

Mar 11 2012

The U.S. and Iran: A Pathology of Paternalism

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By George Fernee

With articles in Foreign Affairs brandishing titles such as: "[Time to Attack Iran](#)," and "[What Happens after Israel Attacks Iran](#)," it is little wonder why many feel that we are being primed for an eventual showdown between the U.S., Israel, and Iran. We must be aware, however, that the script is not a new one, nor the actors staging this tragic comedy. This article explores the perceptions underpinning what the author considers to be a growing discourse of war 'inevitability.'

A list of terrible choices.

An 'international community,' we are told, has reached 'near consensus' over the malignant designs of Iran's nuclear program. The hypotheses speak of cataclysmic future implications for the region and the rest of the world. Suspending rational thought, we are asked to overlook questions regarding evidence for such doomsday prognoses. The perception of an Iran-gone-nuclear is presented as more ominous now than ever, even though it has been a [recycled threat](#) for the past two decades. It is a threat that has readily been used by Israeli politicians and lobbies in the U.S., consecutive U.S. administrations, and Congressional members alike. It is enveloped in a discourse that teaches us that the remaining alternatives are restricted to:

- (1) A continued cocktail of sanctions and 'diplomacy' aimed at halting nuclear enrichment. The objective being to force the Iranian delegation back to the negotiating table to be reprimanded for its 'irrational behaviour.' This comes under the auspices of the Obama administration's [dual track policy](#) – a continuation of the [Clinton dual containment](#) policy and Bush's neoconservative policy regarding the [Axis of Evil](#).
- (2) Open military confrontation alongside Israel, or [air strikes](#). These are pre-emptive strikes, which Alan Dershowitz argues, '[Israel has every legal and moral right to pursue](#).'
- (3) Inaction, thereby suffering the consequences of a nuclear-armed Iran.

The problem with this story line is that it readily omits the myopic fixation of the 'international community' – with the United States at its helm – which equates the country of Iran solely to its nuclear capability. Its existence as a nation-state, culture, and civilization has become defined through this [suffocating lens](#). Its people, their ambitions, and dreams are made irrelevant, in the name of presumed 'national', 'regional', and 'global' interests.

Much is said about the unfolding covert war, where the Jason Bourne's of Israel and Iran (and perhaps the U.S.) murder scientists on the streets of Tehran, and attempt to kill diplomats in New Delhi and Tbilisi. The unknown identity of the culprits does not prevent these violent actions having real consequences. There are few – I know of only one – sources that have [questioned](#) the logic behind Iran being the main culprit of the attempted assassinations in New Delhi and Tbilisi. The time has come to critically deconstruct these freely circulating accusations. The idea that Iran, in a time of economic isolation due to crippling sanctions would alienate countries that it has cordial relations with seems at best counter-intuitive. Journalists run stories, without divulging all their sources, of elaborate plots of an Iranian-American used car salesman, the Mexican drug cartel, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard plans to kill a Saudi Ambassador on U.S. soil. Scripts that even Charles Bronson would have difficulty taking on, and that would surely never see the light of day in a courtroom. Be that as it may, other similar scenarios are supposedly being hatched and scheduled to take place in the U.S. Republican presidential candidates have used these speculations to sound the alarm of national security.

On the diplomatic front, the U.S., Israeli, and Iranian governments have entangled themselves in a match of shadow boxing. Ambiguity in rhetoric on one side is mirrored by mixed signals of intention on the other. The U.S.'s rhetoric most readily comes under the panoply of 'all options are on the table', while glimpses of Iranian nuclear plants point to the supposed evolution of its nuclear program. While neither side seems willing to budge, the ambiguity employed is helpful in pandering to particular domestic audiences. Diplomacy has pre-emptively been cut short time and time again. Many missed opportunities, such as the Tehran Declaration for the [swap of isotopes](#) early on in Obama's presidency, could have produced an opening to rid this fraught relationship of some of its mistrust. Turkey and Brazil had managed to convince Iran to hand over 1,200 kilograms of



Images such as this propagate an unhelpful and one dimensional view of Iran

low enriched uranium (LEU), which then would be returned in a years time in the form of fuel pads. Iran, in a dire situation, needed those pads for treating cancer patients. Sadly, however, the common and comfortable path of following defunct and antiquated policies still reigns supreme. The Obama administration opted in this instance to push for more sanctions before the proposed deadline for diplomacy had been met. It was judged China and Russia would go against their voting record and allow the sanctions resolution to pass, leading the US to push for the vote rather than engage in dialogue with Iran.

