

Cheney's tour of Middle East raises tensions with Iran

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The overriding theme of US Vice President Dick Cheney's now-concluded trip to the Middle East was to marshal support for the Bush administration's menacing stance against Iran. Referring to Tehran as the "darkening cloud" over the region, Cheney left no doubt that the Bush administration has not resiled from its oft-repeated threat to keep all options—including the military one—on the table.

Publicly Cheney repeated the mixture of lies and half-truths about Iran's nuclear programs and its support for "terrorism" that provide the pretexts for imposing sanctions and threatening military strikes against Tehran. Privately, particularly in Israel, the conversations unquestionably dealt more specifically with the Bush administration's plans for action against Iran.

All the countries on the nine-day itinerary—Iraq, Afghanistan, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Israel, the Occupied Territories and Turkey—are either key US allies in the region, or would play a critical role in any attack on Iran. Especially ominous was the visit to Oman, which not only provides logistical support for the US military in the region, but occupies the southern coastline of the strategic Strait of Hormuz. The narrow waterway in the Persian Gulf is a central preoccupation for Pentagon's military planners in any conflict with Iran.

During his two-day stop in Israel last weekend, Cheney met with senior Israeli political figures as well as Palestinian leaders. While the visit to Israel was nominally aimed at assisting US attempts to restart the peace process, no initiatives were announced and no progress was made. Instead, Cheney used the opportunity to accuse Iran and Syria of "doing everything they can to torpedo the peace process".

Cheney made absolutely clear, however, that the Bush administration would do nothing to restrain

Israel's provocative attacks in Gaza and the West Bank or in the broader region. Speaking during a press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, the vice president declared: "America's commitment to Israel's security is enduring and unshakeable... The United States will never pressure Israel to take steps to threaten its security."

In comments to ABC News on Monday, Cheney again raised the Iranian spectre, declaring concern over "everything from their support for Hezbollah, their efforts—working through the Syrians, for example to interfere in the political process inside Lebanon, they've supported Hamas, with the intention, I believe, of trying to disrupt the peace process.

"Obviously, they're also heavily involved in trying to develop nuclear weapons enrichment, the enrichment of uranium to weapons grade levels. So if you put all of that together, and you see that range of activity that Iran is engaged in, it's very disturbing to many leaders in the region."

There is no evidence that Iran is trying to produce weapons-grade enriched uranium. The Iranian regime has repeatedly denied that it is seeking to build a nuclear bomb. Its enrichment facilities continue to be inspected by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which has reported that uranium has been enriched only to the low levels required to fuel Iran's nuclear power reactor.

Cheney, of course, provided no proof that Iran has a secret nuclear weapons program. Like Bush's deliberate lie last week that the Iranian government has "declared that they want to have a nuclear weapon to destroy people—some in the Middle East," Cheney's remarks are aimed at heightening tensions.

Behind the scenes, Cheney clearly discussed the possibility of a military strike on Iran with Israeli

leaders. While the vice president was relatively guarded in his statements, his Israeli counterparts were not. Opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu put the matter most bluntly, telling the Israeli press: “I spoke to him about the need to remove the Iranian threat before [Tehran] arms itself with a nuclear bomb.”

Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak reportedly told Cheney that Israel supported financial sanctions against Iran but “none of the options should be taken off the table”. Following his meeting with Cheney, Israeli President Shimon Peres chided the US and Europe for ignoring Iran’s development of ballistic missiles. “Iran’s only intentions in developing missiles with nuclear warheads are to destroy Israel and threaten the entire world,” Peres said.

Iran was also high on the agenda in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi monarchy is a longstanding rival of the Iranian regime for regional influence, but in recent months has hosted Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on several occasions. One factor in this more conciliatory approach was the release in December of the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) compiled by US intelligence agencies, which concluded that Iran had ended its nuclear weapons programs in 2003.

While in Oman, Cheney effectively dismissed the NIE findings, declaring it was not known whether or not Iran had restarted a nuclear weapons program. Undoubtedly he repeated a similar message in Saudi Arabia in order to scotch any suggestion that the NIE meant a reduction of the US military threat against Iran. Cheney held lengthy talks with King Abdullah over a range of issues, including Iran and global energy market. Washington is seeking a boost in Saudi oil production not only to ease current record oil prices, but with an eye to the potential impact on energy supplies of any military confrontation with Iran.

On the final leg of his trip in Turkey on Monday, Cheney again declared his concerns about Iran’s nuclear program in a meeting with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. He also met with the Turkish President Abdullah Gul and military chief Yasar Buyukanit. Virtually nothing was reported of the discussions, which included a US request for Turkish troops to be deployed in Afghanistan, energy supplies and last month’s Turkish military incursion into northern Iraq against the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

Washington has been concerned that its NATO ally has been establishing closer economic and political ties with Iran. Turkish and Iranian forces have cooperated over the past year in operations against Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq. Cheney reiterated American support for Turkish actions against the PKK, but was no doubt looking for a quid pro quo from Ankara—on Iran in particular. If nothing else, by ratchetting up tensions over Iran, the US will force Turkey and other US allies to think twice about expanding relations with Tehran.

The precise nature of Cheney’s discussions in the Middle East about the Bush administration’s war plans is unknown. But one rather chilling exchange took place on Monday during a roundtable interview between Cheney and the accompanying press corps in Jerusalem.

As a final question, an American reporter asked: “You said, when you were standing with Prime Minister Olmert, that you would never do anything that would threaten their own security. And I’m wondering, if they came to you and the President and said, we need to strike Iran to maintain our own security, would you try to stop them?”

After Cheney dismissed the question as hypothetical, the reporter responded by asking: “Did they come to you and [ask]?” Cheney again dismissed the question as hypothetical, but he did not deny the suggestion outright. The whole exchange was accompanied by laughter.

As everyone present was well aware, such a scenario is far from hypothetical. Israel has repeatedly warned that it would not allow Iran to develop its nuclear capacities and the matter may well have been discussed with Cheney during his visit.



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