

Joint Chiefs Chairman Says U.S. Preparing Military Options Against Iran

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Global Research, April 25, 2008

Washington Post 25 April 2008

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The nation's top military officer said today that the Pentagon is planning for "potential military courses of action" against Iran, criticizing what he called the Tehran government's "increasingly lethal and malign influence" in Iraq.

Adm. Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said a conflict with Iran would be "extremely stressing" but not impossible for U.S. forces, pointing specifically to reserve capabilities in the Navy and Air Force.

"It would be a mistake to think that we are out of combat capability," he said at a Pentagon news conference.

Still, Mullen made clear that he prefers a diplomatic solution to the tensions with Iran and does not foresee any imminent military action. "I have no expectations that we're going to get into a conflict with Iran in the immediate future," he said.

Mullen's statements and others by Defense Secretary Robert Gates recently signal a new rhetorical onslaught by the Bush administration against Iran, amid what officials say is increased Iranian provision of weapons, training, and financing to Iraqi groups that are attacking and killing Americans.

In a speech Monday at West Point, Gates said that Iran "is hell-bent on acquiring nuclear weapons." He said a war with Iran would be "disastrous on a number of levels. But the military option must be kept on the table given the destabilizing policies of the regime and the risks inherent in a future Iranian nuclear threat."

Gen. David Petraeus, the top U.S. commander in Iraq, who was nominated this week to head all U.S. forces in the Middle East, is preparing a briefing soon to lay out detailed evidence of increased Iranian involvement in Iraq, Mullen said. The briefing will detail, for example, the discovery in Iraq of weapons that were very recently manufactured in Iran, he said.

"The Iranian government pledged to halt such activities some months ago. It's plainly obvious they have not. Indeed, they seem to have gone the other way," Mullen said.

He said recent unrest in the southern Iraqi city of Basra had highlighted a "level of involvement" by Iran that had not been understood by the U.S. military previously. "It became very, very visible in ways that we hadn't seen before," he said.

But while Mullen and Gates have recently stated that the Tehran government certainly must know of Iranian actions in Iraq, which they say are led by Iran's Revolutionary Guard, or

Quds Force, Mullen said he has “no smoking gun which could prove that the highest leadership [of Iran] is involved in this.”

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