

December 13, 2006

Israel, Alone

The nuclear cat is out of the bag – and Olmert issues a warning...

Israel's long-standing policy of nuclear **ambiguity** came to **an end** the other day when Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, in answer to a question about his country's rumored WMD arsenal, replied,

"Iran openly, explicitly, and publicly threatens to wipe Israel off the map. Can you say that this is the same level, when they [the Iranians] are aspiring to have nuclear weapons, as America, France, Israel, Russia?"

Ha'aretz **avers**, "It is not clear whether this was a slip of the tongue on the part of Olmert or an intended statement" – and his aides and supporters are certainly scrambling to explain his comments away as a linguistic mix-up. Yet, taken in context – not only the context of the interview, but the context of Israel's present position – I would argue the Israeli Prime Minister was sending a message not only to Iran, but also to the U.S.

As a rebuke to President **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's rants** about wiping Israel off the map, Olmert's is the perfect retort. Everyone knows that Israel has **at least 400** nukes, and it **isn't hard** to guess in which direction they're aimed. Olmert is pointedly reminding the Iranians of what everyone has **known** for **quite some time**. All the Israeli prime minister has to do is give the order, and Tehran would be reduced to a pool of molten glass.

The message sent to Washington – and, indeed, to the entire world – is that Israel is making **a clean break** with **the policies of the past**, based as they were on a strategy of **economic, diplomatic, and military** dependence on Western allies. Israel feels it has been abandoned by the West, including not only Britain but also the U.S. – and all bets are off.

This fear of abandonment, although greatly exaggerated, is not entirely unfounded. It is based on a sensitive reading of the political dynamics in the U.S. and the threatened future of Israel's **"special relationship"** with the Americans.

The **Israel lobby** in the U.S. has recently taken it on the chin four times in a row, without so much as getting a punch in edgewise: it started with the arrest and **indictment** of two top AIPAC officials, **Steve Rosen** and **Keith Weissman**, for espionage. They are charged with funneling classified information, some of it high-level stuff, to Israeli **embassy officials**. Then there was the Harvard University **research paper** authored by professors **John J. Mearsheimer** and **Stephen Walt**, documenting and decrying what they called "the Lobby" and its **distorting effect** on American foreign policy. Now there's the Baker-Hamilton commission **linking** the Palestinian question to our "grave and deteriorating" **prospects** in Iraq, and, to top it off, **the Jimmy Carter book**.

The Lobby is reeling. For the first time since **the Eisenhower era**, our Israeli-centric policy in the Middle East is being openly and successfully challenged. In the past, **Israel's amen corner** in the U.S. has been able to effectively neutralize all critics by smearing them, and the charge of "anti-Semitism" has been applied with an absurdly broad brush to everyone from **Gore Vidal** to **Pat Buchanan** and all points in between. However, this case is getting increasingly hard to make. Are we now to believe that the U.S. Department of Justice, Harvard

University, Baker and the Bush I crowd, and Jimmy Carter are all part of a vast anti-Semitic conspiracy?

Surely not. With the **British endorsement** of the Baker group's conclusions, one would also have to include Tony Blair among the conspirators. When Mearsheimer and Walt published their paper, the Lobby **likened** them to David Duke. They can't pull that, however, with **Baker's wise men**, a former president, and the British prime minister. The Lobby has cried wolf once too often. **Tony Judt**, who has taken more than a few **hits** from the tireless efforts of the amen corner, recently **noted** the new atmosphere of *glasnost* when it comes to discussing the "special" status of American-Israeli relations:

"What seems to me the case is that if you keep pushing, if you insist there at least be a discussion of the Mearsheimer-Walt paper ... even a discussion about the failure to discuss it, something does change. And it seems to me there's a shift."

The Israelis recognize this shift, and Olmert's alleged slip of the tongue is their answer. The "**clean break**" strategy embraced by the Israelis, predicated on the invasion and occupation of Iraq by the Americans, has so far played out pretty much as outlined in a notorious **game plan** drawn up by top U.S. policymakers, including neocon point-man and former Defense Policy Board official **Richard Perle**, former Deputy Secretary of Defense for Policy **Douglas Feith**, and **David Wurmser**, currently Dick Cheney's top adviser on Middle Eastern affairs.

The agenda put forth in this widely cited 1996 document, intended as advice to then-incoming Israeli Prime Minister **Benjamin Netanyahu**, was meant to confront the central conundrum at the heart of the Zionist predicament: how to overcome its essential dependence on the West. As a settler colony, implanted by **force of arms** and sustained by aid from abroad, Israel has from the start been **dependent** on outside forces to ensure its survival. What was needed, argued **the Clean Breakers**, was a new offensive that would repudiate the concept of "**land for peace**" and set Israel free from Western-imposed constraints. Invoking the "right of hot pursuit," Israel would launch **periodic invasions** of Palestinian and Lebanese territory – and set the stage for strikes against Syria and Iran.

