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Are the United States and Iran on a Collision Course?

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The attempt on the life of the Saudi ambassador to Washington has brought Iranian-US relations to an all-time low. However, this event did not occur in a vacuum: Iranian provocations directed at the United States have increased recently, raising the possibility of a confrontation, even if limited, between the two nations. Over the past few months, Shiite militias supported by Iran have killed a large number of American soldiers in Iraq, as if to suggest that US troops will be withdrawing from Iraq in the coming months under fire. Such an impression would almost certainly serve Iranian propaganda on Iran's decisive role in cleansing the region of America's presence.

At the same time, the Persian Gulf has seen an increase in Revolutionary Guard provocations against US Navy Fifth Fleet ships and planes. Likewise, the Shiites in northeastern Saudi Arabia, the most oil-rich area in the world, took up weapons for the first time this month – according to the Saudis at the behest of Iran. Iran is liable to incite the many pilgrims it sent to Mecca on the Hajj, which begins soon. And on the nuclear front, which has received less attention because of events in the Arab world, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Yukiya Amano, is concerned about the possibility that Iran will expel IAEA inspectors in response to the revelation of material that incriminates Iran.

Against this background, senior officials in the American administration, including Vice President Biden and Secretary of Defense Panetta, transmitted explicit threats to Iran. Secretary of State Clinton went even further: in what we believe is an unprecedented declaration, she addressed the Iranian opposition directly, suggesting they ask for international assistance “as did the rebels in Libya.”

This provocative Iranian policy cannot but appear surprising due to its seemingly decreasing power. Internationally, Iran's isolation is growing and the sanctions against the country are tightening. Internally too, there are increasing reports about severe controversies within Iran's leadership, between President Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, who has declared that he may cancel the office of the president – a hint to Ahmadinejad not to exceed his limited authority. In addition, the

Arab spring, which has already led to the fall of regimes and received varying measures of support from the West, is liable to reignite the protests in Iran, despite the regime's increased monitoring and oppression of its population. In the context of the nuclear program, various assessments indicate that Iran is encountering difficulties in its progress.

Furthermore, Iran's provocations appear particularly surprising in light of the assessments that its status and power have weakened in recent months as a result of the events in Syria, which might escalate into a blood-soaked civil war. Iran, worried about the destabilization of the regional alignment it has constructed, is forced to stand by without any significant ability to help its central ally in the region. However, it is not inconceivable that Iran's defiance is part of calculated deterrence designed to demonstrate the cost of Assad's fall, should harsher international steps be taken against Syria. The toppling of Assad is also liable to make Iran try to inoculate the regime in Tehran against possible harm and therefore accelerate its "race for the bomb."

The source of Iran's temerity apparently lies in its assessment that at least in the short term President Obama, for a number of reasons, will not dare to order a military action against Iran:

- a. The President's decision to withdraw American forces from Iraq bespeaks a lack of American willingness to be involved in further combat confrontations.
- b. The severe economic crisis in the US and Europe and the fact that the US is entering a presidential election year limit America's room for maneuver and its ability to consider seriously a military option against Iran.
- c. The success of the military option is by no means guaranteed. At the end of the operation, the Iranian regime may prove that it remains in power and its nuclear project has not been seriously hampered.
- d. Even a limited military operation in Iran could have fateful ramifications for the regional and international arenas. Thus the US would apparently prefer covert operations.

The relatively weak American response to Iran's provocations strengthens these Iranian assessments and is liable to prompt it to engage in more defiant moves. To date, the administration's response to the attempted assassination of the ambassador has been limited to tightening the sanctions against Iran and signaling that the US is likely to make it difficult for companies selling refined oil to Iran to do business in the US – a step that could demand a steep, perhaps unbearable, cost of Iran. Furthermore, the US disclosed intelligence with evidence that implicates Iran engaging in forbidden activity in conjunction with its nuclear program. This evidence could be included in the IAEA's next report to represent additional grounds for increasing the pressure on Iran. In addition,

many Republicans are now demanding that the response to Iran be expanded, and Vice President Biden even declared that the US is likely to go further and is “not taking any option off the table.” Nonetheless, it seems that in the Iranian assessment the probability that these threats will be translated into action is low.

Is Iran not risking a mistaken assessment about America’s strategy? Despite the American lack of appetite for opening another front, significant American punitive steps against Iran could under certain circumstances become more appealing to Washington. The administration is aware that as a result of the withdrawal, Iraq will be more exposed to growing Iranian influence. This probable development is highly troubling not only to the administration but also to many nations in the region, chief among them Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Thus, the pressure on Washington, especially from the Gulf states, to confront the Iranian challenge also militarily will likely increase. The evacuation of American forces from Iraq will give Iran a tailwind but will also free the US from the possibility of an Iranian attack on its troops there and allow the US to threaten Iran with greater credibility.

An aggressive American move against Iran will serve American interests in several contexts. It will blur the image of a weak and retreating America (from Iraq and Afghanistan) in international awareness. It will rehabilitate American’s deterrence in the region and demonstrate to its allies that Washington has not deserted them. Such a confrontation is likely to lead Israel’s leadership to table, even if only in the short term, the option of a unilateral Israeli military operation against Iran. In addition, a confrontation is likely to improve the status of President Obama (who is encouraged by NATO’s success in Libya) in American public opinion, and improve his chances for reelection in the coming presidential race.

In short, the two sides have taken some significant steps in recent months toward a possible collision, even if limited in scope. Yet despite the unprecedented low point in relations between Iran and the United States, the probability of a collision between the two countries, certainly a comprehensive one, appears low. Iran’s leadership is steering its policies with measured, cautious brinkmanship, as is its wont. Under these circumstances, a brawl between the sides will not likely escalate from its current and largely covert nature to an extensive military confrontation. However, a limited engagement could erupt as the result of unintentional escalation.

