

## **After Iraq, Bush will attack his real target**

*by Eric Margolis*

NEW YORK – President George Bush wrapped himself in the American flag and won a major victory last week as U.S. voters gave control of both houses of Congress to the Republican party. In mid-term elections, the party in power almost always fares badly, but this year an electorate, gripped by fear of terrorism, and whipped into war fever by high-voltage propaganda, voted Republican. Thank you Osama and Saddam.

One poignant photo said it all: Georgia's defeated Democratic senator, Max Cleland, sitting in a wheelchair, missing both legs and an arm lost in combat in Vietnam. This highly decorated hero was defeated by a Vietnam war draft-dodger who had the audacity to accuse Cleland of being "unpatriotic" after the senator courageously voted against giving Bush unlimited war-related powers. I do not recall a more shameful moment in American politics.

Bush's victory is clearly a mandate to proceed with his crusade against Iraq. Preparations for war are in an advanced stage. The U.S. has been quietly moving heavy armour and mechanized units from Europe to the Mideast. Three division equivalents and a Marine heavy brigade are now in theatre. An armada of U.S. warplanes is assembling around Iraq, which is bombed almost daily. U.S. special forces are operating in northern Iraq, and, along with Israeli scout units, in Iraq's western desert near the important H2 airbase. The war could begin as early as mid-December if there is no coup against Saddam Hussein.

But for all the propaganda about wicked Saddam, Iraq is not the main objective for the small but powerful coterie of Pentagon hardliners driving the Bush administration's national security policy. Nor is it for their intellectual and emotional peers in Israel's right-wing Likud party. The real target of the coming war is Iran, which Israel views as its principal and most dangerous enemy. Iraq merely serves as a pretext to whip America into a war frenzy and to justify insertion of large numbers of U.S. troops into Mesopotamia.

### **A minor threat**

Israeli defence officials have long dismissed demolished Iraq as a minor threat, even though it likely has between six and 18 old Scud missiles hidden away. Saddam did not use chemical weapons in 1991 for fear of Israeli nuclear retaliation. Israel now has the world's most advanced anti-missile system, Arrow, with two batteries operational, and numerous batteries of the latest U.S. Patriot missiles in place.

The prevailing view in the Israeli military is that Iraq will be quickly defeated by U.S. forces, and then likely split into two or three cantons. Israel's North American supporters, however, are still being given the party line that Israel is in mortal danger from Iraq.

Iran is a different story. Iran is expected to produce a few nuclear weapons within five years to counter Israel's large nuclear arsenal, and is developing medium-range missiles, Shahab-3s and -4s, that can easily reach Tel Aviv.

With 68 million people and a growing industrial base, Iran is seen by Israel as a serious threat and major Mideast geopolitical rival. Both nations have their eye on Iraq's vast oil reserves.

Israel's newly appointed hardline defence minister, former air force chief Shaul Mofaz, who was born in Iran, has previously threatened to attack Iran's nuclear installations. Thanks to

long-range F-15Is supplied by the U.S., plus cruise and ballistic missiles, Israel can strike targets all over Iran. This week, Israel's grand strategy was clearly revealed for the first time, though barely noticed by North American media, as Prime Minister Ariel Sharon called for an invasion of Iran "the day after" Iraq is crushed.

Elections in Israel at the end of January will probably return Sharon's Likud party and its extreme rightist allies to power, this time with a strengthened position. Ferocious competition for party leadership between the iron-fisted Sharon and the even more hardline Benjamin Netanyahu suggests a further move to the far right, zerochance for peace with Palestinians, and a more aggressive policy towards Israel's unloving neighbours.

In the U.S., Pentagon hardliners are drawing up plans to invade Iran once Iraq and its oil are "liberated." They hope civil war will erupt in Iran, which is riven by bitterly hostile factions, after which a pro-U.S. regime will take power. If this does not occur, then Iraq-based U.S. forces will be ideally positioned to attack Iran. Or, they could just as well move west and invade Syria, another of Israel's most bitter enemies.

Israel's Likudniks thirst for revenge against Syria - and also Iran - for supporting Lebanon's Hezbollah movement, which drove Israeli forces from Lebanon.

Pentagon superhawk Richard Perle, told the TVO program Diplomatic Immunity that the U.S. was prepared to attack Syria, Iran, and Lebanon.

By February or March, the U.S. media will likely be flooded with dire warnings about the threat to the world from Iran. Israel's American lobby will turn its guns from Iraq to Iran. "Links" will surely be "discovered" between Iran and al-Qaida. The cookie-cutter pattern that worked for whipping up war psychosis against Iraq should work just as well against Iran, Syria or Saudi Arabia - and win the next national election.

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