



## **Seymour Hersh: US indirectly funding Al-Qaeda linked Sunni groups in move to counter Iran**

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Investigative reporter Seymour Hersh joins us to talk about his explosive new article in the New Yorker Magazine. Hersh reports that John Negroponte's decision to resign as National Intelligence Director was made in part because of the Bush administration's covert actions including the indirect funding of radical Sunni groups - some with ties to Al-Qaeda - to counter Shiite groups backed by Iran. Hersh also reports the Pentagon has established a special planning group to plan a bombing attack on Iran and U.S. military and special-operations teams have already crossed the border into Iran in pursuit of Iranian operatives.

John Negroponte was sworn in to his new position as Deputy Secretary of State on Tuesday at a ceremony attended by President Bush. Negroponte resigned from his post as National Intelligence Director in early January. His career includes stints as Ambassador to Iraq after the US invasion and ambassador to Honduras, where he was accused of overseeing the arming of Nicaraguan rebels during the Iran-Contra scandal of the 1980s.

In an explosive new article, the New Yorker Magazine reports that Negroponte's decision to resign as National Intelligence Director was made in part because of the Bush administration's covert actions in the Middle East, which so closely echo Iran-Contra. According to investigative reporter Seymour Hersh, the Bush administration, with Saudi Arabia, is secretly funding radical Sunni groups - some with ties to Al-Qaeda - to counter Shiite groups backed by Iran. Moreover, this is being done without any Congressional authority or oversight.

Hersh also reports the Pentagon has established a special planning group within the office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to plan a bombing attack on Iran. The new panel has been charged with developing a plan that could be implemented within 24 hours of getting the go-ahead from President Bush. Hersh also reveals that U.S. military and special-operations teams have already crossed the border into Iran in pursuit of Iranian operatives. Seymour Hersh joins me now from Washington DC.

AMY GOODMAN: Seymour Hersh is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist for The New Yorker magazine, joining us now from Washington, D.C. Welcome to Democracy Now!, Sy Hersh.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Good morning.

AMY GOODMAN: It's nice to have you back from Egypt.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Yeah, that's right.

AMY GOODMAN: Talk about what you have found. Start off with John Negroponte.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Well, I did not talk to him. He did not deny the story. He simply refused to comment when The New Yorker sent a series of questions to his office at the State Department. Essentially, it was simply that there were a couple of reasons that he wanted out of the job, the

job that McConnell -- you just heard in your opening -- took after him. One was that he didn't get along with Cheney very well, because he was considered to be too much of a stickler, or "legalistic" was another term people used, in terms of agreeing with some of the covert and clandestine operations by the Pentagon.

As many now know, the Pentagon has been running operations without any congressional oversight for years -- this has been written about -- on the basis that they are all part of the war, preparing the battlefield, having to do with military affairs, not intelligence, and therefore, since they were not intelligence, there was no reason to abide by legislation reporting covert intelligence operations. They were simply military activities that the President could authorize without Congress. And he disagreed with that. He disagreed. I guess you could say Negroponte found some of these operations to be risky and also perhaps illegal. But the one that really upset him the most was the covert operations that we're doing in various places in the Middle East, targeted against the Iranians and also the Shia with funds used in some part by Bandar.

And, Amy, I should say one thing to correct what you said in the opening, just to adjust it. It's not as if we're ever going to find any evidence that American money went to any Sunni terrorist jihadist groups in Lebanon, which I allege. There is no direct connection. What there is is a flood of American money, none of it approved by Congress, into the government of Lebanon, which is Sunni. The government of Prime Minister Siniora. And they, in turn, funnel it into various -- at least three different Sunni jihadist groups.

AMY GOODMAN: Now, explain -- first of all, you talked about Prince Bandar, this, the former ambassador to the United States.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Twenty-two years here, yes.

AMY GOODMAN: Known as "Bandar Bush."

SEYMOUR HERSH: Not by me.

