

Iran: It's Déjà Vu All Over Again

Einstein defined stupidity as doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results.

By Aijaz Zaka Syed

January 08, 2012 "[Arab News](#)" - - This dangerous game of brinkmanship and perpetual bickering between America and Iran has been played out for over three decades now. Little seems to change in Washington no matter who is in the White House — a Bible-thumping gunslinger with an endless wish list of regime change or a messianic rhetorician, who earned himself a Nobel Peace Prize in his first year in office by promising all sorts of Yes-We-Cans to all sorts of folks.

On the other hand, over the past couple of decades we have heard nearly the same monotonous grandstanding against the “Big Satan” from the ayatollahs, which is now beginning to bore even those who are sympathetic to Tehran and believe that it's being unfairly targeted by the West, just as Iraq had been not long ago.

Every pundit worth his two-bit take has been obsessing over the coming war on Iran for more than a decade now. We in the Gulf have lived with this fear for years now, especially since the Iraq invasion. Indeed, after Iraq, moving next door to Iran wouldn't have been too difficult for the coalition of the willing, if it wasn't for the mess that it unleashed on itself by removing Saddam Hussain.

With the war of words between Washington and Tehran heating up, coupled with the latest — and toughest — Western sanctions against Iran coming into play, that scenario now looks increasingly plausible.

As if defying the war talk, a totally defiant Tehran launched new war games in the Gulf last week. Ten days of exercises saw Tehran shoot off some of those “long-range” missiles that it claims could hit as far as Israel and US military assets in the Middle East, giving the jitters to an already tense region.

For good measure, the Iranians have also threatened to block the Strait of Hormuz, the jugular for Gulf oil markets, if its oil exports were targeted by sanctions. Nearly half of the world's oil and other exports and imports by the Gulf states as well as Iran pass through Hormuz, a really narrow entrance at the mouth of the Gulf.

In response, the US moved one of its biggest warships, USS John C. Stennis, into the

Gulf, dangerously close to Iran's naval exercises. The aircraft carrier, which leads the naval operations in the Gulf and provides air support to the war in Afghanistan, moved back later after what it called its “regularly scheduled movement.” Iran, however, says the aircraft carrier left after it issued a “stern warning” to the nosey Americans.

Not everyone is convinced that Iran could and would close Hormuz though. “It cannot do so even if it wants to,” Dr. Mustafa Alani of the Dubai-based Gulf Research Center tells me. “It tried to do so during the long war with Iraq but couldn't succeed even for a day.”

Whatever the truth of this saber-rattling, it has certainly spooked world markets and the region in these volatile times. Oil prices shot up on fears of another conflagration in the Middle East. And whether the much-prophesied US-Israel war on Iran eventually takes off or not, the Islamic republic has already been fighting an increasingly vicious war by the West on the economic front. Iran has lived with and survived Western sanctions over the past three decades, thanks to the sheer resilience of its people. However, the fourth round of sanctions are beginning to bite the Iranian economy and ordinary people.

And with the new US law that Obama signed this past week targeting the Central Bank and an EU oil embargo becoming a reality, things could get even worse. Hitting the Central Bank, which also handles payments for Iran's oil exports, could cripple the Iranian economy that's heavily dependent on oil trade. Already there has been a run on the banks with the Iranians scrambling to buy dollars to protect their dwindling savings. The Iranian rial has taken a direct hit with its value being almost halved over the past month or so.

This is just the beginning. Iran's trade with its neighbors like the UAE and emerging Asian economies has been melting down too. Under pressure from the US to implement the sanctions, UAE banks have started tightening screws on Iranian businesses and thousands of off shore companies. The UAE is not just one of Iran's biggest trading partners, it's also the largest single source for commodities that are essential to support Iranian economy. China, on the other hand, has halved its oil imports from Iran and is demanding discounted prices.

Meanwhile, fed by election year politics and calculations of Jewish votes and funds, war drums are beating harder than ever for Iran in Washington. The Republicans are competing with each other to demand urgent “action” against Iran even as they accuse Obama of being “soft” on the Islamic republic. Mitt Romney, who could face Obama, has vowed military action if he wins the White House to ensure Tehran doesn't have

nukes. Another Republican, Lindsey Graham, wants total annihilation of Iran, a la Iraq. “You'd have to do more than go after the nuclear program,” he told CBS. “You have to neuter this regime, destroy the air force, sink their navy, go after the Revolution Guard and try to get people in the country to overthrow the regime. We need a regime change.”

This is familiar stuff of course. It's déjà vu all over again. Parallels with Iraq are uncanny. It's as though we are back in 2003, under George W. Bush, with the US and its allies hitting Iraq with sanctions after crippling sanctions before unleashing the full “shock and awe” of the biggest war machine known to mankind. Ironically, the senator from Illinois who voted against that war and promised a “new way forward with the Muslim world” is now threatening the same treatment to Iran.

Nearly a decade on, it seems little has changed in Washington or in the Middle East. The cast largely remains the same. Only the bad guy, or the bogey, has changed. And even if the “clear and present danger” that Iran allegedly poses to Israel is neutralized, they will have to invent another one tomorrow — to justify their expanding military presence in the region and to keep their military industrial complex and arms manufacturers in business.

With those endless military exercises and rhetoric and regular status updates about the progress of their nuclear program, the ayatollahs are playing right into the hands of Iran's enemies. But who said this had anything to do with Iran's nuclear ambitions? This is not about Iran; it never was. This is about maintaining the Western hegemony in the region. Anyone who dares to defy it or even betrays a streak of independence will countenance the empire's wrath. Wars begin and end in the minds of men, as Archibald McLeish argued.

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