

Is Tehran preparing for a showdown with the US?

*Iran's escalation has backfired,
even with trusted allies, and it is
edging closer to red lines*

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Following US accusations of Iran being behind the recent attacks on tankers in the Gulf, tensions between the two countries are set to escalate further this week as decision-makers in Tehran continue to see the status quo as favouring them, and feel gleeful at the level of panic shown by the Europeans and the International Atomic Energy Agency. For its part, the US administration has adopted “strategic patience”, content with its policy of economically strangling Iran to coerce it into negotiating a new deal that covers both its nuclear enrichment and its ballistic missiles and possibly its regional expansionism and regime reforms. Both sides want a deal but have mutually exclusive conditions and are preparing for the next step as they inch closer to a military confrontation.

Washington is now in the process of forming a naval alliance that Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the US, said would be ready within a fortnight with the aim of protecting navigation in the Straits of Hormuz and Bab al Mandeb. This is while the US and Britain have blamed Iran for attacks on oil installations and tankers in the Gulf, with London deploying two British warships so far to the region.

Iran has responded to the formation of this US-led naval coa-

lition by demanding all foreign forces leave the Middle East. The leadership in Tehran believes prolonging the current situation serves its interests and thus intends to escalate further. If the US fires first, Iran might attack US bases in Bahrain and Qatar. But the Trump administration will also escalate by greatly tightening the sanctions on Iran and its proxies, according to the US president. Sources said the sanctions would be tantamount to a full blockade of Iran, with the assets of Iranians and non-Iranians affiliated to the regime frozen.

Both sides are also preparing for a military showdown. According to sources, the US needs a week to ensure full readiness to do so, although its current deployment is sufficient for a swift military strike if necessary. Iran is also preparing its forces and proxies in the Arab region, from Hizbollah in Lebanon to the Popular Mobilisation Forces in Iraq. In other words, unless a deal precludes confrontation, the current trajectory of events indicates pending military hostilities in the Gulf and Middle East.

From the US perspective, meanwhile, and even from the perspective of some European countries, Iran's violation of the cap on uranium enrichment cannot be ignored.

So far, all mediation efforts have failed to convince Iran to abandon its demands for an end to sanctions before agreeing to



The Iranian supertanker Grace 1 was seized off the coast of Gibraltar, suspected of being involved in attacks on oil tankers.

negotiate.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is still trying to play the role of broker with the Irani-

ans to curb their escalation and attempts to provoke a US military strike. Mr Putin's previous attempts have all failed but he

Palestinians have no support in Israel

BEN WHITE

With just over two months to go before the second Israeli election this year, and with the latest polls predicting prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu will struggle to meet the 61 seats needed to form a governing coalition, former Israeli minister and current Yisrael Beiteinu party chair Avigdor Lieberman has emerged as the kingmaker. Last month the veteran politician expressed his desire for a unity government between Likud and the opposition Blue and White list.

Mr Lieberman, whose refusal to form a coalition with Likud triggered the dissolution of the Knesset in May, told Israeli radio: “We will aim for a government with Likud and with [the Blue and White party] and that will be an emergency government, a national liberal government. We will do everything to limit the haredim (ultra-Orthodox) so that they won't enter government.” Blue and White number two Yair Lapid, leader of the centrist party Yesh Atid, quickly backed Mr Lieberman's call.

It marks a remarkable volte face for Mr Lieberman, who just days earlier had claimed he would never recommend Mr Gantz as prime minister and that the Blue and White could “go to the North Pole to form a government with polar bears”. In a later Facebook post, he appeared to relent by stating the

party with the most seats in the September 17 election would get his support.

What is driving his loyalties is his stated goal of the exclusion of the ultra-Orthodox parties. The contentious issue of conscription of the haredim, a bill that former defence minister Mr Lieberman fiercely supported before his sudden resignation, was cited as the reason why he would not join a coalition with Mr Netanyahu after the last election in April.

A national unity government could secure an estimate 70 seats, well above the 61 needed to secure a majority in the Knesset. However, Mr Lieberman is effectively calling for a government without Mr Netanyahu, since Mr Gantz has rejected the idea of a coalition with the Likud leader, who faces indictments over alleged corruption. By default, Mr Lieberman is inviting Likud to get rid of Mr Netanyahu.

Meanwhile, there are elements on the Israeli right – including the orthodox nationalists – who are starting to question whether Mr Netanyahu has become more trouble than he is worth. Within Likud, somewhat discreetly, key players are manoeuvring for the day after.

Mr Lieberman's gamble may not pay off, however. Mr Netanyahu could very well emerge victorious from the new elections and face corruption charges as a sitting prime minister. He is likely to seek a Knesset majority by trying to unite the



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu' failed to form a coalition in the April election.

Mr Netanyahu has loomed large over Israeli politics for some time but his domination has obscured a truth much more unpalatable than the impact of one demagogue.

right, issuing the battle cry that Mr Lieberman is trying to force a “leftist” government.

However, in the context of both a second election after failing to secure a majority, and a possible indictment, it is becoming increasingly possible to imagine Israeli politics without the man who has held the position of prime minister for the past decade (in addition to his three years in office in the 1990s).

For many international leaders and pundits, Mr Netanyahu's dominance, along with his open opposition to Palestinian

sovereignty and alliances with far-right political forces, has made it easy to pin the blame for Israel's ongoing military occupation firmly on the long-time Likud leader.

However, if Mr Netanyahu is removed from the picture a more disturbing reality will become clearer; namely, that the opposition to basic Palestinian rights is not restricted to Mr Netanyahu, or even his party but rather is shared across the majority of the Knesset.

Over the years, an argument framed in terms of “security”

Avigdor Lieberman's manoeuvring might unseat the prime minister but most Israeli parties have no interest in establishing a Palestinian state