

Why Bush Switched to 'Regime Change' in Iran, Too

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

One not-so-diplomatic question being raised in diplomatic circles outside the United States these days, is: "Does President George W. Bush know the difference between Iraq and Iran?" Judging by his recent statements regarding his commitment to "regime change" in Baghdad, and his calls to Iranian student protesters, on July 12, to overthrow their government, it appears that whoever is scripting his foreign policy positions, has put the two Persian Gulf giants in one pot, and turned up the fire.

Whereas the "get Saddam-Hussein" posture represents perfect continuity with the President's father's policy, Bush's most recent statements on Iran mark a shift. Earlier, the Administration had maintained the Clinton Administration's low-profile stance vis-à-vis the Iranian reform government. Following the Sept. 11 attacks—which the Iranian leadership unequivocally denounced—and the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan, relations between Washington and Tehran were relaxed; Iran contributed behind the scenes to organizing the Bonn conference of Afghan opposition groups, which led to the government of Hamid Karzai. Whether it bought the official cover story that "Osama bin Laden did it," or not, the Iranian leadership had every reason to welcome the elimination of the Taliban regime, which had been the source of regional destabilization and illegal drugs.

Attempt To Provoke Student Demonstrators

With his Jan. 29 State of the Union speech, in which he lumped Iran, Iraq and North Korea together into the "axis of evil," Bush signalled that the de facto détente with Tehran was a thing of the past. His remarks in early July went a step further. On July 9, students had demonstrated in Tehran, to commemorate the third anniversary of massive student pro-

tests that rocked the country. Bush applauded the students, saying that "their government should listen to their hopes." He complained that although the population had voted in reformers in the last elections, "Their voices are not being listened to by the unelected people who are the real rulers of Iran."

Bush endorsed moves against the elected government, when he said: "As Iran's people move towards a future defined by greater freedom, greater tolerance, they will have no better friends than the United States of America."

Coming in the context of U.S. preparations for a war against neighboring Iraq, Bush's remarks were correctly interpreted as a major provocation. The man engineering the Bush Administration's about-face, following the Afghan operation, has been Zalmay Khalilzad, the government's official envoy for Afghanistan. A close ally of Paul Wolfowitz, Khalilzad called for abandoning reformist President Mohammad Khatami, and supporting the "democracy opposition." An interview with Khalilzad to this effect was beamed into Iran via Voice of America. Khalilzad had earlier accused Iranian authorities of allowing al-Qaeda operatives to enter the country. In an Aug. 2 speech to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in Washington, he accused Iran's leaders of supporting terrorism, repeated that Khatami is "ineffective" in implementing reforms, and ticked off other grievances: Iran is "aggressively" pursuing weapons of mass destruction, "including nuclear weapons, and the missiles to deliver them," with Russian and Chinese help.

Days earlier, on July 29, the *Washington Post* carried an ominous article, saying the time is "ripe" for a "pre-emptive strike" against Iran. The target would be the Bushehr nuclear power plant, being completed with Russian help.

None of this was idle chatter.

The entire build-up of rhetoric against Iran, must be understood in the context of the ongoing preparations for a strike against Iraq, which would provide cover for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and his Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), both to expand their military operations against the Palestinians—including their mass “transfer” into Jordan—and to launch a “pre-emptive strike” against Iran.

On Aug. 2, the senior military-security correspondent for the Israeli daily *Ha’aretz*, Amir Oren, indicated that Israel, with U.S. cooperation, is training for an air strike against Iran, similar to the one it launched in 1981 against Iraq’s Osirak nuclear reactor. “This month, for the first time, Israeli pilots will take part, in their aircraft, in a battle exercise on the West Coast of the U.S.,” Oren reported. “To move six F-15 aircraft from the coast of the Mediterranean Sea to the place where the exercise will be conducted—a 15-hour flight in a fast passenger plane—requires a complicated operation of piloting, fuelling, and control.” Thus, “anyone who can fly this distance westward, is also likely to succeed when flying in other directions.” Oren added that the Iranians had long since recognized Israel’s strategic bomber as “aimed primarily against them.”

