

Murdoch's media empire girds up for a war against Iran

Peter Symonds
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An editorial in Monday's *Australian* entitled "Endgame for Iran" is another sign that the vast resources of the Murdoch global media empire are being mobilised to support a new US war of aggression against Iran. A similar editorial headed "A nuclear Iran is not an option" appeared in the same newspaper last week, along with an opinion piece in the London-based *Times* entitled "What a shambles over Iran" and continuing agitation by Fox News commentators in the US.

The message is: Iran has flouted UN deadlines, it is building nuclear weapons, time is running out, diplomacy is a dangerous waste of time and military action is an urgent imperative. The same theme has dominated recent speeches by Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld over the past week, reflecting a definite shift in the Bush administration. Its purpose is to demonise the Tehran regime and whip up a climate of fear and hysteria to justify US military action against Iran. Murdoch and his editorial boards have not missed the cue.

The *Australian* editorial contemptuously dismissed the efforts of the UN and the European powers to resolve the nuclear standoff through diplomatic means. "In watching the slow dance between Iran and the rest of the world over Tehran's nuclear program, two things are becoming ever more clear. Iran's theocratic despots are hell-bent on acquiring atomic weapons with which to threaten Israel and control events in the Middle East and beyond, and large swaths of the world appear prepared to let them have their wish," it declared.

The argument is riddled with cynicism and hypocrisy. In the *Australian's* upside-down view of the world, the Iranian regime is the chief threat to peace, seeking through military might to "control events in the Middle East and beyond". In fact, the description applies most appropriately to the United States, which in the name of its phony "war on terror" has occupied Afghanistan, illegally invaded Iraq and backed the criminal Israeli invasion of Lebanon. The Bush administration makes no bones about its determination to "control events" in the region. Standing amid the ruins of Lebanon, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice openly declared that Washington's aim was to fashion "a new Middle East".

Just as in the lead up to the invasion of Iraq, the propagandists for the Bush administration have no hesitation in building their case on lies. The *Australian* has provided no proof for its sweeping accusation that Tehran is "acquiring nuclear weapons". In place of hard evidence, it offered the specious argument that Iran, with its

vast reserves of oil and gas, had no need for nuclear energy, therefore must be constructing atomic bombs. It was not the present regime, however, that initiated Iran's nuclear programs, but the former Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, with US backing. It was also the Shah who argued that the country's oil and gas should be reserved for exports and who, in the 1960s, drew up plans for a network of 23 nuclear power stations, also with US support.

It is possible that sections of the Iranian regime have ambitions to build nuclear weapons, but after three years of inspections the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has found no proof. All of its findings are presented in the negative: it is unable to verify that Iran has no weapons programs. Even if Tehran were "hell-bent" on building atomic bombs, its current facilities are completely inadequate. A heavy-water research reactor at Arak capable of producing plutonium is not due to be completed until 2009. Iran's enrichment plant at Natanz still has only one cascade of 164 gas centrifuges operating, well short of the many thousands required to produce significant amounts of highly enriched uranium. Even the CIA in last year's leaked National Intelligence Estimate judged that Iran required a decade to manufacture nuclear weapons. None of this, however, stops the *Australian* from baldly asserting: "With every day that ticks by, Tehran comes that much closer to being able to build either a dirty bomb or a full-scale atomic fission weapon."

The sense of panic that permeates the *Australian* editorial is bound up with the profound political crisis engulfing the White House. The US occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq have become unmitigated disasters, the US-backed Israeli war against Hezbollah in Lebanon was a debacle and, at home, there is broad hostility to the Bush administration, particularly over the continued US military presence in Iraq. Yet, far from pulling back, the US is preparing to lurch into another military adventure. Its agenda is nothing less than the assertion of American hegemony over the resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia and the stirring up of war fever to intimidate domestic opposition and justify further attacks on basic democratic rights.

The *Australian's* real venom was reserved for "the large swaths of the world" that stand in the way of the Bush administration's plans—Russia and China, which have opposed any punitive measures against Iran, and the European powers, which continue to string out negotiations, as well as those in the American establishment who have expressed concern at the consequences of

reckless militarism for US interests. The editorial speaks for a US administration that senses its profound isolation and feels, with mid-term elections due in November and the end of Bush's second term just two years off, that it is running out of time.

