

The endgame in Iraq that can't succeed: Half the military establishment believes that an attack on Iran is likely

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Global Research, January 27, 2007

The Independent 26 January 2007

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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There was not a chink of light between the British and American positions in Iraq, said a White House spokesman on Wednesday night. No, indeed. What there is is growing darkness. The US President has announced a "new strategy" to send 20,000 more US troops to Iraq. No one knows whether the Senate will grant the money, what the extra troops are actually for and how long they'll be there, or whether the British are part of it or embarked on a withdrawal all of our own.

So confused is the discussion that there is now a whole new theory that the additional American forces are not there to bring security to Iraq at all. They're there to face off Iran for the moment when Washington, or more likely Jerusalem, decides to launch the bombers.

Iran is the spectre that haunts the Middle East at the moment. Almost every comment from Washington suggests that the White House sees it as the greatest single threat to its policy in the region, and that neither the US nor, even less, Israel will sit by and let Iran continue on its nuclear course, peaceful or otherwise. Every diplomatic and military action also suggests that the US is looking to face down the regime in Tehran by erecting a coalition of Sunni countries around and suppressing the Shia groups within Iraq which are held to be under Tehran's control.

It may be pure and fanciful speculation, but it has to be said that half the military and political establishment believes that an attack on Iran is likely. Even the Iranians are beginning to show signs of nerves, feeling (quite rightly) that President Ahmadinejad has overreached himself and put too many international backs up for the country's good.

So what is the truth? You won't get much of it from either the White House or Whitehall, where a sort of embarrassed evasion prevails. Part of this is because, whether it actually wants to assault Iran or not, it suits Washington to keep up the appearance that it might, the more to frighten the regime into co-operation and restraint. But part of this may be because it doesn't really have a clear plan at all.

The US administration has lost the confidence of the American public and the majority of Congress. No democratic leader can pursue a war without the support of either, let alone both. Iran, as far as Congress is concerned, would be a military escapade too far. The Iraqi venture is no different. We're in the end game, only no one is being honest about what they're up to.

Having rejected the thrust of the recommendations of the Baker study group, not least because they were centred on letting Iran into a settlement, President Bush has gone for the only alternative, which is to continue on the present course, redoubling his efforts, to try to clear the decks for eventual withdrawal. It's not a long-term solution. Few believe that 20,000 extra troops can turn around an Iraqi society fracturing into separate tribal as well as religious groups. The Americans would have to go for long-term direct rule to try to achieve that, and they have neither the troops nor the timescale for it.

What they can hope for, and are presumably seeking, is a short-term suppression of violence through pouring men into hotspot areas and bearing down on militia groups. At the same time, on the assumption that Iran and Syria are responsible for stoking up the violence, America is moving to confront Iran on all fronts. All being well (a highly optimistic assumption), the White House would hope to be in the position of announcing troop withdrawals by autumn, blaming the Iraqi government for failing to deliver its side of the bargain should violence erupt again.

The trouble with this is that it is based on a series of misapprehensions. The violence in Iraq can't all be put down to outside influence from Iran and Syria. Most of it is home grown. It isn't, as the President argued on Tuesday, all a matter of sectarian extremes. It arises from tribal loyalties and local ethnic cleansing, which cannot be dealt with simply by increasing security patrols.

Nor can Iranian influence be simply wished away. They are neighbours after all, with strong family as well as religious ties to groups within Iraq. Whatever happens, Baghdad will have to live with Iran afterwards. Trying to set up regional anti-Shia alliances will only exacerbate a sectarian divide that could, if ignited, rip apart Saudi Arabia and most of the Gulf.

And where does Britain stand in all this? It clearly doesn't believe in the so-called "new US strategy". Equally obviously, it wants to get out as soon as it can. But so long as it is led by Tony Blair, you will hear not a hint of criticism of Washington or of explanation to his own public. There is no light between the US and the UK, just an empty void.

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