

The Coming Uncertain War against Iran

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When Admiral William J “Fox” Fallon was chosen to replace General John Abizaid as chief of US Central Command (CENTCOM) in March 2007, many analysts didn’t shy from reaching a seemingly clear-cut conclusion: the Bush administration was preparing for war with Iran and had selected the most suitable man for this job. Almost exactly a year later, as Fallon abruptly resigned over a controversial interview with Esquire magazine, we are left with a less certain analysis.

Fallon was the first man from the navy to head CENTCOM. With the US army fighting two difficult and lengthy wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and considering the highly exaggerated Iranian threat, a war with Iran was apparently inevitable, albeit one that had to be conducted differently. Echoing the year-old speculation, Arnaud de Borchgrave of UPI wrote on 14 March 2007 that an attack against Iran “would fall on the US Navy’s battle carrier groups and its cruise missiles and Air Force B-2 bombers based in Diego Garcia”.

Fallon is a man of immense experience, having served equally high-profiled positions in the past (he was commander of US Pacific Command from February 2005 to March 2007). The Bush administration probably saw him further as a conformist, in contrast to his predecessor Abizaid who promoted a diplomatic rather than military approach and who went as far as suggesting that the US might have to learn to live with an Iranian nuclear bomb.

Fallon’s recent resignation may have seemed abrupt to many, but it was a well-orchestrated move. His interview in Esquire depicted him as highly critical of the Bush administration’s policy on Iran; the magazine described him as the only thing standing between the administration and their newest war plan. Further, his resignation and “Secretary of Defense Robert Gates’s handling of [it] is the greatest and most public break in the Bush team’s handling of preparations for war against Iran that we are ever likely to see,” wrote respected commentators and former CIA analysts Bill and Kathy Christison on 12 March. “Gates has in fact publicly associated himself with the resignation by saying it was the right thing for Fallon to do, and Gates said he had accepted the resignation without telling Bush first.”

Fallon’s resignation represents a bittersweet moment. On the one hand it’s an indication of the continued fading enthusiasm for the militant culture espoused by the neo-conservatives. On the other, it’s an ominous sign of the Bush administration’s probable intentions during the last year of the president’s term. Sixty-three-year-old Admiral Fallon would not have embarked on such a momentous decision after decades of service were it not for the fact that he knew a war was looming, and — having considered the historic implications for such a war — chose not to pull the trigger.

Unlike the political atmosphere in the US prior to the Iraq war — shaped by fear,

manipulation and demonisation — the US political environment is now much more accustomed to war opposition, which is largely encouraged and validated by the fact that leading army brass are themselves speaking out with increasing resolve. Indeed pressure and resistance are mounting on all sides; those rooting for another war are meeting stiff resistance by those who can foresee its disastrous repercussions.

The push and pull in the coming months will probably determine the timing and level of US military adventure against Iran, or even whether such an adventure will be able to actualise (one cannot discount the possibility that as a token for Israel, the US might provide a middle way solution by intervening in Lebanon, alongside Israel, to destroy Hizbullah. Many options are on the table, and another Bush-infused crisis is still very much possible).

In an atmosphere of hyped militancy, Fallon's resignation might be viewed as a positive sign, showing that the cards are not all stacked in favour of the war party. Nonetheless, it is premature to indulge in optimism. Prior signs have indicated a serious rift among those who once believed that war is the answer to every conflict. Yet that didn't necessary hamper the war cheerleaders' efforts.

Last December, the National Intelligence Estimate — an assessment composed by all American intelligence agencies — concluded that Iran halted its nuclear weapons programme in 2003, and that any such programme remained frozen. Meanwhile the “bomb-first-ask-questions-later” crowd suggested that such an assessment is pure nonsense. Republican presidential nominee Senator John McCain has since then sung the tune of “bomb Iran”, — literally — and Israel's friends continue to speak of an “existential” threat Israel faces due to Iran's “weapons” — never mind that Israel is itself a formidable nuclear power.

According to Borchgrave, “McCain's close friend Senator Joe Lieberman... invoking clandestine Iranian explosives smuggled into Iraq, has called for retaliatory military action against Tehran. He and many others warn that Israel faces an existential crisis. One Iranian nuclear-tipped missile on Jerusalem or Tel Aviv could destroy Israel, they argue.”

In fact, Lieberman, and other Israel supporters need no justification for war, neither against Iran nor any of Israel's foes in the Middle East. They have promoted conflicts on behalf of that country for many years and will likely continue doing so, until enough Americans push hard enough to restack their government's priorities.

An attack on Iran doesn't seem as certain as the war against Iraq always did. Public pressure, combined with courageous stances taken by high officials, could create the tidal wave needed to reverse seemingly determined war efforts. Americans can either allow those who continue to speak of “existential threats” and wars of a hundred years to determine and undermine the future of their country, and subsequently world security, or they can reclaim America, tend to its needy and ailing economy, and make up for the many sins committed in their name and in the name of freedom and democracy.

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