

Houthis ready to join war if needed

A leader of the Iran-backed movement in Yemen warns

REUTERS, Aden

Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthi movement, whose attacks on the Red Sea caused international shipping and trade chaos during the Gaza war, stands ready to strike the key waterway again in solidarity with Tehran, one Houthi leader told Reuters, a move that would deepen a global oil and economic crisis brought on by the Middle East war.

If Houthis open a new front, one obvious target would be the Bab al-Mandab Strait off Yemen's coast, a key shipping chokepoint and narrow passageway that controls sea traffic towards the Suez Canal after Iran effectively shut the Strait of Hormuz.

Iran's Shia allies in Lebanon and Iraq have joined the war in the region unleashed by US and Israeli strikes on Tehran.



A woman holds a pillow amid rubble from an Israeli strike in Tyre, Lebanon yesterday. Unicef said more than 370,000 children have been displaced, with 121 killed and 399 injured during Israel's offensive against Hezbollah.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Pentagon eyes Ukraine military aid shift to ME

Washington Post reports

REUTERS

The Pentagon is weighing whether to redirect weapons originally meant for Ukraine to the Middle East, as the war in Iran strains supplies of some of the US military's most critical munitions, the Washington Post reported on Thursday, citing three people familiar with the matter.

The weapons that could be redirected include air defense interceptor missiles purchased through a Nato initiative launched last year, under which partner countries buy US arms for Kyiv, the report said.

The consideration comes as US operations in the region intensify. Admiral Brad Cooper, the Central Command chief leading US forces in the Middle East, said on Wednesday the US had hit over 10,000 targets inside Iran and was on track to limit Iran's ability to project power outside its borders.

A Pentagon spokesperson told the newspaper the Defense Department would "ensure that US forces and those of our allies and partners have what they need to fight and win."

Iran hardliners push for nuclear bomb

Sources say idea of quitting non-proliferation treaty comes up after Khamenei's death

REUTERS

The debate among Iranian hardliners over whether Tehran should seek a nuclear bomb in defiance of an escalating US-Israeli attack is getting louder, more public and more insistent, sources in the country say.

With the Revolutionary Guards now dominant following the killing of veteran Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei at the start of the war on February 28, hardline views on Iran's nuclear approach are in the ascendant, two senior Iranian sources said.

While Western countries have long believed that Iran wants the bomb - or at least the ability to make one very quickly - it has always denied that, saying Khamenei had banned nuclear arms as forbidden in Islam and citing its membership of Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

There was no plan to change Iran's nuclear doctrine yet and Iran had not decided to seek a bomb, one of the sources said, but serious voices in the establishment were questioning the existing policy and demanding a change.

The US-Israeli attacks on Iran, which came midway through talks on Tehran's nuclear programme, may have changed the equation, convincing Iranian strategists that they have little to gain by forswearing a bomb or staying in the NPT.



The idea of quitting the NPT - something hardliners have previously threatened - has been increasingly aired on state media along with the idea - once taboo in public - that Iran should go outright for the bomb.

Tasnim News Agency, which is affiliated with the Guards, on Thursday published an article saying Iran should withdraw from the NPT as soon as possible while sticking with a civilian nuclear programme.

Hardline politician Mohammad Javad Larijani, brother of senior official Ali Larijani who was killed in a strike this month, was quoted by state media this week urging Iran to suspend its membership of the NPT. "The NPT should be suspended.

We should form a committee to assess whether the NPT is of any use to us at all. If it proves useful, we will return to it. If not, they can keep it," he said.

Earlier in the month, state television aired a segment with conservative commentator Nasser Torabi in which he said the Iranian public demanded: "We need to act in order to build a nuclear weapon. Either we build it or we acquire it."

Nuclear policy has also been a subject of private discussion in ruling circles, said the two sources, adding that there was divergence between harder line elements including the Guards and those in the political hierarchy over the wisdom of such a move.

Teens as young as 12 to guard checkpoints in Tehran: official

AFP, Paris

Iran's security forces are recruiting children as young as 12 to man checkpoints and perform other duties during the war in the capital, a Revolutionary Guards official told state TV on Thursday.

Checkpoints have sprung up all around Tehran since the start of the war, with residents reporting teenagers in plainclothes manning some of them with machine guns.

Iranian authorities have launched a recruitment drive dubbed "For Iran" in Tehran to register people to join the security forces, lowering the minimum age of recruits to 12.

Rahim Nadali, an official with the Guards, told state television that people as young as 12 could register to help the Guards and the Basij youth volunteer militia stand "against the global bully".

The tasks include "collecting security data and operational patrols" as well as organising caravans of cars at night in the city, he said. "At the Basij checkpoints and patrols that you see across the cities, we had a very high number of volunteers among young people and teenagers who wanted to participate," he said.

