Bush Wants Wider War

By Robert Parry
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George W. Bush and his neoconservative advisers saw the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah as an opportunity to expand the conflict into Syria and possibly achieve a long-sought "regime change" in Damascus, but Israel's leadership balked at the scheme, according to Israeli sources.

One Israeli source said Bush's interest in spreading the war to Syria was considered "nuts" by some senior Israeli officials, although Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has generally shared Bush's hard-line strategy against Islamic militants.

After rebuffing Bush's suggestion about attacking Syria, the Israeli government settled on a strategy of mounting a major assault in southern Lebanon aimed at rooting out Hezbollah guerrillas who have been firing Katyusha rockets into northern Israel.

In an article on July 30, the Jerusalem Post hinted at the Israeli rejection of Bush's suggestion of a wider war in Syria. "Defense officials told the Post last week that they were receiving indications from the US that America would be interested in seeing Israel attack Syria," the newspaper reported.

On July 18, Consortiumnews.com reported that the Israel-Lebanon conflict had revived the Bush administration's neoconservative hopes that a new path had opened "to achieve a prized goal that otherwise appeared to be blocked for them – military assaults on Syria and Iran aimed at crippling those governments."

The article went on to say:

> "After the fall of Baghdad in April 2003 – after only three weeks of fighting – the question posed by some Bush administration officials was whether the U.S. military should go "left or right," to Syria or Iran. Some joked that "real men go to Tehran.""

According to the neocon strategy, "regime change" in Syria and Iran, in turn, would undermine Hezbollah, the Shiite militia that controls much of southern Lebanon, and would strengthen Israel's hand in dictating peace terms to the Palestinians.

But the emergence of a powerful insurgency in Iraq – and a worsening situation for U.S. forces in Afghanistan – stilled the neoconservative dream of making George W. Bush a modern-day Alexander conquering the major cities of the Middle East, one after another.

Bush's invasion of Iraq also unwittingly enhanced the power of Iran's Shiite government by eliminating its chief counterweight, the Sunni regime of Saddam Hussein. With Iran's Shiite

allies in control of the Iraqi government and a Shiite-led government also in Syria, the region's balance between the two rival Islamic sects was thrown out of whack.

The neocon dream of "regime change" in Syria and Iran never died, however. It stirred when Bush accused Syria of assisting Iraqi insurgents and when he insisted that Iran submit its nuclear research to strict international controls. The border conflict between Israel and Lebanon now has let Bush toughen his rhetoric again against Syria and Iran.

In an unguarded moment during the G-8 summit in Russia on July 17, Bush – speaking with his mouth full of food and annoyed by suggestions about United Nations peacekeepers – told British Prime Minister Tony Blair "what they need to do is get Syria to get Hezbollah to stop doing this shit."

Not realizing that a nearby microphone was turned on, Bush also complained about suggestions for a cease-fire and an international peacekeeping force. "We're not blaming Israel and we're not blaming the Lebanese government," Bush said, suggesting that the blame should fall on others, presumably Hezbollah, Syria and Iran.

Meanwhile, John Bolton, Bush's ambassador to the United Nations, suggested that the United States would only accept a multilateral U.N. force if it had the capacity to take on Hezbollah's backers in Syria and Iran.

> "The real problem is Hezbollah," Bolton said. "Would it [a U.N. force] be empowered to deal with countries like Syria and Iran that support Hezbollah?" [NYT, July 18, 2006]

Strategy Meetings

Though the immediate conflict between Israel and Hezbollah was touched off by a Hezbollah cross-border raid on July 12 that captured two Israeli soldiers, the longer-term U.S.-Israeli strategy can be traced back to the May 23, 2006, meetings between Olmert and Bush in Washington.

At those meetings, Olmert discussed with Bush Israel's plans for revising its timetable for setting final border arrangements with the Palestinians, putting those plans on the back burner while moving the Iranian nuclear program to the front burner.

In effect, Olmert informed Bush that 2006 would be the year for stopping Iran's progress toward a nuclear bomb and 2007 would be the year for redrawing Israel's final borders. That schedule fit well with Bush's priorities, which may require some dramatic foreign policy success before the November congressional elections.

At a joint press conference with Bush on May 23, Olmert said "this is a moment of truth" for addressing Iran's alleged ambitions to build a nuclear bomb.

"The Iranian threat is not only a threat to Israel, it is a threat to the stability of the Middle East and the entire world," Olmert said. "The international community cannot tolerate a situation where a regime with a radical ideology and a long tradition of irresponsible conduct becomes a nuclear weapons state."

Olmert also said he was prepared to give the Palestinians some time to accept Israel's conditions for renewed negotiations on West Bank borders, but – if Palestinian officials didn't comply – Israel was prepared to act unilaterally.

The prime minister said Israel would "remove most of the [West Bank] settlements which are not part of the major Israeli population centers in Judea and Samaria. The settlements within the population centers would remain under Israeli control and become part of the state of Israel, as part of the final status agreement."

In other words, Israel would annex some of the most desirable parts of the West Bank regardless of Palestinian objections. That meant the Israelis would need to soften up Hamas, the Islamic militants who won the last Palestinian elections, and their supporters in the Islamic world – especially Hezbollah, Syria and Iran.

In a speech to a joint session of Congress, Olmert added that the possibility of Iran building a nuclear weapon was "an existential threat" to Israel, meaning that Israel believed its very existence was in danger.

Nuclear Face-Off

Even before the May 23 meetings, Bush was eyeing a confrontation with Iran as part of his revised strategy for remaking the Middle East. Bush was staring down Iran's hard-line President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad over demands Iran back off its nuclear research.

