

ISRAEL AND IRAN: A NEW CONFLICT IN THE MAKING?

Eleni Stavrou

Lecturer of Middle-Eastern Studies, Frederic University

Following the overthrow of the Shah of Iran by "the religious clerics and the people" in 1979, Iran's dependency on the West ended, awakening the ambitions of the newly-established regime to become a peripheral, leading force of Shi'ite Islam in the region. Added to the ambitions of the regime were its intense political, social, and economic objectives.¹ The Shi'ite System in the region includes Syria, Southern Iraq, Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Shi'ite religious minorities in the countries of the wider Middle East.²

In order to ensure the support, subjection, and dependency of the Shi'ite population either by the government or through its minorities Iran depicted Israel as the old enemy whose elimination was essential while staunchly defending its own nuclear programme which, as a result, brought about the dire condemnation of Iran by the West.³ This demonization of Israel as both a precondition and a motive for uniting all Arabs under the Iranian leadership, incidentally, is a strategy often employed by another wishful hegemony of the region - Sunni Turkey.⁴

According to western intelligence assessments, which were reinforced by the new International Atomic Energy Agency report, Iran will not only be able to acquire its very first nuclear weapon within six months but will also attain the capability to further enrich its armoury⁵. Concurrently, and while it anticipates a possible imminent attack by Israel, Iran has acquired the necessary means to effectively defend itself and counterattack multilaterally.⁶ This certainty of its own military strength has turned Iran into an arrogant, provocative opponent.⁷

In view of Iran's regional influence, the US will always protect Israel and its vital interests in the Eastern Mediterranean, Middle East, and Persian Gulf.⁸ In providing assistance to the opposition in Iran, the US hopefully anticipates an "Arab Spring" uprising which will overthrow the regime and terminate the dangerous, self-destructive course the country has taken.⁹

¹ Henry Sokolski, Nuclear Power goes Rogue, December 5, 2001, pp. 45-48.

² James Harskin, Inside the City of fear, *Newsweek*, December 5, 2011.

³ *Fileleftheros*, December 8, 2011, p.26.

⁴ *Simerini*, December 8, 2011.

⁵ <http://www.mideastweb.org>

⁶ Anonymous, Syrian stalemate? A special report on developments in Syria, *The Middle East*, November 2011, Issue 427, pp. 24-25.

⁷ Erika Atzori, Ankara's influence gains sway, *The Middle East*, November 2011, Issue 427, pp. 24-25.

⁸ Ed Blanche, Last word, *Ibid.*, pp. 66.

⁹ Anonymous, The tide turns against Bassar Assad, *The Economist*, November 19-25, 2011, pp. 40-41.

The US will try to exhaust all diplomatic measures and appropriate sanctions in order to delay Iran's nuclear programme and will revert to any military operations only if it is absolutely necessary, preferably after the 2012 Presidential elections. The US President has presented for approval to Congress the sale of 600 modern, armour-piercing missiles to the United Arab Emirates which neighbours Iran and which also possesses the most recent military jets and bombers manufactured in the US.¹⁰ NATO has made it clear through its Secretary General that it does not intend to intervene in Iran. It does, however, steadily promote its anti-missile shield programme, which reaches the fringes of Russia, against Iranian threats.¹¹

With reference to Iran, Britain fully supports the US policy. It champions the imposition of sanctions and prefers diplomacy but will most probably participate if necessary in an unavoidable war.¹² The EU in general but especially its main players Germany and France actively participate in the sanctions against Iran.

The main Iranian sectors that are truly affected by western sanctions are the economy, financial institutions, trade in general and more specifically oil, armaments, official visits, security controls of cargo, etc.¹³ Even though these sanctions are effective, Iran arrogantly underestimates them. The United States has declared that any organisation dealing with the Central Bank of Iran will also face sanctions. Russia and China clearly emphasized that they are not prepared to approve any UN sanctions against Iran. The question is: will these sanctions be effective enough so as to arrest Iran's nuclear programme and avoid a possible war?

Iran has yet to feel directly the consequences of the Arab Spring which were extensive. The uprising has affected the political balance in the wider area, the possible recognition of a Palestinian state by the UN, the collapse of the Turkish-Israeli alliance, the general uncertainty of the Eastern Mediterranean, especially after the discovery of oil, and Israel's perception that its very existence is under threat.¹⁴ The entire Israeli home front will be under intense rocket and missile assault in any future conflict with Iran's proxies.¹⁵ On the other hand, an imminent strike against Iran by Israel will divide Israel's political leadership. Currently in favour of such an intervention are President Peres, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Ministers Ehud Barak and Avigdor Liberman.

