



BRINGING RADICAL CHANGE TO THE ARAB WORLD: THE “DEMOCRATIZING” LEGACY OF GEORGE W. BUSH

Dan Tschirgi¹

American University in Cairo

Abstract:

In the wake of this summer’s war between Israel and Hizballah, it seems likely that the Bush Administration’s hopes for the Middle East have produced their antithesis. Far from becoming a showcase for the realization of one of the administration’s most prominently proclaimed values—democracy—the region is now threatened as never before by obscurantist Muslim forces. This article examines the rise of neoconservative forces in American policy-making circles, examining their ideological premises, their linking of Iraq to the requirements of Arab-Israeli peace in light of the Palestinian Refugee issue, and their confidence that historical or divine purpose upholds the use of American political power on the world stage. It concludes by questioning this position.

Keywords: Israel, Hizballah, Middle East, United States, democratization.

Resumen:

Tras la guerra del pasado verano entre Israel y Hezbolá, parece probable que las esperanzas de la Administración Bush para Oriente Medio hayan producido su antitesis. Lejos de convertirse en un escaparate del logro de uno de los valores mas proclamados por la administración, la democracia, la región esta ahora mas amenazada que nunca por fuerzas musulmanas oscurantistas. Este articulo examina el auge de las fuerzas neoconservadoras en los círculos políticos estadounidenses, analizando sus premisas ideológicas, su vinculación de la guerra de Irak con los requerimientos de la paz árabe-israelí a la luz de la cuestión de los refugiados palestinos, y su confianza en que un propósito histórico o divino apoya el empleo del poder político estadounidense en la escena mundial. La conclusión del artículo cuestiona esta posición.

Palabras clave: Israel, Hezbolá, Oriente Medio, Estados Unidos, democratización.

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¹ Dan Tschirgi is Professor of Political Science at the American University in Cairo.
Address: Department of Political Science, 236 Social Sciences (SS) Building, The American University in Cairo, Cairo, 11511, Egypt. E-mail: tschirgi@aucegypt.edu.



Introduction

Two years prior to the expiration of George W. Bush's presidency, it seems likely that his administration's hopes for the Middle East have produced their antithesis. This may well be the ultimate dialectical outcome of events that culminated in the 2006 Summer War between Israel and Hizballah in Lebanon. Eight months after the militant Islamic group Hamas won a resounding victory in Palestine's parliamentary elections, the radical Islamic resurgence in the Middle East reached new heights. Far from becoming a showcase for the realization of one of the administration's most prominently proclaimed values—democracy—the region is now threatened as never before by obscurantist Muslim forces. In an immediate sense, the situation arose as a direct result of Israel's failure to achieve either of its primary objectives in the Summer War: to rescue, or force the release of, its captured soldiers and to crush Hizballah militarily. With the prestige of militant Islam currently at an all-time high, moderate Arab voices are muted, the value of democracy is increasingly doubted, and Washington's supporters have largely been silenced. It is all very far from the goals the administration proclaimed in its early years.

The individuals who initially helped George W. Bush set his presidential sights on bringing radical change to the Arab World had lengthy histories of involvement with US foreign policy issues. Loosely bonded by what could best be termed a common "orientation" rather than a fully worked out "theory" or "political philosophy," these neoconservatives gained initial experience in the Defense Department, the State Department and, as staff, in the halls of Congress. During the Clinton years, many neoconservatives found employment with a limited range of inside-the-Beltway think-tanks. Major employment venues included the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), the Jewish Institute for National for National Security Affairs (JINSA), the Center for Security Policy, The Project for a New American Century, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies.² The first G.W. Bush Administration relied heavily on the expertise of these neoconservative luminaries. The second Bush government did the same.

Tracing their earliest activities back to the late 1960s—the period following Israel's sweeping victory in the 1967 War—the initiators and primary spokesmen of neoconservatism, were mainly disillusioned liberal Jewish intellectuals who turned sharply away from what they saw as the liberals' excessive naiveté regarding practical politics. Although numerically insignificant, the "neocons" had some significant assets. First, their most important spokespersons enjoyed positions of influence in the media and in public affairs. Second, in addition to the force of ideological orientation, neocons were bound by personal, professional, and familial ties. These lent the incipient movement considerable potential force from its onset.

Following the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, US-Soviet rivalry over the Middle East provided neoconservatives with their first major operational cause and an opportunity to pursue it in government service. When the Soviet Union claimed to be concerned over Israeli efforts to colonize the Arab lands seized in 1967 and restricted Jewish emigration from the USSR, Democratic Senator Henry (Scoop) Jackson moved to mobilize penalties against Moscow. The budding neoconservative movement flocked to Jackson's banner. Neocons took

² Special Projects: "Empire Builders: Spheres of Influence" *The Christian Science Monitor*, available online at: <http://www.csmonitor.com/specials/neocon/spheresInfluence.html>. See also Joel Benin: "Israeli-Palestinian Peace—What's Iraq Got to Do With It?" *South Bay Jewish Voice for Peace*, 27 February 2003, available online at www.stanford.edu/group/peace/docs/march5th/BeninSanJose.doc



Moscow's ensuing retreat and modification of its emigration policy as confirmation that hardball politics paid off.

