

A Different Tack

By Gareth Porter | September 4, 2007

Israeli officials warned the George W. Bush administration that an invasion of Iraq would be destabilizing to the region and urged the United States to instead target Iran as the primary enemy, according to former administration official Lawrence Wilkerson.

Wilkerson, then a member of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff and later chief of staff for Secretary of State Colin Powell, told the Inter Press Service that the Israelis reacted immediately to indications that the Bush administration was thinking of war against Iraq. After the Israeli government picked up the first signs of that intention, Wilkerson said: "The Israelis were telling us Iraq is not the enemy—Iran is the enemy."

Wilkerson described the Israeli message to the Bush administration in early 2002 as being: "If you are going to destabilize the balance of power, do it against the main enemy."

The warning against an invasion of Iraq was "pervasive" in Israeli communications with the administration, Wilkerson recalled. It was conveyed to the administration by a wide range of Israeli sources, including political figures, intelligence community members, and private citizens.

Wilkerson noted that the main point of their communications was not that the United States should immediately attack Iran, but that "it should not be distracted by Iraq and Saddam Hussein" from a focus on the threat from Iran.

The Israeli advice against using military force against Iraq was apparently triggered by reports reaching Israeli officials in December 2001 that the Bush administration was beginning serious planning for an attack on Iraq. Journalist Bob Woodward revealed in *Plan of Attack* that on December 1, 2001, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had ordered the Central Command chief Gen. Tommy Franks to come up with the first formal briefing on a new war plan for Iraq on December 4. That started a period of intense discussions of war planning between Rumsfeld and Franks.

Soon after Israeli officials got wind of that planning, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon asked for a meeting with Bush primarily to discuss U.S. intentions to invade

Iraq. In the weeks preceding Sharon's meeting with Bush on February 7, 2002, a procession of Israeli officials conveyed the message to the Bush administration that Iran represented a greater threat, according to a *Washington Post* report on the eve of the meeting.

Israeli Minister of National Infrastructures Binyamin Fouad Ben-Eliezer, who was visiting Washington with Sharon, revealed the essence of the strategic differences between Tel Aviv and Washington over military force. He was quoted by the *Post* as saying, "Today, everybody is busy with Iraq. Iraq is a problem. ... But you should understand, if you ask me, today Iran is more dangerous than Iraq."

Sharon never revealed publicly what he said to Bush in the February 7 meeting. But Yossi Alpher, a former adviser to Prime Minister Ehud Barak, wrote in an article in the *Forward* last January that Sharon advised Bush not to occupy Iraq, according to a knowledgeable source. Alpher wrote that Sharon also assured Bush that Israel would not "push one way or another" regarding his plan to take down Saddam Hussein.

Alpher noted that Washington did not want public support from Israel and in fact requested that Israel refrain from openly supporting the invasion in order to avoid an automatic negative reaction from Iraq's Arab neighbors.

After that meeting, the Sharon government generally remained silent on the issue of an invasion of Iraq. A notable exception, however, was a statement on August 16, 2002, by Raanan Gissin, an aide to Sharon. Gissin declared: "Any postponement of an attack on Iraq at this stage will serve no purpose. It will only give [Hussein] more of an opportunity to accelerate his program of weapons of mass destruction."

As late as October 2002, however, there were still signs of continuing Israeli grumbling about the Bush administration's obsession with taking over Iraq. Both the Israeli Defense Forces chief of staff and its chief of military

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intelligence made public statements that month implicitly dismissing the Bush administration's position that Saddam Hussein's alleged quest for nuclear weapons made him the main threat. Both officials suggested that Israel's military advantage over Iraq had continued to increase over the decade since the Gulf War as Iraq had grown weaker.

The Israeli chief of military intelligence, Maj. Gen. Aharon Farkash, said Iraq had not deployed any missiles that could strike Israel directly and challenged the Bush administration's argument that Iraq could obtain nuclear weapons within a relatively short time. He gave an interview to Israeli television in which he said army intelligence had concluded that Iraq could not have nuclear weapons in less than four years. He insisted that Iran was as much of a nuclear threat as Iraq.

Israeli strategists generally believed that taking down the Hussein regime could further upset an Iran-Iraq power balance that had already tilted in favor of Iran after the U.S. defeat of Hussein's army in the 1991 Gulf War. By 1996, however, neoconservatives with ties to the Likud Party were beginning to argue for a more aggressive joint U.S.-Israeli strategy aimed at a "rollback" of all of Israel's enemies in the region, including Iran, but beginning by taking down Hussein and putting a pro-Israel regime in power there.

That was the thrust of the 1996 report of a task force led by Richard Perle for the right-wing Israeli think tank the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies and aimed at the Likud Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

But most strategists in the Israeli government and the Likud Party—including Sharon himself—did not share that viewpoint. Despite agreement between neoconservatives and Israeli officials on many issues, the dominant Israeli strategic judgment on the issue of invading Iraq diverged from that of U.S. neoconservatives because of differing political-military interests.

Israel was more concerned with the relative military threat posed by Iran and Iraq, whereas neoconservatives in the Bush administration were focused on regime change in Iraq as a low-cost way of leveraging more ambitious changes in the region. From the neoconservative perspective, the very military weakness of Hussein's Iraq made it the logical target for the use of U.S. military power.

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

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