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Did the President Declare "Secret War" Against Syria and Iran?

By Steve Clemons

01/12/07 "Washington Note" -- -- Washington intelligence, military and foreign policy circles are abuzz today with speculation that the President, yesterday or in recent days, sent a secret Executive Order to the Secretary of Defense and to the Director of the CIA to launch military operations against Syria and Iran.

The President may have started a new secret, informal war against Syria and Iran without the consent of Congress or any broad discussion with the country.

The bare outlines of that order may have appeared in President Bush's Address to the Nation last night outlining his new course on Iraq:

Succeeding in Iraq also requires defending its territorial integrity and stabilizing the region in the face of extremist challenges. This begins with addressing Iran and Syria. These two regimes are allowing terrorists and insurgents to use their territory to move in and out of Iraq. Iran is providing material support for attacks on American troops. We will disrupt the attacks on our forces. We'll interrupt the flow of support from Iran and Syria. And we will seek out and destroy the networks providing advanced weaponry and training to our enemies in Iraq.

We're also taking other steps to bolster the security of Iraq and protect American interests in the Middle East. I recently ordered the deployment of an additional carrier strike group to the region. We will expand intelligence-sharing and deploy Patriot air defense systems to reassure our friends and allies. We will work with the governments of Turkey and Iraq to help them resolve problems along their border. And we will work with others to prevent Iran from gaining nuclear weapons and dominating the region.

Adding fuel to the speculation is that U.S. forces today raided an Iranian Consulate in Arbil, Iraq and detained five Iranian staff members. Given that Iran showed little deference to the political sanctity of the US Embassy in Tehran 29 years ago, it

would be ironic for Iran to hyperventilate much about the raid.

But what is disconcerting is that some are speculating that Bush has decided to heat up military engagement with Iran and Syria -- taking possible action within their borders, not just within Iraq.

Some are suggesting that the Consulate raid may have been designed to try and prompt a military response from Iran -- to generate a casus belli for further American action.

If this is the case, the debate about adding four brigades to Iraq is pathetic. The situation will get even hotter than it now is, worsening the American position and exposing the fact that to fight Iran both within the borders of Iraq and into Iranian territory, there are not enough troops in the theatre.

Bush may really have pushed the escalation pedal more than any of us realize.

-- Steve Clemons

UPDATE: This exchange today in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee between Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Joseph Biden and Senator Chuck Hagel with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is full of non-denial denials and evasive answers to Biden's query about the President's ability to authorize military operations against forces within Iran and Syria:

SEN. BIDEN: Last night, the president said, and I quote, "Succeeding in Iraq requires defending its territorial integrity and stabilizing the region in the face of extremist challenges, and that begins with addressing Iran and Syria." He went on to say, "We will interrupt the flow of support for Iran and Syria, and we will seek out and destroy networks providing advanced weaponry and training to our enemies in Iraq."

Does that mean the president has plans to cross the Syrian and/or Iranian border to pursue those persons or individuals or governments providing that help?

SEC. RICE: Mr. Chairman, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs was just asked this question, and I think he perhaps said it best. He talked about what we're really trying to do here which is to protect our forces and that we are doing that by seeking out these networks that we know are operating in Iraq. We are doing it through intelligence. We are then able, as we did on the 21st of December, to go after these groups where we find them. In that case, we then asked the Iraqi government to declare them persona non grata and expel them from the country because they were holding diplomatic passports.

But the -- what is really being contemplated here in terms of these networks is that we believe we can do what we need to do inside Iraq. Obviously, the president isn't

going to rule anything out to protect our troops, but the plan is to take down these networks in Iraq.

The broader point is that we do have and we have always had as a country very strong interests and allies in the Gulf Region, and we do need to work with our allies to make certain that they have the defense capacity that they need against growing Iranian military build-up, that they felt that we are going to be a presence in the Persian Gulf Region as we have been, and that we establish confidence with the states with which we have long alliances, that we will help defend their interests. And that's what the president had in mind.

SEN. BIDEN: Secretary Rice, do you believe the president has the constitutional authority to pursue across the border into Iraq (sic/Iran) or Syria, the networks in those countries?

SEC. RICE: Well, Mr. Chairman, I think I would not like to speculate on the president's constitutional authority or to try and say anything that certainly would abridge his constitutional authority, which is broad as commander in chief.

I do think that everyone will understand that -- the American people and I assume the Congress expect the president to do what is necessary to protect our forces.

SEN. BIDEN: Madame Secretary, I just want to make it clear, speaking for myself, that if the president concluded he had to invade Iran or Iraq in pursuit of these -- or Syria -- in pursuit of these networks, I believe the present authorization granted the president to use force in Iraq does not cover that, and he does need congressional authority to do that. I just want to set that marker.

SEN. HAGEL: I want to comment briefly on the president's speech last night, as he presented to America and the world his new strategy for Iraq, and then I want to ask you a couple of questions.

I'm going to note one of the points that the president made last night at the conclusion of his speech. When he said, quote, "We mourn the loss of every fallen American, and we owe it to them to build a future worthy of their sacrifice" -- and I don't think there is a question that we all in this country agree with that -- but I would even begin with this evaluation; that we owe the military and their families a policy, a policy worthy of their sacrifices, and I don't believe, Dr. Rice, we have that policy today.

I think what the president said last night -- and I listened carefully and read through it again this morning -- is all about a broadened American involvement, escalation in Iraq and the Middle East. I do not agree with that escalation, and I would further note that when you say, as you have here this morning, that we need to address and

help the Iraqis and pay attention to the fact that Iraqis are being killed, Madame Secretary, Iraqis are killing Iraqis. We are in a civil war. This is sectarian violence out of control -- Iraqi on Iraqi. Worse, it is inter-sectarian violence -- Shi'a killing Shi'a.

To ask our young men and women to sacrifice their lives, to be put in the middle of a civil war is wrong.

It's, first of all, in my opinion, morally wrong. It's tactically, strategically, militarily wrong. We will not win a war of attrition in the Middle East.

And I further note that you talk about skepticism and pessimism of the American people and some in Congress. That is not some kind of a subjective analysis, that is because, Madame Secretary, we've been there almost four years, and there's a reason for that skepticism and pessimism, and that is based on the facts on the ground, the reality of the dynamics.

And so I have been one, as you know, who have believed that the appropriate focus is not to escalate, but to try to find a broader incorporation of a framework. And it will have to be, certainly, regional, as many of us have been saying for a long time. That should not be new to anyone. But it has to be more than regional, it is going to have to be internally sponsored, and that's going to include Iran and Syria.

When you were engaging Chairman Biden on this issue, on the specific question -- will our troops go into Iran or Syria in pursuit, based on what the president said last night -- you cannot sit here today -- not because you're dishonest or you don't understand, but no one in our government can sit here today and tell Americans that we won't engage the Iranians and the Syrians cross-border.

Some of us remember 1970, Madame Secretary, and that was Cambodia, and when our government lied to the American people and said we didn't cross the border going into Cambodia. In fact we did. I happen to know something about that, as do some on this committee.

So, Madame Secretary, when you set in motion the kind of policy that the president is talking about here, it's very, very dangerous. Matter of fact, I have to say, Madame Secretary, that I think this speech given last night by this president represents the most dangerous foreign policy blunder in this country since Vietnam, if it's carried out. I will resist it -- (interrupted by applause.)

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