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Covert US Military Strategy on Iran

By Robert Parry

May 25, 2010

Hawks in the United States and Israel appear set on “regime change” in Iran, pursuing a game plan similar to the run-up to war in Iraq, ratcheting up tensions while frustrating opportunities for a peaceful settlement.

In the latest example, the New York Times on Tuesday published a leaked account of an order signed by U.S. Central Command chief, Gen. David Petraeus, expanding “clandestine military activity in an effort to disrupt militant groups to counter threats in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Somalia and other countries in the region.”

In most of those countries, the secret U.S. military operations would be intended to help U.S. allies combat anti-government militants. However, in Iran, the goal would be to make contact with opposition forces, according to the Times article by Mark Mazzetti.

“Officials said the order also permits reconnaissance that could pave the way for possible military strikes in Iran if tensions over its nuclear ambitions escalate,” the article said.

The leaking of Petraeus’s order -- which was signed almost eight months ago on Sept. 30, 2009 -- follows a May 17 tripartite agreement among Iran, Brazil and Turkey that called for Iran exporting 2,640 pounds of low-enriched uranium (LEU) – about half its supply – to Turkey in exchange for higher-enriched uranium that could only be used for peaceful purposes.

Though the new accord paralleled a tentative agreement that the Obama administration brokered last fall with Iran, hawks inside the U.S. government and the American news media quickly went to work ripping the deal apart.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva were portrayed as ambitious neophytes striving for a spot in the international limelight, with their oversized egos making them easy marks for Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Even before the agreement was announced, the Washington Post's neoconservative editors [had framed](#) the story as a case of two out-of-their-league regional leaders getting sucked into "yet another effort to 'engage' the extremist clique of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad."

After the deal's announcement, the Post rushed out an analysis with the headline, "[Iran creates illusion of progress in nuclear negotiations.](#)" Its main points were that the 2,640 pounds now accounted for a smaller percentage of Iran's low-enriched uranium than last fall; that Iran would retain enough LEU so it could theoretically be refined to a purity needed to build one bomb; and that Iran was not abandoning its proclaimed right to enrich uranium for what it says are peaceful purposes.

Quickly, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other administration hawks began belittling and undermining the accord, too.

The following day, Clinton claimed that Russia and China had signed onto "a strong draft" for new sanctions against Iran. "This announcement is as convincing an answer to the efforts undertaken in Tehran over the last few days as any we could provide," she declared.

Even a week later, the mockery of the two Brazilian and Turkish leaders continued. On Tuesday, the New York Times ran a headline, "[Iran Deal Seen as Spot on Brazilian Leader's Legacy,](#)" giving Lula da Silva's critics pretty much a free shot to hit him over his supposed stumble.

"The most charitable interpretation is that we were naïve," said Amaury de Souza, a political analyst in Rio de Janeiro. But "in a game like this, being labeled naïve just shows you have a third-rate diplomacy."

An Obama Letter?

Yet, while the U.S. news media engaged in Brazil-Turkey bashing, little or no attention was paid to [a Reuters report](#) from Brasilia that said President Barack Obama had sent a letter to President da Silva encouraging Brazil to move forward on the uranium swap.

"From our point of view, a decision by Iran to send 1,200 kilograms [2,640 pounds] of low-enriched uranium abroad, would generate confidence and reduce regional tensions

by cutting Iran's stockpile," Obama said, according to excerpts from the letter translated into Portuguese and seen by Reuters.

Brazilian officials claimed that Obama's letter was just of one of the signs that dovish officials in Washington and other Western countries had quietly encouraged Brazil to help revive last October's fuel swap deal.

"We were encouraged directly or indirectly ... to implement the October proposal without any leeway and that's what we did," said Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim.

In other words, Obama may not be enthusiastic about forcing a showdown with Iran, but the policy now appears to be driven by the American hawks and the Israeli government. They behave as if they're spoiling for a fight with another Muslim country that is considered a threat to Israel, despite the fact that Israel has a huge nuclear arsenal of its own, with some 200 to 400 warheads and possessing missiles and planes to deliver them.

Iran also has been the object of open discussions inside Israel and within neoconservative circles in the United States about the desirability of a preemptive military strike aimed at destroying Iran's nuclear facilities and encouraging an uprising that would oust the current government.

Fueling Fears

The leaking of Petraeus's order for special operations within Iran will surely fuel the fears of the Iranian Islamic government, which took power in 1979 after ousting the U.S.-backed Shah of Iran, who had been installed by a CIA-organized coup in 1953. Even earlier, Great Britain, Russia and other world powers had intervened in Iranian affairs.

So, one casualty from the Petraeus-order leak could be the Iran-Brazil-Turkey accord. However, Iran still pressed forward with the agreement on Monday, formally notifying the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Still, the New York Times' account on Tuesday could convince Iran that its only protection is the construction of an atomic bomb, which in turn could exacerbate tensions between Tehran and Washington.

Regarding the secret U.S. military actions, the Times reported that Petraeus's seven-page order "appears to authorize specific operations in Iran, most likely to gather intelligence about the country's nuclear program or identify dissident groups that might be useful for a future military offensive.

