

‘Israel’s attack on Iran’ - in Gaza

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In Israel, Hamas is seen as an arm of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which seeks to extend its hegemony over the Middle East.

Predictions that Israel would attack Iran before President Bush leaves office have proven correct, in a manner of speaking. The attack on Hamas in the Gaza Strip is seen by some analysts as an attack on the western arm of Iran’s would-be Middle East dominion.

“Israel has, in effect, launched the war on the Iranian empire that President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney can only have contemplated,” writes American author Robert D. Kaplan in Atlantic Online.

A number of Middle East experts had predicted that Israel would attack Iran’s nuclear facilities sometime between the American elections and Bush’s departure from the White House. Washington, however, blocked an Israeli plan to launch such an attack, according to the New York Times. The timing of the attack on Gaza suggests that Israel wanted to pull it off before the inauguration of President-elect Barack Obama, who might be less tolerant of its activism.

The blow to Hamas has been discreetly welcomed by moderate Arab leaders who are fearful of Teheran’s attempt to achieve hegemony in the Middle East and infuse the region with its brand of radical Islam. While condemning the loss of civilian lives in Gaza, the leaders ignored demands by the Arab masses that they support Hamas’ fight.

Iranian influence over Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Hezbollah in Lebanon, two dynamic movements which Teheran arms and funds, is particularly galling to Arab leaders because Iran is not an Arab state but a Persian one. In addition, it follows the Sh’ite branch of Islam while most of the Arab states are Sunni.

When Israel fought Hezbollah in 2006, Egypt and Saudi Arabia condemned Hezbollah for starting the war by staging a cross-border raid into Israel. Egypt likewise warned Hamas in recent months that firing rockets at Israel would bring strong retaliation.

Egypt, no less than Israel, has made clear its discomfort with an Iranian proxy on its border. Furthermore, it sees Tehran threatening Cairo’s traditional leadership of the Arab world. “The Persians are trying to devour the Arab states,” said Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak at a meeting of Egypt’s ruling party last month.

The strain between Egypt and Iran has been exacerbated by the Gaza war. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called on Egypt last week to clarify whether it was Israel’s “partner” in its effort to crush Hamas and anti-Egyptian demonstrations have been staged in Tehran.

When Egypt announced its cease-fire initiative, senior Iranian officials met with Hamas's political leaders in Damascus to warn against accepting it.

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah attacked Egypt for refusing to open its border crossing to the Gaza Strip and permit access from the outside world. He called on the Egyptian masses, and particularly members of the armed forces, to force the opening of the crossing. Egyptian Foreign Minister Aboul Gheit responded that the Egyptian armed forces existed to defend Egypt "and if need be, they will also protect Egypt from people like you".

The seismic split in the Muslim world between hard liners and moderates was again evidenced by the boycott on Friday by Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other moderate countries of an emergency conference called by Qatar to discuss the Gaza situation. The meeting was attended by Ahmadinejad as well as Syrian President Bashar Assad, an Iranian ally, and Hamas's political leader Khaled Mashal. Egypt said it preferred to discuss Gaza at a two-day meeting opening today (Monday) in Kuwait. "The Arab situation is in great chaos," said Arab League head Amr (cq) Moussa.

The Jerusalem Post quoted an Egyptian official as saying that Iran had encouraged Hamas to fire rockets into Israel in the hope that it would trigger a war. "They are satisfied because the violence in the Gaza Strip has diverted attention from their nuclear ambitions," he said. Iran also wanted to use its influence with Hamas, the official added, as a card in the talks it anticipates with the new American administration.

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