

Why Condi's Anti-Shi'ite Alliance Won't Work

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

As wild speculations are making the rounds in world capitals about possible changes in Iraq policy, in the wake of the electoral defeat of the Bush-Cheney regime and the ouster of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, one insane option, known as the anti-Shi'ite coalition, has been sneaked onto the agenda by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. If this project were to be realized, it would not only accelerate the widening civil conflict inside Iraq, but draw neighboring forces into a region-wide war along sectarian lines.

While Rice's name has been publicly associated with this new lame-brain scheme, the actual authorship comes from the usual cabal of neo-conservatives who once championed the Shi'ites as the "change agents" for Middle East democracy—before Iraq turned to Hell-on-Earth. Some of these neo-cons have turned into sharp critics of the Bush-Cheney Administration, in a supreme act of hypocrisy and duplicity that reflects their survival strategy into the post-Bush-Cheney era, as both a dominant faction within the Republican Party, and as born-again conservative Democrats (see accompanying article).

Rice's GCC+2 Wingding

Rice first floated the idea of pulling together a new "coalition" of "moderate" Arab states, ostensibly to jump-start the peace process between Palestine and Israel, during a regional tour in early October. The "new configuration," which she dubbed the "GCC+2," was to be made up of the Gulf Cooperation Council members (Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Qatar), plus Egypt and Jordan—Arab countries considered allies of the United States "I do think that the GCC+2 effort is new," she said on Oct. 2, "and it gives us an opportunity, in a new configuration, to work with the moderate states and the moderate voices in the region." Then she added, "That configuration can be quite powerful in resisting extremist forces as well." The "extremist

forces" are identified as Hezbollah and other Shi'ite movements, as well as the Palestinian Hamas, all considered to be under the leadership of Iran.

Rice put the option on the table, at a meeting of foreign ministers of her self-styled GCC+2, in Cairo on Oct. 3. On that occasion, she made clear that the "new configuration" was to be wielded as a weapon against Iran. Arab sources reported to *EIR* that Rice essentially informed her interlocutors of Washington's decision to attack Iran, and asked for their support, not only politically, but logistically; the GCC includes countries with U.S. military bases that would be used in such a new war.

Turning Point: Lebanon

Significantly, Rice presented her idea with reference to the disastrous Israeli war against Lebanon, which had taken place in July-August. She said that that conflict had brought to the fore a rift between the "moderate" and the "extremist" states in Southwest Asia.

The rift was indeed there: In the first post-Lebanon War meeting of the Arab League states, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt tried to lay the blame for Israel's attack and invasion of Lebanon on the Hezbollah, whose forces had captured two Israeli soldiers crossing into Lebanese territory. As the war progressed, and Hezbollah emerged victorious, that movement, and especially its leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrullah, became the heroes of the Arab and Islamic world, including among Christians. This forced the governments in Riyadh, Amman, and Cairo to rethink and reformulate their position, at least in form.

The significance of the Lebanon War of 2006 cannot be understated. It had been envisioned by the Israelis and their sponsors in the Cheney camp, as a prelude to the planned assault against Iran. Hezbollah was viewed, rightly, as an Iranian-backed and trained militia, which would, in the event



State Dept./Josie Duckett

Secretary Rice meeting with Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal on Oct. 2. Condi is attempting to mobilize a “new configuration,” including Sunni leaders such as the Saudis, against Iran, the Shi’ites, and Hezbollah.

of an attack on Iran, immediately mobilize its forces against Israel. Thus, knocking out Hezbollah was considered the precondition for the war against Tehran.

The plan backfired. Israel was not only militarily defeated, but humiliated. Its vaunted air offensive failed to destroy Hezbollah’s rocket-launching capabilities, and its land offensive failed to occupy and hold any significant site; the casualties the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) sustained were disproportionately high, and those of Hezbollah, despite the war propaganda, relatively low; and the proclaimed aims of the war—to free the two captured soldiers—were nowhere in sight. In-depth studies of the war have brought to light the superiority of Hezbollah forces in intelligence (they succeeded in “turning” Israeli spies, and in intercepting Israeli coded communications); in training and tactics (they succeeded in firing rockets and removing the launchers to safety within 60 seconds); in weaponry; and, above all, in determination and morale.

With a total force of 3,000 highly trained, dedicated troops in the Nasr Brigade, Hezbollah maintained the resistance for

34 days, against not only IDF regulars, but also 15,000 called-up reserves. It was reportedly in a position to continue fighting for another three months, and to continue firing rockets into Israel. (See Alastair Crooke and Mark Perry, “How Hezbollah Defeated Israel,” *Asia Times*, Oct. 16.)

As a result, those Arab governments—Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia—which initially supported the Israeli attack (and reportedly endorsed an Israeli plan to assassinate Hezbollah’s Nasrullah), found themselves threatened by opposition movements in their own countries, which had taken up the banner of Hezbollah’s fight. In polls conducted throughout the region, Arabs who were asked to name their favorite political leader, put Nasrullah as number one, and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (who is not an Arab) as number two.

Fallacy of Composition

Why should the governments of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt have been tempted to support the Israeli attack against Hezbollah? How could they even consider Condi Rice’s crazy scheme for an “axis of good” vs. an “axis of evil”?

