US carrying out acts of war against Iran, magazine reports

Patrick Martin
20 January 2005

According to an extensive report by the well-connected journalist Seymour Hersh published in the *New Yorker* magazine last weekend, US military forces have been staging commando operations in Iran for months, preparing the way for air strikes against suspected weapons facilities or even a full-fledged invasion of the country. The article, titled "The Coming Wars," cites multiple sources whom Hersh describes as "former high-level intelligence officials"—most likely CIA officials forced out over the last seven months in the Bush administration purge of the agency—as well as Pentagon consultants and others in a position to know.

Hersh combines his revelations about US operations in Iran—themselves acts of war under international law—with an account of steps towards an enormous expansion of what the Pentagon calls the "Global War on Terrorism." This includes not only provocations against Iran, but covert operations in nearly a dozen countries in the Middle East, North Africa and Southeast Asia.

Hersh writes: "The Administration has been conducting secret reconnaissance missions inside Iran at least since last summer. Much of the focus is on the accumulation of intelligence and targeting information on Iranian nuclear, chemical, and missile sites, both declared and suspected. The goal is to identify and isolate three dozen, and perhaps more, such targets that could be destroyed by precision strikes and short-term commando raids." Such raids would be carried out either by the US military on its own, or in conjunction with Israeli forces, which destroyed Iraq's nuclear reactor at Osirak in 1981 with such a preemptive strike, entirely illegal under international law.

Iran has established its weapons research and development facilities at underground sites, distributing them widely throughout the country, including in the eastern region most distant from Israel, an effort which makes a single air strike unfeasible. US forces have conducted surveillance operations in the eastern region, taking advantage of their bases in Afghanistan established since the US conquest of that country in 2001. According to Hersh, they have been assisted by Pakistan, once a supplier of nuclear technology to Iran.

Iran was openly targeted by the White House in Bush's 2002 State of the Union Speech, with its infamous reference to the "axis of evil," consisting of Iraq, Iran and North Korea. This involves not just air strikes against alleged weapons sites, but preparation for full-scale war. Once again Hersh:

"The Pentagon's contingency plans for a broader invasion of Iran are also being updated. Strategists at the headquarters of the U.S. Central Command, in Tampa, Florida, have been asked to revise the military's war plan, providing for a maximum ground and air invasion of Iran. Updating the plan makes sense, whether or not the Administration intends to act, because the geopolitics of the region have changed dramatically in the last three years. Previously, an American invasion force would have had to enter Iran by sea, by way of the Persian Gulf or the Gulf of Oman; now troops could move in on the ground, from Afghanistan or Iraq. Commando units and other assets could be introduced through new bases in the Central Asian republics."

The conquest and occupation of Iran, a country of 70 million people and 640,000 square miles, three times the size of Iraq, would require at least a million troops—and megalomania of Hitlerian proportions. Hersh suggests that the invasion plans fall short of such a full-scale takeover, but rather aim at overthrowing the current government, the Islamic Republic dominated by fundamentalist clergy, and establishing a pro-US stooge regime in Tehran. Citing a "government consultant," he writes that "the hawks in the Pentagon, in private discussions, have been urging a limited attack on Iran because they believe it could lead to a toppling of the religious leadership."

There is little doubt that the *New Yorker* account is accurate as far as it goes. Hersh is a longtime recipient of high-level leaks from dissident officials in the military and intelligence apparatus, going back to his role in uncovering the story of the My Lai massacre during the Vietnam War. Hersh has written an extensive account of the torture and abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, tracing its connection to the policy decisions in the White House and Pentagon on the treatment of those captured in the US invasion of Afghanistan.

White House and Pentagon officials criticized the Hersh article, but only in a perfunctory fashion, and without denying its core assertion about US covert operations inside Iran. Chief Pentagon spokesman Lawrence DiRita claimed the Hersh article was "so riddled with errors of fundamental fact that the credibility of his entire piece is destroyed." He did not cite any

© World Socialist Web Site

errors, however. Another Pentagon spokesman, Lt. Col. Barry Venable, asked about the covert operations, said only, “We don’t discuss missions, capabilities or activities of Special Operations forces.”

