



FORWARD-LEARNING Global Security Report



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PROPRIETARY CLASSIFICATION: BUSINESS-IN-CONFIDENCE

FLASH: STRAIT OF HORMUZ CONFLICT CLOSE ABOARD

Iran May Be Just 1 to 2 Months from Nuclear "Breakout"

Yesterday, Russia expressed "regret and worry" over revelations that Iran has commenced uranium enrichment at its new underground facility in Fordo near the holy city of Qom. Moscow called on Tehran to agree to a "quick-start of six-way talks" on its nuclear weapons program "without preconditions." Secretary of State Hillary Clinton ramped up rhetoric as well, calling the enrichment regiment "especially troubling."

There is no plausible justification for this production [other than to] bring Iran a significant step closer to having the capability to produce weapons-grade, highly-enriched uranium.

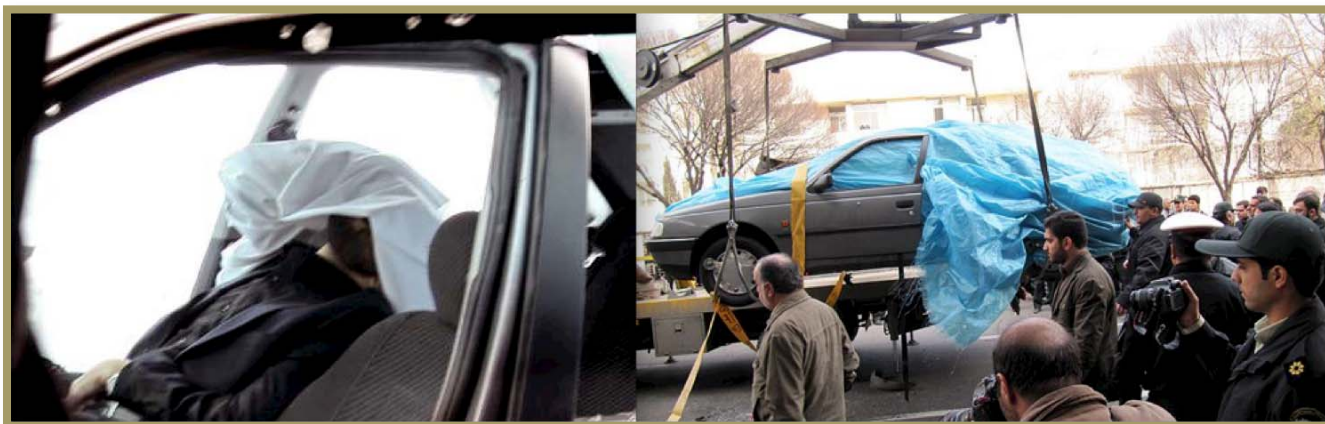


Yesterday, Indian Ocean. Aviation Electrician's Mate Airman Michael Johnson with STRIKE FIGHTER SQUADRON EIGHT ONE carries tie-down chains to an F/A-18E Super Hornet aboard the aircraft carrier USS CARL VINSON (CVN 70).

(Public domain photo by MC2 James R. Evans, U.S.N.)

Russia's "worry" over enrichment and a bombing in Tehran today may signal that conflict with Iran is close aboard. According to MASHREG, an Iranian news outlet close to SEPAH PASDARAN (REVOLUTIONARY GUARD CORPS), a car bomb killed nuclear scientist Mostafa Ahmadi today. A rider or riders on one or more motorcycles attached the magnetized bomb to Ahmadi's car and detonated the device as it passed in front of ALLAMEH UNIVERSITY in Tehran where the scientist was a frequent lecturer. MASHREG reported that the scientist was "one of the managers" at Iran's Natanz nuclear facility. Intelligence sources indicate he was either #1 or #2 in procurement at the site and deeply involved in uranium enrichment.

The Iranian *MAJLIS* (parliament) opened today calling for “Death to America” and “Death to Israel” in condemnation of the slaying. A spokesman for the NATIONAL SECURITY AND FOREIGN POLICY COMMISSION (the “foreign affairs committee” of the *MAJLIS*) said the attack “was a clear sign of desperation on the part of the enemy.”



The Ahmadi assassination resembled the bombing of another Iranian nuclear scientist, Massoud Ali Mohammadi, in January 2010. In that incident, a bomb rigged to a parked motorcycle was detonated as the physicist was leaving home for the university. As in the January 2010 slaying, Iran today blamed “elements of arrogance” (code for the U.S. and Israel).¹ Above left, Ahmadi’s remains. Above right, the PEUGEOT 405 in which he was a passenger. (Iranian source.)

