

IAEA chief declares any attack on Iran “an act of madness”

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The latest meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which ended on Thursday, has set the stage for a new round of punitive measures against Iran over its nuclear programs. Washington is pressing for a third round of UN Security Council sanctions, but the presence of two US aircraft battle groups in the Persian Gulf is a constant reminder that the Bush administration is keeping “all options on the table”.

In his concluding remarks, IAEA director general Mohammed ElBaradei ominously warned that the use of force against Iran would be “an act of madness ... [that] would not resolve the issue.” Having witnessed firsthand the Bush administration’s use of lies about WMDs to justify military aggression against Iraq, ElBaradei is well aware that US “diplomacy” is also providing the pretext for war against Iran.

ElBaradei bluntly told the BBC a fortnight ago: “I wake up every morning and see 100 Iraqi innocent civilians are dying. I have no brief other than to make sure we don’t go into another war or that we go crazy into killing each other. You do not want to give [an] additional argument to the new crazies who say ‘let’s go and bomb Iran.’” Asked who the “new crazies” were, the IAEA chief refused to be drawn, simply saying: “Those who have extreme views and say the only solution is to impose your will by force.”

It is not difficult to identify who ElBaradei is referring to: the dominant sections of the American establishment. While the Bush administration publicly maintains the fiction that it wants a “diplomatic solution”, Vice President Dick Cheney and his supporters barely disguise their support for military action. All bar one of the Republican presidential candidates declared their willingness in a televised debate on June 5 to use nuclear weapons to destroy Iran’s atomic facilities. As for the Democratic contenders, most have publicly backed the US campaign of diplomatic bullying, economic sanctions and military threats that is preparing the ground for war against Iran.

Currently the Bush administration is presenting its diplomatic face. US IAEA envoy Gregory Schulte told Associated Press last Tuesday that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice “is ready to go to the [negotiating] table with our partners from Russia, China and Europe.... All the Iranians have to do is ... suspend ... uranium enrichment [and] plutonium production that aren’t necessary for civil purposes but are necessary if you want to build a bomb.”

Tehran, however, insists that its uranium enrichment plant at Natanz is not only necessary to ensure an indigenous supply of nuclear reactor fuel, but also conforms with its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The latest IAEA report presented to this

week's meeting confirms that Iran is operating 1,312 gas centrifuges and has more under construction. Tests confirmed that uranium was being enriched to 5 percent, not the 80-90 percent level needed to construct an atomic bomb. As for "plutonium production", what Schulte is actually referring to is a research reactor under construction at Arak, which is still years from completion.

The Iranian regime, moreover, quite legitimately has doubts that the US will negotiate in good faith. Tehran previously agreed to a "voluntary, non-binding" freeze of its uranium enrichment programs in 2004 to enable negotiations with Britain, France and Germany (the EU-3), later joined by the US, over a package of economic incentives to resolve the standoff. Iran insisted from the outset that it would not give up its right to uranium enrichment nor allow talks to drag on indefinitely, effectively making the freeze permanent. After nearly a year of discussions, the EU-3 finally made an offer that Tehran denounced as "an insult".

The US has offered no guarantee that new talks would be any different. In a bid to restart negotiations, ElBaradei has been pushing for a "time-out"—a freeze of Iran's nuclear programs in return for a suspension of UN sanctions—to allow for negotiations. In an interview with the *New York Times* last month, the IAEA chief argued that, as Iran had already demonstrated its ability to enrich uranium, diplomatic efforts should focus on containing the program by allowing for a limited research capacity. Not only has the US ignored proposals for a time-out, but, together with Britain, France and Japan, formally rebuked ElBaradei for suggesting a compromise.

In his remarks on Thursday, ElBaradei warned that time was running out, saying: "The next few months will be crucial." While noting that Iran was three to eight years away from having a bomb even if that was its intention, he added: "[T]he longer we delay, the less option we have to reach a peaceful solution." The Bush administration is publicly playing down Iran's enrichment capability, but a debate is undoubtedly continuing in the White House over timetables for the use of force. Following a visit to Washington last weekend, Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Shaul Mofaz reiterated Israeli's support for a "military option" and suggested that "diplomatic efforts should bear results by the end of 2007."

