

Middle East Update: 20 Dec 2011

The situation in the Middle East continues to slowly deteriorate. The Sunni countries and Israel continue to prepare for an attack by Iran or preemptive attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities.

It appears that the United States may have changed its policy on Iran's construction of a nuclear weapon.

"Despite the efforts to disrupt the Iranian nuclear program, they have reached a point where they can assemble a bomb in a year or potentially less," said US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta in a CBS interview Tuesday, Dec. 20, marking a radical change in US administration policy, he added: "That's a red line for us and that's a red line, obviously for the Israelis. If we have to do it we will deal with it." (<http://www.debka.com/article/21585/>)

As an example of the change in policy and perhaps an indication of the possible timing of a preemptive strike on Iran's nuclear program, the United States and Israel will hold a major anti-ballistic missile exercise in the Spring.

Israel is moving forward with plans to hold the largest-ever missile defense exercise in its history this coming spring amid Iranian efforts to obtain nuclear weapons.

Last week, Lt. Gen. Frank Gorenc, commander of the US's Third Air Force based in Germany, visited Israel to finalize plans for the upcoming drill, expected to see the deployment of several thousand American soldiers in Israel.

The drill, which is unprecedented in its size, will include the establishment of US command posts in Israel and IDF command posts at EUCOM headquarters in Germany – with the ultimate goal of establishing joint task forces for the event of a future large-scale conflict in the Middle East.

The US will also bring its THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) and ship-based Aegis ballistic missile defense systems to Israel to simulate the interception of missile salvos against Israel. The American systems will work in conjunction with Israel's missile defense systems – the Arrow, Patriot and Iron Dome. (<http://www.jpost.com/Defense/Article.aspx?id=250249>)

In addition, Saudi Arabia has suggested that the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states upgrade their relationship to that of a union.

King Abdullah began by saying "our summit opens in the shadow of challenges that require vigilance and a united stance" adding "no doubt, you are all aware that our security and stability has been threatened and we therefore need to live up to our responsibilities towards our region and nations. We, in the Arab Gulf countries, are an integral part of the Arab and Islamic community. Our duty is to assist our brothers to achieve their aspirations...so that the blood stops flowing and to guard against the risks of foreign intervention."

Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz also stressed that "history and experience have taught us not to stop and watch the status quo, as whoever follows such behavior will find themselves at the end of the queue facing loss and weakness" adding "we do not accept this situation for our nations, peoples, stability, and security. Therefore, I ask today that we move from a

phase of cooperation to a phase of union within a single entity which achieves good and wards off evil." (<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=27762>)

The Gulf Cooperation Council states also called on Syria to stop killing protesters and on Iran to stop meddling in the affairs of GCC states.

Gulf Arab states on Tuesday urged Syria's government to immediately halt its "killing machine", and called on arch rival Iran to stop interfering in their internal affairs.

The six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council also pledged to implement comprehensive reforms and strengthen economic and military integration as a first step towards forming a union.

In a statement issued at the end of their annual summit, held in Riyadh against the backdrop of the Arab uprisings, the GCC members called on Syria to "immediately halt its killing machine."

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The GCC meanwhile called on Iran to stop meddling in the internal affairs of the group's members.

"Stop these policies and practises... and stop interfering in the internal affairs" of the Gulf nations, said the summit's closing statement, expressing concern over attempts by the Islamic republic to "instigate sectarian strife."

The Gulf bloc also called on the Shiite nation to "fully cooperate" with the International Atomic Energy Agency and work to resolve regional conflicts "peacefully," adding GCC members were committed to a Middle East "free of weapons of mass destruction." (<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=27776>)

And in perhaps a little noted but very important story, it appears that a major portion of the pipeline system designed to bypass the Straits of Hormuz is about to be completed.

According to industry sources, the crude oil pipeline in the UAE, one of the world's top five oil exporters, which will bypass the Strait of Hormuz is nearly complete with first oil to flow before the end of the year.

The Abu Dhabi Crude Oil Pipeline (ADCOP) project, a 480 km pipeline with a capacity of up to 2.5 million bpd – would allow the UAE to avoid the risky sea route and boost exports from its Fujairah terminal on the Gulf of Oman.

An industry source with direct knowledge of the pipeline stated: "Oil could flow through the pipeline from end-December initially at 1 million bpd and gradually increase to 2 million bpd."

"There's a hurry to get this operational," he said, adding that the start-up of the pipeline would ease a serious bottleneck in the Gulf.

