

Considering a war with Iran

by George Vint

Dan Plesch, Director of the Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy at the University of London, and Martin Butcher, former Director of the British American Security Information Council (BASIC) have produced a discussion paper: *Considering a war with Iran*, which looks at US preparations for war with Iran.

Using open source analysis and their own assessments of the situation, the researchers conclude that the US already has its military prepared for a massive attack against Iran, without a ground invasion and with little contingency planning required. An attack limited to Iran's weapons facilities would leave Iran too many retaliatory options, leave President Bush open to the charge of using too little force and leave the regime intact. Any attack is therefore likely to target a wide range of installations and infrastructure, a 'full spectrum approach' with the aim of instigating the demise of the government or reducing Iran to 'a weak or failed state'. British military sources have stated (on condition of anonymity), that 'the US military switched its whole focus to Iran' from March 2003; this continues to be the case in spite of having such a large part of its military bogged down in the ongoing occupation of Iraq.

The report found that:

- US bombers and long range missiles are ready today to destroy 10,000 targets in Iran in a few hours.
- US ground, air and marine forces already in the Gulf, Iraq, and Afghanistan can devastate Iranian forces, the regime and the state at short notice.
- Nuclear weapons are ready, but most unlikely, to be used by the US, the UK and Israel. The human, political and environmental effects would be devastating, while their military value is limited.
- The attitude of the UK is uncertain, with the Brown government and public opinion opposed psychologically to more war, yet, were Brown to support an attack he would probably carry a vote in Parliament. The UK is adamant that Iran must not acquire the nuclear bomb.

Plesch and Butcher acknowledge that there are factors which might deter the Bush administration from carrying out such an attack, but they also point to the National Security Strategy which includes the elimination of Iran as a regional power as a major goal. A major air attack could destroy Iran's nuclear programme as well as destabilising the regime - following such an attack it would be difficult for the Iranian military to retain control of armed opposition and separatist groups. However, it would also be a very risky undertaking, with a strong possibility of increased global tension and hatred towards the United States, especially if the desired results were not achieved. The only likely allies for such an attack are Israel and the UK.



The technology which can project military power from the United States to anywhere in the world – known as Global Strike - is supposed to have had initial operational capability since December 2005. This is what might enable the US to launch a massive attack at very short notice. Meanwhile, US Marine forces are assembling in the Gulf; Special Force Units are believed to be operating within Iran already; US army units in both Iraq and Afghanistan could launch attacks on Iranian forces on the Iran-Iraq border and those protecting their supply lines in Iraq.

In spite of the disastrous war with Iraq, both Republican and Democratic Party presidential candidates are likely to make political capital out of a show of strength in relation to Iran. A range of spokespeople for both parties have repeatedly refused to rule out military action against Iran. Israel too seems to be preparing for a major attack and is likely to already be

involved in intelligence gathering within Iran, possibly training rebel groups to destabilise the government.

In Britain, Margaret Beckett and her successor David Miliband have both refused to rule out military action, reversing the position of Jack Straw as Foreign Secretary. The report's authors note that, if required, Gordon Brown would almost certainly be able to persuade Parliament to support the use of Diego Garcia for military action against Iran, and possibly even the direct involvement of British forces. These measures are unlikely to be opposed by the Tories. Relations between Britain and Iran have deteriorated recently; the capture of the British sailors in the Persian Gulf by Iran's Revolutionary Guard has hardened British attitudes, while Tehran is irked by repeated claims that Iran is fuelling the insurgency in southern Iraq. However, the authors believe that there is a possibility that the British public and elite will be strongly opposed to any military action, 'almost out of bloody minded revenge for the Iraq deceit.'

Conclusions of the report:

(1) If the attack is 'successful' and the US reasserts its global military dominance and reduces Iran to the status of an oil-rich failed state, then the risks to humanity in general and to the states of the Middle East are grave indeed.

(2) If the attack is pursued with the skill of the Iraq campaign then we face major and unpredictable escalation arising from the fallacy of attempting to make 'the last move' on the political game board... The Shakespearean quote, 'cry havoc and let loose the dogs of war' expresses the simple rule that wars, like fires, are far easier to start than to contain or put out.

(3) The potential for a major regional war over Iran should give greater impetus to all sides to avoid conflict and act on previously agreed objectives for security in the region as a whole. In this respect the UNSC (687, 1540) objective of establishing a WMD Free Zone in the Middle East should be given far greater political investment by all parties.

