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Apr 25, 2006

Tehran insider tells of US black ops

By an Asia Times Online Special Correspondent

TEHRAN - A former Iranian ambassador and Islamic Republic insider has provided intriguing details to Asia Times Online about US covert operations inside Iran aimed at destabilizing the country and toppling the regime - or preparing for an American attack.

"The Iranian government knows and is aware of such infiltration. It means that the Iranian government has identified them [the covert operatives] but for some reason does not want to show [this]," said the former diplomat on condition of anonymity.

Speaking in Tehran, the ex-Foreign Ministry official said the

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agents being used by the US "were originally Iranians and not Americans" possibly recruited in the United States or through US embassies in Dubai and Ankara. He also warned that such actions will engender "some reactions".

"Both sides will certainly do something," he said in a reference to Iran's capability to stir trouble up in neighboring Iraq and Afghanistan for the occupying US troops there.

Veteran US journalist Seymour Hersh wrote in a much-discussed recent article in The New Yorker magazine that the administration of President George W Bush has increased clandestine activities inside Iran and intensified planning for a possible major air attack as the crisis with Iran over its nuclear program escalates.

Hersh wrote that "teams of American combat troops have been ordered into Iran, under cover, to collect targeting data and to establish contact with anti-government ethnic-minority groups". The template seems identical to the period that preceded US air strikes against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan during which a

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covert Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) campaign distributed millions of dollars to tribal allies.

"The Iranian accusations are true," said Richard Sale, intelligence correspondent for United Press International, referring to charges that the US is using the Mujahideen-e Khalq (MEK) organization and other groups to carry out cross-border operations. "But it is being done on such a small scale - a series of pinpricks - it would seem to have no strategic value at all."

There has been a marked spike in unrest in Kurdistan, Khuzestan and Balochistan, three of Iran's provinces with a high concentration of ethnic Kurdish, Arab and Balochi minorities respectively. With the exception of the immediate post-revolutionary period, when the Kurds rebelled against the central government and were suppressed violently, ethnic minorities have received better treatment, more autonomy and less ethnic discrimination than under the shah.

"The president hasn't notified the Congress that American troops are operating inside Iran," said Sam Gardiner, a retired US Army colonel who specializes in war-game scenarios. "So it's a very serious question about the constitutional framework under which we are now conducting military operations in Iran."

Camp Warhorse is the major US military base in the strategic Iraqi province of Diyala that borders Iran. Last month, Asia Times Online asked the US official in charge of all overt and covert operations emanating from there whether the military and the MEK colluded on an operational level. He denied any such knowledge.

"They have a gated community up there," came the genial reply. "Not really guarded - it's more gated. They bake really good bread," he added, smiling.

But that is contrary to what Hersh was told by his sources, According to him, US combat troops are already inside Iran and, in the event of air strikes, would be in position to mark critical targets with laser beams to ensure bombing accuracy and excite sectarian tensions between the population and the central government. As of early winter, Hersh's source claims that the units were also working with minority groups in Iran, including the Azeris in the north, the Balochis in the southeast, and the Kurds in the northwest.

Last week, speaking on the sidelines of a Palestinian solidarity conference, Major-General Yehyia Rahim Safavi, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander, sent a warning to the US and British intelligence services he accuses of using Iraq and Kuwait to infiltrate Iran. "I tell them that their agents can be our agents too, and they should not waste their money so casually."

On April 9, Iran claimed to have shot down an unmanned surveillance plane in the southwestern province of Khuzestan, according to a report in the semi-official Jumhuri Eslami newspaper. US media have also reported that the US military has been secretly flying surveillance drones over Iran since 2004, using radar, video, still photography and air filters to monitor Iranian military formations and track Iran's air-defense system. The US denied having lost a drone.

This new mission for the combat troops is a product of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's long-standing interest in expanding the role of the military in covert operations, which was made official policy in the Pentagon's Quadrennial Defense Review, published in February. Such activities, if conducted by CIA operatives, would need a Presidential Finding and would have to be reported to key members of Congress.

The confirmation that the US is carrying out covert activities inside Iran makes more sense out of a series of suspicious events that have occurred along Iran's borders this year. In early January, a military airplane belonging to Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards

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went down close to the Iraqi border. The plane was carrying 11 of the Guard's top commanders, including General Ahmad Kazemi, the commander of the IRGC's ground forces, and Brigadier-General Nabiollah Shahmoradi, who was deputy commander for intelligence.

Although a spokesman blamed bad weather and dilapidated engines for the crash, the private intelligence company Stratfor noted that there are several reasons to suspect foul play, not least of which was that any aircraft carrying so many of Iran's elite military luminaries would undergo "thorough tests for technical issues before flight". Later, Iran's defense minister accused Britain and the US of bringing the plane down through "electronic jamming".

"Given all intelligence information that we have gathered, we can say that agents of the United States, Britain and Israel are seeking to destabilize Iran through a coordinated plan," Minister of Interior Mustafa Pour-Mohammadi said. This sentiment was echoed on websites such as AmericanIntelligence.us, where one reader commented, "We couldn't have made a better hit on the IRGC's leadership if planned ... sure it was just an accident?"

Then, in late January, a previously unknown Sunni Muslim group called Jundallah (Soldier of Allah) captured nine Iranian soldiers in the remote badlands of Sistan-Balochistan province that borders Afghanistan and Pakistan. And in mid-February, another airplane crashed just inside Iraq after taking off from Azerbaijan and transiting Iranian airspace. The Iranian Mehr news agency reported that the "passengers on board were possibly of Israeli origin". It added that US troops have restricted access to the site to Iraqi Kurdish officials and that Western media were reporting the passengers aboard as having been German.

The Iranian government has not sat idly by and just taken these breaches of sovereignty. Early this month, an unidentified source in the Interior Ministry was quoted by the hardline Kayhan newspaper as saying that the leader and 11 members of the Jundallah group had been killed by Iranian troops. Then last Friday, Iranian missile batteries shelled Iranian Kurdish rebel positions inside Iraqi territory. They were targeting a militant group called PJAK that seeks more autonomy for Iran's Kurdish population and has been operating out of Iraq since 1999.

The former Iranian ambassador argues that in the event that US pressure on Iran continues, "the end of the tunnel" for President Mahmud Ahmadinejad's administration is "weaponization of the [nuclear] technology ... and a military strike".

"The Americans are pushing Iran to become a nuclear state. Iran just wants to be a supplier of nuclear fuel. But [with their threats] they are pushing it further."

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