

The Second Bush Administration and US Policy Towards Iran¹

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Abstract

The present article discusses about the US security policy after the incident of 11 September 2001, with reference to the Middle East, in general and Iran in particular. The author focuses the design of current US administration and its endeavor to capture some of the strategic places in the name of terrorism and as a savior of democracy such as in Afghanistan and Iraq, although those designs have brought uneasiness and destruction in those countries. Further, this paper highlights the emergence of neo-conservatism and Christian Zionism and their evil design since the creation of Israel, who sees the State of Israel as the fulfillment of biblical prophecies. Although the Christian Zionism took root during the Second World War, however, the current Bush administration have seen coming together of this movement with neo-conservatism. This paper also discusses US presence in Iraq and continuous use of its surveillance to monitor the Iranian defense establishment as well as rhetoric from Washington, especially from the neo-conservatives commentators, for the Iranian nuclear issue.

Keywords: Second Bush Administration, Neo-Conservatism, Christian Zionism, and Confrontation with Iran

In the aftermath of the attacks in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, the United States embarked on a "global war on terror", initially with the strong support of many other countries. In its first three years, this war involved

a sustained campaign against the al-Qaida network, the termination of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the subsequent termination of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq.

Three and a half years after 9/11, and two years

1. This paper is developed from two recent papers: "Endless War: The Global War on Terror and the Second Bush Administration", Oxford Research Group Briefing, forthcoming, March 2005 and "Iranian Options", www.opendemocracy.net, 24 February 2005.

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after the initial military occupation of Iraq, there are few signs of an early end to this war. The al-Qaida network remains active, having been involved in a far larger number of paramilitary actions than in a similar period prior to 9/11, and its core elements are largely at liberty, aided by enduring support in parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Osama bin Laden himself remains at large and is able to deliver detailed statements on al-Qaida strategy and tactics. In Iraq, an anticipated early withdrawal of occupation forces has proved a chimera, and an insurgency is persisting that is tying down some 200,000 US troops in Iraq itself and neighbouring countries. The US defence budget is rising rapidly and is even beginning to approach the levels reached at the height of the Cold War.

There is little prospect of any early end to the American global war on terror and nor is there any prospect of a change in US policy. George W Bush was re-elected with a clear majority in 2004, the Republican Party has control of both Houses of Congress, and there is a clear feeling of vindication in Washington. Experienced independent analysts in the United States may be persistently critical of the effects of current policies, but there is little or no sign that their views will be taken into consideration. Indeed, neoconservatives in the United States believe that last electoral successes mean that the project for a New American Century is very much on agenda and that the first three years of President Bush's second term represent the clearest opportunity to further this great idea.

This is in marked contrast to opinions across much of Europe, where threats of possible military

action against Iran and Syria are viewed with deep misgivings. There is even more concern in much of the majority world, with a rise in anti-Americanism that further fuels support for radical movements.

The aim of this paper is to review the factors that lie behind current US security policies, with reference to the Middle East and, in particular, Iran. In doing so, it will examine the risk of a direct confrontation between the United States and Iran.

The US Political Context

Although neoconservatism has been a feature of US politics for several decades, it came to the fore in the late 1990s during Bill Clinton's second term. While it ranges across many areas of policy, it has developed a particular resonance in relation to US foreign and security policy, itself rooted in a belief in an historic role for the United States in the 21st century. Much of this was encapsulated in the Project for a New American Century, founded in 1997 and supported by Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and many others who were to become key figures in the Bush administration after November 2000.(1)

At the root of the neoconservative outlook is the belief that there is only one viable economic system, a belief supported powerfully by the collapse of most centrally-planned economies after 1989. That system is the globalised free market developed along the lines of the domestic US economy. Moreover, the United States has a pivotal and historic mission to be a civilising force in world affairs, promoting free-market values to ensure a world economy and polity that is broadly

in the US image.(2)

This sense of mission came to the fore immediately prior to George W Bush's election victory in 2000 and is deep-seated in significant parts of the US political and electoral system. Major elements of it have substantial religious overtones and these speak to some of the more evangelical elements of American Christianity, a religious orientation with well over 100 million adherents.

