

# U.S. Targeting of Iran Fuels Iraq Resistance

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

No sooner has the smoke cleared in Iraq, than the chicken-hawks have raised their strident voices in Washington, calling for regime change in Iran. Not only are the accusations against the Islamic Republic carbon-copies of those launched against Iraq—that it is developing weapons of mass destruction and harboring al-Qaeda terrorists—but the “evidence” for the charges is as phony, if it exists at all. “Intelligence sources” cited as the origin of the charges, are likely the same used in the Iraq case, by the special intelligence unit under Abram Shulsky in Donald Rumsfeld’s Pentagon.

The real reason for the drumbeat against Iran, has nothing to do with these charges. Rather, as the occupying forces in Iraq lose control and credibility, coming under increasing guerrilla attacks, some organic political and religious forces inside Iraq are consolidating their structures and preparing to make a bid for self-government, outside U.S. and U.K. control. Given that the largest and most representative force among these groups is the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), which has close ties to Iran, where its leadership stayed in exile for 12 years, it is thought in Washington that Iran is about to extend its control into its neighbor’s territory, and spark an Islamic revolution in that country. Rumsfeld, who inaugurated the new round of attacks against Tehran, said on May 27 that the allies (occupying forces) would not allow some “new form of tyranny” to replace the Saddam Hussein regime. Explicitly, he said, “Iran should be on notice that attempts to remake Iraq in Iran’s image will be aggressively put down.”

The Iran war drive was launched on April in a speech by Michael Ledeen of the American Enterprise Institute: “The time for diplomacy is at an end; it is time for a free Iran, free Syria, free Lebanon.” Ledeen has recently launched the Center for Democracy in Iran.

## Press Reflects Divided Administration

The May 25 *Washington Post* reported that the Bush Administration had cut off contact with Iran; that after the May 12 suicide bombings in Saudi Arabia, the Bush Administration reportedly cancelled the next planned meeting between U.S. and Iranian officials. The paper reported that senior Administration officials were scheduled to meet on May 27 at the White House to discuss U.S. strategy toward Iran, with Pentagon officials pushing for both public and private actions that they hope could lead to the overthrow of the Iranian

government through a popular uprising—all this according to unnamed Administration officials. State Department officials, on the other hand, warned that such measures could ultimately discredit reformers in Iran, although the *Post* claimed they were inclined to accept such a policy.

But the story was discredited by Secretary of State Colin Powell, when he was asked on May 27 about the reported meeting and change in policy. Powell said, “Our policies with respect to Iran have not changed.” He repeated U.S. condemnation of Iran’s alleged support for terrorism and attempts to develop nuclear weapons, but, when asked if contacts had been cut off, said: “We have contacts with them.”

The fact of the matter is, there is no consensus in Washington, as to what should be done to contain Iran. Whereas Rumsfeld and others have called for a revolution from below, to overthrow the current government, Ledeen et al. would prefer a direct U.S. military attack. Condeleezza Rice has loudly demanded that Iran not only stop its support for the Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, but move to have it “dis-mantled.”

The response from Tehran has been immediate and unequivocal: the country’s leaders have denied all the charges and launched counter-accusations against Washington. On May 25, all the leading Iranian political figures, from Supreme Leader Khamenei, to Expediency Council chief Rafsanjani, to President Khatami, and others, made energetic public statements denying that the country is developing (or has) weapons of mass destruction, or that it is harboring al-Qaeda terrorists. Tehran’s leaders are aware that the threats coming from the neo-cons in Washington cannot be taken lightly. They have drawn the lesson from the Iraq conflict, that the neo-con crowd is fanatically committed to war.

President Seyyed Mohammed Khatami, in a meeting with Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, said, “No one can stand against the tide of world public opinion,” which is for peace. He said using violence and aggression instead of logic and dialogue in international relations poses a danger which threatens the entire world. “Unfortunately, in no other time have violence, aggression, and attempts to weaken international institutions been so prevalent as now,” he said. He blamed the irresponsible behavior by U.S. officials for Islamic extremism in some parts of the Muslim world. He also singled out unilateralism as a global threat. Regarding the accusation that Iran is building nuclear weapons, Khatami repeated that Iran is pursuing transparent and peaceful use of nuclear energy. Iran has proposed that the entire region be free of such weapons; in this context, Khatami recalled that Iran has signed all relevant treaties against WMD, “as opposed to Israel which has refused. . . . However, the right to peaceful use of nuclear energy should be furnished to countries that want it.”

Head of the Expediency Council and former President Hashemi Rafsanjani, in a meeting with Downer, referred to Iran’s policy vis-à-vis Iraq. He said that although the Islamic



*Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's targeting of Iran is spreading resistance in Iraq.*

Republic of Iran had suffered the most from the former Ba'ath regime, it could not remain indifferent toward the fate of the Iraqi nation: The best way to alleviate the people's pain is to install a democratic government there. In his refutation of U.S. allegations against Iran on harboring al-Qaeda terrorists, Rafsanjani stressed the well-known fact of strong ideological differences between Iran and al-Qaeda. He said that it had been the United States that created and masterminded Taliban and al-Qaeda, to confront the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

Iranian Foreign Minister Asefi said that Iran repatriates any al-Qaeda suspects it arrests in the country. Asefi had charged that the United States is pursuing a clear interventionist policy against Iran, in violation of international law. He said that whatever Taliban-linked elements may have illegally entered Iran, have been jailed and identified. Government speaker Ramazanzadeh reported that Interior Minister Younesi had sent 500 al-Qaeda suspects back to their home countries.

