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Iran, War, and Sanctions

Abbas Edalat interviewed by Foaad Khosmood

[*We present three articles on Iran in the crosshairs, examining the conflict over Iran in light of moves by the US, UN, Japan, EU and Israel. The central issue concerns the US effort to bring Iran before the UN Security Council for its refusal to terminate the development of its civilian nuclear power program. It is a course that many see as the essential step toward US-directed regime change.*

In the first article, Mindy Kotler, Director of Asia Policy Point, examines critically Japan's reluctance to join the US-led bandwagon on Iran, highlighting the failure to criticize the Iranian president's statements on Israel and the holocaust, and noting Japan's heavy dependence on Iranian oil. She also hints at another potent factor: like Iran, Japan is actively pursuing the development of nuclear power for civilian uses. Unlike Iran, however, Japan's effort is advancing with US and EU tacit support. Japan did in fact vote with the US to bring Iran before the UN Security Council, as well as privately pressing Iran to halt its nuclear development program. Kotler notes important Japanese interests in Iranian oil. But she attributes Japan's reluctance to play a forward role in condemning Iran to a failure of its diplomacy. Where some see Japan's diplomatic failure to center on its Prime Minister's provocative visits to Yasukuni Shrine and other acts antagonizing its neighbors, Kotler believes that a more forward role on such issues as Iran are the prerequisites if Japan's is to succeed in its quest for a permanent Security Council seat. In declining to discuss the legitimacy of Iran's claims to develop civilian nuclear power, the article implicitly reiterates the US position on the issues.

The second article, an interview with Abbas Edalat, Professor of Mathematics, Kings College, UK, locates the US-Iranian conflict in the perspective of the conflict since the 1979 Iranian revolution and US designs to remake the Middle East map from the Iraq-Iran War to the present Iraq War. It makes a vigorous case for Iran's right to develop civilian nuclear power as a signatory to the Non Proliferation Treaty, and for that nation's right to survival. Edalat sharply criticizes US policy and warns of the dangers of the road to war being mapped out by leaders in the Pentagon and Israel. Indeed, it is Israel, even more than Washington, that has since 9/11 beaten the drums for war in Iran. Edalat argues, possibly optimistically, that strong opposition to the US position by Russia and China will make it difficult for the US to secure a Security Council sanction of Iran.

The third article, from the Asahi Shimbun, sets Japan's oil dependence on Iran, and particularly the decision about whether to proceed with its investment in the Azadegan oil fields, against the US-led pressures to bring Iran before the Security Council. Japan Focus]

Foaad Khosmood: Iran has been at odds with the United States since the 1979 revolution. It has also had tumultuous relations with Europe over the years. What makes the present time different, in your opinion, to make UN sanctions or military intervention more likely in the near future?

Abbas Edalat: The western media gives the impression that it is the comments of the new Iranian president about Israel and Iran's nuclear program which, in the context of US's "war on terror", are the root cause of the present conflict. However, the truth is quite different. In fact, the anti-Israel and anti-US slogans in Iran were far more radical in the earlier days on the revolution in 1979, in the American hostage crisis 1979-80 and during the 8 year Iran-Iraq war in 1980-88 that Saddam with the backing of the west waged on Iran.

Furthermore, according to all western intelligence Iran is many years away from being able to develop a nuclear weapon capability even if it does decide to follow this path, for which there is no evidence at all. Thus none of the propaganda in the western media can possibly be the root cause of the present conflict and justify threats of sanctions and the option of military intervention.

We need to see the underlying reasons for the situation elsewhere. What is fundamentally different today compared with the past is that the Bush administration, dominated by the neoconservatives and their doctrine of the "Project for the New American Century", has been resolved ever since it came to power in 2001 to redesign the map of the Middle East and to replace all defiant regimes in the region with client pro Western states.

Of course, this has virtually the same motivation that induced the United States to back first the Shah of Iran, and then Saddam Hussain, and to maintain close relations with Saudi Arabia. But what has really changed is that the neoconservatives aim to use the military power of the US to remove any regime which poses obstacles for them and are prepared to pay a high price for it in terms of any massive loss in credibility of the US in the world public and in the western world.

The neoconservatives consider this strategy as vital for controlling the oil resources in the Middle East and Central Asia and for dominating these strategic regions in the course of the present century in face of increasing competition with the growing economic, political and military power of China. After the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, Iran and Syria remain the only two countries which need to undergo regime change in accord with the neoconservatives' project, and clearly Iran presents a much greater challenge.

The US strategy for regime change in Iran was spelled out very clearly in President George W. Bush's State of the Union speech in January 2002 when, in a very dramatic move, he labeled Iran as part of the axis of evil only a few weeks after Iran had assisted the US in overthrowing the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Indeed, Iran's reward for assisting the US in Afghanistan in late 2001 was its designation as evil by the US president.