AMY GOODMAN: So he was the ambassador who sat with President Bush a few days after the 9/11 attacks, as they smoked cigars at the White House.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Well, he's very close to Cheney. He was ambassador here for twenty-two years. He left a few years ago, replaced by a man named Turki, who's a very eminent member of the royal family, was head of intelligence for the Saudi government, also ambassador to London. And Turki came, and Turki quit after less than two years on the job, because Bandar had a backdoor or private relationship with too many people in the administration. He was seeing Cheney without telling Turki. You know, he was arranging meetings. So Bandar has a one-on-one relationship, I assume, with the President -- I can say firsthand with Cheney -- and also very close to certain members of people inside the White House, including Elliott Abrams, the former -- who's now a -- I think he's the senior advisor on the Middle East for the National Security Council and a Deputy National Security Advisor to the President.

AMY GOODMAN: So, what exactly is the role of Prince Bandar, who's now no longer ambassador, back in Saudi Arabia?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Well, you know, "exactly," I don't know. We're talking about a world that's very murky and about which nobody wants to talk officially, unofficially even, except for a few people. In other words, I can't go to the Saudi Arabian government and say, "Give me an explanation of what's going on." That's just -- you know, forget it. We try.

Bandar left here, and everybody thought his career was over, including -- he did, too. And he ended up being named National Security Advisor. And lo and behold, in the last three or four

months he has emerged as a major player for the United States. He's met with the Israelis. What's happened very simply is the president decided some time in the last three or four months, perhaps earlier, but he's put it into effect in the last three or four months, he has decided to work with the British, the UK, and the Israelis, and join up -- all three of those countries will join up with what we call the moderate Sunni governments -- that is, Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia -- all very strongly Sunni, and those six countries would work together against the Shia and against Iran collectively.

And in Lebanon, for example, there is a longstanding political -- it's been going on for months -- so really a political standoff between the Siniora government, the Sunni Siniora government, which supports us and we support, and a coalition headed by Hezbollah, the Shia group that we always call a terrorist group, that was a terrorist group but is now working pretty much in the last six or seven years domestically and politically inside Lebanon with still great capacity.

We're also working against the regime of Bashar Assad in Syria. He's not a Sunni, he's an Alawite, which is also a minority sect that the Sunni world -- you know, in the Sunni world, for the Sunni jihadists, if you're not a Sunni and you don't support their particular view, political view of the Quran, you're an infidel, you're expendable. And as an Alawite, Bashar Assad is, too.

And also, of course, everybody has also targeted Iran. So there's been -- the article is called "The Redirection." That's what they call it in the White House. There's been a sort of a massive shift of attention away from Iraq towards Iran, towards stopping Hezbollah in Lebanon and towards doing something about Assad.

AMY GOODMAN: So who is getting the money in Lebanon right now?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Well, it's money that's flowing in, covert money. A lot of it came when -- all of this started in Lebanon after the assassination of Rafik Hariri, whose assassination took place, I think, two years ago this month in February of '05. Immediately, we, the United States and our allies, blamed Syria. There's no empirical evidence Syria did it. That seems to be the prevailing view, but there's just no evidence.

There's an awful lot of political assassinations in Lebanon. There's twenty or so in the last ten years. It's just that's one aspect. And what happened is the Sunni government there became our big ally, and we did everything we could to support it. We flooded -- if somebody -- I think we called it the Cedar Revolution. And it was a sense of -- the Sunni government in opposition to Nasrallah, who we view as a major terrorist threat.

And I think I have to tell you, digress a second to say that I don't know a thing about Bush. I know something about what Cheney thinks, and that is in terms of having some people with firsthand access. And Cheney does believe that -- the core belief of Cheney is that Iran is going to get a bomb, no matter what the intelligence is. As you know, there's not much intelligence supporting the fact that it has a bomb. Iran's going to get a bomb, and once it gets a bomb, its agent, its brown shirt -- and that's the phrase they use at least once or twice inside the White House -- its brown shirts will be Hezbollah. And they have a capacity in America. They have underground facilities, cells here, and when Iran gets the bomb, they will give it to Hezbollah to distribute it, and Washington and New York will be vulnerable. In other words, Cheney sees what's going on now as a threat to the United States directly. He doesn't view this as simply something that's happening in Western Europe or the Middle East. He is protecting America by taking a preemptive, a proactive action right now.

