

Iran: The War Begins

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As opposition grows in America to the failed Iraq adventure, the Bush administration is preparing public opinion for an attack on Iran, its latest target, by the spring.

The United States is planning what will be a catastrophic attack on Iran. For the Bush cabal, the attack will be a way of "buying time" for its disaster in Iraq. In announcing what he called a "surge" of American troops in Iraq, George W Bush identified Iran as his real target. "We will interrupt the flow of support [to the insurgency in Iraq] from Iran and Syria," he said. "And we will seek out and destroy the networks providing advanced weaponry and training to our enemies in Iraq.

"Networks" means Iran. "There is solid evidence," said a State Department spokesman on 24 January, "that Iranian agents are involved in these networks and that they are working with individuals and groups in Iraq and are being sent there by the Iranian government." Like Bush's and Tony Blair's claim that they had irrefutable evidence that Saddam Hussein was deploying weapons of mass destruction, the "evidence" lacks all credibility. Iran has a natural affinity with the Shia majority of Iraq, and has been implacably opposed to al-Qaeda, condemning the 9/11 attacks and supporting the United States in Afghanistan. Syria has done the same. Investigations by the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times and others, including British military officials, have concluded that Iran is not engaged in the cross-border supply of weapons. General Peter Pace, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, has said no such evidence exists.

As the American disaster in Iraq deepens and domestic and foreign opposition grows, "neo-con" fanatics such as Vice-President Dick Cheney believe their opportunity to control Iran's oil will pass unless they act no later than the spring. For public consumption, there are potent myths. In concert with Israel and Washington's Zionist and fundamentalist Christian lobbies, the Bushites say their "strategy" is to end Iran's nuclear threat.

In fact, Iran possesses not a single nuclear weapon, nor has it ever threatened to build one; the CIA estimates that, even given the political will, Iran is incapable of building a nuclear weapon before 2017, at the earliest. Unlike Israel and the United States, Iran has abided by the rules of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, of which it was an original signatory, and has allowed routine inspections under its legal obligations - until gratuitous, punitive measures were added in 2003, at the behest of Washington. No report by the International Atomic Energy Agency has ever cited Iran for diverting its civilian nuclear programme to military use.

The IAEA has said that for most of the past three years its inspectors have been able to "go anywhere and see anything". They inspected the nuclear installations at Isfahan and Natanz on 10 and 12 January and will return on 2 to 6 February. The head of the IAEA, Mohamed ElBaradei, says that an attack on Iran will have "catastrophic consequences" and only encourage the regime to become a nuclear power.

Unlike its two nemeses, the US and Israel, Iran has attacked no other countries. It last went to war in 1980 when invaded by Saddam Hussein, who was backed and equipped by the US, which supplied

chemical and biological weapons produced at a factory in Maryland. Unlike Israel, the world's fifth military power - with its thermo nuclear weapons aimed at Middle East targets and an unmatched record of defying UN resolutions, as the enforcer of the world's longest illegal occupation - Iran has a history of obeying international law and occupies no territory other than its own.

The "threat" from Iran is entirely manufactured, aided and abetted by familiar, compliant media language that refers to Iran's "nuclear ambitions", just as the vocabulary of Saddam's non-existent WMD arsenal became common usage. Accompanying this is a demonising that has become standard practice. As Edward Herman has pointed out, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad "has done yeoman service in facilitating [this]"; yet a close examination of his notorious remark about Israel in October 2005 reveals how it has been distorted. According to Juan Cole, American professor of modern Middle East and south Asian history at the University of Michigan, and other Farsi language analysts, Ahmadinejad did not call for Israel to be "wiped off the map". He said: "The regime occupying Jerusalem must vanish from the page of time." This, says Cole, "does not imply military action or killing anyone at all". Ahmadinejad compared the demise of the Israeli regime to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The Iranian regime is repressive, but its power is diffuse and exercised by the mullahs, with whom Ahmadinejad is often at odds. An attack would surely unite them.

