

Stepped up US preparations for war against Iran

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A relentless and unmistakable American buildup for war against Iran is currently underway. Military preparations are being accompanied by a daily barrage of propaganda against Tehran issuing from US sources and relayed uncritically via a compliant media. The chief accusation currently being levelled against the Iranian regime is that its agents are supporting and arming Shiite militias inside Iraq to attack US troops—a charge that has yet to be substantiated with concrete evidence.

President Bush last month not only ordered the US military to “seek out and destroy” Iranian networks in Iraq, but confirmed last week that he had authorised American troops to capture or kill Iranian agents. On Monday, in an interview with National Public Radio, Bush reiterated: “If Iran escalates its military action in Iraq to the detriment of our troops and/or innocent Iraqi people, we will respond firmly.”

In Congressional confirmation hearings this week, Bush’s new appointees echoed the same message. John Negroponte, who has been nominated as deputy secretary of state, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Tuesday, that Iran’s “behaviour, such as supporting Shia extremists in Iraq, should not go unchallenged. If they feel they can continue with this kind of activity with impunity, that will be harmful to the security of Iraq and to our interests in that country.”

Admiral William Fallon, who has been nominated as head of Central Command, told the Senate Armed Services Committee on Tuesday that Iran’s involvement in terrorism and sectarian violence was “destabilising and troubling”. “They have not been helpful in Iraq. It seems to me that in the region, as they grow their military capabilities, we’re going to have to pay close attention to what they do and what they may bring to the table,” he added.

Fallon indicated that he intended to assist in building a regional coalition “to address Iran’s actions”. As the first naval officer to be appointed head of Central Command, his role will obviously not be limited to diplomatic activity. Fallon will preside over a huge US naval buildup in the Persian Gulf, which, for the first time since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, will include two aircraft carrier groups.

The *Jerusalem Post* reported that the assault ship, USS Bataan, steamed through the Suez Canal on Tuesday on its way to the Persian Gulf. The seven-vessel battle group includes 2,200 US Marines and sailors, helicopters and Harrier fighter jets. The aircraft carrier USS John C. Stennis and its associated warships are due in the region later this month, joining the carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower which is already in the Gulf. In all, Fallon will have around 50 warships as well as hundreds of warplanes at his disposal.

A comment in the French newspaper *Le Figaro* on January 27 noted that with the two carrier groups, “the United States now has the ability to conduct an air offensive 24 hours a day for 30 to 40 days. It can rely on Bahrain, the huge al-Udaid airbase in Qatar and its operational command centre, and the Diego Garcia base in the Indian Ocean for supply. The American satellites have reportedly identified 1,500 targets linked to the Iranian nuclear weapon program, distributed over 18 main sites. No one doubts that considerable damage could be inflicted on them. Industrial and oil targets could be added to them.”

Ominously, an article appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* yesterday outlining plans for more aggressive patrols by US warplanes along the Iran-Iraq border, ostensibly to counter the smuggling of weapons into Iraq. A senior Pentagon official told the newspaper: “Air power plays major roles, and one of those is as a deterrent, whether it be in border control, air sovereignty or something more kinetic.” As the *Times* noted, “kinetic” is a term used to denote offensive military action. Whatever the stated purpose, provocative US air patrols close to Iranian air space could quickly escalate into open conflict.

While top US officials keep repeating as fact that Iranian agents are involved in supporting anti-US militia in Iraq, no proof has been offered for the allegation. US ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, was scheduled yesterday to present a “dossier” of specific evidence of Iranian arms shipments to Iraq, including serial numbers and shipping documents. But the plan was put on hold, indicating that the “proof” is just as threadbare as the lies about weapons of mass destruction that were concocted to justify Iraq’s military occupation.

A propaganda war

Lack of evidence has not stopped the US media from publishing stories that have all the hallmarks of planted articles from the Bush administration, the CIA or Pentagon. An article appeared in the *New York Times* yesterday based on anonymous US and Iraqi officials suggesting that Iranian agents were involved in an attack on a secure compound in Karbala on January 20 in which five American soldiers were killed.

