
Interview: Martin van Creveld

Is Iran Really a Threat To The United States and Israel?

Professor van Creveld teaches military history at Hebrew University, Jerusalem, and is the author of over 15 books on military history and strategy. He has lectured or taught at strategic and military institutes and universities throughout the world. Michael Liebig and Dean Andromidas interviewed him on Feb. 28.



EIR: What is your assessment of the conflict over Iran's nuclear program?

Van Creveld: First, I find it hard to understand why Washington should be so concerned with Iran. One could argue, if the Bush Administration is so much concerned over the Iranian nuclear program, why did they pick Iraq for attack in 2003? Why did they attack Iraq, which was no danger to anybody, and not Iran? From the beginning, it was obvious that the great winner of the war in Iraq and its aftermath would be the Iranians.

I think a nuclear-armed Iran would be very worrisome to the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia. The one state that can counterbalance such a potential threat is the United States. Clearly, when the United States withdraws from Iraq, it will have to keep its military presence in the Gulf region—just to make sure that the oil does not fall into the hands of the mullahs. And, maybe this whole ruckus about Iran is really about oil and preventing Iran from dominating the Persian Gulf.

EIR: What do you think about the line coming from Dick Cheney and the neo-cons, that there is a clear and present danger from Iran—necessitating preemptive military action?

Van Creveld: I don't see it like that; this is not very good reasoning. In fact, for the last 60 years every country that acquired nuclear weapons became less adventurous, not more so, as a result of having them. I see no reason why that should not apply to Iran.

EIR: So you see a deterrence regime as a definite possibility in the Southwest Asia region? Would you think that Israel's security is compatible with such a deterrence regime?

Van Creveld: I think a deterrence regime in the Persian Gulf

region is very likely to emerge. It's hard to see what could prevent the Iranians from getting nuclear weapons—even if they do arrive at an agreement with the Russians for uranium enrichment in Russia. I have no doubt that the Iranians want to have nuclear weapons. And, if I were an Iranian, I too would be working on nuclear weapons.

After all, seen from Tehran, the strategic situation of Iran has deteriorated very much in the past three years. Iran is now surrounded by American forces: from the south in the Persian Gulf, from the east in Afghanistan, from the northeast in some of the Central Asian Republics, and from the west in Iraq. So, Iran is really surrounded by American forces. And everybody knows, wherever American forces are deployed, nuclear weapons are not far behind.

So from the Iranian point of view, their country is going through a very dangerous period. You might compare it to Germany in the early 20th Century, when she was building up her fleet. The Germans were worried that the British might do to them what they did to the Danes in 1806—setting Copenhagen and the Danish fleet ablaze. They even had a term for it: "to copenhagen." The Iranians' problem is to go through this dangerous period when they don't have the bomb yet and are therefore open to attack. So they will use all diplomatic means to maneuver, to evade, to deceive, including that agreement with Russia, if it were to materialize, while pressing on towards nuclear weapons. Once they have them, their problem would be solved.

As to Israel, I think its role in all this is rather marginal. We have what we need to defend ourselves or to deter an Iranian attack. We've had that capability for over 20 years. First, long-range aircraft with air-to-air refueling, then missiles that are capable of reaching Tehran, and now in the form of a second strike capability with submarines, each with four cruise missiles. We already have three subs, and are going to get another two. So at any time, there are going to be some eight cruise missiles with nuclear warheads, presumably thermonuclear weapons, aimed at Tehran. That will be enough.

I also think the Iranian nuclear effort is not primarily directed against us. It is directed against the United States—and that's understandable. You might say Israel is a good lightning rod for the Iranians. And, of course, we in Israel have our own game to play: Traditionally we have used threats to get weapons. First, to get them at all, and then to get them

on good terms—and it has worked. It worked in the 1960s, when first Germany, and then the United States, provided us the weapons we wanted. It worked after the first Gulf War in 1991. We told Germany: “Your missiles have been falling on us”; the German response: “Okay, you get three submarines.” And now it’s working again. “The Iranians are building nuclear weapons to eliminate us”; response: “Okay, you get another two submarines, almost for free.”

