Will Cheney Drag Israel Into War With Iran, Syria?

by Dean Andromidas

Vice President Dick Cheney is determined to attack Iran. The question is, will Israel follow, despite the sobering experience of last Summer's Lebanon war?

After Cheney declared in a *Newsweek* interview on Iran, "We've also made it clear that we haven't taken any options off the table," Israeli commentator Yoel Marcus commented in the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* Feb. 7, "If that isn't a hint that the military option still exists, I didn't know what is."

Marcus further warned that despite Bush being a "lame duck," he "can get ready for take off, fly and even go on a bombing spree." Bush doesn't care about poll ratings, he wrote, because "he sees himself as a messenger of God, as the guardian of the free world. Fired by deep religious faith, he believes it is his duty to save humanity from a crazy leader who is threatening the entire region and not just Israel. . . .

"The Jewish lobby [in Washington] is not very happy about the idea of Bush's shifting gears from talk to action, for fear that an attack on Iran could endanger Israel. . . . It is critically important for Israel to avoid any kind of overt involvement in a U.S. offensive."

Even Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, a Bush loyalist, held out the prospect of a peaceful settlement of the Iran nuclear issue. Speaking before a meeting of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations on Feb. 6, Olmert said Iran can be stopped without violence. "If the international community joins forces and applies the necessary restrictive measures on the economy of Iran, it will force Iran to reconsider its position." The Iran threat, Olmert stated, "is not as close as the Iranians want us to think. They are not as close to the threshold as they pretend to be. There is still time to fight in a comprehensive and responsible manner."

A Nuclear Iran Will Act Logically

When it comes to an independent Israeli strike against Iran, the Israeli security establishment is far more cautious than Cheney and his cabal of neo-con lunatic advisors. The Israeli Institute for National Security Studies, which represents the mainstream in Israel's security establishment, released a new study Feb. 7 on Iran's nuclear program, saying that Iran will most likely "act logically."

The report, by Ephraim Kam, a former Israeli military intelligence officer, states that Iran will have three options in formulating its nuclear policy: 1) remain on the verge of acquiring weapons with the capability to produce them on short notice; 2) adopt a policy of nuclear ambiguity, meaning it would produce weapons but avoid making it public or engaging in testing; and 3) produce a weapon, announce it, and carry out a test.

The second option, which is, in fact, the same as Israel's policy, "appears most likely, at least in the first stage," the report asserts.

Kam cautioned those who want to attack Iran at this time, saying: "This is a very problematic and complex operation that involves many risks, including an open-ended Iranian response. At this stage the political conditions are also not ripe for an operation, so long as the diplomatic efforts continue." Kam nonetheless says a military option should remain on the table as a form of pressure.

Although Kam asserted that a nuclear-armed Iran could pose an existential threat to Israel, "One must assume that in a nuclear Iran will act logically, rationally evaluating the price and risks involved in its actions, and will not act out of religious ideological motives. If one makes this assumption, then one appreciates that Iran's motives for acquiring nuclear weapons" are defensive, are aimed at defense from Iraq and the United States. Israel's policy, Kam wrote, should be one of "deterrence that assures Iran that if it attacks, Israel will still retain a counter-strike capability with severe consequences."

By contrast, the Institute for Policy and Strategy at the Herzliya Center held a conference Jan. 22-24, where far more dangerous views were voiced, not only by some Israelis, such as right-wing Likud Party chairman Benjamin Netanyahu, but by a battery of U.S. neo-cons. The Institute for Policy and Strategy, which is headed by Dore Gold, an advisor to Netanyahu, speaks for the Israeli right. American billionaire Ronald Lauder, who is a financial backer of Netanyahu, financed the conference and funds the Institute.

Among the U.S. neo-cons was Richard Perle, who told the conference, "I have no doubt that if it becomes apparent to President Bush that during his term Iran will achieve nuclear weapons, he will not hesitate to order a strike," adding that, "The U.S. supports an Israeli military operation and would even embark on a similar, parallel action."

Former CIA director James Woolsey, another neo-con who addressed the conference, told the Israeli daily *Yedioth Ahronoth* Jan. 26: "If we are required to use force, we should use it decisively. Not some surgical strike on one, two, or three facilities, but rather one that destroys the power of the Mullah regime. It is a shame that Israel did not and the United States did not help and participate in moving against Syria last summer when Hezbollah presented the opportunity. We should not pass up the opportunity to act decisively if we are to use force."

DOD/Staff Sgt. Gary Hilliard, USAF

Dick Cheney's sabre-rattling against Iran has much of Israeli's security establishment worried. One report just released says that a nuclear Iran would most likely "act logically, rationally evaluating the price and risks invovled in its actions, and will not act out of religious ideological motives."

(Woolsey, a leading bio-fool, followed this with a pitch for bio-fuels: "We also need to decisively move away from the use of oil. New developments in batteries and in genetic engineering of bio-catalysts are making that entirely feasible now. . . .")

Speaking via satellite from the United States, former U.S. Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), another lunatic neo-con, also attacked Iran: "Israel is facing the greatest danger for its survival since the 1967 victory," Gingrich said. "Three nuclear weapons is a second holocaust. We have enemies who are quite explicit in their desire to destroy us. They say it publicly, on television, on websites. We are sleepwalking through this as though it is all a problem of communications, and that somehow diplomacy will enable us to come together and have a wonderful fiesta in which we will all learn to love one another."

