Pentagon Targeted Iran for Regime Change after 9/11

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WASHINGTON, May 5 (IPS) - Three weeks after the 9/11 terror attacks, former U.S. Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld established an official military objective of not only removing the Saddam Hussein regime by force but overturning the regime in Iran, as well as in Syria and four other countries in the Middle East, according to a document quoted extensively in then Undersecretary of Defence for Policy Douglas Feith's recently published account of the Iraq war decisions.

Donald H. Rumsfeld

Feith's account further indicates that this aggressive aim of remaking the map of the Middle East by military force and the threat of force was supported explicitly by the country's top military leaders.

Feith's book, "War and Decision", released last month, provides excerpts of the paper Rumsfeld sent to President George W. Bush on Sep. 30, 2001 calling for the administration to focus not on taking down Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network but on the aim of establishing "new regimes" in a series of states by "aiding local peoples to rid themselves of terrorists and to free themselves of regimes that support terrorism."

In quoting from that document, Feith deletes the names of all of the states to be targeted except Afghanistan, inserting the phrase "some other states" in brackets. In a facsimile of a page from a related Pentagon "campaign plan" document, the Taliban and Saddam Hussein regimes are listed as "state regimes" against which "plans and operations" might be mounted, but the names of four other states are blacked out "for security reasons".

Gen. Wesley Clark, who commanded the NATO bombing campaign in the Kosovo War, recalls in his 2003 book "Winning Modern Wars" being told by a friend in the Pentagon in November 2001 that the list of states that Rumsfeld and Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz wanted to take down included Iraq, Iran, Syria, Libya, Sudan and Somalia.

Clark writes that the list also included Lebanon. Feith reveals that Rumsfeld's paper called for

getting "Syria out of Lebanon" as a major goal of U.S. policy.

When this writer asked Feith after a recent public appearance which countries' names were deleted from the documents, he cited security reasons for the deletion. But when he was asked which of the six regimes on the Clark list were included in the Rumsfeld paper, he replied, "All of them."

Rumsfeld's paper was given to the White House only two weeks after Bush had approved a U.S. military operation in Afghanistan directed against bin Laden and the Taliban regime. Despite that decision, Rumsfeld's proposal called explicitly for postponing indefinitely U.S. airstrikes and the use of ground forces in support of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance in order to try to catch bin Laden.

Instead the Rumsfeld paper argued that the U.S. should target states which had supported anti-Israel forces such as Hezbollah and Hamas. It urged that the United States "[c]apitalize on our strong suit, which is not finding a few hundred terrorists in caves in Afghanistan, but in the vastness of our military and humanitarian resources, which can strengthen the opposition forces in terrorist-supporting states."

Feith describes the policy outlined in the paper as consisting of "military action against some of the state sponsors and pressure -- short of war -- against others".

The Rumsfeld plan represented a Pentagon consensus that included the uniformed military leadership, according to Feith's account. He writes that the process of drafting the paper involved consultations with the outgoing Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Henry Shelton and the incoming Chairman Gen. Richard Myers.

Myers helped revise the initial draft, Feith writes, and Gen. John P. Abizaid, who was then director of the Joint Staff, enthusiastically endorsed it in draft form. "This is an exceptionally important memo," wrote Abizaid, "which gives clear strategic vision." In a message quoted by Feith, Abizaid recommended to Myers that "you support this approach".

After the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, Abizaid was promoted to become chief of CENTCOM, with military responsibility for the entire Middle East.

Neither Myers nor Abizaid, both of whom are now retired from the military, responded to e-mails asking for their comments on Feith's account of their role in the process of producing the Rumsfeld strategy.

Rumsfeld's aides had also drafted a second version of the paper, as instructions to all military commanders in the development of "campaign plans against terrorism".

That instructions document was a joint effort by Feith's office and by the Strategic Plans and Policy directorate of Abizaid's Joint Staff. It followed the broad outlines of the paper for Bush, arguing that the enemy was a "network" that included states that support terrorism and that the Defence Department should seek to "convince or compel" those states to cut their ties to terrorism.

The Pentagon guidance document called for military commanders to assist other government agencies "as directed" to "encourage populations dominated by terrorist organizations or their supporters to overthrow that domination".

That language was adopted because the campaign planning document was issued as "Strategic Guidance for the Defense Department" on Oct. 3, 2001 -- just three days after the Rumsfeld strategy

paper had gone to the president.

Bush had not approved the explicit aim of regime change in Iran, Syria and four other countries proposed by Rumsfeld. Thus Rumsfeld adopted the aggressive military plan targeting multiple regimes in the Middle East for regime change even though it was not White House policy.

The Defence Department guidance document made it clear that U.S. military aims in regard to those states would go well beyond any ties to terrorism. The document said that the Defence Department would also seek to isolate and weaken those states and to "disrupt, damage or destroy" their military capacities -- not necessarily limited to WMD.

The document included as a "strategic objective" a requirement to "prevent further attacks against the U.S. or U.S. interests". That language, which extended the principle of preemption far beyond the issue of WMD, was so broad as to justify plans to use force against virtually any state that was not a client of the United States.

The military leadership's strong preference for focusing on states as enemies rather than on the threat from al Qaeda after 9/11 continued a pattern of behaviour going back to the Bill Clinton administration (1993-2001).

After the bombing of two U.S. embassies in East Africa by al Qaeda operatives, State Department counter-terrorism official Michael Sheehan proposed supporting the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance in Afghanistan against bin Laden's sponsor, the Taliban regime. However, senior U.S. military leaders "refused to consider it", according to a 2004 account by Richard H. Shultz, Jr., a military specialist at Tufts University.

A senior officer on the Joint Staff told State Department counter-terrorism director Sheehan he had heard terrorist strikes characterised more than once by colleagues as a "small price to pay for being a superpower".

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