

Iran: what if nothing happens?

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A good friend asked me to write something on Iran. 'What is there left to say?' I asked. 'That's true of any subject' he suggested, helpfully. But all of a sudden it came to me.

Amidst official statements, media interviews and op-eds variously predicting that America will bomb Iran, or that America will negotiate with Iran, or that Israel will bomb Iran, or that Iran will close the Straits of Hormuz, or that the Iranian economy will collapse, or even that the regime will collapse, I do not recall reading, hearing or seeing anyone say that nothing will happen this year.

As I rolled this idea around in my head I was astonished at how much easier it was to argue that the main actors in this drama would do nothing this year, rather than to argue that they would do something.

Let's start with America. President Obama is squeezing Iran with sanctions, but no-one expects this to change Iran's position on its nuclear program. At best it might force Iran to the negotiating table, but who actually believes that the Iranians and the Americans have the will or the ability to do a deal on anything, let alone the nuclear program, especially in a US presidential election year?

But if sanctions do not work, or if rising oil prices make them unsustainable, does anyone believe that Obama would start a war with Iran, when he has spent his first term getting America out of Iraq and has started to do the same in Afghanistan? In fact, does anybody believe he would do this when even his more gung-ho predecessor could not bring himself to attack Iran?

What about Israel? Prime Minister Netanyahu has said a lot on Iran, but I struggle to think of another example in Israel's military history where the country has threatened to bomb something so many times without ever actually doing it. Usually when Israel sees a threat and decides that it has the military means to deal with it it does so.

If the problem is American objections, then Obama statement's in the wake of the AIPAC conference suggest that this is not going to change this year. Others suggest Israel will act, even against US wishes, because the nuclear threat is becoming acute, crossing technical thresholds and moving into a 'zone of immunity', provided by the Fordow nuclear site built under a mountain near Qom.

I defer to those with deeper technical knowledge of the Iranian nuclear program and simply ask, isn't that what people said last year (and the year before)? In fact, does not Iran's real immunity lay in the nuclear knowledge that it now has and that no amount of bombing can really destroy.

Which brings us, finally, to Iran.

It is not exactly doing nothing. It continues to put in place the various components it needs to one day produce a nuclear weapon. But most Western intelligence agencies say that Tehran has not yet taken the decision to actually build a bomb. In fact, even if Iran were in a technical position to make such decision this year why would they do it, given the self-evident advantages of keeping a nuclear capability ambiguously hidden away in the attic rather than out on the table for everyone to see and react to.

So in the face of growing economic pressure and threats of military action, what will Iran do? The regime won't abandon its nuclear program because it can live with economic sanctions. It can brutally repress any domestic unrest stimulated by sanctions. It probably does not really believe that anyone is going to bomb its nuclear facilities. Or it may figure that even if it is wrong on this count it can survive an attack that might only serve to rally most Iranians against the external threat.

I had thought until recently that the regime might, if sanctions were proving effective, lash out in some provocative way, as suggested by recent attacks on Israeli diplomats in India and Georgia. But with everyone now firmly established at the precipice of this crisis I wonder whether Tehran, even with its history of misreading American intentions and policy, would really think that now was a good time to do anything that would unnecessarily bring even more pressure onto itself.

Even though the argument that no-one will do anything this year has been an easier argument to make, I am still unsure of the evidence and my conclusion. So I decided to re-read some recent commentary by people whose views on this issue I respect. One, a former US official, said that America, Israel and Iran 'are now engaged in a three-way game of chicken' in which 'physical or political survival makes blinking more dangerous than confrontation'. But what if, I wondered, everyone blinks at the same time?

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