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Is Iran Next?

The Pentagon neocons who brought you the war in Iraq have a new target

By Tom Barry

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Shortly after 9/11, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith began coordinating Pentagon planning for an invasion of Iraq. The challenge facing Feith, the No. 3 civilian in the Defense Department, was to establish a policy rationale for the attack. At the same time, Feith's ideological cohorts in the Pentagon began planning to take the administration's "global war on terrorism," not only to Baghdad, but also to Damascus and Tehran.

In August it was revealed that one of Feith's Middle East policy wonks, Lawrence Franklin, shared classified documents—including a draft National Security Presidential Directive formulated in Feith's office that outlines a more aggressive U.S. national security strategy regarding Iran—with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and Israeli officials. The FBI is investigating the document transfer as a case of espionage.

This spy scandal raises two concerns for U.S. diplomats and foreign policy experts from across the political spectrum. One, that U.S. Middle East policy is being directed by neoconservative ideologues variously employed, coordinated or sanctioned by Feith's Pentagon office. And two, that U.S. Middle East policy is too closely aligned with that of Israeli hardliners close to U.S. neoconservatives.

Feith is joined in reshaping a U.S. foreign Middle East policy—one that mirrors or complements the

policies of the hardliners in Israel—by a web of neoconservative policy institutes, pressure groups and think tanks. These include the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA), the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies (IASPS), Center for Security Policy (CSP) and the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA)—all groups with which Feith has been or still is closely associated.

First Iraq, now Iran

In the months after 9/11, rather than relying on the CIA, State Department or the Pentagon's own Defense Intelligence Agency for intelligence about Iraq's ties to international terrorists and its development of weapons of mass destruction, neoconservatives in the Pentagon set up a special intelligence shop called the Office of Special Plans (OSP). The founders, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and Feith, are fervent advocates of a regional restructuring in the Middle East that includes regime change in Iran, Syria and, ultimately, Saudi Arabia.

Not having its own intelligence-gathering infrastructure, Feith's office relied on fabricated information supplied by Ahmed Chalabi, an Iraqi expatriate who led the Iraqi National Congress (INC). In 1998, Chalabi's group was funded by the Iraq Liberation Act, a congressional initiative that was backed by neoconservative institutions such as AIPAC, CSP, Project for the New American Century (PNAC) and the American Enterprise Institute (AEI).

At the same time that Chalabi and other INC militants were visiting Feith's office, so were Israeli officials, including generals, according to Lt. Col Karen Kwiakowski, who formerly worked in the Near East and South Asia office under Feith's supervision. Like the neoconservatives in the United States, Israeli hardliners believe that Israel's long-term security can best be ensured by a radical makeover of Middle East politics enforced by the superior military power of the United States and Israel.

It now appears that Feith's Office of Policy, which was creating dubious intelligence rationales for the Iraq war, was also establishing a covert national security strategy for regime change in Iran—most likely through a combination of preemptive military strikes (either by the United States or Israel) and support for a coalition of Iranian dissidents.

Covert operators

This covert operation is now the subject of an FBI espionage investigation and inquiries by the House Judiciary Committee and Select Senate Intelligence Committee—inquiries that have been postponed

until after the election.

Without notifying the State Department or the CIA, Feith's office has been involved in back channel operations that have included a series of secret meetings in Washington, Rome and Paris over the last three years. These meetings have brought together Office of Policy officials and consultants (Franklin, Harold Rhode and Michael Ledeen), an expatriate Iranian arms dealer (Manichur Ghorbanifar), AIPAC lobbyists, Ahmed Chalabi, and Italian and Israeli intelligence officers, among others.

Franklin, an Iran expert who was pulled into Feith's policy shop from the Defense Intelligence Agency, met repeatedly with Naor Gilon, the head of the political department at the Israeli embassy in Washington. According to U.S. intelligence officials, during one of those meetings, Franklin offered to hand over the National Security Presidential Directive on Iran. For more than two years, an FBI counterintelligence operation has been monitoring Washington meetings between AIPAC, Franklin and Israeli officials. Investigators suspect that the draft security document was passed to Israel through an intermediary, likely AIPAC.

