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Bush in Amman, Cheney in Saudi Arabia

Working Towards Replacing Shiite Maliki with a Sunni Premier



The sudden decision by President **George W. Bush** to spend next Wednesday and Thursday – Nov. 29-30 - in Amman and send Vice President **Dick Cheney** to Saudi Arabia Friday, Nov. 23, has three purposes.

They are revealed here by **DEBKA-Net-Weekly**. But don't expect the administration to admit to any

of them:

1. The pace of events in Iraq has substantially overtaken the decision-making process on Iraq and the Middle East in Washington. Bush and Cheney understand that time has run out and they had better get cracking on their revised strategy for Iraq now. Waiting for the Iraq Study Team to submit its final report on Dec. 10 is a luxury they cannot afford.

2. Washington must have a fast response in hand for the summit president **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad** has convened to bring Syrian and Iraqi presidents to Tehran this coming weekend. Iran's president is resolved to draw Syrian president **Bashar Asad** away from the temptation to play ball with the Americans and into Tehran's policy orbit on Iraq.

If Ahmadinejad pulls this off, he will have robbed the administration's new Iraq strategy of its keystone and the Baker-Hamilton commission of the grounding for its Iraq and Middle East recommendations.

The White House has been working on the premise that Damascus and Tehran are divided on Iraq. They rely on the report filed by British prime minister **Tony Blair's** senior political adviser **Nigel Sheinwald** on his talks with Asad in late October. He quoted the Syrian ruler as asserting that he and the Iranian government do not share an identity of political and military interests in Iraq.

This was the lead that Washington had been waiting for since the US invasion of Iraq nearly four years ago. (**DEBKA-Net-Weekly 276** covered the Sheinwald mission on Nov. 3, 2006.) It has raised US hopes for new horizons and solutions opening up for solving the Iraq crisis – if indeed Syria proves willing to go along with the United States and break ranks with Iran.

Cheney as repairman for fractured inter-Arab relations

3. Even if Syria does climb on board, an Iraq solution remains nebulous without co-opting the dominant Sunni Arab insurgent groups in Iraq. This is perhaps the most radical switch in the minds of Bush and his advisers: The Shiite-Kurdish solution for Iraq must now be jettisoned in favor of a Sunni Arab formula.

DEBKA-Net-Weekly's Middle East sources add that before reaching the finishing line of Iraqi Sunni and Syrian collaboration on Iraq, US leaders will have to climb over some lofty hurdles:

First: Saudi King Abdullah and the Syrian president have been at daggers



drawn for two months. This is where Cheney comes in. His must persuade the two rulers to bury the hatchet. His next task will be to rescue from the dustbin the Mecca Document which leading Iraqi Shiite and Sunni figures signed on October 22. This document consists of 10 items formulated in the hope of a sectarian reconciliation that would stem the violence in Iraq.

It has fallen by the wayside since then, because both signatories have not only given up on the effort to carry it through but are sunk deep in unimaginable reciprocal butchery. Shiite death squads are escalating the slaughter and abductions in and outside Baghdad. The Sunnis are matching the carnage, recruiting manpower across the Arab world to fight in a confrontation which regional Sunni Muslim Brotherhood clerics are calling the decisive Sunni Muslim battle for Iraq.

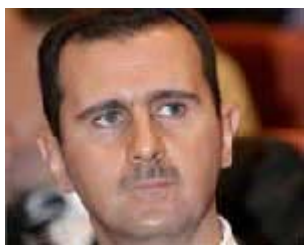
The Bush administration has come to accept that the Sunni Arab minority has nothing to lose by insurgency because of the way power is stacked in Baghdad. Therefore for a breakthrough, Iraqi Sunni Arabs must first regain top jobs in central government, the army, police and intelligence, together with influence and budgets.

For such US pledges to be credible in Sunni eyes, Bush and Cheney need guarantees that they seriously mean to follow through to be signed by the two Kings Abdullah in Amman and Riyadh, Syria's Assad and Egypt's **Hosni Mubarak**.

Second: To bring the four rulers together, Cheney will have to perform a second piece of fence-mending surgery on the fractured Mubarak-Asad relationship.

Damascus took the first tentative step Thursday, Nov. 23, by telling **Khaled Meshaal**, the hardline Hamas leader who operates out of Damascus, to get himself over to Cairo and talk to Egyptian officials about a Palestinian unity government after months of obstructing Cairo's efforts.

Turkey is roped in to bring Asad round



This unity government, a Hamas-Fatah coalition, is the prerequisite for the international conference proposed by the Iraq Study Group to have any chance of success. (More about this conference proposal in the next article) The road to pan-Arab cooperation on Iraq, say Baker and Hamilton, is contingent on Western recognition of the Palestinian government leading to a reactivated Palestinian-

Israeli peace process.

