

Bush Fiddles While Cheney Plots More Wars

by Jeffrey Steinberg

If there were any doubt that Vice President Dick Cheney still presides over a powerful war faction inside the Bush White House that is committed to engineering a military confrontation with Iran, the April 10 meeting of the President's key foreign and national security advisors proved the point. Going into the meeting, the State Department was strongly advising that the United States release the five Iranian Revolutionary Guard officials seized in Irbil in January. According to the April 14 *Washington Post*, Cheney put his foot down, and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice caved in. The five Iranian officials, who were detained while on an official visit with the Kurdish regional government—at an Iranian diplomatic mission—will remain in U.S. custody in Iraq, pending a review in July.

By the time that review comes up, if Vice President Cheney has his way, the United States will be in a shooting war with Iran—a war that the U.S. military and intelligence establishment strongly oppose, and that powerful voices within the British Establishment are also attacking as dangerous folly.

Even within Israel, government officials are being forced to contend with intense pressure from the Cheney clan in the Administration—including National Security Council Middle East chief Elliott Abrams—to reject Syrian offers to reach a bilateral peace deal with Israel. Instead, the Cheney clan, represented by daughter Liz, a former top State Department Middle East official, now out of the government, is demanding, at minimum, the total isolation of the Syrian regime.

In an April 12 op-ed in the *Washington Post*, Ms. Cheney railed against Damascus, pronouncing herself prosecutor, judge, and jury, and finding that the Syrian President was guilty of a series of still-unsolved assassinations in Lebanon, beginning with the February 2005 killing of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

Liz Cheney, a true chip off the old blockhead, ranted, “talking to the Syrians emboldens and rewards them at the expense of America and our allies in the Middle East. . . . They are an outlaw regime and should be isolated.” Going one step further, she directly attacked Congressional Republicans and Democrats alike, who recently traveled to Damascus for talks with Syrian officials.

An Historic Knesset Briefing

The Cheney tirade appeared in the *Post* on the very day that an historic event was taking place in Israel: For the first time, a Syrian addressed the Israeli Knesset (parliament) with a message of peace from Damascus. Ibrahim Suleiman, a Syrian-born, naturalized American living in Maryland, who participated last year in Syria-Israeli back-channel talks with former Israeli senior Foreign Ministry official Dr. Alon Liel, briefed the Knesset's Defense and Foreign Affairs Committee on Syria's readiness for peace talks.

“Syria right now is ready to speak peace. I challenged the Israeli government to answer President Bashar [Assad]'s call for peace and sit[ting] down together,” *Ha'aretz* quoted Suleiman telling a press conference after his Knesset briefing. “I think it can happen in six months.”

Both Suleiman and Alon Liel briefed the Knesset committee on their secret talks, held between 2004 and 2006 (see “Even Sharon Allowed Israel-Syria Talks,” *EIR*, Jan. 26, 2007). Suleiman, who reportedly enjoys good relations with the Assad family, presented various possibilities, including a return to Syria of the Golan Heights, in exchange for a full peace agreement, normalization of relations, and economic cooperation. He reportedly told the committee that Syrian President Assad has appointed a committee, headed by one of his Army generals, to coordinate talks with Israel. He also conveyed messages from Syrian Foreign Minister

Walid Moallem.

Calling for secret negotiations, Suleiman said, "I believe that only secret negotiations between Israel and Syria, far away from the eyes of the media, will lead to peace." Thanking the committee for inviting him, he said, "I'm very glad I came. I hope that both sides will begin to meet and we, as a private channel, will disappear. My presence here makes everything possible."

Knesset member Yahava Gal On, of the Meretz party, who initiated the Knesset briefing, said, "In a peace agreement, Syria would agree to stop supporting terror against us and cut ties with Hezbollah, and would demand that we return to 1967 borders in the Golan Heights." She added that the briefing "was a huge step, especially because it returns the Syrian option to public discourse. . . . It is important that Israel begin formal talks with Syria. . . ."

Although committee chairman and right-winger Tzahi Hanegbi of the Kadima party said he did not believe the time was right for negotiations, he also said it was "important for the committee not to silence other views, particularly when the man outlining these views claims to have direct access to the Syrian leadership."