So Israel has been playing its own game. Henry Kissinger once said that Israel has no foreign policy, only a domestic policy—and that’s true. We are having Knesset elections in March, so the Arab danger and the Iranian threat are being played up. It works politically inside Israel—and outside of Israel. This is something you have to take into account.

EIR: You say there is a near-inevitability of Iran becoming a nuclear power. And you say this is not a strategic catastrophe at all. But, were an attack against Iran to occur, the Iranian counterstrike would obviously be massive. What is your sense of that?

Van Creveld: No, I disagree. Let’s start with the first part of the question. I don’t have the intelligence about the U.S. plans for Iran, so as to assess whether hitting the Iranian nuclear sites could be so effective as to knock them out indefinitely, or at least delay the program significantly. We don’t really know. The best available information does not tell us the really important point. The really important question is: How are the various nuclear sites linked to each other? What is done in each of them and how are they integrated in the program? Maybe the Americans know enough to really put the pieces of the puzzle together, maybe they don’t. One lesson from the last few years is: How lousy, to put it politely, all those intelligence agencies have been when it comes to weapons of mass destruction.

EIR: What about the Iranian capabilities for counteraction?

Van Creveld: I think that this is grossly exaggerated. We can imagine basically two kinds of reactions. The Iranians barely have an air force—you can forget that. They have not acquired a single modern combat aircraft for the last 30 years, as far as I know. So they would have to use missiles. Their missiles are, as far as we know, not yet fully operational; they are not yet available in large numbers, and we don’t know how accurate they are. Remember Saddam Hussein’s Scuds. They couldn’t hit anything smaller than a big city. Militarily, their impact was absolutely zero.

Some people say Iran has 20 missiles, maybe they have 50 of them. According to my information, the Iranian missile tests have not gone smoothly; they seem still to be experimenting with their missiles. There is no mass production yet. To use such missiles with anything but nuclear warheads would be simply stupid. Do you spend billions developing these weapons simply to destroy a few houses? Suppose the Iranian missiles carried chemical warheads, the impact would

be somewhat greater, but still not significant, militarily. Civilian casualties might be greater with chemical weapons, but militarily the impact would be close to zero.

But, here Israel gets very emotional. My feeling is that if anybody tried to use chemical weapons against Israel, it would be a fatal mistake—not to mention the fact that it might hurt the Palestinians, because the prevailing wind blows from the Mediterranean inland. A not-so-accurate chemical missile aimed at Israel has a very good chance of hitting the Palestinians. We are talking about a 1,500-kilometer flight path; if they fall 10 kilometers to the east they fall on occupied territory. I think chemical weapons are not a military threat for Israel. But, I think that if the Iranians were foolish enough to use chemical weapons against Israel, some very bad things might happen. This is something that is traumatic for us. This is what we set up Israel for: Never again will Jews be gassed. If they tried that, it might lead to some very, very bad things. I hope the Iranians understand that.

EIR: How do you see a possible asymmetric irregular warfare response by Iran and its potential consequences on world energy markets and financial markets?

Van Creveld: Remember we had similar fears during the 1991 Gulf War. Supposedly Iraqi sabotage teams would be waiting to strike all over the world. In the middle of that war, I flew from Tel Aviv to London-Heathrow and there were more British troops around Heathrow than there were in the Gulf. But, there was not one act of sabotage. Now I won’t rule out an irregular warfare response by the Iranians. My guess is that even if that happened it would be pinpricks, just pinpricks. Even a 9/11-type of attack in the midst of a strike against Iran, militarily would not make any difference.

EIR: What about closing the Straits of Hormuz?

Van Creveld: I am not sure the Iranians have what it takes to close the Straits of Hormuz. Don’t forget that the first state that goes bankrupt, is Iran itself, because they can’t export their oil any longer. They would have to use their submarines. I am not a naval expert, but I do know they have a few Russian-built subs. Probably, the U.S. Navy could take care of them. Otherwise all they could do is to float mines or use speed boats. Well, those are threats, but not very serious ones.

EIR: What about Iran’s ability to act through the Shi’ites in Iraq?

