

Bush administration escalates confrontation with Iran

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Last week's meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna was one more sign that the US is intent on intensifying the confrontation with Iran over its nuclear program and laying the ground for another military adventure.

As far as Washington was concerned, the meeting had only one purpose: to issue an ultimatum to Iran to shut down its nuclear activities or face automatic referral to the UN Security Council for punitive measures. Despite failing to provide conclusive evidence, the US claims that Tehran has had secret nuclear weapons programs for nearly two decades.

Iran has consistently denied any plans to build nuclear weapons, insisting that its uranium enrichment program is designed to provide fuel for a power reactor being constructed at the southern port city of Bushehr. Tehran is adamant that under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty it has the right to develop all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle for civilian purposes, including enrichment.

The European Union, spearheaded by Britain, France and Germany, presented a somewhat "softer" approach, including possible inducements if Iran freezes its uranium enrichment program. At the same time, however, the EU was unwilling to cross Washington on the key issue: Iran had to demonstrate it had no weapons program or face the consequences.

The US insists that Iran prove the unproveable: that it has no nuclear weapons programs anywhere in its extensive territory. Every Iranian attempt to satisfy US demands is dismissed with contempt and inevitably followed by fresh accusations, based on little or no evidence, in order to keep up the pressure on Tehran.

On cue, new allegations surfaced in the midst of the latest IAEA proceedings. A former US weapons inspector David Albright released satellite images of an industrial complex at Parchin which he claimed was "a logical candidate" for developing high-explosive components needed for the trigger device to a nuclear weapon. No further evidence was offered. But the threadbare allegation served its purpose: to assist in browbeating IAEA members to take a tough stance.

The final "compromise" resolution on Iran produced last Saturday fell short of US demands. While calling on Iran to "immediately suspend" its uranium enrichment program, it included no automatic trigger clause to refer the matter to the UN and extended the deadline to November 25 to comply with other IAEA requirements. But as US undersecretary of state John Bolton declared: "Whatever the precise wording of the resolution, the issue of the Security Council referral will be up at the November

board meeting and everyone knows it."

Underlying Washington's contemptuous attitude towards the IAEA proceedings lies the Bush administration's repeated declaration that it reserves the right to take unilateral, preemptive action, including by military means. US Secretary of State Colin Powell reiterated the point this week. While stating that the US had no immediate plans to attack Iran, he pointedly added: "Every option, though, of course remains on the table."

Despite Powell's denials, there are a number of indications that military action is being actively discussed. The *Financial Times* reported last week: "The Bush administration's warnings that it will not 'tolerate' a nuclear-armed Iran have opened up a lively policy debate in Washington over the merits of military strikes against the Islamic republic's nuclear program. Analysts close to the administration say military options are under consideration, but have not reached a level of seriousness that indicate the US is preparing actual action."

An article in the September 27 issue of *Newsweek* also reported that "last week US and Israeli officials were talking of possible military action—even though some believe it's already too late to keep Iran from going nuclear (if it chooses)... *Newsweek* has learned that the CIA and DIA have war-gamed the likely consequences of a US preemptive strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. No one liked the outcome. As an Airforce source tells it, 'The war games were unsuccessful at preventing the conflict from escalating'."

Israel has already hinted that it may conduct military strikes to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities just as it hit Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981. The prospect of an Israeli attack on Iran was further heightened following reports this week that the US intends to sell 500 "bunker buster" bombs to Israel, along with thousands of other precision munitions. One of the obvious targets is Iran's nuclear establishments, many of which are in underground sites, heavily protected from aerial attack.

Iran has responded angrily to the increasingly belligerent and menacing US stance. Tehran has repeatedly warned that it will retaliate against any military attack on its soil. In an interview with the Qatar-based Al Jazeera network earlier this month, Iran's defence minister, Admiral Ali Shamhani, suggested that his country might take preemptive action, declaring: "We will not sit and wait for what others will do to us. Some military commanders in Iran are convinced that preventive operations, which the Americans talk about, are not their [the US] monopoly." At its

annual parade in Tehran this week, the military showed off its long-range ballistic missiles draped in anti-US and anti-Israeli slogans.