### **'Groveling Is Not Persian Policy'**

Iran has been in bitter conflict with the Taliban/al-Qaeda networks since long before Sept. 11, 2001. The Taliban brand of "Islam" is diametrically opposed to mainstream Islam, whether Sunni or Shi'ite. In the case of Iran, the Taliban/al-Qaeda elements had targetted the Islamic Republic, not only through massive drug smuggling, but also through assassinations of Iranian representatives in Afghanistan, including diplomats, and terrorist activities against the Tehran regime inside Iran. Therefore, to insinuate any common ground between the two is absurd. President Khatami was not exaggerating when he stated on May 24, that the Taliban represented "fascistic Islam." He also made the pertinent point, that "only people who have no inkling of our culture and history, believe what the Americans say about us."

The Iranian military also rejected the threatening tones

emanating from Washington. On May 22, Iranian press reported that Zollghadr, the commander of the Islamic Revolution Army, spoke out against U.S. policy against Iran. He said it was based on two principles: military threats and destroying the country from within. Pointing to undercover activities being carried out by U.S. intelligence inside Iran, he said the U.S. is constantly trying to demonstrate that the Iranian government is not capable of controlling and organizing everything. The U.S. is trying to generate anarchy in Iran, and to destroy national unity, he said.

The question raised by this escalation of tensions, is: What will Iran do? In a *Guardian* editorial on May 27, Simon Tisdall posed the useful question: What would you do if you were an Iranian leader, and saw all the signs of coming aggression? His answer is, Iran would strengthen ties with Lebanon and Syria, as well as India, Russia, and China; but, would also develop nuclear weapons. "If this is Iran's choice, the U.S. will be much to blame," he says, adding that the U.S. plans for researching and developing mini-nukes can only encourage other countries to defend themselves.

"Groveling is not Persian policy," Tisdall emphasized, stressing that Iran will not capitulate to U.S. demands, whether to abandon Hezbollah or to stop its critical stance on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Although the entire Iranian political elite was shaken by the war of aggression against neighboring Iraq, there are red lines which no one in the leadership can allow to be crossed. Iran cannot relinquish its cooperation with Russia, for peaceful nuclear energy plants. The current reform government cannot capitulate to U.S. demands, without giving the conservative opposition a whopping political advantage. As the *Guardian* put it on May 27, the call from Washington to destabilize Iran "has given the country's clerics ammunition to portray their liberal opponents as traitors." Thus, it is to be expected that, while the reform forces will continue to try to keep lines open to Washington, through the UN-sponsored "6 plus 2" mechanism for Afghanistan (a forum of Afghan neighbors plus the U.S. and Russia), it will maintain a principled resistance to issues touching its independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity.

### **The Question of Iraq**

At the same time, Iran cannot and will not sever its ties to the SCIRI, the leading Iraqi Shi'ite organization, which spent the years since the 1991 war in exile in Iran. The organization has been consolidating its ties inside Iraq, not only with other Shi'ite groups, but with the Sunni community. Leaders of both tendencies have stressed that they are committed to an independent, sovereign coalition government, elected through a democratic process representing all Iraq's ethnic, political, and religious communities. Rumsfeld's outbursts about alleged Iranian designs for an Islamic regime, really point to the fact that the occupation forces will not allow such a sovereign government.

But, regardless of what the U.S. may desire for Iraq, these kinds of political processes will prevail. The most important factor undermining the plans for a puppet government, at present, is their incompetence in how they have handled affairs thus far. The deployment of Paul Bremer as proconsul to replace Gen. Jay Garner, was intended to introduce swift, efficient changes to get things running again in the country. But one of Bremer's first decisions, on May 23, was to dissolve the Iraqi armed forces, the Ministry of Defense, and security organizations. In one fell swoop, he put about 400,000 Iraqi soldiers and officers—certainly not all ardent Saddam Hussein fans—out on the street, unemployed and without any future prospects. Some 2,000 Iraqi officers immediately took to the streets of Baghdad to protest the move.

The UN's most senior humanitarian official immediately countered that Bremer's move would lead to disaster. On May 26, Ramiro Lopez da Silva said that without any plan for re-employment of the soldiers, it would lead to "low-intensity conflict" in the countryside. "We cannot force through an ideological process too much," he said, referring to Bremer's much-touted de-Ba'athification plan, modelled on the de-Nazification of Germany after World War II. "The way the decision was taken leaves them [military] in a vacuum. Our concern is that if there is nothing for them out there soon this will be a potential source of additional destabilization." The UN is setting up its own re-employment program in Iraq, hoping to give 250,000 people jobs in the next six months.

Da Silva explicitly criticized the de-Ba'athification campaign, which has automatically excluded 30,000 from office. "Many bureaucrats who have important experience that would help the new government were only Ba'ath party members on paper," he said.

Within the first days of the last week of May, a marked increase in anti-American hostilities was visible. In three days, seven U.S. soldiers were killed and more wounded. A Baghdad police station was attacked with rocket-propelled grenades. Two convoys, one a supply convoy and another a military one, came under fire in two different locations about 120 kilometers from Baghdad. A helicopter was shot down.

The German daily *Die Welt* May 27 reported that one Gen. Saheb al Mussari, speaking to a group of military in Baghdad, said, "We demand a rapid government formation, the return of security and public institutions, and the payment of salaries for the army." If not, he said, by next Monday "there will be a break between the Iraqi people and its army, on the one side, and the occupiers, on the other."

Certainly, American officials tended to play down the reports, and attribute some of the killings to "accidents." But the reality is more brutal. As Robert Fisk wrote in the *Independent* on May 28, after ticking off the toll of U.S. casualties: "Isn't it time we called this a resistance war in Iraq?" It is also time to realize that accelerating the tensions against Iran, will only fuel the dynamic which has been unleashed in Iraq.