

Bush's tough tactics are a 'declaration of war' on Iran

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American forces stormed Iranian government offices in northern Iraq, hours after President George Bush issued a warning to Tehran that was described as a "declaration of war".

The soldiers detained six people, including diplomats, according to the Iranians, and seized documents and computers in the pre-dawn raid which was condemned by Iran. A leading UK-based Iran specialist, Ali Ansari, said the incident was an "extreme provocation". Dr Ansari said that Mr Bush's speech on future Iraq strategy amounted to "a declaration of war" on Iran.

"The risk is a wider war. Because of the underlying tensions, we are transferring from a 'cold war' into a 'hot war'," he said.

In his speech, the President accused Iran and Syria of providing material support for attacks on US troops, and vowed to stop the "flow of support" from across the border. "We will seek out and destroy the networks providing advanced weaponry and training to our enemies in Iraq," he said.

Dr Ansari argued that the Bush administration had decided to confront Iran at a time when public opinion has been focused on the conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia. "There's been a shift of emphasis without anyone noticing," he said.

"Moderate" Sunni Arab states who feel threatened by the rise of Shia Iran, thanks to its influence in Iraq and its refusal to curb its nuclear programme, could be expected to back the Bush approach, he said. The US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, is due to visit Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia this week.

Until now, the Bush administration had been content to deal with the perceived Iranian threat diplomatically. The United Nations adopted sanctions against Tehran on 23 December. However, the economic measures adopted by the UN have failed to convince Iran to halt its uranium-enrichment programme which could lead to production of a nuclear weapon. The US is calling on allied states to adopt tougher unilateral sanctions.

President Bush appointed Admiral William Fallon to replace General John Abizaid as head of Central Command for Iraq and Afghanistan last week in a sign that change could be afoot. This week, Mr Bush ordered a second aircraft carrier to the Gulf, along with its support ships, which could be used to contain Iran.

The US Treasury named Iran's Bank Sepah as a proliferator of weapons of mass destruction

on Tuesday, banned US companies or citizens from doing business with it and blocked any of its assets that come under American jurisdiction.

But if the US is preparing to confront Iran militarily – which some top military officials in Israel are reportedly recommending – the Bush administration will find itself involved in conflicts on four fronts.

In Somalia, US special forces have been pounding suspected al-Qa'ida suspects since early on Monday, in a continuing operation that risks pulling the Americans back into a conflict in a failed state. US forces are also active in southern Afghanistan in the hunt for the al-Qa'ida leader, Osama bin Laden, and his top associates. Al-Qa'ida has reactivated its Taliban allies who have become bolder in their attacks on coalition forces.

In Iraq, US troops are losing soldiers on an almost daily basis to the bombs of Sunni and Shia insurgents. The Shia-led government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was warned by Ms Rice yesterday that his days were numbered unless he was able to take on Shia militias who are his allies in government.

Ms Rice followed up President Bush's tough words on Iran by saying: "The President made very clear last night that we know Iran is engaged in activities endangering our troops... and that we're going to pursue those who may be involved in those activities."

Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman, Mohammad Ali Hosseini, protested against the raid by US forces in Arbil, saying on Iranian state-run radio that it targeted a "diplomatic mission" since the "presence of Iranian staffers in Irbil was legal".

Ironically, Iran had been contained by Saddam Hussein, until his overthrow by the Americans in 2003. Obsessed by a threat from "Persian hordes", Saddam maintained ambiguity about his weapons of mass destruction so Iran would believe that it had reason to fear its western neighbour. So have the Americans made a strategic mistake by refusing to engage with Iran? "There's no doubt that nothing good will come of this," said Dr Ansari.

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