

From Baghdad to Tehran?

By Jim Lobe | May 7, 2003

With Iraq under U.S. occupation and Syria's leaders shaken by a series of high-level threats from top Bush administration officials, Iran has come under increased U.S. pressure. As officials in Washington talk about "Iranian agents" crossing the border into Iraq to foment trouble for the U.S. occupation, a leading neoconservative strategist Monday said the United States is already in a "death struggle" with Tehran, and he urged the administration of President George W. Bush to "take the fight to Iran," through "covert operations," among other measures.

The appeal by the chief editor of *The Weekly Standard*, William Kristol, followed last week's surprise announcement that U.S. military forces had signed a surrender agreement with rebel Iranian forces based in Iraq that permits them to retain their weapons and equipment, including tanks, despite their formal designation by the State Department as a terrorist group. The agreement between the military and the Mujahedeen Khalq sparked speculation that Washington may deploy the group, which had been supported by Baghdad for more than 20 years, against Tehran or its allies in Iraq, despite its terrorist tactics.

"The liberation of Iraq was the first great battle for the future of the Middle East," wrote Kristol in the *Standard's* latest issue. "The next great battle—not, we hope, a military battle—will be for Iran. We are already in a death struggle with Iran over the future of Iraq," added the editor, who is closely associated with Richard Perle and other neoconservatives in the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board (DPB).

Hawks and Realists Tangle Again

Kristol's blast reflects the ongoing and increasingly intense policy debate within the administration between hawks centered in the Defense Department and Vice President Dick Cheney's office on the one hand and "realists" in the State Department and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) on the other.

The Islamic government in Tehran, long accused by Washington of being the world's most active supporter of international terrorism, primarily due to its

backing of Lebanon's Hezbollah, has been a particular target for neoconservatives like Kristol, who see it as the greatest long-term threat to Israel, especially now that Baghdad is in U.S. hands.

In an open letter to Bush sent on Sep. 20, 2001—just nine days after the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon, the influential Project for the New American Century (PNAC), chaired by Kristol, called for Washington to deliver an ultimatum to both Syria and Iran demanding a halt to their support for Hezbollah. "Should Iran and Syria refuse to comply, the administration should consider appropriate measures of retaliation against these known state sponsors of terrorism," urged the letter, whose agenda for the anti-terrorist campaign so far has been followed in virtually each detail, from the ouster of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam in Iraq, to the cutting off of U.S. support for Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. In fact, intelligence reports claim that supplies to Hezbollah have fallen off fairly sharply in the past year, but the neoconservatives and other hawks are now claiming that Tehran is determined to make Washington's stay in Iraq difficult.

Despite informal but relatively high-level diplomatic contacts between the two countries—which broke off formal ties after the U.S. embassy seizure in Tehran in late 1979—in the run-up to the war, the hawks are claiming that Iran failed to cooperate during the actual hostilities and is now actively undermining U.S. efforts to stabilize Iraq. In an article appearing in last week's *The New Republic*, Eli Lake, a reporter with close ties to administration hardliners,



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claimed that Iran has not only provided safe haven to a number of Iraqi and Islamist fugitives wanted by Washington, but has also planned to infiltrate its own paramilitary units to create confusion on the ground.

In addition, U.S. media reports for the past two weeks have been filled with assertions about “Iranian agents” in the Shiite community in Iraq whose goal is to back local clerics in a bid to create an “Iranian-style Islamic Republic.” Shiites constitute about 60% of Iraq’s population. Their main instrument for this effort, according to the accounts, is the Tehran-based Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution of Iraq (SCIRI) headed by Abdulaziz Hakim and his brother Ayatollah Mohammed Bakir Hakim. They have been coy about their participation in U.S. efforts to establish an Iraqi governing council over the next month.

Kristol’s article reflects the thinking of a number of neoconservative strategists who have been arguing virtually since September 11 that the Iranian people, especially the youth, are ready to rise up against the mullahs, including the reformists led by President Mohammed Khatami, the minute Washington installs a secular, democratic government next door in Iraq. “The theocrats ruling Iran understand that the stakes are now double or nothing,” according to Kristol. “They can stay in power by disrupting efforts to create a pluralist, non-theocratic, Shia-majority state next door—or they can fail, as success in Iraq sounds the death knell for the Iranian revolution.”

The hawks have been encouraged in that view by much of the Iranian exile community, according to Gary Sick, a Columbia University expert who served on the National Security Council under the Carter administration. “The argument among the American ayatollahs (of conservatism) is that the only solution for Iran is to get rid of the regime,” says Sick. “They say that the Iranian people are ready to rise up, the regime is about to collapse, but people in Iran say this is just nonsense. The situation in Iran was far more unsettled in 1999 than it is now,” added Sick, who noted that suspicions among Iranians that Washington is already trying to manipulate the inter-

nal situation is “complicating the life of (Iran’s) reformers.”

But, notes Richard Augustus Norton, an expert on Shia Islam at Boston University and a retired U.S. army colonel who served in UN operations in Lebanon, the neoconservative approach “plays into the hands of the hard-liners [in Iran]. The Bush people are certainly right that there is a large constituency within Iran that favors better ties [with the U.S.]. But most Iranians, including the reformers, regard the government as legitimate.” Norton continued, “It seems that Kristol and others are more intent on creating chaos and instability than they are with changing things for the better.”

The fact that prominent neoconservatives closely tied to administration hawks are now calling for covert action against Tehran, combined with the surrender accord with the Mujahedeen, will, in any case, make it far more difficult for forces with influence in Iran to press for cooperation with Washington. Sick said he was “totally surprised” by the surrender accord, whose details still have not been released. “The notion that we would join forces with (the Mujahedeen) really undercuts the whole idea of our war on terrorism,” he noted, and will preclude “any kind of working arrangement with Iran.”

But Kristol and his comrades in and out of the administration insist that there is no point in working with Tehran anyway and much to be gained by helping oust the “theocrats.” “Iran is the tipping point in the war on proliferation, the war on terror, and the effort to reshape the Middle East. If Iran goes pro-Western and anti-terror, positive changes in Syria and Saudi Arabia will follow much more easily. And the chances for an Israeli-Palestinian settlement will greatly improve,” wrote Kristol.

(Jim Lobe <jlobe@starpower.net> is a political analyst with Foreign Policy in Focus (online at www.fpif.org). He also writes regularly for Inter Press Service.)

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