

6 Signs the U.S. May Be Headed for War in Iran

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This report by the US mainstream press suggests in no uncertain terms that the US is heading for war with Iran and that opposition within the US high command has been significantly weakened with the forced resignation of Admiral William Fallon.

Is the United States moving toward military action with Iran?

The resignation of the top U.S. military commander for the Middle East is setting off alarms that the Bush administration is intent on using military force to stop Iran's moves toward gaining nuclear weapons. In announcing his sudden resignation today following a report on his views in *Esquire*, Adm. William Fallon didn't directly deny that he differs with President Bush over at least some aspects of the president's policy on Iran. For his part, Defense Secretary Robert Gates said it is "ridiculous" to think that the departure of Fallon — whose Central Command has been working on contingency plans for strikes on Iran as well as overseeing Iraq — signals that the United States is planning to go to war with Iran.

Fallon's resignation, ending a 41-year Navy career, has reignited the buzz of speculation over what the Bush administration intends to do given that its troubled, sluggish diplomatic effort has failed to slow Iran's nuclear advances. Those activities include the advancing process of uranium enrichment, a key step to producing the material necessary to fuel a bomb, though the Iranians assert the work is to produce nuclear fuel for civilian power reactors, not weapons.

Here are six developments that may have Iran as a common thread. And, if it comes to war, they may be seen as clues as to what was planned. None of them is conclusive, and each has a credible non-Iran related explanation:

1. Fallon's resignation: With the Army fully engaged in Iraq, much of the contingency planning for possible military action has fallen to the Navy, which has looked at the use of carrier-based warplanes and sea-launched missiles as the weapons to destroy Iran's air defenses and nuclear infrastructure. Centcom commands the U.S. naval forces in and near the Persian Gulf. In the aftermath of the problems with the Iraq war, there has been much discussion within the military that senior military officers should have resigned at the time when they disagreed with the White House.

2. Vice President Cheney's peace trip: Cheney, who is seen as a leading hawk on Iran, is going on what is described as a Mideast trip to try to give a boost to stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. But he has also scheduled two other stops: One, Oman, is a key

military ally and logistics hub for military operations in the Persian Gulf. It also faces Iran across the narrow, vital Strait of Hormuz, the vulnerable oil transit chokepoint into and out of the Persian Gulf that Iran has threatened to blockade in the event of war. Cheney is also going to Saudi Arabia, whose support would be sought before any military action given its ability to increase oil supplies if Iran's oil is cut off. Back in March 2002, Cheney made a high-profile Mideast trip to Saudi Arabia and other nations that officials said at the time was about diplomacy toward Iraq and not war, which began a year later.

3. Israeli airstrike on Syria: Israel's airstrike deep in Syria last October was reported to have targeted a nuclear-related facility, but details have remained sketchy and some experts have been skeptical that Syria had a covert nuclear program. An alternative scenario floating in Israel and Lebanon is that the real purpose of the strike was to force Syria to switch on the targeting electronics for newly received Russian anti-aircraft defenses. The location of the strike is seen as on a likely flight path to Iran (also crossing the friendly Kurdish-controlled Northern Iraq), and knowing the electronic signatures of the defensive systems is necessary to reduce the risks for warplanes heading to targets in Iran.

4. Warships off Lebanon: Two U.S. warships took up positions off Lebanon earlier this month, replacing the USS Cole. The deployment was said to signal U.S. concern over the political stalemate in Lebanon and the influence of Syria in that country. But the United States also would want its warships in the eastern Mediterranean in the event of military action against Iran to keep Iranian ally Syria in check and to help provide air cover to Israel against Iranian missile reprisals. One of the newly deployed ships, the USS Ross, is an Aegis guided missile destroyer, a top system for defense against air attacks.

5. Israeli comments: Israeli President Shimon Peres said earlier this month that Israel will not consider unilateral action to stop Iran from getting a nuclear bomb. In the past, though, Israeli officials have quite consistently said they were prepared to act alone — if that becomes necessary — to ensure that Iran does not cross a nuclear weapons threshold. Was Peres speaking for himself, or has President Bush given the Israelis an assurance that they won't have to act alone?

6. Israel's war with Hezbollah: While this seems a bit old, Israel's July 2006 war in Lebanon against Iranian-backed Hezbollah forces was seen at the time as a step that Israel would want to take if it anticipated a clash with Iran. The radical Shiite group is seen not only as a threat on its own but also as a possible Iranian surrogate force in the event of war with Iran. So it was important for Israel to push Hezbollah forces back from their positions on Lebanon's border with Israel and to do enough damage to Hezbollah's Iranian-supplied arsenals to reduce its capabilities. Since then, Hezbollah has been able to rearm, though a United Nations force polices a border area buffer zone in southern Lebanon.

Defense Secretary Gates said that Fallon, 63, asked for permission to retire. Gates said that the decision, effective March 31, was entirely Fallon's and that Gates believed it was "the right thing to do." In *Esquire*, an article on Fallon portrayed him as opposed to President Bush's Iran policy and said he was a lone voice against taking military action to stop the Iranian nuclear program. In his statement, Fallon said he agreed with the president's "policy objectives" but was silent on whether he opposed aspects of the president's plans. "Recent press reports suggesting a disconnect between my views and the president's policy objectives have become a distraction at a critical time and hamper efforts in the Centcom region," Fallon, said in the statement issued by Centcom headquarters in Tampa, Fla. "And

although I don't believe there have ever been any differences about the objectives of our policy in the Central Command area of responsibility, the simple perception that there is makes it difficult for me to effectively serve America's interests there," he said. Gates announced that Fallon's top deputy, Army Lt. Gen. Martin Dempsey, will take over temporarily when Fallon leaves. A permanent successor, requiring nomination by the president and confirmation by the Senate, might not be designated in the near term.

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