

Washington considering nuclear strikes against Iran

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The Bush administration is in the advanced stages of the planning and preparation for a full-scale air war against Iran, including the possible use of tactical nuclear weapons against selected targets, according to reports published this week.

“Current and former American military and intelligence officials said that Air Force planning groups are drawing up lists of targets, and teams of American combat troops have been ordered into Iran, under cover, to collect targeting data and to establish contact with anti-government ethnic-minority groups,” investigative reporter Seymour Hersh writes in the new edition of the *New Yorker* magazine, dated April 17.

The *New Yorker* report was largely corroborated by an article in Sunday’s *Washington Post*, which reported, “Although a land invasion is not contemplated, military officers are weighing alternatives ranging from a limited air strike aimed at key nuclear sites, to a more extensive bombing campaign designed to destroy an array of military and political targets.”

The *Post* added that the administration is considering an “ambitious campaign of bombing and cruise missiles leveling targets well beyond nuclear facilities, such as Iranian intelligence headquarters, the Revolutionary Guard and some in the government.” It also said that war planners are “contemplating tactical nuclear devices.”

According to Hersh’s account, while the ostensible purpose of this military planning is the destruction of Iran’s capacity to produce nuclear weapons, “President Bush’s ultimate goal in the nuclear confrontation with Iran is regime change.”

Officials told Hersh that the Pentagon’s plans call for bombing “many hundreds” of targets inside Iran, the majority of them having no connection with the country’s nuclear program.

According to an unnamed former Pentagon official quoted in Hersh’s report, the Bush administration’s strategy is based on the premise that “a sustained bombing campaign in Iran will humiliate the religious leadership and lead the

public to rise up and overthrow the government.” The former official told Hersh, “I was shocked when I heard it, and asked myself, ‘What are they smoking?’”

That top US officials may have convinced themselves that a US bombing campaign, which would undoubtedly cost thousands of lives and leave a substantial section of Iran’s infrastructure in ruins, would trigger a pro-American uprising is indeed mind-boggling.

Even more ominous, however, is the fact that they are drawing up plans for the first use of nuclear weapons in war—this time wholly unprovoked—since the American bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

The Pentagon, Hersh reports, presented the White House this winter with contingency plans calling “for the use of a bunker-buster tactical nuclear weapon, such as the B61-11, against underground nuclear sites. One target is Iran’s main centrifuge plant, at Natanz, nearly two hundred miles south of Tehran.”

The article further quotes a former defense official as revealing that US warplanes operating off of aircraft carriers in the Arabian Sea have been “flying simulated nuclear-weapons delivery missions—rapid ascending maneuvers known as ‘over the shoulder’ bombing—since last summer... within range of Iranian coastal radars.”

A former senior intelligence official told Hersh that if the US wants to destroy Iran’s nuclear facilities, which are widely dispersed and, in some cases, housed in fortified underground bunkers, it would almost have to use nuclear weapons. “Every other option, in the view of the nuclear weaponeers, would leave a gap,” the official said. “‘Decisive’ is the key word of the Air Force’s planning. It’s a tough decision. But we made it in Japan.”

Spelling out the implications of nuclear strikes, the official added, according to Hersh: “...we’re talking about mushroom clouds, radiation, mass casualties, and contamination over years. This is not an underground nuclear test, where all you see is the earth raised a little bit. These politicians don’t have a clue, and whenever anybody tries to get it out—remove the nuclear option—they’re

shouted down.””

Hersh reports that the threatened use of nuclear weapons against Iran is strongly opposed by senior officers in the military's uniformed command, some of whom have threatened to resign over the issue. This was echoed by the *Washington Post*, which wrote: “Many military officers and specialists, however, view the saber rattling with alarm. A strike at Iran, they warn, would at best just delay its nuclear program by a few years but could inflame international opinion against the United States, particularly in the Muslim world and especially within Iran, while making US troops in Iraq targets for retaliation.”

There has been speculation that the appearance of reports such as these is part of the Bush administration's strategy for intimidating the Iranian regime into giving up its nuclear program without a fight. On the other hand, there is reason to believe that senior officers in the US military command may want the discussion of nuclear strikes against Iran made public as a means of heading off such a move before the Bush administration can carry it out.

The Iranian government dismissed the war threats as an intimidation tactic. “We regard that (planning for air strikes) as psychological warfare stemming from America's anger and helplessness,” Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi told the media. At the same time, he charged Washington with seeking to provoke a crisis. “They do not want us to reach an agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency and the Europeans,” he said.

Washington's principal ally in the war against Iraq, Britain, likewise rejected the idea that there was any real threat of a US war against Iran. “...there is no smoking gun, there is no ‘casus belli,’” said British Foreign Minister Jack Straw. “We can't be certain about Iran's intentions and that is therefore not a basis for which anybody would gain authority to go to military action.”

However, according to the *Washington Post*, the Blair government “has launched its own planning for a potential US strike, studying security arrangements for its embassy and consular offices, for British citizens and corporate interests in Iran and for ships in the region and British troops in Iraq.”

Many observers point to the irrationality of launching a war against Iran under conditions where the US military is already stretched to the breaking point in neighboring Iraq, and where air strikes across the border would undoubtedly trigger upheavals within the Iraqi Shiite population, the majority of the country, making the US occupation even more untenable.

Such reassurances, however, rely on the unwarranted assumption that rational considerations play the preponderant role in the formulation of the Bush

administration's policies. A criminal and reckless military adventure is a very real possibility, arising to no small degree from the growing domestic political crisis of the Bush administration. The Bush White House has seen its popular support slump to historic lows, and it is threatened by a series of ticking political time bombs: the unraveling situation in Iraq, economic instability, criminal investigations into corruption and abuse of power.

A decision to embark on another war as a means of diverting and intimidating public opinion is a very real possibility. An attack on Iran would also likely give the Bush White House a real “war on terror” to facilitate its assault on democratic rights at home and justify even greater US military adventures in the future against such potential targets as China and Russia. Most people familiar with political relations in the region predict that a US strike on Iran would provoke a very real campaign of retaliation by well-organized and well-equipped forces against US targets both outside and within the United States.

There has been virtually no protest from the Democratic Party leadership against the threat of nuclear attacks on Iran. Many party leaders, including Senator Hillary Clinton of New York, have made repeated attacks on Bush from the right on the Iranian question, accusing the administration of failing to prosecute a sufficiently hard-line policy against Teheran.

According to Hersh's account, at least one leading congressional Democrat has been included in the administration's discussions with members of Congress on war plans for Iran. Quoting an unnamed member of the House of Representatives, Hersh reported that questions from those briefed in Congress were limited to the military's technical capacity for carrying out an effective strike. “There's no pressure from Congress” against launching a military attack on Iran, the House member said.

The general consensus for military aggression against Iran within the American ruling establishment is driven by the same interests that provided bipartisan support for the war on Iraq. As a “high ranking diplomat” told Hersh, “The real issue is who is going to control the Middle East and its oil in the next ten years.”



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