

New Yorker article points to advanced US preparations for war on Iran

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A lengthy article by veteran journalist Seymour Hersh published in the *New Yorker* on Sunday provides further confirmation of the Bush administration's well-developed military and political preparations for attacking Iran. According to Hersh, the Pentagon has drawn up new war plans, the CIA has allocated substantial extra resources and the White House has already sounded out US allies, including Israel, Britain and Australia, for support in any military strike.

The article "Shifting Targets: The Administration's plan for Iran" focusses on the changing pretext for war: from allegations that Tehran is building a nuclear bomb to a new propaganda campaign claiming that Iran is arming, training and supporting insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan who are killing US troops. The cynical ease with which the White House has switched from one unsubstantiated claim to another underscores the fact that a US attack will have nothing to do with any threat posed by Iran, but will aim at furthering US ambitions for the domination of the resource-rich region.

Like the lies that were used to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration is casting around for a *casus belli* to try to stampede public opinion behind an attack on Iran. At the same time, however, the White House confronts deep-seated suspicion, hostility and opposition—in the US and internationally—to any new US military adventure.

Hersh told CNN on Sunday: "The name of the game used to be, they're a nuclear threat... Sort of the same game we had before the war in Iraq. And what's happened is in the last few months, they've come to the realisation they're not selling it. It isn't working... So they switched really."

According to Hersh, the new bombing plan targets the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC), which Washington alleges has been assisting Shiite militias in Iraq. "The strategy calls for the use of sea-launched cruise missiles and more precisely targetted ground attacks and bombing strikes, including plans to destroy the most important Revolutionary Guard training camps, supply depots, and command and control facilities," he wrote in the *New Yorker*.

A former senior American intelligence official told Hersh: "[Vice President Dick] Cheney's option is now for a fast in and out—for surgical strikes. The Navy's planes, ships, and cruise missiles are in place in the Gulf and operating daily. They've got everything they need—even AWACS are in place and the targets in Iran have been programmed. The Navy is flying FA-18 missions every day in the Gulf."

Hersh also cited a Pentagon consultant who explained that the air war would be accompanied by "short, sharp incursions" by Special Forces units against suspected Iranian training sites. "Cheney is devoted to this, no question," he said. Ominously, the consultant also

explained that while the initial bombing campaign might be limited, there was an "escalation special" that could also include attacks on Iran's ally Syria, as well as against the Hezbollah militia in Lebanon. "[A]dd-ons are always there in strike planning," he said.

In the early northern summer, Hersh reports in the *New Yorker*, President Bush told Ryan Crocker, the US ambassador to Iraq, via a secure videoconference that he was thinking of attacking Iranian targets across the border and that the British "were on board". Bush concluded by instructing Crocker to tell Iran to stop interfering in Iraq or it would face American retribution. In a separate interview with *DemocracyNow*, Hersh admitted that Bush had been even blunter. "The President was very clear that he is interested in going across the border and whacking the Iranians," he said.

The *New Yorker* article presents the new war plans as limited, precision strikes against specific IRGC targets, but such acts of aggression always entail the danger of rapid escalation into all-out war for which military planners prepare. Moreover, other recent articles in the British press have pointed to a discussion in Washington of a far more extensive "shock and awe" bombardment aimed at levelling Iran's military, industrial capacity, transport and communications.

As Hersh acknowledged in an interview with *DemocracyNow*, a limited military strike appeared to be a tactical factional compromise in the White House between Cheney and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who has previously advocated extended diplomatic moves. "She [Rice] favours a limited bombing, so I hear," Hersh said. "If you want to really get a dark scenario, Cheney has gone along with the limited bombing. Basically, they call the limited bombing the third option, because there's one option to do nothing, the other is to bring in the Air Force and rake...everything."

Not only the military, but the CIA has now made Iran the top priority. A recently retired CIA official explained: "They're moving everybody to the Iran desk. They're dragging in a lot of analysts and ramping up everything. It's just like the fall of 2002 [prior to the invasion of Iraq]... The guys now running the Iranian program have limited direct experience with Iran. In the event of an attack, how will the Iranians react? They *will* react, and the Administration has not thought it all the way through."

Hersh told CNN that the CIA has established "something called the Iranian Operations Group. We had the same kind of a group for the Iraq war... It's suddenly exploded in manpower. And they have been going around, just dragging a dozen people here, a dozen there. They built it up into a large, large operational group." He also explained that "the National Security Council inside the White House is focussed much more on attacking Iran and what's going on in Iran than it has been before."

Diplomatic feelers have already been put out to a number of countries. But as Hersh explained, even among close US allies there is scepticism and resistance. One of the reasons for scaling back the attack plans and shifting emphasis is to secure backing in Europe in particular, where few believe that Iran will have the capacity to construct a nuclear bomb, even if it wanted to, in less than five years. Plans for a strike have received the “most positive reception” from the British government. Hersh explained to CNN that the White House had received “expressions of interest” from Australia and other countries. While backing the strikes, Israel is still insisting on a more extensive war that includes the destruction of Iran’s nuclear facilities.

