

27 Who lost the Middle East?

The collapse of the neoconservative-led US–Israeli hegemonic project

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After the Chinese communists led by Mao Zedong won the civil war in China in 1949 and forced Chiang Kai-shek and his pro-American Chinese Nationalists to flee to Taiwan, US Congress and the press started to debate the question: “Who Lost China?” Conservatives blamed the “China Hands” in the US State Department, who were accused of exhibiting pro-communist sympathies, while liberal critics argued that Washington’s long-time support for the corrupt Nationalists ended up producing anti-American blowback in China.¹

Considering the continuing decline in US influence in the Middle East—from the Persian Gulf through the Levant and to the Holy Land—is it possible that sometime during the first or second term of the next occupant of the White House, when Iran, perhaps armed with nuclear weapons and supported by its proxies in Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine, emerges as a dominant regional power, lawmakers and pundits in Washington will engage in a similar debate: who lost the Middle East?

In many ways, the last visit by US President George W. Bush to the Middle East in May 2008²—his advisers once referred to the region with the sobriquet the “New Middle East”³—could be seen as a defining moment in the history of America’s relationship with that region. It exposed the failure of the Bush administration’s Middle East policy that has been driven for eight years by the neoconservative officials and pundits whose agenda was based on what they considered to be two intertwining axioms: that the strategic interests of the US and Israel were compatible, and that those interests would be advanced by maintaining US hegemony in the Middle East with Israel serving as its local deputy of the American sheriff there. But as was becoming clear during the last days of the Bush administration, pursuing US policies based on these dubious assumptions proved to be disastrous for both US and Israeli interests.

Bush visits his “new” Middle East

As he was drowning politically and personally in scandals that would lead eventually to a humiliating resignation from office, in June 1974, President Richard Nixon took a triumphant seven-day trip to four Arab states and Israel, where, as *Time* put it, “the *huzzas* and the *hosannas* fell like sweet rain.” The magazine suggested that, “coming out of the parched Watergate wasteland of Washington, the praise and the cheers of multitudes were welcome indeed, particularly since each stop, each spectacle, was beamed in living color back to the living rooms of the US.”⁴

Following on the flight route of another unpopular and disgraced Republican White House occupant, President Bush decided that, as it was raining in the Midwest, in the form of his falling approval ratings, it was time to seek the sunshine of the Middle East, hoping that the television images of his five-day excursion to the region in May, 2008 would help salvage his personal and political legacy in the Midwest and the rest of the US.

Bush’s legacy included his ambitious strategy of transforming the Middle East and making it safe for US interests and values. Indeed, Bush’s tour to the region took place a month after the

fifth anniversary of the beginning of the Iraq war, which was supposed to mark the launching of the Freedom Agenda in the Middle East. Bush and his neoconservative advisors had promised that ousting Saddam Hussein would lead to the establishment of a stable and prosperous democracy in Mesopotamia that would serve as a model for the rest of the Middle East, creating the conditions for the emergence of pro-US liberal political systems in the Arab world and for the resolution of the Israel–Palestine conflict, or as neoconservative pundits would put it as the US was preparing to invade Iraq, “The road to Jerusalem leads through Baghdad.”⁵

Hence, on the eve of the ousting of Saddam Hussein, Bush and the other supporters of the planned “liberation” of Iraq in Washington argued that, notwithstanding the death and destruction that Jews and Arabs in Israel/Palestine experienced in the aftermath of the second Intifadah that had started in 2000, the resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict could be placed on the policy backburner until freedom and democracy were established in Iraq. Iraq would be joined by free and democratic Syria and Iran, and other players in the American-dominated Broader Middle East in pressing a free and democratic Palestine to make peace with Israel. After all, the creation of a Westernized and secular Mesopotamia was supposed to have a “domino effect” on the rest of the authoritarian governments in the region. Hence, the withdrawal of Syria’s troops from Lebanon in the aftermath of the so-called Cedar revolution, which was celebrated as an important chapter in the US-led “democratization” of the Middle East, was supposed to help eradicate the sectarian splits in that country and make it possible to disarm and co-opt the Shi’ite-led Hezbollah into the political system. The expectation in Washington was that this would be followed by the collapse of the Ba’ath regime in Damascus, leading eventually to the downfall of the ayatollahs in Tehran. As the Bushies envisioned it, the dramatic explosion of freedom in the Arab world would make it more likely that the Palestinians would move to establish their own independent state and conclude a peace accord with Israel. In the first stage of that process, the Palestinians would hold a free election that would bring to power a moderate and peace-oriented leadership.

But if the Nixon-in-the-Mideast spectacle and the accolades in Jerusalem and Egypt couldn’t help warm the political weather in Washington and strengthen Nixon’s hand in his battle to stave off impeachment, it was very doubtful that Bush’s May 13–18 trip to Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, a follow-up to his trip to the same three countries and others in the region in January, would produce more than photo ops.

If anything, Bush’s visit helped to highlight the gap between his grand designs for the Middle East and the depressing reality on the ground: the continuing violence and political and economic disintegration of Iraq; the failure to bring about an end to the Arab–Jewish dispute in the Holy Land; and the most dramatic development that has taken place since the removal of Saddam Hussein and the invasion of Iraq—the increasing power of Iran and its allies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine.

“What we’re seeing here is, in a sense, the growing—the birth pangs of a new Middle East, and whatever we do, we have to be certain that we’re pushing forward to the new Middle East, not going back to the old Middle East,” said Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice during her effort to end the Israel–Hezbollah war in July 2004.⁶ During his visit to the Middle East in May 2008, Bush had the opportunity to observe the contours of this “new” Middle East, which looked very different from the way he, Rice, and the rest of the neoimperialists and democratic crusaders in Washington had envisioned it.

There was an element of *chutzpah* in Bush’s assertion before the Israeli Knesset that diplomatic engagement with Iran—an idea proposed by, among others, his own Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and the Bush family’s close aide, former Secretary of State James Baker—could threaten US interests in the Middle East and strengthen Iran. In reality, it is the policies that Bush has pursued, including the refusal to open a dialogue with Tehran, that have been responsible for the weakening of the US position in the region and the increasing influence of Iran, making it less likely that the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians would be resolved any time soon.

Hence, the ouster of Saddam Hussein helped open a Pandora's box of sectarian discord between the Shi'ites and the Sunnis in Iraq, igniting the current violence between the ethnic and religious groups in the country and turning it into new safe heaven for terrorists from around the Middle East. Al-Qaeda was able to establish its presence in Iraq only in the aftermath of the collapse of Hussein's secular Ba'athist regime, which had been one of the fiercest foes of Osama bin Laden's radical Islamist terrorist group.

At the same time, the fall of Hussein's Sunni-led Iraq, which had served as a counterbalance to the power of the Shi'ite-controlled regime in Tehran, ended up helping to strengthen the power of Iran in the Persian Gulf. The government in US-liberated Baghdad, which was composed of Shi'ite political figures and groups with close ties to Iran and the Hezbollah movement in Lebanon, which represented the growing Shi'ite community in Lebanon, were becoming part of what the pro-US Arab Sunni regimes describe as a pro-Iran Shi'ite crescent in the Middle East.⁷

Indeed, future historians will probably conclude that the implementation of Bush's neo-conservative agenda in the Middle East—the toppling of Iraq's secular Sunni regime; the resurgence of Iran and its Shi'ite allies; a series of US-driven elections that strengthened the hand of Islamist parties in Iran, Lebanon, and Palestine; the breakdown in the Israel–Palestine peace process—provoked a set of powerful revolutionary changes that are challenging the post-cold war status quo in the Middle East, and in a way that runs contrary to the interests of the US and its traditional allies there.