Tehran has declared that it will not abide by the IAEA resolution which it has denounced as “illegal”. It announced on Tuesday that it had begun converting 37 tonnes of uranium oxide or “yellowcake” into the gas uranium hexafluoride—the basic feedstock for the gas centrifuges used to manufacture enriched uranium. Iranian spokesman Hassan Rowhani has also made clear that Iran will pull out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty if the IAEA refers the country to the UN Security Council in November.

Iran has legitimately pointed to the utterly hypocritical attitude adopted by Washington, as well as France, Germany and Britain, towards its nuclear programs. While Iran is being menaced with diplomatic isolation, economic sanctions and military attack, it is an open secret that Israel has nuclear weapons. Yet no such pressure is being brought to bear on Israel to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty or to open up its nuclear facilities to IAEA inspection—both of which it has refused to do.

Contrary to Washington’s claims, it has certainly not been proven that Iran is building nuclear weapons. Iran has an ambitious nuclear power program, which envisions that 10 percent of the country’s electricity requirements, or 7,000 megawatts, will be provided by nuclear plants by 2020. The first stage is the 1,000-megawatt nuclear power reactor at Bushehr, due to be completed by 2006.

At the same time, Iran is building an uranium enrichment plant at Natanz—a secret that was exposed two years ago. While the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty does not ban uranium enrichment, all such activities have to be reported to the IAEA. Washington seized on the revelation as confirmation of Iran’s intentions to make nuclear weapons and demanded that the IAEA take action. The evidence remains inconclusive, however. As IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei declared recently: “We haven’t seen any concrete proof that there is a weapons program. Can we say everything is peaceful? Obviously we are not at that stage.”

Iran has, however, offered to accept any IAEA proposals to ensure that enrichment at the plant be limited to the 3.5 percent needed to provide fuel for its power reactors. In an article on the *Asia Times* website this week, Iranian experts pointed out that US and Israeli claims that the equipment could be used to manufacture a bomb in two to five years were wildly exaggerated. “To produce an atomic bomb, one needs more than 64,000 modern centrifuges running together with much other equipment 24 hours a day, but to our knowledge Iran has but 164 pilot centrifuges,” one said.

While the secret construction of the enrichment plant may constitute a formal breach of the treaty, Iran has reason to be wary about making it public. Ever since the fall of the pro-US Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi in 1979, Washington has been intent on sabotaging any Iranian nuclear programs—military or civilian. Construction of the Bushehr reactor, which began in the 1970s, ceased after German firm Siemens AG pulled out at Washington’s urging. The project was only restarted in 1995 after a Russian firm contracted to complete it. But Russia has been under constant pressure from the US to abandon the contract.

In the final analysis, if Iran is manufacturing nuclear weapons, it

has obvious motivations. In 2002, Bush branded Iran, along with Iraq and North Korea, as part of an “axis of evil”. The obvious lesson from Iraq is that all the attempts to meet US demands failed to stop the military invasion and subjugation of the country. Iran confronts the US, which is armed to the teeth with hi-tech weapons, including a huge nuclear arsenal and has troops on two of Iran’s borders—with Iraq and Afghanistan. While the *World Socialist Web Site* holds no brief for the theocratic regime in Tehran, Iran, a relatively small and underdeveloped country, has every right to defend itself by whatever means it can.

Once again the Bush administration is manufacturing a pretext to advance its broader ambitions of establishing US dominion over the resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. Not only does Iran have huge oil and gas reserves of its own, but it is strategically located adjacent to the Persian Gulf and Central Asia. The feeble opposition of the Europeans powers to Washington’s actions stem from a concern that any confrontation with Iran will undermine their extensive trade and economic relations with Tehran.

Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry has not opposed the Bush administration’s belligerent stance towards Iran. In fact, Kerry has been critical of Bush for ignoring the issue and not being tough enough. In a speech in late August, his vice-presidential running mate John Edwards declared that Bush had “stood on the sidelines” while both Iran and North Korea “advanced their nuclear programs”. While emphasising the need to negotiate a “grand deal” with Iran, he did not exclude military options.

The outcome of the IAEA meeting appears to have postponed any immediate action against Iran until November 26—that is, after the US presidential elections. But if the Bush administration appears to be headed for certain defeat, an “October surprise” cannot be ruled out. That could easily take the form of a provocative military strike on Iran—either by the US or ally Israel—with potentially explosive consequences throughout the Middle East.



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