
THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Will 2012 Be to Iran What 1998 Was to Iraq?

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I have been fairly sanguine that another war in the Middle East will not occur despite the recent outbursts from both Washington and Tehran. My thinking has been that neither the administration nor the American people have much of an appetite for another war, and Congress seems to have decided that Romania would be the last country on which America would ever declare war (during World War II). Posturers like [Lindsey Graham and Joe Lieberman](#) may wish to remind themselves that if they desire a war with Iran, [they are constitutionally empowered to start one](#), if they have the courage of their convictions and the votes of their colleagues.

However, Tuesday in the *Washington Post* a [“senior U.S. intelligence official” admitted that the aim of President Obama’s policy with regard to Iran is—wait for it—“regime collapse.”](#) In the same article, another “administration official” says that this is not true, offering this entirely unconvincing explanation: *The notion that we’ve crossed into sanctions being about regime collapse is incorrect. We still very much have a policy that is rooted in the notion that you need to supply sufficient pressure to compel [the government] to change behavior as it’s related to their nuclear program.*

And now the *Post* is running a correction saying that the “regime collapse” bit was wrong, and that a better formulation of what the first official was saying is that the sanctions are designed to “build public discontent that will help compel the government to abandon an alleged nuclear weapons program.” It’s worth examining what exactly is going on here.

For instance, when it comes to the amended comment from the first official and the analysis of the second official, how exactly are sanctions supposed to create pressure that will compel the Iranian government to change its behavior on its nuclear program? Presumably via creating fear in the Iranian government that public unrest resulting from the pain imposed by sanctions could bring down the regime. This sounds eerily similar to the model that has worked so well for the United States in places like Cuba and Iraq.

More generally, all of this is getting a very uncomfortable feeling about it. In 1998 when the Democratic president Clinton signed the Iraq Liberation Act, under pressure by usual suspects from the Beltway foreign-policy community, few people clearly foresaw the wreckage of the 2000s. But once the Bush administration decided to take the country to war, the neoconservatives who were pushing the war were at pains to point out that their preferred policy was hardly some sort of Straussian conspiracy that their critics alleged—after all, it was the liberal Democratic president Bill Clinton who made regime change the policy of the United States! Don’t blame us!

I don’t know who will be the next president and neither do you. But this sounds to my ear very much like one more click of the “regime-change ratchet,” regardless of who winds up in the Oval Office in 2013.