That was certainly the message that Bush received from these allies during his stops in Israel, Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, where there was clearly a sense of panic over growing indications that Iran's Shi'ite allies are growing stronger and that the US is losing its hegemonic position in the region.

In Lebanon, the Western-backed government was fighting pro-Iran Hezbollah forces and seized control of much of Muslim west Beirut. Iran and its Shi'ite proxies were demonstrating that neither the Lebanese military nor the various militias representing the Sunni, Christian, and Druze communities have the power to disarm Hezbollah. The other side of the coin was that the Americans did not have the power to impose a settlement in Lebanon, and that the interests of Hezbollah, and by extension Iran and Syria, who support the Shi'ite militias, had to be taken into consideration in any agreement to bring stability to the Levant.⁸

The “new” Lebanon is one in which “the strongest group comprises Iranian- and Syrian-backed Islamist Shiites and their junior partners, Christian and Sunni Lebanese allies,” wrote Lebanese columnist Rami Khouri recently. “They will share power in a national unity government with fellow Lebanese who are friends, allies, dependents, and proxies of the US and Saudi Arabia.” Khouri told *The Christian Science Monitor* that “Bush and Rice singled out Lebanon as a poster child of their success” during the so-called Cedar revolution that brought an end to the Syrian occupation of that country. “That makes the loss even bigger,” he added.⁹

In Iraq, the US-led offensive against the Shi'ite militia of anti-US and pro-Iranian cleric Muqtada al-Sadr in Baghdad's Sadr City was suspended only after the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, which is controlled by Shi'ite parties, sent a mission to Tehran and requested Iran's intervention to halt the fighting in the Shi'ite neighborhood. As with Lebanon, Iran demonstrated that it, not the US, is the power broker in Iraq, where Iranian influence has been growing in the political, economic, and religious spheres. Ironically, while Washington continues to accuse Tehran of assisting the Iraqi insurgents, the Maliki government maintained close ties to Iran's leaders.¹⁰

The worst case scenario was that Iraq gradually becomes a satellite of Iran, which in turn could emerge as the hegemon in the Persian Gulf, able to exert enormous influence on the Saudis and the other pro-Western petroleum sheikhdoms. These concerns were raised during Bush's meeting with Saudi leaders, who do not have the military capability to contain Iran's

rising power. And if Iran succeeds in acquiring a nuclear weapons capability, it would pose a threat not only to the Saudis and the other Sunni Arab regimes, but also to Israel.

While Bush discussed the issue of Iran during his meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and other Israeli leaders, the main reason for his visit to Israel was to take part in celebrating its sixtieth birthday and to try to revive (once again) the Israeli–Palestinian “peace process.” In the speeches he made in Israel, Bush promoted (once again) his Freedom Agenda for the region. After praising “60 years of democracy in Israel,” he stressed that “what happened here is possible everywhere.”¹¹

But notwithstanding Bush’s public commitment to reviving Israeli–Palestinian negotiations, which he reiterated during last year’s summit in Annapolis, Maryland, there was no indication that Israelis and Palestinians are closer to reaching an agreement to the principles that would guide a final accord. Olmert’s political power was now threatened by investigations into allegations of bribery, while the Palestinian Authority’s Mahmoud Abbas controlled only the West Bank and remained in power thanks to the backing of Israel, the US, and the European Union, which rejected any negotiations with the Hamas movement that rules over Gaza.

Dramatizing the lack of progress on the Israel–Palestine front and the potential for a major war between Israel and Hamas, Palestinians in Gaza launched a large-scale rocket attack on an Israeli shopping mall while Bush was at a gala event in Israel. While many Israelis have hailed Bush as one of the most pro-Israel US presidents, others point out that the stalemate in the peace process and the failure to implement a two-state solution—an Israel side-by-side with an independent Palestine—threatened Israel’s survival as a Jewish state, as more and more Palestinians would demand the creation of a single, binational state in the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean.

Indeed, it was difficult to argue that Bush’s policies were advancing the long-term interests of Israel—or for that matter, those of the US and its allies in the Middle East. That was the depressing reality that the White House and its neoconservative allies would be facing during the last six months of the Bush administration. It was not surprising, therefore, that pundits were speculating that the Americans and the Israelis, with tacit support from the Saudis and other Arab Sunni governments, might decide to take military action against Iran, as well as against Hezbollah and Hamas, before Bush leaves office as a way of reversing the regional rise in power of Tehran and its proxies.

According to an Israeli Army radio report quoted in the *Jerusalem Post*, a “senior member” of Bush’s traveling entourage told officials in Jerusalem that Bush intended to attack Iran before the end of his term, but that Condoleezza Rice and Robert Gates’ were opposed to such action.¹² At the same time, former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) analyst Philip Giraldi reported on the *American Conservative* website that speculation in Washington was growing that the National Security Council agreed with plans to attack an Iranian camp where Iraqi insurgents are believed to be trained. Gates, however, counseled delaying any offensive action.¹³

There were also growing indications that Israel was preparing for a massive military strike against the Hamas forces in Gaza, which could result in an invasion of that Palestinian territory by Israel. According to the Israeli press, Vice President Dick Cheney gave Israel the green light for such an operation during his last visit to the country. And interestingly enough, after expressing opposition to the opening of negotiations between Israel and Syria that could result in a peace agreement between the two countries, there were signs that the Bush administration is now approving such an Israeli–Syrian dialogue, mediated by Turkey, as part of an effort to provide Damascus with incentives to end its partnership with Iran. The Americans and the Israelis were apparently hoping that co-opting Syria into the pro-US coalition in the Middle East would weaken the power of Hezbollah, which receives military support from Iran via Syria.

These and other reports suggested that a new Middle Eastern war, pitting the US, Israel, and other pro-US players against Iran and its proxies in Lebanon and Gaza, could take place before the November presidential election, a dramatic development that could affect the outcome of

the race. But a US military conflict with Iran would only speed up what would probably turn out to be the most dramatic makeover of the Middle East since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the Western takeover of the region after the First World War. The partnership between the US and Israel has helped produce these changes in the Middle East. But this relationship would be transformed as a result of the new balance of power evolving in the region.

The neoconservatives and US–Israeli relationship

The terrorist attacks on the American homeland on September 11, 2001 highlighted the costs of the US strategy of maintaining US hegemony in the Middle East after the end of the cold war and, particularly, in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf war. That strategy had been embraced by both Republican President George H.W. Bush and the Democratic administration of President Bill Clinton, and it was based on the notion that an “over the horizon” presence of US troops in Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf states would be sufficient to contain the anti-status quo powers of Iraq and Iran (a policy known as “offshore balancing”), and that continuing US diplomacy aimed at fostering peace between Israel and the Palestinians would help win the support of the moderate Arab regimes in the region. In short, it was a low-cost strategy aimed at deterring potential challenges from regional players, such as Baghdad and Tehran, as well as global powers such as the European Union.