(This issue is also discussed in a separate article on the Baker-Hamilton draft.)

Third: Accepting the British reading of the division between Damascus and Tehran on Iraq as correct, Washington sees **Turkey** as the Sunni-dominated country closest to Syria. This premise brought **Brent Scowcroft**, former national security adviser to the first President Bush and an influential figure behind the Iraqi Study group, to Ankara to ask prime minister **Tayyep Erdogan** to persuade Assad to throw his weight behind the new American strategy for Iraq.

This approach restored Turkey to its former central role in determining US Middle East policy, three and-a-half years after being sidelined by the US invasion of Iraq, and placed Scowcroft at the hub of a pivotal US foreign policy gambit.

It is too soon to say how the former official's rise will affect the standing of secretary of state **Condoleezza Rice**.

Fourth: The US president has saddled himself with a task at least as arduous as that of the vice president in Riyadh: In the talks he plans to hold with the Iraqi prime minister **Nouri al-Maliki** in Amman, he must let it be known -

without saying so explicitly – that Washington is preparing the way for his exit from government.

Bush has concluded that any new momentum on Iraq is foredoomed to failure so long as government in Baghdad is ruled by a Shiite prime minister whom the Sunnis do not trust.

According to our sources in the US and Iraqi capitals, the two frontrunners for the premiership are former prime minister, **Iyad Allawi**, who officiated in 2004, and the deputy Iraqi president, **Abdul Mahdi**.

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The Baker-Hamilton Final Draft

No to US Pullout from Iraq. Yes to Détente with Syria – but not Iran. Yes, to Israeli Concessions



Former US secretary of state **James Baker** and ex-congressman **Lee Hamilton** have two writers, one each, working on the final drafts of their long-awaited recommendations on the Iraq crisis.

DEBKA-Net-Weekly's Washington sources reveal their identities as former US ambassador to Syria **Edward Djerejian**, who runs the Baker Institute in Houston, Texas, and **Michael Van Dusen**, Deputy Director of the Woodrow Wilson International

Center for Scholars.

Though representing the bipartisan nature of the study group, the two share a common expertise. Both are Syria connoisseurs. Djerejian and Van Dusen therefore talk the same language; they can swap their versions of the drafts, make mutual adjustments and, when they disagree on a point, bring it before the Baker-Hamilton duo for arbitration.

The group's deadline for final presentation to Congress is December 10.

The first draft was read by the **President George W. Bush**, Vice President **Dick Cheney** and top White House advisers, Secretary of State **Condoleezza Rice**, national security adviser **Stephen Hadley** and two deputies, **J.D. Crouch** and **Elliott Abrams**.

The president was not impressed.

When Bush assembled his top political and military advisers at the White House on Nov. 13, Bush, Cheney and several others voiced disappointment at not finding a single new thought or idea which had not been hashed over in their internal discussions on the next directions of the Iraq war. The President did not say much, but he let it be understood that he intends to treat the Baker-Hamilton findings as a domestic political document rather than a set of proposals for practical implementation.

Two extra divisions – or more – for Iraq

Influenced by Bush's response, the two task group leaders and their writers appear to have made an effort to inject into their final work content with international not to say practical Middle East applications.

Nowhere in the report, therefore, is a recommendation to gradually withdraw US forces from Iraq. According to **DEBKA-Net-Weekly's** sources, the group in its latest discussions moved close to adopting Senator **John McCain's** proposal to beef up the US army with a National Guard Division of some 20,000 men, which the



administration has already decided to accept. (See last week's **DEBKA-Net-Weekly 278**).

The group will propose sending another two full divisions, if not more, to Iraq.

The Baker-Hamilton commission is also engaged in a final examination of the proposals made by Senator **Joseph Biden** (D-Delaware) to divide Iraq into three sectors between Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds. Security will be relegated to the local military forces. The tendency in the group is to reject this idea.

DEBKA-Net-Weekly can disclose here the draft recommendations most likely to survive into the final document:

1. The **Nouri al-Maliki** government, labeled a failed force, should be replaced. How Washington should achieve this and obtain the requisite parliamentary approval is not defined.

At the same time, Bush's summit meetings next week in Amman with Arab leaders and Vice President Dick Cheney's mission to Saudi Arabia appear to bypass the report and respond to the far speedier Middle East tempo and the spiraling figures of the butchery in Iraq. A Bush interview with al-Maliki is therefore of prime importance.

