

Bush Regime Targets Iran After 9/11

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Global Research, October 31, 2007

RCP Publications 31 October 2007

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For over 100 years, the domination of Iran has been deeply woven into the fabric of global imperialism, enforced through covert intrigues, economic bullying, military assaults, and invasions. This history provides the backdrop for U.S. hostility toward Iran today—including the real threat of war. Part 8 of this series examines why the Bush administration targeted Iran after 9/11, how the invasion of Iraq has backfired on them in many ways, and why this has increased their felt need to confront the Islamic Republic.

Iran, 9/11 and the “War on Terror”

George W. Bush’s capture of the U.S. presidency in 2000, followed by the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, led to a radical shift in U.S. global strategy and the launching of Bush’s “war on terror.” Iran was a key target from the start.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the U.S. was suddenly the only global imperialist superpower. America’s rulers saw an opportunity to vastly extend their power, as well as the necessity to do so given the many contradictions—and potential contradictions—they faced worldwide. For a decade the “neo-cons” had been arguing for aggressively using U.S. military might to create an unchallenged and unchallengeable U.S. empire. They assumed key positions in Bush’s new administration.

After the 9/11 attacks, the Bush team felt compelled to forcefully lash back to preserve the U.S. empire’s global credibility. They also saw the opportunity—and the necessity—to push forward their broader agenda, which required crushing anti-U.S. Islamic fundamentalism and forcefully dealing with a host of impediments to their global power and ambitions—including states like Iran and Iraq.

During a secret November 2001 meeting, as reported by Bob Woodward in *State of Denial: Bush at War*, Part III, leading strategists close to the Bush administration argued that the 9/11 attacks did not represent “an isolated action that called for policing and crime fighting.” Their solution: a “two-generation battle with radical Islam” to defeat this movement—as well as take down regimes in Iraq, Iran, and Syria that were contributing in one way or another to the spread of anti-U.S. sentiments and fundamentalism or that posed obstacles to U.S. plans. They thought this would open the door to transforming the entire region—“draining the swamp,” as Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and his assistant Paul Wolfowitz put it shortly after Sept. 11—to eliminate the conditions giving rise to forces which, while reactionary, posed a growing obstacle to U.S. imperialist interests.

The first phase of this global war was launched on October 7, 2001 with the bombing of Afghanistan and the overthrow of the Islamist Taliban government. The Bush regime then decided that Iraq would be phase two. Saddam wasn’t an Islamist, nor was he allied with al

Qaeda, but his continued rule was creating a variety of problems for the U.S. in the Middle East.

Even as they invaded Iraq, the Bush regime had Iran's Islamic Republic squarely in their sights.

The Islamic Republic of Iran was not involved in the Sept. 11 attacks, and it aided the U.S. during the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan by backing the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, allowing U.S. search-and-rescue missions to operate from Iranian territory, and passing on intelligence from Afghanistan. But the imperialists still had a big problem with the Islamic Republic—not because it is a reactionary theocracy that brutally represses its people. The problem, from the imperialists' standpoint, was that Iran has been a key font of anti-U.S. Islamic fundamentalism. It was the first place where current-day Islamists seized state power—and they have used that power to promote Islamic fundamentalism and support Islamist movements in the region. Tehran's rulers have also sought to redefine Iran's place in the regional order, including by negotiating economic and political deals with U.S. rivals like Russia and China. All this has made Iran a big obstacle to U.S. plans in the region, and so the Bush regime placed Iran high on its target list.

On January 30, 2002, Bush charged that Iran “aggressively pursues these [nuclear] weapons and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom,” and he included Iran (along with Iraq and North Korea) in the so-called “axis-of-evil,” which he said posed “a grave and growing danger.”

After Iraq, Debating Iran

After the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, some within the Bush administration argued that the U.S. should continue to pressure Iran's Islamic Republic to end its support for Islamist movements in the region and give up its nuclear program, while also keeping the diplomatic channel to Tehran open, if only to use Iran's influence to first stabilize post-invasion Iraq before moving on to other targets in the “war on terror.”

But the neocons, and those around Vice President Cheney in particular, argued that such rapprochement with Iran would derail the U.S.'s momentum and mission. “Our fight against Iraq was only one battle in a long war,” Meyrav Wurmser, a fellow at the right-wing American Enterprise Institute and wife of leading neocon David Wurmser, stated. “It would be ill-conceived to think that we can deal with Iraq alone... We must move on, and faster.” (Jim Lobe, Asia Times, 5/28/03)

As further justification for their call for more aggressive action, Cheney and others pointed to new revelations about Iran's nuclear program. In February 2003, Iran admitted that it was building two uranium enrichment plants, although it had not yet enriched uranium. By November 2003 Iran was in discussions with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) over verifying its compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and stated it had suspended its enrichment program.