¹⁰ ELKEDA, Arab Spring or Islamic Neo-Ottoman Tsunami? *Strategy*, volume 207, December 2011.

¹¹ Safe without the bomb? ,*The Economist*, April 11-17, 2009, pp.15.

¹² Iran: an unholy row, *The Middle East*, March 2009, Issue 398, pp. 10-12.

¹³ Uncertainty in Iran: did they really mean to do it?, *The Economist*, December 10, 2011.

¹⁴ Amicam Nachmani, Israel-Greece: The Third Chance, *In Depth*, volume8, Issue 6, December 2011.

¹⁵ Uzi Rubin, *BESA Mideast Security and Policy Studies*, Number 87.

The essential progress made by Iran to acquire its first nuclear weapon, the rise of its readiness and means to withstand a strike, its ability to counterattack using ballistic missiles of effective range, the concealment and protection of various nuclear sites, as well as the recent chaotic environment of its ally, Syria, are the main arguments in favour of a strike against Iran. A devastating strike against Iran will also force into the conflict the weakened Assad regime and its dependents, Hezbollah and Hamas, with all the potential consequences that these developments will entail for Israel.¹⁶

The upcoming US elections further favour US and British involvement in the Middle East especially since the Republicans accuse Obama of reluctantly protecting Israel. An additional factor encouraging a possible strike against Iran is the departure of American troops from Iraq¹⁷ thus preventing Iran from any retaliation against American troops in that country.¹⁸ At the same time the Mossad is very active inside Iran, and from the intelligence gathered it is evident that it is responsible for the six recent explosions at the Isfahan site in which General Hassan Mogadam and twenty Guards of the Revolution were killed.¹⁹

Turkey, even though recently upgrading its economic relations with Iran and agreeing to installing a NATO anti-ballistic sensor on its soil, will greatly benefit by the curtailment of the expansionist ambitions of a Shi'ite Iran against the Sunni masses who consider Turkey an example of a modern Islamist country. With the discovery of oil in the Eastern Mediterranean and with the emergence of a new order new alliances with mutual interests are being formed in order to confront common threats, while Israel is emerging as a guardian who will protect both Greece and Cyprus from aggression originating from Turkey and the Muslim world.²⁰ As Uzi Rubin, an eminent Israeli aeronautical engineer stated, "We need to understand that what began as a mere nuisance a decade ago has now grown into a serious strategic threat."²¹

British sanctions against Iran brought about the recent spontaneous attack on its embassy in Tehran by the Revolutionary Students to which Britain answered with the evacuation of its embassy, the recall of its diplomatic mission, and the expulsion of the Iranian Ambassador from London. Following these actions, the EU extended its own sanctions which affected a further 180 Iranian companies and officials and also considered

¹⁶ Ray Takeyh, Iran: Détente, Not Regime Change, *Foreign Affairs*, March/April, 2007.

¹⁷ Iraq, goodbye and good luck, *The Middle East*, December 2011, Issue 428, p. 13-16.

¹⁸ Iran in the spotlight, *North-South*, June 2009, volume 3, number 6, pp. 16-25.

¹⁹ Shlomo Avineri, The creation of new Alliances in the Eastern Mediterranean, *Fileleftheros*, December 31, 2011, p. 4.

²⁰ Mathew Kroenig, Time to Attack Iran, *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2012, pp. 76-86.

²¹ Uzi Rubin, *BESA Mideast Security and Policy Studies*, No.87.

the imposition of an oil embargo. At the same time, and in an effort to support these sanctions, France, Germany, and Holland recalled their ambassadors, Norway temporarily closed its embassy, and Italy demanded guarantees for the safety of its diplomatic mission.²²

These sanctions, however, instead of slowing down Iran's nuclear programme might escalate events and lead to unforeseen reactions which might actually promote the enrichment of the programme and instigate military conflict before or after its completion.²³ Considering the ongoing slaughter of the Syrian rebels by the Assad regime, one can almost certainly predict that Ahmadinejad will try to keep pace with his Syrian ally should an uprising happen in Iran.

The main difference between the leaders of Iran and Syria is that, unlike Syria, the military opposition in Iran is associated with Ayatollah Ali Khomeini who attributes a serious dimension to their movement. In any case, an Iranian Spring constitutes a very distant possibility. And so humanity watches, awe stricken, at the existing world order and realizes that it is virtually ineffective and incompetent to deter the creation of conditions which may lead to inevitable wars.

²² The Missile threat from Gaza: From Nuisance to Strategic Threat, BESA Center, p. 24.

²³ The Monster of Kandahar in the hands of Iran. Scenarios of the electronic captivity of the RQ-170, *Greek Defense and Technology*, volume 24, January 2012, pp. 20-25.