

An Assessment of the Momentum Towards War Between the United States and Iran: Causes and Potential Ramifications

**Preliminary Findings By a Working Group
June 2008**

INTRODUCTION

The following study contains the initial results of research undertaken by a working group. The purpose of this research project has been to explore the dynamics bound up with the relationship between U.S. imperialism and the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). In particular, the working group examined the contradictions driving the U.S. towards confrontation and war with Iran—as well as the factors holding that back.

The key issues of analysis include: how the U.S. imperialists view Iran and how Iran objectively represents an obstacle to U.S. imperialism's regional as well as global interests and ambitions; how Israel enters into this dynamic; the social and economic character of the IRI; views towards “regime change” held by neoconservative forces influential in the U.S. ruling class; the actual prospects and potential for the IRI to unravel under pressure, including possible attack; and some concrete elements of U.S. planning currently underway for military action against Iran. The paper also offers a very preliminary consideration of possible responses that an attack on Iran might unleash in the Middle East and beyond.

This study consists of a Main Report as well two appendices: Regime Change, the Internal Situation in Iran and the Neocon Calculus; and Assessment of U.S. Military Options Against Iran.

Since the completion of this study in June 2008, the situation has developed further. We have not attempted to update research and analysis.

We feel that these findings, though initial, are important to share with progressive scholars, activists, and others. The momentum towards war between the United States and Iran is quite real. And it is our hope that this paper stimulates serious and urgent dialogue about this critical faultline in today’s world—while spurring further research and wrangling. We appreciate *Revolution* making this work available online. Comments are welcome and will be forwarded to us by contacting *Revolution* c/o rcppubs@hotmail.com.

NOTE TO READER: A great deal of source material has been consulted in the preparation of this study. For this online version of preliminary findings, we have not included a full and formal list of citations and references. There are some explanatory notes in the text, as well as endnotes that elaborate on particular points of analysis.

June 2008

Overall Main Report

An Assessment of the Momentum Towards War Between the United States and Iran: Causes and Potential Ramifications

The initial set of questions we took up to address were:

1. What would be the different scenarios of the U.S. attempting to effect changes in Iran in accordance with their interests? How likely is the U.S. to attack Iran and what different forms might this take etc.?
2. What are different scenarios of how Iran and those allied with it might respond (in the region and beyond) if there were to be military action against Iran by the U.S.?
3. What's likely to be the impact of a U.S. invasion politically and in terms of repression within the U.S. itself?

The following preliminary paper and appendices address only questions 1 and 2.

Through discussion, questions 1 and 2 were fleshed out to include: how do we assess the momentum toward war? How likely is war in the near future—from now (before the 2008 election) over the next 1-2 year period? What are the factors pushing the U.S. toward war and what are the countervailing contradictions? What might stay the U.S. hand? What might force the U.S. hand?

SUMMARY

Our initial working thesis was that there's an escalating trajectory of confrontation between the U.S. and the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), which may result in war. This trajectory is deeply rooted in many levels of necessity (and perceived necessities) confronting the U.S. imperialists: the history of U.S. dominance in the region, the collapse of the Soviet Union, 9/11, and the launching of the “war on terror” (WOT) and the Bush regime’s “grand strategy” of securing U.S. global dominance for decades to come. At the same time, this trajectory is conditioned by necessity and opportunities confronting the IRI (and other major players such as Israel, the EU, Russia and China).

The Bush team targeted Iran in its WOT from the beginning, and the core has held that nothing short of regime change would accomplish U.S. objectives. Our understanding of the nature and

magnitude of the obstacle posed by Iran to the U.S. in the region and in relation to U.S. imperialism's larger global geopolitics—not just in a general way, but in a growing, urgent, and immediate way—has been greatly deepened by our investigation from a number of different angles.

What follows are key summary points.

I. IRAN AS OBSTACLE TO U.S. NEEDS AND AMBITIONS

- 1). The IRI is a particular problem and obstacle for U.S. imperialism for three basic and interrelated reasons: a). the IRI is a relatively coherent regime that embodies and strengthens, directly and indirectly, the second outmoded* and poses an alternative political and ideological model away from the direction that U.S. imperialism wants to take things in the Middle East and globally; b). Iran contains the third largest reserves of oil and the second largest of natural gas in the world, in a period in which demand for, access to, and control over energy resources is of heightened importance in global accumulation and inter-imperialist power relations; and c). this relatively coherent regime is right at the geopolitical fulcrum of many key world contradictions and not only has its own regional ambitions but is interacting with shifting “tectonic plates” in the world economy and world politics, and taking advantage of the increasing assertiveness of, and building ties with, powers like Russia and China—giving Iran more room to maneuver and stand up to the U.S. and at the same time contributing to the potential emergence of a rival constellation of forces that could challenge U.S. global dominance.
- 2). The overall coherence of the IRI, which concentrates it as a problem and obstacle, trumps and encompasses the issue of nuclear weapons. But the fact that this regime is working to master uranium enrichment could give it the potential to develop nuclear weapons, which would qualitatively change the military-political equation and further destabilize the region, given Iran's overall coherence.
- 3). Regionally, the IRI is actively clashing with U.S. interests in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, perhaps Afghanistan, and in other areas. And in many ways, the IRI is an “existential threat” to Israel, given Israel's role and necessities as an outpost of U.S. imperialism. Further, the IRI has benefited from certain trends across the region, especially after 2005, including military

* The reference here is to the "two historically outmodeds" formulated by Bob Avakian. As discussed in his work, *Bringing Forward Another Way*, Fall 2006 (available at revcom.us):

“ ‘What we see in contention here with Jihad on the one hand and McWorld/McCrusade on the other hand, are historically outmoded strata among colonized and oppressed humanity up against historically outmoded ruling strata of the imperialist system. These two reactionary poles reinforce each other, even while opposing each other. If you side with either of these ‘outmodeds,’ you end up strengthening both.’

“While this is a very important formulation and is crucial to understanding much of the dynamics driving things in the world in this period, at the same time we do have to be clear about which of these ‘historically outmodeds’ has done the greater damage and poses the greater threat to humanity: It is the ‘historically outmoded ruling strata of the imperialist system,’ and in particular the U.S. imperialists.”

difficulties encountered by U.S. imperialism in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the strengthening of Islamic fundamentalist forces in Iraq, Lebanon, occupied Palestine, and elsewhere. All of this has the potential, if these continue, to directly threaten U.S. strategic objectives in the immediate future, e.g., the stability and viability of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, or the balance of power in Lebanon, or Israel's regional role.

4). These clashing interests are accelerants towards military confrontation. There are particular factors intensifying the necessity and drive of U.S. imperialism to take military action against Iran. These include Iran's growing military capabilities and acquisition of new and more sophisticated equipment and weapons systems from Russia. Iran has its own comprador^{*} ambitions, those ambitions are fueling a response by U.S. imperialism, and that in turn prompts new IRI efforts to maintain themselves in power. By doing so, Iran challenges unfettered U.S. hegemony in the region and poses some potentially strategic challenges in particular and most immediately thwarting U.S. victory in Iraq and the WOT more broadly. So a dynamic gets into play in which things that Iran might do to defend itself and prevent war can end up presenting the U.S. with new problems in Iraq and Afghanistan—further fueling a dynamic toward war. This dynamic is heightened because the U.S. is at war, and war imposes its own dynamic and necessities—including of timelines (although not in some absolute sense). And, again, Iran is right at the fulcrum of many key world contradictions and moving tectonic plates.

5). Overall, the Bush team has dealt with these contradictions by “modifying the course in order to stay the course”—by attempting to seize freedom in the face of these strategic necessities and difficulties. Rumsfeld’s dismissal and Gates’s appointment, the ensuing “surge” in Iraq, and the way in which the Bush team turned the National Intelligence Estimate to serve its doctrine of regime change are key expressions of this. The Bush team has not strategically shifted away from the WOT, victory in Iraq, or plans for far-reaching regional transformation. Rather, these modifications represent efforts to modify the course (diplomatically, militarily, politically) in order to forge ahead—and fighting through divisions at the top in order to reach a new unity around how to forge ahead. *It is highly significant that the increased targeting of Iran, in particular beginning in 2007 has been part of this package.*

II. U.S. IMPERIALIST OPTIONS, DEBATES OVER STRATEGY, THE DOMINANT LINE

1). Our assessment is that the ruling class is united on the “danger” Iran poses and the need to “contain” the IRI and, to varying degrees, to “roll back” its influence (in places like Lebanon). The problem is that efforts to contain Iran and weaken and/or destabilize the IRI—which have been going on in one form or another since 1980—have not worked in effecting qualitative transformation. The accession to power of the Bush regime, and its post-911 global strategy, brought with it in 2001-02 a new aggressive program of containment and rollback of Iran. The results and consequences, intended and unintended, of this policy have sharpened disagreements in the U.S. ruling class.

* The ruling bourgeois class forces of an oppressed nation that are economically linked to, dependant on and subservient to imperialist capital.

2). There is unity on the need to “transform” this regime—no major section of the bourgeoisie advocates a modus vivendi with the IRI qua IRI. But *how* to transform the regime is a source of major disagreement within the ruling class. In the face of the IRI’s “staying power,” because the various military options for regime change all have serious drawbacks, and given other global challenges facing U.S. imperialism—there are calls from some quarters in the ruling class for a new approach. Such an approach would combine containment with more flexible negotiations and various “soft power” initiatives (economic, cultural, etc.). Through these means, but backing them up with a continued military presence while formally disavowing forcible regime change, this approach (and there are different variations of it) suggests that the regime could in fact be induced and pressured to change. In this view, such a multi tiered approach would actually contribute to a repolarization of forces within Iran and the unraveling of institutional stability that could end up in a qualitative transformation of the regime.

3). Thus two roads to regime change seem to be contending: containment combined with negotiations leading to some qualitative change in the character and posture of the regime, if not its fall; and containment, perhaps combined with “hawkish negotiations,” leading to military confrontation. The latter position, the Bush line, is dominant. And the Bush team has rejected a more negotiations-centered approach—most recently in Bush’s “appeasement” speech in Israel and, more importantly, in its continued insistence that regime change be kept on the table and in its insistence in negotiations that Iran cease enrichment of uranium as a precondition for any agreement—thus guaranteeing the failure of negotiations and making clear that any negotiations continue to be in the service of regime change, if not a direct run up to war.* (While there has been the emergence of two different approaches, there does not seem to be a concerted effort within the ruling class to derail the Bush course.)

III. THE NATURE OF THE IRI AND THE NEOCONSERVATIVE CALCULUS FOR BRINGING IT DOWN

1). We see the Iranian social formation as an amalgam of semi-feudal and capitalist relations in which capitalist relations are dominant but confined within and fettered by theocratic political and social structures. This is a reactionary, ideologically driven regime with a developed “theo-hegemonic” state system. And the entire formation stands in a dependent and subordinate relation to world imperialism.

2). The regime exhibits a high degree of coherence, is highly repressive, and also has a social base in society. But, at the same time, the regime is brittle. There are divisions and fissures at the very top of this regime. These divisions may reflect contradictions in the functioning of the economy, Iran’s modes of interaction with the imperialist world economy, and possibly different responses to the pressure that has been applied to the regime (and that has taken its toll economically). Internally, there is widespread hatred for the regime. There are centrifugal forces

* If the U.S. had offered to take regime change off the table, by assuring Iran that it would not try to undermine or overthrow the Islamic Republic and would recognize its legitimate interests, it is possible that Iran would have agreed to give up enrichment, as indicated by its May 2003 offer to negotiate all outstanding differences with the US.

in Iranian society bound up with national oppression. There are profound social contradictions in Iranian society. But this is not a regime that will easily “crumble” from within—because of that coherence.

3). There are discernible outlines of a neocon strategy for regime change in Iran. We believe there is strong evidence that this strategy is informing much of the Bush regime’s forward planning for Iran and actual moves to attack it militarily. Central to the neocon view is that the U.S. must continue to exert and step up economic and political pressure on and diplomatic isolation of the regime, and ratchet up military pressure on the regime—including the threat of actual military attack and invasion. From the neocon perspective, this kind of intensified pressure from without can accelerate and widen fracturing of the regime. The neocon assessment holds that such external pressure in combination with other factors—including a more cohered and legitimized external opposition, the unleashing of national minority resistance and uprising, and promotion of dissent and opposition to the regime—could bring about instability, maybe civil war, and chaos that could lead to regime change. The neocons do not see this as a slam-dunk, and much of their strategic calculus pivots on the primacy and efficacy of smashing hostile regimes and “managing” the anarchy that comes with this. And they see U.S. imperialism being confronted with a certain “window of necessity,” i.e., Iran can become more of a problem if action is not taken.

IV. OUR ASSESSMENT

Our assessment of both the underlying contradictions driving events as well as specific “warning signs” and the overall “balance of forces” points to a growing danger and likelihood of military attack—even if we cannot say this with absolute certainty, or precisely ascertain the dimensions or specific goals of an attack.

Specific issues of military deployments, military advantages and disadvantages on the U.S. and Iranian sides, and scenarios for U.S. attack are addressed in Appendix B—“Assessment of U.S. Military Options Against Iran.” Several points are important to note here: U.S. military planners have been searching for a viable, winning military strategy—which could entail a range of attack scenarios, all geared to serving political goals of destabilizing and disintegrating the regime; military preparations have increased, on both sides, over the last period; and any military confrontation is likely to have wider regional ramifications involving Iraq, Israel and the Levant overall (including Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine).

In terms of the U.S. taking military action, this is a summary assessment of the things staying the U.S. hand, and those pushing toward war:

1. *What's staying the U.S. hand?*

- Lack of good military options to accomplish U.S. political goals—i.e., regime change—without unacceptable costs and/or risks. There are a number of dimensions to this including shortcomings in intelligence inside Iran, the IRI’s coherence (it’s unlikely to immediately collapse if attacked, and could even be strengthened in the short-term). There is also Iran’s ability to respond militarily and politically, and the degree of

unpredictability about this, and the potential for military action to spiral in unpredictable ways.

- Stresses and strains on the U.S. military, and the potential vulnerability of U.S. troops in Iraq and possibly U.S. ships nearby, and relatedly the necessities the U.S. faces in consolidating its occupation of Iraq and preventing defeat there (which may also be pushing toward war).
- The potential for any attack to negatively rebound—in Iran, Iraq, across the region, and globally—in possibly unpredictable ways; this is linked to the ongoing negative regional and global political/diplomatic fallout from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.
- What seems to be a mixed picture among other world powers—with only France clearly stating its agreement on the need for war at some point, Russia and China opposed, Britain and Germany seemingly willing to go along with war.
- Some divisions within the U.S. ruling class broadly over global grand strategy, how to proceed in Iraq, and strategy toward Iran.
- The coming elections and the potential for any Bush action to create a political crisis, including possibly unleashing the deep well of “Bush hatred.”

2. Factors pushing the U.S. towards war:

- Iran’s growing threat to fundamental U.S. strategic interests and objectives, and the failure of other means to halt this trend—and the potential immediacy of this threat, possibly reaching a “point of no return” on a number of fronts—Iraq, Lebanon, Israel, nuclear enrichment.
- Iran’s refusal to strategically back down in the face of U.S. threats, including in the nuclear negotiations, or halting support to Hezbollah, Hamas, or Shi’ite factions in Iraq. Iran has seemed to make tactical adjustments to avoid a head-on collision with the U.S. in these theaters, and has stated a willingness to negotiate differences, but at the same time has also been defiant, particularly in terms of enrichment and stating its readiness to defend itself in the event of attack.
- Iran’s growing military capabilities, including an upgraded air defense system that will be operational by December of this year. Delaying war could also facilitate military alliances, direct or tacit, between Iran and other powers and nations.
- The fact that there is no serious opposition to war on Iran in the U.S. ruling class in the sense of a powerful, coherent opposition willing and able to actually block war and/or exact a big political price; in particular, the Democrats seem less able to mount any serious opposition (even as there are real differences over aspects of global strategy) and in many ways seem more onboard for war on Iran than they were with Iraq (note the Kyle-Lieberman resolution in Congress, the failure of the Democrats to dictate Iraq

policy in any way, Clinton's recent statement threatening to "obliterate Iran" (ABC News 4/22/08) and Pelosi's statement in Israel recently that the U.S. should do more against Iran). Scott Ritter argues there is an 80 percent chance of war, the greatest ever, and there's "no constitutional" impediment to war because Congress has already given Bush authorization).

- The passivity of the U.S. public, its paralysis within the bounds of the elections, support for Israel
- The degree to which war might lock in terms for the next president.
- Bush's mind set is still messianic—he's repeated his overall mission of "democratizing the Middle East"; not going forward but instead allowing the IRI to continue to exist and build its influence might not only lead to U.S. defeats but could effectively mean the end of the Bush doctrine of preemption, regional transformation, and unipolar hegemony globally.
- The remaining and very powerful military reserves of the U.S. (airpower, etc.) and the potential for the U.S. to forge military plans—a political-military calculus—that could advance or conceivably advance their objectives. Any given military action need not be mechanically identical to, or necessarily immediately aimed at achieving, all the U.S.'s strategic objectives. So a U.S. attack may not be aimed at immediately achieving regime change, even as that remains the Bush team's goal. The U.S. political-military calculus can be complex, multi-faceted, and unfold over time. (The surge was a cautionary tale; at the time many bourgeois critics claimed the U.S. had no military options in Iraq, which did not prove to be the case.)

3. Overall Assessment:

On balance, the deeper necessities driving the U.S. imperialists, its continuing quest to secure unchallengeable global dominance for decades to come, the regional trajectory unleashed since Sept. 11 and the escalating clash with Iran, and concrete warning signs of impending war—all point to the predominance of factors and dynamics pushing things toward war.

The Bush regime has sought regime change since 2002-2003, and has not primarily been using military threats to increase its bargaining leverage with Iran (in fact its negotiating positions have been designed to be rejected by making demands they know are unacceptable to the Iranian regime). It has been concretely and systematically working to isolate and vilify Iran and overcome the obstacles in its path to the more aggressive containment/rollback of Iran and to war—diplomatically, politically, and militarily.

There seem to have been nodal points, particularly Fall 2007, when, at least according to much of the evidence we have come across, forces around Cheney were moving in that direction. The U.S. pulled back, for one reason or another, and regrouped to deal with dangers and obstacles and go forward. Now, the Bush team is again on the offensive against Iran, with many

immediate signs, on a number of fronts, pointing to a posture of aggressive containment (given the overall trajectory and Iran's posture) combined with concrete preparations for military action in the not distant future, quite possibly before Bush leaves office.

SOME GUIDEPOSTS TO THE READER ABOUT THE REPORT THAT FOLLOWS:

The above summary represents the fullest and highest synthesis we have reached through this investigation. Much of the report that follows was written before this higher synthesis was achieved—and the evaluation, criticism, and deepening of some of the arguments and presentation in the report was part of what enabled us to develop the summary/synthesis. But we were not able to go back into the report and make all the changes necessary for it to be more fully consistent with the summary. Moreover, some parts of the report were written in a somewhat decentralized way, and we were not able to collectivize to the degree called for, especially in the final stages—and this too contributes to some inconsistencies of analysis. And some sections, notably those dealing with NATO and the Western alliance and contradictions among the imperialists, as well as the domestic situation in the U.S. and intra-ruling class issues in the run-up to the elections, are rougher and more provisional than the other sections.

So while the report overall is in line with the summary, there are some inconsistencies and aspects of sketchier analysis. And two particular problems should be noted:

- In some parts of the discussion of U.S. interests in the Middle East and the question of “regime change” in Iran, there is a somewhat linear “from the Middle East region out” perspective, rather than seeing issues of “regional hegemony” and the U.S. “war on terrorism” and the clash with Islamic fundamentalism in a larger geopolitical context of the preservation of U.S. global dominance, i.e., the larger Bush doctrine—while at the same time recognizing the particular contradictions and particular dynamics of what is happening in the Middle East. We were able to correct much of this problem, but not all.
- The discussion in Section D concerning three different views/options before the ruling class vis-à-vis Iran has been left in its original form. But we think it is not quite cast correctly, especially in posing containment as a distinct option, as opposed to what we think is correct: there are two different broad views on how to effect the transformation of the regime, each of which involves containment. In addition to deadline issues, the reason we left this section in as it was constructed has to do with some of the important information and detail that it does contain about how different sections of the ruling class are “reading” the situation in the Middle East, U.S. room to maneuver, and larger geopolitical interests and needs of U.S. imperialism.

Again, the report should be read with the summary points in mind. What follows is the main report with two appendices:

- A. Regime Change, the Internal Situation in Iran, and the Neocon Calculus
- B. Assessment of U.S. Military Options Against Iran

MAIN REPORT

A. WORKING THESIS AND OVERALL TRAJECTORY

Our initial working thesis was that there's a trajectory of escalating confrontation between the U.S. and Iran, which may result in war. This trajectory is deeply rooted in the necessities and perceived necessities confronting the U.S. imperialists as well as the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI).

There are countercurrents and countervailing tendencies—this isn't a metaphysical or transcendent trajectory to war—it flows from the interplay and unfolding of contradictions, including perceived necessity and freedom. For both the U.S. imperialists, as well as the IRI, it seems they face a number of very difficult “Gordian knots”—with the difficulties posed by these knots adding to their need to deal with them (understanding there are different pathways or options for their resolution or mitigation).

We've sought to more deeply understand the unfolding of events—and test our core thesis—by investigating and analyzing a) the dynamic that has unfolded since 2003 in particular; b) what kind of obstacle the Islamic Republic poses to the U.S.; and c) the military-political options the imperialists have (whether they need to effect regime change, and if so, what military and political options they have). This analysis, and the unfolding of events, has deepened our conviction that our core thesis does reflect reality.

The U.S.' necessity to deal with the IRI is deeply rooted in many layers of imperialist necessity: the central role the Middle East has played in the U.S.'s standing as a global superpower since WW2, and the crucial role of Iran within that as one of the region's largest countries, an oil producer, and one located at a crucial nexus geographically straddling the Persian Gulf and the Soviet Union/Russia's southern flank—a bridge of sorts between the Middle East and Central Asia. Because of all this, Brzezinski calls Iran one of the most strategically important—“pivot”—states in the world. Since its 1979 Islamic revolution, Iran has been a problem and a thorn for the U.S. The U.S.'s perceived necessity and freedom to deal with Iran took a leap after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in relation to resolving the growing knot of problems they faced in this region and their broader global agenda.

This necessity (and opportunity) took a further leap following Sept. 11 and the launching of the WOT, both in terms of crystallizing the danger posed by Islamic fundamentalism and the view that the whole Middle East/Central Asia region was a “swamp,” and the key focus of danger and opportunity for the imperialists globally. Sept. 11 also provided an opening to launch a war to forcibly resolve this mess by draining the swamp, defeating Islamic fundamentalist adversaries, and overthrowing regimes (“rogue states” in their words) that supported or contributed to regional instability including by fueling the Islamic fundamentalist trend.

The Bush plan was not a piecemeal defeating of various enemies—it was a vision and plan to wage war for “two generations” to radically restructure this region. The Bush team envisioned unfolding the initial wave of this very quickly—in years, not decades—there were plans circulating right after Sept. 11 to take down 7 government in 5 years according to Richard Clarke—Iran being one of them. So it seems the vision was to generate an initial shock wave

across the region through U.S. military action that would topple regimes and unleash pro-US democratic forces, perhaps akin to what happened with the collapse of the Soviet Union, even if it took decades to consolidate all of this. It is important to note this—and realize just how much different the current realities are than what the imperialists envisioned—although that doesn't mean they've given up or that they'll necessarily fail.

The end product would be imperialist “democratization,” which would undercut the material basis for the rise of these anti-US forces, bring the region more firmly under U.S. control, and make it more fully serve the current needs of U.S. global capitalism/imperialism—economically, politically, and militarily.

This effort has been seen by the U.S. ruling core as the key arena and focus of their global strategy of locking in their status as an unchallenged imperialist superpower. So success in the “war on terror” has been seen by the dominant core as crucial, including to other U.S. objectives in the new millennium.

The U.S. and Iran actually worked together to stabilize Afghanistan in the immediate aftermath of the U.S. attack. However, it quickly became clear that this tactical cooperation did not trump the fact that, for the U.S., the IRI was a key initial target in the WOT. In Bush's January 2002 State of the Union speech he included Iran as a charter member of the “axis of evil.” Both Saddam's regime and the IRI were viewed as “rogue states”—countries not in line with critical U.S. interests and actively working against them. There is a fundamental illegitimacy to the IRI in the eyes of the U.S. imperialists, and among the core forces in particular (as illustrated by the treatment of Ahmadinejad when he came to NY). So the Bush team's approach has been that nothing short of regime change would deal with the threat and challenge posed by the Islamic Republic. There's been an eerie consistency to this stance or bearing towards Iran—it is an objective they've never abandoned—even as they've not been able to go “one, two, three,” with three being regime change in Iran, as well as differences among themselves over how to proceed vis-a-vis Iran. (This is also evident in reading Ritter's book, and the unrelenting U.S. effort to sanction, isolate, and vilify Iran on the nuclear issue.) There's been no discernable change of fundamental attitude towards that regime and they see Iran as a major, major impediment to their global interests.

Given Iran's size, location, and political, ideological and economic weight in the Middle East and Central Asia (and beyond) and because it was the first Islamist movement to take state power and embody the Islamic fundamentalist trend, it is likely that the imperialists viewed it as a—if not the—key target of the WOT. Their necessity to deal decisively with the IRI was heightened by the fact that the Bush agenda was not aimed at maintaining the regional status quo—but transforming things in various countries and across the region. In this context Iran looms as a huge obstacle—in many different ways (and increasingly).

There is evidence that the Bush team wanted to quickly move to effect regime change in Iran after the invasion of Iraq. Some even thought the invasion could trigger a “velvet revolution” in Iran. Shortly after the conquest of Baghdad, Bush asked Jay Garner, the first U.S. “viceroy” in Iraq,—half jokingly, but reflecting the Bush team's triumphalist mood—whether he wanted to do the same in Iran. In the fall of 2002, the U.S. and Israelis escalated their charges against Iran

on the nuclear front. In May 2003 the U.S. refused to even consider an offer by Iran to negotiate on all outstanding issues, even chastising the Swiss for bringing this Iranian offer to them. One analysis in Current History characterized the 2003-2005 period as one of the U.S. “toying” with regime change. Scott Ritter had argued at one point that the U.S. was preparing to strike in mid-2005, although it seems clear that preparations and level of hostility then were nowhere near what they are now.

It seems there were a number of reasons the U.S. didn’t carry the war to Iran in that period (although more work is needed to understand this): 1) the invasion of Iraq didn’t trigger an internal Iranian uprising; 2) the U.S. immediately faced great difficulties in quelling the Sunni resistance and consolidating a government in Iraq which meant that a) its military was focused on stabilizing things in Iraq, and b) the lack of a stable pro-US government in Iraq made U.S. forces more vulnerable there and meant that the U.S. didn’t have this political advantage vis-a-vis Iran (the neocons felt—and feel—that a pro-US Shi’ite regime in Iraq would de-legitimize Iran’s clerical rulers); and 3) (according to Ritter) the U.S. needed European help in stabilizing Iraq and going to war with Iran at that point would have made that impossible. There may have been other considerations at work as well (domestic and international public opinion, military planning and preparation, etc.).

A. 2003-2005

The shockwaves from the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq did bear some immediate fruit: the Taliban and Hussein regimes were shattered; Libya came to terms; in 2001-2002 Iran helped the U.S. stabilize Afghanistan and in May 2003 offered to come to terms; the “Cedar Revolution” unfolded in Lebanon and Syrian troops withdrew by 2005; the PLO more fully capitulated to the U.S.-Israel in Palestine; and U.S. military actions may have impacted North Korea’s willingness to strike a deal.

“In 2005, a popular uprising in Lebanon appeared to have cast off thirty years of Syrian dominance. Activists in Morocco had recently pressed for, and won, greater rights for women. A truth commission had, with government backing, exposed past abuse against the monarchy’s opponents. A burgeoning protest movement in Egypt, the most populous Arab state, was challenging the quarter-century rule of President Hosni Mubarak with the simple slogan Kefaya—‘Enough!’” (“The Arab Spring, and After,” Max Rodenbeck, *New York Review of Books*, May 15, 2008).

However, by 2005, this initial shock wave had subsided and it became clearer that it was giving rise to its opposite in many ways - mainly by further fueling Islamic fundamentalism—including in Iraq—and, relatedly but not identically, by greatly increasing Iranian influence and its need and freedom to extend its influence and agenda. Iran’s main regional enemies—Saddam and the Taliban—were overthrown; Saddam’s defeat opened the floodgates to greater Iranian influence in Iraq as well as was something of a death-knell for secular Arab nationalism—further strengthening Iran and the Islamic fundamentalist trend—in particular in Palestine and Lebanon.

