

المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
ARAB CENTER FOR RESEARCH & POLICY STUDIES
(Doha Institute)



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Assessment Report

Renewed prospects of war on Iran

Policy Analysis Unit- ACRPS

Doha, November - 2011

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The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) issued its widely anticipated report on the Iranian nuclear program on November 8, 2011. The report was distributed among the 35 members of the Board of Governors for discussion in their session of November 17 in Vienna. Although the report initially remained confidential, what was leaked about Iran possibly seeking to develop a nuclear bomb served the hawks in both Israel and the United States. Some of those who are skeptical of the peaceful and civilian nature of the Iranian program used the report to support their pro-war stance because economic and political sanctions have thus far failed to deter Iran. In fact, IAEA reports like the most recent one are based on intelligence reports of states that in turn refer to them, and this when a real war has been being waged against Iran for more than two years. This recent war against Iran has included bombings, terrorist attacks and assassinations. In addition, some raise questions about the sources of mysterious “accidents” and link them with Israeli and/or American intelligence. In this context of escalation, the Israeli government and its opposition agree on this approach. We note what opposition leader Tzipi Livni has written in Britain’s *Times* newspaper on November 15, arguing that Israel must stop Iran by any means, and that it must do this immediately because the opportunity was appropriate. She warned that Israel must resolve the matter before the political currents of the Arab spring become well defined.

The latest IAEA report does not appear to be based on anything new and solid. *The Christian Science Monitor* quoted American nuclear engineer Robert Kelley, who was among the first IAEA inspectors in Iran in 2005, as saying: “The first is the issue of forgeries. There is nothing to tell that those documents are real.. My sense when I went through the documents years ago was that there was possibly a lot of stuff in there that was genuine, [though] it was kind of junk.”¹

”. The Russians also poured cold water on heated responses to the report, advancing the view that that there is insufficient information to justify the new assessment.

Despite these reservations, the convulsive attitudes persisted, and within hours of the report’s distribution, the war option was being openly discussed at the highest levels in Israel. A number of writers and commentators with major American magazines and newspapers responded to this invitation, criticizing the Obama administration’s position, which seemed hesitant to them.

¹ Scott Peterson “Iran nuclear report: Why it may not be a game-changer after all”, *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 9, 2011

<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/1109/Iran-nuclear-report-Why-it-may-not-be-a-game-changer-after-all>

Comforting statements and coordination with allies

The declarations of US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, made a few hours after Iran's response to Israeli military threats, served to rein in the warmongers, both inside and outside Israel. During a news conference at the Pentagon on November 10, and in response to a question about the possibility of attacking Iran's nuclear facilities, Panetta literally said: "You've got to be careful of unintended consequences here. And those consequences could involve not only not really deterring Iran from what they want to do, but more importantly, it could have a serious impact in the region and it could have a serious impact on US forces in the region". He said his assessment of the situation was an extension of the one on which his predecessor, Robert Gates, and the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, had depended. While Panetta re-emphasized the need to consult with allies to impose further sanctions on Iran, he added that he agreed with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who said the same day that "war should be the last option". Panetta also told reporters that a strike would only set Iran's nuclear program back by three years at most.

For her part, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who was attending the of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Honolulu, demanded that Tehran respond to the charges of the IAEA.

Without going into details of the US-Israeli relationship and the possibility of a disagreement in the assessment of priorities, Panetta's remarks seemed designed to curb enthusiasm for war. It also appeared intended to refute the charge that the United States does not seek to resolve the dispute with Iran through diplomatic means, but is actually preparing to attack Iran. There is no doubt that American patience – while the Israelis are threatening to attack Iran – has the purpose of gaining time to consult with allies possessing military capabilities and political influence. What America needs is to gain support before taking any punitive action against Iran, be it through economic, political, or eventually military means. The United States does not want to fight this battle alone, and it is certainly seeking to mobilize public opinion against Iran in the West and even in the Arab world (particularly in the Gulf), for instance by recently raising the issue of an alleged assassination plot against the Saudi ambassador to Washington. Following the IAEA report issued on November 8, which questioned the peaceful and civilian purposes of the Iranian nuclear program, the second step requires coordination with allies to find out what the most effective means would be.

