Economic, military pressures on Iran escalate global tensions

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The march towards an oil embargo against Iran and continuing military threats against the country from both the US and Israel are escalating global tensions.

Having recently doubled the number of US aircraft carrier battle groups within striking distance of the Persian Gulf, the Obama administration reportedly used back channels last weekend to deliver a threatening ultimatum to the Iranian government. It identified "red lines", which, if Iran crosses them, would trigger a US attack.

Chief among these is Tehran making good on a threat made last month to close the Strait of Hormuz, through which at least a fifth of the world's oil must pass, in retaliation for what amounts to a looming US-European sanctions blockade designed to strangle the Iranian economy and permit "regime change" in this country of 70 million people.

Washington and its European allies claim that such economic warfare is necessary to halt Iran's development of nuclear weapons. Tehran insists that its nuclear program complies with international treaties, that it has taken no steps to weaponize uranium at its nuclear plants, and that it is developing its nuclear capacity solely as a source of power.

Direct US threats have grown in tandem with Israel's increasingly provocative actions. The *Sunday Times* published a detailed investigative piece on January 15, citing multiple Israeli sources as confirming that the January 11 car bomb assassination of Iranian nuclear scientist Mostafa Ahmadi-Roshan in Tehran was the work of Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency, which had prepared the murder through extensive surveillance by multiple agents working in the Iranian capital.

US officials formally distanced themselves from the killing. "We were not involved in any way with regards to the assassination that took place there," claimed US Defense Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, who did allow that he had "some idea" of who was behind it.

In reality, the line of demarcation between the covert operations against Iran carried out by Mossad and those conducted by the CIA is decidedly murky. This was made clear in an article in *Foreign Policy* magazine last week entitled "False Flag," in which military analyst Mark Perry cites US intelligence officials as saying that Mossad agents have posed as CIA agents while recruiting members of the Sunni Islamist group Jundallah for terrorist operations inside Iran.

While the murder of Iranian nuclear scientists is unlikely to significantly disrupt Iran's nuclear program, it is a further means of destabilization and a provocation aimed at eliciting an Iranian retaliation that can then be seized upon as a pretext for war. Iran's intelligence minister warned on Monday that "The US, the UK and Mossad will see the results of their actions and Iran will deliver a firm response."

The *Sunday Times* article quoted Israeli sources as saying that the assassination last week was part of the preparations for an Israeli military strike against Iranian targets.

Both US and Israeli officials denied press reports this week that Washington had called off a planned joint US-Israeli military exercise dubbed "Austere Challenge 2012" because of US concerns that it would heighten tensions with Iran. Thousands of US troops were to be deployed to Israel this spring for the exercise, which was to test joint US-Israeli missile defense systems in apparent preparation for an anticipated retaliatory missile attack from Iran.

US military officials denied that the postponement had anything to do with concerns over Iran's reaction. A Pentagon spokesman said that it had been put off until the second half of the year to allow "optimum participation" by units from both countries. In Israel, it was reported that the Netanyahu government had requested the delay over

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budgetary concerns.

While Israel has repeatedly claimed the right to attack Iran because Iranian nuclear weapons would supposedly pose an "existential threat" to the Zionist state, a speech by an Israeli general Tuesday made it clear that the real concern is that if Israel were to lose its monopoly on nuclear capabilities in the region, it would no longer enjoy impunity in waging aggression against neighboring states.

Maj. General Amir Eshel, head of strategic planning for the Israeli military, told an audience of foreign journalists and diplomats assembled at a right-wing Zionist think tank that Iran's nuclear program threatened to "create a dramatic change in Israel's strategic posture, because if we are forced to do things in Gaza or Lebanon under an Iranian nuclear umbrella, it might be different."

In 2006, Israel invaded Lebanon, killing at least 1,200 civilians and destroying much of the country's infrastructure. In 2008-2009, it waged its "Operation Cast Lead" against Gaza, killing at least 1,400 Palestinians and devastating the already impoverished territory.

US General Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, is set to visit Israel this week for discussions with the Israeli military centered on Iran.

While the ostensible concern driving US war threats is Iran's nuclear program, the underlying motive is Washington's determination to prevent Iran from emerging as a regional power capable of resisting the imposition of US imperialist hegemony over the oil rich regions of the Persian Gulf and Afghanistan.

Bordering both Iraq and Afghanistan and with significant influence in both countries, Iran has become an increasing preoccupation of US foreign policy amid the US military withdrawal from Iraq and the pending drawdown of US troops from Afghanistan. Tehran has opposed US efforts to establish a permanent military presence in both countries, while seeking to wrest control of the distribution of energy resources from US hands.

By ratcheting up the sanctions regime, Washington is now trying to strong-arm the rest of the world into joining its campaign against Iran. Passed unanimously by Democrats and Republicans in the US Senate and signed into law by President Barack Obama on New Year's Eve, the new sanctions will go into effect in June, barring access to US markets for any third country public or private institutions that buy oil through the Central Bank of Iran.

The European Union, meanwhile, is set to meet this month to discuss imposing an embargo against Iranian oil products that would go into effect on July 1, as well as sanctions against Iran's central bank. While France, Britain and Germany have voiced support for the actions, other EU members more heavily dependent on Iranian imports, including Greece, had sought to delay their implementation.

Iran's OPEC representative, Mohammed Ali Khatibi, warned Tuesday that a European embargo would be a case of "economic suicide" for the West, urging both the US and Europe to "avoid adventurism in the world oil markets." Oil prices have already risen to $110 a barrel, and it is widely believed that a showdown with Iran could drive prices catastrophically high, deepening the global capitalist crisis.

While European powers have indicated that they are seeking alternative sources of oil, Iran has issued pointed warnings that it will not tolerate neighboring OPEC states, in particular Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf emirates, profiteering off of its losses due to sanctions, raising the specter of a regional military confrontation.

In Asia, which accounts for the vast bulk of Iran's oil exports, US allies South Korea and Japan have indicated reluctance in complying with US sanctions. India, Iran's second biggest energy customer after China, buying some 400,000 barrels a day, issued a statement that it did not intend to alter its trade relations with Tehran.

For its part, China, which is Iran's main trading partner and depends on the country for 22 percent of its oil imports, has rejected any new sanctions and expressed is intention to continue "normal cooperation with Iran in energy, the economy and trade."

Similarly, Russia has rejected sanctions and indicated it would veto any new actions against Iran in the United Nations Security Council. "We believe sanctions [against] Iran have lost their usefulness," Russian Deputy Foreign Minister said at a press conference in Moscow on Tuesday. "We will oppose any new resolution."

The Russian daily *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* reported that Moscow has scheduled a series of military exercises in the North Caucasus in anticipation of a military strike by the US and or Israel against Iran, and the potential for war spreading throughout the region.

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