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OPINION PAPER

Threats of War and the Vienna Talks

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As the negotiations in Vienna proceed and Western delegations seem unsatisfied with Iran's positions, talks of war and striking Iran's nuclear facilities have become increasingly loud and ever-present. While the US states it is negotiating in good faith and seeking to revive the nuclear deal, talk of war with Iran has become a pro forma part of almost every US government address, statement, or press release on the matter of the talks. Needless to say, this rhetoric is significantly deteriorating the already hostile and dire environment in which the talks are currently taking place.

Obviously, one reason for this rhetoric is the psychological war element against Iran. Some sanctions scholars have argued that where sanctions are effective, it is often because they are a stalking horse for military action¹. Iranian officials, however, seem unlikely to make concessions over such threats. From the Iranian standpoint, threats of war have become a permanent fixture of the US approach to Iran, and making concessions against it will only enhance its perceived usefulness. Additionally, the most likely possibility of war is an Israeli attack that draws in American support. Considering Israel's certain opposition to any deal, it is hard to say whether agreeing to American demands in Vienna would neutralize that threat.

Overconfidence and Miscalculation

The boastfulness with which US officials consider the notion of striking Iran's nuclear facilities to be "very achievable"² and the comparisons to the bombings of Iraq or Syria's nuclear facilities³ does imply that many believe that doing so would be easy. That the US military would definitively destroy the Iranian nuclear program with overnight strikes and Washington would wake up in time for patriotic jubilation. But there is a reason why even the Bush and Trump administrations never attempted such a war.

When the Bush administration was reported to be considering such attacks on Iran, retired US Army General Anthony Zinni told CNN that "[a]ny military plan involving Iran is going to be very difficult. We should not fool ourselves to think it will just be a strike and then it would be over. The Iranians will retaliate. And they have many possibilities in an area where there are many vulnerabilities, from our troop positions, to the oil and gas in the region that can be interrupted."⁴

When the Obama administration was considering military action in its early days, the efficacy of such options were called into question by military leaders including Secretary of Defense Robert Gates⁵. When Trump was considering an attack on Iran over a downed drone, he faced significant pushback from chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley, America's most senior military official⁶. The concern US military planners have long had is both the military viability of such an attack and the consequences of Iranian retaliation.

¹ Pape, R. A. (1997). Why economic sanctions do not work. *International security*, 22(2), 90-136.

² Al-Monitor. (2021). Iran's Quds Force chief warns US as hopes for nuclear accord fade. December 3. Available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/12/irans-quds-force-chief-warns-us-hopes-nuclear-accord-fade>

³ Saab, B. (2021). Washington must lay down its red lines to Iran. Middle East Institute. December 13. Available at: <https://www.mei.edu/blog/washington-must-lay-down-its-red-lines-iran>

⁴ CNN. (2006). American Morning. Transcript. April 10th. Available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0604/10/itm.03.html>

⁵ Ellner, A. (2013). British nuclear non-proliferation policies towards Iran and the Middle East. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 26(1), 225-251.

⁶ Glaser, S.B. (2021). "You're Gonna Have a Fucking War": Mark Milley's Fight to Stop Trump from Striking Iran. *The New Yorker*. April 15th.

US Airforce General Thomas McInerney stated in 2006 that a US attempt to destroy Iran's nuclear program would require roughly 700 aircraft, 500 cruise missiles, and a vast array of advanced munitions over the initial 36-48 hours phase of the war⁷. An assessment by Anthony Cordesman of CSIS in 2012 said that strikes against the nuclear facilities would require place after a vast array of planes, ships, and missiles spending days just to neutralize Iran's air defenses⁸. Needless to say, Israel fares far worse in such assessments. These assessments predate significant improvements in Iran's air defense⁹ and missile capacities¹⁰. Tehran will also retaliate against US forces and allies which is likely to spillover into a broader regional war. Colin Kahl, now the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, wrote in 2019 that this may lead to a shock in the global economy and a "cycle of carnage" in the region¹¹.

According to a blue-ribbon panel convened by the Wilson Center, even if carried out to "to near perfection," US strikes would only set the nuclear program back by 4 years at the most. US planners know that such strikes would finally convince Iran that it needs a nuclear deterrent and terminate any hope of diplomacy¹². The Bush administration's CIA director Michael Hayden said that "the consensus was that [attacking Iran] would guarantee that which we are trying to prevent — an Iran that will spare nothing to build a nuclear weapon and that would build it in secret"¹³.

So why does this threat continue to be a core feature of US discourse on the issue of Iran? Of course, one cannot rule out that the US foreign policy establishment, including the punditocracy and even civilians in the administration, are unwilling to seriously entertain the warnings of military planners. Doing so would possibly mean having to reassess demands and ambitions at the negotiating table. This may be difficult to imagine but it does not go without precedent. In 2003, US Army General Eric Shinseki testified before Congress that an invasion of Iraq would require almost double the number of troops the US was planning to deploy¹⁴. He was later dismissed from his position and the US invaded with a small force expecting an easy and historic victory which Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld famously anticipated would take "six days, six weeks, I doubt six months"¹⁵.

