

THE POLITICAL MANEUVERING taking place today is eerily familiar. As with Iraq, the next step is to formalize congressional support for a harder-line policy. Congressional hawks, from powerful right-wing senators to members of the House Committee on International Relations, have already tried to introduce Iran resolutions patterned on the Iraq Liberation Act. Last summer, Senate Republican Rick Santorum cosponsored the Iran Freedom and Support Act. A draft that I read mimicked the language of the Iraq act: "It should be the policy of the United States to support regime change for the Islamic Republic of Iran.... The President is authorized to provide assistance to foreign and domestic pro-democracy groups opposed to the non-democratic Government of Iran." Another resolution authorizes "all appropriate means" to curtail Iran's nuclear-weapons program.

With each draft, the State Department, along with moderate Republicans like Indiana senator Dick Lugar, objected to the language calling for regime change and managed to stave off passage of Santorum's act. But with Armitage and Powell gone and with Lugar weakened by an incoming class of tough congressional Republicans, a new Iran Freedom and Support Act has been proposed and seems likely to pass. It would provide \$10 million in funding for Iranian dissidents and also bar any representatives of Tehran from even entering U.S. government buildings, a stipulation that, needless to say, would make any efforts at détente considerably harder.

Once passed, the act will commit America to taking the gloves off regarding Iran, and a major hurdle in the hard-liners' strategy will have been cleared. But there is a subtler agenda at work as well, one most congress-people won't openly discuss. "The bill helps ratchet up and build a case against Iran, should military action be necessary," one congressional aide tells me. "There is here an incremental raising of the bar, so that if a military strike is necessary, we can say, 'We've tried these elements and failed,' and we can move up the ladder of action." In other words, if relations with Tehran continue to disintegrate and the mullahs remain in power, hard-liners can point back to this bill and say, "Look, we tried to promote peaceful change, but it didn't work."

A day after hearing plans for an Iran liberation act, I found myself sitting in the baroque lobby of a Washington apartment building. My contact, a conservative former high-ranking government official who maintains close links to the Pentagon, eventually arrived and moved us to a back room so no one could overhear our conversation. When maintenance staff wandered through, he laughed and chatted with them until they left, then quickly turned serious.

Out of his briefcase he pulled a long transcript of his recent meetings with

leaders of the Mujahideen-e-Khalq (MEK), the biggest Iranian opposition group. The MEK has a political front, the National Council of Resistance in Iran (NCRI), which operates primarily out of France, but the group also has a large base in Iraq and many agents inside Iran. My companion said he had learned from the group that Iran has sent many intelligence specialists into Iraq to create havoc for American troops. He considered the MEK's information valuable and has suggested that the administration utilize it—and the MEK's legions—against Tehran. He's delivered these transcripts to top officials at the Pentagon, he told me.

The MEK is a powerful force, with over 3,500 members who've dedicated their lives to fighting Tehran and collecting information on its abuses and nuclear activities. They have launched numerous successful sabotage missions against the mullahs, including bombings of Iranian embassies. They're also stark bonkers. As Elizabeth Rubin reported in *The New York Times* two years ago when she visited the group's Iraq base, the MEK locks up followers who disagree with its leaders, requires its members to practice celibacy, and trains a *Stepford Wives*-like coterie of female fighters who are fiercely loyal to the husband-and-wife duo who are its leaders. Most Iran experts, including some of the smartest neocons, like Eli, say the MEK is also hated inside Iran because the group sided with Iraq in the bloody Iran-Iraq war. Oh, and there's this: The MEK, which killed U.S. civilians in the 1970s, has been on the State Department's list of proscribed foreign terrorist organizations since 1997.

The former official is hardly deterred. He's convinced that there's now sufficient sympathy toward the MEK in the Pentagon and Congress to review the group's status. "Taking the MEK off the terrorist list...it will now be considered," he said. Top Pentagon hawks appear to share his views. As one administration official with access to high-level internal debates told me, "It's my impression that the Defense Department has argued we should arm the MEK and go let them fight." And on Capitol Hill, hard-liners still quietly push for the Mujahideen. "Why is the MEK on the terror list?" one congressional aide asked me, behind her closed door. "They take on hard targets of an enemy of the U.S."

