New provocation against Tehran

Bush to brand Iranian force as “terrorist”

Peter Symonds
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In a move with ominous implications, the Bush administration, according to articles in yesterday’s *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, has resolved to brand the entire Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a “specially designated global terrorist” organization. In doing so, Bush will use powers provided under a presidential order signed shortly after the September 11, 2001 attacks.

The highly provocative step not only sets the stage for intensified economic pressure on Tehran, but also formalises a potential *casus belli* for US military action against Iran.

The decision to unilaterally criminalise a major branch of the military of a sovereign nation is unprecedented. The IRGC, which was formed after the 1979 Iranian revolution, has an estimated 125,000 soldiers and other personnel in its land, sea and air forces.

The designation will place the IRGC in the same category as Al Qaeda, Lebanon’s Shiite militia Hezbollah and the Palestinian Hamas and Islamic Jihad groups, all of which have been attacked either by the US military or its Israeli allies, and their members detained and tortured as “terrorist” suspects.

The pretext for the move is the unsubstantiated US claim that the IRGC is “interfering” in Iraq and Afghanistan and supporting “terrorist” groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas. Bush administration and Pentagon officials have been engaged in an escalating propaganda offensive in recent weeks claiming that the IRGC, in particular its elite Quds Force, has been arming, training and directing Shiite militias engaged in attacking US troops in Iraq. Washington further alleges that the IRGC has been assisting the Taliban and other anti-occupation forces in Afghanistan.

Even if one were to accept these allegations at face value, it is the height of hypocrisy for the gangsters of the Bush administration to brand a section of Tehran’s military as terrorist and proscribe it for “meddling” in Iraq and Afghanistan, two countries on its border that are occupied by US-led forces. The US military has killed thousands of Afghanis and reduced Iraq to ruins over the past five years. American occupation forces have slaughtered hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, forced millions to flee the country and devastated the physical and social infrastructure. Tens of thousands of Iraqis have been rounded up, detained indefinitely without charge and tortured.

No one deserves the designation of “terrorist” more than the Bush administration, which has utilised its vast military superiority to terrorise the Afghan and Iraqi peoples in an effort to stamp out the legitimate opposition to neo-colonial occupation.

The US propaganda against Iran bears an eerie resemblance to the lies used to justify the illegal 2003 invasion of Iraq. It is a concoction of bald assertions, half-truths and outright falsehoods, all riddled with unexplained contradictions. No evidence has been provided to rebut Iran’s repeated denial of any involvement in supporting Shiite militias in Iraq. No attempt is made to explain why Iran would be arming the Taliban and other Sunni extremists, who regard all Shiites, and the Tehran regime in particular, as heretics to be wiped out.

Iran may very well be providing aid to anti-US Shiite forces in Iraq, but the Bush administration’s suggestions that Tehran is the mastermind behind the Iraqi resistance and is using it to wage a proxy war against America are patently absurd, as are the entirely contradictory claims that the Sunni extremist Al Qaeda is the main source of attacks on US occupation forces and their Iraqi allies. According to the twisted logic of American imperialism, any Iraqis who oppose US domination of their country are, by definition, “anti-Iraqi” agents of external terrorist forces.

While Iranian intelligence agents are undoubtedly active in Iraq, so too are Saudi, Jordanian and other intelligence agencies. Saudi citizens, not Iranians, account for the majority of suicide bombings in Iraq. And while demanding ever tougher sanctions against Iran over its alleged nuclear weapons program, the Bush administration has just concluded multi-billion dollar arms deals with Saudi Arabia, Israel and other Middle Eastern allies that can only trigger an arms race in the volatile region.

The immediate effect of branding the IRGC as “specially designated global terrorist” organisation is economic. Any organisation or individual knowingly providing material support to the IRGC would be subject to criminal charges. Any US bank that uncovered IRGC resources would be compelled to hand them over to the Treasury Department.

The main impact would not be inside the US, which has maintained an economic blockade of Iran since 1981 and designated the regime as a state sponsor of terrorism in 1984, but against foreign corporations with any relations with the IRGC’s extensive business interests.

According to the *Washington Post*, the Bush administration is considering unveiling the measure at next month’s session of the UN General Assembly. The timing is calculated to maximise pressure on Russia, China and the European powers to agree to US demands for tough new economic sanctions against Iran.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had already reportedly told European countries that the unilateral measure was necessary due to the delay in a new UN resolution—the result of Chinese and Russian opposition. “Anyone doing business with these people will have to reevaluate their actions immediately,” one US official told the *Washington Post*. “It removes the excuses for doing business with these people.”

