

New US media campaign promotes military strike on Iran

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Global Research, January 13, 2009

[World Socialist Web Site](#) 12 January 2009

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

Front-page reports in two leading US newspapers Sunday signal a ratcheting up of US pressure on Iran and the preparation of American public opinion for a new round of US military aggression.

The New York Times published a lengthy article by its chief diplomatic correspondent, David Sanger, a long-time conduit for the concerns of the Pentagon and State Department, purporting to detail discussions between the Bush administration and Israel over the past year about possible air strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities.

The Washington Post carried a shorter but equally prominent article, written by correspondent Joby Warrick, recounting efforts by Iran to obtain electrical components from US and European suppliers, allegedly for Improvised Explosive Devices to be used against American forces in Iraq.

The provocative character of the Post article is demonstrated in its sensationalistic first sentence, which reads: "The Iranian businessman was looking for high-quality American electronics, but he had to act stealthily: The special parts he coveted were denied to Iranians, especially those seeking to make roadside bombs to kill US troops in Iraq."

Other than the florid prose, the Post article adds little to the public record provided by a federal court filing last fall in Miami in which the US Department of Justice charged four companies, based in Dubai, part of the United Arab Emirates, with acting as purchasing agents for the Iranian government. The principal company involved, Mayrow General Trading, was shut down by Dubai authorities in 2006.

As for the Times article, it provides new details about US-Israeli relations, as well as about US covert operations against Iran, which reportedly involve efforts to sabotage the Iranian nuclear enrichment program by supplying faulty equipment through third parties and also through the practice of cyber-warfare against Iranian computer systems.

But the article has the character less of an exposé than a semi-official declaration of the US government, sanctioned by both the outgoing Bush administration and the incoming Obama administration, represented in both cases by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, the first Pentagon chief to be carried over from one administration to its successor.

Times correspondent Sanger not only bases his account on interviews with US and Israeli military and intelligence officials, he acknowledges submitting to what amounts to government censorship, declaring, "Several details of the covert effort have been omitted from this account, at the request of senior United States intelligence and administration

officials, to avoid harming continuing operations.” This admission suggests that the article was pre-approved and “planted” by the US government.

The article portrays the Bush administration and Gates, in particular, as opposed to Israeli air strikes on Iranian nuclear targets, partly because they could not accomplish the goal of destroying the Iranian program and partly because of the likely backlash throughout the Middle East, especially in Iraq, where 140,000 US troops would be prime targets for any Iranian retaliation.

The article states that the Israelis approached the Bush administration early last year with three requests to facilitate air strikes on Iran: a supply of deep-penetrating bombs, equipment for refueling bombers in the air, and permission to use US-controlled Iraqi airspace.

According to Sanger, while stalling on the bombs and equipment, the White House flatly refused over flight permission, fearing the consequences for the US position in Iraq. He writes: “At the White House and the Pentagon, there was widespread concern that a political uproar in Iraq about the use of its American-controlled airspace could result in the expulsion of American forces from the country.”

The ongoing discussions between Washington and Jerusalem on whether and how to attack Iran have been the subject of multiple articles over the past five years by Seymour Hersh of the New Yorker magazine, based on leaks from Pentagon and CIA sources. Sanger adds little that is new in this area.

The Israeli technical preparations for air strikes on Iran have been quite open, including well-publicized military exercises last summer over the Mediterranean, in which Israeli warplanes simulated a bombing mission of the same length as a direct flight to Natanz, Iran’s main nuclear research and uranium enrichment facility.

Israel has completed purchase of 90 F-16I fighter-bombers from the US, which can carry enough fuel to reach Iran, (flying east from Israel through Jordan and Iraq), as well as two new Dolphin submarines from Germany that could fire nuclear-armed warheads against Iran, in addition to three similar vessels already in service.

Iran has sought to parry these moves by upgrading its air defense capabilities, buying 29 new Tor-M1 surface-to-air missile systems from Russia in 2007, and seeking delivery of an even more advanced Russian surface-to-air missile, the S-300. Israeli and US officials have sought to pressure Moscow not to deliver that weapons system.

There is a sinister side to Sanger’s discussion of US covert operations against Iran. Towards the end of his article, he singles out a top Iranian nuclear scientist, noting that one goal of the US activities was to “keep the pressure on a little-known Iranian professor named Mohsen Fakrizadeh, a scientist described in classified portions of American intelligence reports as deeply involved in an effort to design a nuclear warhead for Iran.”

What kind of “pressure” is Sanger talking about in this chilling passage? The naming of this scientist is tantamount to a threat by the US (and Israeli) intelligence services that Fakrizadeh could be targeted for assassination.

On a broader political level, what does the US military-intelligence establishment hope to

accomplish by injecting the question of military action against Iran into public debate only nine days before Barack Obama takes the oath of office?

One passage in the article suggests that it represents an effort both to pressure the Obama administration to take action on Iran, and to begin the process of preparing American public opinion for such action. Sanger writes:

“Since his election on Nov. 4, Mr. Obama has been extensively briefed on the American actions in Iran, though his transition aides have refused to comment on the issue. Early in his presidency, Mr. Obama must decide whether the covert actions begun by Mr. Bush are worth the risks of disrupting what he has pledged will be a more active diplomatic effort to engage with Iran. Either course could carry risks for Mr. Obama. An inherited intelligence or military mission that went wrong could backfire, as happened to President Kennedy with the Bay of Pigs operation in Cuba. But a decision to pull back on operations aimed at Iran could leave Mr. Obama vulnerable to charges that he is allowing Iran to speed ahead toward a nuclear capacity, one that could change the contours of power in the Middle East.”

This suggests that Obama is being put on notice: Back down from ongoing plans for sabotage or military action against Tehran, and he could face a “Who lost Iran?” campaign in the media. Not that Obama needs much encouragement.

Only two months ago, on the eve of the election, the Times editorial page noted that “inside Washington’s policy circles these days—in studies, commentaries, meetings, Congressional hearings and conferences—reasonable people from both parties are seriously examining the so-called military option ...”

One report cited then by the Times was produced by the Bipartisan Policy Center, co-founded by former Democratic Senator Tom Daschle, now an Obama cabinet nominee. That report, which declared that “a military strike is a feasible option and must remain a last resort,” was co-authored by Dennis Ross, Obama’s top Middle East adviser, recently named a top aide to Hillary Clinton in the Obama State Department.

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