Bush himself, in an interview broadcast the day after Hersh’s article was published, was asked about possible military action against Iran. He did not even deny the plans, saying of the US-instigated conflict over alleged Iranian nuclear weapons programs, “I hope we can solve it diplomatically, but I will never take any option off the table.”

The British daily newspaper the *Guardian* reported January 18 that it had “learned the Pentagon was recently contemplating the infiltration of members of the Iranian rebel group, Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MEK) over the Iraq-Iran border, to collect intelligence. The group, based at Camp Ashraf, near Baghdad, was under the protection of Saddam Hussein, and is under US guard while Washington decides on its strategy. The MEK has been declared a terrorist group by the State Department.”

Two right-wing Republican senators, Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania and John Cornyn of Texas, have introduced the Iran Freedom and Support Act, which calls for an official US policy of “regime change” in Iran and would provide as much as $100 million for exile organizations. It is modeled on the Iraq Liberation Act passed in 1998, which funneled millions in US cash to Iraqi exile groups like that headed by the current interim prime minister Iyad Allawi.

Last month the *Atlantic Monthly* produced a cover story on a war game carried out by retired military, intelligence and diplomatic officials which simulated a US war with Iran and concluded there were no viable military options, and that even limited air strikes would provoke Iranian retaliation—especially inside Iraq—which would leave US imperialism even worse off. The exercise was commissioned by the magazine to slow down the war drive in Washington, but it has had no such impact.

According to the Hersh article, the actions in Iran are only part of an extensive escalation of Pentagon operations throughout the Muslim-inhabited regions of the world, from North Africa to Southeast Asia. In the wake of the November election, Bush, Cheney and Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld felt they could now implement an agenda drawn up well before the vote, overriding what they regard as the timid reservations of the CIA and State Department.

Hersh writes: “The war on terrorism would be expanded, and effectively placed under the Pentagon’s control. The President has signed a series of findings and executive orders authorizing secret commando groups and other Special Forces units to conduct covert operations against suspected terrorist targets in as many as ten nations in the Middle East and South Asia.”

These directives give the Pentagon authority to run covert operations “off the books—free from legal restrictions imposed on the CIA.” The Pentagon refers these actions, not as “covert ops,” which the CIA must report to Congress, but as “black reconnaissance,” which is treated as preparation of the battlefield and therefore not subject to intelligence reporting requirements.

The *New York Times* reported last November that the Bush administration was studying whether to transfer control of all US-sponsored covert paramilitary operations from the CIA to the Pentagon, with a panel to report its recommendations in February. At the same time, Bush has installed his nominee to head the CIA, Porter Goss, who has removed all top officials who indicated any reservations about the concocting of evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the principal pretext for the war.

Hersh cites the report from two former CIA undercover officers, Vince Cannistraro and Philip Giraldi, that Bush has signed a broadly worded presidential finding permitting the Pentagon “to operate unilaterally in a number of countries where there is a perception of a clear and evident terrorist threat. . . . A number of the countries are friendly to the U.S. and are major trading partners. Most have been cooperating in the war on terrorism.” Cannistraro and Giraldi named Algeria, Sudan, Yemen, Syria, and Malaysia, while Hersh adds Tunisia to the list as well.

These operations would bypass another legal constraint on the CIA—the ban on assassinations imposed after the exposure of CIA murder plots in the early 1970s. Hersh writes, “The new rules will enable the Special Forces community to set up what it calls ‘action teams’ in the target countries overseas which can be used to find and eliminate terrorist organizations.” He cites the example of right-wing death squads in El Salvador as the model. He quotes a Pentagon adviser: “It’s a finesse to give power to Rumsfeld—giving him the right to act swiftly, decisively, and lethally. It’s a global free-fire zone.”

The low-key response from the Bush administration to the Hersh article reveals that it has calculated—quite correctly—that the American media will bury this sensational report about ongoing and planned war crimes by the US government. At the same time, the White House may find it useful to send a signal to Iran that it is contemplating military action, to bolster the diplomatic squeeze by Britain, France and Germany, which have sought to browbeat the regime into effectively shutting down its program of nuclear research, which Tehran has claimed is only for the purposes of developing nuclear power.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site