To some extent, neoconservatism has elements of a faith-based system, so strong are the views of many of its adherents. In particular, it is not possible to accept that there is any legitimate alternative, and the war on terror is essentially being fought against forces that represent a fundamental threat to the vision of an American Century.

Prior to 9/11, the new vigour of US foreign and security policy was particularly evident in a belief that multilateral cooperation was only appropriate when it was directly in American interests. Indeed, there were many examples where it was deemed highly inappropriate. Even in the closing years of the Clinton presidency, Congress made it unacceptable to attempt ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), there was antagonism in Republican circles, proposals for an International Criminal Court, and even efforts to ban anti-personnel land mines and control some forms of arms transfer were thought to be limiting to the United States.

After George W Bush came to power in 2001, the extent of opposition to multilateralism increased rapidly, including withdrawal from the

Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the Kyoto Protocols, opposition to the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention and a refusal to participate in talks on limiting the weaponisation of space. Coupled with vigorous policies on trade issues, this amounted to a substantial change of attitude on the part of the Bush administration and represented a very different outlook for those who had anticipated a consensus administration, given the narrowness of its electoral victory in November 2000. The approach was summarised succinctly by Charles Krauthammer shortly before the 9/11 attacks:

Multipolarity, yes, when there is no alternative. But not when there is. Not when we have the unique imbalance of power that we enjoy today - and that has given the international system a stability and essential tranquility that it had not known for at least a century. The international environment is far more likely to enjoy peace under a single hegemon. Moreover, we are not just any hegemon. We run a uniquely benign imperium.(3)

Neoconservatism and Christian Zionism

In parallel with the rise of neoconservatism, a particular stream within American evangelical Christian churches has acquired a considerable political significance, especially in relation to the post 9/11 environment. This is Christian Zionism or dispensationalism, a movement that is rigorous in supporting Israel as a Jewish state with Jerusalem as its epicentre. Christian Zionism has only acquired real political significance in the past decade and its current importance stems from three

factors. One is the voting power of a significant proportion of evangelical Christians, the second is its intrinsic support for the survival of the State of Israel and the third is the manner in which it links with neoconservatism.

There are some variations within dispensation theology but the essence of it is that God has given a dispensation to the Jews to prepare the way for the Second Coming. There is to be the literal fulfillment of Old Testament promises to biblical Israel in the sense that the "end of days" will involve a millennium of earthly rule centred on Jerusalem. As such, the State of Israel is a fundamental part of God's plan and it is essential for it to survive and thrive.

Christian Zionism took firm root in US in the interwar years and a particular boost came with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, with many dispensationalists seeing this as the beginnings of a fulfillment of biblical prophecies. Yet another boost came when Israel took control of Jerusalem in the Six Day War in 1967, and a third came with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, not least because Jimmy Carter, though from an evangelical tradition, had been seen to be too conciliatory towards Palestinian aspirations.

The Clinton years were more difficult for dispensationalists, partly because they came soon after some of the preacher scandals of the late 1980s, but also because Clinton was more at home with the more secular elements of the Israeli political system, not least with the Labour Party. Even so, during his Presidency, the main Israel lobbies in Washington, particularly the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), sought

to build close links with the Christian Zionists.(4) In part, organisations such as AIPAC recognised the increasing demographic and political power of the Christian Zionists, but they were doubly important because of the deep divisions among American Jewish communities that resulted in a decrease in support for Israel from a traditional source of influence.

