

US congressional hearings on Iraq foreshadow aggressive stance against Iran

Peter Symonds
7 April 2008

In testimony before the US Congress this week, General David Petraeus, the top US commander in Iraq, is widely expected, as part of his assessment of the military situation, to slam Iran for allegedly arming and training anti-US insurgents. However, British officials warned in the *Telegraph* on Saturday that Petraeus could go further, by accusing Tehran of waging a proxy war against the US in Iraq and laying the basis for military strikes against Iran.

“A strong statement from General David Petraeus about Iran’s intervention in Iraq could set the stage for a US attack on Iranian military facilities, according to a Whitehall assessment. In closely watched testimony in Washington next week, General Petraeus will state that the Iranian threat has risen as Tehran has supplied and directed attacks by militia fighters against the Iraqi state and its allies,” the article stated.

In comments to the *Telegraph*, a British official dismissed the argument that the American military was too stretched in Iraq to attack Iran. “Petraeus is going to go very hard on Iran as the source of attacks on the American effort in Iran. Iran is waging a war in Iraq. The idea that America can’t fight a war on two fronts is wrong, there can be air strikes and other moves,” he said.

“Petraeus has put emphasis on America having to fight the battle on behalf of Iraq,” the official said. “In his report he can frame it in terms of our soldiers killed and diplomats dead in attacks on the Green Zone.” In an interview with the BBC last month, the US commander declared that rockets hitting the Green Zone in Baghdad were “Iranian-provided, Iranian-made” and accused Iranian leaders of a “complete violation of promises made ... to their Iraqi counterparts”.

US Ambassador Ryan Crocker, who will also testify to Congress, repeated the accusations last week, declaring: “[It’s] very clear to us here, because we got the fins of—the tail fins of what was dropping on us, very clear to the prime minister down in Basra, because they were dropping on him, too. And this was, quite literally, made in Iran. All of this stuff was out of Iran, and a lot of it, you know, manufactured in 2007.”

Washington has offered no proof that the Iranian regime is arming or training Shiite militia in Iraq. Yet, according to yesterday’s *Sunday Times*, Petraeus is expected to tell Congress that Iranian personnel were directly involved in recent fighting in Basra. “Military and intelligence sources believe Iranians were operating at a tactical level with the Shiite militias fighting Iraqi security forces; some were directing operations on the ground, they say,” the article explained.

Dr Daniel Goure from the Lexington Institute, a conservative think tank, told the *Sunday Times*: “There is no question that Petraeus will be tough on Iran. It is one thing to withdraw troops when there is a purely sectarian fighting but it is another thing if it leaves the Iranians to move in.” In other words, allegations of Iranian involvement would be used by Petraeus and the Bush administration to oppose to any further withdrawal of US troops from Iraq.

The congressional hearings come in the wake of the humiliating failure of a US-backed offensive in the southern port city of Basra. For six days, some 30,000 Iraqi troops and police, bolstered by US and British advisers and supported by air strikes and artillery barrages, fought pitched battles with the Madhi Army militia of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Far from making any inroads into Sadrist strongholds, the Iraqi puppet forces were confined to central Basra and came under repeated attack. Fighting spread to the Shiite suburbs of Baghdad and other southern cities, threatening to become an anti-occupation uprising.

Clashes only subsided when Sadr issued a statement on March 30 calling Mahdi Army militia off the streets. The call was a product of behind-the-scenes negotiations in Najaf and also in Iran, where government members and officials reportedly met with Sadr himself. Iranian and Iraqi officials have since confirmed that Tehran played a crucial role in mediating the deal. Sporadic fighting, including US air strikes, has continued and Sadr has accused the Iraqi government of continuing to arrest his supporters, but the uneasy truce has largely continued.

A string of articles over the past week has underlined the extent of the Basra debacle. Citing Iraqi, British and US officials, the *New York Times* reported on Saturday that more than 1,000 Iraqi soldiers and police had either refused to fight or abandoned their posts. Estimates of the number of officers who refused to fight varied from several dozen to more than a hundred. Colonel Rahim Jabbar and Lieutenant Colonel Shakir Khalaf, the commander and deputy commander of a brigade attached to the Security Ministry, were among those relieved of duty for refusing to fight.

The disintegration of the security forces is likely to have been far worse. A senior official in Iraq’s Defence Ministry told the *Washington Post* that he estimated that 30 percent of Iraqi troops abandoned the fight before the truce was arranged and some police actually fought with the Madhi army. “I was afraid the Iraqi forces would break,” he said. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has called for disciplinary action against all soldiers who disobeyed orders.

