

Targeting Tehran: US-Israeli Military Plan formulated in 2001

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This article published by Global Research in early January 2002, points to Israel's intent to wage war on Iran. These plans have now entered their operational phase.

Israel is waging a diplomatic offensive to persuade the US administration that Iran should be next on the "war against terror" hit list.

Targeting Tehran

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Where will the US strike next? The question has been splashed across the world's media and is being asked of political and military analysts everywhere. Washington remains tight-lipped on the subject. But Israel, its closest ally, seems to have made up its mind.

Israeli officials are trying to persuade their friends in the US that Iran should be next on the hit list. Iran is a major source of backing for Lebanon's Hizbullah — a common enemy to both Israel and the US. Iran, Israel claims, is giving military and financial backing to armed Palestinian groups in the occupied territories, something apparently confirmed by the Karin-A affair which has recently hit the headlines. US intelligence reports about Iran's nuclear potential may also be used to further the case against Iran.

Israeli Defence Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer is likely to use these kinds of arguments during his Washington visit later this month.

Iran is a long-time US bogeyman, a free agent in a region that — as Washington sees it — could use some disciplining. Ever since the Islamic revolution in 1979, the US and Iran have been sworn enemies. Iran's attempts to export its revolutionary ideology may have been tempered by age, but they have not been totally forgotten.

Just before 11 September, Iran sent naval and air forces to the Caspian Sea to safeguard an emerging status quo that gives it a share in the area's rich oil resources. Iranian forces drove US companies, which were ostensibly prospecting on behalf of other Caspian Sea countries, out of what Tehran claims to be Iranian territorial water.

Another worry for Washington is the affinity that mostly-Shi'ite Central Asian countries feel for Iran. Furthermore, Iran's half-hearted support for the US-led international coalition did not please US officials as much as it might.

One effect of the Afghanistan debacle has been increased tensions between countries that once supported one Afghan faction or another. This is good news to the Americans, who now see themselves as the region's ultimate power broker. The recent rise of temperature in India-Pakistan relations is just one of many signs that a scramble for power is afoot in the region.

From the US point of view, Iran remains an untamed opponent, a local power to be subdued. The Israelis, of course, would be glad to help. It would not be surprising, therefore, to see some measure being taken against Iran in the near future: A package of US-style international economic sanctions, or perhaps a strike by Israel, may be on the cards. The war of words is already on.

On Thursday, President George W Bush warned Tehran against attempting to destabilise Afghanistan and called on Iranian officials to cooperate in the war against terror and not to allow Al- Qa'eda members to take refuge in Iran. The Iranian government responded by calling Bush's statements groundless. The US president was not impressed. He reiterated that neutrality is unacceptable in the US war against terror. "You're either with us or against us," Bush said, calling on Iran to play a more active role in the coalition.

Iran's Arab neighbours the Iraqis may be even higher on the US hit list, however, and Iranian officials are divided as to whether they should support a possible US strike against Iraq. Ayatollah Khamenei's followers oppose a US strike against their neighbour, for fear that the Americans would install a US-backed regime in Baghdad. Current Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, they argue, is better than a US-backed regime that may instigate regional trouble.

Iranian President Khatami's supporters are more philosophical about the situation, however. If the coalition is determined to strike at Iraq, they argue, it would be less politically costly for Iran to support the strike than oppose it.

Khatami's supporters expect that the coalition will take one of two paths of action against Baghdad. Iraq will either be subjected to tougher sanctions and closer monitoring through the return of weapons inspectors — or be dealt with by a military strike aimed at overthrowing the regime. Iranian intelligence are reporting widespread discontent in Iraq as the regime scrambles to mobilise on all fronts.

There is also the question of missiles. The CIA is warning that the US may face a ballistic missile attack by North Korea, Iran, or Iraq during the next 15 years. According to a CIA report, prepared in December and leaked two weeks ago, Iran and Iraq will take a few years yet to produce a nuclear weapon. North Korea already has one or possibly two nuclear weapons, however. Baghdad still has a limited number of Scud missiles, but is unlikely to be able to test a long- range missile that can reach the US before 2015. In the absence of monitoring, the report says, Iraq will need years before collecting enough material to produce a nuclear device.