During the first George W Bush administration, there was a remarkable coming together of the movement and of neoconservatism, especially in terms of support for Israel. As the leading evangelical preacher Jerry Falwell put it "The Bible Belt is Israel's safety net in the United States." According to Donald Wagner, a historian of Christian Zionism:

By 2000, a shift had taken place in the Republican Party. It began embracing the doctrines of neoconservative ideologues who advocated US unilateralism and favored military solutions over diplomacy. The more aggressive approach was put into action after Sept. 11, and to no one's surprise, Israel's war against the Palestinians and its other enemies was soon linked to the US 'war on terrorism'.(5)

There are now a number of groups that connect evangelical Christian churches in the United States with support for the State of Israel, with many of them making specific reference to Jerusalem. Stand for Israel, for example, talks of the need "to mobilise Christians and people of faith to support the State of Israel..."declaring on its home page that Anti-Israel = Anti-Zionism = Anti-Semitism".(6)

Christian Zionists may not be particularly

significant in the major conservative think tanks in Washington, nor even in the administration itself. Instead, what they do is to provide an electoral pressure that enhances support for a Republican administration with marked neoconservative leanings.

Perhaps what is most interesting is that the growth in Christian Zionism in recent years forms one part of the wider increase in the conservative Evangelism movement, the fastest growing sector within American Christian churches. According to Wagner, estimates of the number of evangelicals range from 100 to 130 million, the latter being close to half the total population of the United States.

By no means all are Christian Zionists, perhaps 20-25% would be described as fundamentalist. Indeed, many evangelical Christians have grave misgivings about aspects of Republican policies. At the same time, larger numbers may be inclined to support Israel because of dispensationalist sympathies, and evangelical Christians seem particularly disposed to vote, and to be more likely to support the Republican Party. The overall effect of this is that both Israel and US neoconservatives have a particular electoral support from an unexpected and growing source. Moreover, many adherents seriously believe that we may be approaching the end of the world, that salvation can only come through a Christian message linked fundamentally to the success of the State of Israel, and that Islam is necessarily a false faith.

In any other era, Christian Zionism and its links with neoconservative thinking would be interesting but not particularly significant in guiding the

policies of the United States. What is relevant here is that there has been a confluence of neoconservatism, the vigorous pursuit of a "war on terror" that is seen to be primarily against Islamic groups and the Christian Zionist movement with its electoral strength, support for Israel and anti-Islamic strand. This comes at a time of a particularly hard-line government in Israel that looks to neoconservatives and Christian Zionists as the foundation for its support within the United States. All of these have contributed to the policies of the last three and a half years in terms of the war against al-Qaida, the termination of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, and persistent support for the Sharon government in Israel. Indeed, in a real sense, Israel and its confrontation with the Palestinians has been widely seen as an integral part of the global war on terror.

Furthermore, the strength of the Israel lobby in the United States, supported as it is by a significant Christian Zionist movement, extends to opposition to states that are perceived as a threat to Israel. Iran is singled out in this context and, even 26 years after the Iranian Revolution, this builds on a legacy of antagonism that stems from the loss of US influence in Iran and the hostage crisis.

Consequences of the Iraq War

Any examination of a potential confrontation between the United States and Iran must take into account the current occupation and insurgency in Iraq. Termination of the Saddam Hussein regime was said to be necessary because of the regime's production of weapons of mass destruction and its support of al-Qaida. Neither claim had any

substance, but regime termination still went ahead. In the wake of this, the Bush administration expected a rapid and peaceful transition to a secular regime. This client state would be sympathetic to the United States, would embrace free market economics, would welcome US oil interests and would ensure that the US had extended long-term influence in one of the world's most important oil-bearing countries. More generally, it would enhance US power in the region, render Saudi Arabia less significant and, perhaps most important, demonstrate the sheer power of the United States to that other regional member of the "axis of evil", Iran.

The establishment of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) was expected to preside over a caucus system that would bring the right kind of government to power and it would certainly take immediate steps to institute a free market low-tax economy likely to prove highly attractive to foreign investors. As far as economic management was concerned, the CPA certainly moved with great speed, but its oversight of the political evolution of Iraq was a very different matter. Within a few months of the end of the old regime, the insurgency was developing with unexpected speed and by the end of 2003 the United States was facing a highly unstable environment, especially in the main Sunni regions of Central Iraq.

