

Targeting Teheran

By Conn Hallinan | January 25, 2006

Iran has long been a target of the Bush administration's rhetorical ire. The president called it "the world's primary state sponsor of terrorism," Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice characterized it as "something to be loathed," and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld accused Teheran of designing roadside bombs to kill U.S. and British troops. But with the U.S. military under siege in Iraq, and polls running heavily against the White House's Middle East version of Vietnam, it seemed just bluster and so much talk.

But this past December, German newspapers reported that briefings by high-level officials indicate that the United States is seriously contemplating an air attack on Iranian nuclear facilities sometime this spring. And the general consensus among newspapers like *Der Spiegel*, *Der Tagesspiegel*, and DDP News Agency is that recent anti-Semitic tirades by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmandinejad gives the Bush administration an opening.

"I would be very surprised if the Americans, in the mid-term, didn't take advantage of the opportunity offered by Teheran," one high-placed German defense official told DDP. The news agency also reported that Saudi Arabia, Oman, Pakistan, and Jordan had been briefed that a U.S. military strike was an "option."

Speculations

The European speculation is based less on any escalation of threats, than on *who* is making them. According to *Der Tagesspiegel*, Central Intelligence Agency Director Porter Goss visited Turkey Dec. 12 and informed Turkish Prime Minister Redep Tayyip Erdogan that the United States was seriously considering striking Iran sometime in 2006. Rice

and FBI Director Robert Mueller also made trips to Ankara.

Goss reportedly made the bizarre charge that Iran was cooperating with al-Qaida in Iraq, and he asked the Turks to share intelligence on Iran. Since many of al-Qaida's targets are Shiites, why Iran would cooperate with the terrorist organization or target U.S. troops is not obvious. "Iran's protégés are in control in Iraq right now, yet these weapons are going to people fighting Iran's protégés?" Kenneth Katzman, former Middle East analyst for the CIA and now with the non-partisan Congressional Research Center, said to the *New York Times*. "That makes little sense to me."

Goss reportedly told the Turks that if they cooperated, the United States would "green light" a Turkish cross-border attack on the People's Liberation Army, the armed wing of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), now known as the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress. The PKK has some 10,000 disciplined militia in the mountains of Northern Iraq.

Turkey is deeply opposed to the establishment of an independent Kurdish state, having fought a long and bloody war with the PPK in the mid-1980s. Turkey fears if the Kurds seize the oil fields of



Kirkuk and Mosul, independence would be a foregone conclusion, which in turn would send separatist ripples through Kurdish populations in Syria, Iran, and Turkey's eastern provinces.

As recently as March 20, Rumsfeld denounced Turkey for refusing to let the U.S. Fourth Infantry Division invade Iraq from southern Turkey during the opening weeks of the Iraq War. He charged that Ankara was partly responsible for the United States' current problems with the insurgency.

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But in mid-December, Yasar Buyukanit, head of the Turkish army and the likely future military chief of staff, flew to Washington for a round of talks with the Department of Defense, which he later described as "very friendly." This was the same Buyukanit who threatened to invade Iraq last year if the United States did not suppress the PKK.

The question Europeans are asking is did Washington and Ankara reach a quid pro quo? The United States whacks Iran with minimal protest from the Turks; Ankara smashes the PKK and derails the formation of a Kurdish state with a few mild "tut-tuts" from the Americans?

Israel's Role

And then there is Israel.

According to the *Sunday Times*, Israeli Special Forces have been put on alert in anticipation of the International Atomic Energy Agency's March report on whether Iran has been concealing a nuclear weapons program. The Israelis say they will not tolerate a nuclear-armed Iran. "Israel cannot live in a situation in which Iran has the atomic bomb," Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom told the *Associated Press*.

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A number of neoconservative organizations, like the American Enterprise Institute, and Zionist organizations, like the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA), have been pushing hard for "regime change" in Iran.

The JINSA—whose members once included Vice President Dick Cheney and UN Ambassador John Bolton—sponsored a conference in 2003 entitled "Time to Focus on Iran—The Mother of Modern Terrorism." And late last year, AIPAC attacked the Bush administration for its decision not to refer Iran to the UN Security Council, (Washington did not have the votes to do so), and for endorsing a Russian proposal to enrich reactor fuel for Iran's civilian program. AIPAC called the decision a

“disturbing shift” in administration policy that “poses a danger to the United States and our allies.”

No one thinks Iran has nuclear weapons, and estimates of when they could produce them range from five years to a decade. Even the conservative International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) says Teheran is at least 10 years away from producing a weapon.

The Iranians deny they intend to build a bomb, and the country’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, says nuclear weapons are incompatible with Islam. But then again, everyone denies building bombs. India and Pakistan disavowed they were constructing nuclear weapons up until the moment they tested them, and Israel even built a false wall at its Dimona Reactor to hide its weapons program from the Kennedy administration.

Given that Iran is surrounded by nuclear powers in Russia, Pakistan, India, and Israel, and that there are American troops occupying countries on its borders, one can hardly blame them. And it does not follow that a nuclear-armed Iran is a danger to countries in the region, even Israel. Given the number of nuclear weapons in their arsenals, any attack on Israel or the United States would be tantamount to national suicide.

Most observers think Ahmandinejad’s anti-Israeli rants have more to do with domestic matters than foreign policy. “He wants to control the domestic situation through isolating Iran,” says Saeed Laylaz, an Iranian policy analyst. “Then he can suppress the voices inside the country and control the situation.”

An Israeli attack on Iran would be logistically complex, because Israel’s air force would need to over fly Jordan and Iraq to strike targets in Iran. The planes would also have to be refueled in-flight.

However, the Israelis recently purchased some 500 GBU-27 and GBU-28 “bunker buster” satellite guided bombs that can penetrate 30 feet of concrete, so they could pull off an attack.

But given the upheaval in Israel following Ariel Sharon’s stroke, and the regional political fallout from such an action, it seems more likely Washington would do the job.



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The United States could do it easily, using either carried launched planes, B-2 “stealth” bombers armed with “bunker busters,” or Tomahawk cruise missiles. The United States might even invoke the 2002 “Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations” and use tactical nuclear weapons.

Why Attack?

If Iran is no immediate threat, why attack?

First, the United States would love to put a crimp in the developing Asian Energy Security Grid, which in turn would hamper the development of India and China. An Iran in turmoil, maybe enchained by sanctions, might help derail or slow down the second great industrial revolution in Asia.

Foreign reaction would be severe, but it is not clear the White House much cares. In a Jan. 5 interview with the *Financial Times*, a “senior” State

Department official told the newspaper that the administration will concentrate on “coalitions of the willing” in future conflicts, rather than turning to “existing but unreliable” institutional alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Second, an attack on Iran rolls the 9/11 dice for the 2006 mid-term elections. Recent polls indicate that the Republicans may lose both houses of Congress, which would make U.S. Rep. John Conyers chair of the House Judiciary Committee. Conyers armed with subpoenas is the White House’s definition of a nightmare. If the country is in another war, might the voters again feel uncomfortable about shifting horses in mid-stream?

Attacking Iran seems like madness, but the White House appears more desperate and out of touch these days than at any time in the past five years.

What the administration does know is that if it cannot change the subject from domestic spying, Katrina, and the chaos of Iraq, it faces defeat in November, which would deeply damage Republican designs on the presidency in 2008.

It will not be easy to stop this new drive toward war, particularly given that many Democrats in the Congress are almost as bellicose on Iran as the Republicans. But any attack on Iran will unleash regional and international consequences that will finally make Iraq look like the cakewalk the Bush administration originally predicted it to be.

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