

US Military Threat directed against Iran: Muffled Voices, ElBaradei's Unheard Assessments

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In recent weeks, Mohamed ElBaradei, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), has repeatedly condemned any plans for military action against Iran by the United States and Israel. However, not only has little attention been given to ElBaradei's assessments by mainstream media sources, but traditionally well-reputed publications, including the Observer and Guardian, have reported distorted and unsubstantiated articles regarding Iran's intentions. The Campaign Against Sanctions and Military Intervention in Iran (CASMI) urges recognition of the dangerous path of the new phase of U.S.-Iran confrontation by all those who oppose the insane and criminal foreign policy of the Bush administration, for the sequences currently unfolding bear an unsettling resemblance to the events leading up to the American-led coalition's illegal and criminal invasion of Iraq. As the voices of ElBaradei and the United Nations are once again muted, the drum beating of warmongers in Washington, London, and Tel Aviv becomes louder and louder. This while the last two American wars have left one state, Afghanistan, in a dizzying opium high, and another state, Iraq, on fire.

Before continuing this analysis, it seems appropriate to point out the consistently erroneous portrayal of Iranian officials by news sources for this trend has accelerated in recent weeks and is part of a greater US attempt to vilify the country. For example, after the US Journal of Defense News recently stated that Iran's defense minister, Admiral Ali Shamkhani, argued that "Iran would attack Gulf countries used as a launch pad for a U.S. strike on Iran" ("Iran denies threat to hit Persian Gulf states," 12 June, 2007), Shamkhani quickly dismissed the report as "baseless" and a "bunch of lies" (Daily Star, "Iran Denies Threat to Hit Persian Gulf States," 12 June 2007). In spite of this refutation, however, the news was widely dispersed.

A June 10th article in the Observer by Mark Townsend alleged "a nuclear conspiracy to transfer 'weapons grade uranium' from Russia to Sudan as a 'trans-shipment point' ("MI6 probes UK link to nuclear trade with Iran"), the article goes on to claim, while presenting no supporting evidence, that the material was 'destined' for Iran. Townsend also refers to Iran's 'nuclear weapons programme,' a claim wholly unsupported by the inspectors of the IAEA, which is overlooking Iran's nuclear programme under a Safeguards Agreement"(CASMI Press Release, 12 June 2007).

Similarly, on May 22nd, the Guardian reported the claims of an anonymous senior U.S. official:

Iran is secretly forging ties with al-Qaida elements and Sunni Arab militias in Iraq in

preparation for a summer showdown with coalition forces They [Iran] are behind a lot of high-profile attacks meant to undermine US will and British will, such as the rocket attacks on Basra palace and the Green Zone. The attacks are directed by the Revolutionary Guard who are connected right to the top [of the Iranian government]... We expect that al-Qaida and Iran will both attempt to increase the propaganda and increase the violence... (qtd. in CASMII Press Release, 25 May 2007)

In spite of the potentially volatile nature of the claims made by the unnamed source, the author Simon Tisdall reports them as fact - almost entirely without qualification, sources, or supporting evidence.

These media distortions exist in the greater context of American funding of terrorist organizations within Iranian territory (The Independent, "Fear grips Iranian academics as radical groups launch campaign of intimidation," 16 June 2007), the refusal of American forces to return five Iranian diplomats taken hostage in Irbil in January, and arresting three other diplomats in Iraq on Friday June 15th (Islamic Republic News Agency, IRNA, "Iran strongly condemns arrest of 3 diplomats in Iraq," 16 June, 2007), American attempts to halt international business with Iranian banks and institutes (AFP, "US Treasury chief urges allies to blacklist Iran's banks," 15th June 2007), and American funding of exile organizations and domestic NGO's, "the survival of Iranian non-governmental organisations is being threatened by the US administration's continuing attempts to fund the country's civil society, leading activists have warned....But there is no sign the US administration will retreat. Condoleezza Rice, the secretary of state, made clear last month the US would not be deterred from funding pro-democracy efforts in Iran by requesting a sharp increase in spending to \$75m for "civil society and human rights projects in Iran" in 2008" (Financial Times, "US funds put Iran's activists in line of fire," 15 June 2007).

Additionally, continuous and unsubstantiated allegations against Iran by top U.S. government officials has unnecessarily led to an escalation of tensions: "Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns said in Paris that Tehran was directly supplying weapons to the Taliban. He told CNN television there was 'irrefutable evidence' that arms shipments were coming from Iran's government;" however, this account was quickly dismissed by Afghanistan's defense minister the following day (AP, "Afghan Official Denies Iran Arming Taliban," 14 June 2007). Furthermore, "on Saturday June 9, 2007, Shaul Mofaz the Israeli Deputy Prime Minister threatened to use military action against Iran (IRNA, "Tehran condemns Israeli threats against Iran," 12 June 2007). Prior to this, the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, in response to a question in April 2007 regarding whether military action would be an option against Iran said, "It is impossible perhaps to destroy the entire nuclear program but it would be possible to damage it in such a way that it would be set back years... it would take 10 days and would involve the firing of 1,000 Tomahawk cruise missiles" (IRNA, "Tehran condemns Israeli threats against Iran" 12 June 2007). Finally, Senator Joe Lieberman's call for a military attack of Iran on CBS last week further diverts attention from the assessments of the IAEA, an international organization created for exactly this purpose, halting inhumane aggression toward independent states.