To put it in perspective, **Stephen Hadley** told reporters Tuesday Nov. 21 not to expect "a big, bold announcement." He said the meeting will allow a joint commission examining how to speed up the transition from coalition to Iraqi security forces to report to Bush and al Maliki.

"It will also be an opportunity for the president and the prime minister to review the situation in Iraq more generally and talk about the way forward in order to accomplish... a move toward our objectives in an expeditious way."

Will Gemayel's murder affect the decision to court Syria?

The security adviser's explanation for the encounter does not account for the fact that Bush and the Iraqi prime minister last met on July 25 and have held two videoconference conversations since then.

2. Washington is urged to resume diplomatic relations with Syria and pick a prominent, influential Washington figure as ambassador.

Once again, after the assassination on Tuesday, Nov. 21, of the Lebanese minister Pierre Gemayel, the US president sounded as though he was out of step with the Baker-Hamilton report.

He said: "We support the Siniora government and its democracy, and we support the Lebanese people's efforts to defend their democracy against attempts by Syria, Iran and their allies to foment instability and violence in that important country."

It is by no means certain that, after the Gemayel assassination and the president's statement, the Iraqi Study Group will stick to its recommendation of a détente with Damascus. Most **DEBKA-Net-Weekly's** Washington sources believe that it will. Van Dusen and Djerejian believe staunchly that Syria is the key to a solution in Iraq and the Asad regime can only be persuaded to abandon its support for Sunni insurgents and terrorists by direct dialogue.

3. The group takes the opposite line on Iran, contrary to widely published purported leaks from its work. The Bush administration is urged to set aside any hope of UN Security Council sanctions to punish Tehran for its defiance on uranium enrichment. Instead it must push harder on the undercover sanctions already underway against Iran's economy, financial system, industry and banking. Washington is urged to exercise all its leverage on its allies - economic, military and industrial - to impose a total economic



embargo against Iran that will destabilize parts of its national economy and force it into stagnation.

Iran's Achilles heel: insufficient oil refining capacity

The most fruitful course indicated is to hit the Islamic Republic oil industry in its Achilles heel, its limited capacity for refining oil and processing its by-products.

Iran is forced to cover 50% of its domestic needs by imports, on which its armed forces and Revolutionary Guards, the backbone of the Islamic government, are dependent. Even a partial stoppage would cause the Iranian economy grave damage.

4. The Baker-Hamilton group recommends an international conference on Iraq attended by leaders from Europe, Russia, the Middle East, the Persian Gulf and the main Muslim nations.

DEBKA-Net-Weekly's Washington sources report that this conference would spend more time on the Palestinian-Israeli issue than on Iraq. The group's leaders claim that this is a sine qua non for the Arab leaders. Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other Arab participants will demand "progress on the Israel-Palestinian track" before letting the conference get down to brass tacks on Iraq.

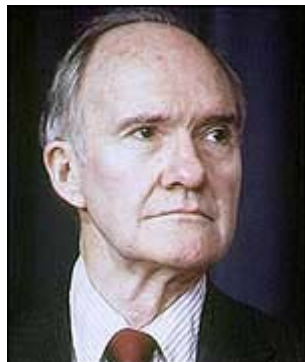
To lay the groundwork for the conference, therefore, Washington will have to give the international community free rein to squeeze Israel for far-reaching concessions to the Palestinians (and also Syria). This would require a diametric reversal of George Bush's previous warm attitude towards "our friend and ally" Israel, possibly even a reversion to the iciness displayed towards the Shamir government in the early 1990s by his father, whom James Baker served as secretary of state.

DEBKA-Net-Weekly's Washington informants disclose that another figure from the past has moved onto center-stage. He is **Brent Scowcroft**, national security adviser to presidents **Richard Nixon**, **Gerald Ford** and **George Bush Sr** (and mentioned in two other articles in this issue), who wields strong influence over the compilers of the final version of the Iraqi report.

His mindset was revealed in an interview he gave the Turkish Daily News of Nov. 9, 2006 when he visited Ankara as chairman of the American-Turkish Friendship League.

Question: You were opposed to the invasion of Iraq. Do you feel vindicated now that we see chaos there? How do you see the situation as it is today and what do you see for the future?

Scowcroft: Israel is in bad shape right now



Scowcroft: No, I don't have any feeling of satisfaction. Regardless of how we got there, we are there, and it is a difficult situation. Far more difficult than the administration expected. And it will be increasingly hard to stay in because it has become an unusually important issue in domestic US politics.

But I think we have to stay and try and manage the situation to get some kind of a resolution where we can have an Iraq that is relatively stable.

Our sources reveal that this sentiment is incorporated in the final recommendations of the Iraq Study Group.

