

Iran gets room to manoeuvre in phantom war

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A phantom war in the Middle East is pitting Iran against the West, Israel and most of the Gulf Arab states. It has been fought for years, involves multiple lines of operation, but has for the most part been played out in the shadows.

The stakes are high -- the ability or otherwise for Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon capability. The war has waxed and waned, but the regional background against which it is being fought is radically changed from past years.

As a result, there is an increasing eagerness to ratchet up the pressure on Iran still coming to terms with the implications of the Arab Spring.

The report by the International Atomic Energy Agency that accused Iran of carrying out tests "relevant to the development of a nuclear weapon" were the focal point about which a range of events pivoted.

The not-so-private ruminations emanating from Israel about military options being openly considered against Iranian nuclear sites are one public element of the stick with which Iran is being threatened, while the announcement by the US, Canada and Britain of a new round of sanctions against Tehran, following the release of the IAEA report, are another.

There is also a much harder edge to the stick wielded by the forces aligned against the Iranian nuclear program, and it remains very much in the shadows.

A little more than a year ago two nuclear scientists were attacked on the same morning in Tehran traffic by motorcyclists placing sticky bombs on the side of their cars. One scientist was killed while the other, Fereydoon Abbasi, survived and is now head of the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran.

Last month, Major-General Hassan Muqaddam, a senior member of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, was killed along with 16 others in a blast at a corps missile base near Tehran.

Iranian state media deemed the blast accidental, but General Muqaddam was a pioneer in developing the Iranian missile program and responsible for achieving self-sufficiency in armaments, which makes the timing of his death terribly coincidental.

Last week, there were reports of an explosion near Isfahan that might or might not have occurred and might or might not have been at the site of a nuclear facility.

Parallels between the standoff in the Gulf and the Soviet-era Cold War are hard to ignore. Not only targeted assassinations, but technical attack was a feature of these undeclared hostilities.

The best-known, and perhaps most effective, was the introduction of the Stuxnet computer worm into the Iranian uranium enrichment facility at Natanz. Allegedly a joint US-Israeli initiative, the virus damaged up to 10 per cent of the centrifuges at the facility.

Examples of espionage and counter-espionage round out the picture of an increasingly warm cold war. Last week, Iranian "demonstrators" attacked the British Embassy in Tehran while riot police stood silently by until the damage had been done.

US claims of an Iranian-inspired plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in a Washington restaurant have been followed up by Bahraini claims of the discovery of an Iranian-linked terrorist cell targeting Saudi and Bahraini interests.

Tehran countered with its own claim of Arab interference, arresting two Kuwaitis it has charged with spying, while the pro-Iranian Hezbollah has announced the rolling up of a large part of the CIA's agent network in Lebanon.

How many of these claims are true remains to be seen, but the timing of, evidence for, and motives behind all of these claims raise more questions than they answer.

Iran is also facing both regional challenges and opportunities arising out of the momentous political events in the Arab world.

On the negative side its main ally in the Arab world, the Assad regime in Syria, is facing an increasingly hostile and organised internal opposition while its popularity as a rejectionist state against Western influence is waning as internal revolts topple autocratic regimes without any help from Tehran.

The withdrawal of the last US troops from Iraq at the end of the year, however, and the downsizing of Washington's military commitment in Afghanistan leave open the potential for Iran to exert greater influence among its eastern and western neighbours.

While some commentators talk of the need to learn to live with a nuclear-armed Iran, the reality is that Western and Arab governments continue to pursue a dual strategy of public containment and private confrontation.

Tehran has willingly joined the fray, and the next few years hold out the very real prospect of the confrontation becoming increasingly public as both Iran and the West seek to take advantage of the competing challenges of the Arab Spring and the US withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan.

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