

The Bush administration prepares for war against Iran

Part two

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SEP national secretary Nick Beams's report was posted in three parts. Part one on February 12, Part two on February 13 and Part three on February 14. James Cogan's report on Iraq was posted on February 15.

There are also broader strategic reasons for the US seeking to dominate Iran, which lies at the crossroads between the Middle East and Central Asia. To the north, it borders on the Caucasus—Armenia and oil-rich Azerbaijan—as well as the Caspian Sea and Turkmenistan. It lies between two countries currently occupied by US forces—Iraq and Afghanistan—and controls the entire northern coastline of the Persian Gulf. A US-dominated Iran would link up with Iraq and Afghanistan and open enormous opportunities for the transport of oil and gas from Central Asia via pipelines to the Persian Gulf. If, on the contrary, Iran formed alliances with other powers, such as Russia and China, it would become a serious obstacle to US ambitions in the region. Some steps have already been taken in that direction with the admission of Iran as an observer to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)—an alliance being developed by Russia and China to counter US influence in Central Asia.

The strategic significance of Iran is underscored by the fact that it has long been an object of Great Power rivalry. During the nineteenth century, Persia was a key element in the Great Game played out between Russia and Britain for domination in the Middle East and Central Asia. The Anglo-Russian Entente of 1907—a major settling of issues between the two powers in Iran, Tibet and Afghanistan—reduced Iran to a semi-vassal. The north was transformed into a Russian sphere of influence, the south became a British Zone and the rest became a neutral zone. The Iranian regime was not consulted or informed of the terms of the treaty, which was only made public by the Bolsheviks after the Russian revolution in October 1917.

After World War I, Britain sought to extend its control over the entire country by imposing the 1919 Anglo-Persian Treaty, which would have effectively turned Iran into a British protectorate. Such was the opposition generated in the wake of the October revolution that Britain was compelled to back away from the Treaty while seeking to maintain control in the oil-rich south with the continued presence of British troops. Britain increasingly threw its weight behind the government of Reza Khan, head of the elite Cossack Brigade (formed in the nineteenth century with Russian backing), who seized power in a coup in 1921, became prime minister in 1923 and installed himself as Shah in 1925.

Britain continued to be the major power in Iran, extracting considerable profits through the dominant role and lucrative concessions of the Anglo-

Persian Oil Company. To counteract British dominance, Reza Shah increasingly turned to Germany for support and espoused Nazi ideology to justify his dictatorial rule. On the eve of World War II, the government made political and economic commitments tying it to a pro-German stance. In 1941, Britain and the Soviet Union issued an ultimatum to Reza Shah to expel German officials. When the Shah prevaricated, Soviet and British troops entered and forced him to abdicate—carving the country into a northern Soviet Zone and a southern British Zone.

In the aftermath of the war, however, the US established its dominance. The crucial turning point was the 1953 coup that ousted the nationalist government of Mohammad Mosaddeq—one of the first of the CIA's dirty operations in the postwar period. The trigger for British and American hostility to Mosaddeq had been his nationalisation of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. The US backed British moves to overthrow the government, but after the fall of Mosaddeq ensured that American oil companies and American influence predominated. Reza Khan's Swiss-educated son was reinstalled as the Shah and, with US backing, managed to suppress all opposition and cling to power for nearly three decades.

Iran was a major US base of operations during the Cold War. The CIA trained the Shah's notorious secret police apparatus, SAVAK, and was heavily involved in Iranian political affairs. US military programs provided training and technical assistance. The Shah used the country's oil revenues to purchase US arms in such quantities that Iran was America's number one arms customer, accounting for \$18 billion or 25 percent of all military orders by foreign governments between 1950 and 1977. To support the sophisticated weapons, a small army of American technicians was based in the country. Prior to the fall of the Shah, more than 6,400 civilian contract personnel and over 1,200 government personnel were stationed in Iran in connection with arms programs.

The US never really accepted its loss of influence following the fall of the Shah in 1979. It has not reestablished diplomatic relations since the takeover of the US embassy in Tehran and has maintained what amounts to an economic blockade on Iran for more than two and a half decades. The US and other powers backed Iraq in a bloody war in the 1980s to undermine the new Iranian regime at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives. Since then, however, the US has watched as Russia, China and the European powers have filled the void—particularly with the election of the so-called reformist Iranian president Mohammad Khatami in 1997. The ongoing US confrontation with Iran serves the very definite purpose of undermining the economic and strategic gains made by America's European and Asian rivals.

It is worth considering the underlying logic of the Bush administration's strategy, which has been laid out most explicitly by the so-called neo-conservatives. As early as 1996, in a document entitled "A clean break: a new strategy for securing the realm" drawn up for Israeli Prime Minister

Benjamin Netanyahu, a group of neo-cons, including Richard Perle and Douglas Feith, recommended a complete break with the Middle East peace process, and a strategy “to contain, destabilise and roll-back some most dangerous threats”, including Syria and Iraq.

In positions of authority in the Bush administration, the neo-cons seized on the September 11 terrorist attacks to promote their plans for the transformation of the Middle East. In a public letter to the president on September 20, just nine days later, a prominent group of neo-cons headed by William Kristol made clear that capturing or killing Osama bin Laden was “by no means the only goal”.

The letter explicitly targeted Iraq even though there was no connection to September 11. It stated: “Even if evidence does not link Iraq directly to the attack, any strategy aiming at the eradication of terrorism and its sponsors must include a determined effort to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq.”

The letter also advocated an ultimatum to Iran and Syria to end support for Hezbollah. “Should Iran and Syria refuse to comply,” it declared, “the administration should consider appropriate measures of retaliation against these known state sponsors of terrorism.” In other words, right from the outset, the so-called war on terror was a war aimed at refashioning the Middle East in the US interests.

