

Syria, Iran Brace for U.S. or Israeli Attack

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

Since Lyndon LaRouche warned of new Israeli attacks—even nuclear attacks—against Syria and Iran (see lead article in this section), the neo-conservative drumbeat for such a war has gotten loud in Washington. The Oct. 15 veto by U.S. Ambassador to the UN John Negroponte, of a UN Security Council resolution condemning Israel's new assault against Gaza, signalled support for such a scenario by the U.S. war party led by Vice President Dick Cheney. Shortly after the veto, three Americans were killed in a car bomb explosion in Gaza, escalating the violence qualitatively.

Anyone, among the crazed neo-cons, who believes that knocking out Syria and Iran would contribute to “stabilizing” the situation in Iraq, is clinically insane. Action against Damascus or Tehran would throw the entire Iraq crisis into a qualitatively new, explosive phase. Contrary to the neo-con propaganda, Syria is concerned to stabilize Iraq, if at all possible. According to sources in the region, there have been discreet talks going on between Syrian and American circles, precisely on Iraq. It is mooted that some cooler heads around President Bush have realized that Syria could play a positive role there. One source said that the Israeli bombing of Palestinian camps near Damascus on Oct. 5 was in fact undertaken, on orders of the Cheney-led war party, to sabotage these talks. Similarly, the rush in the U.S. Congress to pass the Syria Accountability Act was the work of the neo-cons allied to “Christian” fundamentalist forces.

Syria and Iraq

Syrian-Iraqi ties go deep, and are longstanding. The Baath Party, which has been officially disbanded in Iraq, still exists, with an estimated 4 million members, and has good relations with the Syrian party of the same name. Tribal groups in the two countries often overlap. Many of the members of the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) were in Syria before the war. Thus, the influence of Syria is considered significant.

Dovetailing with this reading is the news that Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, the new leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), visited Damascus from Oct. 13-15. After talks with Vice President Abdel Halim Khaddam, Hakim said that Damascus could “follow the example of other countries in the region and play an important

role in the reconstruction of Iraq.” He told the press he had asked officials to work “to strengthen relations between the Iraqi and the Syrian people” and to “support the Iraqi people’s effort to recover independence, sovereignty and stability.” It has also been made known in Tehran, that Iran will lend Syria whatever assistance is required, should the Congressional initiative of the Accountability Act be translated into sanctions against Damascus. The two governments are coordinating their policies very closely.

The View From Iran, Russia

Iran, too, is bracing for a confrontation. One trigger could be a failure of the Iranian government and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to reach agreement regarding the agency’s demand that Iran sign an additional protocol to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), by the deadline of Oct. 31. If the talks currently ongoing in Tehran collapse, the issue could be referred to the UN Security Council, where the United States could mount a new war drive.

Prior to flying to Tehran, IAEA Director General ElBaradei was in Moscow for talks with Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov. Ivanov told journalists on Oct. 15, that the two had “thoroughly examined the nuclear problems of Iran and North Korea.” He expressed his hope that ElBaradei’s trip to Iran would yield “tangible results” and recommended that Iran “provide exhaustive information on all its previous programs.” He said that Russia favors Iran’s signing the protocol, and added, “Iran suspending uranium enrichment would also be important.” Although Ivanov stressed that “it is indeed the right of Iran to conduct uranium enrichment,” he said, “considering the complicated and tense situation around the nuclear problem of Iraq [sic], it is necessary to take steps which would strengthen trust.”

Clearly, Russia perceives the danger that non-cooperation on Iran’s part would be immediately exploited to set up a confrontation. When asked if he thought the Iran situation could develop according to the “Iraqi scenario,” he said that that was what he and ElBaradei had discussed. “I think no one is interested and should not be interested in seeking events in Iran develop according to the Iraqi scenario.” He added, “We still do not know what is to be done in Iraq,” where the situation becomes increasingly “complicated.”

The Shi’ite Factor

Any action against Iran would have immediate repercussions inside Iraq. There, resistance against the occupying forces has continued to grow in scope, ferocity, and frequency of attacks. For example: On Oct. 12, an American soldier was killed in Bedji, and the Iraqi Oil Minister and the Vice Chairman of the IGC narrowly escaped an assassination attempt. On Oct. 13, two American soldiers and one Iraqi assailant were killed. In Jaljulah, a U.S. military convoy was attacked, and one GI killed; another U.S. soldier was killed by

a grenade in Tikrit. In Basra, on Oct. 13, four British soldiers were wounded. On Oct. 14, shooting broke out at the Palestine Hotel, where foreign personnel are housed. On Oct. 14, the Turkish Embassy in Baghdad was hit by a car bomb explosion.