Under Ronald Reagan's presidency, neoconservatives—many of whom had by then formally joined the Republican Party—won appointments to important positions, particularly in the Defense Department. The trend was maintained when George Bush Senior followed Reagan to the White House. Among neoconservatives from the 1980s who were destined to reappear in influential government roles in the new millennium figured Richard Perle³, Douglas Feith⁴, Paul Wolfowitz⁵, Lewis Libbey⁶, John Bolton⁷, and Elliott Abrams.⁸

Bill Clinton's election in 1992 meant that the rest of the decade was a political wilderness for the neocons and marked a hiatus in the growth of their input into policymaking. In retrospect it is obvious that this did not undermine the neocon outlook's gathering political strength. Uninvited to assume positions of immediate influence during Clinton's two terms in office, neoconservatives put the years to good use expanding their organizational base and refining their policy goals and the arguments used to support them.

As an "outlook," rather than a comprehensively articulated philosophy or academic theory, neoconservatism retained the inchoate quality of an ideological position-in-the-making. Thus, it could accommodate a range of views that were not always completely in harmony and which, indeed, were sometimes marked by sharp differences.⁹ Nonetheless, neoconservative proponents shared key tenets that effectively gave them a common political direction. Three convictions formed the core of the neoconservative outlook: 1) That the United States is morally superior to other countries and is the vanguard of historical political development; 2) That power should and must be unapologetically exercised on behalf of moral and historical necessity; 3) That Israel and the US share common values and goals, and that unstinting support of Israel must therefore be a pillar of American foreign policy.

³ Former Assistant Secretary of Defense under Ronald Reagan, foreign policy advisor to G.W. Bush, and—until 2003—Chairman of the Defense Policy Board in the G.W. Bush Administration.

⁴ Served until the summer of 2005 as the third ranking civilian in the Bush Administration's Defense Department, previously served as a Middle East specialist for Ronald Reagan's National Security Council then transferred to the Defense Department where he served under Richard Perle and later rose to the rank of Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense.

⁵ Served as aide to Senator Henry Jackson in the 1970s, then held senior positions in the State and Defense Departments, including an Ambassadorship to Indonesia. From 2001-2005, Wolfowitz was the second-ranking civilian in the Defense Department. In January, 2005 he was nominated to the presidency of the World Bank, the post he currently fills.

⁶ Chief of Staff and Assistant for National Security Affairs to Vice-President Dick Cheney. In October 2005 he resigned from government as a result of being indicted in the Valerie Plame scandal. Libby joined Paul Wolfowitz, William Kristol, Robert Kagan, and others in founding the controversial neoconservative "Project for the New American Century."

⁷ Before joining the George W. Bush administration, Bolton was Senior Vice President for Public Policy Research at the neoconservative think tank, the *American Enterprise Institute*. Under the Reagan and Bush I administrations he held posts at the Justice Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development. Under the administration of George W. Bush, Bolton has been the Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security (since May 11, 2001) and, since August 1, 2005, U.S. Ambassador to the UN. Bolton has participated in many neoconservative lobbies, such as the Project for the new American Century, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs.

⁸ Served as Assistant Secretary of State in the Reagan Administration and selected by George W. Bush to serve as the National Security Council's Senior Director for Democracy, Human Rights and International Operations.

⁹ For a good discussion of this point, see Irving Kristol: "The Neoconservative Persuasion," *The Weekly Standard*, 25 August 2003, Vol. 008, n° 47

at <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/003/000tzmlw.asp>



The neoconservative worldview gained widespread attention in March, 1992, some ten months before Clinton took office, when a draft document prepared for then Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney was leaked to the *New York Times*. The document had been written under the supervision of the Pentagon's then Under Secretary for Policy, Paul Wolfowitz. Its contents immediately produced a firestorm of criticism, both domestic and foreign. The Wolfowitz draft called for Washington to cap its victory over the Soviet Union in the Cold War by gearing foreign policy to the overriding goal of ensuring that the United States would remain the world's only superpower. Referring less than diplomatically to the possibility that future political challenges might emanate from such countries as Germany and Japan, the document's unrelieved unilateralist bent and emphasis on US military might seemed to rest on contempt for close allies and unbridled arrogance vis-à-vis the rest of the world.

The controversy over the Wolfowitz draft forced a change. The push for a more moderate version of "Defense Planning Guidance," generally credited to Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney and Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell, prevailed. The final version lacked the earlier draft's offensiveness and sharp edges. While hinting at a preference for unilateral directions, the final draft also seemed to support multi-lateral approaches to international problems. Over the next eight years, neoconservatives presented their message in various ways. By the end of the decade, it had become part of the daily American political discourse.

In 1995 prominent right-wing spokesmen William Kristol and Robert Kagan founded *The Weekly Standard*, the Washington-based political magazine that quickly became the most relentless and prominent purveyor of neoconservative views. Between them, Kristol and Kagan manifested many of the most striking qualities that would mark leading neoconservative personalities in the coming decade. Both were highly intelligent, articulate political observers, both had records of government service in the Reagan Administration (in addition to other posts, Kristol had been Chief of Staff to Vice-President Dan Quayle; Kagan had been Secretary of State George Shultz's principal speechwriter). Thus, Kagan and Kristol were intimately familiar with Washington's intricate political environment. Both were also products of ivy-league educations, and had ties to East Coast intellectual circles. In Kristol's case, these last constituted a primordial bond to the very origins of the neoconservative orientation. His father, Irving Kristol, was widely known as the "godfather" of neoconservatism, a sobriquet reflecting his own intellectual journey from a Trotskyist position in the 1940s to a Right-Wing Conservative stance by the late 1960s.

