

With Congress in Tow, AIPAC Targets Iran

by William Jones

Still licking its wounds from the scandal involving three of its key members, including Iran expert Larry Franklin, on suspicion of giving secrets to Israel, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) is trying to proceed as if it never happened, and is setting its sights on beating the hustings for military action against Iran. The 5,000 people who gathered for AIPAC's annual conference in Washington on March 11 underwent a pretty intensive brainwashing around the Iran nuclear issue. And that there were still dozens of Congressmen and Senators who came to its Gala Banquet, indicates that AIPAC may be down, but is by no means out.

Ironically, the delegates were subjected the first evening to a rip-roaring harangue from that wild Christian fundamentalist preacher John Hagee, who represents the top echelon in the Christian Zionist cult. While many of the delegates may have been brought close to The Rapture by Hagee's rants about the biblical Israel, there were still a few skeptics who thought that the preacher may still have on his agenda the conversion of these "lost souls," and deemed it somewhat inappropriate to have Hagee address the conference. Hagee had himself been bowled over by AIPAC's success with the U.S. Congress and Administration, and has set himself the goal of forming a Christian AIPAC, which might wield the same influence in Washington. AIPAC members ought to be wary however: If Hagee succeeds in his endeavor, his new-found ecumenism may be quickly transformed into a veritable Inquisition.

There was, as is usual, a strong Israeli government presence at the AIPAC conference, with Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and Defense Minister Amir Peretz in attendance. While Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert remained in Jerusalem, he did address the delegates in a live video appearance.

The main player from the Bush Administration was Vice President Dick Cheney—licking his wounds from the recent Libby conviction—who spoke on the morning of March 12. Cheney, who was given a cordial, albeit not terribly warm reception, used the occasion to attack the legislation Democrats have introduced to place strictures on the Iraq War deployment. "Other threats have been made that would hamper the war effort and interfere with the operational authority of the President and with our military commanders," Cheney

said. “They too are counterproductive and send exactly the wrong message. When members of Congress pursue an anti-war strategy that’s been called slow bleed, they’re not supporting the troops, they are undermining them. And when members of Congress speak not of victory, but of time limits—[applause]—when members speak not of victory but of time limits, deadlines or other arbitrary measures, they’re telling the enemy simply to watch the clock and wait us out.”

Cheney urged the delegates to put pressure on their Congressmen during their lobbying day to prevent them from voting for the Democratic bill. In an outrageous interference in U.S. internal affairs, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, in a video appearance later that evening, pushed the same line as the Vice President, claiming that any lack of success by the United States in Iraq would endanger the security of Israel. Many were those who commented that Olmert’s intervention was really an interference in the internal affairs of another country, i.e., the United States. But, of course, that is what AIPAC was precisely set up to do.

Bush Given Free Pass on Iran

Already prior to the conference, AIPAC had scored one major goal. They had succeeded in getting House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) to eliminate a clause from the Iraq

legislation, which would have forced the President to come back to Congress before launching any military action against Iran. This would have prevented the Administration from suddenly launching a strike against one or several of Iran’s military facilities, or responding to any of the possible “incidents” that might occur in the Persian Gulf, now packed with U.S. military hardware. Some of the AIPAC stalwarts in Congress, had raised a furor over this clause, claiming that restricting the military option would take pressure off Iran to come to the negotiating table, as if Iran would ever go anywhere at the point of a gun.

And Iran was really the center of attention during the two days of discussions. Also on March 12, Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.) presented his new Iran Counter-Proliferation Act of 2007, which would place even more draconian restrictions on Iranian exports to the United States, deprive Iran from using the banking system, and penalize any third-party countries that do business with Iran’s energy sector. The bill is also specifically aimed at the Russian collaboration on the Bushehr nuclear reactor, and would deprive the Russians of any nuclear cooperation with the United States if they continue that work.

Lantos appealed to the delegates to push hard for support for these sanctions, which would even be subject to opposition from some in the Bush Administration, since it would deprive the Administration of the right to waive the restrictions of the legislation for national security or other reasons. The Administration would thereby be deprived of any possibility of “softening” the sanctions if they felt this would lead to a productive result. The new sanctions would be a veritable straightjacket, targetting not only Iran, but also anyone willing to deal with Iran.

Israeli Foreign Minister Livni also gave her support to the Lantos measures. “Sanctions must be expanded without delay,” Livni said. Reviving the rhetoric of the Cold War, Livni continued, “The free world is being watched. The Middle East is a tough neighborhood. And when there is a bully in this neighborhood there are only two choices, to beat it or to join it. If states in the region feel that the world will not stop Iran, they may feel the need to appease it. We live in a region where images matter, and where the perception of weakness can have far-reaching consequences. If we appease the extremists, if they feel that we are backing down—they will sense victory and become more dangerous not only to the region, but to the world.”

In addition to the Lantos legislation, AIPAC chairman Howard Kohr also indicated that AIPAC would be targetting individual firms in the states which have investments in Iran to pressure them to divest, the California pension fund Calpers being one of its prime targets. But the psychosis generated at the AIPAC conference goes further than the “tough sanctions” gambit. By taking the Iran clause out of the House bill, Pelosi has given the Administration a free hand to launch military action against Iran at will.

What Is AIPAC?

AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee), created in 1954, is accurately referred to as the Israeli Lobby. According to a complaint with the Federal Election Commission in 1989, the Committee runs the activities of at least 27 pro-Israel Political Action Committees scattered throughout the United States. While AIPAC is not allowed by law to donate to political candidates, it evades the law by having key AIPAC officials set up “independent” PACs, which then bankroll candidates on the basis of AIPAC ratings.

On Aug. 4, 2005, two former top officials of AIPAC, Steven Rosen and Keith Weissman, were indicted on espionage charges. The same indictment included new spy charges against Pentagon desk officer and Air Force Reserve Colonel Lawrence Franklin.

The indictments unveiled an Israeli espionage network that has been functioning since at least April 1999, involving a number of Pentagon officials beyond Franklin, as well as at least three officials of the Israeli Embassy and a former senior Mossad officer, Uzi Arad, who now heads Israel’s premier national security think-tank, the Herzliya Interdisciplinary Center.