

# Washington turns to “regime change” in Iran

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Top officials in the Bush administration met Tuesday to discuss American policy toward Iran. The meeting between Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice, Bush’s national security adviser, came in the wake of published reports indicating that the Pentagon’s right-wing civilian leadership is strongly pushing a strategy of “regime change.”

A full-scale inter-agency summit that had been scheduled for the same day was postponed, however, apparently due to differences within the administration over the turn to a more overtly menacing policy toward Iran. There were reports that the meeting could be held Thursday.

Washington has launched a steady barrage of accusations and threats against the Iranian regime in recent weeks, and it is widely reported that the Pentagon’s top officials are advocating an active program of “destabilization,” if not outright US military intervention, with the aim of restoring to power a regime dominated by the US in the oil-rich nation of 65 million people.

In a lineup that is strikingly similar to that which emerged in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, officials at the State Department and the CIA are reportedly skeptical about the likelihood that Pentagon leadership’s destabilization strategy would produce the kind of popular revolt envisioned by its drafters. They warn that instead a campaign of US covert operations could have the opposite effect, provoking a resurgence of anti-Americanism in Iran, while strengthening the position of the hard-line Islamic leadership and isolating more pro-Washington “reformers.”

US charges against Iran include claims that the Islamic regime there is secretly developing nuclear as well as biological and chemical weapons. Washington has also charged that Teheran is harboring leading members of the Al-Qaeda movement of Osama bin Laden. And finally, the Pentagon has accused Iran of “interference” in US-occupied Iraq.

In a speech before the Council on Foreign Relations Tuesday, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld touched on this last point, warning that the US military authorities in Iraq would “aggressively put down” any attempt to install an Iranian-backed theocracy in Iraq.

The threat reflects Washington’s growing concern that Iraqi Shia Muslim clerics, some of whom enjoyed Iranian backing and refuge during the rule of Saddam Hussein, have gained substantial influence since the US toppled the Iraqi regime. Among the most potent political forces vying for power in the post-Hussein Iraq is the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), whose leader recently returned to Iraq after years of exile in Iran.

“Iran should be on notice that their efforts to remake Iraq in Iran’s image will be aggressively put down,” Rumsfeld declared. In an article published the same day by the *Wall Street Journal Europe*, Rumsfeld made the same point: “Interference in Iraq by its neighbors or their proxies—including those whose objective is to remake Iraq in Iran’s image—will not be accepted or permitted.”

The warnings echoed similar statements made over the past several weeks by other US officials, none of whom seemed in the slightest aware of the extreme irony in the US, having illegally invaded and occupied Iraq, accusing a neighboring country of “interference” in its internal affairs.

Administration officials also cite supposed US intelligence reports suggesting that senior Al-Qaeda members in Iran played a role in the May 12 suicide bombings in Saudi Arabia. Washington has announced it will boycott a scheduled meeting between US and Iranian officials—part of an ongoing series of contacts—in protest over the alleged link.

Iran has denied any complicity with Al-Qaeda, noting that it has deported several hundred of the group’s members—along with their families—to Saudi Arabia in the past year under a bilateral security agreement between the two countries. Tehran recently announced that it has arrested and is interrogating others.

Meanwhile, the administration is insisting that Iran is close to developing a nuclear weapon. It is pressuring the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)—which Washington has barred from Iraq—to declare Iran in violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). A decision is due June 16. Tehran has maintained that its nuclear facilities, including a uranium enrichment plant, are designed solely for electricity generation and have been open to inspection by the IAEA.

There is an unmistakable parallel between the accusations being leveled against Iran as the justification for a new, more bellicose US policy toward that country, and the charges that were made as the pretexts for the US invasion of Iraq.

In an interview on CBS television Sunday, Richard Lugar, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said that the ongoing discussions within the administration over Iran are “reminiscent” of similar deliberations last August, when the decision was taken to seek a United Nations resolution to legitimize the planned US war of aggression against Iraq.

Of course, as it is now plain, the claims that Iraq was hiding tons of chemical and biological weapons materials and consorting with Islamic terrorists were bald-faced lies designed to deceive the American people and facilitate a war waged for the control of oil and to further the US objective of global hegemony.

