

A Real Clean Break in the Middle East

By Ronald Bruce St John | September 14, 2006

In 1996, a group of American neoconservatives participated in a study group organized by the Israel-based Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies. The group produced a paper entitled “A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm,” which advocated an ambitious set of policies aimed at ensuring Israel’s security. Although originally directed at Israel’s then-incoming Likud government led by Benjamin Netanyahu, the ideas discussed in the paper parallel to a remarkable degree U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, which has resulted in disastrous consequences for American interests in and out of the region. It’s time for the Bush administration to make a clean break with this flawed strategy and to implement a new policy that promotes peace and security in the Middle East.

Members of the “Clean Break” study group included Douglas Feith, Richard Perle, David Wurmser, Meyrav Wurmser, and several other like-minded ideologues, many of whom would later be given posts in the administration of President George W. Bush. Among the paper’s more salient points was the argument that “Israel can shape its strategic environment, in cooperation with Turkey and Jordan, by weakening, containing, and even rolling back Syria. This effort can focus on removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq—an important objective in its own right—as a means of foiling Syria’s regional ambitions.” The authors also encouraged Israel to seize the initiative on its northern borders, “engaging Hezbollah, Syria, and Iran as the principal agents of aggression in Lebanon.” If striking military targets in Lebanon proved insufficient, Israel should feel free to strike at “select targets in Syria proper.” To justify the new policy, Israel was counseled to remind the world that “Syria repeatedly *breaks* its word” (emphasis in the original). Finally, the paper considered it “both natural and moral” for Israel to abandon the idea of a “comprehensive peace,” move to contain Syria, draw attention to Syria’s weapons programs, and reject “land for peace” deals on the Golan Heights.

The paper also called for a fundamental change in the nature of the Israeli relationship with the Palestinians. The new relationship would be grounded on the understanding that “[Israel’s] claim to the

land—to which we have clung for hope for 2,000 years—is legitimate and noble.” The document declared that “Israel’s efforts to secure its streets might require hot pursuit into Palestinian-controlled areas, a justifiable practice with which Americans can sympathize,” though it avoided the related issue of targeted assassinations.

Two years after the paper was published, conservative Republican policy advocates, in an open letter to President Bill Clinton, contended that “containment” of Iraq was a failure and that removing Saddam Hussein from power “now needs to become the aim of American diplomacy.” Among the 18 people who signed the letter were a number of future George W. Bush administration appointees, such as Feith, Perle, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, and Richard Armitage.

Interestingly, when George W. Bush campaigned for the presidency, there was not a hint of any of this. In fact, it was the reverse. Candidate Bush looked set to follow in the foreign policy footsteps of his father. Condoleezza Rice said as much in an article, “Promoting the National Interest,” published in the January/February 2000 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. The attacks on 9/11 changed all that. In the wake of those events, the president, looking for a new way to think about the world and the role the United States should play in it, found a game plan in the work of these neoconservatives, many of whom by

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then surrounded him in the administration's foreign policy bureaucracy.

A review of the Mideast policy of the Bush administration, beginning with the 2001 overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the occupation of Iraq in 2002, highlights the extent to which it reflects the neoconservative thinking embodied in "A Clean Break" and reveals the disastrous impact that this thinking has had.

In Afghanistan, a five-year, multinational "peace-keeping" effort has resulted in no peace, no democracy, and little reconstruction. The Taliban forces are stronger today than at any time since 2001, while the powerless central government is under siege in the capital, protected by foreign troops. Cynical Afghans have taken to calling President Hamid Karzai the mayor of Kabul. The situation is worse in Iraq, where not even the capital is safe. Internecine conflict is sabotaging reconstruction efforts and undermining the Nuri Kamal al-Maliki government, probably the last chance for a democratic Iraq. If the so-called unity government is not able to gain control soon, the civil war may degenerate into pitched sectarian battles for resources and territory.

