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Can the Iranian Resistance Triumph Before The U.S. Turns to War?

By Daniel Luban
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The images coming out of Iran in recent days have spoken for themselves, and I don't have much to add to what others have said. It is nearly impossible for anyone — let alone an outsider half a world away — to predict what the outcome of the protests will be.

Still, the protests have helped drive home the message that the logic of the democracy issue is distinct from the logic of the nuclear issue. While hawks in the U.S. and Israel have been more than happy to clothe themselves in the moral legitimacy of the protesters to build support for taking a harder line with Tehran, all indications are that their ultimate goal — a military attack against Iranian nuclear facilities — would prove disastrous for the nascent democracy movement.

Jeffrey Goldberg notes that there are “two clocks” governing the democracy and nuclear issues, [writing](#): “It would be best for everyone if the people of Iran could triumph over their oppressors before the regime goes definitively nuclear. The peace of the world may depend on this.” What he fails to note, however, is that these clocks do not exist in a vacuum. The path that the West takes on the nuclear issue has enormous ramifications for the success or failure of the protesters.

Moreover, the really salient “nuclear clock” does not concern Iran's march to the bomb — U.S. intelligence [estimates](#) that Iran would not have the capacity to produce highly enriched uranium until at least 2013, if it even chose to do so — but rather the West's march to war. In the next few months, the Obama administration is sure to come under

enormous pressure either to launch a military attack or to acquiesce to an Israeli attack; such an attack would be likely to set back the “democracy clock” significantly, and perhaps even snuff out the Green Movement entirely. Our capacity to harm the protesters, in other words, seems to be far greater than our capacity to aid them. And the disjuncture between the “two clocks” has rarely been as striking as at the present — for just as the democracy protests appear to be cresting, the push for war in the U.S. is escalating significantly in its own right.

As noted, it is difficult to judge the democracy clock with any accuracy, and the Green Movement’s prospects seem to vary on a daily (and even hourly) basis. While I would like to believe that we are witnessing the regime’s death throes, any such optimism must be tempered by the knowledge that the regime’s ability to maintain its power by force might long outlast its popular legitimacy. The protesters’ strength is by all indications much greater than it was even a few days ago. But it also possible that the end result for the near future will be neither all-out victory or defeat, but rather periodic and recurring cycles of unrest and repression.

The Washington clock, however, has been advancing more steadily and inexorably. The hawks’ plan, from the time Obama took office, has been to set a firm deadline for diplomacy (the end of the year or before) at which point the U.S. would move to sanctions. When sanctions failed to show results within a few months (as nearly everyone agrees is likely), the push for war would begin in earnest.

This is the strategy codified in last year’s Bipartisan Policy Center report “Meeting The Challenge,” which Jim Lobe aptly [described](#) as a “roadmap to war.” The report — signed onto by Dennis Ross, now the Obama administration’s National Security Council point man on Iran — was notable for its apparent insistence that both diplomacy and sanctions were likely to fail, and were therefore worth trying chiefly in order to build international support for an inevitable military attack.

So far, events in Washington have been roughly conforming to the script. Michael Rubin (one of the chief drafters of the BPC report) recently [wrote](#) that “over the last year...[the report] seems to be a play-by-play of U.S. strategy toward Iran.” December saw the passage in the House of the Iran Refined Petroleum Sanctions Act (IRPSA), the sanctions bill targeting Iran’s refined petroleum sector that has been the top priority of AIPAC and other hawkish lobby groups. A parallel Senate bill was recently delayed, but appears to be [on track](#) for passage early in the new year.

But unsurprisingly, the imposition of sanctions seems only to have whetted, not sated, the hawks’ appetite for war. Alan Kuperman’s long *New York Times* [op-ed](#) [discussed](#) in more depth) was a warning shot, and we can expect more of the same in the months to come. As Marc Lynch [writes](#), “one of the great foreign policy challenges of 2010 is going to be to push back on this mad campaign for another pointless, counter-productive war for the sake of war.” from last week urging military strikes (which Jim Lobe has already

All this means that 2010 is shaping up to be a very tense year for the Green Movement; it may have to worry not only about the Iranian regime, but also about overenthusiastic or disingenuous “supporters” in Washington and Jerusalem. The democracy clock and nuclear clock have diverged sharply in recent months, and the real question is not whether the Green Movement can triumph before Iran gains a nuclear capability, but whether it can do so before these Western “supporters” deal it a potentially fatal blow.