

The Bomb Iran Faction

An Existential Question for the Power Elite?

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There is clearly a faction of the power elite that is, and has for some years been pressing, for a U.S. military attack on Iran. It is not advocating a war, at least openly, or an occupation of that vast nation; rather, it is advocating an operation similar in concept to the Israeli attack on Iraq's French-built Osiraq nuclear reactor in 1981. In a word, it is both advocating an Israeli-like action and justifying it explicitly as one on behalf of Israel.

That Israeli raid on the Iraqi reactor in 1981, justified at the time by Tel Aviv as an act of "preemptive self-defense," was condemned by the entire world as an egregious violation of international law. President Ronald Reagan directed the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations to vote with other members of the Security Council to condemn the attack. It is a measure of the Israelification of U.S. foreign policy that a quarter-century later Vice President Cheney and the neoconservatives who used his office as their general headquarters praised this action and raised preemption to the status of a sacred U.S. military doctrine. What was the attack on Iraq in 2003, to eliminate its (imaginary) weapons of mass destruction, but a preemptive Osiraq raid on crack?

George Bush declared that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction threatening its neighbors, requiring U.S. action (despite lack of UN approval). Iran and Kuwait, recent victims of real Iraqi aggression, stated that they did not feel threatened. Neither did any other bordering state. That left, by implication, Israel. But Israel was not much discussed as an issue during the massive propaganda build-up to the Iraq War. The last thing its proponents wanted was to convey the impression that this was a war for Israel, although that was in fact the only country in the world where the war enjoyed any popularity outside the U.S. (It was, as Joe Klein put it in a 2003 column, "the casus belli that dare not speak its name.")

With Iran, it's very different. Those advocating the attack on Iran don't mince words: the U.S. must, they tell us, use its armed might to destroy Iran's nuclear program for Israel. For years now they've been telling us that Iran is months away from the bomb and that therefore Israel hovers on the edge of the abyss. Oh, the issue of Iranian nukes threatening Europe is also used to justify the construction of the Polish missile base and Czech tracking radar system which many mainstream analysts find at best strategically futile and diplomatically provocative to Russia. No one in Europe takes an Iranian nuclear threat seriously. And the U.S. rhetoric about those facilities last year following the Russian invasion of Georgia (following the Georgian attack upon South Ossetia), exposed their real purpose.

But to the Chicken Littles crying that the sky is falling, Iran's nuclear program is an existential issue for Israel, hence for the Jewish people. There is a certain intransigent reasoning here and manifest desperation. One saw it in the screeching editorials of Norman

Podhoretz in 2007 praying for Bush to bomb Iran to prevent a “nuclear holocaust.” One saw it in the Wall Street Journal op-ed piece by neocon Iran expert and Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute Michael Ledeen, “Iran and the Problem of Evil” in June 2008 linking the entire history of anti-Semitism culminating in its European fascist varieties with Iranian Khomeinists and the Saudi Wahhabis. And one sees this craziness too in the ceaseless barrage of AIPAC-backed congressional resolutions targeting Iran.

The call for an attack on Iran, to the extent it is being voiced in the ruling class, is being most sharply framed by neocon columnists including some who recently served in the Bush administration. It is echoed by AIPAC and other Lobby organizations. In a just world the former would be completely disgraced by now, their lies about Iraq having been fully exposed, and the latter would be shamed into silence by the Israeli espionage scandal. But now that the Justice Department has dismissed the AIPAC spying charges filed in 2005, the Lobby and neocons are proclaiming the decision as a “vindication” of the activities of Steven Rosen and Keith Weissman (passing U.S. documents pertaining to Iran to Israeli Embassy staff). An emboldened Jane Harman addressing AIPAC can make light of her wiretapped conversation with the “Israeli agent” revealed by Jeff Stein of the Congressional Quarterly. (You know, the guy who offered AIPAC money to buy her the chairmanship of the House Intelligence Committee in return for getting Rosen and Weissman off the hook.)

The message of the AIPAC spy case dismissal seems to be: the foreign policies of these two countries are one, or if not so, the desire of the smaller to determine that of the greater is understandable and legitimate (since its very existence is at stake). There is really no such thing as “spying” or “treason” in this relationship. We’re all family, for God’s sakes! AIPAC emerges as strong as ever with half of Congress dutifully attending its convention.

