

Sanctions against Iran: War and Containment

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Abstract

While completing a general assessment of the fourth round of international sanctions imposed against the Islamic Republic of Iran, this paper assumes that even if the sanctions successfully target the country's economic sector, they will not reach their main objective, which is to suspend the Iranian nuclear energy program within the timetable desired by the West. Based on such an assumption, the alternative to sanctions is war (with different aims and various degrees of intensity) or containment. In this review, it will be indicated that as war is rejected during the period in question, U.S. policy in the last three decades, i.e. containment through dexterity and with newer dimensions, will continue and severe sanctions will be used as the main element of containment. This paper includes sanctions, containment and war as three fundamental concepts. As sanctions are futile in stopping the Iranian nuclear program, the questions then are why and how Washington is stepping up sanctions within the framework of its containment policy alongside talk of war? The hypothesis is that the talk of war as a means to support diplomacy will remain as the main pillar of U.S. containment policy.

Keywords: Sanction, Iran, War, Containment, US policy.

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Introduction

The fourth round of international sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran started with the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1929 followed by unilateral sanctions imposed by the U.S., EU and some other states. Nevertheless, as far as the target is concerned, in addition to the sanctions being disputed among UN Security Council (UNSC) members, American officials and political institutions also have some disagreements among themselves on this issue. However with all these disagreements, there are several ideas held by the Obama administration concerning the aims of these sanctions. Firstly, at the domestic level, Obama pursues new international sanctions as a move to get relief from the pressure exerted by two groups: Congress, which seeks a blockade of Iran, and neo-conservatives who insist on the bombardment of Iran. Secondly, regarding confrontation with Iran, it is said that Obama came to the conclusion that he cannot force Iran to engage in “meaningful” talks without inflicting pressure about 18 months ago. Thus, he has adopted pressure as a pillar of his approach towards Iran. Hence, punitive measures aimed at changing Iranian policy and indications that the world is behind U.S. efforts to isolate the Islamic Republic of Iran are other aims of the sanctions. Another issue on the table is the issue of de-legitimizing the Islamic political system of Iran.

Meanwhile, an important feature of the new sanctions is their association with human rights. The result of such a link is that even if the nuclear issue is solved, sanctions would not be eased. As far as the efficacy of the punitive measures is concerned, given the severe



disagreement over their aims, evaluating their success is not an easy job; even for the West itself. Meanwhile, there is no uniform measuring scale for this evaluation. States imposing sanctions have standards and review scales which are wholly rejected by the target of those sanctions. Nonetheless, the most important element in the evaluation of sanctions is their aims. And since the objectives of the current sanctions against Iran are not clear and there is a serious dispute about this matter, their evaluation is very difficult. As some argue that sanctions are an alternative to war, a method of evaluation of the efficacy of sanctions would then have to review their capability to negate the possibility of war.

Replacing Sanctions with War

As George Lopez and David Cartwright assert, today, sanctions are principally considered as a strategy to ignite economic war during hostility and have different aims. The pattern of the use of sanctions has changed since 1990. The main cases have been multilateral in nature and subject to UN supervision. During the past two decades, the UNSC has imposed comprehensive or targeted sanctions against Iraq, Libya, Haiti, Somalia, Liberia, former Yugoslavia and the Khmer Rouge. These sanctions have sometimes come in the form of coercive acts other than war, multilateral means of preventive diplomacy, a strategy provoking political and social changes in the targeted country, or a prelude to war. A review of the chain of international developments clearly shows a predictable and varied trajectory of sanctions cases.

In 1992, the U.S. initiated the policy of imposing sanctions against Haiti to topple Raoul *Cédras* regime through the UN. At the same time, the U.S. threatened North Korea after it refused to accept full inspections of its suspicious nuclear activities. In Haiti, sanctions did not achieve their objective, which was the overthrow of the government, and finally there was a resort to diplomacy. Jean-Bertrand Aristide was returned to power as the president in a



democratic manner. In North Korea, a mixture of threats of economic sanctions, high level diplomacy, and a series of economic and technological incentives resulted in an agreement which temporarily scaled down the possibility of new atomic weapons production. Simultaneous with these events, debates on the American sanctions against Cuba and Iraq were resumed.