In the early months of the insurgency, most of the blame was put on a few "remnants" of the old regime, groups that were expected to be severely damaged by the deaths of Uday and Qusay Hussein in July 2003 and then by the capture of Saddam Hussein himself at the end of the year. In practice,

the US authorities put more and more emphasis on two external factors, Islamic paramilitaries linked to al-Qaida and interference from Iran. Neither of these was particularly plausible, even if both may have had a minor impact. Instead, the insurgency gathered pace through 2004, with thousands of Iraqis dying mainly at the hands of coalition forces, not least during periods of intense violence in Fallujah, Najaf, Mosul and elsewhere.

Since the start of the Iraq War, at least 18,000 civilians have been killed and many tens of thousands have been injured,(7) the insurgency has persisted and the early indications are that the elections of January 2005 will have little impact. The United States and its partners currently maintain over 170,000 troops in Iraq itself, supported by tens of thousands more in neighbouring countries such as Kuwait. The Pentagon is planning to maintain troops numbers at around 130,000 for at least the next two years, and permanent bases continue to be developed. In the first two years of the war, the United States has had 1,500 of its troops killed and 11,000 injured,(8) with at least another 10,000 evacuated because of physical or mental illness.

While US military planners may wish to limit their presence, and certainly want to avoid a substantial presence in urban areas, it is proving excessively difficult to train Iraqi security forces to replace them. Indeed, the training programme is something akin to a disaster, so much so that the Pentagon is no longer giving figures for the numbers of indigenous combat-ready troops available. The Economist, which has a track record of caution tempered with realism on this-issue, was

recently scathing in its assessment:

The Iraqi forces are utterly feeble. At present only 5,000 of them are a match for the insurgents; perhaps as many as 12,000 are fairly self-sufficient. Most of the rest are unmotivated, unreliable, ill-trained, ill-equipped, prone to desertion, even ready to switch sides. If the Americans left today, they would be thrashed. Indeed, as things now stand, politically and militarily, the war is unwinnable.(9)

Although the United States is clearly in a serious military predicament in Iraq, this does not mean that it will be deterred from its wider policy against the perceived "axis of evil". Indeed, in one respect there is strong belief among neoconservative elements in Washington that it is even more essential to persist with its policy of regime change. The thinking here stems in part from the November 2004 election victory, which invigorated the neoconservative consensus, and partly from the belief that the long-term future of the Project for a New American Century was dependent on further rapid progress during the first three years of the second Bush administration. From a neoconservative perspective, if the Middle East of 2007 includes a deeply problematic Iraq and the near-term potential for Iran to be a nuclear weapons state, then the entire Project may be irreversibly damaged.

In any case, the US predicament in Iraq will not be readily ended, given the importance of Iraqi oil reserves. The [Persian] Gulf States as a whole have over 65% of world oil reserves, with Iraq alone having 11%, about four times as much as the United States itself. Much of the recent history of

US involvement in the [Persian] Gulf, including the establishment of the Rapid Deployment Force at the end of the 1970s and its later development into Central Command, is connected with the strategic importance of [Persian] Gulf oil reserves.(10) Given increasing US dependence on [Persian] Gulf oil, and the massive importance of the oil reserves to the rest of the world, not least China, it is a near-certainty that the United States intends to maintain a major military presence in Iraq and the wider region for many years. It is, in essence, a core part of the quest to maintain superpower status. A well-defended Iran is not seen as conducive to such a strategy.

The Potential for a US Confrontation with Iran

The visit to several European cities by President Bush [in February 2005] was welcomed as an opportunity to improve transatlantic relations, yet his speech on 21 February did not do enough to reassure much of the European media about US attitudes towards Iran. His response was to be more categorical in his press conference the following day, when he was widely reported as saying talk of an attack was ridiculous. Even so, this is one occasion when the full text of what he said is worth repeating:

Great Britain, Germany and France are negotiating with the ayatollahs to achieve our common objective. This notion that the US is getting ready to attack Iran is simply ridiculous. Having said that, all options are on the table.

