

US prepares for tougher action against Iran

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12 November 2007

With the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) due to report on Iran's nuclear programs this week, the US administration has been intensifying its campaign for stronger action against Tehran. While insisting that it is still "pursuing diplomacy", Washington refuses to rule out a military attack on Iran.

During discussions over the weekend, President Bush pressed German Chancellor Angela Merkel to back tougher economic sanctions on Iran. More ominous, however, was the visit to Washington last week by Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Shaul Mofaz during which the two countries agreed to establish working committees to coordinate their strategy on Iran's nuclear programs.

Speaking to the media, Mofaz paid lip service to the current US call for more sanctions, but added that he also supported "the strategy of declaring without any doubt that all options are on the table". While saying military force was a last resort, he warned that "the opportunity for a negotiated solution is diminishing if by the diplomatic path we should not succeed to stop the advancement of the Iranian nuclear program".

Last Thursday, the London-based *Times* highlighted predictions among US military sources that Israel was reaching "a tipping point" for a military strike on Iranian nuclear facilities. One defence official told the newspaper: "Israel could do something when they get around 3,000 working centrifuges. The Pentagon is minded to wait a little longer."

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced last Wednesday that Iran had 3,000 gas centrifuges operating in its uranium enrichment plant at Natanz. The claim has yet to be verified by IAEA inspectors. Tehran continues to insist that its nuclear programs are for peaceful purposes and that the enriched uranium is needed to fuel its power reactor. Iran is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty and its Natanz facility is monitored by the IAEA.

The Bush administration claims that Iran is seeking to build a nuclear bomb, but has provided no evidence to support its allegations. In fact, IAEA director Mohamed

ElBaradei recently told *Le Monde* that Iran constituted no immediate threat and was three to eight years away from being able to produce a bomb. "I want to get people away from the idea that Iran represents a clear and present danger and that we're now facing the decision whether to bombard Iran or let them have the bomb," he said.

In August, the IAEA reached an agreement with Iran to resolve all outstanding questions about the peaceful nature of its nuclear programs. Far from welcoming the deal, the Bush administration denounced ElBaradei for exceeding his mandate, but was forced by Russia and China to hold off imposing any new sanctions until the IAEA submitted its report. The latest statements from Washington appear to be something of a pre-emptive strike against an IAEA announcement this week that Iran has clarified previous issues.

While in the US, Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Mofaz launched an extraordinary tirade against ElBaradei, calling on the IAEA to sack its director. "The policies followed by ElBaradei endanger world peace. His irresponsible attitude of sticking his head in the sand over Iran's nuclear program should lead to his impeachment," Mofaz said.

Israeli foreign ministry spokesman Mark Regev also accused "foreign officials"—the IAEA leadership in particular—of "playing the Iranians' game by contributing to the Iranian strategy of footdragging". Regev went on to imply that the IAEA was in cahoots with Tehran, saying: "One could ask whether the agency agreed to fulfil the role the Iranians want it to play, to allow Tehran to implement its strategy."

The criticisms of ElBaradei recall similar statements by the US and its allies prior to 2003 invasion of Iraq. At that time, the IAEA chief earned the Bush administration's animosity by publicly contradicting its lies that the Baghdad regime was seeking to build nuclear weapons. The latest accusations about Iran's "footdragging" have far more to do with the Bush administration's agenda in the remainder of its second term, than Iran's capacity to build an atomic bomb in the near future.

The *Asia Times* website pointed out on Saturday that the US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran had been held up for more than a year because of the refusal of the so-called intelligence community to remove from the NIE dissenting opinions on Iran's nuclear programs. In another parallel with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Vice President Dick Cheney and his hawkish allies appear to be pressuring US intelligence agencies to provide the pretext for war against Iran.

Citing an unnamed US intelligence official, the *Asia Times* article stated: "There is a split in the intelligence community on how much of a threat the Iranian nuclear program poses... Some analysts who are less independent are willing to give the benefit of the doubt to the alarmist view coming from Cheney's office, but others have rejected that view."

A similar process is taking place in Iraq where the US military has been insisting for more than a year that Tehran has been training, arming and assisting anti-occupation militias. Testifying to Congress in September, the top US commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, accused Iran of fighting "a proxy war" against the US. Last month, the White House unilaterally branded the entire 130,000-strong Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) as a weapons proliferator and its elite Quds Force as a "terrorist organisation".

Apart from the occasional display of allegedly Iranian-made weapons, the Pentagon has provided no evidence to support its accusations. But as one privately contracted interrogator, Micah Brose, explained in yesterday's British-based *Sunday Observer*, the heat is on to produce information to feed Washington's anti-Iranian propaganda.

"They push a lot for us to establish a link with Iran," Brose said. "It feels a lot like, if you get something and Iran's not involved, it's a let down... My impression is they're just trying to get every little bit of ammunition possible. If we get something here it fits the overall picture. The engine needs impetus and they're looking to us to find the fuel—a particular type of fuel."

A military intelligence official confirmed Brose's comments: "The message is, 'Got to find a link with Iran, got to find a link with Iran.' It's sickening." Although not specifically asked to manufacture evidence, Brose added: "But if a detainee wants to tell me what I want to hear so he can get out of jail... you know what I'm saying." He was pessimistic about the possibility of avoiding war, saying: "If nothing changes in the current course, I'd say military action is inevitable."

In comments yesterday, Major-General Rick Lynch repeated US allegations that Iraqi militias were "trained in Iran and they're conducting operations in our battle space. They're Iraqis but they're IRGC surrogates and they're still out there." He said his troops were chasing 20 "targets" whom he claimed were Iranian agents. Like other American officials, however, Lynch provided no evidence to support his bald assertions.

Lynch's remarks follow the release last Friday of nine Iranian detainees who have been held for up to three years without charge by the US military. A brief official statement blandly declared that the men were no longer considered security threats and had no further intelligence value. The fact that they were all released without charge is a tacit admission that their detention was illegal and they were never a threat.

Two of those freed were among five Iranian officials seized in a pre-dawn raid by US special forces on an Iranian liaison office in the northern Iraqi city of Irbil during January. The US has refused Iraqi government demands for the release of all five and repeatedly claimed they were IRGC officials who had been involved in providing weapons and other assistance to Iraqi insurgents. The release of Brujerd Chegini and Hamid Reza Asgari Shukuh after nearly a year in detention calls into question all the US claims about the five.

Whatever the purpose behind these releases, the Bush administration has no intention of easing tensions with Iran over allegations of its "meddling" in Iraq. In the event that Washington is unable to secure UN Security Council backing for tough measures, including military action against Iran, US propaganda about Tehran's "proxy war" in Iraq provides a convenient alternative excuse for launching a new military adventure against Iran.



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