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They Have the Watches, We Have the Time; US and Iran Hardliners Still Want War



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When I was in Afghanistan, I often heard a Pashtun saying attributed to the Afghan Taliban strategy for war with the United States: “They have the watches, but we have the time”. I do not know the provenance of this saying and I do not know if the saying exists in other Muslim or Asian societies, but it certainly has held true in warfare over the centuries whether you understand it in terms of the United States Revolution, the Vietnamese war for liberation against the French, Japanese and the US, or the decades long struggle against apartheid in South Africa. It is a saying that, if translated from Afghanistan’s Pashto to Iran’s Farsi, could be very applicable to Iran right now.

After the assassination in January of Iranian General Soleimani by the US, many commentators, including myself, were alarmed and concerned about the prospects for war between the US and Iran. Aside from the morally and intellectually dishonest here in the US, who believe the wars of the last decades have somehow been effective and worthwhile in a manner other than for the profits of weapons companies and promotions for the generals, the remainder of those paying attention have understood the wars to have not just been staggering failures of misguided and malicious Western policies to forcibly mold and shape the Muslim world into a political order and system beholden to the US, the UK and Israel, but have also unleashed horrid and hellish sufferings on tens of millions of people, sufferings that seem to be unending. A war between the US and Iran would be no different. It would bring cruel and brutal suffering to the Iranian people, devastate another country through flattened cities and wrecked infrastructure, and, once again, validate the eternal adage that war is a breeding ground for unintended consequences.

I am thankful, of course, many of us have been wrong in our predictions and estimations, and I am glad the worst has not happened.

However, before we rest and believe such a war has been averted, I think it is correct to look at Iran through that Pashto saying about watches and time and for us to be vigilant about a possible US-Iran war, a war hawks in both countries have wanted for nearly my whole life.

My understanding of Iranian society and customs is not great, however I have had Iranians, in Iran, not expats, bring this first consideration directly to me. Iranians observed a 40 day mourning period for General Soleimani. This mourning period may have restricted them in their military and political planning and operations. That mourning period ended a couple of weeks ago, so it may be possible, in line with some Iranian statements, that more attacks from Iran may occur. Such attacks may well be being planned now and may occur in the next weeks, month or year. I have no knowledge of any such planning or attacks, there are conflicting Iranian statements saying there would be no more attacks, and I am the last person who wants to sound like John Bolton or Naftali Bennett – I can't think of anything else I'd like less – but Iranian attacks, particularly non-conventional attacks, think of the Houthi drone strike on the Aramco oil facility in Saudi Arabia last year, are something still to be understood as possible. Best case regarding Iranian retaliation is Iranian leaders are thinking in political terms and will

utilize their political and diplomatic weight to see an expulsion of US forces from Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, rather than conventional or unconventional military action..

The next aspect of the early January warfare between the US and Iran to consider is the Iranians did make an honest try at retaliation. I am not in agreement with those who say the Iranians pulled their punches or missed on purpose. They fired, if I recall correctly, 16 ballistic missiles. 11 of them missed their targets and caused no damage, but 5, according to the satellite imagery released by a private company of Al Asad air base in Iraq after the attack, did strike the flight line and airfield operations area of the US air base.

The Iranians I believe were trying to cause harm and hit back strongly, but, because of decades of sanctions and embargoes, their weaponry and technology are not very good and we have here another example of an overblown enemy threat by the US and its allies (the peril of Iran's ballistic missile force was a major stated reason behind President Trump's withdrawal from President Obama's nuclear deal with Iran). So the Iranians, in my view, tried to hit Al Asad, but 2/3 of their missiles missed the target area, because, again, Iranian missiles are not very capable, which should be expected due to the sanctions, embargoes and the long history of the US over-hyping the dangers of its enemies.

Fortunately, advanced warning of the Iranian missile attack was received as the Iranians told the Iraqis of the impending attack and the Iraqis then told the US. US forces at Al Asad were protected in bunkers that evening and no deaths occurred. That might have been a different matter if more of the missiles struck the populated parts of the airbase, rather than falling into the unmanned and deserted grounds in and around the airbase. If deaths had occurred I think it would have been very difficult politically for Trump to not have responded and God knows where that could have ended up. We see this right now in Syria, where a war that continues to provide its people with new iterations of battles and killings enters a new phase between Syria/Russia and Turkey and Turkey's Islamist allies.

We should also give credit to rational and intelligent men and women in Tehran. I have no doubt many in Iran understood the position they were in militarily and politically in that early part of January. Remember, Iran's military had just shot down a civilian airliner and 2/3 of their missiles failed in their attack on the US airbase. Rational Iranian military and political leaders would not just be cautious about their own military capabilities, but would understand the danger they were in. The US Air Force and Navy can, in two or three weeks, destroy or severely damage every Iranian ship, plane, airfield, port, and

military installation, as well as much of Iran's critical civilian physical and cyber infrastructures. If I was an Iranian leader, it would be hard, but certainly I would swallow my pride and urge restraint. This is something I have said to Iranian television and university audiences twice: the danger of the US Air Force and Navy can not be exaggerated and must be respected due to the extreme violence and destruction the US can bring to any part of the planet through those unholy winged organs of empire.

Finally, I think many in Iranian military and government circles understood their own parliamentary elections to be coming up (held the last full weekend in February) and these elections had to be Iran's priority this winter. A war, especially a disastrous one, could very well have upset the ruling religious leadership's plans for the elections. The weighted, if not fully rigged, elections saw conservative politicians fill the parliament – an outcome not helpful for peace. Many in Tehran recognize as well the US presidential elections to be held in November, and with that, particularly with a potential Bernie Sanders presidency, a potential lessening of tensions between the US and Iran if there is a change in the White House. Benjamin Netanyahu's challenger in Israel, Benny Gantz is a hawk on Iran, but how worse could Gantz be than Bibi? With Netanyahu's indictment and another round of elections in Israel forthcoming, I think there are Iranian leaders who believe a change in US and Israeli leadership could be beneficial, a sort of the devil you don't know is better than the devil you do approach. Add in potential political unrest due to a strangled economy, and now the coronavirus outbreak, and for many Iranian leaders waiting for November and the US elections is worthwhile and prudent. Doing anything in the interim which would give the US and Trump the excuse to attack would be staggeringly foolish and self destructive.

In the summer of 2006, as I was preparing with my Marines and sailors to go to Iraq, in the chow hall aboard the Marine Corps base in 29 Palms, California, I would wonder at all of the excitement exhibited on the chow hall's televisions by US political and media classes over Israel's new war in southern Lebanon. Aren't people pleased enough with the two wars the US currently has I thought. For the US Empire, and those relishing the responsibility for its maintenance and expansion, to include much of corporate media, there can simply not be too much war. There are hardliners in Iran who want confrontation and war with the US, just as for decades now we have had hardliners in the US start, prolong and sustain war after war, stretching from Western Africa to Pakistan. What we need to do, both Americans and Iranians, is to recognize the dangers within each of our own governments and not do anything to allow these hardliners to feed off

each other, escalate crises and deliver the political space needed in both countries for war between the US and Iran to occur.

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