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## US warms to strike on Iran

By Victor Kotsev  
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"With sufficient foreign assistance, Iran could probably develop and test an intercontinental ballistic missile [ICBM] capable of reaching the United States by 2015," claimed a Pentagon report that was declassified on Monday. The almost simultaneous timing of two key recent revelations - this and Israeli accusations that Syria had transferred Scud missiles to Hezbollah in Lebanon - has contributed to a fresh escalation of tensions in the Middle East and to speculation that the stage is being set for a military show-down.

The war of words has become particularly harsh, and threats are now being exchanged openly between the United States and Iran: the first salvo since President Barack Obama's inauguration, and a troubling development. "We are not taking any options off the table as we pursue the pressure and engagement tracks," the Pentagon's press secretary, Geoff Morrell, said this week. "The president always has at his disposal a full array of options, including use of the military ... It is clearly not our preferred course of action but it has never been, nor is it now, off the table."

Days ago it was revealed that the US military was actively preparing for war against Iran. "The Pentagon and US Central Command are updating military plans to strike Iran's nuclear sites, preparing up-to-date options for the president in the event he decides to take such action," CNN reported on Monday.

The Iranians, meanwhile, have embarked on a show of force of their own. "Iranian armed forces on Sunday displayed three generations of modern home-made ballistic missiles in military parades marking the country's Army Day," Fars News reported. Last week, the agency quoted the chief of staff of the Iranian armed forces, Major General Hassan Firouzabadi, as saying, "As I

have already announced, if the US attacks Iran, none of its soldiers [in the region] will go back home alive."

What is particularly worrisome is that a US (or Israeli) military strike against Iran in the near future would, in a sense, fit in with Obama's goals and public relations image up to now. Firstly, there are growing indications that, after the Democratic nomination, the presidency, and the healthcare bill, the Middle East has become the next major quest for the US president.

For example, this is also reflected in the US administration's massive pressure on Israel to make further concessions to renew the stalled negotiations. "At the heart of this disagreement [between Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu] lies a dramatic change in the way Washington perceives its own stake in the game," the former US ambassador to Israel, Martin Indyk, wrote on Monday in an op-ed for the New York Times. "It actually began three years ago when [secretary of state](#) Condoleezza Rice declared in a speech in Jerusalem that US 'strategic interests' were at stake in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict - a judgment reiterated by Obama last week when he said resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict is a 'vital national security interest' for the United States."

Moreover, Obama has acquired a reputation for slow, methodical escalation of rhetoric, followed by daring and decisive action. He tends to give his most powerful opponents ample room to debate and negotiate, and to show maximum reserve in an attempt to secure a claim to the moral high ground: a brilliant public relations strategy, if nothing else.

In the case of Iran, he has gone so far as to delay vital support to the Iranian opposition in the post-[election](#) demonstrations last summer and to openly pressure Israel not to attack. He kept a lid on all talk about a possible military scenario coming from anywhere important in his administration for close to a year, and has been reluctant to discuss such an option himself to date.

Critics have accused him of being too soft, but the harshness of his administration's rhetoric toward Iran has been growing since late last year, when a first few cautious officials started talking about the possibility of military strikes on Iran's nuclear program. Escalation has been slow but consistent, in a way similarly to the progression of the domestic healthcare debate that ended in a dramatic victory for Obama.

On Saturday, the New York Times reported on parts of a secret memo by US [Defense Secretary](#) Robert Gates, accusing the administration of lacking a clear policy to thwart the Iranian nuclear program [1].

Apparently, still-classified portions of the memo called for an adequate preparation for military strikes. Coming from Gates, a [Republican](#) who stayed on as defense secretary after the George W Bush administration was dissolved due to his long-standing opposition to war against Iran, this development is significant.

Analysts see the conflict between the US and Iran as complex and far-reaching. "Until 2003, regional stability - such as it was - was based on the Iran-Iraq balance of power," writes

prominent think-tank Stratfor. In the wake of the Iraq war, "The United States was forced into two missions. The first was stabilizing Iraq. The second was providing the force for countering Iran."

There are serious doubts whether the rhetoric itself has not gone so far that reconciling now would have to be a failure for one side or the other. "There is a legitimate concern that if sanctions are considered a political necessity now, will military action be regarded as a political necessity in 2011, once the sanctions have been deemed a failure?" said Trita Parsi, president of the National Iranian American Council, this month. [2]

Last month, I pointed out that key US regional allies such as Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt had reportedly been pushing for US military action. [3] "There are countries [in the Gulf] that would like to see a strike [on Iran], us or perhaps Israel, even," said US Central Command chief General David Petraeus to CNN in March.

There are consistent indications that Israel, too, is gearing up for an impending regional war and perhaps is considering initiating action on its own. "For practical reasons, in the absence of genuine sanctions, Israel will not be able to wait until the end of next winter, which means it would have to act around the congressional elections in November," Brigadier General Ephraim Sneh, a former Israeli deputy defense minister, wrote this month in an op-ed for Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

Sneh's assessment has been among the boldest so far in terms of specific time-frame predictions, but high-ranking Israeli officials and politicians, including Netanyahu, have called for the use of military force as a tool of last resort to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. The Israeli prime minister has repeatedly asserted his belief that a nuclear Iran would pose an existential challenge to the Jewish state, and must be prevented despite the high price tag.

Sources close to him add weight to his words in light of the special relationship between him and his 100-years old father, who predicted the Holocaust in 1937 and who is a prominent hawk on Iran. "Look the danger straight in the eye, calmly weigh what should be done, and be prepared to enter the fray the moment the chances of success seem reasonable," said the elder Netanyahu as advice to Israel and his son during his centennial celebration address last month. [4]

In this context, last week's Israeli accusation that Syria had supplied Scud missiles to Hezbollah can be seen as, among other things, part of a public relations campaign to discredit Lebanon and Syria in preparation for a possible conflict there. This is not to say that the Israeli claim is incorrect: on the contrary, it appears to be true, and this is yet another indicator of volatility in the region. Even a high-ranking Hezbollah source (albeit an anonymous one), interviewed by Kuwaiti newspaper al-Rai, confirmed the reports. Israel has long maintained that the transfer of sophisticated missiles to Hezbollah would be considered a legitimate reason for preventative military action.

Tensions have risen in the past six months or so despite mutual attempts between Israel and Syria to avoid a full-blown war. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad decided on a surprise visit to Egypt to discuss the possibility of an Israeli-Syrian war, Ha'aretz reported. [5]

Oddly enough, Lebanon appears to be one among few issues in the Middle East on which Israel and the US can agree. "If such an action has been taken [transfer of Scuds to Hezbollah] ... clearly it potentially puts Lebanon at significant risk," US State Department spokesman P J Crowley told reporters last week.

It is hard to tell whether a major Middle Eastern war is inevitable at this point, but the clouds are getting significantly darker, and the US appears to be rapidly warming up to the idea of a military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities, whether carried out by the Americans themselves or by Israel. This is a major development, and the next big red line to watch for would be a statement affirming military action coming directly from the US president. If his track record is any indication, when Obama decides to act, he will abandon his reserve and act swiftly and decisively.