

Secret US air force team to perfect plan for Iran strike

Sarah Baxter, Washington

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THE United States Air Force has set up a highly confidential strategic planning group tasked with “fighting the next war” as tensions rise with Iran.

Project Checkmate, a successor to the group that planned the 1991 Gulf War’s air campaign, was quietly reestablished at the Pentagon in June.

It reports directly to General Michael Moseley, the US Air Force chief, and consists of 20-30 top air force officers and defence and cyberspace experts with ready access to the White House, the CIA and other intelligence agencies.

Detailed contingency planning for a possible attack on Iran has been carried out for more than two years by Centcom (US central command), according to defence sources.

Checkmate’s job is to add a dash of brilliance to Air Force thinking by countering the military’s tendency to “fight the last war” and by providing innovative strategies for warfighting and assessing future needs for air, space and cyberwarfare.

It is led by Brigadier-General Lawrence “Stutz” Stutzriem, who is considered one of the brightest air force generals. He is assisted by Dr Lani Kass, a former Israeli military officer and expert on cyberwarfare.

The failure of United Nations sanctions to curtail Iran’s nuclear ambitions, which Tehran claims are peaceful, is giving rise to an intense debate about the likelihood of military strikes.

Bernard Kouchner, the French foreign minister, said last week that it was “necessary to prepare for the worst . . . and the worst is war”. He later qualified his remarks, saying he wanted to avoid that outcome.

France has joined America in pushing for a tough third sanctions resolution against Iran at the UN security council but is meeting strong resistance from China and Russia. Britain has been doing its best to bridge the gap, but it is increasingly likely that new sanctions will be implemented by a US-led “coalition of the willing”.

Iran’s President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who arrives in New York for the United Nations general assembly today, has been forced to abandon plans to visit ground zero, where the World Trade Center stood until the September 11 attacks of 2001. Politicians from President George W Bush to Senator Hillary Clinton, the Democratic frontrunner in the 2008 race for the White House, were outraged by the prospect of a visit to New York’s most venerated site by a “state sponsor” of terrorism.

Bush still hopes to isolate Iran diplomatically, but believes the regime is moving steadily closer to obtaining nuclear weapons while the security council bickers.

The US president faces strong opposition to military action, however, within his own joint chiefs of staff. “None of them think it is a good idea, but they will do it if they are told to,” said a senior defence source.

General John Abizaid, the former Centcom commander, said last week: “Every effort should be made to stop Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, but failing that, the world could live with a nuclear-armed Iran.”

Critics fear Abizaid has lost sight of Iran’s potential to arm militant groups such as Hezbollah with nuclear weapons. “You can deter Iran, but there is no strategy against nuclear terrorism,” said the retired air force Lieutenant General Thomas McInerney of the Iran policy committee.

“There is no question that we can take out Iran. The problem is the follow-on, the velvet revolution that needs to be created so the Iranian people know it’s not aimed at them, but at the Iranian regime.”

Checkmate’s freethinking mission is “to provide planning inputs to warfighters that are strategically, operationally and tactically sound, logistically supportable and politically feasible”. Its remit is not specific to one country, according to defence sources, but its forward planning is thought relevant to any future air war against Iranian nuclear and military sites. It is also looking at possible threats from China and North Korea.

Checkmate was formed in the 1970s to counter Soviet threats but fell into disuse in the 1980s. It was revived under Colonel John Warden and was responsible for drawing up plans for the crushing air blitz against Saddam Hussein at the opening of the first Gulf war.

Warden told The Sunday Times: “When Saddam invaded Kuwait, we had access to unlimited numbers of people with expertise, including all the intelligence agencies, and were able to be significantly more agile than Centcom.”

He believes that Checkmate’s role is to develop the necessary expertise so that “if somebody says Iran, it says: ‘here is what you need to think about’. Here are the objectives, here are the risks, here is what it will cost, here are the numbers of planes we will lose,

here is how the war is going to end and here is what the peace will look like”.

Warden added: “The Centcoms of this world are executional – they don’t have the staff, the expertise or the responsibility to do the thinking that is needed before a country makes the decision to go to war. War planning is not just about bombs, airplanes and sailing boats.”

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