In Iraq, after a brief demonstration of power by the U.S. along Kuwait's borders in 1994 giving rise to fear of new military confrontation, Saddam Hussein formally recognized the sovereignty and re-demarcation of borders with Iraq's southern neighbor. All these cases show that policymakers view economic sanctions as a policy tool along other coercive instruments like military intervention. In the case of Iraq, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted comprehensive sanctions along with a demand that Iraqi forces withdraw from Kuwait. Soon afterwards, many other demands were added, such as inspection requests, dismantling of Weapons of Mass Destruction, payment of compensation for war damages, UN proceedings as well as putting an end to Iraq's suppression of Shiites and Kurds. Nevertheless, U.S. President George H. W. Bush was not very confident of the efficacy of sanctions and resorted to military forces to get Iraqi forces out of Kuwait. Nevertheless, some fundamental questions still remain to be answered. If Bush had given a six-month chance to Iraq, would the sanctions have worked in a way that there had been no need for war? Moreover, when the objectives of the sanctions were achieved, why did they continue to be in force against Iraq even after the war?

For Patterson and other critics of sanctions, they consider such measures as a technique of passing through the "threshold of peace" in the best way in preventive diplomacy and settlement of disputes (Lopez, 1997). The fundamental point in explaining why sanctions should be imposed is that there is no other alternative when principles put the military option aside (Zuckerman, 2010). The prevalent paradigm in this regard is that there is an inverse



relationship between sanctions and war, meaning the higher pressure of sanctions, the less likelihood of war. In other words, sanctions are basically an alternative for war. Moreover, the longer the sanctions go on with the goals of boycotters unattained, the higher the possibility of war. The scope and intensity of punitive measures vary in proportion to their goals. For instance, in the case of Iran, the minimum goal is to delay access to nuclear weapons and destroy nuclear capability. The maximum goal is to destabilize the government and “regime change”. In cases where sanctions are aimed at toppling the government, they will be directed at infrastructure, with military action functioning as a coup de grace. American sanctions against Panama under Noriega as well as sanctions against Saddam are analyzed on this basis. Nevertheless, there are many elements proving the hypothesis of a link between the longevity of sanctions and war. For example, there is a possibility that states imposing sanctions are impatient, unwilling to wait for the impact of economic sanctions in the long term. This would lead to the consideration of the military option as a way to achieve goals within a reasonable period. There are also other factors. The power, strength and previous defense experiences of targeted countries are but some examples. As Iran is the eighteenth largest country in the world, it is not considered as a good target for attack.

Talk of War during the Bush Era

Putting war on the political agenda involves several stages. In the U.S., at the first stage, war is proposed by individuals, personalities and think tanks. At a later stage, the U.S. administration, headed by the president, begins to talk of war. Normally, at this stage, war is not out of the question. After this stage, war enters the discourse of decision-makers and especially that of the government, and in fact, its political agenda. At the final stage, a decision will be made about military action. Nevertheless, during the Bush administration, “talk of war” served as an element forming its policy towards Iran. When it



became clear in 2002 that Iran was moving towards a nuclear capability, this gained a higher urgency. Even the architects of the war against Iraq considered fighting with Saddam as preparation for an attack on Iran with the aim of “regime change”. At the same time, there was increasing Iranian influence in the region in comparison with the past year. It was privately told that Arabs had given the green light for an attack on Iran and that they were supporting anti-Shiite Lebanese Sunnis. It was hoped that with the progress in the Middle East peace talks, the U.S. could isolate Iran more than before. According to this analysis, Saudi Arabia had also said in private that it would use oil as a weapon to make Iran reconsider its policies towards Iraq and the nuclear issue. Saudi Arabia disagreed with the positions of the Iraq Study Group, which proposed dialogue with Iran. During Israel’s 33-day war against Lebanon, Saudi Arabia also provoked Israel to keep fighting until the total annihilation of Hezbollah, a policy which changed the next year.

At that time, the aims of a war against Iran were said to be an end to the Iranian nuclear program, bring stability to Iraq as well as solving the security problems in Iraq and Afghanistan. It was argued that if the American public regarded Iraq as another Vietnam for U.S. forces, the unsolvable problem of Iran would have been described as the cause of hostilities should war break out. Moreover, had more extensive problems been witnessed in the region, war with Iran would have broken out in the last month of the Bush administration’s term in the White House. The excuse for war could have been the avenging of horrendous acts of violence in Iraq or a will to target the supposed root cause of American problems in the region, similar to the rationales which led to the war in Iraq (Nasr , 2003).

The idea of war against Iran was proposed when U.S. President George W. Bush was in office. It had more than a few opponents. The assumptions of opponents of war were that firstly, there was still a significant amount of time left until Iran would be able to build a nuclear bomb should it decide to do so. Secondly, there would be



