

U.S. reinforcements in Gulf signal preparations for possible strike against Iran: Interview with General Wesley Clark

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Interview: Ex-NATO Commander cautions Iran

By DALAL SAOUD

JEDDAH, Saudi Arabia, Feb. 26 (UPI) — A gradual withdrawal from Iraq, a diplomatic offensive in the Middle East and dialogue with Iran over its nuclear program could help introduce needed change of policy according to NATO's former Supreme Allied Commander Europe Gen. Wesley Clark.

Clark, who took part in the negotiations that ended the Bosnia conflict and led the 19-nation NATO force to end Serb ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, cautioned Iran over the U.S. recent military build-up in the Gulf region and its determination to prevent Tehran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

"If I were the Iranians, I would take very seriously the statements made by the (Bush) administration and the presence of the aircraft carriers (in the Gulf)," Clark said during an interview with United Press International, while attending the Jeddah Economic Forum.

Asked if the U.S. reinforcements in the Gulf signal preparations for a possible strike against Iran, he said: "Certainly, it's an indication, a potential... If I were the Iranians, I would take very seriously the U.S. capabilities present in the region."

Tehran, he said, needs not to expect "that the world is going to acquiesce an Iranian nuclear weapon. It's up to Iran to solve this diplomatically and the U.S. and Iran should have a dialogue."

Although Iranian officials repeatedly emphasized their peaceful nuclear activities and denied aiming at acquiring a nuclear bomb, Clark warned: "As Iran is persistent in trying to conceal its nuclear weapons program and continues to work toward acquiring a nuclear weapon, then the problem cannot be solved."

The question remains: Would President George W. Bush strike Iran despite the failure in Iraq? And would attacking Iran serve its purpose?

Such a strike "depends on a number of factors", according to Clark. "I think there is a military option but it's not an attractive option. The right solution is a diplomatic solution. Iran needs to understand that it's much safer and it would be able to pursue its aims much more effectively if it doesn't have a nuclear weapon."

While difficult to predict Bush's next move against Iran, Clark said the Democrats, who now control the Congress, would try to influence his decision by insisting that the U.S. president "completes his process of dialogue and uses every other alternative before he resorts to military force."

However, restoring trust and building up a minimum level of confidence is needed to help pave the way for such a dialogue.

Iran and Syria, which felt threatened when the U.S. controlled Iraq after toppling President Saddam Hussein and his Baath Party in 2003, indeed had no intention to facilitate Washington's mission.

"It shouldn't be a surprise that they (Iran and Syria) work against the interests of the U.S. because they knew once the U.S. succeeded in Iraq, they would be next," said Clark. "It is normal to believe that these two regimes will resist being changed." He explained that Iran "has played a very nuanced game permitting the U.S. to attack (Iraq) and take off the Baathist threat while building up its own protective force through the militias and through its influence inside the political structure in Iraq... They took advantage of the chaos and confusion of the aftermath of the (2003) American military action."

According to the former NATO commander, who was also a Democratic candidate for U.S. presidential elections in 2004, the U.S. action in Iraq "has been a source of instability in the region" and this problem could not be solved "just by force of arms."

"What we really needed to do in Iraq and the region was not a troop surge but a diplomacy surge," he said. "It takes diplomacy and an expanded political push in the region to resolve this problem.... But I don't think President Bush is yet taking important steps he needs to take in terms of promoting a dialogue in the region."

Fears of the Iraq conflict expanding to other countries are well justified.

"I think Lebanon in particular is in peculiar position," Clark noted, expressing hope that the Lebanese government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora will hold and Iran-backed Hezbollah turns into "a political movement... as it can't be permitted" to keep its weapons independently of the government.

What is the best way out for the U.S. in Iraq?

A slow withdrawal coupled with a diplomatic offensive that changes the dynamics in the region "from a dynamic of conflict to a dynamic of economic development" might be the answer, Clark explained.

Would a war break out between Syria and Israel?

"I would be surprised if there is war between Syria and Israel because Syria knows what the consequences of this would be," the 63-year-old retired general said. "I don't think Syria would initiate a war in order to restart the peace talks. They would be playing a very dangerous game."

Feeling the growing dangers in the region, Saudi Arabia — a close U.S. ally — stepped in, initiating a dialogue with Iran to avoid a widening of the Iraq conflict, helping promote a peaceful resolution of the Iranian nuclear problem and its alleged "hegemonic attempts" in

the region.

It would be hard to predict whether the Saudi effort will succeed at this crucial time and while the stakes of the region plunging into a destructive Shiite-Sunni confrontation are high.

"I think the Saudi role is potentially critical in this region. It is very important in the sense of helping bring neighbors together to discuss common issues," Clark said.

But as long as Bush maintains his "Stay the Course" policy, no big changes are expected until the next U.S. presidential elections.

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