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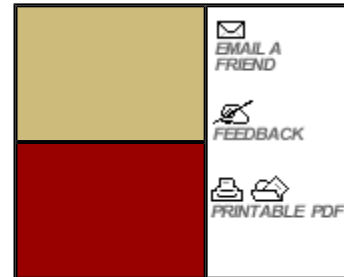
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Analysis

New Report Shows Tactical Neocon Switch on Iran

By Khody Akhavi

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A new report published by the [American Enterprise Institute](#) (AEI) purports to show the reach and scope of Iranian influence across the Middle East but stops short of drawing conclusions about Tehran's intentions or grand strategy.

Cowritten by AEI fellows [Fred Kagan](#) and [Danielle Pletka](#), and Kagan's wife Kimberly who heads the Institute for the Study of War, the report doesn't offer much in the way of rhetorical grandstanding, doesn't discuss Iran's current nuclear program, and fails to offer recommendations of how to counter Tehran.

But that's not the point really, said the authors repeatedly during a panel discussion last Tuesday in the think tank's conference room.

"We endeavored to take a look at what Iran is doing, not with a view to figuring out whether the regime in Tehran has particular motivations, not with a view to figuring out even necessarily what the regime's strategy is, rather just to take a 'clean'—if you will—look at Iran's reach," said Pletka, vice president for foreign and defense policy studies at AEI.

The report, entitled "Iranian Influence in the Levant, Iraq, and Afghanistan," describes the debate about the aims and the nature of power in Tehran's regime as "charged." Hence, drawing firm conclusions about a government that is opaque and rife with internal schisms is "almost hopeless."

Yet it warns: "Much as America might desire to avoid war with Iran, continued Iranian interventions ... might ultimately make that option less repulsive than the alternatives."

The report relies entirely on open-source material, international and domestic media, nongovernmental and government reports, as well as interviews conducted by Fred and Kimberly Kagan, who visited Afghanistan and Iraq, respectively.

AEI has been home base for a long list of influential figures, including several former George W. Bush administration officials such as [John Bolton](#), [Paul Wolfowitz](#), and [Richard Perle](#). Having helped lead the effort to push public support for the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq—including by creating influential advocacy groups such as the now defunct [Project for the New American Century](#) (PNAC)—AEI writers and scholars have turned their attention to Iran.

They have long been advocates for confrontational policy approaches, and until recently, open agitators for military intervention with Tehran. At an event last summer, neoconservative author [Michael Ledeen](#) said: "The [Iranian] leadership constantly tells its people, 'the Iranian people must prepare to rule the world.'"

"Everybody has convinced themselves that they can make a deal with Iran. We have been negotiating for 27 years, as if there have been no negotiations. ... There is no escape," he said. "The only question is how best to defeat them."

In November 2006, AEI fellow [Joshua Muravchik](#) began an opinion editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* with four words: "We must bomb Iran."

But during the discussion last Tuesday, the report's authors' ducked questions about the possibility of air strikes against Iran before President George W. Bush leaves office next January.

"What I would say simply is that whatever your view about when or if air strikes will occur, air strikes are not a strategy, and we need to be thinking more broadly than that," said Fred Kagan.

Kagan, a member of an influential neoconservative family that includes father [Donald](#) and brother [Robert](#), is widely known for his advocacy of Bush's "surge strategy," the increase of some 30,000 U.S. soldiers in Iraq to provide security and breathing space for a political reconciliation between the country's political parties.

AEI may have had the ear of the White House and Pentagon at one time, but since the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate that said that Iran had decided to stop its nuclear weapons program, the drive toward confrontation with Iran seems to have sputtered.

While Bush may share AEI's view on Iranian malfeasance, his influence is waning. In a National Public Radio interview this month, Defense Secretary Robert Gates appeared to contradict his boss's view that Iran posed a "threat," instead saying that Tehran posed "significant challenges."

"When I think of a threat I think of a direct military threat, and while the jury's out in terms of whether they have eased up on their support to those opposing us in Iraq, I don't see the Iranians in the near term as a direct military threat," he said.

It seems the scholars at AEI have caught on, as they have attempted to shift the focus of the debate from Iranian motivations and intentions toward an "empirical study" of Iran's influence. In the final analysis, it reflects a tactical shift away from openly beating the war drums as do scholars like Ledeen, whose most recent book is entitled, *The Iranian Time Bomb: The Mullah Zealots' Quest for Destruction*, and toward an attempt to highlight the extent of Iranian influence in the region. The conclusion to be drawn is that, even without the nuclear issue at the forefront, Iran continues to exert a negative impact on U.S. interests.

By assembling an empirical study based on open-source information, the intention may be to provide a purportedly unvarnished account of Iran's ability to compete with the United States for hegemony in the region, to challenge the compartmentalized view of the Iran-U.S. conflict, in a debate the authors argue has been "short on facts."

But perhaps the authors should do some fact checking of their own. On page three, they incorrectly identify the former president of Syria as "Hafez al-Hassad," who died in 2006. Assad died in 2000.

Khody Akhavi writes for the Inter Press Service..



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