(http://www.energyglobal.com/sectors/pipelines/articles/Crude_oil_pipeline_in_the_UAE_expects_first_flow_oil_in_December.aspx)

Not mentioned is that this pipeline will also start to negate the effects of Iran closing the Straits of Hormuz in retaliation for its nuclear facilities being attacked.

It also appears that the coalition government of Iraq may be in serious trouble.

Iraq's Nuri al-Maliki is acting like Saddam Hussein in trying to silence opposition and he risks provoking a new fightback against dictatorship, one of Maliki's predecessors as prime minister said on Tuesday.

Iyad Allawi, who leads the Sunni-backed Iraqiya bloc, said the televised confessions Maliki has used to demand the arrest of the country's Sunni Muslim vice president were fabrications.

Speaking to Reuters two days after the final departure of the U.S. forces that ended Saddam's Sunni-dominated rule, Allawi called for international efforts to prevent the Shi'ite premier from provoking renewed sectarian warfare of the kind that killed tens of thousands in the years after Saddam fell in 2003.

"This is terrifying, to bring fabricated confessions," Allawi said shortly before leaving the Jordanian capital Amman to return to Iraq. "It reminds me personally of what Saddam Hussein used to do where he would accuse his political opponents of being terrorists and conspirators."

Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi, who has taken refuge in Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region, denies allegations he ordered bombings and shootings against his opponents. The move against him, on the very day U.S. troops left the country, threatens to upset a balance among Shi'ite, Sunni and Kurdish factions.

"We fear the return of dictatorship by this authoritarian way of governing. It's the latest in a build-up of atrocities, arrests and intimidation that has been going on a wide scale," said Allawi, who comes from the Shi'ite Muslim majority but who has drawn support heavily from disaffected Sunnis.
<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=27779>

Baghdad/Erbil, Asharq Al-Awsat – In a striking development in the crisis surrounding Iraqi Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi, Iraqi authorities yesterday issued a warrant for his arrest for suspected ties to assassinations and bombings. Iraqi Interior Ministry spokesman, Major General Adel Daham, informed a news conference that confessions by suspects identified as al-Hashemi's bodyguards linked the vice president to killings and attacks on Iraqi government and security officials.

Waving a copy of the arrest warrant in front of reporters, General Adel Daham said "an arrest warrant was issued for Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi, according to Article IV of the terrorism law and is signed by five judges" adding "this warrant should be executed."

Al-Hashemi has been accused of being behind a number of terrorist attacks and assassinations in Iraq.

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He claimed that the arrest warrant was part of a campaign to "embarrass" him and the Iraqiya bloc, saying "[Prime Minister] al-Maliki is behind the whole issue. The country is in the hands of al-Maliki. All the efforts that have been exerted to reach national reconciliation and to unite Iraq are now gone. So yes, I blame al-Maliki." <http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=27769>

Please read all of the referenced articles for more important information.

Analysis. All of these events appear to point to a possible preemptive strike against Iran's nuclear facilities sometime after the early Spring. I believe that the timing of the anti-missile exercise is the most important pointer to a period of opportunity for such a strike when good weather is available in the Middle East.

Both the Sunnis and the Shiites continue to consolidate their respective positions. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia has called for the GCC to become a union with stronger political and military ties. This is most likely in response to the increased Shiite radicalization along the western side of the Persian Gulf. For this the Saudis blame Iran directly.

At the same time Iran has begun its consolidation of Iraq's Shiites under Ayatollah Shahroudi. The first apparent move is to get the Sunni Iraqi Vice President out of the government. While al-Malki would run into serious problems were he to antagonize the Kurds, Sunnis are a minority in Iraq and most live in the western provinces. The Shiites are interested in the Tigris-Euphrates Valley, the oil fields and refineries around Basra and most particularly the two most revered Shiite mosques in an-Najaf and

Karbala. For the Mahdi to appear safely, Shiites must control the Imam Hussein Mosque.

Control of Iraq also opens up direct land communications with Syria. So far Iran has been limited to air links with Syria and one recent shipment of material by sea. A land route from Iran to Syria would allow the Iranians to take to Syria cargo that is too heavy or too big to fly in. That would not be good for the Sunnis. It would complete the Shiite Crescent.

Another important indicator of a possible strike against Iran's nuclear facilities is given to us by the near completion of the UAE pipeline around the Straits of Hormuz. As I remember, this whole project was started in 2008 and includes pipelines from the Saudi oil fields across Saudi Arabia to the Red Sea as well as a main pipeline south to Oman that also connects with all of the oil pipeline systems of the Gulf States. This system will allow the GCC states to export the bulk of their oil without sending tankers through the Straits of Hormuz.

