US general fires a new propaganda salvo against Iran

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The top US commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, has raised the propaganda war against Iran another notch levelling new allegations that the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) was responsible for the deaths of US troops in Iraq. The comments to journalists last weekend at a military base near the Iranian border come in the wake of persistent leaks in Washington indicating that the Bush administration is preparing to use "counter-terrorism" as the pretext for air strikes on Iran.

Petraeus provocatively declared that Tehran's ambassador to Baghdad, Hassan Kazemi Qomi, was a member of the elite Quds Force, which the Bush administration has been contemplating formally branding as a "terrorist organisation". Petraeus acknowledged that Kazemi had diplomatic immunity and "therefore he is obviously not subject [to scrutiny]," but the general's remarks lay the basis for US demands for the diplomat's expulsion or other punitive actions.

The US military has over the past year seized a number of Iranian officials, including credentialled diplomats. Last December US troops detained at least five Iranians, including two diplomats, and pressured the Iraqi government to expel them on the basis of unsubstantiated allegations that they were involved in assisting Shiite militia in Iraq.

In January, just hours after President Bush declared that the US would "seek out and destroy" Iranian networks in Iraq, US Special Forces broke into an Iranian liaison office in the northern Iraqi city of Irbil. Five Iranian officials were detained in the pre-dawn raid. Last month, US soldiers detained Iranian official Aghai Farhadi, who was part of a delegation holding trade talks with the Kurdish regional government. Farhadi and the Irbil Five, who the US alleges are Quds Force members, are still in custody, despite demands for their release by the Iraqi government. No charges have been laid.

Last week, Lieutenant General Raymond Odierno, the US operational commander in Iraq, told the *Washington Post* that "militarily, we should hold onto them [the Irbil Five]". He did not elaborate on the military value of holding the Iranian officials. But the newspaper reported in April that during White House discussions of their fate Vice President Dick Cheney had insisted the Iranian officials continue to be held to send a message to Tehran that its "actions are monitored"—that is, to use the five as hostages.

Petraeus's allegations against Iran's ambassador were part of a barrage of other accusations. He accused the IRGC of being "responsible for providing the weapons, the training, the funding and in some cases the direction for operations that have killed US soldiers". The IRGC is an 125,000-strong component of the Iranian military.

In comments to CNN, Petraeus declared: "There's no question, absolutely no question that Iran is providing advanced RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades], RPG 29s. It has provided some shoulder-fired, Stinger-like, air-defence missiles. It has provided the explosively formed projectiles [roadside bombs] and it has provided some 244 mm rockets, in addition to mortars, mortar rounds and other small arms ammunition."

The general also claimed that the Iranians "are implicated in the assassination of some governors in the southern provinces". He was particularly dismissive of talks between the US and Iranian ambassadors in Baghdad, sponsored by the US State Department, over stabilising the US-led occupation of Iraq. Referring to Iranian assurances, Petraeus declared: "We are very much in the 'show-me' mode right now."

Petraeus's inflammatory remarks add to the growing deluge of American propaganda accusing Iran of arming and training anti-US insurgents in Iraq. US officials now routinely brands any attack on its forces in Shiite areas as the work of "Iranian-backed militia".

Last Friday, air strikes on a predominantly Shiite village in Diyala province killed at least 25 people. The US military claimed that the operation had been targetting a "Special Groups" commander believed linked to the Quds Force and that all the victims were Shiite militiamen. An Iraqi police spokesman and eyewitnesses told AFP that women and children had been killed and injured in the attack, which

levelled at least four houses.

The US campaign recalls the barrage of lies in 2002 and early 2003 that were used as the *casus belli* for its illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq. The Pentagon's only attempt to justify its claims of Iranian interference in Iraq was a dossier presented in February to a select group of journalists in Baghdad. Iranian-made rocket propelled grenades, mortar shells and explosively formed penetrators were put on display as "proof" that Tehran was supplying arms. Asked how he knew that "the highest levels of the Iranian government" were involved, the unnamed American official had to admit that his conclusion was just "an inference".

The escalating war of words against Tehran is in line with a tactical reorientation in the White House. In a detailed article last week in the *New Yorker*, investigative journalist Seymour Hersh explained that the Bush administration had shifted the pretext for a war on Iran from the threat of Tehran's alleged nuclear weapons programs to Iranian "meddling" in Iraq. According to Hersh's sources, military plans for an air war involving cruise missiles and precision-guided munitions on IRGC training camps, supply depots and command and control facilities are well-advanced, and navy warships and aircraft are already in place.

One reason for the shift in targets is the opposition of Russia and China to a new UN Security Council resolution over Iran's nuclear facilities. Tougher sanctions have been delayed until the end of November and it is highly unlikely that either of the veto-holding powers would agree to UN-sanctioned military action against Iran. By shifting the *casus belli* for war, the White House will undoubtedly claim to be acting out of self-defence—in all likelihood in response to an "Iranian" incident—provoked or manufactured—resulting in the death of American troops.

The change in tactics is also bound up with US efforts to secure support from close allies. Hersh noted that the proposal had received the "most positive reception" from the British government, but had also had "expressions of interest" from Australia, Israel and other countries. However, the British-based *Telegraph* claimed yesterday that Prime Minister Gordon Brown had not only considered the plan, but was "on board" for US air strikes on Iran.

The *Telegraph* reported that Brown had ruled out British support for an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, but was supportive of an attack on the IRGC. "Pentagon officials have revealed the President Bush won an understanding with Gordon Brown in July that Britain would support air strikes if they could be justified as a counter-terrorist operation. Since then discussions about what Britain might contribute militarily, to combat Iranian retaliation that would follow US air strikes, have been held between ministers and officials in the Pentagon and the Ministry of Defence," the newspaper stated.

Former top CIA official Vincent Cannistraro told the *Telegraph* that, according to his sources in the US military and intelligence, British warplanes would not be directly involved in the initial assault. "The British have to be a major auxiliary to this plan. It's not just for political reasons: the US doesn't have a lot of mine clearing capability in the Gulf. The Dutch and the British do. There will be renewed discussions with British defence officials about what role Britain would perform in the naval sphere. If there was a retaliatory response by the Iranians, they might close the Straits of Hormuz and that would affect the entire West," he said.

Brown has attempted to play down the leaks. A Downing Street spokesman told the media: "While we won't comment on the specifics of conversations between the Prime Minister and the President of the United States, this is not a version of events we recognise." The *Telegraph* added, however, that "a source close to Brown" said the two men had talked about Iran in July.

British support for an air war targetting the IRGC coincides with a marked escalation in the Bush administration's rhetoric over Iran's activities not only in Iraq but also Afghanistan, where US officials claim Iran is supplying weapons to its former enemy, the Taliban. Over the past three months, Iran has been variously accused of supplying Al Qaeda in Iraq and being behind rocket attacks on US bases. In his report to the Congress last month, General Petraeus accused Iran of waging "a proxy war" against the US in Iraq.

Both the *New Yorker* and *Telegraph* articles claim that Bush has given no "execute order" as yet. But the political momentum building up in Washington for a new military adventure in Iran is unmistakable. The articles also emphasise the limited character of the proposed air war. Whatever the initial calculations and plans, however, any attack on Iran has the potential to rapidly escalate into an all-out war that could spill over into a major regional conflict. The Bush administration's main objective is not the destruction of the IRGC or even Iran's nuclear facilities, but the establishment of unchallenged US dominance over the Middle East and Central Asia.