

Reactions to Iranian missile tests underscore danger of war

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American and Israeli reactions to Iranian missile tests this week have again highlighted the danger of an explosive new military conflict in the Middle East.

The two sets of missile tests on Wednesday and Thursday followed a string of barely-concealed Israeli threats to launch air strikes on Iran's civilian nuclear installations. Despite Iranian denials, the US and Israel allege that Iran is actively building a nuclear weapon—contradicting a National Intelligence Estimate produced by 16 US spy agencies last December, which concluded that no such weapons program exists.

Tehran used the missile tests to underscore warnings that it will respond to any attack by striking Israel and blocking the Strait of Hormuz, through which 40 percent of the world's oil is transported. The state media reported that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) had fired a variety of missiles, including the medium-range Shabab-3, and quoted a senior official saying the tests were “a lesson for enemies”.

Among military analysts, there is debate as to the number and type of missiles tested. Several reports claimed that one of the photographs released by the IRGC photograph appeared to have been doctored to show an extra rocket being fired, perhaps covering up a misfiring. According to the US Defence Department and intelligence agencies, between 7 and 10 missiles were launched.

Several analysts pointed out that no new missiles were tested. Charles Vick from GlobalSecurity.org told the *New York Times* that the newer version of the Shabab-3, which has a range of around 2,000 kilometres and is capable of striking Israel, was apparently not fired. John Pike, also from GlobalSecurity.org, told Reuters: “They put on a big show and as a result they were able to get headline coverage.”

The limited character of the tests did not stop US and Israeli officials from seizing upon them to issue a new round of threats against Iran. White House spokesman Tony Fratto condemned the exercise as “provocative” and again demanded that Iran halt its uranium enrichment and missile testing. Speaking at a press conference in Georgia, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice warned: “We will

defend our interests and the interests of our allies... We take very, very strongly our obligations to defend our allies and no one should be confused about that.”

In the context of the ongoing discussion in the US and Israel over launching air strikes on Iran, these claims that Iran is being provocative are completely hypocritical. Just last month, the Israeli air force carried out a large, long-range exercise over the Mediterranean Sea involving more than 100 war planes, helicopters and refuelling aircraft which could only be interpreted as a dry run for an attack on Iran.

While the White House objects to Iran's missile tests, the US navy is currently conducting joint exercises with its British and Bahraini warships in the Persian Gulf supposedly to protect gas and oil installations in the region. Last week, the US navy conducted a little-reported exercise coordinating two warships, one in the Mediterranean Sea and the other in the Persian Gulf, in the simulated shooting down of a ballistic missile. The unprecedented five-day test, reported in *Stars and Stripes*, was clearly aimed at enhancing the US military's ability to neutralise Iran's ability to retaliate in the event of a US or Israeli strike.

Divisions exist in the Bush administration over whether to launch an attack on Iran. Whereas the most hawkish elements gathered around Vice President Dick Cheney have been pressing for war, President Bush is still supporting, publicly at least, the so-called diplomatic option advocated by Rice aimed at bullying Tehran through international sanctions into agreeing to US demands.

However, Rice's strident comments in Georgia underline the tactical character of these differences. Her “very, very strong” support for the interests of US allies—above all, Israel—makes clear that the US would be drawn quickly into any conflict between Israel and Iran.

Responding to the Iranian missile tests, Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak warned: “The Iranian issue is a challenge not just for Israel but for the entire world... Israel is the strongest country in the region and has proved in the past it is not afraid to take action when its vital security

interests are at stake.”

Barak’s comments are an obvious allusion not only to Israel’s air strike on Iraq’s nuclear reactor in 1981, but also last September’s unprovoked attack that destroyed a building in northern Syria. The Bush administration, which would have been consulted over the Syrian strike, alleged this year that the building was a nuclear reactor under construction—a claim denied by the Syrian government.

To underscore Israel’s capacity to strike Iran, Israel Aerospace Industries displayed its latest state-of-the-art airborne early warning and control plane to the media on Thursday. The plane, which is equipped with sophisticated radar and intelligence-gathering technology, as well as electronic warfare systems, would be deployed in any attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities.

Yuval Steinitz, a senior member of the Israeli parliament’s powerful Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee, commented to the press: “If those [Iranian] missiles will one day be equipped with nuclear warheads, this will produce [an] existential threat to Israel... Therefore we have to do our utmost to stop the Iranian nuclear project before such missiles can really become devastating.”

Israel already has nuclear weapons and the ability to deliver them against Iran. In April, amid the country’s largest ever civil defence drill, National Infrastructure Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer warned that an Iranian attack would lead to “the destruction of the Iranian nation”. Israel’s determination to shut down Iran’s civilian nuclear programs is to ensure that Tehran does not have the capacity, either now or in the indefinite future, to undermine Israel’s position as “the strongest in the region”.

Iran is clearly at the centre of a series of top-level discussions between Israel and the US. Barak is due in Washington next week for three days of talks with Vice President Cheney, Defence Secretary Robert Gates, Secretary of State Rice and National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley. In an article entitled, “Barak to tell Bush time is running out on thwarting Iran”, the *Jerusalem Post* described the talks as “aimed at coordinating policies against the Iranian nuclear threat”.

Barak’s visit follows days after Mossad chief Meir Dagan was in Washington for talks with key US intelligence officials. A week after Barak leaves, Israel’s Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Gabi Ashkenazi, will arrive in the US for a round of discussions with Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Admiral Michael Mullen and other top Pentagon officials. While all these discussions are described as “routine”, it was only two weeks ago that Mullen was in Israel for talks with Ashkenazi and other Israeli military heads.

A particularly ominous report in the Iraqi media yesterday, based on unnamed Iraqi army officers, claimed that Israeli

jets had recently flown via Jordan into Iraqi air space and landed at an airport in Haditha in the western province of Anbar. US, Iraqi and Israeli officials immediately dismissed the report, which contributed to a \$5 jump in crude oil futures to more than \$146.60 a barrel yesterday. Iraq is one of few routes that Israeli war planes could use in any attack on Iran.

Nervousness over a possible war with Iran also contributed to the decision this week by Total, the French energy giant, to cancel plans for a \$10 billion project to develop the huge South Pars gas field in Iran. Total has been under intense pressure from the Bush administration and the French government to pull out of Iran. Last year the company’s chief executive Christophe de Margerie and two other executives were investigated by French police over the project. De Margerie declared this week that the political risk was too high to continue.

Even as tensions over Iran escalated this week, a series of comments appeared in the US press playing down the danger of war. Most highlighted the remarks of Defence Secretary Gates who declared on Thursday that the Iranian missile tests did not bring the US any closer to a confrontation. “There is a lot of signalling going on,” he said. “But I think everyone recognises what the consequences of any kind of a conflict would be.” Gates’s comments reflect concerns among layers of the military top brass about the consequences of having to fight a third war on top of the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.

However, the dangerous game of brinkmanship being played by the Bush administration in the Persian Gulf has a logic of its own. The hostility of the most hawkish elements in Washington to a diplomatic solution to the standoff with Tehran is based on the calculation that the beneficiaries of any easing of tensions would be America’s rivals in Europe and Asia, which already have large investments and substantial trade links with Iran. A new military adventure, despite its potentially catastrophic geopolitical consequences, thus appears as the only viable alternative to ensure American domination in the vital oil-rich region.



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