In this context, Turkey, the pro-American Arab regimes in the Persian Gulf, the Levant, and Egypt were expected to play a supporting role in this scenario of cost-free Pax Americana. There was very little pressure on Israel to end its settlement policy in the West Bank and Gaza, with the Clinton administration occasionally dispatching its diplomatic brigades to the region as part of an effort to create an impression that it was trying to make progress in the peace process involving the Jewish state, the Palestinians, and Syria.¹⁴

But the collapse of the Camp David talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians in 2000 and the start of the second Intifadah, followed by 9/11, illustrated the need for replacing the old deluxe Pax Americana approach in the Middle East and also provided Americans with a glimpse of hell-on-earth, of what could happen if the tensions between the West and the Islamic world degenerated into a bloody confrontation—with the Israeli–Palestinian conflict becoming a major source of this apparent global clash.

US policy in the first months of the presidency of George W. Bush could have followed the realist approach to the region that was pursued by President George H. W. Bush and then Bill Clinton, of trying to help resolve the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in a way that would have served common US and Israeli interests. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Secretary of State Colin Powell, the leading proponent of this realpolitik view in the new administration, was trying to promote a new effort to revive Israeli–Palestinian negotiations along the lines of a Saudi peace proposal, which was based on the notion that the road to a creating a new balance of power in the region that would favor US and Israeli interests led through Jerusalem and not Baghdad.¹⁵

An activist and creative US role in creating the conditions for the resolution of the main issues separating Israelis and Palestinians—the future of the Jewish settlements in the occupied Arab territories, the status of Jerusalem and the Jewish and Moslem religious sites there, the demand for the “right of return” of Palestinian refugees—could have weakened the hands of Muslim radical figures (such as Osama bin Laden) and secular Arab leaders (such as Saddam Hussein) while strengthening the hands of the pro-American governments in the region and lessening anti-US sentiments in the Middle East, and by extension, the ability of terrorist groups to attract more public support and new recruits.¹⁶

Instead, the neoconservative ideologues that emerged as the central players in the policy process and the elite discourse in Washington succeeded in exploiting the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in order to advance a US-led messianic crusade to remake

the Middle East—in the most devastating way, as far as US national interests and the Western presence in the Middle East were concerned. And while the neoconservative agenda seemed to be advancing short-term Israeli interests by providing then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon with the green light to crush the second Intifadah, isolate Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and members of his Fatah movement, and implement a unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, the implementation of the ambitious American strategy, including the invasion of Iraq and the threats to do “regime change” in Tehran and Damascus as part of a hegemonic project, ended up harming the long-term security of the Jewish state.

In a way, the neoconservative notion that the US and Israel were allied together in the cause of spreading democracy in the Middle East and worldwide would be scoffed at by Israeli officials and pundits who tend to subscribe to a *realpolitik* reading of their national interests. After all, their government has been strengthening its military ties with China despite US opposition. Israelis are not “pro-American” because of their commitment to Jeffersonian values—the Jewish state has yet to adopt a constitution—but because they concluded that their interests and those of the US are compatible now. But they have always seen this “special relationship” not as a marriage but as an affair. And like any affair, it could end.

Indeed, there was a time when Israelis were pro-Soviet and pro-French.¹⁷ In 1948, Stalin’s Soviet Union was the most enthusiastic supporter of establishing Israel, which it hoped would be a leading anti-imperialist post in the Middle East, while Secretary of State George Marshall pressed Harry Truman not to recognize the new state, warning that it could harm America’s position in the region. Hence Moscow recognized Israel immediately after the state was proclaimed and provided it with arms, while it took the Americans more than a year to grant *de jure* recognition to Israel, on which they imposed an arms embargo. At the height of the “In-Russia-With-Love” mood in Israel, the expectation was that the new state would remain neutral in the evolving cold war.

Then Israel had its French kiss. It was France that served as Israel’s main source of arms in the 1950s and early 1960s and helped it develop its nuclear arsenal. Israel was then embracing a European orientation and forming close ties with an emerging Franco-German bloc to help resist US pressure to end its nuclear program. The Israeli alliance with France reached a peak in the aftermath of the 1956 Suez campaign during which the two conspired (with Britain and against US wishes) to oust Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser. Their interests were seen to be compatible as the French tried to suppress the Nasser-backed struggle for independence in Algeria. But after Charles de Gaulle’s decision to grant independence to Algeria, the relationship between Israel and France cooled; relations soured after Israel rejected the aging French leader’s advice not to attack Egypt in 1967.

It was only after Israel’s 1967 victory over Egypt, a Soviet ally, that the intellectual predecessors of today’s neoconservatives started popularizing the idea of Israel as an American “strategic asset” in the Middle East. Members of the first generation of neoconservatives, such as the Rostow brothers and Ben Wattenberg, who served in the administration of President Lyndon Johnson, helped him drum up support for the Vietnam war among Jewish liberal democrats who had been opposed to that military adventure. This was done by convincing such liberals that only a militarily strong and perpetually interventionist America can guarantee the security of Israel.

The corollary was that a strong Israel is a “strategic asset” as far as US interests in the Middle East were concerned, helping Washington to contain Soviet expansionism in the area. This was reduced to the neoconservative dogma that what is good for Israel is good for America, and vice versa. Neocons have treated the questioning of this dogma as the equivalent of a declaration of war and have immediately sought, by innuendo, to brand such questioners as “anti-Semitic.”¹⁸

Israel became one of the most important elements on the agenda of the neoconservative coalition that emerged as a counterforce after the 1972 victory of presidential candidate George McGovern in the Democratic Party. In 1968, the neocons backed the late Senator Hubert Humphrey from Minnesota for president. In 1972, they mobilized their support

behind the late Senator Henry Jackson from Washington. Both Humphrey and Jackson represented staunch anti-Soviet and pro-Israeli positions in the party. Senator Jackson's aides, Richard Perle and Elliott Abrams, who later became major figures in the Reagan foreign policy team, attempted to torpedo any effort by the Nixon and Carter administrations to improve relations with the Soviet Union or to launch peace efforts in the Middle East. And it was the Carter administration's foreign policy agenda, including its efforts to improve the relationship with the Soviets and to accommodate the national interests of the Palestinians, that accelerated the political transition of the neocons from the Democratic to the Republican Party, with some of their leading figures holding key positions in the administration of President Ronald Reagan.

Neoconservatives in the Reagan administration argued that Israel should become America's leading ally in the region during the renewed cold war tensions, while depicting the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as a Soviet stooge. For members of the second generation of neoconservatives, including officials such as UN Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, Richard Perle, and Elliott Abrams, and for more traditional anti-Soviet officials, such as Marine Colonels Robert McFarlane and Oliver North, Israel was a country that could combat Soviet mischief by no-nonsense foreign policy realism, unbound by domestic legal constraints.

The neoconservative propagandists proposed Israel as a model for recovering from "post-Vietnam syndrome" and for renewing American energy and drive. Unilateral US intervention in places such as Grenada and Libya began to resemble Israel's own iron fist approach to Middle East issues. The two countries found themselves increasingly alone in international organizations such as the United Nations. A visitor from Mars to the UN headquarters in 1985 would have found it difficult to decide, after listening to US Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick and Israeli Ambassador Benjamin Netanyahu, which of the two represented the US and which Israel.