Assessment: At long last, the mainstream press is beginning to acknowledge that the likely Iranian threat in the Arabian Gulf is asymmetric, as we’ve assessed for years.² This threat is touched on in *FOREIGN POLICY* today by Afshon Ostovar, a senior analyst at the CENTER FOR NAVAL ANALYSES. While he makes the point that such an attack (e.g., small boat swarm) might be a “kamikaze” act, we disagree with his contention that an asymmetric attack, especially by the naval arm of the REVOLUTIONARY GUARD CORPS, would be a “last-ditch” assault. Rather, like Iran’s “missile saturation strategy,”³ **it would be a tactic of first resort. We would be wise to anticipate a reprise of the IRGC’s “Black Swan” Navy and more installments of its erratic behavior at sea – not so much a display of tactics as the antics of shallow-water sailors afflicted with terminal ADHD who, unfortunately, have the maritime equivalent of IEDs in their possession.**

Dr. Ostovar’s analysis fails in two other important ways. First, it fails to tackle the looming prospect that the Iranian “Black Swan” in the Strait of Hormuz could well be the result of simple miscalculation or abject incompetence on the part of the volatile *SEPAH* sailors.⁴ Second and most significantly, it does not fully reflect the assumptions and prevailing view of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the hothead who has his ear – Hossein Shariatmadri. **Both are convinced Iran is already at war with the U.S., that Washington is “weak” and our leaders “stupid.”** They see the U.S. and the West as “fragile, materialist powers ... being eaten away by worms from the inside.”⁵ **Failure to comprehend and full embrace this as the view held by the Mullahs and *SEPAH* will only serve to obscure the opening salvo and double the calamity that lies ahead.**

On the nuclear question, there are some weapons sources who suggest that Iran will produce, or have the capability of rapidly assembling, between 2 and 4 nuclear weapons by April. **That could translate to Iran’s ability to achieve “breakout”⁶ in 1 to 2 months.**

If and when Iran reaches breakout, the game changes entirely, and every subsequent threat takes on profound, new dimensions. A carrier strike group can pierce whatever “impenetrable barrier” Iran claims its IRI and IRGC navies can erect.⁷ A Navy and Marine Corps

¹ “Triangle of Wickedness’ vs. Slain Iranian Physicist.” *FORWARD-LEANING INSIDER* 10-006 13 January 2010.

² Summarized here: “Asymmetric Attack: The Continuing Assessment,” under “Another Iranian Threat, Another Mixed Message from Washington.” *FORWARD-LEANING INSIDER* 12-001 3 January 2012.

³ “HEZBOLLAH Warns It Will Attack Tel Aviv.” *FORWARD-LEANING INSIDER* 11-141 22 October 2011.

⁴ “The Money Quote: Deep Iranian Concern of Surprise Military Strike.” *FORWARD-LEANING INSIDER* 11-169 6 December 2011.

⁵ “Analysis: Rising Likelihood of an Iranian Maritime Interdiction.” Under “Flash: Iranian Naval Commander Says Closing Strait of Hormuz as Easy as ‘Drinking Water.’ Assessment in Part: ‘Just a Matter of Time’ Before Iranians Board Merchantmen.” *FORWARD-LEANING INSIDER* 11-177 28 December 2011.

⁶ Arms control wonks, bless their glowing heads, will bicker over the definition, but “breakout” usually means the capability to assemble and deploy a nuclear weapon “quickly,” and “quickly” usually means 60 to 90 days (but they may bicker over that as well). For related discussions, see “Washington Adopts New, More Aggressive Policy Toward a Nuclear Iran.” *FORWARD-LEANING INSIDER* 11-176 23 December 2011. “Reactions & Voices on Iran’s Presumed ‘Breakout’ Capability.” Under “Iran Shrugs: If the West Attacks, ‘The Dying Wail But Once.’” *FORWARD-LEANING INSIDER* 11-154 7 November 2011. “Flash: Iranian Threat to U.S. Forces in Central Command AOR.” *FORWARD-LEANING INSIDER* 11-155 8 November 2011.

expeditionary strike group can take Greater and Lesser Tunbs and Abu Musa islands in the strait – disputes over which by Iran and the U.A.E. are likely to surface in a Gulf shooting exchange.⁸ The Royal Navy, the French Navy and the U.S. FIFTH FLEET can defend Bahrain, known in Tehran as the 14th Province of the Islamic Republic of Iran, a claim of sovereignty over the Shiite-majority but Sunni-ruled kingdom that dates back to the 17th century.

