

Peace Conference Or Hot Autumn?

by Dean Andromidas

While the U.S. State Department appears to be busy preparing a “Middle East Peace Conference” for November, the region is preparing for the war that Vice President Dick Cheney wants to start against Iran.

On Aug. 28, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas) met to discuss an “agreement of principles” to present at the November peace conference, which was proposed by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice earlier this year. But since the original announcement, expectations have been reduced to the scale of a meeting on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly. One peace activist suggested that by November, the “conference” might become nothing more than a “conference call.”

Nothing came of the Olmert-Abu Mazen meeting. While Rice is said to have been pressuring Israel to ease living conditions in the occupied territories to help “strengthen” the Palestinian President, not even one of the 539 roadblocks and checkpoints has been removed, with Olmert reportedly telling Abu Mazen that “staff work” by the Israeli Defense Forces on the issue has not been completed. It is well known that not one checkpoint has been removed since they were first erected in 1991, during the first Gulf War.

The very next day, the moderate Palestinian Prime Minister and former World Bank official, Salam Fayyad, told the Jordanian daily *al-Dustour*, “Israel did not carry out even one move it committed to in terms of the removal of checkpoints, the humiliation of our people at those checkpoints, not to mention the raids, assassinations, and settlements.”

While Olmert has offered the Palestinians nothing but spin, the real problem lies with the Bush Administration. Boggled down in Iraq, and with Cheney leading an internal policy fight for war against Iran, the Administration has done little follow-up, after announcing its intention to convene the conference.

On Aug. 29, the Palestinian President met with Jordan’s King Abdullah II in Amman. Abu Mazen told Jordanian television, that prospects for the U.S.-backed conference looked dim for three reasons. First, there has been no concrete peace plan, clearly backed by the United States, to be presented to the conference. Second, it still is not clear who

will be attending. “The third issue is related to the content of the meeting. If we go to a conference without clarity on a solution and without a declaration of principles within the framework of a workable plan, I don’t think that a conference will be beneficial.”

King Abdullah reminded Abu Mazen that little success can be achieved unless the Palestinians unify their ranks. This is a reference to the split between Hamas, which now completely controls the Gaza Strip, and Abu Mazen’s Fatah, which controls only the West Bank. What Abdullah did not say, was that the Hamas-Fatah split was engineered by the policy of the National Security Council’s Middle East director, Elliott Abrams, one of Cheney’s top cronies, to promote a civil war between the two Palestinian factions.

War Seen as Inevitable

What is really on the minds of the leaders of the region is not Rice’s peace conferences, but the next war. A senior intelligence source based in the region told *EIR* that the question is not “if” Cheney will order an attack on Iran, but when, and everyone, the Israelis, Syrians, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Iranians are preparing for what is being seen as the “inevitable” war against Iran. There are some groups “anticipating the conflict as the ultimate defeat of the U.S.”

The source compared the psychology of the region to that of Europe in 1912 and 1914, on the eve of World War I. “There are many ticking time bombs, but no one knows for sure where the Sarajevo will be.”

The “ticking time bombs” are:

- Fear of war between Israel and Syria has been the topic of headlines in each nation’s press for weeks. While some observers believe that a peace agreement between the two countries could be negotiated “within 24 hours,” the Bush Administration refuses to support such talks, and continues to have Syria on its list of countries slated for “regime change.” In light of these perceived tensions, both countries have signalled to one another that neither is preparing for war. The danger of war stems from the fear that, in the event of a U.S. attack on Iran, Israel would attack Syria in an alliance with Washington, or launch a preemptive attack on Syria before the latter could come to the aid of its ally Iran.

- The possibility of resumption of the war between Hezbollah and Israel lies, not with the missiles allegedly being smuggled into southern Lebanon to replenish Hezbollah’s stock depleted during last year’s war with Israel; it lies with Cheney’s policy, financed by his crony, Prince Bandar bin Sultan of Saudi Arabia, to push Lebanon into a civil war. Intelligence sources in Beirut have informed *EIR*, that France’s effort, led by its envoy Jean-Claude Cousseran, to mediate a compromise between the Bush Administration-backed government of Prime Minister

Fouad Siniora, and the opposition led by Michel Aoun, leader of the predominantly Christian, Free Patriotic Movement, and the Hezbollah, over upcoming Presidential elections, has been frustrated by Cheney's policy. The source reports that the Bush Administration refuses to back any candidate that does not toe an anti-Syrian and anti-Iranian line, a policy that could lead to a renewal of the civil war that ravaged Lebanon in the 1970s and 1980s. With the Presidential election campaign scheduled for the end of September through November, a "hot Autumn" can be expected in Lebanon.

After last year's war in Lebanon, Israel has no desire to engage in another asymmetric war with Hezbollah, which it knows it could not win; but if Lebanon falls back into civil war, or if Hezbollah's ally Iran is attacked, then war between Israel and Hezbollah would be almost inevitable.

- As for Israel and Palestine, Elliott Abrams' civil war scenario between Hamas and Fatah continues. Former Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben Ami, in a commentary published in Ynet.com on Aug. 18, wrote that Bush's "call for an international conference is also a call to declare war on Hamas, which came to power through democratic elections, and to sign a peace agreement with Fatah that lost the elections." He wrote further that the exclusion of Syria and Hamas can only lead to the conference's failure. "It is an illusion to believe that peace can be achieved without the participation of these forces."

Despite efforts behind the scenes, by Arab intermediaries, to reestablish a unity government between the two factions, the brutal sanctions against the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, under the orders of the United States and Israel, will inevitably lead to the failure of the talks and the eventual renewal of hostilities between the two factions. The fact that the Bush Administration has authorized \$80 million to "strengthen" Abu Mazen, by financing five security battalions, does not signal that peace is imminent. Unemployment among Palestinians is 40-60%, with the situation in Gaza particularly grim.

In Israel, the Labor Party elected a new leader, former Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who has replaced Amir Peretz as Defense Minister. Unlike in 1999, when Barak ran an election campaign for Prime Minister by promising to negotiate peace agreements, he is now vowing to rebuild the Israeli Defense Forces for the next war.

The most likely trigger for a war against Iran, is by Cheney's blaming the American collapse in Iraq on alleged Iranian support for Iraqi insurgents. But a senior Middle Eastern source warned that the next "Sarajevo could come where we least expect it." He pointed to the possibility of a major social upheaval in Egypt, Jordan, or Syria.

He warned that if Cheney is not removed and a radical change in policy is not implemented, you can expect a "very hot Autumn."