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## Weather clears for a US strike on Iran

By Victor Kotsev  
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War drums are beating in the Middle East. In a short time, the United States has increased the number of its carrier strike groups opposite Iran to three, and reports are raining down of a tightening ring of American and Israeli concentrations all around the Islamic Republic. On the diplomatic front, the Israelis are unusually concerned about their international image (for example, making concessions in Gaza) while their top officials - including Defense Minister Ehud Barak and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu himself - are shuttling between Jerusalem and Washington.

Everybody in the region is restless. [Turkey](#) is making spectacular diplomatic pirouettes. Egypt is quietly seething, and Saudi Arabia less quietly so. [Jordan's](#) king had ruefully predicted war if no peace was achieved by the summer [1], and summer has now come. Syria and Lebanon are positioning themselves to weather the coming storm [2]. Yemen is in disarray. Russia, China, [India](#), and a host of other powers are vying to make the best of the fracas. The Iranian regime itself appears to be digging in for a fight.

By most accounts, a cataclysm is approaching. The situation, according to analyst Tony Badran, is "arguably similar to the one immediately preceding the 1967 Arab-Israeli war". Some very detailed analyses of the technical details of an Israeli strike on Iran are also available, such as David Moon's Asia Times Online story "The anatomy of an attack on Iran" [3]. An Israeli expedition into Iran may well take this course; however, at this point it seems very likely that if a strike occurs, it will involve Israel and the US acting in tandem.

The US appears to have stepped up covert operations and preparations for action against Iran. Persistent reports reveal that American forces have been concentrating around the

Persian Gulf and the Caucasus, most remarkably in Yemen and Azerbaijan, and that US and Israeli air forces have recently been practicing joint bombing drills. It may be, therefore, that the US is simply on a geostrategic collision course with Iran, and doesn't feel confident enough that Israel will be able to do the job.

According to a Stratfor monograph from February 27 titled "The Geopolitics of Iran", for example, the Islamic Republic cannot put up with a US presence on its borders, and has consequently tried hard to "manipulate ethnic and religious tensions in Iraq and Afghanistan to undermine the American positions there and divert American attention to defensive rather than offensive goals". Writes Stratfor:

The greatest threat to Iran in recent centuries has been a foreign power dominating Iraq - Ottoman or British - and extending its power eastward not through main force but through subversion and political manipulation. The view of the contemporary Iranian government toward the United States is that, during the 1950s, it assumed Britain's role of using its position in Iraq to manipulate Iranian politics and elevate the shah to power. This in itself - not to mention the interests of other vital American allies such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt - might be reason enough for an American military intervention.

However, all this is only a part of the picture. An attack on Iran will likely spark a conflict that is brutal and intense, but relatively short-lived and militarily inconclusive. The US interest is to end up with as little spilt blood as possible. As a rule, no Middle East war in the last 60 years has lasted for much longer than a month (the shortest and most spectacular one ended in just six days), and this is no coincidence. Nobody in the region, Iran and Israel included, can sustain an all-out campaign for very long, and in fact, nobody is likely to even attempt an all-out campaign. Such an option would be too devastating given the destructiveness of modern military technology and carry too great a risk of outside intervention. [Russia](#) has also repeatedly warned that it would not tolerate a major war close to its borders.

Stratfor's broader geostrategic prognosis also points to a deadlock of sorts:

As always, the Persians face a major power prowling at the edges of their mountains. The mountains will protect them from main force but not from the threat of destabilization. Therefore, the Persians bind their nation together through a combination of political [accommodation](#) and repression. The major power will eventually leave. Persia will remain so long as its mountains stand.

The main impact of a military campaign, therefore, would not be military. The true battle will be one of persuasion, and the target will be the Iranian people as well as the Muslim and broader international community. Luckily for the US, Israel, and their Middle Eastern allies, it appears that there is a growing international consensus against [Iran](#), and that at the very least most states would once again refrain from too much criticism of the dominant superpower. If that happens, the Iranian regime could be quickly humiliated and weakened, its nuclear program set back by many years, and its international isolation

deepened. In this case, seething internal tensions would eventually lead to regime change in the Islamic Republic.

Moreover, such a development would shake up the status quo in the Middle East, giving US President Barack Obama much needed leverage to push through an Arab-Israeli peace agreement. Having fulfilled his most important pre-election promise, in turn, would make Netanyahu more prone to compromise. Hamas would be left adrift, more or less, and initiatives like Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas' recent peace public relations campaign might be able to take hold and to galvanize some support in otherwise disillusioned Israeli and Palestinian publics. [4]

Pessimistic scenarios also exist, but apocalyptic predictions of a major war involving Syria and Lebanon are unlikely to materialize. In that respect, right-wing Israeli blog Samson Blinded makes a couple of unusually sharp observations: "[Syrian President Bashar al-]Assad remembers that the ayatollahs did not help him when the IAF [Israeli Air Force] flattened his nuclear reactor, and wouldn't be eager to help them. He understands that launching Scuds at Israel would cost him Damascus, and perhaps something more important - his throne. As the Arab saying goes, 'Syria is ready to fight [Israel](#) to the last Egyptian soldier'."

Still, it is unclear whether at least some large-scale bloodletting could be avoided, and Iran would likely be hit hard. Iraq and Afghanistan, already on the verge of chaos, could be additionally destabilized, though a perceived US victory against Iran would add some credibility to the American presence. Even minor disruptions in shipping through the Strait of Hormuz could wreak havoc on world economies.

Despite these potential problems, Obama could get a chance to make something of a generally bad situation he faces in the Middle East (for an insightful analysis of the Afghanistan situation, see [Obama risks all on flip of a COIN](#) Asia Times Online, June 29, 2010).

If he succeeds in minimizing the immediate fallout from an Iran campaign and capitalizing on it to achieve even partial progress in the Israeli-Arab peace talks, the embattled US president would get some major foreign policy credit to compensate for the dark clouds looming elsewhere.

In all, it appears that some sort of a military showdown is all but unavoidable between the Americans, the Israelis, and the Iranians. The most important question, then, becomes to what extent the damage can be contained and what opportunities might arise in it.