

Next Stop: Tehran

The White House denies plans to attack Iran, but the signs all point in that direction.

By Philip Giraldi

BY THE TIME President Bush finally announced it, his surge strategy was old news. But an unexpected section of the speech jarred the normally somnolent mainstream media: "Iran is providing material support for attacks on American troops. We will disrupt the attacks on our forces. ... And we will seek out and destroy the networks providing advanced weaponry and training to our enemies in Iraq." Speculation that Bush was already plotting his next war nearly stole the story of how he plans to salvage the current one.

Picking up the presidential cue, the administration began advancing the fiction that Iranian support of America's "enemies" in Iraq is killing U.S. soldiers—an implausible assertion since the insurgents and al-Qaeda are Sunnis, while the Iranians are Shi'ites linked to parties within the current Iraqi government. The day after the speech, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, on her way to the Middle East to pull together a Sunni coalition against Iran, asserted willingness to confront Tehran over its "destabilizing behavior." And by Jan. 15, the administration's supposed realist, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, had jumped on the scrum, declaring that Iran has been "very negative," while admitting for the first time that the naval buildup in the Persian Gulf was designed to threaten Iran and "reassure allies." White House sources report that the National Security Council has already considered likely consequences of a war with Iran, and an assessment of Tehran's ability to retaliate concluded

that the resulting damage to American facilities and interests worldwide would be "acceptable."

White House Press Secretary Tony Snow dismissed as "urban legend" the notion that war preparations are underway. But he persuaded neither a public turned skeptical by the Iraq invasion nor certain congressional Democrats. The Jan. 11 Special Forces raid on the Iranian Consulate in the Kurdish Iraqi city of Irbil, a calculated provocation personally authorized by President Bush and evidently representative of the more muscular new policy, fueled questions about the administration's intentions. Sen. James Webb asked Secretary Rice, "Is it the position of this administration that it possesses the authority to take unilateral action against Iran in the absence of a direct threat without congressional approval?" She ducked the question. Similarly, on ABC's "This Week," National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley would not say whether he agrees with senators who insist that the president needs congressional approval for an attack. Other administration sources assert that Bush believes he could strike Iran in his capacity as commander in chief or under his 2003 Iraq authorization. Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Sen. John D. Rockefeller voiced his alarm: "It's Iraq again. This whole concept of moving against Iran is bizarre."

In some sense, the war has already begun. For the past two years, the U.S. has been conducting secret operations inside Iran, employing Special Forces units operating out of Afghanistan,

while Pentagon-supported dissidents have been carrying out armed raids into Iran's predominantly Arab provinces.

A second carrier group, the *USS John Stennis*, is moving toward the Persian Gulf to supplement the carrier *USS Dwight D. Eisenhower*—the last time two carrier groups were in the Gulf was during the invasion of Iraq—and a flotilla of minesweepers accompanied by an Aegis class cruiser was sent to the region at the end of 2006. The carrier aircraft, useless against insurgents and terrorists in Iraq, can only be employed in a war with Iran, while the minesweepers would be needed to keep clear the Strait of Hormuz for oil tankers and other shipping.

The naval presence in the region will be directed by Adm. William Fallon, the recently appointed chief of Central Command, replacing the uncooperative Gen. John Abizaid, who had opposed the surge. Fallon knows little of ground combat but a great deal about naval air operations. The dearth of "boots on the ground" Army and Marine infantry would be irrelevant in Iran as an assault would be conducted from the sea and air, where the U.S. has more than enough available resources.

Bush has also ordered Patriot missile batteries to the region, clearly intended to defend against Iranian ballistic missiles and airstrikes launched in a retaliatory attack against vulnerable U.S. bases in Iraq and in Kuwait and against the region's oil fields.

