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Bush 'is planning nuclear strikes on Iran's secret sites'

By Philip Sherwell in Washington
(Filed: 09/04/2006)

Jack Straw: Iran attack would be 'nuts'

The Bush administration is planning to use nuclear weapons against Iran, to prevent it acquiring its own atomic warheads, claims an investigative writer with high-level Pentagon and intelligence contacts.

President George W Bush is said to be so alarmed by the threat of Iran's hard-line leader, Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, that privately he refers to him as "the new Hitler", says Seymour Hersh, who broke the story of the Abu Ghraib Iraqi prisoner abuse scandal.

Some US military chiefs have unsuccessfully urged the White House to drop the nuclear option from its war plans, Hersh writes in The New Yorker magazine. The conviction that Mr Ahmedinejad would attack Israel or US forces in the Middle East, if Iran obtains atomic weapons, is what drives American planning for the destruction of Teheran's nuclear programme.

Hersh claims that one of the plans, presented to the White House by the Pentagon, entails the use of a bunker-buster tactical nuclear weapon, such as the B61-11, against underground nuclear sites. One alleged target is Iran's main centrifuge plant, at Natanz, 200 miles south of Teheran.

Although Iran claims that its nuclear programme is peaceful, US and European intelligence agencies are certain that Teheran is trying to develop atomic weapons. In contrast to the run-up to the Iraq invasion, there are no disagreements within Western intelligence about Iran's plans.

This newspaper disclosed recently that senior Pentagon strategists are updating plans to strike Iran's nuclear sites with long-distance B2 bombers and submarine-launched missiles. And last week, the Sunday Telegraph reported a secret meeting at the Ministry of Defence where military chiefs and officials from Downing Street and the Foreign Office discussed the consequences of an American-led attack on Iran, and Britain's role in any such action.

The military option is opposed by London and other European capitals. But there are growing fears in No 10 and the Foreign Office that the British-led push for a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear stand-off, will be swept aside by hawks in Washington. Hersh says that within the Bush administration, there are concerns that even a pummelling by conventional strikes, may not sufficiently damage Iran's buried nuclear plants.



Mahmoud Ahmedinejad: 'The new Hitler'



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Iran has been developing a series of bunkers and facilities to provide hidden command centres for its leaders and to protect its nuclear infrastructure. The lack of reliable intelligence about these subterranean facilities, is fuelling pressure for tactical nuclear weapons to be included in the strike plans as the only guaranteed means to destroy all the sites simultaneously.

The attention given to the nuclear option has created serious misgivings among the joint chiefs of staff, and some officers have talked about resigning, Hersh has been told. The military chiefs sought to remove the nuclear option from the evolving war plans for Iran, without success, a former senior intelligence officer said.

The Pentagon consultant on the war on terror confirmed that some in the administration were looking seriously at this option, which he linked to a resurgence of interest in tactical nuclear weapons among defence department political appointees.

The election of Mr Ahmedinejad last year, has hardened attitudes within the Bush Administration. The Iranian president has said that Israel should be "wiped off the map". He has drafted in former fellow Revolutionary Guards commanders to run the nuclear programme, in further signs that he is preparing to back his threats with action.

Mr Bush and others in the White House view him as a potential Adolf Hitler, a former senior intelligence official told Hersh. "That's the name they're using. They say, 'Will Iran get a strategic weapon and threaten another world war?' "

Despite America's public commitment to diplomacy, there is a growing belief in Washington that the only solution to the crisis is regime change. A senior Pentagon consultant said that Mr Bush believes that he must do "what no Democrat or Republican, if elected in the future, would have the courage to do," and "that saving Iran is going to be his legacy".

Publicly, the US insists it remains committed to diplomacy to solve the crisis. But with Russia apparently intent on vetoing any threat of punitive action at the UN, the Bush administration is also planning for unilateral military action. Hersh repeated his claims that the US has intensified clandestine activities inside Iran, using special forces to identify targets and establish contact with anti-Teheran ethnic-minority groups.

The senior defence officials said that Mr Bush is "determined to deny Iran the opportunity to begin a pilot programme, planned for this spring, to enrich uranium".