heavy costs for Iran should it reject the international community's demand that it suspend enrichment of uranium. Thirdly, bombings of nuclear sites in Iran would merely delay its possible capability to build an atomic weapon should it decide to do so by two years at most. Meanwhile, a variety of military action, asset freezes, blockades and deterrence remained as elements of containment (Carter, 2008). On this basis, as Mike McConnell quotes from the *Washington Post*, in the last year of the Bush administration, there were arguments on how to deal with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Ashton Carter and his colleagues also held that military action in any form could not put an end to Iran's nuclear program. In 2009, a report called "*Plan B*" was released. It began with the question of "If diplomacy with Iran fails, then what?" In the report, former U.S. Defense Secretary William Perry and Ashton Carter proposed three alternative answers for this question: 1) Direct talks between the United States and Iran 2) a comprehensive military, economic and political plan to reach a better outcome of talks and 3) accepting a nuclear Iran. Dennis Wright has proposed the remedy of offering a "big carrot accompanied with a big stick". The American government approached Iran through all of the aforementioned routes: secret talks, informal envoys, meetings like with the 5+1 as a cover for bilateral talks, and direct requests made by the U.S. president for a comprehensive settlement of issues (Carter, 2008).

One of the wrong approaches of some American elites and presidents is their simplification of affairs and comparisons. This was prominently the case when George W. Bush was in power. His administration used the Israeli attack against Syria in September 2007 and Iraq in 1981 as probable scenarios of an assault on Iran and its outcomes. An attack on Iranian nuclear facilities was also compared with a potential attack against North Korea. Opponents of war dismissed those comparisons because they did not distinguish between reactor-based programs and uranium enrichment with gas centrifuges. Apart from that, the comparisons ignored the fortified,



advanced and scattered nature of gas centrifuge facilities. Opponents of war additionally argued that Iran had years of opportunity to purchase centrifuge parts from abroad. Hence, sensitive apparatus and raw material like hard aluminum, non-magnetized spiral magnets and special steel would likely have been stored by Iran. Iran could thus easily move such materials to a plethora of tunnels and hideouts in the depths of mountains in the country. Besides, neither Iraq nor Syria had the capability to replace reactors or domestically produce any of their components rapidly. An attack on Iran would also lead the Iranian government to terminate cooperation with the IAEA and its inspectors. Moreover, it would lead other states to end diplomatic cooperation with the United States (Albright, Brannan and Shire, 2008).

It was argued that an attack on Iranian nuclear facilities could not possibly have the same technical consequences for Iran as it had for Iraq or the presumed U.S. plan to raid Yongbyon in North Korea in 1994. Natanz could have been a target for onslaught when it had 3,000 P-1 centrifuges which when fully functioning could produce 25 kilograms of enriched uranium annually, with a purity enough for building an atomic bomb. Iran had said that it intended to install 54,000 centrifuges at the site. It was reported that Iran was building P-2 centrifuges, which could operate at a speed three times as fast as P-1 centrifuges. If Iran does not return nuclear fuel used at its Bushehr nuclear power plant to Russia, it would only be able to make a dozen atomic bombs. Moreover, the contamination level of plutonium produced in Bushehr would be above pu-240 and pu-241, which is higher than what is produced at Yongbyon, i.e. pu-239. That would make it far more difficult for Iran to make an atomic weapon. Moreover, it does not have reprocessing facilities. Arak, the site of a medium size heavy water reactor, is still in the early stages of construction. Even if it was completed, it could only produce a volume of weapons-grade plutonium far below that which could be produced at Bushehr (Carter, 2008). Besides, Russia would not offer



Iran fuel for its Bushehr plant again if Iran would not return spent fuel. Therefore, such a possible measure would not be repeatable. It was expected that after the last presidential election in Iran, the U.S. strategy vis-à-vis Iran would become clear (Carter , 2008).

Apart from the points considered above, the warmongering against Iran during the period should be viewed in the context of the atmosphere following the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. war against the Taliban and Saddam Hussein as well as the rhetoric of an “Axis of Evil”. To attack the Taliban and especially to establishment a new government in Afghanistan, Washington was in serious need of cooperation on the part of Iran. Immediately after the Taliban were overthrown and a new Afghan government was formed, Iran was listed as a member of the “Axis of Evil”. On the whole, an understanding of the debate on military action against Iran over its nuclear program during the Bush era is not possible in isolation and without a consideration of the problems following 9/11.

Talk of War During the Obama Administration

Part of the issue of war threats under the Obama administration is the continuation of the conditions prevailing during the Bush era. However, new factors have surfaced since Obama took office; some due to Iranian advancements in the nuclear field, some originating from slogans and attitudes of Obama and his team, and others related to developments in the UN Security Council. A review of the discourse in the U.S. after the adoption of UNSC Resolution 1929 indicates that three currents can be distinguished when it comes to a war against Iran. Figures like Israeli Premier Benjamin Netanyahu, extremists in the U.S. and some members of the former Bush administration assume that war with Iran is a simple task (Gerecht, 2010). According to Flynt and Hillary Mann Leverett, Netanyahu plays down the danger of attacking Iran in the mid-term in order to maximize the pressure exerted on the U.S. to take military action against Iran (F. Leverett and Mann Leverett , 2010) It is assumed that