Bush's attack on Iran was in sharp contrast to the foreign policy of the Iranian government, headed at the time by President Mohammad Khatami, who since his first landslide election victory in 1997 had been promoting Dialogue among Civilizations to resolve conflicts and reach peaceful co-existence with the West. In this context, the axis of evil label shows that the current US administration is quite serious about its desire to enforce a regime change in Iran.

After the invasion of Iraq the US strategy against Iran continued unabated. Despite facing a disaster in its occupation of Iraq, the US has lost no time in preparing the diplomatic grounds for its broader agenda in Iran. The US diplomatic offensive has been based on a host of charges against Iran - that Iran is the principle state in the world for sponsoring terrorism, that it has ties and co-operation with Al-Qaeda, that it supports the insurgents to destabilize Iraq, and above all that it has a covert nuclear weapons program that makes it a threat to Israel and the Western world.

These charges are strikingly reminiscent of the run-up to the Iraq invasion and are similarly designed to pave the road for the ultimate aim of regime change, this time in Iran.

According to two articles by Seymour Hersh in January 2005 in the New Yorker, all high ranking officers of the Bush Administration, whom he had interviewed on the US foreign policy, had stated that Iran is the next target after Iraq, and that the administration has learned its lessons on the run-up to the Iraq invasion and this time they would first follow the diplomatic road to prepare fully the political case for an attack on Iran. Interestingly, the US administration only challenged the details of Hersh's revelations but not their essential substance.

It is in the light of this strategy that we should understand the current massive diplomatic efforts by the US to refer Iran to the UN Security Council. It aims for some sort of UN resolution against uranium enrichment by Iran followed by UN sanctions in order to completely isolate Iran as a prelude to a military attack.

FKh: How likely is an actual military offensive? What shape do you think this action would take? Would Israel be involved?

AE: The probability of a military intervention against Iran has been steadily rising since the invasion of Iraq. Whether a military attack will eventually take place or not will of course depend on the outcome of the diplomatic battles ahead at the UN Security Council and the strength of the rising opposition to a new war in the public opinion both internationally and in the Middle East and Iran.

Given the present fiasco in Iraq, it is unlikely that massive US ground troops will be employed for a full invasion of Iran, a country four times larger with a population three time bigger than Iraq. What is more likely at least in the short and medium term is a military assault on Iranian nuclear plants as well as military and strategic sites.

Israel is likely to be involved in such an operation. Let's go over these points in more detail.

The US and Israel leaders have openly and repeatedly threatened military action on Iran in the past few years and there has been a massive escalation of these threats in the past few months which amongst other things desensitize and prepare the world public opinion for any eventual military attack.

Most significantly, the Sunday Times on December 11th last year revealed that Prime Minster Sharon instructed Israel’s air force to prepare itself for a major military attack against Iran before the end of March 2006, when elections are due in Israel.

Benjamin Netanyahu, the present leader of the Likud party, warned last year that if prime minister Sharon does not destroy Iran's nuclear plants, he would make sure that this is carried out if he comes to power in the March elections.

The crucial issue here is to understand that the intention of the US is regime change in Iran and that a number of options have been planned and to some extent are being carried out. Unmanned US drones have already been flying into Iranian air space for mapping Iranian radar systems and spying on military facilities; in October last year Iran complained about these illegal acts to the UN, stating that two such drones had come down over a hundred miles inside Iran.

There have also been various reports about CIA activities to foment national, ethnic and religious conflicts inside Iran, which, given the historically unresolved problem of oppression of national and religious minorities in the county, seems to be one of the main strategies of the US to destabilize the Islamic Republic.

Then there is the report by Philip Giraldi, an ex-CIA officer, in the August 2005 issue of the American Conservative which reveals that Vice President Dick Cheney has instructed the Pentagon to prepare itself for a massive air assault against some 450 sites in Iran if a second 9/11 event takes place in the US. Alarmingly, the plans for the air assault are reported to include the use of tactical nuclear strikes against the fortified Iranian nuclear plants which are deep underground. This scenario would decisively break a 60 year taboo in the West on using nuclear bombs.

Giraldi's report, unchallenged by the Bush administration, should be taken very seriously by the anti-war and peace movement all around the world in particular in the light of the latest videotape by Bin Laden who has pledged a new attack against the US.

In recent days, President Chirac of France has also caused a bombshell by threatening to retaliate with nuclear strikes against any state found to be responsible for a terrorist attack on France.

FKh: Does Iran pose a nuclear threat to the United States, Israel or other countries?

