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Asia times Online

Ahmadinejad makes a call to arms

By Kaveh L Afrasiabi
7/31/2010

Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad's statement this week that "they have decided to attack at least two countries in the region in the next three months", has sparked intense debate in Iran. Even some hardline supporters of the president, such as the conservative daily Kayhan, have taken issue with his statement by discounting the possibility of another US invasion at a time when the Afghanistan war is going badly for Washington and Iraq remains highly unstable.

While the [United States](#) may have its hands full with two wars, the same cannot be said about Israel, especially if backed by regional states concerned about the prospect of a possible Iranian nuclear bomb.

Domestically, Ahmadinejad's statement in a press interview represents a political gamble that may make it easier for him to show flexibility on the nuclear question, as a conflict-prevention move, in light of Iran's stated preparedness for talks without preconditions come this autumn.

Iranian people are not in a fighting mood and the country can hardly stomach the multiple ills of another war, with some southern sections of the country still in post-reconstruction infancy some 23 years after the gunfire between Iran and Iraq stopped.

This was vividly demonstrated in Ahmadinejad's recent [trip](#) to the southern city of Khoramshahr, whose inhabitants gave him an earful about the lack of adequate reconstruction of the city, which fell into the hands of Saddam Hussein's army before it was liberated at exorbitant human cost.

Any attack on Iran's nuclear [installations](#), many of which are close to urban centers, is bound to cause serious collateral damage and would doubtless awaken the sleeping giant of Iranian patriotism. In fact, by raising the prospect of the imminent launch of war by Iran's enemies, Ahmadinejad may have been calculating to stir such emotion. At the same time, it is clear the deafening sound of an imminent war against Iran has unleashed new national [security](#) worries in Iran that affect the national psychic and discourse.

A political gamble by a president who a mere three years ago openly denied that the nuclear issue represented any crisis whatsoever, his statement is simultaneously a call for national mobilization, in preparation for confronting the military muscles of a Western superpower and its Israeli ally. This in turn is cultivating ties in the Persian Gulf to the detriment of Iran's interests.

Still, with foreign priorities taking the upper hand, Ahmadinejad's warning of a coming war on two fronts, widely interpreted as Iran and [Lebanon](#), is bound to (a) shore up support in the Arab and Muslim streets and (b) raise the possibility of more aggressive Iranian behavior in the region meant to underscore a pre-emptive Iranian response to the winds of war.

The wealth of US military secrets leaked on the [Internet](#) paint Iran as having a highly subversive role in Afghanistan, second only to Pakistan. Whether or not the [documents](#) are genuine or fabrications, they nonetheless present a unique opportunity to revisit Iran's Afghanistan policy in connection with the sanctions and a low-intensity war waged against Iran through such groups as Jundallah, which continues to pose a military risk despite the recent hanging of its arrested leader, Abdulmalik Rigi. Prior to his execution, Rigi provided fresh insights on the US's and Israel's support for the group.

A problem with the US approach is that it overlooks Iran's ability to strike back with low-intensity warfare in both Afghanistan and Iraq. The WikiLeaks documents on Iran depict precisely such a scenario that, conceivably, could get worse depending on the evolution of the nuclear crisis. That is, the allegations of Iranian training and logistical support for the Taliban inside Iranian territory could be true and only the beginning of a serious turnaround from a general policy of self-restraint.

"Iran will not let itself become another Iraq scenario in slow motion," says a Tehran University political science professor, referring to the long period of economic sanctions that preceded the US's invasion in March 2003.

In that scenario, economic warfare that substantially weakened the central government in Baghdad preceded the invasion. Similarly, if Western governments have their way, the same fate may be awaiting Iran - except that the Iranians have learnt from the Iraq war and are intent on doing everything humanly possible to keep an invasion at bay.