

Israel, the US and Iran Flirt with Disaster

Doha, Qatar, March 9, 2010 – Internationally speaking, there are only two subjects to talk about in the Middle East. These are Israel, the Palestinians and the Americans; and Iran and Israel.

The two subjects dominated the annual meeting here of the Institute for Mediterranean Political Studies, a group of senior or retired European, American, and Middle Eastern officials and observers, otherwise known as the Club of Monaco

The prospect of an Israeli attack on Iran was of general concern, assumed as certain to bring Iranian retaliation against oil transit to the West and against American forces in Iraq and the Gulf principalities, as well as on Israel itself, leading to ruinous escalation and grievous permanent consequences -- most of all to the United States.

Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the American Joint Chiefs of Staff, was in Israel in mid-February to warn the Israelis not to attack Iran, the message he has since been conveying to all and sundry. In an aside on the Afghanistan war, during a February 22 press conference at the Pentagon, the admiral – who unlike most other senior U.S. commanders is old enough to have experienced the Vietnam war -- delivered a short admonition concerning the “essential truth” about war: its horror.

His message to the Israelis had been that an attack on Iran would be “a big, big, big problem for all of us, and I worry a great deal about the unintended consequences.”

Despite Admiral Mullen’s warnings, the Obama administration perversely continues to encourage Israeli belligerence through its failure to react to the calculated insolence of the Benjamin Netanyahu government, displayed this week with the announcement of 1,600 new housing units to be constructed in East Jerusalem. This deliberate humiliation of the Obama administration is undoubtedly intended to reinforce the Israeli prime minister’s domestic political position, and that of the Likud party.

In addition, and more important, the function of this contemptuous treatment of the vice president and of Barack Obama is meant to demonstrate to the Palestinians, and to the Arabs generally, that Likud’s political blackmail of the American administration and the U.S. Congress can withstand any Israeli excess.

The first news Vice President Biden received when he arrived in Jerusalem

on Tuesday to launch a new American negotiations initiative (and give a university lecture on U.S.-Israel "solidarity!") was that the Defense Ministry had already authorized 112 new residence units in an existing ultra-Orthodox settlement on Palestinian land -- an "emergency case." The 1,600 came afterwards.

The new peace initiative has Israel and the Palestinian Authority negotiating indirectly, but in "proximity," with the tireless Senator George Mitchell running back and forth between the two. No one has the faintest expectation of anything coming of this. Israel under its present government is determined to continue to annex and settle Palestinian territory.

The actual terms of a realistic settlement have long ago been agreed by official and unofficial negotiators and been ratified by both Jewish and Palestinian populations in the course of the so-called Geneva Initiative with its recently published annexes. This agreement was privately circulated to the electorates on both sides and accepted by both. However it, too, is meaningless so long as Israeli policy remains what it is.

Two other initiatives are worth discussion. Both involve international intervention. One could be launched by the Palestinians themselves; the other involves the European Union and such other members of the international community as wished to join. These ideas eventually dominated discussion at the IMPS meeting.

The first is a version of the proposal already made by French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner. The essential element in this plan is international recognition of the declaration of a sovereign Palestinian state within the territory recognized by the UN and international law as Palestinian -- even though part of this territory is occupied by Israel.

It has recently been described in the French press by Dominique Moisi, an influential commentator and proven friend of Israel, as a means for international intervention to "save a people and their leaders rendered monstrous or powerless by the madness of man or an aberration of nature." He cites Rwanda and the atrocity at Srebrenica in Bosnia as prior cases where the international community had a duty to intervene.

Moisi defends this as saving Israel from itself, which -- as its former foreign minister, Tzipi Livni recently said -- "has been taken hostage by its extremist parties." Moisi quotes David Ben-Gurion himself: "It is reasonable to believe in miracles." A miracle would be necessary to make the United States support such an action as this.

There nonetheless might be the ingredients of a miracle in the second proposal discussed at the Qatar meeting. In 1947, Palestine was

partitioned and Israel created by the United Nations. Israel today is recognized internationally within its 1967 borders.

It is conceivable that the Palestinians could petition the UN, or a permanent member of the UN Security Council, to lay before the Council its duty to complete its unfinished work from 1947: to set the borders of the state of Palestine that was meant to be jointly created with Israel, and to recognize its sovereignty within those borders. The United States, of course, has a veto in the Security Council.

However there is a further consideration. The Security Council in 1947 acted on the recommendation of the General Assembly. It is possible that a Special Session of the General Assembly could be convened to address the Palestinian petition.

There is no veto in the General Assembly. John Whitbeck, the international lawyer who first raised this possibility in an article published in 2001, says that if “a constructive and principled General Assembly Resolution were passed on to the Security Council,” an American use of its veto against the Palestinians would at the minimum “cost it all remaining regional support for its war in Afghanistan.”

It was, after all, the United States in 1950 that found a way, by means of a “Uniting for Peace” resolution in the General Assembly, to mobilize the UN’s successful intervention against North Korean aggression against South Korea, at a moment when Security Council action was blocked by a Soviet veto.

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