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Iran, WikiLeaks and the Pentagon Papers

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12/21/2010

The WikiLeaks disclosures and their global ramifications, particularly on the sensitive subject of the Iran nuclear standoff, warrant limited comparison with the modern age's first leaks scandal - the New York Times' publication of a massive cache of United States government [documents](#) and self-analysis on the Vietnam War in 1971, otherwise known as the Pentagon Papers.

As Tehran and the "Iran Six" nations gear up for follow-up talks in Istanbul after an initial meeting in Geneva in early December, news of US intentions to impose a new round of both unilateral and multilateral sanctions on Iran ahead of Istanbul has hit Iran as yet another sign of America's "bad faith". This acts as a brake on a spurt of optimism in Iran post-Geneva that saw Saeed Jalili, Iran's negotiator, state that Istanbul could be the scene of a major breakthrough.

Such hope may prove to be unfounded, in light of ominous signs of the US administration's policy on Iran being in disarray, worse, the increasing sway of hawkish voices and neo-conservative and pro-Israel influences that are seeking to thwart any deal between the White House and Tehran. The pro-Israel, anti-Iran spin is in full throttle in the Western media, with an avalanche of commentaries pushing for an iron fist toward Iran and the end of the "linkage approach" previously favored by President Barack Obama, which linked progress on the Middle East peace process to the Iran nuclear standoff.

Thanks in part to a well-orchestrated campaign based on highly selective reading of the WikiLeaks documents, that consistently ignore Arab leaders' insistence on such a linkage, Western public opinion has been molded into the false belief that there is Middle East consensus on the priority of the Iran nuclear threat above the Israel-Palestine problem. Although the fallacy of this assumption has been demonstrated in articles by Jim Lobe, Gareth Porter and others, the anti-Iran mill continues to pour out countless disinformation to influence US policy away from a compromise with Iran that could conceivably end the nuclear crisis.

Fatal flaw in the stick approach

Behind the US's push for new Iran sanctions is the familiar argument that "negotiations without continued pressure will not achieve our objectives", to paraphrase William Bundy, a US policymaker, quoted in the Pentagon Papers. Indeed, how little the US learns from its own history. But, the mounting pressures on North Vietnam, and the US's [strategy](#) of "converting bargaining pressure" into concessions from Hanoi, did not work then and, by all indications, will not work against Iran either.

Both the Pentagon Papers and the WikiLeaks releases on Iran depict a similar "domino theory"; in Vietnam it was the fear communism would spread throughout Indochina, while similar metaphors cast Iran as a "growing cancer" with the "tentacles of an octopus". These are used to state the case that the protective powers of the US are needed everywhere in the Middle East. Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the US military, has said that the US is "very ready" to counter Iran.

All this sabre-rattling and pressure tactics coincide with Tehran's selection of a US-educated technocrat, Ali Akbar Salehi, as the new foreign minister. In his first speech as acting minister he struck a conciliatory note by highlighting the importance of "confidence-building" steps. This raises serious questions about US motives and its claim that it is seeking a solution, and not the intensification, of the Iran nuclear crisis.

A parallel moment shown in the Pentagon Papers is the US's watershed decision in 1954 to scuttle the Geneva peace talks that could have ended the conflict in Vietnam. The Papers solidly established the US's "direct role" in pressuring the Europeans, chiefly France, against "acquiescence" to North Vietnam that led to a breakdown in talks that paved the way to the full-fledged Americanization of the conflict, thanks in part to war-mongering initiatives in the US Congress.

Similarly, today, in light of pressure on the White House from various members of congress demanding a "red line" be drawn on Iran's enrichment activities and for no deal on a nuclear fuel swap until Iran agrees to fully implement United Nations resolutions seeking the suspension of such activities, the US's present drift away from meaningful negotiations comes from multiple sources, including its legislative branch, which should know better than to propel the nation to yet another disastrous "proxy war" in the interests of the state of Israel.