This pipeline system does two things. First, it negates the effects of Iran's ability to strangle ship traffic into and out of the Persian Gulf through which flows some forty percent of the World's oil. Second, it allows other powers to close the Straits to Iranian oil traffic without having GCC tanker traffic interrupted. It reverses control of the Straits and allows other countries to pressure Iran to give up its nuclear program by threatening to do exactly what The United States et. al. has been prevented from doing by Iran's continuing threats to close the Straits of Hormuz: strangle Iran's economy.

The Iranians are now faced with two serious strategic problems. The first is the seriously dwindling over time of the value of their threat to close the Straits of Hormuz. The second is the impending loss of their strategic partner Syria. So far Bashar Assad has not been able to crush the opposition to his family's rule the way his father Hafez did in the early 1980s. Hafez pretty much leveled the town of Homs to break the back of that rebellion. Bashar's reenactment of that slaughter has failed to stop the rebellion.

The difference is that this time the rebellion has serious outside support in the form of money, weapons and leadership from the GCC countries funneled mostly through Jordan and the western provinces of Iraq. This is King Abdullah's response to being told no when he asked Bashar to throw the Iranians out in February, 2009. A Shiite Syria (Alawites are Seventh Shiites) allied with Iran represents an existential threat to Saudi Arabia, the House of Saud and Sunni control of the Two Mosques upon which rests the legitimacy of the House of Saud.

Recent articles have detailed Syria's posting of chemical weapons armed Scud missiles to the Turkish border. They have also detailed Syria's deployment of armored divisions to the Turkish border and the Jordanian border. These deployments are designed to impress upon Turkey and the GCC states what will happen if there is an invasion of Syria from either direction. So far the Turks have declined to create a buffer zone in northern Syria. They have concentrated on providing support to refugees who make it into Turkey.

However, all of these moves are point and counter point centered around the impending sectarian war between Shiites and Sunnis for the leadership of Islam. This conflict cannot be avoided. It has been festering for some 1400 years ever since Ali was denied the leadership of Islam upon the death of Mohammad. For the first time in history, the Shiites control a nation state with a large Shiite population and the resources to support a military of sufficient size to challenge the Sunni states.

The mullahs also realize that the imposition of a doctrinaire Shiite Islamic state has pretty much destroyed the Iranian economy. Besides the obvious problems with graft and corruption which exist in any authoritarian state, few Persians really want to be doctrinaire Shiites. I learned this from the Iranians I corresponded with while doing the Iran updates for *World Threats* (www.worldthreats.com). The majority of the people of Iran want the mullahs gone. They want to live a modern life with all the

freedoms that brings with it. Rule by terror can only last so long.

The poor economic situation in Iran puts more pressure on the mullahs to begin the conflict. The movie *The Coming is Upon Us* (<http://atimetobetray.com/blog/iran-leaders-the-coming-is-upon-us-%E2%80%93-israel-shall-be-destroyed-watch-the-video/>) describes the conditions that must be met for the Mahdi to appear and for the war to conquer the infidels for Shiite Islam to begin. Of those conditions all have been met except the death of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. Other forces appear to be at work that may cause the Iranians not to wait for King Abdullah to die. These have been detailed above.

It appears to me from the pronouncements and events that have occurred recently that a strike on the Iranian nuclear facilities may happen any time after the Ides of March. The announced anti-missile exercise may well be cover to bring in the American anti-missile systems and tie them together with the Israeli systems. This has been practiced before but not to the level of establishing reciprocal command cells in the other's main headquarters. That is well beyond what is required for a simple interoperability exercise.

Perhaps the comments of Secretary of Defense Panetta are the most telling.

*"Despite the efforts to disrupt the Iranian nuclear program, they have reached a point where they can assemble a bomb in a year or potentially less," said US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta in a CBS interview Tuesday, Dec. 20, marking a radical change in US administration policy, he added: "That's a red line for us and that's a red line, obviously for the Israelis. **If we have to do it we will deal with it.**"*

I have said for about the past six years that it makes no difference where the war starts. Once it begins it will spread from the beaches of Beirut to northern Hokkaido and maybe even beyond. The interrelations and interdependencies of the nations of the World require them to get involved. If we attack Syria in the same manner we attacked Libya it means war with Russia. Any action that closes the Straits of Hormuz and thereby deprives the People's Republic of China of the majority of their daily oil input is a *causus belli* for them.

The year 2012 may yet live up to its billing.