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US preparing 'massive' military attack against Iran

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In-depth Report: IRAN: THE NEXT WAR?

The United States has the capacity for and may be prepared to launch without warning a massive assault on Iranian uranium enrichment facilities, as well as government buildings and infrastructure, using long-range bombers and missiles, according to a new analysis.

The paper, "Considering a war with Iran: A discussion paper on WMD in the Middle East" – written by well-respected British scholar and arms expert Dr. Dan Plesch, Director of the Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London, and Martin Butcher, a former Director of the British American Security Information Council (BASIC) and former adviser to the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament – was exclusively provided to RAW STORY late Friday under embargo.

"We wrote the report partly as we were surprised that this sort of quite elementary analysis had not been produced by the many well resourced Institutes in the United States," wrote Plesch in an email to Raw Story on Tuesday.

Plesch and Butcher examine "what the military option might involve if it were picked up off the table and put into action" and conclude that based on open source analysis and their own assessments, the US has prepared its military for a "massive" attack against Iran, requiring little contingency planning and without a ground invasion.

> The study concludes that the US has made military preparations to destroy Iran's WMD, nuclear energy, regime, armed forces, state apparatus and economic infrastructure within days if not hours of President George W. Bush giving the order. The US is not publicising the scale of these preparations to deter Iran, tending to make confrontation more likely. The US retains the option of avoiding war, but using its forces as part of an overall strategy of shaping Iran's actions.
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> - Any attack is likely to be on a massive multi-front scale but avoiding a ground invasion. Attacks focused on WMD facilities would leave Iran too many retaliatory options, leave President Bush open to the charge of using too little force and leave the regime intact.
> - US bombers and long range missiles are ready today to destroy 10,000 targets in Iran in a few hours.
> - US ground, air and marine forces already in the Gulf, Iraq, and Afghanistan can devastate Iranian forces, the regime and the state at short notice.

- Some form of low level US and possibly UK military action as well as armed popular resistance appear underway inside the Iranian provinces or ethnic areas of the Azeri, Balujistan, Kurdistan and Khuzestan. Iran was unable to prevent sabotage of its offshore-to-shore crude oil pipelines in 2005.

- Nuclear weapons are ready, but most unlikely, to be used by the US, the UK and Israel. The human, political and environmental effects would be devastating, while their military value is limited.

- Israel is determined to prevent Iran acquiring nuclear weapons yet has the conventional military capability only to wound Iran's WMD programmes.

- The attitude of the UK is uncertain, with the Brown government and public opinion opposed psychologically to more war, yet, were Brown to support an attack he would probably carry a vote in Parliament. The UK is adamant that Iran must not acquire the bomb.

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When asked why the paper seems to indicate a certainty of Iranian WMD, Plesch made clear that "our paper is not, repeat not, about what Iran actually has or not." Yet, he added that "Iran certainly has missiles and probably some chemical capability."

Most significantly, Plesch and Butcher dispute conventional wisdom that any US attack on Iran would be confined to its nuclear sites. Instead, they foresee a "full-spectrum approach," designed to either instigate an overthrow of the government or reduce Iran to the status of "a weak or failed state." Although they acknowledge potential risks and impediments that might deter the Bush administration from carrying out such a massive attack, they also emphasize that the administration's National Security Strategy includes as a major goal the elimination of Iran as a regional power. They suggest, therefore, that:

> This wider form of air attack would be the most likely to delay the Iranian nuclear program for a sufficiently long period of time to meet the administration's current counterproliferation goals. It would also be consistent with the possible goal of employing military action is to overthrow the current Iranian government, since it would severely degrade the capability of the Iranian military (in particular revolutionary guards units and other ultra-loyalists) to keep armed opposition and separatist movements under control. It would also achieve the US objective of neutralizing Iran as a power in the region for many years to come.
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> However, it is the option that contains the greatest risk of increased global tension and hatred of the United States. The US would have few, if any allies for such a mission beyond Israel (and possibly the UK). Once undertaken, the imperatives for success would be enormous.

Butcher says he does not believe the US would use nuclear weapons, with some exceptions.

“My opinion is that [nuclear weapons] wouldn’t be used unless there was definite evidence that Iran has them too or is about to acquire them in a matter of days/weeks,” notes Butcher. “However, the Natanz facility has been so hardened that to destroy it MAY require nuclear weapons, and once an attack had started it may simply be a matter of following military logic and doctrine to full extent, which would call for the use of nukes if all other means failed.”

Military Strategy

The bulk of the paper is devoted to a detailed analysis of specific military strategies for such an attack, of ongoing attempts to destabilize Iran by inciting its ethnic minorities, and of the considerations surrounding the possible employment of nuclear weapons.

In particular, Plesch and Butcher examine what is known as Global Strike – the capability to project military power from the United States to anywhere in the world, which was announced by STRATCOM as having initial operational capability in December 2005. It is the that capacity that could provide strategic bombers and missiles to devastate Iran on just a few hours notice.

