

IRAN: CONFRONTATION OR DIPLOMACY?

U.S.-IRAN STANDOFF

BY OMEED ALERASOOL

Ever since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the relationship between the United States and Iran has been a complicated one. The two sides have been engaged in intense rhetorical and political warfare for decades; and for the last few months, we have witnessed an escalation of rhetoric, threats of embargoes, sanctions, and even military strikes. This tense and dangerous crisis stems not only from the



Photograph: Omeed Alerasool

current political climate, but is also rooted in a complicated history of mistrust between the two nations. Unfortunately the major news media in the United States fails to provide the proper historical context. Many of our media sources have become hyperbolic when it comes to reporting on Iran, failing to keep the public informed (a necessity in a democracy) of several key facts of the U.S.-Iran standoff. In post-9/11, 21st century American foreign policy, Iran has become a token issue. The oppressive policies of the Iranian regime, blatant hostility towards Israel, and developments in its nuclear program have become hard to ignore. However, these concerns have been arguably misrepresented by the media, thus mainstreaming the notion of military strikes and intervention. The truth is that genuine diplomatic solutions have not been exhausted and a close look at both nations shows that diplomacy continues to be the only hope for a lasting peace.

TROUBLED REPUBLIC

In 1953, the Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh was overthrown by a CIA coup d'état once he nationalized Iran's oil industry (which the British had monopolized). The young Mohammad Reza Shah returned from his brief exile to rule with an iron fist. Throughout the Shah's reign, he maintained a brutal secret police, SAVAK, trained by the CIA and Mossad,

which crushed any opposition to the unrestricted power of the Peacock Throne. It was in this light that the Iranian public staged the revolution of 1979. And it was in this light that the Iranian public of the time saw American power.

Shortly after the revolution, a handful of Iranian students stormed the American Embassy and took 52 Americans hostage. At first Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the face of the revolution, condemned the actions of the students, until a senior cleric convinced him of the political value of such an ordeal. The hostage crisis continued for 444 days. It resulted in the complete severing of U.S.-Iran relations. Spewing anti-West rhetoric, Khomeini secured his hold on power, removed the more moderate revolutionaries and imposed himself as Supreme Leader of the new Islamic Republic of Iran. When Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, Khomeini used the foreign threat to consolidate power and established strict new laws that drastically limited individual freedoms and severely punished “anti-revolutionary” thought or dissent. The Islamic Republic, as we know it, came into existence.

Not until the late 1990s, under the reformist President Mohammad Khatami, did the domestic laws began to transform and loosen. Yet when his term expired and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became President, the status quo returned. In 1999, a group of university students rose up in protest against the government, but it was crushed. One decade later, after the disputed reelection of Ahmadinejad in 2009, the supporters of reformist Mir-Hossein Mousavi took to the streets in protest. Clothed in green, the color of Islam as well as the Mousavi campaign, the protesters sparked the Green Uprising. The government responded with brutal crackdown. Riot police, tear gas, and troops in cities across the country arrested hundreds. The leaders and supporters of the Green Movement were arrested and stripped of influence and power. The progressive theologian and public blogger Mohammad-Ali Abtahi, for example, was imprisoned and stripped of his clerical status. After being held for months, the once plump and cheery cleric was put on military trial frail and thin, showing signs of torture.

Despite being brutally repressed, the Green Uprising, for the first time since the revolution, brought the legitimacy of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, under scrutiny after he ordered the Revolutionary Guards, defenders of revolution and the largest

paramilitary force in the world, to crush the protesters. Having eliminated the reformists from the political scene, new conflicts within the conservatives are now surfacing and have led to a power struggle between the Supreme Leader and his supporters (the Principlists) on the one side and the government of Ahmadinejad on the other. Recently, supporters of Ahmadinejad faced criticism from the Supreme Leader, most prominently over Presidential Cabinet appointments. Rumors have circulated that the Principlists may seek to remove Ahmadinejad, prior to the 2013 elections, or of even removing the post of President and reinstating a Prime Minister. (Having emerged as the clear winner of the recent parliamentary election in the Iranian Parliament, the Principlists have intensified the pressure on Ahmadinejad's camp and are well-positioned to enable the Supreme Leader to eliminate the presidency.) Evidently, Iranian politics is undergoing a transformational period where external conflict would be as expedient in consolidating power as it was in 1980.