And so, in Lebanon, once Hariri fell and there was a crisis there, we immediately moved to support any group that was against Nasrallah and Hezbollah. And so, we've poured a lot of money, illicit money. It was not authorized by Congress. Money went pouring in there. Former

retired CIA guys were put in there. Retired people went in there, other agencies. The funds came, nobody is quite sure where. There's a lot of pools of black money around, a lot of money.

Undoubtedly, some was, I'm told, came from Iraq. That is, as you know, there were hearings the other week that showed \$9 billion in Iraqi oil money mysteriously disappeared and was unaccounted for. Some of that money was washed around. There was also a lot of money found after Saddam fell. We found several caches of huge amounts, you know, hundreds of millions, and billions of dollars in some cases, of cash. We also found money in various ministries. There's no, really, accountability, and a lot of it could have ended up in black pools. It's just not clear where the money came from, and it's not supposed to be clear. What you do is you wash the money in. You get it to certain people. The government of Lebanon underwrites its internal security people.

And what we do know is, in the last few years, or less than that, the last year or so, three jihadist groups, three Sunni Salafi or Wahhabi -- these are the religious sects out of Saudi Arabia, and don't forget, fifteen of the nineteen guys who went into the building in New York, the two towers, were Saudis and from the extreme religious -- they were jihadists from -- either Salafis or Wahhabis. And we know that the groups now -- there are three groups, similar in character -- according to reports I've read, some of the people in these groups were trained in Afghanistan, closely associated with Al-Qaeda, not everybody. It's a loose network. What you have around the world is these terror groups operating independently of Osama bin Laden, although it's not clear they don't have some ways of communicating. Through the web or what, we're not sure.

But these three groups, two years ago, we would have done everything we could in the United States to arrest them and sent them to Gitmo, Guantanamo, or some other place. Instead, we're throwing money into the country, into the government, into the internal security apparatus, and the internal security facilities or mechanisms inside Lebanon are underwriting these groups. They, as soon as one group came across the border from Syria, were immediately giving material, a place to live, arms, and resupplied. There are three such groups that are operating.

And why are they there? Because in case things go bad in Lebanon and we end up in a civil war between Hezbollah and its partners in the coalition and the Sunni government, this is a very tough bunch of guys that can handle, we think, the tough guys inside Hezbollah. It's sort of a matching game. And so, in effect, you sleep with the -- you know, the enemy of your enemy is your friend.

Bandar, as I wrote in this article, Bandar has assured us that the Salafi groups in Lebanon are OK. Don't worry about them. I think somebody said -- described it to me, he said at one point, "I'm a Wahhabi." He's a member of that austere religious sect, himself, in Saudi Arabia. "I can go and pray and then come back from the mosque and sit down, have a business meeting and have a drink." And he said these groups in Lebanon, he told us, are targeted, not at America necessarily, they're targeted at Iran, at Hezbollah, at Shias elsewhere, at Syria. That's their prime target, and they're OK. I quote others, including senior people from Saudi Arabia, saying this is really nutty, because these people are not controllable. So that's where we are in that situation. It's complicated. It's very cynical, in a way. And what you have is a major sort of redirection. I had one military friend describe it as failing forward, talking about the failures in Iraq driving this policy. And you got it, kid.

AMY GOODMAN: And the US is also funding, supporting, training the Sunni police in Iraq -- rather, the Shia police.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Well -- the Shia police, no. Here's the wonderful irony of it, of course, is that after 9/11, after we invaded Iraq, the neoconservatives in Washington wanted nothing to do

with the Baathist party -- that's Saddam's party, most of them were Sunnis -- disbanded the Baathist party, disbanded the military -- a lot of Sunnis, a lot of Shia in the military, too, of course -- and threw in our weight with the Shia.