perhaps, after a year to 18 months, Americans will come to the conclusion that the U.S. and UN sanctions against Iran do not work. If Obama's answer to Netanyahu regarding war is no, it will almost immediately be known to everyone that it will have a negative effect for Obama in the next presidential election. If Obama replies yes, the result would be a destructive war for the United States. Thus, in this period, the most important question affecting U.S.-Iran relations could be answered by Obama's reply to Netanyahu concerning an attack on Iran (Leverett and Leverett, 2010). Bill Kristol proposes targeted military operations, too (Fly and Kristol, 2010). In the meantime, warmongers criticize Obama for consenting to UNSC Resolution 1929, which hardens diplomacy and at the same time blocks the military option.

The second group, considers the war as legitimate, asserting that this war will pave the way for the opposition to come to power (Stephens, 2010). Others argue that while a military attack is followed by many consequences, those of a nuclear Iran are much worse than the aftermath of such an onslaught. Besides, if it is predictable, then why shouldn't we think of preventing it? (Stephens, 2010) On the same basis, figures like Michael E Hayden, former head of the CIA, also assert that a military attack on Iran is not the worst option out of all alternatives (Fitzpatrick, 2010). Richard Haass, head of the Council on Foreign Relations, proposes the option of war if sanctions turn out to be unable to slow down the advancement of the Iranian nuclear program. He argues that no one can estimate the damage of such a limited attack, while inaction – meaning acceptance of a nuclear Iran -- is much more dangerous and probably followed by more costly consequences (Haass, 2010).

The third current includes those who consider war as neither an applicable nor desired option (Perkovich, 2010). Some opponents of war say that war could at most delay the nuclearization of Iran (Stephens, 2010). As Mortimer B. Zuckerman, the chief editor of the daily *USA Today* believes, military action against Iran when there are



two unfinished wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will be problematic (Zuckerman, 2010). There are some among them who believe in nuclear deterrence on the side of Iran, asserting that even if Iran gets access to nuclear weapons, it would act wisely, and to avoid its own destruction, never resort to using them. Thus Iran could be expected to act as other nuclear states. Hence, *inter alia*, the nuclear security umbrella of Israel could be strengthened. Brzezinski and retired U.S. General John Abizaid are among the people who hold such views, and whose numbers seem to be increasing. There are some individuals in the Obama administration who follow this line as well.

The most important reason behind Europe and later Russia and China's decision to join UN sanctions against Iran seems to be the American success in convincing them to do so to avoid war. Nevertheless, the assumption that sanctions are a substitute for war is not just marked by the links between the U.S. and other states. This debate is mainly held within the U.S., between the Congress and the White House as well as between different political wings. For instance, Senator Jon Kyl, in charge of the Senate National Security Working Group and the most important figure in the field of disarmament in the Congress, says: "If Obama really intends to prevent war, he should concentrate on sanctions with all of his energy." (Kyl, 2010) Meanwhile, some do not consider UNSC Resolution 1929 as irrelevant to war. For instance, it is said that Brazil's opposition to the resolution was due to the Iraqi experience, which saw sanctions as a prelude to the use of military force (Los Angeles Times, 12 June 2010).

Normally, most of the proponents of war are Israeli extremists or radical neo-conservatives in the U.S. and their lobbies in the Congress, media and Western intelligentsia. Nevertheless, all of the proponents of war are not necessarily pursuing physical war in itself. Rather, they are in favor of a psychological war within the U.S. against Obama to gain concessions from him. For this reason, as David Kay (American special envoy of disarmament in Iraq of Saddam argues,



Netanyahu's slogan of war against Iran is aimed at putting a dilemma before the Obama administration to accept war against Iran or to give considerable privileges to Israel vis-à-vis Palestine (Kay, 2010). Figures like Richard Haass, argue that with the war being unresolved in Afghanistan and futility of sanctions, next presidential election will be the proper time for Israel and the US to make the decision on what could be tolerated vis-à-vis Iran Whose nuclear program has advanced 90 percent to bomb will arise (Haass, 2010) .

On the other hand, there is a strong belief that Israel will not attack Iran. Brett Stephens' enumerates three points regarding why Israel will not attack Iran. Firstly, he argues that the attack would be fruitless. Secondly, Stephens says there are internal problems within Netanyahu's cabinet and that disagreement about such an onslaught has been shown by his (former) defense minister, Amir Peretz and (former) Army Chief Gabi Ashkenazi. He also argues that (former) Mossad chief Meir Dagan and Ashkenazi would disassociate themselves from such an attack within months. Thirdly, Israel would buy time to get more prepared for an attack the longer it doesn't launch a war. Assuming that Obama will not change his strategy on Iran, one could conclude that Israel has to opt for attacking Iran as the last resort, similarly to the Arab-Israeli war in 1967. However, a tactical mistake by Israel could bring about horrendous strategic outcomes (Stephens, 2010). According to Ray Takeyh, the Israelis have repeatedly reiterated that they will attack Iran this summer since 2004. This indicates that Israel will in principle not engage in a war with Iran. Repetitions of such threats and red lines have led Israel to experience a credibility crisis (Takeyh, 2010). Insisting on war launched by Israel is also a method to find a way out of the psychological war in the United States (Kay, 2010).

