

## Tehran's Tocsin

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America's prospective development and implementation of a national missile defense system will provide countries targeted by the system intriguing diplomatic and military opportunities. This is especially true for Iran, one country that would be "targeted." Throughout Iran, a tocsin has sounded in response to the perceived threat of NMD.

Should Iran, regarded as one of the countries intent on developing a long-range missile and nonconventional capability, worry about this new U.S. initiative? If so, how might Iran react to the U.S. defense shield, if at all? At first glance, one may be forgiven for assuming that the two countries are already so far apart politically and geographically that such a deployment will not affect their rather strained bilateral relations. But Iran watchers will testify that Tehran actually does note, quite carefully and more systematically than most people care to know, what the United States does and what it says it is going to do in its foreign and strategic policies. The NMD then is likely to be of interest to Iran.

In the short term, Iran's response is likely to be heavy on rhetoric and light on concrete action. Although the rhetorical exchange between the two sides is unlikely to affect the slow pace of progress in bilateral relations, Tehran will probably use the NMD as a perfect opportunity to enhance its political-military relations with China, Russia, and North Korea. Short of political posturing, however, Tehran has no concrete military alternatives to explore as countermeasures.

Before embarking on an analysis of possible Iranian responses to the U.S. NMD deployment, it is appropriate to consider the basis of Iran's outlook toward the United States. It is true that the Islamic elite as a whole has

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Anoushiravan Ehteshami is a reader in International Relations and director of the Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, University of Durham, UK.

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little love for the U.S. way of life. Their responses thus far to U.S. actions, however, have been based less on ideological grounds and more on pragmatic and realistic calculations about the balance of power between the two at any one time. Iran has based much of its strategy toward the United States in political terms, not unlike other actors in the international system. Iran's pragmatic calculations toward the United States are driven by a widely shared perception.

Iran holds an almost paranoid and conspiratorial view of the United State's role and actions in the Middle East and sees almost every U.S. initiative as a direct or indirect assault on Iran's regional interests. Since the Cold War, the United States has been in strategic competition with Iran and is the main challenger in the Middle East and the Transcaspian region north of Iran. The view that the United States is Iran's main regional rival is shared by both the political elite and large sections of the military establishment.

For an oil-rich country like Iran, sitting in the middle of the two strategically important oil zones of the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Basin, America's words and deeds, particularly in the defense and security realms, matter a great deal to those who will inform Tehran's strategic thinking.

## **NMD and Iran's Foreign and Defense Policy**

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Iran can explore several responses through its foreign policy. It can intensify its extremely slick charm offensive, by making noises of compromise on the status of the three islands in dispute with the United Arab Emirates, and effectively remove itself as a threat from the calculations of its Gulf Arab neighbors. In this way, Iran would politically remove one of the key rationales for the continuing U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf and force the United States to rethink its Gulf Arab allies. Removing U.S. military forces from the region, of course, will be seen by the more forward-looking groups in Tehran as a way of reducing U.S. attention on Iran and as a way of minimizing the dangers of NMD emboldening the Pentagon to plan direct action against Tehran. Yet, these actions are unlikely.

NMD development will undoubtedly be seen by target countries as the United States' gaining first-strike capability. In response, they will search for effective deterrence measures. Iran is no exception, though it is almost impossible to say whether the NMD will generate a military response from Iran. What then, might Iran's deterrence mechanism be?

Again, we can speculate that the best deterrence in Iran's case will have to incorporate measures that aim to buildup its conventional military capabilities and force structures in order to allow it to present a greater potential challenge to U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf and the wider Middle East. Such

weapon systems as long-range bombers, missile systems, and sea mines will be the basic requirements of this type of planning. The strategy would be built around the idea that the United States must be made to think twice about a confrontation with Iran.

Next on the list will probably be whether Iran should renege on its international obligations and actively develop its nonconventional weapons capabilities. In an atmosphere where Iran's membership in nonproliferation regimes is openly debated in Tehran, a nonconventional weapons capability combined with a credible delivery system will be seen as providing a well-structured deterrent—even countermeasure—against possible attack by U.S. forces. Thus, the NMD may actually encourage this line of reasoning amongst the Iranian security establishment and strengthen the hand of those who do want to give Iran a credible weapon of mass destruction profile at any price.

Whether Iran would have the resources to further modernize its armed forces, as well as a nonconventional weapons capability, is a different matter altogether. For one thing, Iran will probably have to turn to traditional arms suppliers (Russia, China, and North Korea)—hungry for hard currency—for the required advanced equipment and training. Whether these suppliers can fill Iran's increasingly sophisticated military and military-related needs is an open question. Also, can Iran itself afford the services of its suppliers? For one thing, Iran's economy cannot as of yet generate the sorts of surpluses that would allow a massive military program—even with the beneficial impact of high oil prices since early 1999. For another, Tehran's offer of oil-for-weapons is probably an insufficient incentive for the three suppliers to absorb the wrath of the United States over significant military trading with Iran.