Whether Washington’s charges concerning Iran’s nuclear projects are any more true than those fabricated against Baghdad, the Iraqi invasion combined with unrelenting US threats may well push the regime in Teheran to seek nuclear weapons as the only means of assuring that Iran does not suffer the same fate as Iraq in another “preventive” war for “regime change.”

In any case, Washington’s accusations against Iran are entirely hypocritical given its own contempt for international nuclear weapons treaties. While flouting requirements that it dismantle its vast nuclear arsenal, the Pentagon is pushing ahead with the development of a whole new range of “tactical” nuclear weapons, while the Bush administration appears prepared to flout the test ban treaty so that these arms can be tested and deployed.

In his 2002 “State of the Union” address, Bush declared Iran part of an “axis of evil” that included Iraq and North Korea. While Washington has not had diplomatic relations with Iran since the revolution that overthrew the US-backed dictatorship of the shah in 1979, the administration is reportedly discussing a proposal to break off all existing diplomatic contacts between the two countries. Since the September 11, 2001, attacks

on Washington and New York, these bilateral talks have covered issues ranging from Afghanistan to Iraq and the US “war on terrorism.”

In both Afghanistan and Iraq, the Iranian regime offered tacit support to US military interventions that overthrew regimes—the Taliban and Saddam Hussein—that Teheran disliked. In the case of the aggression against Iraq, the Iranian government hosted meetings of the US-backed Iraqi exiles, agreed to coordinate search-and-rescue operations for US pilots, and made little protest even when US aircraft strayed into its airspace and even when misguided cruise missiles struck its territory.

This cooperation did little to assuage Washington’s antagonism toward the Iranian regime, however. The predominant tendency within the Bush administration sees Iran as a “terrorist state,” sharing the view of the right-wing Likud regime of Ariel Sharon in Israel.

Driving this unrelenting hostility is not merely the noxious ideology of the Pentagon tops, but also very definite financial and geopolitical interests.

In an unintentionally revealing statement, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer told a Tuesday press briefing: “We continue to have concerns that a nation that is awash in gas and oil would seek to produce peaceful nuclear energy.”

With crude oil reserves estimated at approximately 90 billion barrels (the fourth largest in the world, constituting about a tenth of the world’s known oil reserves) and another 812 trillion cubic feet in natural gas reserves (the second largest worldwide), Iran indeed represents a major “concern” for the US.

When the nationalist regime of Mohammad Mosaddeq nationalized the country’s British-controlled oil concession in 1951, the stage was set for a US-organized coup two years later. Following the coup’s success and the consolidation of the shah’s brutal dictatorship, a consortium agreement was reached with the National Iranian Oil Company that left the US and British oil companies in control of the country’s principal resource.

The 1979 revolution that toppled the shah also revoked existing oil contracts, and the government took over the operation of Iran’s oil fields, ejecting the US and British oil firms. The US responded with an economic embargo, imposing sanctions against both US and foreign firms for doing business with Iran.

Over the past decade, the Iranian regime has awarded “buy-back contracts”—in which the contractor finances capital investments, exploration, drilling, and so on, in return for a guaranteed profit, and then turns over the facility to Iran when the deal expires. Those getting these contracts have been Japanese, Russian, French, Italian and Malaysian firms. American oil companies have been cut out of the action.

Moreover, the US trade embargo has meant that American-based corporations have been forced to cede Iran’s substantial internal market to rivals in Europe and Asia.

The attempt of the regime in Tehran to exercise an independent policy, particularly in the oil-rich former Soviet republics of the Caspian region, has also been a thorn in Washington’s side as the US seeks hegemony over the world’s energy sources. The Iranian regime has sought to build up its own Caspian sphere of influence, offering Iranian pipelines to the Persian Gulf as the shortest and most economical route for exporting the region’s oil to the world market. It has likewise urged the area’s governments to reject Washington’s proposals to set up a permanent military presence under the guise of waging the “war on terrorism.”