In August, 2003 the elder Kristol would use the pages of his son's magazine to reflect upon the meaning of the neoconservative label and conclude that the orientation's essential purpose in today's world is "to covert the Republican party and American conservatism in general, against their respective wills, into a new kind of conservative politics suitable to governing a modern democracy." Irving Kristol clearly indicated the "new kind of conservative politics" he wanted to promote. It is the politics of power. "Suddenly" he noted, referring to the 1990s after the Soviet Union's collapse:

...the United States emerged as uniquely powerful... With power come responsibilities, whether sought or not, whether welcome or not. And it is a fact that if you have the kind of power we now have, either you will find opportunities to use it, or the world will discover them for you.¹⁰

The elder Kristol wanted the United States to determine where, when and how its own power would be used. Kristol's view that the US, as the world's dominant power, had

¹⁰ Kristol: "The Neoconservative Persuasion", *op. cit.*



“ideological” interests—which meant an obligation “to defend, if possible, a democratic nation under attack from non-democratic forces”—produced the only specific policy recommendation in his article: the US should defend Israel.

In the summer of 1996, just as the struggle over Clinton’s second term approached its climax, the younger Kristol and Kagan co-authored a major article, a clarion call urging conservatives to commit themselves to the new kind of politics Irving Kristol would later describe. The work, entitled “Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy”, appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, then as now the most prestigious vehicle in the United States for discussions of international affairs.

In strong and succinct terms, the authors outlined their version of “a conservative view of the world and America’s proper role in it.”¹¹ The state of the world, they argued, was simply that the United States enjoyed a position of unchallengeable power. Traditional American conservatives had lapsed into confusion over the significance of this and, in consequence, were tending to coalesce around a “lukewarm consensus about America’s reduced role in a post-Cold War world...”¹² This, they warned, would prevent conservatives from governing the country. What was needed was something to attract and indeed inspire the voting public—“a more elevated vision of America’s international role.”¹³ Kristol and Kagan’s definition of the proper US role was straightforward: “Benevolent global hegemony.”¹⁴

This, of course, was no more than a reiteration of the main thrust of Paul Wolfowitz’s 1992 draft Defense Planning Guidance. No doubt mindful that only four years had passed since a public outcry caused that draft to be discarded in favor of a much watered-down version, Kristol and Kagan carefully stressed that there was a need to educate “the citizenry to the responsibilities of global hegemony...”¹⁵

Among the primary lessons to be imparted was the view that “American hegemony is the only reliable defense against a breakdown of peace and international order.” Once this were understood, it would be clear to all that “the appropriate goal of American foreign policy... is to preserve that hegemony as far into the future as possible.” That strategic goal, they maintained, required a “foreign policy of military supremacy and moral confidence.”¹⁶

The 1996 *Foreign Affairs* article was above all a cry to American conservatives, one seeking to rally conservative support of an activist ideological stance. It therefore sought to link conservatives’ concern over the role of moral values within American society to the role Kristol and Kagan hoped to see those values play in US foreign policy. The messianic implications of such an approach to international affairs could not be hidden, nor did the authors attempt to disguise them: “The remoralizing of America at home ultimately requires the remoralization of American foreign policy.”¹⁷

Kristol and Kagan concluded by chastising conservatives who did not favor an activist foreign policy aimed at securing American benevolent global hegemony. These were accused

¹¹ William Kristol and Robert Kagan, “Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 1996) at <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=276>

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.



of pursuing a “pinched nationalism.”¹⁸ In contrast, Kristol and Kagan claimed to promote “a true ‘conservatism of the heart.’”¹⁹ The prose used to describe this brand of conservatism (or Neoconservatism) was notable for its romantic, virtually rhapsodic, character as well as for its careful employment of words written by George F. Kennan half a century earlier. As an ideological statement of purpose, Kristol and Kagan produced an article which leaves no doubt that neoconservative moral confidence is ultimately rooted in a conviction of divine or historically-sanctioned mission:

George Kennan was right 50 years ago... the American people ought to feel a “certain gratitude to a Providence, which by providing [them] with this implacable challenge, has made their entire security as a nation dependent on pulling themselves together and accepting the responsibilities of moral and political leadership that history plainly intended them to bear.”²⁰

In 1997 Kristol and Kagan co-founded the Project for the New American Century. Based in Washington, D.C., the new organization was devoted to furthering the neoconservative outlook. According to its “Statement of Principles,” this boiled down to promoting “the propositions that American leadership is good both for American and for the world; that such leadership requires military strength, diplomatic energy and commitment to moral principle; and that too few political leaders today are making the case for global leadership.”²¹

From the outset, the PNAC received politically significant support. Its founding document was signed by a host of high-profile personalities from the national political scene, among whom figured Elliot Abrams²², William Bennett²³, Jeb Bush²⁴, Dick Cheney²⁵, Fred C. Ikle²⁶, I. Lewis Libby²⁷, Dan Quayle,²⁸ Donald Rumsfeld²⁹, and Paul Wolfowitz.³⁰

In retrospect it is obvious that the 1990s provided neoconservatives with an opportunity to consolidate their message as well as their political efforts. Their first challenge was to sway the Republican Party into neoconservative channels, the second was to gain support from the country as a whole. George W. Bush’s selection as the Republican presidential candidate in 2000 capped the neocons’ winning confrontation with the first challenge. However, Bush’s questionable electoral victory and subsequent serious domestic differences over his administration’s prosecution of the War on Terror long frustrated the neoconservatives’ search for national approbation. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to contend that Bush’s campaign for a second term was essentially a search for overall approval of his first-term performance.

The highlights of that performance were linked to the War on Terror, and therefore to the Arab and Islamic Worlds. Given that the neoconservative orientation had been shaped from

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Project for the New American Century: “Statement of Principles”, at <http://www.newamericancentury.org>

²² Former Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights.

²³ Former Secretary of Education.

²⁴ Son of ex-president George Bush; brother to President George W. Bush.

²⁵ Former Secretary of Defense.