However, if sources are reasonably accurate that “breakout” is as little as a month or two away, time is running out fast. If military action becomes the “only” or “least worst” option to curb Tehran’s appetite for the bomb, that action must be taken now – before it can be parried by the bomb itself.



Monday. Arabian Sea. Aviation Structural Mechanic Airman Amanda Mason and Aviation Electronics Technician Airman Kelsey Parker give the approval to launch an F/A-18C Hornet with STRIKE FIGHTER SQUADRON ONE NINE TWO aboard USS JOHN C. STENNIS (CVN 74). (Public domain photo by MC3 Benjamin Crossley, U.S.N.)

ASSAD V. SYRIA: IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES

400 Killed Since Arab League Monitoring Began 15 Days Ago

Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad in a speech yesterday promised “no let-up” in his fight against his political opposition. The “armed terrorists,” he pledged, “must be hit with an iron fist,” echoing the words of his interior minister made after Friday’s blast in downtown Damascus.⁹ Assad promised “no compromise” against a conspiracy he claimed was led by “Arab counties ... who are implementing instructions from foreigners” [the West]. Speaking chiefly to his hardline constituency (as he always does), the dictator said:

The foreign conspiracy is no longer a secret to anyone, because what was planned behind closed doors is now clear before the people.

⁷ When he cut the ribbon in 2008 on the new Iranian naval base in Jask, on the Iranian side of the Oman Gulf, ADM Habibullah Sayyari boasted the Jask base would make Iran “capable of preventing the entry of any kind of enemy into the strategic Persian Gulf” by creating an “impenetrable naval barrier.” He has never demonstrated his “barrier.” “Neighbor vs. Neighbor.” *FORWARD-LEANING INSIDER* 08-014 6 November 2008.

⁸ “The Money Quote from Assad: *Iran Will Attack U.S. Warships.*’ *Assessment in Part: Miscommunication or Iranian Ineptitude Could Trigger War,*” especially “Analysis: The REVOLUTIONARY GUARD’s Maritime Emphasis & the Three Islands in the Stream,” page 2. *FORWARD-LEANING* 11-011 29 November 2011. Available at the [OSEN-HUNTER website](#).

⁹ Two hours after the blast Friday, Syria’s Interior Minister said the regime would “strike back with an iron fist,” euphemism for a bloody crackdown. We assessed the bombing in the downtown Damascene district of Al-Midan was “regime-rigged” – a pretext for more ruthless tactics in Syria’s major cities. **“Flash:** Damascus Bombing Triggers Attack Threats by Assad Loyalists.” *FORWARD-LEANING* 12-002 6 January 2012. Available at the [OSEN-HUNTER website](#).

- **ATTACKS ON & ASSASSINATION THREATS AGAINST ARAB LEAGUE MONITORS.** Assad loyalists attacked a convoy of monitors as they tried to enter the port city of Latakia, and a LEAGUE official adopted a business-as-usual response in the wake of the assault (**some monitors are actively currying favor with regime officials**). Smashing the vehicles, Assad thugs injured 11 monitors, most of them from the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait (doubtless allied with those “Gulf terrorists” who are now Public Enemy #1 for the regime). Loyalists in Latakia managed to square-off the wheels, sending the vehicles limping away from the city. (U.K. TELEGRAPH Video, 01:45).¹²



RumInt: Asma Al-Assad separated from Bashar and fled to London, reports a Jordanian news outlet (corroboration weak). Reportedly, she fears for her children’s safety and objects to the killing spree. **Opposition sources say the rumor is rubbish, calling Syria’s First Lady “Assad’s Eva Braun.”** (Un-marked photo from a Syrian source.)

The opposition charges that Algerian Anwar Malek “defected” from the ARAB LEAGUE monitor mission, because he found the regime had “orchestrated and fabricated most” of what monitors witnessed. A trusted, anti-Assad activist told INSIDER that Mr. Malek felt he was inadvertently abetting regime violence by “giving Sy [Syrian] government more time to kill.” He found “people in Homs suffering, detained ... severely tortured,” and “Sy government tried to assassinate him” this past weekend.