To the Likud Party, the policies of the Reagan administration seemed to offer Israel time to consolidate its hold on the West Bank and Gaza. The neoconservatives occupying top positions on Reagan's foreign policy team encouraged Washington to view the Arab-Israeli conflict through cold war lenses, and to identify Palestinian nationalism as an extension of Soviet-induced international terrorism. In that context, Washington could view Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands with benign neglect.

All this was accomplished at serious cost for both Israel and the US. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the Iran-Contra affair were among the harmful products, while the first Intifadah highlighted the destructive consequences of the neoconservative "strategic asset" formula and its operational implication of placing the Palestinian issue on the backburner.

But the end of the cold war seemed to spell disaster to the neocons, now at risk of being deprived of their favorite enemy and the justification for the strategic alliance between Washington and Jerusalem. Enter the Middle Eastern bogeyman, as neoconservative intellectuals began focusing on the need for the US to confront the new transnational enemy from the Middle East, radical Arab nationalism and Islamic "fundamentalism," or what columnist Charles Krauthammer termed the "global Intifadah."¹⁹ The notion that America was threatened by new set of enemies in the Arab and Muslim worlds in the aftermath of the cold war seemed to fit into the evolving neoconservative narrative. It suggested that the value of the strategic relationship between the US and Israel was now becoming even more significant as the military strength of the Jewish state could serve as a deterrent to radical Arab regimes and help shore up shaky ones.²⁰ By this vision, Israel could become the contemporary crusader state, a bastion of the West in a region and a world beset by the threat of what President George W. Bush, reflecting the neoconservative narrative, described as Islamo-Fascism.²¹

Israel as America's "strategic asset: the geostrategic paradox

But even as Israel and the US were strengthening their ties, there was recognition in both governments of the strategic constraints on their relationship. America could not maintain its

position in the Middle East without establishing a presence in the Arab world, while Israel's friendship with America could not substitute for the acceptance of Israel by its Arab neighbors. Washington's efforts to bring about Middle East peace had to be an integral and central part of a strategy to advance US and Israeli interests.

Indeed, Washington's ability to play the role of an honest broker between Israel and Egypt (and Syria) after the 1973 Middle East war was only made possible when Richard Nixon re-established diplomatic ties with Cairo, co-opting it into the pro-American camp. It was the even-handed US role that made it possible for Jimmy Carter to mediate the historic peace agreement between Israel and Egypt in 1979 and for George H.W. Bush to launch a round of Israeli-Arab negotiations after the Gulf war in 1991 that resulted in the peace accords between Israel and the PLO and Jordan. Hence, from an Israeli perspective that regarded peace with the Arabs as a top national interest, the pressure on Israel by Nixon, Carter, and Bush to withdraw from occupied Arab territories in exchange for peace reflected a genuinely pro-Israeli direction of US policy as the agreements with Egypt, the Palestinians, and Jordan advanced the Jewish state's long-term strategic interests. But of course, if you were listening to the proponents of Greater Israel in Jerusalem and their neoconservative allies in Washington, Nixon, Carter, and Bush were the enemies of the Jewish people.

At the same time, a realistic analysis of Israeli interests would have concluded that there was nothing pro-Israeli in the willingness of the Reagan administration to treat with benign neglect Israel's creeping annexation of the West Bank, creating the conditions for the outbreak of the first Intifadah, or in giving Israel a yellow light to invade Lebanon in 1982. Those US policies reflected the agenda of Likud and its neoconservative partners, with their emphasis on propping up the "strategic asset" by placing the Palestinian issue on the backburner and punishing the "pro-Soviet" PLO. They resulted in the rise of Palestinian and Shi'ite terrorism aimed against both the Jewish state and the US and damaged core Israeli and American interests.²²

The same kind of geostrategic paradox—an American administration that is tagged as "pro-Israeli" but whose policies damage the long-standing interests of the Jewish state—will be recalled as one of the legacies of George W. Bush. After 9/11, and against the backdrop of the second Intifadah and the Iraq war, a new generation of neoconservatives succeeded in marketing to another White House the notion that the US and Israel were now being brought together in a strategic alliance against "Islamofascism." This alliance would operate with America as sheriff and Israel as its deputy while Israeli-Palestinian peace is placed on the backburner. Bush and his advisers saw America's battle with Iraq and Israel's battle with the Palestinians as part of the same war, according to *Ha'aretz* chief political analyst, Akiva Eldar. "They have actually suggested that Israel will help the United States to take over the Middle East," Eldar said. "They were sitting in think tanks that believed that you don't even try to appease or satisfy the Arabs, you reach peace by force which means you impose it [and] you don't make concessions to people you don't trust, and that puts them and Sharon in the same party."²³

Consider the results of US policies—the coming to power of radical Shi'ites in Baghdad and the strengthening influence of Iran and its allies; the radicalization of the Palestinians, the election of Hamas, and an environment less conducive for Arab-Israeli peace; the growing isolation of the US and Israel in the Middle East, in Europe, and around the world. Is it surprising that many Israelis were now asking: if we have a pro-Israeli administration in Washington, how would an anti-Israeli one look?

How the Iraq war disappointed Israel

There is no doubt that, in the months leading to the US invasion of Iraq, Israeli officials and analysts were jumping on the American bandwagon. After all, it became clear that the ousting of Saddam Hussein was inevitable and, despite Israel's tragic failure in achieving "regime change" in multiethnic Lebanon in 1982, most Israeli observers expected that the American

experience in Iraq would be more successful and benefit short-term Israeli interest by ridding the region of the anti-Israeli leader in Baghdad, and were not even trying to hide their glee over American plans to conquer Mesopotamia. “Enthusiastic IDF [Israeli Defense Forces] Awaits War in Iraq,” screamed the headline in the respected Israeli daily *Ha’aretz* on February 17, 2003. “The military and political leadership yearns for war in Iraq, seeing it as an opportunity to win the war of attrition with the Palestinians,” reported diplomatic editor Aluf Benn.

Senior IDF officers and those close to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, such as National Security Advisor Ephraim Halevy, painted a rosy picture of the wonderful future Israel can expect after the war. They envisioned a domino effect, with the fall of Saddam Hussein followed by that of Israel’s other enemies: Arafat, Hassan Nasrallah, Bashar Assad, the ayatollah in Iran, and maybe even Muhammad Gaddafi. Along with these leaders, the war would bring about the disappearance of the threats of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction.

Benn also noted that there was “excitement” in the IDF’s planning department over the standoff between the US and its NATO allies: “A paper distributed to the army’s upper echelons even spoke of an opportunity to ‘remove the pro-Palestinian Europeans from the Middle East.’” Israeli officials concluded, according to Benn, that the US would “punish the Europeans for their back-stabbing on the road to Baghdad, and will no longer ask them for input regarding Israeli concessions.”

Benn quoted Maj. Gen. Amos Gilad, Co-ordinator of Government Activities in the West Bank and Gaza, voicing the Israeli army’s belief that a US-led war for regime change in Iraq would establish a precedent for, in Gilad’s words, “the removal of other dictators closer to us who use violence and terror.” Reflecting official and public Israeli attitudes at that time, polls indicated that a large majority of Israelis cheered the removal of Saddam Hussein by the Americans.²⁴

Ironically, after American critics of the planned war against Iraq raised these same points, suggesting that neocons were pressing for Saddam’s ousting because they were hoping that it would help secure Israeli interests, mainstream US media columnists seemed to insist that Americans must not speak as frankly as the Israelis. When then *New York Times* columnist (and now editor) Bill Keller wrote about the possible effects of the invasion of Iraq on Israeli interests, he made it clear that he wasn’t trying to advance “one of the more enduring conspiracy theories of the moment, the notion that we are about to send a quarter of a million American soldiers to war for the sake of Israel,” and he even chose an ironic title for his piece, “Is It Good for the Jews?”²⁵ But an alternative title, “Is It Good for Israel?” would certainly have captured the gist of his column—that the war was perceived in Jerusalem and Washington to be in Israel’s interest.

