

The Bush administration's committee for regime change in Iran

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Global Research, January 07, 2007
[WSWS.org](#) 7 January 2007

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An article published in the *Boston Globe* on January 2 has provided a glimpse into the preparations of the Bush administration for political provocations and a military attack against Iran. While the White House continues to maintain that it intends to resolve the ongoing confrontation with Iran diplomatically, a team of top officials from the Pentagon, State Department, Treasury, CIA and National Security Council has been working to strengthen US military alliances against Tehran, covertly finance Iranian dissidents and oppositional groups, and isolate Iran economically.

The Iran Syria Policy and Operations Group (ISOG), set up nearly a year ago, is modelled on the Iraq Policy and Operations Group established in 2004 to consolidate the US-led occupation of Iraq. Syria, as a close ally of Iran, has been included in the ISOG's brief, but, according to the *Globe*, "is a lesser focus of the group". Emile El-Hokayem, a research fellow at the Stimpson Centre, a US-based thinktank, told the newspaper: "There is a perception in the Gulf that Iran is really on the rise. Washington wants to prepare for a potential showdown."

The article, based on interviews with half a dozen officials, pointed out that the ISOG's activities are highly secretive. To handle its administrative work, it employs the same private contractors—BearingPoint—as the Iraq Policy and Operations Group. Several officials in the State Department's Near Eastern Affairs bureau—which covers Iran and Syria—told the *Globe* they were unaware of the group's existence.

Kate Starr, a National Security Council spokeswoman, played down the ISOG's significance, saying it was nothing more than "a forum for ongoing interagency group discussions on Iran and Syria". But a former official involved in the early stages of its establishment indicated that the group's purpose was far from routine. He told the newspaper, "he got the impression that regime change was a key goal of many of the meetings' participants".

Iran is clearly at the top of the list of the Bush administration's targets for the final two years of its second term. In 2002, Bush branded Iran, along with Iraq and North Korea, as part of an "axis of evil". Since 2003, the US has cynically set the stage for confrontation with Iran by pressing for UN action over its nuclear programs. At the end of last year, the White House rejected the suggestion made by the top-level Iraq Study Group to seek the assistance of Iran and Syria in bolstering the US occupation of Iraq and pressured the UN Security Council into voting for a resolution to impose sanctions on Iran.

The US targetting of Iran has nothing to do with its alleged nuclear weapons programs, for which no positive evidence has been offered, nor with bringing about "democracy". Rather

the aim of regime change in Tehran is to extend US domination over the resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia at the expense of its European and Asian rivals. Not only does Iran have huge oil and gas reserves of its own, but the country is a pivotal strategic bridge between the two regions, adjacent to US-occupied Iraq and Afghanistan.

A senior State Department official involved in the ISOG told the *Globe*: “Iran is the key to everything at the strategic level—the biggest problem we have faced in a long time.” Couched in the language of the Bush administration’s bogus “war on terror,” he went on to complain about growing Iranian influence in Lebanon, Israel, Iraq, Afghanistan and the Palestinian territories. Rejecting any suggestion of negotiations with Iran, he declared: “These are all things they are doing because they sense weakness [on the part of the US]. The best thing for us to project is strength, not ‘please talk to us’.”

The participation of Elliot Abrams as a co-chairman of the ISOG’s steering committee is further evidence of the group’s preparations for dirty operations against Iran. Abrams, an unabashed neo-conservative, 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. He eventually admitted to lying under oath to cover up the Iran-contra scandal. This political gangster is now Bush’s deputy national security adviser with a special brief for “global democracy strategy”—that is, for undermining regimes targetted by the Bush administration.

Prior to taking maternity leave last year, Elizabeth Cheney, daughter of Vice President Dick Cheney, served as the ISOG’s co-chairwoman. She was in charge of the State Department’s Iranian Affairs office established last year to coordinate policy on Iran and dispense “pro-democracy” financing to Iranian opposition groups. Last February, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice requested a boost from \$10 to \$75 million for such activities. A senior State Department official told the *Globe* that this budget would double again in 2008.

A *Time* magazine article “Syria in Bush’s Cross Hairs” published on December 19 provided details of an ISOG proposal for destabilising the Syrian regime of President Bashar Assad by funding opposition groups in the country’s election in March. The document called for “regular meetings of internal and diaspora Syrian activists” in order to “facilitate a more coherent strategy and plan of actions for all anti-Assad activists”.

The ISOG plan would be run under the guise of an “election monitoring program” to avoid being formally designated as a covert action. It would operate through a foundation run by Amar Abdulhamid, a member of a Syrian opposition umbrella group known as the National Salvation Front (NSF). The NSF includes the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood and Syrian dissidents. According to *Time*, NSF representatives, including Abdulhamid, met at the White House twice last year for “exploratory” discussions.

