



## **The US and Iran Might Clash While We Remain Complacent**

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In the last 26 years, the United States and Iran have consistently demonized and vilified each other. Yet, except for a few occasions, including the 1987 “tankers war” in the Persian Gulf, they have been willing and able to maintain a “no war no peace” relationship. However, since September 11, and more recently because of Iran’s nuclear crisis and the radicalization of its domestic politics, as well as the rising level of anti-Iran hysteria, the relations have deteriorated to a dangerous level. These developments are making it increasingly hard for either side to maintain the no war no peace status quo.

While on both sides there are still voices of reason, evidence suggests that egotistical intentions, wrong policies, national pride, and power politics are narrowing the option for diplomacy perilously thin. Meanwhile, countries and political groups opposed to the regime in Tehran are actively propagating the war option. It is only unfortunate that the United Nations is failing to exercise its founding purpose to make peace among nations, and that no world power is involved in a serious mediation effort. Nowadays, most states would side with the higher bidder, a market in which Iran cannot compete with the US!

Worse yet, most in the civil society and business communities on both sides, including academics, experts, journalists, civic leaders, business executives, and the general public remain complacent about the growing tension between the US and Iran. Some deny that there can ever be a war between the two, given domestic problems in the US, high oil prices, crisis in Iraq, and Iran’s internal problems and political divisions. They dismiss those warning against a possible war as alarmists. Meanwhile, nationalists, jingoists, opportunists, and hypocrites are wittingly or unwittingly promoting the war option.

Under such conditions, warmongers on both sides and beyond will shape events in the coming months. Unless prevented by force of reason, public pressure, an unpredictable event, or a combination thereof, they are intent to impose a war on the two nations. Sadly, the usual anti-war arguments, including colossal death and destruction, immense costs, and regional instability, would not deter the war strategists. While they realize such fallout, the warriors among military, commercial, and political interest groups on both sides and beyond argue that a war would produce “strategic gains” for the victor.

The dangerous deadlock between Iran and the US was underscored by Iran’s former Foreign Minister, Dr. Kamal Kharrazi, in a recent “off the record” discussion with the Rooz Daily in Tehran, which was later published online. Dr. Kharrazi acknowledged that in Iran two views exist on US-Iran relations. One view favors normalization because the conflict is costing Iran dearly and is concerned that the status quo can no longer be maintained. The contrary view, on the other hand, while acknowledging such costs, points out that the status quo can be maintained and serves Iran’s long-term interests.



Dr. Kharrazi named the former Presidents Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami as pro-normalization. He named no one from the opposite side but implied that the hard-line religious conservatives currently in control of the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches did not wish to mend relations. Given that the “ice of the relations between Iran and the US is too thick, no faction alone can melt it,” he claimed. Under the present conditions, he implied, only the Leader Ali Khamanei could authorize a dialogue with the US. However, he said, at present, no such move is possible.

The former Foreign Minister then blamed the hardliners on both sides for the deadlock. In his words, “the hardliners in the US are totally inflexible, and in the same vain no willingness exists in Iran for diplomatic ties.” He then said “the US will never reach an agreement with the present Iran because we are also inflexible and do not like to give the impression that we gave up; and the US does not wish to change its position on Iran. Thus, under this situation, each side sees accepting the condition of the other side as a defeat.” Dr. Kharrazi forgot to mention that President Clinton did change the American position on Iran but that he and President Khatami “missed” the historic opportunity.

That opportunity was provided at the historic conference of the American Iranian Council on March 2000, where Secretary Madeline Albright extended an apology to Iran for past US mistaken policies toward Iran and lifted sanctions on carpet and certain food items. While one can be certain that powers above Mr. Khatami and Dr. Kharrazi obstructed the initiative, it must not be forgotten that the former President and Foreign Minister did not embrace the US offer either. Indeed, both gentlemen dismissed the offer as inadequate and demanded that the US change its policy toward Iran before Tehran makes a move!

Dr. Kharrazi’s characterization of factional politics regarding the US tactfully excludes a third faction, which, since the Revolution in 1979, has expected a war with the US. This faction is convinced that the US will never accept to live in peace with the Islamic Republic, and it will one day attempt to destroy the regime in Tehran. This wrong assumption has been a key obstacle, on the Iranian side, to a US-Iran dialogue. Besides, operating on the basis of such an assumption, this faction has advocated military-security preparedness, and as a result has made the probability for the occurrence of a US-Iran war that much higher.

While Dr. Kharrazi is silent on the Iranian warmongers, his reading of the mood in Washington is also only partially correct. Here, too, there are the moderates, who prefer dialogue; the conservatives, who favor containment; and the neoconservatives, who favor war. Now that Iran is trapped by the IAEA resolution, the moderates and the conservatives are pursuing a policy that Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns has described as “a patient long-term strategy” designed “to isolate Iran ... to ratchet up the international pressure on Iran, and to assemble the kind of global coalition against Iran.”

In sharp contrast, the neoconservatives are calling for immediate military action and regime change. They argue that even if Iran were to be isolated, the end result would still leave the Islamic regime and its “nuclear bombs” in place. The power and influence of the neoconservatives cannot be



underestimated despite setbacks in Iraq and the fact that a number of them have been reassigned to non-policy positions or have left the Administration. Significantly, the neoconservatives continue to receive support from Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. President Bush has also often sided with them.

