

Attacking Iran for Israel?

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Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice is at her mushroom-cloud hyperbolic best, and this time Iran is the target.

Her claim last week that “the policies of Iran constitute perhaps the single greatest challenge to American security interests in the Middle East and around the world” is simply too much of a stretch.

To gauge someone’s reliability, one depends largely on prior experience. Sadly, Rice’s credibility suffers in comparison with that of the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Mohammed ElBaradei, who insists there is no evidence of an active nuclear weapons program in Iran.

If this sounds familiar, ElBaradei said the same thing about Iraq before it was attacked. But three days before the invasion, American nuclear expert Dick Cheney told NBC’s Tim Russert, “I think Mr. ElBaradei is, frankly, wrong.”

Here we go again. As in the case of Iraq, U.S. intelligence has been assiduously looking for evidence of a nuclear weapons program in Iran; but, alas, in vain.

Burned by the bogus “proof” adduced for Iraq—the uranium from Africa, the aluminum tubes—the administration has shied away from fabricating nuclear-related “evidence.”

Are Bush and Cheney again relying on the Rumsfeld dictum, that “the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence?” There is a simpler answer.

Cat Out of the Bag

The Israeli ambassador to the U.S., Sallai Meridor, let the cat out of the bag while speaking at the American Jewish Committee luncheon on Oct. 22. In remarks paralleling those of Rice, Meridor said Iran is the chief threat to Israel.

Heavy on the *chutzpah*, he served gratuitous notice on Washington that effectively countering Iran’s nuclear ambitions will take a “united United States in this matter,” lest the Iranians conclude, “come January ’09, they have it their own way.”

Meridor stressed that “very little time” remained to keep Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. How so?

Even were there to be a nuclear program hidden from the IAEA, no serious observer expects Iran to obtain a nuclear weapon much sooner than five years from now.

Truth be told, every other year since 1995 U.S. intelligence has been predicting that Iran could have a nuclear weapon in about five years.

It has become downright embarrassing — like a broken record, punctuated only by so-called “neo-conservatives” like James Woolsey, who last summer publicly warned that the U.S. may have no choice but to bomb Iran in order to halt its nuclear weapons program.

Woolsey, self-described “anchor of the Presbyterian wing of the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs,” put it this way: “I’m afraid that within, well, at worst, a few months; at best, a few years; they [the Iranians] could have the bomb.”

The day before Meridor’s unintentionally revealing remark, Vice President Dick Cheney reiterated, “We will not allow Iran to have a nuclear weapon.”

That remark followed closely on President George W. Bush’s apocalyptic warning of World War III, should Tehran acquire the knowledge to produce a nuclear weapon.

The Israelis appear convinced they have extracted a promise from Bush and Cheney that they will help Israel nip Iran’s nuclear program in the bud before they leave office.

Never mind that there is no evidence that the Iranian nuclear program is any more weapons-related than the one Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld persuaded President Gerald Ford to approve in 1976 for Westinghouse and General Electric to install for the Shah (price tag \$6.4 billion).

With 200-300 nuclear weapons in its arsenal, the Israelis enjoy a nuclear monopoly in the Middle East. They mean to keep that monopoly and are pressing for the U.S. to obliterate Iran’s fledgling nuclear program.

Anyone aware of Iran’s ability to retaliate realizes this would bring disaster to the whole region and beyond. But this has not stopped Cheney and Bush before.

The rationale is similar to that revealed by Philip Zelikow, confidant of Condoleezza Rice, former member of the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, and later executive director of the 9/11 Commission. On Oct. 10, 2002, Zelikow told a crowd at the University of Virginia:

“Why would Iraq attack America or use nuclear weapons against us? I’ll tell you what I think the real threat is—it’s the threat to Israel. And this is the threat that dare not speak its name...the American government doesn’t want to lean too hard on it rhetorically, because it is not a popular sell.”

Harbinger?

The political offensive against Iran coalesced as George W. Bush began his second term, with Cheney out in front pressing for an attack on its nuclear-related facilities.

During a Jan. 20, 2005, interview with MSNBC, just hours before Bush’s second inauguration, Cheney put Iran “right at the top of the list of trouble spots,” and noted that negotiations and UN sanctions might fail to stop Iran’s nuclear program.

Cheney then added with remarkable nonchalance:

“Given the fact that Iran has a stated policy that their objective is the destruction of Israel, the Israelis might decide to act first, and let the rest of the world worry about cleaning up the diplomatic mess afterwards.”

Does this not sound like the so-called “Cheney plan” being widely discussed in the media today? An Israeli air attack; Iranian retaliation; Washington springing to the defense of its “ally” Israel?

A big fan of preemption, Cheney has done little to disguise his attraction to Israel’s penchant to preempt, such as Israel’s air strike against the Iraqi nuclear reactor at Osirak in 1981.

Ten years after the Osirak attack, then-Defense Secretary Cheney reportedly gave Israeli Maj. Gen. David Ivri, commander of the Israeli Air Force, a satellite photo of the Iraqi nuclear reactor destroyed by U.S.-built Israeli aircraft. On the photo Cheney penned, “Thanks for the outstanding job on the Iraqi nuclear program in 1981.”

Nothing is known of Ivri’s response, but it is a safe bet it was along the lines of “we could not have done it without U.S. help.”

Indeed, though the U.S. officially condemned the attack (the Reagan administration was supporting Saddam Hussein’s Iraq at that point), the intelligence shared by the Pentagon with the Israelis made a major contribution to the success of the Israeli raid.

