

Guns of August in the Middle East?

By CONN HALLINAN

Crazy talk about the Middle East seems to be escalating, backed up by some pretty ominous military deployments. First, the department of scary statements:

First up, Shabtai Shavit, former chief of the Israeli spy agency Mossad, speaking June 21 at Bar Ilan University, Tel Aviv on why Israel should launch a pre-emptive strike at Iran: "I am of the opinion that, since there is an ongoing war, since the threat is permanent, since the intention of the enemy in this case is to annihilate you, the right doctrine is one of presumption and not retaliation."

Second up, Uzi Arad, Israeli prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's national security advisor, speaking before the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem June 22 on his belief that the "international community" would support an Israeli strike at Iran "I don't see anyone who questions the legality of this or the legitimacy."

Third up, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi speaking to reporters at the G-8 meeting in Toronto June 26: "Iran is not guaranteeing a peaceful production of nuclear power [so] the members of the G-8 are worried and believe absolutely that Israel will probably react preemptively."

Fourth up, Central Intelligence Director Leon Panetta predicting on ABC's "This Week" program June 27 that Iran could have two nuclear weapons by 2012: "We think they [Iran] have enough low-enriched uranium for two weapons...and while there is continuing debate [within Iran] right now about whether or not they ought to proceed with a bomb...they clearly are developing their nuclear capacity." He went on to say that the U.S. is sharing intelligence with Israelis and that Tel Aviv is "willing to give us

the room to be able to try to change Iran diplomatically and culturally and politically.”

A few points:

- 1) Iran and Israel are not at war, a fact Shavit seems confused about.
- 2) Since the recent rounds of sanctions aimed at Iran would have lost in the United Nations General Assembly, it unclear who Arad thinks is the “international community.”
- 3) Berlusconi is a bit of a loose cannon, but he is tight with the Israelis.
- 4) An Iran that is different “diplomatically and culturally and politically” sounds an awful lot like “regime change.” Is that the “room” Panetta is talking about?

And it isn't all talk.

Following up the London Times report that Saudi Arabia had given Israel permission to fly through Saudi airspace to attack Iran, the Jerusalem Post, the Islam Times and the Iranian news agency Fars report that the Israeli air force has stockpiled equipment in the Saudi desert near Jordan.

According to the Post supplies were unloaded June 18 and 19 outside the Saudi city of Tabuk, and all civilian flights into the area were canceled during the two day period. The Post said that an “anonymous American defense official” claimed that Mossad chief Meir Dagan was the contact man with Saudi Arabia and had briefed Netanyahu on the plans.

The Gulf Daily News reported June 26 that Israel has moved warplanes to Georgia and Azerbaijan, which would greatly shorten the distance Israeli planes would have to fly to attack targets in northern Iran.

The U.S currently has two aircraft carriers—the Truman and the Eisenhower—plus more than a dozen support vessels in the Gulf of Hormuz, the strategic choke point leading into the Gulf of Iran.

The Saudis have vigorously denied the reports they are aiding the Israelis, and Shafeeq Ghabra, president of the American University of Kuwait, says "It would be impossible for the Saudis to allow an Israeli attack on Iran."

But Ephraim Inbar, director of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies in Ramat Gan, Israel, argues that Saudi Arabia and Israel both fear a nuclear-armed Iran. "This bring us together on a strategic level in that we have common interests. Since the Arab world and Saudi Arabia understand that President Obama is a weak person, maybe they decided to facilitate this happening." He also said the story might not be true because "I don't think the Saudis want to burden themselves with this kind of cooperation with Israel."

According to military historian Martin van Creveld, a professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, "The real fear is that someone will get carried away by his own rhetoric and fear mongering" and start a war. He also thinks, however, that Israel should not take a preemptive strike "off the table."

Trita Parsi of the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington argues that the escalation of rhetoric is dangerous. "When you have that kind of political environment, you are leaving yourself no space to find another solution," she told the Christian Science Monitor. "You may very well end up in a situation where you are propelled to act, even though you understand it is an unwise action, but [do so] for political reasons."

The rhetoric is getting steamy, the weapons are moving into position, and it is beginning to feel like "The Guns of August" in the Middle East.

Conn Hallinan can be reached at: ringoanne@sbcglobal.net