The Quiet and Lethal Wars Against Iran

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Some wars are fought with bombs and bullets. These are the wars in Syria and Iraq, in Afghanistan and Yemen. Then there are quieter wars executed by drone. These cowardly wars also kill people, but not our people. These quieter wars accomplish what the more cacophonous wars accomplish without the public outcry and condemnation.

Medical Warfare

But there are wars that are even quieter still. There are wars so quiet that they aren't even heard beyond the borders of the countries in which they are happening. In Iran, the U.S. is waging medical warfare: what foreign minister Javad Zarif has called medical terrorism.

Iran is being crushed by the COVID-19 virus, and the weight of the pandemic is being intensified by US sanctions that prevent Iran from adequately testing and treating the virus and from preventing it. Iran's strangled economy is too emaciated to come to a temporary stop or to support people if they are prevented from going to work to earn their living. And sanctions on Iranian banks choke the acquisition of drugs and medical equipment.

But, like the efficient and deadly warrior it is, the US doesn't ease up as its enemy staggers, but presses at the enemy's exposed weakness. Despite pleas from both U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres and UN Human Rights Commissioner, Michelle Bachelet, Iran and the international community, America has not provided momentary respite from the sanctions but intensified them.

The crime is compounded by an ugly and little discussed piling of crime upon war crime. People with respiratory illnesses are at greater risk of dying from COVID-19, and approximately 100,000 Iranians are made vulnerable by that risk because of respiratory illnesses still lingering from the effects of an Iraqi chemical war rained on Iran with US approval and partnership.

Adding the word "medical" to the word "war" doesn't make it any less of a war.

Economic Warfare

And there have been other forms of quiet wars. The re-imposition of sanctions on Iran has been a modern version of a medieval siege.

The US was legally bound to honor its commitments under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear agreement, including ending sanctions, as long as Iran was honoring all of its commitments. So, since Iran was verifiably honoring all of its commitments, the US acted illegally when it pulled out of the treaty and re-imposed sanctions.

America has pressed Iranians down under the weight of unprecedented unilateral sanctions that may well constitute an internationally prohibited act of aggression. Iran's economy is suffering, and its people are being killed.

The US didn't only sanction Iran by itself but forced extraterritorial sanctions on every other nation. Those sanctions barred any economic trade that could contribute to Iran's nuclear program or that dealt with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. But since the US claimed that any contribution to the economy could contributed to the nuclear program or to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the US, as Gareth Porter and John Kiriakou explain in their book The CIA Insider's Guide to the Iran Crisis, essentially criminalizes the entire Iranian economy. The sentence, according to the IMF, was "severe distress" for Iran's economy and people.

As the American economic siege strangled the Iranian economy, the Iranian people gasped for breath. The economy has collapsed into severe recession; GDP has shriveled; oil production has fallen; Iran's currency, the rial, has lost 50% of its value; inflation has soared and the cost of living, including buying food, has become prohibitive.

A siege is the oldest form of collective punishment and war. Adding the word "economic" to the word "war" doesn't make it any less of a war.

Cyber Warfare

But medical warfare and economic warfare did not exhaust the variety of quiet wars. The U.S. has admitted direct responsibility for a barrage of cyberattacks against Iran.

The New York Times has revealed that the US ordered sophisticated attacks on the computers that run Iran's nuclear enrichment facilities. A massive virus known as Flame attacked Iranian computers. This virus maps and monitors the system of Iranian computers and sends back intelligence that is used to prepare for cyber war campaigns against Iran. Officials have now confirmed that Flame is one part of a joint project of America's CIA and NSA and Israel's secret military unit 8200.

One such cyber war campaign was Stuxnet, the computer virus that infected Iran's centrifuges and sent them spinning wildly out of control before playing back previously recorded tapes of normal operations that plant operators watched unsuspectingly while the centrifuges spun faster and faster until they literally tore themselves apart. Stuxnet seems to have wiped out about 20% of Iran's nuclear centrifuges.

Adding the word "cyber" to the word "war" doesn't make it any less of a war. The United States attacked Iran. That crucial Iranian infrastructure was destroyed by a computer virus rather than a bomb does not change the destruction. A NATO study has admitted that Stuxnet qualified as an "illegal act of force." According to Russia scholar Stephen Cohen, after the US accused Russia of hacking computers, NATO issued a statement saying that "hacking a member state might now be regarded as war against the entire military alliance, requiring military retaliation." That is, cyber attacks are an act of war, not only justifying, but requiring military retaliation.

America has dropped no bombs on Iran. There are no explosions to be heard. But the quiet of the war doesn't make it any less of a war. Wars don't stop being wars because you place the words "medical," "economic," or "cyber" before the word "war."