Whatever else may be working in these strange machinations, the underlying ideological, political problem is that leading circles in Cairo, Riyadh, and Amman confuse the rising power and regional stature of Iran, with a “Shi’ite danger.” Jordanian King Abdallah II spoke in alarming terms of a “Shi’ite crescent” which he said was forming, in the wake of the establishment of a Shi’ite-majority government in Iraq. This crescent, he said, would stretch from Iran, across Iraq to Lebanon. In addition, the stunning victory of Hezbollah against Israel is viewed by these governments as a threat, because mass-based political movements in their own countries—whether Shi’ite or not—have been energized by that victory, to demand radical political change. As reported in *Middle East Online* Oct. 25, a leading Saudi cleric, Salman al-Udeh, came out with a dramatic warning, that, due to the mounting popularity of Hezbollah, and the situation in Iraq, Sunnis are converting to Shi’ism in waves. Speaking to al-Jazeera TV on Oct. 23, he said, “This allegiance [to Shi’ism] turns in many cases into a fertile soil to be exploited. . . .” He went on to attack Iran, which, he said, “has flagrantly dipped its hand into Iraq’s affairs.”

The knee-jerk response to this perceived Iranian regional power *qua* “Shi’ite threat,” has been to nurture the idea of a Sunni power bloc, embracing Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan, and stretching into Iraq.

It is in this light, that one can understand the calls by Jordanian King Abdallah II, for rebuilding the Iraqi Army on the basis of former Ba’ath Party officers, not completely compromised by the former regime. Thus, too, the moves toward reversing the disastrous de-Ba’athification process imposed by then-U.S. proconsul Paul Bremer in the immediate aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. On Nov. 7, the Iraqi Supreme National Commission for de-Ba’athification



Sheikh Hassan Nasrullah, leader of the Lebanon's Shi'ite Hezbollah movement, now viewed as heroes in the Islamic world, following its victory against Israel in the Lebanon War.

announced that it was sending a draft law with amendments to parliament for ratification. The law would move toward rehabilitating Ba'ath Party members who had been banned from public service under Bremer.

This move, which must have been made with the consensus of the occupying powers, appears to go in the right direction, in that it would allow former Ba'ath Party members to be reintegrated into civil service. Other reports of talks aimed at reconciliation with leaders of the Sunni resistance, initiated by the Iraqi government as well as by the occupying powers, dovetail with this process.

All this would be laudable, were it not for the fact that key forces inside the United States, along with co-thinkers among the "moderate" Arabs and the Israelis, view such a Sunni revival not as a step towards national reconciliation, but as a move against Iran. A rehabilitated Sunni political (and military) force in Iraq is seen by these outside forces, as a battering ram to be mobilized against the Shi'ites, within the larger planned attack on Iran.

Were such a scenario to be implemented, it would rapidly accelerate the process of civil war already unleashed inside Iraq, to overwhelm the region. Sunni forces in those countries named, would be mobilized, and Shi'ite communities in Saudi Arabia, Bahrein, Kuwait, and other Persian Gulf countries would respond.

On the Drawing Board

None of this is hypothetical. In Washington, D.C., just days prior to the elections, the issue was at the center of a public forum with Akiva Eldar, a leading Israeli pro-peace journalist, and Nematt Salameh, the Washington bureau chief of the London-based Saudi daily *al-Hayat*. The two were featured speakers at a forum of the Middle East Institute, the American Friends of Peace Now, and the Middle East Peace

Forum. In their opening remarks, as well as in extensive discussion thereafter, both speakers said that the "moderate" Arabs—i.e., the Saudis, Egyptians, and Jordanians—considered a nuclear-armed Iran to constitute a greater threat than [a nuclear-armed] Israel. They went so far as to assert that a U.S. or U.S.-Israeli attack on Iran, to take out the country's purported nuclear weapons program, would be quietly applauded by the Arab regimes. The *al-Hayat* bureau chief added that during the Lebanon War, Arab heads of state had been quietly hoping that the Israelis would kill Hezbollah leader Sheikh Nasrullah, whom they view as an Iranian puppet.

Washington sources, in discussion with *EIR*, have pointed to the role of former Saudi Ambassador to the United States, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, as an architect of this Arab-Israeli grouping against Iran, and as the contact point for the Cheney group in the Bush Administration (see article, this issue: "Cheney and Neo-Cons Plotting More Wars.")

EIR's Jeffrey Steinberg had questioned Eldar and the *al-Hayat* bureau chief at the Washington event, noting that a vast number of U.S. military, intelligence, and diplomatic experts had come out against any military action against Iran, arguing that it would not succeed, and would trigger asymmetric warfare all over the globe. Eldar made it clear that he personally preferred a diplomatic solution to the Iran nuclear issue, but clearly the Arab-Israeli support for a U.S. strike against Iran is "in the air" throughout the region.

Significantly, *al-Hayat* journalist Salameh has a pedigree identifying him as close to the war party in the United States. He worked at the pro-government (and pro-American) *al-Rai* and *Jordan Times* in Amman, did a stint in London, and now has become the D.C. correspondent for the Saudi paper.

A few days after this forum, on Nov. 8, the neo-con mouthpiece *Washington Times* published an op-ed by William Hawkins, with a similar line of argument. The author, described as a senior fellow in national security studies at the U.S. Business and Industry Council, called for a Sunni alliance against Iran and the Shi'ites.

Inside Iraq today, Hawkins wrote, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki would have to rise above Shia partisanship, if he wanted to be a national ruler. Al-Maliki, he said, is too closely aligned with Shi'ite leader Moqtada al-Sadr and the Mahdi Army, considered agents of Iran. Hawkins wrote that if al-Maliki were not ready to declare war on al-Sadr and his militia, then the United States should consider shifting its support to the Sunnis. Although the Sunnis are a minority in Iraq, they are a majority in the Muslim world.

While rehabilitating nationalist, patriotic Sunni figures in Iraq, is a precondition for providing the political and military leadership for a strong Iraq, it must be promoted as part of a process of national reconciliation, including Shi'ites, Kurds, Turkmen, etc., which must be endorsed and reinforced by all neighboring countries, emphatically including Iran, with its Shi'ite majority, as well as Sunni Turkey and Syria.