

The Bush Administration's New Strategy for Setting the Middle East Aflame

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A lengthy article in this week's New Yorker magazine by veteran investigative journalist Seymour Hersh provides further evidence that the Bush administration has not only set course for war against Iran, but has over the past few months embarked on a reckless and incendiary strategy that has the potential to unleash sectarian Sunni-Shia conflicts throughout the Middle East.

The broad outlines of what Hersh writes in his article "The Redirection" (as the plan is termed in the White House) have been out in the open for some time. In the wake of the US Congressional elections last November, the Bush administration ignored the sentiments of the overwhelming majority of the American people and the recommendations of the top-level Iraq Study Group (IRG). The White House has increased troop numbers in Iraq, bolstered its naval presence in the Persian Gulf and markedly turned up the volume of the threats against Iran.

In outlining his plans for Iraq on January 10, President Bush denounced Syria and Iran for assisting anti-US insurgents in Iraq and warned that the US military would destroy their networks of agents. According to Hersh's sources, since last August as many as 500 Iranians have been arbitrarily detained and interrogated at any one time, including many Iranian humanitarian and aid workers. As a former senior US intelligence official explained: "The White House goal is to build a case that the Iranians have been fomenting the insurgency... and supporting the killing of Americans."

These unsubstantiated allegations, along with Iran's alleged nuclear weapons program and its support for "terrorist" groups in the Middle East, are being drummed up as potential pretexts for a confrontation with Tehran. In articles over the past year, Hersh has pointed to high-level preparations for an intensive bombing attack on Iran. In his latest article, he notes that these processes have accelerated with the establishment of a special planning group in the Pentagon offices of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, with a brief to prepare a contingency plan that could be implemented on Bush's orders within 24 hours. Two replacement aircraft carrier groups are due to arrive in the Gulf, but the entire naval force could be ordered to stay in place, "to allow for an attack order this spring".

The Pentagon's military planning is being accompanied by a broad US diplomatic offensive against Tehran, which was outlined by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in her testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last month. She declared that the US was seeking "a new strategic alignment in the Middle East" by supporting "moderates," including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt and the Gulf states, against the "extremists"—Iran, Syria and their allies such as Hezbollah and Hamas. Significantly, all talk of "spreading

democracy” in the region went out the window so as to justify alliances with openly autocratic and repressive regimes.

Behind the recent intense diplomatic activity of Rice and other top US officials in the Middle East is a strategy aimed at isolating Iran and undermining its allies using all available means, including covert operations in Lebanon, Syria and Iran itself. To consolidate its new alignment, the Bush administration is preying on the fears in the so-called Sunni Arab nations of the expanding influence of Shiite Iran following the toppling of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq. Having plunged Iraq into civil war, the US is fanning the flames of sectarian conflict throughout the Middle East with no regard for the disastrous consequences.

Contrary to media speculation that the so-called neo-conservatives have been marginalised in the Bush administration, Hersh explains that the “key players” are Vice President Dick Cheney and deputy national security adviser Elliot Abrams, together with the departing US ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad and Saudi Arabia’s national security adviser Prince Bandar bin Sultan. “While Rice has been deeply involved in shaping the public policy,” the article explained, “former and current officials said that the clandestine side has been guided by Cheney.”

Last November, Cheney made a snap one-day trip to Saudi Arabia to meet with King Abdullah and his top aides. While publicly the visit was to reassure the Saudi monarchy the US was not going to pull out of Iraq, privately the discussion focussed on countering Iranian influence throughout the region. Along with Israel, Saudi Arabia is a central element in the US strategy as a rallying point for other “moderate” Sunni states and a source of finance for clandestine operations throughout the region. The more aggressive Saudi stance has provoked sharp conflicts in ruling circles in Riyadh, leading to the abrupt resignation in December of the country’s ambassador to the US, Prince Turki al-Faisal, who reportedly favours easing, rather than heightening, tensions with Iran.

According to Hersh, the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia have developed an informal agreement about the new strategic direction, which includes security guarantees to Israel, US support for Sunni nations in the Middle East to counteract Iranian influence and Saudi efforts to rein in Hamas. The Saudi monarchy brokered a deal in Mecca this month to form a coalition Palestinian government between Hamas and Fatah as a step toward negotiations with the Israeli government.

A de facto alliance with Al Qaeda

A major focus of the US strategy is to weaken the Syrian government of President Bashar Assad and his alliance with Iran, and to undermine the influence of Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Bush administration actively encouraged Israel’s savage bombardment and invasion of Lebanon last year as the opening shot in a broader campaign against Syria and Iran. But in a significant blow to US plans, Israel failed to destroy Hezbollah, which emerged from the rubble with heightened political stature. In an interview on Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio, Hersh described Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah as “the single most popular figure among Sunnis and Shias” in the Middle East.

