

More warnings of a US war on Iran

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The Bush administration's unprecedented decision last week to brand the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a weapons proliferator and its Quds Force as a "supporter of terrorism" has heightened tensions with Tehran and undermined European efforts at negotiations, setting the stage for a US attack on Iran.

While the White House still claims to be seeking a diplomatic solution to the current confrontation, a series of media articles have noted Washington's increasingly bellicose rhetoric and warned that the US appears to have decided on military action against Iran.

In a comment last Thursday, the British-based *Financial Times* declared that "the White House once again seems hell-bent on being outwitted in the court of global opinion; and, maybe, on making a strategic miscalculation that could make the war in Iraq look like a sideshow".

FT columnist Philip Stephens noted: "If Mr Bush does intend to act he has to do so soon. The window of opportunity for an attack, the conventional wisdom has it, will close next summer. Even this president cannot take the nation into another war of choice once the 2008 election campaign is under way. This ticking clock coincides with a hardening view in Washington, and in one or two European capitals, that coercive diplomacy has done nothing to shake Iran's resolve to acquire the means to make the bomb."

Washington's repeated claims that Iran has a nuclear weapons program were undercut by International Atomic Energy Commission (IAEA) chief Mohamed ElBaradei in comments to CNN on Sunday. Asked if he had any evidence that Iran was seeking to build a nuclear weapon, ElBaradei declared: "I have not received any information that there is a concrete, active nuclear weapons program going on right now." After noting that the IAEA was seeking to clarify outstanding questions, he again emphasised: "Have we seen Iran having the nuclear material that can be readily used into a weapon? No. Have we seen an active weaponisation program? No."

Obviously fearful that the Bush administration is intent on manufacturing a pretext for war, ElBaradei added: "I very much have concern about confrontation, building confrontation, because that would lead absolutely to a disaster. I see no military solution. The only durable solution is through negotiations and inspections... My fear is that if we continue to escalate from both sides that we would end up in a precipice, we would end up in an abyss."

Speaking on Australia's ABC radio this morning, he added: "I would hope that we should continue to stop spinning and hyping the Iranian issue" because it could lead to a "major conflagration... not only regionally, but globally".

One clear indication that the Bush administration has no interest in a peaceful resolution to the standoff with Iran was its hostility to an agreement reached in August between the IAEA and Tehran to systematically answer outstanding questions about Iran's nuclear programs. On the one hand, the White House insists Iran must shut down its uranium enrichment facilities prior to any negotiation because of unresolved issues about its past nuclear activities. On the other hand, the US reprimanded ElBaradei for exceeding his powers when a process was established to address the questions.

An article in the British-based *Sunday Times* entitled, "Will Bush really bomb Iran?" noted that the US air force had made a request for Congressional funding for an "urgent operational need from theatre commanders" for \$88 million to equip B2 stealth bombers with a 13,600 lb bomb known as a massive ordinance penetrator. The MOP is an advanced "bunker buster" bomb designed to destroy targets deep underground. There are no sites in Iraq or Afghanistan that would justify an "urgent" order of such weapons—the obvious targets are Iran's nuclear facilities, especially the Natanz enrichment plant, which is housed in a huge underground cavern.

The *Sunday Times* reiterated Bush's comments of a week ago warning of the dangers of World War III if Iran gained the "knowledge to make a nuclear weapon". As the article observed: "Iran-watchers noted with interest the use of the word 'knowledge'. Bush it appeared, was determined to act well before the mullahs got anywhere close to an actual bomb... A senior Pentagon source, who remembers the drumbeat of war before the invasion of Iraq, believes Bush is preparing for military action before he leaves office in January 2009. 'This is for real now. I think he is signalling that he is going to do it,' he said."

The article dismissed the argument that the US was simply engaged in empty threats designed to extract concessions from Iran, concluding: "The most convincing explanation for the sabre-rattling is that Bush has embarked on a course of action that may lead to war, but there are many stages, including the imposition of tougher sanctions, before he concludes a military strike on Iran is worth the risk... If muscular diplomacy can stop the mullahs, so much the better. If it cannot, Bush may decide to launch an attack as one of the final acts of his presidency."

One of the most chilling indications of the Bush administration's advanced preparations for war against Iran came from two former high-level insiders—Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann who worked as Middle East experts on the National Security Council. In a lengthy interview published last week in *Esquire* magazine, Leverett and Mann not only underscored the immediate dangers of an attack, but pointed out that the Bush administration had never

been willing to seriously negotiate with Tehran. Given that both Leverett and Mann are politically conservative and accept the Bush administration's unsubstantiated claims about Iran's nuclear weapons programs and support for anti-US militia inside Iraq, their comments are telling.

