

The Bush administration prepares for war against Iran

Part one

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The following is the first part of a report delivered by Peter Symonds to a membership meeting of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) from January 25 to January 27, 2007. Symonds is a member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site and of the SEP central committee. Part two will be posted on February 17.

SEP national secretary Nick Beams's report was posted in three parts. Part one on February 12, Part two on February 13 and Part three on February 14. James Cogan's report on Iraq was posted on February 15.

US President Bush's January 10 speech was far more than the announcement of a surge of 20,000 US troops and an escalating bloodbath in Iraq. It signalled an intensification of his administration's efforts to refashion the entire Middle East under the domination of US imperialism. The central target of this strategy is Iran.

"Succeeding in Iraq requires defending its territorial integrity and stabilising the region in the face of the extremist challenge," Bush declared. "This begins with addressing Iran and Syria." "Defending Iraq's territorial integrity" means, of course, defending the criminal US military occupation of Iraq and "stabilising the region" signifies extending US domination in the Middle East.

Bush declared the US military would "interrupt the flow of support from Iran and Syria" and "seek out and destroy" networks providing arms and training. Just hours after Bush finished speaking, American troops conducted an early morning raid on an Iranian diplomatic office in the northern Iraqi city of Irbil. The operation followed the similarly provocative detention in Baghdad on December 20 of at least five Iranians, including two credentialled diplomats.

Tehran protested strongly. Iraqi officials cautiously pointed out that the Iranians were in Iraq at Baghdad's invitation. All this was ignored by US military authorities who continued to maintain, without offering a shred of evidence, that the Iranians had been assisting anti-US militia. The message to all, including Washington's closest allies in Iraq, was that the White House and the Pentagon decide what takes place in Iraq.

In his speech, Bush also announced: "We are taking steps to bolster the security of Iraq and protect American interests in the Middle East." These steps include the dispatch of a second carrier strike group to the Gulf, for the first time since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the deployment of Patriot anti-missile systems in the Gulf states. The USS John C. Stennis has already set out from its homeport of Bremerton, Washington, and will be in place in the Persian Gulf with seven other warships and nine air squadrons in a matter of weeks.

Bush administration officials have openly explained the purpose of the deployment is to menace Iran. Newly installed Defence Secretary Robert Gates, who, along with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, has been crisscrossing the region to line up support for the Bush escalation, declared in Kabul: "The Iranians clearly believe that we are tied down in

Iraq, that they have the initiative, that they're in a position to press us in many ways... We are simply trying to communicate to the region that we are going to be there for a long time."

At a gathering in Dubai on January 23, senior state department official Nicolas Burns bluntly declared: "The Middle East isn't a region to be dominated by Iran. The Gulf isn't a body of water to be controlled by Iran. That is why we've seen the United States station two carrier battle groups in the region. Iran is going to have to understand that the United States will protect its interests if Iran seeks to confront us."

In the name of "containing Iran", the US is building an alliance of "Sunni" states in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt and the Gulf states, to confront Shiite Iran. As it cobbles together its coalition of sheikdoms and autocratic regimes, the pretext of promoting democracy throughout the Middle East is being quietly shelved.

A stream of top US officials, including Vice President Dick Cheney, has beaten a path to Saudi Arabia to line up support. The Saudi monarchy is alarmed that the ousting of Saddam Hussein has strengthened the hand of its traditional rival Iran. There is a very real danger that Washington's efforts to construct what Rice terms, "a new alignment" of "moderates" against "extremists" will transform the current sectarian civil war in Iraq into a region-wide conflict. In December, the London-based *Sunday Times* warned of a sectarian confrontation in the Middle East akin to the bloody Thirty Years War in seventeenth century Europe between Catholics and Protestants.

There has been no shortage of media reports over the past two years outlining the advanced preparations for an attack on Iran. The WSWs has previously written on the detailed articles in the *New Yorker* produced by veteran journalist Seymour Hersh. The first in January 2005 reported that the Pentagon was preparing new war plans for potential air strikes and an invasion of Iran, and that US Special Forces had been operating inside Iran to identify targets.

Last April Hersh reported a top-level debate in the White House and Pentagon over the use of nuclear weapons, as generals and officials argued about how best to reduce Iran to rubble. The *Sunday Times* has now published several articles on the preparations of the Israeli military for air strikes on Iran—the most recent last month also referred to the use of tactical nuclear weapons.

The extent of what is being prepared was highlighted by a former state department official, Wayne White, in comments to Reuters last week. "You're not talking about a surgical strike... You're talking about a war against Iran... We're talking about clearing a path to the targets," he explained, by taking out much of the Iranian air force, Kilo submarines, anti-ship missiles that could target US warships in the Gulf, and maybe even Iran's ballistic missile capacity.

The military preparations are being accompanied by the continuing

drumbeat by Bush officials in the media against Iran. The pretexts for war against Iran are just as bogus as those used against Iraq.

* At the top of the list is the claim, repeated *ad nauseum* by top US officials, that Iran is constructing nuclear weapons. Israel alleges that the Iranian program is reaching the point of no return. There is no doubt that the Iranian nuclear program in 2007 is more advanced than the Iraqi program in 2003, which was completely non-existent. It cannot be completely ruled out that the Iranian regime is seeking to build a bomb in a bid to counter US and Israel threats. Certainly some elements of the regime have called for such a strategy.

