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The CIA's war-before-war: From Iraq to Iran

A US blueprint drawn in 2002 to break Iraq before invading is being revived against Iran – with sabotage, assassinations, and psychological warfare already underway.



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MAY 13, 2025



Photo Credit: The Cradle

On 11 September 2001, while smoke still rose from the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, two meetings – one in Tel Aviv and the other in Washington – put Iraq in the crosshairs. Then-Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon convened an emergency meeting of his National Security cabinet and resolved to exploit the attacks to push for war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Embedded Israeli agents in the hawkish Bush administration were tasked with advancing this agenda. Meanwhile, former US defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his deputy, Paul Wolfowitz, initiated internal discussions on targeting Iraq.

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According to then-secretary of state Colin Powell's testimony to the **9/11 Commission**, "Wolfowitz – not Rumsfeld – argued that Iraq was ultimately the source of the terrorist problem and should therefore be attacked." It was he who insisted that Iraq was the root of the terror problem. Inside the Pentagon, "Wolfowitz continued to press the case for dealing with Iraq."

On 11 September, the very same day of the terror attacks – and despite the fact that Washington immediately identified Afghanistan-based Al-Qaeda leaders as the culprits – CIA director George Tenet authorized the creation of the Iraq Operations Group (IOG), led by covert ops veterans Luis Rueda and John Maguire.

Within 24 hours, the two were drafting a blueprint for the destabilization of Iraq. Codenamed DB/ANABASIS ("DB" being the CIA's cryptonym for Iraq), the plan was activated long before any formal declaration of war, and well before the American public was groomed to support the spurious allegation of WMDs in Iraq.

Rueda and Maguire brought deep experience in **black ops** from **Latin America** and Afghanistan. Both had failed in earlier efforts to topple Saddam – most notably with DB/ACHILLES in 1995. But now, the stage was set, the funding secured, and the political climate ripe.

The key takeaway: While the world focused on Al-Qaeda and Afghanistan, Iraq had already been chosen as the first target.

Operation DB/ANABASIS

Approved by US president George W. Bush in February 2002 and backed by \$400 million, DB/ANABASIS was a playbook of sabotage, disinformation, psychological warfare, armed uprisings, and assassinations of Iraqi officials. Though the CIA is barred by law from conducting assassinations, euphemisms like "direct action operations" cloaked the intent.

The first objective was to deepen Saddam Hussein's paranoia. By sowing chaos through subterfuge, the CIA hoped he would lash out – arresting, torturing, and executing his own personnel in a desperate attempt to root out traitors.



Maguire's team entered Iraqi Kurdistan in April 2002, securing the cooperation of Kurdish leaders **Masoud Barzani** and Jalal Talabani in exchange for US guarantees. By fall, DB/ANABASIS was in full effect.

Iraq, already weakened by wars, sanctions, and a decade of no-fly zones, was being "softened up" before the invasion. The plan was not meant to replace war but to ensure a fragmented, broken state that could not resist one.

Target shift: From Iraq to Iran

In January 2002, president Bush delivered his infamous "Axis of Evil" speech, lumping Iran and Iraq together. The speech, written by neoconservative David Frum, who, like Oded Yinon – author of the "**Yinon Plan**" – was a disciple of Ariel Sharon.

It followed the strategic logic of the Israeli-authored "**A Clean Break**" report prepared in 1996 for Benjamin Netanyahu by Richard Perle, Doug Feith, and David Wurmser, among others. The original plan targeted Iraq, Iran, and Syria. To disguise Israeli fingerprints, North Korea was inserted as a decoy.

The strategy was straightforward: Take down Iraq first, then Iran. Once those fell, Syria and Hezbollah would be easy pickings.

Iraq fell in 2003. Syria has been shattered. Now, Iran remains the last domino. And the tools once used against Iraq are being dusted off and re-targeted. This is the CIA's revised ANABASIS – but this time, it is for Iran.

Remaking ANABASIS for Iran

The principles of DB/ANABASIS are being applied in Iran today: sanctions to weaken the economy, sabotage and assassinations to create confusion and fear, and psychological operations to fracture public trust.

Iranian opposition groups are central to this new campaign. In 2012, former US president Obama removed the Mujahideen-e-Khalq (MEK) from the US State Department's terrorism list. MEK was relocated to Albania, where it now operates from Camp Ashraf, launching cyber and terror attacks against the Islamic Republic.



The CIA also leverages Kurdish and Baluch separatists in its operations. Mossad, often in collaboration with the CIA, is suspected of orchestrating assassinations of scientists like Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, and terror attacks in Tehran (2017), Ahvaz (2018), Chahbahar (2019), and Shah Cheragh (2022, 2023). The recent **Kerman** (2024) attack fits the same mold.

Protests after **Mahsa Amini's** death were swiftly hijacked by CIA – or Mossad-aligned operatives, armed with Molotov cocktails and firearms – a stark contrast to earlier demonstrations.

Fires in Bandar Abbas, Karaj, and **Mashhad** also fall within the scope of ANABASIS. These are not accidents – they are acts of economic and psychological sabotage.

The hidden war: Psychological and strategic impact

“Mr Bond, they have a saying in Chicago: ‘Once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. The third time it’s enemy action’” – *Goldfinger* (1959).

A respected Iranian analyst described the sabotage in Bandar Abbas, Karaj, and Mashhad as “crude counter-value” strikes. That judgment understates the military and **psychological impact**: As in Lebanon, these acts damage infrastructure, kill civilians, and provoke panic.

Sabotage works best when it appears random yet coincides with political moments. When former speaker of parliament Ali Larijani appeared on television during the Karaj blackout, the message was clear: Your leaders cannot protect you.

Such operations trigger internal suspicion. Iranian security agencies must investigate colleagues, family members, and even friends. As they chase ghosts, trust breaks down. Counterintelligence will target security staff at affected sites, breeding paranoia. Tehran becomes obsessed with foreign infiltrators and moles.

During the Cold War, the KGB was adept at making the CIA suspect its own staff of betrayal. The resulting “mole hunts,” led by CIA counterintelligence chief James

Angleton, devastated morale. The same dynamic is now being replicated in Iran.

The endgame: Collapse from within

The CIA's strategy aims to destroy unity and morale as precursors to outright war. Washington and Tel Aviv hope that Iran, like Iraq before it, collapses from within under pressure from a disillusioned population.

Maguire once said that DB/ANABASIS was about "settling scores" with Saddam. This attitude – reducing foreign policy to vendettas – still dominates US strategic circles. Inside the Pentagon and CIA, figures view Iran through the lens of the **1979 hostage crisis** and Tehran's support for the Iraqi insurgency and Taliban.

American troops, particularly the US occupation army – which absorbed the brunt of IED attacks in Iraq – hold **deep animosity** toward Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). One especially deadly IED variant, the explosively formed penetrator (**AFP**), was attributed to Iranian design, with Israeli intelligence helpfully pointing fingers.

This animus, combined with pro-Israel sentiment and a black-and-white worldview, leads many in the Trump administration to align with Netanyahu – such as Mike Waltz, a leading advocate for confrontation with Iran. According to *Foreign Policy*:

[We are witnessing the] "ideological struggle between proponents of an America First 'realist' foreign policy, particularly regarding Iran, and an entrenched neoconservative faction that is pushing for regime change within yet another Middle Eastern country."

Trump complains about the "**Deep State**," but fails to see its true nature – a network not interested in jailing him, but in bypassing the presidency itself to advance long-standing agendas. For the Deep State and Israel alike, Iran has been the ultimate prize for decades.

The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect those of The Cradle.

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