²⁶ Former Undersecretary of Defense.

²⁷ Former holder of senior positions in the State Department and the Pentagon.

²⁸ Former Vice President.

²⁹ Former Secretary of Defense and White House Chief of Staff.

³⁰ Former Undersecretary of Defense.



its inception at least partly by events in the Middle East, it was only natural that the ascendant neoconservatism of the late 1990s and early 2000s had clear positions regarding the region.

Neoconservative discussion of the Middle East has mainly focused on three topics: Israel, Iraq, and the overall context of Arab-Muslim culture. The neoconservative position on Israel has been straightforward, consistent and strong: Israel must be supported. Norman Podhoretz, acknowledged as another of the neoconservatives “founding fathers,” set the tone very early on as editor-in-chief of *Commentary*, the publication of the American Jewish Committee. Once a mainstay of liberal political positions, *Commentary* followed its editor’s increasing shift to the right after the late 1960s—becoming what has long been accurately described as “a neoconservative journal.”³¹ Podhoretz, *Commentary* and neoconservatives in general proved to be not simply supportive of Israel but especially committed to the Israeli political spectrum’s right-wing. Thus, American neoconservatives quickly and steadfastly aligned themselves with Israel’s Gahal, subsequently known as Likud, party—the direct descendent of Vladimir Jabotinsky’s Revisionist Zionist movement.

Following various turns in domestic Israeli politics after 1967, it fell to a Labor Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, to preside over the Oslo initiative, the first development in nearly 50 years that held promise of ending the Arab-Israeli conflict. In 1993, Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) signed a Declaration of Principles, a seminal agreement whereby the two sides acknowledged each others’ legitimacy and pledged to settle outstanding differences politically. An Israeli who could not bear the thought of a territorial compromise with Palestinians assassinated Rabin in 1995.

The assassination’s aftermath not only witnessed a growing divide in Israel between right and left political tendencies but also the rising dominance of the right-wing Likud view. In 1996, Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu, became Israel’s Prime Minister. Netanyahu’s right-wing credentials were impeccable. His father, Binzion Netanyahu, a renowned historian and Revisionist Zionist theoretician, once served as Vladimir Jabotinski’s secretary.³² Netanyahu himself unwaveringly saw things through Revisionist lenses as he surveyed the more recent twists of the struggle for Palestine. He thoroughly disliked the Oslo Peace Process, and was just as strongly opposed to the cornerstone upon which supporters of the Process hoped to achieve peace: a two-state solution that would provide for Israel’s security while allowing Palestinians to have a state of their own. As prime minister, he faced the delicate—but not impossible—task of presiding over Israel’s participation in the peace process, in which the Clinton administration had placed high hopes, without allowing the process to move toward the two-state solution it was designed to achieve.

Netanyahu’s strong links to the United States brought him into contact with the full spectrum of pro-Israeli Americans, but his closest ties were with the most politically conservative elements of this group, and it was from them that he received encouragement and support for his political ambitions.³³ Such neoconservative quarters shared Netanyahu’s antipathy to the Oslo Peace Process and the prospect of Palestinian statehood. It was, therefore, not surprising that he looked to American neocons for suggestions as to how the Oslo Peace Process could best be scuttled.

³¹ See <http://www.csmonitor.com/specials/neocon/>

³² MEDEA, European Institute for Research on Mediterranean and Euro-Arab Cooperation: “Netanyahu, Benjamin” at <http://www.medeas.be/index.html?page=&lang=en&doc=137&highlight=netanyahu>

³³ *Ibid.*



Leading American neoconservatives were eager to counsel Israel's new anti-Oslo prime minister. An Israeli think-tank, the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies (IASPS) promptly commissioned a high-powered group of neoconservative "Washington insiders" to recommend policy directions for the new Netanyahu government. The Institute, based in Jerusalem and Washington, adhered to such an extremely conservative political line that by 2001 its founder and president, Robert J. Loewenberg, was branding Israel's Likud leader Ariel Sharon "socialist Sharon."³⁴

Richard Perle headed the consultancy group hired by IASPS. He was joined by three additional prominent neoconservatives, Douglas Feith and David and Meyrav Wurmser. While Perle and Feith went on to achieve prominent positions in George W. Bush's Defense Department, Wurmser became Vice President Dick Cheney's Middle East Adviser. His wife, Meyrav, an Israeli national who strongly opposed the Oslo Process, was a columnist for the *Jerusalem Post*, and worked at the right-wing Hudson Institute in Washington.

The 1996 report produced by this group for Israel's new prime minister minced no words. The document's thrust was captured by its title: *A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm*. It argued that Israel should decisively turn away from what was condemned as an impractical, dangerous, and politically immoral recent past—the entire trajectory toward a settlement along the lines of the Oslo Program.³⁵

In keeping with this, the advice given to Israel's new prime minister argued that the Netanyahu Government had an opportunity to establish Israel's policy "on an entirely new intellectual foundation."³⁶ Most important, was the flat advice that Israel should abandon any notion of "land for peace" and instead commit itself totally to "peace through strength."³⁷ In short, the Oslo Process should be discarded. By the same token, the report suggested that Syria's internal dynamics could be helpfully swayed by a policy of harsh confrontation. A regime change in Iraq, argued the report, would accomplish "an important Israeli strategic objective in its own right."³⁸