Only Yisrael Katz, a member of the Likud party and a crony of its chairman, Benjamin Netanyahu, told Suleiman that Israel will never withdraw from the Golan Heights.

While in Israel, Suleiman met with a group of Israelis who have been promoting peace with Syria. He also held talks at the Economic Cooperation Foundation, a think-tank involved in the informal peace process. It is led by Yossi Beilin, chairman of the Meretz-Yahad party. Suleiman also visited the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial.

Neither the Israeli Foreign Ministry nor the Prime Minister's Office received him, for fear that it would look like a peace negotiation. Suleiman's visit was preceded by that of U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), who used her recent visit to both Israel and Syria as an effort to promote peace between the two countries, which was rebuked by Vice President Cheney as "bad behavior." Although Pelosi brushed aside Cheney's ravings, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert apparently did not want to suffer a similar rebuke.

While underscoring the significance of Suleiman's visit to Israel, one Israeli intelligence source told *EIR* that as long as Olmert refuses to buck the Bush Administration, the prospects for agreement are slim.

In yet another indication of President Assad's desire to strike a peace agreement with Israel, he met in Damascus on March 16 with a prominent Jewish-American peace activist and Middle East scholar, Dr. Norton Mezvinsky, a professor of history at Central Connecticut State University, who co-authored an important book on Jewish fundamentalism, with the late Israel Shahak. The two-hour discussion between Dr. Mezvinsky, which he detailed in an April 5 op-ed in the *Hartford Courant*, was arranged by the Syrian Ambassador in Washington, Dr. Imad Moustapha, and was part of a week-

long visit to Syria, which involved public lectures and meetings with other prominent leaders of government and civil society. In his *Courant* commentary, and in an interview the next day with the *New Britain Herald*, Mezvinsky sharply criticized the Bush Administration's policy of shunning diplomatic talks with Damascus—precisely the policy demanded by Liz Cheney, Elliott Abrams, and the Vice President.

Shortly after the Mezvinsky visit, President Assad met with the Pelosi delegation, which included Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.), the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, a close ally of George Soros and a leading voice within the Congress for the Israeli lobby.

General Ivashov Speaks

If the contrasting policies on Syrian-Israeli bilateral peace talks underscore the Armageddonist orientation of the war party at the White House, the real issue of confrontation centers around Iran, where, according to U.S. military sources, the Vice President is still firmly committed to a confrontation before Team Bush leaves office, and probably by the Summer of this year. According to one retired U.S. four-star general, who served in the Middle East for decades, the naval buildup in the Persian Gulf can only be explained by the fact that the Administration is committed to a confrontation with Iran, but knows that none of the ground-based U.S. military assets in the region, especially U.S. Air Force and missile capabilities, can be deployed, because every Persian Gulf state is officially opposed to an attack on Iran and refuses to grant authorization for those capabilities to be used in any attack. In early April, the government of Bahrain explicitly announced its opposition to any attack on Iran, and the presence of the Iranian Foreign Minister at the recent Arab League summit in Riyadh further underscored the point.

However, the forces behind Dick pay no mind to those concerns. They intend to use the first pretext to launch a massive bombing attack on Iran, and the presence of two U.S. Naval carrier groups in the Persian Gulf, and the anticipated arrival of a third carrier group led by the *USS Nimitz* in early May, virtually guarantee that some tactical incident involving U.S. and Iranian ships will occur, providing the pretext for the long-premeditated preventive attack.

Russian Gen. Leonid Ivashov (ret.), who headed the international relations department of the Russian Ministry of Defense and is close to President Vladimir Putin, directly hit at the reason for the Cheney obsession with starting a new Persian Gulf war.

In an article that he first published in the March 30 journal of his own Strategic Culture Foundation, and which was reprinted on April 9 by the Canadian online publication *Global Research*, Ivashov detailed U.S. military plans to bomb as many as 1,500 Iranian targets, including a wide range of sites linked to an alleged underground nuclear weapons program. Ivashov asserted that such a campaign could only be carried

out with the use of tactical nuclear weapons.

“What is the real reason that the U.S. is unleashing this military conflict?” he asked. “The activities having consequences of global proportions can only be intended to deal with a global problem. This problem itself is by no means something secret—it is the possibility of a crash of the global financial system based on the U.S. dollar. Currently the mass of U.S. currency exceeds the total worth of U.S. assets by more than a factor of ten. Everything in the U.S.—industry, buildings, high-tech, and so on—has been mortgaged more than ten times all over the world. A debt of such proportions will never be repaid. It can only be relieved.”

