sunni country leaders? What does this mean for the Sunni countries of the region? How do you think they're going to react?**

They're terrified. I was in Pakistan this year and I talked to a Pakistani intelligence officer who used to meet Bin Laden. And I asked, "Was it all worth it, this war in Afghanistan in the 70s and 80s?" And he said, "Well not really because Iran won. Iran beat the Sunnis. We fought the war, but it was the Iranians who won influence," which is really an empire by proxy. Iran won, and so the Saudis are terrified. Why shouldn't Saudi Arabia break up? It's an artificial country; it was created in the 1920s and 1930s. Who's to say it won't be divided between Jeddah, the Hejaz, and Eastern Saudi Arabia? It could very easily break up, and who's going to stop Iran, now that it has a predominant influence over the Shia in Iraq, from inciting the Shia in the Eastern province? I mean they sit all along the rim of the Gulf. These divisions, we don't think about them.

I just did a book tour, and the people that really praised my book were the Washington set who have been following this for years, in the Pentagon in particular, and people in the Middle East. The Sunni Arabs in particular were bitter about the book because it shows them as incompetent. I said well you are incompetent. They said right, but we don't like it. And for the rest of the country, it's all very esoteric.

**You also made similar statements along the lines of Iraq and Pakistan also breaking up—can you touch on that?**

You see Baghdad as falling more and more to the Shia. I think they want the city and I think they have the demographics to take the city. The Kurds are just never going to go back to where they were. They don't want to be part of an Arab Sunni Iraq or an Arab Shia Iraq. They just don't want to go back...they've got oil, and they're up in those mountains. There's no central

government in Baghdad that could force them out or re-take the Kurdish northeast. And I think Pakistan is breaking up. You know people who really know the country talk about the breakup of Pakistan. I'm not a Pakistani expert but groups affiliated with Al Qaeda are in the major cities—they're in Islamabad and Lahore. It's not just the tribal areas. And now the Pashtuns are so [angry]. They're furious that Islamabad has an alliance with the United States; they're getting bombed.

It's just moving more and more to an unmanageable country that was made up as well too, that was made up in four provinces—five, if you include Kashmir. So these countries are not that far from the edge.

**So if the coup in Iraq would have worked the idea was to keep the Sunni regime in place, no invasion—you know, sunshine and lollypops.**

**When you were in the CIA your plan to overthrow Saddam was abruptly curtailed by the US government. Your job was put on the line; you were called an outlaw, a maverick. But do you think it would have been successful? And, if so, what would Iraq look like today?**

If this coup that I was involved in 1995 had been genuine, and you just don't know until you actually pull the trigger, that's the nature of overthrowing governments. So if it had worked, the idea was to keep the Sunni regime in place and that would have been the military. So you bring in a general--that's a tall order--who controls the country--what I like to call a Saddam Light, someone you can talk to, someone that we could have immediately rushed in, recognized and armed against an Iranian threat and restored some sort of civil society to Iraq—that would have been the ideal. I mean, we had five generals in place. Whether they would have run for it the day the coup started I have no idea, but they all had solid records: they had not killed Kurds and they were not part of Saddam's family.

On the other hand, people try to cast me as some kind of opponent of [Anthony] Lake. What happened on that issue was that the head of the Near Eastern division, a guy named Steve Richter, sent none of the memos to Lake. So Lake heard about this whole thing by way of the Kurds and a

couple of other people. And he said, "What in God's name is going on here, why didn't I know about any of this?" And that's when someone from his office called the FBI and the CIA. This thing could have been stopped very easily in the beginning had Lake known about it. Or he could have supported it. So it was just raging incompetence in the US government. I mean how you could have a coup ready in Iraq and not tell the National Security Advisor. I don't know—but that wasn't my problem. So if the coup in Iraq would have worked, the idea was to keep the Sunni regime in place, no invasion—you know, sunshine and lollypops.