This dynamic has been especially problematic for the U.S. in Iraq. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s secular rule unleashed a wave of fundamentalism, both Sunni and Shi’ite. It sparked a

violent Sunni-based opposition, strengthened the Shi'ite religious parties with close links to Iran, and sparked sectarian civil war. The election of late 2005 in which Shi'ite parties with links to Iran came out on top was a bellwether of growing Iranian and fundamentalist influence. All have threatened to derail the U.S. mission in Iraq—something that would constitute a major strategic defeat for U.S. imperialism, while giving Iran an unprecedented opportunity (and need) to expand its influence in Iraq. And Iran has been working to do just that (even if not in the ways the U.S. rulers claim, i.e., directly participating in military attacks on the U.S.).

The picture was similar across the region. Elections were held in Palestine and the Islamist Hamas won, and took control of Gaza. In Lebanon Hezbollah gained strength and influence, in particular in the wake of Israel's July 2006 assault, which was designed to crush Hezbollah and weaken Iran's regional influence. Instead it strengthened both and unleashed a wave of support for anti-U.S. Islamism. (U.S. neocons helped Israel plan the attack, and some reportedly saw it as a dry run—or even a trigger—for a bombing campaign against Iran.) Islamist movements were also gaining ground in Turkey and Pakistan, in Pakistan amidst the growing fissures and instability in the ruling military order.

Rodenbeck writes, “The regimes ruling Morocco and Egypt, both of which, a few years ago, seemed potential bellwethers for an Arab transition to democracy, have handily parried challenges....Similarly, Iraqis and Palestinians feel duped by the promise of democracy, which appears to have delivered nothing but schism, insecurity, and weakness. In both places, the voice of the people has given power not to the liberal secularists who sign on to Western notions of progress, but to religious conservatives who see themselves as a bulwark of opposition to dangerous Western ways. As a result, in both places, the same external forces that called for greater democracy—most aggressively, the Bush administration—now urge their beleaguered pet leaders to crack down on their more popular opponents....This regressive trend extends toSaudi Arabia.” The more secular and modern middle class forces called forth by the U.S. war and declared support for democracy were small, and in many ways marginalized by the religious forces who were able to tap into deep wellsprings of discontent (including anger at the U.S. and Israel for their aggression).

The June 2005 election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as Iran's new president (replacing the more reformist, pro-Western Khatami) was something of a turning point in the sharpening conflict between the U.S. and Iran over Iran's nuclear program and regional posture. Iran had been negotiating with the U.S.'s European allies—Britain, France and Germany—for several years. But the negotiations went nowhere because the Europeans were unwilling to allow Iran to enrich uranium for energy, and were unable to provide the security guarantees (against regime change) that Iran's rulers wanted. And the U.S. never directly took part (although it was actively involved behind the scenes) nor took regime change off table.

Ahmadinejad's election seemed to reflect the Iranian leadership's view that they had little to gain by continued negotiations and that their survival depends instead on resisting U.S. demands, pursuing enrichment (two months after Ahmadinejad's election, Iran announced it was resuming efforts to enrich uranium), and strengthening their hand in the region as well as their ties with other world powers. And U.S. difficulties in Iraq presented Iran with the opportunity and necessity for them to do so. So this further deepened the trajectory of confrontation.

These developments were also reinforced by global trends—including rising oil prices and the consequent strengthening of petro-states like Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela, the more assertive role being played by Russia and China, as well as a shift in U.S. strategy toward focusing on getting control first in Iraq (and secondarily Afghanistan), and then increasingly focusing on Iran, (including by strengthening the U.S.’ alliances with Sunni tyrannies and even Sunni Islamic fundamentalist forces), and putting broad regional reform and democratization basically on the back burner. (During Bush and Rice’s spring 2008 visits to the region, they both talked about democratization, but the administration doesn’t seem to be really doing much about it and little seems to be coming of it.)

Overall, these developments reinforced the U.S. imperialists necessity to drain the “swamp” of anti-U.S. states, mass anger, and Islamic fundamentalism and reorder the region. The 2006 National Security Strategy (NSS) repeats this broad goal of regional transformation, and integration in a U.S.-dominated world economy and global order:

“The Broader Middle East continues to command the world’s attention. For too long, too many nations of the Middle East have suffered from a freedom deficit. Repression has fostered corruption, imbalanced or stagnant economies, political resentments, regional conflicts, and religious extremism. These maladies were all cloaked by an illusion of stability. Yet the peoples of the Middle East share the same desires as people in the rest of the world: liberty, opportunity, justice, order, and peace. These desires are now being expressed in movements for reform. The United States is committed to supporting the efforts of reformers to realize a better life for themselves and their region.

“We seek a Middle East of independent states, at peace with each other, and fully participating in an open global market of goods, services, and ideas. We are seeking to build a framework that will allow Israel and the Palestinian territories to live side by side in peace and security as two democratic states. In the wider region, we will continue to support efforts for reform and freedom in traditional allies such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Tyrannical regimes such as Iran and Syria that oppress at home and sponsor terrorism abroad know that we will continue to stand with their people against their misrule. And in Iraq, we will continue to support the Iraqi people and their historic march from tyranny to effective democracy. We will work with the freely elected, democratic government of Iraq—our new partner in the War on Terror—to consolidate and expand freedom, and to build security and lasting stability.”

However, the imperialists have not been able to proceed in a straight line and make progress (or even focus on) on all these issues. By necessity they’ve been forced to focus on consolidating their grip on Iraq and Afghanistan, while confronting Iran, which they increasingly see as the main problem they face in the region. The fact is, the geopolitical “playing field” in the Middle East has been tilting in ways unfavorable to U.S. goals, and increasingly threatening to Israel, while strengthening Iran’s hand—whether or not it’s directly involved in any particular development. So overall, the difficulties the U.S. encountered in Iraq (and Afghanistan), and the ways in which the U.S.’s actions created new contradictions, have intensified their need to deal with Iran—even while their options for doing so are not clear or easy, but fraught with risk, even peril.

B. 2006-2007: Surging in Iraq, Escalating Toward Iran

By 2006, Iran's centrality in U.S. thinking and the breadth of its concerns were reflected in a new National Security Strategy (NSS) which mentioned Iran 16 times:

“We may face no greater challenge from a single country than from Iran. For almost 20 years, the Iranian regime hid many of its key nuclear efforts from the international community. Yet the regime continues to claim that it does not seek to develop nuclear weapons. The Iranian regime’s true intentions are clearly revealed by the regime’s refusal to negotiate in good faith; its refusal to come into compliance with its international obligations by providing the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) access to nuclear sites and resolving troubling questions; and the aggressive statements of its President calling for Israel to ‘be wiped off the face of the earth.’ The United States has joined with our EU partners and Russia to pressure Iran to meet its international obligations and provide objective guarantees that its nuclear program is only for peaceful purposes. This diplomatic effort must succeed if confrontation is to be avoided.”

“As important as are these nuclear issues, the United States has broader concerns regarding Iran. The Iranian regime sponsors terrorism; threatens Israel; seeks to thwart Middle East peace; disrupts democracy in Iraq; and denies the aspirations of its people for freedom. The nuclear issue and our other concerns can ultimately be resolved only if the Iranian regime makes the strategic decision to change these policies, open up its political system, and afford freedom to its people. This is the ultimate goal of U.S. policy. In the interim, we will continue to take all necessary measures to protect our national and economic security against the adverse effects of their bad conduct. The problems lie with the illicit behavior and dangerous ambition of the Iranian regime, not the legitimate aspirations and interests of the Iranian people. Our strategy is to block the threats posed by the regime while expanding our engagement and outreach to the people the regime is oppressing.”

William Polk writes: “Iran [is a] major perceived adversary capable of doing what [the 2005] National Defense Strategy of the U.S. termed “adopting threatening capabilities, methods, and ambitions.... to limit our global freedom to act, 2) dominate key regions, or 3) attempt to make prohibitive the costs of meeting various U.S. international commitments.”

During this period, U.S. strategy in the region shifted its focus to containing and rolling back Iran’s influence, which Nasr & Takeyh (*Foreign Affairs*) called “the heart” and “primary objective” of the Bush administration’s Middle East policy. (See Three Options, below).

By the end of 2006, a sharp debate had broken out at the top levels of the U.S. political establishment over strategy in Iraq and the region. In December, the bi-partisan Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group called the situation in Iraq “grave and deteriorating” and warned of a potential “slide towards chaos.” Baker-Hamilton called for scaling back the U.S. military mission in Iraq, and engaging in aggressive diplomacy to stabilize Iraq—with Iran and Syria in particular. While committed to maintaining U.S. hegemony in the Middle East, Baker-Hamilton seemed to represent a different direction (more pragmatic and status quo oriented) than continuing to

aggressively pursue Bush-Cheney's two-generation war for regional transformation, including perhaps aiming to head off the growing danger of war with Iran.

In January 2007, Bush rejected the core of the Baker approach and went in the opposite direction—a “surge” of over 30,000 more troops in Iraq and a multi-pronged offensive against Iran. (This is discussed more fully in the Iran-Iraq section below.)

Overall, Bush's escalation flowed from the realization that the U.S. had, in significant ways, staked its imperial future on victory in its “war on terror,” and to back down now could gravely weaken its regional and global positions, derail the war effort, and embolden U.S. adversaries. Iran had become the main obstacle to victory in this war for greater empire.

The drumbeat against Iran increased throughout the year, culminating with a rash of threats and reports of military preparations by the fall. The release of a new National Intelligence Estimate in early December 2007 seemed to temporarily deflate this growing momentum toward war.

However, by early 2008, the U.S. was again back on the offensive against Iran and warning signs of possible war have been increasing. In fact, during these recent months, the tensions between the U.S. and Iran and the all-around danger signals of possibly impending war have ratcheted up well beyond any previous situation (including the Fall of 2007) and are continuing to escalate sharply as of this writing (early June 2008).

Iran has benefited in many ways from the difficulties the U.S. has encountered in Iraq (and Afghanistan) and from some of the new problems and instabilities its occupation has generated. And Iran has also helped exacerbate this—by its very existence as well as the actions it has taken to both further its own agenda/ambitions, strengthen its hand, and to counter U.S. moves to pressure, encircle and threaten it.

Iran has its own comprador freedom and necessity, and this is fueling a response by U.S. imperialism, which in turn prompts new efforts by the IRI to maintain itself in power. By doing so, Iran challenges unfettered U.S. regional hegemony: by undermining Israel, fueling Islamist movements and forces, threatening the whole regional military balance (in the argumentation of the Western imperialists and Israel) through its pursuit of nuclear enrichment (which theoretically could result in their ability to at some point in the future develop nuclear weapons), and possibly thwarting a U.S. victory in Iraq and the WOT more broadly. And Iran poses an obstacle to the larger Bush agenda for unchallengeable world empire. So a dynamic gets into play in which things that one side does to defend itself and prevent war (Iran) can end up confronting the U.S. with new problems and hence further fueling the dynamic toward war.*

Within this overall picture of tectonic plates moving, but not locked into place, there's a specific and intensifying dynamic in which the U.S. and Iran confront each other across the region, and Iran is increasingly seen as—and is objectively—the main obstacle the U.S. faces in realizing its

* There's an analogy to Gorbachev and the Soviet Union here; his moves to extricate himself from the accelerating conflict with the U.S. in order to save the Soviet empire, ironically, ended up hastening the collapse of the empire. Here, the irony may be that moves by Iran to defend itself could have the effect of making it even more of an impediment to U.S. goals, thus heightening tensions and the possibility of war.

plans. This has many dimensions—from Iran’s nuclear program, its sharp clash with Israel, its links with Hamas and Hezbollah as well as Shi’ite forces in Pakistan and Afghanistan, its position astride the Persian Gulf oil routes, and its leverage in Iraq. As Bush put it in his most recent State of the Union, wherever they turned, they confronted Iran as an obstacle to U.S. goals.

This dynamic is heightened because the U.S. IS AT WAR, and war imposes its own dynamic and necessities (which does impact timelines).

This game is still afoot, the outcome not determined, and the U.S. imperialists still have elements of freedom, even as they confront these profound necessities.

So the trajectory toward confrontation has intensified, and seems increasingly headed toward war, although this is not automatic or absolutely certain.

B. CORE QUESTIONS, CORE ELEMENTS OF THE TRAJECTORY

We identified 6 “core questions”—the answers to which we felt were key to understanding more deeply the nature of the problem Iran posed for the U.S. in different dimensions and how this intersected with other contradictions (regionally and globally).

1. What does the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), released in December 2007, focus up about the objective contradictions the U.S. is facing in confronting Iran and the debate within the ruling class about how to deal with them? How does the nuclear issue fit into the U.S.’s perceived necessity to bring about regime change, and issues of tactics and timing? How does Gates fit into this picture? Are these most recent developments prompting any shift at all in the trajectory, tactical or even strategic in nature?
2. What military options, constraints, and contradictions confront the U.S. in trying to achieve its objectives vis-a-vis Iran? What is the debate and thinking about this in the ruling class? What do recent war-games re Iran tell us? What are the prospects of military action (in combination with other covert and political efforts) leading to regime change?
3. How are other contradictions (e.g., Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Russia, etc.) influencing the imperialists’ war calculus?
4. How does Israel’s critical and unique role for the U.S. in the region impact the trajectory to war? How is Israel a defining factor and feature in the war calculus and momentum?
5. How are the different factions of the ruling elite within Iran looking at and responding to the danger of war with the U.S.? How is it being perceived and responded to in Iran, and how does that enter into the U.S.’s calculus? (E.g., are there forces in Iran that would welcome a conflict? Are there forces ready to meet U.S. terms?) What are the prospects for regime change (with or without military action)?

6. Given U.S. imperialism's needs and ambitions (and those of the IRI), could there be a strategic accommodation between U.S. and the Islamic Republic (i.e., without regime change)?

In addition to delving into important background issues, the remainder of the paper will focus on these core questions.

The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI)

The regime has demonstrated significant resilience. One commentator listed the challenges it has endured to date—the long war with Iraq where all the major powers sided primarily with Iraq, natural catastrophes, persistent actions by the U.S. to isolate and vilify the regime etc.—and concluded that it has been able to cope with “everything short of the plague.”

Iran remains a dependent and oppressed nation within the framework of, and subordinate to, world imperialism. But within that, due to a combination of factors, it has acquired greater maneuvering room and geopolitical reach. Chief among these factors are its extensive oil and natural gas reserves in combination with its coherent, ideologically driven, deeply rooted, and far reaching (within Iran and elements beyond, especially regionally) state institutions and structure.

The regime exhibits a high degree of reactionary, ideologically driven coherence. There is a tremendous amount of centralization of power in the government, including in the “Supreme Leader” and other key institutions.¹ And on the basis of harsh repression and in connection with state-Islamic welfarism and the regime’s ability to forge a base of support among sections of society, the regime has achieved relative stability up until now. But the structure and nature of this regime contains within it the seeds of severe contradictions. There is what we have called an extreme “brittleness” that portends potential splintering, including in the top ruling circles.

The social formation of Iran today is overall an amalgam of semi-feudal and capitalist relations of production within which capitalist relations are dominant but confined within and fettered by theocratic political and social structures. The majority of economic activity, especially of any significant scale, is state run and controlled. The heart of the economy and its most dynamic factor is petroleum. But the Iranian economy is marked by a bloated, inefficient state sector and actual over-reliance on oil—something which most analysts, including the neocons, consistently point out.

In short, the IRI is a “theo-hegemonic” state system, sitting atop a complex and dependent economic structure in which the state-capitalist oil sector occupies a central position.

This high degree of theocratically cohered centralization also encompasses a system of sub-institutions that are integrated and that function in a “feudal sort of way”—with their own networks of control, authority and commerce. This includes informal social networks but also a byzantine complex of “states within the state” (which have some international reach). These include the religious foundations (*bonyads*) that have come to dominate trade and the manufacturing sectors and that have morphed into huge holding companies. For example, one of these bonyads, the Ayatollah Khomeini Foundation, has more than 1.7 million employees.

Another institution that functions in a similar way is the Revolutionary Guard (IRGC, or *pasdaron*) which was formed early after the revolution as an ideological, hardcore military arm to defend the revolution internally (the traditional armed forces were to protect the IRI from external threat) The IRGC is not only a key pillar of the armed power of the state. It has also steadily become more integrated into economic activities, developing its own commercial firms with privileged contracts in key strategic industries, including those related to defense. This has enhanced its patronage power and allowed it to cultivate its own constituencies. Which in turn has led to widespread corruption. Current and former IRGC members are stepping more and more into central political roles in the regime (described as a “silent coup” by some). The IRGC totals 125,000 men, but is estimated to effectively control over one million employees.

An important feature of this theo-hegemonic state system, and very much connected with what has been described above, are significant elements of an “Islamic welfare state.” This fits in with the IRI’s ideological agenda and also serves to undergird the regime’s legitimacy, solidifying and extending its base of support. But this is also a fetter on capitalist modernization. State-Islamic welfarism is facilitated by oil revenue but is also a drain on Iran’s oil revenue. The regime has historically subsidized essentials such as food and gasoline, but in the last year or so it has increasingly cut back (and this has had dire consequences for sections of the masses). This welfare system is an additional source of corruption within the regime. This, in conjunction with the oppressiveness of this society overall as well as the increasing downward trajectory of this Islamic welfare state’s ability to deliver on the basic needs of the masses, contributes to the growing antagonism between the masses and the regime as well as intra-ruling class conflict.

The corruption associated with the “states within the state” (like the bonyards) and the functioning of the Islamic welfare state impart another distinct feature to the IRI: a kind of “theocratic-crony capitalism.”

While the regime does have relative independence and control over an extensive oil sector and associated spheres of operation, this is again all grounded in and subordinated to the capitalist world economy. A big contradiction for the IRI is the need to modernize and attract investment, including in relation to its dynamic energy sector (This energy sector is also relatively and seriously inefficient viewed on the world scale). All sections of the Iranian ruling class recognize the need to modernize to a greater or lesser degree. But there are different approaches to privatization and modernization, and this intersects sharply with issues of ideology and the economics and politics intertwined with all of that (as sketched out above).

There is a section of the Iranian ruling class that is fighting strongly for a neoliberal program of privatization of state-run industries. Others are strongly opposed to this. And this contradiction also intersects with questions of social base and, to some degree, with different imperialist powers with which different sectors have traditionally been allied. There has been a move towards privatization, but for reasons beyond the scope of this discussion, this has occurred on a relatively minor scale (over the last ten years, about 200 state-run enterprises have been privatized). So these are expressions both of internal contradictions and divergent programs at the top.

Politically, most mainstream analysts break up the ruling circles into three broad camps. There are the “hard-liners” represented by Ahmadinejad and Ayatollah Yazdi. And many analysts put the Supreme Leader, Khamenei, in this camp. Its base is still more among the traditional and conservative classes, e.g., the very conservative Bazaar who are at the core of the bonyads, and a considerable if not the predominant section of the IRGC and *basij*².

Then there is what is sometimes called the moderates or “pragmatic conservatives” led and typified by Rafsanjani, who is often described as straddling between this “hardcore” and the third camp—the “reformers,” such as Khatami (president from 1997-2005). The “reformers” share with Rafsanjani, among other things, an aggressive program for neo-liberal transformation and have stood for a liberalization of society and curtailment of some of the power of the clerics. The reformers’ base is among various modern, urbanized strata including apparently some that are the product of these “peculiar institutions” of the IRI. Some analysts only speak of two camps, the conservatives and reformers, but there is something to this characterization of Rafsanjani as a “conservative pragmatist” straddling these two sections of the ruling class.

The IRI’s resilience is not simply a function of its centralized character but also its absorptive capacity. Different factions of the ruling circles have found a place within the system to operate; there is a certain “inclusiveness”. It is the “theo-hegemonic” character of the regime that is fundamentally setting the terms of the cohesiveness of the ruling elite. And it is this theo-hegemonic character that has enabled the regime, despite the contradictions and pulls and various pressures (economic, political, and military) flowing from Iran’s position in the region and the world as a whole, and intersecting with the need to hold on to power (both rule over the masses and preserving a relative functioning ruling group), that has contributed thus far to the regime’s ability to survive many challenges. And yet this very coherence is also the source of extreme “brittleness,” especially with the sharpening of international as well as internal contradictions.

One way to understand the sharpness of this contradiction on the political level is that the “reform” faction argues that the regime needs to open up on a whole new level to the world, to attract capital and modernize large segments of the economy, and to limit the rule of the clerics and allow more air to breath in Iranian society—or to risk losing it all. The “hardliners” argue the opposite—that it is necessary to tighten up, reassert even more strongly “core Islamic values”—or else there is the risk of the whole regime unraveling. The point is...both factions are actually speaking to dynamics of the actual reality.

So, on the one hand, the regime has this absorptive and integrative capacity. On the other hand, its theocratic nature, and the power of its theocratic core, throws up political and economic barriers to modernization, deeper engagement with the world economy, and adapting institutions to profound demographic and social changes taking place in Iranian society.³ But, again, it is precisely its theocratic nature that coheres the regime. This is what makes for the “brittleness” of the IRI. And the neocons grasp this on some level. (This is discussed further in Appendix A).

Regime Change, the Internal Situation in Iran, and the Neocon Calculus

See Appendix A.

Israel

How does Israel's critical and unique role for the U.S. in the region impact the trajectory to war?
How is Israel a defining factor and feature in the war calculus and momentum?

Bob Avakian makes the point that Israel plays a special role in the region for the U.S. because its coherence as a society enables it to play the cop role, whereas the various pro-U.S. Arab regimes are sitting on volcanoes without that kind of internal stability. Israel plays a strategically essential role for the U.S. in the region—particularly at a time when the U.S. is attempting to violently reshape the region. When you try to do that, as Avakian notes, you need your “ducks lined up, with no unclarity on that.” So anything that threatens Israel is a strategic threat to the U.S. imperialists of the first order.

Israel insists that Iran poses an existential threat to its existence. On the surface, this ignores Iran's 2003 offer to negotiate an overall settlement with the U.S., which included ending support for Hamas and Hezbollah. And Iran doesn't yet possess nuclear weapons. But on a deeper level, the Israelis feel that the IRI, by its very character, presents an unacceptable risk and existential threat—with military, ideological, and political dimensions.

For instance, what is Israel's stability based on? Ethnic cleansing and suppression of the Palestinians, preventing the emergence of any coherent and viable Palestinian state, military superiority in the region and in particular no states on Israel's borders that can in any way threaten it. These elements are deeply woven into the dynamics of the Israeli state as an outpost of the west, with Western standards of living and security, i.e., military and economic dominance in the region, while requiring ongoing immigration and support from the imperialist world.

Iran threatens all of these pillars. It supports Hamas in Palestine as well as Hezbollah in Lebanon. And if it acquired nuclear weapons, this would challenge Israeli military hegemony. Why have the Israelis not been able to do a deal with the Palestinians and force them to accept the kinds of agreements the U.S. has been attempting to impose on them? In large part because Hamas is at this point significantly supported by Iran.

This intersects with U.S. strategic concerns: if you want to transform the region, you need a certain degree of stability which means ending the Palestine question. Otherwise too many pro-U.S. regimes could be at risk in an unpredictable ways. The U.S. sees the need to crush the Palestinians and they know this will raise a lot of hell—therefore it is even more important to crush Iran. So part of the dynamic is that the Bush core knows that this will greatly antagonize the situation, but they look at this as something to be fought through (albeit not in a straight line necessarily).

The U.S. and Iran are directly colliding right now over the direction things will go in the Middle East-Central Asian region including over how the Palestinian issue will be “settled” or dealt with. This includes the future balance of power and direction of the government in Lebanon, what role Syria will play in the region (an ally of Iran or capitulate to the U.S.-Israel?), the stability of the pro-US gulf states including Saudi Arabia (all of which have large Shi'ite populations and long ties to Iran), the outcome in Afghanistan and to a lesser degree Pakistan, both of which have 20% Shi'a populations with links to Iran and a history of very sharp clashes

with the Sunni Islamic fundamentalist forces, and in particular Iran's ties with some of the key warlords comprising the Karzai regime. (And on all these fronts, Iran is driven by its own necessities and ambitions as well; to maintain its legitimacy as a "revolutionary" and Islamist power, to extend its regional influence—including to give it more levers and bargaining chips vis-a-vis the U.S.—and to strengthen its own military defense.)

This trajectory is very alarming to the Israelis and the U.S. (And this continues to be a big theme in the news coverage—how "radicals" are gaining ground). In his book *The Shia Revival*, Vali Nasr describes the striking impact of the 2006 Israeli war on Hezbollah: all of the Sunni regimes condemned Hezbollah, even as the masses cheered them; Iran by contrast stood with Hezbollah and won sympathy (including among Sunnis) across the region. Nasr argues that Iran has taken center stage in the region and become the 'custodian of the Palestinian struggle,' and the main force standing against the U.S. in the region. Hezbollah's performance underscored for many that the Islamic fundamentalist trend is superior to nationalism. And Hezbollah emerged from the war as a more powerful force within Lebanon (again a sharp reversal of the trends that seemed to be going in the U.S.' favor after the 2003 invasion of Iraq—with the withdrawal of Syrian forces and the pro-West "Cedar" revolution in Lebanon.) And we should not forget that according to Seymour Hersh, Cheney and other neocons saw the Lebanon war of 2006 as a dress rehearsal for attacking Iran as well as an effort to destroy Hezbollah's "strategic" weapons, weapons which could be used against Israel in the event of war with Iran. And during that war, the neocons argued for expanding it to Iran.

Also NOTE: The May 2008 fighting in Lebanon between Hezbollah and pro-government forces has been very significant, potentially with military implications. It began with an attempt by the pro-US government—perhaps as part of the wider covert operations authorized against Iran a couple of months ago by Bush—to remove Hezbollah personnel from their airport positions and close down a Hezbollah-run phone system. [See "Warning Signs," *Revolution* May 18, 2008] Both of these were aimed at Hezbollah's military strength—which Hezbollah correctly saw as a life and death challenge—and could have been intended to a) weaken Hezbollah in Lebanon and/or b) weaken Hezbollah in preparation for a strike against Iran. This came in the wake of a U.S. offensive against Iranian-linked Sadr forces in Basra and Baghdad, and on the heels of the September 2007 Israeli strike against a site in Syria. All are signs of heightened tensions and possible war preparations. Also, the fact that Hezbollah emerged strengthened from the 2008 fighting in Lebanon represented another significant tilt in the regional terrain toward Iran—adding further necessity to the U.S. need to take it down.

One Israeli military analyst summed up this broader picture:

"Beyond this, one may speculate that Hezbollah's taking control of Lebanon will bring about a new awareness on the part of various international elements of the 'Iranian threat.' To date, the concerns of the international community regarding Iran have focused on its intention to develop nuclear capabilities. Hezbollah's taking control of Lebanon would bring the danger inherent in Iran into sharper relief, not only regarding the nuclear question but also vis-à-vis the stability of other pro-Western regimes in the region, chief among them Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the Gulf states. Such a development might very well match the interests of the State of Israel."

("Hezbollah's Increased Strength: Risks and Opportunities for Israel," Zaki Shalom, INSS

Insight May 26, 2008)

We think the question of nuclear weapons is secondary to and a function of Iran's coherence; nukes don't trump coherence in terms of the perceived threat Iran poses to the U.S. and Israel. But there's a real dimension here as well. Iran with nuclear weapons (or even the potential to quickly make nuclear weapons) would dramatically change the regional balance of military power, threaten Israel, and impede Israeli-US freedom of military action. (And it's very significant that a major dimension of the current escalating tensions and threats between the U.S. and Iran revolves around Iran's "threat" to Israel.) Iran's pursuit of nuclear enrichment threatens to unleash a destabilizing regional arms race, and its defiance in the face of international demands is also a damaging example that emboldens anti-US, anti-Israel sentiments across the region. (And one U.S. motivation for overthrowing Hussein was that his defiance was contributing to the problems and instability which fueled Islamic fundamentalism across the region.) The U.S. considers a nuclear armed Iran so intolerable that its consistent position has been that Iran should not even be allowed to master enrichment technology (the most difficult aspect of building weapons). This is the red line the U.S. has vowed not to let Iran cross.

In April-June 2008, the issue of Iran's nuclear program and its "existential" threat to Israel has taken center stage, with Bush traveling to Israel and giving a very bellicose speech marking Israel's 60th anniversary and Olmert then traveling to the U.S. for consultations focusing on Iran. U.S.-Israeli coordination seems to be stepping up in "real-time" fashion, and this could portend a devastating attack on Iran (not simply an attack on Revolutionary Guard camps), and/or a coordinated regional war involving Gaza, Lebanon, and/or Syria (a scenario DEBKA, April 11, 2008, argues).

Former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer wrote in Lebanon's Daily Star (May 30, 2008, "As things look, Israel may well attack Iran soon"):

"A hitherto latent rivalry between Iran and Israel thus has been transformed into an open struggle for dominance in the Middle East. The result has been the emergence of some surprising, if not bizarre, alliances: Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas and the American-backed, Shiite-dominated Iraq are facing Israel, Saudi Arabia, and most of the other Sunni Arab states, all of which feel existentially threatened by Iran's ascendancy....

"Iran's nuclear program is the decisive factor in this equation, for it threatens irreversibly the region's strategic balance...

"But those who had expected that his visit would mainly be about the stalled negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians were bitterly disappointed. Bush's central topic, including his speech to Israel's Knesset, was Iran."