But was it? That was certainly not the conclusion that you would be drawing after skimming through analyses issued by Israeli experts since the collapse of Saddam’s statue in downtown Baghdad, which suggest that America was fighting the right war (against terrorism) in the wrong place (Iraq). “The war in Iraq did not damage international terror groups but instead distracted the United States from confronting other hotbeds of Islamic militancy and actually ‘created momentum’ for many terrorists,” the Associated Press reported of a study conducted by “a top Israeli security think tank.” The Jaffe Center for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University said that, far from undermining Islamic militants, the Iraq war “has created momentum for many terrorist elements, but chiefly al-Qaeda and its affiliates.”

The center’s director, Shai Feldman, suggested in the report that the vast amount of money and effort the US has poured into Iraq has deflected attention from other centers of terrorism, such as Afghanistan. The focus of US intelligence upon Iraq “has to be at the expense of being able to follow strategic dangers in other parts of the world,” he wrote. The bottom line of this and other similar Israeli studies is that Iran, and not the US, has emerged from the war in Iraq as the major winner.²⁶

Even more intriguing was the way Israeli officials and pundits scoffed at the Wilsonian fantasies of the neocons—fantasies of using the invasion of Iraq as the first stage in

“democratizing” the Middle East. Not only were most Israeli experts suggesting that such a scheme is impractical, they also argued that the collapse of authoritarian regimes in places such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan is bound to bring to power anti-Israeli and anti-American forces. As Israeli leaders saw it, the Jewish state would have a hard time adjusting to a democratic Arab world in which public opinion, rather than centralized rulers, determined policy.

Yehezkel Dror, a political science professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, related the Israeli establishment’s view: “We’re all for democracy, but let us imagine democracy in Egypt or Jordan. Will it strengthen their peace with Israel?” Dror and his colleagues have concluded that the answer to this question is a clear “No!”²⁷ That explained why *Newsweek* characterized the reputation of Natan Sharansky—George W. Bush’s favorite author and the prophet of Middle Eastern democracy—in Israel as that of a “scorned idealist.”

“I’m very frustrated,” Sharansky told the international edition of *Newsweek*. “My ideas are not taken seriously at all [in Israel].” Why? Because they were perceived as “too disconnected from the harsh Middle East reality,” Sharansky explained, noting that most Israelis believe that democracy in the Arab world could easily translate into even greater hostility toward Israel.²⁸

In short, there was a growing recognition in Israel that the Iraq war was not so good for the Jews. It has diverted attention and resources from the war on terror and threatened to unleash anti-Israeli and anti-American forces in the Middle East—such as a Shi’ite clerical government in Iraq that could become an ally of a radical Shi’ite, nuclear-armed Iran, which would pose more of a long-term threat to the strategic interests of the Jewish state than the militarily weak Saddam ever did.²⁹

Israel’s enthusiastic support for US intervention in Iraq was easy to understand: an opportunistic response by a client state that had hoped to get a free ride on a successful military operation against an anti-Israeli Arab state. “Unlike during the Roman Empire, this time the current reigning empire is with us,” explained Likud politician Benjamin Netanyahu in the immediate aftermath of the successful US military operation in Iraq. But what many Israelis failed to take into consideration was that the American empire could fail. “What was interesting is that among the many scholars preoccupied with the war in Iraq, not a single one has discussed the possible outcome of an American withdrawal, in the wake of faulty handling of the war,” Ze’ev Schiff, *Ha’aretz’s* military analyst, wrote recently. If that happens, Israelis’ “relatively optimistic intelligence assessment regarding strategic threats to the country would be eroded,” he concluded.³⁰

The neoconservative strategic vision assumed that what is good for America is good for Israel, that a global and democratic American empire in control of the Middle East will help preserve Israel’s interests while a strong and democratic Israel would help secure American concerns in the region. As noted, the neocons considered this an axiom and seemed to be amazed that most American Jews, most of whom did not vote for Bush in the last election, do not share their perspective. “The surprising thing is not that there are so many Jews who are neocons but that there are so many who are not,” complained leading neocon and former Pentagon official Douglas Feith in an interview with *The New Yorker*.³¹

Some Americans, such as professors John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, authors of the controversial *The Israeli Lobby*, concluded that Israeli and American strategic interests were not always compatible and that the strong ties with the Jewish state were hurting the US position in the Middle East. Some Israelis are now asking themselves whether they can count on the long-term support of an American empire that, not unlike the Roman one, was bound to decline and shed its commitments in the Middle East.³²

Israel–Hezbollah war demolishes the “strategic asset” thesis

These Israeli sentiments were becoming more prevalent in the aftermath of the Israel–Hezbollah war in Lebanon during which the high costs of the Israeli–American “strategic alliance” were

becoming quite evident to both sides. Washington had given Israel a green light to attack Hezbollah in Lebanon as a way of punishing its patrons, Iran and Syria. But Israel proved to be more of a strategic burden than an asset, hurting the interests of a pro-American government in Beirut and eroding what remains of US credibility in the Middle East. "Hezbollah's unprovoked attack on 12 July provided Israel the extraordinary opportunity to demonstrate its utility by making a major contribution to America's war on terrorism," wrote Charles Krauthammer, insisting that America "has been disappointed" by Israeli failure to defeat Hezbollah.³³

From that perspective, one of the main casualties of that crisis in the Middle East was that favorite neoconservative paradigm, according to which the US should regard Israel as a major "strategic asset" in the Middle East, which in turn was rooted in a neoconservative axiom that what is good for Israel's strategic interest is good for America, and vice versa.

That paradigm was very central to the spin that the neocons concocted on the eve of Lebanon war II. Their plot-line was obvious: Iran and Syria encouraged its proxy in Lebanon, Hezbollah, to deliver a blow to America's proxy in the Middle East, Israel, as a way of shifting the balance of power in the Middle East in favor of Tehran and Damascus. According to the script, Israel, the American proxy, was supposed to deliver a counterblow to Hezbollah, the Iranian-Syrian proxy and reshift the balance of power in favor of Washington. This game was expected to conclude with an American-Israeli win over the "axis of evil" team. Instead, according to the conventional wisdom among experts, the final results of Lebanon war II—Israel failing to decimate Hezbollah by doing a rerun of the Six Day war or a remake of the Entebbe rescue operation—were looking more and more like, in the best case scenario, a draw or, in the worst-case scenario, a perception of a Hezbollah victory.

"We have been driven into something we didn't want to do," said Anthony H. Cordesman, a military analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington in an interview with the *New York Times*. "Far from Israel being the American proxy in a war against Iran, we've become Israel's proxy in its war against Hezbollah," he said. "Israel's miscalculations have been so serious that its only hope for victory is to have the United States and the international community do for Israel what it can't do militarily, which is defeat Hezbollah, assemble an international force in Lebanon and bring some sort of endgame to all this."³⁴ In short, something not very funny had happened to the neocon paradigm on the way to southern Lebanon.

