

War threats against Iran overshadow US elections

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The US election campaign, rather than offering the American people any real opportunity to vote for an end to the war and occupation in Iraq, is increasingly overshadowed by threats of new acts of military aggression against Iran.

This is the significance of a series of provocative actions and statements coming out of both Washington and Tel Aviv in recent days.

Speculation about the likelihood of imminent air strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities were heightened by a report published last Friday in the *New York Times* detailing a long-range exercise staged over the Mediterranean earlier this month involving over 100 Israeli F-15 and F-16 fighter jets, refueling planes and rescue helicopters. Citing unnamed Pentagon sources, the *Times* reported that the operation was a dry run for an attack on Iran.

“Israel carried out a major military exercise earlier this month that American officials say appeared to be a rehearsal for a potential bombing attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities,” the *Times* reported.

Responding to this military threat, Mohamed ElBaradei, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations organization charged with oversight of the Iranian nuclear program, said it was not justified by any “current, grave or urgent danger” and threatened to quit his post in response to any such an attack.

Air strikes against Iran, he warned, would “turn the region into a fireball” and cause Iran to “launch a crash course to build nuclear weapons with the blessing of all Iranians.”

The report was widely seen as a deliberate leak by Washington and Israel aimed at ratcheting up pressure on Teheran to abandon its uranium enrichment program. The Iranian government has rejected Western demands that it halt these efforts, insisting that they are dedicated exclusively to the development of domestic nuclear energy and are not in violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The *Times* report came less than a week after a trip to Iran by EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana, who offered the Iranian government a package of economic and political incentives in exchange for Teheran bowing to demands that it halt its enrichment program. As of early this week, the Iranian government had yet to respond officially to the offer.

Meanwhile, the European Union Monday adopted a resolution imposing new sanctions against Iran, banning the country’s largest bank, Bank Melli, from operating in Europe.

The Israeli press presented the published report of a supposed dress rehearsal of air strikes on Iran as part of an orchestrated pressure campaign.

“When the diplomacy of economic and political pressure fails to produce results, a shift is made to gunboat diplomacy,” wrote Alex Fishman, the military affairs columnist for Israel’s largest newspaper, *Yedioth Ahronoth*.

“As the Iranian regime discusses the European Union representative’s most recent offer to halt its nuclear programme in exchange for extensive benefits, the Americans opted to add a bit more pressure in the shape of Israel’s air force,” he wrote.

An unnamed Israeli official quoted in the *Times* of London Sunday put the matter somewhat more bluntly. Iran, he said, should “read the writing on the wall.” He continued: “This was a dress rehearsal, and the Iranians should read the script before they continue with their program for nuclear weapons. If diplomacy does not yield results, Israel will take military steps to halt Tehran’s production of bomb-grade uranium.”

Citing an unnamed US military official, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that “US policy makers were divided over reasons for the exercise. Some viewed the maneuver as an actual practice run for a future strike on Iran, while others see it mainly as a show of force designed to remind both Tehran and Washington of Israel’s concern.”

Such an exercise—and the publicity about it in the US media—has another and crucial objective. It is aimed at preparing the American public for being dragged into another war of aggression.

Military analysts agree that the Israeli air force by itself lacks the strategic capacity to carry out any attack on Iran that would even have the possibility of destroying its nuclear program, much of which is housed in fortified underground bunkers. The only viable purpose for such threats is either as part of a joint campaign with the US or to draw Washington into such an attack.

There is an important constituency for such a course of action among influential elements of the Republican right, who are openly expressing support for a US-Israeli attack on Iran—as well as their frustration with Washington for not moving more rapidly to carry one out.

This was clearly the message of an editorial published Monday in the *Wall Street Journal*, among the most consistent mouthpieces for the right-wing layers that have dominated the current administration. Entitled “Israel on the Iran Brink” the editorial states:

“Israelis surely don’t welcome a war in which they will suffer. Yet they have no choice but to defend themselves against an enemy that vows to obliterate them if Iran acquires the weapon to do so. The tragic paradox of the past six years is that the diplomatic and intelligence evasions offered in the name of avoiding war with Iran have done the most to bring us close to this brink. Appeasement that ends in war is a familiar theme of history.”

