

## **For Neocons, an Attack on Iran Has Been a Six-Year Project**

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The escalation of US military planning on Iran is only the latest chess move in a six-year push within the Bush Administration to attack that country. While Iran was named a part of President George W. Bush's "axis of evil" in 2002, efforts to ignite a confrontation with Iran date back long before the post-9/11 war on terror.

Presently, the Administration is trumpeting claims that Iran is closer to a nuclear weapon than the CIA's own analysis shows and positing Iranian influence in Iraq's insurgency, but efforts to destabilize Iran have been conducted covertly for years, often using members of Congress or non-government actors in a way reminiscent of the 1980s Iran-Contra scandal.

The motivations for an Iran strike were laid out as far back as 1992. In classified defense planning guidance -- written for then-Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney by then-Pentagon staffers I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, World Bank Chief Paul Wolfowitz, and ambassador-nominee to the United Nations Zalmay Khalilzad -- Cheney's aides called for the United States to assume the position of lone superpower and act preemptively to prevent the emergence of even regional competitors. The draft document was leaked to the New York Times and the Washington Post and caused an uproar among Democrats and many in George H. W. Bush's Administration.

In September 2000, the Project for the New American Century (PNAC) issued a report titled "Rebuilding America's Defenses," which espoused similar positions to the 1992 draft and became the basis for the Bush-Cheney Administration's foreign policy. Libby and Wolfowitz were among the participants in this new report; Cheney, former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and other prominent figures in the Bush administration were PNAC members.

"The United States has for decades sought to play a more permanent role in Gulf regional security," the report read. "While the unresolved conflict with Iraq provides the immediate justification, the need for a substantial American force presence in the Gulf transcends the issue of the regime of Saddam Hussein. ... We cannot allow North Korea, Iran, Iraq or similar states to undermine American leadership, intimidate American allies or threaten the American homeland itself."

This approach became official US military policy during the current Bush Administration. It was starkly on display on January 22 when Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns noted a second aircraft carrier strike force headed for the Persian Gulf, saying, "The Middle East isn't a region to be dominated by Iran. The Gulf isn't a body of water to be controlled by Iran. That's why we've seen the United States station two carrier battle groups in the region."

The structure

Almost immediately after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, Iran became a focal point of discussion among senior Administration officials. As early as December 2001, then-Deputy National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley and the leadership of the Defense Department, including Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith, allegedly authorized a series of meetings between

Defense Department officials and Iranian agents abroad.

The first of these meetings took place in Rome with Pentagon Iran analyst, Larry Franklin, Middle East expert Harold Rhode, and prominent neoconservative Michael Ledeen. Ledeen, who held no official government position, introduced the US officials to Iran-Contra arms dealer Manucher Ghorbanifar. According to both Ghorbanifar and Ledeen, the topic on the table was Iran. Ledeen said last year the discussion concerned allegations that Iranian forces were killing US soldiers in Afghanistan, but Ghorbanifar has claimed the conversation focused on regime change.

In January 2002, evidence that Iran was enriching uranium began to appear via credible intelligence and satellite imagery. Despite this revelation -- and despite having called Iran part of the Axis of Evil in his State of the Union that year -- President Bush continued to focus on Iraq. Perhaps for that reason, throughout 2002 the strongest pressure for regime change flowed through alternative channels.

In early 2002, Ledeen formed the Coalition for Democracy in Iran, along with Morris Amitay, the former executive director of the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).

In August 2002, Larry Franklin began passing classified information involving United States policy towards Iran to two AIPAC employees and an Israeli diplomat. Franklin pleaded guilty to the charges in October 2005, explaining that he had been hoping to force the US to take a harder line with Iran, but AIPAC and Israel have continued to deny them.

At the same time, another group's political representatives begin a corollary effort to influence domestic political discourse. In August 2002, the National Council of Resistance of Iran -- a front for a militant terrorist organization called Mujahedin-E-Khalq (MEK) -- held a press conference in Washington and stated that Iran had a secret nuclear facility at Natanz, due for completion in 2003.

Late that summer, the Pentagon's Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz expanded its Northern Gulf Affairs Office, renamed it the Office of Special Plans (OSP), and placed it under the direction of Abram Shulsky, a contributor to the 2000 PNAC report.

Most know the Office of Special Plans as a rogue Administration faction determined to find intelligence to support the Iraq War. But that wasn't its only task.

