The U.S.-Iran-Iraq-Israeli-Syrian War

At a not-for-quotation pre-speech briefing on Jan. 10, George W. Bush and his top national security aides unnerved network anchors and other senior news executives with suggestions that a major confrontation with Iran is looming.

Commenting about the briefing on MSNBC after Bush's nationwide address, NBC's Washington bureau chief Tim Russert said "there's a strong sense in the upper echelons of the White House that Iran is going to surface relatively quickly as a major issue – in the country and the world – in a very acute way."

Russert and NBC anchor Brian Williams depicted this White House emphasis on Iran as the biggest surprise from the briefing as Bush stepped into the meeting to speak passionately about why he is determined to prevail in the Middle East.

"The President's inference was this: that an entire region would blow up from the inside, the core being Iraq, from the inside out," Williams said, paraphrasing Bush.

Despite the already high cost of the Iraq War, Bush also defended his decision to invade Iraq and to eliminate Saddam Hussein by arguing that otherwise "he and Iran would be in a race to acquire a nuclear bomb and if we didn't stop him, Iran would be going to Pakistan or to China and things would be much worse," Russert said.

If Russert's account is correct, there could be questions raised about whether Bush has lost touch with reality and may be slipping back into the false pre-invasion intelligence claims about Hussein threatening the United States with "a mushroom cloud."

U.S. weapons inspectors concluded in 2004 that Hussein had long ago abandoned his nuclear weapons program. Many experts agreed that continued international sanctions would have prevented its resumption for the foreseeable future.

Indeed, some observers believe Bush's invasion of Iraq has proved counterproductive by spurring Iran and other countries to speed up their development of nuclear and other unconventional weapons in hopes of keeping the United States at bay.

The countries on Bush's "axis of evil" hit list saw that Iraq's WMD disarmament and acceptance of United Nations inspections didn't stop the U.S.-led invasion.

Not only have possibly hundreds of thousands of Iraqis died as a result, but U.S. forces killed Hussein's two sons and turned the deposed dictator over to his enemies so he could hanged like a common criminal on Dec. 30.

So there can be little incentive for Iranian or North Korean leaders to follow the Iraq model of disarmament and inspections. Further, the explosion of anti-Americanism in the Muslim world has increased risks to the pro-U.S. dictatorship in nuclear-armed Pakistan, where Islamic militants with close ties to al-Qaeda are reported to be gaining strength.

While avoiding any overt criticism of Bush's comments about an imaginary Iraqi-Iranian arms race, Russert suggested that the news executives found the remarks perplexing.

"That's the way he sees the world," Russert explained. "His rationale, he believes, for going into Iraq still was one that was sound."

MSNBC's Chris Matthews then interjected, "And it could be the rationale for going into Iran at some point."

Russert paused for a few seconds before responding, "It's going to be very interesting to watch that issue and we have to cover it very, very carefully and very exhaustively."

Reasons for Alarm

In his prime-time speech, Bush injected other reasons to anticipate a wider war. He used language that suggested U.S. or allied forces might launch attacks inside Iran and Syria to "disrupt the attacks on our forces" in Iraq.

"We will interrupt the flow of support from Iran and Syria," Bush said. "And we will seek out and destroy the networks providing advanced weaponry and training to our enemies in Iraq."

Bush announced other steps that could be interpreted as building a military infrastructure for a regional war or at least for air strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities.

"I recently ordered the deployment of an additional carrier strike group to the region," Bush said. "We will expand intelligence sharing and deploy Patriot air defense systems to reassure our friends and allies."

Though most news accounts of Bush's speech focused on his decision to send about 21,500 additional U.S. troops to Iraq – on top of the 132,000 already there – Bush's comments about his regional strategy could ultimately prove more significant.

Militarily, a second aircraft carrier strike force would do little to interdict arms smuggling across the Iran-Iraq border. Similarly, Patriot anti-missile batteries would be of no use in defeating lightly armed insurgent forces and militias inside Iraq.

However, both deployments would be useful to deter – or defend against – retaliatory missile strikes from Iran if the Israelis or the United States bomb Iran's nuclear facilities or stage military raids inside Iranian territory.

Iran has a relatively sophisticated arsenal of short- and medium-range missiles. Those short-range missiles could be fired at U.S. bases in Iraq or elsewhere in the Persian Gulf. The medium-range missiles could conceivably hit Tel Aviv.

Not only could Patriot missiles be used to knock down Iranian missiles while they're heading

toward their targets, but the fearsome firepower of two aircraft carrier strike forces could deter any Iranian retaliatory strike following a U.S. or Israeli attack.

In other words, the deployments would fit with Israel or the United States bombing Iran's nuclear sites and then trying to tamp down any Iranian response.

Another danger to American interests, however, would be pro-Iranian Shiite militias in Iraq seeking revenge against U.S. troops. If that were to happen, Bush's escalation of troop levels in Iraq would make sense as a way to protect the Green Zone and other sensitive targets.

