

# U.S. Hawks Behind Iraq War Rally for Strikes Against Iran

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Global Research, October 18, 2011

IPS 18 October 2011

Region: [Middle East & North Africa, USA](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [IRAN: THE NEXT WAR?](#)

WASHINGTON, Oct 17, 2011 (IPS) – Key neo-conservatives and other right-wing hawks who championed the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq are calling for military strikes against Iran in retaliation for its purported murder-for-hire plot against the Saudi ambassador here.

Leading the charge is the Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI), the ideological successor to the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), which played a critical role in mobilising support for “regime change” in Iraq in the late 1990s and subsequently spearheaded the public campaign to invade the country after the 9/11 attacks. The group sent reporters appeals by two of its leaders for military action on its letterhead Monday.

In a column headlined “Speak Softly ...And Fight Back” in this week’s Weekly Standard, chief editor William Kristol, co-founder of both PNAC and FPI, said the alleged plot amounted to “an engraved invitation” by Tehran to use force against it.

“We can strike at the Iranian Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC), and weaken them. And we can hit the regime’s nuclear weapons program, and set it back,” he wrote, adding that Congress should approve a resolution authorising the use of force against Iranian entities deemed responsible for attacks on U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, acts of terrorism, or “the regime’s nuclear weapons program”.

Kristol’s advice was seconded by Jamie Fly, FPI’s executive director, who called for President Barack Obama to emulate former presidents Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton when they ordered targeted strikes against Libya in 1986 and Iraq in 1993, respectively, in retaliation for alleged terrorist plots against U.S. targets.

“It is time for President Obama to follow in the footsteps of his predecessors and stand up to tyrants who kill Americans and threaten our interests,” wrote Fly, who served on the National Security Council staff and the Pentagon under George W. Bush, in the on-line edition of The National Review.

“It is time to take military action against the Iranian government elements that support terrorism and its nuclear program. More diplomacy is not an adequate response,” he wrote.

The FPI appeals, which have been echoed by other former Iraq war hawks, such as Bush’s former U.N. ambassador, John Bolton, and Reuel Marc Gerecht at the neo-conservative Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), came as analysts here continue to debate the credibility of the alleged plot against Saudi Amb. Adel al-Jubeir and how to react to it if, as the administration contends, it was authorised at a high level in Tehran.

The likelihood that the plot was indeed real – and, if so, whether it gained high-level authorisation – has been widely questioned, mainly by two sets of experts here.

Reaction among virtually all Iran specialists, including former government and intelligence personnel, has ranged from outright scepticism to bewilderment over what, if the alleged plot was actually consummated, Tehran would have hoped to gain from assassinating the Saudi ambassador on U.S. soil.

“(N)othing short of mind-boggling,” wrote Vali Nasr, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institute, in reaction to the alleged plot. “If true, this plot shows a monumental lapse in judgment on Tehran’s part, an audacious and reckless adventurism that will go down as the clerical regime’s colossal mistake that will weaken its hand internationally and even unravel its grip on power...”

Counter-terrorist experts knowledgeable about Iran’s Quds Force, the elite unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) accused of sponsoring the scheme, have been even more sceptical that it would rely on an untested Iranian-American used-car salesman to make contact with a purported member of the Zetas drug cartel in Mexico to arrange the assassination.

The supposed Zeta contact turned out to be an informant for the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), according to the complaint released with great fanfare last week by the attorney general.

“Fishy, fishy, fishy,” said Bruce Riedel, a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) veteran who was formerly in charge of the Near East and South Asia on the National Security Council, when asked to characterise his assessment, while Robert Baer, a former Middle East CIA field officer, compared the plot as outlined by the complaint to a “truly awful Hollywood script”.

“None of it measures up to Iran’s unsurpassed skill in conducting assassinations,” he wrote on Time magazine’s website.

“Why on earth would they create a situation in which they had to rely on this untested, untrained, unguided, and uncontrolled asset rather than their own people?” wrote Col. Pat Lang (ret.), the Defense Intelligence Agency’s former top Middle East and South Asia analyst on his Sic Semper Tyrannis blog.