Once the military and naval resources arrive at the end of February, the precise

timing for a strike would depend on political and economic factors, as well as suitable weather conditions permitting aerial and satellite reconnaissance. But maintaining two carrier groups and support vessels in the Persian Gulf is hugely expensive, so the administration will be motivated to use them once all the components for an attack are in place. A Kuwaiti newspaper, relying on confidential sources in the Emirate's government, predicts that the attack will take place before the first week of April, when Tony Blair steps down as British prime minister, under the assumption that he will provide political cover as well as material support in the form of minesweepers. As Kuwait's government, host to the sprawling U.S. base Camp Doha and a prime target for Iranian retaliation, has been in the loop for planning vis-à-vis Iran, the suggested date has a high level of credibility.

As for *casus belli*, an attack might be preceded by a Gulf of Tonkin type incident in which Iran fires on or otherwise interferes with a U.S. warship. As two carrier groups will basically fill the shallow and narrow waters of the Persian Gulf, the potential for an incident is obviously very high.

At least as significant as the military buildup is the intensifying rhetoric surrounding the Iranian threat. President Bush has guaranteed Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert that the U.S. will defend Israel against Iran and will not engage Tehran in negotiations. At the 2006 annual meeting of AIPAC, the principal Israeli lobbying group, Vice President Dick Cheney stated in his keynote address, "We will not allow Iran to have a nuclear weapon." There have been similar, and frequent, iterations of that theme by Rice, Hadley, former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and, most recently, by the Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns addressing an audience in Israel. Those who hope

that Democrats will stop the rush to war need only note the repeated excoriation of Iran by party leaders like Hillary Clinton, Nancy Pelosi, Steny Hoyer, and Charles Schumer. Howard Dean has declared that the U.S. attack on Iraq was directed against the "wrong enemy" while Iran is "the right enemy." Dean's DNC, which reportedly receives more than half of its funds from Jewish sources, would be understandably reluctant to oppose war against Iran.

Former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Deputy Prime Minister Avigdor Lieberman urge an expeditious attack to destroy Iran's nuclear capabilities—arms inspector Scott Ritter has called the drive to attack Iran a policy "made in Israel." And outspoken former Israeli Brigadier General Oded Tira has called on the Israeli lobby to engage Democratic hawks and exploit media connections to bring about action against Iran:

President Bush lacks the political power to attack Iran. As an American strike in Iran is essential for our existence, we must help him pave the way by lobbying the Democratic Party (which is conducting itself foolishly) and U.S. newspaper editors. We need to do this in order to turn the Iranian issue to a bipartisan one and unrelated to the Iraq failure.

Tira joins other advocates of war with Iran in recognizing the power of the mainstream media to prime the public for an attack. Four separate Iran groups working within the U.S. government—and staffed by many of the same individuals who brought about the Iraq War—will likely preface military action against Tehran with a series of leaked stories to latter-day Judith Millers demonizing the designated enemy. As with the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq, ideologically driven intelligence centers relying on

dubious sources like the terrorist group Mujahadeen e Khalq have been established at the Pentagon and elsewhere to offer alarmist assessments of Iran.

The propagandizing effort has already begun. A late-2006 series of largely fictional Israeli-generated stories in Rupert Murdoch's *Times* newspapers of London hyped the Iranian threat. Most recently, the *Times* reported that Israel is preparing for its own attack on three key Iranian nuclear facilities. The planning reportedly includes use of nuclear devices to eliminate deeply buried facilities, a refinement to the story added to encourage the United States to attack instead, as the U.S. believes it could take out the targets without using nuclear weapons.

Other indicators suggest that an attack against Iran is impending, if not imminent. Pentagon planners, conscious that if attacked Iran would stir up its Shi'ite friends in neighboring Iraq, anticipate that extra soldiers being used in the surge might be shifted to the Iran-Iraq border to seal it off when military operations against Tehran start. Retired Air Force Col. Sam Gardiner, who taught strategy and military operations at the National War College, believes that combat brigades ostensibly being collected for the surge pacification of Baghdad might instead be sent directly to the border with Iran. The Department of Defense is also reported to be hiring more Farsi speakers to train soldiers in the language—a pointless exercise unless some level of engagement with Iran is anticipated—while Washington contractors providing translation services to the Pentagon are working seven days a week on Farsi documents, seeking the "silver bullet" linking Iran to terrorism, thus making some case for war.

