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Iran, Israel Spoiling for a Fight?

By Mel Frykberg

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RAMALLAH — Iran and Israel appear to be spoiling for a fight, going by recent belligerent statements emanating from several regional capitals.

Military movement on the ground is also lending credence to the idea that the mutual loathing and major ideological differences between the two countries could lead to a vortex of violence capable of sucking the entire region into a new war.

"Diplomacy and sanctions are not going to work with Iran. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is a messianic ideologue. He is a follower of the extremist Shia cleric Mesach Yazdi, who even the late Ayatollah Khomeini rejected as too extreme," says senior policy advisor Dan Diker from the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.

"Iran has been threatening Israel with destruction for a long time and this language needs to be taken seriously," Diker told IPS.

"Furthermore, the International Atomic Energy Agency has confirmed recently what Israel has been saying for 15 years and that is the Iranian regime is hell bent on acquiring nuclear weapons," Diker added.

The Israeli media has reported that Syria, considered an Iranian proxy, has been transferring advanced weapons, of the type which it dared not to hand over before, to the Shia resistance organization Hezbollah in Lebanon.

A senior researcher for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) told the Israeli Knesset, or parliament, that Syria had crossed a red line.

The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a conservative and pro-Israeli think tank, reported that, "Syria may have delivered to Hezbollah Russian-made shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles — the Igla-S (SA-24 by its NATO code) which could pose a threat to the Israel Air Force (IAF)'s F-16 fighters."

The IDF has further warned that since the second Israel-Lebanon war in 2006 Hezbollah has engaged in extensive activity, focusing on a military build-up in the south of Lebanon.

Israeli defense minister Ehud Barak stated recently that the size of Hezbollah's missile and rocket arsenal stands at approximately 45,000 — much higher than previous assessments.

A further development that has analysts scratching their collective heads is Tehran moving its entire stockpile of low-enriched uranium above ground level.

Any attack hitherto would have been dependent on the use of bunker-busting bombs to reach Iran's underground nuclear complex.

Is this a move aimed at provoking an Israeli attack and challenging just how serious Israel is?

Iran, however, argues that the enriched uranium could go into enhancing the capability of its small reactor in Tehran that is used to produce isotopes for medical equipment.

Other experts claim Iran had run out of suitable storage containers for its enriched uranium, so it had to move almost all of it.

For several years Israel, too, has been upping the ante and the rhetoric by drip-feeding continuous statements to the media warning of the danger Iran allegedly poses and insinuating a possible preemptive strike on the country.

This rhetoric has come in conjunction with extensive diplomatic pressure for severe sanctions against Iran as well as dummy-run preemptive military exercises and home drills in the case of an attack.

Israel also has a history of actual military strikes on its neighbors. In 1981 the IAF bombed Iraq's Osirak nuclear facility. In 2007 the IAF carried out a preemptive strike on an alleged Syrian nuclear site.

In addition to military movement, heated rhetoric emanating from Israel and its enemies in Iran, Syria and Lebanon are adding fuel to the fire.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu last Tuesday compared Iran's nuclear development to "a runaway train and the international community a car on the brink of collapsing."

The Iranian leadership has likewise warned of Israeli aggression. Last week Ahmadinejad opined that Israel was planning to attack Syria and Lebanon and vowed that Iran would stand by them.

Furthermore, senior Iranian, Syrian and Hezbollah officials have all recently commented extensively on the likelihood of a war with Israel.

This scenario was discussed extensively several weeks ago when Ahmadinejad met with Syrian President Bashar Assad in Damascus.

Assad also met with leaders from Hamas and Hezbollah. Hamas has acknowledged receiving military and financial support from Iran.

Israeli daily *Haaretz* reported that U.S. national security adviser James Jones argues that Iran, "may try to divert international public opinion from the Obama administration's initiative to step up sanctions against it through an attack on Israel via Hezbollah or Hamas."

The U.S., aware of the growing tension on Israel's northern borders, has urged both Israel and Syria to avoid an escalation in the region.

U.S. under-secretary of state William Burns paid an unsuccessful visit to Damascus recently when he met with Assad and urged him to stop the weapons flow to Hezbollah. Assad denied that Syria was behind the weapons shipment.

Haaretz journalist and analyst Aluf Benn believes that both Ahmadinejad and Netanyahu are playing a game of brinkmanship and pondered what will happen if diplomacy and sanctions against Iran do not work.

Will Israel carry through with an attack on Iran or will it be forced to back down and admit that the Iranian threat has been exaggerated? asked Benn.

Benn further argues that both leaderships too were counting on only one of them surviving any future confrontation.

Diker refused to be drawn into a debate on a possible preemptive Israeli strike on Iran.

"However, many Arab officials who are also worried about Iran's desire for regional hegemony have told me that the only way to deal with the Islamic theocracy is with militarily action," Diker told IPS.