In October 2003, Israel—in line with the advice in "A Clean Break"—launched its first air strike against Syria since the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, bombing the Ayn al-Sahib camp outside Damascus. Israel claimed the site was an Islamic jihad training camp, but Syria denied it and sought a UN resolution condemning the attack. In a striking reversal of U.S. policy in the region, Bush refused to condemn the attack, terming it an act of "self-defense" and arguing that "Israel must not feel constrained defending the homeland."

In mid-December 2003, Bush signed into law the Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003, calling for strict sanctions against Syria. Having previously rejected similar proposals, the willingness of the Bush administration to sign the bill at that time signaled a more aggressive stance toward Damascus. Admittedly, Syria is in need of economic and political reform, a condition it shares with many governments in the

region, but the Syrian regime's principal foreign policy offense was simply its rejection of the Bush foreign policy agenda. Before the "Syrian Accountability" bill reached Bush, it passed the 100-member Senate with only four dissenting votes and with a like number opposed in the 435-member House, suggesting the neoconservative unilateralist world view affects Mideast policy in both the Democratic and Republican parties.

In January 2004, *Jane's Intelligence Digest* reported that the Pentagon, possibly with the help of Vice President Dick Cheney's office, was drawing up plans to raid Hezbollah targets in Lebanon and Syria. The report noted that attacks against Hezbollah in Lebanon would likely destabilize that country, where civil war had ended less than a decade and a half earlier. Given the longtime neo-conservative interest in destabilizing Damascus, they presumably thought attacks would have the same effect in Syria. While nothing appeared to come from this planning until Israel invaded southern Lebanon in July 2006 in search of Hezbollah targets, the fact that the United States had been developing plans to attack additional sovereign states, plans with little apparent logic behind them, threatened a major expansion in the "war on terror."

Regarding Palestine, the Bush administration from the beginning labeled Yasser Arafat an "unreliable" peace partner and refused to deal with him. When asked in early 2004 to name the main obstacle to peace in the Middle East, Condoleezza Rice answered without hesitation, "Yasser Arafat." With Arafat's November 2004 death, the world waited to see what the Bush administration would offer to the Middle East in a post-Arafat world. The answer was soon at hand in the form of continuing strong support for Israel coupled with pious pronouncements to the Palestinian people on the need to build democracy.

When the Palestinians later held "free and fair" elections in late January 2006, Hamas mobilized candidates to win a plurality in the legislative election, bringing a Hamas government to power for the first time. The results of the election were not surprising, as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and

Hezbollah in Lebanon had earlier achieved similar electoral success. Washington hardly welcomed these freely elected officials into the democratic fold. In the Palestinian case, the Bush administration worked with Israel to destabilize the new Palestinian government so that newly elected Hamas officials would fail and fresh elections could be called. Encased in its neoconservative cocoon, Washington promotes democratic reform only to the extent that the process brings to power individuals and groups that meet U.S. approval. The problem the Bush administration faces in this regard is that its abject failure to uphold basic democratic principles, like nonviolence and the rule of law, opens it to charges of hypocrisy.

A close look at U.S. policy vis-à-vis Syria shows that for over the last three decades, policy has oscillated between engaging Damascus in an effort to facilitate Israeli-Syrian agreements and isolating the Syrian regime in an attempt to pressure it to modify its terms and tactics for achieving a peaceful settlement. The Israeli-Syrian disengagement agreement, brokered by Henry Kissinger in 1974, marked the outset of serious American involvement in Israeli-Syrian diplomacy. The Carter administration also pursued a comprehensive Arab-Israeli settlement for a time, while the Reagan administration made the isolation of Syria a central objective of U.S. foreign policy. The George H. W. Bush administration returned to the goal of a comprehensive peace, refocusing diplomatic efforts on Syria, and Bill Clinton largely continued the efforts of his predecessor. In stark contrast to his father, George W. Bush has declined to engage Damascus fully, resorting more often than not to unilateral threats and demands couched in the context of the war on terror.