Although the conference was heavy with Islamophobes, including top British agent Bernard Lewis (promoter of the "clash of civilizations"), more moderate voices could be heard. Dr. Richard Haass, head of the New York Council on Foreign Relations, told the conference, "The U.S. era in the Middle East is over," pointing out the catastrophe in Iraq. Haass, a former head of Policy Planning at the State Department, criticized Israel for not negotiating with Syria. "I don't understand the "reticence about engaging in diplomacy," he said. He also called on the United States to engage in direct negotiations with Iran over stabilizing Iraq, and about Iran's nuclear program.

War or Peace With Syria?

Despite widespread support in Israel for accepting Syrian peace overtures, the Bush Administration has made clear it will not give such talks its blessings. Diplomatic correspondent Aluf Benn confirmed this well-known fact yet again in *Ha'aretz* Feb. 8. Benn pointed out that the only diplomatic move that could save Olmert and the political collapse of his government, which is now at its lowest point in the polls, is a

diplomatic initiative towards Syria. "But Olmert has a problem," Benn wrote: "Bush is not allowing him to talk to Assad. American officials who are asked about the revival of the Syrian channel respond by reading out the long list of crimes committed by Damascus. . . . If the choice is between pursuing the ideological war against terror and a realistic policy that would preserve Olmert's government, Bush prefers the ideology."

By contrast, the men Bush refuses to listen to, James Baker III and Lee Hamilton, the co-authors of the Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group report, testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Jan. 30, where they called for the United States to hold talks with Syria. "We could get them [Syria] to get Hamas to recognize Israel's right to exist," Baker said. "It would be a huge step in the right direction." He added that it could also get Syria to stop arming the Hezbollah group.

Hamilton told the same committee that Syria has been "sending signals to us" that it wants a dialogue with the United States.

In Israel, where there is widespread support for the Baker-Hamilton report among policy-makers, a group of top retired Israeli military and security officers, among others, has formed a grassroots organization called the "Forum of the Peace Initiative with Syria," which held its first public meeting on Jan. 28. The group includes former chief of staff Amnon Lipkin Shahak, former Shin Bet chief Yaakov Peri, and former director-general of the Foreign Ministry Dr. Alon Liel. Liel had led back-channel talks with Syria from 2004 to 2006 (See "Even Sharon Allowed Israel-Syria Talks," *EIR,* Jan. 26, 2007.)

"We all know that in recent months Syrian sources, including President Bashar Assad, have been indicating their readiness to begin negotiations with Israel without preconditions," Peri told the meeting. "It is possible that these signals from Damascus are a result of Syrian distress, or it's possible that Assad is trying to take advantage of voices within Israel calling for dialogue regarding a permanent solution with the Syrians." Peri said that a dialogue with Syria would neutralize the threat of rockets on Israel's northern border, and stop Syrian funding of Hezbollah and support of Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

"The Syrian leadership isn't happy about its isolation from the West and Israel is a Western representative in the Middle East. Within this context, it seems that Assad's declarations illustrate an analysis based on home politics that will allow him to come to some sort of compromise with Israel. I ask that Israel change its decision and its 'no,' and pursue dialogue with Syria," Peri said.

New Provocations

But Bush and Cheney will not allow Israel peace on any front. The much talked about "summit" with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Olmert, and Palestinian President Abu Mazen, scheduled for Feb. 19, is programmed to fail. *Ha'aretz*'s Aluf Benn wrote on Feb. 3, "The White House regards Rice's optimism with contempt. . . . [Bush] has no interest in getting involved with Israel and the Palestinians. His aides have come to understand by now that during Bush's term no Palestinian state will be set up next to Israel, and the [Palestinian] President's vision will not be realized." All this activity by Rice, Benn wrote, was only to placate the Arabs and the Europeans who are pressuring Washington to revive the peace process.

On Feb. 6, clashes between Palestinian youths and police near the al-Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, Islam's third-holiest site, threatened to lead to riots, recalling Ariel Sharon's infamous march on the Mount in September 2000, which ignited the second Intifada. At issue was an illegal archaeological dig in the so-called "City of David," not far from the site. Another was repair work to rebuild a walking bridge near the Western Wall, at the foot of the site.

Jordan's Abdullah II issued an angry statement, declaring the work "a blatant violation that is not acceptable under any pretext." The King also said that the activity "will only create an atmosphere that will not at all help in the success of efforts being undertaken to restore the peace process." Hamas leader Khaled Meshal, who lives in exile in Damascus, and the Syrian government issued similar warnings.

Despite a recommendation by Israeli Defense Minister Amir Peretz and other security officials to halt the work, Olmert, who, as a former mayor of Jerusalem, enjoyed the support of the "Temple Mount Faithful" extremists, refused to order a halt to the activity.

A second flashpoint has been created along the Lebanese-Israeli border, where the Israeli military has changed its procedures. On the night of Feb. 7, a serious incident between the Israeli and Lebanese armies took place, when Lebanese soldiers fired on an Israeli army engineering battalion that was clearing mines between the international border and the security fence that lies a few tens of meters south of the border. The Israelis responded with tank fire. New clashes are programmed to occur as the new procedures, which include operating in the "no-man's zone" between the fence and the border, have gone into effect. An escalation of fighting along this border could lead not only to a renewal of the fighting between Israel and Lebanon, but also to a Syrian-Israeli war.

It is well known that the Bush Administration was greatly disappointed by the failure of Israel to attack Syria during last Summer's war with Lebanon. This possibility is underscored by concerns among European intelligence sources that the Bush Administration, while threatening to attack Iran, might, in fact be preparing to attack Syria. An Israeli-Syrian clash could serve as a useful pretext.

There is no doubt that the security of all countries in the region, including Israel, depends on getting Cheney and Bush out of the White House as soon as possible.