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POLITICS-US:**"Cabal" Blocked 2003 Nuclear Talks with Iran**

Gareth Porter*

WASHINGTON, Mar 28 (IPS) - The George W. Bush administration failed to enter into negotiations with Iran on its nuclear programme in May 2003 because neoconservative zealots who advocated destabilisation and regime change were able to block any serious diplomatic engagement with Tehran, according to former administration officials.

The same neoconservative veto power also prevented the administration from adopting any official policy statement on Iran, those same officials say.

Lawrence Wilkerson, then chief of staff to Secretary of State Colin Powell, says the failure to adopt a formal Iran policy in 2002-2003 was the result of obstruction by a "secret cabal" of neoconservatives in the administration, led by Vice Pres. Dick Cheney.

"The secret cabal got what it wanted: no negotiations with Tehran," Wilkerson wrote in an e-mail to IPS.

The Iranian negotiating offer, transmitted to the State Department in early May 2003 by the Swiss ambassador in Tehran, acknowledged that Iran would have to address U.S. concerns about its nuclear programme, although it made no specific concession in advance of the talks, according to Flynt Leverett, then the National Security Council's senior director for Middle East Affairs.

It also raised the possibility of cutting off Iran's support for Hamas and Islamic Jihad and converting Hezbollah into a purely socio-political organisation, according to Leverett. That was an explicit response to Powell's demand in late March that Iran "end its support for terrorism".

In return, Leverett recalls, the Iranians wanted the United States to address security questions, the lifting of economic sanctions and normalisation of relations, including support for Iran's integration into the global economic order.

Leverett also recalls that it was drafted with the blessing of all the major political players in the Iranian regime, including the "Supreme Leader", Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Realists, led by Powell and his Deputy Richard Armitage, were inclined to respond positively to the Iranian offer. Nevertheless, within a few days of its receipt, the State Department had rebuked the Swiss ambassador for having passed on the offer.

Exactly how the decision was made is not known. "As with many of these issues of national security decision-making, there are no fingerprints," Wilkerson told IPS. "But I would guess Dick Cheney with the blessing of George W. Bush."

As Wilkerson observes, however, the mysterious death of what became

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known among Iran specialists as Iran's "grand bargain" initiative was a result of the administration's inability to agree on a policy toward Tehran.

A draft National Security Policy Directive (NSPD) on Iran calling for diplomatic engagement had been in the process of interagency coordination for more than a year, according to a source who asks to remain unidentified.

But it was impossible to get formal agreement on the NSPD, the source recalls, because officials in Cheney's office and in Undersecretary of Defence for Policy Douglas Feith's Office of Special Plans wanted a policy of regime change and kept trying to amend it.

Opponents of the neoconservative policy line blame Condoleezza Rice, then the National Security Adviser, for the failure of the administration to override the extremists in the administration. The statutory policymaker process on Iran, Wilkerson told IPS in e-mail, was "managed by a national security adviser incapable of standing up to the cabal..."

In the absence of an Iran policy, the two contending camps struggled in 2003 over a proposal by realists in the administration to reopen the Geneva channel with Iran that had been used successfully on Afghanistan in 2001-2002. They believed Iran could be helpful in stabilising post-conflict Iraq, because the Iraqi Shiite militants who they expected to return from Iran after Hussein's overthrow owed some degree of allegiance to Iran.

The neoconservatives tried to block those meetings on tactical policy grounds, according to Leverett. "They were saying we didn't want to engage with Iran because we didn't want to owe them," he recalls.

Nevertheless, U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad was authorised to begin meeting secretly in Geneva with Iranian officials to discuss Iraq. The neoconservatives then tried to sandbag the talks by introducing a demand for full information on any high-ranking al Qaeda cadres who might be detained by the Iranians.

Iran regarded that information as a bargaining chip to be given up only for a quid pro quo from Washington. The Bush administration, however, had adopted a policy in early 2002 of refusing to share any information with Iran on al Qaeda or other terrorist organisations.

On May 3, as the Iranian "grand bargain" proposal was on its way to Washington, Tehran's representative in Geneva, Javad Zarif, offered a compromise on the issue, according to Leverett: if the United States gave Iran the names of the cadres of the Mujahideen e Kalq (MEK) who were being held by U.S. forces in Iraq, Iran would give the United States the names of the al Qaeda operatives they had detained.

The MEK had carried out armed attacks against Iran from Iraqi territory during the Saddam regime and had been named a terrorist organisation by the United States. But it had capitulated to U.S. forces after the invasion, and the neoconservatives now saw the MEK as a potential asset in an effort to destabilise the Iranian regime.

The MEK had already become a key element in the alternative draft NSPD drawn up by neoconservatives in the administration.

The indictment of Iran analyst Larry Franklin on Feith's staff last year revealed that, by February 2003, Franklin had begun sharing a draft NSPD that he knew would be to the liking of the Israeli Embassy.

(Franklin eventually pled guilty to passing classified information to two employees of an influential pro-Israel lobbying group and was sentenced to 12 and a half years in prison.)

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Reflecting the substance of that draft policy, ABC News reported on May 30, 2003 that the Pentagon was calling for the destabilisation of the Iranian government by "using all available points of pressure on the Iranian regime, including backing armed Iranian dissidents and employing the services of the Mujahideen e Kalq..."

Nevertheless, Pres. Bush apparently initially saw nothing wrong with trading information on MEK, despite arguments that MEK should not be repatriated to Iran. "I have it on good authority," Leverett told IPS, "that Bush's initial reaction was, 'But we say there is no such thing as a good terrorist'." Nevertheless, Bush finally rejected the Iranian proposal.

By the end of May, the neoconservatives had succeeded in closing down the Geneva channel for good. They had hoped to push through their own NSPD on Iran, but according to the Franklin indictment, in October 1983, Franklin told an Israeli embassy officer that work on the NSPD had been stopped.

But the damage had been done. With no direct diplomatic contact between Iran and the United States, the neoconservatives had a clear path to raising tensions and building political support for regarding Iran as the primary enemy of the United States.

*Gareth Porter is an historian and national security policy analyst. His latest book, "Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam", was published in June 2005. (END/2006)

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