

Maddox points out that the IISS has predicted Iran is 'at least two or three years' away from acquiring a nuclear bomb: 'That is the answer it has given for each of the past three years; it is reassuring that every year the threatening date is just as far in the future.'

DIVISIONS IN WASHINGTON

Condoleezza Rice, US Secretary of State, and Bob Gates, the new Defence Secretary are said to be pushing for open talks with Iran, 'having softened it up with the recent application of United Nations-approved sanctions on Iran and the beefing up of US naval forces off the Iranian coast'. Richard Haass, head of policy planning in the State Department in the first Bush administration, says: 'You could interpret Bush's recent actions towards Iran in two ways—either he is increasing pressure on the regime in order to soften it up for talks over its uranium enrichment plans, or this is classic gunboat diplomacy in which the US is preparing for some kind of punitive action. My guess is that Mr Bush's actions leave room for either scenario and the Bush administration remains divided over which to pursue.'

Afshin Molavi of the New America Foundation warns: 'The danger to this strategy is that it carries the risk of accidentally leading into some kind of military confrontation.' (*FT*, 27 Jan., p. 7 <tinyurl.com/2cb9pd>)

On the other hand, raiding an Iranian consulate, kidnapping and threatening to kill Iranian officials, and deploying two US navy carrier battle-groups to the region for the first time since mid-2003 (Paul Rogers <tinyurl.com/29brym>) seem to lean towards provoking a clash.

'A diplomatic source in Washington told *The Times*: "It is difficult to imagine Bush and Cheney leaving office without resolving the Iranian issue, if necessary by force."' (*Times*, 31 Jan., p. 34 <tinyurl.com/28sde7>)

There are alternatives. 'The IAEA chief, Mohamed El-Baradei, called at the weekend for a "timeout" in the worsening confrontation in an attempt to enable both sides to save face and climb down. But the Americans rejected the proposal.' (*Guardian*, 31 Jan., p. 17 <tinyurl.com/236vxu>)

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THREATENING TEHRAN

BLAMING IRAN FOR US FAILURE IN IRAQ

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FROM IRAQ, DOWNHILL TO IRAN

Former US National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski:

'If the US stays bogged down in Iraq, the final destination on this downhill track is likely to be head-on conflict with Iran and with the broader world of Islam. A plausible scenario for a military collision with Iran involves Iraqi failure to meet US benchmarks [*in other words, US failure in Iraq*]; followed by US accusations of Iranian responsibility for the failure; then by some provocation in Iraq or a terrorist act in the US blamed on Iran. This could culminate in "defensive" US military action against Iran that plunges a lonely America into a deepening quagmire eventually encompassing Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan.'

(*Financial Times*, 2 Feb. 2007, p. 15 <<http://tinyurl.com/2xu5w3>>)

It is not clear what Brzezinski means by 'some provocation in Iraq', but recent US actions and public statements have been sharply provocative.

SEIZING IRANIANS

'A number of Iranians were arrested in the Iraqi capital on 21 December [2006], when US forces raided a compound belonging to Abdul Aziz Hakim, leader of a powerful pro-Iranian Shia party... Officials told *Newsnight* the arrests produced highly important intelligence, but no "smoking gun" about weapons supplies or attacks on coalition forces. They said that the arrested men were in Iraq to hold high-level meeting with representatives of several Iraqi Shia factions.' Iranian diplomats were among the arrested—they were released rapidly, but the US 'continued for some time' to hold two alleged intelligence officers. (BBC News Online, 4 Jan. 2007 <tinyurl.com/2zgppz>)



It then emerged that the Iranians had been invited to Baghdad by Iraqi President Jalal Talabani. (Reuters, 26 Dec. 2006 <tinyurl.com/ya5sf9>)

Three weeks later, US soldiers raided a building in Irbil, Iraqi Kurdistan, seizing five Iranians, computers and documents. 'Iranian and Iraqi officials said the building was an Iranian consulate and the detainees its employees.' (BBC News Online, 11 Jan. 2007 <tinyurl.com/2736k2>) 'The Iraqi Foreign Minister, Hoshiyar Zebari, called yesterday for the Iranians to be freed, stressing that they have been working with Iraqi government approval.' (*Independent*, 15 Jan. 2007, p. 23 <tinyurl.com/2yklq2>)