Ever since the end of the 1990-91 Gulf War, neoconservatives had been unanimous in condemning US policy toward Iraq. In their view, Saddam Hussein should never have been allowed to remain in power following that conflict, and the quicker Washington overturned the dictator's regime, the better things would be. Initially, the main reason behind this outlook was the conviction that Saddam would be a potential danger to regional and world stability so long as he remained in office. In 1998, a group calling itself the Committee for Peace and Security in the Gulf published an open letter to President Clinton calling on the United States to launch "a determined program to change the regime in Baghdad".³⁹ The committee's membership was practically a roster of leading neoconservative spokesmen, thinkers and personalities, many of whom would later assume important positions in the George W. Bush

³⁴ Loewenberg, Robert J.: "Arik Sharon's Strategy: Barak or the Linchpin of Unity Government—Part I" *Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies, Op. Ed.*, (25 February 2001) at <http://www.iasps.org/opeds/oped23.htm>

³⁵ Perle, Richard; Colbert, James; Fairbanks, Charles Jr.; Feith, Douglas; Loewenberg, Robert; Torop, Jonathan; Wurmser, David and Wurmser, Meyrav (1996): *A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm*, The Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies, at <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/news/860941/posts>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁹ "Open Letter to the President, February 18, 1998," text at: http://www.centerforsecuritypolicy.org/index.jsp?section=papers&code=01-D_76.



administration. Among them were Richard Perle, William Kristol, Robert Kagan, Bernard Lewis, Paul Wolfowitz, and Donald Rumsfeld.

However, as the neoconservatives' political vision became more clearly defined over the next several years, the basis of their insistence on the need for regime-change in Baghdad shifted to a broader focus. Saddam's record and aggressive personality were not discarded as valid reasons, but they were superceded by the neocons' growing enthusiasm for a global US benevolent hegemony. In short, regardless of what happened to Saddam Hussein, the geopolitical importance of the Middle East would require a permanent (or at least open-ended) US military presence in the Persian Gulf. In itself, this consideration heightened the attraction of a pro-American regime-change in Iraq. There is no doubt that such thoughts went into a major report issued by the Project for a New American Century on the eve of George W. Bush's election to the presidency. Entitled *Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Resources for a New Century*, the report maintained that "the need for a substantial American force presence in the Gulf transcends the issue of the regime of Saddam Hussein."⁴⁰ In referring to North Korea's Kim Jong Il and Iraq's Saddam Hussein, the report strongly criticized previous Pentagon planning efforts for having "given little or no consideration to the force requirement not only to defeat [those countries] but to remove these regimes from power and conduct post-combat stability operations."⁴¹

From the neoconservative perspective, then, Iraq was vitally important to the goal of US global hegemony, a conclusion deriving directly from Iraq's regional significance. It is not difficult to make or perceive the case for Iraq's regional importance, and neocons made at least parts of the case repeatedly—for example, in the 1996 paper prepared for Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu. The long and short of it is simply this: a pro-American, or American-controlled, Iraq would: (A) eliminate Syria's strategic depth in its confrontation with Israel, thereby rendering Damascus much more likely to reach an accommodation with Israel on Jerusalem's terms; (B) Provide a secure Western base for protecting all oilfields in the Arab/Persian Gulf, including those of Saudi Arabia, independently of any preferences local governments might have; (C) Stand as a strong bastion against radical tendencies emanating from Iran's Islamic Republic and, at the same time, possibly provide an important base of support for moderate factions seeking regime change in that country.

There was an additional important reason for favoring war with Iraq from a neoconservative perspective. The idea was not directly mentioned by American neocons, though it has been explicitly endorsed by the retired right-wing Israeli Army General and leader of the National Religious Party, Effi Eitam. Eitam has long been "a strong proponent of the notion that a US war on Iraq will permit the transfer of Palestinians from the West Bank."⁴² Thus, the link melded the "confluence of views between the Israeli ultra-right and the Washington Iraq war hawks."⁴³

The linkage between Iraq and a solution to the Palestine problem must have imposed itself on neocon strategic thinking about the Middle East by the mid-1990s for at least three reasons. First, the issue was repeatedly being brought up and widely disseminated by think tanks and academic forums whose activities would have been well known to neoconservative organizations. Second, the issue related very much to Israel and its future—a subject of deep

⁴⁰ *Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Resources, A Report of the Project for a New American Century*, (September 2000), at <http://www.newamericancentury.org/RebuildingAmericasDefenses.pdf>, p. 14.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p., 10.

⁴² Benin, Joel: *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.

⁴³ *Ibid.*



concern to leading neoconservative spokesmen. Finally, the issue not only related to Israel and its future but also linked Israel's future to a certain role Iraq might play in an effort to resolve the Palestine conflict.

The Clinton presidency inherited from the first Bush presidency a renewed interest in pursuing Palestinian-Israeli peace. Although initially buoyed into an optimistic frame of reference by the Oslo Accord of 1993, the sober reality was that the closer the two sides came to having to deal with “final status issues”—Jerusalem, final borders, and the fate of Palestinian refugees—the more elusive a final agreement seemed to be. The Palestinian refugee issue was the most difficult of them all, not only tapping the deepest emotional wellsprings of both sides but also presenting the narrowest range of options for maneuvering toward any sort of agreement.

Because of its centrality to each side's belief system, the refugee issue was soon frozen within a terrible wrapping of silence that only occasionally was broken by the unthinking reiteration of the standard Palestinian or Israeli positions. In private, Palestinian thinkers or leaders would sometimes acknowledge—strictly off the record—that the demand for the full, unrestricted return of all refugees was neither realistic nor helpful to the peace process. In private, their Israeli counterparts would—also off the record—admit much the same with reference to Israel's established refusal to accept the return of more than a minimally symbolic number of refugees in the context of a peace settlement and its utter refusal to acknowledge—even symbolically—guilt for the problem's creation. There were very few exceptions to this general refusal to express dissenting views publicly.

