

Global Journalist: The Next Weapons of Mass Destruction

Abstract: This Sep. 04, 2003 conversation will give us the glimpse of an understanding if Iran is developing weapons of mass destruction; if so, will it be the next threat for the world? Is Iran really a growing threat?

Host: Stuart Loory

Guests:

- Jim Mujer
- [Patrick Fort](#)
- [Barbara Slavin](#)
- John Calabrese

Producers: Sarah Andrea Fajardo,

Directors: Pet Acres,

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Speakers

Stuart Loory, Jim Mujer, Patrick Fort, Barbara Slavin, John Calabrese

Stuart Loory 00:07

Welcome to Global Journalist on KBIA. This is the program that says mid Missourians. indeed, many Americans are interested in international news. I'm Stuart Loory of the Missouri School of Journalism. The crisis in Iraq focal point these days of the world wide War on Terrorism continues to preoccupy the United States government, the news business and the public in this country. But last week, it was revealed that Iraq's neighbor Iran may have made some progress toward developing nuclear weapons that is weapons of mass destruction. How dangerous is that activity? Is Iran once called part of the axis of evil by President George Bush, really a growing threat to humankind? Is there any chance that Iran is more of a threat to the world than Iraq? And if so, what should be done if anything to bring that country under control? Those are the questions for discussion today. Our guests are Jim Mujer, Iran bureau chief of BBC in Tehran, Patrick Fort correspondent Agance France Press, Madrid, Spain, Barbara Slaven senior diplomatic reporter of USA Today in Washington, and also in Washington, Dr, John Calabrese scholar at the Middle East Institute, let's start in Iran. Jim, your can you bring us up to date on what these charges are all about? And what if anything is being done in Iraq to counteract them?

Jim Mujer 01:44

Well, what's being done about it remains to be seen. But the situation here at the moment is that Iran is being accused certain by the United States of having a secret weapons program. Now, the IAEA that's

the International Atomic Energy agency, which is following things very closely here is about to present a report to its board of governors on the eighth, which is next Monday if my calculations are correct. And that report is actually a little bit milder than the one they had in June. It does give Iran credit for increasing cooperation with the IAEA. Inspectors have been in and out of here. In recent months, they've been given access to sites which, strictly speaking under its existing obligations, Iran is not totally committed to allowing them access to but at the same time, that report does note that enriched uranium traces were found at the Natanz enrichment facility. Those traces should not have been there. Iran has said, Oh, well, they must have come from equipment that was imported from abroad. And that is an explanation which the IAEA is at least entertaining it hasn't brought it out to they're still awaiting the results of some analyses. The Iranians have also allowed inspection and environmental samples as they're called, to be taken at Thinkle da Kalai electricity company where some nuclear activity had been taking place. The results of those samples won't be through until the end of September and in other words until after that meeting next week. So, things are kind of coming to a head the Americans are getting very impatient. They want the IAEA to actually go to the UN and seek a resolution condemning Iran and possibly even imposing sanctions, but at this stage with unfinished test results, still not in it looks as though that meeting next week will be more inconclusive. And the focus may actually shift back to November when they'll be another meeting of the IAEA in Vienna, but the whole thing is becoming very highly charged. And as you said in your introduction there, there are of course, many other issues on which Iran is coming under mounting pressure from the international community.

Stuart Loory 03:48

Barbara Slavin, the United States is apparently putting pressure on Iran, but I don't get the feeling that this is really a big issue in Washington at the present time?

Barbara Slavin 04:02

Well, as you know, President Bush has a few other issues to worry about these days, primarily Iraq and also North Korea, which has been more of a focus of diplomacy in recent weeks. But I think there is a great concern about Iran. Just because it's not in the headlines every day, I wouldn't say that it's not a huge concern. We have people like John Bolton who is the Undersecretary for nonproliferation affairs, who is very insistent on bringing this matter to the UN. We also have something called the Proliferation Security Initiative, the PSI, which is a program 11 countries have now signed up to to intercept ships on the high seas, suspected of carrying arms or illegal drugs from North Korea but possibly also material bound for Iran. So, Iran is supposed to be part of one of the targets of this initiative. And I have a question if I may for Jim and that is a lot of pressure has come from the European on Iran to sign what's called the extra protocol or additional protocol of the IAEA, which would allow the organization to come in and do snap inspections of suspects sites, and there was a feeling that I was getting for people here that if Iran selling that additional protocol, it might at least take some of the heat off from the Europeans. And that would also force the US to back down a bit.

