

Bush authorises covert CIA operations to destabilise Iran

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An ABC News report on Tuesday provided further evidence that the Bush administration is actively engaged in a covert campaign of destabilisation aimed at “regime change” in Iran.

According to the American television network, Bush signed a formal “non-lethal presidential finding” earlier this year authorising “a CIA plan that reportedly includes a coordinated campaign of propaganda, disinformation and manipulation of Iran’s currency and international financial transactions”.

Based on information from unnamed former and current CIA officials, ABC News reported that Bush approved the plan “about the time that [Admiral William] Fallon took over [as head of the Pentagon’s Central Command]”—that is, about mid-March. It also stated that National Security Adviser Steve Hadley and Deputy National Security Adviser Elliott Abrams both gave the green light for the operation.

The timing of the plan coincides with a steady stream of articles, prominently placed in the media, highlighting Tehran’s crackdown on women’s dress, arrest of dissidents, alleged nuclear weapons programs and support for anti-occupation militia operating inside neighbouring Iraq. While it is impossible to know how many of these reports are direct CIA “plants,” they point to a concerted campaign of propaganda and disinformation. Whatever the impact inside Iran, such stories serve to poison public opinion in the US and internationally in preparation for a possible military strike.

ABC News was at pains to point out that “approval of the covert action means the Bush administration, for the time being, has decided not to pursue a military option against Iran”. Retired CIA official Bruce Riedel said that in the internal White House debate, “Vice President [Dick] Cheney helped to lead the side favouring a military strike but I think they have come to the conclusion that a military strike has more downsides than upsides.”

These reassurances count for nothing. The US navy continues to maintain two aircraft carrier battle groups in the Persian Gulf, which have the capacity to mount a sustained air assault on Iran. During his visit to the Middle East earlier this month, Cheney pointedly declared on the deck of the USS John C. Stennis, just 150 miles off the Iranian coast, “We’ll stand with others to prevent Iran from gaining nuclear weapons and dominating the region.”

The US fleet began extensive exercises in the Persian Gulf on Wednesday, in a move designed to intensify the pressure on Iran as a UN deadline passed for Tehran to shut down its uranium enrichment program. Bush has never withdrawn his menacing threat that “all options are on the table”—in other words, if diplomatic bullying and covert operations fail, the military option remains.

It would also be wrong to conclude that covert operations are

confined to the CIA. According to a number of media reports, including detailed articles from veteran investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, the Pentagon and other US agencies have been actively targeting Iran since at least 2004. Unlike the CIA, which—formally at least—requires a presidential finding to mount “black” operations, the US military has, under Bush, increasingly engaged in its own covert activities, including the dispatch of special forces units inside Iran, without any congressional oversight.

There is nothing particularly secret about the Bush administration’s campaign for “regime change”. Last year Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice sought and received \$75 million for anti-Iranian propaganda broadcasts and to fund opposition groups inside and outside Iran. In 2005, the figure was just \$10 million. Rice also established an Iranian Affairs office last year, initially headed by Elizabeth Cheney, the vice president’s daughter, to coordinate policy and provide “pro-democracy funding” for opponents of the regime. The *Boston Globe* reported in January that a team of top officials from the Pentagon, State Department, CIA, Treasury and National Security Council, known as the Iran Syria Policy and Operations Group (ISOG), had been working for some time to strengthen military alliances against Iran, finance Iranian dissidents and undermine the country economically.

While the approved CIA activities may at present be “non-lethal,” the same cannot be said of all US activities inside Iran. In his article last November entitled “The Next Act: Is a damaged Administration less likely to attack Iran, or more?”, Hersh provided evidence that the Pentagon was covertly supporting minority Kurdish, Azeri and Baluchi tribal groups as a means of undermining Tehran’s authority in northern and southeastern Iran. In particular, the US military was collaborating with Israel in backing a Kurdish armed group—the Party for Free Life—based in northern Iraq to foment opposition inside the Kurdish regions of Iran and to spy on “targets inside Iran of interest to the US”.

A series of ABC News reports last month stated that the US was actively backing Jundullah, an armed Baluchi group based in Pakistan, to carry out cross-border attacks inside Iran. It reported on April 3 that the militia had been “secretly encouraged and advised by American officials since 2005”. The group was responsible for the bomb blasts in the southeastern city of Zahedran in February that killed 11 members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.

Alexis Debat, a senior fellow on counterterrorism at the Nixon Centre, told ABC News that Jundullah leader Abd el Malik Regi “used to fight with the Taliban. He’s part drug smuggler, part Taliban, part Sunni activist.” According to this week’s report, US officials deny any “direct funding” of Jundullah but “say the leader of

Jundullah was in regular contact with US officials.” In other words, in its efforts to bring about “regime change” in Iran, the Bush administration is collaborating with Sunni extremists associated with the Taliban, which is the main target of the US “war on terror” in neighbouring Afghanistan.