> Iran has a weak air force and anti aircraft capability, almost all of it is 20-30 years old and it lacks modern integrated communications. Not only will these forces be rapidly destroyed by US air power, but Iranian ground and air forces will have to fight without protection from air attack.
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> British military sources stated on condition of anonymity, that “the US military switched its whole focus to Iran” from March 2003. It continued this focus even though it had infantry bogged down in fighting the insurgency in Iraq.

Global Strike could be combined with already-existing “regional operational plans for limited war with Iran, such as Oplan 1002-04, for an attack on the western province of Kuzhestan, or Oplan 1019 which deals with preventing Iran from closing the Straits of Hormuz, and therefore keeping open oil lanes vital to the US economy.”

> The Marines are not all tied down fighting in Iraq. Several Marine forces are assembling in the Gulf, each with its own aircraft carrier. These carrier forces can each conduct a version of the D-Day landings. They come with landing craft, tanks, jump-jets, thousands of troops and hundreds more cruise missiles. Their task is to destroy Iranian forces able to attack oil tankers and to secure oilfields and installations. They have trained for this mission since the Iranian revolution of 1979 as is indicated in this battle map of Hormuz illustrating an advert for combat training software.

Special Forces units – which are believed to already be operating within Iran – would be available to carry out search-and-destroy missions and incite internal uprisings, while US Army units in both Iraq and Afghanistan could mount air and missile attacks on Iranian forces, which are heavily concentrated along the Iran-Iraq border, as well as protecting their own supply lines within Iraq:

> A key assessment in any war with Iran concerns Basra province and the Kuwait border. It is likely that Iran and its sympathizers could take control of population centres and interrupt oil supplies, if it was in their interest to do so.

> However it is unlikely that they could make any sustained effort against Kuwait or interrupt supply lines north from Kuwait to central Iraq. US firepower is simply too great for any Iranian conventional force.

Experts question the report's conclusions

Former CIA analyst and Deputy Director for Transportation Security, Antiterrorism Assistance Training, and Special Operations in the State Department's Office of Counterterrorism, Larry Johnson, does not agree with the report's findings.

"The report seems to accept without question that US air force and navy bombers could effectively destroy Iran and they seem to ignore the fact that US use of air power in Iraq has failed to destroy all major military, political, economic and transport capabilities," said Johnson late Monday after the embargo on the study had been lifted.

"But at least in their conclusions they still acknowledge that Iran, if attacked, would be able to retaliate. Yet they are vague in terms of detailing the extent of the damage that the Iran is capable of inflicting on the US and fairly assessing what those risks are."

There is also the situation of US soldiers in Iraq and the supply routes that would have to be protected to ensure that US forces had what they needed. Plesch explains that ""firepower is an effective means of securing supply routes during conventional war and in conventional war a higher loss rate is expected."

"However as we say do not assume that the Iraqi Shiia will rally to Tehran – the quietist Shiia tradition favoured by Sistani may regard itself as justified if imploding Iranian power can be argued to reduce US problems in Iraq, not increase them."

John Pike, Director of Global Security, a Washington-based military, intelligence, and security clearinghouse, says that the question of Iraq is the one issue at the center of any questions regarding Iran.

"The situation in Iraq is a wild card, though it may be presumed that Iran would mount attacks on the US at some remove, rather than upsetting the apple-cart in its own front yard," wrote Pike in an email.

Political Considerations

Plesch and Butcher write with concern about the political context within the United States:

> This debate is bleeding over into the 2008 Presidential election, with evidence mounting that despite the public unpopularity of the war in Iraq, Iran is emerging as an issue over which Presidential candidates in both major American parties can show their strong national security bona fides. …
>
> The debate on how to deal with Iran is thus occurring in a political context in the US that is hard for those in Europe or the Middle East to understand. A context that may seem to some to be divorced from reality, but with the US ability to project military power across the globe, the reality of Washington DC is one that matters perhaps above all else. …
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> We should not underestimate the Bush administration's ability to convince itself that an "Iran of the regions" will emerge from a post-rubble Iran. So, do

> not be in the least surprised if the United States attacks Iran. Timing is an open question, but it is hard to find convincing arguments that war will be avoided, or at least ones that are convincing in Washington.

Plesch and Butcher are also interested in the attitudes of the current UK government, which has carefully avoided revealing what its position might be in the case of an attack. They point out, however, "One key caution is that regardless of the realities of Iran's programme, the British public and elite may simply refuse to participate – almost out of bloody minded revenge for the Iraq deceit."

And they conclude that even "if the attack is 'successful' and the US reasserts its global military dominance and reduces Iran to the status of an oil-rich failed state, then the risks to humanity in general and to the states of the Middle East are grave indeed."

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