Iranian delusion and the American war machine

The million-dollar question is: How can Iran defuse one of this era’s most serious crises?

Written by Ramin Jahanbegloo | Published: May 20, 2019

Despite increasing pressures and threats, there is no indication from the various statements by Iranian officials that Tehran is preparing itself for an attack from the US. (Illustration: C R Sasikumar)

“Should we negotiate with Iran’s ayatollahs?” This is a question which was put by Henry Kissinger, the former US Secretary of State under Richard Nixon, to Bernard Lewis, the British-American historian of the Middle East. “Certainly not!” came Lewis’s uncompromising response. It looks like the overall stance of the Trump Administration goes in the direction of Lewis’s general doctrine for the future of Iran and the Middle East. Lewis died a year
ago, on May 19, 2018, but his influence among the American statesmen and strategists has not decreased. As a matter of fact, in his obituary for Lewis, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo wrote: “I owe a great deal of my understanding of the Middle East to his work. He was also a man who believed, as I do, that Americans must be more confident in the greatness of our country, not less.” Well, it happens that in the mind of Lewis, the greatness of the United States goes hand in hand with a radical Balkanisation of the Middle East. Dick Cheney, the 46th US vice president (2001 to 2009), had a similar strategic ambition in terms of the invasion of Iraq. About half a million people died in Iraq as a result of war-related causes between the beginning of the US-led invasion in 2003 and mid-2011.

Inspired by the same line of thinking, Pompeo and John Bolton seem to be impatient to try once again the “Bernard Lewis Doctrine”. However, as the recent verbal confrontation between the authorities in Tehran and the Trump administration shows, nobody can say what the end game of the new American sanctions and the recent military measure taken by the Pentagon in the Persian Gulf would be. Are these measures part of Donald Trump’s campaign for re-election? Or, is it an effort to force Iran to negotiate a “better” nuclear deal? Or is it to prepare for a regime change in Iran? One does not need to be in on the secret of the gods to answer these questions. As the saying goes, “When the chips are down, these civilised people will eat each other.”

Let us be very clear: By hitting Iran between the eyes, the US is hoping to provoke the ayatollahs and the Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) to react militarily. But for the time being, Iran’s response has not been to attack any American interests in the region. As a matter of fact, in a calculated step-by-step escalation, Iran declared that it will not abide by some of its obligations under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Also, during a visit to Moscow, Iran’s Foreign Minister Javad Zarif added that Iran will not leave
the nuclear deal. It is also doubtful that Zarif’s recent visit to Delhi will have any effect on the American decision to suspend its sanctions’ exemption to Iran’s oil customers such as India or to stop the US aircraft carrier, Abraham Lincoln, from going to the Middle East.

Interestingly, leaked video footage aired on Israeli TV shows Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu boasting that he had personally convinced President Trump to abandon the Iran nuclear deal. The video, aired by Israel’s Kan News, shows Netanyahu praising his own and the Likud leadership’s efforts. “We convinced the US president to exit the deal and I had to stand up against the whole world and come out against this agreement,” Netanyahu claimed.

Netanyahu posted the interview segment with the commentary in Hebrew: “I will continue to strengthen Israel as a rising global force.” It looks like Lewis’s doctrine of “Balkanisation of the Middle East” is also taken very seriously in Tel Aviv, especially since we know that Ben Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel, too had a similar strategic ambition.

Now, the million-dollar question is: How can Iran defuse one of this era’s most serious crises?

Despite increasing pressures and threats, there is no indication from the various statements by Iranian officials that Tehran is preparing itself for an American attack. Tehran is still hanging its hopes on Trump’s defeat in the 2020 US presidential elections. Another dangerous misconception among the leaders of the Islamic regime is that in the event of a war with the US, Iranians will be galvanised in the same way as they were in 1980 against Saddam Hussein. However, for the younger generation of Iranians — the 70 per cent of the population under the age of 35 — who are disenchanted with the Islamist ideology and have suffered from a brutal eight-year war with Iraq and domestic unrests in 1999, 2009 and 2017, a war against the US is not necessarily a desirable objective.

Jobs, social freedoms and better economic opportunities are one thing, but dying for the revolutionary principles of 1979 is another. Tehran is also hanging its hopes on its proxies in the region. Surely, the Lebanese
Hezbollah will make a military move against Israel and the American interests in the region, but no doubt, they too, would have to pay a heavy price, though nothing compared to what Iran would pay in case of an America attack. However, it would be contrary to any expectation that a country in West Asia or the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region would help Iran. Unfortunately, the delusion of the Islamic regime is that it could cause enough harm to Americans and their allies so that they will be forced to end the war.

There is no doubt that Iran will not recover easily from the damage done by a possible American attack. Even if Iran does not suffer a devastating civil war and ethnic fissures like post-Saddam Iraq, the fates of tens of millions of Iranians, including the Iranian-American citizens who are spending time in Evin prison, are at stake. Let us hope that Pompeo and Bolton will not follow the advice Bernard Lewis offered to Henry Kissinger.

*The writer is professor and vice dean, Jindal Global University*