Washington has in turn sought, with some success, to isolate Iran, backing the construction of a longer pipeline to the Turkish port of Ceyhan on the Mediterranean. And Iran today finds itself ringed with US military bases, tightening like a noose around its national territory. In addition to the 140,000 troops across its western border in Iraq, US forces are carrying out combat operations in Afghanistan to the east, while at the same time the Pentagon has opened up a string of bases in the former Soviet Union stretching from Georgia to Central Asia.

The Pentagon leadership apparently intends to tighten while launching a program of covert destabilization efforts within Iran aimed at provoking a “popular uprising,” or more likely, a military coup. It has also set out to provide material and political support for dissident Iranian exile groups. These include such seemingly disparate forces as the People’s Mujahideen, or MEK, and Reza Pahlavi, eldest son of Iran’s late shah.

The former group played a leading role in the events of 1979 that toppled the shah and brought to power the Islamic Republic of Ayatollah Khomeini. A petty-bourgeois nationalist formation that sought to adapt the politics of Maoism and national liberation to Islam, the MEK served to divert a layer of radicalized youth in Iran back behind the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini and his fellow mullahs. Inevitably, the conservative Islamic theocracy turned against them as it consolidated power, jailing and killing thousands.

The group fled into exile, establishing itself in Iraq under the patronage of Saddam Hussein, and using the country as a base to launch hit-and-run assassination attacks. Meanwhile, it simultaneously sought backing from the US Congress and various Western European states. To curry favor in western capitals, it cast itself as a democratic reform movement committed to free market economic policies.

While the State Department has classified the MEK as a terrorist organization, the Pentagon leadership ordered the US occupation forces in Iraq to negotiate a truce with the group, effectively granting it legitimacy as an armed force. This deal was subsequently rescinded, but the organization has been allowed to continue its operations on Iraqi soil.

Playing much the same role as the Iraqi National Congress of Ahmed Chalabi in relation to Iraq, the MEK and its front group, the National Council of Resistance of Iran, have provided Washington with supposed intelligence concerning Iranian weapons programs. Earlier this week, the MEK claimed to have discovered two uranium enrichment facilities under construction 40 miles west of Tehran. “It’s time for US policy to be clear and firm against the Iranian regime,” a spokesman for the group declared.

Elements within the Pentagon have reportedly contemplated using the MEK as a proxy force against the Iranian regime, much in the same way that the US employed the Northern Alliance in toppling the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

In the person of Reza Pahlavi, the Bush administration unquestionably has found an ideological soul mate, though one who is apparently a subject of near universal ridicule and revulsion in Iran itself. The cementing of ties with the son of the former dictator only underscores the real agenda sought by Washington behind the talk of promoting “democracy” in Iran. As in Iraq, its principal aim is the installation of a repressive US puppet regime that will privatize the country’s oil industry and turn it over to the US-based energy corporations.

Despite differences within the administration, the *Washington Post* reported that the State Department appeared ready to bow to the push by the Pentagon for a policy of destabilizing the Iranian regime.

A number of prominent Democrats have indicated that the administration would likewise face no significant opposition in Congress if it embarks on another, far more dangerous, chapter of military aggression in the Persian Gulf.

Senator Joseph Biden, the senior Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, indicated that any differences on Iranian policy were limited to tactics and timing. Appearing on NBC’s “Today” show, Biden cautioned that the US military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq were still far from completion.

“We’ve got a long way to go there,” he said of Iraq. “I don’t think we should be biting off more than we can chew right now.”

Rep. Jane Harman (D-Calif.), the ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, said on CBS’s “Face the Nation” that Iran represented “more of a clear and present danger than Iraq last year.”

For his part, Senator Joseph Lieberman (D-Ct.) enthusiastically

embraced the administration's adoption of a state policy of "regime change."

Responding to the talk of a new policy of aggression aimed at Iran, the spokesman for the country's Foreign Ministry, Reza Asefi, stated, "We hope that wisdom and logic dominates the Americans' debates and they refrain from carrying out any interference in our affairs." The spokesman added, "Iran has always defended its interests with full power and will continue to do so. It won't hesitate even for a fraction of a moment to defend itself."



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