

# While the War Party Raves, Regional Mideast Diplomacy Seeks Peace

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

War-mongering statements from Vice President Dick Cheney and President George W. Bush were echoed at an important conference in Herzliya, Israel, the week of Jan. 22, where American neo-cons joined with Israelis to issue threats of military aggression, even as the U.S. military buildup in the Persian Gulf proceeded. It is thus clear, that without decisive Congressional action to oust Cheney, his plans for the next war will go ahead.

Ironically, at the same time, Iran and Syria have begun to implement key facets of the approach of the U.S. establishment-endorsed Baker-Hamilton report in their own regional diplomacy. Once Washington policy is changed, many of the pieces would be in place to arrange a settlement.

## Russians Warn of Nuclear Strike

Lest one were to misconstrue the war threats as mere propaganda, it is important to read and digest what retired Russian Gen. Leonid Ivashov had to say in a Jan. 24 Internet article on globalresearch.ca, entitled "Iran Must Get Ready To Repel a Nuclear Attack." Ivashov said that recently the Kuwaiti *Arab Times*, "citing well-informed but undisclosed sources . . . wrote that the U.S. plans to launch a missile and bomb attack on the territory of Iran before the end of April 2007."

Ivashov cited the widely reported news of the two carrier groups arriving in the Persian Gulf, and the deployment of Patriot missiles, which will most likely be used to defend American troops and positions in Iraq, to illustrate that this report is credible, and the attack is already under way. Ivashov wrote that he believed the U.S. occupation is planning to partition Iraq into three warring entities, Shia, Sunni, and Kurd, whereby "a zone of an endless bloody conflict will be created at the core of the Middle East, and . . . the countries neighboring Iraq—Iran, Syria, Turkey (Kurdistan)—will inevitably be getting drawn into it."

After noting the constraints of the U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan, which should make a new war unlikely, Ivashov argued that, "Due to all of the above, the U.S. will use nuclear weapons against Iran. *This will be the second case of the use of nuclear weapons in combat [since] the 1945 U.S. attack on Japan.*" Ivashov concluded: "Today, the probability

of a U.S. aggression against Iran is extremely high. It does remain unclear, though, whether the U.S. Congress is going to authorize the war. It may take a provocation to eliminate this obstacle (an attack on Israel or the U.S. targets including military bases). The scale of the provocation may be comparable to the 9/11 attack in New York. Then the Congress will certainly say 'yes' to the U.S. President."

## Ravings from Herzliya

The annual Herzliya conference generally provides the opportunity for the war party from the U.S. and Israel to spout its venom, and this year was no exception. Reports from the Israeli press were blood-curdling.

Former Israeli Defense Forces Chief of Staff Moshe Ya'alon stated: "We cannot avoid confrontation with the Iranian regime. The sense of self-confidence in Iran is growing, and they have not yet paid any price for being a rogue regime. If we do not take political and economic steps, we are actually bringing a military conflict closer." Leading American neo-con Richard Perle announced that Bush would certainly order an attack on Iran if it became clear that Tehran were on its way to achieving a nuclear weapons capability.

In an interview to the Israeli press, Perle was asked if Israel would launch an attack, and he replied: "The Israeli consideration is very similar to the American consideration. In principle, Israel has to take its own independent decision, but the truth is that it will not be an independent decision. The U.S. cannot afford for Israel to fail, if Israel decides to strike. The U.S. supports an Israeli military operation and would even embark on a similar parallel action." Both Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and his radical rival, Cheney-asset Benjamin Netanyahu, among many others, raved against Iran.

## Iran and Syria Implement Baker-Hamilton

Intense diplomatic activity has broken out in the region, in a determined effort to stave off this insane war. Iraqi President Jalal Talabani travelled to Damascus for an historic summit with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, the first such in almost 30 years. During their talks, which focussed on finding a regional approach to stabilizing Iraq, they also addressed the

danger of a widening conflict involving Iran. Upon his return to Iraq, Talabani told the press that he knew that Iran was open to talks with the United States, referring back to a visit he had made to Tehran in November. "During my last visit to Tehran," he stated, "I discussed the matter with Iranian officials, who said they are ready to meet the Americans, but they said the Americans should publicly announce their readiness." He specified: "I will say it for history, that they said they are ready for an understanding with America, from Afghanistan to Lebanon. They are ready for discussions in order to reach results that please both sides."

Ali Larijani, the head of the Iranian National Security Council and chief negotiator on nuclear issues, then made his way to Damascus on Jan. 21, for a meeting with al-Assad, and soon thereafter, the foreign ministers, Manucheher Mottaki (Iran) and Walid al-Muallem (Syria) met, to draft a proposal for a regional conference on Iraq, to be held in Baghdad. Although the Iraqis had rejected earlier proposals for regional conferences, Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari quickly signalled to Mottaki that he agreed to this idea, because it specifically said the gathering would be held in Baghdad, not abroad. When, on Jan. 24, Mottaki spoke with his Saudi counterpart, Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal, the latter de facto endorsed the idea, thanking him for launching the initiative, and urging Zebari to move rapidly.

U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has been working overtime to sabotage any such effort, and has focussed on organizing the Arab leaders of the Persian Gulf into an anti-Iran coalition. Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns echoed Rice in a speech in Dubai Jan. 23; he stated that the deployment of the *USS John C. Stennis* in late February to the Persian Gulf was "Washington's way of warning Iran to back down in its attempts to dominate the region."