The Bush administration’s new justification for war is just as riddled with holes as the previous one. Beyond repeated bald assertions that Iran is helping to kill US troops and lurid stories fed to a compliant American media about the sinister activities of the IRGC’s elite Quds Force in Iraq, the only publicly presented “evidence” has been the occasional display of Iranian manufactured weapons. No attempt has been made to rule out other obvious sources for such arms, including the region’s extensive blackmarket in weapons and the huge stockpiles of arms that existed in Iraq prior to the 2003 invasion.

In his interview with *DemocracyNow*, Hersh pointed to the scepticism in US military and intelligence circles over the Bush administration’s claims. “There is a tremendous dispute about all of those assertions inside the American government. There’s just a lot of questions about it inside the government. They don’t see the case as being nearly as strong as the White House is saying in public,” he said.

Some of the most telling comments have been those of David Kay, former CIA adviser, UN weapons inspector and the man who headed the large US team hunting for evidence of WMDs following the 2003 invasion. Even though he was a vigorous proponent of the pre-invasion lies about Iraqi WMDs, Kay was forced to conclude that Saddam Hussein’s regime had no biological, nuclear or chemical weapons, their precursors or any plans for their future construction. To deflect attention from the lies concocted by the Bush administration, Kay attributed his findings to a massive “intelligence failure”.

Kay told Hersh that his inspection teams had been astonished, in the aftermath of the two Iraq wars, by “the huge amounts of arms” it had found. “He recalled seeing stockpiles of explosively formed penetrators, as well as charges that had been recovered from unexploded cluster bombs. Arms also had been supplied years ago by the Iranians to their Shiite allies in southern Iraq,” Hersh explained. The existence of “stockpiles of explosively formed penetrators” or EFPs, is particularly significant as one of the Pentagon’s chief accusations is that Tehran is currently supplying EFPs to Iraqi insurgents. It raises the possibility that these weapons were looted during the US invasion and obtained by militias, either directly or through the blackmarket.

Commenting on Bush’s campaign, Kay told Hersh: “When the White House started its anti-Iran campaign six months ago, I thought it was all craziness.” Even as he repeats the current White House line, Kay is cautious in his assessment: “Now it looks like there is some selective smuggling by Iran, but much of it has been in response to American pressure and American threats—more a shot across the bow sort of thing, to let Washington know that it was not going to get away with its threats so freely. Iran is not giving the Iraqis the good stuff—the anti-aircraft missiles that can shoot down American planes and its advanced anti-tank weapons.”

Well aware of public scepticism, Patrick Clawson, from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, advised the Bush administration to provide some evidence for its increasingly improbable claims. “If you are going to attack, you have to prepare the groundwork, and you have to be prepared to show some evidence,” he told Hersh. Clawson also cautioned that an attack on Iran could compound US problems in Iraq, where it relies on a government headed by Shiite parties with longstanding ties to Tehran. “What is the attitude of Iraq going to be if we hit Iran? Such an attack would put a strain on the Iraqi government,” he said.

Hersh noted that the Bush administration would not be deterred from war by the potential impact on the Republican Party. A former intelligence official explained: “There is a desperate attempt by Cheney et al. to bring military action to Iran as soon as possible. Meanwhile the politicians are saying, ‘You can’t do it, because every Republican is going to be defeated, and we’re only one fact from going over the cliff in Iraq.’ But Cheney doesn’t give a rat’s ass about the Republican worries, and neither does the President.”

The *New Yorker* article explained that the Bush administration planned to counter any objections from the Democrats by pointing to the record of the Clinton administration in unilaterally bombing Afghanistan, Sudan and Iraq during the 1990s. But there is already ample evidence that the Democrats would support a new war on Iran. The main Democratic presidential candidates—Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and John Edwards—have already declared that all options are on the table. A majority of Democrats supported a Senate amendment last week calling on the administration to provocatively declare the entire 125,000-strong Iranian Revolutionary Guard to be a “terrorist organisation”.

Even the support of the Democrats, however, will not halt the eruption of mass antiwar opposition. To energise its own rightwing base, the Bush administration desperately needs to goad the Iranian regime into a confrontation, or, failing that, to concoct an incident that can be blamed on Tehran. Asked about his assessment of the new US war plans, a retired four-star general candidly told Hersh that the revised bombing plan “could work—if it’s in response to an Iranian attack. The British may want to do it to get even, but the more reasonable people are saying, ‘Let’s do it if the Iranians stage a cross-border attack inside Iraq.’ It’s got to be ten dead American soldiers and four burned trucks.”

All of Hersh’s sources stressed that the President had not yet issued a final, formal “execute order”. But in emphasising that the US military is not about to attack Iran tomorrow, their comments only confirm that the administration’s plans for war are far advanced and can be executed at short notice.

Seymour Hersh’s article in the *New Yorker* is available at http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/10/08/071008fa_fact_hersh



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