Scowcroft went on to say: "I think we need to embed Iraq in a larger regional



solution, and that to me goes back to the Palestinian issue. I think this would put us back on the offensive psychologically and even make Iraq easier to manage.

He then linked this viewpoint to the notion of an international conference, saying: “But I don’t think this will start with some kind of a conference because everyone will come with their preset speeches and everything will freeze again. But I think that there will be some quiet consultations in the region. I believe the Arab states in the region are eager for such a conversation. Israel may not be eager, but Israel is in bad shape right now.”

Scowcroft was therefore the first American strategic thinker willing to say out loud what **DEBKA-Net-Weekly** has been reporting since early August, that George Bush and his key advisers have diagnosed Israel as being “in bad shape right now.”

Never considered a friend of Israel, Scowcroft’s attitude fits well into the main thrust of the Baker-Hamilton report.

This thrust has not been lost on some of Washington’s most influential figures. Both Baker and Hamilton received messages this week from Senator **John McCain**, a leading candidate for chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, **Tom Lantos** of California and the Democratic Senator **David Obey** from Wisconsin.

The main burden of those messages was that if the Iraqi Study Group takes its anti-Israel line too far, it will not win bipartisan endorsement.

5. DEBKA-Net-Weekly’s Middle East sources report that the United States has been holding quiet talks with the Palestinian leader **Mahmoud Abbas**, without Israel’s knowledge, on ways for the Palestinians to be integrated in the Bush administration’s revised Middle East strategy.

These talks tie in with the trip hardline Hamas leader **Khaled Meshaal** finally made to Cairo this week, which Abbas and Egyptian officials hope will clear the way for the creation of a Palestinian unity government and the end of the Western embargo.

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Pentagon Purge

Robert Gates Begins Axing Rumsfeld’s Men



Donald Rumsfeld is still US secretary of defense and running the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and on global terror. **Robert Gates** has not yet been confirmed by congress as his successor. Yet the nominee is not waiting to take his seat in the secretary’s office before applying a large broom to the Pentagon, a sign of impatience which has not gone down well in many parts of Washington.

DEBKA-Net-Weekly reports that Gates’ minions have been calling Rumsfeld’s top advisers and informing them the new man expects their resignations to be handed in without delay, because he would like them to be gone when he takes office.

These notices have been delivered, according to our sources in the US capital, to:

Jack Bell, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense

Stephen A. Cambone, Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence

Eric Edelman, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy

Gordon England, Deputy Secretary of Defense

Peter W. Rodman, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security

Affairs

When these top officials asked whether it would not be more advisable for them to stay on for an orderly handover to their replacements, they were told brusquely that Gates would like them to vacate their offices with all possible speed.

Our sources add that Rodman, one of outgoing defense secretary's closest aides, wasted no time and removed himself from his Pentagon office.

Washington insiders see Gates as acting not only to assert himself as the new boss of the Pentagon but also to quarantine Rumsfeld by sweeping out his loyalists in the weeks left him to serve as defense secretary.

Rumor mills are working overtime on the team Gates means to install in their place. They are expected to be drawn from the circle centering on Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser to three presidents. Some sources say the team will be handpicked by Scowcroft, James Baker, the former secretary of state and current leader of the Iraq Study Group, and Frank Carlucci, assistant secretary of defense in the Reagan administration. This trio will also decide on their functions under the new defense secretary.

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Who Murdered Pierre Gemayel?

A Majority Theory: Syria, to Break Lebanon in Two



No one in Beirut needed an investigation to be convinced that Syria's notorious military intelligence, which controlled the levers of power in Lebanon for decades, was behind the assassination Tuesday, Nov. 21, of the anti-Syrian minister of industry, **Pierre Gemayel**, 34-year old scion of an eminent Catholic Maronite clan.

The murder released a flood of anti-Syrian passions in the throng of hundreds of thousands of mourners who mobbed Beirut's Martyrs Square for the funeral Thursday, Nov. 23.

This is also the general consensus of Lebanon watchers in most Western intelligence agencies. They are familiar with the bloody record of Syria's military intelligence as the Asad regime's instrument of assassination.

They also point to four items of circumstantial evidence against Damascus:

1. It is common knowledge in these circles that Syrian president **Bashar Asad** will never submit to the international tribunal approved by the UN for trying the plotters and executors of the bombing attack which killed the former Lebanese prime minister **Rafiq Hariri** and 22 others in February 2005. Should this tribunal comes into being, as approved by the UN Security Council on the night of the Gemayel assassination, Syria will generate an environment of such chaos that the court will be unable to function. The Syrian ruler will go to any lengths to keep the heads of the Syrian government and intelligence, including his younger brother, head of the presidential guard **Maher Asad** and his brother-in-law, the strongman of Syrian military intelligence **Asaf Shawqat**, out of the dock.

