

Specter of Nuclear War Shadows the Middle East

by Dean Andromidas

Two events occurred in October that have not been widely reported. First, was the visit of Saudi Arabian Defense Minister Prince Sultan bin Abdelaziz al Saud to China, for discussions on military-strategic matters. The second, was an announcement by Israeli Army Radio that the *Tekuma*, the last of three German-built Dolphin-class submarines, was rushed, in the midst of the training of its new Israeli crew, from Germany to Israel for “security reasons.” Since the Palestinian Authority is not known to have a navy, the submarine’s transfer has fuelled a great deal of speculation.

Both events are evidence that the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict threatens to engulf the region in a conflagration that would radically transform the global military strategic situation. In fact, the events point to the nuclear dimension of the current conflict. Although President George Bush’s Gulf War was fought under the pretext of preventing Iraq from developing nuclear weapons, Israel is continuing to develop its nuclear arsenal.

Saudi Doubts about U.S. Guarantees

Prince Sultan’s trip to China signalled Saudi and Arab fears that the unravelling Middle East crisis could lead to a general war. Moreover, given President Clinton’s capitulation to the right-wing Zionist lobby circles in the United States and Israel, the Saudis are no longer confident that the United States will honor secret treaty obligations to defend their nation. Saudi, and all other Arab leaders, believe that, in an Arab-Israeli conflict, the United States would side with Israel, even if Israel used nuclear weapons.

In view of Israel’s conventional and nuclear superiority, several Arab and Islamic states reportedly have tried to explore the possibilities of gaining access to nuclear weapons, or setting up “nuclear deterrence” arrangements with nuclear

powers, including China, Pakistan, Russia, and India.

In 1988, Prince Sultan and his son, Prince Bandar, the Saudi Ambassador to Washington, concluded a \$2 billion deal for 50 CSS-2 “East Wind” intermediate-range missiles from China. Although highly inaccurate, these missiles have a range of 2,500 kilometers, and are now deployed at two operational bases, including the multibillion-dollar King Khalid Military City.

Saudi Arabia has signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and King Fahd has given the United States written assurances that it has no intention of acquiring nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, it has pursued a policy of seeking out deterrence arrangements. Prince Sultan’s visit to China was preceded by an official visit to Saudi Arabia by Chinese President Jiang Zemin in late November 1999. Also, in May 1999, Prince Sultan travelled to Pakistan, the only Islamic nation with nuclear weapons, and a country with which Saudi Arabia has enjoyed close military and political ties. The Prince toured the Pakistani nuclear and missile facilities, including a uranium enrichment plant and the industrial complex where the nuclear-capable Ghauri missiles are manufactured.

The more substantive political dimension of this Saudi diplomacy should not be overlooked. The Saudis, like other Arab countries, view the current Middle East crisis in the broader context of the disastrous effects of the West’s economic and financial globalization process on all developing nations. Prince Sultan’s trip to China was part of an Asian tour that also took him to Malaysia, where he held talks with Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad, who has been in the forefront of the fight against the globalization policies of the West. Being one of the world’s largest oil producers, Saudi Arabia could make its influence felt with other developing countries in this cause.

During his Asian tour, Prince Sultan levelled a strong criticism at Washington's Middle East policy. "We do not doubt that the American Administration wants peace in the region and is striving to settle the issue," he told the Arabic daily *Al Hayat*. "But we ask it to change its ways with the Israelis to guarantee a just and comprehensive solution." He also called on Arab countries to be prepared "for a comprehensive boycott of Israel if it does not comply with what is right."

Israel's Domsday Machine

The announcement by Israeli Army radio of the arrival of the *Tekuma* submarine, can be viewed as a signal that Israel's nuclear arsenal has been activated in response to this crisis.

Israel's nuclear option has come a long way from the "bomb in the basement" policy of the late 1960s and 1970s. While officially maintaining a policy of "nuclear ambiguity," it is well known that Israel has developed its own nuclear "triad" of bombers, rockets, and now submarines for its estimated 100-200 nuclear devices. While maintaining several squadrons of state-of-the-art aircraft, including the F-15E, capable of delivering nuclear weapons, it also maintains a variety of launch vehicles, including the Jericho I and Jericho II missiles. The former has a range of 500 km and the latter a range of 1,500-4,000 km, which make them capable of hitting targets in the former Soviet Union. In addition, Israel has the theoretical capability to deliver a nuclear weapon to even greater distances, through conversion of its own satellite launch vehicles.

With the recent acquisition of three Dolphin-class submarines, it has developed a "second strike" capability, thus completing its triad.

At first glance, the 1,600 ton diesel-powered submarine, designed for interdiction, surveillance, and special forces, and with a speed of 20 knots, might not appear to be the most ideal platform for a nuclear strike capability. But this is misleading, because the vessel faces no serious naval threat from any of its potential adversaries in the region. These submarines, in addition to six standard 533 millimeter torpedo tubes, have been fitted with two specially enlarged 650 mm tubes. It is capable of launching torpedos and the American-built Harpoon anti-ship missile.

In January, Israel asked the United States for 50 Tomahawk cruise missiles, a request the United States turned down, because the only cost-effective use for the missile is to arm it with nuclear weapons. This refusal did not deter the Israelis, who are said to have developed other options, including a U.S. submarine-launched Harpoon missile with a range of 80 miles, and modified by the Israelis to carry a nuclear warhead.



Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak (left) and President Clinton. Without major outside intervention to revive the peace process, the Middle East is headed toward war.