Franklin, who is known to be close to militant Iranian and Iranian-American dissidents, is the common link to another series of meetings in Rome and Paris involving Ledeen (an American Enterprise Institute scholar who was a special consultant to Feith), Harold Rhode (a cohort of Ledeen's from the Iran-Contra days, who is currently employed by Feith to prepare regime-change strategy plans for Middle Eastern countries on the neoconservatives' hit list), and Ghorbanifar (an arms dealer who claims to speak for the Iranian opposition). These meetings addressed, among other things, strategies for organizing Iranians who would be willing to cooperate with a U.S.-spearheaded regime change agenda for Iran.

Echoes of Iran-Contra

This cast of characters indicates that U.S. Middle East policy involves covert and illegal operations that resemble the Iran-Contra operations in the '80s. Not only are the neoconservatives once again the leading actors, these new covert operations involve at least two Iran-Contra conspirators: Ledeen, who has repeatedly complained that the Bush administration has let its regime-change plans for Iran and Syria "gather mold in the bowels of the bureaucracy"; and Ghorbanifar, who the CIA considers a "serial fabricator" with whom the agency prohibits its agents from having any association

During the Iran-Contra operation, Israel served as a conduit for U.S. arms sales to Iran. The proceeds

went largely to fund the Nicaraguan Contras despite a congressional ban on military support to the counterrevolutionaries. This time around, however, the apparent aim of these back channel dealings is to move U.S.-Iran relations beyond the reach of State Department diplomats and into the domain of the Pentagon ideologues. Ledeen, the neoconservative point man in the Iran regime-change campaign, wrote in the National Review Online that too many U.S. government officials “prefer to schmooze with the mullahs” rather than promote “democratic revolution in Iran.”

In early 2002, Ledeen, along with Morris Amitay, a former AIPAC executive director as well as a CSP adviser, founded the Coalition for Democracy in Iran (CDI) to build congressional and administration support for Iran regime change. AIPAC and CDI helped ensure passage of recent House and Senate resolutions that condemn Iran, call for tighter sanctions and express support for Iranian dissidents.

The CDI includes members of key neoconservative policy institutes and think tanks, including Raymond Tanter of the Washington Institute for Near East Affairs (WINEA)—an off-shoot of AIPAC—and Frank Gaffney, president of CSP. In the '90s, Feith served as the board chairman of CSP, whose slogan is “peace through strength,” and where Woolsey currently serves as co-chairman of the advisory committee. Other neoconservative organizations represented in the coalition by more than one member include AEI and Freedom House.

Rob Sobhani, an Iranian-American, who like Ledeen and other neoconservatives is a friend of the Shah’s son Reza Pahlavi, is also a CDI member. CDI expresses the common neoconservative position that constructive engagement with the Iranian government—even with the democratic reformists—is merely appeasement. Instead, the United States should proceed immediately to a regime change strategy working closely with the “Iranian people.” Representatives of the Iranian people that could be the front men for a regime change strategy, according to the neoconservatives, include, the Shah’s son, Reza Pahlavi (who has also cultivated close ties with the Likud Party in Israel), the Iraq-based guerrilla group Mujahadin-E Khalq (MEK), and expatriate arms dealer Ghorbanifar.

The CDI’s Ledeen, Amitay and Sobhani were featured speakers at a May 2003 forum on “the future of Iran,” sponsored by AEI, the Hudson Institute and the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. The forum, chaired by the Hudson Institute’s Meyrav Wurmser, the Israeli-born wife of David Wurmser (he serves as Cheney’s leading expert on Iran and Syria), included a presentation by Uri Lubrani of Israel’s Ministry of Defense. Summarizing the sentiment of neoconservative ideologues and strategists, Meyrav Wurmser said: “Our fight against Iraq was only a battle in a long war. It would be ill-conceived to think we can deal with Iraq alone. We must move on, and faster.”

JINSA, a neoconservative organization established in 1976 that fosters closer strategic and military ties between the United States and Israel, also has its sights on Iran. At a JINSA policy forum in April 2003 titled “Time to Focus on Iran—The Mother of Modern Terrorism,” Ledeen declared, “The time for diplomacy is at an end; it is time for a free Iran, free Syria and free Lebanon.”

