

Iran: the Next War

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Bush and Blair are gearing up for it, and they are preparing us, too – just as they did before attacking Iraq. But where is the threat?

Has Tony Blair, our minuscule Caesar, finally crossed his Rubicon? Having subverted the laws of the civilised world and brought carnage to a defenceless people and bloodshed to his own, having lied and lied and used the death of a hundredth British soldier in Iraq to indulge his profane self-pity, is he about to collude in one more crime before he goes?

Perhaps he is seriously unstable now, as some have suggested. Power does bring a certain madness to its prodigious abusers, especially those of shallow disposition. In *The March of Folly: from Troy to Vietnam*, the great American historian Barbara Tuchman described Lyndon B Johnson, the president whose insane policies took him across his Rubicon in Vietnam. “He lacked [John] Kennedy’s ambivalence, born of a certain historical sense and at least some capacity for reflective thinking,” she wrote. “Forceful and domineering, a man infatuated with himself, Johnson was affected in his conduct of Vietnam policy by three elements in his character: an ego that was insatiable and never secure; a bottomless capacity to use and impose the powers of his office without inhibition; a profound aversion, once fixed upon a course of action, to any contradictions.”

That, demonstrably, is Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and the rest of the cabal that has seized power in Washington. But there is a logic to their idiocy – the goal of dominance. It also describes Blair, for whom the only logic is vainglorious. And now he is threatening to take Britain into the nightmare on offer in Iran. His Washington mentors are unlikely to ask for British troops, not yet. At first, they will prefer to bomb from a safe height, as Bill Clinton did in his destruction of Yugoslavia. They are aware that, like the Serbs, the Iranians are a serious people with a history of defending themselves and who are not stricken by the effects of a long siege, as the Iraqis were in 2003. When the Iranian defence minister promises “a crushing response”, you sense he means it.

Listen to Blair in the House of Commons: “It’s important we send a signal of strength” against a regime that has “forsaken diplomacy” and is “exporting terrorism” and “flouting its international obligations”. Coming from one who has exported terrorism to Iran’s neighbour, scandalously reneged on Britain’s most sacred international obligations and forsaken diplomacy for brute force, these are Alice-through-the-looking-glass words.

However, they begin to make sense when you read Blair’s Commons speeches on Iraq of 25 February and 18 March 2003. In both crucial debates – the latter leading to the disastrous vote on the invasion – he used the same or similar expressions to lie that he remained committed to a peaceful resolution. “Even now, today, we are offering Saddam the prospect of voluntary disarmament . . .” he said. From the revelations in Philippe Sands’s book

Lawless World, the scale of his deception is clear. On 31 January 2003, Bush and Blair confirmed their earlier secret decision to attack Iraq.

Like the invasion of Iraq, an attack on Iran has a secret agenda that has nothing to do with the Tehran regime's imaginary weapons of mass destruction. That Washington has managed to coerce enough members of the International Atomic Energy Agency into participating in a diplomatic charade is no more than reminiscent of the way it intimidated and bribed the "international community" into attacking Iraq in 1991.

Iran offers no "nuclear threat". There is not the slightest evidence that it has the centrifuges necessary to enrich uranium to weapons-grade material. The head of the IAEA, Mohamed ElBaradei, has repeatedly said his inspectors have found nothing to support American and Israeli claims. Iran has done nothing illegal; it has demonstrated no territorial ambitions nor has it engaged in the occupation of a foreign country – unlike the United States, Britain and Israel. It has complied with its obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty to allow inspectors to "go anywhere and see anything" – unlike the US and Israel. The latter has refused to recognise the NPT, and has between 200 and 500 thermonuclear weapons targeted at Iran and other Middle Eastern states.

Those who flout the rules of the NPT are America's and Britain's anointed friends. Both India and Pakistan have developed their nuclear weapons secretly and in defiance of the treaty. The Pakistani military dictatorship has openly exported its nuclear technology. In Iran's case, the excuse that the Bush regime has seized upon is the suspension of purely voluntary "confidence-building" measures that Iran agreed with Britain, France and Germany in order to placate the US and show that it was "above suspicion". Seals were placed on nuclear equipment following a concession given, some say foolishly, by Iranian negotiators and which had nothing to do with Iran's obligations under the NPT.