In its efforts to counter the Shiite-based Hezbollah and shore up the government of Prime Minister Fuad Siniora, the US is now covertly supporting Sunni extremist groups in Lebanon

that are known to have close ideological ties to Al Qaeda. Nothing is more revealing of the criminal character of the Bush administration. In the name of fighting its bogus “war on terror” against “Islamofascists” to defend the American people, the White House has no compunction in forming a de facto alliance with Sunni fanatics who pay homage to Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda.

A former senior American intelligence official told Hersh: “We are in a program to enhance Sunni capacity to resist Shiite influence, and we’re spreading money around as much as we can... In this process, we’re financing a lot of bad guys with some serious potential unintended consequences. We don’t have the ability to determine and get pay vouchers signed by the people we like and avoid the people we don’t like. It’s a very high-risk venture.”

Former British MI6 agent Alastair Crooke, based at the Conflicts Forum think tank in Beirut, explained that Fatah al-Islam, which broke from the pro-Syrian group Fatah al-Intifada in the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp in northern Lebanon, had been offered money to fight Hezbollah. A larger Sunni fundamentalist group, situated at the Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp, received arms and supplies from Lebanese internal security forces and militias associated with the Siniora government.

An article in the British-based Telegraph last month confirmed that President Bush had given the green light to the CIA to provide financial and logistical support to the Lebanese prime minister. The classified presidential order “authorises the CIA and other US intelligence agencies to fund anti-Hezbollah groups in Lebanon and pay for activists who support the Siniora government. The secrecy of the finding [order] means that US involvement in the activities is officially deniable.”

All these activities are going on behind the backs of the US Congress and the American people. It is no surprise that Elliot Abrams, who was convicted over the Iran-Contra affair, is a central figure in these dirty operations. In the 1980s, the Reagan administration was involved in secretly selling arms to Iran as a means of covertly funding and arming the right-wing Contras in Nicaragua without congressional approval. Now Abrams is directing another criminal operation, involving the Saudis, to fund Sunni extremists to undermine Tehran and its allies as the US prepares to launch a war on Iran.

The close involvement of Saudi Arabia in the enterprise is particularly significant. The Saudi monarchy, which has a long history of financing Sunni fanatics, was a close partner in the 1980s in the CIA’s backing of Mujaheddin fighters against the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan. The “blowback” from that operation included the creation of Al Qaeda, which called for a jihad against the US after American troops were stationed in Saudi Arabia for the first Gulf War in 1990-91. Now with Saudi assistance, the Bush administration is unleashing the same reactionary forces in its efforts to undermine Iran, with cynical disregard for the consequences.

As a US government consultant told Hersh, Prince Bandar and other Saudis had offered assurances that “they will keep a very close eye on the religious fundamentalists. Their message to us was, ‘We’ve created this movement, and we can control it.’ It’s not that we don’t want the Salafis [Sunni fundamentalists] to throw bombs; it’s who they throw them at—Hezbollah, Moqtada al-Sadr, Iran, and at the Syrians, if they continue to work with Hezbollah and Iran.” No doubt similar assurances were given in the 1980s that Riyadh would control a little-known Saudi engineer, Osama bin Laden, and his followers.

The US encouragement of Sunni extremist groups is not limited to Lebanon. Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, a strong supporter of the Siniora government, met with Cheney in the autumn to discuss undermining Syrian President Assad. Jumblatt told Hersh that he had advised Cheney to talk to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood-Sunni fundamentalists with a history of anti-government violence. While Assad is from the Alawi Shiite sect, the majority of people in Syria are Sunni Muslims. Assad may not be the chief target of the US strategy, but the campaign against him is aimed particularly at weakening Syria's alliance with Iran.

In an article in December entitled "Syria in Bush's Cross Hairs", Time magazine leaked the contents of US plans to forge an anti-Assad coalition known as the National Salvation Front (NSF), including the Muslim Brotherhood, to contest elections this year. NSF representatives held at least two meetings last year in the White House and plans were mooted to open an office in Washington. Hersh's sources confirmed that the US and Saudi Arabia were covertly providing support to the NSF. The issue is particularly sensitive as another of Bush's "moderate" allies-the Egyptian government of President Hosni Mubarak has been attempting to wipe out the Muslim Brotherhood for years.

Region-wide sectarian conflict

As in his previous articles, Hersh is a conduit for deep concerns within US ruling circles about the implications of the Bush administration's plans for the underlying interests of US imperialism in the Middle East. Having created a disaster in Iraq, the White House is now implementing another reckless and criminal adventure that is plunging the entire region toward conflict. While all the critics undoubtedly share the long-held US ambition of establishing its undisputed dominance over the Middle East and its huge oil reserves, they fear the outcome will be an unmitigated disaster.

