

# The Confrontation with Iran: A Covert War

By Akbar E. Torbat

January 20, 2012 "[Information Clearing House](#)" --- The Control over the oil-rich regions of the Middle East and North Africa is strategically very important for the US and its Western allies. To expand their domination over the oil-rich regions, the US and its allies are trying to destabilize the countries that are not under their control so that they can install new client regimes in their place. After the US - NATO success to control the oil-rich Libya, it appears that the next would be the oil-rich Iran. In recent years, Iran has significantly progressed in science and technology. The US and its allies are concerned that Iran's progress will deter their imperial hegemony in the Persian Gulf region. To contain Iran, the US & its allies have used the Iranian nuclear program as a pretext to weaken Iran by imposing sanctions against it. In addition to the economic sanctions that have been in effect for some time, the US and its allies have recently confronted Iran in several other fronts, including covert operations, freezing assets, cutting ties with Iran's Central Bank, threatening to attack Iran's nuclear installations, trying to overthrow Iran's ally President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, and media campaigns to foment a soft-coup. Here is how these actions have increased tensions between Iran and the West.

## Fomenting a Velvet Revolution

Iran's relations with the West improved during 1990s and early 2000s through a faction of Islamic clerics, the so-called "moderate clerics", affiliated with the Iranian affluent and merchant class. Between 2003 and 2005 Britain along with France and Germany negotiated with Iran on the issue of its nuclear program and tried to stop that program. However, the moderate clerics gradually lost their power following the election of President Ahmadinejad who won the elections in 2005 by gaining grassroots' support from the urban poor and rural dwellers. Since then the West has turned against the radical Islamists who have gained total control over the government. In early 2006, the Bush administration allocated \$75 million for promoting "democracy" in Iran and supporting the groups opposing the Islamic government. In addition, the US State Department expanded its staff in American embassy in Dubai and other nearby embassies for watching the regime in Tehran. That had an impression that Washington has a new plan for Iran. In 2009, Iran's relations with the West further deteriorated after the US and its Western allies sided with the "moderate" wing of the regime to foment a velvet revolution against the incumbent president Ahmadinejad.

The US does not want necessarily to overthrow the Islamic regime. After all, the US and its Western allies overthrew the secular regimes of Saddam Hossein and Muammar Gaddafi and replaced them by Islamic regimes, and they are at work now to do the same in Syria to legitimize a fundamentalist Islamist regime in that country. The purpose of the pressures on Iran is to change its leaders to those who will take orders from Washington. In other words, the US plans to make a client Islamic regime out of the existing “moderate clerics”. That plan was in the cards during the 2009 presidential elections in Iran. Few months before the elections, several major Western media outlets, including the New York Times, Financial Times, the BBC, and the CNN began to boost Mohammad Khatami, a moderate cleric, as a favorite candidate to re-enter the presidential elections. At the same time, the BBC started a Persian language TV program, which along with the Voice of America’s Farsi language program began negative campaigning against the incumbent president. Yet, the Western media excessive pro-Khatami propogandas backfired as he was viewed by many to be a comprador to serve the interests of the West. Furthermore, there was an impression that a cleric presidential candidate would be unpopular in the eyes of the Iranian voters; therefore Khatami was forced to step aside. At that time, Mir-Hossein Mousavi returned to the political scene after 20 years being out of his position as prime minister. He became the so-called “reformist” factions’ candidate in the presidential elections. The Western media outlets immediately shifted their daily propoganda in favor of Mousavi to the point that he was ludicrously painted as being Iran’s Mahatma Gandhi.

