

Iran: War or Rumors of War?

By Frida Berrigan | October 4, 2006

What's going on with the current bustle around U.S. naval stations? According to *Time*, the Navy has issued "Prepare to Deploy Orders" (PTDOs) to a strike group including minesweepers, a submarine, an Aegis class cruiser, and a mine hunter. Taken alongside disclosures that the chief of naval operations asked his planners for a rundown of how a blockade of Iranian oil ports would work, these military preparations led *Time* to conclude cautiously that the United States "may be preparing for war with Iran."

Military officials downplay these recent moves as routine. But given the administration's recent history of manufacturing threat, misreading intelligence, and misrepresenting war plans, it is tempting to read between the lines—especially when increasingly hot rhetoric is coming from Washington.

Asked whether the United States will do anything to stop the Iranians from having a nuclear bomb, Vice President Dick Cheney paid lip service to diplomacy before emphasizing that "we think they should not have a nuclear bomb ... the President has always emphasized no options have been taken off the table." President Bush leveled some barbed criticism at Iran during his recent UN General Assembly address. Tehran continues to "fund terrorism, and fuel extremism, and pursue nuclear weapons," he said. "Iran must abandon its nuclear weapons ambitions."

What might push this combative rhetoric over the edge toward war? Iran's purported interest in nuclear weapons and its insistence on the right to enrich uranium have been portrayed as one and the same. And members of the administration have cited Tehran's hostility to Israel, its support of terrorism, and its alleged desire to control some of the world's richest oil regions as part of an apparent propaganda campaign to justify acts of war against Iran.

President Bush claims that the United States is "working toward a diplomatic solution to this crisis, and as we do, we look to the day when you can live in freedom, and America and Iran can be good friends and close partners in the cause of peace." But U.S. military preparations belie this talk of peace. On September 17, speaking to a group



of peace activists, former CIA official Ray McGovern offered a dire warning: "We have about seven weeks to try and stop this next war from happening."

The Absurdity of War

Given the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the sheer cost of existing military commitments, it would seem that the last thing the United States can afford right now is another war. But as retired Air Force Colonel Sam Gardiner observes, the Bush administration didn't apply the "making sense" filter over the past four years in Iraq. It is therefore unlikely to use common sense in evaluating whether to attack Iran.

In a report for the Century Foundation, Gardiner puts forward a hypothetical view of the "seven truths" about Iran shared by members of the Bush administration. Of these propositions, Gardiner sees two as true: that Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons and that sanctions aimed at stopping them will be ineffective. He also maintains that Bush policymakers mistakenly assume that the Iranian people support "regime change" and that Iran cannot be negotiated with. He further notes that U.S. and Israeli commandos have been exploring targets in Iran for some time. This combination of U.S. beliefs and real world actions, Gardiner believes, will lead to U.S. air strikes against Iran and even possibly a campaign for regime change.

Bombing Iran, however, is not an easy proposition. According to estimates quoted in *Time*, there are 1,500 different "aim points" (or viable targets) in Iran related to



their nuclear development complex. Air strikes would require almost everything the Air Force has, and even then, a White House official admits, “we don’t know where it all is ... so we can’t get it all.” Gardiner and most other analysts assume that air strikes would bring Iranian retaliation, from stepped up support for Hezbollah and a greater role in fostering attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq to efforts to block the straits of Hormuz, a main outlet for Persian Gulf oil. Less likely but not out of the question would be Iranian attacks on the oil pipelines of other major suppliers such as Iraq and Saudi Arabia, which would send world oil prices through the roof and make Iran’s reserves worth all that much more.

In light of these potential counter moves, Anthony Zinni, former commander of U.S. troops in the Middle East, warns: “You’ve got to be prepared for the worst case, and the worst case in Iran is [U.S.] boots on the ground.”

Bluff or Chicken?

The administration may well be bluffing to demonstrate its “hard-nosed” diplomatic resolve. The U.S. military does not believe that air strikes on Iran are either workable or advisable, and, as noted above, an attack would not likely hit all major Iranian nuclear sites since U.S. intelligence doesn’t know where they are.

Fred Kaplan, writing in *Slate*, argues that Iran policy may be moving along parallel tracks—one involving force as a form of pressure and the other involving plans for an actual military attack. He imagines the current situation as a dangerous game of highway chicken in which two drivers speed toward each other, head on. The winner is the one who doesn’t veer off the road, and it’s a tie if both drivers steer off the road. “If they both keep driving straight on, pedal to the metal, certain of victory, opposed on moral principle to backing down, the outcome is mutual catastrophe,” Kaplan writes. “And in this case, we’re all sitting in those cars.”

The flaw in Kaplan’s metaphor is that it implies two equal adversaries. Even with a nuclear weapon, Iran couldn’t subject the United States to the kind of damage that Washington could inflict on it. But as we see every day in Iraq, the car that “veers off the road” can come back to fight another day, by other means that are just as deadly.

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