**Do you feel that US intelligence has a good read on Iran? What are the indicators to look at when assessing Iran?**

Well, I think the people who follow Iran from day to day understand it as well as I do, or many of them better than I do. There are just certain inroads into Iran that are unknown to the general public. So when they say that Iran has suspended its nuclear weapons program, I tend to believe them. The problem is that the dialogue about Iran is at such a superficial level—it's about weapons of mass destruction. How many good books are there on Iran? When you think about it, you've got five or six. We just don't pay attention to it. I mean there's been no good academic book on Iran since Nikki Keddie, and she's dated. An important related book is *The Shia Revival* by Vali Nasr.

**If the literature does not answer our questions, then why don't we talk with Iran? How do Iranians feel about Obama? Do they take him seriously when he talks about dialogue?**

I think there's an interpretation that the Iranians loosened up on the basing agreement because of Obama's win. I think they see a coincidence of things going their way. I mean,

we're committed to leave Iraq; they beat George W. Bush in a sense because he wanted to keep bases. So I think that's a good thing.

**So if we talk to Iran, how do we know we can believe them?**

You have to do it piece by piece. You've got to figure out what their minimum demands are and what ours are, and they have to slow down their re-arming of Hezbollah. They can't resort to

terrorism. I got an email from somebody in the Pentagon. He was quite certain that the Iranians were behind those attacks in Yemen in September. Without any evidence, I just pass on something like that. With Iran I've got to see the evidence in black and white. I can't take that from newspaper stuff or comments by exiles.

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## PIPELINE POLITICS

**How does Iran use its large supply of oil and gas to control politics in the region? What role do neighboring countries play in this balance of power?**

I've heard about Iran taking oil to the Emirates for refining and for sale. The Iranians can't refine it, so they pretty much have to take it out in ships and send it down. I know about this because I follow the oil industry. People talk about vast discounts off the Dubai plats—essentially stealing the oil. A discount I recently heard about was \$18 off Dubai plats which is a huge amount of money off the market price. So, oil is still being stolen right and left. Plus there's a criminal element in Iran that would take advantage of this as well. Iran is a very complicated country. It's not a totalitarian dictatorship; they've got crooks and narcotics gangs and people making money off of oil. And what better place, just as the Americans made money off Iraq, for Iranians to make money there as well.

**In *The Devil We Know*, you mention that there's an emerging alliance between Iran and Russia that will lead to a stranglehold on Gulf and Caspian oil and gas exports, potentially affecting half of the world's trade in oil. Can you talk about the great game to acquire fossil fuels in the Middle East? How will this play out? And more specifically, what pragmatic options are on the table for US policy-makers?**

Well, it's a simple calculation of Moscow. They're saying, "You [messed] with us in Georgia by extending NATO so we're going to arm Iran. We're going to keep the nuclear issue from going to the UN. You go anywhere in the Southern tier and try to undercut us, and we're going to arm Iran." They don't have to do it directly: they can do it through Moldova, they can do it through the Ukraine, or through any place that makes arms. And we're essentially going to put the Iranians in a position where they are not only going to be hostile to you, but they are going to be armed enough to deter your attack.

This is classic balance of power politics. The Chinese are the same way—they go to Iran and say, "We'll arm you, but you sell us oil. We'll have this alliance." Now, of course this recession has thrown everything up in the air, and the leverage of oil has completely fallen back to what it was—back to 2004 at least. But that doesn't keep these sorts of alliances up in the air. And the more aggressive we are in the Southern Tier of the Soviet Union, the more aggressive we are on Russia or on whatever front—Venezuela, the more likely they are to arm our enemies, which would be Iran.

How much longer can we afford to stay in the Middle East? How much longer can we afford to have two armies in Afghanistan and Iraq? We need some help. We could probably keep our carrier troops there; that's not too expensive. But we need help. And if I were going to go for help from anybody, it would be Iran.

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## US POLICY IN SOUTHWEST ASIA

**What about the argument that we started the war so we have to finish it?**

It sounds like a gang fight. We've been dissed; we can't live in the 'hood as long as we're dissed. I'd say we got out of Vietnam—and who even noticed? Yeah, it was unpleasant for a year, for our allies, but in terms of national security it didn't affect us at all, we just went on. I mean, Vietnam's our best ally now. So you declare victory and get out, both in Afghanistan and Iraq.

