

From Al Qaeda to Al Quds: America prepares for War on Iran

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In 2002, in the runup to the war against Iraq, the George W Bush administration changed the subject from its failure to destroy al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan to Iraq's non-existent weapons of mass destruction.

In 2007, in the run-up to the coming war against Iran, the administration has changed the subject from its abject failure in Iraq to Iran's also non-existent nuclear weapons. The manufacture-of-consent techniques are exactly the same - the apocalyptic 2007 Bush forecast of an Iranian-orchestrated "nuclear holocaust", echoing Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's apocalyptic 2002 prediction of a Saddam Hussein-orchestrated "mushroom cloud".

Vastly experienced European diplomats, from Paris to the European Union headquarters in Brussels, confess their helplessness and impotence. They also confirm off the record that Bush's brand-new European poodle, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, is convinced the US president will order the bombing of Iran's nuclear sites - not to mention general infrastructure. A number of chancelleries are already working under this premise.

The Democrat-controlled US Congress, for its part, has elevated its irrevocable irrelevance to the starry skies by virtually - and ignominiously - playing itself out of the Bush administration's decision to attack Iran. In the unlikely event Congress would object, Rice already has the anti-virus vaccine: the stamping out of the Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Eslami - known in the West as the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) - as a "terrorist organization".

It doesn't even matter - from the point of view of the Bush administration - if the whole 125,000-strong IRGC or just its elite Quds Force is branded as terrorists. The transition will be covered by the Authorization for the Use of Military Force issued on September 18, 2001. Moreover, the US Senate has already approved - by a Stalinist 97 votes to 0 - an amendment accusing Iran of committing acts of war against the US.

It also doesn't matter that Gabriel Kolko - arguably the best historian of the Vietnam War - keeps stressing that since 1950, the US has never lost a battle; but it has never won a war either.

And now for the laundry list

Every serious observer of the hysterical manufacture-of-consent rampage is now aware of Vice President Dick Cheney's mandate for US corporate media and selected think-tanks to declare war on Iran - that is, the Office of the Vice President telling the Wall Street Journal,

Fox News and assorted usual suspects what to do, all under the aegis of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), the de facto policy think-tank of the Bush administration. AEI's stalwart Michael Ledeen's new book – a prodigy of subtlety titled *Iranian Time Bomb: The Mullah Zealot's Quest for Destruction* – is a key part of this package.

Everyone is aware of the shrill Pentagon-concocted blitzkrieg about made-in-Iran explosive devices and roadside bombs penetrating Bradleys and Abrams tanks and killing scores of US soldiers in Iraq – with no proof being volunteered to, or asked for, by cowed mainstream media.

Many are now aware of the report by Daniel Plesch and Martin Butcher summarized last month by the Raw Story website [1], according to which the Pentagon, in the impossibility of a land invasion, plans a “massive, multi-front, full-spectrum” new “shock and awe” against Iran, destroying not only the Quds force and the IRGC but all nuclear energy sites and the country's whole economic infrastructure. The objective is clearly “regime change” – or at least to reduce Iran to Iraq status, that is, a feeble, failed state.

The paper was written by British scholar and arms expert Dan Plesch, director of the Center for International Studies and Diplomacy of the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, and Martin Butcher, a former director of the British American Security Information Council and former adviser to the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament.

The neo-conservatives for their part are plugging a new “shock and awe” in a slightly watered down version – the destruction of no less than 1,200 Iranian military/nuclear targets in a mere three days (no attacks on civilian infrastructure are mentioned).

The to-be-destroyed list certainly includes the Russian-built Bushehr nuclear power plant; the uranium enrichment plant in Natanz; a heavy-water and radioisotope plant in Arak; the nuclear fuel unit in Ardekan; the uranium conversion and nuclear technology center in Isfahan; the Tehran Nuclear Research Center; the Tehran molybdenum, iodine and xenon radioisotope production plant; and the Tehran Jabr Ibn Hayan Multipurpose Laboratories. No one of course is talking about “collateral damage”, or the fact that hundreds of Russian experts may be obliterated in Bushehr (how about that as a declaration of war?), or the fact that hundreds of thousands of civilian residents of fabled Isfahan may become victims of radiation provoked by US mini-nukes.

Meanwhile, Bush and “new Adolf Hitler” Mahmud Ahmadinejad keep feeding on each other. The Iranian president has dismissed a US attack (“they cannot implement it”) as well as the new, Sarkozy-coined (“he's inexperienced”) Western choice: “The Iranian bomb or the bombing of Iran.” As far as Ahmadinejad is concerned, “Iran's nuclear case is closed. Iran is a nuclear nation and has mastered the nuclear fuel cycle.”