Although it is unlikely that Iran will pursue alternative (conventional or nonconventional) military systems in response to NMD, it is not impossible. In foreign policy terms, however, Tehran is likely to capitalize on the NMD issue to strengthen its already close relations with the other targeted nations, each of which ironically regards itself as the real target of the NMD initiative. Iran would thus take a step closer toward its dream of creating close strategic partnerships with the two continental powers of Asia—Russia and China—and the strategically placed North Korea. NMD also enables Iran to tie itself more closely to an Asian balance of power game, in which the United States is viewed by all four parties as an intrusive military power.

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Such strategic alliances, if made to work, can pose serious challenges to Washington's Asia-Pacific interests.

What are Iran's medium-term countermeasures to the NMD? Assuming that Iran actually felt threatened by the NMD, it is conceivable that Iran could try and make life for the United States and its citizens in the region less pleasant. It could raise the premium on the U.S. presence by (directly or indirectly) threatening its vital interests in the Middle East and putting un-

due pressure on its allies in the Persian Gulf and the Levant, as well as try to stretch U.S. resources in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The least that Tehran may have to do is to encourage its Islamist allies in the Arab and Muslim worlds to be more proactive in their challenges to the status quo, which they managed with great effect in the 1980s.

In military terms, Iran could consider other factors. For instance, the United States is spending substantial sums (some \$60 billion per year) on defending its interests and allies

in the Persian Gulf—a matter that the U.S. Congress is not too happy about. In the context of a response to the NMD, Iran might be tempted to raise the premium on U.S. military commitments in the area and hope to find a tradeoff between the longer-term impact of the NMD on its own national security and the protection of U.S. regional interests.

Focusing more closely on the implications of the NMD, Tehran will probably regard the U.S. missile defense shield largely in Middle East regional terms. One direct consequence of this perception is likely to be how Iran will regard the NMD as aiding U.S. military allies in the Middle East. This is likely to form a significant part of Iran's strategic calculations about the NMD. Its impact on the resources and abilities of one U.S. ally in particular, Israel, is likely to be scrutinized. Iran already confronts Israel in other ways as it is seen as the protector of U.S. interests in the region. In the conspiratorial world of Middle East politics, it is believed Israel and the United States, already known to be close military partners and cosponsors of the Arrow antimissile defense project, are developing an elaborate defense pact. With this pact, the United States would commit to Israel's defense in case of attack. Israel's regional rivals can be forgiven for calculating that the NMD's virtues for the United States will also directly benefit Israel. In the Iranian view, where a steady flow of U.S. military know-how to Israel is assumed, there is a direct relationship between NMD and Israel's missile defense shield. In this sense, a totally unintended level of tensions could creep

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into Middle Eastern regional dynamics and adversely affect different aspects of U.S. regional strategy, whether the United States engages or contains independent regional actors.

In purely military terms, the mere perception that Israel stands to gain from the NMD could intensify the regional arms race and encourage countries like Iran to seek regional partners (like Syria) to form a military front against Israel. Paradoxically, it would be this sort of response, spawned from the United States' own defense strategies, which would encourage the United States to discuss the provision of a security umbrella for Israel.

## Relations with the United States

What about the NMD and Iranian-U.S. relations? Let us be clear: We are starting from an already low base and the NMD will only become the latest on a long list of items for discussion between Tehran and Washington. Its impact, therefore, on the glacial process of dialogue between the two countries is likely to be minimal. But hard-liners in Iran will draw lessons from the NMD and the fact that Iran is often named in U.S. circles as a threat. Such hard-liners could argue that while on the one hand the United States is talking of dialogue and the need to turn the page, its defense establishment is actively planning against the Islamic Republic. Even if untrue, the political impact of such an argument cannot be underestimated, particularly if it is used against the very moderate forces that the United States is courting. Whether the NMD issue is of sufficient importance to affect the domestic balance of power within Iran is hard to say, but one gets the sense that public initiatives such as NMD will not blow the internal debate off course.

But where should the NMD agenda sit in the current Iranian-U.S. bilateral relations? In an atmosphere where the United States seems actively to be courting Tehran, and the U.S. president openly speaks—in what can only be termed his 'Valentine's Day' message to Tehran—of his desire for a partnership, we can afford to be more positive. When President Bill Clinton states that in his view, "one of the best things that [the United States] can do for the long-term peace and health of the Middle East and, indeed, much of the rest of the world, is to have a constructive partnership with Iran," he is really saying that his administration is not only interested in better relations, but in the context of broader dialogue, is actively trying to address some of Iran's security concerns as well.<sup>1</sup>

On the eve of Iran's sixth Majlis elections, when State Department Spokesman James Rubin praised the Iranian electoral process, and his government's interest in the mechanics of the Islamic political system,<sup>2</sup> he was merely reinforcing the message that Washington wants to do business with Tehran and

support the reformer democrats to emerge as the administration's negotiating partners. In this interesting situation, and with Iran's reformers having scored a resounding victory in the country's elections, can the United States afford to miss this historic window of opportunity by embarking on a military strategy likely to alienate the forces it must talk to in Iran? Are the two parties able to rise above such distractions and push ahead with establishing a forum for bilateral talks? They may be able to, but only if progress in the relationship advances further.

## **Notes**

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1. See <[www.CNN.com](http://www.CNN.com)>, February 14, 2000.
2. Associated Foreign Press, February 16, 2000.