

Behind the Annapolis Meet And the Iran NIE Shock

by Jeffrey Steinberg

The war party faction in the Bush Administration has suffered a pair of stunning political setbacks to their plans for further military confrontations in Southwest Asia. The danger of yet another Persian Gulf war is not over; but the prospects of perpetual war in the world's oil patch is reduced, for the first time in a long while.

First, the Nov. 27 summit meeting in Annapolis, Md. was a qualified success, robbing Vice President Dick Cheney of the opportunity to seize upon a breakdown of the Israel-Palestine peace process to press for the immediate bombing of Iran. As one well-informed Washington intelligence source put it, "The Annapolis conference did not fail, and that alone represents a modest success."

Sources close to the Vice President say that he was furious that the Annapolis conference took place, and that the State Department even extended an invitation to one of Cheney's most detested "rogue states," Syria—and, what is worse, they attended. Cheney, the sources elaborated, had hoped the failure at Annapolis would discredit Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in the eyes of the President, dash any prospects of an Arab-Israeli peace deal, and revive Cheney's argument that Bush's "Presidential legacy" must be ensured, by wiping out Iran's nuclear ambitions, militarily.

Second, on Dec. 3, the U.S. intelligence community's long-awaited National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran's nuclear weapons program—at least 18 months in preparation—was released by the Director of National Intelligence, with the shocker key finding that Iran had halted its weaponization efforts in Autumn 2003, and had probably not resumed them, as of Summer 2007.

Washington sources have confirmed to *EIR* that the White House decision to release the NIE on Iran's nuclear program, including a five-page public version of the key findings, was,

in part, driven by the fear that, if the Bush Administration continued to conceal the report, it would soon be leaked to the national media, creating a scandal, far more damaging than the Nixon-era leak of the Pentagon Papers. The release of the declassified summary findings has, for now, blown a further hole in Cheney's plans to bomb Iran before the Administration leaves office.

The Vice President himself all but admitted that the White House had been forced to publicly release the NIE, which expresses the judgment of 16 U.S. intelligence agencies, under pressure from the intelligence community. In a Dec. 5, interview with the online neoconservative Capitol Hill journal *Politico*, Cheney explained, "There was a general belief that we all shared that it was important to put out—that it was not likely to stay classified for long, anyway." Asked point blank if the NIE would have been leaked to the media, Cheney responded, "Everything leaks."

According to the sources, senior officials in the U.S. intelligence community had made it clear that there were people willing to go to jail in order to reveal the NIE findings and avert an unwarranted bombing of Iran; and that if the Administration continued to block its release, it would trigger another round of political warfare, pitting the CIA and other intelligence agencies against the White House. "It would have been far, far bloodier than the Valerie Plame affair," one senior ex-intelligence official told *EIR*.

It is widely known that the top U.S. military brass, along with Defense Secretary Robert Gates, are opposed to any military attack on Iran. Drafts of the NIE had been completed months ago, and sources tell *EIR* that the drafts were sent back for further work, largely due to Cheney's efforts to block any findings that would undercut his war drive.

Coincident with the NIE release, *Newsweek* published a



White House/Chris Greenberg

Cheney and the neocons, both inside the Beltway, and in Israel, were doubly outflanked when the latest NIE undercut their plans for war against Iran; and by the qualified success of the Annapolis peace conference. Shown here: Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert; President Bush, and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, at Annapolis, Nov. 27.

lengthy profile of Defense Secretary Gates, on Dec. 1, 2007, reporting, among other things, that he had met with the Democratic Senate Policy Committee in late September, and had candidly told them, “It would be a strategic calamity to attack Iran at this time.” Gates has ordered military commanders in the Persian Gulf to be on guard for any incident that might “accidentally” trigger a military brush-up with Iran—a sound policy, given that several former CENTCOM (U.S. Central Command) commanders have voiced serious worries about a “Gulf of Tonkin incident” that could quickly lead to a full-scale war.

Furthermore, Cheney has by no means given up on his Iran bombing scheme. According a Dec. 6 *New York Times* account, just two weeks before the release of the NIE, top White House officials were briefed in detail, and Cheney pitched a fit over some of the key findings, including that Iran had halted its weaponization program. Intelligence community briefers were prepared to answer the Cheney challenges, reporting that they had conducted “red team” exercises, and concluded that the intelligence reports and intercepts about the shutdown of the weapons component of the Iranian nuclear program, on which they based the finding, were not Iranian disinformation.

Intelligence community sources intimately familiar with the Cheney circles said that the Vice President will now focus

much greater attention on Iran’s activities inside Iraq, and will look for an alternative argument for starting a military confrontation with the Islamic Republic. In June 2007, Gen. Kevin Bergner, a former military aide to Elliott Abrams at the National Security Council, was dispatched to Baghdad, to take over as intelligence briefer. According to U.S. journalists recently in Baghdad, Bergner has been feeding a steady stream of alarmist, and often uncorroborated “intelligence” on stepped up Iranian activities, in support of insurgents in the country, in an effort to keep Cheney’s “Plan B” alive.

The ‘Bush Legacy’ Factor

Lyndon LaRouche has recently emphasized that there is a significant “Bush legacy” factor at play, that likely contributed to both the new-found enthusiasm for Middle East diplomacy, and the decision to publicly release the NIE findings. Former President George H.W. Bush and former First Lady Barbara Bush, according to sources close to the family, are horrified at the prospect of G.W. leaving office with no accomplishments to show for his eight years in power. The Israel-Palestine and Israel-Syria peace deals offer the last, best chance to salvage the Bush Presidency, and a Bush family legacy that also hangs in the balance. Texas sources point to

George Prescott Bush, the son of former Florida governor Jeb Bush, and a prominent Dallas-area attorney and Naval Reserve intelligence officer, as a future Bush family political star. The Bush family sees itself as an American dynasty, and does not wish to go down in history as the architects of America’s ultimate decline.

