

Israel and the US threaten Iran and Syria

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On Monday, in an interview with German TV, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert made an ostensible “slip” in which he tacitly admitted that Israel possessed nuclear weapons.

Responding to a question, Olmert said Iran could not be compared to what he called responsible nuclear powers, in which he listed Israel along with the US, France and Russia. Israel has always refused to acknowledge its nuclear arsenal, which analysts estimate at between 80 and 200 nuclear warheads.

In reality, Olmert was issuing a deliberate threat directed primarily against Iran. Commenting on Olmert’s breach of Israel’s policy of “ambiguity,” Yosef Chagal of Yisrael Beiteinu, the far-right coalition partner of Olmert’s Kadima, noted, “In my opinion, this is not a slip of the tongue. In my view, it is a demonstration of power.” Olmert’s message was, “We are strong. We are not afraid of anyone. If you are not ready to be partners, if you want to screw the state of Israel, then we have the means to answer.”

That Iran is the target for such a warning was underscored by the comments made that same day by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice indicating that Washington was attempting to utilise the mass protests against the pro-Western government of Fouad Siniora in Lebanon to justify hostile action against Iran and Syria, including a possible military attack.

For almost a fortnight, rallies involving hundreds of thousands have been held in Beirut. Politically led by Hezbollah, but also backed by Amal—another Shia group—and the Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) of General Michel Aoun, demonstrators have taken over two main squares in the centre of Beirut and the adjacent streets. They are demanding that the government cede more power and seats to the opposition parties or step down.

The Bush administration has accused Syria and Iran of instigating the demonstrations in order to extend their influence in the Middle East. Earlier this month, State Department spokesman Tom Casey stated, “Hezbollah and its allies, with support from Syria and the Iranian government, are continuing to work to destabilise Lebanon.” US Ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton called the Hezbollah demonstration “part of the Iran-Syria-inspired coup.”

On Monday, Rice gave an interview to Agence France-Presse in which she warned that the US was not “going to get into a situation where it is even a conceivable notion on the part of Syria or Iran that the future of Lebanon would somehow be compromised for other interests of the US.... I want to make it very clear that the future of Lebanon is not an issue for negotiation with anybody.”

“There is no way that the United States or the international community could ever countenance a reassertion of Syrian authority in Lebanon,” she added.

Passing on to the subject of Iran, Rice stated that she was “optimistic” that the United Nations Security Council would soon pass a resolution threatening Iran with international action unless it suspends its nuclear enrichment programme.

After months of arguing against opposition from Russia and China, she was satisfied with the latest version because it will be voted under Chapter Seven of the UN Charter. “It establishes Chapter Seven, which to my mind is the most important element here,” she said. Chapter Seven allows the Council to “determine the existence of any threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression” and to take sanctions, including military action, to “restore international peace and security.”

Rice’s comments are a continuation of the offensive being mounted by the Bush administration in the aftermath of the publication of the Iraq Study Group report. Statements by President Bush himself and a host of leading neo-conservatives in Washington have pointedly rejected all calls for negotiations with Iran and Syria aimed at stabilising Iraq, which featured prominently in the report by the bipartisan panel, and are instead working to ratchet up hostilities against Syria and Iran.

Lebanon is viewed by the US administration as an antechamber to the more fundamental conflict with Iran to establish its hegemony over the Middle East, an aim that it is already being fought out in Iraq and which will ultimately be decided in a direct offensive against Tehran.

In this offensive, Israel plays a key role as a regional military and political partner of the US, offering its services in staging provocations against Iran, Syria and Lebanon.

It is likely that Olmert discussed what he would say in Germany with the Bush administration. Commenting on the interview, Christiane Schlötzer noted in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that “a few days ago the designated US Defense Secretary Robert Gates also named Israel as a nuclear power. In a further interview directly before his trip to Germany, Olmert did not exclude a military strike against Iran’s nuclear programme.”

Schlötzer also placed Olmert’s comments in the context of the ongoing factional warfare over Middle East policy in the US, writing, “Since the publication of the Baker/Hamilton report last week there has been an accumulation of anxious and even apocalyptic media commentaries in Israel. The country is depicted in such reports as the victim of a new American policy: a policy which up to now does not exist.”

