
Conference Report

No Real Conflict of Interests Between Israel and Iran

by Mary Burdman

What emerged most clearly in discussions at an excellent seminar on a potential “Nuclear Iran,” held at the James Shasha Institute for International Seminars at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem on May 30-June 2, is that there are *no* intrinsic conflicts between the real strategic and economic interests of Israel and Iran. While tensions remain high, in reality, these nations are not enemies and have never been. There are certainly ideological conflicts between Jerusalem and Tehran, yet, at this time, neither state poses a serious threat to the other. The real impulse for conflict in the region of Southwest Asia, comes from the neo-con/pre-emptive strike faction now running the Pentagon and the White House in Washington D.C., led by Vice President Dick Cheney.

Presentations by seminar participants, representing Israeli academic, intelligence, and official circles—as well as academics, analysts, and policymakers from the United States, Germany, France, Italy, India, Russia, and other nations—demonstrated that many in Israel have a sure grasp of Iran’s actual strategic concerns. There was general and strong opposition to Iran developing nuclear weapons, while the existence of Israel’s own nuclear capabilities remains unquestioned. At the same time, Tehran maintains its position, dating from the regime of Ayatollah Khomeini, that Israel does not exist, and government rhetoric constantly attacks Israel. Yet, a number of Israeli and other speakers maintained that Iran’s interests—at least if it does not develop nuclear weapons—do not fundamentally conflict with those of Israel. One Israeli participant noted that Israel is *not* the main reason for bad U.S.-Iran relations.

Iran, with a rapidly growing population and urgent need for economic development, is an independent nation of 70 million people, slightly larger than the size of Alaska, and surrounded by the most volatile region in the world. The determining factor in the region at this time, is the U.S. presence in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Persian Gulf, and Tehran perceives itself as being “engulfed” by this overwhelming U.S. presence. Iran is a nation with a long-term perspective; over the last 26 years, its focus has shifted to national interests, rather than the Islamic Revolution.

Israel itself, as some leading analysts there emphasize, after the demise of Saddam Hussein, now has no enemy ex-

cept terrorism. Syria is far too weak to be a concern; Iran, without nuclear weapons, is not a threat. These analysts report that there is a growing consensus in the country—expressed also by some seminar speakers—that the only way for Israel to solve the terrorism threat, is to itself pull out of the occupied territories and go ahead with the two-state solution, with or without Palestinian cooperation. The withdrawal from Gaza will go ahead this Summer—not without a lot of problems which will look bad on television—but most Israelis are committed to this withdrawal. Further developments will take time. But Israel’s presence in the territories is now being understood as a heavy economic and military burden, rather than a first line of defense. The situation, particularly around Jerusalem, is *extremely* complicated. This, however, is hardly a new problem—its history goes back well over 2,000 years.

As one perceptive Israeli had it, the real problem afflicting the country, is that every *mishegaas* in the world is there. (*Mishegaas* is a Yiddish word of Hebrew origin, meaning insanity, although with a generous shot of irony.) Much of this current plague of *mishegaas* originates outside Israel. Israelis also point to the October 1973 war as a turning point. Immediately after the 1967 war, Israel’s founding father David Ben Gurion had wanted to return the just-captured territories, with the exception of Jerusalem, accompanied with a rational re-drawing of some borders, which had been left in a patchwork by the 1948 cease-fire. Many in Israel supported this idea, but the Egyptian attack in 1973 set off the messianic tendency which has grown to become so dangerous today. In a broader context, it was in this time period that President Nixon’s first Secretary of State, William Rogers, developed a plan for mutual Israeli-Palestinian security and territorial accords, but ousted and replaced by Henry Kissinger, who wrecked all potential agreements.

It is also noteworthy, that many of the most messianic types infesting Israel today—Jewish and Christian alike—are recent immigrants from the United States. These lunatics, as Lyndon LaRouche said in a recent discussion of Southwest Asia, come out of the U.S. fundamentalist-fascist movements, and are bringing that fascism to Israel.