Within months, the American intelligence community was raising a lot of questions internally. I was talking to people about this by the late spring of '03. They were trying to tell the White House: you guys are making a big mistake, because Iran is the big winner of this war, particularly when we began to see signs of the insurgency, and the Shia are going to support Iran. The Shia are going to go with the Shia of Iran over you.

And the neocon mantra -- there had been a war between Iran and Iraq for eight years during the 1980s, a very, very devastating war, thousands killed in any one set-piece battle. They would just rush each other. And the assumption of the neoconservatives was that the Iraqi Shiites, having fought the Iranian Shiites for so long and so brutally, would be loyal to Iraq.

Well, it turned out the Shia tie, particularly when the occupation began and the American troops began, like all occupiers, became hated, I don't think there was much we could do. We certainly --- our activities and the bombing and the violence didn't help, but no matter how we behave, occupiers historically are always hated. And so, once that happened, and we became -- the Americans became essentially the 200-octane fuel that drove the resistance, once that began, the Shiite immediately began to work with the Iranians much more. And all of this was ignored by the White House for years, because it didn't fit in with their preconceptions.

AMY GOODMAN: We're talking to Seymour Hersh, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist for The New Yorker magazine. Don't go away. When we come back from our break, we're going to ask him about this planning group within the Joint Chiefs of Staff that is planning to attack Iran. And, he says, once it gets the word, it could happen within twenty-four hours. Stay with us.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: Seymour Hersh is our guest, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist for The New Yorker magazine. He has an explosive new piece called "The Redirection." Before we go to the planning group that is ready to attack Iran within the Joint Chiefs of Staff, I want to ask you about this group of players you've laid out, Sy. You're talking about Elliott Abrams, about Prince Bandar and their connections to twenty years ago to the Iran-Contra scandal. Explain.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Well, it's interesting. One of my favorite paragraphs in the story -- it's unsourced -- but it describes a meeting within the last two years that Elliott Abrams called. Elliott Abrams, as some may remember, was a key player. He was in the Reagan White House in the National Security Council.

And what happened is, twenty-some-odd years ago, Ronald Reagan wanted very much to stop what he saw as the revolutionary government of Nicaragua, the Sandinista government. He thought they were pro-communist. It's a little bit like the Chavez issue today. And the CIA began supporting a group of opposition people known as the Contras, a pretty violent bunch of people. Congress authorized an amendment called the Boland Amendment. The congressmen just -- they passed an amendment saying no money for the Contras. So instead of adhering to that, the government then -- if you remember the name Ollie North and the National Security Advisor John Poindexter -- set up a sort of a Rube Goldberg scheme to sell arms through Israel to Iran.

The Iranians were our bitter enemies at that time. We were only seven years from the overthrow of the Shah and the capture of our embassy people. If you remember, they were kept for more than a year. So, and the idea was to generate profits that would -- the sale would generate a lot of profits that would be used to fund the Contras. Well, this, of course, blew up in

everybody's face. There were sort of inconclusive hearings in the Senate. A few people were charged, I don't remember. Nothing much came out of it. They never got to the bottom of it. Nobody wanted to go after Reagan. It was '87, etc., etc., whatever happened.

So two years ago, Abrams, who's still now in the government, even more important than ever, very conservative -- Elliott Abrams -- pro-Israel, etc., etc. He convened a meeting of all of those people in the Bush administration who had been connected to Iran-Contra. It was like a reunion, somebody said to me. And they did a "lessons learned." What was the good thing? Well, the good thing is you could do things outside of Congress, who would stop you, those bad guys in Congress. You could do things for the good of the nation. That was the plus.

The negatives were pretty extreme, because, of course, it got blown. Let's see, the negatives included, you don't trust your friends, you don't trust the uniformed military, you don't trust the CIA, and you don't let it be run by the NSC, by somebody like Poindexter. You move it into the Vice President's office, Cheney, Cheney's office.