But how well have the neoconservative-inspired policies of the war on terror been working? The most recent annual report on global terrorism, released by the State Department in April 2006, concluded that the number of terrorist incidents and deaths had increased exponentially in the three years since the United States invaded Iraq. While arguing the United States had enjoyed some success in fighting terrorism, it also acknowledged al-Qaida and its affiliate groups remained a grave threat to

U.S. national security. Of greater concern, it noted that small, autonomous cells and individuals, so-called “micro-actors,” are engaging in more acts of terrorism. To put it succinctly, the neoconservative policies of the Bush administration are spawning terrorists far faster than they are eliminating them.

In June 2006, the Washington-based Pew Research Center released the results of an international public opinion poll taken in 15 countries. As the Iraq War continued into its fourth year, the report showed the global image of the United States was slipping. According to the Pew data, favorable opinions of the United States had declined over last year in 13 of the 15 countries surveyed, with only people in China and Pakistan having a slightly more favorable opinion. In Spain, for example, only 23 % of those polled expressed a positive opinion, compared to 41 % in the previous year. Support for the war on terror, led by the United States, was also down. Even more significant, Pew found most people viewed the Iraq War as a greater danger to world peace than Iran’s nuclear intentions.

As the war on terror continues with no end in sight, and as military and political events in Iraq and Afghanistan deteriorate, Bush’s response has been to “stay the course.” While policy continuity can be a virtue, it makes no sense to doggedly pursue flawed policies in the face of repeated failure. It is past time to abandon the destructive thinking contained in “A Clean Break” and replace it with an ambitious, comprehensive process designed to promote American interests, including the creation of a lasting peace between Israel and its neighbors.

In the case of Lebanon, components of this process would include Israel’s return of the Shebaa Farms, a prisoner exchange, final demarcation of the Blue Line, and security guarantees on Israel’s northern border. For Syria, progress begins with ending its current diplomatic isolation, replacing it with dialogue in the form of a step-by-step process of negotiation similar to that successfully employed with Libya. Key elements of an Israeli-Syrian settlement would include the return of the Golan Heights to Syria in return for a comprehensive peace treaty, normalization, and security guarantees to Israel.

With Iran, a peaceful resolution of the issues related to its nuclear program, a process which must at some point include direct American-Iranian talks, needs to be tied to a host of related issues, including Iranian security concerns, Iran's present and future role in Iraq, the Iranian-Syrian relationship, and Iran's support for Hezbollah.

In the case of the Palestinians, the way forward has been clear since the collapse of Clinton's efforts in 2000. Elements of a comprehensive settlement with Israel would include, but not be limited to, the following: A Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders, subject to such minor modifications agreed to by Israel and Palestine; Palestinians must relinquish the right of return, with Israel reciprocating with the removal of West Bank settlements, again with minor rectifications as agreed to by both parties; displaced citizens on both sides of the final border would be compensated by the international community; a robust international force would be deployed in southern Lebanon, a process already under way; a separate international force to supervise and facilitate Palestinian movement between Gaza and the West Bank would also be deployed; and finally, Jerusalem would be designated the shared capital of Palestine and Israel, with needed guarantees concerning freedom of movement and civic life in the city.

Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, a French newspaper proclaimed, "We are all Americans." Symbolic of the change that has taken place over the last five years, London demonstrators protesting the recent Israeli invasion of Lebanon carried placards saying, "We are all Hezbollah now." Central components of the "new beginning" outlined above, including a "comprehensive peace," dialogue with Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria, and "land for peace" in the West Bank, Golan Heights, and Shebaa Farms, are the antithesis of the approach found in "A Clean Break" and anathema to right-wing Israelis and their neoconservative proponents in the Bush administration. The absence of these components from the Mideast policy of the United States also explains why the Bush administration's policies in the region have been an abject failure.

It is time to make a clean break with the "clean break" policies of the past, inaugurating a fresh approach that seeks to negotiate new solutions to old problems by recognizing and accommodating the interests and objectives of all involved parties.

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