

British academics warn US is preparing “shock and awe” attack on Iran

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Global Research, September 15, 2007
wsws.org 15 September 2007

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An 80-page study written by two British security analysts and released on August 28 makes a chilling estimation of the overwhelming force that the US would use in the event of any attack on Iran. “The US has made military preparations to destroy Iran’s WMD, nuclear energy, regime, armed forces, state apparatus and economic infrastructure within days, if not hours, of President George W. Bush giving the order,” the paper declared.

The authors, Dr Dan Plesch and Martin Butcher, concluded on the basis of publicly available sources that “US bombers and long range missiles are ready today to destroy 10,000 targets within Iran in a few hours. US ground, air and marine forces already in the Gulf, Iraq and Afghanistan can devastate Iranian forces, the regime and the state at short notice.”

Both Plesch and Butcher have written extensively on security and international relations. Plesch is director of the Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy at the prestigious School of Oriental and African Studies. The study, entitled [“Considering a war with Iran: A discussion paper on WMD in the Middle East”](#) made no estimate of Iran’s nuclear programs—the nominal pretext for a US war—and reached no definitive conclusion as to the likelihood of an attack. But it did outline the Pentagon’s extensive preparations and examined probable US military strategies.

Plesch and Butcher assessed that any US military attack would not be limited to Iran’s nuclear facilities, but would aim to eliminate its ability to strike back by destroying its military capacities and economic infrastructure. “Any attack is likely to be on a massive multi-front scale but avoiding a ground invasion. Attacks focussed on WMD facilities would leave Iran too many retaliatory options, leave President Bush open to the charge of using too little force and leave the regime intact,” they stated.

The paper examined the Pentagon’s Global Strike plans developed under the Bush administration to enable the US military to strike anywhere around the world at short notice. Since 2001 in particular, the role of the US Strategic Command (STRATCOM), previously a nuclear deterrent against the Soviet Union, has been modified to “enable the seamless delivery of tailored effects, anywhere and anytime, across the globe.... The US has strategic forces prepared to launch massive strikes on Iran within hours of the order being given.”

Plesch and Butcher analysed the available types of US bombers and conventional bombs and calculated that 100 strategic bombers, each with 100 “smart” bombs, would be enough to hit 10,000 individual targets. “This strike power alone is sufficient to destroy all major Iranian political, military, economic and transport capabilities,” the authors conclude. “Such a strike would take ‘shock and awe’ to a new level and leave Iran with few if any

conventional military capabilities to block the straits of Hormuz or provide conventional military support to insurgents in Iraq.”

The study all but ruled out the US use of nuclear weapons, declaring that “the human, political and environmental effects would be devastating, while their military value is limited.” But the authors did acknowledge “clear evidence that nuclear weapons use [against Iran] is being given serious political consideration” in the US. And while stating that a US or British nuclear attack on Iran was “most unlikely,” Plesch and Butcher did not think it impossible. They calculated that nearly three million “prompt deaths” would occur in the event that 300 kilotonne nuclear bombs were dropped on just 11 suspected Iranian WMD sites.

A substantial portion of the paper dealt with the various US options, using military forces already in place within the region, to counter Iranian responses to a US attack. “Iran has a weak airforce and anti-aircraft capability, almost all of it is 20-30 years old and it lacks modern integrated communications. Not only will these forces be rapidly destroyed by US air power, but Iranian ground and air forces will have to fight without protection from air attack,” the authors stated.

The paper noted the existence of standing US war plans to counter any blockade of the strategic straits of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf, and to seize the western Iranian province of Khuzestan, where the bulk of the country’s oil production occurs. It detailed the ability of the US military in neighbouring Iraq and Afghanistan to devastate forces and bases inside Iran hundreds of kilometres from the border without a ground invasion. It cited a variety of sources pointing to covert US operations already taking place inside Iran to identify targets and foment armed rebellion among ethnic and religious minorities.

Considering the question “how likely is an attack?” the authors pointed out: “The [US] administration has steadfastly refused to remove the military option from the table, and has continued to prepare to go to war. Congress rejected a proposal to require the president to consult it before going to war with Iran.” The study cited a number of menacing comments by senior Bush officials this year, as well as belligerent anti-Iranian statements by Republican and Democrat presidential candidates. It also noted Congressional moves for tougher measures against Tehran.

The authors rebutted many of the arguments commonly advanced as reasons why the US would not launch an attack on Iran. They assessed the likelihood of a compromise over Iran’s nuclear programs as “extremely remote” as “the United States refuses to offer any form of security guarantee to Iran, and indeed is actively engaged in attempts to undermine Iranian authorities.” As to the European Union’s attempts to broker a deal, “privately, and not so privately, senior US officials ... deride the EU’s efforts as futile.”

Responding to those who point out the US military is bogged down in Iraq and lacks troops, the study stated: “Army overstretch from long-term deployments in Iraq is a significant problem, but providing forces for a short duration war (following the pattern of the initial invasion of Iraq) would be much less of a problem. Iran has little ability for conventional military attack outside its own territory, allowing the US considerable scope to sit back and await internal developments after the type of attacks described in this paper.”

The paper also considers Iran’s capacity to retaliate in other ways, either directly against US

allies like Israel and US bases or indirectly by encouraging unrest among Iraqi Shiites. The authors regarded such arguments as strengthening the military case for an overwhelming, rather than limited, US attack. They pointed out that Iran retained some options for counter-missile strikes and had closely observed US military operations around its borders. "At the same time, the US armed forces have been preparing for this contingency for many years and it would be hard to be the military commander telling President Bush that Iran is just not 'doable.'"

Plesch and Butcher did not make any predictions about a war, but they did note that the lack of publicity surrounding US military preparations was no guarantee against a US attack. "US military, if not political, readiness for a war using minimum ground forces indicates that the current seeming inaction surrounding Iran is misleading. The United States retains the ability—despite difficulties in Iraq—to undertake major military operations against Iran. Whether the political will exists to follow such a course of action is known only to a few senior figures in the Bush administration."

Plesch and Butcher made no attempt to analyse the underlying economic and strategic reasons for a US attack on Iran or to consider in detail the potential for it triggering a broader war. Their study in no way challenged the escalating US propaganda campaign concerning Iran's alleged nuclear weapons programs. The real motivation for a reckless, new US war on Iran lies in the Bush administration's attempts to establish unfettered American dominance in the resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. Any outcome that allows America's European and Asian rivals to strengthen their influence in these key regions is simply intolerable to the US ruling elite.

The rather limited scope of the study only makes its conclusion all the more disturbing: the military preparations that would allow the Bush administration to reduce much of Iran to rubble at short notice have already been completed.

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