According to an article in The Forward in May 2003, "A budding coalition of conservative hawks, Jewish organizations and Iranian monarchists is pressing the White House to step up American efforts to bring about regime change in Iran. ... Two sources [say] Iran expert Michael Rubin is now working for the Pentagon's 'special plans' office, a small unit set up to gather intelligence on Iraq, but apparently also working on Iran. Previously a researcher at the Washington Institute for Near East policy, Rubin has vocally advocated regime change in Tehran."

Dark actors/covert activities

While the Iraq war was publicly founded upon questionable sources, much of the buildup to Iran has been entirely covert, using non-government assets and foreign instruments of influence to conduct disinformation campaigns, plant intelligence and commit acts of violence via proxy groups.

A few weeks prior to the Iraq invasion, in February 2003, Iran acknowledged that it was building a nuclear facility at Natanz, saying that the facility was aimed at providing domestic energy. However,

allegations that Iran was developing a nuclear weapons program would become louder in the course of 2003 and continue unabated over the next three years.

That spring, then-Congressman Curt Weldon (R-PA) opened a channel on Iran with former Iranian Minister Fereidoun Mahdavi, a secretary for Ghorbanifar. Both Weldon and Ledeen were told a strikingly similar story concerning a cross border plot between Iran and Iraq in which uranium had been removed from Iraq and taken into Iran by Iranian agents. The CIA investigated the allegations but found them spurious. Weldon took his complaints about the matter to Rumsfeld, who pressured the CIA to investigate a second time, with the same result.

In May 2003, with pressure for regime change intensifying within the US, Iran made efforts to negotiate a peaceful resolution with the United States. According to Lawrence Wilkerson, then-Chief of Staff to Secretary of State Colin Powell, these efforts were sabotaged by Vice President Cheney.

"The secret cabal got what it wanted: no negotiations with Tehran," Wilkerson said.

The US was already looking increasingly to rogue methodology, including support for the Iranian terrorist group MEK. Before the US invasion, MEK forces within Iraq had supported Saddam Hussein in exchange for safe harbor. Despite this, when they were captured by the US military, they were disarmed of only their major weapons and are allowed to keep their smaller arms. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld hoped to use them as a special ops team in Iran, while then-National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and State Department officials argued against it. By 2005, the MEK would begin training with US forces in Iraq and carrying out bombings and assassinations in Iran, although it is unclear if the bombings were in any way approved by the US military.

The Pressure is On: 2004-2006

For a variety of reasons -- ranging from the explosion of the insurgency in Iraq following the high point of "Mission Accomplished" to Iran's willingness to admit IAEA inspectors -- the drumbeat for regime change died down over the summer of 2003. In October 2003, with Iran accepting even tougher inspections, Larry Franklin told his Israeli contact that work on the US policy towards Iran which they had been tracking seemed to have stopped.

Yet by the autumn of 2004, pressure for confrontation with Iran had resumed, with President Bush telling Fox News that the US would never allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. By then, the Pentagon had been directed to have a viable military option for Iran in place by June 2005.

This phase of pressure was marked by increased activity directed at Congress. An "Iran Freedom Support Act" was introduced in the House and Senate in January and February of 2005. Neoconservatives and individuals linked to the defense contracting industry formed an Iran Policy Committee, and in April and May presented briefings in support of MEK before the newly-created Iran Human Rights and Democracy Caucus of the House of Representatives.

In March 2006, administration action became more overt. The State Department created an Office of Iranian Affairs, while the Pentagon created an Iranian Directorate that had much in common with the earlier Office of Special Plans. According to Seymour Hersh, covert US operations within Iran in preparation for a possible air attack also began at this time and included Kurds and other Iranian minority groups.

By setting up the Iranian Directorate within the Pentagon and running covert operations through the military rather than the CIA, the administration was able to avoid both Congressional oversight and

interference from then-Director of National Intelligence John Negroponte, who has been vocally skeptical about using force against Iran. The White House also successfully stalled the release of a fresh National Intelligence Estimate on Iran, which could reflect the CIA's conclusion that there is no evidence of an Iranian nuclear weapons program.

In sum, the Bush Administration seems to have concluded that Iran is guilty until proven innocent and continues to maintain that the Persian Gulf belongs to Americans -- not to Persians -- setting the stage for a potential military strike.

 [PNAC.PDF](#)

[http://www.rawstory.com/news/2007/Iran\\_The\\_Road\\_to\\_Confrontation\\_0123.html](http://www.rawstory.com/news/2007/Iran_The_Road_to_Confrontation_0123.html)

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