

Bahrain says Iran wants the bomb

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Bahrain's crown prince has claimed that Iran is developing atomic weapons or the capability to do so, British press reports said on Friday, the first time an Arab state in the Gulf has openly accused Tehran of lying about its controversial nuclear drive.

In interviews with correspondents for British newspapers in the capital Manama, Sheikh Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa also urged a diplomatic solution to the standoff between the West and Bahrain's close neighbour.

"While they don't have the bomb yet, they are developing it, or the capability for it," the crown prince said, warning that "the whole region" would be drawn into any military conflict.

"There needs to be far more done on the diplomatic front," he added, according to The Times. "There's still time to talk."

"We need to be very well aware that this could escalate. And we think that is not advisable," The Daily Telegraph quoted him as saying.

Bahrain is a Sunni Muslim-ruled dynasty with a population that is 60 per cent Shiite, the same branch of Islam that dominates in Iran.

"I want to see the region being fully consulted," The Independent quoted the crown prince as saying. "We were not fully consulted when the Iraqi regime was removed.

"Iran is an even bigger issue... We want to be part of any arrangement that deals with Iran. We don't want to wake up one day and suddenly find our skies darken and sirens blaring on every street."

Bahrain hosts the US Fifth Fleet, the main American carrier battle group tasked with securing the Strait of Hormuz through which much of the world's oil supplies must pass.

Despite already being under UN sanctions, Tehran refuses to suspend its controversial programme of uranium enrichment, which the West fears to be a cover for atomic weapons development, a charge Iran denies.

On October 25, Iran's arch-foe the United States announced new sanctions aimed at punishing Tehran over its nuclear ambitions and alleged sponsorship of terrorism.

The sanctions targeted the Revolutionary Guard Corps, accused of spreading weapons of mass destruction, and its elite Quds Force, which was designated as a supporter of terrorism.

On October 29, a top Revolutionary Guards general warned that his forces were ready "if necessary" to carry out suicide operations in the Gulf.

Washington has never ruled out military action against Iran to end its defiance over uranium enrichment.

Tehran has vowed never to initiate an attack, but has also warned of a crushing response to any strike against its territory.

On Thursday influential former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani warned Iran to be alert in the face of "unprecedented" actions by the United States.

"The movements and the presence of US forces and their supporters in the region is unprecedented, as is the creation of a menacing climate of fear," he told army commanders.

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