"Arming insurgents"

Iran's nuclear programs are not the only pretext for a US attack on Iran. Senator Joseph Lieberman, who describes himself as an "independent Democrat", yesterday repeated his call for "limited military action" against Iran. Last Sunday he accused Tehran of "training and equipping" insurgents to "kill US soldiers and Iraqis". On Friday, he extended the scope of his allegations to say that "Iran has already begun to carry out military action against American soldiers and a lot of our allies in the Arab world."

According to Lieberman, Iran's hand is behind every crisis in the Middle East. He cited the civil war between Palestinian factions in Gaza and the assassination on Wednesday of Lebanese parliamentarian Walid Eido in Beirut. "This is outrageous stuff going on and it's going to affect our security," he said. "If we don't ... stop Iranians from killing Americans and our Arab allies today, it's going to be impossible for us to do what everyone in both [American] parties and all ideologies say we have to do tomorrow, which is to stop them getting nuclear weapons," Lieberman ranted.

Lieberman, who remains a bellicose supporter of the Iraq war, provided no evidence to

support any of his wild claims. Even the official propaganda issuing regularly from the Pentagon and State Department stops short of claiming as proven that Iranian regime itself is supplying weapons to anti-US insurgents. Tehran has denied the accusation and in talks last month with US officials in Baghdad offered to assist in stabilising Iraq. As for the crises in Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon, the chief responsibility for the deepening instability rests with the US, which refused outright to recognise the elected Palestinian government and last year backed Israel's brutal war in southern Lebanon.

Lieberman is not an isolated individual, but reflects the views of the most militaristic layers of the Bush administration and American political establishment. True to form, the *Wall Street Journal* opened its pages to the senator yesterday to defend the US occupation of Iraq, as well as the Bush administration's "surge" strategy, and to repeat again: "Iran has initiated a deadly military confrontation with us, from bases in Iran, which we ignore at our peril, and at the peril of our allies throughout the Middle East."

No less significant are the repeated accusations being made by senior Bush officials that Iran is also supplying weapons to the Taliban in Afghanistan. Following comments by Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns on Tuesday, Defence Secretary Robert Gates repeated the allegation on Wednesday, saying: "[G]iven the quantities that we're seeing, it is difficult to believe that it is associated with smuggling or the drug business or that it's taking place without the knowledge of the Iranian government." Gates offered no evidence to support his claim, nor any explanation as to why Tehran would arm the Taliban fighters that it previously opposed throughout the late 1990s.

Speaking to Associated Press on Thursday, Afghan Defence Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak dismissed the statements of Burns and Gates, saying: "Actually, throughout, we have had good relations with Iran and we believe that the security and stability of Afghanistan are also in the interests of Iran.... There has been evidence of weapons, but it is difficult to link it to Iran. It is possible that [the arms] might be from Al Qaeda, from the drug mafia or from other sources." Such statements by Wardak, Afghan President Hamid Karzai and other top Afghan officials will do nothing to prevent the Bush administration from repeating its unproven claims.

The steady stream of anti-Iranian propaganda from Washington suggests that ElBaradei is not wrong to warn of the dangers of a new war. Lieberman's accusation that Iran is already "killing US soldiers" is aimed at mobilising the right-wing zealots that form the Bush administration's base of support, as well as providing a convenient excuse for a "defensive" war that would avoid the necessity for the UN Security Council to provide a legal figleaf. Needless to say, any "limited military action" by the US against Iran has the potential to involve US regional allies and engulf the entire Middle East.

An unprovoked military strike on Iran would be "an act of madness". There is, however, an underlying method to the Bush administration's madness. As a declining economic power, US imperialism is seeking to exploit its residual military might to dominate the key resource-rich regions of the globe. The occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, and now the aggressive push against Iran, are aimed at asserting US control over the Middle East and Central Asia and blocking the ambitions of its European and Asian rivals. That is why, despite the quagmire in Iraq, the Bush administration is still contemplating plans for regime change and war against Iran.

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