Van Creveld: That’s correct. Those Shi’ites will take help from whoever is prepared to offer it, including, of course, the Iranians. Insurgencies are made with weapons up to one yard long because those can be concealed; anything bigger than that cannot be concealed. And of those small arms, the Iraqis already have an unlimited supply. On the other hand there is an age-old hatred between Arabs and Persians. The Iraqi Shi’ites may receive some aid from Iran, but over the long run, I certainly don’t see an important part of Iraq becoming

part of Iran. Anyhow, the Iranians have enough trouble at home, and I don't think they want to take over 25 million Arabs who don't want that.

EIR: With the possibility of an attack against Iran in mind, let's have a look at the U.S. situation. On the one side the series of massive mistakes of the Bush-Cheney Administration, and on the other side a revival of the Democratic Party, significantly catalyzed by Mr. LaRouche. What is your assessment of the political dynamic in the United States?

Van Creveld: You know, I just finished a book on the United States, called *The American Riddle*; it is even now making the publishers' rounds. As an historian who has tried to understand America, what really impresses me most about the United States, is how enormously stable this country is. Here you have an extraordinary success story. With one very major disruption—the Civil War with 600,000 dead, more than all the other wars America was involved in, put together—the 18th-Century U.S. Constitution has held up remarkably well.

That assessment might seem to differ from Mr. LaRouche's views. Of course, Mr. LaRouche is not criticizing the American Constitution, but he is criticizing American political life. Yes, there have been all kinds of funny people who ruled in Washington, including a Dick Cheney, whom I view as a very, very dangerous man, and all sorts of political crazies pushing terrible things. But, the United States has never ceased to be the country of its people; it never, never strayed away from its Constitution in any really significant way. So, I would say that what always impressed me most about the United States is the extraordinary stability of the country. There have been deviations, but I don't see the system changing so fundamentally that it will no longer be American. There are 300 million people in America and they are committed to freedom, equality, and justice.

You, of the LaRouche movement, are talking about Roosevelt as a model and, on the other side, the danger of a "unitary executive" government. I think I understand what you mean. But, remember how much opposition there was to the New Deal. I mean few Presidents in all of American history have been so much hated as Roosevelt—he was denounced as a dictator, pinko, socialist, communist—what has not been said and written about Roosevelt? But the American system held. It held despite the greatest economic depression in the whole of modern history, with 25% of the workforce being unemployed. At that time, few married women worked. Therefore, the economic impact of 25% unemployment was much larger than it would be today when, in many families, women can go on working even when their husbands are unemployed. Yet the American system survived that. The system was strained, but it was never in real danger, there was never, ever any serious alternative like there was in Germany during the 1930s.

EIR: Well, Mr. LaRouche has always emphasized the



Staff Sgt. Alfred Johnson

"I could never understand why on Earth the Americans should want to attack Saddam Hussein, who was absolutely no threat," said Professor van Creveld. "Maybe they just picked the wrong country—as we all know, geography is not Mr. Bush's specialty." Here, a U.S. soldier from the 101st Airborne Division during Operation Swarmer, northeast of Samarra, on March 22, 2006.

uniqueness and superiority of the U.S. Constitution and the "American System" based upon it. What about the "funny people" in very high places, including in the White House, making "funny" decisions, for example in 2003 in respect to Iraq?

Van Creveld: Each time the United States has waged a war that was seen as necessary and successful, like after 1945 and after 1991, the Executive has gained in power at the expense of the Legislative. And you could interpret what happened in 2003 along this pattern. Of course, the successful Gulf War of 1991 was blown up out of all proportion. You will remember, in 2003 the Senate voted 99:1 in favor of the war—so strong had the confidence in the administration become. Now, after this Iraq War, things have turned around. Bush, is, I think you will agree, now a "lame duck" President. The real miracle is that he got himself re-elected in 2004. But almost since the day after his election, his power, his prestige, his status, have dropped like a stone.

I would argue that the Legislative is now recapturing the ground it has lost between 1991 and 2003. The push for "unitary executive" government is a reaction to that. The tension between the Legislative and the Executive is, as you know, deliberately built into the American system. Remember, under Nixon, people used to talk about the "imperial Presidency"—and then came the bitter end of the Vietnam War, and Watergate. Under Carter, the Executive was in really bad shape, but then came Reagan and he rebuilt the prestige of the Executive. Then came Saddam Hussein and gave Bush, Sr. a little push.