An Israeli air strike against the Bushehr reactor would most likely require the Israelis to fly around the Arabian peninsula; Israel’s maneuvers would show it could cover the distance, roughly 6,000 kilometers.

Iran Against the Iraq War

Why should the Bush Administration target Iran? And why now? There are many layers of answers to this question. One to be considered is an unconfirmed report, that someone in the Bush Administration was toying with the possibility that Iran could be persuaded, by threats, to support a “regime change” in Baghdad, if the price were right. Given the level of insanity reigning in policy-making circles, it is perfectly possible that someone was playing with such fantasies in Washington; but that Iran would entertain such an offer, is out of the question. The entire Iranian establishment—conservatives and reformers—are united around the rejection of any U.S. military move in the region, emphatically including Iraq. They all know that if Iraq is number one, Iran is number two on the target list. Thus, the response to Bush’s July remarks, was immediate and unanimous.

President Khatami immediately denounced the speech as an interference into internal affairs: “We advise those who who are pursuing [a] war-mongering policy under the influence of certain lobbies, to get rid of the false interpretation of [the] situation in Iran and apologize to the Iranian nation and government for the misdeeds of the past. Unfortunately, the extremist policy has formed a part of the U.S. administration’s approach towards global issues. They threaten with war and subversive actions, posing a threat to the entire world and

U.S. interests first of all.” He warned the United States “not to fall into the traps more disastrous than what it experienced in [the] Vietnam war,” according to the Iranian News Agency (IRNA) paraphrase.

In addition to Khatami, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, National Security Council head Rowhani, and all leaders of political parties in parliament, denounced Bush’s statement as an obvious provocation, aimed at fuelling factional strife inside the country. On July 19, demonstrations against Bush took place throughout the country. In the following week, Khatami conducted a high-profile state visit to Malaysia, where he reiterated his denunciations.

Saudis Join To Say ‘No’

Diplomatic initiatives launched by Tehran against a U.S. war on Iraq, underlined the fact that Iran’s leaders read the heightened rhetoric from Washington as a prelude to military adventures which would threaten the entire region. Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal went to the Iranian capital on Aug. 4 for talks with his counterpart, Dr. Kamal Kharrazi, and with President Khatami. Saud al-Faisal told reporters, “We have always opposed any attack against an Arab or Muslim country, and that also means Iraq.” Kharrazi responded, “We, too, have the same position.”

The Saudi foreign minister delivered a letter from Crown Prince Abdallah to the Iranian leadership, which, he said, “deals with the Middle East situation, and, in general terms, with the whole region.” The *Tehran Times* announced that they would discuss “issues of mutual interest, as well as regional developments such as the anticipated U.S. attacks on Iraq, the Palestinian crisis, and mutual cooperation within the context of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).” It added: “Al-Faisal arrives in Tehran at a time of high tension, with the U.S. expected to launch its adventurist action at any moment, further destabilizing the region. Therefore, Iran and Saudi Arabia, as two key regional states, have a great responsibility to thwart the plan of the U.S. war-mongers. Saudi Arabia’s declared positions regarding Middle East and Persian Gulf issues have all been focussed on regional common interests. It is therefore expected that Riyadh will continue objecting to Washington’s military actions against Baghdad. Saudi Arabia should not allow U.S. troops to use its territory to launch a military campaign against Iraq.”

The Saudi government and press continue to voice opposition to the Iraq war. On Aug. 3, the Saudi paper *Okaz* warned against military adventures, and the “policy of [regime] change” (evidently not limited to Iraq), declaring that “The region will never be another Afghanistan.”

In an interview with Associated Press on Aug. 7, Prince Saud explicitly ruled out the use of Saudi territory for the planned war: “We have told them we don’t [want] them to use Saudi ground. We are against any attack on Iraq, because

we believe it is not needed, especially now that Iraq is moving to implement United Nations resolutions,” declared the Prince.