The Gemayel murder has made every member of the anti-Syrian Siniora government realize that voting for a tribunal could cost him his life.

2. The Syrian masterminds who plotted the assassination miscalculated in their choice of target. Because young Gemayel was fairly low on the Beirut totem pole, his murder was not expected to become the catalyst for an outpouring of anti-Syrian outrage. Unlike top Lebanese politicians, he was not given armored cars or large bodyguards. He traveled simply with a driver

and made it easy for the gunman to fire off 8 rounds through a side window of his vehicle and make his getaway.

3. To throw investigators off Syria's track, the plotters abandoned their usual car bombs and used a gunman.

4. They believed the only suspicions raised by their choice of victim would be of a crime motivated by a domestic feud. At the same time, every Lebanese political insider would realize that Damascus was signaling its determination to topple the government – not by igniting a civil war, but by craft and guile.

Damascus has divided the country and split the government



For instance, **DEBKA-Net-Weekly's** Middle East sources recall that for the last two months, Syria has been pumping massive quantities of war materiel to allied Lebanese militias, clans and organizations. (**DEBKA-Net-Weekly 274** of Oct. 20: Iran & Syria Plot Regime Changes). This has brought Tripoli, Lebanon's second city of 600,000 inhabitants, under the thumb of Syrian military intelligence which has start building it up as the northern rival to Beirut.

The recipients of these arms are Tripoli's masters, the pro-Syrian **Marada** (Giants) militia of the **Faranjeh** clan, Maronite Catholic rivals of the Gemayels, who in their day too sent a national president and ministers to Beirut. The clan and its militia, which has 3,500 members under arms, have established an autonomous administration in Tripoli, which refuses to defer to the Beirut government or the Lebanese national army and depends on Syria for services and economic subsistence.

Tripoli is serving Damascus as the model for autonomous regions to rise in other parts of Lebanon, divorced from central government. Its immediate targets are the Beqaa Valley and the central mountains, where Syria is providing weapons for the local Druze clans opposed to **Walid Jumblatt**, one of the most fervently anti-Syrian heads of the Lebanese parliamentary majority.

Damascus also has its eye on regions south of the Druze Chouf mountains and the port town of Sidon.

Since Syria's ally, Hizballah, has established strongholds in the southern districts of Beirut, in South Lebanon, Baalbek and large parts of the Beqaa Valley in the east, the Syrians are confident that they have substantially whittled down the area still under the sovereign control of central government, confining it to East and West Beirut, the anti-Syrian Maronite areas north and east of the capital, the Druze Mountain and the stretch of coast running south from Beirut to Sidon.

By this means, Syria has managed to bisect Lebanon into two entities.

Damascus' puppet, the Lebanese president **Emile Lahoud**, was thus encouraged this week to denounce the Siniora government as illegitimate. Damascus has not only split the country but also Lebanon's ruling administration between a president who does not recognize the government and a government which does not recognize the president.

The Gemayel assassination conveyed a message from Damascus to prime minister **Fouad Siniora** to beware of deploying the national army to alter this status quo by force, because not only his ministers' lives would be forfeit, but the army would break up; Hizballah and the other militias, as well as the pro-Syrian clans, would simply recall their loyalist troops from national service and order them to defect.

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Who Murdered Pierre Gemayel?

A Minority Theory: Iranian Extremists, to Scuttle Détente with US



Western intelligence sources have told **DEBKA-Net-Weekly** that they are checking out signs that an Iranian Revolutionary Guards unit engineered the assassination of the young Lebanese Christian minister **Pierre Gemayel** on Tuesday, Nov. 21, at the behest of a group of ultra-radicals.

They conjecture that the deed was committed by a hard-core element of Hizballah, whose members were trained and indoctrinated in Iran and given instruction for the hit at a Hizballah base in Baalbek.

This base is in fact a RC facility which houses five commanders up to the rank of colonel for more than a thousand Hizballah commando fighters trained as terminators of politicians and senior public officials.

DEBKA-Net-Weekly's counter-terror sources report that the interest of some Western intelligence agencies was drawn to Iran by the method used to kill the Lebanese minister. Atypical of Syria, whose assassins specialize in bombings, shootings are commonly practiced by RC elite units in Iran and abroad. Gemayel's car was blocked by two vehicles as masked gunmen jumped out and one fired shots into a side window of his vehicle. The murder and escape took no more than a couple of minutes. According to some witnesses, the killers did not use the cars that brought them to the scene of the crime but got away on motor bikes hidden nearby.

