

# Denials of US interference in Iran not credible

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The US administration has responded to Iranian allegations of manipulating opposition protests inside the country with flat denials. President Obama declared last week that the United States respected Iran's sovereignty "and is not at all interfering in Iran's affairs".

The American and international media, which has mounted a strident campaign in support of defeated Iranian presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, has similarly dismissed out of hand any suggestion that the US and its European allies had a hand in the events since the presidential poll on June 12. Just as the press never examines the claims of Mousavi and his supporters that the election was rigged, so it ignores the considerable evidence of extensive US operations against Iran, spanning a range of diplomatic, intelligence and military activities.

*USA Today* last week noted that the US Agency for International Development (USAID) was handing out \$20 million in grants this financial year to unnamed organisations "to promote democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in Iran". For next year, the Obama administration is seeking another \$15 million via the Near Eastern Regional Democracy Initiative, which has similar aims.

Asked whether such grants constituted interference, White House spokesman Tommy Vietor disingenuously declared: "Let's be clear. The United States does not fund any movement, faction or political party in Iran. We support... universal principles of human rights, free speech, and the rule of law." In reality, the funding is the continuation of the Bush administration's efforts to establish ties with opposition groups in Iran and undermine the government.

One of the funnels for funding is the state-funded National Endowment for Democracy, which has been intimately involved in "colour revolutions" in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics. The NED website lists a number of Iranian organisations including the National Iranian American Council as recipients of its funds.

This openly acknowledged program is, however, just the tip of the iceberg. In a series of articles in the *New Yorker*, investigative journalist Seymour Hersh provided details of the Bush administration's efforts to foster "regime change" in Tehran and prepare for a military strikes. There is no reason to believe that the Obama administration has ended any of these covert activities by

the CIA and the Pentagon.

In one of his first articles entitled "The Coming Wars" in January 2005, Hersh reported that the US military had been staging commando operations inside Iran for months to accumulate "intelligence and targeting information on Iranian nuclear, chemical and missile sites" for future military strikes. US special forces were operating from bases inside neighbouring, US-occupied Afghanistan and Iraq. The use of the military for covert operations avoided the formal legal constraints under which the CIA operated. ("US carrying out acts of war against Iran, magazine reports")

The WWSW also noted an article in the *Guardian* reporting that the Pentagon was using members of the Iranian opposition group Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MEK) for intelligence operations inside Iran. The MEK, which is listed as a terrorist organisation by the US State Department, had been under the protection of Saddam Hussein, having fought on Iraq's side during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. Following the US occupation of Iraq, the group was based at Camp Ashraf near Baghdad, watched over by American troops.

In 2006, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice sought an extra \$75 million to fund anti-Tehran propaganda and support opposition groups inside and outside the country. While avoiding the use of the term "regime change," Rice told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the US intended to "actively confront" Iran. Congress eventually approved \$66 million—a major expansion from the previous year's \$10 million. Lacking any diplomatic presence in Iran, the State Department set up a small outpost in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates—the Iranian Regional Presence Office—ostensibly to monitor Iranian state television and talk to Iranians who travelled there.

The extra funding was part of stepped-up US activities against the Iranian regime amid increasingly strident, but unsubstantiated, claims that Tehran was building nuclear weapons, arming anti-US insurgents inside Iraq and Afghanistan, and supporting "terrorism" throughout the Middle East. In a February 2007 article entitled "The Redirection," Hersh focussed on US efforts to counter Iran throughout the Middle East by forging a coalition of "moderate" states, including Saudi Arabia and Israel. The article provided details of US covert operations inside Lebanon, Syria and Iran, including the use of Al Qaeda-linked Sunni groups deeply hostile to Shiite Iran. ("The Bush administration's new strategy of setting

the Middle East aflame”)

In January 2007, the *Boston Globe* reported that the Bush administration had established the Iran Syria Policy and Operations Group (ISOG), involving senior officials from the Pentagon, State Department, Treasury, the CIA and National Security Council, with a broad brief to consolidate the US military alliance against Tehran, covertly finance Iranian dissidents and opposition groups and isolate Iran economically. Elizabeth Cheney, daughter of former Vice President Dick Cheney, had initially headed ISOG, having been in charge of the State Department’s Iranian Affairs office that dispensed “pro-democracy” funding to Iranian opposition groups. The *Los Angeles Times* noted in 2006 that the Pentagon had already established its own Directorate for Iran, modelled on the notorious Office of Special Plans that played a major role in concocting the lies to justify the invasion of Iraq. (“The Bush administration’s committee for regime change in Iran”)