Bolstering the “legacy factor,” *EIR* reported last week that former Bush Sr. National Security Advisor and alter ego Brent Scowcroft, played a pivotal role, in aiding Secretary of State Rice in her diplomatic efforts, leading into the Annapolis summit. The inclusion of Syria in the meeting opened the prospect for a Syria-Israel peace deal in the immediate period ahead. Such a deal has been promoted by LaRouche as a key to rebuilding momentum towards a larger peace agreement, along the lines of the Beirut Declaration of the Arab League, the December 2006 Iraq Study Group call for a regional peace conference, and his own “LaRouche Doctrine for Southwest Asia,” by far the most comprehensive blueprint for long-term stability in the region, first published in April 2004.

According to several senior U.S. intelligence sources, two times before, an Israeli-Syrian final agreement was nearly signed: in 1994-95, and again in 2000. In the first instance, in the immediate aftermath of the 1992 Madrid Summit and the Oslo Accords, the United States had pledged \$11 billion in

sophisticated surveillance systems to Israel, to guarantee its security against a Syrian attack; and had additionally promised to place a U.S. combat battalion on the Golan Heights, similar to the U.S. observer force in the Sinai, once the Golan had been returned to the Syrians. The deal was stalled when Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated in 1995.

Again, in 2000, President Bill Clinton met in Geneva with then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, and Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, and a variation on the earlier agreement was almost finalized. There are varying explanations why the Geneva effort broke down at the last moment, none of which are definitive. The point is, as one senior U.S. intelligence official told *EIR* recently, “an Israel-Syria final peace deal is 99% worked out already, and could be finalized in a matter of days.” Such an agreement, the source continued, “would tilt the entire situation in the region—away from war.”

Indeed, those who saw Annapolis as a step towards building a Sunni Arab/Israeli axis of war against Iran, were seriously set back by statements from Saudi Arabia, that the Arabs have no interest in confrontation with “the Persians.” Indeed, on Dec. 4, Iran’s President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad showed up at the Gulf Cooperation Council summit, “holding hands” with Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah. It was the first time an Iranian President had ever been invited to the GCC session.

The ‘War Party’ Goes Ballistic

Predictably, Beltway neocons and their Israeli co-thinkers have gone ballistic over the Annapolis conference and the NIE. The day after the report was released, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, held an emergency conference call, according to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. The group’s executive vice chairman, Malcolm Hoenlein, said that they would be sending letters to all of the Presidential candidates, urging them to ignore the NIE, and make no reference to it in their campaign activities. Hoenlein also said that the organization would focus its own efforts at Iran’s continuing role in sponsoring international terrorism—a track totally consistent with Dick Cheney’s “Plan B.”

AIPAC (the American Israel Public Affairs Committee) also responded immediately to the NIE—with predictable sophist spin. Spokesman Josh Block told the JTA that the NIE,

far from exonerating Iran, proved that the Islamic Republic was pursuing a nuclear bomb. “Far from acquitting Iran,” he told the JTA, “the NIE reveals that Tehran continues to violate the international community’s calls to end the pursuit of the fuel cycle and the ability to make highly enriched uranium, concludes that Iran has utilized and has at its disposal a hidden, secret second unacknowledged, unmonitored track for enriching bomb fuel, and has engaged in a nuclear weaponization program, an assessment never before made public by the American intelligence community.” Block concluded, “All in all, it’s a clarion call for additional and continued effort to pressure Iran economically and politically to end its illicit nuclear program.”

Other leading Washington neocons from the American Enterprise Institute, including Norman Podhoretz and Danielle Pletka, made similar statements, attempting to trash the findings, denounced the U.S. intelligence community, and urged action against Iran.

But the climate has, for the moment, shifted even further against their war cries.

In response to the NIE, the Council on Foreign Relations pre-released an article, scheduled to appear in the January/February 2008 edition of *Foreign Affairs*, calling for the United States to pursue “dialogue, compromise, and commerce” with Iran, as part of a larger scheme to create a new, inclusive regional security and economic structure, with Iran included as a full participant. Authors Ray Takeyh and Vali Nasr argue, “Engaging Iran while regulating its rising power within an inclusive regional security arrangement is the best way of stabilizing Iraq, placating the United States’ Arab allies, helping along the Arab-Israeli peace process, and even giving a new direction to negotiations over Iran’s nuclear program. Because this approach includes all the relevant players, it is also the most sustainable and the least taxing strategy for the United States in the Middle East.”

Asked, during a conference call on Dec. 5, whether they thought the Bush Administration would embrace their call for an inclusive strategy towards Iran, abandoning the nearly 30-year policy of containment and confrontation, both Takeyh and Nasr said they were skeptical; however, just a few weeks back, most strategists were convinced that the United States was almost certainly going to bomb Iran, before Bush and Cheney leave office.

Any fundamental shift in Bush Administration policy towards Iran, even at this late date, hinges on the removal of Vice President Cheney from office, now. As the neocon uproar shows, the war party is smarting from a pair of significant setbacks; but they are not about to give up on their confrontation agenda—unless and until their man at the White House is removed from the scene.

If the Family Bush is serious about using the next year to salvage some legacy for G.W., they would do well to exert their newfound leverage, to see to it that the Vice President makes for the exit—the sooner the better.

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