Calling the government’s case “trash”, Lang added that, “The overwhelming likelihood is that this is someone’s ‘information operation’ intended to condition public attitudes for some purpose.”

Such scepticism, however, has not deterred the administration, key lawmakers, or former Iraq hawks from calling for a stern response.

Indeed, Obama himself said Thursday that he will push for “the toughest sanctions” against Iran on the part of the U.S. allies and the U.N. Security Council, while senior Treasury officials testified that they were considering blacklisting Iran’s central bank, a move that enjoyed strong bipartisan support in Congress, notably from lawmakers most closely associated with the Israel lobby, even before the alleged plot was disclosed.

But a number of former Iraq hawks, few of whom appear to entertain much doubt about the plot’s seriousness or provenance, are calling for military action.

“More sanctions aren’t a bad idea...,” wrote Gerecht, a major proponent of invading Iraq when he was at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), in a column published Friday by the Wall Street Journal’s staunchly neo-conservative editorial page. “But they will not scare (the regime). The White House needs to respond militarily to this outrage. If we don’t we are asking for it.”

Another Iraq war booster, Andrew McCarthy, also of FDD, joined the chorus in the National Review Online: “There is a range of possible political responses, of course, but given its three-decade campaign of aggression, the response to Iran must be military – and decisive. The regime must be destroyed.”

Monday’s appeal by FPI for military action was perhaps more remarkable, if only because three of the group’s four directors – Eric Edelman, Robert Kagan, and Dan Senor – were recently named as key advisers to Mitt Romney, the frontrunner for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination.

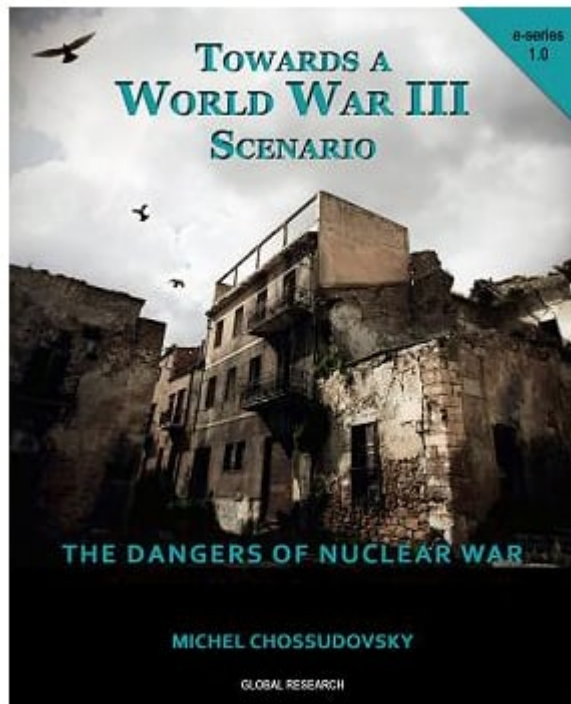
Like Kristol, Kagan was a co-founder of both PNAC and FPI and a critical advocate of invading Iraq, while Senor served in Iraq after the invasion as a top official in the Coalition Provisional Authority. Edelman, who, as ambassador to Turkey at the time, lobbied its military to support the 2003 invasion, went on to serve as undersecretary of defence for policy under former Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld.

Although Romney has remained silent to date on how Washington should respond to the alleged plot, a number of his other advisers who championed the Iraq invasion have long called for the U.S. to make the threat of military action against Iran more credible.

In his first major policy address two weeks ago, Romney himself called for two aircraft carrier task forces to be permanently deployed in the region as a deterrent to Tehran.

*Jim Lobe’s* blog on U.S. foreign policy can be read at <http://www.lobelog.com> .