Iran, on the other hand, could produce a nuclear weapon by 2010 according to the CIA. It is currently developing a missile, Shehab-3, with a range of 1,300 kilometres — which would put Israel squarely within striking distance. Israeli Defence Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer

has warned that Iran could develop nuclear capabilities sufficient to threaten Israel and the world by 2005. Iran would be in a better position to support terror if this happens, he argued.

For his part, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon says that Iran is pursuing three lines of policy that put it on a collision course with Israel. Firstly, Sharon said, Iran is giving arms to Hizbullah. He mentioned the figure of 8,000 Katyusha rockets. Secondly, Tehran is also supplying the Palestinian Authority with weapons. Here Sharon reiterated his claims about the ship Karine-A.

Thirdly, claimed Sharon, Iran is maintaining active links with the Arab minority in Israel. In a statement given to Israeli newspaper Maarev, the prime minister said he felt that Iran could strike Israel on more than one front.

If the Palestinian Authority were to use Iranian-supplied weapons against Israel, for example, Hizbullah would fire the Katyushas at northern Israeli villages.

The message Israeli officials are hinting at with the Americans is that Iran is a threat so serious that Israel will have to react, with or without US support. The Iranian nuclear reactor is no less of a threat to Israel than the Iraqi one which Israel destroyed two decades ago, Israeli officials maintain.

Ben-Eliezer's visit to Washington is likely to focus on this topic, and speculation is already underway that Israel is planning a strike against Iran's nuclear reactor.

Iran, aware of these moves, is annoyed but defiant. Former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani described George W Bush's remarks as "crude and insulting," saying Iran cannot let itself be bullied by the US. Iranian officials are concerned about increased US influence in Afghanistan and other neighbouring countries. They also fear that once the US gets matters settled in Afghanistan, it will begin targeting other Arab and Islamic countries.

Tehran was particularly piqued by a recent visit by Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres to India, during which the Israeli minister made statements which the Iranians regarded as provocative.

At the moment, however, Iran is virtually surrounded. Western troops and allies are deployed all around it: Turkey to the northwest, US bases in Uzbekistan to the northeast, US forces in Afghanistan to the east, possible western bases in Pakistan, and — if Iraq's president is deposed — a possible pro-US regime in Baghdad.

Nevertheless, Tehran is not completely isolated. It has strong military links with North Korea, China and Russia. Its cooperation with these countries could conceivably help it amass an impressive arsenal of conventional and non-conventional weapons in the not-too-distant future.

North Korea is said to have developed ballistic missiles that can reach the US, but has voluntarily refrained from testing them. China has 75 to 100 nuclear warheads, most of them pointed at the US. Beijing also has 20 transcontinental missiles that can reach US soil, and 10 long-range missiles that could be used against Russian and Asian targets. Russia is an even more powerful ally. Even with a reduced nuclear arsenal, it will still have close to 2,000 nuclear warheads by 2015.

The proliferation of missile technology has worried the US so much that it is about to design a defence system against long-range missile attacks. This is the purpose of the so-called missile shield, an idea which is making many uncomfortable. China has already voiced opposition to such system, for fear that it may be used to protect Taiwan.

Newly installed Afghan officials, too, have expressed some animosity toward Iran. Official sources in Kabul have accused Iran of providing support to local Afghan tribal chiefs who oppose foreign presence in Afghanistan. Tehran thinks the charges are motivated by the new government's desire to please India and Israel, among others.

For the time being, though, the Iranians are keeping their cool with the new administration. They have even offered help in rebuilding Afghanistan's economy and army.

Before 11 September, Iran was already a major backer of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. Tehran's aim was to prevent the Taliban from controlling areas close to its western borders. During the civil war in Afghanistan, the Iranians established a strong intelligence presence in Afghanistan, and forged strong alliances. One of the friendships they developed was with a certain General Ismail Khan. A former Herat governor, Khan spent time in Taliban prisons and had to flee to Iran more than once. Last November, Khan described Iran as "a model" Islamic country. Iran's ability to stay on good terms with Afghanistan will depend on the goodwill of such friends.

A game of regional rivalry is unfolding from the shores of the Mediterranean to the Caspian Sea. It's a game in which Israel is eager to portray its foes as villains who should be brought to justice, and one in which the US is eager to strike more than one bird with the stone of anti-terror action. In this game, the true victims of terror — the Palestinian families who are now freezing in harsh winter weather in makeshift camps in Gaza — are all but forgotten.

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