KILLING IRANIANS

Having failed to provoke Iran into responding aggressively, President Bush escalated the crisis. 'The belief that George Bush's troops "surge" policy in Iraq is also aimed at confronting Iran was strengthened yesterday when the White House declared that it was "going to deal" with the actions of the Tehran regime. In a series of interviews, Vice-President Dick Cheney, the Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and the National Security Adviser, Stephen Hadley, struck belligerent notes on Iranian activity inside Iraq. Mr Hadley did not rule out the possibility of US forces striking across the border' in so-called 'hot pursuit'. (*Independent*, 15 Jan. 2007, p. 23 <tinyurl.com/2yklq2>. A suggestion withdrawn later: *Times*, 2 Feb., p. 40)

'Asked about reports that he had authorised a "kill or capture" policy against Iranians inside Iraq, Mr Bush **did not deny it**, but rather appeared to defend the decision. "It makes sense that if somebody is trying to harm our troop or stop us from achieving our goals or killing innocent citizens in Iraq, that we will stop them".' (*Times*, 27 Jan. 2007 p. 50)

How would the US react if Iranian forces seized computers and documents from the US Embassy in Baghdad, detaining US diplomats? How would the US react if Iran authorised a 'kill or capture' policy against US officials and troops inside Iraq?

The intention seems to be to kidnap more officials, and, soon, to kill one—in order to provoke Iran into actions or statements that can be converted into a justification for a major US assault.

NO EVIDENCE? ISSUE ANOTHER DOSSIER

Bush says: 'If Iran **escalates** its military action in Iraq to the detriment of our troops and/or innocent Iraqi people, we will respond **firmly**.'

(*Guardian*, 30 Jan. 2007, p. 15 <tinyurl.com/ysszxt>) The assumption is that Iran is **already** engaged in military action in Iraq. 'The Bush administration believes Teheran is fuelling the insurgency by supplying Shia militias with weapons, money, bomb-making equipment and expertise.' (*Telegraph*, 27 Jan. 2007, p. 18 <tinyurl.com/2rbbtw>)

In Jan. 2006, *The Times* and the *Independent* both reported that British officials in Iraq had withdrawn this claim, and in particular the assertion that Iran was supplying a new and more deadly design of roadside bomb with infrared triggers which cannot be disrupted by US/UK technology. (BBC News Online, 10 Jan. 2006 <tinyurl.com/2wgxca>)

A year later, 'Senior British officials, citing mistakes over Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction, are voicing scepticism about US efforts to build an intelligence-based case against Iran... Amid signs of a concerted American operation to prove that Iran is threatening US troops in the region, British officials say that they are "not aware of a smoking gun" that would justify taking military action against Tehran.' (*Times*, 1 Feb. 2007, p. 38 <tinyurl.com/ypl5kx>)

Just as with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, there are divisions within the Bush administration: 'The rift has spilled over into a dispute about how and when to publish alleged evidence of Iranian backing for Iraqi militias and Iran's provision of supplies and technology for roadside bombs, the biggest killer of American soldiers in Iraq, a White House adviser revealed... The State Department and the CIA, which both objected to the way the Bush administration used pre-war intelligence on Iraq, also wanted to publicise clear evidence of Iranian interference in Iraq as a way of justifying the US stance. "The military's highest echelons really do not want the release of details of what Iran is up to as they don't want the Iranians to know what's working and what's not," the administration adviser said.'

'Stephen Hadley, Mr Bush's national security adviser, acknowledged on Friday that the intelligence briefing on Iranian interference in Iraq—publication of which has been delayed twice—was still being refined.' (*Sunday Telegraph*, 4 Feb. p. 24 <tinyurl.com/36yh2j>)

The history of such 'dossiers' is not promising. Bronwen Maddox notes that even the independent International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) issued a 'dossier' on Iraqi WMD 'which was authoritative and detailed, and soon proved **wrong** comprehensively.' (*Times*, 1 Feb., p 38 <tinyurl.com/2b5wwm>)