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E-Book Series No. 1.0  
Global Research Publishers  
Montreal, 2011

ISBN 978-0-9737147-3-9

76 pages (8.5×11)

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## **DETAILED TABLE OF CONTENTS**

### **PREFACE**

*A New War Theater in North Africa*

*Operation Odyssey Dawn*

*Nuclear Weapons against Libya? How Real is the Threat?*

*America's Long War: The Global Military Agenda*

*How to Reverse the Tide of War*

*World War III Scenario*

*Acknowledgments*

### **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

*The Cult of Killing and Destruction*

*America's Mini-nukes*

*War and the Economic Crisis*  
*Real versus Fake Crises*

## **CHAPTER II: THE DANGERS OF NUCLEAR WAR**

*Hiroshima Day 2003: Secret Meeting at Strategic Command Headquarters*  
*The Privatization of Nuclear War: US Military Contractors Set the Stage*  
*9/11 Military Doctrine: Nuclear Weapons and the "Global War on Terrorism"*  
*Al Qaeda: "Upcoming Nuclear Power"*  
*Obama's Nuclear Doctrine: The 2010 Nuclear Posture Review*  
*Post 9/11 Nuclear Doctrine*  
*"Defensive" and "Offensive" Actions*  
*"Integration" of Nuclear and Conventional Weapons Plans*  
*Theater Nuclear Operations (TNO)*  
*Planned Aerial Attacks on Iran*  
*Global Warfare: The Role of US Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM)*  
*Nuclear Weapons Deployment Authorization*  
*Israel's Stockpiling of Conventional and Nuclear Weapons*  
*The Role of Western Europe*  
*Germany: De Facto Nuclear Power*  
*Pre-emptive Nuclear War: NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept*  
*The World is at a Critical Crossroads*

## **CHAPTER III: AMERICA'S HOLY CRUSADE AND THE BATTLE FOR OIL**

*America's Crusade in Central Asia and the Middle East*  
*"Homegrown Terrorists"*  
*The American Inquisition*  
*Washington's Extrajudicial Assassination Program*  
*The Battle for Oil*  
*The Oil Lies in Muslim Lands*  
*Globalization and the Conquest of the World's Energy Resources*

## **CHAPTER IV: PREPARING FOR WORLD WAR THREE**

*Media Disinformation*  
*A "Pre-emptive" Aerial Attack Directed Against Iran would Lead to Escalation*  
*Global Warfare*  
*US "Military Aid"*  
*The Timetable of Military Stockpiling and Deployment*  
*World War III Scenario*  
*The United Nations Security Council*  
*The American Inquisition: Building a Political Consensus for War*

## **CHAPTER V: TARGETING IRAN WITH NUCLEAR WEAPONS**

*Building a Pretext for a Pre-emptive Nuclear Attack*  
*"Theater Iran Near Term"*  
*The Military Road Map: "First Iraq, then Iran"*  
*Simulated Scenarios of a Global War: The Vigilant Shield 07 War Games*  
*The Role of Israel*

Cheney: "Israel Might Do it Without Being Asked"  
US Israel Military Coordination  
Tactical Nuclear Weapons directed against Iran  
Radioactive Fallout  
"The Mother of All Bombs" (MOAB) Slated to be Used Against Iran  
Extensive Destruction of Iran's Infrastructure  
State of the Art Weaponry: "War Made Possible Through New Technologies"  
Electromagnetic Weapons  
Iran's Military Capabilities: Medium and Long Range Missiles  
Iran's Ground Forces  
US Military and Allied Facilities Surrounding Iran

## **CHAPTER VI: REVERSING THE TIDE OF WAR**

Revealing the Lie  
The Existing Anti-War Movement  
Manufacturing Dissent  
Jus ad Bellum: 9/11 and the Invasions of Yugoslavia and Afghanistan  
Fake Antiwar Activism: Heralding Iran as a Nuclear Threat  
The Road Ahead  
The Antiwar Movement within the State Structure and the Military  
Abandon the Battlefield: Refuse to Fight  
The Broader Peace Process  
What has to be Achieved

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