But the U.S. imperialists were determined to prevent Iran from having the bomb—not because they feared a preemptive Iranian strike on the U.S. or Israel, but because of the concern about “the constraining effect” a nuclear-armed Iran threatened “to impose upon U.S. strategy for the Greater Middle East,” as neocon Tom Donnelly put it. (Gareth Porter, Huffingtonpost.com, 9/8/07)

Iran's rulers may want to acquire nuclear weapons, and they may have taken steps to do so. IAEA head Mohammed El Baradei, however, has stated that he's found no evidence of any undeclared "source or special nuclear materials" or that such materials had ever been "used in furtherance of a military purpose." (Farhang Jahanpour, oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk, June 2006)

In May 2003 the U.S. government secretly received a wide-ranging proposal from Iran's leadership, perhaps motivated partly by fear that the U.S. was going to quickly turn its guns on Tehran. In exchange for an end to U.S. hostility, lifting of U.S. sanctions, and removal of Iran from the State Department's list of countries supporting "terrorism," the Iranian regime said it would meet the main U.S. demands and basically accommodate itself to a U.S.-dominated Middle East. Iran would also freeze its nuclear program and open it up to inspections that would guarantee it wasn't making nuclear weapons. Iran also offered to support a democratic, non-religious government in Iraq, to cooperate fully in fighting al Qaeda and other groups, and to end its support for Hamas in Palestine. (Peter Galbraith, The NY Review of Books, 10/11/07)

The Bush regime summarily rejected Iran's offer. The high-level dialogue between the U.S. and Iran over Iraq, Afghanistan, and other regional issues was abruptly shut down, and the neocons continued to push for regime change in Tehran.

The Fateful Decisions of May 2003

Before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, fervent advocates of the war had predicted that Hussein's overthrow would trigger upheaval, even the fall of the regime in Iran. But, in fact, U.S. actions ended up strengthening Iranian influence in Iraq and across the region-intensifying some of the very contradictions the U.S. was trying to solve by invading Iraq in the first place.

The Bush regime attempted to quickly and radically reshape Iraqi politics, economics, and society in the interests of U.S. imperialism. In mid-May 2003, less than a month after Bush declared "victory" in Iraq from the deck of an aircraft carrier, occupation chief Paul Bremer issued decrees banning Iraq's Baath Party, disbanding Iraq's army and police force, closing unprofitable state-run industries, and beginning the privatization of Iraq's economy. Bremer also scuttled the proposed interim government in favor of a "Coalition Provisional Authority" (CPA) which would gradually unfold the political process and form a new Iraqi government under Bremer's tight control.

Bush officials also calculated that Iraq's Shi'ites (some 60 percent of the population) would be hostile to Iran. Some even predicted that backing the Iraqi Shi'a religious factions would serve U.S. aims. Neocon war architect David Wurmser wrote that "liberating the Shi'ite centers in Najaf and Karbala, with their clerics who reject the wilayat al-faqih [clerical rule], could allow Iraqi Shi'ites to challenge and perhaps fatally derail the Iranian revolution." (Larry Everest, Oil, Power, and Empire, Chapter 9)

These were profound miscalculations. The Bush regime underestimated how the shock of the invasion and the dismantling of the Iraqi state would lift the lid on the deep contradictions roiling Iraq, including hatred of the U.S. and its ally Israel, and the growing strength of Islamic fundamentalism among both Sunnis and Shi'as. And it underestimated how the CPA's handling of the political process and elections would raise tensions with Shi'as and strengthen Iran's hand.

While the full scope of Iranian actions in U.S.-occupied Iraq is unclear, it appears that Iran has sought to prevent the re-emergence of a hostile Iraq on its western border, as well as extend its regional influence and strengthen the Islamist project. (And expanding its influence in Iraq as a means of increasing Tehran's bargaining leverage with the U.S.) From 2003 to 2005, U.S. and Iranian actions in Iraq ran more or less parallel—even as the U.S. imperialists and Iran's Islamic rulers had sharply antagonistic strategic objectives. During the invasion, Iraq's Shi'a leadership (who have close ties to the Iranian regime) encouraged their followers to avoid confrontations with U.S. forces. Both the U.S. and the Iranians ended up supporting the same reactionary Kurdish and Shi'ite parties, neither wanted Sunni forces to return to power, and both wanted the establishment of a stable new Iraqi government.

But U.S.-Iranian tensions continued to develop. In June 2003, less than a month after coming to Iraq, Bremer complained that Iran was "meddling" in Iraq (this came from the mouth of an official representing a power that had just invaded this country!). Bremer singled out the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution of Iraq (SCIRI, which was formed in Iran in the early 1980s) for threatening to boycott a Bremer-chosen interim Iraqi administration. (Financial Times, 6/10/03)

Tufts University Professor Vali Nasr, an expert on Iran, recently told investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, "Iran's policy since 2003 has been to provide funding, arms, and aid to several Shi'ite factions—including some in [current Prime Minister] Maliki's coalition." In the fall of 2004, during the run-up to the January 2005 Iraqi elections for a Transitional National Assembly engineered by the U.S., the CIA reported that Iran was spending \$11 million a week to help the United Shi'a Platform, which ended up winning a majority of seats in the election. So while Iran wasn't directly challenging the U.S. in Iraq, it was definitely increasing its leverage.

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