

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نېاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

Asia times Onlin

Deep undercurrents stir in the Middle East

By Victor Kotsev

7/29/2010

On the surface, the Middle East is so still it is almost unbelievable. Not that nothing is happening, on the contrary, but the comparison with just a few weeks ago is enough to raise an eyebrow. Back then, amid military maneuvers and loud threats, every other analyst (including this one, though with some caution [1] was predicting an imminent flare-up.

So far, not only has the cataclysm not happened, but the voices have quieted down somewhat. "Plainly I was wrong," writes Bret Stephens for the Wall Street Journal, discussing his earlier prediction of an Israeli strike on Iran [2].

There is some violence in Gaza; recently, we hear a lot from Hezbollah in Lebanon, too, as the Shi'ite organization keeps getting entangled in various intrigues. There is also vague talk about conservative pressure on US President [Barack Obama](#) and the military option against Iran being back on the table for the US administration.

An American attack on Iran "seems inexorable", former [Central Intelligence Agency](#) chief Michael Hayden said on Sunday, but he did not give a specific time frame. Moreover, we remain to hear anything nearly as strong from a current administration official, and there are good reasons to believe that any American attack on Iran would be preceded by a very clear public relations effort. (We do hear a bit more in counter-threats from Iran, whose President Mahmud Ahmadinejad proclaimed on Tuesday that America was planning to attack two Middle East countries in the next three months, without offering any further details.)

In other words, the focus of the discussion has moved away from an imminent Israeli

strike on Iran, shifting toward a possible American operation. In addition, much of what occupies the media attention in the Middle East consists of the usual rumors about the health of [Egyptian President](#) Hosni Mubarak, the Palestinian peace process, and the tribunal into the assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafik Hariri. These, in turn, may contain important clues about where things are headed, but it's hard to avoid the impression: business as usual.

Such a silence could mean one of two things: either there is a chance that the war clouds will blow away, or this is a deceptive calm, intended to allow an opportunity for some intense last-minute negotiations and preparations for a strike. The former seems more likely to happen by chance rather than deliberation. At this point, all the main actors have so much invested in a status quo that is, essentially, a collision course, that a backing down by any side is hardly conceivable.

For all its shows of strength, the Iranian regime appears to be feeling the pressure of sanctions and to be facing grave danger at home [3]. This is hardly a moment when Ahmadinejad can afford to back down on the foreign policy front, particularly given that an attack on his country is probably one of the very few things that can rally Iranians behind him. The Israeli government, although in a very different position, is also trapped by its own promises to halt the Iranian nuclear program.

Cracks are already visible between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman. Given how many compromises with other parts of his pre-election program he has already made, Netanyahu is no doubt haunted by the specter of his own political calamity a decade ago, when he tried to backtrack from some of his right-wing commitments and was booted out of office.

Obama also has much invested in frustrating Iran's nuclear ambitions. With mid-term [election](#) season in full swing, he is coming under increasing domestic fire from conservatives. Moreover, key American allies in the Middle East such as [Saudi Arabia](#) (and to a lesser extent Egypt) see the Iranian nuclear program as an even greater existential threat than Israel, and consequently are doing their best to spur the US administration into action. According to Israeli intelligence analysis site Debka, the [Saudi king recently presented Obama with a stern ultimatum: "We cannot live with a nuclear Iran."](#)

It could be, nevertheless, that a collision is being avoided by chance, or by various unexpected circumstances and misunderstandings. Bret Stephens' account of the history of the Iranian standoff, cited above, is particularly illustrative in this respect. What we have before us is an intense conflict involving a number of powerful interests, and it is good to keep in mind the following principle of history (passed down to the author by a mentor at Duke University, who in turn inherited it from his mentor, Harold Parker): "Very often, out of the conflict of wills arose a result that no one had willed." However, that said, we would be very unwise to bank on a result nobody seems to want.

It is practically certain that intense preparations for an attack and difficult negotiations

between all the major parties involved are going on as we speak. It is hard to predict the result of these, given how little reliable information on them is being made public, and this is perhaps the main reason behind the comparative silence on this issue over the past few weeks. However, it is safe to assume that all the other issues that are made public reflect in some way the course of the backstage bargaining, and it is worth taking a look at these.

For example, there is Lieberman's Gaza disengagement plan. Ten or so days ago, the controversial Israeli foreign minister, known for his right-wing views, surprised everybody by suggesting that Israel disengage from Gaza according to all regulations of international law, that it close the land border and leave the enclave to the Europeans to police [4].

The idea was practically drowned in criticism from all sides, including Hamas [5]. Its main supporter turned out to be Lieberman's similarly controversial deputy, Danny Ayalon, whose praise spurred Israeli journalist Doron Rosenblum to write in the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz: "The more he spoke, the stronger the impression that the summary rejection and the hopelessness of the proposal were actually what led to it being embraced by him so passionately."

The most obvious explanation for Lieberman's announcement was that he wanted to get back at Netanyahu and to put pressure on him not to part with right-wing policies. A month ago, the prime minister went around Lieberman by sending Trade Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer to secretly negotiate the Free Gaza aid flotilla incident with Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu.