The rejection of the Iraq Study Group's suggestion that the U.S. work diplomatically and constructively with all parties in the Persian Gulf region

provided further evidence of the administration's intentions. Likewise, its refusal to approach the bargaining table until Iran agrees to abandon its nuclear energy program. That program, monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency, exists in response to a legitimate need for electrical generating capacity based on projections that Iran's oil resources will soon sharply diminish and eventually be depleted. An as yet unreleased U.S. National Intelligence Estimate on Iran concludes that the evidence for a weapons program is largely circumstantial and inconclusive, while the Director of National Intelligence John Negroponte reported that Iran is five to ten years away from having a weapon even if it accelerates the process and no one interferes with its development. Negroponte was predictably fired for his unwillingness to alter the intelligence, and the NIE is unlikely to see the light of day unless it is rewritten to conclude that Iran is an immediate threat.

Other attempts to build bridges between Washington and Tehran have also failed. Years of negotiations with Iran by Britain, France, and Germany went nowhere because of American refusal to play a part in the process, which came very close to a comprehensive settlement on a number of occasions. The U.S. instead chose to block agreements that did not include complete Iranian surrender on the key issue of its nuclear program. A series of compromises proposed by Tehran between March 2005 and October 2006 that would have banned nuclear-weapon production and permitted round-the-clock complete-access inspections were rejected due to American objections.

Iran has also reached out directly to the United States to establish a basis for negotiations but has been rebuffed repeatedly by an intransigent White House. In the spring of 2006, confidential

negotiations between Iran and American Ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad to help stabilize Iraq were suspended under orders from Vice President Cheney. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's 18-page letter to President Bush in May 2006, widely interpreted in Iran as an attempt to establish dialogue, was summarily rejected. Bush did not even bother to read it. Yet the overtures continued. Former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami's September visit was a backdoor approach for opening discussion. But Rice's State Department only reluctantly permitted the visit, and the White House then ignored it, failing to grasp the extended olive branch. It is the ultimate irony that the Iraqi government, which the U.S. is ostensibly protecting,

is regularly meeting Iranian leaders to establish a *modus vivendi*, while Washington refuses to engage.

Iran is not an imminent threat and clearly doesn't want war, while the United States can ill afford another. But the Bush administration seems intent on toppling Ahmadinejad. The overwhelming victory of moderates and reformers in Iran's December election shows that the Iranian people are peacefully working toward the same end. But the White House, showing interest neither in dialogue nor in letting the democratic process do its work, seems more inclined to let bombs do the talking. ■

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Making Enemies

How Israel helped to create Hamas

By Brendan O'Neill

IN THE BLOODY STREET struggle between Hamas and Fatah for control of the Palestinian territories—a civil war in all but name—Israel is firmly pinning its hopes on a Fatah victory. It sees its old enemies in Fatah as far preferable to Hamas, which refuses to recognize Israel's right to exist and whose members still occasionally blow themselves up on streets and buses inside the Jewish state.

Fatah has been a thorn in Israel's side for over 40 years. It is the largest group in the Palestine Liberation Organization, and its name is a reverse acronym of the Arabic title Harakat al-Tahrir al-Watani al-Filastini, which literally translates

"Palestinian National Liberation Movement." But Israel is ready to overlook all that and is making moves toward its old secular, nationalist opponents—"Arafat's men"—in an attempt to isolate what it sees as the cosmically minded religious extremists of Hamas.

When British Prime Minister Tony Blair publicly supported Fatah leader Mahmoud Abbas in December and promised to donate £13 million to Fatah, he won the fulsome praise of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who thanked Blair for his "good and interesting ideas" and agreed that it is time for "moderate [Palestinian] elements to be strengthened." To this end, Olmert