It would be more correct to say that Israel is instrumental in

implementing the actual policy of the Bush administration. It should be remembered that after meeting Russian President Vladimir Putin last month, Olmert said the Iranians “have to be afraid” of the consequences of their refusal to heed international calls to stop their nuclear development efforts. “They have to understand that if they object to every compromise, there will be a heavy price,” he said.

What he meant is indicated by the ongoing discussion of a possible Israeli military strike on Iranian nuclear facilities. In December of last year, the British *Sunday Times* provided details of such a planned attack on an Iranian uranium-enrichment plant that was based on unnamed Israeli intelligence and military sources. The strike—a combined air and ground assault using special-forces units and long-range F-15I fighters, scheduled for the summer of 2006—was not carried out. But that period saw the commencement of sustained and devastating military hostilities against both the Palestinians and Lebanon.

Israel has also continued to threaten Lebanon, even after the ceasefire it agreed to on August 14. It lifted its naval and aerial blockade only in September and did not withdraw most of its troops until October. The Israeli Air Force has regularly violated Lebanese airspace, flying at low altitude over areas where UN peacekeepers are stationed. Israeli cabinet minister Meir Sheerit recently declared, “If the Siniora government falls, it means Lebanon will be controlled by the long arm of Iran.”

For their part, the European powers have also made strong statements denouncing the movement against the Siniora government and blaming it on Syrian interference. “France and Germany call for an end to all interference in the affairs of Lebanon,” German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Jacques Chirac said in a joint statement. “They wish that Syria will no longer support forces that want to destabilise Lebanon and the region,” the statement added.

Italian Foreign Minister Massimo D’Alema stated separately, “President Siniora was legitimately elected by the people, he leads a government supported by a majority, he’s not a pawn of the West.” When asked about the situation in Lebanon, he added that “governments are formed through elections, not through street rallies.”

D’Alema conveniently forgets that the Siniora government came to power as a result of the so-called “Cedar Revolution,” a series of street rallies fully supported by all the Western powers that followed the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005 and that ended in the disbanding of the pro-Syrian government of Prime Minister Omar Karami on April 27, 2005.

The claim that the mass movement against Siniora’s government is merely the product of Syrian scheming is far from the truth. In reality, the main reason for the destabilisation of the ruling regime is the devastating assault mounted by Israel and fully supported by the same Bush administration that now feigns outrage against the violation of Lebanese sovereignty.

The Israeli bombardment not only devastated much of Lebanon’s infrastructure, killed more than 1,000 people and displaced a million more, it also destroyed what little credibility the Siniora government possessed. It has faced mounting popular

opposition ever since, which has only served to reinforce its reliance on the Western powers.

The main beneficiary of this popular outrage against the US, Israel and the Siniora government has been Hezbollah, whose authority has been strengthened amongst the most oppressed, largely Shia sections of the population.

The opposition parties have been demanding more seats in parliament in return for agreeing to take part in a national unity government, but this has been rejected by Siniora. In November, five Shiite ministers from Hezbollah and Amal and one from the Free Patriotic Movement walked out of the government. Under the constitution, the death or resignation of an additional two ministers would automatically bring the government down.

Two weeks later, on November 21, the anti-Syrian Phalangist minister of industry, Pierre Gemayel, was assassinated.

The US and its allies within Lebanon immediately, without any corroborating evidence, blamed the killing on Syria. It cleared the way for the UN Security Council to agree to the Hariri tribunal, which had been delayed by opposition from Russia and Qatar.

On November 25, the Lebanese cabinet voted to approve the establishment of an international tribunal to try suspects in Hariri’s assassination, setting the stage for a confrontation between the UN Security Council and the Syrian government of President Bashar al Assad, which is accused of orchestrating the killing.

On December 1, in response to a call from Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, hundreds of thousands joined the first anti-government demonstrations in Beirut, which have continued ever since. The protest have been characterised by denunciations of the government as a stooge for the US and Israel.

Syria does not want a confrontation with Washington and has backed the diplomatic efforts of the Arab League to secure a negotiated compromise with the Siniora government, under which the number of ministers in the Lebanese government will grow to 30. Two thirds of these will represent the parliamentary majority and one third the opposition. In addition, the plan gives the new government power to establish a new international court for the investigation of Hariri’s murder.

Hezbollah leader Hasan Nazrallah has also accepted the Arab League plan in principle. But there is no sign that either the Bush administration or Jerusalem is interested in such a compromise.



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