**What are some of the emerging threats facing American allies on which we're missing the signals?**

The CIA report that came out last week about China rising—that's about the economy. What I deal with is the Iranian threat, and the fact that it's not a linear power like we're used to. It's not a Second World War, where they defeated the Axis Powers. They've carried on this war so cheaply

for so long, and we're missing all this and we're looking at traditional powers like China because the Chinese have a large army, and they've got a missile force, they've got an Air Force, they've got a nuclear bomb, but the

chances of us ever going to war with China are not very good—one of us is going to back down, or come to an accommodation. But if we misunderstand Iranian power, it's a lot more likely there's going to be an accident and we're going to go to war with them.

**Could you say the same about Hezbollah?**

They're the only guys that beat the Israelis, you know. And they placed their king, Hassan Nasrallah, as the only guy to ever beat the Israelis on the field of battle. They've had their clocks cleaned for so long, and the Arabs are just tired of it. Whether they like his ideology or his being a Shia or anything else, they overlook it and look at

him as a military commander, and that's really given the Iranians a boost. They intend to benefit from this by securing the same sort of victory in Iraq as they did in Lebanon.

If Iran were to have veto power over the government in Iraq, and to make a cohesive military force, the Middle East would be that much closer to changing, and that much closer to destroying Israel. What the Israelis are saying to us is that they think the Iraq War is a fiasco empowering Iran, you've got to do something about Iran right now, and we're not talking just about nuclear weapons. We cannot afford for them to become a strategic threat, looming on our Northern border, maybe one day in Egypt and Jordan. It's a catastrophe for the Israelis. And we have ignored this for so long.

### **Do you foresee Israel responding with military action against Iran?**

It depends on how much we mess up Iraq. If we pull out of Iraq, and it becomes an Iranian entity, like Lebanon, and Jordan starts to go the same way, the Israelis may think, "Let's do it." It's a Hail Mary pass, but let's see if we can push Iran into some sort of revolution, or at least take out their strategic weapons, or at least drag the US into a confrontation with Iran and let the Americans do it. If we get out of Afghanistan and Iraq and the Iranian power spreads, like it threatens to do, then we're really in trouble. Then how do you get the Americans engaged?

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### **What's Iran's plan to continue what you call its "unshakable belief in its right to empire," and what will the reaction be from the rest of the region?**

I think we're going to see a Sunni defeat. I think that the Iranians are going to be into a position to strong-arm Saudi Arabia. I think that the United States will leave Iraq and that we're going to leave Saudi Arabia to a large degree at the mercy of Iran, and if Iran wants to effectively co-administer Mecca, they'll get away with it.

### **What was one thing you encountered in your travels to Tehran and interviews with Hezbollah that stood out as something that people would never believe?**

One thing I'll never forget is going and seeing the aftermath of a suicide bomber. They took this kid, and not only did they get him in a van full of explosives, but to drive through the front door of a base and strike devastating blow to the Israelis. The Israelis couldn't imagine this happening; it was the beginning of the end for them. And the Marine bombing, the embassy bombing—the fact that they could keep the details of these operations secret for so many years—it's not because of our incompetence; they just know how to keep a secret. I mean don't you find it shocking that this happened in 1983 and no one in the family came forward? No political leader came forward to claim credit for it. They've kept the secret for 25 years now. I thought it was a telling turn in history, that they can do this and they can keep their plans secret. It's always a wonder how different the Iranians are from the Arabs.

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*The views and opinions expressed in articles are strictly the author's own, and do not necessarily represent those of al Nakhlah, its Advisory and Editorial Boards, or the Program for Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization (SWAIC) at The Fletcher School.*

## WORKS CITED

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- <sup>1</sup> Robert Baer, *Sleeping with the Devil: How Washington Sold Our Soul for Saudi Crude* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2003).
- <sup>2</sup> Robert Baer, *See No Evil: The True Story of a Ground Soldier in the CIA's War on Terrorism* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2002).
- <sup>3</sup> Stephen Gaghan, *Syriana* [motion picture] (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2006).
- <sup>4</sup> Robert Baer, *The Devil We Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2008).

Anna Wolf, Fletcher MALD 2010, transcribed this interview from an audio recording made by the author.