During the 1980s and 1990s, small Revolutionary Guards hit squads used the same method for liquidating opponents of the Islamic regime in Paris, Geneva, Rome and in Iran.

The men suspected of plotting the Gemayel murder are the RC commander, **Yahya Rahim Safavi**, his onetime assistant and current deputy interior minister, **Mohammad Baqer Zolghadr**, who is deeply involved in Lebanon, together with an extremist religious faction led by **Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi** and **Hossein Nouri-Hamedani**.

The plot may also have also involved veteran Iranian founders of Hizballah, **Ali Akbar Mohtashami-Pour** and **Mohammad Hassan Akhtari**, both former Iranian ambassadors in Damascus.

Their motives in setting up the assassination of the anti-Syrian Lebanese minister would have been:

1. Their deep concern over the reported American opening to Tehran. In the meeting that took place in New York last week, the Iranian UN ambassador **Mohammad Javad Zarif** assured the head of the Iraq Study Group, **James Baker**, that his government would be willing to extend a helping hand for stabilizing Iraq, and even encourage Syria to join the effort, provided the United States showed good will towards Tehran and eased up on its pressure for UN Security Council sanctions.

This sort of deal would appear near-blasphemy in the eyes of the ultra-radical elements of the Islamic Republic's ruling caste, especially the people around the president, **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad**.

This group holds that Iran should encourage the Americans and British to stay in Iraq and sink into a quagmire that would erode America's deterrent strength and standing as the only world superpower. After this fiasco, the US would stop thinking about attacking Iran or scheming regime change in the Islamic Republic

2. The off-the-wall extremists of Tehran feel bound to frustrate any step, such as rapport between Tehran and Washington, with the potential for stalling

Iran's designs for Israel's destruction and the establishment of a world Islamic regime in Jerusalem.

3. Tehran cherishes an ambition to generate chaos in Lebanon as a vehicle for bringing Hizballah to power. There is evidence that Iran has pondered the assassination of Lebanese prime minister **Fouad Siniora** in the hope of the ensuing chaos opening up a power vacuum which Hizballah would quickly fill.

4. Since the 1979 Islamic revolution, Iranian rulers have dreamed of sufficient control of the Mediterranean to completely encircle the Jewish state. There is even a secret Iranian plan to achieve this through the domination Syria by subverting its regime.

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HOT POINTS

A Digest of DEBKAfile Round-the-Clock Exclusives in Week Ending November 23, 2006

If Islamic militancy is not stopped today, "we'll go through World War Three tomorrow," US Middle East chief Gen. John Abizaid warns

18 November: Addressing a Harvard University audience Saturday, Gen. Abizaid compared the rise of militant ideologies such as the force driving al Qaeda to the rise of fascism in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s and said: "If we don't have guts enough to confront this ideology today, we'll go through World War Three tomorrow.

If not stopped, said the general, "extremists would gain an advantage to gain a safe haven, to develop weapons of mass destruction, to develop a national place from which to operate. And I think that the dangers associated with that are just too great to comprehend."

The European "peace initiative" is the logical outcome of previous Israeli policy lapses

18 November: The rule of cause and effect applies naturally to the policies practiced by Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert and foreign minister Tzipi Livni from their first moments in office. The Hamas election victory in the January 24, Palestinian elections, for instance, was preventable. Candidates of the terrorist group that vowed never to recognize Israel or renounce violence were allowed freedom of movement to campaign although the Hamas victory was predicted on this site well in advance.

Now the Olmert government is laboring to turn the clock back by accepting Abbas, a leader stripped of clout by the Palestinian voter.

The Spanish-Italian-French "peace initiative" which aims at deploying a European-dominated peace force on the Gaza-Israel border, is likewise the outcome of Israel's mistake in accepting UN resolution 1701 which brought European contingents for the first time to control an Arab-Israeli border. To this end, the resolution's primary clauses - to prevent Hizballah from reestablishing its strength and missiles opposite the Israeli border and block arms smuggling to replenish its arsenals - have gone by the board.

Once ensconced on the Gaza border, the European powers will push next for a West Bank presence and, after that, why not Jerusalem?

Spain, France and Italy push Middle East peace initiative that does not require Hamas government recognition of Israel

18 November: The plan calls for an immediate ceasefire, a Palestinian national unity government, exchange of prisoners, talks between Israeli prime minister and Mahmoud Abbas and an international team of ceasefire monitors.