The Extent of Propagation for War

Although there is lively opposition to war, there is an attempt to turn the Iranian issue into a crisis. According to Dov Zakheim, deputy



secretary of defense in the Bush administration, the Iranian nuclear program is approaching a critical point. Three factors have proliferated arguments for war: Iran's advance in the enrichment of uranium, confrontation with Security Council resolutions for years and defiant posture (Zakheim, 2010). Some figures attempt to portray war against Iran as a necessary reality, and in the same line, try to provoke the Obama administration to launch a war. For instance, Elliott Abrams, in charge of Iranian affairs in the National Security Council during the Bush administration, claims that while it was not pictured beforehand that Obama would engage in war with Iran, such an onslaught is now possible for political and other reasons. According to this claim, if Iran gets nuclear weapons, Obama will first hand witness that Security Council resolutions are of no value and that the IAEA has been fooled. Hence, insistence on adherence to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and multilateralism as Obama's main approaches would end since Iran would have proven that the international community has no power. Then, the question is raised about if he would be willing to leave a disastrous heritage behind? Obama is faced with the problem of whether the U.S. will remain dominant in the Middle East or if Iran has gained some sort of regional hegemony. All of the aforementioned will become clear, politically, during the next U.S. presidential election. An Obama who has stopped the Iranian nuclear program would be much "stronger" than his competitor (Abrams, 2010). It is noteworthy that the assertions of pro-war figures should be examined more cynically. They promote preemptive war as a norm, whatever the nature of the threat might be, and they ignited the war against Iraq based on the Rumsfeld Commission axiom in the 1990s. According to the assumptions of the Rumsfeld axiom, if Iran is an "enemy", it should be assumed that it is indeed developing a nuclear weapon; even if the IAEA is not able to find any evidence establishing such a fact. This dangerous assumption paves the way for preemptive war as a norm, ignoring the reports produced by bodies like the IAEA.



This argument is based on an erroneous calculation and understanding of the situation, including an overestimation of one self's power, viewing one's enemies as weak and waning, as well as arguing that one's enemy's front is fragile. Moreover, other erroneous calculations are based on too much emphasis on internal divisions on the other side, underestimating costs of war and exaggerating its outcomes and being taken hostage by one's own propaganda in such a way that slogans are assumed to be reality and capabilities. More importantly, wrong calculations are based on assumptions deeming war as confined to a limited scale and ending rapidly. In this regard, the type of perception of change in the structure of the international system and the limitations it imposes on one's enemy's activities is to be considered.

Writing about war against Iran, Jeffrey Goldberg asserted in the September issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* that the possibility of Israel attacking Iran by the end of December last year was more than 50 percent (Christian Science Monitor, 13 August 2010). This article triggered a severe reaction. Some points to be mentioned in this regard are: Firstly, a new atmosphere was created by asserting that the U.S. should attack Iran by itself in order to not engage Israel in hostilities (F. Leverett and Mann Leverett, 2010). Robin Wright too, asks whether the *Atlantic Monthly* article is neocons' and Israel's means of propaganda for war against Iran. This question was answered in the website of the monthly in which the story of an attack by Israel on Iran was published. In fact, in this debate, the Israelis have planned to show the absolute necessity of an attack, and the question is just whether the U.S. or Israel should go ahead with it (Wright, 2010). Secondly, according to Stephens Walt, the article, like those published before the war against Iraq, is trying to introduce war not as an unlikely event but a normal practice in the Middle East and a win-win situation for Obama. If Obama does what they say, his act would be construed as in line with Israeli interests. Otherwise, he would be called a coward and soft in dealing with Iran, removing his



ability to exert pressure on Palestine and Israel to attain peace (Walt, 2010). From this angle, proponents of this idea of war are in fact making an effort to put American society and decision-makers in a place in which war is probable (Walt, 2010). Martin Indyk claims that if the existing current goes on, it is the U.S. that will attack Iran and not Israel (Atlantic.com, 17 August 2010).

