

Bracing the Brass on Iran

By Gareth Porter | October 23, 2007

The George W. Bush administration's shift from the military option of a massive strategic attack against Iran to a surgical strike against selected targets associated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), reported by Seymour Hersh in the *New Yorker* in early October, appears to have been prompted not by new alarm at Iran's role in Iraq but by the explicit opposition of the nation's top military leaders to an unprovoked attack on Iran's nuclear facilities.

The reorientation of the military threat was first signaled by passages on Iran contained in Bush's January 10, 2007 speech announcing the controversial troop "surge" plan for Iraq. A few weeks after that speech, the Joint Chiefs of Staff issued a decisive rejection of a strategic attack on Iran's nuclear facilities.

Although scarcely mentioned in press reports of the "surge" speech, Bush accused both Iran and Syria of "allowing terrorists and insurgents to use their territory to move in and out of Iraq." Bush also alleged that Iran was "providing material support for attacks on American troops."

Those passages were intended in part to put pressure on Iran, and were accompanied by an intensification of a campaign begun the previous month to seize Iranian officials inside Iraq. But according to Hillary Mann, who was director for Persian Gulf and Afghanistan Affairs on the National Security Council (NSC) staff in 2003, they also provided a legal basis for a possible attack on Iran.

"I believe the president chose his words very carefully," says Mann, "and laid down a legal predicate that could be used to justify later military action against Iran."

Mann says her interpretation of the language is based on the claim by the White House of a right to attack another country in "anticipatory self-defense" based on Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. That had been the legal basis cited by then National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice in September 2002, in making the case for the invasion of Iraq.

The introduction of a new reason for striking Iran, which also implied a much more limited set of targets related to Iraq, followed a meeting between Bush and the Joint Chiefs of Staff on December 13, 2006, in which the uniformed military leaders rejected a strike against Iran's

nuclear program. *Time* magazine political columnist Joe Klein reported last May that military and intelligence sources told him that Bush had asked the Joint Chiefs at the meeting about a possible strike against the Iranian nuclear program, and that they had unanimously opposed such an attack.

Mann says that she was also told by her own contacts in the Pentagon that the Joint Chiefs had expressed opposition to a strike against Iran.

The Joint Chiefs were soon joined in opposition to a strike on Iran by Adm. William Fallon, who was nominated to become Central Command (Centcom) commander in January. Mann says Pentagon contacts have also told her that Fallon made his opposition to war against Iran clear to the White House.

The Inter Press Service reported last May that Fallon had indicated privately that he was determined to prevent an attack on Iran and even prepared to resign to do so. A source who met with Fallon at the time of his confirmation hearing quoted him as vowing that there would be "no war with Iran" while he was Centcom commander and as strongly hinting that he would quit rather than go along with an attack.

Although he did not specifically refer to the Joint Chiefs, Fallon also suggested that other military leaders opposed a strike against Iran, saying, "There are several of us who are trying to put the crazies back in the box," according to the same source.

Fallon's opposition to a strike against Iranian nuclear, military, and economic targets would make it very difficult, if not impossible, for the White House to carry out such an operation, according to military experts. As Centcom commander, Fallon has complete control over all military access to the region, says retired Air Force Col. Sam

Gardiner, an expert on military strategy who has taught at the National War College.

Douglas McGregor, a retired Army lieutenant colonel who was a tank commander in the 1991 Gulf War and has taught at the National Defense University, agrees. "I find it hard to imagine that anything can happen in the area without the involvement of the Central Command," says McGregor.

The possibility that Fallon might object to an unprovoked attack on Iran or even resign over the issue represents a significant deterrent to such an attack.

Former NSC adviser Mann believes the Iraq-focused strategy is now aimed at averting any resignation threat by Fallon or other military leaders by carrying out a very limited strike that would be presented as a response to a specific incident in Iraq in which the deaths of U.S. soldiers could be attributed to Iranian policy. She says she doubts Fallon and other military leaders would "fall on their swords" over such a strike.

Gardiner agrees that Fallon is unlikely to refuse to carry out such a limited strike under those circumstances.

Mann believes the Bush-Cheney purpose in advancing the strategy is to provoke Iranian retaliation. "The concern I have is that it would be just enough so Iranians would retaliat[e] against U.S. allies," she says.

But the issue of what evidence of Iranian complicity would be adequate to justify such a strike evidently remains a matter of debate within the administration. A story published by McClatchy newspapers August 9 reported that Vice President Dick Cheney had argued some weeks earlier for a strike against camps in Iran

allegedly used to train Iraqi Shiite militiamen fighting U.S. troops if "hard new evidence" could be obtained of Iran's complicity in supporting anti-U.S. forces in Iraq.

But Cheney and his allies have been frustrated in the search for such evidence. Mann notes that British forces in southern Iraq patrolled the border very aggressively for six months last year to find evidence of Iranian involvement in supplying weapons to Iraqi guerrillas but found nothing.

After several months of trying to establish specific links between Iraqis suspected of trafficking in weapons to a specific Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard contact, the U.S. command has not claimed a single case of such a link. Maj. Gen. Rick Lynch, the U.S. commander for southern Iraq, where most of the Shiite militias operate, admitted in a July 6 briefing that his troops had not captured "anybody that we can tie to Iran."

Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-CT), who is known to be closely allied with Cheney on Iran policy, has betrayed impatience with a policy that depends on obtaining proof of Iranian complicity in attacks. On June 11 he called for "strike over the border into Iran, where we have good evidence that they have a base at which they are training these people coming back into Iraq to kill our soldiers."

Lieberman repeated that position on July 2, but thus far it has not prevailed.

Gareth Porter is a historian and national security policy analyst who writes for the Inter Press Service. His latest book, Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam, was published in June 2005.

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