As it did during the US wars against Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq, the newspaper painted the latest target of aggression as "evil" and Iranian Mahmoud President Ahmadinejad as the new Hitler. Lashing out at the Bush administration's opponents, it declared: "In this regard the current climate feels reminiscent of the late 1930s, when many in the West supported Germany's right to rearm having had its pride wounded by the Treaty of Versailles, or even the 1940s when some felt the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour was simply blowback for US oil sanctions on Imperial Japan."

But, like Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq, Iran is not an imperialist power. Unlike Japan and Germany in the 1930s, it does not have the military capacity to seriously threaten the United States, even if it were to build a handful of atomic weapons. The most accurate parallel to the Third Reich and the Japanese imperial regime is the Bush administration itself, which seeks to offset the economic decline of the United States and to resolve its deepening social contradictions by using its military strength to bully its rivals and establish unrivalled US dominance over critical resources. The apologists for Hitler's regime in the 1930s were to be found among the most right-wing layers of the political establishment—today's admirers and supporters of the Bush administration.

The *Australian* portrays Ahmadinejad in apocalyptic terms as a man who regards himself as the "hidden" iman, the herald of the end of the world, in order to justify its conclusion that war is the only way. "[D]iplomatic threats and sanctions could have the perverse effect of emboldening Mr Ahmadinejad," it insisted, ignoring the fact that the Iranian regime has, throughout the past decade, indicated a willingness to negotiate an end to the standoff with the United States. The US, on the other hand, has repeatedly ruled out talks with Iran. In discussions with European powers, one of Tehran's key demands has been for a security guarantee, which the Bush administration has continued to rule out with the stock phrase—"all options are on the table".

Now, the *Australian* declares: "[T]he world's only option is military, though the window of opportunity for strikes against Iran's nuclear program is rapidly closing as the regime plays for time and hardens its facilities. US President George W. Bush and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert may each have been weakened by mistakes and miscalculations in Iraq and Lebanon respectively. But they may also have no choice but to act, since no one else in the world seems prepared to."

The purpose was not to advise Bush and Olmert. As Murdoch's editorial staff are well aware, the White House and the Pentagon have been engaged for well over a year in drawing up detailed plans for a massive air campaign against Iran. Speaking on the Democracy Now radio program last month, veteran journalist Seymour Hersh explained that the White House regarded Israel's war on Lebanon as the necessary precursor to a war on Iran.

Asked about current US plans to bomb Iran, Hersh replied: "Well, you can't apply rationality to it, because I think it's simply

something Bush and Cheney want to do. As I said earlier, they want to take out Iran. They don't want to talk to it. They believe it's, you know, the axis of evil cubed. And so, frankly my real worry is what's going to happen—I think nothing's going to happen before this election. That's impossible. My real worry is what's going to happen when George Bush is a lame duck."

Hersh has written a series of extensive articles in the *New Yorker* based on top-level sources in the Pentagon and the CIA detailing the plans for a military assault on Iran, including chilling discussions about the use of nuclear weapons. As the *Australian* editorial implies, far from the setbacks in Lebanon and Iraq being a brake on these preparations, they have become a further spur to action. The most fascistic sections of the American establishment stridently declare that the US cannot win in Iraq without taking the fight to Syria and Iran.

In his article last month entitled "The Real War," Michael Ledeen of the right-wing American Enterprise Institute set out the twisted logic of militarism. "Even if we continue to win every battle in every region of Iraq and Afghanistan, we will only prolong the fighting... But if the mullahcracy is replaced by a government empowered by the tens of millions of pro-American and pro-democracy people now oppressed by the evil terror masters in Tehran, the fight in Iraq and Afghanistan would quickly be transformed into a operation with the balance of power overwhelmingly on the side of the governments," he declared.

In this absurd fantasy world, the "evil terror masters in Tehran" are responsible for all the problems confronting the Bush administration. Remove them and the peoples of Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran would welcome American soldiers with open arms. This is the line of the *Australian*. It is a recipe for unending war to suppress the resistance of the peoples of the Middle East to US ambitions. It is not designed to convince, but to browbeat and intimidate. The editorial is one more indication that an assault on Iran is being planned for sooner, rather than later.



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