One day following the joint statement issued by the Saudi and Iranian foreign ministers, the Omani Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Youssef bin Alawi bin Abdallah, visited Tehran, and “added his voice to earlier statements by Tehran and Riyadh expressing opposition to any military action against Iraq,” reported IRNA.

The fact that Saudi Arabia, which was the launching pad for Desert Storm in 1990-91, should join with Iran in defending Iraq, is significant. The rapprochement of Iran and Iraq has been being steadily consolidated, while Saudi-Iraqi relations have been improving, in the wake of the last Arab League summit. Thus, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Iran are in de facto agreement. The participation of Oman in the anti-war front is also noteworthy, as an extension of British opposition into the region.

The Casus Belli

Among the others layers of answers, to the question, why this U.S. shift toward “regime change” in Iran, is the most obvious: that the aim pursued by the imperial-war faction of McCain and Lieberman in the Senate, Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in the Pentagon, Zbigniew Brzezinski, et al., is the destabilization of the entire region, as part of the global Clash of Civilizations strategy against the Islamic world. This includes the breakup of Saudi Arabia, and the seizure of the oil fields, as recently reiterated in a Defense Policy Board briefing.

Peeling off one further layer reveals that this strategy represents merely the current form of a long-term strategic thrust to take over all significant mineral and raw materials resources worldwide. The doctrine was presented in the 1974 National Strategic Study Memorandum 200 (NSSM-200), commissioned by then-National Security Council head Henry Kissinger and revealed only in 1990. The thesis was: If resource-rich countries of the developing sector grew demographically, their governments would desire industrialization, improved standards of living, and economic as well as political sovereignty, including over resources.

This, Kissinger saw as a threat to the Anglo-Americans’ interest and right to plunder, and population growth in these countries was therefore defined as a strategic threat *per se* to U.S. national security interests. Therefore, the four horses of the Apocalypse were to be harnessed to halt population growth. In the period during which NSSM-200 was classified, from 1974-89, many of the targetted countries were subjected to political destabilizations, assassinations, and wars, among them India, Pakistan, Egypt, and Iran and Iraq, through the Kissinger-engineered war.

Now, 12 years later, Iraq remains shackled through the continuing sanctions policy. The planned war would deal the

final blow to whatever infrastructure the country has managed to rebuild despite sanctions.

Iran is poised to become a major industrialized power in the region. Since the collapse of Communism in 1989-91, Iran has emerged as a key factor in the Eurasian Land-Bridge project, to join Asia and Europe through vast transportation infrastructure. Iran’s geographical position defines it as the gateway to the Persian Gulf, for the landlocked Central Asian Republics. Iran has shaped its entire foreign policy around economic cooperation deals with its many neighbors—including Saudi Arabia—within this Eurasian development perspective.

Nuclear power is crucial to Iran’s development. It was historically in the forefront of the fight for the right to nuclear energy. Shah Pahlevi had announced in 1974, that Iran would install 23,000 MWe by 1994, one of the most ambitious nuclear programs in the world at the time. Due to internal opposition to the program, as well as financial constraints, by 1978 it had been cut back, and it was expected that only the four reactors being built would be completed on schedule. Plans made to purchase four air-cooled German plants and six to eight American units were dropped. During his short-lived government in January 1979, Shahpur Bakhtiar continued the *demontage*, cancelling two reactors that had been started with

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the French. This left Iran with two German reactors, of 1,190 MWe each, one of which was 80% completed, the other, 50%. Both were at Halikeh, near the city of Bushehr, on the Persian Gulf. Work on the reactors, which were once to start operating in 1980, had been halted in 1978, prior to the revolution, as a result of massive strikes, and the exodus of foreign technicians fleeing the political turmoil.

Iran's nuclear energy ambitions had been effectively crushed, and the economic disaster of the eight-year war with Iraq (1980-88) buried it.

Revival of the Bushehr Nuclear Program

Times changed, and so did energy policy. On Jan. 8, 1995, Iran's nuclear program was resuscitated, at least in part, when a contract was signed with Russia to complete one of the two plants at Bushehr. The \$1 billion contract foresaw the completion of the 1,000 MWe plant within four years. The Germans, who had originally started the construction, were refusing to deliver the parts and equipment promised in the original deal, until forced to do so by international arbitration in 1981. In final negotiations in 1990, the Germans revealed that they were under pressure of "other Western states" not to deliver the remaining parts.