AE: The fact is that objectively Iran is not a threat to the US or Israel since its military power is negligible compared even to Israel, let alone the US. Iran today has far fewer tanks and about a third of the defense budget it had at the time of the Iran-Iraq war.

Its air force is based on the obsolete US made fighters purchased by the Shah's regime some 30 years ago. What is more significant is that Iran has not threatened or invaded any country essentially for a few centuries. Even when the Taliban regime murdered nine Iranian diplomats in Mazar-e Sharif in 1998, Iran chose not to take military action despite the fact that the Taliban regime, which was internationally isolated, remained unapologetic.

FKh: Media reports in the United States often convey an assumption that the Iranian regime plans to attack Israel and Mr. Ahmadinejad's anti-Israel remarks about "wiping out," etc. are often cited as evidence. This often bolsters the argument that a nuclear Iran is "unacceptable." What are your own thoughts on the matter?

AE: I think Ahmadinejad's controversial statements on Israel are essentially aimed at winning popular support in Iran and in the Muslim world for bolstering his base in Iran vis-à-vis his powerful rivals in the Islamic regime such as Rafsanjani.

I think it is also very clear to the west and to Israel that such rhetorical language have been used in Friday prayers ever since the Islamic revolution of 1979, that there is no threat let alone any intention behind Ahmadinejad's rhetoric.

Iran, which according to the CIA is at least 10 years away from building a bomb assuming that it does intend to pursue such a goal, is objectively in no way a threat to Israel which is currently estimated to have some 200 nuclear warheads.

What of course is true is that Ahmadinejad's statements have been playing into the hands of Israel and the US who have fully exploited them to isolate Iran in their preparation for a military attack.

FKh: Why do you believe the nuclear issue has become so important to the clerical leadership in Iran?

AE: The nuclear issue has become a major national issue of vital importance to the great majority of Iranian people and not just the clerical leadership. At the heart of the issue is Iran's inalienable right as a signatory of the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to develop a civilian nuclear technology for generating electricity for its growing population of 70 million.

The US and Israel accuse Iran of having a covert nuclear weapons program. However, numerous intrusive and snap visits by the inspectors of the International Atomic Energy Agency, which Iran allowed for over two years by voluntarily ratifying the NPT Additional Protocol, have failed to provide any shred of evidence that Iran has a weaponization programme.

Iran also voluntarily suspended all uranium enrichment-related activity during the course of negotiations with France, Germany and the UK (EU-3) since October 2003. However, under US pressure as the back seat driver of the Europeans in these negotiations, the EU-3 has consistently refused to accept Iran's right under NPT to enrich uranium to the level required for a civilian program and insisted that Iran should permanently forfeit this right, which can only be regarded an affront to any sovereign country.

No wonder that over 80% of Iranians in several opinion polls have defended Iran's position to enrich uranium for peaceful nuclear technology. This is a crucial national issue: no Iranian government would be able to easily bend under western pressure to abandon Iran's right under NPT.

FKh: What are the bases for the call by the US and the EU-3 for Iran's referral to the UN Security Council?

AE: In fact, the US and EU-3's call for Iran to be referred to the UN security Council has no grounds in international law. According to the Paris agreement of November 2004, the EU-3 formally reconfirmed that Iran's moratorium was "a voluntary confidence-building measure and not a legal obligation." Under the watchful eyes of the IAEA, Iran removed the seals on its nuclear plant in Natanz early in January when the negotiations with EU-3 failed as a result of their insistence that Iran give up its right for enrichment.

Since the moratorium observed by Iran was not legally binding as recognised in the Paris Agreement, the resumption of scientific nuclear research in the nuclear plant in Natanz gives no legal grounds for a referral to the UN Security Council.

FKh: If Iran is referred to the Security Council, how likely is it that some sort of military approach would be "blessed" by that body?

AE: It is highly unlikely that Russia and China will ever agree on a UN Security Council resolution against Iran, which could be interpreted to justify military action in some future date. What is more likely to happen is that the US will try very hard to get a UN Security Resolution to call on Iran to halt its enrichment related activities and to accept the additional protocol for inspections so that pressure on Iran is gradually built up if Iran refuses to comply.

The Iranian parliament has already passed a resolution which obliges the government to abandon its voluntary adherence to the additional protocols if Iran is referred to the Security Council. Thus, any referral will most likely lead to a sharp escalation of the conflict.

This could eventually lead to a stand off at the UN Security Council, with Russia and China refusing to endorse a resolution with any hint of a possible military attack in the event of non-compliance by Iran.

Then the US can replay its strategy in the run-up to the war in Iraq and justify a military attack against Iran by "rising to its responsibility" with its allies to defend the "security of the US and its allies." The bottom line is that the West's position which denies Iran's right to enrichment and Iran's position to defend this right are irreconcilable and can only lead to a major confrontation.