"The Obama administration insists that for the moment, it is committed to penalizing Iran for its nuclear activities only with diplomatic and economic sanctions. Nevertheless, the Pentagon has to draw up detailed war plans to be prepared in advance, in the event that President Obama ever authorizes a strike."

The Times quoted one Pentagon official with knowledge of Petraeus's directive as saying: "The Defense Department can't be caught flat-footed."

Petraeus's just-disclosed directive was issued on Sept. 30, 2009, a date that closely coincides with Iran's original uranium-swap agreement, which had been under negotiation for weeks but was announced on Oct. 1.

Iranian President Ahmadinejad initially supported the swap accord and agreed to a follow-up meeting on Oct. 19 in Vienna.

However, the deal came under criticism from Iran's opposition groups, including the "Green Movement" led by defeated presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, who [has had ties to the American neocons and to Israel](#) since the Iran-Contra days of the 1980s when he was the prime minister who collaborated on those secret arms deals.

Last October, Mousavi's U.S.-favored political opposition deemed the swap agreement an affront to Iran's sovereignty. But Ahmadinejad's opponents also stood to lose politically if tensions between Iran and other nations declined.

Also, as former CIA analyst Ray McGovern [has noted](#), the prospects of the follow-up session were damaged on Oct. 18 when a car bombing and an ambush in Iran left several Iranian Revolutionary Guards commanders dead along with other officers and civilians.

A terrorist group called Jundallah took credit for the attacks, which followed years of killing Revolutionary Guards and Iranian policemen and an attempted ambush of President Ahmadinejad's motorcade in 2005.

Tehran has long maintained that Jundallah is supported by the United States, Great Britain and Israel. Now, the newly disclosed fact that this bloody attack followed Petraeus's secret order by only 18 days is likely to heighten Iranian suspicions even more.

A Captured Leader

Iranian authorities captured Jundallah leader Abdolmalek Rigi in February and publicized his claims that the United States had promised his group military help in its insurgency against Iran's Islamic Republic.

Rigi described contacts in March 2009, claiming that U.S. representatives "said they would cooperate with us and will give me military equipment, arms and machine guns. They also promised to give us a base along the border with Afghanistan next to Iran."

Rigi asserted that the U.S. representatives said a direct U.S. attack on Iran would be too costly and that the CIA instead favored supporting militant groups that could destabilize Iran.

"The Americans said Iran was going its own way and they said our problem at the present is Iran... not al-Qaeda and not the Taliban, but the main problem is Iran," Rigi said, according to [Iran's Press TV](#).

"One of the CIA officers said that it was too difficult for us [the United States] to attack Iran militarily, but we plan to give aid and support to all anti-Iran groups that have the capability to wage war and create difficulty for the Iranian (Islamic) system," Rigi said.

Rigi added that the Americans said they were willing to provide support "at an extensive level." However, in the Press TV's account, Rigi did not describe any specific past U.S. support for his organization.

In [a July 7, 2008, article for The New Yorker](#), investigative journalist Seymour Hersh quoted Robert Baer, a former CIA clandestine officer who worked in South Asia and the Middle East for nearly two decades, as saying that Jundallah was one of the militant groups in Iran benefiting from U.S. support.

Hersh also reported that President George W. Bush signed an intelligence finding in late 2007 that allocated up to \$400 million for covert operations intended to destabilize Iran's government, in part, by supporting militant organizations.

Hersh identified another militant group with "long-standing ties" to the CIA and the U.S. Special Operations communities as the Mujahedin-e-Khalq, or MEK, which has been put on the State Department's list of terrorist groups.

But Jundallah has been spared that designation, a possible indication that the U.S. government views it as a valuable asset in the face-off against Iran, or in the parlance of the "war on terror," as one of the "good guys."

Gen. Mizra Aslam, Pakistan's former Army chief, also has charged that the U.S. has been supporting Jundallah with training and other assistance. But the U.S. government denies that it has aided Rigi or his group.

Whatever the truth about the alleged U.S. backing for Jundallah, its Oct. 18, 2009, attack on the Revolutionary Guards does appear to have disrupted Iran's readiness to move forward on the uranium swap deal. Iran sent a lower-level Iranian technical delegation to Vienna for the Oct. 19 meeting while Iran's leading nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili stayed away.

Ahmadinejad's government also began expressing doubts about American and Western trustworthiness. The Iranians proposed some alternative ideas regarding where the uranium might be swapped, but Obama – stung by harsh criticism over his diplomatic outreach to Iran – began retreating from his peace plans, talking tougher against Iran and suggesting no further concessions.

Yet, according to the letter released in Brazil, it appears Obama continued to harbor hopes that the swap could be salvaged.

Despite that, the hawks have been insistent on the need to escalate the confrontation with Iran by imposing ever harsher sanctions and closing off options for peace talks. The neocons are raising their decibel level for “regime change,” much as they did before the invasion of Iraq.

The new leak regarding covert U.S. military operations inside Iran has sprayed even more cold water on hopes for a diplomatic solution.