

Who's Next—Iran & Syria?

By Conn Hallinan | November 3, 2005

In the wake of a United Nations investigation implicating a number of Syrian and Lebanese officials in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, the Bush administration is calling for international sanctions, and leaking dark hints of war. But the United States is already unofficially at war with Syria. For the past six months, U.S. Army Rangers and the Special Operations Delta Force have been crossing the border into Syria, supposedly to “interdict” terrorists coming into Iraq. Several Syrian soldiers have been killed.

The analogy the administration is using for this invasion? Cambodia, which the Nixon administration accused of harboring North Vietnamese troops during the war in Southeast Asia. On April 30, 1970, American and South Vietnamese Army units stormed across the border, igniting one of the great disasters of all time. The invasion was not only a military debacle; it led to the rise of Pol Pot, who systematically butchered some two million Cambodians.

As in Vietnam, the American and British line in Iraq is that the war is fueled by foreign fanatics infiltrating from Syria and Iran. In an October talk to the National Endowment for Democracy, President George W. Bush told the audience that “Iran and Syria” have allied themselves with Islamic terrorist groups; he warned that the “United States makes no distinction between those who commit acts of terror and those who support and harbor them.”

According to the *Financial Times*, the Bush administration is already discussing who should replace Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, with the White House leaning toward sponsoring an

internal military coup. National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley—the fellow who brought us the Niger-Iran uranium fairy tale—is in charge of the operation.

Flynt Leverett of the Brookings Institute says the cross border raids are aimed at encouraging the Syrian military to “dump” Assad. A military coup was how the United States helped put Saddam Hussein in power so he could liquidate the Iraqi Left.

The White House, in fact, knows that foreign fighters have very little to do with the insurgency in Iraq. The conservative London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) estimates that the number of foreign fighters is “well below 10%, and may be closer to 4 or 6%.” American intelligence estimates that 95% of the insurgents are Iraqi.

The Bush administration has long had its sights on Iran, which Bush calls “The world’s primary state sponsor of terrorism.” These are sentiments recently echoed in London, where Prime Minister Tony Blair accused Teheran of smuggling weapons and explosives into Iraq to

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Provocations

The United States has been provocatively sending unmanned Predator aircraft into Iran, supposedly looking for nuclear weapons, but most likely mapping Iranian radar systems, information the United States would need before launching an attack. According to Irish journalist, Gordon Thomas, the United States has already targeted missiles at Iranian power plants at Natanz and Arak.

Some 4,000 fighters of the Mujahedeen-e-Khalq (MEK), an armed organization that seeks to overthrow the present regime in Teheran, have a base north of Baghdad near the Iranian border. The United States has thrown a protective umbrella over the MEK's soldiers and equipment, although the State Department classifies the organization as "terrorist."

Most of the information on Iran's nuclear weapons programs comes from the MEK, which has an uneven track record for accuracy. In any case, there is a disturbing parallel between the role the MEK is playing in developing information on Iran's weapons of mass destruction and the pre-war intelligence on Baghdad's WMD programs cooked up by Ahmad Chalabi and the group of Iraqi expatriates gathered around the Pentagon.

A major player in all this is Israel, where the Likud and its U.S. supporters have long lobbied for a U.S. attack on Iran and Syria. In a speech last May to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), Richard Perle, a

Likud adviser and former Bush official, said that the United States should attack Iran if it is "on the verge of [developing] a nuclear weapon." Along with David Frum of the *Weekly Standard*, Perle co-authored *An End to Evil*, which calls for the overthrow of "the terrorist mullahs of Iran."

An Israeli Proxy?

Vice President Dick Cheney has even suggested that Israel might do the job. According to the Israeli daily *Haaretz*, the United States recently sold Tel Aviv 500 GBU-27 and 28 "bunker buster" guided bombs (although Syria would be a more likely target for such weapons).

The Israeli Right has been spoiling for a fight with Syria for some time. The Israelis bombed near Damascus last year, and Cabinet Minister Gideon Ezra threatened to assassinate Damascus-based Hamas leader, Khaled Meshaal. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon

made a similar threat about Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasallah.

The Sharon government is just as belligerent about Iran. When he was Israeli Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. Moshe Ya'alon said that he hoped international pressure on Iran would halt its development of nuclear weapons, adding ominously, "If that is not the case we would consider our options."

One Israeli intelligence official told the *Financial Times* that, "It could be a race who pushes the button first—us or the Americans."

What that official meant by "the button" is not clear, but the logical candidate is a nuclear strike. In 1981 the Israelis used conventional aircraft and weapons to destroy the Iraqi

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nuclear power plant at Osirak, but an attack on Iran's facilities would be another matter.

Following the 1981 attack, the Iranians hardened and dispersed their nuclear infrastructure. Israel's newly purchased "bunker busters" might do the job, but distance is a problem. Iran is a lot further away from Israel than Iraq, and Israeli aircraft would have difficulties making a round trip to Iran without mid-air refueling. Israel has missiles, however, plus several hundred nuclear weapons, and there are at least some in Tel Aviv who wouldn't flinch from using them.

Last month senior Pentagon analyst Lawrence Franklin admitted passing classified information on Iran to Israel through two AIPAC employees. Franklin used to work for former Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith and has close ties to neo-con Michael Ledeen of the American Enterprise Institute, who says, "Tehran is a city just waiting for us."

If all these names sound familiar it is because they are the ones who brought us the war in Iraq.

Prospects for Invasion: Cambodia Redux?

Would the United States (possibly allied with Britain and Israel) actually attack Iran and/or Syria?

Iran seems a stretch. The country has three times the population of Iraq, almost four times the land area, plus lots and lots of mountains you really don't want to fight in.

Iran also has considerable international support, demonstrated several weeks ago when Europeans said they would not back U.S. efforts to bring Iran before the UN Security

Council for supposed violations of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty.

While a number of nations are nervous about Iran's nuclear activities, the country is not seen as a regional threat. Its military budget is only one-third what it was in 1980 and, according to Middle East scholar Stephen Zunes, Iran actually has fewer tanks and planes than it did 20 years ago.

Some of that support is based on the fact that Iran has the second largest oil and gas reserves on the planet, reserves that Europe, China, and India simply cannot do without.

The Americans might bomb the hell out of the place but an invasion is doubtful, particularly given the current disarray of the U.S. military. The Army failed to meet its recruiting goals for 2005, and with the military already overextended in Iraq, it is not clear if

the United States could even muster an effective invasion force.

One caveat could alter that: the U.S. doctrines of preemptive war and first-use of nuclear weapons. Would the White House really push the button? Not out of the question.

According to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, if it does come to war, Congress has no say in the matter. Asked if she agreed that the President would have to return to Congress in the case of military action against Syria and/or Iran, she told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Oct. 19 that "The President retains those powers in the war on terrorism and the war on Iraq."

Syria is an easier target than Iran. With the exception of its northern border, the country is a flat plain, less than half the size of Iraq and

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with a population of only 16.7 million. It is also reeling from the UN investigation.

This may make Syria look like fruit ripe for the picking, and an invasion would certainly divert attention from the chaos in Iraq and Afghanistan. It would also be a logical extension of the Bush administration's mythology that all our troubles in the Middle East are caused by foreign Islamic terrorists.

For the outcome of such a strategy see the war in Southeast Asia.

Conn Hallinan is a foreign policy analyst for Foreign Policy In Focus (online at www.fpif.org) and a lecturer in journalism at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

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