According to Le Monde newspaper's reporting of the latest WikiLeaks diplomatic [cables](#), the Israelis gave erroneous estimates of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction prior to the 2003 invasion. It would be no surprise if Tel Aviv should do the same vis-a-vis Iran.

The Pentagon Papers vilified the French. The target these days is the European Union (EU) and its foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton. She was denounced in Washington for daring to play a "central role" in the Geneva talks, and a riled Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak, who visited Washington last week, reportedly complained of the US taking a back seat to the EU in the Iran talks.

Conveniently ignored by both the Israeli leadership and its powerful influence-peddlers in Washington is that the future does not hold any prospect of Iranian compliance with a maximalist demand of full suspension of Iran's (expensive and much-cherished) nuclear program, no matter how many more sticks are leveled against it. Shouldn't Washington shape its policies based on realistic expectations? Apparently not.

From Iran's point of view, the WikiLeaks disclosures shed unsavory light on Obama's "engagement" policy, showing an administration duplicating the previous "dual track" approach under the guise of a policy change, thus escalating tensions with Iran.

"We do not find presently revealed plans give prospect of clear victory," the Pentagon Papers quoted US government adviser George Ball as saying. How easily that statement

could be applied to the US's present course of action toward Iran, centered as it is on counter-proliferation.

In fact, everything the US and its allies are doing - from biting sanctions to banning conventional arms sales to Iran; from selling Iran's neighbors cutting-edge military hardware to outright threatening Iran with military attack (and a nuclear one if need be) - is bound to have the opposite effect, of heightening Iran's national security concerns and chipping away at its hitherto steadfast antipathy toward nuclear weapons. That would be tantamount to a case of a "self-fulfilling prophecy".

In turn, this raises a red flag for those in Tehran whose optimism about reaching a deal with the US and its allies at the forthcoming talks may be based on a naive and downright mistaken perception of the US's ill-intentions toward Iran, which are based on the fact that US harvests a huge windfall, in both economic and geostrategic realms, from the continued nuclear standoff. A gap between current expectations and future results could easily backfire against the Tehran optimists.

This is not to necessarily endorse the opposite view of pure cynics in Iran, who point ominously at the suicide bombing of a mosque in Chah Bahar that killed dozens of worshipers within days of Iran's appointment of a more dovish foreign minister and prompted the spiritual leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, to issue a strong denunciation of Western complicity in the waves of terrorism in Iran.

A problem with the cynical camp is that it tends to oversimplify the complexities of US policy making and to dismiss the existing tensions between the US and Israel over both Iran and the peace process. Rather, a middle approach is called for in Tehran, based on healthy though calibrated cynicism in combination with optimism. Iran, in fact, has a slight edge going into the Istanbul talks, given Russia's support for a "constructive approach", Turkey's backing of the fuel swap and the Europeans' weariness of American-Israeli war-mongering.

"We now see a total reversal of the American position [on a fuel swap] in October 2009," says a Tehran University political science professor on the condition of anonymity. "The Obama administration has stepped outside the bounds of reasonable assumptions on Iran that Iran can respond to ... Iran may react to the escalation of pressures by downgrading its cooperation with the IAEA [the UN's nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency]."

In other words, there is a real prospect of a qualitative turn for the worse in the nuclear standoff in the near future, compared with the dim prospects for a breakthrough, unless the White House somehow manages to divest itself of unhealthy and poisonous influences that have resulted in Iran policy disarray.

This unlikely development is the *sine quo non* for a successful approach that could reciprocate Salehi's call for confidence-building and incremental steps toward US-Iran detente. But, as Mullen's hawkish "very ready" remark within hours of Salehi taking a conciliatory tone makes abundantly clear, the US is a poor player in conflict-management and a lot more adept at pursuing the long-held addiction to hard power disclosed in the publication of the Pentagon Papers. Call it a superpower malady.