

# A Mideast Feast

By Jim Lobe | January 24, 2007

The Project for the New American Century (PNAC) may have effectively closed up shop two years ago, and its key neoconservative allies in the administration, such as Scooter Libby and Douglas Feith, may be long gone, but the group's five-year-old Middle East strategy remains very much alive.

This is not the "Wilsonian" strategy of transforming Iraq into a model of democracy and pluralism that would supposedly spread domino-like across the entire benighted region of autocrats, monarchs, and theocrats whose oppression and backwardness have, according to the neoconservative narrative, been the main cause of anti-U.S. Islamic extremism.

On the contrary, that "idealist" vision has largely disappeared from the administration's discourse, particularly over the past year as Iraq slipped steadily into sectarian civil war, despite having been enthusiastically embraced by President George W. Bush and his neoconservative supporters after their early justifications for war in Iraq—Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and ties to al-Qaida—proved unfounded.

It is, rather, the hard-edged strategy first enunciated in PNAC's letter to Bush published just nine days after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon. That document called for the administration to focus its "war on terrorism" on what it considered the main regional threats to the security of Israel, "America's staunchest ally against international terrorism."

Indeed, the September 20, 2001 letter, signed by some three dozen prominent, mostly neoconservative, hawks, suggested that Afghanistan and al-Qaida should be treated as mere hors d'oeuvres in a six-course meal in which Saddam Hussein's Iraq was to be only the main course.

The Palestinian Authority, Lebanon's Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria were also featured as part of the feast, a series of dishes that, with the notable replacement of the Palestinian Authority by Hamas as a result of last year's democratic elections, now appears to be, more than at any time since Washington's conquest of Iraq in 2003, back on the menu.

In its September 20 letter, PNAC mentioned briefly its support for military action in Afghanistan to "capture or

kill" Osama bin Laden and "to destroy his network of associates." The letter then warned that the failure to remove Saddam would "constitute an early and perhaps decisive surrender in the war on international terrorism" and declared that "any war against terrorism must target Hezbollah."

In words that sound remarkably familiar today, the letter continued: "We believe the administration should demand that Iran and Syria immediately cease all military, financial, and political support for Hezbollah and its operations. Should Iran and Syria refuse to comply, the administration should consider appropriate measures of retaliation against these known state sponsors of terrorism."

Finally, the letter called on Bush to cut aid to the Palestinian Authority until it ends terrorism against Israel, a recommendation that was followed up about six months later with a second PNAC letter demanding that Washington break all ties with then-leader Yasser Arafat. "No one should doubt that the United States and Israel share a common enemy," the April 3, 2002 letter asserted, opining that both countries were targets of the "Axis of Evil" and that "Israel's fight against terrorism is our fight."

Since its letters, PNAC has accomplished much of its agenda—albeit with results that it almost entirely failed to anticipate.

After chasing the Taliban and al-Qaida out of Afghanistan, Washington did indeed break off ties with the Palestinian Authority in June 2002. After Arafat's death and replacement by Mahmoud Abbas Washington began rekindling ties, only to effectively break them off once again after Hamas defeated Fatah in U.S.-supported elections one year ago.

The United States invaded Iraq in March 2003 and, nearly four years later, finds itself waging an extremely costly

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counterinsurgency campaign that neither the administration nor its neocon cheerleaders anticipated.

While most regional and military experts believe that Washington is fighting a losing battle, political observers are virtually unanimous that public disaffection with the war was the single most important cause of the Democrats' sweep of the midterm congressional elections last November, not to mention the growing Republican revolt against Bush's latest plans to send some 21,500 more U.S. troops to add to the 132,000 already in Iraq.

Finally, Hezbollah and Israel fought a month-long war last summer that was widely seen as a major political, if not military, victory not just for the Lebanese Shia movement, but also for its two main backers, Iran and Syria, whom Washington now accuses of trying to destabilize Iraq.

The summer 2006 Hezbollah-Israel conflict, combined with Iran's nuclear program and the fact that Tehran has emerged as the biggest winner of Washington's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, appears responsible for the White House's renewed embrace of PNAC's original targets (which are now being referred to by some neocons as "HISH": Hezbollah, Iran, Syria, and Hamas).

Just as ousting the Taliban and capturing or killing bin Laden and his associates were depicted by the neocons five years ago as a mere prelude to the main business of decisively defeating Israel's regional foes, so the administration appears to have once again relegated both Afghanistan and al-Qaida to the margins in its war on terrorism, despite the Taliban's unexpected resurgence of the past year.

Thus, even as National Intelligence Director John Negroponte was warning that al-Qaida still poses the gravest threat to U.S. security, Secretary of State

Condoleezza Rice omitted any mention of the group in congressional testimony last week when she explained that Washington now faces what she called "a new alignment of forces" in the region.

"On one side are reformers and responsible leaders," a group that Rice said included "Saudi Arabia and the other countries of the Gulf, Egypt, Jordan, the young democracies of Lebanon, of the Palestinian territory led by Mahmoud Abbas, and in Iraq." On the other side, however, "are Iran, Syria and Hezbollah, and Hamas," who Rice said "use violence to spread chaos, to undermine democratic governments, and to impose agendas of hatred and intolerance."

Of course, this is anything but "a new alignment of forces." However, it does recall not only PNAC's exhortations of five years ago, but also the strategy that prevailed in the early 1980s as the Reagan administration—and its neoconservative allies—supplied "moderate" Sunni Arab states, including Saddam Hussein's Iraq, with weapons, training, and other support to ward off the threat posed by a revolutionary Shia Iran and its allies in Lebanon and Syria. In so doing, of course, Washington helped lay the groundwork for the emergence of a radical Sunni Islamist movement that eventually blossomed into al-Qaida.

A quarter-century later, we are faced with an Iran emboldened by Bush's and the neocons' colossal mistakes of the past five years. And Washington finds itself desperately trying to rope the same Sunni authoritarian states (relabelled "responsible" and "mainstream") it and its neocon allies so recently depicted as the main source of al-Qaida's recruitment into a new anti-HISH alliance.

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