On his joint press conference with Chancellor Schroeder, there was agreement that Iran should not develop nuclear weapons but there remains

clear disagreement on the action to be taken. The European view is that diplomacy is the best option, the aim being to "allow" Iran to develop a relatively small nuclear power programme but without an indigenous capacity for uranium enrichment, given that this can, under certain circumstances, form the basis for enriching uranium to weapons grade. In response to Iran agreeing to this, there would be progressive improvements in trade and other forms of interstate relations.

Whatever European perceptions, this policy should be expected to be deeply unpopular within a wide range of opinion-forming circles in Iran. From an Iranian perspective, the country has been labeled part of an "axis of evil" by the world's sole superpower that has adopted a clear strategy of pre-empting perceived threats. Furthermore, the United States has already terminated regimes on either side of Iran - the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq. The US may be facing formidable problems in Iraq, but does have 150,000 troops there and is still building permanent bases. Moreover, it sanctions an Israeli military presence in the Kurdish region of Iraq close to Iran's western border, and is likely to develop a substantial military base at Shindand near Herat in western Afghanistan, close to its eastern border. Finally, the US Navy has almost total control of the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea.

The Iranian perspective perhaps goes further than this perception of vulnerability in that there is a failure to accept that countries such as Britain and France can modernise their own nuclear forces

and turn a blind eye to Israel's formidable nuclear forces, while failing to see Iranian arguments for developing their own deterrent. In the current climate of tension, there are two different issues that need to be considered. One is the significance of the recent US deployment of surveillance drones into Iranian air space, and the other is whether an even tougher version of the European proposals would be acceptable in Washington, in the unlikely event that it was agreed by Tehran.

On the issue of the drones, there is now reliable evidence that the US has been using bases in Iraq for nearly a year to undertake extensive surveillance missions across Iraq, with these missions having two quite separate intentions.⁽¹¹⁾ The recent information fills in some of the detail of the Seymour Hersh article in the New Yorker on the moves towards a confrontation with Iran,⁽¹²⁾ but the Iranian reaction has itself been significant. The two roles of the drone missions are to collect information on nuclear sites and to probe Iranian air defences. In the latter case, one of the intentions is to provoke the use of Iranian air defence radars, so that US systems can gauge their effectiveness. It would even be useful to the US military if the Iranians attempted to destroy some of the drones. What has happened, though, is that the Iranians have made no attempts at interception and rarely even try to illuminate the drones with radar, thereby limiting US attempts to probe any weaknesses.

At the same time, the effect of this activity is to convince the Iranian military that the United States is indeed preparing for the option of military attacks, and this leads on inevitably to the question

of whether there could be sufficient changes in Iranian nuclear programmes to satisfy Washington. The negotiations to date with the European Union (EU3 - Germany, France and the UK) have resulted in the Paris Agreement of November 2004, with Iran freezing uranium-enrichment for the time being, in return for possible economic, trade and technology connections. The Paris Agreement is voluntary rather than legally binding under current international agreements. If it wishes, Iran can embark on uranium enrichment for civil nuclear power purposes within the terms of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and under the inspection processes of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

It is also possible, if not legally necessary, for the IAEA and Iran to agree even tighter verification procedures if enrichment was to resume, making it very difficult for activities to be diverted towards the rapid development of a nuclear weapons programme. Such procedures would be tough. Iran does have a substantial body of knowledge on nuclear issues, with some of it dating back to the ambitious nuclear programme of the 1970s, and it may even be possible for Iran to embark on the more efficient plutonium route to nuclear weapons.

It is also the case that there are economic reasons for Iran to want its own uranium enrichment programme. Producing reactor-grade uranium for the Bushehr nuclear power plant, for example, would probably be substantially cheaper than buying it from Russia.(13)

The current state of affairs is that Iran has been prepared to negotiate with the EU3 on the uranium

enrichment issue, and may be prepared to accept quite a long-term pause in its programme if the rewards were big enough. But these would have to include not just further trade and technology transfer concessions, they would also need to include some kind of security guarantee that would simply have to involve Washington.

This is the crux of the matter and is really what will determine whether the United States, or indeed Israel, will attack Iran's nuclear facilities in the near future. To put it bluntly, what does Iran have to do to make it certain that the Bush administration will refrain from confrontation?