From the clientalist days of the Shah, to the revolutionary moment in which we 'lost Iran', the U.S. has been grappling with its own Foucauldian regime of truth (the types of accepted discourse that function and determine truth). This regime of truth frames a father figure (the U.S. hegemon) who feels impelled to initially scold his son before letting him back into the house. The son, cognizant that heeding his father's demands will result in placing him under more scrutinizing supervision, is fearful of suspending his already limited sense of freedom. This also occurs at a time when the father is uncertain of the paths that many of his other 'children' may take. Having tasted freedom, the children are less willing to follow the dictates of the father (the Arab revolutions). Nevertheless, this particular son now thinks himself capable of pushing his father's hand, dictating his father's next move.

Obama and Netanyahu met this week, with Obama first declaring to an AIPAC audience that he [has Israel's back](#). He also shook Netanyahu's hand after the Prime Minister [rhetorically united](#) the U.S. and Israel against Iran. Obama turned quickly to rebuke GOP candidates for 'beating the drums of war', while simultaneously failing to put to rest the image of an Israel that calls all the shots. Obama could have told Netanyahu that both he and the media should cease talking in terms of the invisible hand of Machiavellian fortuna, or the [supposed zeitgeist](#) that mindlessly leads America down the path of another protracted war.

Others say one must focus on domestic stumbling blocks, such as Congressional and lobby efforts that push for more sanctions and the removal of the Mujahedin-e Khalq from the list of terrorist organizations. This pressure has for decades put diplomacy in a straight jacket. Nevertheless, Obama cannot continue to bide his time, as he has done with regards to Syria, and did for quite a while with Libya. Obama must now fill his earlier slogans of hope and change – the same slogans that put him in office – with a meaningful shift in policy. He must be bold and substitute the pathology of paternalism with an understanding that the future of regional stability cannot merely involve addressing the insecurities of Israel and a handful of Gulf monarchies. Iran, like other actors in the region, has aspirations and fears that should be addressed, not merely brushed aside and dictated from Washington.

It would behoove the president to take an unambiguous stance vis-à-vis his Israeli counterpart and many of his own domestic constituents, by denouncing the continued Israeli attempts to provoke the Iranian government. An unequivocal statement against the military option would send a clear signal to the voices who [prophesize military engagement](#) as a solution. These prophecies run counter to any evidence that they would be effective in stopping the nuclear program. Most experts agree that this option would only embolden the Iranian government's stance.

This is a geopolitical problem. A problem that can only be solved by an approach that many would deem utopian at the moment: a [nuclear weapons free region](#). This would entail Israel, Pakistan, and India doing away with their nuclear arsenals, whilst countries like Iran accept full transparency and monitoring of their nuclear programs. This indeed is the [only viable means](#) to a more peaceful and secure region. However, in order to do so, the U.S. must first wrestle with its own regime of truth. The urge to play the role of condescending father who feels impelled to intervene first and foremost adversely impacts the lives of those in the region. The solutions must emanate from the region and should be monitored by those same actors. With all the uncertainty surrounding how to cope with China, the advent of multi-polarity, and the revolutions of West Asia and North Africa, the U.S. should spend less time discussing the volatility and irrationality of others and first come to grips with its own rationality. With individuals valiantly struggling together for change in the region and an Iranian leadership's legitimacy tarnished after its brutal response to the Green Movement's popular demonstrations after the 2009 elections, an important consideration would be to not derail these courageous efforts through economic sanctions and 'loose talk of war'.

The argument that Iran is inching towards breakout capability flies in the face of [U.S. National Intelligence Estimates](#). It is a card the Israeli government has used from time to time since the early 1990s, proclaiming that Iran has always been 2,3 or 5 years from developing nuclear warheads. Two decades later the same song is sung and the evidence is still absent. But with over 40 U.S. military bases encircling Iran, 90,000 troops in Afghanistan, two aircraft carrier strike groups, two Aegis ballistic missile defence ships, and multiple Patriot antimissile systems, it may be fair to ask, [who poses the real threat](#)? Politics has turned into a game of reverse psychology, in which the player holding most of the cards create the illusion that it is their opponent that has the most impressive hand. A continuation down this path will inevitably see everyone involved lose.

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