There is also a European offer to host a new peace conference. DEBKAFfile: The three largest European contributors to the expanded UN force in Lebanon are seeking to extend their presence to the Israel-Palestinian front. The European monitors at the Rafah crossing between Egypt Sinai and Gaza have not prevented the smuggling of tons of arms and hundreds of million dollars destined for Hamas fighting forces - largely from Iran.

Senior Israeli officials are not inclined to take the European initiative seriously at this point. The Hamas prime minister said noncommittally it was worth studying.

Blair Set to Open Washington's Road to Damascus. Next Stop Tehran

18 November: The primary object of the new Spanish-Italian-French Middle East "peace plan" is to insert European military forces into the Gaza Strip after establishing themselves in the expanded UNIFIL in South Lebanon. In furtherance of their goal, the European Union endorsed the UN resolution's call Friday, Nov. 17, for Israel to pull out of Gaza, although its withdrawal to the UN-approved line was completed in September 2005.

European assertiveness is coming at the expense of the Bush administration's post-election weakness. Its tenaciously-held premise that the roads to all the region's woes lead back to the Israel-Palestinian issue is already reflected in these two European steps, the first of a systematic campaign of crushing pressure on Israel to fall into line.

The campaign will peak in the third week of December, when British premier Tony Blair is due to visit Damascus.

As a down-payment for buying Syrian president Bashar Asad's cooperation on Iraq, Blair will try and coerce Israel to accept talks with Syria for the return of the Golan captured in the 1967 war.

Israeli cabinet crisis sparked by accelerated Palestinian missile offensive. Olmert prepares defense minister's ouster

20 November: DEBKAFfile's political sources report prime minister Ehud Olmert is preparing to sack Labor leader Amir Peretz. They expect the post to be offered to the former Labor leader, prime minister, chief of staff Ehud Barak, with ex-Shin Beit director, ex-navy commander Ami Ayalon as his deputy.

Olmert's hand is now forced by the acute crisis over the government's failure to subdue the escalating missile attacks from Gaza. It is coupled with criticism from the ministers of his own Kadima as well as Labor members for a cabinet reshuffle to demote Peretz - partly over his incompetence and partly to clear the way for the contest for a new Labor leader.

The prime minister hopes that by bolstering defense with two experienced former generals he will lift his falling popular rating, improve the look of his Kadima party and, above all, prolong his cabinet's life expectancy. He may not find it plain sailing. Our sources report that Peretz's Labor backers are spoiling for a fight.

Will the US-UK diplomatic opening to Syria and Iran be cut short by the Gemayel assassination?

21 November: The murder of a prominent anti-Syrian Christian minister, scion of the former Lebanese president Amin Gemayel, and the finger of blame pointed at Damascus by the Sunni majority leader Saad Hariri may

well trigger bloody strife between the anti-Syrian factions against the pro-Syrian militias led by Hizballah. No one in Beirut doubts Damascus' hand in the assassination, any more than in the Feb. 2005 murder of Hariri's father. The Syrian president may well have gambled on the uncertain US and British position in Iraq and the Bush administration's post-election weakness for a reckless move to undermine the Siniora government and so save his close relatives from prosecution before an international tribunal. Assad is capable of deciding that this benefit was worth the risk of sparking another Lebanese civil war and sacrificing the chance of a rapprochement with the West when he is assured of Iran's friendship and support.

Iran, Syria, the Iraqi insurgents, Shiite militias and al Qaeda on the move as Bush ponders next step in Iraq

21 November: Our Middle East sources report that all these elements are using the hiatus in Washington to snatch the initiative. In Jakarta, President George W. Bush said Monday, Nov. 20, "I haven't made any decisions about troop increases or troop decreases." Before day's end, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad summoned the Iraqi and Syrian presidents to a weekend summit, demonstrating that Tehran rather than Washington is now making the rules for progress in the Iraq crisis.

Some steps set in motion:

1. Syria and Iraq have agreed to restore diplomatic relations.
2. The Sunnis and Shiites are locked in battle over the domination of Baghdad.
3. The US military and Iraqi army are playing no part in this battle royal. In other words, large sections of the Iraqi capital have slipped out of the control of the Americans and the al Maliki government. This situation prevails also in other main cities.
4. It means time has run out for building and training a competent Iraqi army capable of independent, competent operation.
6. The Iran-Syria partnership continues to strike US interests around the Middle East. In Lebanon, they have activated their pawn, Hizballah, to topple the pro-US anti-Syrian government. In the Palestinian areas, Iran and Syria are pumping in hundreds of military instructors and tens of tons of explosives, missiles and cash to dethrone Mahmoud Abbas, demolish his Palestinian Authority and engage Israel in war.