Would it be enough for Iran to return to enriching uranium for civil purposes but under an extremely stringent IAEA verification regime—far tougher than anything imposed on other countries? Almost certainly, this would not satisfy Washington. Would it therefore be necessary for Iran to abandon all indigenous enrichment programmes, maintaining its relatively small nuclear power programme solely with imported fuel? The belief among many opinion formers seems to be that even this would not be enough.

Given the rhetoric coming from Washington, especially from neoconservative commentators, and given the recent military surveillance of Iran, there is a conviction that only the abandonment of all civil nuclear activities, including any substantive research, will be enough. Even then, there is a persistent belief that all of this is simply a front for a policy that is really about regime termination.

There are many voices coming out of Washington, and some certainly do advocate

regime change as the real policy, but the substantive view is probably that a total Iranian abandonment of all its civil nuclear programmes might be enough. This is far more than the E3 are asking for, and certainly far more than Iran might be expected to concede. Therefore, there is really a major gap between the United States and the E3, whatever gloss was put on transatlantic relations during George W Bush's recent visit to Europe.

It is just possible that the EU3 will put sufficient pressure on Washington to persuade it to hold back from military action against Iran, but it will take formidable diplomatic persistence and will be against a mood in influential circles in Washington that sees Iran as unfinished business. Whatever the massive dangers of embarking on military action against Iran, and they could be far greater than the many effects of the current Iraq War, it is by no means clear that the second Bush administration can be deterred, even by a united commitment from Germany, France and Britain.

If that is a dismaying conclusion, then it is probably realistic for one reason in particular, that being that there really have been some quite fundamental changes in the US security outlook due to a combination of the rise of neoconservatism and the impact of the 9/11 attacks. It may be possible to rein in the potential belligerence of current US policy in the region, but it will require renewed and re-invigorated actions and sustained diplomatic activity on the part of the political leadership in Iran and Western Europe.

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دوره دوم ریاست جمهوری بوش و سیاست امریکا در برابر ایران

پل راجرز^۱

چکیده

مقاله حاضر با ارجاع به خاورمیانه به طور عام و ایران به طور خاص، به بحث درباره سیاست امنیتی امریکا پس از رویداد ۱۱ سپتامبر ۲۰۰۱ می‌پردازد. نویسنده طرح هیأت حاکمه فعلی امریکا را مد نظر قرار داده و تلاش آنها را برای دستیابی به بعضی اهداف استراتژیک، تحت پوشش مبارزه با تروریسم و نجات دموکراسی در کشورهایی همچون افغانستان و عراق، بررسی می‌کند، علیرغم اینکه چنان طرحهایی موجب آشفتگی و ویرانی در این کشورها شده است. به علاوه آنچه در این مقاله روشن و برجسته شده، ظهور نو محافظه‌کاران و پدیده صهیونیسم مسیحی و برنامه‌های شرارت‌آمیز آنها از زمان تشکیل اسرائیل است، یعنی کسانی که به دولت اسرائیل همچون تحقق وعده‌های نورانی می‌نگرند. اگرچه صهیونیسم مسیحی ریشه در جنگ دوم جهانی دارد، با این حال، هیأت حاکمه امریکا در دوره فعلی ریاست جمهوری بوش جنبش مذکور را با پدیده نو محافظه‌کاری در امریکا همگام و همسو می‌بیند. این مقاله همچنین به بحث در مورد حضور امریکا در عراق و استفاده مداوم از این موقعیت برای زیر نظر گرفتن بنیه دفاعی ایران پرداخته و لفاظی‌های دولت واشنگتن، بویژه از طرف گزارشگران و مفسران نو محافظه‌کار، را در مورد موضوع هسته‌ای ایران بررسی می‌کند.

کلیدواژگان: دوره دوم ریاست جمهوری بوش، نو محافظه‌کاری، صهیونیسم مسیحی و ایران

پژوهشگاه علوم انسانی و مطالعات فرهنگی
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