American fears

While Panetta did not rule out the military option, he did say that "it must be the last option." At the same time, he made it clear that a military attack on Iran would have consequences to which the advocates of this option may not have paid attention. The purpose of this warning was to

stress that the Gulf remains vulnerable to Iranian reactions despite the US military presence. This means that, in the event that Iran were attacked, it is not necessarily the case that the response would occur where everyone expects (for example, against Israel, if it were the attacker). The response could be wherever Iranian forces can strike, including US allies inside and outside the region, without ruling out the US forces themselves. In other words, Panetta says the price of war may exceed the expectations of some, with the added risk that the objective (to prevent the production of nuclear weapons) may not be achieved.

Panetta added that his assessment was based on CIA information. This raises a fundamental question: How is it possible that – on the eve of what could be a new war – the Americans “agree with” the Iranian authorities’ claim that Iran can hurt any party that tries to attack it? In fact, Panetta’s statements echoed those of Iran’s supreme leader, Sayyed Ali Khamenei, on the same day (November 10): “Anybody who takes up the idea of an attack on the Islamic Republic of Iran, should get ready to receive a strong slap and an iron fist” by the Army, Sepah (Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps), and Basij, and in one word by the great Iranian nation.”.

It seemed as if Panetta supported the idea that Iran is capable of a fierce response, which was also expressed by Iranian Defense Minister Ahmad Vahidi. On November 11, Vahidi said that his country “is self-sufficient in the production of all defense equipment including advanced missile systems. He also said that domestically manufactured military equipment enjoy highest international standards. In addition, he announced that the Defense Ministry plans to unveil new military equipment during the current Iranian calendar year, which ends on March 19, 2012....”.

Although Panetta’s words may have been intended to warn all the allies who are pushing for escalation and war by reminding them of the price, his scenario was not necessarily exaggerated. There are already American strategic assessments that go in the same direction.

Does Iran pose a threat to the United States and its allies in the region?

Some American strategists assess the situation in the Gulf region on the basis of at least four axes, namely: conventional capabilities, irregular capabilities and asymmetrical warfare, the theater of operations, and non-conventional capabilities. In a nutshell, these elements appear in recent assessments as follows:

1 - Conventional capabilities

Iran has an arsenal of weapons imported from Russia, China and North Korea. Both Russia and China have the right of veto in the UN Security Council, and it is unlikely that they will support any decision that is contrary to their interests with Tehran. Iran has conventional military capabilities that make it a real threat to its neighbors. Iran has worked in recent past years to

improve its deterrent posture in the face of US air and naval operations, as well as the possible Israeli operations. It can use such force against its neighbors in the Gulf, and it can also use its allies in the region – such as Hezbollah – to attack its enemies.

2 – Irregular capacities and asymmetrical warfare

Iran has stepped up its efforts in recent years to improve its performance and capabilities in irregular and asymmetrical warfare, and done so in a way that makes it difficult for the United States to respond in the same way. This effort has been manifested by improvements in the capacity of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in particular, an effort that has not neglected any weapon, means or force that can be used in this area. There have been several examples of this effort, including: the tanker war with Iraq, leaking oil and deploying mines in the Gulf, the use of the IRGC's Quds Force in Iraq, providing Hezbollah with long-range rockets and various types of shells, using Iranian pilgrims in riots, arming the Mahdi Army in Iraq and other groups of fighters, the diversion of arms to western Afghanistan, conducting several experiments on long-range missiles, etc. It also should not be disregarded that Iran has been responsible for several operations against US forces in the region (although they were carried out by its agents and its allies), beginning with the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983 and ending with the war of some Shiite militias against the American presence in Iraq during certain phases of the occupation after 2003.

3 - Expanding the circle of the theater of operations

There is a prevalent belief in US strategy literature that Iran is seeking to expand its influence and field of operations to areas beyond the Gulf, extending to Central Asia, South Asia, and perhaps even North Africa. It also is believed to have the ability to challenge the United States and its allies by mining the waters of the Gulf, using anti-ship missiles, and carrying out air strikes on important facilities such as water desalination plants, as well as striking cities and military bases with missiles. Although Iran is not capable of completely closing the Gulf to navigation, it can disrupt it for brief periods.