Iraq-Iran

U.S. antagonism toward Iran isn't reducible to the clash over Iraq, and war on Iran won't be determined simply through the unfolding of events in Iraq, but Iraq is a point of friction and a real flashpoint—a genuine concern for the imperialists. There's nowhere where the U.S. has

more directly invested its global political, military, and economic capital than Iraq. The core of the ruling class feels victory in Iraq is essential, that the U.S. can't lose there—for many different reasons. Recently (May 13, 2008), Gates argued that defeat in Iraq would be much more damaging than the current strains on the military:

“The risk of over-extending the Army is real. But I believe the risk is far greater—to that institution, as well as to our country—if we were to fail in Iraq. That is the war we are in. That is the war we must win.”

So U.S.-Iranian contention in Iraq is an accelerant of the trajectory toward war, a possible trigger for war, as well as a pretext for launching war (including for broader objectives)—all in one.

The situation in Iraq has both stayed the U.S. hand, but also intensified U.S. antagonism toward the IRI because of its rising influence there, and because of the difficulties the U.S. has faced, which it's increasingly blaming on Iran (in part because the terrain in Iraq has shifted and the Sunni insurgency has largely ended). And U.S. moves in Iraq are aimed at both stabilizing the situation in a way favorable to U.S. domination, curbing Iranian influence, as well as preparing for possible war with Iran (whether the aims of the war are limited to the conflict over Iraq or not).

The surge spoke to the political and military contradictions facing the U.S. - it was more than just adding troops, but also a shift in strategy and political objectives in the near term away from over-reliance on Shi'as and Kurds and a linear view of creating a stable central government, and toward making local alliances, and directly bringing the Sunnis into alliance with the U.S.

The surge strategy has been aimed at both stabilizing the situation in Iraq by isolating and defeating al Qaeda, and unreconstructed anti-US Shi'a forces, while hammering together a government not dominated by Iran. A key dimension of the surge has been targeting Iran both for what it's doing in Iraq and for broader reasons. This is linked to military preparations for a possible attack on Iran. Both of these goals are served by making peace with the Sunnis and trying to bring them into the government. Both too are served by neutralizing the Sadr forces. So the U.S. is pursuing a number of objectives via the surge—not reducible to either targeting Iran or simply stabilizing Iraq. In fact the U.S. sees the two as increasingly intertwined.

The U.S. is attempting to bully and bribe various Iraqi factions and cobble something together more in their interests while both preventing the kind of all-out civil war that could overwhelm U.S. forces and spread through the region, and preventing Iraq from being dominated by Iran. This includes making the various reactionary Iraqi factions with ties to Iran an offer they can't refuse, and/or by directly bullying and perhaps attacking Iran. The U.S. is basically trying to create a situation in which all the various factions are forced to go along with U.S. plans as the best/only way they're going to have a share of power and forge a structure in which the U.S. - not Iran - is the dominant power.

So one dimension of the surge in Iraq was a reconfiguration of military force in the Gulf toward Iran and an escalation of medium-term thinking/planning for war against Iran; the further build up of the U.S. naval presence and the creation of new points of entry and platforms for military

action (we have to get clearer on the specifics of this). This was also protective of the surge; there was a dialectic between the surge on one side and U.S. naval positioning in the Gulf and antagonism toward Iran on the other. Reaching out to Sunni forces in Iraq both lessened violence in and stabilized Sunni areas and Iraq generally, but was also aimed to undercut (and/or provide a counter-weight to) Iranian influence in Iraq, including at the governmental level. So with respect to Iran, the surge was also a synthesis of containment and confrontation.

As of summer 2008, the situation seems neither as good as Bush says nor as dire as the critics say. Both sides are right, and wrong. The U.S. has made progress, but Iraq remains a simmering cauldron, with deep tensions and stresses underneath the decline in violence. The imperialists have necessity but also freedom and all of it's in motion, not static. Petraeus's description of "Fragile and reversible" seems about right—containing the potential for a major debacle or a strategic victory for the imperialists.

If Iraq became a pro-Iranian Shi'ite state, it would undermine the entire WOT and the U.S.' anti-Islamic fundamentalist struggle globally. On the other hand, if the U.S. claim to see glimmers of victory—i.e., that the Iraqi people have rejected al Qaeda—has some truth to it, it would have strategic implications for the whole WOT. This is not impossible. They are, after all, two outmodeds. And a U.S. victory in Iraq (in the form of consolidating a stable, pro-US regime of some sort) would be a huge blow against Iran and al Qaeda and the Islamic fundamentalist trend generally. Note: before the invasion of Iraq, the neocons argued that a quiescent regime in Baghdad—i.e., Islamist, but not anti-US Islamic fundamentalist—could undermine the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and by implication the Islamic fundamentalist trends overall. The neocons continue to argue this: "The stakes for the Islamic Republic of Iran inside Iraq are greater than those of the United States. While Washington's international prestige is on the line, the Islamic Republic of Iran faces an existential crisis. U.S. success in Iraq and the establishment of a stable, democratic government in a majority Shiite country along Iran's borders would undercut the theological legitimacy which the Iranian regime claims. While Western diplomats and journalists emphasize the struggle within Iran between political hardliners and reformers, the real Achilles' heel for the Iranian regime is the theological challenge to its system of governance." ("Iranian Strategy in Iraq," Michael Rubin, AEI, July 16, 2007)

The U.S. increasingly argues that Iran is now the main cause of instability in and attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq, and that Iraq can't be stabilized until Iranian support of anti-US "special groups" ends. How much of this is truth? And how much political truth?

The website SWOOP argues: "Iraq remains the primary point of tension between the U.S. and Iran.....the U.S. is increasingly holding Iran responsible for destabilizing actions in Iraq....A consequence of this is that developments within Iraq form an additional and unpredictable variable for the U.S.-Iran relationship. This is particularly of concern to U.S. commanders within the context of recent intra-Shi'a competition between the U.S.-favored Dawa and Badr parties and Muqtada al-Sadr's Mehdi Army. Sadr, by raising the specter of "an open war until liberation" against the government, threatens a crucial pillar in the U.S. security strategy that has depended on an uneasy cease-fire with his forces. Privately, we understand that, if current measures to contain Sadr's militia run into difficulty, the question will arise in military planning

circles as to whether the U.S. should directly attack logistics lines and training camps in Iran itself.” (Swoop—“Iran: The Sadr Dimension,” April 26th 2008 and “Iran: Entering a Dangerous Period,” May 3rd 2008)

We need to more deeply understand Iran’s strategy in Iraq—short, medium and long term. There is certainly an element of Iran—seeing that both its neighbors were invaded by the U.S.—having taken steps to both realize its regional ambitions and strengthen its position—including defending itself by giving it options and leverage vis-a-vis the U.S. After the invasion, Iranians flooded into Iraq, and since then Iran has built up considerable economic and political influence. It has close links with all the Shi'a forces as well as the Kurds and has reportedly provided arms and training to various Shi'a forces. There is much dispute about a) the extent of this, and b) whether this is aimed at U.S. forces.

Ray Takeyh argues that Iran is not trying to sustain a low-level war against the U.S. (controlled chaos as the U.S. claims) in Iraq in order to bleed the U.S. Rather Iran wants the U.S. out, which means stabilizing the government of Iraq (and Iran has consistently backed the actions of the Iraqi government and has close ties with it) and not giving the U.S. an excuse to stay. But meanwhile it is arming the various Shi'a factions to ensure that they can prevail in any civil war with the Sunnis. Others argue that restoring a Sunni regime in Iraq would constitute a “red line” for Iran. The degree that Iranian supplied weapons are used against U.S. forces reflects the breadth of Iranian contacts and that these various factions are not under tight Iranian control. The *New York Times* reports that Iran stopped sending its military personnel into Iraq in early 2007, after several Iranian officials were arrested by the U.S.

The big problem the U.S. has with Iran may not be direct Iranian attacks (or involvement in organizing or arming those who are attacking) but that Iran is effectively a rear area for the Shi'a forces (including those with a more anti-US bent such as the Sadr movement). This could make Iran the power broker behind the scenes that ends up negotiating the terms and arrangements between the players in Iraq—i.e., the ultimate arbiter of key decisions within Iraq. (Iran brokered the recent cease-fire over the fighting in Basra.) If Iran has that kind of political-military leverage, the U.S. will not get the kind of state in Iraq that it is seeking and this has huge implications for the whole U.S. strategy in the region and the WOT. This raises the question—can the U.S. withdraw from Iraq with the Islamic Republic in tact and in power?

Recent U.S. moves can be seen—in part—as possibly preparatory to an attack on Iran (without necessarily reducing them only to that). Iraq is the U.S.’s vulnerable rear area in the region, even if the attack comes via bombers from Nebraska (see Appendix B). So suppressing the Sadr and other militias is key to preventing Iranian “blowback” in Iraq. And securing Basra is also key in that it is very near U.S. supply lines from Kuwait and is part of a wide, flat area bordering Iran (much of the Iran-Iraq border is mountainous) that would be the quickest, most direct route for U.S. forces to enter Iran and vice versa.

Trying to solidify the Iraqi government could also be part of these war preparations in that if the Malaki government collapsed due to a U.S. attack on Iran, that would create a huge mess for the U.S. to deal with, while having a more stable government in place with a functioning military could assist the U.S. in suppressing any pro-Iranian retaliation for a U.S. attack. (As recently as

January 2008, the Malaki government was widely seen to be under attack from all quarters.) But whatever the military outcome of the Basra offensive was, politically it did seem to increase Sunni and Kurdish support for Malaki. Both see Sadr as a problem because in part he opposes the kind of federalism some Shi'as and the Kurds want (not sure about the Sunnis on this point).

We should note that Iran has vigorously protested the crackdown on the Sadr forces in Basra and Baghdad, as well as the new long-term agreement the U.S. and the Iraqi governments are negotiating which reportedly would give the U.S. 50 military bases, control of Iraqi airspace, and legal immunity for all American soldiers and contractors indefinitely. And it would be binding, regardless of who wins the presidential election. (This is also relevant to “locking in” the trajectory, see below; Patrick Cockburn, “Revealed: Secret plan to keep Iraq under U.S. control,” Independent, 6/5/08)

The situation in Iraq may also impact the timing of war since the different contradictions propelling things toward confrontation, possibly war, do unfold at different paces. To what degree could developments in Iraq force the U.S. hand toward Iran (even as the overall global and regional mix of contradictions was determinant)? I.e., could the U.S. rulers reach a point where they felt that they could not win and Iraq was slipping away, that they were facing strategic defeat, and that this was due to what Iran was doing or even its very presence on Iraq's border, and that the only way to salvage the situation was to strike Iran?

The Nuclear Issue

Our sense is that Iran's nuclear program is a major concern of the imperialists, but it isn't their only or necessarily main concern. This is, in part, because presently Iran does not have any nuclear weapons and may be years away from acquiring them (if they are indeed pursuing nuclear weapons), while there are more immediate and looming ways (Iraq, Gaza, and Lebanon in particular) in which the IRI is creating big problems for the U.S. So the nuclear issue—while of real strategic concern—is also part of a larger package of concerns and objectives.

There are a number of dimensions to the U.S. opposition to Iran even having an enrichment program. As the 2006 NSS spells out, stopping the spread of nuclear weapons, particularly to rogue states or those with links to “terrorists” is a key strategic objective:

“Countering proliferation of WMD requires a comprehensive strategy involving strengthened nonproliferation efforts to deny these weapons of terror and related expertise to those seeking them; proactive counterproliferation efforts to defend against and defeat WMD and missile threats before they are unleashed; and improved protection to mitigate the consequences of WMD use. We aim to convince our adversaries that they cannot achieve their goals with WMD, and thus deter and dissuade them from attempting to use or even acquire these weapons in the first place.

The proliferation of nuclear weapons poses the greatest threat to our national security. Nuclear weapons are unique in their capacity to inflict instant loss of life on a massive scale. For this reason, nuclear weapons hold special appeal to rogue states and terrorists.

Significantly, the NSS also argues that the key is preventing these states from even having the

ability to enrich uranium (whatever its “rights” may be under the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT)). This is the position the U.S. has consistently taken vis-a-vis Iran, particularly in the European-led negotiations since Sept. 11:

“The best way to block aspiring nuclear states or nuclear terrorists is to deny them access to the essential ingredient of fissile material. It is much harder to deny states or terrorists other key components, for nuclear weapons represent a 60-year old technology and the knowledge is widespread.”

US doctrine also argues that the overwhelming danger of WMD legally justifies—in international law—preemptive war. (In the 2006 NSS, the U.S. defended their logic on this point re Iraq—despite the fact that it turned out there were no WMDs—it was still right to make sure!)

Iran’s possession of a nuclear weapon would not only significantly change the regional balance of military and political power—especially in regards to Israel, it would greatly impede U.S.-Israeli military freedom of action. It could add to the stability and coherence of the IRI. But analysts argue it would also undermine U.S. counter-proliferation efforts in the region in particular, where it could trigger a destabilizing arms race. (On February 5, 2008, National Intelligence Director McConnell testified regarding Iran, “We are most concerned about the threat and destabilizing effect of nuclear proliferation.”)

While the U.S. insists Iran has had a weapons program (claiming one component of which was stopped in 2003, see NIE section below), Ritter and others argue that there is no proof that Iran has ever had a nuclear weapons program; the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has repeatedly said that it has no conclusive proof of this either, although it continues to have questions about the whole history and scope of Iran’s nuclear program, which was kept secret for over a decade. (On May 26, 2008, the IAEA issued a statement saying Iran’s alleged research into designing nuclear warheads remained a matter of serious concern which needs “substantive explanations.”)

There are different assessments of Iran’s intentions. The IRI has been committed to building nuclear power plants and being energy self-sufficient and reliant (which they do have necessity to do), and that their drive to do so has been intensified by their perception (and the fact) that years of U.S.-led imperialist sanctions have been aimed at preventing them from being self-sufficient. Iranian energy self-sufficiency would change the economic and political equation and would be a major development. For this reason, Iran has been insistent on its right to acquire nuclear power for peaceful purposes under the NPT, and it has rejected Russian efforts to “guarantee” a foreign supply of enriched material. This could also explain Iran’s efforts to secretly build a domestic enrichment program. There may also be issues of national pride and political standing in the region involved. Recently, “Hashemi Rafsanjani, [Supreme Leader] Khamenei’s rival and a politician known for his pragmatism, has similarly claimed, ‘It is our natural right; if we retreat on this path, we will allow the enemy to interfere with every issue of our country.’” (“Shaping a Nuclear Iran—The West’s Diplomatic Goal Needs to Move From ‘Suspension’ to ‘Transparency.’” Ray Takeyh, Washington Post, May 18, 2008).

Iranian leaders, beginning with Khomeini himself, have issued a number of fatwas banning nuclear weapons as un-Islamic. In 2003, Iran did offer to basically give the U.S. the right to make sure it's program was peaceful. And the U.S.'s rejection of that offer—and the failure of their temporary suspension of enrichment to impact positively on negotiations with the Europeans between 2003 and 2005 also convinced the Iranians that concessions were pointless, the U.S. was determined to target them no matter what, and concessions only put them in a weaker position.

(Others argue that Iran may be seeking nuclear weapons as the only way it can protect itself. Perhaps even their perceived ability to quickly develop nukes could act as a deterrent.)

So for the U.S. imperialists, as Ritter argues, the real goal has been regime change, not disarmament; and the disarmament issue and negotiations have been used to further an agenda of regime change by building a “dossier” on Iran’s “non-compliance” with UN resolutions and ostensible violations of international law. This is also underscored by the fact that the U.S. has refused to offer security guarantees or to take possible military action off the table—which could induce Iran to give up its enrichment program. Again, the overriding goal has been regime change, not disarmament. (And to the degree Iran allowed widened inspections, it could conceivably be used by the U.S. as a way of gathering intelligence on Iran's conventional military and industrial capabilities, as was done in Iraq.)

The Global Dimension—Rivals, Shifting Alignments, Other Hotspots

The IRI's relative coherence and staying power—and the problems it poses for the U.S. imperialists—are linked with its influence (and potential influence—or the impact its actions could have when linked with other powers) regionally and globally. No other Middle East regime sits in quite the same position—a large state with enormous energy reserves and a coherent ideological/political model, located at a crucial geopolitical nexus.

Iran's influence is not only a product of its own strengths (although its geographic location and oil and gas resources are key elements of this picture), but these attributes exist in relationship to (and are magnified by) emerging players in a world of shifting tectonic plates. Russia, China, India and Pakistan are all in this mix. Russia is regrouping and trying to exert power—thanks in part to its vast energy reserves. If it can basically dictate energy policy to some of Western Europe and be hooked up with Iran, this constitutes a very portentous development—possibly more important than the rise of the Euro. This is taking place in the context of a fierce rivalry with the U.S. over the shape of Central Asia including around energy development and pipelines. (Iran is in this mix—with ties to the Central Asian countries, and because it is a “natural” transit route for oil and gas from Central Asia to the world market. During the 1990's the U.S. and Iran clashed sharply overall all this.) This is an example of the “Grand Chessboard”—with Iran as a pivot state.

The U.S. strategy has been to build up India. The U.S. also has a love-hate relationship with China. China is unique in that it's the epicenter of the globalization process raising the overall profitability of capital: the U.S. can't function without the China fix—it's on both ends of import/export—and China can't function without the U.S. market. Japan doesn't have the

international reach or military capability of China.

In this mix, the alignment represented by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is significant and a problem for the U.S.—and potentially a big problem. The SCO is a mutual-security organization founded in 2001 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (an outgrowth of an earlier “Shanghai Five” grouping created in 1996 with the signing of the Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions in Shanghai by Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan. Pakistan, Iran, India and Mongolia have observer status in the SCO, with Pakistan and Iran lobbying for full membership. The SCO played a role in reducing the U.S. military base presence in Central Asia after an initial buildup following Sept. 11 and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. Significantly, two of the four criticisms of China in the 2006 NSS revolve around its role vis-à-vis Iran.)

In October 2007, the Caspian Sea countries (Iran, Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan) announced during a summit held in Tehran that they would not under any circumstances allow their territories to be used as platforms for any military action against any member of their forum. However, beyond this, it seems unlikely that any—Russia and China in particular—would take any direct military action if the U.S. attacked Iran (although this is not something we’ve studied).

Iran is trying to extend its reach and ties—regionally and globally—in this mix, to strengthen its grip on power, extend its influence, and forge political-military protection against the U.S. A speech by Khamenei we read paints a picture of Iran seeing itself as a global player, with relations with many countries, not isolated as the U.S. claims—and a real pole and model in the world. (Republic of Iran Network, June 4, 2006, reported in Juan Cole’s *Informed Consent*.)

This has economic implications for Iran as well, which impact on the stability of the IRI. Iran is now able to draw on capital and credits from Russia, China and others—not simply the West—so Iran’s choice is no longer simply between capitulating to the U.S. or stagnating; the playing field is more complex.

Iran is pursuing a “Look East” strategy, trying to build ties in South and Central Asia as well as with China, including through massive energy deals with China, India, and Pakistan, including the export of natural gas via a \$7.6 billion Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline. Both India and Pakistan are reportedly ignoring Bush administration desires and rapidly bolstering their connections with Iran. (“Iran is trying to position itself as the unavoidable bazaar-state in an oil-and-gas-fueled New Silk Road—the backbone of a new Asian Energy Security Grid.” “The Iranian Chessboard,” Pepe Escobar, May 2, 2008)

Another angle here is the growing instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan (something the team has not studied in depth), including whether this more stays the U.S. hand re Iran, or more forces its hand (or neither). This is becoming a major concern for the U.S. imperialists. As mentioned below, this is a big focus for Gates who has recently criticized the U.S.’s European allies—and the U.S. Air Force—for not doing more. Obama has made an issue of shifting troops and attention to Afghanistan. Ahmad Rashid has a new book out—*Descent into Chaos* (June 2008)—in which he argues that the regrouping and growth of Islamist forces in Pakistan and

Afghanistan are a greater threat to global stability than either Iraq or Iran.

Asia Times, May 27, 2008, reports that any attack on Iran could reverberate in the Muslim world, Pakistan and Afghanistan in particular: “The Islamic world could also react strongly against a U.S. attack against a third predominantly Muslim nation. Pakistan, which also shares a border with Iran, could face additional pressure from Islamic parties to end its cooperation with the U.S. to fight al-Qaeda and hunt for Osama bin Laden. Turkey, another key ally, could be pushed further off its secular base. American companies, diplomatic installations and other U.S. interests could face retaliation from governments or mobs in Muslim-majority states from Indonesia to Morocco.”

We need to get a deeper sense of all these rolling and interpenetrating contradictions: Iran’s uniqueness as a coherent state with relative stability, its regional influence and global ties, which is a pole of opposition and its Islamic fundamentalist ideology. Iran is capable of linking up with other regimes—rogue and legitimate. And it is right at the fulcrum of many key world contradictions and moving tectonic plates. In the main, Iran’s role in all this is in contradiction to the whole direction the U.S. is trying to take the region and world.

The Global Dimension—European Allies

The team did some study of this question, but it was not thorough and much remains to be understood. Here’s our thinking at this point.

Relative to the sharp differences that emerged between the U.S. and France and Germany in particular over Iraq in 2003, the U.S. seems to be in a stronger position vis-à-vis the main European powers in relation to Iran.

Russia and China remain on a different page, willing to go along with sanctions on a certain level (3 UN Security Council resolutions to date), but refusing so far to countenance military action or UN Security Council resolutions that could lead in that direction, or to significantly tighten sanctions (i.e., block oil sales as was the case with Iraq). (It is not clear that France or Germany have wanted such steps either.) We haven’t studied this closely, but it would seem their acceptance of the sanctions devised so far has been driven by a combination of their overall necessities/freedom vis-à-vis the U.S. and Europe, which of course are not identical for Russia and China (in particular the fact that they’re not in position to frontally challenge the U.S.). Russia’s stance towards a nuclear-armed Iran is probably evolving: on the one hand, it has its own concerns and difficulties with the Islamic fundamentalism; on the other hand, it could derive strategic benefits from a strengthened and emboldened Iran.

Turning back to Europe, Ritter argues that the U.S. was able to divide and marginalize Europe (and undercut French and German leadership) during the run-up to the Iraq invasion mainly by going around them by offering NATO integration to a number of European states. Weakened, the EU leadership decided to join with the U.S. on Iran in 2003. (Pp. 76-81)

Ritter’s argument is that Europe decided to cooperate with the U.S. so as to have a voice in the action, and be a buffer between the U.S. and Iran (p. 198). Therefore, the EU, after some

vacillation, ended up endorsing (or at least carrying out) the U.S. position (at least by 2005 or so, p. 176) that Iran shouldn't even be allowed to enrich uranium. This was one thing that led to the breakdown of talks. We should note here that the EU is Iran's largest trading partner and it thought it could use that leverage to its advantage to dissuade Iran from pursuing nuclear enrichment as well as strengthening the EU's position vis-à-vis the U.S. The EU's actions on this front were also probably related to its relations with China and Russia. (p. 91)

At the same time, Ritter argues that the need for European help concerning Iraq (at least getting UN approval for the occupation - it doesn't seem the Europeans have offered much aid, much less military support) was a big factor in the U.S. not directly going after Iran in 2003-2004 (p.97). The EU's position and freedom of maneuver has probably been undercut since then by Iran's refusal to halt enrichment.

It does appear that there is more unity between the U.S., France, Britain, and Germany over Iran today than there was over Iraq in 2003. First, the U.S. has been working on this diplomatic front; in 2003 the U.S. broke ranks with the existing sanctions/weapons inspection regime which had been worked out with the Europeans in order to invade Iraq. Second, Iran IS a bigger threat and danger to the current order in the Middle East, which all the Western imperialists feast off. Third, a nuclear armed Iran would drastically change the political-military equation there. Fourth, the region's geopolitical terrain is shifting in ways that are eroding Western dominance, again, which they all participate in.

One very significant development is France's shift after Sarkozy's May 2007 election. In particular, France has openly warned of and agreed with the need to go to war rather than allow Iran to become a nuclear power. In February 2006, a high-ranking European official for the first time openly said Iran's nuclear program was aimed at secretly developing nuclear weapons. A French official made this statement and the British agreed. In May 2007, the French declared the prospect of Iran having a military nuclear capacity is unacceptable. In August 2007, Sarkozy said the alternatives were "The Iranian bomb or the bombing of Iran." Shortly thereafter, Foreign Minister, Bernard Kouchner, said the world should prepare for war—"We have to prepare for the worst, and the worst is war." Since this was taking place during the previous peak of U.S. warmongering on Iran, it would seem it was coordinated with the U.S. and (for this as well as other reasons) that the Fall 2007 push for war was a real push—not a bluff to force negotiations.

There are still contradictions within the EU around Iran. "In October 2007, the Italian deputy prime minister and foreign minister announced that in its meeting in Luxembourg in October 2007, the EU Council of Foreign Ministers adopted a balanced approach towards Iran, relying on negotiations, sanctions and cooperation with the IAEA." (Al Ahram).

However, the May 26, 2008, IAEA report may signal an important shift in Europe's willingness to take a more aggressive posture toward Iran. (See below).

C. THE DOMESTIC FRONT

The domestic front is another component of the current trajectory, an element of what's pushing

the U.S. toward war, and what's staying its hand, particularly in the period from now through the end of 2008. This includes intra-ruling class differences and ways in which these might be worked through, muted, or dealt with through bullied fait accomplis. How might this trajectory toward war get "locked in" (bequeathed to the next administration)? What about broader public opinion and the elections? How does all this bear on compulsions and timelines?

Gates, National Intelligence Estimate, Fallon, and the Current Trajectory

Tensions are escalating between the U.S. and Iran in ALL of the areas mentioned above, and together they form a larger overarching trajectory of an accelerating U.S.-Iranian confrontation. All this is more acute now for the U.S. imperialists than it was in 2002—even noting that they targeted Iran back then.

The team's research and analysis on the questions of what Gates, the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) and the Fallon firing represent also points to this intensifying trajectory toward confrontation, possibly war.

The unfolding of events since Rumsfeld's resignation in Nov 2006—his replacement by Gates, the subsequent surge, the NIE, Fallon's resignation, and the current escalation of threats and tensions have to be seen as "of a piece," although there are also particularities to each of these elements. The overarching theme here is how the Bush team has modified the course (its tactics, timing, and diplomatic/political/military mix) in order to stay the course; how the necessity it confronts has deepened, and how it has attempted to seize freedom in the face of this.

Judging from the reporting at the time and subsequent events (the "surge" and Gates' positions overall), it seems clear that Rumsfeld was not replaced because he was "too hawkish." Instead, it seems he wasn't willing to embrace new thinking in terms of military strategy, so the U.S. could stay the course and win in Iraq. Frontline did a special on Iraq and one of the stunning parts was Rice embracing the "clear, hold, and build" reconfiguration of U.S. military strategy (which had been summed up and was being proposed by commanders on the ground in Iraq, Tal Afar in particular). Rumsfeld immediately called a press conference denouncing the concept, this shortly before his firing.

Rumsfeld has also been criticized for going into Iraq with too small a force and being too fixed on overall military transformation (the character of which is beyond the scope of this paper), perhaps in some ways skewing strategy and deployments in Iraq to that goal. About the time he was replaced, a number of memos were released he'd written musing about scaling back U.S. goals in Iraq—sort of the Baker group's take. Finally, Rumsfeld's firing could have been an effort to find a scapegoat for U.S. failures and difficulties in Iraq, as well as to put a different—and much more diplomatic and "reasonable" face on the whole WOT (Rumsfeld was literally gleeful at various press conference when talking about killing people, and dismissing the chaos and suffering in Iraq—"stuff happens.") So overall, it seems replacing Rumsfeld was part of changing the course to stay the course—a tactical, not strategic adjustment.

Likewise, Gates didn't represent a strategic shift away from the Bush doctrine, the WOT and victory in Iraq. We need to understand this better, but it's our understanding that while in some ways he represented a bridge to other forces in the ruling class, mainly he was someone who was

not a “realist” (a la Scowcroft and Bush I) but who could reshape U.S. efforts in Iraq and across the globe—by both reconfiguring U.S. strategy in Iraq (and toward Iran), by stepping up U.S. political and diplomatic efforts in order to achieve victory (e.g. with the Europeans vis-a-vis Iran), and by putting a different and better “public face” on the war for the world and U.S. public (note how different his demeanor is than Rumsfeld’s). All this was deemed crucial to pressing ahead, not turning back.

In the face of big problems the Bush team came up with a synthesis. The surge (discussed above) was the most immediate result, representing a political/military reconfiguring of U.S. efforts in Iraq and toward Iran at the same time. It was a package—changing the course to stay the course, seizing freedom from necessity. It was counter intuitive and counter to what was appearing in discussions in the press at the time. The political situation was unfavorable for Bush, popular discontent was high, and the Democrats had just won Congress. The situation on ground in Iraq was deteriorating politically and militarily, and U.S. hopes for a stable, inclusive regime in Iraq were looking dim.

The surge was a specific military strategy to meet the level of necessity the U.S. faced in order to stay the course, but also modified the course both politically and militarily, with the two elements working together/interconnected with each other. The surge both spoke to the internal military/political needs in Iraq, but was also an example of operational thinking; their M.O. isn’t just to throw more guns at a problem, but to come up with new military solutions that also have political elements, on all kinds of levels. So they made adjustments, didn’t just push ahead blindly.

