

Troop surge paves way for wider war

## Bush authorizes shoot-to-kill policy against Iranians in Iraq

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29 January 2007

The Bush administration has authorized US military forces in Iraq to hunt down and kill Iranian government personnel operating in that country, according to a report that first appeared in the *Washington Post* last Friday. The newspaper said President Bush authorized the new “kill or capture” program last fall during a meeting with his most senior advisors, which also resulted in the approval of a series of other measures aimed at destabilizing the Iranian regime.

The existence of the program was confirmed by Bush Friday. He told reporters that “it just makes sense that if somebody is trying to harm our troops and stop us from achieving our goal, or killing innocent citizens in Iraq, that we will stop them.” The White House and the Pentagon have long claimed that Iranian military and intelligence operatives in Iraq have provided supplies for roadside bombs and technical assistance for attacks against US troops. Not a shred of evidence has ever been presented to substantiate these claims.

The targeting of Iranian citizens has one purpose: to provoke a military confrontation with Iran. The revelations about the program follow the bellicose threats against Iran and Syria made by Bush in his January 10 speech, when he said American military forces would “seek out and destroy the networks providing advanced weaponry and training to our enemies in Iraq.” The next day, US forces raided the Iranian consulate in the northern Iraqi city of Irbil, detaining at least five diplomatic employees. Shortly afterwards the US dispatched an additional aircraft carrier battle group, armed with nuclear weapons, to Iranian waters in the Persian Gulf.

These provocations against Iran underscore the fact that Bush’s decision to send 21,500 additional troops to Iraq has nothing to do with stabilizing the situation in the country—a proposition that no serious observer considers

achievable through such a deployment. On the contrary, faced with a military and political debacle in Iraq, the White House intends to extend the war to Iran and its population of 70 million people.

According to the *Post* report, for more than a year US forces in Iraq have secretly detained dozens of Iranians, holding them for three to four days at a time, while collecting DNA samples from some without their knowledge and subjecting others to retina scans and other identification methods before letting them go. However, starting last August, top administration officials—including deputy national security advisor Elliott Abrams, NSC counterterrorism adviser Juan Zarate, outgoing State Department counterterrorism chief Henry Crumpton and several representatives from the vice president’s office and the Pentagon—called for the replacement of the “catch and release” policy with a much more confrontational approach.

“There were no costs for the Iranians,” one senior administration official told the newspaper. “They were hurting our mission in Iraq, and we were bending over backwards not to fight back.” Another “counterterrorism official” added, “Our goal is to change the dynamic with the Iranians, to change the way Iranians perceive us and perceive themselves. They need to understand that they cannot be a party to endangering US soldiers’ lives and American interests, as they have before. That is going to end.”

Under the new policy, US troops have the authority to target any member of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard, as well as officers of its intelligence services believed to be working with Iraqi militias. While allegedly not targeting diplomats and civilians, the new order will have the effect of placing a target on any Iranian found in Iraq. In addition to the hundreds of Iranian government personnel

in Iraq, thousands of Iranian religious pilgrims visit the Shiite holy cities in southern Iraq each year, along with many others engaged in trade, including the export of electricity, refined oil and other products.

Though US forces are not known to have killed any Iranians yet, the *Post* reports, “Bush administration officials have been urging top military commanders to exercise the authority.” During interviews with the newspaper two unnamed “senior administration officials,” both compared the Tehran government to the Nazis and the Revolutionary Guard to the “SS.” They also referred to the Guard members as “terrorists,” a designation that would at the very least subject Iranian personnel in Iraq to indefinite detention as “enemy combatants” in a secret CIA prison.

In comments to the US Congress last week, the new US commander of military operations in Iraq, Army Lt. Gen. David Petraeus said a top priority will be “countering the threats posed by Iranian and Syrian meddling in Iraq, and the continued mission of dismantling terrorist networks and killing or capturing those who refuse to support a unified, stable Iraq.” From the standpoint of White House and Pentagon, as well as the US media, the devastation wrought by the US occupation does not constitute “meddling” in Iraq’s affairs. However, Iran—which has a long history of cultural, economic and political ties with its western neighbor—is denounced as a “foreign” influence.

The *Post* reported that the decision to ratchet up the anti-Iranian operation coincided with the Israeli invasion of Lebanon last summer, which failed to defeat the Hezbollah militia forces. “Officials said a group of senior Bush administration officials who regularly attend the highest-level counterterrorism meetings agreed the conflict provided an opening to portray Iran as a nuclear-ambitious link between al-Qaeda, Hezbollah and the death squads in Iraq.”

Like the propaganda campaign during the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, the vilification of Iran is filled with transparent lies, including suggestions that Tehran supports al-Qaeda, a Sunni fundamentalist terror group hostile to Shiite-dominated Iran. Acknowledging the fabricated character of the administration’s charges, a senior intelligence officer wary of the new strategy told the *Post*, “This has little to do with Iraq. It’s all about pushing Iran’s buttons. It is purely political.” He went on to suggest that the US was escalating toward an unnecessary conflict with Iran to shift attention away from Iraq and blame Iran for the US failure there.

There are sharp tactical divisions within the US political establishment over extending the war to Iran and the implications that such a reckless move would have for the long-term interests of American imperialism. Within the top echelons of the Bush administration, however, it is apparent a consensus has emerged that the only means to salvage the disaster in Iraq is to extend the war.

Although the regime in Tehran assisted the US invasion of Afghanistan and is aligned with the same Shiite conservatives the US brought to power in Baghdad, Iran’s increasing regional influence—particularly in the aftermath of the toppling of the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein—is considered an unacceptable obstacle to US plans to exert hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East. Because of this there is considerable support in Washington for a war against Iran—within both the Republican and Democratic parties—despite the massive opposition of the American people and world public opinion to such a crime.

Senator Harry Reid of Nevada, the Democratic majority leader, said he backed the “kill or capture” policy toward Iranians operating in Iraq. “We want the American troops protected in Iraq,” he said in a question-answer session at the Capitol. “Whatever it takes to protect them is something we’re certainly interested in. But for the president to escalate this conflict outside Iraq is something he has to come back and ask us permission to do.”

For some time, leading Democrats have criticized the invasion of Iraq for “diverting” US military and financial resources from the “war on terror” and squandering public support for other wars more vital to American interests, including against Iran. The chief concern, however, is that if the Bush administration takes unilateral action against Iran it will provoke a massive political crisis in the US.



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