It should be noted that a group in the U.S. is trying to reduce the number of options to the least possible to confine the discussion on what should be done to a single question: When will the U.S. launch an attack? (Karon , 2010) According to Hillary Mann and Flynt Leverett, there is a plan for war against Iran by the very same journalists, social intellectuals and organizations who led the campaign for war against Iraq (F. Leverett and Mann Leverett, 2010). The debate goes to the extent that, according to the chief editor of the daily Washington Times, till now, supporters of the idea of military action against Iran were mainly Israeli or could be found among the neo-con lobbies in Congress, the press and think tanks. However, during recent weeks, the number of those who believe that there is no other option than military action has increased. This group argues that with the worsening situation in Afghanistan and violence in Iraq, bombardment of Iran could provide Obama with a chance to be engaged in three fronts, securing the support of both the House of Representatives and the Senate (Borchgrave , 2010).

Two Rationales for Launching a War against Iran

The literature in the U.S. on war against Iran assumes that the initiator of such a war would be either America or Israel. However, it is being claimed that developments in Iran during the past year have resulted in the possibility of provocative acts by Iran, paving the way for conflict with the U.S. through "terrorist" attacks in Iraq or Afghanistan, or military action in the Persian Gulf or elsewhere (Eisenstadt and Crist, 2010). The significant point here is that those who are for war against Iran argue within a framework that criticizes



the assumptions of deterrence and rationality in Iranian foreign policy, wholly rejecting the idea of coexistence with a nuclear Iran. It is noteworthy that experiences of the past 30 years clearly indicate that as many admit in the West, the aforementioned assumptions are baseless. In all cases and crises, Iran has shown that it has never surrendered to the logic of suicide.

Patrick Clawson, deputy head of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, has tried to uphold the logic behind the abovementioned assumptions about a lack of rationality on the part of Iran by referring to the Iran-Iraq war and the American military conflict with Iran at the time. He argues that a wrong calculation on the part of Iran could be attributed to the U.S. turning a blind eye to the killing of hundreds of American soldiers in Iraq with explosives allegedly provided by Iran (Clawson , 2010). Clawson also accuses Iran of having too much self-confidence, erroneously believing in the demise of the world order set up following World War II, as well as the collapse of American power ultimately leading to a change in the international balance of power in favor of Iran. He compares what he calls wrong calculations by Iran to Saddam's decision to invade and occupy Kuwait, although he admits that there is little chance that any such event will happen with Iran as the aggressor.

Clawson argues that although Iran knows that its military capabilities are weak, it is not worried about an attack. He says that Iran needs a psychological victory rather than a military one. Hence, the Iranian logic is built on the assumption that it will emerge victorious from a conflict with the United States, even if it loses some military capabilities, as long as Washington fails to reach its ultimate objective.

Clawson goes on to argue that an example of this Iranian lack of worry was apparent during the final stages of the eight-year war with Iraq, when U.S. forces were involved in confrontations with Iranian forces in the Persian Gulf. He says that Iran presumed that while the American reprisal could have been swift and destructive, damage



inflicted by Iran could have been a psychological triumph. Clawson further claims that some elements in the naval forces of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) have personal motives for, and certain other entities welcome, such a confrontation to gain superiority over domestic adversaries. He also argues that more importantly, the diffuse decision-making system in Iran leads to a buildup of conflict probability due to low crisis control capabilities. Clawson argues that the rewarding of offensive IRGC officers as well as the IRGC's "self-deception" would lead the organization to instigate military conflict, based on the presumption that Iran thinks it can repeatedly trespass American red lines.

Clawson says the risk of Iran making wrong calculations about the U.S. is increased due to the Islamic Republic's view that the American military is not ready to engage in even a limited conflict with Iranian forces due to Washington's focus on terrorism and efforts to stabilize Iraq and Afghanistan. He says that Iran may count on American allies backing away and U.S. observing its policy of proportionality in its response. For instance, in the late 1990s, America's allies in the Middle East did not allow Washington to use airbases in the Persian Gulf to bomb Iraq. This issue led the U.S. to suffice with employing cruise missiles. Meanwhile, since the U.S. stresses "proportionality" in reprisals, the Iranian state thinks that military action by Washington won't be so fierce as to threaten its survival (Eisenstadt and Crist, 2010).

The chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, argues that a military attack on Iran will trigger too much instability in the region and that America and Israel are well aware of it (Washington Times, 29 June 2010). Kristol also talks of well-known warmongers, while Obama does not even touch the issue of military confrontation in his words (Fly and Kristol, 2010). It is said that, overall, there is no serious sense of a consideration of a military attack against Iran within the Obama administration. Even Dennis Ross, an extremist figure in Obama's national security team, avoids bringing up



the subject of a military attack against Iran (Dreyfuss, 2010). The most important point is that any kind of war is aimed at a political goal. Hence, what is the aim of a war against Iran? And will this war attain its goal(s)? (Stephens , 2010) When the Obama administration is this divided over the goal of sanctions, how can it be able to agree on and detail the aim of war against Iran?