This is an example of the application of force to solve political and military contradictions for imperialism; and the ways in which that force can be modulated due to needs and circumstances and freedom and necessity.

Overall, Gates represents a multi-front war on terrorism, able to combine diplomacy with the military; Gates is now pushing hard to build up forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He is very concerned about these fronts, and recently criticized the Air Force for being flat footed in Afghanistan. Gates argues the U.S. has to deal with all these fronts and contradictions simultaneously—not pull back or disengage.

Gates principal task is to manage the military needs of empire - not just military strategy in Iraq - he’s got a bigger hand of cards he’s playing and working. He has argued for a multilateral effort in Pakistan and Afghanistan—but with the U.S. taking the lead—and the U.S. is stepping up its presence in Pakistan. Gates has been pushing to raise the overall U.S. military presence in the region and ratchet up its operations. So people have misread Gates in seeing him as a hope *against* a widening war—although this does not necessarily mean that there are no differences between him and Bush and Cheney over tactics, timing, etc.

For example, a recent *Jerusalem Post* article reported that during Bush’s recent trip to Israel, Army personnel were told that Bush had decided on attacking Iran before his term in office was over, but the only thing which had so far prevented this were objections/doubts by Gates and Rice. There have been other reports like this over the last couple of years, but it is difficult to

know how much credence to give them or the nature of these reputed differences—or whether there are any real differences. One thing that IS clear, however, is that Gates and Rice are both on board with the U.S.’s aggressive campaign to win the WOT and aggressively move against Iran. Both have targeted Iran as a central problem for the imperialists, and both have stepped up the vehemence of their denunciations in recent weeks, although neither have directly called for military action in quite the same way Bush did in Israel.

The 2007 NIE

Following the surge, there was a sharp escalation of rhetoric and (reportedly) military planning for an attack on Iran. This seemed to be building toward a peak in the fall of 2007. Then the NIE in December took the wind (temporarily) out of what seemed to be a trajectory toward war in the very short term.

It is unclear exactly what prompted the release of the NIE (the government claimed it was new intelligence) and the precise nature of the struggle within the Bush regime over it. This NIE held that Iran had halted the weapons design component of its nuclear program in 2003, reversing the 2005 NIE which claimed Iran was pursuing nuclear weapons. It was widely reported in the press as implying that Iran was not pursuing nuclear weapons thus deflating the drumbeat against Iran.

We do know from various commentators that this report was apparently held up by Cheney’s office for nearly a year, reportedly because he distrusted the assessment and felt it would limit U.S. options. We also know that Cheney remarked that a decision was made to release the report because it would have been leaked anyway, and so better for the administration to come forward with it. The most ardent neocon advocates of confrontation with Iran claimed the new NIE was fundamentally flawed (proving again their suspicion of U.S. intelligence agencies) and represented a revolt by disgruntled intelligence professionals (perhaps to get back at Bush for the distortion of intelligence around Iraq).

Given that the NIE represented a consensus of the U.S.’s 16 different intelligence agencies, and would have involved top officials of the Bush regime, it seems very unlikely that it was simply a ‘revolt of the professionals.’ However, there may have been an element of intra-bourgeois infighting and contradictions, including perhaps over timing and positioning vis-a-vis Iran or broader concerns about the credibility of the U.S. government.⁴

Different possible motives suggest themselves. First, to restore the “credibility” of the U.S. intel services (a key part of prepping for war and a key objective of the 2006 NSS). Second, to “credibly” establish that Iran did have a nuclear weapons program, something Iran denies (Ritter says this was the whole purpose of the new NIE). Third, it may have been released to slow or halt immediate U.S. plans to attack Iran, possibly because some in the Bush regime may have felt the diplomatic/political conditions had not been laid and/or that the military strategies were not yet in place for a successful attack. Perhaps the NIE was also a vehicle to work through differences at the top of the Bush regime and provide a framework for forging further unity around Iran. (Question: Could this be coming from a force within the ruling class with the capacity to throw a monkey wrench in the works, but not the capacity to cohere an alternate core?)

Most significantly, the aftermath of the release of the NIE has not resulted in a turn away from confrontation with Iran, but an escalation of this trajectory. By early 2008, all the principals associated with the NIE (Rice, Gates, the CIA's Hayden, National Intel Director McConnell, Joint Chiefs Chair Mullen) have taken up and endorsed a confrontational tact with Iran, including on the nuclear issue. In fact they've gone out of their way to "clarify" the content and implications of the NIE. So while the NIE may have represented a tactical adjustment, it did not represent or result in a strategic shift.

In the "Annual Threat Assessment of the Director of National Intelligence" (February 5, 2008) by Director Nat Intel McConnell, terrorism and nuclear proliferation topped his threat list, Afghanistan and Pakistan were also high priorities, and Iran was singled out for extensive discussion, not nearly as much in relation to Iraq as on the nuclear issue. In particular, McConnell made a special effort to clarify the NIE—stressing that Iran is continuing to pursue the most difficult and decisive components of building nuclear weapons. He also stressed U.S. suspicions about Iran's intentions (and given U.S. doctrine, the possible need to attack Iran preemptively) remain very high, and that the key to making sure Iran did not have nuclear weapons would be an Iranian political decision to forego them, which he argued was unlikely (again, pointing to the possible need for regime change to ensure Iran was not a nuclear military power). And he broadly critiqued Iran's actions and intentions in the region. The picture painted was an Iran actively trying to extend its influence and power on many fronts in contradiction to U.S. interests.⁵

Israeli analyst Ephraim Kam ("The Devaluation of the National Intelligence Estimate of the Iranian Threat, INSS Insight No. 50, March 25, 2008) points out that McConnell's testimony deviated from the NIE in both emphasizing that Iran was continuing the two most crucial aspects of nuclear weapons production—mastering enrichment and building delivery systems—and "doubts about Iran's intention and determination to develop nuclear weapons, which figured prominently in the NIE, are absent from" his testimony.

Kam argues that this is part of the "devaluation" of the NIE—prompted by the insistence by governments in the U.S., Europe, and Israel that Iran remained a nuclear threat, and "a storm of criticism by professional echelons in Israel, Europe and the United States itself." Kam also cites the IAEA report of February 2008 which was a "more severe" indictment of Iran than the NIE. "All this," Kam sums up, "has combined to draw some of the sting from the December report and to relax the constraints it initially seemed to impose on the pressure that can be applied on Iran to change course."

In sum, the release of the NIE may have been forced upon the Bush regime by various necessities (it didn't seem like a stage-managed event flowing from a master script), but they have wrenched freedom from it, in particular by building greater unity in the Bush team about the threat posed by Iran and greater unity on the international level about the danger posed by Iran's enrichment program.

May 26, 2008 IAEA Report

It is potentially very significant that recently the IAEA has taken a harsher tone toward Iran—

based in part on new evidence provided by the U.S. which has raised new questions according to the IAEA - and that diplomats are reporting that the nuclear negotiations are at an impasse. Talks between the U.S. and Iran over Iraq have also recently broken down in the wake of the U.S. assault on the Sadr movement, as well as rising U.S. hostility generally. This could portend a move by the Bush regime—or reflect increased necessity—to act militarily, having more laid the political-diplomatic groundwork.

Trita Parsi writes, “The permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany—will present Tehran with a secret incentive package in the next few days to convince Iran to suspend its enrichment program and enter negotiations. There is little doubt that Tehran will reject the offer since it crosses its red line—suspension of enrichment. The offer of a secret nuclear package to Tehran at the same time as a new case for war with Iran is presented may not be coincidental. But the calculation that the threat of war will compel Tehran to amend its red line on suspension has failed before and ignores the lessons Tehran drew from its earlier negotiations with Europe....Why such an offer will be made at this time remains unclear.... And if the latest P5+1 package is accompanied by earlier preconditions, the perfect may set the stage for a disaster.” May 10, 2008, “Can P5+1 Offer Break Iran Nuclear Stalemate?”

In this light, the new IAEA report seems like a significant shift, and possible indication of lining things up for war. First, the *New York Times* (2/15) assesses that the U.S., at the urging of the Europeans, turned over its nuclear information to the IAEA in February, and basically stepped back and let the IAEA take the lead on this issue. Meanwhile, the IAEA was being told by the Europeans, France in particular, that it needed to take a tough stance on Iran, its credibility was on the line. (And the IAEA is a tool of imperialism, not the voice of peace and reason, and its actions seem to represent or reflect some level of inter-imperialist consensus.)

This new report is being called a huge step backward by those who follow these negotiations closely and who oppose war on Iran. The IAEA downplays the fact that it has had unprecedented access to Iranian facilities and that there is no proof whatsoever that Iran has had a military program or that it has diverted uranium. And some of the “questions” being raised for immediate resolution by the IAEA reflect 20-some year old data, equipment, etc. Given the fact that Iran is refusing to reconsider enrichment ahead of negotiations, and the Europeans and U.S. knew this ahead of time yet are still insisting on it, this report could set the stage at an upcoming June meeting during which the EU presents Iran with a new package of “incentives” (the U.S. is refusing to attend), the consequent breakdown of negotiations and the referral of the Iran issue to the Security Council, which could be a prelude to harsher action, perhaps a U.S. attack.

The *New York Times* (6/1/08) assesses that this new IAEA report “could transform the debate over what to do about Iran, particularly because it is being posed now by an international agency that retains high credibility overseas, something the Bush administration lost long ago”—i.e., add credibility to U.S. claims that Iran is a danger. (The *NYT* also mentioned, that the 2007 NIE “did not mention the possibility that now seems to concern the international inspectors—that Iran had perhaps made enough progress that it could afford to slow down or stop.” This is more grist for the war mill, potentially.)

This is not to say that the Europeans are necessarily fully onboard with war. In the wake of the

new NIE, France reportedly “gave cautious backing” to the U.S. position that the report pointed to Iran having a military program (France said “signs of a possible military dimension”) and Germany called on Iran to disclose more information. But whatever the Europeans wishes about the military option, they’re very much assisting the U.S. in building a case against Iran, and also NOT insisting that regime change be taken off the table. (Al Ahram also points out that there was no international—i.e., European—outcry against Israel’s bombing of Syria in September, 2007, which is another sign that there would be no serious opposition to war from France, Germany or Britain. On the other hand, there are reports that Germany may pull out of Afghanistan if the U.S. attacked Iran. Conn Hallinan, “Rumors of War: Is Bush Gearing Up to Attack Iran?” June 6, 2008).

Meanwhile, Russia’s “Sergei Lavrov called on international powers to offer security guarantees for Iran in order to help resolve all problems in the region and the crisis over Iran’s nuclear programme. The White House immediately rejected this call. Spokesman Gordon Johndroe simply retorted: ‘Security guarantees are not something we are looking at the moment,’ exposing yet one more time the administration’s unwillingness to change its failing agenda for regime change and instead pursue a sincere path for peace.” (CASMII, May 17.)

Fallon’s Firing

The March 2008 firing of Adm. Wm. Fallon as the head of CENTCOM (head of U.S. forces in the Middle East-Central Asian region) came as the U.S. was ramping up a public opinion counter-offensive against Iran in the wake of the December NIE. From what’s so far been made public, Fallon’s firing was prompted by a *Vanity Fair* article in which he (as he’d been doing publicly) spoke out not only against an attack on Iran, but also against threatening military action against Iran, and essentially articulated a different vision for U.S. strategy in the region which de-emphasized the confrontation with Iran (‘we have six pots boiling, we don’t need others.’) He also reportedly had differences over Iraq strategy, in particular feeling U.S. forces should be drawn down more quickly there. (Fallon had helped lead U.S. war games against Iran, so he may also have had differences over military strategy and capabilities.)

All this reflected Fallon’s being out of step with the Bush regime—and making the additional unforgivable error of speaking publicly about it—on grand strategy, strategy in the Middle East, and strategy toward Iran.

Fallon had been head of the forces in the Pacific taking the lead in dealing with China. But the Middle East and Iran aren’t China—they’re the central front in the U.S. war, and where the Bush team feels victory is demanded. So focusing on managing problems and diplomacy which may have been consistent with Bush policies with China (which is definitely a big problem the U.S. confronts, but was not labeled a “rogue state” in the 2006 NSS) was not consistent when applied to the Middle East/Iran. And he was, it seems, standing directly in the way of U.S. war planning. One could not aggressively confront Iran and ratchet up the pressure—much less go to war—with Fallon at the helm. So removing him and replacing him with Petraeus both unified the Bush team in confronting Iran and removed a possible roadblock to war.

(Re Fallon: “In a widely publicized incident last January, Iranian patrol boats approached a U.S.

ship in what the Pentagon described as a ‘taunting’ manner. According to Centcom staff officers, the American commander on the spot was about to open fire. At that point, the U.S. was close to war. He desisted only when Fallon personally and explicitly ordered him not to shoot. The White House, according to the staff officers, was ‘absolutely furious’ with Fallon for defusing the incident.” Andrew Cockburn)

This follows a pattern in which a number of leading generals have been removed by Bush because they weren’t in step with the Bush doctrine and his determination to win victory in the WOT. This also shows how radical this doctrine is and how the Bush regime needed its own “revolution” as they themselves have described it, within the state apparatus to weed out people who weren’t ideologically and politically in step—this is something going on since Bush took power in many agencies—CIA, State, DOD, etc. Petraeus’ elevation to head of CENTCOM now removes a roadblock to war with Iran.

Differences in the Ruling Class

Here is how we understand the “state of play” within the ruling class, and how it relates to Iran (also discussed in “Options” below), although this is not the final word and more analysis needs to be done.

First, while there are real and sharp differences within the U.S. ruling class over grand strategy and over Iran, there is growing unity around seeing Iran as the main problem confronting the U.S. in the Middle East, that it must not be allowed to get nuclear weapons, and that defense of Israel is foundational to U.S. regional and global interests. And there’s unity around the need to defeat “terrorists,” continue to dominate the Middle East, and to rollback, neutralize, or contain Iran, even as there are differences over how to do so.

The Bush core remains dominant, and in some ways has been strengthened by a) the ongoing necessities confronting the whole ruling class in keeping its grip on the Middle East, including because of what the Bush regime has set in motion; b) the success so far of the surge; c) Iran’s rise; d) the Democrats’ failure (refusal) to in any way impede Bush’s conduct of the war in Iraq; and e) that there is not yet a coherent alternative global and regional strategy (although we keep open the possibility that the elections could bring a “changing of the guard” on this).

There is evidence of some differences within the Bush team, although its hard to evaluate their depth or significance (perhaps it is simply a matter of tactics and timing), but also of growing unity. Bush and Cheney in particular seem to have a harder, more warlike edge toward Iran than other top officials, even as it seems clear that the regime has forged a high level of unity around a) the centrality of the Iranian threat in Iraq and regionally, b) the need to focus U.S. efforts on Iran, c) the need to intensify the aggressiveness of those efforts across a broad range, d) the need to take a more multinational approach than with Iraq, with more emphasis on the diplomatic and political tracks against Iran, and e) the need to stay the course to prevail in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As discussed elsewhere, there is also evidence that Gates and Rice may not (yet?) be precisely on the same page as Bush and Cheney concerning military action. (For instance, the Wall Street Journal and Weekly Standard, two neocon bellwethers, while still overall supporting the Bush

team, have critiqued it for letting things slide in its second term, losing its aggressive edge, and downplaying the preemptive and transformative core of the Bush doctrine and allowing America's enemies to gain ground. And both papers have recently launched a scathing offensive against Rice, who is blamed for this malaise, which may be part of pushing for more aggressive action on Iran.)

More broadly in the ruling class, there are real differences over grand strategy and Iran, including between McCain and Obama (although it's important to note there's been evolution and growing unity in some ways across these divides). The anti-neocon argument is basically that the attempt at forcible regional transformation has backfired and is hurting U.S. interests, that the Bush regime has focused too narrowly on the Middle East to the exclusion of other global concerns, allowing other powers to gain initiative, and that it's focused too much on U.S. military power to the exclusion of other (softer) elements of U.S. power. (And McCain shares some of these views as well, stressing the need for diplomacy and alliances, even as the U.S. pursues victory and keeps its focus on the Middle East.) The world is now multi-polar, they argue, there are many complex challenges, not just "terror," that it's crucial to preserve the current international order—of course with the U.S. on top—but that Bush's actions have in addition to being too one-dimensional, have frayed this order overall, as well as weakened the U.S.'s ability to influence and dominate it.

How does this come down in terms of Iran? There are increasing calls (see options section, below) for a negotiated settlement with Iran which explicitly takes regime change off the table and offers Iran security guarantees. The concerns cited are both the lack of good military options, and the continuation of the Bush trajectory in Iran (as well as Iraq) which people like Brzezinski feel are taking things overall in the wrong direction. One dimension is fear of the regional fallout of an attack on Iran, a concern shared it seems by Fallon. Adm. Mullen recently said it would be very challenging to wage war against a third Muslim country.

However, if regime change is off the table, then so is the core of the Bush agenda of regional transformation, it would seem. And if you're not going to transform the region, what IS your strategic objective?

Seeking a negotiated settlement does not necessarily preclude continued aggressive containment. Gates recently argued that negotiations won't work unless the United States and its allies develop "leverage, either through economic or diplomatic or military pressures, on the Iranian government so that they believe they must have talks with the United States because there is something they want from us."

But while the Democrats continue to raise some criticisms of Bush's foreign policy, have not explicitly called for war, and have on occasion stated that Bush cannot wage war on Iran without Congressional approval (and have, with support from some Republicans, tried, without success, to pass legislation restricting Bush's ability to go to war with Iran via executive order)—generally on all other legislation related to Iran they have given bipartisan support to Bush initiatives. And overall they've been quite vehement in their denunciations of Iran (Clinton's "obliterate" statement and Obama's recent speech to AIPAC being cases in point) and even voted for measures like Kyle-Lieberman which can be cited by Bush as authorization for war.

During her recent trip to Israel, House Speaker Pelosi stated that “no option should be ruled out in order to stop Iran’s march toward nuclear weapons. ‘Iran must be stopped. They are a threat to the neighborhood and a source of funding for Hamas and Hezbollah.’” (*Jerusalem Post*, May 18, 2008). All these at least are partial “green lights” for Bush.

The Democrats have had these differences with the Bush core for some time but have been unwilling or unable to do anything to fundamentally change the direction Bush is taking things. This too is part of the dynamic: there are real differences at the top, but the ruling class forces generally grouped around the Democrats realize that much is at stake and don’t want to do anything that could be seen (or could) jeopardize the war effort; and they have not yet had the strength to move decisively against Bush. Again, we can’t rule out the possibility that Obama’s election could represent a “changing of the guard” and some real strategic shifts in grand strategy. This could be one of the ways contradictions within the ruling class are worked through. Or could Obama be another LBJ...inheriting and going with a certain trajectory?

Locking in the Trajectory

First, perhaps the main way the current trajectory is to some degree “locked” into place is objectively—by the rolling contradictions and necessities facing the whole imperialist ruling class (and any new administration) in maintaining its Middle East and global dominance and successfully concluding—one way or another—the wars the U.S. is now embroiled in.

There are a number of ways the Bush administration seems to be working to both win victory in the WOT and deal with differences within the ruling class by locking in the current trajectory (bequeathing it to the next administration) in the sense of maintaining first a commitment to stay in Iraq for the foreseeable future without major troops reductions in order to ensure (or attempt to ensure) a U.S. victory. That remains a key priority. This is also closely related to remaining in a confrontational posture with Iran—maintaining high levels of U.S. troops is, according to Petraeus, key to blocking Iranian influence in Iraq. Obviously having 140,000-160,000 U.S. troops on Iran’s border also impacts the equation in many ways. The surge, Fallon’s firing, and diplomatic efforts against Iran’s nuclear program, discussed above, are also elements of this.

Petraeus’ appointment to head of CENTCOM (and other changes in the military ranks) are also part of bequeathing the Bush policy to whoever follows. Stephen Biddle of the Council on Foreign Relations put it this way: [the appointment] “represents something of a stay-the-course choice that suggests that the president is happy with the kinds of policies we’ve had in the country over the last year and wants them to continue.” (Lehrer Newshour, April 23)

On the same program, Lawrence Korb, an Obama supporter said: “Petraeus represents a decision by his commander and Fallon’s commander that he doesn’t want a major reallocation of resources from Iraq and into Afghanistan.....[this would] bring us to the end of the Bush administration before we have anymore substantial troops drawdowns, which, again, that would make it very difficult to deal with the situation in Afghanistan.” Both agreed that such military appointments tend to last 3 years at least, and that it would be highly unusual for an incoming president to remove them.

There have been other—unprecedented—changes in top military personnel and Pentagon posture pushed through by Gates that seem linked to both dealing with sharp contradictions in winning in Iraq and Afghanistan and staying the current course.

On May 13, 2008, Gates sharply criticized the military for not focusing enough on winning in Iraq and preparing to fight other insurgencies, but instead on possible big wars with other countries in the future. Gates acknowledged U.S. ground forces had been stretched by long and repeated deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan and said measures had been taken to tackle those strains, such as increasing the size of U.S. ground forces. But he said a defeat in Iraq would be much more damaging than the current strains on the military. “The risk of over-extending the Army is real. But I believe the risk is far greater—to that institution, as well as to our country—if we were to fail in Iraq. That is the war we are in. That is the war we must win.”⁶

On May 16, 2008 Gates again sharply criticized the Air Force in particular: (something which the press called a highly unusual break with past practice): “We must put our defense bureaucracies on a war footing with a wartime sense of urgency”....the outcome in Iraq and Afghanistan is “far from foretold” and that each will persist “for a long time to come....A lesson I learned fairly early on was that important elements of the defense establishment were not at war.”⁷

Several weeks after these talks, Gates fired the two top commanding officials of the Air Force. The reason was ostensibly their mishandling of nuclear weapons, but it seems very likely his criticisms of the Air Force also motivated the change. Again, military analysts felt it was unprecedented for two top officials to be removed at once, and for this to be done at the end of a Presidential term.

The Bush administration is also working to sign a secret long-term strategic agreement with the Iraqi government (without Congressional consultation) which is reportedly going to give the U.S. the right to keep troops in Iraq for the foreseeable future (50 military bases, control of Iraqi airspace, and legal immunity for American personnel indefinitely), regardless of who wins the presidential election. And it may even be crafted to specify certain levels or duties that would ensure a large presence and thwart any Democratic attempts at a draw-down. There are also reports (Gulf News June 3, 2008) that the agreement gives the U.S. the right to launch strikes against any country it considers a threat to its security from within Iraqi territory. There have been murmurs in Congress against this, but no serious action to prevent Bush from concluding such an agreement.

Relatedly, the U.S. is also working behind-the-scenes (and not so behind-the-scenes) to influence the outcome of the upcoming parliamentary elections in Iraq—scheduled for October - to ensure an outcome favorable for the U.S. There was a lot of reporting that the offensives in Basra and Baghdad were also aimed at crippling the Sadr movement in advance of these elections as it seemed possible that Sadr’s movement could actually emerge from these elections as the single biggest force in the Iraqi government, which could have created major problems for the U.S. (Sadr has never dropped his call for a U.S. withdrawal.)

Two recent articles in the Washington Post also seemed significant in this regard. They reported

that the military is quite concerned with the political (presidential) transition; the top levels of the Pentagon feel strongly that basically the current course—and aggressive posture—must be continued given that the U.S. is in the midst of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and they seem to be consciously working to carry it forward. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Navy Adm. Michael G. Mullen, told the Post that “the transition to a new American president will mark a ‘time of vulnerability’ and military leaders are already actively preparing for the changing of the guard. “‘We need to be strong and really in the deterrent mode, to not be very predictable’ regarding Iran, he said... ‘There are very few either briefings or meetings that I’m in that I’m not thinking about ‘How does what we’re talking about right now transition to next spring?’” William Arkin also wrote on how the military may be trying to shape things. (Is this being done within the confines of civilian control? Or is there more here than meets the eye?)⁸

Public Mood/Opinion and the Elections

How much is the public mood an obstacle to an attack on Iran? First, the public mood seems deeply contradictory. In many ways it’s a highly charged and politicized atmosphere. In spring 2008, seventy-five thousand people turned out to see Obama in Portland, Oregon (a huge, perhaps unprecedented number for a campaign stop).

On the other hand, there is very little open protest and mass resistance to the Bush regime (especially around the question of Iran). The following from the *New York Times* captures something of the mood—including getting used to the “new normalcy”—as well as the deliberate efforts of the bourgeoisie:

“A statue in Logan Circle in Washington shows the general on horseback flanked by two female figures said to represent America at war and America at peace. Given public indifference to a war that refuses to end, perhaps a third statue should be added: America at peace with being at war.

“Even as we celebrate generations of American soldiers past, the women and men who are making that sacrifice today in Iraq and Afghanistan receive less attention every day. There’s plenty of blame to go around: battle fatigue at home, failing media resolve and a government intent on controlling information from the battlefield. According to the Project for Excellence in Journalism’s News Coverage Index, coverage of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has slipped to 3 percent of all American print and broadcast news as of last week, falling from 25 percent as recently as last September.” (“The Media Equation - The Wars We Choose to Ignore,” David Carr, May 26, 2008)

Yet, at the same time, we shouldn’t underestimate the deep currents of dislike—even hatred—of the Bush regime. This hasn’t gone away, even as it’s been blunted or submerged.

And there are particularities around the threat of war on Iran. Some reasons for the passivity, at least in relation to the wars (including Iran), seems to be that people are very much expecting the Bush regime to be over soon and are mainly waiting for that, and mainly throwing their hopes and energies into getting Obama into office.

In addition, the lack of outrage/activity around a possible war on Iran (with notable exceptions among a section of the intellectuals and former officials as well as some in the anti-war movement) seems to stem from a number of factors: a) people don't really think war is imminent (partly because the media has systematically under-covered this growing threat); b) the Democrats are joining with efforts to vilify and move aggressively on Iran (even as they have strategic differences over how to do so); c) Democratic Party efforts to quash anti-Iran war protest because it would hurt Obama (e.g., Mayor Daley blocking of a resolution against invading Iran in the Chicago City Council early 2008), and the acquiescence/support for this in the anti-war movement; d) support for the state of Israel and the resultant vilifying and suppressing any serious criticism of Israel; e) the feeling that Iran IS, actually, a real threat because it is much stronger than Iraq, it is a fundamentalist state (and abhorrent), and may be pursuing nuclear weapons; and f) because people have largely bought into the argument that the U.S. needs to stay in Iraq and not leave precipitously, before the country is "stabilized." And the fact is that the American empire—with its relative stability and ability to extend material privileges to large sections of the U.S. population—has a lot riding on the outcome in the Middle East.* A U.S. defeat or withdrawal could be a major jolt to American power and standing.

However, it is possible that if Bush did attack Iran—especially before the election (note the Asia Times report of a strike in August)—it could dramatically change the mood of the masses and possibly unleash a storm of outrage because Bush was, once again, effectively stealing an election or unfairly trying to impact an election, or acting in blatant disregard for the will of the people. It would likely also shock many people and raise deep questions about the nature of the Bush regime and the trajectory on which it's put the U.S., as well as deeper questions about the whole U.S. political-economic system. (Far too many have ascribed the Bush regime's actions to Bush's personality or a cabal of neocons or military contractors, etc., and haven't confronted their systemic roots, or the sweeping and radical changes underway.)

This storm could be contained if Obama urged people to rally behind the President—and no doubt there would be very fierce calls from within the ruling class including through charges of treason if he were not to do so. Bush's appeasement charge in Israel recently was directed at Obama (and by extension to the antiwar masses) and was an effort to paralyze the Democrats, perhaps in advance of a U.S. attack. We shouldn't forget Brzezinski—an Obama supporter—on Charlie Rose saying he'd be forced to support the President in case of war on Iran. And the election and the campaign could be used to hammer together a public "consensus" and acceptance of such an attack.

But in this situation if cracks did emerge in the ruling class, including in the form of between the candidates, and even if Obama wasn't calling for active protest but even questioning the timing or utility of an attack, this could be a fissure through which this mass anger might find more expression.

* For an important discussion of the material underpinnings of the U.S. empire and the "American way of life" and the ideological effect on the domestic population see the discussion of "Living in the House of Tony Soprano" in *Bringing Forward Another Way* by Bob Avakian. This is available in its entirety, as a pamphlet and online at revcom.us. The installment in that series which discusses "Living in the House of Tony Soprano" is found in *Revolution* #87, May 6, 2007.

Time (5/22/08) reported that leading Democrats are worried that Bush may bomb between November and January—after the elections and before he leaves office—when the political cost has gone down and when it may appear he's doing his successor a “favor.” Daniel Pipes posits a similar timeline: in a June 4, 2008, interview posted at *National Review Online*, Pipes (a leading right-wing Middle East strategist) claimed Bush would attack Iran if Obama won: “Should the Democratic nominee win in November, President Bush will ‘do something.’ and should it be Mr. McCain who wins, he’ll ‘punt,’ and let Mr. McCain decide what to do.”

