

## US missile defense system turns the heat up on Iran

Contributed by Paige Kollock  
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After several weeks of saber rattling between both Washington and Tehran, Iran has once again decided to play tough, announcing over the weekend that it would raise its uranium enrichment levels from 3.5 to 20 percent, inching closer to the 90 percent enrichment needed to make a nuclear weapon. This defiant move comes a week after the US unveiled its new and improved Persian Gulf-based missile defense shield and Iran fired a rocket into space.

In addition to military pressure the US is exerting on Tehran, the Iranian government, in the wake of June's disputed reelection of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is facing mounting civil unrest and pressure from the international community, which is discussing further sanctions.

One year after US President Barack Obama promised to bring Iran in line with his silver-tongued diplomacy, the recent demonstration of US military might, coupled with further sanctions, shows his progress is lacking.

"[The missile defense system] signals that the US is ready for a conflict. It doesn't signal that there would be one, or even that the US is expecting one," said David Crist, a historian for the Joint Chiefs of Staff who is on leave to write a book about the US-Iranian conflict.

In fact, Crist noted, the missile defense system is not new. It began under the Clinton administration in the 1990s. What is new is the increased cooperation from Iran's neighboring Gulf countries, and their strong desire to protect themselves from an ever more unyielding neighbor.

"Iran's own actions have served only to strengthen the hand of the US with Gulf countries, who are afraid of a nuclear attack or even the damage imposed from Iran's Shabat 3 long-range missile," Crist told NOW.

Last October, President Obama's diplomatic maneuvering seemed to be working when Iran agreed, in principal, to a proposal by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to curb its uranium enrichment program. The plan called for Iran to send its uranium abroad, to countries such as France and Russia, for high-level enrichment. But the mercurial Ahmadinejad never followed through.

Now, four months later, with the support of his friends on the UN Security Council, Obama is pushing for a fourth round of UN sanctions on the rouge regime. Even Russia has agreed to the measures, though China is still on the fence, perhaps in response to the perceived slight of a US arms shipment to Taiwan. As rumors of further sanctions float around, Ahmadinejad again signaled that he would accept last year's IAEA deal. No one is taking him seriously.

"Ahmadinejad is trying to diminish political pressure from outside. He is trying to prevent the imposition of new sanctions on Iran," said Mehdi Khalaji, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "He is in a very weak position because of the [domestic] political crisis in Iran."

"Iran's internal problems will only flare up this week ahead of the anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, when widespread anti-government rallies are expected to take place across the country.

"The X factor now is the Iranian people," said Patrick Disney, assistant Policy Director at the National Iranian American Council. "The Iranian opposition movement has asserted itself as a force to be reckoned with. There is now a political clock that's competing with the nuclear clock. What's happening with the repression in Iran, innocent protesters being beaten and jailed and killed and tortured, is absolutely abhorrent, but I firmly believe the movement for democratic change and respect for human rights in Iran is best thing that can be happening for Iran in the long term. It's a drive for democracy that they started in 1905."

But that drive to democracy comes at a price, Disney said, because it leaves Iran's leaders on the defensive, less willing to cooperate with diplomacy efforts.

Crist says that Iran's recent expression of openness for a deal was merely a stalling tactic. "It's an attempt to buy more time, maybe avoid stiffer sanctions. Kick the can down road a little bit," he said.

Adding to Obama's concerns in the region, the fragile peace between Israel and its Middle Eastern neighbors is beginning to crack. Israel has threatened Syria, and in part Lebanon, with war, should Hezbollah — Iran's proxy in Lebanon — step out of line, and Syria has fired right back. On February 3, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid

al-Mouallem warned Israel "should not test Syria's determination, for it should know that a war will move to Israeli cities."

"The US has repeatedly cautioned Israel not to go ahead with any military attacks before all other options are exhausted," Disney said. But a nuclear-armed Islamic Republic whose president has vowed to "wipe Israel off the map" may be enough for Israel to ignore Obama's pleas for patience.

Disney thinks Iran's leaders would relish the opportunity to point to an external conflict as a way to distract from their problems at home, and a regional war involving Israel, Syria and Lebanon would do the trick perfectly. So is that what Iran is angling for? No one knows for sure.

An ever patient consensus builder, Obama is pledging to stick to a combination of hard and soft pressure — sanctions alongside diplomacy — hoping one of them will stick. In the meantime, the missile defense shield will help reassure Israel and Obama's Arab allies that the US is there for them if Iran chooses not to be.  
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