

Bush administration seeks funds for regime change in Iran

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The Bush administration took a further step on Wednesday in its campaign against Iran by requesting a large increase in funding for the political destabilisation of the Tehran regime.

Speaking to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared that the US would “actively confront” Iran and called for an extra \$75 million to fund anti-Tehran propaganda and to support opposition groups inside and outside the country. Last year just \$10 million was allocated to such activities.

Rice carefully avoided the use of the term “regime change” and its obvious associations with the US campaign that culminated in the illegal invasion of Iraq. But there is no mistaking the Bush administration’s intention to subvert and remove the current Iranian regime.

The absurdity of Rice’s claims to be promoting democracy in Iran is highlighted by the activities of the US across the border in Iraq. While American troops are engaged in the ruthless suppression of Iraqi opposition to the US occupation, the US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad is engaged in frantic behind-the-scenes efforts to fashion a new puppet regime to carry out Washington’s dictates.

The Bush administration’s support for “democracy” in Iran, like its opposition to Tehran’s nuclear programs, is simply a pretext for advancing US ambitions for economic and strategy dominance in the resource-rich region. For Washington, “a democratic government” in Tehran is synonymous with a pro-US regime that opens up the country’s huge oil and gas reserves to American corporations, implements IMF dictated market reforms and slavishly supports US foreign policy in the region.

Rice’s appeal for more funding has close parallels with Washington’s support for Iraqi exile groups throughout the 1990s. The CIA funded and worked closely with the convicted embezzler Ahmed Chalabi and former Baathist thug Iyad Allawi in fomenting opposition and a failed

putsch inside Iraq. Now, Khalilzad is seeking to ensure that both men have prominent positions in the next Iraqi government, despite their lack of any significant popular support.

Washington’s potential Iranian allies have a similarly sordid record. They include monarchist groups allied to the family of the former dictator Shah Reza Pahlavi and the People’s Mujahideen of Iran (MEK). The MEK, a petty bourgeois nationalist formation, backed the Islamic regime established in Iran following the ousting of the Shah in 1979, but its leaders fled to Iraq after the new conservative theocracy turned on the organisation. While carrying out hit-and-run attacks inside Iran, the MEK also sought support in the US and Europe, recasting itself as a pro-Western movement supportive of free market policies.

At present, the MEK is on the US State Department’s list of terrorist organisations and last month Rice reiterated it was US policy not to work with the organisation. In Congress, however, there are already moves afoot to transform the MEK from “terrorists” to “freedom fighters”. Congressman Tom Tancredo told a congressional briefing on Wednesday that the decision to place the MEK on the terrorist list was “a sop to the mullahs” by the previous Clinton administration, indicating it should be overturned.

The Bush administration is also seeking to link up with the trade union opposition inside Iran. The AFL-CIO, which is a notorious arm of US foreign policy and the CIA, has recently latched onto a struggle by Tehran bus drivers for recognition of their union and better conditions. This right-wing union bureaucracy, which has presided for decades over the destruction of the jobs and conditions of its own members and is oblivious to suffering of workers around the world, suddenly decided to organise a joint protest last Wednesday with unions in 17 other countries against the repression of the Tehran bus

drivers union.

These efforts could easily fall apart. Hostility inside Iran to the theocratic regime does not immediately translate into support for the predatory plans of US imperialism. Raymond Tanter, a former National Security analyst during the administration of President George Bush Snr, warned that US-backed groups “will be tarred by association”. “If the administration follows the path of putting money into opposition groups in a public way, that will only reinforce Iran’s supreme leader [Ayatollah Ail Khamenei] and his selected president, Mr Ahmadinejad,” he said.

The main criticism of the Bush administration’s policy on Iran has come from the extreme right, particularly from the so-called neo-conservatives, who championed the military invasion of Iraq. These neo-fascistic layers ridicule Rice’s diplomatic efforts and criticise the Pentagon plans for air strikes against Iran’s nuclear facilities as ineffective and inadequate.

Rice’s appeal for Congressional funds was in part aimed at placating these right-wing critics. Prominent Republican Senator Sam Brownback had effectively foreshadowed the move at a speech to the neo-conservative American Enterprise Institute on February 2. He told his audience that Congress should increase funding for “promoting democracy inside Iran” from \$10 million to \$100 million as well as pushing for a suspension of World Bank funding to Iran.

Brownback, however, was chastised for not going further. American Enterprise Institute analyst Michael Ledeen declared: “What I took from this speech is that Brownback wants regime change, that he’s in favour of it, so why doesn’t he just come out and say it. Why isn’t he endorsing the Santorum bill?” The Iran Freedom and Support Act proposed last year by Senator Rick Santorum would commit the Bush administration to a program for “regime change” in Iran.

The Santorum legislation parallels the Iraq Liberation Act passed by Congress in 1998, which made the ousting of the Saddam Hussein regime part of US foreign policy and provided \$97 million to recognised Iraqi opposition groups, including military aid. According to its supporters, the Iran Freedom and Support Act currently has the backing of 42 senators and 333 congressmen.

Rice’s call for funds to support regime change in Iran has been generally welcomed by the neo-conservatives. Ledeen commented on Friday: “[A]fter years of dithering, we now have the first encouraging signs that this administration is inclined to support revolution in Iran.

Secretary of State Rice, after her laudable reform of the Foreign Service, has now asked Congress for an additional \$75 million to advance the cause of freedom in Iran. This is good news indeed, especially since there were hints in her testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Wednesday that we have already begun supporting Iranian trade unions, and even training some of their leaders.”

Of course, if the plan to stir up a phony revolution in Iran fails, these circles will want more direct military action. In an interview on the conservative *Human Events* website on February 10, former Republican speaker Newt Gingrich declared his support for a military invasion, should alternatives fail. Asked if force were warranted, he said: “I believe this [Iran] is such a high risk that it is utterly irrational for us not to have a strategy that says in the next two to three years this regime is going to be changed.”

The latest funding request is designed to heighten tensions in the lead up to a key meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in early March. In line with an IAEA resolution passed on February 4, if Iran fails to agree to freeze its uranium enrichment programs and cooperate fully with the IAEA, it will be referred to the UN Security Council for possible punitive actions.

Like the deliberate leak last week of the Pentagon’s plans for air strikes against Iran, Rice’s announcement is also aimed at putting pressure on Washington’s allies in Europe and Asia to support tough action against Tehran in the UN Security Council. The obvious threat is that, with or without international support, the Bush administration will do whatever it deems necessary to pursue US interests in the Middle East. The comments of Gingrich and others make clear that the inexorable logic of Washington’s actions is another illegal war of aggression.



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