

Who Is Out To Sabotage The Annapolis Peace Process?

by Dean Andromidas

Commenting on recent developments following the Annapolis peace conference held last Nov. 27, Lyndon LaRouche said, “We had Syria, Israel, other states, meeting in Annapolis, and coming to an attitude of cooperation—it’s not yet home, we’re not yet secure on this. But we took a great step forward, ... not a great treaty, but a change in attitude ... which promises an opportunity for bringing to an end this mess in Southwest Asia. ...” These comments were made on Dec. 11, in an address by telephone to an international conference in Ottawa, Canada. The next day, in a move that must be seen as an attempt to squash this opportunity, a car bomb in Lebanon killed Gen. François Haggi, the second most senior officer in the Lebanese Army, threatening to throw that nation back into civil war.

In September, LaRouche had endorsed the call by Israeli President Shimon Peres for Israel to open peace talks with Syria; LaRouche later called for Syrian participation at the Annapolis peace summit, as key to transforming the ‘dynamic in the region. Syria’s presence, LaRouche indicated, would signal to the region that the Bush Administration had pulled back from its policy of regime change in Damascus, thus allowing Syria to play a positive role in resolving its conflict with Israel, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Lebanese internal crisis, and the stabilization of Iraq. Furthermore, Syria’s special relationship with Iran could serve as a bridge between Iran and the United States.

In the two weeks since Annapolis, developments have confirmed LaRouche’s forecast, while the release of the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), revealing that Iran had halted its nuclear weapons program several years ago, signalled an open revolt by the U.S. military-security establishment against Vice President Dick Cheney’s attempt to launch an attack on Iran. On Dec. 11, LaRouche commented, “The big frustration for Dick Cheney and for some people in Lon-

don, is the fact that it’s rather difficult now for Cheney and company to pull off the strike on Iran—because the military position of the United States would be devastated by opening such an attack. And with the collapse of the value of the dollar, they would have to be absolutely insane and totally British to do this kind of thing.”

The finger of suspicion for the assassination of General Haggi on Dec. 12, now points to those who were sidelined at Annapolis. Haggi had been one of the key elements in ending the political impasse in Lebanon, where a consensus had been reached to back Army commander Michel Sleiman as President. That consensus had been worked out in the context of the post-Annapolis dynamic and with the help of Syria. In fact, Middle East intelligence sources told *EIR* that the U.S.-backed ruling coalition was informed that the U.S. military would not support an adventure by the coalition aimed at starting a civil war against the Hezbollah-led opposition. Haggi was a potential candidate for Sleiman’s successor as Army chief, in the complex negotiations over constitutional and political issues that would have allowed the Presidential elections to move forward. His assassination threatens to throw Lebanon into a civil war that could sabotage efforts at bringing peace to the region.

Syria-Israel Talks Key to Regional Settlement

The weeks since Annapolis have seen dramatic diplomatic developments, the most important of which, was a decision by Russia to convene a peace conference next April, where the Syria-Israel peace track will be at the top of the agenda. According to the Israeli daily *Ha’aretz* Dec. 12, Russian diplomats in Moscow and UN headquarters confirmed to Israeli officials that U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice supports the conference.

Reconfirming Syria's desire to open talks with Israel, within days of Annapolis, Syrian Parliamentarian Dr. Muhammad Habash said, in a recent press interview, "We're ready for public talks." He added, "The mediation between Syria and Israel has never ended. The Russians are aiding in the mediation as well as the Turks and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, as well as a number of other countries that have mutual interests."

On Dec. 6, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert gave a de facto endorsement of a Moscow peace conference in a telephone call to congratulate Russian President Vladimir Putin on his election victory. The two discussed "preparations for the next international conference in the first half of 2008," according to a statement by Putin's office.

On the Palestinian-Israeli front, Syria has moved with other Arab states, to reconcile Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah faction with Hamas, which now controls the Gaza Strip, through the mediation of Saudi Arabia. In the first week of December, Khaled Meshal, the Damascus-based leader of Hamas, travelled to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, for talks aimed at reintegrating Gaza into a central government with the West Bank, which would greatly facilitate Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. It was also announced that Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh made the unprecedented move of addressing a letter to Secretary of State Rice and the European Union, declaring that Hamas was interested in opening a dialogue.

At the same time, former Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei was in Damascus, where he met Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem, as well as Nayef Hawatmeh of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, another group that was part of the "Rejectionist Front" which refused to enter peace talks with Israel. They issued a joint statement promising to coordinate peace efforts with Syria and other Arab nations, while endorsing Russia's call for the Moscow peace conference, which will take up peace talks between Syria and Israel.

Commenting on these developments, LaRouche said that these efforts by Syria and other Arab states to bring Hamas and Fatah together, demonstrate that "regional pressures, regional interests, are now coming into play, which is what I was hoping they would do... It has worked so far..." He added that it also "solves a problem for Israel. It gets this problem off their backs, so it works for all sides."

Bridge to Iran and Iraq

The release of the NIE not only derailed Cheney's Iran war option, but it also buried his so-called Sunni alliance against Iran. This was confirmed by the Dec. 3-4 summit meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which included heads of state from Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states, and where Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was a featured guest who entered the meeting arm-in-arm with Saudi King Abdullah. According to intelligence sources, the

Saudi King debunked Cheney's schemes by declaring at the conference that there was no anti-Iranian Sunni alliance, nor was the region divided between "moderate" and "extremist" Arab states reiterating that all the Arab states are part of one Arab nation. Thus, Syria's special relationship with both Iran and Shi'a Hezbollah in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia could now serve as a bridge between the Sunni Arab states and Shi'a Iran, as well as serving as a key mediator in resolving the internal Iraqi crisis where a Shi'a-Sunni civil war is ongoing.

Shortly after Annapolis, on Dec. 2, Syria's Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Miqdad travelled to Tehran to brief the Iranian leadership on the peace talks and on Syria's role. Miqdad met with the Foreign Minister of Iran, Manouchehr Mottaki and conveyed a letter from Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad.

The Arabic daily *Asharq al-Awsat*, cited Iranian sources as saying that the message "explained to the Iranians the reasons why Syria opted to participate in the Annapolis meeting, and its position on the peace negotiations, while at the same time including an overall discussion of the situation in Southwest Asia, especially Lebanon and Iraq." Miqdad, in his press conference after meeting with his Iranian counterpart, called for the resumption of peace talks between the Arab nations and Israel. Miqdad's visit, and his statement, issued from Tehran, cut through the speculation about a break between Iran and Syria, over the latter's participation at Annapolis. Following Miqdad's visit, Tehran postponed indefinitely a conference of anti-Annapolis Palestinian opposition factions including Hamas, Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and other militant factions.

Israel-Iran Engagement?

Many regional observers see that the release of the NIE report on Iran could open the door for direct contact between the United States and Iran, which would have profound implications for everyone in the region, including Israel. Peace between Israel and Syria could open the way for what, until now, has been unthinkable: an Iranian-Israeli dialogue. The latter possibility was given voice by Efraim Halevy, the former head of the Israeli Mossad intelligence agency.

In an interview with the *Jerusalem Post*, Halevy commented that while the NIE concluded that "Iran has the scientific, technical and industrial capacity eventually to produce nuclear weapons if it decides to do so," it nonetheless stated that the Iranian regime "operates in a rational way, based on its interests" and that "they can be deterred." Currently the head of the Shasha Center for Strategic Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Halevy added that while he was "not sure" the NIE report had taken the U.S. military option off the table, what was "in the cards" now was U.S. political engagement with Iran.