

Naval encounter highlights tensions stoked by Bush trip to Middle East

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An incident in the Strait of Hormuz on Sunday involving US warships and small, high-speed Iranian craft has served to heighten tensions in the Gulf on the eve of President Bush's departure for his first extended trip to the Middle East. The Iranian foreign ministry downplayed the encounter as "a normal issue" that "happens every now and then for both sides", but the Pentagon and White House did the opposite, claiming that the Iranian actions had been provocative and dangerous.

The only details have been provided by the US. Vice Admiral Kevin Cosgriff, commander of the US Fifth Fleet based in Bahrain, told the media that five Iranian boats had approached three US warships at high speed as they passed through the Strait of Hormuz some three miles outside Iranian waters. A radio message warned that the US warships would shortly explode as two of the Iranian craft came within 500 metres of the USS *Ingraham* and dropped white box-like objects in its path. The US warships increased their "onboard readiness" but no shots were fired and the *Ingraham* passed safely. The entire incident was over in less than 30 minutes.

A series of high-level US warnings have followed. Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman described the moves, allegedly involving the Iranian Revolutionary Guard (IRG), as a "reckless and dangerous and potentially hostile act". In a separate statement, White House national security spokesman Gordon Johndroe declared: "We urge the Iranians to refrain from such provocative actions that could lead to a dangerous incident in the future." US Defence Secretary Robert Gates declared the incident to be "troubling" and "a matter of real concern".

All these pronouncements have to be taken with a large grain of salt. While there are no independent accounts of what took place, it certainly cannot be ruled out that the encounter was deliberately provoked by the US navy, rather than the IRG vessels, with the intention of inflaming tensions as Bush arrives in the region tomorrow. Washington has a long history of staging such provocations, including for the purpose of creating the pretext for war. In 1964, for instance, the Johnson administration manufactured the notorious "Gulf of Tonkin incident" that provided the justification for escalating the US military intervention in Vietnam.

An examination of Bush's trip to the Middle East makes clear that Washington has far more to gain by highlighting the "Iranian danger" than Tehran has in risking a potentially disastrous military confrontation. The US president has repeatedly declared in the past few days that one of the purposes of the seven-day tour is to warn of the threat posed by Iran. He told *Al Arabiya* TV last week: "I view the Iranian regime as a danger. Part of the trip is to tell people, yes, we're engaged to help you [against Iran], if you want our help, to enhance security."

Nominally, the focus of Bush's tour is to advance the decision taken at the Annapolis summit in November to secure a comprehensive treaty between Israel and the Palestinian Authority by the end of the year. The US president is to spend the first three days of the trip in Israel and the West Bank in discussions with Israeli and Palestinian leaders. No one, however, expects any major breakthroughs in this fanciful project. Indeed, in the lead up to Bush's arrival, the Israeli military has been engaged in repressive actions, including a large-scale, three-day operation in the West Bank town of Nablus, no doubt to underscore Israeli demands that Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas dismantle "terrorist organisations".

The subtext of the Annapolis summit was to ensure the support of "moderate" Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt, for the US administration's plans to intensify hostilities—both economic and military—against Iran. Over the past year, Washington has sought to capitalise on concerns in "Sunni" Arab capitals over the growing influence of "Shiite" Iran following the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of Tehran's main regional rival—the regime of Saddam Hussein. The US campaign has been accompanied by escalating demands for UN sanctions and economic and military threats against Iran over its alleged nuclear weapons programs, support for anti-US insurgents in Iraq and backing for "terrorist" organisations such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Palestinian territories.

The White House plans suffered a significant setback shortly after the Annapolis summit when 16 US intelligence agencies issued a long-delayed National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran, which concluded that Tehran had ended any nuclear weapons program in 2003. By puncturing the Bush administration's often sensational but unsubstantiated claims about the Iranian nuclear threat, the NIE undermined a potential pretext for a confrontation against Iran, on which Israel and other US allies had based their own calculations.

Bush's trip to the Middle East is aimed at shoring up US alliances in the region, above all by resurrecting the "Iranian threat". Last Friday he told the Israeli newspaper *Yediot Ahronot*: "Part of the reason I'm going to the Middle East is to make abundantly clear to nations in that part of the world that we view Iran as a threat, and that the [NIE] in no way lessens that threat, but in fact clarifies the threat."

It is no accident that Bush's remarks are directed to Israel, whose leaders have been bitterly critical of the NIE. The Israeli political and military establishment, which regards Iran as its main regional rival, has repeatedly sought assurances that the Bush administration would "deal with" Tehran before leading office. Senior ministers have warned that Israel would take military action of its own to disable the "threat" posed by Iran's nuclear facilities.