NUCLEAR PROGRAM

Iran did once have a nuclear weapons program, and much of the technology was provided to the Shah by the United States. However, according to international and American intelligence reports, the military component of the program was abandoned in 2003, around the time of the invasion of Iraq. The reality today is that intelligence agencies cannot conclude that the nuclear program has made a turnaround and now aims at developing weapons. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the leading voice on nuclear technology and us, has followed the issue and published several reports in the last few years. The most recent (February 24th, 2012) outlines the developments in nuclear technology at certain sites across Iran, commenting and evaluating based on its own ability to investigate. In regards to a nuclear weapons program, the most recent report stated that their "information indicates that: prior to 2003 [nuclear weapons-related] activities took place under a structured programme; that some continued after 2003; and that some may still be ongoing." This is far from the definite cry that Iran has nuclear bombs or is actively pursuing them.

One perspective seldom discussed publicly in the United States involves asking: Why Iran might want a nuclear bomb if it is pursuing a weapons program? It should be noted that the world's nine nuclear powers pursued nuclear weapons for deterrent purposes to guarantee their survival in times of major security threats. From an Iranian perspective, Iran has had much reason to worry: Israel to the West, Pakistan to the East, and Russia a quick sail North, each with confirmed (or in the case of Israel, highly suspected) nuclear weapons. Iran has also maintained a terrible relationship with the world's only superpower. There are dozens of American military bases surrounding Iran, in Saudi Arabia, the Persian Gulf states, Iraq, Central Asian states, and Afghanistan. And since 2003 especially, there have been many calls by prominent U.S. politicians for military action against Iran or even forced regime change. Additionally, Iran has its own 'terrorist' problems, state-sponsored or not; from 1998 when

the Taliban destroyed an Iranian embassy and the Islamic Republic almost invaded Afghanistan, to attacks by Jundallah earlier this decade and the more recent assassinations of civilian scientists and engineers. Not to mention, there have been severe sanctions against Iran since the Revolution that continue to be intensified unilaterally and through the UN Security Council.

At the same time, it is worth asking why Iran might actually abstain from having a nuclear arsenal. First off, Iran has signed and ratified the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (India, Israel, and Pakistan have not). Secondly, regardless of Ahmadinejad's rhetoric, the Supreme Leader has ultimate say on all matters in the Islamic Republic. The President only influences domestic policy and Ahmadinejad has come under severe criticism from the clerical establishment recently. The Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has proclaimed, more than once, that nuclear weapons are contrary to Islam. Although the Supreme Leader's words have at times contradicted Iranian actions in the past, his statement regarding Iran's nuclear ambitions should not be totally dismissed. If he is lying about opposing nuclear weapons, he is taking a huge risk to his legitimacy, post-2009 Green Uprising, since the regime is built upon Islamic principles with consistency being one of its cornerstones. At the same time, Iran is a leading power of the Persian Gulf region and the Middle East. If Iran obtains a nuclear weapon Saudi Arabia may very well be next, as the two are rivals politically, militarily, historically, and religiously.

It is very possible that Iran does not desire nuclear weapons, although it is nearly impossible to be sure. One might ask why doesn't Iran simply stop enrichment immediately or open up completely to the IAEA instead of sending mixed signals. However, in a country with enormous domestic uranium reserves, facing a growing population, limited electricity and refined fuels, development of its own nuclear technology can be viewed as a matter of national security and sovereignty. The subject has become the one issue that the most Iranians agree on. From the Iranian people's point of view, nuclear technology is a right and when the U.S. or Europe demand Iran stop its research and development, it is perceived as denying rights that many other nations have been allowed to pursue. From the government's point of view, why agree and give up their nuclear program if they cannot gain something in return, removal of sanctions for example?

Thus, for now at least, it seems that Iran will neither back down from its nuclear program nor completely cooperate with the international community, leaving the U.S. and its allies in an unfortunately difficult position.

HOSTILITY TO ISRAEL

When Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in 1980, Iranians rallied to the defense of their nation, resurgent, revolutionary, and united by a common enemy. Deeply offended by the hostage crisis, the Reagan administration sent military aid to Iraq, including ammunition, helicopters, and the latest military technology. Iraq also produced and used chemical weapons, killing tens of thousands of Kurds and Iranians. Cognizant of American support of Saddam, Iran decided to counter the United States via proxy. During the war, Iran directly supported the creation of Hezbollah which fought Israel, an American proxy in the eyes of the Islamic Republic. With a Machiavellian mentality, the Iranian government leveraged its influence wherever it could.

Iran pressed Hezbollah to release American hostages taken in Lebanon in exchange for weapons from the U.S. to utilize against Iraq. The same funds were later channeled to the Contras in Nicaragua, hence the Iran-Contra Scandal.

In recent times, a major concern from the American perspective has been the hostility and perceived hatred of Israel by Iran. It is true



Israelis protest against a strike on Iran, Tel Aviv, March 24th, 2012.

that Iran was essentially the architect of Hezbollah and has supported Hamas against Israel. Hezbollah was created in the 1980s to counter U.S. support of Iraq through hostility to Israel, an American proxy in the Islamic Republic's eyes. More recently though, continued support of Hezbollah and support of Hamas has been used to garner public support for the Islamic Republic in the Arab world, historically hostile to Persian power.