The plan agreed upon with the Russians differs from the original German plan, with regard to method of transfer of technology and know-how. As reported by Iranian wires at the time, "the Russians have undertaken to train Iranians to make up the personnel required and [by March 1995] 500 or so Iranian engineers and technicians [were] in Russia, receiving instructions and being trained in various Russian nuclear power plants. At the same time they [were] supervising the manufacture of the parts that [would] ultimately make up the plant at Bushehr."

Once the news of the Russian-Iranian deal had been made public, the fireworks began in Washington and Tel Aviv. It was an unspoken assumption that Iran would never be allowed access to nuclear technology. Continuing public and private pressure on Moscow slowed down the process considerably, such that the plant has still not been completed.

Then, in the midst of the drumbeat for war against Iraq, Russian First Deputy Foreign Minister Trubnikov visited Tehran and announced, on July 20, that Russia was ready to receive and accept new proposals to build more nuclear plants in Iran. Speaking to press after talks with his Iranian counterpart Mohsen Aminzadeh, Trubnikov said cooperation on the Bushehr nuclear power plant did not violate international accords, and would continue. Asked about Bush's criticism of Russian-Iranian cooperation, and the U.S. President's attacks against Iran, Trubnikov said, "Russia's stance is clear: We do not accept the U.S. President's view on the axis of evil. Iran has had good cooperation in regional developments generally, especially in realization of peace and campaign against terrorism."

Russian Deputy Defense Minister M. Dimitriov, visiting Iran days later for talks with defense officials, also stated: "Russia's stance vis-à-vis construction and operation of the Bushehr nuclear power plant is crystal-clear and based on international laws and regulations."

Russian intentions became clear on July 26, when they made public the annexes to their energy cooperation agreements with Iran, specifying they would not only soon complete the Bushehr plant, but also work on five others. The proposed new plants are part of a ten-year blueprint for economic, scientific, and political cooperation with Iran, approved by Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov on July 24. The document referred to three new reactors which could be built near Bushehr, and a plant at Ahvaz. Russian Atomic Energy Minister Alexander Romyantsev reiterated his government's guarantees, that Iran would not gain access to weapons technology.

Bombing Threat Is Very Real

The U.S. reaction was immediate and predictable. Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham held closed-door talks with Romyantsev on July 31 and Aug. 2. Abraham officially warned Russia to halt all nuclear cooperation. Secretary of State Colin Powell, meanwhile, was putting pressure on Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, in Brunei, about the same issue. One senior U.S. official told reporters, "Russian cooperation with Iran has long been a sore point with Washington, with the Bushehr power plant an especially sensitive issue."

The chairman of Iran's Majlis (Parliament) Energy Commission, Dr. Hossein Afarideh, told *Tehran Times*, of the United States and Israel, that such countries were "actually against the Islamic Republic acquiring technology to advance itself. These countries have always been trying to prevent Iran from progressing and, in fact, desire to see Iran remain underdeveloped." As for Israel's threat to bomb Bushehr, he replied: "Israelis will never tolerate Iran achieving scientific and technological progress." Defense Minister Ali Shamkani also stated "their psychological warfare against Iran . . . is aimed to deprive Iran of nuclear technology."

The danger of an Israeli attack against Bushehr, modelled on its destruction of Iraq's Osirak, is very real. Israel carried out a campaign of assassinations of Iraq's top scientists worldwide, to deprive the nation of advanced technology. All Israeli leaders, including Shimon Peres, who first articulated Israel's "right" to a monopoly on nuclear weapons, are adamant that Iran must be prevented from acquiring this technology.

Iran, for its part, will respond to any attack. On July 30, for example, the *Tehran Times* wrote: "Iran will not sit by idly and do nothing if its nuclear installations are attacked. Iran will take any measures it sees fit in such an event. It is a matter of national pride and security."