

Cheney and Netanyahu Conspiring for War?

by Dean Andromidas

Benjamin Netanyahu, chairman of the Israeli Likud party, met with Vice President Dick Cheney during the World Forum conference organized by the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) in Beaver Creek, Colorado, on June 16-18. According to the *Jerusalem Post*, "Netanyahu spoke at great length on the Iranian issue" with Cheney. Also at the conference was Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. The fact that the Bush Administration's two top hawks, who have been leading the charge for a military strike on Iran, were meeting with Netanyahu raises the question of whether their rendezvous constituted a planning session for a U.S.-Israeli strike against Iran.

There is no doubt what Netanyahu's message was. On June 14, in an interview with Fox News, Netanyahu blasted the idea of U.S. talks with Iran, and insisted that the regime must be changed. He told Neil Cavuto about the Iranians: "They'll be happy to help you with Iraq, as long as you don't prevent them from acquiring nuclear weapons. Once they have nuclear weapons, they'll be able to bring down Iraq, bring down Jordan, bring down the Arabian Peninsula, and get their hands on the world's oil supplies," Netanyahu raved. He added that Iran has threatened Israel with being "obliterated with one bomb, one nuclear bomb," that this was not only "one man," Ahmadinejad, but "the regime" as a whole.

It is widely known that the 1996 policy paper drafted for then-Prime Minister Netanyahu, "A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm," was written by Richard Perle (then with AEI), Douglas Feith, and David Wurmser, among others. Not only did many of its authors later play leading roles in the Bush Administration, but the policy served as Cheney's war plan for Iraq.

The Colorado event was closed-door and largely unreported in the media. The participants also included other Bush Cabinet members and co-thinkers: Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, Veterans Affairs Secretary Jim Nicholson, Health and Human Resources Secretary Michael Leavitt, Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke, Securities and Exchange Commission member Paul Atkins, and former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.).

During the conference, Cheney met with Farid Ghadry, the head of the Reform Party of Syria, who is an AEI fixture, and the would-be Ahmed Chalabi of Syria (the neo-cons' favorite Iraqi exile, who had no domestic following, returning

to the country after the U.S. invasion, and who was unsuccessfully groomed to become a top Iraqi leader). Ghadry's group, which has zero support inside Syria, released a statement that "Mr. Ghadry urged the United States to increase its support for democracy and human rights in Syria."

When Cheney returned to Washington on June 19, he met Likud Knesset (parliament) member Natan Sharansky, a hardliner on Iran and a darling of the neo-cons. Sharansky, shy on the meeting's details, told the *New York Sun*: "Mainly this was about democracy and about American policy in Iran. We are now trying to engage Russia and Iran on the one hand, and weakening the opposition there on the other. We need to understand the opposition are our real allies and not repeat the mistakes of the Clinton Administration." Sharansky sees the recent openings to Iran as "dangerous," adding, "I don't think I should make judgments about this administration. My role is to bring this case to the people's attention. It is so easy to go from engagement and talks and the atmosphere to make it easier for Iran to make nuclear weapons and take tough measures against dissidents."

Sharansky was in the U.S. to build support for a hard line against Iran. He appeared with Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) at an event sponsored by the Middle East Forum, which is run by top neo-con Daniel Pipes. Santorum had recently authored an amendment—which was defeated—to authorize \$100 million for the Iranian opposition. Sharansky also spoke at an event sponsored by the neo-con Heritage Foundation.

Bibi Making a Political Comeback

Since Netanyahu's decisive defeat in the March 28 elections, in which Likud's Knesset seats dropped to 12 from 40, "Bibi" Netanyahu's political career has been as comatose as former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. At first glance, Bibi, now leader of the opposition, appears an unlikely instrument for Cheney to use in launching a U.S.-Israeli strike against Iran or any other adventure. Yet Netanyahu's political fortunes, with a little help from his friends, like George Shultz and Dick Cheney, could change over the next months.

Israeli political observers see the cohabitation government, comprised of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's neo-liberal Kadima and Defense Minister Amir Peretz's social-oriented Labor Party, and two other parties, does not make for a stable government, and will not serve out its full four-year term. Kadima, founded by Sharon, and made up of a mixture of opportunists and dissidents who split from the Likud and Labor parties, is even more unstable than Olmert's coalition. Although no one will put money on a new election for at least another two years, there are strong reasons for Netanyahu to hope for the break-up of Olmert's coalition, with the Labor Party exiting, and bringing Bibi into the government.

In the first two weeks of June, Netanyahu made moves to put himself back on the political map. First, just prior to meeting with Cheney, he convinced Olmert to convene a forum of former Prime Ministers to advise him on the danger posed by

Iran. The forum, which met soon after Olmert returned from the U.S., consisted of Ehud Barak, Shimon Peres, and Netanyahu. The *Jerusalem Post* of June 19 noted that, as Prime Ministers, these three were the only political leaders who were fully briefed on “certain historical aspects of the nuclear policy [of Israel], agreements and assurances that bind and secure Israel to this day and in the future.” The content of their meeting was kept secret, but it is widely reported that Iran was at the top of the agenda. In past statements, Barak has “counseled a cautious tack on Iran,” Peres is known to be willing to wait out the diplomatic process, and Netanyahu has “urged preemptive action.”