But senior Iranian leaders have declared that the country's nuclear program is for peaceful purposes and insisted that it is entitled to proceed under the terms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Three years of intensive IAEA inspections have failed to find positive evidence of a secret nuclear weapons program and IAEA reports have repeatedly stated that. The two possible pathways for producing the necessary fissionable material to construct a bomb—the uranium enrichment plant at Natanz and the heavy-water research reactor at Arak—are years away from completion and remain under IAEA observation. Of the 50,000 gas centrifuges planned for the Natanz facility, all that has been tested is a 164-machine cascade. Even the US Director of National Intelligence, John Negroponte, estimated last year that it would be up to a decade before Iran acquired nuclear weapons, if that is what it intended.

Iranian leaders have hinted on a number of occasions that they would be prepared to shut down or severely restrict uranium enrichment in return for a comprehensive package that included security guarantees, technical assistance and economic aid. However, the Bush administration rejected such a package in 2003, has steadfastly refused to talk directly with Tehran and has undermined European efforts to negotiate an end to the crisis. Without a security guarantee from the US, any deal would be meaningless. Bush and his top officials have declared again and again that all options—that is, including a US military attack on Iran—remain on the table.

The Bush administration's objective is not a negotiated end to the nuclear standoff, but "regime change"—that is, the installation of a compliant regime in Tehran that will serve US interests. While Congress has not formally adopted such an objective, as was the case with Iraq, the Bush administration has already established a number of mechanisms devoted to this end.

Secretary of State Rice established an Iranian Affairs office last year headed by Elizabeth Cheney, the vice president's daughter, to coordinate policy and provide "pro-democracy funding" for Iranian opposition groups. Funds for such activities were boosted from \$10 to \$75 million. An article in the *Boston Globe* this January highlighted the activities of the Iran Syria Policy and Operations Group (ISOG)—a team of top officials from the Pentagon, State Department, CIA, Treasury and National Security Council that has been working to strengthen alliances against Iran, finance Iranian dissidents and undermine Iran economically. The ISOG has been actively involved in strengthening military alliances with the Gulf states. Finally, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, the Pentagon has established the Iranian equivalent of the notorious Office of Special Plans (OSP), which played a major role in concocting the lies about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. The Directorate for Iran works from the same offices as the OSP and includes former OSP personnel among its staff and advisers.

* The next charge against the Iranian regime is that it is destabilising Iraq and aiding anti-US insurgents. The first point to be made is the most obvious: the real destabiliser in Iraq is the US. The second is that while Iranian intelligence undoubtedly has operatives inside Iran, they are certainly not alone. Saudi Arabia, for instance, not only has intelligence agents in the country, but several reports indicate Saudi money and arms is flowing to Sunni insurgent groups inside Iraq.

Despite repeated claims, the US is yet to produce proof that the Iranian regime is actively supporting anti-US fighters. An article in the *Los Angeles Times* on January 23 declared: "For all the aggressive rhetoric, however, the Bush administration has provided scant evidence to support these claims. Nor have reporters travelling with US troops seen extensive signs of Iranian involvement. During a recent sweep through a stronghold of Sunni insurgents here, a single Iranian machine gun turned up among dozens of arms caches US troops uncovered. British officials have similarly accused Iran of meddling in Iraqi affairs, but say they have not found Iranian-made weapons in areas they patrol."

There is more evidence in the public arena of US and Israeli operations inside Iran. Seymour Hersh has written on a number of occasions of the involvement of Israeli and US intelligence with Kurdish groups in training infiltrators to gather information on potential targets inside Iran and encourage armed opposition among the Kurdish minority. Similar efforts are being made to stir up opposition among Azeri, Baluchi and other minorities. In his latest book *Target Iran*, Scott Ritter details the longstanding use of Kurds by Israeli intelligence to carry out operations in Iran.

In an article in the *Los Angeles Times* on January 23, the Iranian consul in the southern Iraqi city of Basra said Iranian police had discovered arms, ammunition and other illegal equipment that had been smuggled from Iraq into Iran—into the oil-rich province of Khuzistan in particular, where Iran's small Arab minority is concentrated and armed attacks against Persian domination have taken place.

* The Bush administration also accuses Iran of supplying assistance to the "terrorist" organisations Hezbollah and Hamas, while of course ignoring the criminal actions of Israel in the Palestinian territories and Lebanon. The accusations against Hezbollah and Hamas form part of broader US plans to refashion the Middle East as a whole with Israeli assistance. The Bush administration's encouragement of Israel's savage war on Lebanon last July was viewed as the initial stages of a broader war against Iran and Syria.

In the November-December issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Ze'ev Schiff, chief military correspondent for *Haaretz*, wrote: "The recent fighting in Lebanon may have looked to some like old news, just another battle in the long-running Arab-Israeli war. But it also represented something much more disturbing: the start of a new war between Israel and Iran. The Israeli defence establishment, which regards Hezbollah as a frontal commando unit of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, certainly saw things this way."

The Iranian regime has offered the US a comprehensive deal on all these issues—hinting at the possibility that it would cut off aid to Hamas and Hezbollah if it received a sufficiently attractive offer in return.

The greatest boost for the Bush administration's campaign was the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as Iranian president in 2005. His deliberate stirring up of rabid nationalism and anti-Semitism has played directly into the hands of the Bush administration in isolating Iran and sowing divisions among working people in the Middle East.

The real reason for US belligerence against Iran has nothing to do with any of these pretexts. Washington's obvious ambition is to secure control of Iran's huge reserves of oil and gas. Iran has the second largest reserves of natural gas in the world and the third largest of oil. According to 2005 figures, it is the world's fourth largest producer of oil and the fifth largest exporter. Given its huge reserves and the rundown character of its infrastructure, which was seriously damaged during the protracted war with Iraq in the 1980s, there is considerable scope for expanded exports. At present, however, the Bush administration is working to block the investment that Iran desperately needs.

To be continued



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