⁷ McInerney, T. (2006). Target: Iran. April 24. The Weekly Standard. Available at: <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/weekly-standard/target-iran>

⁸ Cordesman, A.H., Toukan, A. (2012). Analyzing the Impact of Preventive Strikes Against Iran's Nuclear Facilities. September 10. Center For Strategic and International Studies. Available at: https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/120906_Iran_US_Preventive_Strikes.pdf

⁹ Kahl, C. H. (2019). This is how easily the U.S. and Iran could blunder into war. The Washington Post. May 23. https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/this-is-how-easily-the-us-and-iran-could-blunder-into-war/2019/05/23/40dbbcae-7c07-11e9-8ede-f4abf521ef17_story.html

¹⁰ Ahmadi, A. (2019). Danger in the Gulf: What the Attack on Saudi Arabian Oil Means for America. The National Interest. September 17. Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/danger-gulf-what-attack-saudi-arabian-oil-means-america-81286>

¹¹ Kahl, C. H. (2019). This is how easily the U.S. and Iran could blunder into war. Washington Post. May 23. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/this-is-how-easily-the-us-and-iran-could-blunder-into-war/2019/05/23/40dbbcae-7c07-11e9-8ede-f4abf521ef17_story.html

¹² Wilson Center. (2012). Weighing Benefits and Costs of Military Action Against Iran. The Iran Project. Available at: https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/sites/uscpublicdiplomacy.org/files/legacy/media/IranReport_091112_FULL%20FINAL.pdf

¹³ Rogin, J. (2012). Bush's CIA director: We determined attacking Iran was a bad idea. Foreign Policy. January 19. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/01/19/bushs-cia-director-we-determined-attacking-iran-was-a-bad-idea/>

¹⁴ Engel, M. (2017). Scorned general's tactics proved right. The Guardian. July 15. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/mar/29/iraq.usa>

¹⁵ John, J. (2002). Rumsfeld: It Would Be A Short War. CBS News. November 15. Available at: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/rumsfeld-it-would-be-a-short-war/>

Converting Military Threats into Sanctions

During the US sanctions drive in the 2000s, the US faced resistance from even key European allies against adopting increasingly broad sanctions against Iran. According to senior Obama administration sanctions architect Richard Nephew, the Obama administration adopted a “simple, but powerful, argument” in order to push its allies towards greater sanctions. The message was that “failure to resolve the Iranian nuclear issue diplomatically would increase the chances of another war in the Middle East” and that “he was prepared to use force to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon”¹⁶. Threats that Israel would attack Iran, especially under the assumption that the US would join such a campaign on Israel’s behalf, were also motivating.

Tarja Cronberg, who chaired the European Parliament’s delegation on relations with Iran between 2011 and 2014, argues that the obvious intention of the Europeans in the 2010 to 2013 period was to avoid an Iran-US military confrontation and that their adoption of the oil embargo against Iran was “both an acceptance of US pressure for more sanctions and also a way to avert an Israeli military strike on Iran’s facilities”¹⁷. Laurent Fabius, who served as French Foreign Minister from 2012 to 2016, said that the “tenor” surrounding European considerations of new sanctions “changed over several months, as the objective refocused to prevent an Israeli strike rather than on solving the basic problem of Iranian nuclear capacity. The fear of military intervention once again raised the question, so often asked since the beginning of the crisis in 2002: have we tried everything to find a diplomatic resolution to this crisis?”

Many scholars have pointed to the central role of military threats in encouraging European sanctions. According to scholars Nassiri Tabrizi and Hanau Santini “[w]ithin European strategic calculations, the looming prospects of a military conflict, either initiated by Israel alone or in accordance with Washington, have likely changed the cost-benefit analysis of those member states reluctant to endorse costly sanctions.”¹⁸

One would imagine that these threats were effective on Iran, its posture at the negotiating table in Vienna would not have hardened after the recent Presidential election. The most serious concern about the possibility of such a war is of course that it will happen. Many of history’s wars are a product of miscalculation or a failure to consider military realities. But the constant threat of a new war in the Middle East seems principally driven by its value as a proven tool of compellence towards other countries, especially the nations of the EU, whose cooperation Washington believes is critical to pressure against Iran.

¹⁶ Nephew, R. (2017). *The Art of Sanctions: A View from the Field*. Center on Global Energy Policy Series. Columbia University Press. Page 104.

¹⁷ Cronberg, T. (2017). No EU, no Iran deal: the EU's choice between multilateralism and the transatlantic link. *The Nonproliferation Review*, 24(3-4), 243-259.

¹⁸ Bassiri Tabrizi, A., and Hanau Santini, R. (2016). *EU Sanctions against Iran: New Wine in Old Bottles?* The Brookings Institution. July 29. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/eu-sanctions-against-iran-new-wine-in-old-bottles/>, also see Borszik, O. (2014). International sanctions against Iran under president Ahmadinejad: explaining regime persistence. GIGA Working Paper, 260. And Tabatabai, A. M., and Samuel, A. T. (2017). What the Iran-Iraq war tells us about the future of the Iran nuclear deal. *International Security*, 42(1), 152-185.

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