

A Greater Israel

By Robert Parry
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A big part of the crisis confronting the United States in the Middle East can be traced back to what is now more than a quarter-century-old competition among American politicians over who can best pander to Israeli hardliners.

Rather than furthering Israel's long-term interests – or those of the American people – these politicians seek short-term electoral gains by appealing to blocs of right-wing Christian and Jewish voters who reject any criticism of Israeli policies.

But this calculated positioning – from the likes of Hillary Clinton and John Edwards on the Democratic side to George W. Bush and the neoconservatives on the Republican side – has thrown the diplomatic calculus in the Middle East out of whack.

Whereas the United States traditionally served as an honest broker between Israel and its Arab neighbors, the current dynamic is for ambitious American politicians to adopt what they see as the favored Israeli position and thereby deepen the anger of the Muslim world.

So you get former Sen. Edwards appealing to an Israeli security conference earlier this year with tough talk about putting military pressure on Iran – “We need to keep ALL options on the table. Let me reiterate – ALL options must remain on the table” – without offering a word of criticism about Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's policies toward the Palestinians. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Bush Is Hiding the Ball on Iran.](#)”]

You get Sen. Clinton eagerly sharing a platform last summer with Israel's ambassador to the United Nations, Dan Gillerman, a notoriously anti-Arab bigot who joked at a 2006 conference of the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee that “while it may be true – and probably is – that not all Muslims are terrorists, it also happens to be true that nearly all terrorists are Muslim.” [See Consortiumnews.com's "[A New War Frenzy.](#)”]

You get President Bush – only 10 days after taking office – giving a green light to an Israeli crackdown on Palestinians. At the first meeting of his National Security Council, Bush jettisoned President Bill Clinton's efforts to broker an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal.

“We're going to tilt it back toward Israel,” Bush said of his new policy, according to Bush's first Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill whose insider account appeared in Ron Suskind's *The Price of Loyalty*.

Secretary of State Colin Powell expressed strong misgivings, predicting that U.S. disengagement would unleash Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and lead to “dire consequences,” especially for the Palestinians. But Bush shrugged off the concerns, saying “Maybe that's the best way to get things back in balance.”

Elaborating on his theory, Bush said, “Sometimes a show of strength by one side can really clarify things.”

With Bush's cavalier response, years of U.S. diplomatic efforts to resolve the Middle East conflict came to a halt. Sharon launched some of the deadliest attacks ever seen in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Palestinians countered with suicide bombings that killed Israeli civilians. The cycles of violence continued to spiral out of control.

Post-9/11

After al-Qaeda's terror attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, Bush spotted a political opportunity to implement a long-held neoconservative strategy for eliminating anti-Israeli governments in the Middle East, whether or not they represented security threats to the United States.

The invasion of Iraq was sold to Americans alternatively as necessary to eliminate weapons of mass destruction, which turned out not to exist; to topple a tyrant; or to spread democracy. But the underlying neocon plan was to conquer Iraq for use as a base of American power that would then force additional “regime change” in Iran and

Syria.

In 2003, the punch-line for a neocon joke about whether U.S. forces should next go west to Syria or east to Iran was that "real men go to Tehran."

Once those two governments were removed, the theory went, Israel's front-line enemies – Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Palestinian territories – would be starved of support, brought to their knees and forced to accept peace terms dictated by Israel.

Though this neocon pipedream has proved to be a disastrous fantasy – with 3,100 dead U.S. soldiers in Iraq and anti-Americanism surging around the world – Bush still earned a reputation in some pro-Israeli circles as “the best friend Israel's ever had.”

It was, however, the classic case of the easygoing friend who lets you stagger to your car and drive off down a mountain road instead of acting as the true friend who takes away your keys and calls you a cab.

The old-fashioned friends of Israel balanced their support for its legitimate security needs with criticism of overly harsh policies against Palestinians or other actions that might unnecessarily estrange Israel from its Arab neighbors.

Yet many of those friends are now smeared with the ugly epithet “anti-Semite” and shouted into silence, while the panderers continue to jostle for position to stand shoulder to shoulder with Israel's hardest of hardliners.

So, Bush's Middle East policies now neatly dove-tail with Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's. In both Washington and Tel Aviv, military force against Islamic militancy is seen as the only acceptable answer, with only periodic lip service paid to the cause of peace.

Though on one level Israel is getting what it wants, the neocon strategy also guarantees eventual catastrophe, the prospect of casting one of the world's most strategic and volatile regions into a cauldron of violence that, in the end, could jeopardize Israel's very survival.

Just as Bush's invasion of Iraq predictably turned that country into a larger version of the Gaza Strip, an expansion of the neocon regional wars will transform the entire Middle East into a giant facsimile of Iraq. Rather than quell Muslim radicalism, the neocons only will exacerbate and spread the extremism.

Eventually, even American military power won't be able to save Israel from the spreading hatreds. Radicalism eventually will infect Israel's internal Arab population or the chaos finally will lead to a committed terrorist gaining control of a real weapon of mass destruction and the means to deliver it.

Risking Peace

The alternative course for Israel and the United States is one of showing empathy for the Palestinians and other Arabs who have legitimate grievances with Israel – and then taking concrete steps toward peace.

This course, which carries its own serious risks, would involve making difficult concessions, such as withdrawal of Israeli settlements from occupied Arab lands. A peace offensive also would require greater humility and more honesty from Washington.

A good early step might be a truth commission that lays out the history of U.S. covert strategies in the region and acknowledges American wrongdoing.

Meanwhile, a repositioning of U.S. forces out of Iraq could include putting some American troops in Israel to ease security concerns there and to help relocate settlers off the Golan Heights and out of occupied Palestinian lands.