He concluded: “The solution is already in the plans. The U.S. has nothing to offer the rest of the world to save the declining dollar except for military operations like the ones in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. But even these local conflicts yield only short-term effects. Something a lot greater is needed, and the need is urgent.” Ivashov then outlined a nightmare scenario of a conflict between Iran and the United States, backed by Israel, leading to a global asymmetric religious war that “will be in all respects much more nightmarish than World War II.”

A British General Speaks Out

The grave fears of such a war are being heard elsewhere around the world, including in Britain and the United States. On April 15, Gen. Sir Michael Rose (ret.), former head of the British SAS and the former commander of the United Nations forces in Bosnia, gave an interview to the *Daily Mail*, in which he lambasted Prime Minister Tony Blair for allowing Britain to be drawn into the fiasco in Iraq, and for eroding the British military to the point that there was a total breakdown of discipline under fire, when the Iranians captured the 15 British sailors and marines in March 2007, in disputed waters in the Persian Gulf. While the general made no direct mention of the danger of a new war in the Persian Gulf, he assailed the Prime Minister’s “slithering” behavior, bluntly noting, “If Blair had been a director of Enron, he would be doing 40 years.”

Echoing widely publicized warnings by retired U.S. Army General Barry McCaffrey about the hollowing out of the U.S. military, particularly the U.S. Army and Marine Corps, Rose told the *Daily Mail*, “Iraq has undermined the military ethos. You trust troops to do the ultimate, but they trust you not to throw them into situations that are pointless and wasteful.”

British and American sources report that Rose’s remarks were widely read as a warning that Britain must avoid any further military confrontation in the Persian Gulf, precisely because of the global consequences of such a misadventure.

Rube Goldberg to the Rescue

Back in Washington, a number of retired American generals were grabbing headlines over their rejection of White

House offers to become “War Czar,” a new post being promoted by former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) in an 18-point memo he recently circulated to key Bush advisors.

On April 11, the *Washington Post* reported that three retired four-star generals had rejected the offer of the job, which would, in effect, supercede the role of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who, by law, is the chief military advisor to the President.

One of the generals who rejected the offer, Marine Gen. John J. Sheehan, a former NATO commander, confirmed to the *Post* that the job offer had been discussed with National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, but he had rejected the offer in a note to the White House in late March. “The very fundamental issue is, they don’t know what the hell they’re doing. . . . So rather than go over there, develop an ulcer and eventually leave, I said, ‘No thanks.’” Sheehan elaborated that he had called around Washington and found that the Cheney apparatus was still on top at the White House, and that greatly affected his decision. “There’s the residue of the Cheney view—‘We’re going to win, al-Qaeda’s there’—that justifies anything we did. And then there’s the pragmatist view—how the hell do we get out of Dodge and survive? Unfortunately, the people with the former view are still in the positions of most influence.”

According to sources close to the Bush Administration, at least some White House officials, including Chief of Staff Josh Bolten, saw the idea of a “War Czar” as a way of placing a seasoned military professional close to the President to offset the powerful Cheney factor. However, this “Rube Goldberg” scheme was unacceptable to the Chiefs, and was thus leaked to the *Post*.

The reality, which few in Washington wish to face, is that, so long as Cheney remains on the job, the likelihood of a war with Iran, triggering a global asymmetric nightmare, remains high.

Some U.S. intelligence sources fear that the string of U.S. provocations, from the arrests of the Iranian officials in Irbil, to continuing low-grade covert operations on the ground inside Iran, have convinced hardline factions in Tehran that war is inevitable. Some among those hardliners reportedly are convinced that the regime will survive the air war, reform factions promoting dialogue with the West will be crushed, and Iran’s regional power status will increase.

All this makes for a hyper-volatile situation. The efforts to offset the Cheney factor in the White House, to date, have failed. An incident in the Persian Gulf, this time involving an American Naval vessel, could easily turn into a shootout, providing Cheney with exactly the pretext he seeks to bypass Congress and the United Nations and go to war.

Isn’t it time for Cheney to be removed from office?

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