I gather that was the time that they began thinking about this possibility, and obviously they were talking to Bandar all along, as I say, the former ambassador. He later became, when he left, he became the National Security Advisor of Saudi Arabia, sort of a surprise job, a new job they set up for him. And I think at that point, some point a long time ago, they began thinking about doing what they're doing now, using Saudi money and some of the American funds wherever they get it, whether Iraq or other pools -- there's a lot of black pools of money around, undeclared pools -- using American and Saudi money without going to Congress for anything to fund the kind of operations they want to fund, as I was describing, against Hezbollah, against etc., etc., etc.

And so, this is the genesis, if you will, history, you know -- of course, I have never known an American government to learn from history. And once again, they haven't. They have now done another Rube Goldberg scheme here. I just don't know if Congress -- I can assure you that Congress knows very little about what's going on now in Iran. They're not being briefed. They know nothing about the money going in there, at least I've been told by people who are in a position to know. There's been no real findings.

AMY GOODMAN: So will they hold hearings?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Oh, will anybody do anything? I don't know. I don't know. You know, you pump out this stuff. I started writing about Iran, I think, almost a year ago, about covert operations in Iran. And for the longest time, I felt a little bit like Chicken Little, you know, the guy running around saying, "The sky is falling! The sky is falling!" Well, now a lot of people are very interested in Iran. But still, I haven't seen -- as you know, there's a vibrant -- in Europe the story like I write is huge, and this story is huge around the world. But it's hard to -- you know, the major newspapers have troubles, because -- I don't think it's because they don't want to run the story. They can't find people that will verify it for them, because this is such inside stuff, I guess.

AMY GOODMAN: Seymour Hersh, can you talk about the planning group within the Joint Chiefs of Staff?

SEYMOUR HERSH: That is nothing new, really. It's just the same old story. That's all contingency planning. There's been no execute order. In other words, there's no order to bomb Iran. The President has now -- a lot of the planning was done at a place in Virginia, a very secret joint staff facility, where the services would get together and discuss what to hit. And they moved it within the last three months. They've set up a special cell inside the Joint Chiefs, very secret. That's sort of normal. Everything is secret in there.

And they've been giving a number of -- at least two new developments have taken place. One is the President or the White House has asked for a bombing raid that can be put on within twenty-four hours. What can we hit if the President wakes up one morning and scratches something and says, "I want to go"? What can you do in the next twenty-four hours? They've done that, or they are doing that.

The other significant change is, the debate all along about bombing internally, with the Air Force being very much for it, and a lot of the other services being very much against it -- there's been tremendous dissension about this in the Joint Chiefs -- the initial targeting was what they call counter-proliferation -- that is, against the Iranian nuclear targets. As you know, Iran is a member of the nonproliferation regime and has released or made public all of its facilities, at least all of -- it's declared many facilities, perhaps not all, but they say it's all, to the International Atomic Energy Agency. So, using what we know from the IAEA, we've targeted a lot of things that we would destroy in case of a major assault.

There's also been something called regime change targeting. The wonderful word they use inside in the system is "decapitation." You go after leadership nodules. You hit the leaders where they live, where they work. And you get rid of the top player, the mullahs running the government, and presumably in the fantasyland that exists among the neocons, the people then rush and take over, and they set up a democratic Iran that's secular and pro-American.

But what's happened in the last month or two, in the wake of the President's new campaign that's very clear, since January 10th, I think, when he made his speech, we've seen an absolute drumbeat of allegations that Iran is involved in operations directly against America and responsible for killing Americans, you know, the stuff about bombs that they give. And I think it's Article 51 of the UN (Charter), I see it, some of my friends see this, as a legal argument the President's making. Under the UN articles, you have a right of self-defense. And if some country is killing your troops or acting against them, you can attack them. That seems to be one of the bases for why the President is saying what he's saying.

