

The War on Iran: America's Last Middle East Domino

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Global Research, January 20, 2012
[Frontline](#) 20 January 2012

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The U.S. media reported that the Obama administration initially considered a military incursion into Iran to retrieve the drone but better sense prevailed. RQ-170s are mainly used for reconnaissance and are not used to target militants in Afghanistan. The drones have been reportedly carrying out surveillance over Iran for the last two years to identify possible targets for attack.

The end of 2011 saw the formal departure of the United States' occupation troops from Iraq. Most of the troops have been relocated in neighbouring Kuwait so as to be ready to intervene militarily at short notice once again in Iraq or in other West Asian countries.

The U.S. is in no hurry to loosen its grip on the resource-rich region. Its strategists are busy devising ways by which it can retain its hegemony there. They are emboldened by the happenings in Libya, where, in the words of President Barack Obama, "the U.S. led from behind". A similar strategy is being followed in the case of Syria, a close ally of Iran.

The immediate goal of the West is to effect a regime change in Syria and further isolate Iran in the region. If the West succeeds in its game plan, then Iran will be the last domino it will have to tackle in the region.

Tensions with Iran have risen alarmingly in recent months. Bellicose statements are emanating regularly from Washington and other Western capitals. The West is now threatening to impose unilateral sanctions against Iran. These include new sanctions on the export of Iranian oil and gas.

The Obama administration started piling up pressure after the release of the latest report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which, without providing any tangible evidence, accused Teheran of engaging in clandestine uranium-enrichment activity. U.S. Defence Secretary Leon Panetta said in the last week of December that Iran could be in possession of a nuclear weapon within a year's time. He pronounced that this was a "red line" that the U.S. would never allow Iran to cross and that his country would take "whatever steps necessary to deal with the situation".

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short notice. The U.S. has big military bases in neighbouring Bahrain and Qatar. In the WikiLeaks cables, the Saudi King is on record exhorting the U.S. to “attack Iran” and “cut off the head of the snake”.

Iran continues to insist that its nuclear programme is only for peaceful non-military purposes. Challenging the so-called evidence provided by the IAEA, Iran claims that much of it has been fabricated by U.S. and Israeli intelligence agencies.

An article titled “Time to Attack Iran” by Matthew Kroenig in an influential foreign policy journal said that “a carefully managed U.S. attack” on Iran would be able to destroy Iran’s nuclear installations without provoking an all-out war engulfing the region. Kroenig was until recently Special Adviser to the U.S. Defence Secretary.

The anti-Iran hysteria in the U.S. has in recent months been carried to absurd levels. Some months ago, the U.S. government and the media gave credence to charges that the Iranian authorities had given a Mexican drug cartel a contract to assassinate the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the U.S. In December, a U.S. federal judge ruled that Iran was involved in the September 11 attacks on New York. The judge concluded that Iran provided “direct help to Al Qaeda specifically for the attacks”.

Iran, which is one of the biggest oil producers in the world, has reasons to feel threatened by the latest developments. Iranian military leaders have warned that if the West implements new sanctions, Teheran retains the option of closing down the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf. The Strait of Hormuz is a 6.4-kilometre-wide channel between Iran and Oman, located at the mouth of the Gulf. One-third of the world’s tanker-borne oil traffic passes through it. Nearly all the liquefied gas from Qatar passes through the strait.

Iran’s economy has already been affected severely because of years of sanctions imposed by the West. Obama signed a new piece of legislation on December 31 that would penalise companies doing business with the Central Bank of Iran. This law is aimed at countries such as India that import oil from Iran. Much of Iran’s oil goes to China and India. The European Union accounts for only 18 per cent of Iran’s oil exports.

Iran’s warning

Iranian Vice-President Mohammad Reza Rahimi has issued a warning that “not a drop of oil” will flow through the Strait of Hormuz if sanctions are imposed on the Iranian oil sector. In the last week of December, the Iranian army carried out 10 days of military drills in the Sea of Oman, located near the Strait of Hormuz. Iranian ships and aircraft dropped mines in the sea as part of the drill.

Admiral Habibullah Sayyari, the Iranian navy chief, told the Iranian media that it would be “very easy” to close the strait to shipping. “Iran has comprehensive control over the waterways,” he said, adding that Iran had no “hostile intentions” but the West “doesn’t want to go back on the plan to impose sanctions”.