Military preparations

The ISOG’s activities are not, however, limited to supporting Syrian and Iranian oppositionists. “Democracy outreach” is the focus of just one of the ISOG’s five working groups, which include “media outreach” or propaganda; tracking of Iran’s activities in Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan and other countries; and imposing financial restrictions on Iran.

The work of the financial working group has already received considerable attention. US Treasury officials have been bullying major banks in Europe and Asia into cutting off

relations with Iran by threatening to restrict their access to the US banking and financial system. UBS and Credit Suisse First Boston announced last year they would do no new business with Iran. Last month, the Japan Bank for International Cooperation announced it would issue no new loans for Iranian projects until the nuclear issue was resolved.

An article in the *New York Times* on January 2 outlined a “new push” underway to exploit the sanctions against Iran in last month’s UN resolution as broadly as possible. Bush administration officials “would soon head abroad to press officials of foreign governments and banks to interpret the Security Council resolution equally aggressively [as the US]”. The article implied that part of the US effort was directed at undermining Iran’s ability to finance new oil and gas projects and constricting its ability to obtain petrol. Currently Iran has limited refining capacity and has to import 43 percent of its gasoline.

The most sinister aspect of the ISOG’s operations concerns the working group on military actions. Despite claiming that the US is seeking a diplomatic solution, senior Bush administration officials have repeatedly insisted that all options, including the military one, remain on the table. A series of articles by veteran American journalist Seymour Hersh in the *New Yorker* over the past two years has detailed the discussion in the Bush administration’s top circles of a military attack on Iran, including the possible use of nuclear weapons. His articles have also reported on Israeli and US activities inside Iran to identify potential targets and foster armed opposition by Kurdish, Azeri and other minorities.

Last May, the *Los Angeles Times* revealed that the Pentagon had established the equivalent for Iran of the notorious Office of Special Plans (OSP), which played a major role in concocting the lies about weapons of mass destruction to justify the invasion of Iraq. The new office, known as the Directorate for Iran, is situated in the same area in the Pentagon as the OSP and contains ex-OSP personnel among its staff and advisers, including former OSP head Abram Shulsky.

The ISOG military group has been engaged in bolstering US allies in the Persian Gulf, including Saudi Arabia, in preparation for a confrontation with Iran. The *Globe* article highlighted the trips by John Hillen, assistant secretary of state for political and military affairs, to the region. “In October, Hillen and Assistant Secretary of Defence Peter W. Rodham, along with National Security Council staff and others, travelled to Oman, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain to discuss ways to beef up the military capabilities of those countries,” the newspaper stated.

The *Globe* also reported: “Pentagon officials involved with the group intend to ask Congress as early as February to increase funding for transfers of military hardware to allies in the Persian Gulf and to accelerate plans for joint military activities. The request, which is still being formulated, is expected to include but not be limited to more advanced missile defence systems and early-warning radar to detect and prevent Iranian missile strikes.”

The US has already conducted joint naval exercises with the Gulf states, under the guise of intercepting weapons shipments to and from Iran. An article entitled “US May Use Sectarian Split to Contain Iran” in the *Wall Street Journal* in November provided further details of the US military activities in the Gulf.

“US naval fleets have engaged in a number of training exercises with countries abutting the Persian Gulf as a means to show Washington’s strength in the region, said US officials. Last month [October], the US conducted war games about 30 kilometres outside Iran’s territorial

waters with Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and about two dozen other countries," the newspaper noted.

Commenting on Hillen's activities, the *Journal* explained that he had been visiting the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), as well as Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon, to discuss "revamping the region's security framework". The article continued: "Mr Hillen has laid out an ambitious plan to better integrate the US into the GCC's security architecture. It includes plans to develop regional maritime security and missile defence initiatives with these countries; a broader intelligence-sharing mechanism; and a program to rapidly improve these nations' air defences."

These steps can be interpreted only as definite preparations for a possible US assault on Iran. Concerned that Iran may strike back in the event of a US attack, the Bush administration is making plans to counter any Iranian threat to its warships, shipping in the Persian Gulf or the large US military bases in the Gulf states. Ominously, the Pentagon has plans to soon deploy a second aircraft carrier group to the Gulf to menace Iran.

In building an anti-Iranian alliance in the Middle East, the Bush administration is openly playing on sectarian fears in so-called Sunni countries of the rising regional sway of predominantly Shiite Iran. The autocratic pro-US regimes in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf states are deeply concerned that the US invasion of Iraq has destabilised the entire region by removing a key Iranian rival and installing a predominantly Shiite puppet government in Baghdad. A faction of the Saudi elite is threatening to intervene directly into Iraq on the side of Sunni insurgents in order to counter Iranian influence in the country.

The activities of the ISOG make clear that far from backing away from a confrontation with Iran because of the deepening quagmire in Iraq, the Bush administration is actively engaged in undermining the regime in Tehran and recklessly preparing for a military strike. By enlisting the support of the "Sunni" states against "Shiite" Iran, the US is setting in motion processes that could result in the transformation of Iraq's sectarian civil war into a broader regional conflagration.

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