By spring 2006, Bush was reportedly weighing military options for bombing Iran's nuclear facilities. But the President encountered resistance from senior levels of the U.S. military, which feared the consequences, including the harm that might come to more than 130,000 U.S. troops bogged down in neighboring Iraq.

There was also alarm among U.S. generals over the White House resistance to removing tactical nuclear weapons as an option against Iran.

As investigative reporter Seymour Hersh wrote in The New Yorker, a number of senior U.S. officers were troubled by administration war planners who believed "bunker-busting" tactical nuclear weapons, known as B61-11s, were the only way to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities buried deep underground.

"Every other option, in the view of the nuclear weaponeers, would leave a gap," a former senior intelligence official told Hersh. "'Decisive' is the key word of the Air Force's planning. It's a tough decision. But we made it in Japan."

This former official said the White House refused to remove the nuclear option from the plans despite objections from the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "Whenever anybody tries to get it out, they're shouted down," the ex-official said. [New Yorker, April 17, 2006]

By late April, however, the Joint Chiefs finally got the White House to agree that using nuclear weapons to destroy Iran's uranium-enrichment plant at Natanz, less than 200 miles south of Tehran, was politically unacceptable, Hersh reported.

"Bush and Cheney were dead serious about the nuclear planning," one former senior intelligence official said.

But – even without the nuclear option – senior military officials still worried about a massive bombing campaign against Iran. Hersh wrote:

> "Inside the Pentagon, senior commanders have increasingly challenged the President's plans, according to active-duty and retired officers and officials. The generals and admirals have told the Administration that the bombing campaign will probably not succeed in destroying Iran's nuclear program. They have also warned that an attack could lead to serious economic, political, and military consequences for the United States."

Hersh quoted a retired four-star general as saying, "The system is starting to sense the end of the road, and they don't want to be condemned by history. They want to be able to say, 'We stood up.' " [New Yorker, July 10, 2006]

The most immediate concern of U.S. military leaders was that air strikes against Iran could prompt retaliation against American troops in Iraq. U.S. military trainers would be especially vulnerable since they work within Iraqi military and police units dominated by Shiites who are sympathetic to Iran.

Iran also could respond to a bombing campaign by cutting off oil supplies, sending world oil prices soaring and throwing the world economy into chaos.

Israel's Arsenal

While the Joint Chiefs may have had success in getting the White House to remove the use of nuclear weapons from its list of options on Iran, the rising tensions between Israel and Iran may have put the nuclear option back on the table – since Israel has the largest and most sophisticated nuclear arsenal in the Middle East.

As Hersh reported, "The Israelis have insisted for years that Iran has a clandestine program to build a bomb, and will do so as soon as it can. Israeli officials have emphasized that their 'redline' is the moment Iran masters the nuclear fuel cycle, acquiring the technical ability to produce weapons-grade uranium."

In spring 2006, Iran announced that it had enriched uranium to the 3.6 percent level sufficient for nuclear energy but well below the 90-percent level for making atomic bombs. The U.S. intelligence community believes that Iran is still years and possibly a decade away from the capability of building a nuclear bomb.

Still, Iran's technological advance convinced some Israeli strategists that it was imperative to destroy Iran's program now. Yet to do so, Israel faces the same need for devastating explosive power, thus raising the specter again of using a nuclear bomb.

One interpretation of the Lebanese-Israeli conflict is that Bush and Olmert seized on the Hezbollah raid as a pretext for a pre-planned escalation that will lead to bombing campaigns against Syria and Iran, justified by their backing of Hezbollah.

In that view, Bush found himself stymied by U.S. military objections to targeting Iran's nuclear facilities outside any larger conflict. However, if the bombing of Iran develops as an outgrowth of a tit-for-tat expansion of a war in which Israel's existence is at stake, strikes against Iranian targets would be more palatable to the American public.

The end game would be U.S.-Israeli aerial strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities with the goal of crippling its nuclear program and humiliating Ahmadinejad.

Strangling an Axis

While U.S. officials have been careful not to link the Lebanon conflict to any possible military action against Iran's nuclear facilities, they have spoken privately about using the current conflict to counter growing Iranian influence.

Washington Post foreign policy analyst Robin Wright wrote that U.S. officials told her that "for the United States, the broader goal is to strangle the axis of Hezbollah, Hamas, Syria and Iran, which the Bush administration believes is pooling resources to change the strategic playing field in the Middle East. …

"Whatever the outrage on the Arab streets, Washington believes it has strong behind-the-scenes support among key Arab leaders also nervous about the populist militants – with a tacit agreement that the timing is right to strike.

> "'What is out there is concern among conservative Arab allies that there is a hegemonic Persian threat [running] through Damascus, through the southern suburbs of Beirut and to the Palestinians in Hamas,' said a senior U.S. official." [Washington Post, July 16, 2006]

Another school of thought holds that Iran may have encouraged the Hezbollah raid that sparked the Lebanese-Israeli conflict as a way to demonstrate the "asymmetrical warfare" that could be set in motion if the Bush administration attacks Iran.

But Hezbollah's firing of rockets as far as the port city of Haifa, deep inside Israel, has touched off new fears among Israelis and their allies about the danger of more powerful missiles carrying unconventional warheads, possibly hitting heavily populated areas, such as Tel Aviv.

That fear of missile attacks by Islamic extremists dedicated to Israel's destruction has caused Israel to start "dusting off it nukes," one source told me.

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, Secrecy & Privilege: Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq, can be ordered at secrecyandprivilege.com. It's also available at Amazon.com, as is his 1999 book, Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth.'

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