

Bush Administration Divided Over the Road to Tehran

By Jim Lobe | August 11, 2003

After the occupation of Iraq, the administration of U.S. President George W. Bush appears to be torn between moving from Baghdad on to Tehran, or refocusing on al Qaeda as the main target in the “war on terrorism.”

According to a series of leaks by U.S. officials, Iran has offered to hand over, if not directly to Washington then to friendly allies, three senior al Qaeda leaders and might provide another three top terrorist suspects that Washington believes are being held by Tehran. But its price—for the U.S. military to permanently shut down the operations of an Iraq-based Iranian rebel group that is on the State Department’s official terrorism list—might be too high for some hard-liners, centered in the Pentagon and Vice President Dick Cheney’s office, who led the charge for war in Iraq. Members of this group see the rebels, the Mujahedin el Khalq (MEK), or People’s Mujahedin, as potentially helpful to their ambitions to achieve “regime change” in Iran, charter member of Bush’s “axis of evil” and a nation that is believed to have accelerated its nuclear weapons program in recent months.

The question of what to do about the reported Iranian offer is one of the issues being discussed by Cheney, Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice during Bush’s summer vacation at his Crawford, Texas ranch.

Al Qaeda Leaders in Custody

Iran has confirmed that it is holding three al Qaeda leaders, including Seif al-Adel, considered the network’s number three and chief of military operations who has a \$25 million bounty on his head; its spokesman, Suleiman Abu Gheith; and Saad bin Laden, Osama bin Laden’s third oldest son.

In addition, Washington believes Tehran also has custody of three other much-sought-after targets: Abu Hafz, a senior al Qaeda operative known as “the Mauritanian;” Abu Musab Zarqawi, who has been depicted by the administration as a key link between al Qaeda and former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein; and possibly Mohammed al Masri, an al Qaeda associate active in East Africa, according to a recent report by a special investigative team of the Knight Ridder newspaper chain. “If Washington could get its hands on even half these guys, it would be the biggest advance since the fall of Afghanistan in the fight against al Qaeda,” according to one administration

official who declined to be identified. “If we could get them all, that would be a huge breakthrough.”

According to Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi in a statement on August 11th, Iran plans to try any al Qaeda members it cannot extradite, and while it has so far said it will not hand over any al Qaeda members to the United States, it would extradite some of those it has arrested to unspecified “friendly countries.” The Iranian Foreign Ministry has not made any public statements with respect to a deal with the U.S.

State Department Battles Pentagon, Again

The State Department has been pushing the administration to engage Iran more directly in pursuit of the best deal possible and was reportedly authorized to hold one meeting with the Iranians two weeks ago. Washington and Tehran broke off bilateral relations during the U.S. embassy hostage crisis in 1980, but quiet meetings were held over the past year, until they were broken off in mid-May after administration hard-liners charged that a series of terrorist attacks carried out against U.S. and other foreign targets in Saudi Arabia May 12th were organized from Iranian territory, presumably with the approval of elements of its government.

But the same hard-liners reportedly oppose a deal with Tehran, which they depict not only as a sponsor of terrorism determined to acquire nuclear weapons, but also an exhausted dictatorship teetering on the verge of collapse that could be easily overthrown in a popular insurrection, with covert U.S. help or even military intervention. The hawks are backed by the Likud government in Israel, which has been urging Washington to go after Iran since even before the war in Iraq. As soon as Iraq is dealt with, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon told the *New York Post* last November, he “will push for Iran to be at the top of the ‘to do’ list.”

Pentagon hard-liners, who exert the greatest control over the occupation authority in Iraq, last month authorized the re-birth of the arm of Saddam Hussein’s intelligence service—the Mukhabarat—that worked on Iran, according to the Pentagon-backed Iraqi National Congress



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(INC), which is helping in the effort. That was the same unit that worked closely with the MEK under Saddam Hussein.

The MEK, which began in the late 1960s as a left-wing Islamist movement against the Shah but broke violently with the leaders of the Islamic Republic after the 1978-79 revolution, was given its own bases, tanks, and other heavy weapons by the Iraqi leader during the Iran-Iraq War, all of which it retained during his regime to use in raids against Iran, but also to help Hussein put down unrest, particularly after the 1991 Gulf War. U.S. forces bombed the group's bases in the initial phases of the Iraq campaign earlier this year, but negotiated a cease-fire and eventually a surrender as Washington expanded its control over Iraq. Yet the group has been permitted to retain most of its weapons, remain together, and, despite its listing by the State Department as a terrorist group and Tehran's demands that it be completely dismantled, continue radio broadcasting into Iran.

Although the MEK, which displays many of the characteristics of a cult in its hero-worship of its "first couple," Maryam and Massoud Rajavi, appears to have intelligence assets inside Iran—the group was the first to alert Washington to the existence of a previously unknown nuclear facility earlier this year—most Iran specialists believe it has no popular following there whatsoever, and is mostly despised due to its alliance with Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war. "It's hard to see how they could ever be seen as a political asset to the United States in Iran," one administration official who favors a deal said. "The

(MEK) is precisely the kind of common enemy against which both the reformists and the conservatives—and even the students—are likely to rally against."

A deal would also re-confirm to an increasingly skeptical Islamic world that al Qaeda was indeed the primary target of Bush's war on terror and not simply a pretext for a major intervention in the Middle East and the Gulf to ensure U.S. and Israeli domination of the entire region, say analysts here. "Our priority should be al Qaeda, and if we can engage the Iranians tactically to get some high-ranking al Qaeda operatives, we should," Flynt Leverett, the top Mideast expert on the National Security Council under both Clinton and Bush until his departure earlier this year, told the *New York Times* on August 2nd. The same analysts argue that disbanding the MEK would help demonstrate that Washington is not applying a double standard to different terrorist groups, depending on their usefulness.

But the Pentagon reportedly remains resistant to stronger action against the group. "There is no question that we have not disbanded them, and there is an ongoing debate about them between the office of the Secretary of Defense and the State Department," Vince Cannistraro, a former counter-terrorism director in the Central Intelligence Agency, told *USA Today* in early August.

It appears that some officials believe the MEK could yet serve some purpose.

(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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