In his comments to Hersh, Martin Indyk, a senior official in the Clinton administration, declared: "The Middle East is heading into a serious Sunni-Shiite Cold War. The White House is not just doubling the bet in Iraq. It's doubling the bet across the region. This could get very complicated. Everything is upside down." Vali Nasr, a senior fellow at the Council of Foreign Relations, was deeply troubled by the unleashing of Sunni extremists. "The last time Iran was a threat, the Saudis were able to mobilise the worst kind of Islamic radicals. Once you get them out of the box, you can't put them back," he warned.

Far from resolving the US military disaster in Iraq, the deliberate inflaming of Shiite-Sunni tensions throughout the region will only expand the escalating sectarian war there. The US occupation rests directly on a puppet regime in Baghdad dominated by Shiite fundamentalist parties that have longstanding links with Tehran. Sections of the Saudi elite have been bitterly critical that the US has opened the door for expanding Iranian influence in Iraq. As part of its propaganda war, the Bush administration is accusing Iran of supplying anti-US insurgents, but remains completely silent about the growing evidence that Saudi finance and arms are making their way to the Sunni resistance groups responsible for the overwhelming majority of US casualties.

Any US assault on Iran is certain to inflame opposition among Iraq's Shiite majority and provoke a political crisis in the government of Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki. In what can only be interpreted as a warning to the Iraqi parties to sever their relations with Iran, the US military has deliberately targetted figures associated with some of Iran's closest allies. Just last week, US troops detained the son of Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, leader of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), and his bodyguards as he returned from a visit to Iran.

While US officials subsequently apologised for “the mistake,” there is little doubt that the arrest was another threat to the governing parties. If the Maliki government does not toe the line, the US has already made clear, in a series of thinly veiled warnings last year, that it will be removed.

The kindling of anti-Iranian, anti-Persian and anti-Shiite prejudices is already having ramifications throughout the Gulf states, many of which have significant Shiite minorities. The petty despots who preside over these oil-rich countries have no hesitation in deliberately stirring up sectarian hostilities to divide working people against each other and prop up their own corrupt rule.

An article in yesterday’s Wall Street Journal entitled, “As US puts pressure on Iran, Gulf’s religious rift spreads,” highlighted the tensions in Bahrain, where a privileged Sunni elite rules over a Shiite majority. The latest flare-up occurred when extremist Sunni clerics, backed by government officials, launched a campaign last year against the purchase of a house by Shiites, alleging they were “Iranian agents”. In the lead-up to elections, the issue led to a witch-hunt against Shiites and polarised voters along sectarian lines.

The article provided more evidence that the US is enlisting Sunni extremists sympathetic to Al Qaeda in its confrontation with Iran. In a document published in January entitled, “Covenant of the Supreme Council of Jihad Groups,” a Kuwaiti cleric ranked Iran ahead of the US and Israel as the most dangerous foe, denouncing “the Safawi [Iranian] enemy that seeks the destruction of Islamic civilisation”. In late December, a senior Saudi cleric branded Shiites as “more dangerous than Jews and Christians”.

The Wall Street Journal noted: “Some experts on the region warn that America’s stand-off with Iran is exacerbating Sunni-Shiite rivalry and pushing the US into some unruly company. Indeed, America now unintentionally finds itself on the same page as Sunni firebrands who loathe America but sometimes hate Shiites even more. Much of the most venomous anti-Iranian rhetoric comes from militants whose views echo Osama bin Laden’s.” What Hersh’s article demonstrates is that far from being unintentional, these “firebrands” are being deliberately encouraged, with Saudi assistance, as part of the US war drive against Iran.

Consolidating the support of the Gulf states is critical to the US strategy. These states sit atop huge reserves of oil and gas, are dotted along the coastline of the Persian Gulf directly opposite Iran and host major US military installations. Bahrain is home to the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet and Qatar hosts the US Central Command, whose area of responsibility covers the Middle East and Central Asia. As part of its military buildup, the Pentagon has sent Patriot anti-missile batteries to several Gulf states to protect its military bases and to reassure nervous local allies.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states are bolstering their own military capacities. A fortnight ago, nearly 900 weapons manufacturers attended the annual Idex military trade fair in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). According to a New York Times report, deals worth some \$60 billion were signed by the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Oman, covering everything from the most sophisticated warplanes and combat helicopters to early warning systems, cruise missiles and tanks. This year’s planned purchases are a marked hike over previous years.

Taken together, the Bush administration’s strategy for the Middle East—stretching from Lebanon and Syria to Iran and the Gulf states—can only produce a catastrophe for working people throughout the region, in the United States and internationally. Any US attack on Iran

has the potential to plunge the entire Middle East into conflict, drawing in America's European and Asia rivals, whose vital economic and strategic interests are at stake. Having gambled and lost with their criminal invasion of Iraq, the gangsters in the White House are doubling their bets across the board and dicing with the future of humanity.

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