It was in the mid-1990s that cracks in the silence began to appear—not through the agency of Palestinian, Israeli or “third party” official channels but rather through activities of academic centers and private think tanks. Through this prism it was possible to get a sense of the direction of thinking on the Palestinian refugee issue.

Two clear examples of this were the 1996 book, *From Refugees to Citizens: Palestinians and the End of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*,⁴⁴ by Syracuse University Professor of Law Donna Arzt and a 1998 concept paper produced by a non-governmental Israeli-Palestinian team working under the umbrella of Harvard's Program on International Conflict Analysis and Resolution.⁴⁵ Significantly, two highly influential US think tanks with close ties to policy-making circles were associated with Arzt's work. The New York-based Council on Foreign Relations published the book and the Washington-based Brookings Institution distributed it. Arzt had directed the Council on Foreign Relations project “The Arab-Israeli Conflict: Demographic and Humanitarian Issues.” *From Refugees to Citizens*, she wrote, advanced for discussion “the basic components of a plan for permanent regional absorption of Palestinian refugees that is intended to result in a mutually agreeable division of responsibilities among all parties to the peace process.” The heart of Arzt's proposal was, as she put it, “an adjustment in the demographic distribution of Palestinian refugees...”⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Arzt, Donna E. (1999): *From Refugees to Citizens: Palestinians and the End of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*. New York, Council on Foreign Relations Press. See also “Palestinian Refugee Return,” at <http://www.arts.mcgill.ca/MEPP/PRRN/papers/Arzt99.html>

⁴⁵ Cited in Tschirgi, Dan: “Resolving the Palestinian Refugee Problem: Edward A. Norman's Unintended Contribution to Relevant Lessons in Perspectives, Values, and Consequences,” in Dietrich Jung (ed.) (2004): *The Middle East and Palestine: Global Politics and Regional Conflict*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, p. 188.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 189.



Casting her plan in terms of a seven to ten year time-frame, Arzt projected a total (refugee and non-refugee) Palestinian population of some 8.2 million by the year 2005. She dismissed the standard Palestinian and Israeli stands on the refugee issue as non-starters, totally incompatible with any conceivable political settlement. “Get real” was her blunt advice to would-be Middle East peacemakers. What Arzt put forth as a preliminary idea, a basis for discussion, was a strategy designed to resolve the refugee problem within the existing context of Middle Eastern political reality

Arzt’s suggested approach was predicated on the coordinated use of the full range of traditional options for resolving massive refugee situations. Arzt calculated that, if acted on immediately, the approach she advocated would lead to just over one-third (34.4%) of the world’s Palestinians residing in the West Bank and Gaza by 2005. The other two-thirds would be found outside Palestine in accordance with Arzt’s recommended demographic adjustments. The West Bank’s Palestinian population would rise to twice its 1995 level. Israel, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan would absorb small percentages of the remaining refugees, but Arzt reserved the most significant contributions in this regard for non-Middle Eastern states and what she termed “the sparsely populated Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Kuwait.”⁴⁷ Each would double the size of its 1995 Palestinian population. Thus, non-Middle East states would allow the resettlement of some 10.8 percent of the world’s 2005 Palestinian population, increasing their own Palestinian population to approximately 900,000. What Arzt conceived of as underpopulated Gulf countries—Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Kuwait—were to more than match this contribution by taking in 11.6 percent of the world’s Palestinians, thus raising their own combined Palestinian population to some 965,000. In fact, Arzt actually saw Iraq as the primary venue for relocating the nearly one million Palestinian refugees to whom she referred.

In contrast to Arzt’s work, the 1998 Harvard concept paper, *The Palestinian Refugee Problem and the Right of Return*, did not present a detailed plan for resolving the refugee problem.⁴⁸ In particular, it avoided Arzt’s penchant for suggesting specific numbers of refugees to be demographically adjusted. The paper was the result of mock negotiations held over two years under Harvard’s auspices by influential private Israeli and Palestinian citizens. The very valuable goal of the exercise was to introduce “insights and ideas... into the public debate and decision-making processes of the two communities.”⁴⁹ Several important general principles emerged from the Harvard project. Chief among these, perhaps, was the Palestinian-Israeli group’s agreement that neither the traditional (or maximalist) Palestinian nor Israeli positions on refugees (unrestricted right of return as opposed to complete denial of refugee return to Israel) was compatible with an overall settlement that would provide enduring peace.

Donna Arzt’s book and the Harvard concept paper differed in a variety of ways but were strikingly parallel in their common insistence that repatriation, resettlement and compensation be combined as tools for resolving the Palestinian refugee problem; that only limited numbers of Palestinians return to Israel, while the bulk of refugees resettle permanently in non-Israeli parts of Palestine and other parts of the Middle East and the world at large; that full resolution would require a period of several years; and, finally, that the international community must play an active role in any viable settlement. The parallels, of course, arose because each effort

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁴⁸ Alpher, Joseph and Shikaki, Khalil: “The Palestinian Refugee Problem and the Right of Return,” Program on International Conflict Analysis and Resolution, Paper n° 98-7 (1998), Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.



was grounded in the conviction that established official Israeli and Palestinian positions could not be part of any viable political settlement.