Esquire explained: "When they left the White House, they left with a growing sense of alarm—not only was the Bush administration headed straight for war with Iran, it had been set on this course for years. That was what people didn't realise. It was just like Iraq, when the White House was so eager for war it couldn't wait for the UN inspectors to leave. The steps have been many and steady and all in the same direction. And now things are getting much worse. We are getting closer and closer to the tripline, they say."

Leverett told the magazine: "The hardliners are upping the pressure on the State Department. They're basically saying, 'You've been trying to engage Iran for more than a year now and what do you have to show for it? They keep building more centrifuges [to enrich uranium], they're sending this IED stuff [roadside bombs] over into Iraq that's killing American soldiers, the human rights internal political situation has gotten more repressive—what the hell do you have to show for this engagement strategy?'"

According to Leverett and Mann, failure to obtain new UN sanctions combined with continuing Iranian enrichment and "meddling" in Iraq, would trigger a military response from the White House. "If you get all those elements coming together, say in the first half of '08, what is this president going to do? I think there is a serious risk he would decide to order an attack on the Iranian nuclear installations and probably a wider target zone," Leverett said.

"As disastrous as Iraq has been, an attack on Iran could engulf America in a war with the entire Muslim world," Mann added. As a senior National Security Council official, she was involved in secret talks with Iranian diplomats following the September 11 attacks on the US. While the negotiations have been reported previously, Mann is the first official to confirm that regular discussions took place between 2001 and 2003, opening up the prospect of easing tensions between the US and the Iranian regime then headed by "moderate" President Mohammad Khatami.

Mann was part of a team of US officials who met in Geneva with Iranian diplomats in 2001 to hammer out the basis for Tehran's cooperation in the US intervention in Afghanistan. Iran agreed to provide assistance to any American shot down over its territory, to allow the US to send food through its border and to restrain anti-US Afghans in Iran, such as militia leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. During the US bombing campaign, an Iranian intelligence official provided targets for US warplanes. After the toppling of the Taliban regime, Iran helped the US to install its puppet government headed by President Hamid Karzai.

Far from offering any easing of tensions in return, the Bush administration blocked any negotiations with Iran or its ally Syria. Stephen Hadley, then deputy national security adviser, drew up a brief memo in late 2001 to cover any contacts. It became known as Hadley's Rules. As described in the *Esquire* article, these were: "If a state like Syria or Iran offers specific assistance, we will take it

without offering anything in return. We will accept it without strings or promises. We won't try to build on it."

Bush's response to Iran's assistance was to brand it along with Iraq and North Korea in his 2002 State of the Union address as "an axis of evil". As Mann explained, the speech profoundly shocked Tehran, which nevertheless continued monthly discussions for another year. While not reported in the *Esquire* article, the Iranian regime provided assistance to the US military in the course of its criminal 2003 invasion of Iraq.

A month after the Iraq war began, Tehran sent an offer via the Swiss ambassador to the US offering negotiations for a comprehensive settlement of all outstanding issues between the two countries. A faxed memo included proposals on all of the items that are routinely cited by the White House as reasons for treating Iran as a pariah state: offers of "decisive action" against all terrorists in Iran, an end to support for the Palestinian organisations Hamas and Islamic Jihad, cessation of its nuclear programs and an agreement to recognise Israel.

The Bush administration, however, immediately dismissed the Iranian offer. A memo drafted by Mann calling for the US to send a swift and positive response was blocked. Condoleezza Rice, who was White House National Security Adviser at the time, has subsequently denied even seeing the Iranian fax. Then US Secretary of State Colin Powell privately praised Mann for her memo, but told her: "I couldn't sell it at the White House." After quitting their jobs, attempts by Leverett and Mann to publicise the offer have been met with censorship and threats.

The Bush administration's flat refusal to countenance negotiations with Iran certainly reinforces the warnings of Leverett and Mann about the dangers of a new US war on Iran. But while they clearly regard such an attack as madness, the two former Bush officials cannot explain why the White House is intent on pursuing this course of action. As with the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, the US is seeking to establish its untrammelled domination over the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. Strategically placed Iran, with its own huge reserves of oil and gas, is an obvious next target in these reckless plans.



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