Brigadier General Hossein Salami, Deputy Commander of the Revolutionary Guards, told the Fars News Agency that Iran would implement “defensive strategies to protect its vital interests”. Iran has on earlier occasions warned that in case it is attacked, the 32 U.S. military bases in the region will be targeted along with the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. Experts say that if hostilities break out, the price of oil will go through the roof.

Iran had offered to resume negotiations on its nuclear programme in an effort to stave off the latest round of sanctions. But after Obama approved the new sanctions, the Iranian army fired a new, mid-range surface-to-air missile, designed to evade radars, during the naval drill in the Gulf. Teheran also announced on January 1 that Iranian scientists had produced the nation's first nuclear fuel rods. The rods, which contain natural uranium, have been inserted into the core of Iran's research reactor.

U.S.' response

The Obama administration responded to the Iranian statements on the Strait of Hormuz by immediately despatching two of its warships - the aircraft carrier USS John C. Stennis and the guided-missile destroyer USS Mobile Bay - towards the strait. The U.S. Defence Department issued a warning that any step to "inhibit freedom of navigation" through the Strait of Hormuz "will not be tolerated".

Along with the threat of using military force, the U.S. and Israel have been targeting Iranian individuals working for scientific establishments and the military. Iranian military and civilian installations have also been targeted for terror attacks. In the last two years, cars in which two nuclear physicists were travelling were blown up. Fereydoun Abbasi-Davani, the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organisation, was wounded in a bomb attack on his car. On November 12, an explosion in a Revolutionary Guards base killed 17 people, including the man behind Iran's missile programme, General Hassan Tehrani Moghaddam. The New York Times quoted experts speculating that the base was hit by a missile fired from a drone. The Iranian authorities, however, said that the incident was an accident.

In late November, the Western media reported that a mysterious explosion had damaged a uranium-enrichment facility near the city of Isfahan. There has not been any news in the Iranian media of a major explosion taking place near Isfahan. But Israeli and U.S. officials have been claiming credit for the "acts of sabotage". Dan Meridor, Israel's Interior Minister, boasted: "There are countries which impose economic sanctions and there are countries who act in other ways in dealing with the Iranian nuclear threat."

Earlier, in 2010, the U.S. and Israel subjected Iranian nuclear facilities to the Stuxnet computer virus. The Stuxnet computer worm reportedly also damaged computers used in industrial machinery. The purpose of the cyber attack was to cripple Iran's nuclear programme.

For some time now, the Obama administration has authorised the use of armed drones in Iranian air space. The tensions between Washington and Teheran escalated after the Iranian air force brought down an RQ-170 Sentinel stealth drone of the U.S. in the first week of December. The drone, which can fly at 15,000 metres, is among the most sophisticated in the expanding U.S. drone fleet. The downed plane was proudly put on display in Iran. Teheran refused Washington's demand for the return of the drone, which, the U.S. claimed, had mistakenly strayed into Iranian territory.

The U.S. media reported that the Obama administration initially considered a military incursion into Iran to retrieve the drone but better sense prevailed. RQ-170s are mainly used for reconnaissance and are not used to target militants in Afghanistan. The drones have been reportedly carrying out surveillance over Iran for the last two years to identify possible targets for attack. The RQ-170 was used for surveillance of Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

The U.S. think tank Stratfor, which has strong links with the military establishment, has reported that the Obama administration has been waging “a broad ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) campaign in Iran, particularly to map out Iranian nuclear sites, ballistic missile units and development efforts, its air defence networks and command and control nodes”.

Meanwhile, all the Republican candidates vying to occupy the White House in 2012, except Ron Paul, have said that they are prepared to go to war against Iran. Their main argument is that Iran is developing nuclear weapons that would pose an existential threat to U.S.’ closest ally, Israel. Playing to the gallery in an election year, Obama reiterated that the military option against Iran was very much on the table. “No options off the table means that I am considering all options,” he said.

Iran, naturally, has not taken the latest threats lightly. Its Revolutionary Guards have been put on a war footing. The country’s air force has been put on high alert and has been carrying out exercises since December. It has formed “rapid reaction units”. The Iranian government has repeatedly warned that any attack by either Israel or the U.S. will trigger a prompt response, which would envelop the entire region in flames.

China, the biggest buyer of Iranian crude, has said that it is “against emotionally charged action” in the region. Russia has warned the West against “cranking up the spiral of tension”, saying that this will be detrimental to the efforts to get Iran back to the negotiating table.

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