

# Is the US preparing for action against Iran?

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Three weeks ago, out of the blue, US president George Bush made a provocative statement warning Iran against meddling in Afghanistan. “If they in any way, shape or form try to destabilise the [Afghan] government, the coalition will deal with them, in diplomatic ways, initially,” he said.

“Iran must be a contributor in the war against terror,” Bush demanded. “Our nation and our fight against terror will uphold the doctrine: either you’re with us or against us. And any nation that thwarts our ability to rout terror where it exists will be held to account, one way or the other.” He insisted that Iran hand over any Al Qaeda fighters on its territory to the US.

Bush offered no evidence to support any of the allegations and did not elaborate on what was being referred to. But the message was unmistakable. The phrases—“diplomatic ways, initially” and “one way or another”—made clear that if the Iranian government did not meet Washington’s vague demands, it too could become the target of military action.

An article appeared in the *New York Times* on the same day as Bush’s comments, January 10, citing the concerns of unnamed US military and intelligence officials that “Iranian agents are infiltrating the area, threatening some tribal leaders and bribing other local leaders to undermine American-backed programs.” The newspaper honed in on Ismail Khan, governor of the western Afghan city and province of Herat, as “Iran’s closest ally”. Again none of the claims were substantiated—other than by “reports” from US special forces and CIA agents.

Bush’s statement might have appeared, initially at least, as something of an aberration. But since then, further comments have been made by senior administration officials reinforcing the threat against Iran and the US press has published a series of articles alleging Iranian “interference” in Afghanistan.

Shortly after Bush’s speech, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld pointedly noted that Iran was still on the US list of states sponsoring terrorism and reaffirmed that Iran should not harbour terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda. On January 11, an editorial appeared in the *Detroit Free Press* declaring that “Iran seems to have vaulted over Iraq on the potential-target list on terrorism after Afghanistan.”

Just over a week later, on January 19, US special envoy to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad accused Iran of providing arms to factions in western Afghanistan, of sending members of its Revolutionary Guards as well as Iranian-trained Afghan agents across the border, and giving money to groups opposed to the US-backed government. He insisted that Iran’s policy had to be “based on the non-interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan”.

On the same day, an article appeared on the opinion pages of the *Wall Street Journal* entitled “Those Pesky Ayatollahs: Will America stand up for freedom and against terror in Iran?”. The writer drew a connection to the interception of a shipment of arms by Israeli agents on January 3—allegedly dispatched from Iran and bound for the Palestinian Authority. He set out an aggressive plan of action for the US administration: “Mr Bush has already advised the clerics to butt out of Afghanistan. Next will come attention to Iran’s support for terrorism. It will need to start with a demand that Iran, the PLO and Hezbollah recognise Israel’s right to exist or accept the consequences of a refusal.”

Over the past week, US newspapers stepped up the campaign of vilification against Iran, focusing on allegations by Kandahar governor Gul Agha Shirzai that Iran was colluding with Herat’s governor Ismail Khan to destabilise Afghanistan’s southern provinces. Gul Agha’s spokesman Yusuf Pashtun claimed that Iranian agents had been smuggling arms into the southern province of Helmand, had been supplying and training Khan’s troops, and that Khan, an ethnic Tajik, had been “harassing and jailing ethnic Pashtun traders operating in Herat”.

Following a meeting of tribal elders supportive of the Kandahar governor, his intelligence chief Haji Gullalai announced that a force of 20,000 troops was being raised to deal with Khan. Gul Agha obviously thought better of the matter and, after allowing rumours to circulate, scotched the idea, saying “that’s not a solution”. Gullalai later claimed he had been misquoted.

It should be noted that Gul Agha has close ties with the US military and CIA. An article in the *New York Times* on January 6 provided a detailed portrait of a thug-for-hire—brutal, backward and interested only in money and power—who was armed and financed by the US and operated under the direction of US special forces units to seize Kandahar. It is certainly not beyond the bounds of possibility that his accusations against Khan are being made at the behest of his American paymasters.

What is one to make of all this?

Firstly, there is the breathtaking hypocrisy of Bush in accusing Iran of “interfering” in Afghanistan and undermining its current administration. All of the accusations that Washington levels against Teheran—seeking to pursue its interests inside Afghanistan through military and intelligence activities including the arming, training and financing of local warlords—are not only true of the US but are openly bragged about in the American press. US special forces units and teams of CIA operatives roam the country at will, yet the US objects that other countries may be doing the same.

Washington takes the same unilateral attitude to diplomatic

matters. Bush presumes to warn Iran against “destabilising” the interim government of Afghanistan. Yet the very Afghan administration he claims to be defending has made no formal complaint against Iran and in all probability was not even consulted. In the past, the US paid lip service to the principle of national sovereignty and observed the associated diplomatic formalities, if necessary twisting the arm of its local clients to provide the appropriate form of words. The Bush administration simply does not bother.