The image of U.S. and Israeli troops cooperating to resolve longstanding Arab complaints would go a long way toward defusing anti-Americanism and hostilities toward Israel. The relocations also would clear the way for Israeli peace treaties with Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinians.

There are two possible frameworks for an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. One is a two-state solution with the

Palestinians granted enough territory and given enough assistance to create a viable country of their own.

The other approach would be more daring but might hold greater promise toward achieving regional reconciliation and building democratic institutions. This strategy would combine Israel and the Palestinian territories into one pluralistic democracy with strong guarantees of religious freedom for all.

Initially, this Greater Israel might adopt a partitioned government like Lebanon used to end its civil war, with various ethnic and religious groups guaranteed shares of power. Over time perhaps, as hostilities fade and democratic values deepen, this partitioning might become unnecessary.

While this Greater Israel would have to sacrifice some of its Jewish identity – as [many leading Israeli Arabs are already demanding](#) – it would seek to fulfill the universal goal of sanctuary for all people facing religious persecution. In that sense, it would be a tribute to the millions of Jews and other minorities who perished in the Nazi Holocaust.

However, either approach – the Two-State Solution or the creation of a Greater Israel – would open a path for Israel to emerge as a technological, cultural and financial center for the Middle East. Israel would have the opportunity to integrate its extraordinary talents with its regional neighbors, thus building the lasting bonds that can augur peace, not war.

The Neocon Plan

Despite the grand potential that genuine peace might hold for Israel and the Middle East, these options are foreclosed by the current political dynamic that has sucked the region into endless cycles of violence and revenge.

Especially after the 9/11 attacks, President Bush adopted the neocon strategy of militarily crushing or intimidating Israel's regional foes. Through "regime change," the United States sought to create compliant Middle Eastern governments that would follow policies favored by Washington and Tel Aviv.

But this plan for a "new Middle East" never amounted to a realistic strategy for countering the anti-Western hatreds behind violent jihad.

Indeed, while Bush wrapped the plan up in pretty words about "freedom" and "democracy," the policy's reliance on external military force rather than negotiated internal solutions virtually ensured that any genuinely free elections would either reflect sectarian animosities or repudiate Western interference.

Predictably, Bush's signature intervention in Iraq has thrust that nation into a bloody civil war, strengthened Islamic extremism and dangerously demonstrated the limitations of American power.

Yet, as the disaster in Iraq became undeniable in 2006, the neocons refused to admit failure. Instead, they sought to enlist the Israelis more directly in Bush's plan by encouraging the Olmert government to adopt a more belligerent attitude toward Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Syrian government in Damascus.

In summer 2006, tit-for-tat border skirmishes led to the capture of three Israeli soldiers – one near Gaza and two along the Lebanon border. Olmert reacted by unleashing massive Israeli firepower against Hamas in Gaza and against Hezbollah targets across south Lebanon.

Despite horrific bloodshed, the inconclusive outcomes of the Israeli offensives thwarted the neocons' larger scheme of relying on Israel's military prowess to extricate Bush from the quagmire in Iraq. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[A 'Pretext' War in Lebanon.](#)"]

Now, the neocons are pushing an even riskier scheme of expanding the Middle East conflicts to Iran through a combination of Israeli and American air strikes.

Again, there is the wishful thinking that a punishing air campaign against Iran will achieve "regime change" in Tehran by demonstrating to the Iranian people the consequences of their government's defiance of Washington and Tel Aviv.

That, in turn, is supposed to undercut the insurgency in Iraq, isolate Syria, and compel acquiescence from Hezbollah and the Palestinians – thus again enabling Israel to dictate settlement terms to its Arab adversaries.

Mad Strategy

While the madness of these Bush-neocon schemes has become apparent to millions of Americans and is even beginning to dawn on Official Washington, U.S. politics is stuck in the rut of pandering to Israeli hardliners, even at the long-term expense of Israel.

Recently, when I mentioned to one former Israeli intelligence official that some American Jews were calling George W. Bush “the best friend Israel’s ever had,” the Israeli laughed bitterly.

“The best friend Israel ever had was Jimmy Carter,” the Israeli said. “He negotiated peace with Israel’s most dangerous enemy, Egypt.”

But Carter’s role in the Camp David accords, which returned the Sinai to Egypt in exchange for peace between the two countries, angered Prime Minister Menachem Begin and other Israeli hardliners.

In 1980, Begin’s Likud Party effectively threw in its lot with Republican Ronald Reagan and worked behind the scenes to stop Carter’s reelection. [For details, see Robert Parry’s [*Secrecy & Privilege: Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq*](#).]

Once in office, President Reagan credentialed the neocons – the likes of Elliott Abrams and Paul Wolfowitz – who emerged as intellectual stars in Washington. They devised foreign policy strategies, fashioned clever talking points and dominated leading opinion journals.

The neocons’ intensely pro-Israeli positions frightened Democrats about the possible loss of Jewish voters, a key element of Franklin Roosevelt’s historic coalition. So, the pandering competition was on in earnest.

Even facing the geo-strategic disaster in Iraq and after the uprising of American voters in November 2006, Democratic leaders still tread carefully around any criticism of Israel. For instance, they quickly distanced themselves from former President Carter when he came under attack for his cautionary new book, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*.

Very few politicians from either American party, it seems, dare offer the constructive criticism that might guide Israel to a brighter and a more secure future. They prefer to play it safe for themselves, politically, even if that means putting Israel and the world in greater long-term danger.

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Secrecy & Privilege: Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq*, can be ordered at secrecyandprivilege.com. It's also available at Amazon.com, as is his 1999 book, *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'*.

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