The road to Damascus and Tehran would run through Baghdad, however, as the authors of "A Clean Break" put it:

"Israel can shape its strategic environment, in cooperation with Turkey and Jordan, by weakening, containing, and even rolling back Syria. This effort can focus on removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq – an important Israeli strategic objective in its own right – as a means of foiling Syria's regional ambitions."

Syria and Lebanon were seen by the Clean Breakers as the front line in their battle to expand **the frontiers** of Israeli power. Following a **successful** campaign to "redefine Iraq," it would be possible to envision a "profound" shift in the regional "strategic balance of power." Jordan would be drawn into the new order, and the Israelis would succeed in "diverting Syria's attention by using Lebanese opposition elements to destabilize Syrian control of Lebanon."

A decade after the Clean Break scenario was conceived, its policy prescriptions read like **prophecies**. However, as the game plan approaches its projected climax – an **attack on Iran and/or Syria** – there are numerous indications the U.S. is bailing, and not only in Iraq. The appearance on the American political and intellectual scene of forces willing and able to challenge the Lobby's unquestioned hegemony over U.S. foreign policy – especially when it comes to the **crucial** [pdf] Middle East – threatens to scuttle the Clean Break scenario. **Israel** wants regime-change in Syria and Iran, while the **Baker-Hamilton folks** want to open up negotiations with them over the future of Iraq. And the Mearsheimer-Walt thesis on the Lobby's vanguard role in fomenting war with Iraq is taking root. As the two distinguished professors put it:

"Pressure from Israel and the Lobby was not the only factor behind the decision to attack Iraq in March 2003, but it was critical. Some Americans believe that this was a war for oil, but there is hardly any direct evidence to support this claim. Instead, the war was motivated in good part by a desire to make Israel more

secure."

Citing Philip Zelikow's by-now infamous **remarks** that the war was really all about the threat to Israel, and not the U.S., Mearsheimer and Walt reference a report in the *Washington Post* that

"Israel is urging U.S. officials not to delay a military strike against Iraq's Saddam Hussein.' By this point, according to Sharon, strategic coordination between Israel and the U.S. had reached 'unprecedented dimensions', and Israeli intelligence officials had given Washington a variety of alarming reports about Iraq's WMD programs. As one retired Israeli general later put it, 'Israeli intelligence was a full partner to the picture presented by American and British intelligence regarding Iraq's non-conventional capabilities.'"

Now that the **full disaster** in Iraq is unfolding in all its **bloody viciousness** and tragic **futility**, the Israelis are catching a lot of **the blame**, and the **power** of the Lobby is being undermined, perhaps fatally. The cord to the U.S., which has sustained Israel for so long, is in danger of being cut – *before* Israel is ready to make the break. Iraq is destroyed, but the front-line enemies of Israel – Syria and Iran – are still left standing. Not only that, but Iran is **moving ahead** with its nuclear program, and James Baker is whispering sweet nothings in Bashar Assad's ear.

No wonder the Israelis have abandoned all pretenses of reasonableness and are now threatening to plunge the Middle East into the throes of a nuclear Armageddon. Israel is alone against the world, or so their leaders seem to believe: cornered, they are revealing their true face, snarling their resentment and defiance – their ire directed not just or even primarily at **the Iranians**, but at U.S. policymakers.

Olmert has found the elusive "weapons of mass destruction" said to be lurking somewhere in the Middle East, threatening the peace and shadowing the land with the darkest, most ominous war clouds. We know – now – they aren't **anywhere** in Iraq, and our own CIA tells us the Iranians are a good **10 years** away from acquiring nukes. No, they are right where **Mordechai Vanunu** told us they were.

Would the Israelis ever use them? That is the question that we have to ask in light of Olmert's unprecedented admission. After all, why "come out" to the world as a nuclear power at this particular moment? Surely the threat of a nuclear first strike against Iran is implicit in Olmert's "slip of the tongue."

The Israeli conceit is that to equate a regime such as the one that rules in Tehran with Israeli "democracy" is an obscene "moral equivalence" that overlooks the obvious: after all, we can trust Tel Aviv with WMD, but not the Iranian ayatollahs. Yet the **growing extremism** dominating Israeli political life, as demonstrated by the rise of such a dangerous character as **Avigdor Lieberman**, points to a troubling trend that has culminated in Olmert's stunning announcement.

We are now about to experience the consequences – the **"blowback"** – of our Israel-centric policy, which has fostered and nurtured Israeli ultra-nationalism in the womb of the "special relationship." As in so many **other** cases of **aiding** and **abetting** foreign **"freedom fighters,"** we'll find we have created yet another monster. By the time this realization dawns on us, however, it will, unfortunately, be **too late**.

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