As noted earlier, the end of the cold war should have made the "Israel-as-a-strategic-asset" paradigm obsolete. But after 9/11 and against the backdrop of the Iraq war, neoconservatives succeeded in marketing the notion that the US and Israel were now being brought together in a strategic alliance against Islamo-Fascism and a global Intifadah. This alliance would operate in the form of an American sheriff and its Israeli deputy—American hegemony in the region with certain military tasks subcontracted to Israel. Israeli-Arab peacemaking was placed on the policy backburner. The neoconservative message was that the US needed to adopt more of the Israeli tough methods in dealing with Middle Eastern terrorists and "bad guys" (as Arabs only understand force, etc.), which the Americans were trying to do in Iraq with very little success. In the process, the Bush administration has strengthened Iran—which, of course, ran contrary to both American and Israeli interests.

Then Washington, as part of the implementation of the Freedom Agenda, encouraged the holding of free elections in the Palestinian territories in January 2006, which brought to power the radical Hamas movement, and made it even less likely that the Israelis and the Palestinian could restart peace negotiations. The decision to give an American green light to the Israeli military operation, which helped the status of Iran (and Syria) and its proxy Hezbollah, seemed to fit very much into this disastrous American strategy, a bizarre mix of old-fashioned imperialism (which helps produce a backlash from dissatisfied players) and a democratic crusade (which helps strengthen the power of these same players).

So it was not surprising that neocons such as Charles Krauthammer were angry and confused after the war in Lebanon, after concluding that the Israeli deputy had failed to deliver

the goods to the American sheriff. In his unique form of Israel bashing, Krauthammer, in a column in *The Washington Post*, blamed Israel for not playing its part as a “strategic asset” of the US in the Middle East, based on his own “America-and-Israel-defeat-the-bad-guys” script. Suggesting that America had given Israel the green light to attack Hezbollah in Lebanon not as a favor to Israel, but as an act of clear (US) self-interest, Krauthammer explained: “America needs a decisive Hezbollah defeat.” Hence, it was “Israel’s rare opportunity to demonstrate what it can do for its great American patron.” The United States “has gone far out on a limb to allow Israel to win and for all this to happen,” counting on “Israel’s ability to do the job”. And “it has been disappointed”. It seemed that Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert’s “search for victory on the cheap has jeopardized not just the Lebanon operation but America’s confidence in Israel as well,” concluded Krauthammer.

But Israel, as *Ha’aretz* columnist Doron Rosenblum put it, “was not established in order to be a spearhead against global Islam, or in order to serve as an alert squad for the Western world.” Moreover, the neoconservative paradigm would make Israel a modern-day crusader state, an outlet of a global power whose political, economic, and military headquarters are on the other side of the world. America’s commitment to the security of the Israeli “province” would always remain uncertain and fragile, reflecting changes in the balance of power in Washington and the shifting dynamics of US politics and economics.³⁵

At the same time, the Israel–Hezbollah war demonstrated to Americans once again that the interests of Israel—a small Middle Eastern power focused on maintaining its security—were not necessarily compatible with those of the US, a superpower with broad global interests that require co-operation with the leading Arab and Muslim states. In fact, taking into consideration the constraints on their relationship, Washington has never established a formal military alliance with Israel—whose status remains that of a client state that needs US military support in order to preserve its margin of security while occasionally providing assistance to its American patron. And as in the case of any other client state, Washington should ensure that the Israeli tail doesn’t wag the American dog by drawing it into unnecessary and costly ventures.

In short, if Israel continued to be limited in its ability to provide security services to the US, American hegemony cannot make the Middle East safe for Israel. Indeed, Israelis were beginning to understand that taking a path toward a peaceful co-existence with the Palestinians and their other neighbors in the next generations could advance the long-term interests of both Israel and the US.

On the road to Damascus: US and Israel clash over Syria

A prime example of the contrast between the Israeli perceptions and the Bush administration’s perspective on dealing with the changing balance of power in the Middle East has to do with Syria, and in particular, with the Turkish-backed efforts by the Syrians to restart peace negotiations with the Jewish state. Since 2002, the Bush administration pursued policies aimed at isolating Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s regime. Consistent with the advice of those who advocate regime change in Damascus, it has provided assistance to Syrian opposition groups and imposed sanctions on Syria designed to compel the Assad government to reverse course on Lebanon and its support for Palestinian terrorist groups. The Bush administration has portrayed Syria as part of an Iran-led regional coalition, and administration officials have depicted the Syrian Ba’ath regime, a secular and anti-Islamist political movement, as a leading regional opponent of its Freedom Agenda in the Middle East as well as one that is committed to an Islamo-Fascist ideological orientation.

In that context, the Bush administration has continued to pursue a consistent policy, even under the leadership of the more pragmatic Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, of blocking Israeli moves to open a diplomatic dialogue with the Syrians. The Israelis have regarded Syria as a formidable regional Arab adversary, but contrary to the view advanced by the neocons,

they considered the ruling Assad dynasty and the Ba'ath regime as pragmatic political players who have been dedicated opponents of the radical Islamic forces in the region and whose long-term interest lies in achieving stability in the Levant, including through an agreement with Israel, and in opening to the West. According to this view, Syria's partnership with Iran and Hezbollah, its proxy in Lebanon, is tactical and not strategic and provides the Syrians with leverage in future negotiations with Israel as well as the US and the EU. Hence, confronted with the threat of isolation and perhaps even regime change by Washington, Syria sees its partnership with Iran as a way of counterbalancing US and Israeli power.³⁶

The Israelis, recognizing after the war with Hezbollah that they were limited in their ability to impose their strategic preferences on Lebanon without Syrian co-operation, have come to the conclusion that negotiations with Syria could weaken Damascus's ties with Iran and bring about its co-option into the more moderate camp in the Middle East, in a way that could advance the interests of Israel as well as the US on several fronts, including the future of Iraq, the long-term prospects for a viable state in neighboring Lebanon, and progress toward peace between Israelis and Palestinians. But the Bush administration has continued to apply a Manichean and dogmatic ideological framework through which it considers US interests in the Middle East, rejecting diplomatic overtures from Syria and pressing Israel to refrain from opening a dialogue with Damascus.³⁷

Facing this strong American opposition, the Israeli government had nevertheless given the green light to several Israeli public figures to open informal "track two" diplomatic talks with Syrian officials under Turkish and Swiss auspices. The talks, which had been initiated by the Turkish government in early 2004, yielded only mixed results, including an invitation by one of the negotiators, a Syrian-American businessman, to address the Israeli Knesset (parliament) in April 2007. But growing military tensions along the Israel-Syria border and an American-backed Israeli attack on an alleged nuclear military site in Syria have created pressure on both Jerusalem and Damascus to decide to open official talks between the two governments in 2008. Israel and Syria announced on May 21 in simultaneous statements that they had begun indirect talks in Turkey, thus confirming that two long-time enemies are talking again for the first time in almost a decade. Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni said the following day that Israel wanted peace with its neighbors, but Syria needed to "distance itself completely" from its "problematic ties" with Iran. Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moalem said Israel had indicated readiness for a full withdrawal from the occupied Golan Heights, seized in June 1967, although Israeli officials have been unwilling to confirm or deny his claim.³⁸

In a way, both the Israelis and the Syrians have become aware that the collapse of the hegemonic American project in the Middle East has created both risks and opportunities for them. The strategic vacuum created by the erosion in US power could create more instability in the region and could ignite new military conflicts involving Israel, Syria, and Iran. But the same vacuum has also created incentives for the Israelis and the Syrians to start promoting their interests that didn't seem to be aligned with the strategic perspective that continued to dominate thinking in Washington, where the neoconservatives were insisting that their Freedom Agenda was alive and well and that the war in Iraq was creating the foundations for an Israeli-Palestinian peace accord, that the road to Jerusalem continued to lead through Baghdad.