Asia Times (May 27, 2008) assesses the electoral impact of a strike on Iran this way:

“A U.S. air strike on Iran would have seismic impact on the presidential race at home, but it’s difficult to determine where the pieces would fall. At first glance, a military attack against Iran would seem to favor McCain. The Arizona senator says the U.S. is locked in battle across the globe with radical Islamic extremists, and he believes Iran is one of biggest instigators and supporters of the extremist tide. A strike on Iran could rally American voters to back the war effort and vote for McCain. On the other hand, an air strike on Iran could heighten public disenchantment with Bush administration policy in the Middle East, leading to support for the Democratic candidate, whoever it is.”

(*Asia Times* concludes that the rulers also realize that the reverberations of an attack on Iran will be far greater, and extend far beyond, the election.)

In all this, much would likely hinge on the initiating actions of a determined minority.

D. THREE OPTIONS: CONTAINMENT, ACCOMMODATION, REGIME CHANGE

The U.S. basically has three options: continue some form of the current efforts to contain Iran and “muddle through,” forge an accommodation—whether grand strategic bargain or *modus vivendi*—with Iran, or force regime change on Iran, most likely with a substantial component of military force. Here’s our assessment.

Containment/Rollback and ‘Muddling Through’

This is the policy that the U.S. has been pursuing in one form or another since the Iranian revolution of 1979. But it’s taken a leap in terms of its centrality to U.S. regional and global objectives and in its aggressiveness since 2005-2006. This is not to say the U.S. hasn’t also been considering and preparing military strikes—or that this strategy cannot be part of laying the groundwork for either accommodation (on terms favorable to the U.S.) or military action. In some ways there’s not an absolute separation between these different - imperialist - approaches.

Vali Nasr and Ray Takeyh (*Foreign Affairs*) call “Iran’s containment” the “heart” and “primary objective” of the Bush regime’s Middle East policy. And this is something around which the U.S. ruling class as a whole has basic unity around—the assessment that Iran is the biggest immediate threat/challenge the U.S. faces in the region and containing or rolling it back (at minimum) is essential (even as there is debate over how to do this and whether regime change

should remain on the table, or not):

"Washington's goal is to eliminate Iran's influence in the Arab world by rolling back Tehran's gains to date and denying it the support of allies—in effect drawing a line from Lebanon to Oman to separate Iran from its Arab neighbors. The Bush administration has rallied support among Arab governments to oppose Iranian policies in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories. It is trying to buttress the military capability of Persian Gulf states by providing a \$20 billion arms package to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf emirates. According to Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns, one of the arms sales' primary objectives is "to enable these countries to strengthen their defenses and therefore to provide a deterrence against Iranian expansion and Iranian aggression in the future." And through a series of regional conclaves and conferences, the Bush administration hopes to rejuvenate the Israeli-Palestinian peace process partly in the hope of refocusing the energies of the region's governments on the threat posed by Iran."

The problem is that, so far, this somewhat ad hoc approach hasn't worked; instead Iran has been able to increase its leverage and influence, as well as pursue nuclear enrichment. Nasr and Takeyh:

"Washington's containment strategy is unsound, it cannot be implemented effectively, and it will probably make matters worse. The ingredients needed for a successful containment effort simply do not exist. Under these circumstances, Washington's insistence that Arab states array against Iran could further destabilize an already volatile region."

Another problem: the notion that brokering the Israel-Palestine conflict would tamp down all the problems in the region isn't true—and has proved impossible. For one, the only possible settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian struggle is draconian, which would further strengthen the Islamic fundamentalist trend and Iran. Finally, the U.S. can't count on anything emerging spontaneously from within Iran that will bring down the IRI, nor anything internationally to do so. So playing for time is to Iran's advantage.

Here's a passage that points, from another angle, to contradictions within current U.S. strategy that may make its indefinite continuation untenable:

"The desire for regime change in Iran has colored the Bush administration's approach to the challenge presented by Tehran's apparent desire to build a nuclear weapons capability. Yet the threat of military force either to destroy Iran's nuclear infrastructure and/or to effect regime change has proved counterproductive to the simultaneous efforts to stop the Iranian program through diplomacy. Indeed, the entire Bush policy towards Iran of simultaneously wishing to coerce, undermine and replace the regime while also seeking to persuade it to abandon its nuclear program through diplomacy has proved both strategically inconsistent and consistently counterproductive. In failing to decide whether it prioritizes a change of regime or a change of behavior it has got neither."

We should be clear, however, that while so far the Bush strategy has achieved neither regime change nor disarmament, the Bush regime's central goal has always been regime change, not

disarmament only, and it has used the disarmament issue to serve regime change—including preparing the political-diplomatic ground by making Iran negotiating “offers” it has to refuse (essentially demanding it agree to U.S. goals before there can be negotiations), and then using Iran’s refusal to paint it as a rogue state with something to hide, which can only be dealt with through bullying and—perhaps—force. So to the degree U.S. strategy has accomplished or paved the way for this, it hasn’t been a “failure.”

In this situation (and in the wake of the NIE), and with no obvious or easy military options, the main lines of argument in the ruling class have been variations on more aggressive—or “hawkish”—containment, some with aspects of engagement or negotiations to serve this aggressive containment. The theory is that this would both put increased pressure on Iran to scale back its destabilizing activities and put the U.S. in the best position to wage war if need be.

For example, in January, Christopher Hitchens and Reul Marc Gerecht—both neocons - argued that it was necessary to talk to Iran, if only to expose that they were the obstacle to peace—not the Bush regime (greatly discredited by Iraq). Michael E. O'Hanlon of Brookings makes a similar argument (Washington Times, May 15, 2008):

“However, U.S. diplomatic contact with Iran, the sooner the better, still makes sense—not because it will likely produce any breakthroughs, but because what Professor Victor Cha calls ‘hawkish engagement’ can set the U.S. up more effectively to galvanize the kind of growing international pressure on Iran that is probably our only long-term hope of producing better behavior from Teheran....That said, as part of a broader realpolitik strategy, talking with Iran—while preparing for the next steps after those talks fail—is still the right thing to do.”⁹

A variant of this theme focused around stepping up U.S. efforts inside Iraq to both undercut Iranian influence and directly bully Iran, while creating a situation in which the U.S. could stabilize the situation in Iraq and turn its full attention toward Iran. Neocon Gerecht argued recently:

“Barring a strike by President Bush against Iran's nuclear sites before January 2009, Iraq is the only arena where the administration is capable of moving effectively against Tehran....The Iranians have seriously overplayed their hand along the Tigris and Euphrates....In the time remaining to it, the Bush administration should do all it can to reinforce this Shiite dissent and outrage. The surge aside, it is the most effective vehicle for checking Iran in Iraq and stabilizing Iraqi politics. ...The clerics in Tehran could be dealt out of the inner circles of Iraqi Shia politics. With continued progress in Iraq, the next administration would be in a position to turn its full attention to thwarting Iran elsewhere in the region—and to preventing the mullahs from acquiring nuclear weapons.” (“Countering Iran,” May 9, 2008, Weekly Standard)

In the same vein, Gates recently revealed that Washington has plans to engage in a number of “exclusive” activities against Iran. “We're being very aggressive in going after the networks in Iraq, and the individuals who are interfering or supplying weapons from Iran....We have a number of other activities under way. We take it very seriously. But at this point our activities

are focused pretty exclusively inside Iraq.” (“Gates: U.S. will teach Iran a lesson,” 13 May 2008) This is consistent with Gates admonition re Iraq, “This is the war we are in. This is the war we must win.”

So this approach is both stepping up the pressure and attempting to force Iran to back down, while putting the U.S. in a better position to wage war if need be.

Most of these arguments for “hawkish engagement” explicitly do not take the goal of regime change off the table. This approach can also include limited military strikes. This is what they did with Iraq in the 1990's—the goal was regime change, but the immediate strategy was focused on containment which was done very aggressively with no-fly zones, military strikes, etc. Recently there have been reports (Philip Giraldi, Asia Times) that the Bush team has decided in principal to strike Revolutionary Guard training camps in western Iran, using Iran's actions in Iraq as the justification. This could either be a ratcheting up of hawkish engagement/containment, or the beginning of a larger military campaign—or both.

Accommodation?

What would an accommodation with Iran look like? Is there a serious line of thought within the U.S. pushing for accommodation with Iran? Who—if anyone—is espousing that?

The Bush regime doesn't seem to be contemplating any sort of accommodation with Iran—it seems to be heading in the opposite direction. (Both Rice and Bush have recently dismissed the idea of even talking to Iran, let alone reaching an accommodation, with Bush vehemently rejecting any such step as “appeasement.”) None of the candidates have argued for accommodation. (In his recent speech to AIPAC, Obama explained his conditional offer to talk to Tehran in terms of strengthening the U.S. hand in eliminating the threat from Iran—i.e. a form of “hawkish engagement.”) And during recent Congressional hearings on Iraq, where Iran was a big topic, there was no concerted effort by the Democrats to argue for backing off and making a deal with Iran, quite the opposite.

But how do we look beneath the surface? The U.S. made a strategic deal with China in 1972, within a year or two of having considered using nuclear weapons against Vietnam and possibly China. And in 1985 the U.S. sought a strategic opening to Iran, a mere 5 years after having spurred Iraq to invade Iran. So things can turn quickly. Is the U.S. threatening Iran and stepping up the pressure in order set terms for negotiation?

A number of ruling class strategists argue that Bush's Iran strategy of neither engagement nor regime change is failing, and instead making Iran stronger. They argue that there are no realistic military options (including because all could make the situation much worse for the U.S. in their view), and that the continued U.S. exclusive focus on the Middle East—waging wars there, seeking to forcibly transform the region—is both over-reaching and hurting the U.S. on many fronts globally, including increasing global instability.

So there have been calls by various bourgeois forces for talking to Iran and taking regime change off the table as a means of getting Iran to curb its actions and stabilize the region, while inducing

Iran to stop enrichment—or to submit to stringent verification—in order to ensure Iran never develops nuclear weapons. (This approach seems more a *modus vivendi* than a grand bargain to forge an alliance between the U.S. and Iran in the region). There are different variants of this approach being put forward—some more, some less limited. And this is combined with some form of continued containment.

For instance, the *New York Times* editorialized on April 11, 2008, that the U.S. was adrift on Iran and the U.S. should make Iran a serious offer to talk about everything, including security assurances and economic relations. Relatedly, there have been calls for the U.S. to drop its insistence that Iran not be allowed to enrich uranium in return for verification: “enrichment for transparency” not “suspension for incentives.”

Senator Biden (*Wall Street Journal*, May 23, 2008) makes a similar argument (which is related to the current debate on global grand strategy) which is part accommodation, part hawkish containment:

“At the heart of this failure is an obsession with the “war on terrorism” that ignores larger forces shaping the world: the emergence of China, India, Russia and Europe; the spread of lethal weapons and dangerous diseases; uncertain supplies of energy, food and water; the persistence of poverty; ethnic animosities and state failures; a rapidly warming planet; the challenge to nation states from above and below.

“On George Bush’s watch, Iran, not freedom, has been on the march: Iran is much closer to the bomb; its influence in Iraq is expanding; its terrorist proxy Hezbollah is ascendant in Lebanon and that country is on the brink of civil war.

“Beyond bluster, how would Mr. McCain actually deal with these dangers? You either talk, you maintain the status quo, or you go to war. If Mr. McCain has ruled out talking, we’re stuck with an ineffectual policy or military strikes that could quickly spiral out of control.

“Equally unwise is the Bush-McCain fixation on regime change. The regime is abhorrent, but their logic defies comprehension: renounce the bomb—and when you do, we’re still going to take you down. The result is that Iran accelerated its efforts to produce fissile material.

“Instead of regime change, we should focus on conduct change. We should make it very clear to Iran what it risks in terms of isolation if it continues to pursue a dangerous nuclear program but also what it stands to gain if it does the right thing. That will require keeping our allies in Europe, as well as Russia and China, on the same page as we ratchet up pressure.”

This position—that preventing Iran from going nuclear is a higher priority than regime change, that it is more realizable, and that it is consistent with a broader more correct global grand strategy was also argued by a major foreign policy study—Princeton - “Forging a World of Liberty Under Law”:

“America must take considerable risks to ensure that Iran does not develop a nuclear weapons capacity. However, we must also be prepared to offer Iran assurances that assuage its legitimate fears, such as a negative security assurance, the reliable provision to it of

peaceful fissile materials, and international influence commensurate with its position. On the other hand, the United States should make it clear that life as a nuclear weapons power, if it came to pass, would be a thoroughly miserable experience for Iran.”¹⁰

Brzezinski has been being scathingly critical of Bush’s overall performance and strategy, including toward Iran. In a recent oped in the Washington Post he and Ret. Gen. Wm. Odom argued “Current U.S. policy toward the regime in Tehran will almost certainly result in an Iran with nuclear weapons...The United States would have a better chance of success if the White House abandoned its threats of military action and its calls for regime change.”

Brzezinski and Odom argue that an attack would destabilize the region and harm U.S. and Israeli interests, and that instead the U.S. should exploit the opening provided by Iran’s stated desire to negotiate with the U.S. in order to build an international mechanism to ensure Iran doesn’t get nuclear weapons, or deter it, if that fails. This could “help bring Iran back into its traditional role of strategic cooperation with the United States in stabilizing the Gulf region. Eventually, Iran could even return to its long-standing and geopolitically natural pre-1979 policy of cooperative relations with Israel. One should note also in this connection Iranian hostility toward al-Qaeda, lately intensified by al-Qaeda’s Web-based campaign urging a U.S.-Iranian war, which could both weaken what al-Qaeda views as Iran’s apostate Shiite regime and bog America down in a prolonged regional conflict.” (“A Sensible Path on Iran,” May 27, 2008).¹¹

Other analysts put forward a straight forward “realist” argument for having no choice but recognizing Iran’s power and “sharing the region” with it (although this is a minority position, without, it seems, much weight in the ruling class).¹²

There is also an argument that engagement is the best way—in the long term—to speed Iran’s “democratization,” i.e., unraveling. Michael McFaul, Abbas Milani, and Larry Diamond (“A Win-Win U.S. Strategy for Dealing with Iran”) argue that there are no military options, and that current policy is failing and that if the U.S. tries only negotiations about nuclear issues, or if it attempts a military attack or regime change, Iran will come out stronger. Therefore bold change is needed: deal directly with Iran on broad range of issues as well as forge channels to the Iranian people:

“Given past and present failures, we need a radically new approach. It is time for the United States to offer the Iranian regime a deal it cannot refuse. Washington should propose to end the economic embargo, unfreeze all Iranian assets, restore full diplomatic relations, support the initiation of talks on Iran’s entry into the WTO, encourage foreign investment, and otherwise move toward a normal relationship with the Iranian government. In return, Tehran would have to agree to three conditions: a verifiable suspension of activity that could feed into a nuclear weapons development program, including all enrichment of uranium, with a comprehensive and intrusive international inspections regime administered by the IAEA; an end to support for terrorist groups and activities, including training, intelligence support, and weapons shipments for Hezbollah, Hamas, and radical Shi’ite militias in Iraq; and affirmation of basic human rights principles under international covenants and a recognition of the legitimacy of international and domestic efforts to monitor those conditions.

“In a Manichean world between those that seek to preserve the status quo and those that seek to change it, we are firmly in the latter group. Yet, our recommended strategy for promoting such change is not invasion, military strikes, or even sanctions. It is rather to fully engage the regime and thus connect with Iranian society, which in turn will ultimately facilitate democratization.”

Regime Change: Deal unlikely as long as Bush strategy is in command

The Bush strategy has been and remains regime change, not accommodation. This is closely bound up with and a key part of its strategy of waging the WOT to defeat Islamic fundamentalism and restructure the region as part of its larger global strategy to create an unchallengeable global empire for decades to come.

The global situation is much different than 1972 (China) or 1985 (Iran-Contra). In both those cases China and Iran were subordinate concerns to a bigger danger—the Soviet Union. That more overarching concern doesn’t exist now (or yet)—rather the Middle East/Central Asian region is the imperialists’ primary concern (both as an area of instability and rapidly moving tectonic plates, and an opportunity vis-a-vis other powers). And within that, defeating the Islamic fundamentalists is key.

Thomas Donnelly, a neocon, writes in “Getting Ready for a Nuclear Ready Iran” that the U.S. is now the sole guarantor of the international order and the Middle East is the central focus of its security policy; the idea of bargaining with Iran coming to a *modus vivendi* is based on a earlier period when Europe was the key strategic focus and the M.E. was secondary. This is no longer so, therefore striking a grand bargain is off the table in his view, which reflects those of the Bush core.

The other big problem is that the U.S. has to be in command and setting the terms, on the offensive, regionally and globally, and a deal could undercut that. Standing down, and rolling back the rhetoric and the policy would be very difficult, and “dis-organizing” of the whole Bush agenda—internationally and domestically.

The Bush team has been consistent on this. It rejected Iran’s 2003 effort to reach accommodation, and refused to negotiate even with the more reformist Khatemi. During this same period, in the wake of the Iraq invasion, the U.S. did reach deals with Libya and North Korea. (No regime change, but a whole change in orientation of the government). But Iran is neither North Korea nor Libya—there is much more on the line for the U.S. with Iran in terms of the centrality of the Middle East and the core objective of transforming the region, and Iran carries much, much more weight.

In May 2006, when the Bush team agreed to some negotiations, they were designed primarily to further isolate and expose Iran, and maintain a coalition with the European powers, not facilitate a negotiated settlement on the nuclear issue. The U.S. demanded Iran halt enrichment before negotiations even began, with no guarantee that Iran’s right to nuclear power would be respected or that the U.S. wouldn’t continue to pursue regime change. The U.S. negotiating posture hasn’t changed since.

The Bush regime claims its pressure, threats, and military moves are aimed at forcing a diplomatic solution to Iran's nuclear program. Perhaps, but the diplomatic "solution" the U.S. is aiming for is one which serves its strategic goal of regime change by weakening and destabilizing Islamic rule, not accommodating to it.

The IRI understands this and has so far refused to go along. Iran's rulers understand that if they accepted U.S. terms, it could be profoundly destabilizing to their regime: undermining its domestic legitimacy—which is bound up with standing up to the U.S. and building Iran into a regional power—and its regional influence and alliances. Iran's pursuit of nuclear enrichment concentrates and symbolizes these goals. This is why Iran's position has hardened and why Iran's rulers are united on pursuing nuclear enrichment.

So these clashing necessities have created a trajectory and momentum toward confrontation, not making a deal. It's true this tendency toward war can also accelerate bringing forward its opposite—negotiation and some kind of resolution. In late May, a *Christian Science Monitor* article, "Recent events suggest both Tehran and Washington may be willing to engage in dialogue," stated:

"Washington - The United States and Iran may be sworn enemies, but both Washington and Tehran have recently put out feelers suggesting that talks rather than confrontation may top each side's agenda. Last week, Gen. David Petraeus told Congress that as commander of U.S. forces in the Middle East and Central Asia, he would recommend a comprehensive approach to Iran that would 'engage by use of the whole of government' the regime in Tehran.

"General Petraeus, who is President Bush's nominee to head U.S. Central Command—a strategically crucial swath stretching from the Middle East and across Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan to Pakistan—aired his preference for diplomacy at the same time that Iran proposed a wide-ranging dialogue with the international community.

"In a mid-May letter to United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki proposed a wide-ranging package of issues for discussion with the UN Security Council, including Iran's nuclear program, and said Iran is prepared to seek 'real and serious cooperation among the concerned parties.'" ("Recent events suggest both Tehran and Washington may be willing to engage in dialogue." Howard Lafranchi, *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 27, 2008)

However, since this was written, both Bush and Rice—while insisting the U.S. is pursuing "diplomacy"—both stated that there's no point in even talking to Iran now. So it appears things are not heading toward a negotiated resolution—which seems likely only if one side or the other "blinks" and backs off first (imperiling their position)—as was the case with Gorbachev in the Soviet Union. Petraeus's statement may have more reflected the need to give the U.S. political and diplomatic cover (and to get Senate confirmation).

So it still seems that making a deal with Iran would require a big shift in the U.S. posture, or capitulation by the IRI, and that such a shift in U.S. negotiating posture would have to be a

product of a fundamental shift in U.S. regional and global strategy. There are forces in the ruling class that feel such a shift is needed, as mentioned above. But there's no real indication the Bush regime is inclined or headed in that direction—quite the opposite.

Regime Change: Military Options

See Appendix B.

E. CONCLUSION

On balance, the elements detailed above, including the deeper necessities driving the U.S. imperialists, the regional trajectory unleashed since Sept. 11th, the escalating clash with Iran, and concrete warning signs of impending war, all point to the predominance of factors and dynamics pushing things toward war.

The Bush regime has sought regime change since 2002-2003, and has not primarily been using military threats to increase its bargaining leverage with Iran (in fact its negotiating positions have been designed to be rejected because they have not taken regime change off the table). The U.S. has been concretely and systematically working to isolate and vilify Iran and overcome the obstacles in its path to the more aggressive containment/rollback of Iran and to war—diplomatically, politically, and militarily.

There seem to have been nodal points, particularly Fall 2007, when war was close. The U.S. pulled back, for one reason or another, and regrouped to deal with dangers and obstacles and to go forward. Now, the Bush team is again on the offensive against Iran, with many immediate signs, on a number of fronts, pointing to a posture of very aggressive confrontation with Iran, at the very least, and more likely (given the overall trajectory and Iran's posture) preparations for military action in the not distant future, quite possibly before Bush leaves office.

ENDNOTES

¹ Briefly as background: The core of the governing institutions of the Iranian regime is anchored in powerful executive institutions that are based within the clergy (and on some bodies, religious lay people) and various factions of the ruling regime are represented within these institutions. *Felayat-e-faqih* (also transliterated as "Velayat-e faqih") is the concept of religious governance that Khomeini brought into being and is the core of the governance with the selection of Supreme leader or ruling jurist (presently Khamenei) by the clerical hierarchy (the Assembly of Experts.) This Supreme Leader has broad powers including approval/dismissal of the president, supervision over the general policies of the government, is commander and chief and has the power to declare war, appoints the judiciary and has control over radio and TV broadcasting and other public institutions. There is a Council of Guardians which is a body of twelve judges, 6 clerical and 6 lay people and it is empowered to review all legislation for its conformity to Islam as well as the Iranian Constitution and it supervises elections. There is also a president (currently Ahmadinejad), a parliament (*majlis*) and an Expediency Council which is designated to arbitrate between the parliament and the council of Guardians on disputed legislation and advisory to the Supreme leader on broad policies of the state and is explicitly entrusted as the institution that is to supervise that the interest of the state rank above "all ordinances that were derived or directly commanded by Allah."

² *Basij* militia is an appendage of the IRGC among the masses, numbering 12.5 millions members according to the Iranian National Army. They act as an auxiliary domestic police (e.g., enforcing hijab and other elements of Islamic public morality, taking down illegal satellite dishes etc.) and have participated as well in civil defense exercises.

³ Major changes have taken place in Iran since the 1979 revolution. Despite losing close to a million people during the war with Iraq in the 80's, the population of the country has actually doubled. Whereas in 1975, 46% of the population was urban, today it is close to 70%, with Tehran a major "Megapolis." Ninety-five percent of the youth (15-25) are literate and 61% of those accepted in Universities are women (2005). More than 35% of the population is under 15 with approximately 60% of the population under 24 years of age. There is widespread unemployment and 40% of the population is below the poverty line, and, as has been well reported in various presses, there has been a significant amount of unrest in relation to conditions of life, including strikes and very significant student and women's movements, even as there has been a major wave of repression in relation to all this. Of note: Iran has one of the highest heroine addiction rates in the world and prostitution is growing significantly. Also of note is that the "brain-drain" (educated émigrés) is 150-180,000 annually.

4. Interestingly, this March, one of the main authors of the report, Thomas Fingar, deputy U.S. director of national intelligence for analysis and Chairman of the National Intelligence Council that drafted the NIE, claimed that the Council didn't assume the report would be published, and if it had it would have formulated the estimate differently. On February 15, he testified to congress that Iran "continues to develop" capabilities that could be swiftly adopted for production of nuclear weapons, and that the U.S. had "shared" new intelligence on this with the IAEA. .

⁵. "Annual Threat Assessment of the Director of National Intelligence" (February 5, 2008) by Director Nat Intel McConnell:

"I want to be very clear in addressing the Iranian nuclear capability. First, there are three parts to an effective nuclear weapons capability: 1. Production of fissile material 2. Effective means for weapons delivery 3. Design and weaponization of the warhead itself. We assess in our recent NIE on this subject that warhead design and weaponization were halted, along with covert military uranium conversion- and enrichment-related activities. Declared uranium enrichment efforts, which will enable the production of fissile material, continue. This is the most difficult challenge in nuclear production. Iran's efforts to perfect ballistic missiles that can reach North Africa and Europe also continue.

"We remain concerned about Iran's intentions and assess with moderate-to-high confidence that Tehran at a minimum is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons. We have high confidence that Iranian military entities were working under government direction to develop nuclear weapons until fall 2003. Also, Iranian entities are continuing to develop a range of technical capabilities that could be applied to producing nuclear weapons. Iran continues its efforts to develop uranium enrichment technology, which can be used both for power reactor fuel and to produce nuclear weapons.

"In our judgment, only an Iranian political decision to abandon a nuclear weapons objective would plausibly keep Iran from eventually producing nuclear weapons—and such a decision is inherently reversible. I note again that two activities relevant to a nuclear weapons capability continue: uranium enrichment that will enable the production of fissile material and development of long-range ballistic missile systems.

"We assess with moderate confidence that convincing the Iranian leadership to forgo the eventual development of nuclear weapons will be difficult given the linkage many within the leadership see between nuclear weapons development and Iran's key national security and foreign policy objectives, and given Iran's considerable effort from at least the late 1980s to 2003 to develop such weapons.

"Iran remains a threat to regional stability and U.S. interests in the Middle East because of its continued support for violent groups, such as HAMAS and Hezbollah, and efforts to undercut pro-Western actors, for example in Lebanon. Tehran's leadership seeks to preserve Iran's Islamic revolutionary government, sovereignty, stability, and territorial integrity while expanding Iran's influence and leadership in the region and the Islamic world.

"Iran also is enhancing its ability to project its military power—primarily with ballistic missiles and naval power—with the ultimate goal of dominating the Gulf region and deterring potential adversaries. It seeks a capacity to disrupt Gulf shipping, especially in the Strait of Hormuz, and thus the operations and reinforcement of U.S. forces in the region—potentially intimidating regional allies into withholding support for U.S. policy. Iran's growing inventory of ballistic and anti-ship cruise missiles is a key element in its efforts to assert its influence.

"Iranian leadership perceptions of a favorable environment are driving its foreign policy to expand Tehran's influence and leadership in the region and the Islamic world and to undermine U.S. influence, which it perceives as inimical to Iran's clerical regime. To achieve its regional aims and mitigate threats, Iran seeks to develop a sphere of influence based on diplomatic and economic relations, religious affinities, and shared anti-US sentiments. While Tehran seeks better relationships with Shia populations worldwide, it continues to be especially strident in denying Israel's right to exist."

"Whether courting other governments or Muslim citizens, Iranian leaders seek political allies and economic partners as well as religious converts. Moreover, Tehran probably judges that local surrogates—usually Shia allies or proxies cultivated over many years—can promote Iran's interests."

6. Gates also said: "I have noticed too much of a tendency toward what might be called 'next-war-itis' -- the propensity of much of the defense establishment to be in favor of what might be needed in a future conflict." He said any major weapons program should have to show it was relevant to the type of counterinsurgency wars being waged in Iraq and Afghanistan and more likely to occupy U.S. forces in future. "Smaller, irregular forces -- insurgents, guerrillas, terrorists -- will find ways, as they always have, to frustrate and neutralize the advantages of larger, regular militaries....And even nation-states will try to exploit our perceived vulnerabilities in an asymmetric way, rather than play to our inherent strengths." (NOTE this re possible Iranian responses to a U.S. attack.)

7. Gates continued: "The needs of those in combat too often were not addressed urgently or creatively" because too

many people in the Pentagon were "preoccupied with future capabilities and procurement programs, wedded to lumbering peacetime process and procedures, stuck in bureaucratic low gear. I believe that one factor that delayed fielding was the pervasive assumption I referred to earlier—and this applies to all the issues I'm discussing today—that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq would not last long, that regimes could be toppled, major combat completed, the insurgency crushed and most U.S. troops withdrawn fairly soon."

8. On May 1, 2008, the Post carried an article with the following interview with Mullen. (We couldn't recall having seen anything quite like this during an election):

"The nation's top military officer warned yesterday that the transition to a new American president will mark a "time of vulnerability" as the United States fights two wars, and he said military leaders are already actively preparing for the changing of the guard. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Navy Adm. Michael G. Mullen, said the U.S. political transition will be "extraordinarily challenging," particularly as the military is engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan and faces interference in both countries from Iran. "Iran is not going away," Mullen said. "We need to be strong and really in the deterrent mode, to not be very predictable" regarding Iran, he said in a meeting with editors and reporters at The Washington Post. "There are very few either briefings or meetings that I'm in that I'm not thinking about 'How does what we're talking about right now transition to next spring?'" Mullen said. ...The transition is unlikely to be smooth, predicted Mullen...."We will be tested. . . . I'm preparing that this country will be tested....Mullen said he hopes that the change in politically appointed leaders will unfold at a wartime pace, rather than at a "peacetime" one."