According to a summary report that was read in the Iranian parliament on December 29, 2011 concerning the post-election revolt, a soft coup had been planned well ahead of the elections by Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mohammad Khatami, Mehdi Karroubi, and Mir-Hossein Mousavi. The “Gang of Four” had planned to defeat the incumbent president at any price by raising the issue of rigged election, and by using the scheme for fomenting a velvet revolution authored by the Harvard researcher, Gene Sharp. During the run up and after the 2009 presidential elections, the Gang of Four with the help of the Western media campaign wanted to depose President Ahmadinejad by disputing the results of his re-election. This was to be done by a velvet revolution, the so-called Green movement, similar to what had been done in Ukraine and Georgia. The Western media manufactured the Gang of Four as the leaders of Iran’s opposition factions. Rafsanjani went to hiding for two weeks during which time he tried to oust the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei who had backed President Ahmadinejad. The dispute following the presidential elections on June 12, 2009 brought the most violent demonstrations in Iran since the 1979 revolution.

After the post-elections riots, a couple of thousand rioters were arrested, sixty six of them were accused of being affiliated with “foreign services”. Some of these arrested were Iranian nationals who had dual citizenship and were employees of foreign

embassies. They were charged with participating in the demonstrations and gathering of information for their embassies. Nazak Afshar, an employee of the French embassy in Tehran, confessed she had participated in “post-election demonstrations, sent emails containing information on the protests, and let protestors into the embassy based on orders given by her employer.” Bernard Kouchner, the French Foreign Minister, later confirmed that he had told the French Embassy in Tehran to shelter the protestors. Another defendant, Hassan Ressam, an employee of the British embassy, confessed a budget of 300,000 pounds (about \$500,000) had been given to him to establish contacts with the Iranian parties as well as “movers and shakers” in favor of the Green candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi. Also, Reza Rafiyi-Frushani who had worked for the UAE intelligence agency had been paid \$1,400 per month to gather intelligence. The confessions by the accused revealed that there had been Western conspiracies to influence the results of Iranian elections so that to prevent Ahmadinejad to win his second term.

Nonetheless, the attempted soft-coup failed to depose the president. After the elections, Iran’s relations with the West and especially with Britain deteriorated. The Iranian government claimed that the British government had been the main organizer behind the post-election turmoil in the streets of Tehran with London being the command center of the soft coup and the British embassy in Tehran as its local headquarter. In reaction, on June 18, 2009, Britain announced in its Parliament that it would freeze \$1.6 billion approximately £976,110,000 of Iranian assets in the UK banks under the European Union and UN sanctions against Iran. Subsequently, the fall of the Labor government in Britain in May 2010 and the emerging of the Conservative Party Prime Minister David Cameron further deteriorated the relations as he increased pressure on Iran. Cameron imposed sanctions on Iran’s banking system and the energy sector in cooperation with the US and Canada over the Iranian Nuclear program. Also, the U.S. Treasury Department provided information to a US federal court in Manhattan, which led the court to freeze more than \$2 billion funds that Luxembourg's Clearstream Banking S.A. had held in the Citibank Bank alleging Clearstream had acted on behalf of Iran’s Central Bank. Clearstream is owned by the Deutsche Börse AG. The legal order initially was issued in 2008 by the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York in response to an allegation that Iran had been involved in a 1983 attack on the US soldiers' Barracks Bombing in Beirut. In addition to freezing assets and fomenting a velvet revolution, a new front in confronting Iran has been launching a covert war.

### **Covert Operations against Iran**

Even though Iran has strengthened its defense capability against possible military attacks by the US and its allies, yet it has been caught off guard by an undercover war

against it. The US, Britain, and their regional proxy Israel have used covert operations as a viable alternative to conventional military action against Iran. On October 10, 2010, Sir John Sawers, the chief of British MI6 said “Stopping nuclear proliferation cannot be addressed purely by conventional diplomacy. We need intelligence-led operations to make it more difficult for countries like Iran to develop nuclear weapons.” Evidences show covert operations against Iran are ongoing. Such operations consist of sabotage, media war, and infiltration of the Iranian intelligence service by the CIA, MI6, and Mossad. As of now, it seems the US and its allies have established a fifth column inside Iran for clandestine operations. The fifth column can sabotage Iran’s military installations and provides help for a possible US led military invasion.