The Iranians are all over Iraq. They've been all over Iraq. There's thousands inside Iraq at any time. They were there very early, walking around in black suits, white shirts with no ties, black shoes, white socks. They're very clear. They're not hiding themselves. Many did humanitarian things and other social things, really. Iran has a strong presence in Iraq and has all along. There is no evidence they're shooting guns. They're certainly helping to supply them, etc., etc., which, of course, makes sense for Iran. Why shouldn't they? The longer we are stalemated in Iraq, the better it is for them. They're the winners of this war.

So, in any case, the President then asked for a new wave of targeting to take place -- that is, targeting against terrorism targets inside Iran. I'm not sure what they're talking about, maybe base camps, etc. And we've also, since last summer, dramatically increased cross-border operations, very aggressive activities, sometimes hot pursuit of what we claim are Iranians. We're attacking the border more, going across more and more. There's some people who think we could be looking for some sort of a response by Iran that would create casus belli so that we can do some actual physical assault with some justification. It's not clear. I'm not clear why we're being more aggressive. It seems -- I guess common sense would tell you maybe we are looking for some response. But the Iranians have not done it.

AMY GOODMAN: And Iran has just accused the United States of attacking and killing eleven Iranian soldiers.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Well, this is part of the game. And don't forget, as I wrote -- you know, I hate to say it, but as I wrote a year ago, we have been deeply involved with Azeris and Baluchis and Iranian Kurds in terror activities inside the country. I mean, this is -- and, of course, the Israelis have been involved in a lot of that through Kurdistan. So this has been going on for a

year. Iran has been having sort of a series of backdoor fights, the Iranian government, because they are -- they have a significant minority population. Not everybody there is a Persian. If you add up the Azeris and Baluchis and Kurds, you're really (at) maybe even 40% of the country.

AMY GOODMAN: Seymour Hersh, Dick Cheney went to Saudi Arabia in November. Now, well, he went to Asia and then showed up suddenly, a surprise visit, both to Pakistan and Afghanistan, and supposedly there was an attempted assassination, a bombing outside the base where he was. What is Cheney doing right now?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Oh, how do I know?

AMY GOODMAN: You seem to know a lot about a lot of things, especially around Dick Cheney.

SEYMOUR HERSH: No, I don't know. No, I just know -- well, you know, I think he's the horse. I don't think -- there's always -- every two weeks there's a story in some newspaper saying he's lost power. I don't think so. I think he still runs things. I think, you know, if Rice is going to do anything, attend some meeting, some ambassadorial minister-level meeting, it's only done with Cheney's approval. But, of course, that's just my heuristic thought.

AMY GOODMAN: And the latest news yesterday of, the US will be involved in direct negotiations with Iran and Syria?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Our definition of negotiations with Iran are very interesting. Our definition of a negotiating offer with Iran -- remember there was a big flurry last year, where we announced we would sit down at the table with Iran. Well, here's the way we put it. The issue for us is Iran is continuing to do nuclear research and presumably, whether or not they have a bomb, they're learning the techniques of making a weapon. And this is probably absolutely accurate. That's what they are learning. They're increasing the number of centrifuges they're running, etc., etc., albeit with a lot of problems. And they're nowhere down near a weapon. But they're going for that process.

So our position is that we will negotiate with Iran on that issue, on what they're doing in terms of nuclear development, only after they stop all nuclear development. So our bargaining position is we will not negotiate with you about what you're doing in terms of the nuclear development until you stop it. I mean, it is a total nonstarter. And so, I just am very skeptical about anything that's going to come out of any ministerial or subsequent meeting with the Iranians and the Syrians. I don't think the President of the United States and the Vice President want to leave office with things as they are right now.

AMY GOODMAN: You have always said you're afraid of President Bush as a lame-duck president. Do you seriously think -- I know you've been writing about it for a year in The New Yorker magazine -- that he will attack Iran? Or do you see Israel attacking Iran?

