

The Al-Qaida Gambit?

By Gareth Porter | June 11, 2007

Following revelations of a George W. Bush administration policy to hold Iran responsible for any al-Qaida attack on the United States that could be portrayed as planned on Iranian soil, former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski warned recently that Washington might use such an incident as a pretext to bomb Iran.

Brzezinski, the national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter from 1977 through 1980 and the most senior Democratic Party figure on national security policy, told a private meeting sponsored by the non-partisan Committee for the Republic in Washington on May 30 that an al-Qaida terrorist attack in the United States intended to provoke war between the United States and Iran was a possibility that must be taken seriously. The Bush administration might accuse Iran of responsibility for such an attack and use it to justify attacking Iran, he said.

Brzezinski suggested that new constraints were needed on presidential war powers to reduce the risk of a war against Iran based on such a false pretense. Such constraints, Brzezinski said, should not prevent the president from using force in response to an attack on the United States, but should make it more difficult to carry out an attack without an adequate justification.

His warning came after FoxNews's chief Washington correspondent Jim Angle reported on May 14, in a "Special Report with Brit Hume," that, according to unnamed U.S. official sources, U.S. officials had urged Iran in two face-to-face meetings to deport the terrorists to their countries of origin, told them about al-Qaida efforts to get a nuclear device, and "warned that if any terrorist attack against Americans were to come from Iranian territory, it would be held responsible."

Angle quoted a former official as saying that Iran "understood how bad it would be ... if there were another terrorist attack and it was learned it had been planned in Iran."

Former CIA Director George Tenet wrote in his recently published memoirs that U.S. intelligence had learned by early 2003 that a senior al-Qaida operative who had been detained in Iran was in charge of the organization's efforts to obtain nuclear weapons. Tenet said that information was passed on to Iranian officials "in the hope

that they would recognize our common interest in preventing any attack against U.S. interests."

The Bush administration has made persistent claims over the past five years that Iran has harbored al-Qaida operatives who had fled from Afghanistan and that they had participated in planning terrorist actions—claims that were unsupported by intelligence analysts.

Pentagon officials leaked information to CBS in May 2003 that they had "evidence" that al-Qaida leaders who had found "safe haven" in Iran had planned and directed terrorist operations in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld encouraged that inference when he declared on May 29, 2003, that Iran had "permitted senior al-Qaida officials to operate in their country."

The leak and public statement allowed the media and their audiences to infer that the "safe haven" had been deliberately provided by Iranian authorities.

But most U.S. intelligence analysts specializing on the Persian Gulf believed the al-Qaida officials in Iran who were still communicating with operatives elsewhere were in hiding rather than under arrest. Former national intelligence officer for Near East and South Asia Paul Pillar told the Inter Press Service in an interview last year that the "general impression" was that the al-Qaida operatives were not in Iran with the complicity of the Iranian authorities.

Former CIA analyst Ken Pollack, who was a Persian Gulf specialist on the National Security Council (NSC) staff in 2001, wrote in *The Persian Puzzle*: "These al-Qaida leaders apparently were operating in eastern Iran, which is a bit like the Wild West." He added, pointedly, "It was not as if these al-Qaida leaders had been under lock and key in Evin prison in Tehran and were allowed to make phone calls to set up the attacks."

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Although most elements in the Bush administration appear to oppose military action against Iran, Vice President Dick Cheney has reportedly advocated that course. He has also continued to raise the issue of al-Qaida officials in Iran.

Cheney told FoxNews in an interview May 14: "We are confident that there are a number of senior al-Qaida officials in Iran, that they've been there since the spring of 2003. About the time that we launched operations into Iraq, the Iranians rounded up a number of al-Qaida individuals and placed them under house arrest."

Cheney did not say that the al-Qaida officials who were communicating with other operatives outside Iran were under house arrest.

As recently as last February, Bush administration officials were preparing to accuse Tehran publicly of cooperating with and harboring al-Qaida suspects as part of the administration's strategy for pushing for stronger UN sanctions against Iran. The strategy of portraying Iran as having links to al-Qaida was being pushed by an unidentified Bush adviser who had been "instrumental in coming up with a more confrontational U.S. approach to Iran," according a February 20, 2006 report by the *Washington Post's* Dafna Linzer.

As Linzer revealed, the neoconservative faction in the administration was still pushing to link Iran with al-Qaida, despite the fact that a CIA report in early February had reported the arrest by Iranian authorities of two more al-Qaida operatives trying to make their way through Iran from Pakistan to Iraq.

The danger of an al-Qaida effort to disguise an attack on the United States as coming from Iran was raised in a *Foreign Affairs* article published in late April by former NSC adviser and counterterrorism expert Bruce Reidel.

In the article, Reidel wrote that Osama bin Laden may have plans for "triggering an all-out war between the United States and Iran," referring to evidence that al-Qaida in Iraq now considers Iranian influence in Iraq "an even greater problem than the U.S. occupation."

"The biggest danger," Reidel wrote, "is that al-Qaida will deliberately provoke a war with a 'false-flag' operation, say, a terrorist attack carried out in a way that would make it appear as though it were Iran's doing."

Reidel, now a senior fellow with the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, was one of the leading specialists on al-Qaida and terrorism, having served in the 1990s as national intelligence officer, and then as assistant secretary of defense and NSC specialist for Near East and South Asia up to January 2002.

Supporting the warnings by Brzezinski and Reidel about an al-Qaida "false flag" terrorist attack is a captured al-Qaida document found in a hideout of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq in 2006. The document, translated and released by the Iraqi National Security Adviser Mouwafek al-Rubaie, said "the best solution in order to get out of this crisis is to involve the U.S. forces in waging a war against another country or any hostile groups."

The document, the author of which was not specified, explained, "We mean specifically attempting to escalate tension between America and Iran, and America and the Shiite[s] in Iraq."

Gareth Porter is a historian and national security policy analyst who writes for the Inter Press Service. His latest book is Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam (2005).

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