



The Art of the Bazaar Deal: Iran's Strategy for War With the US

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Executive Summary

- * Tehran is convinced that the struggle for the greater Middle East is reaching a climax.
- * There have long been bazaar-style negotiations with the US - that is, the delivery of signals and innuendo by Iranian and Iran-Proxy forces.
- * Tehran resolved to patiently escalate their signaling-through-brinkmanship strategy until the Trump White House makes a decision - either to accept the Iranian demands or to go to war.
- * Iran has a clear strategy for war that Iran will ultimately win, albeit at a huge cost.

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Analysis

Tehran is convinced that the struggle for the greater Middle East is reaching a climax.

There have long been bazaar-style negotiations with the US - that is, the delivery of signals and innuendo by Iranian and Iran-Proxy forces. This has always been the preferable approach - rather than formal talks around a western-style table. The failure of the JCPOA process, particularly the EU' inability to stand up to the US, only reinforced Tehran's resolve to communicate with the US the old-fashioned way - by violent signals.

In so doing, Tehran expected Washington to comprehend what is unfolding in the Persian Gulf and throughout the greater Middle East. Alas, this is not working. The Trump White House does not understand Tehran and keeps coming back again and again with proposals for western-style negotiations. However, after the repeated failures of the Iranian efforts to negotiate directly and via intermediaries with the pliant and forthcoming Obama White House - Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Khamenei forbade, and not without reason, any attempt to repeat the process with the mercurial Trump White House.

Instead, the Iranians resolved to patiently escalate their signaling-through-brinkmanship strategy until the moment the Trump White House makes a decision - either to accept the Iranian demands or to go to war. Tehran would like to resolve the quandary quickly - but has the patience and resolve to wait for as long as it takes provided the process continues to unfold properly. Whatever the means - "peace" or war - ultimately, there ought to be a decision about the future of the greater Middle East and the respective roles of both Iran and the US therein.

Iran has a clear strategy for war (discussed below) that Tehran is convinced Iran will ultimately win, albeit at a huge cost. Moreover, Tehran is also convinced that just as Iran recovered from the horrific and debilitating war with Iraq in the 1980's - so will Iran ultimately recover from the war with the US. By then, however, the US will no longer be in the greater Middle East and that's the crux of Iran's great victory.

Hence, the Iranians will keep escalating their ostensibly deniable almost-war all over the region - not just in the Persian Gulf. They will hit non-American vessels and installations, and will try to avoid too many casualties and too much environmental damage. The Iranians will also continue their relentless efforts to consolidate in the Lebanon-Syria-Iraq bloc, including symbolic strikes on US bases. Of course, there exists the possibility of a clash with US forces emanating from these operations and thus sparking a wider war - but this is not Tehran's intent.

Instead, Tehran hopes that the Trump White House will not be able to politically tolerate the escalatory drip-drip-drip confrontations. The US will therefore have to choose between an unwinnable war and placating Iran into stopping the madness. Iran will be satisfied solely by the lifting of the sanctions and help with Iran's economic recovery. Given the horrific prospects of Iran's war, Tehran is convinced that the US will ultimately relent and pay. Khamenei has all the time in the world, the Iranians note, while Trump has November 2020 to think about.

Tehran has no intention whatsoever to stop their signaling in order to negotiate. Japan's Abe assured Khamenei and Rouhani that Trump would lift sanctions at the negotiations table. But Tehran is not interested in sitting at a negotiations table. Nor will Tehran trust Trump to reciprocate to an Iranian gesture like agreeing to negotiations. "Never trust the US," Khamenei instructed.



And so, there continues the drip-drip-drip escalation that might lead to the outbreak of Iran's war.

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Tehran has been preparing for a major confrontation with the US since February 1979. Iranian experts have studied closely US and allied military operations over the last forty years, and formulated a pragmatic war-plan Tehran is convinced will enable Iran to prevail, albeit at great cost and pain.

Iran is aware of the US military strengths. Hence, Iran is awaiting a vastly expanded "Shock and Awe" air and missile campaign. Tehran has accepted that whatever is left of Iran's dilapidated economy and infrastructure will go up in flames. Rhetoric and bluster notwithstanding, Tehran is cognizant that Iran's air force and air defense are useless against the US onslaught, and are likely to be destroyed early on. The same will happen to the large vessels of the Iranian navy/fleet.

Therefore, there is no intent to confront the US air and missile onslaught.

Tehran knows that there will not be a US invasion. It is impossible to march on Tehran. Hence, there will not be a regime change.

Moreover, Russia and China guaranteed that they would not permit the US to carry out a regime change in Tehran. Iran also knows that Russia and China will not let the US use nuclear weapons. Hence, the Islamic Republic will not be vanquished whatever the outcome of the war.

Hence, Tehran is convinced that Iran will ultimately be able to rise from the ashes and rebuild the country. It will be a daunting task but also an attainable task. Significantly, the Mullahs will remain at the helm of Iran - and this is the most important prerequisite.