Annapolis and the "strategic consensus" fantasy

First, a flashback: On February 11, 1985, President Ronald Reagan welcomed Saudi Arabian King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz during a welcoming ceremony on the White House lawn. "The people of the United States share with the people of Saudi Arabia a deep moral outrage over the continuing aggression and butchery taking place in Afghanistan," Reagan said, referring to the brutal Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. "The citizens of the Western democracies and the

Muslim world, by all that they believe to be true and just, should stand together in opposition to those who would impose dictatorship on all of mankind.” He added: “Marxist tyranny already has its grip on the religious freedom of the world’s fifth largest Muslim population. This same grip strangles the prayers of Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike. We all worship the same God. Standing up to this onslaught, the people of Afghanistan, with their blood, courage, and faith, are an inspiration to the cause of freedom everywhere.”³⁹

Fast forward to the December 2007 Middle East conference in Annapolis, and there is a sense of *déjà vu*. This time, President George W. Bush addressed a meeting attended by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal and called on Jews and Arabs to make peace. Bush highlighted the ominous threat posed by the radical Shi’ite theocracy in Iran to Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike; this supposedly explains why the Western democracies, the Muslim world, and Israel should stand together in opposition to Iranian regional designs.

Indeed, the notion that the US could utilize a perceived common strategic and ideological threat—the Soviet Union during the cold war and Shi’ite Iran today—to bring together Arabs and Jews under an American umbrella and help create the conditions for an Israeli–Palestinian peace agreement has been a central concept shared by the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush.⁴⁰ It also reflected the influence of the pro-Likud neoconservative ideologues on these two conservative Republican presidents.

As pointed out earlier, the neocons who played a leading role in influencing Reagan’s foreign policy—government officials such as Defense Department aide, Richard Perle, and the US Ambassador to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick, are not unlike the neocons who have dominated the thinking of Bush administration policies, applying a similar grand geostrategic and ideological framework to guide US policy in the Middle East.

During the Reagan years, the Middle East, including the Arab–Israeli conflict, was seen as an extension of the struggle with the Soviet Union. Israel served as a strategic asset as far as US interests in the Middle East were concerned, helping Washington contain Soviet expansionism in the region. The PLO under Yasser Arafat was depicted as a pro-Soviet terrorist organization that served to advance Moscow’s regional interests.

And in order to overcome the dilemma that was confronting US policymakers in the Middle East—how to juggle the alliance with Israel with the US strategic commitment to the pro-American Arab camp led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia—Reagan’s neoconservative advisers came up with a creative formula: promote a “narrative” in which Israel and the “moderate” Arabs are supposedly facing common threats—the Soviet Union and, to some extent, the revolutionary regime in Tehran—and unite them through a so-called anti-Soviet “strategic consensus.” In that context, the conflict in the Holy Land would become a side-show of a larger confrontation between the West and the “evil empire” and would become more amenable to resolution as the pro-American Israelis and pro-US Arabs come to the conclusion that the need to confront the common enemy outweighed the significance of the ethnic, religious, and territorial differences that separate them.

During the George W. Bush administration, in particular after 9/11 and the second Intifadah, neoconservative advisers such as Pentagon Deputy Secretary, Paul Wolfowitz, and State Department official, Elliott Abrams, as well as those populating the *Weekly Standard* and the American Enterprise Institute, recycled the old cold war paradigm as a framework for the new “war on terror.” Again, Israel was perceived as a central ally in the war against radical Islam, while the Palestinians and Arafat were depicted as an integral element of Islamofascism, and their Intifadah against Israel was described as an extension of 9/11, part of the anti-Western global Intifadah.

But just like during the 1980s, US officials face a similar dilemma: how to reconcile the partnership with Israel with the important strategic ties with pro-American conservative regimes in Riyadh and Cairo. This dilemma has become even more acute against the

backdrop of the mess in Iraq and the rise of Shi'ite Iran as a regional power, not to mention the increasing economic power of the oil-rich Arab gulf states.

At first, some of the neocons had hoped that the US "march of freedom" in the Middle East and free elections in Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine would bring to power pro-American governments aspiring to make peace with Israel ("the road to Jerusalem leads through Baghdad"). But as we know, that did not happen. In fact, the elections strengthened the radical political parties, some of which have ties to Iran. Thus by extension, the elections helped increase the influence of Tehran and its more radical allies (Hezbollah) and anti-Israeli players (Hamas).

But the spin-masters in the Bush administration replaced one defective narrative with another. Instead of the march of freedom that was supposed to bring together Israel and the pro-American Arabs, Bush and his advisers ended up exploiting the major disasters, such as a more powerful Iran and the election victory of Hamas that they had helped to unleash. They decided to promote a new fantasy: Israelis and pro-American Arabs would be brought together under the US umbrella as part of a new "strategic consensus" against Iran, just as Washington was accusing Iran of developing nuclear weapons and supporting anti-American insurgents in Iraq. Forget the march of freedom. Long live the Iran threat!

The meeting in Annapolis was supposed to highlight the emergence of this Israeli-Arab "consensus" and help persuade both sides to move toward resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. After all, faced with such a menacing regional threat—Iran—Israelis and Palestinians would surely be able to overcome their differences on Jerusalem, the Jewish settlements, and the Palestinian refugees. This inspiring narrative helped the Bush administration write the script for the media event in Annapolis. The problem was that the "peace conference" had very little to do with the realities of the Middle East.

In reality, none of the major attendees was buying into the notion that the issues separating the Israelis and the Palestinians could be resolved by unifying over the threat of Iran. The politically weak prime minister of Israel Ehud Olmert and the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (whose control of the West Bank came about thanks to Israeli and American support) couldn't even take the first steps to overcome their differences during the talks leading to Annapolis. So it wasn't surprising that the meeting, once envisioned as a three-day conference to kick off the negotiation of final-status issues, was transformed into a pathetic twenty-four-hour media event during which Bush played the role of MC and not that of an energetic, honest broker.

The meeting failed. The Saudis attended the meeting but refused to shake the hands of the Israeli officials. But more importantly, the Saudis do not see the rise of Iran as a challenge to the West. They see it through the prism of the Sunni-Shi'ite divide. If anything, they would like to see reconciliation between the radical but Sunni Hamas and Fatah, a move that the Americans and the Israelis oppose.

The notion that a perceived common threat could help produce a common Israeli-Arab front proved to be a fantasy during the cold war. Israel and Egypt decided to make peace only after recognizing that the costs of their conflict outweighed the benefits. And the Oslo peace process began in the aftermath of the cold war, focusing only on the real problems separating Israelis and Palestinians. Peace would come to the Holy Land if and when these issues are resolved. Promoting the idea of an Iranian "threat"—which US intelligence estimates suggested was less menacing than the Bush administration portrayed it—would not make that happen.