William Arkin, (May 20, "Tying Obama's Hands?" Washington Post) writes in a similar vein:

"So when I heard last week at a conference on civil-military relations that national security professionals were fretting about this particular presidential transition because it was occurring during "wartime," I was a bit confused. I was also a bit suspicious.

"The argument goes like this: An announcement of withdrawal from Iraq or negotiations with Iran or any kind of olive branch fluttering in an inaugural could lead to danger for the troops, "miscalculation" on the part of our enemies, or might embolden terrorists: In short, unless the new president adheres to the national security professional's guidance regarding continuity, he could be endangering America.

"There is a subtle two-step process going here. One is about the transition itself and one is about the presidency ahead. First, if the aura of "wartime" can be highlighted as the election and inauguration near, how the candidate will see options will naturally be circumscribed. I'm not suggesting a conspiracy to use Iran or some other October surprise to manipulate the election or tie the new president's hand. Many in the national security community truly believe that we are in a "war" and that there is some turning point hanging in the balance in Iraq that demands continuity of policy and purpose."

9. Fuller excerpts follow:

"However, U.S. diplomatic contact with Iran, the sooner the better, still makes sense—not because it will likely produce any breakthroughs, but because what Professor Victor Cha calls "hawkish engagement" can set the U.S. up more effectively to galvanize the kind of growing international pressure on Iran that is probably our only long-term hope of producing better behavior from Teheran. By trying to talk, we better position ourselves to get tough and have others join the effort [by restoring U.S. credibility, making people realize the U.S. isn't bent on war]....Of course, this process has been started to an extent...The United States, many Sunni countries, Israel, and a couple other American allies are already on board. But this coalition needs to grow to include, as full-fledged members, the likes of Russia and China and India—and most of all, major Iraqi politicians. We need to make Teheran fear that the sanctions will continue to tighten, someday perhaps even extending to its oil trade if its behavior fails to improve or

in fact worsens. We also need to disabuse Iranians of their arrogant notion they can play all sides of the Iraq situation, seeking influence with every major group and most politicians through a combination of bribes, threats, weapons sales, and terrorist training. That said, as part of a broader realpolitik strategy, talking with Iran—while preparing for the next steps after those talks fail—is still the right thing to do.” (“Hawkish Engagement Needed with Iran?”, Washington Times, May 15, 2008)

Walter Russell Mead of the Council on Foreign Relations (LAT 7/25/06?):

“Clearly, the administration isn't spoiling for new crises, to say nothing of new wars, in the Middle East. But the Bush Doctrine is pretty clear on this point. Iran is an authoritarian regime pursuing weapons of mass destruction while maintaining links to terrorists. An administration faced with an Iran that rejects diplomacy would have to either eat the Bush Doctrine or press forward toward military confrontation -- hoping that coercive diplomacy, backed up by a credible threat of force, would persuade Iran's mullahs that compromise was the only option.”

¹⁰. Francis Fukuyama, who broke with the neocons, makes a similar argument for deterrence because regime change is impossible while Iran is determable:

“The U.S. is hardly in a position to invade and occupy yet another country, especially one three times larger than Iraq. An attack would have to be conducted from the air, and it would not result in regime change, which is the only long-term means of stopping the WMD programme. The U.S. would be even more isolated in such a war than during the Iraqi campaign, with only Israel as a certain ally. I believe that there are reasons for being less alarmist. Iran is, after all, a state, with equities to defend - it should be determable by other states possessing nuclear weapons; it is a regional and not a global power; it has in the past announced extreme ideological goals but has seldom acted on them when important national interests were at stake; and its decision-making process appears neither unified nor under the control of the most radical forces.” (The Guardian, January 31 2007)

11. Brzezinski sees Iran’s increased influence as a very negative development and his main line of argument seems to be to bolster U.S. ties with Europe in order to be able to effectively contain Iran. In the 2004 study he co-authored, along with Robert Gates, there was discussion of a “Shanghai” type communique with Iran—but it was more in the spirit of containment—a *modus vivendi* not a grand bargain/partnership with the IRI.

¹² “The notion that the U.S.-Iran standoff can be resolved solely through economic incentives and limited security guarantees is premised on the realities of yesteryear’s Middle East. Current facts on the ground are quite different -- Iran’s regional influence is unquestionable and rolling Iran back out of Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and perhaps even Gaza may no longer be realistic. The question is no longer -- if it ever was -- what economic incentives are required to change Iranian behavior. Rather, to reach a settlement with Iran that could help stabilize Iraq, prevent a Taliban resurrection in Afghanistan, reach a political deal in Lebanon and create a better climate to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the U.S. must arguably grant Iran a role in the region and begin focusing on how to influence Iranian behavior rather than how to roll back Iranian influence. Neither Washington nor Tehran can wish the other away. Sooner or later, Iran and the U.S. must learn how to share the region.” (“Can the U.S. and Iran Share the Middle East?”, Trita Parsi Apr 22)

APPENDIX A

Regime Change, the Internal Situation in Iran, and the Neocon Calculus

As analyzed in the main report, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is a highly structured and coherent “theo-hegemonic” regime with well-developed organs of state power and networks out to the masses (and obtaining support from sections of the masses). How might regime change take place under such circumstances, and how might regime change take place when an escalation of hostility and attack might *initially* result in greater unity at the top and broader popular support for the regime?

There are discernible outlines of a neocon strategy for regime change in Iran—a strategy that takes this question of relative coherence into account, and that operates with some understanding of the brittleness of the regime (as also analyzed in the main report). We believe there is strong evidence that this strategy is informing much of the Bush regime’s forward planning for Iran and actual moves to attack it militarily.

Central to the neocon view is that the U.S. must continue to exert and step up economic and political pressure on and diplomatic isolation of the regime, and ratchet up military pressure on the regime—including threat of invasion and actual military attack. From the neocon perspective, this kind of intensified pressure from without could possibly accelerate and widen fracturing in Iranian society, and even possibly at the top of the regime. The neocon assessment holds that such external pressure in combination with other factors—including a more cohered and legitimized external opposition, the unleashing of and support for national minority resistance and uprising, and promotion of dissent and opposition to the regime—could bring about instability, possibly civil war, and chaos that could lead to regime change.

From what we have been able to make of this neocon calculus of regime change, they see the need to crack the regime in such a way that defections might take place at the top and that they may be looking towards transitional phenomena, like “a coup d’état within the regime,” that might open the door to the actual destruction of the regime. They see the need and the basis as well to turn broad but inchoate disaffection with the regime into actual opposition, and at the same time explicitly seek to turn more organized reform movements and currents into antagonists of the regime. It sees oppositional forces from within elite quarters in society, including former elements of the regime, becoming a kind of “magnetic field” around which some new political order could be constituted. But none of this is possible without external pressure, military threat, and actual attack. And there can be no process of unraveling leading to regime change without some smashing, dismantling, or dissolution of the core institutions of theocratic hegemony, particularly the Revolutionary Guard (IRGC).

The neocons do not see this as a slam-dunk—far from it. And much of their strategic calculus pivots on the primacy and efficacy of smashing hostile regimes and “managing” the anarchy that comes with this. But they argue there is a basis to create a “regime change” dynamic, even if it

does not result in that immediately. And, very importantly, they see U.S. imperialism facing a real “window of necessity”: both on a regional and an international level. If action is not taken, Iran could become even more of an impediment to the interests and designs of U.S. imperialism.

In what follows, we explore this hypothesis by beginning to examine potentially destabilizing and unraveling forces within the regime and outside of it, including outside of Iran. And we provide initial supporting evidence that this strategy is actually in play.

What follows is a rough and initial examination of two main questions in relation to this hypothesis: 1) More on the potential for the ruling factions in Iran to fracture and the centrifugal forces outside of the ruling circles (among the masses in Iran, national questions and forces within the diaspora) and 2) The theoretical argumentation and strategic conception of the neocons on the basis for regime change and what actually the U.S. government has been doing and putting into place in relation to this.

From Factional Fighting to Possible Fragmentation

Universally recognized, and especially emphasized by the neocon analysts is the fact that all three of the main factions of the Iranian ruling circles, not simply the hardliners, have been loyal to the regime and its defining institution, the *felayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist/Supreme Leader). The point is that the reform movement was and continues to be a movement that was attempting to reform the IRI from within, and within the parameters of the IRI. For various reasons a swing to the "Tehran Spring" took place in 1997 and was actually allowed as a response to internal contradictions as well as at least in retrospect, to facilitate an opening to the West.

As discussed elsewhere, the Bush Regime slammed the door on Khatami in 2002 with the “axis of evil” speech. Essentially what the U.S. was telling Khatami and any and all advocating political liberalization and neoliberal economic reform, was that if you have not broken with the regime, we are not going to deal with you, and in fact will act to obstruct you. All this also contributed to Ahmadinejad’s election. The following from Ray Takeyh’s *Hidden Iran* is important to note:

“The fact that Khatami and his cohort confined themselves within the redlines established by the theocratic elite and retreated when confronted by conservative intransigence further estranged them from their constituents. In the end, the reformers simply lacked the courage in their endlessly refined convictions. The reform movement won the battle of ideas, but then had no strategy for implementation of those ideas.” (P 51-52)

A more materialist explanation for the “lack of courage” of the reformists that Takeyh notes harkens back to the analysis made in the executive summary of this report regarding the brittleness of the regime, that “on the one hand, the regime has this absorptive and integrative capacity. On the other hand, its theocratic nature, and the power of its theocratic core, throws up political and economic barriers to modernization, deeper engagement with the world economy, and adapting institutions to profound demographic and social changes taking place in Iranian

society. But again, it is precisely its theocratic nature that coheres the regime. This is what makes for the ‘brittleness’ of the IRI.”

And a number of people—from the neo-cons to mainstream liberal analysts to people very close to revolutionary forces in Iran—have commented that splits within the conservative/hardliner camp of major significance have been emerging, including presenting themselves in relation to the most recent elections (March 2008). There was a disqualification of 2200 candidates mainly from the camp of the “reformers” going into the election and an element of the infighting that had been going on was a continuation of what has been called a “silent coup” that began with the election of Ahmadinejad, and which resulted in this election even more (former) IRGC forces taking over key political positions.

This all may well reflect the regime preparing for possible war with the U.S. and more generally the toll the U.S.’s strategy has begun to take, intersecting with the inherent brittleness of this regime. That is, these developments have further isolated the neo-liberal reformers from the heart of power and continued to alienate their base among the masses. This has had the effect of pushing a section of the masses more fully toward breaking with the regime as well as fostering even deeper divisions, widening the cracks among more core forces etc (Of note: the neocons do seem to have embraced high ranking former officials, including the original co-founder of the IRGC, who broke with the regime a few years ago and is now in exile.)

One specific that is worth some examining is the question of Rafsanjani (president of the IRI from 1989-1997.) The CPI(MLM) has pointed to him—with his alliances in the military—as representative of forces in Iran that possibly see war as a catalyst for a “velvet revolution” or military coup. The neocons pretty universally target him as a fount of evil and as being fully behind the “program for nuclear weapons” and this raised some doubts to us about the possibility of this scenario. But since the CPI(MLM) raised this (in the *Haghigat* article from November 2007, “Public Opinion Fabrication and Military Deployment for a Horrendous War,” they raise that he could be vying for an opportunity to pull off a coup), this was looked into in more depth and there are issues of relevance worth paying attention to.¹ It may well be the case that the neocons would not find a regime headed by Rafsanjani as acceptable (and we believe the Brzezinski/Gates led 2004 task force document* basically implies that if a regime change happened and his grabbing power was the result, it would be no different on the key strategic concerns of the U.S.). But could a coup or power grab by Rafsanjani be the beginning of an ultimate unraveling? Could there be a civil war brewing (or hope of a civil war brewing on the part of the imperialists) among these key players in large part provoked (in conjunction with its own internal contradictions) by a response to the U.S.’s targeting of the regime in the manner it has been? Could this be part of an imperialist gambit to serve the ultimate goal of regime change?

Another growing division in society relating to the ruling circles but also to the masses broadly is in relation to religion:

**Iran: Time for a New Approach*, report of an independent task force sponsored by the Council of Foreign Relations, 2004.

Two overall points on this:

First: While the majority of the people in Iran adhere to Shi'a Islam, the majority of the Iranian masses are apparently not so very devout in that less than 15% attend religious services weekly (Brzezinski/Gates IBID). Obviously cultural influences of religion extend far beyond weekly observances. But many analysts and also even very mainstream Iranian political activists (even with Islamic influences themselves) have been raising that many of the youth, because of the oppressiveness of this regime, are very anti-religious and are very opposed to the ruling doctrine and institutions of the regime.

Second: The neo cons have been emphasizing (and it would be good to get a scientific assessment/confirmation if this is true), that there is a tremendous amount of actual opposition to the regime in Qom (the Shi'a "Vatican" and where all the seminaries are located) among the clergy. The neocons point to Montazeri's^{*} house arrest, claim him as their own and say there are thousands of other clerics imprisoned. It is well known that there are clerics who never took up the doctrine of *felayat-e faqih* (see Main Report endnote 1) and would have preferred (in the briefest terms for our purposes here) to have the clergy continue in their capacity of "rendering unto Caesar..." that was the historic tradition for centuries before 1979. That is, this doctrine of *felayat-e faqih* is a modern invention and many theological arguments have been raised (and continue to be raised) in opposition to it. Also, there are apparently clerics who speak against Iran's support of the Palestinians (a core issue of the regime) and also openly against the pursuit of nuclear enrichment (not just nuclear weapons, again, another core issue) [Takeyh, *Hidden Iran*, 2006].

There is also some potential "unraveling" synergy in terms of Al Sistani in Iraq who as a Shi'a cleric has standing far above Khomeini and is himself very opposed to the core doctrine of the IRI and that Karbala was a location of exiled opposition to Iranian regimes historically (we didn't really pursue this element very deeply but it is again an issue the neocons point to).

A U.S. base of support in Qom that actually opposes the regime (as opposed to being part of it) of any significance would probably be of important utility in any fracturing of the power base of the mullocracy and it is conceivable that in a post "regime change Iran" the imperialist would be willing to accept a constitutional framework that was not fully secular, even as the opposition forces the neocons are backing in the main put forward a program for a "secular democratic" state.

Potential Centrifugal Forces Outside of the Current Ruling Circle within Iran

"Nobody knows with certainty whether revolution can succeed in Iran, or, if it can, how long it will take. But tyrannies often fall with unexpected speed, and in recent years a surprising number of revolutions have toppled tyrants all over the world. Most of them got help from us. Most revolutions, including our own, required external support in order to succeed, and there is a widespread belief in Iran that a democratic revolution cannot defeat the mullahs

^{*}A cleric in his late 80s who has opposed the regime for some time and had been one time considered the likely successor to Khomeini.

unless it is supported by the United States. They are waiting for concrete signs of our support.

“Support means, above all, a constant critique by our leaders of the regime’s murderous actions, and constant encouragement of freedom and democracy. Too many of us have forgotten the enormous impact of Ronald Reagan’s denunciation of the Soviet Union as an “evil empire.” The intellectual elite of this country condemned that speech as stupid and dangerous, yet the Soviet dissidents later told us that they considered it enormously important, because it showed that we understood the nature of the Soviet regime, and were committed to its defeat. In like manner, the Iranians need to see that we want an end to the Islamic Republic. We need to tell them that we want, and show them that we will support, regime change in their country, peaceful, non-violent regime change, not revolution from the barrel of a gun.”

Michael A. Ledeen* testimony before the Congressional Committee on International Relations in support of the Iran Freedom and Support Act, March 8, 2006

There is much that could be summed up about potential centrifugal forces outside of the ruling circles and more than we will be able to within the confines of this report. As the above testimony indicates, the neocons—and actual U.S. government’s current policy—seems very much aimed at encouraging and nurturing a movement to help topple the regime. To explore this a bit more, we will examine some significant elements of the terrain in Iran. The intent here is not to do a full summation as to how one might work to transform and re-polarize for an actual revolutionary advance (and what would be the actual road to accomplishing a new democratic revolution as a transition to the socialist revolution in the concrete in a country such as Iran), but to pinpoint some of the dynamics the imperialists are possibly banking on and even in some ways already concretely acting upon and intersecting with. One question of significance that we will not be able to address in this preliminary outline is the whole struggle around the oppression of women which is a major faultline in Iranian society; another is the youthful character of Iran and the profound alienation many of these youth have for the ruling regime. Both of these sections of the people would likely be a major element in any upheaval in Iran. How exactly the imperialist might be vying to “play those cards” is worthy of investigation and examination.

Civil Society

While there is much of Iranian society that is bound up with the regime and its defining institutions, including broadly among the masses (eg the *basij* militia, the Friday prayer leaders structure etc.) there is also a definite, if embryonic civil society (including beyond the family institutions). This includes everything from informal gatherings of youth in private homes and hikes in the mountains surrounding Tehran to more formal organization taking shape through

*Michael L Ledeen is a leading Neoconservative who is said to frequently advise Bush, was Alexander Haig's adviser during the Reagan administration and co-founded the Coalition for Democracy in Iran (existed from 2001-2005) and he is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute

burgeoning NGOS that began during Khatami's "Tehran spring" largely financed through European governments and entities. There has been reported chilling and stifling of these NGOS including in the form of transferring some of the work of secular western supported entities to the work of Islamic charities. During the Khatami period, there were over 8000 NGOs operating in Iran but it is estimated by some accounts that close to 1/3 have been shut down in the last few years. The internet in Iran is very important and there are between 3-5 million internet users, possibly the largest number in the Middle East with Persian being the 4th most used weblog language and there is apparently a very vibrant internet café scene. This is an avenue for dissemination of ideas, means of organizing and of course a portal to the outside of Iran, including an avenue to try to mold, organize and nurture the democracy movements by the imperialists (note they allocated funds for this) but also an important avenue for progressive and revolutionary minded people. The regime does close down websites, but it is apparently difficult for them to fully suppress and control this.

This civil society has served as one outlet for a certain degree of vitality for a considerable section of the masses of Iran but also as a certain "safety valve" for the regime--which has begun to close it off in some significant ways in the last period. And in a point we will return to shortly, U.S. policy seems to be consciously aimed at speeding the closing of this "safety valve."

The anti-regime/"pro-democracy" forces within Iran:

Reporters have observed that there seems to be extremely widespread disillusionment among the masses in relation to the reform movement as indicated in the earlier discussion on factions within the regime. This has led it seems on some level to demoralization and floundering among the base of that movement. The voter turnout country wide this past March was possibly higher than anticipated (it was estimated as a 60% showing) BUT very interestingly, the turn out in Tehran was very, very low (some estimates were 30%) and the hardline candidates won with a huge margin which indicates that the reform base did not turn out (and/or this could be the product of widespread pre-election disqualification of reform candidates in Tehran). One thing that is important to draw attention to is the extensive controversy around U.S. "democratic funding" among these type of forces, what that represents and reflects and how the neocons have responded to this.

According to the neocons, they have ties "to many forces" within Iran, supposedly working to topple the regime and more than eager to receive financial support from the U.S. government. But the majority of well known bourgeois democratic activists like Ganji (a former IRGC in exile) or Ibrahim Yazdi (in Iran) not only have been speaking out against possible U.S. invasion of Iran, but also against any U.S. government support or assistance for the Iranian democracy movement in that this would just be an invitation to be suppressed or isolated. The kiss of death here does not seem to be simply the repressiveness of the regime (though that is obviously a factor) but the general distrust of the U.S. government because of the powerful "demonstration" effect of the Iraqi war (not the demonstration effect the imps actually had wanted!) as well as the history of the U.S. in 1953 etc. and the attitude towards that among the democratic activists themselves and the masses more broadly. At the same time, there also seems to be a strong desire for cultural and economic relations with U.S. society. Neocons chastise these forces who reject

U.S. funding or criticize the U.S. in any way of only wanting to reform the theocracy, or as Michel Rubin put it,

“Some Iranian reformers do condemn outside support. But this is no surprise. In Iran, reformers by definition seek to perfect theocracy, not implement democracy. When Iranian students rose in July 1999 to demand freedom of speech and assembly, the reformist president...Khatami, supported their expulsion and incarceration. In the words of writer Laura Secor, the reformers are “the loyal opposition in a fascist state.” To base U.S. strategy toward Iranian civil society upon those who seek to subordinate popular sovereignty to unelected clerics is like filtering efforts to protect Darfur refugees through their Janjaweed oppressors.” (2006)

The democratic movement (and many progressive and even liberal bourgeois forces in the U.S.) argue that those who want to promote democracy should encourage “people to people” exchange and lift the sanctions against U.S. civilians and business from donating to Iranian causes or Iranian Civil society groups. (Apparently there are restrictions in place that are not easy to overcome obstructing such activity). **But the U.S. government is actually responding in exactly the opposite direction. To the greatest degree possible (not totally possible because of the internet etc.) they are making the terms that if you want contact with the U.S., it must be on the basis of actual opposition to the IRI.** In fact, their stance seems to be aimed at mainly fostering further polarization and to avoid contributing to creating any “safety valves”. This is in line with the sanctions the Bush Regime tried to impose a couple of years ago which would have made it illegal to print any article from any Iranian in a periodical in this country. This was overturned in court, but the effect, if it had gone ahead, would have been to further “ghettoize” the intelligentsia of Iran, forcing them to break with the regime (literally leave) if there were any need or desire to be part of international discourse in the sciences, including medicine, or other academic pursuits.

Masses in Iran, including the modern middle strata are very disillusioned with the reformers and continue to be alienated from the government, but are caught in this dilemma and the reality is that they are going to be faced with a sharpening contradiction and less ground to stand on unless diverted by the emergence of a genuinely revolutionary alternative (which is quite possible). Left on the terms of the bourgeois democratic movement itself, they will more and more find themselves forced into the camp and under the leadership of U.S. imperialists.

The neocons’ discussions of regime change also reference Poland’s solidarity movement frequently and when it comes to Iran, they have become passionate defenders of workers’ rights. Interestingly, according to Znet (and we were able to confirm some of this independently) the National Endowment for Democracy (NED—See Appendix A endnote #2 for more description of the NED) had been funding the Iran Teacher’s Association (in the range of 300K) even before the Iran Freedom and Support Act². The Women’s Learning Partnership and the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS) obtained 185,000 from the NED to “support the emergence of a sustainable independent labor movement “ in Iran. (Znet states that the ACILS received 600K between ‘97 and 2001 in relation to the close links it had to the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers which was involved in strike actions against Chavez in

2003.) The ACILS website claimed they were heavily involved in a major strike of transportation workers in Iran in 2006.

National Questions and potential for “Balkanization”

There are four national questions that most of the attention is focused on in discussion and analysis of “ethnic unrest” within Iran: Azerbaijani, Kurds, Ahwazi Arabs (in Khuzestan in SW Iran) and the Baluchis. (There are also other ethnic minorities, including with ethnic movements but these four are the most significant and relevant to this discussion) There are national movements of various sorts among all four of these groups. Most analysts share the opinion that “in Iran, most ethnic groups seeking expansion of their cultural rights, view themselves as Iranian citizens and seek to change Tehran’s policies, not Iran’s borders” [*International Herald Tribune* 6-03-06.] The general consensus is that only in Kurdish areas is there any popular demand of significance for actual secession from Iran, linked with forces working towards a greater Kurdistan and pointing as well to the uprising there in 1979 and on a more minor scale, but of some significance apparently, in 2005 (more on Kurdistan below). “Federalization” as opposed to “secession” is what is described as being advanced by these ethnic minorities and the movements among them (this is both in social democratic analysis and most bourgeois press accounts, including neocon, and applies we believe to most of the Kurdish forces as well). The demand for “Federalization” has also actually become a major rallying cry of the neocon forces in relation to the ethnic minority question of Iran and some forces that have apparently allied with the neocons have paired up this demand for federalization explicitly with the demand for regime change.

The predominantly Azerbaijani populated areas of Iran (there is both a North and South Azerbaijan in Iran) border the country of (formerly Soviet) Azerbaijan. Azerbaijanis are the second largest ethnic group in Iran (approximately 26% of the population. Persians are 51% of the Iranian population) This area has witnessed riots against the regime which were violently suppressed, most notably ones in response to an anti Azerbaijani cartoon in 2006 and it has been widely reported that U.S. and Israeli operatives are active in that area. There have also been reports of large protests in Tehran demanding the right to have Azeri be the language of their schools etc. While there has been increased cultural and economic exchange since independence between the country of Azerbaijan and the Iranian Azerbaijanis, from what we could find out, there is little indication that there is any movement in Iranian Azerbaijan to secede from Iran and join Azerbaijan. Iranian Azerbaijani's are actually very well represented in the ruling circles of the IRI. Supreme Leader Khamenei is an Azerbaijani as are a number of other prominent individuals in the regime. On the other hand, former soviet Azerbaijan currently houses U.S. bases and Azerbaijan could be part of a military pathway into Iran in some scenarios or at minimum, provides a porous border for infiltration of U.S. or Israeli operatives in addition to whatever unrest might emerge among the masses if the regime were in crisis.

The Ahwazi Arabs of the province of Khuzestan are reported to be some of the poorest and most oppressed sections of the masses in all of Iran and despite the fact that 80-90% of Iran's oil reserves are in that region, very little of the oil revenue has been used for development there (many of these Arabs work in the oil fields and there are also tribal groupings in the

countryside). While not a large percent of the total population of Iran (between 3-4%), their strategic location make this very oppressed population a focus for imperialist intrigue and a potential weak point for the regime with strategic implications given the role of oil in Iran's economy. (It is widely held that the British in particular have fomented actual terrorist activity there and there have been many bombings. Significantly, there is a British "Ahwazi Friendship Society".) The Arabs of Khuzestan are mainly Shi'a and while this was not actually investigated in the concrete, there is likely a relationship between the masses of this region and forces and political alliances—including involving the Iranian government—among Iraqi Shi'a since the U.S. occupation. To give a sense of the vulnerability the regime feels about this area, when there was unrest there in the recent past (2005), it was reported that they sent in thousands of troops to quell it. The riots were sparked by the publication of a letter supposedly written by the then vice president of Iran outlining a plan for ethnic cleansing. It is widely believed that this letter was a "psych ops" hoax perpetuated by the British. Also, 8 years of the Iran-Iraq war was apparently focused largely on this area. Note that the plan to take out the IRGC *Qods* forces discussed in the U.S. military strategy appendix to this report is actually focused in Khuzestan (this is where the Fahr garrison is located).

Baluchistan has been the site of terrorist activity claimed by a fundamentalist Sunni group. Eg., in February 2007 a bus was blown up carrying Revolutionary Guards killing 11 people in Zahedan, the capital of Iranian Baluchistan. (Something similar also happened this year.) Baluchis actually live in a contiguous area that spans the southeast corner of Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan and as we understand it, it is a very primitive area.

Kurdistan is a more complicated question in that it is also bound up with the Kurdish question in Turkey, Iraq and Syria. There is an Iranian Kurdish group, PJAK (Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan), that is involved in active armed conflicts with the IRI. PJAK is described by many to be related to the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) of Turkey. Iran also ostensibly has been shelling parts of Iraqi Kurdistan targeting PJAK forces in what some have described as a low intensity proxy war between the U.S. and Iran. (Apparently there was also in April 2008 a joint treaty between Iran and Turkey centered on Kurdistan—all very complicated...). Talabani's emergence as president of Iraq has apparently influenced sections of the Iranian Kurdish movement in the direction of support for the U.S. and it is the one place where various press accounts describe some support among sections of the masses for an actual U.S. invasion of Iran. These sentiments are by no means universal and there are political forces in Kurdistan that are not at all influenced by Talabani's ascendancy in U.S.-occupied Iraq etc. (The situation in Kurdistan is complex and no attempt is being made here to give a comprehensive overview, let alone analysis, of all the forces active in Iranian Kurdistan.)

It is generally assessed that turmoil emerging from conditions indigenous to these areas—from the actual national oppression these masses face—and/or from activity fomented or supported by Western Imperialism/ Israel can potentially be a significant factor in contributing to the instability of the regime, and it is clear that this is part of the U.S.'s game plan. There has been terrorist activity (as well as political protests and military campaigns) carried out against the regime in some of these areas, including in the recent past, but the regime has been able to ultimately weather these. But this was without any "full court" press otherwise going on. In the

event of a military strike by the U.S. or just unrelenting pressure causing more instability, Kurdistan and in some ways, especially Khuzestan both pose in their own way potential significant strategic vulnerabilities for the regime even without the threat of an actual secessionist movement. Even the Sunni fundamentalist activity in Baluchistan could prove to be much more than a minor problem in that context. (Though recently it was reported that Pakistan had wiped out this group.)

The Kurdish resistance, while bound up with other problems and contradictions for the U.S. in the region (and hence, Iran has some options as well), also does have some organized forces openly and actively allied with the U.S. and Israel. While Turkey is an actual fetter to this, it is not out of the question that moves to sever Iranian Kurdistan from Iran could be a significant part of the mix and/or an Iranian Kurdistan demand for federalization could be part of and contribute to a U.S. attempt to foment a toppling of the regime. (Note, there is overlap between Kurdish and Azeri historic areas.)

