

Israel's sabre-rattling against Iran

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Israel has responded belligerently to Iran's sending of two warships through Egypt's Suez Canal into the Mediterranean Sea, calling it a provocation and threatening retaliatory action.

The threat portends the growing danger of an attack on Iran and a greater regional war, and follows repeated warnings by Israel, which has an arsenal of more than 200 nuclear weapons, that it will attack Iran's nuclear facilities.

Last Wednesday, Israel announced that Iran was sending two warships, an Mk-5 light patrol frigate, Alvand, and a refuelling and supply vessel, the Kharg, through the Suez Canal. At first both Egypt and Iran denied this and then Egypt claimed that Iran had withdrawn its request for its ships to use the Canal. But Iran later confirmed that it had notified Egypt, as required under regulations governing the use of the Canal, that it proposed sending its ships through the Canal.

Avigdor Lieberman, Israel's foreign minister, told a meeting in Jerusalem of major American Jewish Organisations, that the ships' passage was a "provocation that proves that the overconfidence of the Iranians is growing from day to day."

"To my regret, the international community is not showing readiness to deal with the recurring Iranian provocations," he continued.

In remarks aimed at Washington, he said that expected the world to "put the Iranians in their place. We are the true allies of the United States in the region, and the only ones that share its values. The international community needs to understand that Israel will not be able to ignore these provocations forever."

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said, "I think that today, we can see what an unstable region we live in, a region in which Iran tries to exploit the situation that has been created in order to expand its influence by

passing warships through the Suez Canal".

"Israel's security needs will grow and the defence budget must grow accordingly," he added.

According to Iran's Lieutenant Commander Rear Admiral Gholam Reza Khadem-Bigham, in a statement to the semi-official Fars news agency last month, Iran planned to send ships to the Mediterranean Sea to gain "good intelligence and information of the regions it is due to visit".

He said that they were training to defend "the country's cargo ships and oil tankers" against the threat of Somali pirates.

Last Friday, a defence ministry spokesperson in Tehran stated that the ships, which were heading to Syrian waters for training exercises, would have no military equipment, nuclear materials or chemicals on board.

While this is the first time since the 1979 Islamic Revolution that Tehran has sent warships through the canal, Israel itself regularly uses the canal. In July 2009, Israel sent a Dolphin-class submarine to the Red Sea for military exercises, with Egypt's tacit support. The submarines could be used to launch cruise missiles on Iran. The exercise was widely interpreted at the time as sending a message that Israel had the capability to reach Iran.

White House spokesman Jay Carney said of the Iranian ships, "We're monitoring that, obviously... We always watch what Iran is doing... Iran does not have a great track record of responsible behaviour in the region."

The US is raising its military presence in the region as part of what it claims are "maritime security operations" but which are clearly a response to the revolutionary upheavals in Egypt and throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

The aircraft carrier USS Enterprise has passed through the canal and is on its way to the Persian Gulf,

along with the guided missile cruiser USS Leyte Gulf and a combat support ship USS Arctic. There it will join the USS Carl Vinson, which is currently in the Arabian Sea.

These reports caused stock markets to fall and pushed oil prices to near record prices last week amid fears of a new conflict. Oil prices had already risen sharply after the mass demonstrations in Egypt spread to oil producing countries Bahrain, Iran, Libya, Sudan and Yemen, adding to fears that oil supplies could be disrupted.

Israel has long called for military action to contain Iran's rising influence in the region, consistently urging military action through its substantial political connections and lobby groups in the US. It has also sought to undermine Tehran's nuclear programme. It is believed to have been involved in the kidnapping and targeted assassinations of nuclear scientists in Iran, and to have been responsible for planting Stuxnet, the computer worm virus, in Iran's main uranium enrichment plant.

Israel's stance has hardened further with the overthrow of its chief regional ally, Hosni Mubarak. It has insisted continually that the mass popular movement against the regime will inevitably become a pawn of the Muslim Brotherhood and Tehran and did everything it could to keep Mubarak in power. Despite the military junta's reassurances that it will honour the peace treaties with Tel Aviv, Israel's media is awash with op-ed pieces expressing fear that any civilian government that may be installed will be less committed to an alliance with Israel against Iran.

Israel has been further isolated by the fall of the US-Saudi backed Hariri government in Lebanon after Hezbollah and its allies, who are backed by Iran and Syria, quit the coalition government.

Israel's other props, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority, look no more secure. Jordan has seen repeated mass demonstrations forcing King Abdullah to appoint a new prime minister to form a government.

Mahmoud Abbas, leader of the Palestinian Authority, felt obliged to call elections in light of the revelations of the "Palestine papers" by Al Jazeera that confirm the PA's role as a subcontractor for the United States and Israel to police the Palestinian people. There was a mass demonstration in Ramallah at the weekend calling for an end to the fighting between Abbas's Fatah party

and Hamas, a national unity government in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, and the revocation of the Oslo accords.

Netanyahu is no less isolated at home. His Labour coalition partners have quit the government, leaving him more reliant on the far-right parties and Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu in particular. His defence minister, Ehud Barak, has split from Labour to form his own Independence party that backs the coalition, but which has little support.

More important still, Netanyahu faces an increasingly angry population, who face rising prices, poverty and social inequality. For Israel's elite, warmongering is a tried and tested policy of divide and rule to forestall a political challenge from the working class. It is actively preparing for war and is seeking to create the conditions for a confrontation with Tehran, although attacks on Lebanon, Gaza and even Egypt cannot be ruled out.



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