The purpose of the US move, however, goes far beyond economically penalising Iran and America’s European and Asian rivals, which have huge economic interests at stake. A mad logic is

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propelling the Bush administration towards a military confrontation with Iran despite the quagmires in which the US military is bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan. Having set out through its previous invasions to establish its untrammelled domination over the Middle East and its energy resources, the Bush administration now finds that it has only strengthened Iranian influence in the region by removing two of Tehran's chief rivals—Saddam Hussein in Baghdad and the Taliban in Kabul.

The IRGC's "terrorist" designation is one more sign that the internal debate in the White House is shifting in favour of a military adventure against Iran despite its potentially disastrous consequences for US imperialism. Over the past year, Rice's diplomatic efforts to pressure Iran to bow to US demands have appeared to predominate. But, as the *New York Times* noted, "in recent months, there has been resurgent debate within the administration about whether the diplomatic path is working, with aides to Vice President Dick Cheney said to be pushing for greater consideration of military operations."

An article syndicated last week in McClatchy Newspapers reported: "Vice President Dick Cheney several weeks ago proposed launching air strikes at suspected training camps in Iraq run by the Quds force, a special unit of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, according to two US officials who are involved in Iran policy." It added: "Cheney, who's long been skeptical of diplomacy with Iran, argued for military action if hard new evidence emerges of Iran's complicity in supporting anti-American forces in Iraq: for example, catching a truckload of fighters or weapons crossing into Iraq from Iran, one official said."

At his press conference last Thursday, President Bush bluntly threatened Iran, declaring: "When we catch you playing a non-constructive role, there will be a price to pay." He also made clear that recent meetings in Baghdad between US and Iranian ambassadors did not involve negotiations, but were to present US ultimatums to Tehran. "One of the main reasons that I asked Ambassador Crocker to meet with Iranians inside Iraq was to send the message that there will be consequences for... people transporting, delivering EFPs [roadside bombs]... that kill Americans in Iraq," he said.

Bush publicly contradicted Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who was visiting Tehran at the time and described Iran's role in the region as constructive. "Now, if the signal is that Iran is constructive, I will have to have a heart-to-heart with my friend the prime minister, because I don't believe they are constructive," he said.

Maliki, whose government is dominated by Shiite parties with longstanding ties to Iran, may well be one of the first casualties of Washington's sharpening conflict with Tehran. His cabinet has suffered a series of damaging defections in recent months and, amid rumours of a no-confidence motion when parliament resumes next month, Bush has been less than fulsome in publicly supporting his "friend."

Cheney's reported call for strikes on IRGC bases inside Iran in the event of the discovery of "a truckload of fighters or weapons" crossing into Iraq recalls comments earlier this year by former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, in which he mooted "a plausible scenario for a military collision with Iran." In the midst of a scathing denunciation of Bush's "war on terror" and its deleterious impact on US interests, Brzezinski suggested the following scenario: "Iraqi failure to meet the benchmarks, followed by accusations of Iranian responsibility for the failure, then by some provocation in Iraq or a terrorist act in the US blamed on Iran, culminating in a 'defensive' US military action against Iran that plunges a lonely America into a spreading and deepening quagmire eventually ranging across Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan."

Brzezinski, a man with contacts at the highest levels of the US state apparatus and his own experiences in organising provocations, knows whereof he speaks. It is not difficult to imagine any number of incidents—from the Iranian capture of US sailors to a devastating attack on a US military base—that could be exploited by the Bush administration to whip up an atmosphere of hysteria and jingoism for the purpose of initiating plans that are already in place for a military attack on Iran. In fact, the declaration of the IRGC as a "terrorist" organization, along with the Bush administration's increasingly inflammatory language, is calculated to incite sections of the Iranian regime to provide just such a pretext.

The Democrats, far from opposing a new war against Iran, have already indicated that they would rapidly fall into line and rubberstamp American aggression. None of the Democratic contenders for the presidency have ruled out the use of military force against Iran.

Significantly, Tom Lantos, Democratic chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Relations, yesterday immediately welcomed the Bush administration's move against the IRGC as the means for keeping Iran and its agencies "from destabilising global security." While cautiously declaring that "we are far from exhausting all the peaceful options," he went on to repeat the Bush administration's litany of accusations against the IRGC, from its alleged involvement in nuclear weapons development to its alleged role in training "terrorists" in Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. In the event of a military confrontation, all of the verbal caveats would quickly be torn up—just like the promises to withdraw US troops from Iraq.

With just over a year to the presidential elections, the Bush administration is under few restraints in aggressively pursuing its agenda—including a military attack on Iran as a desperate gamble to fulfill US ambitions to become the predominant power in the resource-rich region. All the signs indicate that it is not so much a question of if, but when US imperialism launches its next criminal war—this time against Iran.

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