Cleverly diverting attention from gargantuan US problems – from the economy to energy dependence to the emergence of multilateral powers – the Bush administration nevertheless seems to be winning the propaganda war as well, at least in the US, Western Europe and great swaths of the Arab world. Iran, internationally, looks very much isolated.

Asymmetrical war ahead

The Iranian regime anyway is clearly getting ready to face the coming attack.

Kazemi Qomi, the Iranian ambassador in Baghdad, hails from the IRGC. Speaking this week to official news agency IRNA, he has indirectly warned the US in no uncertain terms “any change in [Iraq’s Prime Minister Nuri al-] Maliki’s government will lead to the outbreak of a security crisis in Iraq”. This could be code, for instance, for the IRGC-trained Badr Corps giving to the Iranians the precise coordinates of American forces to be targeted inside Iraq.

This past Saturday, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei named the vastly experienced General Mohammad Ali Jafari as the new leader of the IRGC. The former leader for the past 10 years, Yahya Rahim Safavi, has been catapulted upwards and is now the “military advisor” for the supreme leader. Sources in Tehran say this move was not a reaction to the US threat. Both commanders told the Iranian press the decision had been made in early July.

US neo-cons may be oblivious to it, but it’s always crucial to remember that in Iran the IRGC as well as the regular army are under the control of a civilian cleric, the supreme leader. New commander Jafari himself, in a press conference in Tehran, defined the IRGC as “a precautionary force at the service of the commander-in-chief in order to rush to the help of other organizations wherever help is necessary”.

The IRGC, a former popular army that blossomed out of the 1979 Islamic Revolution must, according to the country’s constitution “guard the revolution and its achievements”. The regular army for its part “guards the independence, territorial integrity, and political order of the Islamic Republic”.

During the revolution, Jafari was a student at the elite architecture school at the University of Tehran. According to his own biography he “was active in the takeover” of the American Embassy. He went to the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s as a member of the Basij militia, and then joined the IRGC when he was 25 (he’s 50 today), and soon became a commander. After the war he was a commander of the IRGC’ ground forces. In 2005, the supreme leader put him in charge of the IRGC’s Strategic Center, developing a new Iranian military strategy.

This fine strategist identifies the IRGC’s role as mostly “deterrence and defense”. More importantly, he characterizes the IRGC as a popular organization excelling in asymmetrical war – “similar to the one Hezbollah fought against Israel” in his own words – and, one might add, similar to what Iran will fight against the US. His message to the US after his appointment was clear: “I suggest that they end their presence and interact with Islam and countries of the region from afar. This will surely be to their benefit and I suggest that they leave the region as soon as possible.”

The eternal Rafsanjani

This past Tuesday, former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani became the head of the Council of Experts – the supreme, secretive body of 86 clerics that chooses the supreme leader’s successor. He won by 41 to 33 votes, with 11 abstentions and one spoiled ballot.

Rafsanjani had already been the most voted in the December 2006 elections for the council, but he was still number two to Ayatollah Ali Meshkini, who died at the end of June. A key “spoiler” figure – ultra-hardliner Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, Ahmadinejad’s mentor – did not even contest this latest election; it was Ayatollah Janati, a protege of Yazdi, who lost to Rafsanjani.

First of all, this means a new, although narrow, defeat of the ultra-hardliners. It also shows how fierce is the competition among at least four factions at the top of the Iranian system. But most of all it fully restores Rafsanjani – a pragmatist very much in favor of an accommodation with the US – to the limelight. He is now the head of both the Expediency Council (for which he was nominated by Khamenei) and the Council of Experts. He now even has the power to depose the supreme leader if he sees fit. US conservatives would be certainly thrilled with the prospect.

Rafsanjani's perception in Iran is mixed. He's very popular among Tehran's middle classes. The faraway provinces mostly support populist Ahmadinejad. Arguably the richest man in the whole country, he may also be one of the most corrupt. His presidency (1989-1997), according to reformists in Tehran, was a disaster. The justice system in Argentina has issued an international warrant for his arrest, related to an anti-Israeli bombing in Buenos Aires in 1994 which killed 85 people.

Rafsanjani would use all his privileged back channels in Washington to avoid war. He is very much aware of the stakes, declaring after his election, "The United States plan for the Great Middle East, which was drawn up after September 11 [2001] seriously threatens our region." But he may be as helpless to defuse the situation as dejected European diplomats.

The only guiding logic of the US far right in power is permanent war. The hellish mechanism is already in place. Any pretext will do for Bush to order an attack on the Quds force inside Iran. The IRGC will retaliate. And there it is, the precious casus belli for "shock and awe" remixed. First the bombing of Quds; then the bombing of Bushehr, Natanz and Isfahan. The whole of Iran, out of Persian national pride, will rally behind Ahmadinejad, the supreme leader, the IRGC and the theocratic police state. So much for regime change.

Note

1. Considering a war with Iran: A discussion paper on WMD in the Middle East.

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