That message rankles many in the Justice Department, including prosecutors who thought they had a cut and dried case against the AIPAC operatives. And I’d think there are many in the “intelligence community”—the professionals who use their research skills to prepare such reports as the November 2007 National Intelligence Estimate that stated “with a high degree of confidence” that Iran did not have an operative nuclear weapons program—who are galled by apparent Israeli influence on their work. They must be irked their findings can be ignored by higher-ups who tell them, “No, you don’t understand; Iran threatens Israel with nuclear holocaust.” They are, in effect, being told that Israeli policy requires the circulation of false propaganda concerning Iran’s nuclear program, and that Washington is going to cooperate in that propaganda, ignoring its own intelligence.

That’s the message George Bush conveyed to his own intelligence services when, after the NIE was released (having been delayed a year by the intervention of Cheney’s office), he met with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and told him the document didn’t “reflect his own views” about the Iranian nuclear program. (As though a man challenged to pronounce “nuclear” has “views” about Iran’s nuclear program of comparable sophistication to the heads of the Central Intelligence Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency, National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency, etc.!) What better manifestation of the division within the ruling class than this division between a president, fed bogus intelligence by neocon advisors with a Southwest Asia regime-change agenda, and his own intelligence agencies?

There is a section, a rather larger section, of the ruling class that doesn’t buy the alarmist depiction of Iran, and doesn’t see the point of a U.S. attack. Certainly they don’t see Iran’s nuclear program as an existential threat to themselves. Indeed, the blowback potential of

such an attack is obvious to all with eyes to see, conscious of the existing increasingly problematic consequences of the U.S. alliance with Israel, and not blinded by paranoia. Maybe I'm projecting, but allotting some common sense to these people I'm assuming they realize there's no way that public opinion in Europe, or in Latin America, Japan, China, South Asia, would see an Iran attack as anything other than an insanely immoral deployment of the preemption principle that underlay the Iraq attack. They'd see it as a ratcheting up of the bullying tactics that an hyper-puissance—in precipitous decline, maybe—felt compelled to adopt. Obama's reputation would be toast.

There's no way the 67 million Iranian people, most of whom view the nuclear program as an object of national pride, would understand a U.S. attack as anything other than a savage assault on the Iranian nation, and not the first by the U.S. As all Americans should know, the CIA overthrew the democratically elected government of Iran in 1953 to punish it for its efforts to nationalize the nation's oil industry. It installed the Shah whose vicious rule provoked the most mass-based revolution ever to sweep an Islamic society in 1979.

But we must understand, a neocon like Ledeen (whom by the way an Italian parliamentary investigation has linked to the Niger uranium documents forgeries behind Bush's infamous State of the Union speech claim) sees the CIA overthrow of Mossadegh as a great moment in history, a great CIA success story. And he emphasizes that no people in the Middle East love Americans more than Iranians and are more eager to be freed!

This kind of delusion recalls neocon predictions the U.S. troops would be greeted in the streets of Baghdad with flowers. It also recalls what the unnamed White House official told New York Times columnist Ron Suskind in the months leading up to the war based on lies in Iraq. He berated Suskind for being rooted in the "reality-based community," among those who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." The Bush insider warned against such belief, dismissing it as naïve: "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he declared. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality, we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do." The Bush administration is gone, but that (Straussian?) mindset persists in some quarters.

Those who don't buy the alarmist case against Iran may be becoming increasingly concerned over time about the success of the attack-advocates in advancing their cause; indeed, the frontal attacks on the Israel Lobby from academics like John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt and former President Jimmy Carter—unthinkable just a few years ago—testify to such concern. (On the Lobby and Iran, see especially pages 283-294 of the Mearsheimer-Walt book.)