When Bush lands in Israel tomorrow, the item on the top of the agenda, behind closed doors at least, is going to be Iran, rather than a treaty with the Palestinian Authority. Meir Javedanfar, an Iranian expatriate and security analyst living in Israel, told the *Washington Post* on Monday: "Iran, for Israel, is topic Number One. Most of the Israeli politicians and population see Iran as a greater threat than Hamas. And the Israeli government will be eager for Bush to show them that he is still committed to stopping Iran."

A comment in the right-wing *Jerusalem Post* on Sunday was dismissive of Bush's reassurance on Saturday that the US would defend Israel from any Iranian attack. "The fact that Bush is travelling here to show his support and commitment to Israel and the region must not be minimised. The gesture is significant and appreciated," it stated. "But Bush himself is a leader who presumably understands that it is the bottom line that matters, and that line is a simple one: Will Iran be allowed to go nuclear or not?"

The British-based *Times* indicated that Israeli security officials intended to brief Bush "on their latest intelligence about Iran's nuclear program—and how it could be destroyed". Israeli intelligence, the report stated, had "rock solid" evidence that Iran had restarted its nuclear weapons program. "Ehud Barak, the defence minister, is said to want to convince him [Bush] that an Israeli military strike against uranium enrichment facilities in Iran would be feasible if diplomatic efforts failed to halt nuclear operations," it added.

The remainder of Bush trip will be spent in the Persian Gulf—Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where he will deliver a keynote address in Abu Dhabi, and Saudi Arabia—with a final stop in Egypt to meet President Hosni Mubarak. All these authoritarian Arab regimes, which had expressed concerns about Iranian influence and the emerging "Shiite crescent", were part of Washington's plans for an anti-Iranian alliance. But in the wake of the NIE, the conclusion was reached that the US would have to shelve any plans for a military attack on Iran. In comments to the *Washington Post*, Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa summed up the reaction saying: "As long as they have no nuclear program... why should we isolate Iran? Why punish Iran, now?"

Signs emerged that the US allies were seeking their own accommodation with Tehran, which in quick succession notched up a number of diplomatic advances. In early December, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad addressed a meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which was formed in 1981 in the midst of the Iran-Iraq war to counter Tehran. In another first for an Iranian president, Saudi King Abdullah personally invited Ahmadinejad to visit Mecca for the annual haj religious pilgrimage and later held talks with him. Also last month, top Iranian negotiator Ali Larijani visited Egypt, a country that has frozen its ties with Iran for 28 years, and spoke of cooperation on nuclear programs and the resumption of diplomatic relations.

At a press conference convened last week by the US-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), analyst Jon Alterman pointed to the logic behind these steps. "We like to think of ourselves as a constant in the Gulf... [But] Iran is a constant. Iran is something that they have been dealing with not for years or decades, but for millennia... They are more reluctant to confront Iran. They are more interested in trying to co-opt Iran, because their sense is that the United States may come and go, but Iran will not come and go."

At the same briefing, longstanding CSIS analyst Anthony Cordesman highlighted the growing influence in the Gulf of US rivals, particularly from Asia. After noting concerns about Iran and the US occupation of Iraq, he explained: "It is also a region which had oil at a

low of \$10.98 in 1998 and it went to over \$100 a barrel this week. It is a region where the primary customer isn't Europe or the United States or the West; it's Asia. And not only [is] Asia the primary customer now; it's the primary customer that is going to steadily grow in terms of demand and influence and money."

Cordesman's remarks highlight the central aim of the Bush administration, and indeed the American political establishment as a whole, which is to secure US dominance in the key oil-rich region over its major rivals in Europe and Asia, especially the emerging economic giant China. Washington has nothing to offer the Gulf states economically. In fact, Bush is coming cap in hand to seek their assistance in helping to bail out American corporations hit by the current credit squeeze. Abu Dhabi's investment authority, flush with funds from high oil prices, recently promised to put \$7.5 billion to help prop up Citigroup Inc, still reeling from the subprime crisis.

The US has longstanding defence ties and huge US military bases in the Gulf states. During his trip, Bush is expected to outline plans for closer security ties with US allies and to consolidate \$20 billion in arms deals that were offered last year. But if these countries, all of which have considerable economic clout, reach their own accommodation with Iran then the US security offer will no longer have the same attraction and Washington risks seeing its influence waning as other major powers seek a larger stake in the region. The only lever that Washington retains is the military one that it has recklessly wielded already to invade and occupy Afghanistan and Iraq.

It is in this context that the incident has taken place in the Strait of Hormuz, just three days before Bush's touchdown in the Middle East. If it did not organise the naval affair, the Bush administration is certainly seizing on it with both hands as it seeks to exploit the "Iranian threat" to shore up its alliances in the region.



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