CONFLICT WITH IRAN US deploys uncrewed drone boats for patrols

Pentagon's GARC drones log over 450 hours in Operation Epic Fury

REUTERS, New York

The United States has deployed uncrewed drone speedboats for patrols as part of its operations against Iran, the Pentagon said, the first time Washington has confirmed using such vessels in an active conflict.

The deployment of the vessels - which can be used for surveillance or kamikaze strikes - has not been previously reported. It comes despite a series of setbacks in the US Navy's years long effort to field a fleet of uncrewed surface vessels, Reuters reported last year.

Uncrewed vessels have risen to prominence in recent years after Ukraine used explosive laden speedboats to inflict significant damage on Russia's Black Sea Fleet.

Iran has used sea drones to attack oil tankers in the Gulf at least twice since the US and Israel began strikes nearly a month ago. There was no indication the US had used uncrewed vessels for offensive strikes.

In response to Reuters' questions, Tim Hawkins, a Pentagon spokesperson for Central Command,



said unmanned vessels built by Maryland-based BlackSea, known as the Global Autonomous Reconnaissance Craft, or GARC, had been used for patrols as part of the US campaign against Iran, dubbed "Operation Epic Fury." "US forces continue to employ unmanned systems

Uncrewed vessels gained prominence after Ukraine used explosive speedboats to damage Russia's Black Sea Fleet.

in the Middle East region, including surface drone assets like the GARC. This platform, in particular, has successfully logged over 450 underway hours and more than 2,200 nautical miles during maritime patrols in support of Operation Epic Fury," Hawkins said in a statement.

Hawkins declined to name any of the other unmanned systems being deployed. BlackSea declined to comment for this story.

The US has for years been trying to build a fleet of autonomous uncrewed surface and underwater vessels, as a cheaper and faster alternative to manned ships and submarines, particularly to counter China's growing naval power in the Pacific. The effort, however, has fallen behind schedule and been dogged by technical problems, cost concerns and a series of testing setbacks.

Last year, Reuters reported the GARC, an angular speedboat about five meters long, was involved in multiple performance and safety issues, including one where it collided with another boat at speed during a military test.

In recent weeks, during another failed test in the Middle East, one GARC boat became inoperable, according to a source who was briefed on the matter.

Hawkins declined to comment on the testing setbacks.

"The GARC is an emerging capability and part of a fleet of surface drones operated by US 5th Fleet to enhance awareness of what's happening in regional waters," he said.

CLOSE TO TAIWAN STRAIT China stations jets-turned-drones at six air bases: report

REUTERS, Hong Kong

China has stationed obsolete supersonic fighters converted to attack drones at six air bases close to the Taiwan Strait, according to a new report by the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies.

Satellite imagery of these airfields from the February report, "China Airpower Tracker," shows what appear to be lines of stubby, swept-winged aircraft matching the shape of J-6 fighters that first flew with the Chinese air force in the 1960s. Since their conversion to drones, these aircraft have been identified at five bases in Fujian Province and one in Guangdong Province, according to the report from the Arlington-Virginia based institute.

Senior fellow at the Mitchell Institute, J. Michael Dahm, said China's military, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), has deployed an estimated 200 or more obsolete fighters converted to drones to airfields near the Taiwan Strait.

These jets-turned-drones would fly into targets in the opening phase of an assault on Taiwan, Dahm, a former US naval intelligence officer, told Reuters. They would be used more like cruise missiles than autonomous or remote-controlled unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).

"They will attack Taiwan, US or allied targets in large numbers, effectively overwhelming air defenses," said Dahm. He compiled the data for the report from open source intelligence and commercial satellite imagery. China dominates the global commercial drone market. It is also investing heavily in military drone technologies as it builds the firepower it needs to seize control of Taiwan by force if necessary.



Students march to protest against the government of President Jose Antonio Kast in Santiago, Chile on Thursday. Chile's new government announced on March 23 a historic increase of nearly half a dollar per litre in fuel prices, following a major overhaul of a government mechanism designed to cushion the impact of international price volatility.

PHOTO: AFP

2 aid boats en route to Cuba missing Mexico's navy says amid US embargo on the island nation

REUTERS, Mexico City

Mexico's navy said on Thursday it had activated a search-and-rescue operation in the Caribbean to locate two sailboats carrying humanitarian aid to Cuba after the vessels failed to arrive in Havana as scheduled.

The navy said two boats left Isla Mujeres, in the Mexican Caribbean state of Quintana Roo, last week bound for Havana with nine crew members of different nationalities on board.

The vessels had been expected to arrive between March 24 and 25, but there had been no communication from them, the navy said.

The boats are part of a grassroots aid effort for Cuba, which has been suffering power outages and economic crisis after US tightened an embargo on oil and other goods.