Before ending this section on the ethnic minorities it would be important to at least briefly address the much more radical “Balkanization” plans that have been floated out there, most notably by a retired military officer and analyst and columnist Ralph Peters. This has gotten some play in the Atlantic Monthly (January/February 2008) and among some progressive forces (an informative article that this might actually be the plan behind what the U.S. is doing in the region today was posted at Globalresearch.ca on 11/18/06—“Plans for Redrawing the Middle East: The Project for a ‘New Middle East’ by Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya). Peters has written guest columns for USA Today, the New York Post, Arms Force Journal, The Weekly Standard and much more. Significantly and one of the reasons we thought it important to mention his theory at least briefly is that he is also currently a member of McCain’s foreign-policy and security advisory team.

The crux of his argument is the desirability of “creative destruction” of the “artificial boundaries” imposed on the region by Europeans and go back to more “natural blood borders.” Some argue that this is an actual plan (hidden agenda) of the ruling class, neocons in particular. This plan, as it has been outlined—would entail a major dismemberment and economic devastation of Iran. The idea would be to form an Arab Shi'a state that would include the Iranian province of Khuzestan (with 90% of Iran's oil and natural gas reserves) and also an Azerbaijani state combining much of Iranian Azerbaijan with former Soviet Azerbaijan (though in this model, it seems that Tabriz would become part of a “Free Kurdistan”). Iran, which would literally once again be “Persia,” would get Herat from Afghanistan, not much of a tradeoff!

The previously referenced article from Globalresearch argues that there has been a shift and the State Department started using the term ‘The New Middle East,’ which they argue was “a confirmation of an Anglo-American-Israeli ‘military roadmap’ in the Middle East. This project, which has been in the planning stages for several years, consists of creating an arc of instability, chaos, violence extending from Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria to Iraq, the Persian Gulf, Iran, and the borders of NATO-garrisoned Afghanistan.” While the Globalresearch analysis may be in part confounding result with conscious intent, there is both the question that the U.S. has been willing to unleash “managed anarchy” in changing the contours of Middle East to reach certain

political objectives (e.g., the destruction of the Baath regime) and in doing so has begun a process of possible federalization in Iraq, at least in relation to the Kurdistan question which could conceivably ultimately end up taking things in the direction of much more radical redrawing of national boundaries regionally, possibly even in some ways along the lines of Ralph Peter's map. As mentioned above, there are counterweights to things unfolding in this direction (Turkey for one) and of course other, even bigger contradictions that would come into play if the U.S. attempted this.

While things developing in this direction are not fully out of the question, the more likely way that the national question in Iran intersects with the question of regime change from the vantage of the U.S. imperialists is: 1) the political linking up of the demands of the oppressed nationalities as an important political front for regime change; 2) specific challenges (uprisings etc.), even likely military, in Khuzestan (which again, even small forces rising up would necessitate a major response by the regime) and Kurdistan as well; 3) Trouble in Azerbaijan and Baluchistan, though likely more absorbable by the regime (less of a strategic threat for different reasons) would add to the stresses and strains on the regime.

There has been a recent revelation by Andrew Cockburn [Counterpunch May 2, 2008] of a secret finding authorizing a covert offensive against the Iranian regime to the tune of \$300 million that according to those familiar with its contents, "is unprecedented in scope." If this report is reliable, the amount of funding allocated could well indicate that it is going to forces conducting actual military operations of various sorts against the regime, such as the *Mujahedeen e-Khalq* (MEK—more on them below) or likely various Kurdish, Baluchi and Ahwazi Arab forces as well as political oppositional forces. As mentioned above, it is fairly widely assumed/reported (including by ABC in 2007)—and claimed by the IRI—that the U.S. has for some time been supporting sabotage by some of these forces. The CPI(MLM) corroborates these claims describing readied "paramilitary groups that are located in exploited nations' lands that are set up by the 'Special Forces' of Israel and America." [Haghigat #36 November 2007] This new covert finding, if true, is a significant infusion of funds that would allow a significant expansion of support for various forms of opposition, including with a military component, and maybe only by coincidence, matches the exact amount proposed as a first step in a 6 month plan of "How to Topple the Mullahs" by the neoconservative, Kenneth Timmerman (The timing of this finding also coincides roughly with the ruling in Britain that took the MEK off the British terrorist list...again, more on this below.)

More on the Diaspora

While there are many particulars and even the overall thesis of the analysis of the regime and the potentiality for it to be toppled by the U.S. that we would want to discuss and corroborate with individuals with a much deeper familiarity of the terrain, the question of the character of oppositional forces in the diaspora and their relationship to forces and masses based in Iran (actual or even potential) is something we felt we had the weakest handle on for a variety of reasons, including the inability to read Farsi! So everything we are saying in this section we are presenting in advance as very tentative.

The Iranian diaspora is greater than 2 million people and it is located primarily in the U.S., and Europe and there is a smaller community in Japan. There are many political parties and organizations (these are being examined from the point of view of potential relationships to U.S. imperialism). Briefly on trends:

Royalists—As early as 2003 the Bush Regime had begun working with the Prince Pahlavi to build public opinion against the Iranian regime. The Bush Regime (according to Trita Parsi in his book *Treacherous Alliance*, 2007) summed up that they had hitched their wagon to a dead horse. While according to the Brzezinski/Gates task force report, a sizable minority of the Iranians in the diaspora are monarchists/Pahlavi supporters (there seems to be a number of parties that are for a “constitutional monarchy”) and there are some masses in Iran who now look back at the days of the Shah with nostalgia. But also in most accounts (mainstream and otherwise) even this “nostalgic group” in the main does not think that Prince Pahlavi is in touch with the current realities of the Iranian people and would not be an appropriate ruler for Iran today. It is interesting to note that the U.S. did not utilize the Prince to announce the revelations about the Iranian nuclear program in 2002, but instead a group associated with the MEK (they apparently had considered having the Shah make this disclosure, but he supposedly declined). The significance of these royalist forces might potentially lie in a) funding of efforts to overthrow the IRI, b) possibly as part, but not the leading force, in some coalition emerging (and this might even happen primarily to facilitate funding such efforts. The Shah’s base is largely propertied).

Traditional democratic and leftist forces—Our ignorance is primary on this. We have just discovered a discussion on the internet about a major coalescing of forces, supposedly involving everything from monarchists to the MEK as well as many other political groups, that reportedly has been going on in Europe over the last two years. If this report is accurate and an accurate accounting of the forces involved, it would be important to examine the character of these efforts and if and to what extent these efforts are connected to Western Imperialism as well as whether these forces have any support in Iran—and if so, what is the character of that support. Could threats of war serve to pull together such coalitions out of what was a fairly fractured network of émigré activists? Or another way to put this is could this coming together have any relationship to the neocons’ constant refrain (and threat) “that the best way to avoid military confrontation is regime change”?

Mujahedeen e-Khalq—MEK

The MEK has been headquartered in Iraq since the Iran/Iraq war. They have an estimated force of 4,000-10,000 apparently with ties and influence within Iran. They have a political united front arm, the NCRI (National Council of Resistance of Iran) which states it is acting as a “parliament in exile” and aims to establish a democratic, secular and coalition government in Iran and self-describes as a “broad coalition of democratic Iranian organizations, groups and personalities founded in 1981 by Massoud Rajavi.” (There are only one or two other groups involved in the NCRI.) The MEK is not “marxist” but “democratic Islamist”.

They have been located in a camp about 100 kilometers from the Iranian Border, and about the same distance from Bagdad. They were supposedly disarmed after the American invasion but

some of the literature argues that they were only relieved of major armaments and have actually been playing a role in the re-stabilization of Iraq.

Discussed in more depth in Appendix A endnote #2, there is a group, the IPC (Iranian Policy Committee) who are very pro MEK and have been working to remove the MEK's official designation by the U.S. as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. At the core of the IPC are former military, National Security Council, CIA, a former ambassador to Saudi Arabia etc. The founder of the IPC actually originally founded the earlier mentioned "Coalition for a Democratic Iran" (CDI) but that dissolved in 2005 and the IPC was started. This timing, and the fact that the other founders of the Coalition for a Democratic Iran are very anti MEK, would have one assume that this difference over the MEK is what prompted the dissolution of the CDI.

Most of the members of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) are very anti-MEK. This is probably for a combination of reasons including the AEI's vehement anti communism and MEK's quasi Marxist beginnings and the fact that they claim the MEK are terrorists and responsible for the death of Americans in the 1970s. They also point to their having worked with/given harbor by Saddam Hussein and point to the fact that the MEK is discredited in Iran because of their siding with Saddam in the war between Iran and Iraq. This latter point definitely has some validity according to a wide variety of forces though the MEK has a substantial internet following in Iran and worldwide.

While the arguments in favor of the MEK by the IPC are detailed, mainly they come down to that there needs to be an armed resistance that is genuinely Iranian resistance and they too argue that this would be the one way to possibly avoid direct U.S. military involvement in toppling the regime.

One last point on the MEK: Of note is that a former spokesman and lobbyist for the MEK is currently the Middle Eastern terrorism expert for Fox News (Ali Reza Jafarzadeh) and key board members of the IPC not only have the government histories indicated but most are currently related to private Haliburton type corporations and are regular guest analysts on Fox News.

That some forces among the neocons are very anti-MEK does not necessarily mean that the U.S. is not already working with the MEK or that potentially could unleash them further. Maliki's party (Al Dawa) was also hated by many neocons because of claims of terrorist activity against the U.S. in Lebanon and in Kuwait. But other factors determined the need to rely on them.

The British taking the MEK off their terrorist list is very significant and the speculation is that they will be taken off of the EU list soon. There are a number of U.S. politicians, senators etc., as well as the forces in the IPC and the Israeli lobby, all of which are arguing that the MEK's status should be changed. Most of these forces argue that they were put on the list in '97 as a gesture of "good will" when Khatami first came into power and that using them this way as a bargaining chip is now counterproductive.

ENDNOTES to Appendix A

1. More on Rafsanjani:

- a. In 2007 Rafsanjani was elected to head the Assembly of Experts, which is an extremely pivotal position and he ran for that position on a program of increasing the monitoring of Khamenei. One Iranian we spoke with theorized that this ascendancy might represent pulling Rafsanjani close to the chest in order to “keep an eye on him and keep him in the fold.”
- b. Rafsanjani apparently pulled his party’s candidates out of the March election this year in protest of the disqualification of other reform candidates by the Council of Guardians and has otherwise been making a number of statements implicitly criticizing the government
- c. It was reported in one analytical article on the ruling elite of Iran that Jafari, the head of the IRGC since September 1, 2007, is very close to Rafsanjani (and it is reported that Jafari’s appointment was a slap by the Supreme leader against Ahmadinejad). Whether this analysis of Jafari’s relationship to Rafsanjani is true, there is some indication that a split has been developing in the IRGC itself which is a key pillar of state power.
- d. There is a history of intrigue between Rafsanjani and the U.S. (Iran-Contra for one)
- e. There are rumors that secret negotiations are going on and if so, possibly these would be going on with someone like Rafsanjani. Be that particular as it may, secret negotiations would not negate the working hypothesis we have raised. Eg, there were apparently secret exchanges between the U.S. and Saddam Hussein right before he invaded Kuwait...

2. In 2006 the U.S. government officially institutionalized a policy of working to effect dynamics that promote regime change (even as the actual term “regime change” is not used in official documents) via the establishment of an “Office of Iranian Affairs” in the State Department as well as an “Iranian Directorate” of the Pentagon, both working together “to back dissent more aggressively, boost support to democracy broadcasters and strengthen ties with exiles.” (Cheney’s daughter is actually the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs and will apparently oversee the work of the new State Department office). In line with these new departments, and also in the spring of 2006, 66 million dollars (Rice requested 75 million) were appropriated for the year as an “Iran Democracy Fund.” (This was via the “Iran Freedom Support Act.”) Over half of these funds went to things such as Voice of America as well as funding the internet, but a significant segment was not clearly accounted for (for “democracy programs in Iran”) ostensibly because of a need not to indicate, even through indirect means, who might be receiving funds because of the potential for repression. (Previous to 2006, there were 20 million dollars allocated for “democracy efforts” in Iran and funding to some dissident forces were channeled through the quasi NGO National Endowment for Democracy which was birthed in conjunction with the Contras during the Reagan years. Funding through the NED is certainly continuing independently of the Congressional allocation—for example, the above mentioned neocon initiated Foundation for Democracy is largely funded through the NED.). This year approximately the same level of funds were appropriated. There has been great controversy in relation to this U.S. funding among opponents of the regime within Iran and in the diaspora.

Various neocons have been core initiators of a number of organizations whose aims are to promote regime change (Coalition for Democracy in Iran—now defunct, the Foundation for Democracy Iran and the Iran Policy Committee (IPC) who are ardent supporters of the *Mujahedeen e-halq* (MEK) and there are more we weren't able to look into. Also the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Committee for the Present Danger and the American Enterprise Institute along with the Israeli Lobby—AIPAC—while not limited to activities in relation to Iran, have all actively been working to promote regime change.)

APPENDIX B

Assessment of U.S. Military Options against Iran

This paper will attempt to assess three things. First—the military assets that the U.S. has at its relatively immediate disposal to attack Iran. Second—the various scenarios in which these various assets might come into use. Third—the military assets that Iran has available with which to respond.

I. What Military Assets does the U.S. have available?

STRATCOM strategic bombers and nuclear subs with cruise missiles—Since the outbreak of the Iraq war in March of 2003, there has been some important developments in the U.S.’ ability attack Iran. Most important has been the development of what is called STRATCOM. This was developed in 2005 and is an integrated command that allows the U.S. to attack any country in the world with long range bombers from bases in the U.S. (mainly in Nebraska). STRATCOM combines both conventional and nuclear capabilities. The heart of it is 200 stealth B-2A bombers which can carry a wide variety of bombs with pinpoint accuracy. Plesch & Butcher (“Considering War With Iran”) describe these capabilities as “taking shock and awe to a new level.” These bombs range from new targeted “small diameter bombs” that allow each plane to hit between 150 and 300 targets. Or with larger 500 lb bombs, a plane could drop 80 of these on different targets in 22 seconds. By spring 2008, B-2A’s will be reconfigured to also carry the new MOP conventional penetrating bomb that weighs 30,000 lbs and can penetrate through 200 feet of concrete. Finally, there is a whole array of nuclear weapons that could be dropped which include smaller penetrating nukes as well as much larger ones.

STRATCOM has developed the strategic plans and target lists that would allow it to attack Iran within hours of receiving orders. Their planes all have refueling arrangements that allow them to fly directly to their targets in Iran and drop their bombs—which can be targeted within the precession of a few feet. This gives the U.S. the potential to hit thousands of Iranian targets almost simultaneously, within a day of the President’s order, with little or no warning in terms of troop or fleet movement, and delivered by stealth aircraft that would be extremely hard for the Iranians to detect. All this has been put together since the start of the Iraq war and therefore changes the “footprint” of what an impending war might look like. In other words, it could literally come “out of nowhere.” The U.S. bombers would land in Diego Garcia after the attack and refuel. What is not clear is whether they could rearm there or whether they would have to fly back to their U.S. bases to rearm. If they could rearm in Diego Garcia, they could deliver another massive attack the day after the first one. If they had to return to the U.S., it would probably be 2-3 days before they could make another run.

The second component of STRATCOM’s arsenal are subs loaded with conventional and nuclear missiles. Under an earlier agreement with the Russians to reduce the number of nuclear armed subs each has, the U.S. has converted four of their subs so that each one now carries 154

Tomahawk cruise missiles with conventional warheads. Two of these subs could be secretly inserted into the Persian Gulf and launch 300 cruise missile in 6 minutes—much faster and with far less warning than what could be accomplished by U.S. warships (each of which carry between 120 and 180 cruise missiles). [For more on this see Plesch & Butcher “Considering War With Iran” and Noam Ophir, “From Missouri to Natanz: U.S. Global Strike Capability”.]

US military assets in the Persian Gulf—STRATCOM gives the U.S. an enormous first strike advantage—both in terms of the massive character of the assault and in terms of surprise. But the U.S. has many additional assets they can draw on. For the last few years the U.S. has kept at least two Naval Carrier groups in the Persian Gulf, and press reports indicate they had 3 there in early 2007 and they have two there now. Each of these “groups” contains carriers with fighter/bombers which complement, but can not replace STRATCOM’s strategic bombers (they can not carry that large of munitions). The groups also have ships loaded with cruise missiles. All of these could be called on to attack smaller, more mobile targets in Iran. According to Newsmax (5/20/08), the most recent carrier group (USS Abraham Lincoln) to arrive in the Gulf was “carrying far more weaponry and ammunition than on previous deployments.”

The U.S. has conducted ever larger naval war games in the Gulf each of the last few years. The 2007 games involved 3 carrier groups, so the U.S. has definitely been practicing for an attack on Iran—and also how to deal with possible Iranian responses—especially in the Gulf (more on this below). These exercises included 24 countries and included practice at intercepting ships believed to be carrying weapons of mass destruction. This particular focus could be connected to a recent Israeli proposal for a naval blockade of Iran (5/21/08 Reuters).

In addition, the Marines have their own carrier task forces that are specifically designed for invasions and contain everything a Marine expeditionary force would need for 30 days. One of these Marine task forces is based in Diego Garcia and ready to go. These Marine forces could be called on to secure areas along Iran’s Persian Gulf coast or to control the oil producing areas of some of the Gulf states.

US bases throughout larger Persian Gulf Area—In the last few years the U.S. also has developed an enhanced set of bases throughout the larger Persian Gulf area which would support an attack on Iran. The U.S. is in the midst of expanding a central control and planning facility in Kuwait that could provide command leadership for a war in any one of 27 Middle East countries. The U.S. has air bases that ring Iran and from which attacks could be quickly mounted. These bases include ones in Iraq, Bagram in Afghanistan and Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. The U.S. base in Diego Garcia is in the process of having its hangars retrofitted to handle B-2A bombers equipped with the new MOP bunker buster bombs.

Military analyst William Arkin reported that in 2007 the USAF gave its “most meritorious flight” of the year award to 4 jet fighters that took off from Iraq on an 11 hour bombing mission to eastern Afghanistan—crossing the air space of 6 different nations, requiring 13 refuelings, and hitting their two minute “window of attack.”. Arkin suggests that such an elaborate scheme made no sense in terms of the situation in Afghanistan—but had everything to do with perfecting the U.S.’s ability to hit targets deep in Iran from surrounding U.S. airbases.

The U.S. has also expanded and strengthened its Naval Base in Bahrain and, according to the head of the Navy in the Gulf, the Navy now has more personnel on land in the Persian Gulf area than they do have on ships. Also, in 2007 the U.S. negotiated building a new satellite communication base in western Australia that will give it much more reliable, satellite-based, real time information and images for battlefield forces throughout the S. Asian area.

Finally, the U.S. has on-ground assets in Iraq that could be quickly turned against Iran. In particular, the U.S. Army has a vast array of mobile missile systems that could be quickly turned on any attempt by the Iranian army/Iranian Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) to flood into Iraq. These weapons have been little used in the Iraq war due to its asymmetrical nature. But they would provide the U.S. with devastating fire power to unleash on any large movement of Iranian troops and armor. They also have sufficient range to reach IRGC bases across the border in Iran.

US covert and special ops activities in Iran—According to Al Ahram (4/24-30/08): “There are strong indications of a heavy covert U.S. presence in Iran. Iranian officials have accused the U.S. of engineering a new wave of subversion in the country, using Pakistan as a staging point, with the purpose of destabilizing the Iranian regime. In February 2008, Zahedan was the scene of a massive explosion that killed or injured dozens of Iranian Revolutionary Guard members. Iranian fingers pointed to Washington and charged that CIA operatives were increasingly active in the country, especially in the region of Baluchestan adjacent to the Pakistani and Afghan borders. These suspicions are not unfounded. We recall that Bush asked Congress for a \$75 million allocation for the purpose of promoting democratic change in Iran and supporting Iranian opposition groups. The problem the U.S. is encountering, in this regard, is that apart from the Kurds, Iran has no minorities that are interested in secession.”

On May 2, 2008, Andrew Cockburn reported on *Counterpunch* that, six weeks before, President Bush signed a secret directive authorizing a covert offensive against Iran. The directive, Cockburn writes, funds (to the tune of \$300 million), "actions across a huge geographic area--from Lebanon to Afghanistan--but is also far more sweeping in the type of actions permitted. . . including the assassination of targeted officials."

According to a report in the Tehran Times (5/19/08) the Iranian Intelligence Ministry arrested a CIA-backed terror group that was planning to bomb scientific, educational, and religious centers, and carry out assassinations. "The Intelligence Ministry on Saturday released details of the detection and dismantling of a terrorist network affiliated to the United States," reports the newspaper. The attack on a religious center in Shiraz last month which killed thirteen people and wounded 190 was blamed on the same group and according to the report, "it also had plans to carry out similar attacks on the Tehran International Book Fair, the Russian Consulate in Gilan Province, oil pipelines in southern Iran, and other targets."

Changes in top U.S. Military Command—In addition to the military asserts that the U.S. has built up to attack Iran, the Bush administration has made a number of personnel changes at the top level of the U.S. military to insure that those commanding these forces will carry out orders to attack Iran, when (and if) they are given. What follows is primarily based on the article “Bush

Administration War Plans directed against Iran,” by Michel Chossudovsky, *Global Research*, September 16, 2007.

There was a lot of speculation in the press starting in late 2006 about opposition among top U.S. officers to a major attack on Iran. Apparently this came out in a meeting between Bush and the Joint Chiefs in late 2006 where the JCS opposed such an attack. Since that point there has been a major “house cleaning” at the top of the military. Peter Pace, the head of the Joint Chiefs who opposed Bush, was forced out in the spring of 2007 and replaced by Admiral Mullens who was fresh from leading the largest ever U.S. war games in the Gulf in the spring of 2007 and is committed to waging and winning the War on Terror (WOT). In June, Bush brought in General Cartwright—previously the head of STRATCOM—as vice-chair of the JCS. Admiral Fallon was moved from the Pacific command to CENTCOM which has jurisdiction over the Middle East & S Asia. He turned out not to be what the Bush people expected, and he has since been forced out for speaking against an attack on Iran (and he has now been replaced by Gen. Patreaus—Bush’s Iraq surge architect). Fallon’s previous position as head of the Pacific Command (which controls the largest single chunk of the U.S. navy) is a dedicated WOT fighter, Admiral Timothy J. Keating. So taken together, these personnel changes show a dramatic reconstitution of the military leadership which would carry out an attack on Iran—for which all the necessary U.S. military assets are overwhelmingly in place. It is also worth noting that it is Bush/WOT loyalists in the Navy and Air Force/STRATCOM that now dominate these top positions and they directly control the main forces that would be involved in carrying out such an attack.

What different military scenarios are available for a U.S. attack on Iran?

The most profound way that the U.S. involvement in Iraq has impacted its war planning against Iran is the lack of availability of U.S. ground troops for a major land invasion. This is agreed upon by everyone surveyed and buttressed by statements from top U.S. Army staff saying “our army is tired” and “it will take 4 years to get it back to normal.” However, this does not rule out some more limited ground forays (mainly by Marines or Spec Ops) such as seizing areas along the Iranian Persian Gulf coast to suppress attacks on Gulf shipping or to seize control of Iran’s oil fields in Khuzestan, or a limited foray from Azerbaijan to the outskirts of Tehran to add pressure to topple the regime. Nor does it rule out U.S. ground forces facing Shia militia attacks and IRGC thrusts into southern Iraq in response to U.S. air attacks on Iran. But it does rule out any attempt to actually take control of the entire country. Therefore, the various U.S. attack scenarios are overwhelmingly comprised of bombing and destroying various Iranian targets and capabilities. There are three such bombing strategies that fall on a spectrum from limited attacks on IRGC military targets in western Iran, to broader attacks on Iran’s nuclear capabilities, to an all out assault aimed at destroying the Iranian regime’s ability to function.

Over the course of 2007 there was a major tactical change in the U.S.’s approach to Iran that has implications for what military scenarios might be invoked—and in what order. In March 2007, Seymour Hersh wrote about a “redirection” of U.S. policy in the Middle East towards immediately focusing on destroying Iran’s influence in the Levant (Syria, Lebanon & Palestine) and in Iraq as part of its longer range assault on Iran.

In military terms, this “redirection” has meant the immediate focus of present U.S. military activity has shifted from a massive attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities, military assets, economy and infrastructure to more limited plans to attack Iran’s ability to exert influence in Iraq and the Levant. Hersh wrote:

“The shift in targeting reflects three developments. First, the President and his senior advisers have concluded that their campaign to convince the American public that Iran poses an imminent nuclear threat has failed (unlike a similar campaign before the Iraq war), and that as a result there is not enough popular support for a major bombing campaign. The second development is that the White House has come to terms, in private, with the general consensus of the American intelligence community that Iran is at least five years away from obtaining a bomb. And, finally, there has been a growing recognition in Washington and throughout the Middle East that Iran is emerging as the geopolitical winner of the war in Iraq.”

However, this appears to be only a shift of immediate focus, not a change of overall strategic goals—much less a concession to Iran’s right to process uranium. Extreme concern about the nuclear issue is continually in the background, coming from both U.S. and Israeli officials. Plus, the military plans and assets necessary to switch to a massive bombing attack on Iran are in place and could be quickly activated—or escalated to.

#1—Limited attack on IRGC forces in western Iran. The most limited attack would be aimed at Iranian bases in western Iran that the U.S. claims are aiding attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq. The IRGC base at Fahr (in the oil rich province of Khuzestan) is the one most often referenced since the headquarters of the Quds Force is located there. Most of the IRGC’s ground forces are massed in Western Iran along the Iraq border. These would be targeted utilizing a variety of U.S. assets—land-based rockets from U.S. Army units in southern Iraq and air attacks from carrier groups in the Gulf and surrounding U.S. air bases in the Middle East. Anthony Cordesman describes a similar scenario, but one in which STRATCOM long-range bombers from the U.S. also participate.

Starting in late 2007, analysts began to report that this scenario had become the U.S.’s initial attack plan of choice. Seymour Hersh wrote in Oct. 2007—“Shifting Targets”—that:

“The revised bombing plan for a possible attack … calls for the use of sea-launched cruise missiles and more precisely targeted ground attacks and bombing strikes, including plans to destroy the most important Revolutionary Guard training camps, supply depots, and command and control facilities.

“ ‘Cheney’s option is now for a fast in and out—for surgical strikes,’ the former senior American intelligence official told me. The Joint Chiefs have turned to the Navy, he said, which had been chafing over its role in the Air Force-dominated air war in Iraq. ‘The Navy’s planes, ships, and cruise missiles are in place in the Gulf and operating daily. They’ve got everything they need—even AWACS are in place and the targets in Iran have been programmed. The Navy is flying FA-18 missions every day in the Gulf.’ There are also plans

to hit Iran's anti-aircraft surface-to-air missile sites. ‘We've got to get a path in and a path out,’ the former official said.

“A Pentagon consultant on counter terrorism told me that, if the bombing campaign took place, it would be accompanied by a series of what he called ‘short, sharp incursions’ by American Special Forces units into suspected Iranian training sites. He said, ‘Cheney is devoted to this, no question.’”

And throughout the spring of 2008, the imminent enactment of this scenario has been echoed by almost every major military analyst. The Asia Times reported on May 27th that informed sources in Washington were putting the date of this attack “sometime in August.”

#2—Attack on Iran's nuclear capabilities. The second attack scenario would center around an attempt to destroy Iran's nuclear capabilities. Such an attack would probably draw on both U.S. based strategic bomber forces (STRATCOM) along with cruise missiles and attack air craft from nearby carriers and surrounding U.S. air bases. This is a challenging and complicated question for the U.S. for a number of reasons. First, the Iranians remember how the Israelis were able to destroy the Iraqi reactor at Osirz with a single raid. So Iran has dispersed the different pieces of its nuclear program all around the country. The U.S. knows where some of these facilities are but, given its very limited intelligence from inside Iran, it can not be sure that it knows where all the pieces are. Condi Rice noted this problem on a recent visit to Israel. For this reason, no military commentator argues that a U.S. strike would entirely destroy Iran's ability to develop nuclear weapons. Rather they talk about how many years various levels of attacks might set the Iranians back in such development.