JINSA, along with CSP, serves as one of the main institutional links to the military-industrial complex for neoconservatives. Ledeen served as JINSA’s first executive director and was JINSA’s “Godfather,” according to Amitay. Amitay is a JINSA vice chair. JINSA board members or advisers also include former CIA director James Woolsey, former Rep. Jack Kemp and the AEI’s Joshua Muravchik. After he joined the administration, Feith resigned from JINSA’s board of advisers, as did Vice President Dick Cheney and Undersecretary of State for Arms Control John Bolton.

Like other neoconservatives, Feith sees Israel and the United States sharing common national-security concerns in the Middle East. In 1996, Feith was a member of a study team organized by IASPS and led by Richard Perle that also included representatives from JINSA, the AIPAC-related WINEA, and Meyrav and David Wurmser.

The resulting report, *A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm*, advised Israeli Prime Minister-elect Benjamin Netanyahu to “work closely with Turkey and Jordan to contain, destabilize and roll back” regional threats, to help overthrow Saddam Hussein, and to strike Syrian military targets in Lebanon and possibly in Syria proper. It recommended that Israel forge a foreign and domestic policy based on a “new intellectual foundation” that “provides the nation the room to engage every possible energy on rebuilding Zionism.”

Ideology alone does not explain Feith’s close connections to Israel. His old law firm Feith & Zell, which has an office in Israel, specialized in representing arms dealers and missile defense contractors. The firm has boasted of its role in facilitating technology transfers between U.S. and Israel military contractors.

Zionism runs deep

Feith’s right-wing Zionism typifies neoconservatism. The Pentagon’s advocacy of an invasion of Iraq and, more recently, its hard-line postures with respect to Iran and Syria, must be considered in light of the Zionist convictions and Likud Party connections of those shaping the administration’s Middle East policy.

Through the early '70s anti-totalitarianism was the core political tenet that united neoconservatives and their forerunners. In this Manichean political worldview, the forces of good and democracy led by the United States were under constant threat by the forces of evil as embodied in communism and fascism. At home, the “present danger” came in the form of appeasers, pro-détente advocates, isolationists and peace activists who shied away from direct and preemptive military confrontation with the totalitarian empire builders.

Although the early neoconservatives were largely Jewish, most were not Zionists. In the '50s and through most of the '60s, neocons such as Irving Kristol—widely known as the father of neoconservatism—regarded Israel more as a key Cold War ally than as the biblically ordained homeland of God's chosen people.

After the 1967 Six Day War and the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the Jewish neoconservatives embraced their Judaic roots and incorporated Zionism into their worldview. Anti-totalitarianism remains a core neoconservative foreign policy principle. Since the end of the Cold War, neoconservatism has focused on the Muslim world and to a lesser extent China—but is now tied to the ideological and political imperatives of right-wing Zionism.

Feith's own Zionism is rooted in his family. In 1997, the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA) honored Dalck Feith and his son Douglas at its annual dinner, describing the Feiths as “noted Jewish philanthropists and pro-Israel activists.” The father was awarded the group's special Centennial Award “for his lifetime of service to Israel and the Jewish people,” while Douglas received the “prestigious Louis D. Brandeis Award.”

Dalck Feith was a militant in Betar, a Zionist youth movement founded in Riga, Latvia in 1923, by Ze'ev Jabotinsky, an admirer of Mussolini. Betar, whose members spouted militaristic slogans modeled after fascistic movements, was associated with the Revisionist Movement, which evolved in Poland to become the Herut Party, the forerunner of the Likud Party.

In 1999, Douglas Feith contributed an essay to a book titled *The Dangers of a Palestinian State*, published by the ZOA. That same year, Feith spoke to a 150-member ZOA lobbying mission to Congress that called for “U.S. action against Palestinian Arab killers of Americans” and for moving the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. The ZOA lobbying group also criticized the Clinton administration for its “refusal to criticize illegal Palestinian Arab construction in Jerusalem and the territories, which is far more extensive than Israeli construction there.”

