

Persian Gulf Buildup By US, Israel Worries Region: 'A Perfect Storm?'

Concerns of an imminent confrontation that could take place in the Mideast before Trump exits the White House next January 20 are increasing.



USS Georgia transits Strait of Hormuz

DUBAI: Some Middle East officials worry a “perfect storm” may be brewing in the Middle East as the final hours of Donald Trump’s time in office tick down. The United States and Israel have deployed new military assets in the Persian Gulf region, as Iran sends more ballistic missiles and drones to its proxy groups in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, increasing concerns of an imminent confrontation.

“It is like conditions are being set for the perfect storm,” said one official in the Persian Gulf region, who asked not to be identified.

The U.S. Navy announced Dec. 21 that the Ohio-class guided-missile submarine USS Georgia, accompanied by two other warships, entered the Arabian Gulf

waters, joining the USS Nimitz Carrier Strike Group that was deployed to the region late last month.

“SSGNs are one of the most versatile platforms in the fleet, equipped with superior communications capabilities and the ability to carry up to 154 Tomahawk land-attack cruise missiles. The platform can also be configured to host up to 66 Special Operations Forces,” reads a statement by U.S. 5th Fleet, whose command is based in Bahrain

The U.S. Air Force flew two B-52 bombers to the Middle East on Dec. 30 in the second such mission this month and the third since November. U.S. officials described the B-52 long-range flights to the Middle East as a message of deterrence to Iran.

Several regional analysts and observers have warned the military buildup could be a prelude to a plan by Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to provoke Iran into a military confrontation that would free them to strike its nuclear and ballistic missile facilities and proxy militias in the region.

“These activities are more than just posturing. They are more like repositioning in preparation for something that could either be planned or anticipated,” said Mohammed Baharoon, the director-general of B’huth Center for Public Policy here. “Moving a strike group and a nuclear submarine and flying bombers repeatedly on dry runs are costly exercises and are more than delivering a message to Iran to keep away. Wolves don’t run for nothing.”

Baharoon pointed out that Israel’s decision to show and announce the sailing of a Dolphin submarine through the Suez Canal towards the Red Sea is by itself “a significant message and indication of a possible scenario in place.”

The displays of U.S. military are just days ahead of the first anniversary for the assassination of IRGC senior commander General Qassem Suleimani in a U.S. drone attack last January 3, in Baghdad. Iran has vowed to avenge the killing of its commander who was responsible for all IRGC operations abroad.

Israel is already engaged in a low-intensity conflict with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) and their main allied Shiite militia the Lebanese Hezbollah, as Breaking D readers know. Israeli warplanes have launched about 40 air raids on basis and arms depots for the IRGC and Hezbollah in Syria in 2020. The last

attack, in the early morning hours of Dec. 30, targeted what Syrian sources describe as a missile depot southwest of Damascus. Just few days earlier Israeli warplanes blasted installations at the “Syrian Military Research” compound in Hama province that, Syrian sources say, were used to build long-range artillery rockets and ballistic missiles based on technologies and parts supplied by Iran.

Israeli officials have repeatedly said they will not tolerate the deployment of Iranian ballistic missiles and other advanced weapons along the northern borders with Syria and Lebanon.

Hezbollah’s leader Hassan Nasrallah asserted in a Dec. 27 interview that his group was on a full state of alert and was in possession of “highly accurate” ballistic missiles that can hit any target in Israel. “The (Iranian) precision missile project has not stopped and will not stop,” Nasrallah told pro-Hezbollah Al-Mayadeen TV.

The region was already on tenterhooks after last month’s killing of Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, regarded by the West as the head of the Iranian nuclear program. Iranian officials have accused Israel of killing the scientist and promised retaliation.

Some U.S. officials noted that the recent military deployments were meant to reassert continued U.S. commitment to its Middle Eastern allies even as President Trump’s administration withdrew thousands of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan.

The deployment of the guided-missile submarine and other vessels signals the U.S. Navy’s “commitment to regional partners and maritime security,” the Navy said, displaying its readiness “to defend against any threat at any time.”

Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) spokesman Brig. Gen. Hidi Zilberman said in an interview with a Saudi news-site on Christmas Day that Israeli intelligence has picked up signals that Iran might use its proxies in Iraq or Yemen to attack Israel with drones or ballistic missiles.

Iran and its allies have grown more alarmed by the heightened military activities. This was also reflected in the recent interview by Nasrallah, when he suggested that the Trump administration’s remaining time in office must be managed carefully, calling the outgoing US president “crazy.”

Suleimani's successor, Gen. Esmail Ghaani made a surprise visit to Baghdad on December 23 where he met with the commanders of Iran's proxy militias, a few days after the U.S. Embassy compound in the Iraqi capital was targeted by Katyusha rockets.

The rocket attack on Baghdad's diplomatic Green Zone on Dec. 20 was regarded as a terrorist act by US and Iraqi government officials.

"The United States strongly condemns the latest attack by Iran-backed militias on the International Zone in Baghdad. While no Embassy personnel were harmed, the attack caused at least one Iraqi civilian casualty and damaged Iraqi civilian property," Pompeo said in a statement.

Baharoon says he does not think all-out war is planned. "I don't believe the U.S. or Israel want to start a war with Iran, but they could be trying to provoke a confrontation that would provide the opportunity to target Iran's nuclear and ballistic missiles installations, creating a mess for President-elect Joe Biden to deal with," Baharoon said. "But would Iran take the bait, or keep low until Biden is in office?"

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