Here is a story: While Bush, Sr. was President, Mubarak

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visited Washington. When he came back home, he gave the order that all doors in Egypt were to be marked “Bush.” They asked him: “Mr. President, why that?” Mubarak said: “I have just been to the United States and all the doors there have a sign ‘Bush.’ ” Of course, in the Arabic language there is no “P,” only a “B.”

EIR: What is your sense of the institutions of the United States—the military, the intelligence services, the foreign service—in the period prior to the Iraq War?

Van Creveld: I used to spend many months a year in the United States, I lived there for a couple of years, but now I visit the U.S. only once or twice a year for a few days. I could never understand why on Earth the Americans should want to attack Saddam Hussein, who was absolutely no threat. Maybe they just picked the wrong country—as we all know, geography is not Mr. Bush’s specialty. Well, it didn’t make sense to me. Probably the best article on that subject was written by Anatol Lieven, an excellent piece about how this attack on Iraq really linked up with the neo-conservative agenda.

In many ways, I am an admirer of the United States. But as this Iraq War has clearly shown, the United States—not unlike past empires—has a tendency to overreach itself. Hubris. So as an admirer of the United States, I would like to see the United States blossom and prosper, not to speak about Israel’s own dependence on America. I think that—paradoxically enough—this Iraq War was a “good thing.” It demonstrated to the people in Washington—whatever they might say—the limits of American power. I hope that they know they are not omnipotent. For some time at least, because the way American society is structured means it is rather ahistorical.

The United States is a society that is more dynamic, is more capable of change, has fewer limits than any previous society—because of its ideals, but also because of its power. Tragically as it is, the Iraq War has shown what the United States is capable of when it is the only superpower.

EIR: Now Russia is coming back on the world scene.

Van Creveld: Yes. Putin has succeeded more or less in putting his own house in order. To him, of course, the breakdown of the Soviet Union was a catastrophe. That’s the way he sees it, which, from his point of view, is quite understandable. Putin has succeeded in putting Russia back on track, and now he is trying to make a comeback for Russia—not as the dominant power, but as a major player. Ten years ago or seven years ago, the Russians were on their knees, begging for help. When I was in Russia in 1998, they were literally begging on their knees: “Please, help us, we are collapsing.” Putin put an end to that.

And Putin has been lucky: The oil price went up, raw materials went up. Now, he is trying to make a limited—I would say limited—comeback for Russia as a world power. And among other places, Putin is getting active in the Middle East—like inviting the Hamas leadership to Moscow, or his dealings with the Iranians.

The war in Iraq will make America careful again—for a number of years. And Putin will remind them of that. The Russian attempt to reassert itself is—again, paradoxically—a “good thing” for the United States and for the world. America, which is a country based on ideals, not nationality, does not have the inborn restraints other countries have. So the restraints will have to be provided from the outside. In that sense, I think the reassertion of power by Russia is a “good thing” for the United States.

EIR: You have stated that you have a calm confidence in Israel’s security: Israel should withdraw from the Occupied Territories and basically separate Palestine and Israel. Because Israel possesses an efficient nuclear deterrent, it faces no existential security threat.

Van Creveld: You have to divide Israeli, mainly Jewish existence in Palestine, into three periods. The first one lasted until 1948: Whatever threat existed then came from inside the country, the local Palestinians. They were basically put down by the British—not by us.

Then, in 1948, the British got out and we got a free hand against the Palestinians, and they were defeated. If it hadn’t been for the Arab [League] invasion, which started on May

15, 1948, then our War of Independence would have been over in June or July 1948. By that time the Palestinians had almost ceased to be a factor in the fighting.

Then we had the period between 1948 and the outbreak of the first Intifada in 1987. It is true that 1967 was a very important year, because it was then that we occupied the West Bank and Gaza. Even so, in spite of occasional bombings and other incidents, for 20 years the situation in the territories was essentially calm. The day before the first Intifada broke out in 1987, our Coordinator of Activities in the Territories said that Israeli rule in the Occupied Territories had been a “brilliant success.” And, in some ways, it was. One battalion held the whole of Gaza, and I think less than two battalions held the West Bank.