President Ahmadinejad notably made a speech in which he proclaimed that Israel should "not exist on the world map" that was mistranslated into "Israel should be wiped off the map". The uproar inspired Ahmadinejad to embrace his new reputation and infamy by making similar statements and even hosting an International Holocaust Conference. Although this was a purely political move; the Supreme Leader has acknowledged the

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Holocaust before, and during World War II the Iranian military helped receive Jewish exiles from Eastern Europe until they could safely return to their homes. Israel, not surprisingly, has taken offence to Iran's rhetoric and support of Hezbollah and Hamas. The Israeli government today is the most likely to launch a military offensive as it perceives Iran to be a threat to its national existence. However, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's conservative government pursues a more confrontational policy, many Israeli parliamentarians and citizens have called for a peaceful solution.

"ALL OPTIONS ARE ON THE TABLE"

Although the rhetoric of war is getting louder on all sides, particularly among conservative factions, the effectiveness of military action in removing Iran's nuclear capabilities is often exaggerated while the consequences of such an action for Iran and the region are underestimated. Part of the issue is the exaggeration of both Iran and Israel's military capabilities. For example, Iran recently threatened to block the Strait of Hormuz in response to threats from Israel, sparking fear and outrage throughout world financial markets. In reality, Iran's military does not have the capacity to block the strait for any extended period of time. When it comes to Israel and possible strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities, the capabilities of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have been exaggerated and it has been portrayed as a hyper-aggressive force. However, the IDF does not have aircraft to carry a bomb large enough to destroy deep underground facilities such as the newly-built Fordow facility. In addition, there is significant opposition to military action and Netanyahu's rhetoric in the Israeli Knesset.

Another important aspect to consider is the effect of any military strike on Iran as a nation. Any attack on Iran would be regarded as an attack on the people. As when Saddam Hussein invaded in 1980, the Iranian population rushed to defend its homeland, despite the dynamics of the revolutionary regime. In today's Iran, more than 70% of Iranians were born after the revolution. Many of the young people have lost faith in their government and even Islam. An attack on Iran is exactly what the regime needs to reestablish its authority in a time of political dissent and uncertainty. Any strike on nuclear facilities would also appear as an attempt to halt the scientific progress of Iran, a right most of the Iranian public agrees on regardless of political

allegiances. Not to mention that countless civilians that would face dangerous nuclear fallout, as most facilities are near large cities. Thus the significantly pro-American sentiment in Iran would rapidly diminish. If the goal of a military strike is to stomp nuclear progress or destabilize the regime, then any military action would fail absolutely in its objective. The regime would be strengthened and a sudden increase in domestic pressure may even expedite nuclear research. U.S.-Iran tensions would be aggravated and the conflict would only escalate. From a U.S. national security standpoint: the military option is not viable.

“UNCLENCH YOUR FISTS”

Time and again one side or another has failed to acknowledge the other’s capacity for diplomacy. Ever since 1979, diplomacy has been essentially non-existent; although peaceful efforts are not unprecedented. When the reformist President Khatami was in power in Iran, he called for “A Dialogue of Civilizations”. His administration was the most progressive the Islamic Republic has ever seen. In 2003, soon after the US invaded Iraq and deposed Saddam Hussein, the Khatami administration composed a “Grand Bargain” in the hopes of finally achieving peace and security. The proposal arrived, through the Swiss, only days after President Bush declared “Mission Accomplished”. Iran offered to open its nuclear program to full inspections, halt support for Hamas in the Palestinian territories, help disband militant Hezbollah in Lebanon, and move toward recognizing the state of Israel. The United States would end all economic sanctions. The very fact that the offer had been cleared by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, gave the proposal legitimacy and significance. Unfortunately, the Bush administration never replied. The administration may have doubted the sincerity of the deal, or they may have thought regime change in Iraq would be quick and Iran would be next. Regardless, the rare opportunity for a diplomatic solution was lost.

In 2010, there was another set of deals on the table, focused on a multilateral nuclear fuel swap. This time, Ahmadinejad was President in Iran and Barack Obama sat in the Oval Office. The deal was a complex international agreement that essentially would have involved Iran sending nuclear material to Russia to be further enriched for solely medical, energy, and research isotopes and then returned to Iran. However, this time the Iranian administration rejected the deal, citing a concern with France playing a minor intermediary role in the series of transfers. Thus at this point, the Obama administration reached out to Russia and China in hopes of placing new sanctions on Iran through the UN Security Council. At the same time, Turkey and Brazil attempted to convince the Iranians one last time into agreeing to the deal. Surprisingly, the Turkish and Brazilian envoys succeeded and Iran agreed. Having two options on the table, the Obama administration implemented the more ‘secure’ choice of sanctions, having made significant political sacrifices to gain Russian and Chinese support. Thus, another rare diplomatic solution slipped away.