4 - Non-conventional capabilities

Iran's possession of both long-range missiles and chemical weapons – as alleged by Western reports – increases the effectiveness of its deterrent posture in the eyes of strategic analysts. Moreover, they believe it is seeking to acquire nuclear weapons. Some say that even if Israel or the United States “preventative” strikes against Iran, it would still possess the technological base it has built up and therefore would still be capable of developing options to hide its military nuclear program. In addition, Iran is a declared force in chemical weapons which is not subject to the Convention on the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, and it is believed that it could manufacture nerve gas and use it in warheads. Although Tehran has signed an agreement

banning biological weapons, there is nothing to confirm or deny possession of a biological weapons program, with a certainty that it is capable of manufacturing such weapons.

The truth about the stakes

It is clear to a number of observers that the United States and Israel continue to put pressure on the IAEA, and that the increasing turmoil is designed to take advantage of the new tone of the agency under the leadership of its new director. The declarations of US and Israeli leaders seem intended for domestic consumption as much as they are warning messages to Iran. Both countries are unhappy about the growing Iranian influence in Iraq, especially given what this could mean after the US withdrawal, and in the region in general at a time when the Arab states are preoccupied with revolutions. The United States and Israel have long sought to contain Iran and Iraq, and they will not accept cooperation between the two countries.

At the local level, Netanyahu benefits from tensions with Iran against the backdrop of his government's diplomatic failures, while Obama can justify a massive new military deployment in the Gulf, parallel to the withdrawal from Iraq, on the basis of the new Iranian threat. The whole problem is based on this very point: to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon or being able to establish a "balance of terror" with Israel.

While there is undoubtedly a lot of confusion within the scope of the psychological war between Iran and a number of other countries, notably Israel and the United States, these pressures do not exclude the existence of real preparations, a high level of tension and early signs of for a war. This is not new to the scene of international politics. The Cold War witnessed sharp polarization and so-called "brinkmanship" which in some respects contained the concept of deterrence in terms of both explicit and implicit warnings to the opponent. What we see now is similar, to a large degree, to that phase, albeit with significant changes in the rivals of the game and in the level of risk. Polarization is no longer likely to lead to a heated confrontation between two nuclear superpowers (the Soviet Union and the United States). The game is no longer based on a "balance of terror" that prevents war. Finally, the likely theater of confrontation is no longer the entire planet, as it used to be due to the possession of the two camps in the Cold War of intercontinental missiles carrying nuclear warheads.

Instead of these elements, there are others that seem less serious in terms of the expansion of the confrontation, the quality of weapons and the level of force:

A - In the face of a superpower, i.e. the United States, and its ally, Israel (itself a regional nuclear power), there is Iran, a medium-sized power, which does not have a nuclear weapon yet, even if it is really seeking to acquire one;

B - There is no balance of power between the parties, and no one can speak here of a “balance of terror” that could stop a war, which makes it a possibility;

C - Iran has no intercontinental missiles carrying nuclear warheads, but its long-range missiles can strike Israel and US bases in the region.

The basic variant elements also concerned with “the laws of the game”: the fact that Iran is the weaker party does not mean that it is incapable of causing damage to an enemy. The new element that should be taken into account has to do with asymmetrical and irregular warfare. The United States understands very well the meaning of the impossibility of providing 100% security, whether for its territories, its population or its interests abroad. Its conflict with Al Qaeda and other radical Islamists for at least a decade shows that it has several weaknesses. It also shows that achieving victory through decisive military action over terrorist cells spread across several regions of the world is not easy. For its part, Iran understands that if it could not win a direct confrontation with US and Israeli forces, this does not mean it is incapable of inflicting damage on its opponents and their interests anywhere in the world.

The only constant is that Iran’s opponents are continuing to put pressure on it and seeking to prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons by various means, including heavy military strikes if necessary. They are able to do so, as demonstrated by the Iraqi example. In addition to the siege and the economic sanctions, Saddam Hussein’s regime had to face military strikes more than once following the attack on the Osirak reactor on June 7, 1981, culminating in the invasion of 2003.

Nonetheless, what is more likely in the Iranian case is a strategy of periodic mobilizations for war that keeps Iran’s economy and society on alert, as was then US President Ronald Reagan’s strategy with the Soviet Union. Staying on the alert is economically costly and socially exhausting; it reveals flaws and leads to strains in the relationship between the regime and the people.