Jim Mujer 05:23

Absolutely. There's there's very strong pressure and the conflicting signals from the Iranians. They have told the IAEA that they're ready to start negotiations on that on signing that protocol. But normally, you'd simply sign on not saying you don't negotiate over it, but they are looking for assurances about their sovereignty. They don't want people just barging in and going anywhere they like, they want some

kind of framework for that. The IAEA seems to take that on board. They are willing to give clarifications and so on. But at this moment, it's not yet clear. They're really teasing this. The Foreign Ministry spokesman here a few days ago said Well, we've got eight days to Go before that meeting in Vienna, let's wait and see whether we sign it or not. So, they're really kind of, in a way dangling it there. If they were to sign up, of course, that would take the sting out of a lot of things because it would give the IAEA what it is looking for, which is the kind of access that it needs in order to actually say, yes, the Iranians are clean, they are not doing anything naughty and certifying the whole thing. And that, of course, would take the wind out of Washington sales big time.

Stuart Loory 06:28

If we could bring Patrick Fort into this. Patrick, Javier Solana has talked to the Iranians and I told them that they had better accept this idea of snap inspections very quickly to to maintain any semblance of support with the European Union. Is he going to push this further?

Patrick Fort 06:53

I think he is but actually he's just trying to show the Iranians that they don't need to In an interest not to get mixed up with what happened in Iraq, even though in the global opinion here is, things that has lost a confidence that could have the United States finding or detecting mass destruction weapons in some countries, they are pretty concerned about what can happen in Iran and Iran used to be an enemy, used to be behind a lot of terrorist attacks in the 80s and beginning of the 90s. So, they're going to try to push that through and have a have the Iranians to sign up with the International Agency. But the problem is, the Iranians are scared to have people coming in every day. And they said, I saw a statement this afternoon saying that they could be a matter of months, actually, before they sign anything. And so, it is also a big discussion apparently, in the Iranian government not not everybody is on the same, not everybody has the same opinion in Iran on what to do. And I'd also like to have a like a clarification for me when is how is the nuclear civilian the program because I'm the Iranians are allowed to about to have a nuclear power plant as long as you're not military.

Stuart Loory 08:09

Jim, you want to deal with it?

Jim Mujer 08:12

Sure. Yeah. Certainly they are developing civilian nuclear power and that that is as they regard it their right and the IAEA has no problem with that it is inspecting their their power plant down at the Bushehr which the Russians are finalizing now, but there's a lot of haggling over what happens to the spent fuel. The Russians trying to ensure it goes back to Russia afterwards. Coming back to what Patrick was saying there. Yes, there is a debate going on behind the scenes here hardliners, some of them are arguing, let's jump the whole thing. Why should we cave into international pressure? That's why this decision is taking so long and they do have to take a fundamental decision. Do they open up fully transparently to total international inspection to make a clean rest of it if they have been doing bad things in the past because it is really very difficult to hide these things once you let the inspectors in. Or do they scrap their obligation to the non proliferation treaty altogether as North Korea has done and go the bad boys fruit? That's a basic decision. And it really does have to be taken, if not this week, but certainly in the coming months.

Stuart Loory 09:13

Yeah, John Calabrese, if I can bring you into this discussion, what is the view of your Iran as part of an axis of evil these days? We don't hear that term being used any longer, for a lot of reasons, but is Iran still considered to be a worldwide threat as far as terrorism is concerned?

John Calabrese 09:37

Well, I think, well, there are two perspectives, obviously, from the Iranian perspective and their perceptions of what the United States intentions are. And then, of course, from the United States point of view, there's also a debate as to how willful or how purely coincidental, there hasn't been a flow of, of miscreants into Iraq, from Iran, into Afghanistan from Iran. So, I'm not too sure that there is a great deal of concern about Iran posing a global terrorist threat as much as serious questions among some members of the Bush administration regarding how cooperative Iran has been, is and might continue to be in the neighborhood.

Stuart Loory 10:31

Yeah, do we think that it is not only the Bush administration that has this view, is this a generally accepted view, say in Congress and among scholars like yourself and people in non governmental organizations?