Unfortunately, the professed goal of both works—to spark a broad and free-flowing discussion of the refugee issue and how it might be dealt with in the peace process—was not really attained, or, at best, it was only partly reached. By the late 1990s, the Israeli and Palestinian ideological establishments had zeroed in on Arzt's book and the Harvard paper. The unimaginative, hackneyed outpouring of venom was predictable, and pathetic. Palestinian spokesmen, including Edward Said and his fellow Columbia University faculty member, Joseph Massad, not only denounced Arzt's work and the Harvard paper, but went out of their way to excoriate any Palestinian thinker or leader whom they suspected of favoring a pragmatic, or realistic, approach to the refugee problem. Neither seemed concerned that their purely ideological stand might condemn millions of their fellow Palestinians to an open-ended existence as refugees.⁵⁰

On the other hand, Israeli ideologues found their own grounds for condemning Arzt and the Harvard project. Right-wing political commentator Emanuel A. Winston, for example, railed against what he saw as the beginning of a clear plot to destroy the Jewish state by allowing some refugees to return to Israel proper and permitting masses of hostile Palestinian refugees to set up their own state on Israel's borders. Winston and his ilk in Israel were evidently not bothered by the possibility that their rejection of any concession on the refugee issue promised to condemn their fellow citizens to the uncertainties and tragedies of open-ended conflict.⁵¹

The attacks of September 11, 2001 ultimately provided the administration of George W. Bush with the opportunity to pursue with gusto the neoconservative agenda for the Middle East. Initially, Washington reacted to 9/11 on the basis of tentative and limited rationales: The removal of Afghanistan's Taliban regime was justified as clear retribution for Al-Qaeda's attack on the US, while Saddam's alleged weapons of mass destruction provided the immediate *casus belli* for the Iraq War and justification for Iraq's subsequent occupation. It was not long before both these arguments were deemed insufficient. A more positive rationale for US sponsorship of radical change in the Middle East was needed.

In December 2002, a presidential directive established the Middle East Partnership Initiative. The measure raised "democratization" of the region to a new level of priority in US foreign policy. According to the State Department, by 2006 the program dispersed some \$293 million in partnership with NGOs, universities and businesses "so democracy can spread, education can thrive, economies can grow, and women can be empowered."⁵²

Nearly a year after it launched the Middle East Partnership Initiative—at the end of 2003—the Bush Administration declared a central feature of its commitment to the war on terror to be the promotion of fundamental social and political change in the Middle East. The vehicle for this was to be the Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI), a program designed to facilitate the development of democracy in a region ranging from Morocco to Afghanistan, and including the Arab countries, Afghanistan, Turkey and Pakistan. This bold and ambitious aim was heralded by the president in November, when he spoke before the National

⁵⁰ See Said, Edward: "The Right of Return, At Last," *Al Ahram Weekly Online*, 10-16 February 2000, at <http://www.ahram.org.eg/weekly/2000/468/opl.htm>. See also Massad, Joseph: "Return or Permanent Exile? Palestinian Refugees and the Ends of Oslo", *Critique* (Spring, 1999) pp. 5-23.

⁵¹ Tschirgi, *op. cit.*

⁵² US Department of State: Middle East Partnership Initiative, at <http://www.mepi.state.gov>



Endowment for Democracy, a congressionally-funded private organization dedicated to the worldwide promotion of democratic institutions.

Shortly after 9/11, Bush had promised a “crusade” against terrorism. It was a poor choice of words that did not go down well in the Middle East, where the Crusades are still bitterly remembered as a series of Western Christian invasions of Muslim lands. Although the White House quickly dropped the offending term from its lexicon, Bush’s 2003 speech announcing what he called a new “forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East” rang with the messianic certainty of a true crusader. Equating freedom with democracy, the president found a solid link between Divine approval and practical earthly benefits. “Liberty is both the plan of Heaven for humanity, and the best hope for progress here on earth,” he proclaimed.⁵³ The US would strive to further democracy in the Middle East partly for ideological reasons (“We believe that liberty is the design of nature... the direction of history”) and partly out of sheer self-interest.

As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment and violence ready for export. And with the spread of weapons that can bring catastrophic harm to any country it would be reckless to accept the status quo.⁵⁴

In Bush’s view, the mission—and it was obviously a “crusade”—was clear: “The advance of freedom is the calling of our time; it is the calling of our country.” As a call for national commitment to a proactive policy of democratization in the Middle East, the speech was one of the best—possibly the best—he delivered during his first term. It was concise and straightforward, simultaneously lofty and practical. It also provided a plausible explanation of why America’s terrorist enemies sprang from the Middle East and, therefore, of why America’s national security required fundamental changes in the region. The problem, argued Bush, was not rooted in any “failures of a culture or a religion,” but rather in “the failures of political and economic doctrines.”⁵⁵ The anti-democratic structural conditions that had, in consequence, long prevailed in Middle East created a “freedom deficit” which in turn underlay the “stagnation and resentment” that the president blamed for producing “violence ready for export.”⁵⁶

Much of Bush’s argument resounded with validity to anyone having the least familiarity with the contemporary Middle East, and particularly with the Arab World. Certainly, most governments in the area could not be accused of being either responsible or responsive to the needs of their people. Certainly, various forms of authoritarianism predominated, and along with them a general climate in which the rule of law and concepts of human rights suffered grievously. Certainly, too, those same governments presided over societies in which poverty was rampant, the gap between rich and poor stark and widening, and opportunities for decent education and health care were available only to the affluent. Moreover, it simply could not be denied that these and other ills had indeed helped produce a societal miasma of longstanding, widespread and profound “stagnation and resentment.”

Yet, there were at least two glaring shortcomings in Bush’s diagnosis of the Mideast’s malaise. One was that he severely downplayed the key roles of the US and other developed

⁵³ “President Bush Discusses Freedom in Iraq and Middle East: Remarks by the President at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy,” 6 November 2003, at <http://www.npwj.org/?q=node/1463>, p. 2.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.



nations in fomenting the very conditions he decried. True, he did note that “sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe—because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty.”⁵⁷ The truth, however, is much sharper. For much longer than sixty years (indeed, since the Ottoman Empire’s collapse in World War I), a combination of strategic and economic interests led the West not just to “excuse” and “accommodate” the region’s authoritarian rulers but actually to sponsor their creation and actively work for their survival.

