

# Is Tehran Back in the Crosshairs of the Neocon Crusade?

By Jim Lobe | May 28, 2003

Reports that top officials in the administration of President George W. Bush met Tuesday, May 27th to discuss U.S. policy toward Iran, including possible efforts to overthrow its government, mark a major advance in what has been an 18-month-old campaign by neoconservatives in and out of the administration. Overshadowed until last month by their much louder drum-beating for war against Iraq, the neocons' efforts to now focus U.S. attention on "regime change" in Iran has become much more intense since early May and has already borne substantial fruit.

A high-level, albeit unofficial, dialogue between both countries over Iraq, Afghanistan, and other issues of mutual interest was abruptly broken off by Washington ten days ago amid charges by senior Pentagon officials that al Qaeda agents based in Iran had been involved in terrorist attacks against U.S. and foreign targets in Saudi Arabia May 12th. Teheran strongly denied the charge.

Now, according to reports in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, the administration is considering permanently cutting off the dialogue, which involved the administration's senior envoy for both Iraq and Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, and adopting a far more confrontational stance vis-à-vis Teheran that could include covert efforts to destabilize the government.

Pentagon hawks, particularly Deputy Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and Undersecretary for Policy Douglas Feith, who have long been closely associated with neoconservatives outside the administration centered at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), reportedly favor using the heavily armed, Iraq-based Iranian rebel group, the Mujahadin-e Khalq (MEK), which surrendered to U.S. forces in April, as the core of a possible opposition military force.

They are also pursuing links with the Iranian exile community centered in southern California that has rallied increasingly around Reza Pahlavi, the son of the former shah who was overthrown by the Islamic Revolution in 1979. According to a recent story in the U.S. Jewish newspaper, *The Forward*, Pahlavi has cultivated senior officials in Israel's Likud government with which the neoconservatives here—both in the administration and outside it—are closely allied.

## Iran in the Crosshairs

Besides charges—considered questionable by the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)—

that Iran may be sheltering al Qaeda operatives allegedly involved in the May 12th attacks in Riyadh, the administration has voiced several major concerns about Iran's recent behavior.

Senior officials have accused Iran of accelerating a major nuclear program, which they say is designed to produce weapons, and infiltrating "agents" into Iraq in order to create problems for the U.S.-dominated occupation there. They have also continued to call Iran a major supporter of international terrorism, primarily due to its backing for Hezbollah in Lebanon.

It was Iran's backing for Hezbollah that earned it a prominent place on the target list produced by the Project for the New American Century (PNAC) in an open letter to Bush back on September 20, 2001, just nine days after al Qaeda's attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

The letter's 41 mainly neoconservative signers urged Bush to retaliate directly against Iran if it failed to cut off Hezbollah. The same letter anticipated virtually every other step so far taken by the administration in its war on terror, including invading Afghanistan, severing ties to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, and removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq.

In October, 2001, influential figures at AEI and like-minded think tanks launched a new line of attack on Iran by publishing articles in sympathetic media, most notably on the editorial pages of the *Wall Street Journal*, arguing that the Iranian people were so disillusioned by the ruling mullahs in Teheran, including the "reformists" around President Mohamed Khatami, that they were ready to rise up against the government in a pro-U.S. revolution.

"Iran is ready to blow sky-high," wrote AEI scholar Michael Ledeen back in November, 2001. "The Iranian



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people need only a bright spark of courage from the United States to ignite the flames of democratic revolution.”

## A New Push Against Iran

When, much to the State Department’s dismay, Bush named Iran as part of the “axis of evil” in late January 2002, both Israel and the neocons pressed their advantage, arguing repeatedly that dialogue even with Khatami, “an obliging server” of the theocracy in the words of Rob Sobhani, also writing in the *Journal*, was a waste of time and that Washington should cast its lot instead with “the people” against the regime.

Reuel Marc Gerecht, a former CIA officer and Ledeen’s AEI colleague, argued last August in the neoconservative *Weekly Standard* that the mere presence of U.S. troops in Iraq would bring about revolution next door.

“Popular discontent in Iran tends to heat up when U.S. soldiers get close to the Islamic Republic,” he wrote in the neoconservative *Weekly Standard*. “An American invasion could possibly provoke riots in Iran—simultaneous uprisings in major cities that would simply be beyond the scope of regime-loyal specialized riot-control units.”

But the intensity and frequency of the campaign against Teheran picked up dramatically earlier this month. On May 5, the *Standard’s* editor, William Kristol, whose office is six floors below AEI, wrote that the U.S. was “already in a death struggle with Iran over the future of Iraq” and that “the next great battle—not, we hope, a military battle—will be for Iran.”

The very next day, AEI hosted an all-day conference entitled “The Future of Iran: Mullahcracy, Democracy,

and the War on Terror” whose featured speakers included Ledeen, Sobhani, Gerecht, Morris Amitay of the neoconservative Jewish Institute for National Security Studies, and Uri Lubrani from the Israeli Defense Ministry.

The convenor, Hudson Institute Middle East specialist Meyrav Wurmser (whose husband David worked as her AEI counterpart until joining the administration), set the tone: “Our fight against Iraq was only a battle in a long war,” she said. “It would be ill-conceived to think that we can deal with Iraq alone. ...We must move on, and faster.”

“It was a grave error to send (Khalilzad) to secret meetings with representatives of the Iranian government in recent weeks,” Israeli-born Wurmser said, complaining that, “rather than coming as victors who should be feared and respected rather than loved, we are still engaged in old diplomacy, in the kind of politics that led to the attacks of September 11.”

Just days later, the Khalilzad channel was abruptly slammed shut, and a Christian Right ally of the neoconservatives, Sen. Sam Brownback, introduced the “Iran Democracy Act” that “sets as U.S. policy the goal of an internationally monitored referendum to allow the Iranian people to peacefully change their system of government.”

“Now is not the time to coddle this terrorist regime,” he said. “Now is the time to stand firm and support the people of Iran—who are the only ones that can win this important battle.”

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