

The Bush administration's campaign of lies and misinformation against Iran

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As it prepares for military aggression against Iran, the Bush administration is once again resorting to a concoction of lies, misinformation and half-truths to provide the pretext. In his January 10 speech announcing an escalation of the war in Iraq, President Bush denounced Syria and Iran for backing anti-US insurgents and declared the American military would “seek out and destroy” these networks. He has since confirmed ordering US troops to “capture or kill” Iranian agents in Iraq.

Bush's speech has been followed by a steady stream of top US officials condemning Iran's alleged “meddling” in Iraq—all relayed to the world by a compliant media. To date not a shred of evidence has been provided to support the allegations. Nevertheless, like Bush's claims that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, the accusations against Iran are simply repeated ad nauseum as fact.

US ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, was due to present a “dossier” to the media on January 31 aimed at proving US contentions about Iranian activities in Iraq. The briefing in Baghdad, however, was cancelled without explanation—for a second time, with no future date given. While various excuses were given, the real reason for putting the dossier “on hold” was the lack of evidence and concern about the public reaction in the US.

According to the *Los Angeles Times* on February 1, US officials were concerned that “some of the material may be inconclusive”. They wanted to “avoid repeating the embarrassment that followed the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, when it became clear that the information cited to justify the war was incorrect,” the newspaper explained. “We don't want a repeat of the situation we had when [former US Secretary of State] Colin Powell went before the United Nations. People are going to be sceptical,” one official explained.

A former senior defence official bluntly told the *Los Angeles Times* that the task of presenting a case against Iran to a sceptical American public was “a losing

proposition”. Others explained that in interagency meetings on Iran, State Department and intelligence officials believed that “some of the material overstates murky evidence and casts a negative light on Iranians who may not be guilty”. Another claimed that if sensitive intelligence material were withdrawn, “the result could be a weak and unconvincing report”.

The dubious character of the US evidence was confirmed by National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley in the course of a press conference on February 3. In response to persistent questioning about the cancellation of the Baghdad briefing, Hadley finally blurted out: “The truth is, quite frankly, we thought the briefing overstated. And we sent it back to get it narrowed and focused on the facts.”

Hadley's press conference had been called to release an unclassified summary of a new National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iraq compiled by all 16 US intelligence agencies. As well as providing a bleak picture of the prospects for the US occupation of Iraq, the document played down the significance of outside influence on the situation in Iraq.

While repeating US claims of “Iranian lethal support” for Shiite militants in Iraq and “expatriate Iraqi Baathists” using Syria as a safe haven, the NIE stated: “Iraq's neighbours influence, and are influenced by, events within Iraq, but the involvement of these outside actors is not likely to be a major driver of violence or the prospects for stability because of the self-sustaining character of Iraq's internal sectarian dynamics.” That is, in the words of the NIE, Iran and Syria are not significant factors in the escalating civil war in Iraq.

The lack of evidence has done nothing to rein in Bush's propagandists, however. In an interview on National Public Radio on February 1, US Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns accused Iran of assisting Shiite militias in attacks on British soldiers near Basra and on American

forces in Baghdad. “Now, we warned Iran, privately on a number of occasions over the last year and a half, and the Iranians, of course, did not appear to listen to that. So now we have begun to detain those Iranian officials. And we think it’s absolutely within our rights to do so under Article 51 of the UN Charter, which is self-defence.”

Just hours after Bush’s speech on January 10, US military forces captured five Iranian officials in a provocative early morning raid on a diplomatic office in the northern Iraqi city of Irbil. American officials have claimed that some of those detained were Iranian intelligence agents and that maps and other materials “prove” their involvement in sectarian violence. No evidence has been made public and the five remain in US custody without charge despite protests not only by Tehran but also top Iraqi officials.

The operation followed the detention in Baghdad on December 20 of at least five Iranians, including two credentialled diplomats. All were released. Two of the five were detained in a highly provocative raid in the compound of prominent Shiite leader Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, whose party is a major component of the Iraqi ruling coalition and who held talks with Bush in Washington just a week before. Iran’s ambassador to Iraq, Hassan Kazemi Qumi, insisted that the two security officials were engaged in legitimate discussions with the Iraqi government and should never have been detained.

A significant aspect of Burns’s comments was his reference to Article 51 of the UN Charter. Since the 2003 invasion, the US military has arbitrarily detained scores, if not hundreds, of foreign nationals without trial, without appealing to the UN Charter. Article 51 of the UN Charter has nothing to do with detentions. It provides for the “inherent right of individual or collective self-defence” of a member state against armed attack, and was envisaged to cover direct acts of aggression such as those carried out by Nazi Germany prior to World War II.

From the standpoint of the Bush administration, the most important aspect of Article 51 is that it is the only clause of the UN Charter that allows for military action without prior reference to the UN Security Council. The unproven accusations that Iran is supporting “armed attacks” on US forces in Iraq could thus be seized upon by Washington as the spurious justification for sidestepping the UN altogether and initiating an assault on Iran, all in the name of “self-defence”. Burns’s invocation of Article 51 says more about the thinking in the White House than perhaps he would have wished.

Questioned about US intentions to strike or invade Iran,

Burns repeated the standard line of the Bush administration that “all options are on the table”. Asked directly to comment on the US military build up in the Persian Gulf and the danger of war with Iran, Burns was non-committal. “I don’t believe that a military conflict with Iran is inevitable,” he said, adding that a diplomatic solution was possible. But his strident demand that Iran should “cease and desist” from providing arms to Shiite insurgents to “target and kill American soldiers” indicates that the US is intent on ratchetting up its bellicose rhetoric against Iran.

Pentagon consultant Dan Goure told the British-based *Sunday Telegraph* last weekend: “You cannot try to deal with the militia [in Iraq] if you’re not dealing with the Iranians backing them. The message now is that the gloves are off.” According to the article, the US has increased the number of unmanned spy planes monitoring the Iran-Iraq border to provide for 24-hour surveillance. A US intelligence officer told the newspaper that the drones were being flown into Iran. He said that while the military was not currently planning attacks inside Iran, once suspects were a few miles inside Iraq, they would be “whacked”.

At some stage, as its provocations against Iran intensify, there is no doubt that the Bush administration will present a “dossier” to try to justify its aggression. But the fact that it has been put “on hold,” despite ongoing claims by US officials to have “irrefutable” proof of Iran’s support for anti-US militias, is a tell-tale sign that the evidence is, at the very least, threadbare and unconvincing. Like the lies about Iraqi WMDs in Colin Powell’s presentation to the UN and the corresponding British dossier on Iraq, the US is casting around for a convenient pretext to provide the *casus belli* for war against Iran.



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