Nevertheless, recently making a reference to Dennis Ross's speech at the AIPAC conference, *The New York Times* stressed that Obama has repeatedly elaborated that the U.S. will never let Iran access an atomic bomb and that Iran faces a dangerous path if it resists American efforts aimed to stop such a development. This in itself suggests that a discussion on war with Iran has begun in the White House. However, opponents of war argue that reference to war is more aimed at preparing Iran for a nuclear deal, which Iran knows very well. Hence, the threat is not real. An outcome of talking about war is the repetition of the scenario in Iraq in the 1990s and of course, an actual war. If the military option is put on the table, it will never be put aside, allowing hawks to dominate the debate (Lynch, 2010). According to Lynch, Elliott Abram's suggestion that Obama will be re-elected if he attacks Iran's nuclear facilities has recently been echoed by David Broder in the Washington Post. The Obama administration has however been reluctant to comment on such statements (Lynch , 2010) In his editorial, Broder -- presuming that the Second World War ended economic stagnation -- claims that Obama could start an offensive against Iran as the American economy is weak and he will have Republican support in Congress. Broder also argues that Obama is bound to dedicate the whole of 2011 and 2012 to planning such a move.

However, critics and anti-war forces ask why Iran is portrayed as the biggest threat to the United States. The annual budget of the U.S. military is 700 billion dollars, while the corresponding figure for Iran is at most 10 billion dollars, which is less than that of Greece, the Netherlands, the UAE and even Taiwan. The maximum power of



Iran is its extension of money and arms to Hezbollah. Iran is not an objective threat to anyone. Even if Iran would have a few nuclear bombs, it is clear that putting them at the disposal of terrorists would lead to destructive reprisal by the U.S. and Israel (Walt , 2010). During the Bush era, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates wrote an article in response to discussions on a war against Iran in the U.S. War College Quarterly, titled “A new war in the Middle East is the last thing we want” (Boston Globe, 14 August 2008). According to Dov Zakheim, any attack against Iran, the eighteenth largest country in the world, is much more difficult and dangerous than the Israeli attacks against Iraq or the alleged nascent nuclear power plant in Syria. Meanwhile, neither a single strike nor several military attacks could put an end to the Iranian nuclear program. Even Israel agrees that such a military attack will solely have limited results. With regard to practical obstacles in the way of war, discussion on containment gets highlighted.

Containment: Enduring Policy

One assumption is that if we put the military option aside, the choice would be either diplomacy or containment. This analysis argues that UN Security Council Resolution 1929 impedes diplomacy. Given the long precedence of such efforts in consecutive U.S. administrations in regards to the major paradigm directing American policy towards Iran, Kenneth Michael Pollack explains that during the past thirty years, the dominant U.S. policy has been containment. The two other options, meaning dialogue and war have been occasional or exceptions. As far as war is concerned, for example, Ronald Reagan, the most radical U.S. president, did not launch an attack on Iran even when the U.S. Marine Headquarters in Lebanon was attacked by elements alleged to have links to Iran. As far as dialogue is concerned, except for the McFarlane affair and talks on Afghanistan during the Bush era, no other noteworthy interaction has taken place. In fact, these are the only cases in which the containment policy has been



ignored. However, when it became clear that Iran has nuclear facilities in 2002, the U.S. has become concerned that the progress of the Iranian atomic program will lead to the defeat of its containment policy and even conflict. On this basis, Bush and his successor Obama have both opted for a carrot and stick policy to make Iran stop its nuclear program in a bid to strengthen America's containment policy. At the same time, they both hoped and still hope that an anti-nuclear movement will emerge inside Iran (Pollack , 2010).

Many are concerned that with Iran becoming nuclearized, containment would be totally annihilated. However, others are of the belief that nuclearization of Iran could neutralize the possibility of American attack against Iran and in turn, Iran would have less of a tendency to move closer to the U.S. and as a result, containment would be more practical. A nuclear Iran challenges the containment strategy from another angle as well; i.e. if some of its neighbors take steps to become nuclear states. Besides, it could lead to nuclear confrontation between Iran and Israel (Pollack , 2010). Based on this analysis, Obama should try to attract more support at the international level to narrow the flow of resources towards Iran. Consequentially, one of the clear outcomes of a successful containment strategy against Iran would be the insecurity of world energy supplies. With the ending of the global economic crisis and the need for energy, stored oil would be consumed fast (O'Sullivan , 2010). Nevertheless, warmongers claim that containment of Iran cannot be fruitful since it has been futile towards non-nuclear Iran, let alone a possibly nuclear Iran in the future (Elliott , 2010). In any case, containment is the main U.S. policy towards Iran and consists of the following elements:

1. Diplomatic efforts to isolate Iran and increase the numbers of states joining the U.S. against Iran.
2. Imposing sanctions against Iran in order to prevent it from increasing its capabilities, both militarily and economically.
3. Clandestine efforts to support groups inside Iran opposed to



the government both politically and militarily.

