

Tehran declares State of Alert on its Western Border: Iran-US-Israel Drama goes into Act II

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Two weeks ago, the UN Security Council, in a divided vote adopted Resolution 1929 imposing fresh sanctions on Iran.

Turkey and Brazil voted against while Lebanon abstained in the 15 member Council. The US and its allies lobbied hard for the sanctions, making concessions in order to bring Russia and China on board.

The move followed months of futile efforts to reach a negotiated settlement between Iran and the P5 plus Germany over the nuclear issue. The last minute agreement brokered by Turkey and Brazil for Iran to hand over 1200 kg of low enriched uranium failed to satisfy the US.

As expected, Iran has dismissed the Security Council resolution as illegal, and declared its intention to continue with its nuclear programme. Meanwhile, the US Congress has drafted a tougher sanctions package, which would affect third country companies supplying petrol or engaging in financial transactions with Iran. President Obama seems to have little choice but to approve it. The EU has adopted its own version of tighter sanctions against Iran. On the military front, Israel on June 22 launched a sixth spy satellite Ofek-9 specifically to focus on Iran. It has a more advanced camera with a resolution of 0.5 metres.

A major military exercise took place off the Mediterranean coast on June 6-10, involving US aircraft carrier Truman and associated strike group and German and Israeli ships. The exercise Juniper Stallion 10 involved practice bombing runs by US and Israeli aircraft, as well as Israeli anti missile defences is significant in relation to speculation about a possible military strike against Iran.

The USS Truman battle group has since transited Suez on 18 June, headed for the Arabian Gulf to join the USS Eisenhower battle group already there.

Iran has declared a state of alert on June 22, on its northwestern borders alleging that US and Israeli forces have concentrated in Azerbaijan ready to strike at Iran's nuclear facilities. Iranian sources claim that Israel has secretly transferred a large number of bomber jets to bases in Azerbaijan, via Georgia, and that American Special Forces are also concentrated in Azerbaijan in preparation for a strike.

Dr. Uri Arad, a top adviser to Prime Minister Netanyahu said on June 22 that a pre-emptive military strike against Iran may "eventually" be necessary. On June 17, US Defence

Secretary Robert Gates told US Senators that Iran could fire salvoes of hundreds of missiles against targets in Europe, and argued in favour of stronger missile defence systems in Europe, despite Russian objections. Israeli commentators have pointed out that this could mean a far larger threat to Israel, taking into account the presence of large numbers of shorter range missiles with Syria and the Hezbollah in Lebanon.

US sources indicated that senior Al Qaeda operatives such as Saif al-Adel, living in Iran had been allowed to leave the country through Syria to orchestrate terrorist attacks on American targets. These reports seem aimed at further tarnishing the Iranian regime and portraying it as a supporter of international terrorism.

All these developments point to a situation of increasing tension in the region. A small incident could trigger off a larger conflagration. It is likely that Iran may resort to buying its needs of petrol through companies in third countries having no business operation involving the US.

It would be legally difficult for third countries to apply restrictions on companies that wish to supply petrol to Iran, in the absence of any UNSC ban on such trade. However, the US government is likely to put pressure on countries to try and stop such indirect trade. As the Iran-US-Israel drama moves into its second Act, countries in the region should be ready to face unpleasant consequences of heightened tensions and conflict.

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