In the past few years, Iran has experienced multiple explosions in its oil refineries, gas pipelines, factories, military installations, and has suffered assassinations of five nuclear scientists. Moreover, in 2010, the Stuxnet computer worm was used to cripple Iran’s nuclear centrifuges. Even though, the US top officials have refused to confirm or deny that they were associated with any of these incidents, some others have spoken openly about such vicious acts. One US presidential hopeful Newt Gingrich indicated that the US should “take out” the Iranian nuclear scientists. Another one, Rick Santorum has said killing Iranian nuclear scientists is a good idea and should be celebrated. Other Republican Presidential hopefuls have advocated war with Iran, except Congressman Ron Paul who has rightly said Iran does not threaten the US national security. On October 26, 2011, several military experts who testified in the congress proposed similar schemes. For example, the retired US Army General Jack Keane told in a hearing of the US House of Representatives' Homeland Security Committee "I'm saying we put our hand around their throat right now in every interest they have”.

In the past few months, the intensity of covert operations in Iran has increased as multiple explosions in several strategic locations have occurred. Iran has been able to arrest a number of individuals engaging in espionage against it. On November 24, 2011, Iran announced the arrest of a dozen CIA agents who had worked with Israel's Mossad to damage its military and nuclear installations. Subsequently, on December 19, Iran’s TV showed Amir Mirzaei Hekmati, an alleged CIA spy, who revealed he had intended to play the role of a double agent. Hekmati confessed to have planned to sell some intelligence information to the Iranian Intelligence ministry and to come back to the US as a hired agent of Iran so that to mislead Iran. Hekmati is a US citizen of Iranian origin born in the US, who was first sent to the US-run Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan and was given access to classified US intelligence before flying to Tehran. He had previously worked for BAE Systems plc, a British defense and security company headquartered in London. Hekmati was convicted by a court of being a CIA spy and on January 9, 2012 was sentenced to death.

Iran has blamed the U.S., Britain, and Israeli intelligence agencies for killing of the Iranian nuclear scientists. The latest being Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan, a university lecturer and the deputy director of Marketing at Natanz uranium enrichment facility who was assassinated along with his driver on January 11, 2012. Iran has said all the Iranian scientists who were targeted by the terrorist attacks “had their names given by the IAEA to third parties.” The assassinations have disgraced the UN nuclear agency as the culprit for giving confidential information on Iran’s nuclear experts to the Western intelligence agencies. Iran's Foreign Ministry immediately blamed the US and UK governments for their roles in the assassination. Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei said “the global arrogance led by the US and Zionism has reached a stalemate in confrontation with the determined, devout, and progressive Iran.”

President Ahmadinejad said “not only these actions will fail to halt Iran’s advancement on the path to development, but they will strengthen the Iranians' resolve in making more scientific breakthroughs.” Following the incident, the Iranian foreign ministry handed a letter to the Swiss Embassy, which represents U.S. interests in Iran, alleging it has reliable documents and evidence that this terrorist act was planned, guided and supported by the CIA.

On the case of professor Massaod Ali-Mohamadi, Iran identified and arrested the assassin who confessed he was paid and trained by Mossad to assassinate the professor. In August 2011, the German newspaper Der Spiegel reported that Mossad was behind the assassination of Iran’s nuclear scientists. Iran should have been more vigilant about the security of its top scientists and professors. While condemning the assassinations, the Iranian oppositions blamed the Iranian government for not taking adequate measures to protect the lives of Iranian scientists against such repeated terrorist acts. The Jordanian newspapers International Reality reported about 350 nuclear scientists and 200 university professors were assassinated in Iraq by Mossad in collaboration with American forces between 2003 -2008. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has not been pleased with his security minister Heydar Moslehi and tried to fire him in April 2011. Some members of the president cabinet have been forced on him by the Supreme Leader, including Moslehi, the only cleric minister, who was reinstated shortly after being fired by the president.