What has ElBaradei stated amidst this cacophony of illegal military threats, lies and distortions? In May, ElBaradei announced that Iran has the knowledge for gaining nuclear expertise: "...we believe they pretty much have the knowledge about how to enrich. From now on, it is simply a question of perfecting that knowledge. People will not like to hear it, but that's a fact" (Reuters, "World Should Adapt to Iran Atom Advances, el-Baradei Says,"

16 May 2007). With this insight, however, ElBaradei stresses dialogue and negotiations, for sanctions and military attacks cannot destroy knowledge; ElBaradei's perspective illuminates the ineffectiveness of the current U.S. approach. As recently as Thursday, ElBaradei stated at the UN that an attack on Iran over its nuclear program would be "an act of madness ... even the idea of people talking about using force... it would be catastrophic, an act of madness, and it would not solve the issue" (qtd. in Reuters, IAEA urges Iran compromise to avert conflict, 14 June 2007).

More importantly, in a revealing and relatively unreported interview with BBC's Rob Broomby on May 8th 2007 ElBaradei presented a global and historical context to Iran's enrichment program. First, he highlighted the international instability created by global pursuit of nuclear weapons by the United States and Israel: "For the last ten days the parties to the NPT can't even agree on ... what to discuss. That's how dismal the state of affairs are. The reasons are very obvious. The reason that we still live in a world that relies on nuclear weapons, any country that feels insecure whether it's Iran, whether it's North Korea or any other country is tempted to develop possibly nuclear weapon because they see the 'big boys' continue to rely on nuclear weapons" (in CASMII interview transcript, 4 June 2007). ElBaradei goes on to explain that "whether they have the intention or they do not have the intention, one thing is clear, they are not today a clear and present danger and that is not only my view, that is the view of the MI6, that is the view of the CIA" (in CASMII interview transcript, 4 June 2007). He also explains the technological path Iran is on: "...having an enrichment capability and developing a weapon are two different things. There are certain countries that have enrichment capabilities, some non-nuclear weapons states, you have Japan, you have Brazil, you have Germany, it does not mean automatically that you have that, that you will immediately jump to acquiring nuclear weapons (in CASMII interview transcript, 4 June 2007). Finally, he supported Iran's legal right to pursue an enrichment program:

The issue having the capability as they do have the right under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, to enrich uranium or reprocess plutonium. The fact that every country has the right to sit on an enrichment factory means that the security margin we have is very thin because security perception could change over night and if you look at East Asia, if you look at North Korea, the fact that North Korea developed its nuclear weapon had a lot of implication, and could still have a lot of implications on its neighbouring countries. A few months ago Japan said we are going to have a discussion on whether we can have nuclear weapons or not. The issue that was raised by Iran goes much beyond Iran which means we need to make sure that all fuel cycle activities should be under multi-national control and that is why I have been, and many others, working toward establishing a multi-national control over fuel cycle that makes sure even if a country's perception of security has changed, they are not, they do not have at their disposal the nuclear material that they could develop into a nuclear weapon. So the issue of Iran is a serious issue, but the issue of Iran raises a lot much more fundamental questions about the efficacy of the Non-Proliferation and arms control regime. (CASMII interview transcript, 4 June 2007)

In recent interviews, ElBaradei has stated that Iran is three to eight years away from the capability to assemble nuclear explosives, stressing that "three years is a long time and we need to invest time in creative diplomacy" (Reuters, "IAEA urges Iran compromise to avert conflict," 14 June 2007). He has also called for a "time-out" - entailing both a stop to Iran's enrichment and the two rounds of UN sanctions - so the two sides can engage in dialogue. ElBaradei draws upon his bitter memories of the American invasion of Iraq as a motivating

factor to stop another act of American aggression:

It is highly unlikely, and I hope it is highly unlikely, but I do not want to see that [an American invasion of Iran] happen. I thought Iraq was highly unlikely and we still have 700,000 people who have died. When I wake up every morning and I see a hundred Iraqis, innocent civilians are dying I really don't have any sympathy, to say the least, for anybody saying that I am working under my brief. I have no brief other than to make sure we do not go into another war, or that we go crazy into killing each other. (CASMI interview transcript, 4 June 2007)

As the bridges uniting Iranian academia with their international colleagues burn, NGO's come to a complete stop and our writers, activists and scholars sit in Evin, the Bush administration continues on its military plans for regime change. ElBaradei, the figure most well versed in the Iranian program's progress, calls for the U.S. and Israel to halt plans of war against Iran, and we are left to wonder if anyone is listening.

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