John Calabrese 10:50

I think there are differences and shades of the I mean, my point of view is having been to Iran having some basic knowledge of the Iranian authorities ability or inability to police what is to a significant extent a porous border. And and knowing or believing from what I've heard, that there has been some cooperation from Iranian authorities that may be the kinds of accusations that have been leveled at Iran, for interfering with the United States is sort of efforts with the international community's efforts in both Afghanistan and Iraq are probably exaggerated.

Barbara Slavin 11:36

If I could, if I could, could come in here. There's one very important issue that we haven't discussed, and that is there are perhaps a dozen or more senior Al Qaeda figures in Iran under some form of arrest. And there's quite a debate. I understand. Maybe Jim can enlighten us also a debate within the Iranian government about who to turn these people over to what the price returning them over should be, I understand some people want to hold on to them as leverage because of the nuclear issue to see how that goes. Others are concerned that Al Qaeda might target Iran. But some of these detainees are quite senior, one of them, I believe is Safe Al Autel, who I think is the number three in the organization. He's an Egyptian and I'm wondering, if this is going to cause it for a lot of consternation and in the bush administration, I'm wondering where battle?

Stuart Loory 12:28

Jim?

Jim Mujer 12:29

Well, yeah, here here in Toronto. This is not something that's kind of openly discussed. They're very coy about who they've got, what level they are, if there's any famous names among them, they generally denied that any named people, any of the names that are in bouncing around in public are actually in their custody. But from the Iranian perspective, they have to ask themselves, you know, why, why should we simply hand these guys over to America? One, you mentioned the possible nuclear trade off but the other major trade off they are looking forward or at least they're saying, why should we do this when the Americans are doing that what the Americans are doing as far as they're concerned is harboring this group called the MKR of the Mujahideen organization, which is, has in fact been branded by Washington itself as a terrorist outfit. Now they are still in their bases in Iraq. And the fear here is that the Americans may be quietly winding them up to play some kind of spearhead role in the kind of regime change fantasies that some of the hardliners in Washington have been indulging in, at least in the past. They seem to have been slightly eclipsed recently, because of all the trouble in Iraq. But that's certainly the perception here. As I said, they're very coy about who exactly they've got. But they again, the question is, how much should they cooperate with Americans? The view in Washington is, you know, the Iranians should help us in Iraq and just sort of keep out the way. Well, you know, the perception here is that Iran is doing really, very minimally what it could do to assert its own interests. And if you ask, I've asked a senior American diplomat, a very senior American diplomat in Baghdad, if you were around, wouldn't you be doing this stuff too? And he said, Oh, God, yes. You know, I think Washington does tend to lose sight sometimes of the fact that other nations do have their own interests and can't really be expected simply to drop everything and serve America's.

Stuart Loory 14:10

What an irony, isn't it that the United States would want Iran to help in the campaign against Iraq, when 20 years ago, the United States was pressuring Iraq to help in the campaign against Iran?

John Calabrese 14:24

Well, what's equally ironic is the fact that on the one hand, the Bush administration has indicated that the regime is of a character that should be replaced. And at the same time, you know, needs and demands that that very same regime cooperate, and spawn spells out the means by which and the timetables that by which the Iranian government should cooperate.

Stuart Loory 14:50

Okay, we'll continue this discussion in a second, but we have to take a break right now. I'm Stuart Laurie. This is global journalist on KBIA. Welcome back to Global Journalist, you may listen to this program again, ask questions or make comments by going to www.globaljournalists.org or here in mid Missouri by calling us at 573-882-9641. Let's talk a little bit about this regime in Iraq. It is viewed here in the United States as a very dangerous, fundamentalist, undemocratic regime in Iran. In Iran the United States is still thought of as the great Satan. What is really happening with this regime? Is it becoming any more liberal than it was when the Ayatollah Khomeini led a revolution 20 years ago, Jim mirror,