In the past few months, a number of explosions have happened in several strategic locations in Iran. Two large explosions occurred in November 2011, one on November 12 at a military base located in Bid-Ganeh near the town of Milard 30 miles west of Tehran in which the architect of Iran’s missile technology General Hassan Tehrani-Moghdam along with a dozen other Revolutionary Guard officers were killed. The second explosion occurred on November 28 outside of Isfahan city limit in a uranium processing facility which generated clouds of smoke billow in sky above the city. These prompted widespread speculation that Israel’s intelligence service may have been involved. On November, 30, 2011, the Times of London

reported that the explosions were not caused by accidents according to an Israeli official who had implied Israel was behind the incidents. Iran said the first explosion was due to an accident and has not given a clear account of the second one. Yet another explosion happened on December 11, at Ghadir-e Yazd steel melting factory in which 16 workers were killed and 5 were injured. Also on November 29, it was reported that Ahmad Rezai, 34, the son of Mohsen Rezai, the secretary of Iran's Expediency Council, was found dead at a hotel room in Dubai. These events in a matter of few weeks cannot all be due to accidents.

What is more, the US carefully monitors Iran from the air. On December 4, 2011, Iran grounded a US drone which was flying illegally over Iran's airspace, in the northeastern city of Kashmar, about 140 miles away from the Afghan border. It was an US RQ-170 Sentinel stealth aircraft, designed and developed by the American company Lockheed Martin, which had crossed into Iran's airspace from Afghanistan. Iran brought down the drone by jamming its satellite contact. The aircraft was landed somewhere in the northern city of Tabas in the province of Khorasan by the Iranian Army's electronic warfare unit. Following days of silence, President Barack Obama said Washington had asked Tehran to return the drone. Iran's success in grounding the spy aircraft with minimal damage stunned the West. Iran's successful capture of the spy drone is comparable to the Soviet Union's shot down of an American U-2 spy plane in May 1960 during the Cold War. These events prove the US, Britain, and their regional proxy Israel are actively working on their covert plan to confront Iran.

### **Reactions to the Anglo-American Threats**

The assassinations of scientists, tightening of the sanctions, and the repeated explosions have provoked angers of the Iranian people against the US, Britain, and their regional proxy Israel. Since only Britain had diplomatic relations with Iran at the time, the Iranian parliament reacted by approving a bill on November 27, 2011 to reduce Iran's diplomatic contacts with Britain to chargé d'affaires level, which meant the British ambassador Dominick John Chilot had to leave Iran within two weeks. On the day votes were taken to reduce the diplomatic contacts with Britain 96 members of the Iranian Parliament members were absent. The vote count was 179 yes, 11 abstain, and 4 oppose. Why did almost one-third of the 290 parliament's members decide not to vote? Some top officials of the Islamic government have their daughters and sons studying in Britain and have bank accounts there. At present, two Rafsanjani's sons have taken refuge in London. In the past, Britain has interfered in Iran's internal affairs through the moderate Islamists, including some of the clerics as well as members and heads of the parliament. The British use of power of the purse is well known in Iran.

It seems that the radical Islamists were waiting for the ruling to show their anger at Britain. Just one day after the Guardian Council affirmed the parliament ruling, on the afternoon of November 29, 2011, about one thousand Islamist students gathered in front of the British embassy on Ferdowsi Avenue in downtown Tehran. It appeared that the demonstration was well planned and organized and carried out by radical students who support the Supreme Leader. Some of them were carrying the picture of Majid Shahriari, the nuclear scientist who was assassinated a year ago, to commemorate the anniversary of his assassination. About 50 of the students were able to pass the police line and broke in to the embassy from the main entrance door and began to throw out some documents and pictures from the building. Simultaneously another group of about 300 hundred students demonstrated in front of a second British diplomatic compound located in the Gholhak district in North Tehran and some entered the compound and ransacked the building. The police succeeded quickly to expel them from the compounds in both places. The students' action was not so different from what had happened on September 9, 2011, when some Egyptian students' protestors broke into the Israeli Embassy in Cairo. Also it was a reminiscence of a similar incident that led to take over of the American embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979, when 52 Americans were taken hostage which lasted 444 days.