Reports also emerged in 2006 and 2007 that the US was covertly assisting armed guerrillas based among Iran’s ethnic minorities to wage war against the Iranian regime. Two bombings in Zahedan in southeastern Iran that killed members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps raised questions about US support for a Sunni extremist group, Jundallah, based among Iran’s Baluch minority. In other circumstances, the US would brand Jundallah as Al Qaeda. In a November 2006 article, Hersh noted that the Pentagon had established “covert relationships with Kurdish, Azeri and Baluchi tribesmen and had encouraged their efforts to undermine the regime’s authority in northern and southeastern Iran”. ABC News published several reports in April 2007 indicating that US officials were in regular contact with the Jundallah leader, Abd el Malik Regi. (“Is the Bush administration behind the bombings in Iran?”)

The Pentagon was further implicated in backing Party for Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK) guerrillas operating from northern Iraq against targets inside the neighbouring Kurdish areas of Iran. A spate of articles appeared in the US press after Iran retaliated by shelling PJAK bases. Journalists met with PJAK leaders who were clearly operating with tacit US approval. While both sides were coy about acknowledging direct American support, PJAK leader Rahman Haji Ahmadi had travelled to Washington in 2006 to meet with senior US officials. The US was clearly walking a fine line as the PJAK “freedom fighters” were linked to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which was carrying out its own war inside Turkey, a US ally, and was branded a “terrorist” organisation by the US State Department. (“Washington’s proxy war inside Kurdish Iran”)

In mid-2007, ABC News reported that President Bush had signed a formal presidential finding earlier in the year, authorising “a CIA plan that reportedly includes a coordinated campaign of propaganda, disinformation and manipulation of Iran’s currency and international financial transactions”. A detailed article by Hersh last July entitled “Preparing the Battlefield” provided

further details of the presidential finding, which authorised the CIA to engage in extensive activities in support of dissident groups inside Iran, as well as minority Ahwazi Arab and Baluchi groups, at a cost of \$400 million.

The CIA was working hand in hand with US special forces, who, according to Hersh, were involved in “seizing members of Al Quds, the commando arm of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, and taking them to Iraq for interrogation, and the pursuit of ‘high-value targets’ in the President’s war on terror, who may be captured or killed”. Hersh noted that the scale and the scope of such operations had been significantly expanded.

Significantly, the presidential finding had been approved by four senior Democrats—House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, Senate Intelligence Committee chairman Jay Rockefeller and House Intelligence Committee chairman Silvestre Reyes. The Democrat backing for Bush’s finding underscores the bipartisan character of the US operations against Iran, which are aimed at securing a regime in Tehran more amenable to US strategic and economic interests in the energy-rich Middle East and Central Asian regions. (“As war clouds gather: Democrats back covert US attacks on Iran”)

The advent of the Obama administration resulted in a tactical shift in US foreign policy, not a fundamental change in direction. Sections of the US political establishment regarded the Bush administration’s war in Iraq as disastrous to America’s standing and interests in the region and pressed for a refocussing on the rapidly deteriorating situation in Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan. Iran, which is at the strategic crossroads between the Middle East and Central Asia, was always central to US plans. While Obama has mooted negotiations with Iran to reach a political accommodation, his administration is undoubtedly keeping all its options open.

It is not possible at this stage to determine the full extent of US involvement in the recent Iranian presidential elections and the subsequent protests. However, the entire campaign run by Mir Hossein Mousavi before and after the poll bears an uncanny resemblance to previous US-backed “colour revolutions” in Eastern Europe and former Soviet Republics. Given the intensive activities of the CIA, Pentagon and State Department, not only in recent years, but going back to the 1953 US-backed coup that overthrew the nationalist Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq, it certainly can be ruled out that the Obama administration has simply sat back and watched events unfold.



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