When the NCRI was also officially declared a foreign terrorist entity in 2003, its offices in Washington's National Press Building were shut down, and the Treasury Department issued a notice "prohibiting transactions between U.S. persons and these organizations." So I was surprised when a friend suggested I check out the new digs of Alireza Jafarzadeh, who was the NCRI's Washington representative. Jafarzadeh had moved exactly two blocks

from the Press Building, to an office in a stylish warren of rooms taken up by various consulting and advocacy firms. When I arrived, Jafarzadeh spoke into his phone, and moments later a smiling attendant brought us coffee. Friends from other offices in the building intermittently poked their heads in throughout our conversation.

Jafarzadeh swiveled back in his chair, sipped his coffee, and all but winked at me as he began to talk. "I can't speak for the MEK," he said, "but I can talk to you about them."

"Okay," I replied, happy to play along, and Jafarzadeh, a seasoned Washington operator with sound bites at the ready, launched into his talking points. The MEK is the largest, most organized opposition force, he emphasized, and it continues to collect a wealth of valuable information on Iran's nuclear program. The MEK's operatives in Iraq, he assured me, "have established a good relationship with the U.S. military on the ground. We help each other." He pulled out a thick file for me to peruse: satellite photos and intricate diagrams of suspected nuclear sites, with notes in Farsi scrawled on them.

When I asked him if being labeled a terrorist group has troubled the organization at all, he suggested that it wasn't a huge concern. He himself has weathered the trauma of being part of a terrorist organization quite nicely. The FBI and Treasury never even interviewed him, he said, and his livelihood was not threatened. "I still write op-eds, do interviews, give speeches," he told me, smiling. "I got a job as an analyst for Fox News."

TO MAKE REGIME transformation work, exiles are vital. With Iraq, the role of exiled spokesman and devourer of government funds was played, often with Oscar-caliber skill, by Ahmad Chalabi. And while it's a matter of some shame that since the invasion of Iraq, Chalabi has been accused of providing cooked intelligence and of having little or no support on the ground among Iraqis, to plenty of Iranian exiles Chalabi's is hardly a cautionary tale. After all, he got the entire U.S. government on board. "Chalabi showed Iranian Americans if you bring in these opposition forces and they're willing to liberate their country, as with Iraq...the U.S. will back you," says one influential Iranian American leader.

With that in mind, Iranian exiles have been lining up to meet with U.S. officials, and neocons laying the groundwork for Transformation 2.0 have been auditioning all comers. Reza Pahlavi, the Virginia-based son of the former shah, most clearly echoes the Chalabi model. Like Chalabi, the urbane Pahlavi enjoys the support of the neoconservative world, appears at events sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute, and understands how to woo hard-liners with

visions of a restoration in Iran.

But there are others in the running. Michael Ledeen has been reaching out to the Iranian American community, whipping up crowds and pushing them to present a united face, and trying to bring Iranian opposition figures to the United States. At one surreal event hosted by the American Enterprise Institute, Ledeen introduced a most unique speaker, calling the opportunity "a singular personal pleasure, one I never expected to have." The typical Washington crowd of policymakers, academics, and journalists looked on as a youngish Middle Eastern man in dark, flowing robes and a turban, his beetle brows familiar to any American over the age of 20, glided to the front of the room. Until recently, the cleric had resided in various Shiite holy cities, and Ledeen praised him as a man who had seen the light and turned against the mullahs. The cleric, Ledeen announced, had realized that "freedom is the most important thing, and that all people share a belief in freedom and have a common need for freedom."

The holy man soaked up the rapt applause, then went on to deliver the discourse he had been summoned to Washington for, detailing the rot within the clerical state and pleading for the United States to help Iranians overthrow their government. "The Iranian people have become tired, fatigued, after twenty-five years of deprivation and suppression," he declared. "They have been deprived of the basic means of life, of living. We cannot remain silent and watch the destruction—further destruction—of Iran and Iranian people." When he was finished, amid even more applause, Hussein Khomeini, the grandson of the Ayatollah Khomeini, was whooshed out of the room.