Meanwhile, two prominent supporters of the administration—who played significant roles in promoting the war against Iraq six years ago based on the same pretexts of weapons of mass destruction and terrorist ties—spoke over the weekend in chilling terms about the timing and political calculations concerning an attack on Iran.

Speaking on the television interview show “Fox News Sunday,” Bill Kristol, the publisher of the right-wing *Weekly Standard*, warned that President Bush could be driven to launch a war against Iran by the prospect of a victory for Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama in the November election.

“If the president thought John McCain was going to be the next president, he would think it more appropriate to let the next president make that decision than do it on his way out,” said Kristol.

However, he warned, “if President Bush thinks Senator Obama’s going to win, does he somehow think—does he worry that Obama won’t follow through on that policy.”

Asked by Fox’s Chris Wallace whether he was saying that Bush could “launch a military strike” either in the run-up to or aftermath of the election, Kristol replied: “I don’t know. I mean, I think he would worry about it. On the other hand, you can’t—it’s hard to make foreign policy based on guesses of election results. I think Israel is worried though. I mean, what is, what signal goes to Ahmadinejad if Obama wins on a platform of unconditional negotiations and with an obvious reluctance to even talk about using military force.”

Meanwhile, also appearing Sunday on Fox, the right-wing network owned by Rupert Murdoch, former US ambassador to the United Nations, John Bolton, gave a more precise prediction about an Israeli attack.

“I think if they are to do anything, the most likely period is after our elections and before the inauguration of the next president. I don’t think they will do anything before our election because they don’t want to affect it. And they’d have to make a judgement whether to go during the remainder of President Bush’s term in office or wait for his successor.”

Following up these remarks in an interview with the British *Daily Telegraph*, Bolton, a long-standing advocate of military action against Iran, repeated that the “optimal window” for an Israeli attack would be after the November 4 election and before the inauguration on January 20, 2009.

“The Israelis have one eye on the calendar because of the pace at which the Iranians are proceeding both to develop their nuclear weapons capability and to do things like increase their defences by buying new Russian anti-aircraft systems and further harden the nuclear installations,” he told the *Telegraph*.

“They’re also obviously looking at the American election calendar. My judgement is they would not want to do anything

before our election because there’s no telling what impact it could have on the election.”

There has been ample speculation about an “October surprise,” i.e., a military action or terrorist attack on the eve of the election aimed at shocking the American public into rallying around the Republican administration. But as Bolton suggests, some of Bush’s closest supporters are less than confident that such an event would have the desired effect.

They have the example of the Spanish election of March 2004, when their right-wing ally Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar attempted to exploit and distort a terrorist attack for political advantage and instead provoked a popular backlash that swept him from office.

Despite the Republican drumbeat about Obama and the Democrats being unreliable in terms of their attitude towards Iran, the policies of militarism and the provocation clearly enjoy bipartisan support.

Democrats in Congress are pushing through a resolution that calls for Washington to mount a blockade against Iran—an act of war—as a means of tightening pressure over the nuclear issue. Sponsored by Representative Gary Ackerman (Democrat, New York) in the House and Senator Evan Bayh (Democrat, Indiana) in the Senate, “demands that the President initiate an international effort to immediately and dramatically increase the economic, political, and diplomatic pressure on Iran,” including by “imposing stringent inspection requirements on all persons, vehicles, ships, planes, trains, and cargo entering or departing Iran.”

Such a unilateral action is an act of war under international law and could well provoke a military confrontation between the US and Iran.

For his part, Obama was asked at a press conference in Florida last Friday whether he believed Israel was right to carry out such a threatening military exercise. He responded:

“There is no doubt that Iran poses an extraordinary threat to Israel and Israel is always justified in making decisions that will provide for its security.”

One can only assume from such a remark that an Israeli air strike on Iran, dragging the US into a conflagration that would eclipse the war in Iraq would, in the view of the Democratic presidential candidate, be justified as well.



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