As Iraq has become a disaster, divisions have emerged in the US political establishment that had come together to back the war. It is worth considering the alternative posed by the critics of the Bush administration in US ruling circles who advocate a return to real politik in the Middle East, in order to shore up US interests and prevent what they see as a looming disaster.

The rationale was set out in some detail in a featured article entitled “The New Middle East” in the November/December issue of *Foreign Affairs* by Richard Haass, a former top US State Department official now president of the Council of Foreign Affairs.

Haass draws a broad picture of the Middle East dividing its history into five periods—the colonial period which began with the arrival of Napoleon in Egypt and ended with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, the second involving the division of the region by the European victors that ended with the Suez crisis in 1956, the third covering the Cold War and the fourth being the post-Cold War period in which, he writes, “the United States enjoyed unprecedented influence and freedom to act”.

According to Haass, that period of US dominance is now over, triggered in part by the invasion of Iraq. He writes: “It is one of history’s ironies that the first war in Iraq, a war of necessity, marked the beginning of the American era in the Middle East and the second Iraq war, a war of choice, has precipitated its end.”

The features of the fifth period, as outlined by Haass, are bleak for US imperialism. He points to declining US influence in the region, and increasing challenges by other outsiders, including the European Union, Russia, China and others. He sums up his answer to the situation as being to avoid two mistakes, and to seize two opportunities. The two mistakes are over-reliance on military force and counting on emerging democracies. “As the United States has learned to its great cost in Iraq—and Israel has in Lebanon, military force is no panacea,” he writes.

The two opportunities are, firstly, the greater use of non-military tools and, secondly, to cut US reliance on Middle East oil. On Iran, he declares: “The US government should open, without preconditions, comprehensive talks that address Iran’s nuclear program and its support of terrorism and foreign militias. Iran should be offered an array of economic, political and security incentives.” He goes on to outline such a proposal for a deal with Iran in some detail.

The obvious question to be asked is: why not take up this proposal? The Iraq Study Group report also advocated a comprehensive diplomatic strategy in the Middle East, including negotiations with Iran and Syria. The Bush administration has not only rejected the suggestion but is doing

exactly the opposite. It is not simply bloody mindedness or madness on its part. What may have been rational American foreign policy in the 1970s and 1980s, no longer meets the requirements of the American ruling class. Haass in his discussion of the new “fifth period” is advocating an accommodation to waning American influence in the Middle East, which in turn is tantamount to accepting waning global influence. It is simply not an option for US imperialism.

As in the case of Iraq, a non-military diplomatic strategy in dealing with Iran would leave the United States sidelined politically and economically in what is a key element of the Middle East equation. While the US now has nil political influence in Iran and virtually no economic investment, its rivals have built up a considerable presence. To consider them briefly:

Europe: Since the re-opening of relations with Iran in the mid-1990s, the EU has become Iran’s largest trading partner with 35 percent of total market share, ahead of Japan with 12.3 percent and China with 9.1 percent. EU exports to Iran have doubled since 1999.

Japan: Iran is the third largest exporter of oil to Japan, accounting for about 15.9 percent of its oil needs. In February 2004, Japan’s Inpex Corp signed a major deal with Tehran for 75 percent of development rights of the huge Azedegan oil field, one of the largest in the Middle East. Under heavy pressure from Washington, the share has now been slashed to just 10 percent.

China: Iran accounts for some 14 percent of China’s oil imports and is its number two supplier after Saudi Arabia. China’s state-owned Sinopec Group has signed a \$70 billion deal to develop Iran’s Yadavarn oil field in exchange for a 25-year contract to purchase Iranian liquefied natural gas (LNG). Beijing continues to reject US demands to cut its investments.

Russia: Moscow has had a highly profitable economic relationship with Iran. Russian companies, employing tens of thousands of people, have nearly completed Iran’s first nuclear power reactor at Bushehr. The project was estimated to be worth \$US1 billion, and another \$5 billion in future reactor contracts are in the offing.

India and Pakistan: New Delhi and Islamabad have signed a deal with Tehran for the construction of a \$7 billion gas pipeline from Iran via Pakistan to India. Both countries have come under pressure from Washington to tear up the deal.

Any end to the confrontation with Iran would result in a rapid acceleration in all these plans to the detriment of the US. Without the economic clout to outbid its rivals, the only means left to US imperialism is military. That is what lies behind the Bush administration escalating military threats against Iran and the Middle East as a whole. As can be seen, any war against Iran has the potential to trigger a far wider conflagration as the other major power conclude the only way to defend their interests is through war.

The working class must have its own answer to this eruption of militarism. The states that were carved out of the Middle East by British and French imperialism in the wake of World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire are completely artificial. The US is now seeking to reshape the region in its own interests. The working class must answer this with its own plan: a unified struggle for the United Socialist States of the Middle East as part of the broader international struggle for socialism.

The WSWS statement of January 22 calling for the revival of the antiwar movement is 2007 is crucial. It provided the essential political program for a counteroffensive by working people around the world. It makes an important appeal to workers in the Middle East:

“Working people in the Middle East must reject the fomenting of ethnic and religious differences, which has already produced a sectarian bloodbath in Iraq and threatens to plunge the entire region into conflict. The answer to imperialist aggression and anti-Muslim racism is not a retreat into Islamic fundamentalism, which invariably serves the interests of one or other faction of the ruling elite, but the unification of the working class throughout the Middle East with its class brothers and

sisters around the world on the basis of socialist internationalism.”

It is an appeal that will inevitably produce a response among layers in the Middle East looking for a way out of the maelstrom that has been created by the wars of the Bush administration.

Concluded



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