4. Setting red lines whether expressly or implicitly to the effect that if Iran trespasses them, the US would retaliate with military action.

5. Deployment of military forces along Iranian borders in the Persian Gulf to defend U.S. allies, prevent an Iranian attack and materialize the red lines (Pollack , 2010). This could be in the form of diplomacy, or containment with a warning that the military option is on the table (Robb and Wald , 2010). Deployment of missile defense systems or putting such systems at the disposal of Iran's neighboring states, including missiles having Tehran in their range, and making Iran an exception in agreements on national missile defense reached with Russia are prescribed as minimum policies (Woolsey and Heinrichs , 2010). Opening a regional security umbrella (Clawson , 2010) for Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait is also on the agenda (Zuckerman , 2010). Nuclearizing Iran's neighboring states, forming NATO coalitions against Iran (Clawson ,2010), strengthening Israeli deterrence power (Riedel , 2010), adopting a model of operation for the Persian Gulf as done by Kevin Cosgriff at the American Navy Command Center to contain Iran are also among the consequences (Cosgriff , 2010).

Conclusion

Principally, to date, rival political wings and different political institutions in the U.S. have not been able to find a common objective for Iran. The illusion of Iran's fearsome danger created by American elites and media also causes this disagreement between opposing camps to extend to circles beyond party and ideological lines (Clawson , 2010). The Obama administration has not been immune from this dispute and it is hard to believe that a unitary attitude could have the final say on U.S. policies towards Iran in the present situation (Clawson ,2010). In Congress, one could distinguish three currents in the existing atmosphere: A group moving along with



Obama administration, lawmakers who are for the hardening of sanctions to the level of a sea blockade, and Congressmen who press for military action.

Domestic developments in Iran have further complicated this situation. Under these circumstances, a conflict between profiteering and commitment to values like democracy will continue to dominate the American stance towards Iran. A national security-based foreign policy will continue to remain in conflict with a value-based foreign policy. Existing controversies and pressures in the U.S. vis-à-vis Obama's policy towards Iran after the Iranian presidential election in 2009 is a clear example of this confusion. This had led to a fluctuation in the policy of the American government regarding sanctions against Iran. Its aims have altered between changes in behavior on the part of Iran to containment and ultimately "regime change". Washington, while insisting on behavior change and talks as the aims of its sanctions proscribes government officials from interacting with Iranian counterparts. Generally, the issue is presented as based on identity rather than behavior. This policy does not include behavior change or containment as its basis, but rather "regime change". As Stephen Walt of Harvard University argues, on the one hand there is talk of better ties with Tehran in Washington, while on the other hand, some sort of a clandestine operation against Iran is being organized. At the same time, opportunities like the nuclear fuel swap agreement with Iran brokered by Turkey and Brazil are ignored (Walt, 2010).

Nonetheless, the main framework of dealing with Iran seems to continue to be based on containment and deterrence. In this context, deterrence means preventing Iran from having access to the capability to make a nuclear bomb. In this regards, George Perkowich's assertion that sanctions are the only option since there is no manageable military solution for the problem of Iran seems to be the closest to reality. On the other hand, Iran is also aware of the absence of a real military option against it. The weakness of sanctions lies in



the exact same point; i.e. Iran's knowledge that the international community cannot and will not take further action if sanctions fail to stop its nuclear program (Perkovich , 2010) The Obama administration can resort to a sea blockade or other measures as an intensification of sanctions in reaction to domestic pressure for such a move. The hardening and widening of the extent of sanctions could be done on the basis of a broad interpretation of UNSC Resolution 1929 or even insisting on a fifth UNSC resolution against Iran. Washington might even consider something along the lines of the oil-for-food program that was in place in Iraq until the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. This stage will probably come true after a year and claims that talks are fruitless (Wright , 2010). The strategy of dialogue accompanied by pressure without the military option (exercised by the U.S. or Israel) will remain as Obama's policy towards Iran. This is a stance which may even continue to remain in place beyond 2012 (Burns , 2010). As part of this strategy, use of military leverage, even to the level of opening fire around Iran's borders, would go on as a tool to support economic sanctions while strengthening the military capabilities of some regional states. Under this scenario, war could break out accidentally or due to provocative actions taken by either side. Therefore, an important pre-requisite for the avoidance of war is both sides' avoidance of slogans which may give rise to a securitization of the atmosphere.

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