

Behind the Cheney Trip to Riyadh

by Jeffrey Steinberg

This memorandum was released on Nov. 27.

A well-placed and highly reliable source has provided the following account of Vice President Dick Cheney's Nov. 25, 2006 visit to Saudi Arabia. The report coincides with other evidence of a scheme to induce the United States to self-destruct. While the source may have missed some elements of the picture emerging from the Cheney visit, the essential details appear to be accurate. As will be clear when you read below, all sane forces inside the United States and elsewhere must react to these latest Cheney actions in the most effective preemptive fashion.

The source reported:

1. The essential message delivered to Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah by Vice President Cheney was that there is no basis for dialogue with Iran. The U.S. position in the region has been weakened, and therefore a new security architecture must be established, particularly in the Persian Gulf, to contain and counter Iran's growing influence. Already, NATO has been in dialogue with Qatar and Kuwait, in pursuit of upgraded cooperation. Cheney proposed to establish a new regional balance of power, through a Sunni Arab alliance with Israel, to confront the Iranian threat. Cheney argued that to negotiate with Iran at this time would be tantamount to surrender. A new military organization will be built, involving the Gulf Cooperation Council states, Egypt and Jordan. NATO and the United States will be closely involved, and Israel will be a de facto participant. These moves led by Cheney obviously aim to preempt adoption by the Bush Administration of any recommendations from the Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group, to initiate diplomatic talks with Iran.

2. Cheney took the lead in proposing this new security architecture. There is, at this point, a consensus inside the Bush Administration to pursue this policy. When President Bush arrives later this week in Amman, Jordan, to meet with Iraq's Prime Minister al-Maliki, he may also hold secret talks with several senior Syrian officials. In that meeting, President Bush will bluntly offer Syria the opportunity to break its ties to Iran and join in the emerging Sunni Arab bloc.

3. The approach to Syria coincides with a major effort, within Lebanon, to force Michel Aoun to break his alliance with Hezbollah, in the wake of the assassination of Industry Minister Pierre Gemayel. Over the weekend, there was a meeting of leading Maronites, sponsored by Patriarch Sfair,



White House/David Bohrer

Vice President Dick Cheney tries to sell the Brooklyn Bridge to King Abdullah in Riyadh on Nov. 25.

aimed at tightening the pressure on Aoun to break with Hezbollah, and join a Sunni Arab, Christian, Druze coalition to counter Hezbollah's power. Were the Syrians to accept the Bush offer (highly unlikely), they would be expected to pressure Hezbollah to disarm, as a condition for negotiations to get the Golan Heights back from Israel.

4. Condi Rice's planned meeting with Mahmoud Abbas and Ehud Olmert is aimed at kick-starting the Israeli-Palestinian talks. But the key to the Israeli policy will be to complete the construction of the separation wall, and to build similar walls of separation along the border with Lebanon. The argument is that both Hamas and Hezbollah represent extensions of Iran's influence into the areas bordering on Israel, and they must be contained. The "peace" offer being put on the table will center on these walls of separation.

5. Iran is already aware of these Cheney-led initiatives. While Arab governments will assume that Iran will react and respond to the attempt to create this Sunni Arab-U.S.-Israel security architecture to confront Iran by playing for sectarian conflict in Iraq, Lebanon, and elsewhere, sources caution that Iran is taking a more sophisticated view. Recurring statements by President Ahmadinejad are calculated to instigate an Israeli attack on Iran's purported nuclear weapons sites. Iran anticipates some kind of attack on these sites—either by the United States or Israel. Iran would prefer an Israeli attack for several reasons. First, the U.S. has far more significant military capabilities to strike Iran than Israel does. Second, any Israeli attack on a Muslim country would trigger a revolt on the Arab streets. Iran carefully studied the response of the population throughout the Persian Gulf and Arab world to the Israeli attacks on Lebanon this Summer. They anticipate massive Arab support, across the sectarian Shi'ite-Sunni divide, for Iran, in the event of an Israeli strike.