Then, there is the demographic issue. Israel, in including the occupied territories, is now over 50% Jewish, but this will

be reduced to some 45% in the coming 15 years. For Israel to maintain itself as a democratic Jewish state—its national goal—it will have to pull out of the territories, and carry out the “two states for two peoples” policy.

The Neo-Con Danger

The biggest problem lies with the Cheney crowd in Washington, LaRouche noted. Israel has no intrinsic interest in a conflict with either Syria or Iran at this time; thus, anything being done by Israel to push conflict in this area, is being done to try to placate those dictating policy from the United States. In reality, any Israel-Iran conflict is a U.S.-Iran conflict, which has been the problem all along. In reality, LaRouche said, Israel’s interests coincide with cooperation with Iran, on economic and security problems. Both nations have enough economic, security, and other problems of their own to solve.

The danger of a conflict, of course, should not be underestimated. Iran’s internal situation, and to what degree Tehran’s “death to Israel” rhetoric reflects real policy or merely internal politics, was hotly debated at the seminar. Meanwhile, Israel opposes Iran developing nuclear energy—a long-term goal—on the grounds that this would only be a step to weapons. Iran insists that its program is peaceful, and that it has the sovereign right to nuclear energy.

In the region, Iraq was Iran’s real enemy—a rivalry that goes back to ancient times. Allowing the brutal eight-year Iran-Iraq War to be “forgotten” is a serious error, as Israeli and other analysts stressed. Iran suffered hundreds of thousands of casualties—ten times all of Israel’s casualties in its entire history—and was on the verge of surrendering to Saddam Hussein. This has been the most critical factor in Iran’s security policy since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Iraq’s military capabilities far surpassed Iran’s; for this reason, Tehran determined to develop an independent, effective defense. The “hot topic”—at the seminar and beyond—is whether, and when, that defensive stance might become offensive.

In the debate on a “nuclear Iran,” several high-level analysts emphasized that Iran does not yet have any fixed nuclear doctrine, and one intelligence analyst suggested that Iran would tend to consider a nuclear capability, and nuclear deterrence, in a way similar to India and Pakistan, rather than the United States, Russia, or Israel. This would mean a regional, rather than international policy. A more serious potential threat would be if Iran were to build a lower-level, “dirty bomb” capability.

Independent Nation

Iran is an unusual nation in South and West Asia. Its Constitution really works, and elections matter. It is a genuinely independent nation. Iran’s real rulers are its conservative religious elites, yet the country is now the most open that it has been in the last quarter-century, with more open internal discussion than in its neighbors—despite repression and jailings of dissidents. The opposition is weak and divided, and it



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Iran’s Bushehr nuclear reactor, under construction with Russian assistance. Iran has a sovereign right to nuclear power, and a sensible regional approach would break the current deadlock by giving Iran an “existential” guarantee for its security.

is a mistake to make judgments based on the views of exiled dissidents. All vital issues—national security, nuclear policy, and so on—are determined by the supreme religious leaders; the military has little role.

Iran is also independent in foreign policy. Tehran does not take “Islamic” positions: Iran opposed the Taliban in Afghanistan; it supports Russian policy in Chechnya and never supported Muslim militants against India. It supported Christian Armenia in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, and its closest relations among its neighbors are with Armenia and secular Turkmenistan. In Afghanistan, Iran did cooperate with the United States in getting President Burhanuddin Rabbani to resign in late 2001, to let Hamid Kharzai in: George W. Bush reacted by denouncing Tehran as part of the “Axis of Evil.” However, Iran insists, rightly, that it is not to be compared with North Korea.

