

Pentagon's three-day blitz plan for Iran

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THE Pentagon has drawn up plans for massive airstrikes against 1,200 targets in Iran, designed to annihilate the Iranians' military capability in three days, according to a national security expert.

Alexis Debat, director of terrorism and national security at the Nixon Center, said last week that US military planners were not preparing for "pinprick strikes" against Iran's nuclear facilities. "They're about taking out the entire Iranian military," he said.

Debat was speaking at a meeting organised by The National Interest, a conservative foreign policy journal. He told The Sunday Times that the US military had concluded: "Whether you go for pinprick strikes or all-out military action, the reaction from the Iranians will be the same." It was, he added, a "very legitimate strategic calculus".

President George Bush intensified the rhetoric against Iran last week, accusing Tehran of putting the Middle East "under the shadow of a nuclear holocaust". He warned that the US and its allies would confront Iran "before it is too late".

One Washington source said the "temperature was rising" inside the administration. Bush was "sending a message to a number of audiences", he said – to the Iranians and to members of the United Nations security council who are trying to weaken a tough third resolution on sanctions against Iran for flouting a UN ban on uranium enrichment.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) last week reported "significant" cooperation with Iran over its nuclear programme and said that uranium enrichment had slowed. Tehran has promised to answer most questions from the agency by November, but Washington fears it is stalling to prevent further sanctions. Iran continues to maintain it is merely developing civilian nuclear power.

Bush is committed for now to the diplomatic route but thinks Iran is moving towards acquiring a nuclear weapon. According to one well placed source, Washington believes it would be prudent to use rapid, overwhelming force, should military action become necessary.

Israel, which has warned it will not allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons, has made its own preparations for airstrikes and is said to be ready to attack if the Americans back down.

Alireza Jafarzadeh, a spokesman for the National Council of Resistance of Iran, which uncovered the existence of Iran's uranium enrichment plant at Natanz, said the IAEA was being strung along. "A number of nuclear sites have not even been visited by the IAEA," he said. "They're giving a clean bill of health to a regime that is known to have practised deception."

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Iranian president, irritated the Bush administration last week by vowing to fill a "power vacuum" in Iraq. But Washington believes Iran is already fighting a proxy war with the Americans in Iraq.

The Institute for the Study of War last week released a report by Kimberly Kagan that explicitly uses the term "proxy war" and claims that with the Sunni insurgency and Al-Qaeda in Iraq "increasingly under control", Iranian intervention is the "next major problem the coalition must tackle".

Bush noted that the number of attacks on US bases and troops by Iranian-supplied munitions had increased in recent months – "despite pledges by Iran to help stabilise the security situation in Iraq".

It explains, in part, his lack of faith in diplomacy with the Iranians. But Debat believes the Pentagon's plans for military action involve the use of so much force that they are unlikely to be used and would seriously stretch resources in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Sarah Baxter, Washington, The Times Online

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