Similarly the analyses of the "neoconservative" phenomenon, both as an intellectual movement that influences elite public opinion through such organs as the National Review and the Weekly Standard and editorial pages of the Wall Street Journal and as a self-proclaimed "cabal" within government, have come under scrutiny especially since 2003 when journalists like Seymour Hersh, Jeet Heer and William Pfaff all indicated concern with a genuine threat. These days a well-known Jewish columnist, Time Magazine's Joe Klein, in an exchange with Abraham Foxman notes a "dangerous tendency among Jewish neoconservatives to encourage a pre-emptive attack on Iran's nuclear program. Their gleeful, intellectual warmongering—given the vast dangers and complexities of an attack on Iran—is nauseating." (He wrote this in response to Foxman's allegation that his critique of the

influence of neoconservatism in producing the Iraq War constituted “anti-Semitism.”)

The neocons are sometimes described as an intellectual movement influenced by University of Chicago philosopher Leo Strauss as well as (in a curious way) Trotskyism, the principle proponents of which are almost entirely secular Jews and passionate Zionists. They argue that the U.S. should use its military power to bring “democracy” to the world and so many see them as neo-Wilsonians (with all the shoddy cynicism the originals represented). But Strauss, as leading authority on his thought Shadia Drury points out, argues that deception is the norm in political life, that the big lie is necessary to get the masses to embrace wise policy. (Thus the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq really have nothing to do with “democracy” but with unspoken geopolitical objectives.) The neocons have yet to be sufficiently exposed, or defeated as a political force, but they’ve come under scrutiny in part because of the alarm some in the power structure feel at their rise to power in the early Bush years.

In Bush’s first State of the Union address, in January 2002, he made the reference to the “Axis of Evil,” bizarrely linking Iraq, Iran and North Korea to one another and—in that surreal atmosphere, in the minds of his audience, as the U.S. flag fluttered in the background of every TV screen 24/7—to 9/11. He somehow, when he held the respect of 90% of the people (when he served as what the Straussian would call the “gentleman” ruler manipulated in the background by the “wise”), was able to conflate the rogue Saudis who destroyed the Twin Towers and attacked the Pentagon with absolutely unrelated phenomena—the countries of Iraq, Iran and North Korea, which had little to do with or even hostile relations with one another. Who was responsible for this preposterous phrase but neocon David Frum, associate of neocon Richard Perle, head of the Defense Policy Board who was to insist that Mohamed Atta met Saddam Hussein in Baghdad?

That phrase “Axis of Evil”—placing Iran in the same crosshairs as Iraq—drew consternation from European allies. Asked at a security conference in February what it meant, Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, the top-ranking neocon in government, replied mysteriously, “You’re either for us or against us,” prompting continental editorialists to muse darkly about the descent of a kind of Manichaenism upon the post 9/11 U.S. Here in this country while (following, one might say, the Straussian game plan) fear fed gullibility and the Big Lie generally worked well, many in the intelligentsia (and academia in particular) suspected that the Iraq War was based on calculated deception. Whether it was the lies of Big Oil or the Military-Industrial Complex, clearly there were lies here. It was only after Iraq was firmly under U.S. occupation that the role of the neocons in the war preparations, and of Douglas Feith’s “Office of Special Plans” (what Mother Jones appropriately called the “Lie Factory”) in particular, became clear. (Most people still don’t know that Leo Shulsky, who headed the OSP under Feith, wrote this interesting paper “[Leo Strauss and the World of Intelligence](#)” with Gary J. Schmitt earlier in his career.)

Since then many have come to think that in their desire to reconfigure Southwest Asia in what they suppose to be the interests of Israel the neocons are (1) prepared to lie through their teeth, and (2) threaten to severely jeopardize U.S. security.

My own critique of the neocons, the Lobby and Israel differs from the mainstream ones, coming as it does from a left anti-imperialist perspective. I’ve made as much a fuss as anyone about the neocons’ lies, by way of exposure. (My first forays out of academic writing into political column writing were to perform the sort of exposure which was not entirely

absent in the mainstream press—in fact it was there in bits and pieces for those who looked for it—but seldom sharply expressed.) But liars are of course representative of bourgeois politics and mainstream journalism in general; lying is quite normative and so it, even of a Straussian variety, is not the main issue here.