With Vice President Cheney calling the shots now, similar help may be forthcoming prior to any Israeli air attack on Iran.

It is no secret that former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon began to press for an early preemptive strike on Iran in 2003, claiming that Iran was likely to obtain a nuclear weapon much earlier than what U.S. intelligence estimated.

Sharon made a habit of bringing his own military adviser to brief Bush with aerial photos of Iranian nuclear-related installations.

More troubling still, in the fall of 2004, retired Gen. Brent Scowcroft, who served as national security adviser to President George H.W. Bush and as Chair of the younger Bush’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, made some startling comments to the *Financial Times*.

A master of discretion with the media, Scowcroft nonetheless saw fit to make public his conclusion that Sharon had Bush “mesmerized;” that he had our president “wrapped around his little finger.”

Needless to say, Scowcroft was immediately removed from the advisory board.

An Unstable Infatuation

George W. Bush first met Sharon in 1998, when the Texas governor was taken on a tour of the Middle East by Matthew Brooks, then executive director of the Republican Jewish Coalition. Sharon was foreign minister and took Bush on a helicopter tour over the Israeli occupied territories.

An Aug. 3, 2006, McClatchy wire story by Ron Hutcheson quotes Matthew Brooks:

“If there’s a starting point for George W. Bush’s attachment to Israel, it’s the day in late 1998, when he stood on a hilltop where Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount, and, with eyes brimming with tears, read aloud from his favorite hymn, ‘Amazing Grace.’ He was very emotional. It was a tear-filled experience. He brought Israel back home with him in his heart. I think he came away profoundly moved.”

Bush made gratuitous but revealing reference to that trip at the first meeting of his National Security Council on Jan. 30, 2001.

After announcing he would abandon the decades-long role of “honest broker” between Israelis and Palestinians and would tilt pronouncedly toward Israel, Bush said he would let Sharon resolve the dispute however he saw fit.

At that point he brought up his trip to Israel with the Republican Jewish Coalition and the flight over Palestinian camps, but there was no sense of concern for the lot of the Palestinians.

In Ron Suskind’s *Price of Loyalty*, then-Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill, who was at the NSC meeting, quotes Bush: “Looked real bad down there,” the president said with a frown. Then Bush said it was time to end America’s efforts in the region. “I don’t see much we can do over there at this point,” he said.

O’Neill also reported that Colin Powell, the newly minted but nominal secretary of state, was taken completely by surprise at this nonchalant jettisoning of longstanding policy.

Powell demurred, warning that this would unleash Sharon and “the consequences could be dire, especially for the Palestinians.” But according to O’Neill, Bush just shrugged, saying, “Sometimes a show of strength by one side can really clarify things.” O’Neill says that Powell seemed “startled.”

It is a safe bet that the vice president was in no way startled.

What Now?

The only thing that seems to be standing in the way of a preemptive attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities is foot-dragging by the U.S. military.

It seems likely that the senior military have told the president and Cheney: This time let us brief you on what to expect on Day 2, on Week 4, on Month 6—and on the many serious things Iran can do to Israel, and to us in Iraq and elsewhere.

CENTCOM commander Admiral William Fallon is reliably reported to have said, “We are not going to do Iran on my watch.” And in [an online Q-and-A](#), award-winning *Washington Post* reporter Dana Priest recently spoke of a possible “revolt” if pilots were ordered to fly missions against Iran. She added:

“This is a little bit of hyperbole, but not much. Just look at what Gen. [George] Casey, the Army chief, has said...that the tempo of operations in Iraq would make it very hard for the military to respond to a major crisis elsewhere. Beside, it’s not the ‘war’ or ‘bombing’ part that’s difficult; it’s the morning after and all the days after that. Haven’t we learned that

(again) from Iraq?"

How about Congress? Could it act as a brake on Bush and Cheney? Forget it.

If the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) with its overflowing coffers supports an attack on Iran, so will most of our spineless lawmakers. Already, AIPAC has succeeded in preventing legislation that would have required the president to obtain advance authorization for an attack on Iran.

And for every Admiral Fallon, there is someone like the inimitable, retired Air Force Lt. Gen. Thomas McInerney, a close associate of James Woolsey and other "neo-cons."

The air campaign "will be easy," says McInerney, a Fox News pundit who was a rabid advocate of shock and awe over Iraq. "Ahmadinejad has nothing in Iran that we can't penetrate," he adds, and several hundred bombers, including stealth bombers, will be enough to do the trick:

"Forty-eight hours duration, hitting 2,500 aim points to take out their nuclear facilities, their air defense facilities, their air force, their navy, their Shahab-3 retaliatory missiles, and finally their command and control. And then let the Iranian people take their country back."

And the rationale? Since it will be a hard sell to promote the idea, against all evidence, of an imminent threat that Iran is about to have a nuclear weapon, the White House PR machine is likely to focus on other evidence showing that Iran is supporting those "killing our troops in Iraq."

The scary thing is that Cheney is more likely to use the McInerneys and Woolseys than the Fallons and Caseys in showing the president how easily it can be done.

Madness

It is not as though we have not had statesmen wise enough to warn us against foreign entanglements, and about those who have difficulty distinguishing between the strategic interests of the United States and those of other nations, even allies:

"A passionate attachment of one nation for another produces a variety of evils. Sympathy for the favorite nation facilitates the illusion of an imaginary common interest in cases where no real common interest exists, infuses into one the enmities of the other, and betrays the former into participation in the quarrels and wars of the latter without adequate inducement or justification." - (George Washington, Farewell Address, 1796)

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