Three weeks on, the US has still to provide any evidence to back its allegations. Washington has ignored repeated denials by the Iranian government and Ismail Khan that they are colluding to destabilise the Kabul administration. Iranian officials have pointed out that it participated in the UN-sponsored talks in Bonn which established the interim Afghan administration and has given support to US actions in Afghanistan. It offered to rescue downed US pilots and opened a port for shipments of US aid.

US claims have not been supported by the UN or its European allies. Commenting last week on the growing controversy, the UN’s deputy special envoy to Afghanistan Francesc Vendrell said: “I don’t have any concrete evidence of Iranian involvement and certainly no concrete evidence that this involvement is masterminded in Iran by the Iranian government.” On Saturday, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan discounted US allegations that Iran was harbouring Al Qaeda fighters, pointing out that the country had been hostile to the group for years.

One cannot rule out that Iran is involved in Afghanistan or that Khan is receiving arms, money and other support from Teheran. Iran has a long history of backing various groups in Afghanistan—most recently in supporting the Northern Alliance against the Taliban. Moreover, Khan has been in exile in Iran for most of the time since he was ousted from Herat by the Taliban in 1995.

Iran is hardly alone, however. As well as the US, there are a long list of countries that have intervened to further their own interests, including Pakistan, India, Russia, Saudi Arabia as well as a number of the Central Asian republics. All of them have their own proxies and allies among the warlords of Afghanistan whose record of brutality and intrigue is at least the equal of Ismail Khan. If Iran is to be warned for backing Khan then why not, for instance, rap Uzbekistan over the knuckles for its ties with the notorious Uzbek militia leader Abdul Rashid Dostum, whose forces were engaged last week in fighting troops loyal to former Afghan president Burhanuddin Rabbani?

A number of US commentators and editorials have speculated on the reasons of Iran’s actions in Afghanistan. The real question, however, is why the Bush administration has singled out Teheran for special attention. A number of factors seem to have dovetailed to make it the target of US belligerence.

\* The timing of Bush’s statement appears to have more to do with Israel than Afghanistan. His administration is drawing even closer to the Sharon regime and its attacks on Palestinians, using Israel’s seizure of the arms shipment as the pretext. The US threats against Iran meet up with demands inside Israel that Teheran be targetted as part of the “global war against terrorism”.

An editorial in the *Jerusalem Post* called for Iran to be isolated

“diplomatically and economically until the regime abandons support for international terrorism. For starters, this means cracking down on the financial network used by the Iranians to fund terrorism, parts of which exist in European and Arab countries... Most of all, the Iranian ‘mullah-ocracy’ must understand its support for terrorism is no longer a strategic asset, but rather a direct threat to its survival.”

\* Washington is no doubt also expressing its displeasure at signs that Iran has been engaged in behind-the-scenes diplomatic moves aimed at consolidating growing unease and opposition in the Middle East to the US. Teheran has made gestures towards rival Iraq, with plans for the release of nearly 700 Iraqi prisoners held since the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war. According to a report on the *Asia Times* website, Iran is also sounding out American allies such as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

\* More fundamentally, the US regards Iran as a threat to its aims in Central Asia which include the exploitation of the region’s huge oil and gas reserves. Iran has already built a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan and is engaged in negotiations with New Delhi regarding the construction of another pipeline to India. Its plans for further oil and gas projects threaten to undermine the strategies of Washington and US corporations for alternate pipeline routes through the Caucasus and Turkey, or possibly through Afghanistan. Despite some easing, the US has continued to maintain an economic blockade against Iran for more than a decade.

While the Bush administration has clearly identified Iran as a possible target, it is not possible to say how far Washington will go or if it will resort to military measures. If the US made an example of Iran, it would have the added effect of sending a clear message to its rivals in Europe and Japan as well as to other regional powers such as Russia and India that Washington intends to dictate the terms in Afghanistan.

One means of exerting pressure on Iran would be to take action against its allies in Afghanistan such as Ismail Khan. There are indications that the first warning shot along these lines may have already been fired. Two British newspapers—the *Guardian* and the *Telegraph*—have recently published articles dealing with a major explosion at one of Khan’s barracks near Herat on January 3. At least 18 men died, five were injured and the fire burned for 24 hours.

Rumours were rife in Herat that the US had fired a cruise missile or other precision munitions at the barracks. Khan, who is undoubtedly concerned at the prospect of even sharper tensions with the US, has told his officials to deny the story and put the explosion down to an accident. Off the record, however, local commanders told British reporters otherwise. “It was a sign of Washington’s displeasure with the legendary warlord,” the *Guardian* concluded.



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