IN MID-MARCH, as part of the new U.S. charm offensive toward Europe, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced that the United States shares "the desire of European governments to secure Iran's adherence to its obligations through peaceful and diplomatic means." It was certainly a different tune from what had been sung, at least internally, since George Bush began his second term. It was also largely empty.

Within the executive branch, there's little doubt that Dick Cheney—along with Donald Rumsfeld and John Bolton, Bush's choice to be the new ambassador to the United Nations—is committed to a tougher Iran policy. Cheney's daughter Elizabeth has been assigned to the State Department to head democratization efforts there. "Vice President Cheney is giving interviews and speeches that paint a stark picture of a soon-to-be-nuclear-armed Iran and declaring that this is something the Bush administration will not tolerate," David Kay, the White House's former weapons inspector

in Iraq, warned. He added that, as with Iraq, "Iranian exiles are providing the press and government with a steady stream of new 'evidence' concerning Iran's nuclear-weapons activities."

In the spring of 2003, hawks in the Pentagon drafted a national-security presidential directive on Iran, a statement that formally commits the White House to a certain policy, the way a congressional act does for Congress. According to one official, the proposed language argued that the United States should push harder for regime change and target Iran's key economic and political centers, using independent actors not formally employed by the U.S. government. Due to infighting within the administration, the presidential directive was never formalized. Several current and former officials say they now expect movement toward a presidential directive to begin again.

No matter what Rice says publicly, administration hawks also have been pushing for a stronger commitment to the possibility of outright military strikes—action Rice herself has pointedly refused to rule out. *New Yorker* writer Seymour Hersh recently reported that the United States has been conducting secret reconnaissance missions inside Iran, identifying potential nuclear, chemical, and missile sites that could be targets of missile strikes and commando raids. One government official I spoke with confirmed that last fall, after a meeting of "principals"—cabinet secretaries and other top officials—Iran specialists within the administration were told that a secret new strategy of "deterrence and disruption" toward Tehran was being adopted. This strategy, the official said, could mean a number of different things. It involves conducting stepped-up intelligence assessments of Iranian nuclear facilities, as well as launching covert actions by Special Forces inside Iran in an effort to sabotage those facilities. "You'll start seeing reports," he told me, "of an 'accidental gas leak' at Natanz," a suspected nuclear site.

WHEN WOULD UNOFFICIAL policy become official? How would the hammer drop on Tehran? What would convince the American public that Iran was worth taking on, at the possible cost of thousands more casualties? Well, Iran might cause its own demise: Judgment day may be coming if Iran continues secretly seeking a nuclear-weapons program. Tehran has so far rebuffed European diplomacy, making deals with the European Union only to break them. If this behavior continues in the face of increasing pressure to reveal the scope of its nuclear capabilities, it could be just the triggering event the administration is looking for. "At this point, the president will be forced to make a decision," one prominent neocon told me. "And

a president not facing another term, who goes by his instincts..." His voice trailed off. A lot of groundwork has been laid, and a lot of powerful people believe this may be their one chance to remake America's most implacable foe in the Middle East. My companion smiled. To think that this won't happen, he seemed to be suggesting, is a little naive. ✕

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VOLUME 75, NO. 5. GQ—GENTLEMEN'S QUARTERLY (ISSN 0016-6979) is published monthly by The Condé Nast Publications, which is a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: The Condé Nast Building, 4 Times Square, New York, NY 10036. Advance Magazine Publishers Inc.: S.I. Newhouse, Jr., Chairman; Steven T. Florio, Vice-Chairman; Charles H. Townsend, C.O.O.; John W. Bellando, Executive Vice-President and C.F.O.; Jill Bright, Executive Vice-President-Human Resources; John Buese, Executive Vice-President-Chief Information Officer; David Orlin, Senior Vice-President-Strategic Sourcing; Robert Bennis, Senior Vice-President-Real Estate; Shared Services provided by Advance Magazine Group: David B. Chemidlin, Senior Vice-President-General Manager, Shared Services Center. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement No. 40644503. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. R123242885. Canada Post return undeliverable Canadian addresses to: P.O. Box 874, Station Main, Markham, ON L3P8L4.

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