Nor is “U.S. national security” as mainstream analysts understand it—the security of an imperialist country, a country which is as about as aggressive as a country can possibly be in the history of the world—the issue for me. For me the issue is that this faction of the power elite has a known project—there’s no secret about it—to transform (or in their cynical euphemism “bring democracy to”) what they call “the Greater Middle East.” This includes Afghanistan and whatever other parts of Central Asia they find useful. Various benefits accrue from their project, which they link to such ruling-class objectives as the Indian Ocean-Caspian oil pipeline project and the establishment of permanent military bases in the region. And they are prepared to slaughter hundreds of thousands to achieve their aims.

A conception of Israeli security guides their project, and central to it was the bloody conquest of Iraq. But this is only the beginning of the project. Richard Perle, Douglas Feith, David Wurmser (who also worked in the OSP), and Meyrav Wurmser (of the Middle East Media Research Institute) all participated in the drafting of a white paper for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996 entitled “A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm.” <http://www.iasps.org/strat1.htm> Many have observed how it envisions “regime change” throughout the region to “secure the realm” of Israel. The “effort can focus on removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq,” according to the report, “—an important Israeli strategic objective in its own right.”

Those bearing responsibility for the Iraq War, for the propaganda campaign leading up to it, for the editorials, for the disinformation, for the forged documents, for the coordinated public statements (“We don’t want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud over New York”), for the war—bear a heavy responsibility indeed. They are not limited to the neocons; as many have pointed out, Wolfowitz would be nothing without Rumsfeld, Libby would be nothing without Cheney, the Lie Factory products nothing without the performance of shame of Colin Powell at United Nations in February 2003. And Bush as Commander-in-Chief is ultimately responsible. But the neocons were unquestionably central players in the crime.

The neocons have generated enemies and lost credibility. But they’ve successfully eluded responsibility for their actions and continue to appear as respectable commentators on Fox News (if that’s not an oxymoron) and write columns for reputable publications. (Bill Kristol was just recently terminated as a New York Times columnist but was picked up by the Washington Post.) They are not without a lingering presence in the halls of power. Dennis Ross, Hillary Clinton’s Special Advisor on the Persian Gulf and Southwest Asia (i.e., key advisor on Iran), also known as “Israel’s lawyer” for his efforts on behalf of the Jewish state as a U.S. diplomat during Israeli-Palestinian talks in 1999-2000), is probably the key such figure at present and a person to watch. He co-authored an op-ed piece in the Wall Street Journal Sept. 22, 2008 with Richard Holbrooke, R. James Woolsey, and Mark D. Wallace entitled, “Everybody Needs to Worry About Iran.” It stated without evidence that, “Iran is now edging closer to being armed with nuclear weapons, and it continues to develop a ballistic-missile capability.” In other words it was intended to make you worry and make you forget about the 2007 NIE.

(Former CIA boss Woolsey by the way seems a big enthusiast of the Noble Lie concept, having originally promoted the lie about the meeting between Mohamed Atta and an Iraqi

embassy official in Prague and praised the disinformation articles about Saddam-al-Qaeda ties published by Jeffrey Goldberg in the New Yorker in 2002. He claimed that by showing that the Kurdish al-Ansar group was al-Qaeda affiliated and operating on Iraqi territory, Goldberg had decisively established Saddam's al-Qaeda ties and put the CIA to shame.)

Ross is known to favor a policy of ultimatums to Iran followed by a naval blockade to prevent gasoline imports, then a blockade of oil exports, then massive air strikes on the nuclear facilities and military facilities. The goal would be not only the crippling of the nuclear program for a few years but the destruction of the military and regime. His may be a minority view within the administration, and his appointment even a sop to the Lobby, but he is dangerous.

The ruling class is clearly divided over how to deal with Iran, with the rise of Iran that has paradoxically accompanied the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Maybe this precipitous ascent occurred as a result of the cluelessness of neocon policymakers, few of whom understand Arabic or Persian or Middle East culture and history behind that of Israel. Maybe they genuinely didn't understand the historical specificities of Shiism or the strength of Shiite solidarity. But by toppling the Sunni-based Baathists (whom the CIA had once favored as an alternative to communists or Islamists), the U.S. brought pro-Iranian Shiite Islamists to power—to Tehran's great delight.