Despite the lost opportunities and the mistrust that it has generated on both sides, it is not too late for diplomatic engagement. Politics consists of diplomacy and compromise,

whether between two officials or two countries. During the Cold War, the USSR and U.S. were able to find common ground despite decades of hostility. The Cold War was far more contentious than modern U.S.-Iran tensions, and yet diplomatic progress was ultimately the solution, not military action. Although it is difficult for politicians on all sides to replace harsh rhetoric with thoughtful political courage, particularly during election seasons in the U.S., Israel, and Iran, one can hope that rational and peace-seeking voices will ultimately prevail. As can be seen in the “Israel loves Iran” internet campaign, the people can look past political rhetoric; now it’s the governments’ turn. Glimpses of diplomacy have been seen in the last 10 years. If each nation eases on the rhetoric and steps up genuine efforts towards a diplomatic solution, who is to say that a peaceful solution cannot result?

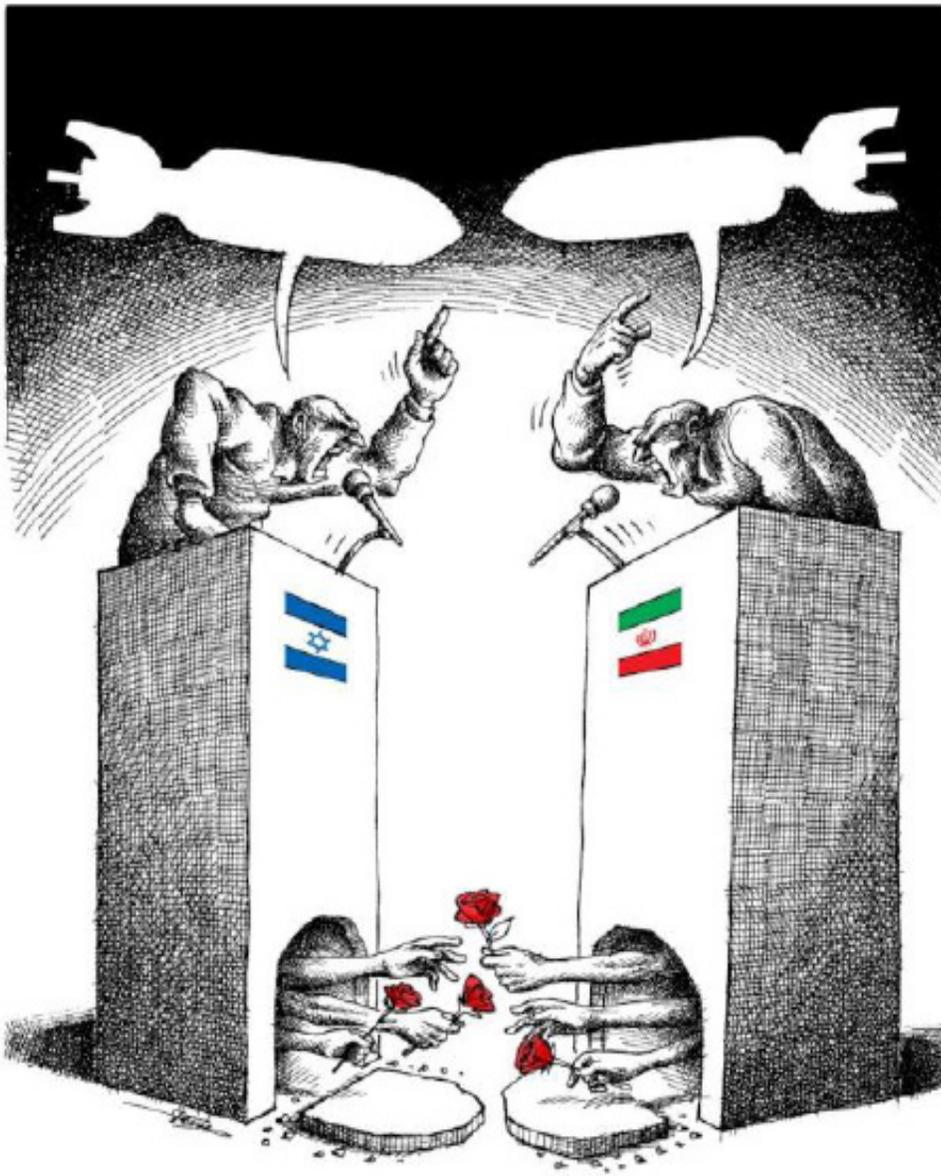


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