Other reports indicate that Israel has modified its own Popeye Turbo air-launched cruise missile for launch from submarines. Although officially this missile has a range of 200 km, independent experts have confirmed that simply fitting the missile with additional fuel tanks could boost its range considerably. The submarine's two oversized torpedo tubes could accommodate such a modified nuclear-capable submarine-launched cruise missile. On June 18, the London *Sunday Times* reported that Israel had test-fired a submarine-launched cruise missile off the coast of Sri Lanka from a Dolphin-class submarine, reportedly with a range of 1,500 km.

If true, the question is: Are the cruise missiles being deployed as a deterrent, or as a first-strike capability against the world's only "Islamic bomb," that of Pakistan, or some Arab nation?

It would be a dangerous miscalculation to view Israel's nuclear doctrine as simply a regional deterrent against its Arab adversaries. These weapons not only directly threaten Israel's neighbors, but also serve as blackmail against hesitant allies, such as the United States, which might see fit to pressure Israel rather than turn the world's largest source of oil into a battlefield. Israel is said to have used this tactic in the 1967 war, when it threatened to use the only two nuclear weapons it reportedly possessed at the time. Also during the 1973 war, it activated 13 nuclear weapons, to convince the Americans to launch a military resupply operation, which in turn enabled Israel to throw the Egyptian Army back across the Suez Canal and establish a new bridgehead on the road to Cairo, thus strengthening its bargaining position once a cease-fire was negotiated.

A War Cabinet?

If the activation of Israel's nuclear option is true, that decision could not have been made simply by "the govern-

ment of the day,” but would have required a political-military consensus that went beyond the decision of the Prime Minister’s cabinet.

In both the June 1967 war and the October 1973 war, Israel’s nuclear option was activated only after the broadening of the coalition governments at the time to deal with those wars.

Although the current conflagration has yet to reach the proportions of the 1967 or 1973 Arab-Israeli wars, no one can deny the potential for the situation to rapidly escalate. Therefore, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak’s efforts to form a national emergency government with Ariel Sharon, who heads the Likud opposition bloc, should not be seen solely as a sign of his political weakness, but as preparation for the possibility of such a war. Although a government of national emergency does not formally exist, Barak has been in constant consultation with Sharon since the latter’s Temple Mount/Al Haram Al Sharif provocation which triggered the violence, and he has made no substantive decision without prior consultation with Sharon. Even the recent decision by Barak to make a political deal with the ultra-Orthodox Shas party, which led to the suspension of unity talks, was taken in consultation with Sharon.

Although Barak is said to favor an emergency government, others in the government know that, once formed, the door would be closed to bringing the situation back from the slide toward war. The failure to form an emergency government thus far, has more to do with the international political situation, not least of which is the U.S. elections, than any change in the region. President Clinton, in several telephone conversations, urged Barak not to enter a coalition with Sharon.

Power Struggle in Israel

As the fighting rages, Prime Minister Barak is in a life-and-death battle to remain in power. On Oct. 30, the Knesset (parliament) returned from several months’ recess, and one of its first items of business was the matter of a no-confidence vote on the Barak government.

For a week prior to the Knesset’s return, Barak had been in intensive talks with Sharon to form a national unity interim government. Such a government would signal the death of the peace process, and would accelerate the momentum toward war.

Those unity talks stalled over Sharon’s demand that he be given unconditional veto power over any peace deal with the Palestinians, and over pressure on Barak from President Clinton, who does not want to see Sharon enter the government.

An uneasy agreement was struck on Oct. 31, between Barak and the Shas Party, a religious party that had pulled out of the governing coalition after Barak went to Camp David in July. Shas has announced that it will support Barak in any Knesset no-confidence vote for the next 30 days—in return

for the release of government funds to Shas-run schools, and a delay in the reform of the civil service system that would have undercut Shas patronage.

Opposition parties have also said that they will not call the no-confidence vote for 30 days, and Sharon has made contradictory statements about whether he will continue the national unity talks with Barak or freeze them, also for a month.

The issue of war or peace will unquestionably be settled in the next 30 days.

Some forces of sanity are taking extraordinary steps, aimed at reviving the near-dead peace process. Leah Rabin, whose husband, Yitzhak Rabin, was assassinated by a right-wing Jewish terrorist from the Sharon stable of bombers and assassins on Nov. 4, 1995, called on Prime Minister Barak to dispatch Shimon Peres, who was Rabin’s peace partner, to meet with Arafat, in an effort to end the violence and resume the peace efforts. Barak agreed, and Peres and Arafat met on Nov. 1, agreeing to a cease-fire.

Outside Intervention Needed

Despite the fact that opposition to an emergency government with Sharon still exists, that opposition is in the minority. Such a government, which would change the current war dynamic, could only be stopped by an intervention from outside the region. One senior Israeli intelligence source told *EIR* that only a “huge show of leadership from Washington” could stop the drive toward war, “but it is not coming from Clinton and it will not come from Bush.” Therefore, he said, the current situation will continue for a “long period, well into next year, and could escalate at any time.” The source said that without such an intervention, a Barak-Sharon government would be assured.

In an interview during an official visit to London, Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben Ami warned Europeans of the danger of a regional war, while appealing to them to restrain Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, thus making it sound more like a threat. “This is the way we say to the Europeans: You have high stakes here. It is the stability of the Mediterranean, maybe even of Europe, that is at risk,” Ben Ami said.

The fact that Ben Ami is one of the leading members of the peace camp indicates how far a new, more militant consensus can go. In warning the Europeans not to support a Palestinian unilateral declaration of a Palestinian state, he said, “We will be obliged to take measures of defensive disengagement in case the Palestinians declare unilaterally. A unilateral declaration means you signal the end of the peace process—nothing binds us any more.”

Once a unity government is formed, reopening the door to a negotiated settlement will become exceedingly difficult, thus further transforming the situation to one in which the axioms of war will replace the hope of peace and economic development.