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Hawks sharpen claws for Iran strike

By Jim Lobe
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WASHINGTON - "From a marketing point of view, you don't introduce new products in August," explained then-White House chief of staff Andrew Card in September 2002, in answer to queries about why the administration of George W Bush had not launched its campaign to rally public opinion behind invading Iraq earlier in the summer.

And while it's only July - and less than a month after the United Nations, the European Union and the US Congress approved new economic sanctions against Iran - a familiar clutch of Iraq war hawks appear to be preparing the ground for a major new campaign to rally public opinion behind military action against the Islamic Republic.

Barring an unexpected breakthrough on the diplomatic front, that campaign, like the one eight years ago, is likely to move into high gear this autumn, beginning shortly after the Labor Day holiday on September 6, that marks the end of the summer vacation.

By the following week, the November mid-term election campaign will be in full swing, and Republican candidates are expected to make the charge that Democrats and President Barack Obama are "soft on Iran" their top foreign policy issue. In any event, [veterans](#) of the Bush administration's pre-Iraq invasion propaganda offensive are clearly mobilizing their arguments for a similar effort on Iran, even suggesting that the timetable between campaign launch and possible military action - a mere six months in Iraq's case - could be appropriate.

"By the first quarter of 2011, we will know whether sanctions are proving effective," wrote Bush's former national security adviser Stephen Hadley and Israeli Brigadier General Michael Herzog in a paper published this month by the Washington Institute for Near Policy (WINEP), a think-tank closely tied to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).

"The administration should begin to plan now for a course of action should sanctions be deemed ineffective by the first or second quarter of next year. The military option must be kept on the table both as a means of strengthening diplomacy and as a worst-case scenario," they asserted.

While Hadley and Herzog argued that the administration should begin planning military options now - presumably to be ready for possible action as early as next spring - others are calling for more urgent and demonstrative preparations.

"We cannot afford to wait indefinitely to determine the effectiveness of diplomacy and sanctions," wrote Charles Robb, a former Democratic senator, and [Air Force](#) General Charles Wald (retired) in a column published in Friday's Washington Post, in which they warned that Tehran "could achieve nuclear weapons capability before the end of this year, posing a strategically untenable threat to the United States".

"If diplomatic and economic pressures do not compel Iran to terminate its nuclear program, the [US military](#) has the capability and is prepared to launch an effective, targeted strike on Tehran's nuclear and military facilities," they wrote.

Their column was based on the latest of three reports promoting the use of military pressure on Iran released by the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) since 2008 and overseen by the BPC's neo-conservative foreign policy director Michael Makovsky.

Makovsky, whose brother is a senior official at WINEP, served as a consultant to the controversial Pentagon office set up in the run-up to the Iraq War to find evidence of operational ties between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein as a justification for the invasion.

The BPC report, "Meeting the Challenge: When Time Runs Out", urged the Obama administration, among other immediate steps, to "augment the Fifth [Fleet](#) presence in the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman, including the deployment of an additional [[aircraft](#)] carrier battle group and minesweepers to the waters off Iran; conduct broad exercises with its allies in the Persian Gulf; ... initiate a 'strategic partnership' with Azerbaijan to enhance regional access ..." as a way of demonstrating Washington's readiness to go to war.

"If such pressure fails to persuade Iran's leadership, the United States and its allies would have no choice but to consider blockading refined petroleum imports into Iran," it went on, noting that such a step would "effectively be an act of war and the US and its allies would have to prepare for its consequences".

Some Iraq hawks, most aggressively Bush's former UN ambassador John Bolton, have insisted that neither diplomacy nor sanctions, no matter how tough, would be sufficient to dissuade Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons and that military action - preferably by the US, but, if not, by Israel - would be necessary, and sooner rather than later.

Since the June 12, 2009, disputed elections and the emergence of the opposition Green movement in Iran, a few neo-conservatives, notably Michael Rubin of the American Enterprise Institute and Michael Ledeen of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, have argued that a military attack could prove counter-productive by rallying an otherwise discontented - and possibly rebellious - population behind the regime.

But with the Green movement seemingly unable to challenge the government in the streets that argument has been losing ground among the hawks who, in any event, blame the opposition's alleged weakness on [Obama's](#) failure to provide it with more support.

"Unfortunately, President Obama waffled while innocent Iranians were killed by their own [government](#)," wrote William Kristol and Jamie Fly, in Kristol's Weekly Standard last month.

"It's now increasingly clear that the credible threat of a [military](#) strike against Iran's nuclear program is the only action that could convince the regime to curtail its ambition," wrote the two men, who direct the Foreign Policy Initiative, the successor organization of the neo-conservative-led Project for the New American Century that played a key role in preparing the ground for the Iraq invasion.

Neo-conservative and other hawks have also pounced on reported remarks made by United Arab Emirates ambassador Yousef al-Otaiba at a retreat sponsored by The Atlantic magazine in Colorado last week to nullify another obstacle to military action - the widespread belief that Washington's Arab allies oppose a military attack on Iran by the US or Israel as too risky for their own security and regional stability.

"We cannot live with a nuclear Iran," Otaiba was quoted as saying in a Washington Times article by Eli Lake, a prominent neo-conservative journalist.

"Mr Otaiba's ... comments leave no doubt what he and most Arab officials think about the prospect of a nuclear revolutionary Shi'ite state," the Wall Street Journal's editorial board, a major media champion of the Iraq War, opined. "They desperately want someone, and that means the US or Israel, to stop it, using force if need be."

Otaiba was interviewed at the conference by The Atlantic's Jeffrey Goldberg, an influential US-Israeli writer who, in a widely noted essay published by The New Yorker magazine in 2002, claimed that Saddam was supporting an al-Qaeda group in Kurdistan and that the Iraqi leader would soon possess nuclear weapons.

Goldberg, who asserted in his blog this week that "the idea of a group of Persian Shi'ites having possession of a nuclear bomb ... certainly scares [Arab leaders] more than the

reality of the Jewish bomb," is reportedly working on an essay on the necessity of attacking Iran's nuclear facilities for publication by The Atlantic in September.