Therefore, once the war breaks out, Iran will focus on hitting and destroying targets of great importance for the US in order to challenge the overall US posture in the greater Middle East. The key undertakings the Iranians are preparing for include the following:

- Iran will try to hit or sink US Navy vessels in the Persian Gulf, using a wide array of weapons including torpedoes, cruise missiles, and suicide bomb-boats and aircraft. This will be a symbolic act to demonstrate that Iran is still fighting.
- Iran will set the Shiite-populated eastern Arabian Peninsula aflame - that is, destroy the entire oil/gas/energy infrastructure using missile strikes and terrorism/sabotage. Nothing will remain standing - whatever the cost to Iran and the Shiite allies. The same will happen to Iraq's infrastructure. Blocking the Strait of Hormuz is part of this surge. It will take decades to rebuild the eastern Arabian Peninsula - by which time dominance of the hydrocarbon economy will have shifted to Iran's allies in Russia and Central Asia. Significantly, the declared ultimate objective of this campaign is to annihilate the House of al-Saud and all other Sunni royal/princely families on the Arabian Peninsula so that the area will be ruled by the local Shiites - Iran's proteges.
- Israel will be subjected to massive rocket/missile attacks from south Lebanon and the Gaza Strip, as well as a wave of Jihadist terrorism - an Intifada. This surge will cause heavy casualties and widespread damage. Compelling the IDF to focus on suppressing the immediate threats to the Israeli population will prevent Israel from interfering in Iran's wider war.



- The Lebanon-Syria-Iraq bloc will be set aflame by Iranian and Iran-Proxy forces with emphasis on attacking US forces, forcing their withdrawal, and inflicting maximum casualties. Tehran is adamant on consolidating the on-land access to the Mediterranean to the extent that it will now become impossible to reverse Iran's presence and influence. The Iranian and Iran-Proxy forces will also slaughter US allies/proxies (mainly Kurds) in order to guarantee that they will never consider allying with, or assisting, the US against Iran and its allies.
- The Iranian and Iran-Proxy forces will also rapidly consolidate control over the key military bases and strategic infrastructure in Iraq and Syria so that the US has nowhere to return to.
- There are discussions in Tehran about permitting Turkey to surge southwards, link-up with the Hashemites of Jordan and march on Mecca and Medina - thus completing the destruction of Saudi Arabia. As much as the Mullahs are eager to control Islam's Holy Shrines - they also know that Shiites constitute only 15% of Muslims, and that the Sunnis will have to retain control. Hence, having allies Turkey and Qatar dominate the titular Hashemites - the historic Sharifs of Mecca - is the best pragmatic option.
- Iran will help the Yemeni proxies surge and advance deep into Saudi Arabia - all the way to Jeddah, Mecca and Medina, as well as block the Bab al-Mandab. The Iranian and Yemeni forces will destroy the Saudi oil/gas/energy infrastructure along the shores of the Red Sea - thus completing the carnage.
- Iranian and Jihadist forces will unleash waves of international terrorism throughout the greater Middle East, the Third World, and the heart of the West (most likely also in the United States). Sabotaging the hydrocarbon and transportation infrastructure in the Central Asia and the Caucasus will be a priority in order to deprive the West, mainly Europe, of oil and gas - a move with immense domestic political ramifications. The objective of this terrorism campaign is to create complete chaos, and prevent the functioning of governments and societies. Even if only a small fraction of the terrorist operations the Iranians and their Jihadist allies are preparing for succeeds - there will still be a huge outcry, especially in Western Europe, for pressure on the US to desist any confrontation with Iran.

At the end, Tehran is convinced, the local powers will not be able to withstand the pain emanating from their tolerance of US presence and operations, and the US will be banished from the greater Middle East and even the Hub of Islam. That the greater Middle East will by then be completely destroyed, and the populace - mostly Muslims - vanquished is irrelevant for Tehran.

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The quintessence of the bazaar approach to negotiations is to compel Washington to decide whether to wage a war the US will lose (even if the price Iran will pay be horrendous) or instead pay Tehran (by lifting the sanctions and providing economic help) in order to project the semblance of negotiations and a political deal. Tehran is pressuring Washington into making a decision - any decision. The drip-drip-drip escalation serves this purpose.

Iranian and Iran-Proxy leaders are increasingly convinced that such a decision is imminent and that the US will choose war. The IRGC Qods Force Commander Major General Qassem Soleimani recently told leaders and senior commanders of the Iraqi Shiite al-Hashd al-Shaabi that Iran would not agree to live under the harsh



sanctions regime for much longer. Hence, he expected a region-wide eruption for which they, and all other allies of Iran, must quickly prepare.

Addressing Iranian officers, the Commander of the Iranian Air Defense Force, Brigadier General Alireza Sabahi Fard, noted the untenable situation. "On one side, the enemy is boasting by its military presence in West Asia and the Persian Gulf and on the other side, it suggests negotiations besides expanding its sanctions on Iran," he said. "All these prove the unreliability of the enemy and instability of its claims. ... The enemy has imposed political, economic and cultural pressures on Iran, which have caused some troubles for the Iranian nation, but we should know that the costs of surrender are much higher than resistance."

HizbAllah Leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah has repeatedly warned his senior commanders of a forthcoming major war in the summer. Recently, he explained that this war will erupt as a result of a war with the US. Nasrallah predicted that the "entire region will burn if the US goes to war against Iran" with "all US forces and interests in the region being annihilated" as a consequence.

Back in the summer of 2018, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani invoked an old Persian saying in order to define the unfolding US-Iranian face-off. "Mr. Trump, don't play with the lion's tail. This would only lead to regret." Rouhani predicted that if Trump failed to heed to his advice, a war will break out and "we [Iran] will definitely defeat America." Iranian senior officials and officers are now citing Rouhani's warning as being clairvoyant and relevant.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.



About the Author of this Issue

Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State.

He is the author of eleven books – including *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (*New York Times* No. 1 Bestseller & *Washington Post* No. 1 Bestseller), *The Secret History of the Iraq War* (*New York Times* Bestseller & *Foreign Affairs Magazine* Bestseller), and *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* – and hundreds of articles, book chapters and Congressional reports.

Mr Bodansky is a Director at the Prague Society for International Cooperation, and serves on the Board of the Global Panel Foundation and several other institutions worldwide.



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