

Iran's Prospects in the Event of War with the United States and the West

If attacked, Iran would probably be a much more formidable opponent than any country the United States has locked horns with over the last few decades. The U.S. should act with extreme caution if it is considering making military attacks.

With U.S. President Barack Obama announcing on January 5 that the Pentagon can expect serious cuts in the near future, hawkish Congressmen who insist on stopping Iran's nuclear program by any means necessary will soon find that the U.S. has fewer levers to deal with the defiant Middle East state. The American military are set to lose about 80 thousand soldiers, a cost saving measure brought about by record expenditures and deficits. In addition, a broader set of cuts will affect each branch of the armed services. "Operation Iranian Freedom" is now far less realistic than many hardliners had previously thought, especially when the real cost is counted.

The low probability of direct confrontation between the U.S. and Iran is a serious setback for some of these hawks in view of the statement made last month by Defense Secretary Leon Panetta in which he suggested that Iran could possess nuclear weapons before the end of 2012, even though, he insisted, this is highly unlikely.

Yet while many state leaders do not hide their concern at the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran any decision which may lead to war between the U.S. and the Islamic republic warrants intensive discussion before the American people. Drowning out the voices of those who oppose military intervention in Iran by beating more ardently the drums of war is a surrogate for genuine and open debate.

As American policymakers weigh up available options, consideration should be given to five aspects which nominally enhance Iran's capabilities in a war with the United States. They are especially important as this year's election is getting closer, and pleas for a military solution are increasingly being heard both inside and outside the United States.

The first point is that Iran could defend itself with probably the most efficient army the United States has encountered in decades. Iran's military forces are incomparably stronger than those of Haiti, Panama, Grenada, Somalia, Serbia, Bosnia, Afghanistan or Iraq. In all these cases, the U.S. military faced an adversary unable to compete with overwhelming American land, sea and air superiority. The Iranian armed forces are far more competent and efficient, and after watching and analyzing the 2003 war in Iraq they have gained a good grasp of American tactics and strategy. Some Iranian officers were even trained in the U.S. during the reign of the last Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1919-80).

Adroit at littoral combat, the regular Iranian navy may be able, many military experts believe, to block the Strait of Hormuz for long enough to wreak economic havoc. The recent Iranian naval exercises demonstrate that Tehran has a ready-made strategy that would seek to block the strait while simultaneously trying to sink American – and European – warships in the vicinity. The end result would be significant losses to commercial shipping and a spike in oil prices. However, the Iranian Navy, with its Russian-made Kilo Class submarines armed with torpedoes, agile frigates and fast corvettes, could sustain an attack only for a short while, as the American retaliation would be massive and overwhelming. Iranian ships would be wiped out in a matter of hours or a few days.

U.S. Air Force fighter aircraft would most likely strike at Bandar Abbas and Kish Island ports (part of the Hormozgan Province of Iran) to cut off the Iranian Navy from its rear operating bases.

On the other hand, the proliferation of sales of advanced air defense systems to countries like Iran has given them highly sophisticated and integrated anti-aircraft defense systems. These have the capacity to inflict on American airpower a scale of losses not seen since the Vietnam War. The decline in the U.S. bomber force could result in unacceptable hardware and human losses.

In contrast to Iraq, the first sight of U.S. ground troops will not persuade Iran's regular Army and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard to lay down their arms. They are the ones who, more than any other elements of the regime, have studied the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq and learned lessons in how to beat the American Army, which can be achieved by not fighting it directly but by adopting hit and run tactics, or "asymmetrical warfare" in contemporary military parlance.

Second, the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and National Security (MOIS) is one of the world's best intelligence agencies. For over thirty years, MOIS agents have shown impressive levels of efficiency. They have hunted down and killed thousands of dissidents and former officials of the Shah's government and valiantly countered real or perceived threats to the republican regime. Despite the precarious economic situation in the country, MOIS still has the means to carry out assassinations, espionage operations and other types of attacks against selected targets. It is also likely that a significant number of Iranian spies are operating inside the United States, which has a large ethnic Iranian immigrant population.

Although the pieces of the puzzle are still difficult to put together, there are reasonable grounds for assuming that Mansoor Arbabsiar, the Iranian who plotted the assassination of Saudi ambassador Adel al-Jubeir in the United States with the help of the Mexican Zetas drug cartel in October 2011, was tied to MOIS. It is also known that MOIS has targeted Iranian expatriates, imprisoning members of their families and causing them great suffering and personal injury. It is not impossible that some of the 1.5 million Iranian Americans living in the United States become victims of such tactics.

Third, Hezbollah, which is backed by Iran, has a greater ability to carry out terrorist attacks than al-Qaida has ever had. This cluster organization has been honing its combat skills for three decades by fighting the Israelis in Lebanon and northern Israel. It allegedly has links with merciless Latin American drug cartels and can count on a global network of agents. Theoretically, Hezbollah has the resources and competence to execute large-scale attacks against the United States and its interests abroad.

In fact, it is believed that Hezbollah cells are active in Europe, Latin America and Asia as well as the United States, making this terrorist group a real threat to Iran's opponents. The bombing of a U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983, the Argentine-Israeli Mutual Association in Buenos Aires in 1994 and the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in 1996 speak volume about Hezbollah's history of global terrorism. If the U.S. military decides to attack Iran, the risk of Hezbollah undertaking a series of terrorist counter-attacks will be seriously increased, and thwarting these attacks will not be as easy as those of al-Qaeda.

Fourth, although already of superior quality, Iran's cyber-capabilities are being constantly upgraded. An attack on Iranian nuclear facilities is likely to provoke a prolonged cyber-attack of a type not yet seen. Tehran will seek to inflict harm and disable public and private data processing systems.

Fifth, U.S. forces have been conducting military interventions almost nonstop over the last decade and hence they deserve a break from war. Afghanistan and Iraq have left their mark on the men and women fighting for America and also taken their toll on the equipment they use. Even a limited attack on Iran is likely to spill over into a wider war. The U.S. Army would then be exposed to a prolonged campaign in exceptionally adverse battle conditions.

One must also realize that, on the war issue, the U.S. and Iran have asymmetrical interests. For Iranian leaders the very survival of their regime would be at stake in any armed conflict, while for the United States the stakes are significantly lower.

Even a strike focused purely on Iranian nuclear facilities will trigger a reaction which will push the conflict far beyond the "limited" objectives of the Obama administration. While bringing U.S. troops home from Iraq and Afghanistan, Iran's main neighbors, may induce Tehran to put the brakes on the development of a "Shiite bomb," a U.S. strategic attack will conversely strengthen its determination to build one and deepen the regime's worst fears.

The Iranian regime has a greater aversion to risk than many think. Although Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's rhetoric and saber-rattling play well to the gallery and make good political theater for insiders and the international press, there is usually little behind them. The suggestion that Ahmadinejad is just words, and will not match them with deeds, is not far from the truth. But ensuring the regime's survival is nevertheless a paramount objective, and this largely explains why it uses a mix of bellicose provocations and olive branch offerings. Pushing Iran to the brink of the abyss may turn empty threats into a real war and certainly jeopardize Obama's efforts to cut America's military budget.

Ultimately, Iran might prove less dangerous than suggested above, and a war on Iranian soil and around the Strait of Hormuz may be less costly in terms of blood and budget than expected. But weighing all "peaceful" options before taking up arms against Iran is of the utmost importance if the best solution is to be found.

For the United States it is crucial to determine what preventing a nuclear-armed Iran is worth. If Americans had understood the costs of the 2003 Iraq war before launching it, one wonders today if they would have gone along with it in the first place.

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