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Behind the mind games in the Gulf

By Richard M Bennett

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Psywar is the name of the game with Iran and both Israel and the United States appear to be raising the ante significantly with a combination of military exercises and public pronouncements that could be taken to suggest that all options are now firmly back on the table.

While the growing psychological pressure being exerted has so far had little clear discernible effect on Tehran's government, the same cannot be said of the mullahs.

Within the ranks of the secretive religious leadership in the holy city of Qom there appears to be both confusion and disagreement about the after-effects of the disputed presidential election in June that saw President Mahmud Ahmadinejad re-elected, and in the response to international pressure over Tehran's continuing nuclear development.

The fault lines are there and the West will no doubt hope to exploit them.

However, this will not be easy as none of the various competing factions led by Grand Ayatollahs Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader; former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani; Ali Montazeri or others are particularly warm to the West and outside interference by Washington will certainly not be welcome.

This also applies to the reportedly growing influence of Iraqi Shi'ite leader Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who appears to have offered his support to what must pass for the moderate or reformist wing of the Iranian religious leadership.

Washington must also be well aware that any form of overt interference could be costly and in the end prove counter-productive.

Intelligence failure

While US intelligence provides an extremely high level of technological surveillance of Iran

with advanced satellite and terrestrial platforms, a number of widely reported HUMINT (human intelligence) setbacks and failures in recent years have left the [Central Intelligence Agency](#) (CIA) with few useful assets within either the Iranian military or the intelligence community.

Robert Sale, reporting in the Middle East Times of March 31, 2009, claimed, "The CIA had lost its entire agent network in Iran when a CIA headquarters communications officer was about to send instructions to an agent via its Immarsat transmitter/receivers."

Sale explained that the CIA officer had attempted to download data intended for a single operative, but accidentally hit a button that sent it to the entire US spy network in Iran.

The information was received by a double agent who quickly passed it on to his case officer in MOIS (Ministry of Intelligence and Security). The Iranian counter-intelligence service was then able to wrap up the entire network within days, reportedly leaving Washington virtually blind.

Whether this report is totally correct or an exaggeration, the CIA has appeared to be critically short of good intelligence in recent years and this may have significantly contributed to a number of seemingly contradictory reports on the state of Iran's nuclear program, which many suspect is geared towards developing nuclear weapons.

Israel's Mossad, however, appears to still have some good sources both within Iran and Iranian communities abroad, as do a number of Western European intelligence services, but none are believed to be high-ranking officials or those who could provide a genuine insight into Tehran's long-term intentions.

This said, the in-fighting between senior clerics backing either Ahmadinejad or his main defeated rival, former prime minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, has provided a glimmer of hope that Iran's leadership is no longer truly united in continuing to defy the world community over nuclear weapons, or even perhaps recognition of Israel.

The remaining chance for a peaceful solution could rest on those senior religious leaders who may now believe that there is little benefit to be gained from pursuing the present confrontational course and that a normalization of international relations would be in the best long-term interests of the region as a whole and the Iranian people in particular.

Others might, however, suggest that the only policies that the clerics really wish to pursue are those that will keep them in supreme power in Iran.

Military options One of the latest hikes in this potentially dangerous psychological warfare game to see who blinks first has been the much reported, but so far unconfirmed, claim that Saudi Arabia may have privately offered to allow Israeli military [aircraft](#) safe passage through its airspace for a strike on the joint enemy - Iran. This has been vigorously denied by Israeli sources and, unsurprisingly, has not been confirmed by the Saudis.

It does, however, fit in nicely with the growing belief in some quarters that while Saudi Arabia may still be unwilling to accept the de jure state of Israel, it probably now views the [regime](#) in Tehran as a very real threat to the continued survival of the Saudi Kingdom.

Meanwhile, members of Iraq's parliament have warned Israel not to attempt to use Iraqi airspace to attack its powerful neighbor. This is a somewhat disingenuous statement as the [Baghdad](#) government simply does not have the military means to prevent such an overflight.

Only the United States might have the genuine capability in the region and it is unlikely in the extreme that President Barack Obama would order US fighters aloft to intercept an incoming Israeli strike on Iranian strategic targets.

Britain's Daily Telegraph recently claimed that Israel was actually negotiating with the United States for permission to fly over Iraq as part of a plan to attack Iran's nuclear facilities.

All of this follows the constant reports of extensive rehearsals by the Israelis for just such an operation. These have been heavily influenced by the hard lessons learnt during the less than impressive air war in southern Lebanon in 2006 against the Iranian-backed forces of Hezbollah and the rather more successful air raid on a secret Syrian special weapons facility in 2007.

It is reported that Israeli strike aircraft have flown a number of test runs to an area off Gibraltar, roughly the same distance from Israel's main air bases as the most sensitive strategic targets in Iran.