Charges of regime fabrication were corroborated by Anwar Malek himself in an interview with AL JAZEERA (02:19):

What I saw was a humanitarian disaster. The regime did not meet any of our requests. In fact, they were trying to deceive us.... They didn’t withdraw their tanks from the streets. They just hid them and redeployed them after we left.

The snipers are everywhere, shooting at civilians. People are being kidnapped, prisoners are being tortured. And no one has been released. Those who were supposedly freed and shown on TV ... were actually people who had been randomly grabbed off the street ...

The regime has gained a lot of time and has helped it implement its plan. They wanted to use this mission, and they sent spies and intelligence officers along with our teams to act as drivers and minders to get their information. And as soon as we left an area, they attacked these people.

Inexplicably, an ARAB LEAGUE official said yesterday that its operations in Syria have *not* been impacted by either the Latakia attacks or numerous regime failures to provide basic transportation for LEAGUE staff to get to locations they want to observe – more evidence of the ineffectiveness of the organization and its protocol in Syria. The Don’t-Worry-Be-Happy LEAGUE appraisal was disputed yesterday in Abu Dhabi, however, by U.A.E. Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahayan who saw the TELEGRAPH footage of the convoy attack as one more sign that “non-opposition elements” are restricting and targeting the monitors. **Since the ARAB LEAGUE protocol began 26 December, 400 Syrians have been killed – about 40 every day – according to U.N. Assistant Secretary-General Lynn Pascoe at a briefing of the U.N. SECURITY COUNCIL yesterday.**

¹² The ARAB LEAGUE protested that the regime was not affording its monitors adequate protection. They should be thankful they weren’t holed up in the French or U.S. embassy compound. In July, **highly-trained Syrian operatives – not protestors – attacked both embassies to the point of assault the residence of French Ambassador Eric Chevallier with a hydraulic ram.** “Flash: Embassy Marines Repel Attack by Pro-Assad Thugs on U.S. EMBASSY DAMASCUS.” **FORWARD-LEANING INSIDER** 11-082 11 July 2011.

- **“CONTINUED CONFRONTATION:” THE OPPOSITION’S RESPONSE TO THE SPEECH FROM “HELL.”** Former Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri called the speech ridiculous and said Assad is in “denial.” **Exiled freedom fighter Ammar Abdulhamid, an incisive but measured commentator, reduced the 2-hour speech to one word: “Hell.”** (*Paraphrase from the Arabic, emphasis added*):

[Our] response can be reduced to the same word ... [We] will not talk with him. Our rejection of a mutual relationship will not change. **Now is the time of confrontation and confrontation only....** Perhaps what happened in the 1980s [a reference to the Massacre of Hama in 1982] in addition to the weakness of the Arab League, the international community and divisions within the opposition divisions helps enshrine this impression [that this is an era of confrontation]

[From here on out,] **we must rely first and foremost on our internal ability to develop new mechanisms for the continued confrontation.** [For it is on the inside] where the key lies to change the will of the international [community] and break the illusion [perhaps the “tunnel vision”].

Several recent, very compelling videos from Syria warrant attention. One features a boy holding up note cards in English that tell the story of his older brother whose body was left in pieces at the family front door (no depiction of the murder-mutilation, just the narration: **(YOUTUBE, 05:20)**; it embodies high production value but is effective and not overly produced. Another captures the final moments of another young man, Bandar Moadamani, before he succumbs to gunshot wounds to the abdomen **(YOUTUBE, 00:37)**. In another, opposition activists claim that a 4-month old infant was killed in a detention center, **apparently by blunt force trauma (YOUTUBE, 01:58)**. **During Assad’s speech, regime security handed over the child’s body to her uncle, as her parents are still in custody.**



MV CHARIOT, a cargo ship operated by WESTBERG, LTD., of Russia, was stopped in Cyprus for carrying “tens of tons of munitions” to Syria. Flagged in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, the small cargo ship (IMO: 8302882) anchored off the port of Limassol Tuesday due to high winds. Customs could not examine all cargo containers due to the way they were stowed but did affirm they were carrying “dangerous cargo.” Cypriot officials allowed the ship to depart after consulting with Russian authorities who agreed to change her destination from Syria to Turkey. **She bears watching, however: at 0600 EST this morning, CHARLOT was just off Limassol, heading southeast at 8.6 knots (Turkey’s the other way), and her Automated Identification System (AIS) appears to be switched off.** (*Un-marked photo from a maritime source.*)

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TURN TIGHTER, GO FASTER, LOOK FURTHER™

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