What is new about this periodic mobilization campaign is that it comes in light of two new developments:

- A. America's imminent withdrawal from Iraq and the need to keep Iran in a state of self-defense, restricting Iranian self-confidence to keep the U.S. withdrawal from turning into an Iranian accomplishment and hegemony over Iraq.
- B. Iran's falling esteem in Arab public opinion because of its retaliation and expansionist behavior in Iraq. The Syrian revolution is another reason with the recent associated lineup of doctrinal nature, especially after the failure of Syria's major urban centers to participate in the revolution. Gulf states and political trends that did not support any Arab revolution also contributed to this lineup around a revolution the aim of which is supposed to be democracy and not sectarian strife.

Repeating the Iraq scenario with Iran?

Both Israel and the United States realize that no war comes without material and human costs, but eventually they may fight this one because it gives them a chance to prove their control over the situation in the Gulf and the wider Middle East, and to demonstrate that there is a ceiling of force which others are not allowed to cross. No one can exclude the scenario of a war from the premise that Iran is also capable of causing damage. Saddam Hussein's regime (which constituted a counterweight to Iran) also was capable also of causing damage, but it eventually fell under the succession of strikes.

Thus, war might break out for one of two circumstances. The first circumstance would be if it were proved Iran was becoming a regional nuclear power and that the door would therefore be open for other countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt, to join the same club. This consequently would transform the entire Middle East into a theater for a "balance of terror", which none of the dominant forces now want. War might also break out solely on the basis of allegations and assumptions, as was the case with Iraq, where no weapons of mass destruction were ever found.

If the decision to make war on Iran is made, it is not unlikely that this will lead to a repeat of the model of intervention in Iraq, with some additions and variations as the products of experience. The reason for this is widely known and acknowledged: bombing Iranian nuclear facilities would not stop Iran's alleged quest for nuclear weapons, but only set it back for three years at most. After that, the war would have to be repeated and so forth. In the meantime there would be reactions from Iran as well other countries, tension would escalate and violence increase, and US and Israeli interests would be destroyed in more than one place.

Because they can imagine the damage resulting from this nightmarish scenario, it is possible that Iran's attackers would change the real objective of the war (even if this were not openly

declared) from “stopping Iran’s development of nuclear weapons” to overthrowing the regime and replacing it with a government that is easier to handle or control. This would require more effort, not only in the course of the war, but also in the aftermath, including handling the potential consequences and mitigating them as much as possible, as well as setting time limitations on the Iranian leadership to prevent it from carrying out severely damaging reactions.

Certainly , the most realistic scenario in the event of war is that it will only be a swift war that does not change the regime, but it will be the first step in paving the way for further and deeper steps, taking into account the will of the Iranian leadership to resist by all means. This war will not be easy, but too much is at stake. A major effort will be made to provide legal cover for military operations. The IAEA report s issued on November 8 represents the first stage in this direction. This was followed by other sanctions, as the siege is tightened on Iran. Siege is actually the beginning of war. The United States and Israel will work to convince their Western and Arab allies to support this trend, and if they do not have the consent of the Arabs, this will not prevent them from launching a war once they have taken a decision in this regard. But we actually doubt the existence of such a decision, which is not Israeli after all.

In summary, given the potential strategic consequences, Israel cannot act alone against Iran without an American green light. Even if Israel were to act alone, Tehran has declared that it would hold Washington responsible for any Israeli military action against it, and threatened comprehensive retaliation against both Israel and US targets in the Gulf, including its bases, interests and allies.

Any attack could lead to serious consequences for the region, and for Western and global economies, including disruption of the normal flow of oil, which means we are still at a point where it is difficult to anticipate any war scenario beyond psychological warfare. Furthermore, the United States and Europe would not necessarily find an economic solution to their problems in waging war on Iran.

Arabs might be the first victims of retaliation, especially in the Gulf (although ironically, if it happened now, this may help the Syrian regime). In general, the Arabs are the ones who feel the consequences of tension or relaxation in relations between the United States and Iran, because they seem to be the absent party in either case.

The Arabs need to defuse the tension and seek a negotiated settlement to the issue of Iran’s nuclear program that takes into account their interests and security.