Meanwhile China, replacing Japan as Iran's main oil customer, signs more and more contracts for pipeline construction and Russia continues work on the Bushehr nuclear reactor. The Russians and Iranians say that that reactor is for entirely peaceful purposes, and the IAEA backs them up, while the Israelis insist that it (like Osirac 28 years ago), ought to be bombed—by the U.S., preferably. But the fact that that hasn't happened yet, and that indeed the Bush administration denied the Israelis bunker-busting bombs in 2008, shows that the "bomb, bomb, bomb Iran" faction of the U.S. ruling class has been on the defensive if not decline for some time now.

I'm not saying the U.S. ruling class is fundamentally divided into factions that are divided over Israel or an Israeli security agenda, more deeply than it is divided, say, about how to grapple with the collapse of the economy. Nor am I suggesting that the struggle between these factions is the only dynamic shaping Middle East policy or foreign policy generally. Foreign policy is generally shaped by its framers' perception of what serves the interests of the ruling class as a whole, which is to say, what generates maximum profit for corporations in which U.S. capitalists are invested. It's not unusual for the interests of the oil companies, for example, to diverge from the interests of Israel as promoted by the Lobby, although they can also converge. But there is a faction in the U.S. polity whose commitment to Israel, or to a particular vision of Israel's security, seems to trump all other considerations including the broader "global interests" of U.S. imperialism. It is an understatement to say that during the George W. Bush years that faction was extraordinarily bold.

The general consensus in the ruling class seems to be at present that its needs are best served by this popular president as a uniting figure with a centrist politics that can distance the country from the Bush policies abhorred by the world and the American people while avoiding any major shifts in foreign policy. Thus we have plans for a gradual withdrawal from Iraq in accordance with the agreement already worked out by the Bush and Maliki regimes; a continued counterinsurgency war in Afghanistan that isn't yet too controversial; continued Predator drone attacks on Pakistan, etc. The plan is to stay the course on the Bush foreign policy that meets with the approval of the generals. There may be some

significant shifts from the preceding administration in U.S. policy towards Latin America and Europe, Russia. On Iran we have renewed diplomacy, and perhaps even the vital concession that Iran indeed has the right under the NPT to enrich uranium and master the nuclear cycle despite some technical violations of the agreement years ago which the U.S. has used to vilify Iran but have nothing to do with Iran as a nuclear weapons threat. In this context we might be seeing the twilight of the neocons as a political force.

But it is important to note the obvious, without being overly delicate about it: the government of Israel, its friends and advocates in the U.S., the neocons and the Lobby retain enormous political power to affect the course of policy. When AIPAC met last week, more than half the members of the House and Senate attended its gala Monday night dinner, featuring the “roll call” when all the legislators rise when asked to demonstrate the lobbyists’ clout on Capitol Hill. Their willingness to take part in such a ritual under current circumstances is itself an extraordinary statement of Lobby power.

But this takes place at a time when the Obama administration is rumored to be heading for a confrontation with the new Netanyahu administration in Israel over the fundamental problem in the Middle East: the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories seized during the (preemptive) war of June 1967. By his selection of former Senator George Mitchell as special envoy to the Middle East Obama signaled that the U.S. would start getting serious about obliging Israel to comply with international law. This provoked an outcry from those worried about a shift from the Bush policy of ignoring the expansion of illegal Jewish settlements on the West Bank, Golan Heights and Shebaa Farms.

“Senator Mitchell is fair,” complained Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League. “He’s been meticulously even-handed. But the fact is, American policy in the Middle East hasn’t been ‘even handed’ — it has been supportive of Israel when it felt Israel needed critical U.S. support. So I’m concerned. I’m not sure the situation requires that kind of approach in the Middle East.”

Obama however may be quite sure that after eight years of slavishly, unprecedentedly pro-Israeli policy the U.S. needs to try to establish some credibility as a rational if not dispassionate party in the Middle East. That means telling the Israelis they have to make peace with the Palestinians, stop settling their land and leave the illegal settlements they’ve established.