Jim Mujer 16:04

I would say that society is becoming more liberal. The regime itself is in flux, you've got the situation where you have an increasingly thin crust a very powerful hardliners with a very strong grip on the lives

of real power. Whereas there is a course that the bulk of the population supporting the reform is President heart, me and his followers who control the parliament. But these elected positions are not really in power. And this is becoming a source of mounting frustration almost to the point of hysteria now on behalf of the on the part of the reformers because their time is now running out. There's elections coming up here in February for the Majlis, at the Parliament and the following year for the presidency. And they really have achieved virtually nothing in terms of actually getting legislation through to consolidate reforms. So, they're getting very, very frustrated. Indeed, in general, I would say that the political atmosphere is certainly much more transparent in the last five years than it was But in the earlier years of the revolution, for example, if people are taken away and secretly interrogated by sinister security people, this is often reported, and even photographs of the buildings where it's taking place come out in the papers, there's there is a search light that is being poured into the dark corners of life here, which certainly wasn't there before. But the fact is that the real power still remains in the hands of a small minority of unelected hardliners who are very, very tough and who are not going to give away easily. However, they are where there's a legitimacy problem coming up. And if they don't give some concessions in advance of those elections, they may find themselves back in control of Parliament and the eventually the presidency, but they will be a very much a minority with very little popular legitimacy. And that would, of course, lay them even more open to international pressures.

Patrick Fort 17:51

Maybe I can add something on Europe's point of view on that is that Europeans have seen that there's been a slow progress since Khomeini came in and that the liberals have been gaining a little bit of a bit of power and they're really scared to set things back in to hurt somebody's feeling and then go back to 1980 situation. So they really trying to like, like we say in French to walk on eggs here. And to be really diplomatic with what's happening in Iran and not really putting too much pressure no the liberals for this if something bad happens and this gets back to an earlier theme, which wasn't, which really wouldn't be in the interest of Europe or the United States.

Stuart Loory 18:31

Well, the European companies, private industry in Europe has also maintained trade relations with Iran, right through the revolution, haven't they? And they certainly don't want to do anything to to harm those relations. Is that right, Patrick?

Patrick Fort 18:50

Yeah, look, it's true and not true. I mean, at the beginning of the 80s everybody was kicked out besides the some gas companies but then at the big at the end of the 80s, they started investing again. And there was a lot of French companies who went back to Iran. But like at the beginning of the 80s and the end of the 70s, it was completely impossible to even have foreign people giving orders in any way. And slowly it's coming back to so that that's also one position. They don't want. They don't want to have anything. They don't want things to go to be again, like in 1980. So, it's it's really complicated to on the other hand, try to help the liberals to gain more and more power and on the other hand, to try at same time to impose views on terrorism or nuclear power on a even on trade agreement or gasoline.

Stuart Loory 19:45

Barbara Slavin and John Calabrese, if I can ask both of you, the United States has no diplomatic relations with Iran, how does this country keep itself informed on what's going on there?

Barbara Slavin 19:59

Good question, we do have contacts with the Iranians. We actually had talks with an in Geneva at a fairly high level earlier this year until the press found out about it and, and then the meetings ended rather abruptly. We also have a Swiss embassy in in Tehran, which represents our interests there. There are a number of Americans who go back and forth and not just members of the press but also people in the oil industry who were would love to go back their academics, others ex diplomats. So, I think there's there's a fairly good base of knowledge about Iran in this country. I wanted to talk a little bit about about this whole notion of regime change, though, which which is so popular among the neoconservatives here. And to again ask Jim's expertise on this. The sense among some of the neoconservatives here is that Iran is somehow right for another revolution, and that all it needs is a little push and this whole edifice will come crumbling down. I haven't been in Iran for over a year but it's always been in my impression that people there are interested in something more evolutionary. But there are economic pressures, other pressures. And of course, the young people are very, very impatient. So, I just wonder what the latest take is on on internal regime change in Iran?

Jim Mujer 21:20

I think, basically, it is a totally unpredictable situation because there's no parallel, there's no precedent, the bulk of the population would like change. My belief is, it's hard to generalize of course, my belief is that they, as you suggest, would prefer evolution because from bitter experience, both of the revolution and the war with Iraq, eight years in the 1980s, they know that upheavals take you 10 or 20 years back and not forward and the vast majority of people including the younger generation, which is very massive, really have it almost genetically built into them and understanding that trouble means going backwards, not forwards. They want a better life and the whole point is that although many people would like regime change gently or otherwise, there is just no mechanism. There's no leadership. There's no structures, there's no ideology, there is no revolution brewing here. There may be a lot of discontent. It's possible that at some stage, social and economic factors could trigger off something. But the kind of troubles we've seen, and I'm talking about the student stuff in July in June, there was some trouble but it's really very small scale involving small amounts of people. Washington gets terribly excited because they think it's happening, the flames are starting to spread. But it's just a few thousand people who are really intimidated that all they're doing is honking their horns and those people who were honking their horns had their car numbers taken. They were later called in, they had their cars held for a month. They're on notice that they're being watched. And they're thoroughly cowed. They won't do it again. So, you know, change is not going to come easy here. It has to come from within and the view even of the most reformist of the reformists, it has to come from within, but even that is blocked. So, it is very hard to predict what's going to happen it could blow at some stage. It could take a long time for this really glacial change or in geographical sort of slowness that it's taking two or geological, I should say, to actually bring about real change, you can see the contradictions but and you can see the crisis, you can feel it. But something actually coming out of it is a different matter.