Conclusion: Israel: America's weakest link?

It is often argued that the grand strategic plan of reshaping the Middle East was conceived by the neoconservatives in the Bush administration as an attempt to lessen the risks for Israel in the region. The presumption was that this US strategy would create a regional environment in

which US hegemony—as well as fractured and weakened Arab states—would place no constraints on Israel’s ability to pursue its most ambitious goals. In the same way that US unilateralism—according to the Bush Doctrine—would make it impossible for any power to oppose US global predominance, US hegemony in the Middle East would protect Israel from challenges from regional players. In short, the American empire was ultimately designed to make the Middle East safe for Israel and to create conditions under which any deal between Israel and the Palestinians would help preserve Israel’s dominant position while turning Palestine into a Bantustan-like entity.

But the current strength of the US–Israeli connection is a product of unique conditions: America’s post-cold war unipolar moment, US economic gains of the 1990s, and the 9/11 terrorist attacks—and the ensuing war on terrorism. These developments—coupled with the presence of powerful forces in the Bush administration, the GOP, the conservative movement, and Congress—have persuaded President Bush to align US policy with the Israeli government.

The problem is that these same policies helped perpetuate the status quo in Israel–Palestine, which is symbolized by the security fence Israel has been building in the West Bank. These policies created the conditions under which Israel was able to continue with its creeping annexation of parts of Jerusalem and parts of the West Bank while building and expanding Jewish settlements there and pursuing a unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. At the same time, Bush’s Freedom Agenda helped bring to power the Hamas in Palestine, weakening the power of the more moderate Palestinian Fatah that still maintains control over parts of the West Bank thanks to Israeli and Western support. At the end of the day, these US policies were making it less likely that Israel would achieve peace with the Palestinians while increasing its dependency on the US.

Moreover, the ousting of Saddam Hussein as part of plan to spread political and economic freedom in the Middle East has strengthened the power of Iran and its Shi’ite proxies in Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine, which threatens the power of the pro-American Sunni Arab governments in Egypt, Jordan—which has signed peace accords with Israel—and in the Persian Gulf where Saudi Arabia’s promotion of an Arab League-backed peace agreement with Israel has received only tapered support from Washington, which has also continued to isolate Syria and to block efforts to open a diplomatic dialogue between Damascus and Jerusalem.

Add to all of that the green light that Washington had given Israel to launch its unsuccessful campaign to destroy Hezbollah’s infrastructure in Lebanon, and it becomes clear that the neoconservative-led hegemonic project that was supposed to establish a quasi US–Israel condominium in the region has only led to the weakening of American influence in the Middle East while playing into the hands of the anti-status quo forces in the region. The ensuing attempts by the Bush administration to square the Middle East circle by trying to create an anti-Iran “strategic consensus” between Israel and the pro-American Arab regimes as a way of creating a diplomatic momentum aimed at reviving the Israel–Palestine peace process have proved to be another example of the neoconservative fantasies.

From an Israeli perspective, the post-9/11 policies of the Bush administration have harmed the long-term strategic interests of Israel. They have failed to create an environment in which US military and ideological supremacy in the Middle East would create a balance of power that favors Israeli interests and put pressure on the Palestinians and other Arab states to make peace with it. If anything, the result has been the evolution of a new balance of power in the Middle East that favors those players in the region that oppose the US and its values, and in that context, reject any plans to recognize Israel and establish normal ties with it. In a way, these policies have not led to the creation of a Palestinian Bantustan but of Palestinian Hamastan.

It is unlikely that a US and/or Israeli military strike against Iran would help readjust the balance of power in the Middle East and tilt it in favor of the US and Israel. Such a costly and difficult operation could wreak even more havoc in the region and around the world in the

form of new waves of anti-Americanism, including more terrorism, and force energy prices to rise to the stratosphere.

In the eyes of most members of the international community, Israel will be identified with this fragile American hegemonic project. For the Arab and Muslim nations—as well as for other powers, especially those challenging the international status—Israel is already perceived now as the “weakest link” in the American empire and is becoming an ideal target for anti-American and anti-globalization forces. We are already seeing the shape of things to come in the growing anti-Israeli sentiments in Europe and Asia, and the way anti-Israeli sentiments are starting to intertwine, in some cases, with dormant anti-Semitic attitudes.

In some respects, Israel’s ties with the US are starting to resemble the relationship between the old political and economic elites and the Jewish community in Europe during the nineteenth century. As Hannah Arendt pointed out in her classic study of European anti-Semitism, it was the erosion in the power of those elites—and their growing inability to protect the Jews of Europe—that sealed their fate. The new and angry social classes and political players turned their frustration against the group they associated with the hated status quo—a group that was also very vulnerable.⁴¹

A similar scenario could take place on an international scale, when a weaker and less confident US would be under pressure at home and abroad to reduce its global commitments. This would leave Israel—its weakest link—vulnerable to attacks not only from Arab and Muslim nations, but from other new anti-status quo powers. That will take place at a time when inside Greater Israel—Israel and the Palestinian territories—Israeli-Jews would be losing their majority status.

Ironically, the original mission of classical Zionism was to release Europe’s Jews from the trap that Hannah Arendt described, to turn them into a normal people, living in a normal state, able to protect themselves—and not dependent on others for their survival. In the real world of nation-states and power politics and in face of opposition from the surrounding Arab states, Israel has to search for support from foreign powers, including the US (and France in the 1950s and the Soviet Union in the late 1940s). But that support was seen by Israel’s founders as a temporary measure to sustain its national security. The long-term goal was to use that outside support and combine it with Israel’s military power as a way of pressing the Arabs to recognize that Israel was a permanent feature in the Middle East—and to make peace with it.

Some of the Israeli policies that followed the 1967 Middle East war, especially from the Likud, violated those principles. US support was utilized to fulfill a Messianic agenda of settling Judea and Samaria—and pursuing the annexation of those territories. Ultimately, it was a policy that was never supported by the majority of Israelis, but one that was promoted by nationalist and religious fanatics. And it only played into the hands of the extremists on the other side and helped to set off the vicious circle of Palestinian–Israeli violence that we are now witnessing.

The terrorist attacks on 9/11 and the rise of the neoconservatives in Washington with their hegemonic Middle Eastern agenda helped create an environment conducive to the interests of those Israelis who want to maintain the disastrous status quo that threatens the Jewish identity of the state. Perhaps it is not too late for the Israelis to figure out how to take a path toward normalcy in the Middle East that leads to peaceful co-existence with the Palestinians and their other neighbors in the next generations.

And, most importantly, Israel has to do so as an independent nation-state—and not as a crusader state whose fate is determined by the decisions of a foreign and distant power. It could then become a technological and commercial center in the region, the Singapore of the Middle East.

It is possible that President Barack Obama could encourage the Israelis to move in that direction by replacing the current neoconservative policies with a new American approach

that leads to a constructive diplomatic dialogue with Iran and invites other regional and global players to support a process that could bring stability to the Persian Gulf and the Levant, and in that context creates incentives for the Israelis, the Palestinians, the Syrians, and the Palestinians to take steps toward peace. In that case, the US as a global power maintaining its influence in the Middle East could still be first among equals (or *primus inter pares*) when it comes to it, which is the next best thing to being Number One.

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