Nuclear option

The one piece of "solid evidence" is the threat posed by the United States. An American naval build-up in the eastern Mediterranean has begun. This is almost certainly part of what the Pentagon calls CONPLAN, which is the aerial bombing of Iran. In 2004, National Security Presidential Directive 35, entitled "Nuclear Weapons Deployment Authorisation", was issued. It is classified, of course, but the presumption has long been that NSPD 35 authorised the stockpiling and deployment of "tactical" nuclear weapons in the Middle East.

This does not mean Bush will use them against Iran, but for the first time since the most dangerous years of the cold war, the use of what were then called "limited" nuclear weapons is being discussed openly in Washington. What they are debating is the prospect of other Hiroshimas and of radioactive fallout across the Middle East and central Asia. Seymour Hersh disclosed in the New Yorker last year that American bombers "have been flying simulated nuclear weapons delivery missions . . . since last summer".

The well-informed Arab Times in Kuwait says that Bush will attack Iran before the end of April. One of Russia's most senior military strategists, General Leonid Ivashov, says the US will use nuclear munitions delivered by cruise missiles launched from the Mediterranean. "The war in Iraq," he wrote on 24 January, "was just one element in a series of steps in the process of regional destabilisation.

It was only a phase in getting closer to dealing with Iran and other countries. [When the attack on Iran begins] Israel is sure to come under Iranian missile strikes . . . Posing as victims, the Israelis . . . will suffer some tolerable damage and then the outraged US will destabilise Iran finally, making it look like a noble mission of retribution . . . Public opinion is already under pressure. There will be a growing anti-Iranian . . . hysteria, . . . leaks, disinformation et cetera . . . It . . . remain[s] unclear . . . whether the US Congress is going to authorise the war."

Asked about a US Senate resolution disapproving of the "surge" of US troops to Iraq, Vice-President Cheney said: "It won't stop us." Last November, a majority of the American electorate voted for the Democratic Party to control Congress and stop the war in Iraq.

Apart from insipid speeches of "disapproval", this has not happened and is unlikely to happen. Influential Democrats, such as the new leader of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, and the would-be presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and John Edwards, have disported themselves before the Israeli lobby. Edwards is regarded in his party as a "liberal". He was one of a high-level American contingent at a recent Israeli conference in Herzliya, where he spoke about "an unprecedented threat to the world and Israel [sic]. At the top of these threats is Iran . . . All options are on the table to ensure that Iran will never get a nuclear weapon." Hillary Clinton has said: "US policy must be unequivocal . . . We have to keep all options on the table." Pelosi and Howard Dean, another liberal, have distinguished themselves by attacking the former president Jimmy Carter, who oversaw the Camp David Agreement between Israel and Egypt and has had the gall to write a truthful book accusing Israel of becoming an "apartheid state". Pelosi said: "Carter does not speak for the Democratic Party." She is right, alas.

In Britain, Downing Street has been presented with a document entitled Answering the Charges by Professor Abbas Edalat, of Imperial College London, on behalf of others seeking to expose the disinformation on Iran. Blair remains silent. Apart from the usual honourable exceptions, parliament remains shamefully silent, too.

Can this really be happening again, less than four years after the invasion of Iraq, which has left some 650,000 people dead? I wrote virtually this same article early in 2003; for Iran now, read Iraq then. And is it not remarkable that North Korea has not been attacked? North Korea has nuclear weapons.

In numerous surveys, such as the one released on 23 January by the BBC World Service, "we", the majority of humanity, have made clear our revulsion for Bush and his vassals. As for Blair, the man is now politically and morally naked for all to see. So who speaks out, apart from Professor Edalat and his colleagues? Privileged journalists, scholars and artists, writers and thespians, who sometimes speak about "freedom of speech", are as silent as a dark West End theatre. What are they waiting for? The declaration of another thousand-year Reich, or a mushroom cloud in the Middle East, or both?

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