

A barrage of US threats against Iran

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During a press conference on Tuesday, US President George Bush spelled out the threat to Iran contained in last week's release of CIA intelligence on an alleged Syrian nuclear reactor. As well as warning Syria and North Korea, which purportedly helped construct the building, he declared that the US was "sending a message to Iran, and the world for that matter, about just how destabilising a nuclear proliferation would be in the Middle East".

While Bush did not explain what the "message" was, the context makes it abundantly clear. Last September, Israeli warplanes demolished the building in an unprovoked act of aggression that had the potential to trigger a wider war. The US administration, which undoubtedly gave the green light for the attack, presented uncorroborated intelligence last week that the building housed an uncompleted reactor and that Syria was trying to build a nuclear weapon. The unstated threat to Tehran was: the US and Israel are prepared to destroy Iranian nuclear facilities as well.

None of the Israeli and US intelligence made public last week implicated Tehran in Syria's alleged plans for a nuclear reactor. So why single Iran out for special mention? As far as nuclear proliferation is concerned, Israel is the only country in the region with a stockpile of nuclear weapons, and US regional allies—Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey—have all announced plans for nuclear reactors. By naming Iran, Bush not only underscored the hypocritical character of his stance, but confirmed Tehran is at the top of the list of US targets.

The "message" to Iran came on the same day as a second American aircraft carrier—the USS Abraham Lincoln—arrived in the Persian Gulf. The accompanying battle group includes two guided-missile destroyers—the USS Momsen and USS Shoup. The USS Harry Truman has moved out of the Gulf, but remains in the area covered by the US Central Command, which covers the Middle East and Central Asia.

Defence Secretary Robert Gates played down the deployment, saying it had been planned for a long time. "I don't think we'll have two carriers there for a protracted period of time. So I don't see it as an escalation," he said, but pointedly added that it could be seen as "a reminder" to Iran. Just last Friday, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, branded Tehran as an "increasingly lethal and malign influence" in Iraq and stressed that "it would be a mistake [for Iran] to think that we are out of combat

capability".

The potential for a US naval provocation in the Persian Gulf was highlighted in January when the Bush administration deliberately inflated an encounter between US warships and Iranian speedboats. On the basis of a highly dubious American account of the incident, President Bush accused Iran of "a provocative act" and warned of "dangerous consequences" if US warships were attacked.

Last Friday, a US naval security team aboard a cargo vessel—the Westward Venture, hired by the military—fired warning shots at two unidentified boats that approached the vessel. The boats left the area after what the US Navy described as "a few bursts" of machine gun fire. Earlier this month, the US military claimed that three small Iranian boats had approached the patrol ship USS Typhoon in a "taunting manner"—one to within 200 metres—before being warned off. Iranian authorities have rejected US allegations.

Mullen's remarks about Tehran's "lethal and malign influence" in Iraq are another unsubstantiated US allegation being recycled repeatedly as a possible pretext for an attack on Iran. While Washington denounces Iran for arming and training so-called special groups to attack US and Iraqi forces inside Iraq, the only evidence made public to date are displays of Iranian-made weapons, allegedly provided by Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC).

Several US newspapers have now reported that the top American commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, has ordered the compiling of a new "dossier" on Iranian interference in Iraq. From what is described, however, the new evidence will be no more conclusive than the old—a display of recently manufactured Iranian-made weapons that hardly proves the direct involvement of the Iranian regime in a region awash with illegal arms markets.

It was announced last week that General Petraeus will replace Admiral William Fallon as head of the US Central Command. Fallon stepped down last month after displaying thinly disguised opposition to the Bush administration's continuing threats of military action against Iran. Petraeus, who has been central to the US "surge" strategy in Iraq, made clear his belligerent attitude when he agreed in congressional testimony earlier this month that Iran was "responsible for killing hundreds of American soldiers".

Last Friday's *Asia Times* reported that Petraeus has been

effectively acting as Central Command head for months. He has made trips to five Middle Eastern countries since last September—Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates—a job that normally would have been done by Fallon.

There has been a growing chorus of US accusations and threats against Iran over everything from “meddling” in Iraq and its supposed nuclear weapons program to Tehran’s ties with groups such as the Lebanese Shiite organisation Hezbollah and the Palestinian group Hamas, which are branded by Washington as “terrorists”. Everyone in the Bush administration and at the Pentagon appears to be singing from the same song sheet.

