

Nato may help US airstrikes on Iran

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WHEN Major-General Axel Tüttelmann, the head of Nato's Airborne Early Warning and Control Force, showed off an Awacs early warning surveillance plane in Israel a fortnight ago, he caused a flurry of concern back at headquarters in Brussels.

It was not his demonstration that raised eyebrows, but what he said about Nato's possible involvement in any future military strike against Iran. "We would be the first to be called up if the Nato council decided we should be," he said.

Nato would prefer the emphasis to remain on the "if", but Tüttelmann's comments revealed that the military alliance could play a supporting role if America launches airstrikes against Iranian nuclear targets.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) will tomorrow confirm Iran's referral to the United Nations Security Council for possible sanctions.

Iran insists it is developing peaceful nuclear energy, a claim regarded as bogus by America and Britain, France and Germany, which believe it wants to develop nuclear weapons. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's remarks about wiping Israel "off the map" have added to fears.

America and Israel have warned that they will not tolerate a nuclear-armed Iran. If negotiations fail, both countries have plans of last resort for airstrikes against Iran's widely dispersed nuclear facilities.

Porter Goss, the head of the CIA, visited Recep Erdogan, the prime minister of Turkey, a Nato country, late last year and asked for political, logistical and intelligence support in the event of airstrikes, according to western intelligence sources quoted in the German media.

The news magazine Der Spiegel noted: "Washington appears to be dispatching high-level officials to prepare its allies for a possible attack."

Nato would be likely to operate air defences in Turkey, according to Dan Goure, a Pentagon adviser and vice-president of the Lexington Institute, a military think tank.

A former senior Israeli defence official said he believed all Nato members had contingency plans.

John Pike, director of the US military studies group Globalsecurity.org, said America had little to gain from Nato military help. "I think we are attempting to bring the alliance along politically so that when all diplomatic initiatives have been exhausted and we blow up their

sites, we can say, 'Look, we gave it our best shot'."

A senior British defence official said plans to attack Iran were pure speculation. "I don't think anybody has got that far yet," he said. "We're all too distracted by Iraq."

Israel's special forces are said to be operating inside Iran in an urgent attempt to locate the country's secret uranium enrichment sites. "We found several suspected sites last year but there must be more," an Israeli intelligence source said. They are operating from a base in northern Iraq, guarded by Israeli soldiers with the approval of the Americans, according to Israeli sources.

The commander of Israel's nuclear missile submarines warned Iran indirectly in a comment to an Israeli newspaper last week that "we are able to hit strategic targets in a foreign country".

The Israelis fear Iran may reach the "point of no return" — at which it has the capacity to enrich uranium to bomb-grade purity — in the next few months. The Americans are more interested in the point at which Iran is close to developing an actual bomb, thought to be at least three years away.

Two Iranian opposition groups claimed this weekend that Iran had increased its production of Shahab 3 missiles, which have a range of 1,200 miles, sufficient to reach Israel.

Diplomatic efforts to contain Iran are likely to proceed slowly, given Russian and Chinese opposition to punitive action. A Foreign Office official said although the IAEA would refer Iran to the security council, any sanctions would be a "strictly step-by-step process".

Additional reporting: Tom Walker

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