Barbara Slavin 23:19

Can i ask if I may, if there's anyone who could replace at this point or whether on it, he's running he his term, second term will end soon?

Jim Mujer 23:26

I learned, yeah, yes. Actually after next year, in the spring of next year, May or June of 05, there is no visible replacement. And we're talking really about him as a symbol of the reform movement. And the whole reform movement as a political in political office is really under question at the moment. They've been able to achieve very, very little. It's quite likely if the next elections go the way of the municipal elections, which may have been a kind of bellwether thing last February, with the turnout was very, very low, really, pathetically low, and where the hardliners or conservatives got back in because they simply weren't the voters there that the reformers used to count on the masses. If that happens next year in the parliamentary elections and the following year, and in the presidential elections, you will see the conservatives back on power a as a minority government with very little actual credibility, but with the power once again in their hands,

Stuart Loory 24:28

If I can ask John Calabrese, is there anything that outsiders should be doing or could be doing to stimulate a change in regime in Iran?

John Calabrese 24:40

And I've been struggling with that myself. And I really don't believe that the United States or any individual action act or collect collection of actors could make a decisive difference in the pace of change and the character of change. I think that we could have an impact on the margins, but probably not much beyond that. And the thing just to sort of pick up on something that Jim said that I agree with completely, and I think that deserves some emphasis are the three factors that impede sort of like an immediate or sort of cataclysmic change, one being the people's, like had not having sort of a stomach for violent struggle. The second being the regimes enduring capacity to use to resort to repression and violence to sort of snuff out any any protest. And the lack of organizational capacity on the part of those who would sort of challenge the regime. And then to sort of add to that, something that that Barbara's comment sort of made me think about is down the road what I worry about is growing not so much growing discontent but growing alienation of the public from government. I mean, there wasn't enthusiasm in 1997 hope that the reformers could actually bring about constructive change and what I've seen is that enthusiasm waning and completely absent now.

Stuart Loory 26:15

Okay, we're beginning to run out of time, but I want to change the subject if I may, a little bit. yesterday or the day before, there was a bombing of the of the British Embassy in Tehran, the embassy was closed down. This was apparently in response to the possibility that the British may try to extradite an Iranian to Argentina for trial they're in the bombing of a synagogue when a number of Jews were killed in Buenos Aires several years ago. Has the embassy reopen Jim and what is the situation and how critical is it?

Jim Mujer 26:59

Well, it wasn't bombed it was shot at by somebody on a motorbike and it got holes in the window, it is still closed down. It there is no date for it to reopen. There's a very intense discussion going on between the Embassy in London over security measures and so on and in what circumstances and under what conditions it should reopen. Obviously, it's something you have to take very, very seriously indeed. But the whole thing fits into this context of tension between the two countries. Interestingly, despite the arrest of that former ambassador, the former Iranian ambassador in the UK, Iran has not taken the obvious step of booting out the British ambassador. And I think there are a lot of reasons for that, partly that the foreign ministry, which is in the hands of the reformist realize that the Blair government has put a huge amount of effort into making better relations with Iran. It's gone out on a limb especially in terms of its relationships with with the US. Also they realized that would be European implications, because if they boot him out to the European ambassadors would have to go to.

Stuart Loory 27:55

Okay, Jim, I'm sorry, we do have to cut you off. We are out of time. Our guests Today have been Dr. John Calabrese of the Middle East Institute, Barbara Slavin of USA Today in Washington. Jim Mujer of BBC in Tehran and Patrick Fort Agence France Press in Madrid. Our director is Pat Acres and our producers, Sarah Andrea Fajardo and Raja Ravi. For all. I'm Stuart Loory Global Journalist will be back next week.