On Sunday, in Iraq, US military spokesman Rear Admiral Patrick Driscoll again accused Iran of arming and training groups that were firing rockets from the suburb of Sadr City in Baghdad. Without providing a shred of evidence, he declared: “The Iranians continue to train Iraqis and finance their networks and over time that is going to build... So over time if they continue to do this activity it will create bigger influence and that’s going to lead to more interference in the internal affairs of Iraq.”

On Monday, CIA director Michael Hayden raised the spectre of a nuclear-armed Syria to justify last September’s Israeli strike. No conclusive proof has been made public demonstrating that the destroyed building was a reactor or that it was nearing completion. The CIA has not explained where Damascus was going to get nuclear fuel or provided any evidence that Syria wanted to build a bomb. Yet, according to Hayden, “in the course of a year after they got full up [fuelled the reactor] they would have produced enough plutonium for one or two weapons.” The remark was aimed not so much at Syria but at Iran which has refused to comply with US demands to shut down its uranium enrichment facilities and end construction on a research reactor.

On the same day, in a report to the UN Security Council, US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad again demanded that “Iran and Syria... stop the flow of weapons and foreign fighters into Iraq, and their malign interference in Iraq”. He repeated allegations that the Quds Force was continuing “to arm, train and fund illegal armed groups in Iraq,” saying “this lethal aid poses a significant threat to Iraqi and multinational forces and to the stability and sovereignty of Iraq”.

On Tuesday, in comments to the American Jewish Committee, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stood fully behind Israel’s refusal to negotiate with Hamas, declaring: “[O]f deepest concern, the leaders of Hamas are increasingly serving as the proxy warriors of an Iranian regime that is destabilising the region, seeking a nuclear capability and proclaiming a desire to destroy Israel.” She took aim at a “belt of extremism” stretching from Hamas and Hezbollah to Iraq and Afghanistan, which was “supported overwhelmingly by Iran and to a certain extent Syria, but particularly Iran. “[It

gives this conflict a regional dimension it has not had before,” Rice warned.

On Wednesday, the US State Department released a report branding Iran as the world’s “most active” and “most significant” state sponsor of terrorism. While also listing Syria, North Korea, Cuba and Sudan, the report highlighted Iran’s alleged support for “terrorism”, claiming it was aimed at “detering the US or Israeli attacks, distracting and weakening the US, enhancing Iran’s regional influence through intimidation, and helping to drive the US from the Middle East”.

The escalating barrage of American propaganda bears an ominous resemblance to the falsehoods told to justify the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003. The technique of the big lie—the endless recycling of unsubstantiated accusations as fact—is again being employed. A CIA dossier on Syria’s nuclear reactor is to be followed by another on Iranian interference in Iraq. The Bush administration’s vocal right-wing allies are already proclaiming that the White House must respond to Iran’s “proxy war” against the US in Iraq.

War plans are being dusted off and redrawn. In his comments last Friday, Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Admiral Michael Mullen revealed that the Pentagon was planning for “potential military courses of action” against Iran. An article in Saturday’s *New York Times* reported that “the administration has, in fact, discussed whether to attack training camps, safe houses and weapons storehouses inside Iran” used to train Iraqi insurgents. The newspaper claimed that US strikes on Iran were off the agenda “for now”.

CBS News issued a chilling report on Tuesday, however, indicating that the time frame for strikes on Iran may be quite short. Citing an unnamed US officer, the article stated that the Pentagon had given orders to develop new options for attacking Iran. “Targets would include everything from the plans where weapons are made to headquarters of the organisation known as the Quds Force which directs operations in Iraq,” it added.

According to CBS: “Later this week Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is expected to confront the Iranians with evidence of their meddling and demand a halt. If that doesn’t produce results, the State Department has begun drafting an ultimatum that would tell the Iranians to knock it off—or else.”

A Pentagon spokesman officially denied the report. However, there is no doubt that the current propaganda campaign against Iran points in the one direction: the danger that the Bush administration will launch another criminal war of aggression in the Middle East in a desperate bid to shore up American economic and strategic interests in the energy-rich region.



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