

Will there be war on Iran? A fresh yet divergent look at an old question

Written by Ali Fathollah-Nejad

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In 2002 Iran was added to the neoconservative-designed 'Axis of Evil' and thus declared ripe for US military intervention. The threat of war in the 'greatest crisis of modern times' (John Pilger in the *New Statesman*, July 12, 2007) was at its height in 2006-2007. With President Obama assuming office in 2009, a great hope for peaceful change emerged. But still, Washington's mantra of 'all options are on the table' looms over the ongoing US-Iran conflict.

The launch of the Centre for Iranian Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), the first of its kind in the British capital city, last October featured a debate between two in-house experts – Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, who lectures on the politics of West Asia, and Dan Plesch, who directs the Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy (CISD) – on the literally explosive theme of 'Is war with Iran inevitable?' Their answers could not have been more different as they discussed the military, political and economic dimensions of a possible war.

Militarily, both agreed, the US could easily destroy Iran. Plesch stressed that there is a huge gulf that separates the US from Iran in terms of military capabilities. While Israel would be able seriously to damage Iranian facilities, it could not finalise a military campaign. Also, the US military is hardly overstretched in the Iraqi and Afghan war theatres, since the Air Force and Navy are 'almost unused', said Plesch. Key bones of contention emerged around 'the politics preceding the war cycle', as Adib-Moghaddam put it: the economic dimensions of war and the multilayered fallout from an attack.

Adib-Moghaddam agreed that in the US, 'there is an organised, systematic movement for war on Iran, which should not be underestimated'. But the Obama administration is realistic enough to fear the fallout of an attack since Iran has emerged as the most powerful regional player after the neoconservative wars on Afghanistan and Iraq. There is now an understanding in Washington that military success does not necessarily translate into strategic gain. Today's 'buzzword' is 'smart power', instead of the 'war on terror', mandating aggressive diplomacy but not military action.

Today, explained Adib-Moghaddam, the US is aware that a war would unleash at the very least a protracted, asymmetrical regional war. Iran's retaliatory capabilities would span from Hezbollah's firing of Scud missiles on Tel Aviv, the targeting of US interests in Iraq and Afghanistan and the destabilisation of Shia areas in US-allied Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. However, Plesch responded, all these retaliatory measures are already factored into Washington's military planning. He added that the Persian Gulf Arab rulers would feel quite confident in containing any domestic turmoil. Also, in the wake of a vast bombing campaign against Iran, out of self-interest, neither Hezbollah nor Hamas would be willing to stand with an 'imploded' regional power, he claimed.

One might add that a future major Israeli war on Lebanon or Gaza, which many experts at the turn of 2010-2011 saw to be in the offing, could be part of a strategy to weaken Iranian allies there so paving the way for a future war on Iran. But what if Iran, as another retaliation to an attack, blocked the Straits of Hormuz through which the bulk of the world's oil supplies is shipped? Based on 25 years of scenario exercises, the US would be able to destroy and take over that sea lane, said Plesch, who has an extensive background in researching the US military.

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While Plesch assessed that the forces for a peaceful resolution are too weak as the lack of diplomatic success illustrates, Adib-Moghaddam emphasised that the power of civil society to organise anti-war movements should not be underestimated. While the former favoured the notion of 'military Keynesianism' to argue that waging war could serve as means to save the US economy, the latter held that after the \$1 trillion Iraq War, 'another protracted war is simply not financeable' and would plunge the world into deeper recession.

On the political front, opinions also diverged. Adib-Moghaddam stressed that an Iran war would be a unilateral one without international support, further exacerbating the US' reputation. But for Plesch, such calculations would not matter that much as 'the Iraq experience can only encourage those intent, such as Tony Blair, on a military confrontation with Iran to think that they can get away with it because they did so already once'.

Due to time pressures, other issues could not be sufficiently explored. What about Israel? Can it tolerate Iran attaining a 'nuclear weapons capability' that would deprive it of its nuclear monopoly and hence potentially from its 'special relationship' with Washington in the context of a strategic re-alignment of US policy in the region? Would the power of the so-called 'Israel Lobby' and the military-industrial complex in the US be strong enough to lure Washington into a war on Iran if Israel struck first?

Moreover, is the comprehensive sanctions regime on Iran that very much weakens its economy not a satisfying replacement for military action? And as we know from the press, there is already an ongoing small-scale war, which has been waged for many years, which includes (1) the sabotage of Iran's nuclear programme through the assassination of leading Iranian scientists and cyber-warfare and (2) US and Israeli support for terrorist separatist groups in Iran's strategically important border regions. In other words, can crippling sanctions coupled with small-scale warfare not do the job of weakening and containing Iran without risking the unpredictable consequences of a war, while the alleged threat posed by Iran provides the basis of massive US weapons sales to Iran's wealthy southern neighbours?

The controversy proved to be refreshingly stimulating and contributed to a richer understanding of the ongoing crisis, helping us in the effort – shared by both panellists – to avoid another cataclysmic war in the region. In that vein, Adib-Moghaddam finally called on everyone to work towards dialogue and reconciliation, as 'no war is inevitable', thus making 'a "cold peace" between the United States and Iran viable'. Plesch's focus on the military prowess of the US as well as the Machiavellian sphere of politics is a valuable reminder of the utterly destructive potential of a war that would not limit itself to the bombing of Iranian nuclear facilities but would extend to a whole range of military and civilian infrastructures. The annual CISED conference on a WMD-free zone in the Middle East is an indispensable element for a way towards regional peace and security. However, as was pointed out in a lively discussion that followed, wars are often kicked off accidentally. Indeed, that an incident in the heavily militarised Persian Gulf could be utilised as a *casus belli* by war profiteers who have overcome obstacles on the political scene is certainly not a matter of sheer fantasy. Urgent action is therefore required to lower the temperatures

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