Israelis are particularly adamant about immediate military action against Iran's nuclear sites. During a recent visit to the US, members of the Knesset Defense and Foreign Policy Committee promoted the idea of a war with Iran. *Al Watan* quoted one member, Arie Eldadm, as saying "nothing will restrain Iran aside from the use of force." His colleague, Yosef Lapid, was more direct: "we don't see any solution except for acting on our own." Given that recent intelligent reports have indicated that Iran is years away from building a nuclear device, the call to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities is nothing but a cover for regime change.

In response to Israeli threats, Iran's Parliament Speaker, Dr. Haddad Adel, during a visit to Damascus said that, "if Israel ventured to attack Iran's nuclear facilities it would incur severe retaliation." President Mahmoud Ahmadinjad followed by saying that Israel must be "wiped off the map." This calculated response to Israeli threats and international pressures was "condemned" by the President of the UN Security Council and refuted by many states. Talks aside, Tehran has taken steps to defend its nuclear sites and borders through troop and equipment movements, administrative changes, and increased control over the ethnic areas.

The warmongers are influential in the US, Europe, Israel and Iran as well as in certain countries in Iran's neighborhood. Worse yet, leaders in some of these countries have openly or discreetly called for the use of force. What concerns me the most is the fact that the Israeli threats cannot be dismissed as mere rhetoric, and American foreign policy does not bluff. Indeed, "threats" by the US presidents have often assumed a life of their own. To be sure, there are evidences pointing toward both war and dialogue, but on the balance, the war option could become inevitable if the current trends were not reversed.

True, Iran is no Iraq or Afghanistan for the US! It is a larger challenge, requiring a larger commitment of political will, military action, and economic resources. Ironically, the very challenge that Iran represents is one key reason advocates of the use of force are so adamant to intensely apply force against Iran's strategic sites and conventional forces. At the minimum, they wish to stir ethnic unrest, and use the political opposition to destabilize Iran and create a civil war. As with Iraq, the warriors are not worried about the immediate fallouts from such actions as they have their eyes on misperceived "strategic gains."

Significantly, the closer we get to the war option the harder it will become to prevent it. Therefore, those of us who are for peace and dialogue between the US and Iran must take our responsibility very seriously. Remaining complacent in the face of threats from the warmongers, jingoists, nationalists, opportunists, and hypocrites is irresponsible, to say the least. Even if we believed that a US-Iran war was a far-fetched possibility, we would still need to remain vigilant about the slightest probability in that direction. The stakes are too high for us to remain silent or be complacent in the face of the looming war dangers!



In case of a war, colossal death and destruction would occur, billions of dollars would be wasted, and Iran's historical monuments could become the accidental targets of the US bombings. For Iranian-Americans, the stakes will be especially high. They will experience more racism and hatred, and will lose freedom to promote their heritage. They will also have to hide themselves, as in the case of the hostage crisis, by denying their native identity. They may even have to support the war to prove loyalty. Americans, Iranians, and Iranian-Americans, as well as others, deserve better. We need to act now to reverse the war trend in the direction of peace and partnership!

Many deny that there can ever be a war between the two countries. As long as they are in denial, they cannot and will not help. Others agree that the danger exists but believe that nothing can be done to reverse the trend. I disagree! They argue that the US-Iran conflict serves powerful interests in Washington, Tehran and the Middle East. True, but we must also consider the fact that we are not alone in this battle for peace, and that our ideas, reasons, persuasions, and collective power matter. By working together, we can make a difference, as we have in the past. It will be helpful to consider the moderating impact of organizations like AIC on US-Iran relations.

The American moderate leaders acted hypocritically and opportunistically in the case of Iraq. At best, they remained complacent in the face of the jingoists who promoted the war, and allowed the Iraqi militants to use the American power toward their design on Iraq. The American nationalists, too, were deceived by the vague promise of a safer US. Tragically, many of the same leaders are now acting in the same vain regarding the rising US-Iran tension. Wittingly or unwittingly, they are promoting a dangerous confrontation that they will surely end up opposing after it has long happened. This time, they are allowing the Iranian militants to use the American power toward their own ends.

Our peace activism must begin by acknowledging the dangers of a US-Iran war. We must try to understand the real causes of the conflict. Fact must be distinguished from fad. We must also understand and acknowledge the concerns and interests of other key players. We must then offer reasonable and honorable solutions which directly address the roots of the conflict. Noble ideas are as powerful as weapons of mass destruction! They would be even more powerful if applied to the dangerous condition prevailing in US-Iran relations. It is our responsibility to develop and disseminate dignified ideas for peace between the two nations and beyond.

We must also educate, organize, mobilize, and pay for the implementation of our just ideas for conflict resolution. Complacency and passivity are no alternatives to vigilance and activism. To be sure, there are those among us who argue against normalization of US-Iran relations. In their view, such diplomatic ties would help regime to stay in power longer, abuse human rights, and forestall democratic change. They must be reminded of two facts: (1) absence of the US from Iran in the last 26 years has not helped their cause; and (2) no country has ever become democratic or developed in the absence of normal diplomatic relations with the US. Iran is no exception!

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