What he’s likely to be told is what Avigdor Lieberman, Israel’s new foreign minister (whom many Israeli’s consider a “fascist” for his views on Palestinians, a particularly harsh designation in the Jewish state) told the Jerusalem Post in a recent interview. He complained that “People try to simplify the situation with these formulas — land-for peace, two-state solution — it’s a lot more complicated.” The real problem, he declared, “is not occupation, not settlements and not settlers. The biggest obstacle is the Iranians.”

Lieberman has also surprised many lately by stating that Israel after years of threats would not attack Iran after all. On April 26 he told the Austrian *Kleine Zeitung*, “We are not talking about a military attack. Israel cannot resolve militarily the entire world’s problem. I propose that the United States, as the largest power in the world, take responsibility for resolving the Iranian question.” In other words, he’s leaving it to the U.S. to solve the problem of Iran as the precondition for Israel addressing the problem of peace with the Palestinians.

Meanwhile we read of another Israeli Air Force refueling drill between Israel and Gibraltar, a

3,800 km flight the first week of May. This could be preparatory for an attack on Iran or designed to signal the U.S.: “We’re serious. You do this for us, or we’ll do it ourselves. Either way, you’ll take the consequences with us, as your Vice President Cheney noted in January 2005 when he said, ‘the Israelis might well decide to act first, and let the rest of the world worry about cleaning up the diplomatic mess afterwards.’ So understanding our resolve, please do the right thing and do it instead of us!”

Because that really is the logic. And within the ruling circles of this imperialist country, where the interests of the masses don’t have much to do with decision-making, there are those who are terrified by this illogic. But then again you have the broad bipartisan support for AIPAC-drafted Congressional resolution 362 designed to provoke war with Iran. Your characteristic politician—shallow, amoral, pragmatic, ignorant of the world and of history but acutely sensitive to constituency issues, calculating, reliant on opportunistic arrogant staffers—can simultaneously understand that something doesn’t make sense and yet requires political support. (Just like he/she may have concluded in high school that there probably was no God but for campaign purposes has to have a religious affiliation.) How many politicians have so much as cited the NIE?

Where this is all going to go is anyone’s guess. There’s a meeting coming up between Obama and Netanyahu May 18 in Washington. The Israeli press is expressing some anxiety about the encounter since U.S. officials have made it clear the U.S. president will pressure Netanyahu on the settlements issue. Obama seems to want to say to the world that he’s serious about getting some justice for the Palestinians. He may believe he can do so at minimal political expense, and this could be a shrewd political device at this juncture given the deterioration of the U.S. position in the world. Following the global revulsion at the New Year’s Gaza blitzkrieg the U.S. can obtain political capital from a period of public tension with its de facto ally over the settlements.

In that likely context of tension, the calls for bombing Iran will continue, coming from Israel, from the neocon columnists, from the Lobby, maybe from some inside the State Department and Pentagon. The cooler heads in the power structure, including in the intelligence community fighting heroic rear-guard actions, will continue to say in various ways privately and publicly: “Look, this is stupid. Not only does Iran not constitute an ‘existential threat’ to the state of Israel, it doesn’t have a nuclear weapons program, period. That’s just not what the science says (not that these people care about science). That’s what some people want you to believe to scare you into supporting their criminal plot to attack a sovereign country, just like they did Iraq on the basis of lies.”

Again, I’m not saying this matter of attacking Iran is the most fundamental issue dividing the power elite at this time. Nor is it the main issue on the minds of the people. But it’s something a strongly determined faction in this country have successfully placed on the policy agenda. They owe a great debt to Dick Cheney who bearing no outward marks of Zionist sentimentality but merely Big Oil written all over his face while nurturing the neocons during two Bush terms in office constantly declared and gave pseudo-legitimacy to the argument that Iran could have a nuclear program for one reason only: nuclear weapons. (This despite the fact that successive U.S. administrations had promoted an Iranian civilian nuclear program in the ‘60s and ‘70s when the Shah was in power and the Ford administration was doing so when Cheney served as Ford’s chief of staff.)