Lebanese PM Siniora divides Beirut by posting Lebanese forces at key points for funeral of anti-Syrian minister Pierre Gemayel

22 November: They form a security belt in the Christian western districts of Beirut, the Sunni eastern districts and at the presidential palace and government offices. DEBKAFfile reports from Beirut that the army will continue to hold these positions after the minister is buried Thursday. They stand ready to ward off attempts by the Shiites of South Beirut to seize centers of government - in keeping with the Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah's threat to topple the anti-Syrian government by a million street demonstrators. The anti-Syrian Christians and Sunnis are braced to resist such attempts, which could tip the country into much-feared civil conflict.

The military deployment effectively divides Beirut in two - the anti-Syrian Christian-Sunni sectors and the pro-Syrian Shiite south.

Israel to Launch Major War Campaign at 11th Hour of Hamas Build-up

November 22: DEBKAFfile's military sources disclose that Israel's security cabinet decided Wednesday, Nov. 22, that there is no option but to launch a major offensive against Hamas and its terrorist allies in the Gaza Strip - both

to pre-empt their war build-up and reduce Qassam missile attacks, which climbed to 80 in the last ten days.

Our sources note that special forces and Shin Bet units have already stepped up ground operations against the missile crews in the north. These operations will soon evolve into a broader, harsher crackdown in other parts of the territory including the Philadelphi border route.

The prime minister was finally convinced that the time for foot-dragging was over by intelligence data which showed Hamas hectically engaged in constructing state of the art fortifications to withstand deep incursions into the Gaza Strip. They are assisted by dozens of military advisers pouring in from Syria and Lebanon. Israeli generals warned Olmert and defense minister Amir Peretz that every day without Israeli counter-action maximizes future IDF casualties. The Qassam salvos are increasing in number and range.

The IDF has switched its counter-missile tactics in the Gaza Strip. Special ground forces backed by Shin Bet units are spearheading strikes against top Hamas missile commanders. Their homes have been turned into fortresses in response.

The new tactic calls for large commando units trained in street combat, who also risk relatively high casualties. It also calls for an Intensive, high-grade intelligence effort to precisely mark the targets and provide details of the protective measures they employ.

Bush in Amman next week for summit talks with Iraqi PM Nouri Maliki and other Arab leaders

23 November: The US president will spend time in the Jordanian capital to demonstrate American support for the Hashemite king Abdullah however badly the situation deteriorates in Iraq.

DEBKAFfile's political sources report that President Bush has no plans to meet Israeli leaders. The changes in regional strategy under discussion in Washington appear in Jerusalem to ignore the dire threats to Israel's security, which in some respects are more acute than those facing Jordan given Tehran's announced intention to destroy the Jewish state. Many Western and Middle East observers see the close rapport developing between Iran, Syria and Iraq and the resumption of Syrian-Iraqi relations as a breakthrough for the Asad regime and a blow to Israel's strategic standing.

Israel's security cabinet met Wednesday in shadow of PM Olmert's insistence on sacking Peretz as defense minister

22 November: The prime minister and Labor leader are not on speaking terms. The prime minister is confident that the remaining Labor ministers will not quit even if their leader is fired. Under this cloud, the ministers must map out an urgent strategy for grappling with the escalating Hamas missile offensive and prepare for chaos in Lebanon and the exit of the expanded UNIFIL contingents from the South. Army chiefs have been asked to present plans of action to meet threats of intensified missile attacks on Ashkelon and more distant Negev towns. Our military sources report that Hamas' missile campaign has two objectives: To finally overthrow the PA chairman Mahmoud Abbas and to establish the extremist Islamic group's supremacy on the West Bank for missile bases against Israel's coastal heartland.

While Israel has hitherto treated the missile offensive as the battle for Sderot, Hamas sees it as a stepping stone to complete domination over all Palestinian territories.

Israel-Hamas combat escalates in northern Gaza Strip

23 November: An Israeli helicopter missile killed two senior Palestinian

terrorist commanders in Beit Hanoun. The missile hit the car driven in Beit Hanoun by Pak Abu Kumtzan, chief of Popular Resistance Committees in Northern Gaza and his deputy Mahmoud Bassiouni Thursday night. Two Hamas operatives were also killed by Israeli forces as they laid a roadside bomb near a tank.

Seven Israeli soldiers were injured on third day of anti-missile combat in Gaza Thursday. Three were hurt by a 57-old Palestinian female suicide bomber.

Four Israeli soldiers were earlier wounded by anti-tank rocket fire during counter-missile operations across the N. Gaza Strip Thursday, as Palestinians stepped up anti-tank fire.

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