

Bush's Iraq Plan - Goaded Iran into War

By [Dr. Trita Parsi](#)

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President George W. Bush's address on Iraq Wednesday night was less about Iraq than about its eastern neighbor, Iran. There was little new about the US's strategy in Iraq, but on Iran, the President spelled out a plan that appears to be aimed at goading Iran into war with the US. While Washington speculated whether the president would accept or reject the Iraq Study Group's recommendations, few predicted that he would do the opposite of what James Baker and Lee Hamilton advised. Rather than withdrawing troops from Iraq, Bush ordered an augmentation of troop levels. Rather than talking to Iran and Syria, Bush virtually declared war on these states. And rather than pressuring Israel to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the administration is fuelling the factional war in Gaza by arming and training Fatah against Hamas.

Several recent developments and statements indicate that the administration is ever more seriously eyeing war with Iran. On Wednesday, Bush made the starkest accusations yet against the rulers in Tehran, alleging that the clerics were "providing material support for attacks on American troops."

While promising to "disrupt the attacks on our forces" and "seek out and destroy the networks providing advanced weaponry and training to our enemies in Iraq," he made no mention of the flow of arms and funds to Sunni insurgents and al Qaeda from Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

Instead, he revealed the deployment of an additional carrier strike group to the Persian Gulf and of the Patriot anti-missile defence system to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states to protect U.S. allies. The usefulness of this step for resolving the violence in Iraq remains a mystery. Neither the Sunni insurgents nor the Shia militias possess ballistic missiles. And if they did, nothing indicates that they would target the GCC states — Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The deployment of the Patriot missiles can be explained, however, in light of a U.S. plan to attack Iran. Last year, Tehran signalled the GCC states in unusually blunt language that it would retaliate against the Arab sheikhdoms if the U.S. attacked Iran using bases in the GCC countries. Mindful of the weakness of Iran's air force, Tehran's most likely weapon would be ballistic missiles — the very same weapon that the Patriots are designed to provide a shield against. A first step towards going to war with Iran would be to provide the GCC states with protection against potential Iranian retaliation.

Perhaps the starkest indication of an impending war with Iran is Washington's recent arrest of Iranian diplomats in Iraq. Around the time of President Bush's speech, U.S. Special Forces

— in blatant violation of diplomatic regulations reminiscent of the hostage taking of U.S. diplomats in Tehran by Iranian students in 1979 — stormed the Iranian consulate in Arbil in northern Iraq, arresting five diplomats. Later that day, U.S. forces almost clashed with Kurdish peshmerga militia forces when seeking to arrest more Iranians at Arbil's airport.

These operations incensed the Iraqi government, including its Kurdish components that otherwise are staunchly pro-Washington. "What happened... was very annoying because there has been an Iranian liaison office there for years and it provides services to the citizens," Iraq's Minister of Foreign Affairs Hoshiyar Zebari, who is himself a Kurd, told Al-Arabiya television.

The Bush administration has justified the raids — including the arrests of several Iranian officials in December last year — on the grounds that evidence is collected on Iranian involvement in destabilising Iraq. But if the purpose is intelligence gathering, it would make more sense to launch a simultaneous mass raid of Iranian offices rather than the current incremental approach that provides the Iranians forewarning and an opportunity to destroy whatever evidence they may or may not have in their possession.

The incremental raids and arrests may instead be aimed at provoking the Iranians to respond, which in turn would escalate the situation and provide the Bush administration with the casus belli it needs to win Congressional support for war with Iran. Rather than making the case for a pre-emptive war with Iran over weapons of mass destruction — a strategy the U.S. pursued with Iraq that is unlikely to succeed with Iran — the sequence of events in the provocation and escalation strategy would make it appear as if war was forced on the U.S.

Prominent Republican and Democratic Senators seem to have picked up on the president's war strategy. At Thursday's hearing in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska drew parallels with the Richard Nixon administration's strategy of lying to the U.S. people and expanding the Vietnam war into Cambodia. "[W]hen you set in motion the kind of policy that the president is talking about here," he warned Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, "it's very, very dangerous."

Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware added that war with Iran would require congressional authority. Still, Congress is yet to pose a major challenge to Bush's war plan beyond holding hearings with heated exchanges between frustrated Senators and defensive administration officials.

The next move may be Iran's. Tehran has likely sniffed the trap and will sit idly by for now and deprive the Bush administration of a pretext for escalation. But continued provocations from the U.S. through additional raids of Iranian consulates and offices will likely lead to an intentional or unintentional response, after which escalation and war may become reality. Iran has at times failed to exhibit the discipline necessary to refrain from responding to aggressions.

While the administration's calculation may be that lethal pressure on Iran will force Tehran to compromise, faith in Iran that offering concessions will prompt a change in the U.S.'s Iran-policy is next to nonexistent due to the Bush administration's past rejections of Iranian offers.

But Tehran may be able to change the political climate and escape Bush's war trap by

reinitiating talks with the European Union to address regional matters as well as the nuclear impasse. Europe's patience and faith in Iran has largely been depleted due to Tehran's failure to fully appreciate efforts by Javier Solana, high representative for the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy, to negotiate an agreement on enrichment suspension last fall.

Still, the EU understands that the tidal waves of a regional war in the Middle East will reach Europe much sooner than they reach U.S. shores. Whether Europe will stand up for its own values and security and against Bush's war plans, however, remains to be seen. Here, Tehran's offers are likely not inconsequential. (Inter Press Service) Back to the US-Iran Media Resource Project.

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