So, Bush's actions and rhetoric over the past several weeks continue to mesh with a scenario for a wider regional war – a possibility that now mainstream journalists, such as Tim Russert, are beginning to take seriously.

The Surge Purge

Other data points are aiming in that same direction.

On Jan. 4, Bush ousted the top two commanders in the Middle East, Generals John Abizaid and George Casey, who had opposed a military escalation in Iraq. Bush also removed Director of National Intelligence John Negroponte, who had stood by intelligence estimates downplaying the near-term threat from Iran's nuclear program.

Bush appointed Admiral William Fallon as the new chief of Central Command for the Middle East despite the fact that Fallon, a former Navy aviator and currently head of the Pacific Command, will oversee two ground wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The choice of Fallon makes more sense if Bush foresees a bigger role for two aircraft carrier groups off Iran's coast.

Though not considered a Middle East expert, Fallon has moved in neoconservative circles, for instance, attending a 2001 awards ceremony at the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, a think tank dedicated to explaining "the link between American defense policy and the security of Israel."

Bush also shifted Negroponte from his Cabinet-level position as DNI to a sub-Cabinet post as deputy to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. To replace Negroponte, Bush nominated Navy retired Vice Admiral John "Mike" McConnell, who is viewed by intelligence professionals as a low-profile technocrat, not a strong independent figure.

McConnell is seen as far more likely than Negroponte to give the administration an alarming assessment of Iran's nuclear capabilities and intentions in an upcoming National Intelligence Estimate. To the consternation of neoconservatives, Negroponte has splashed cold water on their heated rhetoric about the imminent threat from Iran.

"Our assessment is that the prospects of an Iranian weapon are still a number of years off, and probably into the next decade," Negroponte said in an interview with NBC News in April 2006. Expressing a similarly tempered view in a speech at the National Press Club, Negroponte said, "I think it's important that this issue be kept in perspective."

Bush reportedly has been weighing his military options for bombing Iran's nuclear facilities

since early 2006. But he has encountered resistance from the top U.S. military brass, much as he has with his plans to escalate U.S. troop levels in Iraq.

As investigative reporter Seymour Hersh wrote in The New Yorker, a number of senior U.S. military officers were troubled by administration war planners who believed "bunker-busting" tactical nuclear weapons, known as B61-11s, were the only way to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities buried deep underground.

A former senior intelligence official told Hersh that the White House refused to remove the nuclear option from the plans despite objections from the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "Whenever anybody tries to get it out, they're shouted down," the ex-official said. [New Yorker, April 17, 2006]

By late April 2006, however, the Joint Chiefs finally got the White House to agree that using nuclear weapons to destroy Iran's uranium-enrichment plant at Natanz, less than 200 miles south of Tehran, was politically unacceptable, Hersh reported.

"Bush and [Vice President Dick] Cheney were dead serious about the nuclear planning," one former senior intelligence official said. [New Yorker, July 10, 2006]

Delegating to Israel

But one way to get around the opposition of the Joint Chiefs would be to delegate the bombing operation to the Israelis. Given Israel's powerful lobbying operation in Washington and its strong ties to leading Democrats, an Israeli-led attack might be more politically palatable with the Congress.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert also has called the possibility of an Iranian nuclear bomb an "existential threat" to Israel that cannot be tolerated.

Bush's tough talk about Iran also comes as Israel is reported stepping up preparations for air strikes against Iran, possibly including the use of tactical nuclear bombs, to destroy Natanz and other Iranian nuclear facilities.

The Sunday Times of London reported on Jan. 7 that two Israeli air squadrons are training for the mission and "if things go according to plan, a pilot will first launch a conventional laser-guided bomb to blow a shaft down through the layers of hardened concrete [at Natanz]. Other pilots will then be ready to drop low-yield one kiloton nuclear weapons into the hole."

The Sunday Times wrote that Israel also would hit two other facilities – at Isfahan and Arak – with conventional bombs. But the possible use of a nuclear bomb at Natanz would represent the first nuclear attack since the United States destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan at the end of World War II six decades ago.

After the Sunday Times article appeared, an Israeli government spokesman denied that Israel has drawn up secret plans to bomb Iranian nuclear facilities. For its part, Iran claims it only wants a nuclear program for producing energy.

While some observers believe Israel or the Bush administration may be leaking details of the plans as a way to frighten Iran into accepting international controls on its nuclear program, other sources indicate that the preparations for a wider Middle Eastern war are very serious and moving very quickly.

Without doubt, Bush's actions in the past two months – reaffirming his determination to succeed in Iraq and warning about a possible regional explosion if he fails – suggest that his future course is an escalation of the conflict, not some "graceful exit."

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, Secrecy & Privilege: Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq, can be ordered at secrecyandprivilege.com. It's also available at Amazon.com, as is his 1999 book, Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth.

The original source of this article is consortiumnews.com
Copyright © Robert Parry, consortiumnews.com, 2007

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: Robert Parry