In his most recent article, in February, entitled “The Redirection,” Hersh says the Bush administration has enlisted the support of the Saudi monarchy and other Sunni states such as Jordan in a bid to counter the influence of Shiite Iran across the Middle East. As the article points out, the US might not be “directly funding” groups like Jundullah and other Sunni extremist militia, but autocratic Saudi Arabia is able to secretly provide large amounts of money, as it did to Al Qaeda in the 1980s in the CIA’s war against the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan.

Hersh also highlighted the role of Deputy National Security Adviser Elliott Abrams, a prominent neo-conservative who was an active participant in the Reagan administration’s illegal arming of the right-wing Nicaraguan contras through the covert sale of weapons to Iran in the 1980s. Abrams eventually pled guilty to lying under oath to cover up the Iran-contras scandal. His past crimes were no hindrance, however, to his appointment by Bush as deputy national security adviser with a special brief for “global democracy strategy”—that is, for undermining regimes targetted by the administration.

According to Hersh’s sources, Abrams has used his experiences to bypass congressional oversight of a series of clandestine operations, not only inside Iran, but directed against pro-Iranian groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon. Access to funds appears to have been no problem, as a Pentagon consultant explained: “There are many, many pots of black money, scattered in many places and used all over the world on a variety of missions.” Other US officials pointed out that the billions of dollars unaccounted for during the first months of the US occupation of Iraq had been “a vehicle for such transactions”.

Commenting to ABC News about Bush’s secret presidential finding, Vali Nasr, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, warned: “I think everybody in the region knows that there is a proxy war already afoot with the United States supporting anti-Iranian elements in the region as well as opposition groups within Iran. And this covert action is now being escalated by the new US directive, and that can very quickly lead to Iranian retaliation and a cycle of escalation can follow.”

A senior US State Department official admitted to the *Washington Post* that the US was funding oppositionists, albeit indirectly. “We saw early on the problem we would pose if we tried to support them directly. We didn’t want to get them into hot water. That’s why we’re doing it through third countries,” he said.

Already the Iranian government has seized on the US campaign to justify its own political witch-hunt, including the roundup of political opponents as “spies” and “US agents”. US-based Human Rights Watch analyst Hadi Ghaemi told the *Washington Post* last month: “Dozens of Iranian activists are paying the price since the announcement of the \$75 million and practically everyone who has been detained over the past year has been interrogated about receiving this money. They [the authorities] are obsessed with the perception that the US is fuelling a velvet revolution through this money.”

A broad range of activists have been detained and interrogated, including teachers, women’s rights campaigners, labour organisers, students, journalists and intellectuals. “When the US announces its support for civil society movements, it becomes a ready tool for the Iranian government to use against independent activists. It’s really

been counterproductive,” Fariba Davoodi Mohajer, a women’s rights activist, told the newspaper.

Several visiting foreign academics and journalists have also been caught up in the security dragnet, including Radio Farda correspondent Parnaz Azima and Haleh Esfandiari, from Washington’s Woodrow Wilson Centre. Both hold dual US-Iranian citizenship and were visiting family members in Iran. Esfandiari, who has become something of a cause célèbre in American ruling circles, was formally detained on May 8, after being prevented from leaving the country, and has been accused of trying to foment a “soft revolution” and spying for the US and Israel.

While the Iranian regime has offered no evidence to justify its repressive measures, the outrage expressed by the Bush administration and congressional Democrats is completely hypocritical. Secretary of State Rice declared last week that Esfandiari should be released immediately, saying her case demonstrated that the Iranian regime “does not treat its people... very well.” State Department spokesman Sean McCormack dismissed Iranian accusations that the academic was seeking to overthrow the Iranian government as “poppycrack” and “utter nonsense”.

Whether or not Esfandiari is involved, Rice’s perspective is certainly “regime change” in Tehran. Moreover, with the complicity of the Democrats, the Bush administration has arbitrarily detained without trial, and in many cases tortured, thousands of people in Iraq, Afghanistan and the US itself, including five Iranian officials seized from an Iranian liaison office in northern Iraq in January.

The campaign for “regime change” in Iran has nothing to do with defending “democracy” or the political rights of the Iranian population. Its sole purpose is to advance US strategic and economic interests. Iran not only contains huge reserves of oil and gas, it sits at the strategic crossroads of the resource-rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East.

US and Iranian officials are due to meet next week in Baghdad to discuss the deteriorating security situation confronting American occupation forces in Iraq. The meeting is unlikely to ease the escalating tensions between the two countries.



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