SEYMOUR HERSH: No. Israel would never attack Iran. The best they could do is fire some missiles from the Indian Ocean. They have submarines with cruise missiles. No, that's not nearly enough. What's a small attack? A major attack, if you're going to do one, would have to come from the Americans. And Cheney has said internally he will never let the Israelis do it, it's much better if we do it. But that I feel reasonably rational, I can say with some confidence. I can't say anything at all about what the President will or will not do.

There are people inside the military -- there's two aircraft carrier groups in the region right now. One is inside the Straits of Hormuz, which is that narrow straits where all of the oil passes through, going from the Middle East to Asia. And it's such a narrow channel that the US Navy never even had a carrier go into the Straits of Hormuz, because they're accompanied by five or six ships, destroyers, etc., and they don't have much maneuverability. They're very vulnerable

to attack. And I'm told by people that there will be two more carriers sent this spring to relieve the two ships, fleets that are there now. And they will all be kept there for a little while. One off Oman, one in what they call the North Arabian Sea, NAS, one in the Indian Ocean, and one in the Straits of Hormuz. And once those four groups are out there, you're dealing -- you're talking about an enormous amount of firepower.

And it's at that point some people inside the military are worried about what the President might or might not do. I don't think he's going to do anything next year. It's an election year. And he's got to spend -- you know, he's not an old man. He doesn't want to be hated by the Republican Party all the rest of his life. He's damaging it enough now. But in '08, he's got to be careful. He's got to give the Republicans a shot at the presidency. And the way he's carrying on right now, he's helping the Democrats. So, if he does it, it'll be this year. And, you know, people worry about spring.

And if he is in a position where he can authorize something on short notice, and you could with carriers all over the place -- there's an awful lot of planes. They carry -- the carrier squadrons have destroyers with cruise missiles that can fire. You can hit a lot of things in Iran if you want.

The Iranians, I should tell you, are absolutely preparing for the worst. They have been digging holes. They've been digging what they call bunkers for their leadership, survival bunkers, and not in Tehran, outside. We know where they're digging. They're going to move the leadership to underground facilities. The Russians did the same thing during the Cold War, and we, of course, have the same thing, underground bunkers to protect our leaders. They're reinforcing a lot of buildings. They've moved most of the sensitive nuclear stuff, I think, out of the buildings where we think they are into -- probably into Tehran in the very heavily densely populated areas. So if we're going to bomb nuclear facilities, we're going to have to take a chance of an awful lot of collateral damage.

And there's also the possibility -- this is always raised -- that all of this is just some big send-up, that people like me are being used, stories are planted, that this is all part of a propaganda operation by the White House to put pressure on Iran. The only argument against that is, of course, it's not going to work, and the Iranians will never back off.

AMY GOODMAN: Seymour Hersh, what about the report in the Times of London that says five or six US generals will resign if the US attacks Iran?

SEYMOUR HERSH: What paper was that? That's of interest to me. Was it the Telegraph?

AMY GOODMAN: I think it was the Times of London.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Well, you know, it depends. The Telegraph, I always think, have tremendous intelligence about the Americans. It's the conservative paper there that does a great job. A year ago, I wrote that officers are willing to resign inside, high-level officers inside the Joint Chiefs, on the basis of the fact that the White House refused to take out the nuclear option in the plans that were going on. And the military won that battle. The President agreed to a new plan that did not include a nuclear option. And so, that didn't happen.

So the only thing I know is that there is a precedent for it. When you talk about resignations in the Joint Chief, what you're really talking about are not public resignations; you're talking about early retirements. People just say, "I'm out of here." Nobody goes public. They just don't do that in the middle of a war, because it's just not seen as a senior officer as something you want to do to your troops on the ground. You don't do something to walk away from them. So it would be -- my understanding is, if they did leave, it would be quiet.

AMY GOODMAN: Seymour Hersh, I want to thank you very much for being with us.

SEYMOUR HERSH: No sweat.

AMY GOODMAN: Thank you. Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist with The New Yorker magazine. His latest piece that has caused such a stir, the explosive findings in this, called "The Redirection: Is the Administration's New Policy Benefiting Our Enemies in the War on Terrorism?"

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