In addition to his close ties with the right-wing ZOA, before assuming his current position at the Pentagon Feith co-founded One Jerusalem, a group whose objective is “saving a united Jerusalem as the undivided capital of Israel.” Other cofounders of this Jerusalem-based organization are David Steinmann, chairman of JINSA, board member of the CSP and chairman of the executive committee of the Middle East Forum; Dore Gold, a top adviser to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon; and Natan Sharansky, Israel’s Minister of Diaspora Affairs and current chairman of One Jerusalem.

One Jerusalem actively courts the involvement of Christian Zionists. In May 2003, One Jerusalem hosted the Interfaith Zionist Summit in Washington, DC, that brought together Christian Zionists such as Gary Bauer of American Values and Roberta Combs of the Christian Coalition with Daniel Pipes of the Middle East Forum and Mort Klein of the ZOA.

Dual agendas

The Israeli government and AIPAC have denied that they engaged in any criminal operations involving classified Pentagon documents about Iran. Sharansky said, “There are absolutely no attempts to involve any member of the Jewish community and any general American citizens to spy for Israel against the United States.” He observed that the investigation of the Pentagon’s Office of Policy staff most likely stemmed from an inter-agency rivalry within the U.S. government.

For his part, Ledeen told Newsweek that the espionage allegations against Franklin, his close friend, were “nonsensical.” Ledeen and other neoconservatives see the investigations as instigated by the State Department and the CIA to undermine the credibility of neoconservatives and to obstruct their Middle East restructuring agenda, particularly regime change in Iran.

Given the depth of congressional bipartisan support for Israel and close ties with right-wing Israeli lobbying groups like AIPAC, it’s unlikely that the investigations will provide the much-needed public scrutiny of the dual and complementary agendas that unite U.S. and Israeli hardliners. Feith’s policymaking fiefdom inside and outside of government continues to drive U.S. policy in the Middle East with no evidence that these radical policies are increasing the national security and welfare of either the United States or Israel.

Iran rumbles

Meanwhile tensions with Iran deepen—which suits the Iran war party just fine. “Stability,” Michael

Ledeen once said, “gives me the heebee jeebies.”

On September 21, Iran’s President Mohammed Khatami warned that Iran may withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty if Washington and the International Atomic Energy Commission demand that the country desist from plans to enrich uranium. The Iranian government says that it has no plans to develop nuclear weapons, and international inspectors have not determined otherwise. However, if Iran does proceed with its plans to enrich nearly 40 tons of uranium, which it says will be used to generate electricity, it is commonly acknowledged that in a few years it could produce several nuclear bombs.

But it’s not only the possibility that Iran could emerge as the Middle East’s second nuclear power that worries the United States and Israel. At the same time that Washington was demanding that the Iranian case be sent to the Security Council, the Iranian army was test-firing its long-range (810 miles) missile—a demonstration of its commitment to an effective deterrent capacity.

From the point of view of the Middle East restructurers, Iran represents an increasing threat to regional stability. Not only does it already have long-range missiles, and might be developing nuclear weapons, its close ties with the Shiite majority in Iraq do not bode well for the type of political and economic restructuring the Bush administration planned for Iraq. Moreover, neoconservatives and Israelis have long complained that Iran backs the Hezbollah militias in Lebanon and is fueling the Shiite rebels in Iraq.

Effectively, Washington has already declared war on Iran. Being named by President Bush as part of the “Axis of Evil” triad targeted in the global war on terrorism and the new U.S. strategy of preemptive war has made Iran increasingly nervous.

Iran—itself a victim of a 1953 British and U.S.-engineered regime change that installed the Shah—has seen the United States implement regime change in Iraq to its west and Afghanistan to its east. Moreover, the U.S. government has for the first time solidly allied itself with the military hardliners in Israel—the region’s only nation with nuclear warheads and one of the few nations that has refused to sign the nonproliferation treaty.

Back in 1996, Feith was busy representing the armament industries in Israel and the United States while at the same time preparing a policy briefing for the Israeli government. In *A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm*, Feith et al. recommended “a new vision for the U.S.-Israeli partnership

... based on a shared philosophy of peace through strength”—a “clean break” policy that is currently being dually implemented by the Bush and Sharon administrations. The next demonstration of strength may well be with Iran.

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