When Lieberman, who at the time was advocating a hard line against Turkey, learned of this, he went ballistic. It was "extremely serious ... that this was done without notifying the Foreign Ministry," he claimed. "This goes against all norms of government and does serious harm to the trust between the foreign minister and the prime minister."

Why exactly a Gaza disengagement plan, however much of a bluff, would be a way to get back at Netanyahu is a more curious question. The answer is that this was probably more of a warning than revenge per se. Such a plan, if proposed seriously, would disturb the Egyptians more than anybody else.

In 1967, Israel conquered Gaza from Egypt, and there is a vocal Israeli right-wing minority that advocates "the Egyptian option": leaving Gaza to Egypt to be dealt with by Egypt's government. Cairo, as it feels an intense internal threat from the mother organization of Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, is none too happy with this possibility.

Consequently, such talk coming from an Israeli minister could undermine the relationship between the two countries. This, in turn, is the last thing that Netanyahu wants, particularly right after he has lost one key ally in the Middle East (Turkey). Netanyahu badly needs the support of Egypt to deal with Hamas in Gaza and, to a lesser extent, with

Iran's proxy Hezbollah in Lebanon. Lieberman, on the other hand, has little to lose (the Egyptians have spurned him, in any case).

Lieberman also could hardly have been oblivious to the peace process when making his plan known, at the very least including an element of a veiled threat against Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas ("we can further sever Gaza from the West Bank and your authority").

In any case, his announcement coincided with mounting international pressure on Abbas to return to the negotiating table. Recently, the Israeli newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth reported that US officials had said of Abbas, "If he wants Obama to help, then he needs to go to direct talks."

Abbas, on his part, has continued to resist. "The entire world is asking us to go for direct negotiations," he claimed on Sunday, "but going to negotiations without a clear reference might make them collapse from the first moment." (By "reference" he means "that he would enter direct talks only if progress was first achieved on the future borders and security of a Palestinian state," according to a Jerusalem Post report [6].

Netanyahu immediately slammed him. "[First] they said it was the [settlement] freeze, now it's the borders issue," he complained, quoted by Ha'aretz, adding that "[the PA are] stalling direct talks and relying on the Arab League for support".

This picture is curiously flipped over, however, if we question what the relationship is between the peace talks and an attack on Iran. That depends, to a large extent, on if and how Hamas gets involved, and on what happens to Gaza.

While a successful strike on Iran would likely strengthen Abbas and the peace talks in the long term, it is just as likely that the turmoil would force a pause on this specific round of negotiations. The Palestinian leader is notoriously weak domestically; for him to backtrack on his preconditions, in the face of strong internal pressure to take a harder line, would already be a major gamble.

For him to do that and get nothing in return in the short- to mid-term would be political suicide. Thus, if he saw war was coming (or if he believed for some other reason that the negotiations would go nowhere), the best way for him to behave would be as he is behaving now.

On the northern Israeli front, too, there is tumult as Hezbollah appears to have come under duress from several sides. Firstly, there is the Hariri tribunal. "I was personally informed by Prime Minister [Saad] Hariri that the tribunal will accuse some undisciplined members [of Hezbollah]," said the organization's leader, Hassan Nasrallah. He reacted hysterically, vowing to protect the "resistance" and calling the investigation "an Israeli project".

Secondly, Debka reported, a Saudi initiative is afoot to "to tempt Syrian President Bashar

al-Assad to phase out his support for Hezbollah in return for Saudi and Gulf recognition of his dominant role in Beirut" [7]. Nasrallah is expected to do his utmost to derail the attempt.

Thirdly, a series of incidents between Hezbollah-affiliated civilians and the [United Nations](#) Interim Force in Lebanon peacekeepers in the south forced Lebanese Premier Hariri to beef up the army presence there, and this led to international condemnation.

Finally, Israel recently turned up the heat on Hezbollah by circulating new accusations backed by declassified intelligence of the group's military buildup in Lebanon [8]. While this can be interpreted as a warning rather than an aggression, it is hard to avoid the fact that Hezbollah is an important rung in Iran's defensive strategy, and the warning might be part of the pressure on the Shi'ite organization to keep its cool in the event of an attack.

In brief, despite a deceptive calm, the Middle East is very much seething under the surface. It is hard to say what exactly will happen and when exactly it will happen, but it is reasonable to expect a flurry of developments, many of them soon.

- Notes**
1. [Weather clears for a US strike on Iran](#), July 3, 2010, Asia Times Online
 2. [Why Hasn't Israel Bombed Iran \(Yet\)?](#), July 20, Wall Street Journal
 3. ['Even the Regime Hates the Regime'](#), June 11, Foreign Policy
 4. [FM presents: 2nd disengagement from Gaza](#), July 16, Israel News
 5. [Hamas rejects Lieberman's plan](#), July 16, Israel News
 6. [Abbas: 'Entire world' wants direct talks](#), July 25, Jerusalem Post
 7. [Hizballah raises Mideast tension to sabotage four Arab rulers' Beirut visit Friday](#), July 26, DEBKAFfile
 - 8.