The second questionable feature of Bush’s 2003 speech was the ease with which he singled out democracy as the remedy for the Middle East problem and the vehicle for global peace. Few could disagree with the president’s assertion that “for too long, many people [in the Middle East] have been victims and subjects. They deserve to be active citizens.”⁵⁸ Fewer still would question his argument that repressive and unresponsive governments had produced vast reservoirs of bitterness and resentment. What was questionable, however, was whether Bush’s prescription—democracy—was as feasible as he seemed to believe. Noting that observers had often asked “whether this country, or that people, or this group are ‘ready’ for democracy,” Bush roundly rejected such doubts. Instead, he asserted, “it is the practice of democracy that makes a nation ready for democracy and every nation can start on this path.”⁵⁹

And there, of course, was the rub. The real question was—and remains—whether the institutional and legal characteristics of a democratic polity can be erected and sustained in any society or, on the other hand, whether there exist socio-cultural prerequisites for the successful establishment and survival of democratic systems such as Bush outlined?

In early 2004, the Bush Administration expanded its drive to democratize the Middle East by including the G-8 countries as co-sponsors of a campaign to encourage political reform in the Broader Middle East and North Africa Region. Following a rocky start (one made particularly difficult by the outspoken opposition of Arab regimes, including that of the ostensibly friendly governments of Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt) the G-8 Summit was finally held in June at Sea Island, Georgia.⁶⁰ While the G-8 committed itself to a variety of steps to encourage democratic developments in the Middle East, it could only agree on steps that avoided antagonizing Arab Governments.⁶¹ Critics denounced the administration for

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.4.

⁶⁰ The initial American demarche to other members of the G-8 came in the form of “guidelines” for a joint effort to promote Middle East democratization. Particularly galling to the regimes of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia were elements perceived not only as the core of the initiative but also as designed to establish direct links between G-8 countries and local populations in order to pressure Middle East governments into democratizing reforms. What specifically provoked official Arab ire were three suggestions: (1) that G-8 countries increase “direct funding to democracy, human rights, media, women’s and other NGOs in the region”; (2) that they should “encourage the region’s governments to allow civil society organizations, including human rights and media NGOs to operate freely without restrictions”; and, (3) that G-8 members “fund an NGO that would bring together legal and media experts from the region to draft annual assessments of judicial reform efforts or media freedom in the region.” See Gambil, Gary C.: “Jumpstarting Arab Reform: The Bush Administration’s Greater Middle East Initiative,” *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, vol. 6, n° 6-7, at http://www.meib.org/articles/0407_me2.htm

⁶¹ The final product dropped any idea of the G-8 bypassing local governments to work directly with civil society groups. It also abandoned the notion of funding an NGO to monitor political reform. Moreover, it not only pledged that G-8 support for reform in the region would “go hand in hand with support for a just, comprehensive and lasting settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict” but also acknowledged that “change should not and cannot be imposed from outside” and that “each society will reach its own conclusions about the scope and pace of



having compromised its commitment to Middle East democracy, charging that by opting for “a soft-edged approach to promoting change in the Middle East, the administration has ended up with an initiative that is hollow at the core.”⁶²

A year later, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice spoke at the American University in Cairo, calling on the Egyptian people to have faith in the “inevitable” triumph of democracy.⁶³ Just over twelve months later, the Secretary of State’s determinedly optimistic outlook was to be challenged by the implications of Israel’s Summer War against Hizballah. With the leading political regional attraction now residing in militant fundamentalist Islam, the proponents of democratic change could only hope—but not count on—better days ahead.

It is possible to make a plausible argument that democratic institutions and processes must, if they are to be stable, rest on a framework of generally accepted values that are conducive to the trade-offs of power, limitations on governmental authority, and tolerance of opposing views upon which democratic systems depend. Put this way, political culture can be seen as the basis of democratic political systems, and it becomes necessary to ask whether all cultures can sustain that form of government.

Is the Arab world unsuitable for the development of democratic institutions? Bush strongly denied the claim that the Arabs or Islam are inherently unhelpful to the flowering of democratic practices:

Are the peoples of the Middle East somehow beyond the reach of liberty? Are millions of men and women and children condemned by history or culture to live in despotism? Are they alone never to know freedom, and never even to have a choice in the matter? I, for one, do not believe it. I believe every person has the ability and the right to be free.⁶⁴

The president’s position evaded the real question. The issue is not whether the Arabs or Islam per se are inimical to democratic development. It is whether democracy can flourish in societies where a predominant section of the population approaches politics on the basis of transcendental beliefs, whether these are linked to religious or secular absolute value-systems. Whatever the future may hold, George W. Bush’s vision of a politically reconfigured Middle East will not be without impact. The question awaiting a considered answer is whether the long-term results of his administration’s initiative will have been worth the cost.

change.” See “Partnership for Progress and a Common Future With the Region of the Broader Middle East and North Africa,” 9 June 2004. Online at <http://www.g8.utoronto.ca/summit/2004seaisland/partnership.html>

⁶² Ottawa, Marina and Carothers, Thomas: “The Greater Middle East Initiative: Off to a False Start,” The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace *Policy Brief*, n° 29, at www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=1480&prog=zgp&proj=zdr1,zme

⁶³ “Remarks by Condoleezza Rice at the American University in Cairo”, 20 June 2005, at www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/48328.htm

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.