The report provided details of the raid, emphasising its sophistication—the use of forged identity cards, “American-style” uniforms and rifles, sports utility vehicles and communications devices. But it did not offer a shred of evidence that any Iranians, let alone Iranian government agents, were involved. As “proof,” all that was offered was the argument that the operation was too complex for Iraqi insurgents to have carried out alone.

An unnamed senior Iraqi official alleged that rogue elements of the Mahdi Army of Shiite cleric Moktada al-Sadr were being armed and controlled directly from Iran. An American military official hinted at a broad conspiracy involving senior Iraqi officials, asking: “Was the [Karbala] governor involved? Were the Iraqi police that were on guard complicit or just

incompetent?"

The *New York Times* pointed quite openly to the real purpose of the story, which has been recycled throughout the media: "Tying Iran to the deadly attack could be helpful to the Bush administration, which has been engaged in an escalating war of words with Iran."

The article followed another dubious *New York Times* report on January 29 alleging that "Iranian intelligence" had been involved in the assassination of the Egyptian ambassador to Iraq, Ihab Al Sharif, shortly after his posting in June 2005. The story was based on a front-page article in the Egyptian newspaper *Al Ahrām*, which offered no evidence other than the comments of anonymous sources. Both the Iranian and Egyptian foreign ministries denied the allegations. Al Qaeda claimed responsibility for the murder at the time. None of this, however, stopped the *New York Times* circulating the story as good coin.

It is certainly possible that Iranian intelligence agents operate inside Iraq, like those of other countries, including American allies like Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Iran has close links with Shiite parties and militia, including those in the US puppet regime in Baghdad, and may well be supplying them with assistance. It is also possible that insurgents are purchasing arms legally or illegally inside Iran, as well as in other countries. But there is no proof that the Iranian government is backing anti-US insurgents in Iraq.

In comments for the US-based Council on Foreign Relations website, Kenneth Pollack from the Brookings Institution remarked: "The Bush administration seems to be regarding the Iranians as the source of many, if not all, of Iraq's problems today. To me, it is dangerously reminiscent of how they talked about the Syrians in 2004 and 2005, when they ridiculously exaggerated Syria's role in the Sunni insurgency."

An article in the *Los Angeles Times* on January 23 noted: "For all the aggressive rhetoric, the Bush administration has provided scant evidence to support these claims [of Iranian involvement]. Nor have reporters travelling with US troops seen extensive signs of Iranian involvement. During a recent sweep through a stronghold of Sunni insurgents here, a single Iranian machine gun turned up among dozens of arms caches US troops uncovered. British officials have similarly accused Iran of meddling in Iraqi affairs, but say they have not found Iranian-made weapons in areas they patrol."

In an interview with an obviously hostile *New York Times* journalist on January 29, Iran's ambassador to Iraq, Hassan Kazemi Qumi vigorously denied Iranian support for anti-US militias. He dismissed evidence seized by US troops in provocative raids in which a number of Iranians were detained in December and January.

"He ridiculed the evidence that the American military said it had collected, including maps of Baghdad delineating Sunni, Shiite and mixed neighbourhoods—the kind of maps, American officials have said, that would be useful for militias engaged in ethnic slaughter. Mr Qumi said the maps were so common and easily obtainable that they proved nothing," the newspaper noted.

In the coming weeks, the US propaganda offensive will undoubtedly intensify in order to obscure the real reasons for the war preparations against Iran. In the first instance, Washington is determined to prevent Iran from expanding its influence as a result of the disasters that the US has created in neighbouring Iraq and Afghanistan. More broadly, however, the Bush administration views the eventual subjugation of Iran as a necessary stage in its long-held plans for US dominance over the Middle East and Central Asia and their rich reserves of oil and gas.

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