



Iran-US Watch

(Fortnightly)

February 26, 2003

This report is prepared by our affiliate analyst in Washington, DC. Its contents reflect the perspectives on Iran, from the American lens. For more information, contact rms@atiehbahar.com.

The calm before the storm

With a US attack on Iraq looming around the corner, high level contacts between the US and Iran has intensified greatly. As in previous months, the situation in Iraq has necessitated quiet cooperation between Tehran and Washington. At the same time, US setbacks in the Security Council, the growing anti-war movement, strained relations between the US and “old Europe” and the confrontation with North Korea, have all contributed to a situation in which Iranian revelations regarding their nuclear energy program have received relatively little attention.

Will AIPAC revive the anti-Iran campaign?

The America Israel Public Affairs Committee will hold its annual conference at the end of March and discuss its policy priorities for 2003. There is a concern among AIPAC's leadership that the Bush Administration will push for a peace settlement in Israel/Palestine after the confrontation with Iraq, with the creation of a Palestinian state as one of its cornerstones. AIPAC's preference would most likely be a continuation of the status quo, i.e. continues isolation of Arafat, a “peace” process that is put on hold, an expansion of the illegal settlements and a quiet reannexation of the West Bank. However, much like in 1995, when AIPAC made the containment of Iran and not the peace process its top priority, it may opt to refocus on Tehran in order to divert attention from the Israeli/Palestinian issue. Focusing on Iran would also enable a continuation of AIPAC's strategy of uprooting any possible rapprochement between Washington and Tehran.

The White House's report to Congress on ILSA, due between July and December 2003, can become vehicle by pro-rapprochement forces to consolidate US-Iran relations in a

post-War Middle East. Sources close to the White House say that the President has not made up his mind on a final policy on Iran, he is still open to dialog and rapprochement. (Richard Armitage's remarks about Iran's "democracy" should be seen in the light of the State Department's attempts to influence Bush's final decision on Iran). The report can necessitate a decision on a final policy, which then would force AIPAC to revert focus back to Iran and the ever so useful concept of the "Iranian threat". Needless to say, the timing of the report is not convenient for AIPAC, but pro-rapprochement forces in Washington may not have fully realized the opportunity that lies ahead of them.

The final hour of the MKO closes in

The clock is running out for the Iranian Mujahedin. While its efforts to gain support from Congress to get off the State Department's terrorist list has been thwarted by Congressman Bob Ney, recent reports on its cooperation with Saddam Hussein in cleansing Kurdish villages in northern Iraq, US officials declaration that US troops will target MKO bases since the US views the MKO as part of Saddam's terror network, and Iranian coordination with the US regarding troop movements in the border area, have further aggravated the organization's gloomy future. There are now unconfirmed reports that Saddam Hussein may order the group to organize terrorist attacks on US soil through the MKO's network in America. Although such a scenario may is not very likely, it can nonetheless not be ruled out. The MKO leadership has failed to secure refuge outside of Iraq, and in face of Iranian troops and American B52's, fighting with Saddam may be their only option.

From the Iranian viewpoint, the MKO's weak position in the US has not been taken at face value. After Saddam's reported offer to Iran to hand over the MKO was made public, the Iranian UN Mission inquired with many Congressional offices on the exact role and influence of the organization, presumably to evaluate the value of Saddam's offer. The remarks of the unnamed US official that told Reuters that the US would target the MKO should be seen in light of the behind the doors contacts between Tehran and Washington.