Second, the Iranians have gone to great lengths to bury some of their nuclear facilities—especially at Nantz—deep underground in reinforced vaults. So it becomes a question of what level or ordinance would be required to destroy these facilities. This is one reason that the U.S. has rushed the activation of its new massive MOP conventional bunker buster bomb (along with refitting the B2A bombers to carry it). But it is not a certainty that even this bomb will do the trick. And this is where the next level of destructiveness—penetrating nuclear weapons—comes into play. The U.S. has these weapons and they are part of STRATCOM's “full spectrum” arsenal and war plans. So if initial attacks with conventional weapons do not appear to destroy these facilities, the question of using nukes will become real—as indicated in the following quote from Al Ahram:

“The Oxford Research Group, with the assistance of global security consultant Paul Rogers, came up with a third scenario. The group operated on the premise that a military operation against Iranian nuclear facilities needed to accomplish two primary objectives: first, to bury the Iranian nuclear dream forever; and second to show that the U.S. is ready to take pre-emptive military action on this matter. Accordingly, the scenario envisions an intensive assault, relying on the element of surprise, to destroy Iran's primary nuclear infrastructure and air defense systems. It would use primarily air and naval power, in the form of hundreds of formations supported by missile fire and reconnaissance flights to take out Iranian defense systems. Some are of the opinion that such a scenario could forestall a protracted war. They

argue that a short, intensive and powerful surgical operation against Iranian nuclear facilities would convince the Iranian regime to acknowledge defeat without great resistance or responses that would severely damage U.S. military capacities in the region. **Some add that U.S. planners are particularly attracted to the idea of using tactical atomic bombs to accomplish a rapid victory and that this option makes sense in terms of the way U.S. forces are deployed in the area.”**

A number of analysts have also discussed the possibility of Israel—by itself—attempting to carry out this second scenario aimed at destroying Iran’s nuclear capabilities. However, U.S. and British analysts who wrote before December 2007 (when the NIE came out) generally did not foresee this happening for two reasons. First, in addition to all the problems that the U.S. would face, there are additional limitations on the part of the Israeli military. Israel does not have strategic bombers. It would have to use much smaller planes with smaller payload capacities and more limited ranges. And since Iran is much farther from Israel than Iraq, any Israeli attacks would require elaborate refueling strategies. Plus the Israelis do not possess conventional bombs (nothing close to the U.S.’ new MOP) that could guarantee the destruction of dug in facilities like Nantz. So multiple attack runs would be required, at a minimum, and those would just compound all the logistical difficulties getting the planes there and back (problems which also include the question of whose air space would the Israelis would fly over). Second, since up through late 2007 most analysts were anticipating a direct U.S. attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities, they did not envision much of a military role for Israel—except for responding to possible attacks on Israel by Iranian proxies/allies like Hezbollah or Syria.

However, in 2008, reports began to surface—e.g., in Al Ahram, based on British and French military sources—that Israel was seriously preparing an air assault on Iran’s nuclear facilities. These reports also suggest it is increasingly likely that Israel might try to overcome its military limitations by using tactical nuclear weapons to destroy Iranian nuclear facilities.

By 2007, Israeli plans were even more concrete. In January, the Sunday Times reported that Israel was conducting long-range training exercises and that if it did strike Iran it would use atomic bombs to penetrate Iranian underground bunkers. The newspaper added that the air force would use conventional laser-guided missiles to open breaches into which airplanes would then drop tactical atomic bombs, supposedly one-15th the power of the atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

These developments are consistent with Israel’s stated determination to take drastic action against Iran—both to stop its nuclear program and to destroy its influence in the Levant (see section below on Iran’s proxies). It was these Israeli concerns that, in part, underlay the recent “redirection” of U.S. policy to focus on Iran’s proxies in Iraq and the Levant. And it is also these concerns—and the intensity and rapidity with which they are unfolding—that contribute to the complexity and unpredictability of events, with Israel playing an increasingly important role.

The fact that any U.S. or Israeli nuclear attack on a Muslim country would undoubtedly have profound repercussions throughout the world has led most analysts to think it will not happen.

However, as the tensions in the Levant and larger Middle East continue to intensify, it is clear that the use of nuclear weapons can NOT be ruled out.

#3—Massive attack to destroy the Iranian regime. The third scenario is an all out U.S. attack on all Iranian nuclear facilities, all its military installations and concentrations of forces and all the infrastructure necessary for the central government to function. According to Plesch & Butcher, this would be the U.S.’ approach to “regime change.” This would be a massive attack utilizing the full array of U.S. forces starting with a surprise STRATCOM “shock and awe” attack upon as many as 10,000 different targets. The initial attack would primarily utilize strategic bombers based in the U.S. and submarine launched cruise missiles. But it would also involve additional cruise missiles and air sorties from naval and land based forces surrounding Iran. Such an attack would take a minimum of a week, but could extend longer.

This scenario, and to a significant degree the same thing can be said for scenario 2, would have devastating effects on Iran. There would be massive death and destruction, plus the danger of widespread nuclear contamination. Many of Iran’s nuclear facilities are in or near large urban areas where radioactive fallout would be a major problem—to say nothing of wind currents taking it to surrounding Gulf States. One indication of this fear is that the Saudis have been conducting national emergency drills that focus on possible radiation fallout from an attack on Iranian nuclear facilities.

How might this present policy of “redirection” fit into the larger U.S. goal of regime change?

First, there is the question of what a limited “surgical strike” would accomplish by itself? Al Ahram notes that “military experts in the U.S. also know that, as it plays out on the ground, the concept of a surgical strike is an adolescent fantasy.” Certain neo-cons argue that a limited strike could be carried out to chasten Iran and without an Iranian response (see below). While this can not be ruled out, it also has to be recognized that any limited U.S./Israeli strike at either IRGC camps in Iran or an Iranian proxy would also hold the potential of escalating into all out war with Iran—a potential that is widely recognized, and perhaps even desired.

- In the May 4th the Times of London story quoted above, the Joint Chiefs had to admit that “however limited a U.S. attack might be, the fighting could escalate.”
- Seymour Hersh (5/07) quotes a former Bush Nat. Sec. Council official as saying that escalation is the whole point. “This is all part of the campaign of provocative steps to increase the pressure on Iran. The idea is that at some point the Iranians will respond and then the Administration will have an open door to strike at them.”
- Paul Rogers of Oxford Research wrote on 3/13/08: “The uncertainties of the current situation do not exclude (for example) the orchestration of some kind of border incident to elicit an Iranian overaction, thus leading to a major conflict; or a provocation by obliging elements of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. Both are plausible, though neither

is likely...” However, he then goes on to posit a more likely scenario—major Hamas or Hezbollah attacks on Israel, leading Israel to respond against Iran, leading Iran to unleash the IRGC in Iraq against U.S. forces which would then give the U.S. a pretext for an all out assault on Iran.

- A related point is that pressures on one front can increase pressures for the U.S. to take action against Iran on another. Philip Giraldi states (5/9/08): “The decision to go ahead with plans to attack Iran [surgical cross-border attacks to cripple Iranian influence in Iraq] is the direct result of concerns being expressed over the deteriorating situation in Lebanon, where Iranian ally Hezbollah appears to have gained the upper hand against government forces and might be able to dominate the fractious political situation.”

To summarize—the U.S. has a number of possible military attack scenarios—all ready to go. However, there are many intense contradictions at play in the Middle East that interpenetrate with the U.S.’ fundamental strategic goal of regime change in Iran. Therefore, as the U.S. has continued to ratchet up political and military pressure across the board, any number of incidents, in a wide range of situations could set in motion a string of events that could quickly lead to one or another—or a progression—of the above described attack scenarios.

II. Assessment of potential Iranian military responses to a U.S. attack

Prior to the recent “redirection” of U.S. strategy towards Iran—when the most likely mode of U.S. approach appeared to be a major attack, either Scenario 2 or 3 -- there was little disagreement among analysts that Iran would respond. In Plesch & Butcher’s “Considering A War With Iran,” the authors categorically state “If the U.S. were to attack Iran, even in a fairly limited series of air attacks aimed at a small number of nuclear-related targets, Iran is certain to fight back.” This view was shared by almost all of the other analysts who wrote through mid-2007.

More recently, however, there has developed debate about whether Iran would simply take a “surgical” cross-border strike at IRGC camps and not respond. A number of commentators state that people in the Bush regime believe (or at least are saying) that such a strike could be carried out to teach Iran a lesson without the Iranians retaliating. The neocon and ardent Zionist, Patrick Clawson, has been pushing this line recently. Perhaps, Syria’s recent “rolling over” in the face of the Israeli air strike might be feeding this thinking. However, most outside military analysts do not agree—they still think that if Iran is attacked, it will respond.

If Iran were to fight back, there is general agreement that there are 4 areas in which Iran has the potential to respond militarily to a U.S. attack:

1. Their recently improved air defense systems, buttressed by major arms sales from Russia
2. Their fairly extensive arsenal of missiles, of various ranges, that allow them to attack everything from shipping in the Persian Gulf, to U.S. bases in the Gulf States and Iraq, to

Israel.

3. Their huge fleet of small fast attack boats in the Persian Gulf which could take out both U.S. naval forces and merchant shipping and disrupt oil supplies.
4. Their “proxies/allies” who could take the offensive against either the U.S. (the Shia in Iraq and terrorist networks in other parts of the world) or its ally Israel (Hezbollah & Syria).

None of the analysts believe that these Iranian military responses could stop the U.S. from inflicting whatever degree of destruction it wished to inflict on Iran. At most Iran could only raise the military price that the U.S. would have to pay to inflict such damage. However, these responses (combined with the extent and destructiveness of the U.S. attack) could set off other strings of events and generate wide repercussions throughout the world—the nature and scope of which it is difficult to predict.

1. Recently improved Iranian air defense systems

The dramatic rise of oil prices has been a windfall for the Iranian government and they have spent a good piece of that money to upgrade their air defense systems with major arms purchases from Russia. Iran is reported to be the 3rd largest purchaser of Russian arms, after China and India. In July 2007, the Jerusalem Post reported that Iran was negotiating with Russia to buy 250 modern fighter/bombers along with 20 refueling tankers to extend their range.

Iran also received from Russia in 2007 an advanced anti-aircraft missile system (TOR- M1). Iran bought 29 of these mobile systems. They are only useful against relatively low flying aircraft (presenting no threat to U.S. strategic bombers) and have a relatively short range. But within that context, they are pretty much state of the art. The most likely explanation for Iran's purchase of the TOR's is that they could aid in defense against attacks carried out by lower flying Israeli or U.S. carrier-based aircraft. Anthony Cordesman quotes Russian sources saying that these missile systems will be first installed at Isfahan (nuclear facility), then Bushehr (Russian built nuclear power plant), and finally around Tehran and other cities in the east. However, the Soviets actually designed the TOR M1 to provide mobile accompanying air cover for Soviet tank forces invading Western Europe. Much of Iran's armor is out of date. But one commentator (Pavel Felgenhauer), in the book *Bombing Iran*, raises the possibility that Iran could utilize the TOR-M1 systems in conjunction with some relatively recent (post 1991) Soviet era tanks and actually stage an armored assault into southern Iraq—which could present the U.S. forces there with quite a challenge.

In addition, the Iranians have claimed to be purchasing new longer range land-based air defense systems. In Dec 2007 AP reported that “Russia is preparing to equip Iran with a powerful new air defense system that would dramatically increases its ability repel an attack” according to Iran's defense minister. The S-300 anti-aircraft missile defense system is claimed by the Russians to have capabilities that outstrip the U.S. Patriot missile system. According to the article, “Iran-Russia ties increased after a visit here [Tehran] by Russian President Valadmir

Putin in October [2007]." However, there was also a news story out of Moscow in which a Russian gov't official denied that these sales were taking place. But another story quoted the Russian deputy Sec of State saying that Russia was helping Iran strengthen its air defense systems, but he would give not details. So this may not be a done deal—either in terms of whether it will really happen (it could be happening through a back door) or when this system would be in place. But it does give an indication of what the Iranians are attempting to do to meet an anticipated attack.

[As further evidence of Russian commitment to support Iran, in Dec 2007 Russia began shipping nuclear fuel rods so that Iran could start up its nuclear power station at Bushehr.]

In a July 2007 interview, Clinton's ex-Middle East envoy, Dennis Ross, stated that the Israelis considered an attack on Iran needed to occur before "18 months from now [which would be Dec. 2008] when Iran's air defense system, which is being upgraded by the Russians, will be completed. That will make it much more difficult to successfully strike Iran's nuclear capacity from the air. The closer we get to that window without resolution of the Iranian nuclear problem, the more Israel will feel compelled to strike." The same logic also applies to a U.S. timetable for a strike.

2. Iran's arsenal of missiles, of various ranges, that allow them to attack everything from shipping in the Persian Gulf, to U.S. bases around the Gulf, to Israel.

Iran has an extensive arms industry—herited and updated since the days of the Shah. This is the primary reason Iran has the largest force of ballistic missiles in the Middle East. According to Ricki Ellison of the Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance (2/9/08), Iran has 500 hundred short and medium range ballistic missiles and it has engaged in extensive missile training exercises, including recently sending a rocket into outer space. According to Ellison these pose "a real and credible threat to the national security interest of the United States." These missiles could reach U.S. bases in the Gulf States (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, Qatar and Yemen), Iraq and Afghanistan. They could also reach the oil production facilities in the Gulf States. And Iran's longest range missiles have a range of 1,200 miles—meaning they could reach Israel.

According to Plesch & Butcher, Iranian long-range missiles do not possess the precision guidance systems of U.S. weapons, so they are not as accurate. But they do have much better accuracy than the SCUD missiles Iraq fired during the First Gulf War. Plus they can carry large munitions and cause a lot of damage—especially if fired into areas of population or industrial concentrations.

In addition to ballistic missiles, Iran also has a large arsenal of shorter range rockets. In October, 2007, the Commander of the IRGC was quoted as saying Iran could fire 11,000 rockets into enemy bases within the first minutes after any possible attack. These rockets have a range of 155 miles and would be delivered by IRGC ground forces. These too could reach across the Persian Gulf to the Gulf States and into Iraq and Afghanistan where the U.S. has bases.

On Jan 26, 2008, Iran's top military commander spoke specifically to "Muslim countries whose lands host U.S. military stations" and said "if the U.S. launches a war against us, and if it uses these stations to attack Iran with missiles, then through the strength and precision of our own missiles, we are capable of targeting only the U.S. military forces who attack us."

If it became clear to Iran that a war was going to occur, there would be pressure on it to launch as many of these missiles and rockets as possible before the U.S. could bring their superior fire power and precision targeting to bear on destroying them.

3. Iran could attack both U.S. naval forces and merchant shipping in the Persian Gulf and disrupt oil supplies

The IRGC has complete control of all Iranian naval activity inside the Straits of Hormuz. They have been going through a build up over the last decade and now have 1,000 speedboats armed with anti-ship cruise missiles, torpedoes, rocket propelled grenades and machine guns. Iran also has helicopters and submarines armed with cruise missiles. Plus they have a large arsenal of anti-ship missiles based along the shore. Finally, Iran has the ability to lay mines in the Gulf in a variety of ways.

One way Iran could make the U.S. military pay a heavy price in the Gulf is by using some of the world's most advanced land-to-ship missiles that it purchased from Russia and has stationed along the Gulf coast. These are called Sunburn missiles and they were developed by the USSR just before it collapsed. According to a number of different analysts, they are twice as fast as their closest competitor and carry large warheads. They have never been used in combat, so it is harder for the U.S. Navy to be prepared to deal with them. One commentator claimed that they could easily disable, if not sink, a U.S. carrier and/or other major capital ships in the Gulf. And he went on to comment about what a powerful motivator for a larger U.S. war would be provided by pictures of thousands of U.S. sailors going to a watery grave at the hands of the "islamo-fascist mullahs".

[Losing major naval ships would be a serious price for the U.S. to pay. But the U.S. was willing to pay that price in 1941 at Pearl Harbor to create just such a pretext for mobilizing U.S. popular support for going to war against Japan.]

Iran has also developed and continually practices a doctrine of asymmetrical naval warfare. This is described in detail by Fariborz Haghshenass ("Iran's Doctrine of Asymmetric Naval Warfare"). There is an emphasis on stoic endurance and devotion to the cause. Also the Iranians have summed up a lot of experience at this type of naval warfare and have replaced earlier "mass swarming" tactics with new "dispersed swarming" tactics that bring fast boats from multiple, random directions and with no warning. Geography also favors Iran using these tactics because of the hundreds of miles of rough and mountainous coast and islands on the Iranian side of the Gulf which is ideal for hiding small ships and land-based missile sites.

The U.S. navy is well aware of this Iranian naval doctrine and has modified its forces to anticipate attacks by small speedboats. And U.S. Naval war games in the Gulf focus on

combating just such tactics. In January, 2008 Adm. Michael Mullen (Head of JCS) told reporters “For the years that this strategic shift toward their small, fast boats has taken place, we’ve been very focused on that.” However, most analysts still believe that Iran will be able to do some significant damage. This would be especially true if the Iranians pre-empted the U.S. and attacked first. In 2004 at a major U.S. war game that focused on Iran, the “Iranian” naval commander did just that and took out 16 U.S. warships before they called the game off.

David Issenberg, writing in Dec. 2007 stated “considering the many hundreds of targets the U.S. would have to hit in a short time, Iran could do a great deal of damage in the Gulf before its assets on the mainland and islands were destroyed. And any ocean mines they could lay before being hit could continue to do damage long after U.S. planes returned home.”

The biggest concern about Iranian attacks in the Persian Gulf would be their impact on the flow of oil. Twenty percent of the world’s oil flows through the Gulf, so any serious disruption would have a dual effect. First, it would decrease the amount of oil available. Since most of the Persian Gulf oil goes east to India, China and Japan, this would have an immediate impact in energy-poor East Asia. [According to Scott Ritter, over the past year the U.S. has been filling up its own Strategic Oil Reserve to guarantee that the U.S. does not run short.] Second, a disruption of Gulf oil would likely cause a big spike in world oil prices—coming on top of their already record levels—which could have a major negative impact on the whole global economy.

4. Iran’s proxies/allies who could take the offensive against either the U.S. or its ally Israel.

Iraq

Necessity: The U.S. has run into big problems attempting to forge a stable client regime in Iraq. As Seymour Hersh stated, the greatest long term danger for the U.S. comes from Iran’s deep influence—especially in Shia southern Iraq. Since 2003 there has been a massive influx of Iranians into Iraq. 1,000,000 pilgrims come every year and there is over \$1 billion in cross-border trade between the 2 countries. Iran also has close political ties with the major Iraqi Shia political groups. The leaders of Dawa and SIIC spent years in Iran when Saddam Hussein was in power in Iraq, and others—like Moqtada al Sadr—have more recently developed close ties with Tehran (al Sadr is now living in Qom). Finally, there is the question of Iran supplying arms and training to Shia militias in Iraq. Although the exact nature and extent of Iranian aid and support are unclear, no commentators deny the significant level of Iranian influence in Iraq—as indicated by Ahmadinejad’s ‘triumphal’ visit to Baghdad in the fall of 2007. Seymour Hersh quotes a retired 4-Star Army General in April, 2006 as saying “the Iranians could take Basra with ten mullahs and a sound truck.” Hersh also quotes a Pentagon advisor who says that if the U.S. attacks Iran, “the southern half of Iraq will light up like a candle... and be at great risk from Iranian troops or from Shiite militants on instructions from Iran.”

While the above opinions may be extreme, Iranian influence in Iraq is significant and does stand as an increasing impediment to the long-term U.S. strategic goal of dominating the Persian Gulf.

Just one indication of the Gulf's importance is the fact the percentage of the world's oil supply coming from the Persian Gulf is projected to increase from about 21% today to close to 30% in 2030. The U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and the ensuing U.S. quagmires have only increased the stakes for the U.S. in pursuing its strategic aims. In that context, the importance of Iraq stands out even more—especially the opportunity it gives Iran to potentially torpedo the whole U.S. goal of dominating the Gulf.

This awareness is reflected in the comments of military analyst Anthony Cordesman: “[Iraq] is one of only two serious opportunities Iran has to move from a largely defensive power to one that has seriously expanded its power and influence. The other is their effort to acquire long range missiles and nuclear weapons.” Similarly, in February 2007, the BBC described Iraq and nuclear weapons as the “two potential triggers” of a U.S. attack on Iran.

And it is the increasing U.S. concern about Iranian influence in Iraq that to a large degree lies behind the “redirection” of U.S. policy and consequent shifting of its favored military scenarios to an initial limited attack on IRGC forces in western Iran. As explained above, the military assets for this attack are basically all in place. What appears to be missing is a viable pretext.

The Levant (Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Israel)

Necessity: U.S. stated concerns about Iranian influence in the Levant have sharply increased over the past year or so. This mainly has to do with U.S. concern about its number one ally in the Middle East—Israel. Bush underlined this concern in his 5/21/08 speech to the Israeli parliament which McClatchy Newspapers described as “the strongest demonstration of support for Israel ever made by an American president.” This is not a relationship—as described by people like Scott Ritter and the authors of “the Israel Lobby”—of the Israeli tail wagging the American dog. It is much more the opposite—but not totally or without contradiction. Israel has its own national interests and concerns that don’t always neatly align with those of the U.S.—upon which it is overall extremely dependent. And the U.S. has to take into consideration the concerns of its junior partner (and strategic outpost) in pursuing its own overall imperialist interests in the region.

And right now a major feature in their relationship involves the increasing Israeli pressure to do something about Iran. One can not read the Israeli press or listen to Israeli spokesmen without being struck by their extreme impatience with even allowing the IRI to exist. The Jerusalem Post has a special button on its regular on-line masthead titled “Iranian Threat.” The Israelis have stridently disagreed with the findings of the 12/07 NIE and argue that Iran is continuing to pursue nuclear weapons. And in addition to Israel’s determination to destroy Iran’s nuclear capabilities (which Israel believes would most likely be used on them), Israel has also become increasingly worried about Iran’s growing influence in Lebanon and Gaza. In particular:

1. Hezbollah’s growing military and political strength -- especially since it fought Israel to a standstill in 2006. Iran’s Qods Forces originally created Hezbollah and Iranian training and

arms—supplied through Syria—have played a key role in sustaining it ever since. Hezbollah's ascendancy has been further confirmed by recent events in Lebanon which have led to Hezbollah expanding both its political and military influence.

2. Iran's increasing role in arming and training Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya of Global Research wrote on 5/7/08:

"In 2007 and 2008, the Israelis reported that Iran has increased its weapons shipments to the Palestinians. The Jerusalem Post made one such claim on April 17, 2008: 'In recent months, the IDF has noticed an increase in Iranian-made weaponry in the Gaza Strip, including rockets and mortars... The same report also continued to state that thousands of Iranian mortars were also imported by the Gaza Strip, which Israel has defined as a 'Hostile Entity'.'"

The growing strength and opposition of Hamas has pretty much brought the Israeli-Palestinian "peace process" to a halt. And it has led to the U.S. and Israel's belief that they can not solve the Palestinian problem to their liking without first destroying Iranian influence in the Levant—both the material support they provide and the political/ideological pole of anti-Zionism they represent to many Arabs.

3. Syria has emerged as a key link in this chain of Iranian influence in the Levant. However, unlike Hezbollah, Syria is not a direct proxy of Iran. It is a strategically located state with its own interests, but one that also has a close relationship with Iran—receiving extensive material support and having signed a bilateral defense pact. Syria geographically surrounds much of Lebanon and is the main transit point for the Iranian supply of armaments and personnel to Hezbollah. Plus Syria is a Sunni Arab country (although Assad is a secular Shia) aligning with Shia Persians and thereby giving Iran a lot of political leverage more broadly among Arabs. Hence a lot of the U.S. and Israel's recent focus—both war preparations and political maneuvering—in the Levant have been focused on trying to break the Syrian link.

Seymour Hersh quotes Walid Jumblatt (leading opponent of Hezbollah in Lebanon): "We told Cheney that the basic link between Iran and Lebanon is Syria—and to weaken Iran you need to open the door to effective Syrian opposition."

If the U.S. and Israel could smash or "flip" Syria, then they would have a virtual stranglehold on Hezbollah. It would become extremely difficult for Iran to get either weapons or people into a Lebanon encircled by a pro-US Syria, Israel and the U.S./Israeli dominated Eastern Mediterranean. This helps explain the intense Israeli military preparations on its border with Syria, and the September 2007 Israeli air strike into Syria. But along with that stick has come a carrot—the possibility of a negotiated settlement. The recent announcement of talks between Syria and Israel (brokered by Turkey) could potentially alter the whole Iranian equation in the Levant. According to the press, the proposed deal is that Israel would give back the Golan Heights in return for Syria breaking all ties with Iran.

But it is not at all clear if a) this is the actual content of the discussions and b) whether either side would accept it. There was a press report that the Syrians immediately went to Tehran once they learned of the Israeli offer. And there also is opposition on the U.S./Israel side. Zalman Shoval, a former Israeli diplomat and politician describes this evolving situation as follows: “The message I received in Washington about two weeks ago [early April, 2008] was clear and included a trace of displeasure: Why do you have people [in Israel], and ministers in particular, who continue to amuse themselves with the baseless notion that conditions for peace between Israel and Syria have been created?” Since then, opposition to giving back the Golan Heights has also been strongly expressed by two leading members of the Israeli cabinet. So, here too, it is very unclear how all of this will shake out. But it is occurring in the context of an extremely heightened state of political and military pressure in the area.

Military Preparations: While these preparations have not received as much attention in the U.S. media as those in Iraq, U.S./Israeli military preparations in the Levant have been extensive. Mahdi Darius Nazemoroaya at Global Research (5/7/08) offered this overview:

“What is crucial in understanding the evolving Middle Eastern war theater is that the movements taking place in both Syria and Israel are unprecedented. Along with the growing Israeli-U.S. threats directed against Iran, including statements of support for military action from the E.U. and NATO, there is justifiable reason for apprehension and concern.”

However, unlike in Iraq, the focus of these military preparations are more diffuse and seem to comprehend a variety of possible scenarios that involve both local Iranian proxies (Hezbollah and Hamas) and allies (Syria), but which could also lead to direct warfare with Iran. Here are some themes that appear to run through these preparations.

Intensifying Israeli-Syrian war preparations:

- In September 2007, Israel launched an unprovoked air raid on a Syrian facility and destroyed it. The U.S. supported it and Syria basically “took the hit” and did not respond. The exact purpose of this attack is unclear. Investigative journalists from Seymour Hersh to Scott Ritter all agree that it was NOT a nuclear facility—the implied “official” explanation. A more likely explanation is that it was related to sending a message to Syria and Iran about Israeli intentions while trying to learn as much as possible for future Israeli air incursions into Syrian air space (such as might be utilized to bomb Iran).
- In 2006 the Israelis set up a National Emergency Authority. The new organization carried out a five-day emergency exercise (April 6-11, 2008) that was linked to both Israeli military preparations and the preparation of Israeli civilians to deal with missile attacks and extensive casualties. These combined military/emergency exercises were the largest in the history of Israel. One Lebanese newspaper suggested that certain things about the way the exercise was structured (the surprisingly limited number of missiles

hitting Israel) suggests that Israel was planning to strike first to take out a lot of Syria, Hezbollah and Iran's missile capabilities.

- In response, Syria announced its own emergency exercises within days after the Israeli exercises were conducted. There were also reports in the Israeli press that Syrian reserves had been called up to reinforce positions along its Lebanon border.
- Israeli newspapers report that since the 2006 Israeli failure in Lebanon, the Israeli military has been routinely performing simulations of an Israeli invasion of Syria. Major-General Eyal Ben-Reuven, a reservist general, declared in 2007 that Israel is “preparing itself for an all-out war.” He also stated that Israel must invade Syria—“the IDF’s mission will be very focussed and will have to be quick, in order to neutralize as quickly as possible the strategic areas threatening Israel’s soft underbelly, thus preventing Syria [from] reaching its coveted goals.”

Increasing U.S. military build up in E. Mediterranean and aid to Israel:

- The U.S. has recently sold Israel its most sophisticated Patriot anti-missile system for intercepting against incoming missiles. This is the first time the U.S. has ever sold these advanced weapons to anyone.
- The USS Ross, an Aegis-class destroyer, has taken up station off the coast of Lebanon—it is equipped with the U.S.’s most advanced missile intercepting weapons.
- Israel and the U.S. have held joint strategy meetings to formulate a course of military actions to be taken in Lebanon and against both Syria and Iran. According to a report (4/5/08) from Qatar by Al-Watan, a senior Syrian official indicated that the Israeli emergency exercises were observed by an American general.

Increasing military strength of Hezbollah:

- Hezbollah took advantage of the recent fighting in Lebanon link up its key base areas in Beirut, southern Lebanon and the Bekka Valley. This gives it greater strength and flexibility in a military contest with Israel.
- Michael Chossudovsky reports that Hezbollah has built a new defense line. “I estimate that the new line will be even stronger than the old one, will have deeper and more hardened shelters and will have a considerable anti-air capability in addition to what was encountered by the IDF last year.

Increasing overall U.S.-Israeli-NATO military cooperation

- In mid-May, the IDF Deputy Chief of Staff met with Admiral Mullen (head of U.S. Joint Chiefs) at a NATO meeting in Brussels to discuss how to deal with the Iranian threat.
- In 2005, NATO and Israel established the basis of a far-reaching military cooperation agreement. In addition, Turkey, which from a military standpoint constitutes a significant force within NATO, has a comprehensive bilateral military cooperation agreement with Israel.
- [This whole area of increasing NATO involvement in the Levant needs to be dug into further.]

[A number of analysts—often neocons—have posited that Iran could utilize “terrorist networks” operated by its “proxies” (Hezbollah is usually named) to hit at U.S. interests in other parts of the world—especially Latin America. This was not investigated, so it is not possible to judge if there is any truth to these claims]