

US claims Iran tried to shoot down drone

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Just two days after last week's US presidential election, the Pentagon announced that Iranian jets had "fired multiple rounds" at an unmanned American Predator drone in international airspace on November 1. The incident has the character of a US provocation designed to exacerbate the already tense situation in the Persian Gulf.

Pentagon spokesman George Little warned Iran last Thursday that the US had "a wide range of options, from diplomatic to military, to protect our military assets and our forces in the region and will do so when necessary." He said Washington had sent a formal protest to Tehran, indicating that "we will continue to conduct surveillance flights over international waters" in the region.

Last Friday, Iran's defence minister, Brigadier General Ahmad Vahidi, confirmed that Iranian planes had fired on an American drone but insisted that it had been inside Iranian airspace. Mohammad Saleh Jokar, a member of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee of Iran's parliament, told the media: "The US drone entered our country's airspace with an aim to gather information because there is no other justification."

A senior US administration official told the *New York Times* that Iranian planes had attempted to shoot down the drone, but had been "wildly unsuccessful." He described the episode as "another data point in what is clearly more aggressive tactics on the part of the Iranians." However, General Amir-Ali Hadjizadeh, head of Iran's Revolutionary Guards air forces, explained: "Yes, we opened fire, and it was with warning shots."

While the Pentagon has attempted to portray the

drone flight as routine, the incident takes place amid a major American military build-up in the Persian Gulf and continuing threats by both the US and Israel to attack Iran. At the same time, Israel, with at least tacit American support, has been waging a thinly disguised covert war of sabotage and assassination directed against Iranian nuclear scientists and facilities.

Whether or not the latest incident took place in international airspace is unclear. However, it is indisputable that the US has used drones extensively to spy inside Iran. Last December, a sophisticated CIA RQ-170 Sentinel drone, employing the latest stealth technology, was brought down inside Iran. American authorities claimed it crashed. Iranian officials asserted it had either been shot or forced down.

At the time, the US think tank Stratfor noted: "The United States has long waged a broad, comprehensive ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) campaign in Iran, particularly to map out Iranian nuclear sites, ballistic missile sites and development efforts, its air defence network and command-and-control nodes."

Following his re-election, Obama is intensifying the pressure on Iran. One of his first actions was to extend the state of emergency order against Iran last Friday. First signed in 1979, the order allows the president to impose sanctions "to deal with the unusual and extraordinary threat" posed to the US by Iran.

The US State Department last Thursday imposed new sanctions on Iranian individuals and organisations for engaging in media censorship. These penalties are just the latest punitive measures by the US and its allies in what amounts to a campaign of economic warfare against Tehran.

US-led sanctions on Iran's oil exports and financial and banking sector have had a devastating impact on the country's economy. The value of the Iranian currency has plunged by about 40 percent since August. The International Monetary Fund's Middle East chief Masood Ahmed warned on Saturday that the Iranian economy would contract by more than the 0.9 percent estimated before the currency fall. The official inflation rate is about 24 percent, but many analysts estimate the figure could be far higher.

The US Congress is considering even tougher sanctions being sponsored by Republican Senator Mark Kirk and Democrat Robert Menendez that would broadly target Iranian imports of agricultural, industrial and consumer goods, with limited exemptions for food and medicines. The aim is to further cripple the country's manufacturing capacity and basic economic functions.

Very tentative steps are being taken to revive failed negotiations between the so-called P5+1 group—the US, France, Britain, China, Russia and Germany—and Iran over its nuclear programs. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) announced on Friday that it would resume talks next month over alleged military aspects of Iran's nuclear activities. Tehran has repeatedly rejected unsubstantiated claims that it is developing a nuclear weapon. No date has been set for renewed negotiations involving the P5+1.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has kept up his barely disguised threat of a military attack on Iran. Addressing the UN General Assembly in September, he claimed that by spring or summer next year Iran would be in the final stages of building a nuclear weapon. On October 30, he played down the danger of broader Middle Eastern tensions and conflict from Israeli strikes, declaring that “five minutes after... a feeling of relief would spread across the region.”

Last Monday, Netanyahu declared that he was prepared to order a unilateral attack on Iran, without support from Washington. While saying he was not “eager” for war, the Israeli prime minister said that in order to pressure the world's most powerful nations,

they had to know “that we are serious. This isn't a show, this is not false.”

The interview came at the end of a documentary on Israel's Channel 2 that revealed Netanyahu and Defence Minister Ehud Barak had in 2010 ordered the Israeli military to prepare for an imminent attack on Iran. The prime minister had been rebuffed by his country's military and intelligence chiefs, who claimed that cabinet approval was required for such strikes.

The constant ratcheting up of pressure on Iran by the US and Israel compounds tensions throughout the region and the danger of war. In such conditions, any incident, whether accidental or a deliberate provocation, could become the pretext for an all-out US-led assault on Iran.



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