While the defence ministry official pointed to logistical difficulties, the problem confronting Iraqi and American commanders was the same one that has faced all neo-colonial occupations: how to drive hired mercenaries to fire on their own people. As one officer, a lieutenant from Sadr City, told the British-based *Independent*: “What they were asking us to do was to fire on our friends, members of our family. A lot of men were unhappy, we felt there should have been talks before the attack began.”

Accusing Iran is of course a convenient means for shifting blame for the failure in what was declared by President Bush to be a “defining moment” for the US war in Iraq—a key test of the ability of the US-trained Iraqi forces to operate “independently”. Petraeus, one of the architects of the so-called surge strategy, has to explain to Congress why the Iraqi security forces, on which Washington has spent more than \$22 billion, proved unable to carry out the Basra operation.

The Basra fiasco raises a more fundamental question about the Bush administration’s strategy toward Iran. Tehran’s ability to broker a deal between Sadrists and the Maliki government demonstrated the extent of Iran’s influence with all the Shiite fundamentalist parties in Iraq—not only the Sadrist movement, but also Maliki’s own party, Dawa, and its ally, Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI).

This outcome can only exacerbate divisions within US ruling circles over Iran. In December 2006, in the wake of the Republican defeat at the mid-term congressional elections, the top-level Iraq Study Group proposed a diplomatic initiative, including talks with Iran and Syria, with the aim of shoring up the US occupation of Iraq and paving the way for substantial US troop reductions. The Bush administration rejected the recommendations, boosted the number of US soldiers in Iraq and deliberately heightened diplomatic and military tensions with Iran.

The split in the American political establishment reflects sharp tactical differences over the military quagmire in Iraq. The Bush administration’s critics argue that its reckless military adventures have had a disastrous impact on Washington’s authority, particularly in the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. For them, the latest humiliation in Basra is further proof that the US has to cut its losses and negotiate a deal with Iran to stabilise the region and protect US strategic and economic interests. In that light, Tehran’s willingness to broker a deal between rival Shiite parties could be seen as an opportunity for talks.

For the most militarist layers of the Bush administration and their backers, such an approach is intolerable. Any easing of tensions with Iran and Syria would boost these states’ standing in the Middle East, including in Iraq, and, more importantly, enable rival European and Asian powers—especially Russia and China—to extend their interests in the region at Washington’s expense. Far from welcoming Iran’s involvement in the Basra truce, the most right-wing layers in US ruling circles regard it as proof that Tehran must be cut down to size, if necessary by military means.

A comment entitled “The Second Iran-Iraq War” in the *Wall Street Journal* last Thursday by right-wing analyst Kimberly Kagan gave vent to these sentiments. After reviewing all the Pentagon’s unsubstantiated accusations of Iranian activity in Iraq,

Kagan declared that “the US recognises that Iran is engaged in a full-up proxy war against it in Iraq.” Rather than being grateful for the Basra truce, she took it as a retreat on Tehran’s part and called for the US to “encourage the Iraqi government to defeat Iran’s proxies and agents ... and provide the requisite assistance.” After declaring that Iran’s aims “are at best destabilising and at worst hegemonic,” Kagan ominously concluded that the US must “protect” Iraq from Iranian military intervention.

Kagan’s remarks carry particular weight as a sign of the discussion in the White House. Her husband, Frederick Kagan, is a right-wing ideologue who works at the American Enterprise Institute, a think tank closely linked to the Bush administration. He is credited, along with General Jack Keane, an adviser to General Petraeus, with drawing up the strategy that was the basis for the “surge” in Iraq. Kagan has just returned from a tour of nine provinces in Iraq, including Basra, and discussions with Petraeus and other senior military figures. He and his wife authored a joint article last week in the *Daily Standard* about the “Basra business” in which they concluded that the operation offered “extremely positive signs” about the willingness of the Iraqi government to deal with “the increasingly overt malign role Iran is playing”.

The increasingly strident US allegations over Iran’s involvement in Iraq dovetail with recent remarks by Bush, Cheney and CIA director Michael Hayden accusing Iran of continuing a nuclear weapons program—in direct contradiction to last December’s National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), in which US intelligence agencies concluded that the alleged program had ceased in 2003. Hayden told NBC’s “Meet the Press” on March 30 that he “personally” believed that Iran was intent on building a nuclear bomb. No new evidence was offered, only a rhetorical question—why else would Tehran endure UN sanctions? The comments of Bush, Cheney and Hayden amount to a rearguard campaign aimed at discrediting the NIE conclusions and justifying the White House’s determination to “keep all options on the table”, including a preemptive military attack on Iran.

All the signs point to the likelihood that this week’s congressional testimony by Petraeus and Crocker will feature another barrage of accusations to strengthen the pretexts for US military aggression against Iran. And just as they agreed to the Bush administration’s “surge” in Iraq, the US Democrats can be expected to fall into line with any new belligerent moves against Tehran.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact