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Iran Clock Is Ticking

By Robert Parry
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While congressional Democrats test how far they should go in challenging George W. Bush's war powers, the time may be running out to stop Bush from ordering a major escalation of the Middle East conflict by attacking Iran.

Military and intelligence sources continue to tell me that preparations are advancing for a war with Iran starting possibly as early as mid-to-late February. The sources offer some differences of opinion over whether Bush might cite a provocation from Iran or whether Israel will take the lead in launching air strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities.

But there is growing alarm among military and intelligence experts that Bush already has decided to attack and simply is waiting for a second aircraft carrier strike force to arrive in the region – and for a propaganda blitz to stir up some pro-war sentiment at home.

One well-informed U.S. military source called me in a fury after consulting with Pentagon associates and discovering how far along the war preparations are. He said the plans call for extensive aerial attacks on Iran, including use of powerful bunker-busting ordnance.

Another source with a pipeline into Israeli thinking said the Iran war plan has expanded over the past several weeks. Earlier thinking had been that Israeli warplanes would hit Iranian nuclear targets with U.S. forces in reserve in case of Iranian retaliation, but now the strategy anticipates a major U.S. military follow-up to an Israeli attack, the source said.

Both sources used the same word "crazy" in describing the plan to expand the war to Iran. The two sources, like others I have interviewed, said that attacking Iran could touch off a regional – and possibly global – conflagration.

"It will be like the TV show '24'," the American military source said, citing the likelihood of Islamic retaliation reaching directly into the United States.

Though Bush insists that no decision has been made on attacking Iran, he offered similar assurances of his commitment to peace in the months before invading Iraq in 2003. Yet leaked documents from London made clear that he had set a course for war nine months to a year before the Iraq invasion.

In other words, Bush's statements that he has no plans to "invade" Iran and that he's still committed to settle differences with Iran over its nuclear program diplomatically should be taken with a grain of salt.

There is, of course, the possibility that the war preparations are a game of chicken to pressure Iran to accept outside controls on its nuclear program and to trim back its regional ambitions. But sometimes such high-stakes gambles lead to miscalculations or set in motion dynamics that can't be controlled.

'You Will Die'

The rapidly deteriorating situation in Iraq is seen as another factor pressing on Bush to act quickly against Iran.

Other sources with first-hand knowledge of conditions in Iraq have told me that the U.S. position is even more precarious than generally understood. Westerners can't even move around Baghdad and many other Iraqi cities except in armed convoys.

“In some countries, if you want to get out of the car and go to the market, they'll tell you that it might be dangerous,” one experienced American cameraman told me. “In Iraq, you will be killed. Not that you might be killed, but you will be killed. The first Iraqi with a gun will shoot you, and if no one has a gun, they'll stone you.”

While U.S. war correspondents in most countries travel around in taxis with “TV” taped to their windows, Western journalists in Iraq move only in armed convoys to and from specific destinations. They operate from heavily guarded Baghdad hotels sometimes with single families responsible for security since outsiders can't be trusted.

The American cameraman said one European journalist rebelled at the confinement, took off on her own in a cab – and was never seen again.

Depression also is spreading among U.S. intelligence officials who monitor covert operations in Iraq from listening stations sometimes thousands of miles away. The results of these Special Forces operations have been so horrendous that morale in the intelligence community has suffered.

The futility of the Iraq War also is contributing to professional cynicism. Some intelligence support personnel are volunteering for Iraq duty not because they think they can help win the war but because the hazard pay is high and life in the protected Green Zone is relatively safe and easy.

Once getting past the risks of the Baghdad airport and the dangerous road into the city, U.S. civilian government personnel ensconce themselves in the Green Zone, which amounts to a bubble of U.S. creature comforts – from hamburgers to lounging by the pool – separate from the world of average Iraqis who are mostly barred.

Cooks are brought in from other countries out of the unstated concern that Iraqis might poison the food.

That American officials have come to view a posting in Iraq as a pleasant career enhancer – rather than a vital national security mission for the United States – is another sign that the war is almost certainly beyond recovery.

Another experienced observer of conflicts around the world told me that Bush's new idea of putting small numbers of U.S. troops among Iraqi government forces inside police stations represents an act of idiocy that is sure to get Americans killed.

Conditions in Iraq have so deteriorated – and animosity toward Americans has so metastasized – that traditional counterinsurgency strategies are hard to envision, too.

Normally, winning the hearts and minds of a target population requires a commitment to move among the people and work on public action projects, from building roads to improving the judicial system. But all that requires some measure of political goodwill and personal trust.

Given the nearly four years of U.S. occupation and the devastation that Iraq has suffered, not even the most talented American counterinsurgency specialists can expect to overcome the hatred swelling among large segments of Iraqi society.

Bush's “surge” strategy of conducting more military sweeps through more Iraqi neighborhoods – knocking down doors, gunning down hostile Iraqis and dragging off others to detention camps – is not likely to assuage hard feelings.

Wider War

So, facing slim odds in Iraq, Bush is tempted by the allure of escalation, a chance to blame the Iranians for his Iraq failure and to punish them with air strikes. He might see that as a way to buy time, a chance to rally his pro-war supporters and a strategy for enhancing his presidential legacy.

But the consequences both internationally and domestically – from possible disruption of oil supplies to potential retaliation from Islamic terrorists – could be devastating.

Yet, there is a sense of futility among many in Washington who doubt they can do anything to stop Bush. So far, the Democratic-controlled Congress has lagged behind the curve, debating how to phrase a non-binding resolution of disapproval about Bush's "surge" of 21,500 troops in Iraq, while Bush may be opening an entirely new front in Iran.

According to intelligence sources, Bush's Iran strategy is expected to let the Israelis take a lead role in attacking Iran's nuclear facilities in order to defuse Democratic opposition and let the U.S. intervention be sold as defensive, a case of a vulnerable ally protecting itself from a future nuclear threat.

Once American air and naval forces are committed to a new conflict, the Democrats will find it politically difficult to interfere at least in the near future, the thinking goes. A violent reaction from the Islamic world would further polarize the American population and let Bush paint war critics as cowardly, disloyal or pro-terrorist.

As risky as a wider war might be, Bush's end game would dominate the final two years of his presidency as he forces both Republican and Democratic candidates to address issues of war and peace on his terms.

On Jan. 10, the night of Bush's national address on the Iraq War, NBC Washington bureau chief Tim Russert made a striking observation about a pre-speech briefing that Bush and other senior administration officials gave to news executives.

"There's a strong sense in the upper echelons of the White House that Iran is going to surface relatively quickly as a major issue in the country and the world in a very acute way – and a prediction that in 2008 candidates of both parties will have as a fundamental campaign promise or premise a policy to deal with Iran and not let it go nuclear," Russert said. "That's how significant Iran was today."

So, Bush and his top advisers not only signaled their expectation of a "very acute" development with Iran but that the Iranian issue would come to dominate Campaign 2008 with candidates forced to spell out plans for containing this enemy state.

What to Do?

The immediate question, however, is what, if anything, can Congress and the American people do to head off Bush's expanded war strategy.

Some in Congress have called on Bush to seek prior congressional approval before entering a war with Iran. Others, such as Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pennsylvania, have asked Bush to spell out how expansive he thinks his war powers are.

"I would suggest respectfully to the President that he is not the sole decider," Specter said during a Senate hearing on war powers on Jan. 30. "The decider is a shared and joint responsibility."

But Bush and his neoconservative legal advisers have made clear that they see virtually no limits to Bush's "plenary" powers as Commander in Chief at a time of war. In their view, Bush is free to take military actions abroad and to waive legal and constitutional constraints at home because the United States has been deemed part of the "battlefield."

Nothing short of a direct congressional prohibition on war with Iran and a serious threat of impeachment would seem likely to give Bush more than a moment's pause. But congressional Republicans would

surely obstruct such measures and Bush might well veto any law that was passed.

Still, unless Congress escalates the confrontation with the President – and does so quickly – it may be too late to stop what could become a very dangerous escalation.

[For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com's “ [Logic of a Wider Mideast War.](#)”]

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Secrecy & Privilege: Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq*, can be ordered at [secrecyandprivilege.com](#). It's also available at [Amazon.com](#), as is his 1999 book, *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth*.'

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