So, until 1987, certainly until the peace with Egypt in 1979, our main security problem was with the Arab countries, not the Palestinians. They were not a significant factor for our security. Since 1987, the first Intifada, and after 2000, the second Intifada, that has changed.

Between 1948 and 1973, the greatest threat was always Egypt, our largest and strongest enemy, and the worst thing that could happen was a combination between Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and maybe some others. In 1979, when we made peace with Egypt, that threat was lifted. Later, we got peace with Jordan as well. And Iraq, once a powerful Arab state, has ceased to be a military factor. We really have no external enemy left.

So, externally, as Sharon once said, we are now in the fortunate position where the closest threat is some 700 miles to the east, in Iran. We do, however, face an internal threat: The threat now comes from inside. And the question is, how do you deal with an internal threat, which in some ways is much more dangerous than an external one? And, to my mind, the reason why it is more dangerous is not because of a bombing here and a bombing there, but because it puts Israelis against each other. If you are small and you fight the strong, then you unite. If you are big and strong and you fight the weak you become disunited. Very simple.

The danger in the Palestinian Intifada is that it could trigger civil war in Israel. And how real that danger was you could see when Rabin was murdered. A former Israeli Minister of Defense, Benjamin Ben Eliezer, once said something very true: “I am not sure that Israeli democracy can survive another bullet in a prime minister’s spine.” Neither am I; one more such assassination, and God knows what will happen to Israel. So the main danger to us, almost the only danger, is now internal.

If I had a button to press and send all the Palestinians to the Moon, maybe I would do it. But I don’t have such a button. And so I and, at the moment, the majority of Israelis believe we have to build a wall and separate ourselves from the Palestinians.

What will happen after the elections? I am worried about

Kadima. Kadima is not really a party; it is a collection of opportunists who gathered around Sharon, who is no longer there. [Ehud] Olmert actually has no special leadership credentials. There is, in my view, a strong danger that no sooner will the elections be won by Kadima—and so far it looks as if they are going to win—they’ll split. Because nothing, absolutely nothing holds these people together, except pure opportunism. So I am not at all sure that Olmert will be able to get Israel out of the West Bank.

There is another ugly possibility. Only two days ago, Maj. Gen. Yair Naveh of the Central Front Command said that maybe King Abdullah will be the last King of Jordan. And of course the Jordanians were very offended and the Israeli government had to distance itself from Naveh’s statement. But there is a not unimportant part of Israeli public opinion, which in earlier times used to be led by Ariel Sharon himself, which would like to throw all the Palestinians out of the West Bank and into Jordan.

Now obviously to do that, you need a wide internal consensus in Israel. And that could be created by terrorism. Suppose tomorrow we have what we call a mega act of sabotage: 500 people die as a skyscraper in Tel Aviv is blown up, or chemical weapons are used in a terror attack. Some say that the Palestinians have already used biological warfare and that it is being deliberately covered up.

Suppose we got large-scale terrorism on the one hand, and suppose something was to happen in Jordan, like a revolution overthrowing King Abdullah, or King Abdullah dies and there is no successor, so civil war breaks out. Quite a number of Israelis would say: “Let’s use this chance. We did it once in 1948 and we could do it again. We missed our chance in 1967 and we missed our chance in 1991. This may be the opportunity.” These people say that Jordan already has a Palestinian majority and Jordan is already a Palestinian state.

At the worst point of the second Intifada, it looked as if it might happen. Forty-four percent of Israelis polled at that time were in favor of such a solution. This was April 2002.

EIR: In 2002 you firmly said: “My advice to the Americans is: Don’t do this Iraq thing.” What would your advice in respect to the Iran crisis be?

Van Creveld: I have already said, whatever happens in Iraq, the Americans will have to remain in the Middle East and the Gulf. Beyond that there is a possibility that some sort of arrangement on the Iran question could be found with the Russians. That could be a good idea. I don’t know whether the Americans would find it attractive, because the Russians would have to be treated as a full, equal partner by the Americans. The other question is, what will the Russians ask for in return? What about the American presence in Central Asia? How about the Ukraine? The real question is: What is the United States prepared to pay?