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Iran has defense headache

By Richard M Bennett

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United States President Barack Obama reportedly told representatives of the Chinese government recently that the US may not be able to restrain the Israelis from launching a massive military strike on Iran's nuclear and missile facilities for much longer.

According to the Israeli Newspaper Ha'aretz on December 17:

President Barack Obama has warned his Chinese counterpart that the United States would not be able to keep Israel from attacking Iranian nuclear installations for much longer, senior officials in Jerusalem told Ha'aretz. They said Obama warned President Hu Jintao during the American's visit to Beijing a month ago as part of the US attempt to convince the Chinese to support strict sanctions on Tehran if it does not accept Western proposals for its nuclear program.

The Israeli officials, who asked to remain anonymous due to the sensitivity of the matter, said the United States had informed Israel on Obama's meetings in Beijing on Iran. They said Obama made it clear to Hu that at some point the United States would no longer be able to prevent Israel from acting as it saw fit in response to the perceived Iranian threat. However, Iran appears to be in denial of the danger and continues to be its own worst enemy with a constant campaign of bluster, [hyperbole](#) and threats.

As with a number of well-known [Middle Eastern](#) leaders, including the late and largely unlamented Saddam Hussein, President Mahmud Ahmadinejad continues to put what purports to be national pride before common sense or a rational approach to [international relations](#).

The Iranian government, its [military](#) and intelligence services go out of their way to

needle the West in a manner that suggests that they still harbor the illusion of surviving such a military confrontation.

Iran incapable of defending its strategic targets

The truth is that Iran is quite incapable of defending its air space and strategic targets against a determined Israeli attack, let alone one that involved US air assets.

Iran's air force and [air defense](#) forces are a generation or more behind its potential foes. According to the US Center for Strategic and [International Studies](#) (CSIS) in Washington in May 2009, "Without Russian air defense systems, Iran is a sitting duck."

CSIS said, "Iran's current air defense umbrella is antiquated and could not stop an Israeli or US strike. Iran's air defense network could be easily penetrated by the air forces of Israel and the [United States](#)."

The CSIS report continued, "Iran's aging US and Russian-origin assets could not intercept Israeli F-15 and F-16 fighters ... Iran lacks the modern weapon systems, integration and C4I battle management to reduce the potential destructive effectiveness of any offensive interdiction missions by Israel."

The report, titled "Study on a Possible Israeli Strike on Iran's Nuclear Development Facilities", said: "One can predict a very low attrition rate to an Israeli strike."

Indeed, there are so far unconfirmed reports that the five-day Iranian air defense exercise held in late November to test the defense of its strategic nuclear sites was an abject failure. Middle East sources have reported, "From the word go on Sunday, November 22, Iran's five-day drill demonstrated that its air force and air defense units were unequal to their mission of keeping the skies over its nuclear sites clear of incoming strike aircraft."

The Iranian navy is limited to counter-attacking allied naval forces in the Gulf in the event of a major conflict, while the Iranian army has no one to attack directly, with Iraq, Syria and Jordan between its armored forces and the borders of Israel.

It goes almost without saying that any serious attempt by Iran to launch a military strike on US or allied forces based in Iraq, the Gulf, Pakistan or Afghanistan, or indeed the strategically vital oilfields of Kuwait, northern Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, could be expected to bring an immediate Western military response with catastrophic consequences for Tehran.

A growing missile threat

This leaves just Iran's growing missile capability for Israel and the West to ponder. It is fair to say that Iran has made considerable strides in such technology with the overt help of North Korea and covert assistance by Pakistan, China and very probably a number of renegade Western commercial companies.

Iran does now have a limited ability to strike at Israel and Western targets throughout a wide area of the Middle East.

It was widely reported on December 16 that Iran test-fired an upgraded version of an advanced missile system believed to be capable of hitting Israel and even parts of Europe in an apparent show of strength aimed at discouraging attacks on its nuclear facilities. The test of the medium-range Sajjil-2 was reportedly a success and encouraged Iran to claim that it could retaliate effectively against a future US or Israeli military strike.

The Foreign Office in London said Iran has the "clear intention to extend the range of its missiles", calling the launch "the wrong signal to send when the international community is trying to find a diplomatic solution" to its growing nuclear program.

James Lewis, a senior defense expert at CSIS, said that Iran probably has up to 300 shorter-range Shahab missiles, while the Sajjil remains in the test phase and currently "it's not a sophisticated program". But, Lewis added, "they've been putting a lot of money and effort into this program for more than a decade, and we have to take their claims seriously."

Wednesday's test was the third for the Sajjil-2 since it was unveiled in May. The missile has the longest range of any in Iran's arsenal, about 1,200 miles (1,900 kilometers) - putting Israel, Iran's sworn enemy, and US bases in the Gulf region well within reach. It could also reach parts of southeastern and eastern Europe.

Nuclear capability still years away

However, while Iran may have recently tested a "nuclear trigger" under laboratory conditions - if unconfirmed reports coming out of London are to be believed - and have enough enriched uranium for a single crude nuclear bomb, it still remains likely that Iran is at least five years away from having a genuine nuclear first-strike capability against Israel, even assuming that this is the path it is taking - something Tehran consistently denies.

Before that stage is reached, a considerable amount of weapons-grade material would have to be produced; the bomb and its trigger tested, probably more than once and then the advanced technology developed to build a significant number of miniaturized nuclear weapons to fit the nose cones of its missile force.

Iran is highly unlikely to be able to develop or procure in the foreseeable future the type of advanced strike aircraft capable of delivering an air-dropped nuclear weapon over the required distance and which would have undoubtedly provided a quicker option for developing a nuclear strike force.

Therefore, the Iranian threat in the immediate future will rest on a relatively small number of missiles with conventional warheads, for if Tehran was to use any of its known stocks of chemical or biological weapons in missile attacks on Israel, the response

would quite certainly be that which would have followed a nuclear attack; the total devastation of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

If Iran continues to be at odds with the United States, [the European Union](#) and [the United Nations](#), then it must be a distinct possibility that Israel will indeed launch a massive air assault, feasibly backed up by cruise missiles launched from submarines in the Arabian Sea sometime next year.

Even a successful Israeli attack will still hold grave dangers for Washington, however.

A very significant proportion of the munitions that the Israeli Defense Forces would drop on Iran would be "[Made in the USA](#)". It remains a valid point that Iran may reasonably not be too concerned with who actually drops the bombs and be far more vengeful against those who made the weapons, trained the pilots, built the aircraft and who Tehran ultimately blames for sponsoring and protecting its attacker.

Nor could the Iranian military be 100% certain that any such attack would not include covert US involvement and particularly satellite targeting intelligence and [electronic warfare](#) assets. Iran's response may therefore be to blindly strike back at any and all available targets, whether Israeli or Western, and by any means left to it, including missile strikes and attacks by its worldwide network of supporters, including Hezbollah and Hamas.