In reaction, the British foreign secretary William Hague ordered to close the British embassy in Tehran the next day and asked the British diplomats to leave, saying raiding of the embassy had backing of the Islamic regime. Furthermore, he asked the Iranian diplomats in the UK to leave within 48 hours. Britain has not yet formally severed relations with Iran. Despite of the sanctions, Britain has some commercial interests in Iran. For example, Turquoise Partners, a London-based investment company controls about 90% of the total value of foreign investments in Tehran Stock Exchange. The British government has demanded merely one million dollar for the damages to its properties in Tehran.

The office of President Ahmadinejad isolated itself from the incident and Iran's foreign minister Ali Akbar Salehi immediately apologized to Britain for the incident. Some Iranian student associations also criticized storming of the British embassy while some others remained silent. Nevertheless, there was an impression that the Islamists students had been tacitly supported by the office of the Supreme Leader. Some speculated the purpose of the embassy occupation perhaps was to show the Islamic hardliners and their affiliates in the parliament are not backed by the British government.

In December, Iran began conducting a couple of naval exercises in the Persian Gulf and threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz through which 40 percent of the World oil exports passes. Because of Iran's drill, the American aircraft-carrier USS Stennis

moved out of the Persian Gulf in December. On January 3, 2012, General Ataollah Salehi, the army chief, said "I recommend and emphasize to the American carrier not to return to the Persian Gulf." The Iranian parliament is now considering a bill to require battleships getting permission to enter the Gulf. The USS John C. Stennis since has not returned. US Military officials have said another aircraft carrier the USS Carl Vinson has arrived in the vicinity of the Persian Gulf on January 9 to replace the outgoing Stennis. In addition, one more carrier strike group, led by the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, is headed to join Vinson from the Indian Ocean.

### **Preparing for an Attack on Iran?**

The Anglo-American media outlets are now conducting a campaign to prepare public opinion for a military action against Iran. For example, in October 2011, a spurious case was brought in court to link Iran with a plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador. In another case the US court in Manhattan issued a default judgment accusing Iran of involvement in the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

The Guardian newspaper reported in early November 2011, that the British armed services were preparing to support a possible US-led attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. This news came before the release of a new report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which indicated Iran had a nuclear weapons program, but the report turned out to be based on an old document and there was no new information in the report. Also, on December 21, 2011, *The Daily Telegraph* reported that General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, had said the US military was ready to execute force against Iran if necessary and "he had been quietly leading behind the scenes preparations for an attack against Tehran." He further confessed that the United States is collaborating with Israel in its intelligence gathering about Iran.

An air attack on Iran is possible by the US and Israel along with the UK support.

However, if such an attack happens, it will have disastrous results for the West and the region as a whole. Iran obviously would retaliate and that would disrupt the oil supply that is the lifeline for the US and its allies' economies. Iran has the capability to close the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf, the choke point through which 40 percent of exported oil passes to get to the world market. Moreover, on January 14, the Russian deputy prime minister Dmitry Rogozin said "Should anything happen to Iran, should Iran get drawn into any political or military hardships, this will be a direct threat to our national security." This indicates that a military attack on Iran could easily provoke a far more extensive war in the region and have very serious consequence for the West. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have already caused substantial financial burden on the US and its allies. Starting another war will be

financially disastrous for the US. To use Paul Kennedy's word, America has reached to the position of "imperial overstretch" because of its wars of conquest and cannot afford to expand its empire by engaging in another war.

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