

If Only Israel Had Won?

By Jim Lobe | December 29, 2006

Neoconservative hawks inside and outside the administration of President George W. Bush had hoped that Israel would attack Syria during the conflict in Lebanon this past summer, according to a newly published interview with a prominent neoconservative.

Meyrav Wurmser, director of the Center for Middle East Policy at the Hudson Institute, reportedly told Yitzhak Benhorin of the Ynet website that she believes a successful attack by Israel on Damascus would have dealt a mortal blow to the insurgency in Iraq.

“If Syria had been defeated, the rebellion in Iraq would have ended,” she asserted, adding that it was chiefly as a result of pressure from what she called “neocons” that the administration held off demands by UN Security Council members to halt Israel’s attacks on Hezbollah and other targets in Lebanon during the summertime conflict. (Wurmser is married to David Wurmser, a top Middle East adviser in Vice President Dick Cheney’s office.)

“The neocons are responsible for the fact that Israel got a lot of time and space ... They believed that Israel should be allowed to win,” she told Ynet News. “A great part of it was the thought that Israel should fight against the real enemy, the one backing Hezbollah ... If Israel had hit Syria, it would have been such a harsh blow for Iran that it would have weakened it and [changed] the strategic map in the Middle East.”

Wurmser’s remarks bolster reports from Israel that hawks in the Bush administration did in

the first days of the Israel-Hezbollah conflict encourage the government of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to extend its war beyond Lebanon’s borders.

Shortly after the conflict ended in August, a well-informed source who received an account of the meeting from one of its participants told the Inter Press Service: “In a meeting with a very senior Israeli official, [U.S. Deputy National Security Adviser Elliott] Abrams indicated that Washington would have no objection if Israel chose to extend the war beyond to its other northern neighbor, leaving the interlocutor in no doubt that the intended target was Syria.” The *Jerusalem Post* published a similar account at the time.

Abrams has been known to work particularly closely with both David Wurmser and John Hannah, Cheney’s national security adviser, who have long favored “regime change” in Damascus.

Indeed, both Wurmser, along with former Defense Policy Board Chairman Richard Perle and former Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith, worked together on a 1996 paper entitled “A Clean Break” for incoming Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The paper’s policy recommendations called for

overthrowing Iraq's Saddam Hussein as the first step toward destabilizing Syria.

David Wurmser and Hannah, according to the *New York Times*, argued forcefully—and successfully, with Abrams' help—against Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's efforts to persuade Bush to open a channel to Syria in an effort to quickly end the Israel-Hezbollah conflict.

Many analysts believe that Olmert is being held back primarily by fear of crossing hardliners in the Bush administration. Those hardliners assert that Damascus is trying to regain its influence in Lebanon by subverting the government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and by providing support to the Sunni insurgency in Iraq.

Given her husband's work for Cheney, Meyrav Wurmser's remarks to Ynet, which come as the debate over U.S. policy on Syria is intensifying, could offer important insights into the thinking of the dwindling number of administration hawks, particularly those around the vice president, who is reportedly steadfastly opposed to direct engagement with Damascus or Tehran.

Since the Israel-Hezbollah conflict, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has given a series of

interviews with Western media, most recently with Italy's *La Repubblica*, in which he has called on Israel for direct negotiations to end their state of war and to fully normalize relations.

The repeated offers have split Olmert's government. Some cabinet officials, led for now by Defense Minister Amir Peretz, have called for exploring Assad's offers, if for no other reason than to determine what price, besides return of the occupied Golan Heights, Israel might be expected to pay, and what it might gain, particularly with respect to possibly weakening Syria's ties to Iran.

But Olmert has resisted this approach, insisting on December 17, for example, that he would not consider talks with Damascus until and unless it first renounced terrorism and halted its support of "extremist influences," presumably a reference to the Damascus-based wing of the Palestinian Hamas party and Hezbollah.

But many analysts believe that Olmert is being held back primarily by fear of crossing hardliners in the Bush administration. Those hardliners assert that Damascus is trying to regain its influence in Lebanon by subverting the government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and by providing support to the Sunni insurgency in Iraq.

But while hardliners like Cheney and Abrams still maintain the upper hand on Syria policy, the administration finds itself under growing pressure to rethink its strategy there, as in Iraq.

Earlier this month, the bipartisan Iraq Study Group (ISG) called for Washington to directly engage Damascus and Tehran in regional

negotiations designed to stabilize Iraq. Like some prominent Israelis, the ISG's co-chair, former Secretary of State James Baker, has argued that creative diplomacy could woo Damascus away from its strategic alliance with Iran.

"If you can flip the Syrians, you will cure Israel's Hezbollah problem," he said recently, adding that Syrian officials—he met with the foreign minister in September—had indicated that they could persuade Hamas' militant external wing to accept Olmert's conditions for direct engagement with the Palestinians.

The idea of engaging Syria has attracted growing support not only from the U.S. foreign policy establishment and Democrats, several of whom have or are making their way to Damascus over the Christmas recess, but from some important Republican lawmakers, as well. Sen. Arlen Specter is due to travel there next week, while even Sen. Sam Brownback, the favored 2008 presidential candidate of the Christian Right, has endorsed what he called the ISG's call for a "very aggressive, regional diplomatic effort."

The idea of engaging Syria, particularly as part of a broader "land-for-peace" deal with Israel, is anathema to the neoconservatives, whose ranks within the administration have steadily thinned and now, in the wake of Defense Secretary Robert Gates' replacement of Donald Rumsfeld, face further losses in the Pentagon. Until his nomination, Gates served as an ISG member and, during his confirmation hearings, indicated sympathy for the group's diplomatic ideas.

Indeed, Meyrav Wurmser, who is closely identified with the Likud Party, expressed a sense of

imminent defeat in the Ynet interview. Noting the recent departure of former ambassador to the UN John Bolton, a key neoconservative ally, she said, "[T]here are others who are about to leave."

"This administration is in its twilight days," she said.
"Everyone is now looking for work, looking to make money ... We all feel beaten after the past five years ..."

"This administration is in its twilight days," she said. "Everyone is now looking for work, looking to make money ... We all feel beaten after the past five years ..."

While she blamed Rumsfeld, the military, and the State Department for the failure to achieve neoconservative goals in Iraq and the wider region, Wurmser also attacked Israel's conduct in its summer 2006 conflict, insisting that it provoked "a lot of anger" in Washington—presumably in her husband's office, among other places. "The final outcome is that Israel did not do it [attack Syria]. It fought the wrong war and lost ... [i]nstead of a strategic war that would serve Israel's objectives, as well as the U.S. objectives in Iraq." (Wurmser did not return calls for comment. For the full Ynet interview, see <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3340750,00.html>.)

Jim Lobe is the Washington bureau chief of the Inter Press Service and a Right Web contributing writer (rightweb.irc-online.org).

Published by the Right Web of the International Relations Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org). ©Creative Commons - some rights reserved.

The Right Web

“Exposing the architecture of power that’s changing our world”

Recommended citation:

Jim Lobe, "If Only Israel Had Won?" Right Web Analysis (Silver City, NM: International Relations Center, December 29, 2006).

Web location:

<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/rw/3834>

Production Information:

Writer: Jim Lobe

Editor: Right Web

Layout: Chellee Chase-Saiz, IRC