The Iraqi resistance is currently mainly composed of pro-Saddam Hussein and Baath party forces, joined by tribal groups. Thus far, there has been no official, active participation of the large Shi'ite organizations, especially the SCIRI, or the Kurdish parties in the north. Were Iran to be attacked, this could change overnight.

The Shi'ites at present are tolerating the U.S. presence, on condition that they maintain full control over the holy cities of Najaf and Kerbala, and that they be allowed to share power. They are demanding that the occupation end soon, and power be handed over to the Iraqis. If their demands are not met, they will join the resistance. It would be the religious—not political—leaders who would make such a decision. If a *fatwa* (religious decree) were issued, for example, by Ayatollah al-Sistani in Najaf, it would be incumbent on every Shi'ite believer, inside Iraq or abroad, to comply.

Although al-Sistani, who is a religious leader, and the SCIRI (which is represented in the Iraqi Governing Council), both seek to avoid war, there are other, more radicalized Shi'ite forces who are striking a more hostile posture. It is these who have been gravitating to the young Shi'ite self-styled leader, Moqtadeh al-Sadr, in Kerbala. Moqtadeh is described as an enraged young radical, propelled into a position for which he is utterly unqualified. His Arabic is reportedly poor—he cannot deliver a speech without a text; and his followers are mainly from the ranks of the uneducated, poor, disinherited. He is seen by some as the “conscience of the Shi'ites” who do not want to deal with the United States.

Moqtadeh escalated tensions within the Shi'ite community by proclaiming a “shadow cabinet” as a prelude to declaring an Islamic state. After moves were made by his people to occupy buildings, clashes were reported in Kerbala. By Oct. 15, the internal conflict had been settled, through the intervention of religious leaders committed to preserving unity and preventing further strife. Moqtadeh was reportedly brought under control by the “wisdom of the leaders.”

The Iranian government is supporting the SCIRI, whereas more extremist forces in the Iranian clergy back Moqtadeh. If the United States and/or Israel were to attack Iran, militarily or otherwise, using the IAEA as a pretext, then the extremists inside Iran could take power, quickly, through the Basij, the Revolutionary Guards, the military and intelligence-security sectors. If they moved on orders from the religious authorities, there would be little room for hesitation. Any mobilization to defend the nation against an aggressor would be considered a duty for all Shi'ites, not only in Iran. There are Shi'ite populations in Lebanon, Syria,

Iraq, Pakistan, and so forth. This could signal the beginning of a long, irregular war, no longer only inside Iraq, but more broadly.

The Iranian reform government has been explicit in its commitment to defend the sovereignty of the country against aggression. Government spokesman Abdollah Ramanzadeh stated that, if attacked, Iran would use all means to defend itself, “and we are not joking.” This is interpreted to reflect the scenario for fighting on a broad front: in the country, in Iraq, and elsewhere.

The conclusions to be drawn by any sane policymaker in Washington would be: Stop the drive to war, before it is too late! If Syria and/or Iran are attacked, a dynamic will be unleashed, inside both Iran and Iraq, which will not be reversible. Other regional players will intervene in a bid for power. No new UN resolution will be worth the paper it is written on. Whatever the motives that led Germany, Russia, and France to vote for the new U.S. draft presented on Oct. 16, the resolution will change nothing. It will only further frustrate those forces inside Iraq demanding a transfer of sovereignty to a duly elected government.

The only thing that will determine which way political processes flow, will be whether the flight-forward hysteria reigning in Washington and Tel Aviv can be brought under control. This requires the removal from power of those propelling toward conflict: first and foremost, Dick Cheney.

Hyping the ‘Iranian Bomb’

As if on his cue, the Mujahideen-e-Khalq Iranian terrorist group beloved of U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft, has come out with new “evidence” of Iran’s nuclear program. The MEK, also known as the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), charged that Iran has a hidden nuclear facility, and could have the nuclear bomb by 2005. The U.S. State Department and Treasury closed down the U.S. offices of the MEK/NCRI on Aug. 15, citing their “acts of terrorism.”

Firouz Mahvi, of the foreign relations committee of the NCRI, said in Vienna on Oct. 14, “The site has been built to test centrifuges that enrich uranium. It is located 15 kilometers east of Isfahan, under the name of Isfahan’s Fuel Research and Production center.” He said the information came from undercover agents who have been working there. Mahvi also said that Tehran “has asked the contractor for the Natanz site to speed up its activities to expedite the completion of the site.”

Iran’s Ambassador to the IAEA, Ali Akbar Salehi, dismissed the report as “absolutely baseless.”