Before 1979, Iran was an ally of the United States and Israel, and an enemy of the Soviet Union, a policy reversed after the Islamic Revolution. Now, the neo-con-controlled Washington Administration is a new level of threat. As one European pointed out, the United States is the pillar of the system targeting Iran; it is trying to contain Iran economically, militarily, and politically, and threatening a whole new level of attack: “regime change.” Yet, while the U.S. war in Iraq sends a clear message to Tehran, it was emphatically noted by some seminar participants, that the United States simply does *not* have the military capability to move into



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Al-Aqsa Mosque, the Dome of the Rock, and the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

Iran. U.S. forces are already totally overstretched, and Tehran knows this.

Europe, India and Russia

Europe has been playing an important role in relation to Iran, but the future of that relationship is up in the air—as is much else in Europe. At the same time as the Jerusalem seminar, the German ruling party lost crucial state elections, and first France, and then the Netherlands voted “no” in referenda on the proposed European Constitution. Modern European direct interests in Southwest Asia go back to the famous Berlin-Baghdad railroad; with Turkey (potentially) a member of the European Union (EU), Iran would become a direct neighbor.

This writer raised a proposal, based on the April 2004 LaRouche Doctrine for Southwest Asia. It is obvious that Israel is a unique *economic* capability in the entire region. It has achieved a level of development and advanced technology beyond any other regional nation. Iran, with its 70 million people, has a growing economy but is in urgent need of development. Israel, in just one example, produces water desalination plants, which generate the water supply for Cyprus. Water is an issue of urgent concern in the entire region. Could not these two nations, from *inside* the region, cooperate on solving the water and other crises?

The question provoked a positive response, and reference to EU proposals which advocate an in-depth regional approach as the only way to stabilize the situation. Military and security guarantees would be essential—but the perspective is viable.

The most useful proposals, especially from Italy, a nation with long-term close ties to Iran, were for the creation of a *regional* security order, to break the current deadlock. This

would end the demonization and isolation of Iran, which is surrounded by nuclear weapons in Russia, Pakistan, Israel, Turkey (U.S. weapons), plus the “new” U.S. nuclear capabilities in Iraq. As one Italian strategist emphasized: “Never put your enemy in a corner.” The United States has lost its credibility after the weapons of mass destruction debacle over Iraq, and should reconsider its allegations about Iran. The current initiative of Germany, France, and Britain, is too narrowly focused on the nuclear issue: It should be broadened to give the government an “existential” security guarantee, and focus on Iran’s interests with its neighboring nations. Under the Non-Proliferation Treaty—which Iran signed—it has a sovereign right to nuclear energy, and to control the full nuclear cycle. At the same time, the International Atomic Energy

Agency (IAEA) has found no evidence of any military program in Iran.

There were coherent views presented from India and Russia. Russia is carrying out its nuclear energy agreement with Iran, and will complete it. India sees a convergence of interests with Iran, including to supply India’s growing energy needs, and as a “corridor” to Central Asia. Now, when India talks to its “Eurasian triangle” partners Russia and China, Iran is on the agenda. In New Delhi, the view is that U.S. attempted containment of Iran is a bad policy, badly carried out.

Neo-Con Insanity

Despite the generally excellent quality of presentations and discussion at the seminar, neo-con hysteria raised its ugly head. This was certainly not the only view from Washington, and at least one participant from a continental European capital calmly presented the bloodcurdling view that, failing all else, the only way to finally “deal” with Iran’s (alleged) nuclear ambitions, would be to blow up its nuclear facilities—whether by stealth or military attack. The essential point, he said, is to make the threat clear and keep the (alleged) international consensus against Iran strong.

Similar views came from the U.S. neo-con faction. While it was acknowledged that the U.S. consensus is that a military move would be the worst possible option, no one—in the United States or in U.S. allies such as Britain—should downplay the military threat to Iran. “Democratization” is to be taken as a serious commitment of the (insane) President Bush—even while Iraq sinks deeper into chaos. The existence of any other policy than that of the pre-emptive strike faction, is denounced as undermining “consensus.” Here, as in Washington, the pre-emptive strike faction showed itself out of touch with strategic reality.