The meeting’s other purpose was to bypass Defense Minister Amir Peretz (Labor Party), who has become the victim of an unprecedented campaign of criticism since taking office only a few weeks ago. After the former prime ministers’ meeting, the daily *Yedioth Ahronoth* published a cartoon showing Olmert, Barak, Peres, and Netanyahu discussing “Getting rid of Amir Peretz.” For the hawks, it is an absolute necessity to get rid of Peretz. During the election campaign, Peretz was quoted in a press interview as saying if the military option against Iran came on the table, he would do everything in his power to prevent such a disastrous course of action.

Building a New Fascist Party

Netanyahu is now working to transform the Likud from a right-wing party into an all-out fascist party. In his first major interview since his election defeat, which *Ha’aretz* published June 3, Bibi laid out his new campaign line. This time it will not be Jabotinsky’s Greater Land of Israel, but a populist campaign around fighting corruption within Israel—not the small corruption of politicians giving out jobs to their cronies (which the Likud has been accused of), but the big corruption in which politicians took bribes for selling state assets to big private business interests, and in government procurement, and became millionaires while in government. He was obviously alluding to Sharon, who remains in a coma and unable to refute the charge, and to Sharon’s successor, Olmert.

Netanyahu borrowed his other theme from one of his mentors, British intelligence Middle East expert Bernard Lewis: the clash of civilizations between radical Islam and the West. Comparing radical Islam to Nazism, he said, “We are now facing a species of Islam that rejects compromise and coexistence and believes in the need to bend rivals to its will by force of the sword. . . . When the sword possessed by those Muslims becomes a nuclear sword, the world will be a different place. All of humanity will find itself at a different point in history. . . . We will find ourselves facing new barbarians. Facing a challenge the likes of which Western civilization has never before known. . . . Two demonic forces in human existence are about to merge: The dark side of human nature and nuclear weapons. . . . This is a turning point in human history.” He declared that Iran must be prevented from gain-

ing nuclear weapons at all costs, “We must be prepared for the possibility that we will have to defend ourselves with our own forces.”

Within ten days, the Israeli press reported that Netanyahu crony and Member of Knesset Yisrael Katz (Likud), was plotting to unite Likud with the ethnic Russian party Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel Our Home), led by fascist populist Avigdor Liberman, under the name “Likud Our Home.” If successful, the new party would have 24 seats, making it the second largest party in the Knesset.

“Liberman became more moderate than the Likud in the last elections,” one Likud official told Ynet on June 13. “I am not sure it will be that difficult to convince him to join Likud. This will be his chance to turn himself into the legitimate leader of a large political body. For Bibi, this could be his opportunity to ‘swallow’ Israel Our Home and lead a large party.”

What “more moderate” means for Liberman, is that he would support the withdrawal of some Israelis from the West Bank if Israeli Arabs withdraw from Israel. Moreover, Liberman had been a Likud member and served as chief of bureau in the Prime Minister’s Office under Netanyahu. It is believed Liberman left Likud to form his party as a stalking horse to build support in the Russian community for Netanyahu. His political advisor during the last elections was U.S.-based consultant Arthur Finkelstein, who had previously advised both Netanyahu and Sharon in Israeli elections, as well as New York Republicans, former Sen. Alfonse D’Amato and Gov. George Pataki.

On his return from Colorado, Netanyahu moved to split the World Likud Organization when its annual congress in Jerusalem failed to elect his candidate, MK Yuval Steinitz, in favor of the Likud youth group World Betar chairman Danny Danon, who represents the traditional Jabotinskyite line that rejects any withdrawal from the Occupied Territories, which is the position of many Likud members and supporters outside Israel. Steinitz, by contrast, is a straight Netanyahu crony and has a hard-line position on Iran. Netanyahu is expected to form a “New International Likud” with someone like Sharransky as head.

With Likud holding a huge debt of \$40 million, Netanyahu has been seeking new financial support from Russian-Israeli tycoon Arkadi Gaydamak, a reputed arms dealer, who is currently under investigation for suspected money laundering through Bank Hapoalim. Due to his unsavory reputation, Israel’s top politicians avoid him. But it did not stop Bibi from meeting him at the high-profile King David Hotel on June 13. Gaydamak owns two of the Israel’s leading football and basketball teams, and spreads his charitable contributions far and wide throughout Israeli society, to build a considerable base of support. Gaydamak—who tried to launch his own political party, Betar, a name often associated with Likud—would serve as a valuable asset to the type of fascist party Netanyahu is trying to build.