Iran has since claimed back its "inalienable right" under the terms of the NPT to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes. There is no doubt this decision reflects the ferment of political life in Tehran and the tension between radical and conciliatory forces, of which the bellicose new president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is but one voice. As European governments seemed to grasp for a while, this demands true diplomacy, especially given the history.

For more than half a century, Britain and the US have menaced Iran. In 1953, the CIA and MI6 overthrew the democratic government of Muhammed Mossadeq, an inspired nationalist who believed that Iranian oil belonged to Iran. They installed the venal shah and, through a monstrous creation called Savak, built one of the most vicious police states of the modern era. The Islamic revolution in 1979 was inevitable and very nasty, yet it was not monolithic and, through popular pressure and movement from within the elite, Iran has begun to open to the outside world – in spite of having sustained an invasion by Saddam Hussein, who was encouraged and backed by the US and Britain.

At the same time, Iran has lived with the real threat of an Israeli attack, possibly with nuclear weapons, about which the "international community" has remained silent. Recently, one of Israel's leading military historians, Martin van Creveld, wrote: "Obviously, we don't want Iran to have nuclear weapons and I don't know if they're developing them, but if they're not developing them, they're crazy."

It is hardly surprising that the Tehran regime has drawn the “lesson” of how North Korea, which has nuclear weapons, has successfully seen off the American predator without firing a shot. During the cold war, British “nuclear deterrent” strategists argued the same justification for arming the nation with nuclear weapons; the Russians were coming, they said. As we are aware from declassified files, this was fiction, unlike the prospect of an American attack on Iran, which is very real and probably imminent.

Blair knows this. He also knows the real reasons for an attack and the part Britain is likely to play. Next month, Iran is scheduled to shift its petrodollars into a euro-based bourse. The effect on the value of the dollar will be significant, if not, in the long term, disastrous. At present the dollar is, on paper, a worthless currency bearing the burden of a national debt exceeding \$8trn and a trade deficit of more than \$600bn. The cost of the Iraq adventure alone, according to the Nobel Prizewinning economist Joseph Stiglitz, could be \$2trn. America’s military empire, with its wars and 700-plus bases and limitless intrigues, is funded by creditors in Asia, principally China.

That oil is traded in dollars is critical in maintaining the dollar as the world’s reserve currency. What the Bush regime fears is not Iran’s nuclear ambitions but the effect of the world’s fourth-biggest oil producer and trader breaking the dollar monopoly. Will the world’s central banks then begin to shift their reserve holdings and, in effect, dump the dollar? Saddam Hussein was threatening to do the same when he was attacked.

While the Pentagon has no plans to occupy all of Iran, it has in its sights a strip of land that runs along the border with Iraq. This is Khuzestan, home to 90 per cent of Iran’s oil. “The first step taken by an invading force,” reported Beirut’s Daily Star, “would be to occupy Iran’s oil-rich Khuzestan Province, securing the sensitive Straits of Hormuz and cutting off the Iranian military’s oil supply.” On 28 January the Iranian government said that it had evidence of British undercover attacks in Khuzestan, including bombings, over the past year. Will the newly emboldened Labour MPs pursue this? Will they ask what the British army based in nearby Basra – notably the SAS – will do if or when Bush begins bombing Iran? With control of the oil of Khuzestan and Iraq and, by proxy, Saudi Arabia, the US will have what Richard Nixon called “the greatest prize of all”.

But what of Iran’s promise of “a crushing response”? Last year, the Pentagon delivered 500 “bunker-busting” bombs to Israel. Will the Israelis use them against a desperate Iran? Bush’s 2002 Nuclear Posture Review cites “pre-emptive” attack with so-called low-yield nuclear weapons as an option. Will the militarists in Washington use them, if only to demonstrate to the rest of us that, regardless of their problems with Iraq, they are able to “fight and win multiple, simultaneous major-theatre wars”, as they have boasted? That a British prime minister should collude with even a modicum of this insanity is cause for urgent action on this side of the Atlantic.

With thanks to Mike Whitney. John Pilger’s new book, *Freedom Next Time*, will be published by Bantam Press in June

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