Burns was livid at the idea of Iran's regional status: "The Middle East isn't a region to be dominated by Iran. The Gulf isn't a body of water to be controlled by Iran. Iran is going to have to understand that the United States will protect its interests if Iran seeks to confront us. We will defend our interests if we are challenged. That is a message that Iran must understand"

Not only: but NATO held a symposium in Riyadh on Jan. 21, to woo the Saudis, in particular, into joining the "Istanbul Initiative," a form of cooperation between the alliance and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states.

Although traditionally U.S. allies, and under massive political as well as military blackmail (many of the GCC states host U.S. military bases), the Arab neighbors of Iran were anything but enthusiastic about the U.S. Administration's "new" ideas. Indeed, nobody in the region wants another war, least of all the GCC.

Despite historical rivalries, and underlying fears of Iran's emerging stature as a regional power, as well as suspicions

regarding its nuclear program, every GCC government knows it would pay a bitter price if a new conflict were to break out. Shi'ite communities throughout the area could mobilize armed opposition to these shaky regimes if Iran were hit. The Shi'ite minority in Saudi Arabia is located in the oil-producing region of the country; in the recent Bahrain elections, a strongly Islamist, pro-Iranian force made striking gains; Kuwait, which doubles as a British piggy bank and a U.S. military base, would be torn apart; and so on.

Amr Moussa, Secretary General of the Arab League, made the same point: "It's a 50-50 proposition, and we hope it won't happen," he said at the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland, referring to the war danger. "If there were to be such a war, other genies will get out of the bottle. You cannot imagine the impact on the Gulf countries, on the Mediterranean," he said.

Add to this the economic factor: There is a large Iranian business community in Dubai, the financial center of the Gulf, as well as in the other emirates. Iran's trade with the United Arab Emirates is at \$10 billion a year, and growing. Therefore, if only for pragmatic reasons, most Gulf nations are seeking to cool down tensions.

Larijani also visited Saudi Arabia, and delivered letters from President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to King Abdallah, outlining plans for cooperation on Lebanon and Iraq. Unconfirmed reports had it that Tehran was seeking Saudi mediation, to open talks with the United States. Contacts have also abounded with other regional states, including the UAE and Kuwait.

Finally, Larijani has also maintained contact with the International Atomic Energy Agency chief Mohamed ElBaradei. Although Iran decided to bar entrance to 38 of a large group of IAEA inspectors, as a symbolic gesture, it has not terminated cooperation. ElBaradei himself has spoken out against Rice's idiotic notion that dialogue is "a reward for good behavior," stressing instead that: "You have to engage. You have to see where they are coming from, their concerns, their paranoia, their obsessions, and then try to change hearts and minds." The IAEA chief also pointed out what should be obvious to the warmongers: "What we know is that Iran has the knowledge [for nuclear technology], but you cannot bomb knowledge."

## Preparing for War

While frenetically pursuing diplomatic means to prevent a war, the Iranian leadership has shifted its public posture regarding the danger of an attack. When *EIR*'s representative visited Iran in late November-early December, it was only the military brass who acknowledged the imminent threat, while political circles around the Foreign Ministry spoke of psychological warfare, and the general population had virtually no awareness of the imminence or dimensions of the danger. Since Bush's Jan. 10 statements, calling for a

troop “surge” in Iraq, and subsequent saber-rattling, this has changed.

First, the military leadership spoke out. On Jan. 22, several newspapers carried threats that missiles fired from Iran would turn Israel into a “scorching Hell,” were Iran attacked. That same day, Iran began five days of military exercises, including the test-firing of several short-range missiles. Larijani declared that Iran was “ready for anything.”

A hefty internal political debate has broken out into the open. This has taken the form of a barrage of criticism aimed at Ahmadinejad, whom many hold responsible for escalating tensions with his fiery rhetoric and uncompromising stance on the country’s nuclear program. They accuse the Iranian President of having provoked the most recent UN Security Council sanctions. Although no one in the country would budge an inch from defense of the nation’s right to nuclear technology, voices are being raised to urge an approach considered less “confrontationist.”

Not only have the reformist politicians and other adversaries attacked him, but increasingly attacks have come from among his erstwhile supporters. On Jan. 19, a senior dissident cleric, Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, told a group of reformists in Qom, “One has to deal with the enemy with wisdom, not provoke it. This only creates problems for the country,” and complained that urgent domestic problems were being ignored. Hashemi Rafsanjani, the President’s arch-rival from the moderate conservative camp, who recently made a political comeback in the Dec. 15 elections, met with the British Ambassador in Tehran, Geoffrey Adams, on Jan. 24, and offered a conciliatory approach to solving the crisis.

In addition, several editorials in the daily press have blamed Ahmadinejad for stirring up tensions, as well as for ignoring pressing domestic problems, beginning with the economy. Even *Jomhouri Islami*, a paper controlled by Supreme Leader Khamenei, cautioned Ahmadinejad. And, 150 of the 290 members of parliament signed a letter to the President, demanding that he deal with national concerns, and present his annual budget. There are provisions in the Iranian Constitution for impeachment, and this has been mooted as a long-shot option, should things get worse.

Ahmadinejad, who has been characterized to *EIR* as an ideologue and an idealist, seems to have received the message. In a nationally televised live interview on Jan. 23, he assured the population that the Dec. 23 UN Security Council sanctions would not hurt the country, adding that although some Security Council members are trying to push tougher measures, “we are trying to prevent it.” More significantly, he pointed to those in the United States who are opposing military attacks against Iran. And indeed, it is only effective U.S. Congressional action that holds any hope for stopping what would be the rapid descent into a new hell of global asymmetric war.