

Strategic Analysis: Bush's Middle East Policy Paradox

by Jeffrey Steinberg

Any non-crazy person attempting to assess the Bush Administration's current policy towards Southwest Asia, quickly concludes that it is time to reach for the Excedrin headache pill. All at the same time, Team Bush is pursuing three contradictory policy objectives:

First, it is promoting a peace agreement between Israel and the post-Yasser Arafat Palestinian Authority, based on a two-state solution. Top Bush Administration officials insist that a Palestinian state must be a "viable, contiguous territory," incorporating the Gaza Strip and as-yet-to-be determined portions of the West Bank.

Although there are some claims that top Bush officials, including Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, have put pressure on the Sharon government in Israel, to "not play the usual games," and at the last minute sabotage the scheduled Gaza withdrawal, well-placed Washington and regional sources voice skepticism that Team Bush will do anything that seriously ruffles Sharon's notoriously easily ruffled feathers.

The second policy objective is conducting covert destabilization operations against Iran, from bases in neighboring countries — with involvement of Israeli commandos, who are extremely active in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq.

On Inauguration Day, Vice President Dick Cheney removed any wisp of ambiguity from U.S. policy, by going on MSNBC radio to threaten Iran with military action, either from Washington or Israel. Cheney didn't even bother to cite Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions as a pretext. He just stated categorically, that Iran was committed to the destruction of the state of Israel, and Israel would act unilaterally, unless the international community cleaned up the problem first. Cheney was clearly declaring that U.S. policy is nothing short of aggressive "regime change" in Tehran. And Cheney's timetable for military action against Iran, according to a recent Seymour Hersh piece in *The New Yorker*, could

be as early as Summer 2005.

On Jan. 26, UPI national security correspondent Richard Sale reported that the U.S. Air Force is already conducting provocative overflights inside Iranian air space, aimed at forcing Iran to light up its air defenses, thus enabling the U.S. to obtain more precise targetting information for future bombing raids.

Sale reported, and *EIR* independently confirmed, that guerrillas from the Mujihadeen El Khalq (MEK), an Iranian exile group still on the U.S. State Department's list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations, are now operating inside Iranian territory, with the backing of Israeli and U.S. Special Forces teams. The MEK commandos, expected soon to begin sabotage operations in Iran, have bases in southern Iraq, near Basra, and, according to one Egyptian source, are now operating, in league with Israeli military personnel, in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq.

Experienced Middle East hands in the Pentagon and State Department are horrified at the Keystone Cop "regime change" schemes being activated by Washington and Israel. Vincent Cannistraro, former head of the CIA's Counter-Terrorism Center, told UPI's Sale, "It's very, very, very dangerous." A retired senior Naval Intelligence official warned that Israeli and American special operations officers, backing the MEK, stand zero chance of effecting a positive shift in Iran, and such operations open the prospect of a major regional explosion.

All the experts acknowledge that, in response to an American or Israeli attack, Iran will launch asymmetric retaliation, likely targetting vulnerable Persian Gulf neighboring states with large Shi'ite populations. Bahrain is particularly vulnerable to such attacks, and the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, where most of the oil reserves are located, is predominantly Shi'ite. A shock to Saudi oil production would blow



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out the world economy, through skyrocketing petroleum prices and supply cuts.

Planned Chaos

Yet, at least a faction inside the Bush Administration, associated with Vice President Cheney, the neo-con cabal inside his office, and Cheney's policy controller, George Shultz, has no qualms about unleashing a prolonged period of chaos and sectarian warfare in the world's biggest oil patch. This group, made up of self-professed Malthusian physiocrats, sticks to the infamous mid-1970s Henry Kissinger national security doctrine, enshrined in National Security Study Memorandum 200, which called for radical depopulation of 20 Third World states, to secure American control over their strategic raw-material wealth.

Even Tony Blair's Great Britain cannot go along with the latest Iran insanity coming from Washington. Sources on both sides of the Atlantic say that Britain will not side with the "chaos faction," but will ally with continental Europe, in refusing to abet the American war schemes against the ayatollahs. This will further serve Britain's interests in deepening its beachhead in Shi'ite-dominated and oil-rich southern Iraq.

The third contradictory facet of Bush policy towards Southwest Asia centers on Iraq. The Egyptian source reported that there is a deal between Bush and Sharon, linking an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza to an assurance from Washington that there will be no strong government, ever again, in Baghdad. To assure this, Washington has given Israel the green light to deploy large numbers of military and intelligence personnel into the Kurdish region of northern Iraq. They are training and backing the insurgency operations of the MEK against Iran, but also establishing other economic and political roots

in the Kurdish soil.

This has created a deep rift between Israel and Turkey. According to the Egyptian source, at a recent international conference, the Turkish Foreign Minister refused even to greet his Israeli counterpart, Silvan Shalom. Turkey is convinced that any further autonomy concessions to the Kurds will only fuel larger independence efforts, including efforts to grab Turkish, Syrian, and Iranian Kurdish territory to forge a Kurdistan state.

Further contributing to the prospects of a break-up of Iraq into at least three quasi-separate states, was and is the presence of Ahmed Chalabi on the Shi'ite election slate, promoted by the Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani. While final results of the Iraq election will not be known until the second week of February at the earliest, it's no secret Chalabi is pressing for the Prime Ministership of Iraq, and is also targetting Sunni Muslims for renewed purges from the military and civilian bureaucracy—an effort to out-Bremer Bremer. (Coalition Provisional Authority chief Paul Bremer, on orders from Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, ordered the dismantling of the Iraqi Army and state bureaucracy in 2003, thus fuelling what became the nationwide coordinated insurgency).

A break-up of Iraq, a new military action against Iran, and asymmetric Iranian retaliation in the Persian Gulf, is hardly a recipe for peace and stability. And giving Israel a base for waging irregular warfare against Iran, Syria, and Central Asia is hardly a wise strategy for securing a just and meaningful settlement of the Israel-Palestine conflict. But that appears to be the policy path of the Bush-Cheney Administration.

And you thought it couldn't get any worse than the Iraq invasion to capture non-existent weapons of mass destruction and stop the non-existent Saddam/al-Qaeda terror alliance!