The New York Times of June 20, 2008, reported that "US officials say Israel carried out a large military exercise this month that appeared to be a rehearsal for a potential bombing attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. More than 100 Israeli F-16 and F-15 fighters took part in the maneuvers over the eastern Mediterranean and Greece in the first week of June. The exercise appeared to be an effort to focus on long-range strikes and illustrates the seriousness with which Israel views Iran's nuclear program."

The Times of London reported several months ago that the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) was making determined preparations to be able to launch a massive strike on Iran's nuclear facilities within a short period after the operation was sanctioned by Israel's government.

A senior Israeli defense official apparently told The Times, "Israel wants to know that if its forces were given the green light they could strike at Iran in a matter of days, even hours. They are making preparations on every level for this eventuality. The message to Iran is that the threat is not just words."

The rumor mills have been further fed by the reported delivery this year of an unusually large shipment of advanced US weapons to Israel. This apparently included more than 3,000 tonnes of deep-ground penetration, bunker-busting air-dropped munitions, arguably sufficient to destroy a significant proportion of Iran's heavily defended nuclear facilities.

It has been claimed that the stockpiling of US-made bunker-busting bombs by Israel has been ongoing since 2005. These are believed to include more than 5,000 smart bombs, probably made up of at least 500 BLU-109 one-ton bunker-busters that can penetrate two-meter-thick cement walls and 1,000 GBU-39 bunker-busters precision-guided by satellite to their targets.

Israel may also have now acquired the BLU-113 deep-penetration weapon, an improved GBU-28, a major shipment of which was received in August 2006 at the height of the air war in Lebanon. This variant is believed to be capable of penetrating some three meters of

reinforced concrete - which would probably be sufficient to destroy the well-protected Iranian facilities at Natanz.

Israel also possesses a range of indigenous advanced air-launched stand-off weapons, such as the Delilah-GL with a range in excess of 300 kilometers and the Popeye Lite, which is also in service with United States [Air Force](#) as the AGM-142 Have Nap

These and other assets in combination with an IDF air fleet of about 100 specially modified long-range F16I Sufa and 25 F15I Ra'am strike aircraft may be sufficient to destroy or significantly degrade much of Iran's nuclear infrastructure.

This goes with the proviso that the attacking aircraft are provided with a safe zone for in-flight refueling

It has recently been reported that an Israeli Dolphin-class submarine armed with US Harpoon missiles and capable of carrying the 480-kilometer or so range and nuclear-armed Popeye Turbo cruise missile has been allowed to transit the Suez Canal on its way to the Red Sea.

As long ago as 2000 it was reported that Israeli submarines had carried out cruise missile firing tests in the Indian Ocean, possibly in cooperation with the Indian navy.

The small Israeli submarine fleet with three submarine-launched cruise missiles-capable vessels could still provide a significant addition to Israel's strategic reach and allow for simultaneous sea-launched missile attacks on important targets considered to be beyond the acceptable target zone for strike aircraft.

End game

The US administration recently further raised the international stakes. Vice President Joe Biden told ABC reporter George Stephanopoulos when interviewed on July 5 that Israel had the right to determine its own course of action with regard to the Iranian nuclear threat, regardless of what the Obama administration chose to do.

It would be right to point out that this neither indicates a change in US policy nor a "green light" from Washington for an Israeli attack. It does, however, indicate that the Obama administration is aware that it can only restrain Israel so far and certainly not beyond the point where the Israeli government genuinely believes its security has been or soon will be significantly compromised

Biden made this clear when asked whether the Obama administration would restrain [Israeli military](#) action against Iran, "Israel can determine for itself - it's a sovereign nation - what's in their interest and what they decide to do relative to Iran and anyone else."

Biden appeared to hint that Obama was looking to take a harder line toward Iran over its contentious nuclear program. It is unlikely that even the oft-outspoken Biden would have been willing to make such a clear statement without it being in firmly in line with the thinking of both the president and the State Department. Obama subsequently strongly denied that his administration had given a green light to Israel to carry out an attack on Iran. (See [Obama discredits Iran 'green light'](#) Asia Times Online, July 9, 2009.)

Whatever the mind games being played in the Gulf, whatever the rhetoric, the hyperbole and

the countless claims and denials, it remains highly unlikely that even a successful Israeli attack on Iran could avoid some form of direct US involvement eventually, and most probably within a matter of days or even hours.

Any Iranian retaliation would almost certainly be swift and involve widespread attacks on the US and other Western interests throughout the region. Such a deadly response would quickly require some form of major US military response.

However, should an Israeli attack be a failure, a more than possible scenario, then the US may have little or no alternative but to finish the job, as a failed attack would leave Iran enraged and vengeful, and if it is not already, set it on the path to nuclear armament.