FKh: How likely are UN-approved sanctions? What form could they take?

AE: In the short term there is little likelihood of any UN sanctions as Russia and China will certainly veto them. In the medium term, the West can only hope that Russia and China may agree not to veto some kind of "smart" or "targeted" sanctions: e.g. confiscation of Iran's assets outside the country or travel restrictions for Iranian leaders and diplomats.

Only if the West can get Russia and China on board on such sanctions, might there eventually be a possibility of economic sanctions. It is more likely that as a result of resistance by Russia and China to any UN Security Council resolution on Iran, the US will put pressure on the EU to place some sort of smart sanctions (tightened border monitoring) against Iran. That in itself would be another victory for the US war drive on Iran.

What is important here is to recognize that smart sanctions will only be an intermediary stage for either wider economic sanctions at a later stage or for facilitating a later stand-off at the UN Security Council for a military attack against Iran.

FKh: Given existing strict US sanctions on Iran, what will be the effect of additional UN sanctions on Iranian society?

AE: The existing US sanctions have not had any noticeable effect on the every day life of ordinary people in Iran, but have certainly slowed down the process of evolving into a more open society: It has severely restricted scientific and cultural exchange between Iran and the US and has significantly retarded the spread and use of Information and Communication Technology, in particular the Internet, in a country in which over 70% of the population is under the age of 30, and which in the past few years has had the highest ratio of female to male university students in the world.

However, the first major consequence of any economic sanctions, even any confiscation of Iran's foreign assets, is likely to be massive popular anger and resentment against the West, a likelihood that European leaders are quite aware of.

Long-term economic sanctions would definitely result in misery and death for ordinary people as they did in Iraq, but they would probably fail to turn the Iranian people against the regime. On the contrary it is quite possible that, notwithstanding an increase in defiance by some sections of the population against the government and notwithstanding any further curtailment of freedom of press and other democratic rights, the regime will overall b strengthened in its political control over the population in its efforts to withstand "Western aggression against the Islamic nation".

FKh: Does the Iranian exile community support western action against Iran? If yes, to what extent? War? Sanctions? Regime Change?

AE: A minority of Iranian expatriates would support some sort of western action for example "smart sanctions" on Iran. This stems from their resentment against the Iranian regime rather than any understanding of the international legal issues involved or of Iran's national rights.
The dangerous logic of the belief that "my enemy's enemy is my friend" leads a smaller minority of Iranian expatriates to even

support sanctions on Iran against the interests of the overwhelming majority of people in the country. I do not know of any Iranian groups who would be naïve enough to openly advocate a military attack on Iran or a regime change enforced by the West even if they secretly wish such outcomes.

FKh: Many of the more well-known exiled opposition groups - such as monarchists and MKO (Mujahedeen Khlagh Organization)- have consistently opposed any dialog with the Islamic Republic in order to de-legitimize and isolate the Iranian government. What are the merits of this strategy?

AE: The fact is that the monarchists and MKO have long been completely out of touch with the Iranian people amongst whom they have no base of support.

As I have already pointed out opinion polls show that a great majority of the people of Iran, including a majority of those who otherwise oppose the regime, defend Iran's right to civilian nuclear technology and side with Iran against the west on this issue.

It is thus simply irrational to oppose dialogue with the regime, which on this issue, has the backing of a majority of the Iranian people. Western leaders are aware of this reality, which puts them at a dilemma over what course of action to follow so as not to turn Iranians into supporters of the regime.

What the Iranian people need now is to express their defense of Iran's national right for a civilian nuclear technology by organizing themselves independent of the government against threats of sanctions and military intervention and at the same time, independent of the west, demand freedom of press, freedom for political prisoners, respect for human rights, an independent judiciary and an end to oppression of women, national and religious minorities.

These demands represent key historical tasks, which are all vital to building an effective, broad based united front of all Iranian people against Israel/US aggression.

FKh: What about Iranians living in US and Europe? What is the most effective way to oppose sanctions and military action against Iran?
I think the first task for all those who oppose sanctions and military intervention -Iranian or otherwise- is to organise a campaign to express their collective voice in a systematic and united manner. The Campaign Against Sanctions and Military Intervention in Iran (CASMII), which is now also established in the US, is a first step in this direction.

CASMII aims to systematically respond to biased and distorted articles in the media against Iran, to mobilize opposition in the Iraq anti-war movement against any attack on Iran, and finally to lobby representatives in the US congress and the Senate against the war drive on Iran.Abbas Edalat, Ph.D. is a professor of Mathematics and Computer Science at Imperial College, UK. He is a founding member of the Campaign against Sanctions and Intervention in Iran. (www.campaigniran.org)

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