Let’s now see what kind of clout this “bomb Iran” faction can muster vis-à-vis the reasonable people within the crisis-ridden U.S. ruling class. As pro-Taliban Islamists take

power in much of Pakistan, the Taliban continues its revival in Afghanistan, and the policy of paying off the Sunni tribes in Iraq crumbles, U.S. imperialism confronts the limits of its power and has (so to speak) to rethink. “Time for some real apocalyptic savagery” think some, the crazy ones, who imagine using nukes against Iran. They know that there are tens of millions of Christian Zionists, including Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins readers, who’d be down for unprecedented fireworks tomorrow, no questions asked. These folks aren’t providing intellectual leadership to the movement; they’re just yearning for the End Times and that affects their judgment.

Others probably think this has to be the time for a show-down with the nuts. One faction in the power elite must be thinking: They cannot be allowed to get their Iran attack on the basis of fantasy. Whatever one thinks about the mullahs, or Ahmadinejad, or Islam—they can’t be allowed another war-based-on-lies.

People on the radical left should observe the efforts of this faction, encouraging it of course, but observing how the root problem is really the system which nurtures and validates nuts like Wolfowitz, Perle, Feith, Bolton, and their media cheerleaders like Kristol and Podhoretz. But we should raise, if only for discussion the question: why is a system based indifferently on the pursuit of profit (which is what capitalist imperialism is all about) being asked to risk its health for this minor accretion to itself—the nuclear-powered settler-state of Israel—in a confrontation with Iran, a country that doesn’t even threaten the U.S. system (but actually in fact holds open broad investment opportunities with other imperialist countries are exploiting)?

What role do purely ideological factors play here? How do Zionism and, for some, biblical mythology about a Chosen People and a Promised Land intersect with and even outweigh other considerations such as “national security” in a conventional sense and most fundamentally, U.S. corporate profit?

In the collective mind of the U.S. ruling class, such questions are no doubt being posed, probably sometimes in wrong ways. Accused AIPAC spy Rosen now tells the Jerusalem Post his arrest was all due to anti-Semitism. There is such a thing as anti-Semitism, and a deep almost instinctual tendency to think in terms of ethnic stereotypes corrupts the American soul. The blogosphere abounds with commentaries that mix rational critique of U.S. policy with essentializing nonsense about the power of “the Jews” behind policy, without recognizing the diversity of Jewish opinion and the vital role of Christian Zionists with their belief in the End Times in enhancing Lobby strength.

But if the Lobby and the neocons step up their efforts to get the U.S. to bomb Iran on behalf of Israel (because make no mistake, that is exactly what is happening here), their opponents may respond in a way that produces a widespread campaign of criticism in society pertaining to Israeli influence and Lobby power such as we have not seen in this country. That would be a very good thing. The objects of scrutiny will likely however claim that they are victims of anti-Semitism, and some of this will be imaginary. But there is real anti-Semitism in this country, and there can be dangerously essentializing explanations and attributions that contribute to it.

This is the first time that a major U.S. foreign policy question has been posed very frankly as an Israeli security question, posed as such, it must be said, by the “bomb Iran” advocates themselves. If the debate heats up in the coming months, during which by everyone’s calculations Iran is reaching goals which it says are milestones in peaceful nuclear energy

development and Israel says are unacceptable, many issues not typically central to U.S. political discourse may come up. The public debate won't be about blood and oil, bases and pipelines.

It will be about whether Israel is really threatened by Iran, a nation that hasn't attacked another in centuries. It will be about whether the Lobby, on behalf of a nuclear power exposed as such, can successfully make the case that Israel as a nuclear power is truly threatened by a country with three thousand centrifuges producing small test batches of low enriched uranium. It will be about whether conventional political discourse in this country (which has always in any case been conducted in code obscuring the raw class interests involved, always broadcast in a cynical language in which "democracy" means "capitalism" or at least U.S. imperialist interests), will be eclipsed for a time by a discourse in which "Islamofascism" and "nuclear holocaust" and other sensationalistic terms (ridiculous terms which the neocons got Bush to vocalize publicly) designed to stifle thought are at the center of public discussion.

And it may be in part about the usages of the anti-Semitism charge. It will be necessary to carefully follow and objectively analyze the "bomb Iran" faction, its struggle with its opponents, and its defenses from criticism in the months to come.

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