

***Ishraqat*, Part III: Towards a New U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East?**

By Babak Rahimi

With the reelection of Mr. George Walker Bush, the selected president who held on to power for four years thanks to a Supreme Court ruling, has a legitimate electoral mandate at last. With the support of a Republican-led Senate and Congress, the new administration now maintains a firmer base exceeding the Democratic Party by 3.5 million votes – a huge achievement for the Republicans. Now, the “accidental president” has become an elected president with “political capital” to spend for his second term, a capital which he “intends to use” according to his socially conservative and militaristically hawkish agenda.

The one question that looms over all concerns with a second term Bush administration: what will the president elect do now with his victory in terms of US foreign policy in the Middle East? Should we expect any radical changes? Will the neo-conservative ideology of democratization through conquest, articulated best in the idiom of shock and awe, once again overshadow pragmatism and respect for international rule? Will the newly reelected administration demonstrate any greater sensitivity in an attempt to deal with various challenges, including its failure to secure Iraq as a result of an illegitimate and unilateral war?

As the second-term Bush administration begins to pursue its military objectives in the Middle East with battles raging in the streets of Fallujia, Ramadi and other insurgency strongholds, several key issues will play an integral role in the shaping of US foreign policy in the next four years.

Iraq: The Case of a Quagmire

In the January 2003 *Hoover Digest*, Larry Diamond, a leading democratization theorist, argued that the greatest danger facing the US was not Saddam Hussein and his dictatorial regime but “imperial overreach and the global wave of anti-Americanism that it is

already provoking.”¹ According to Diamond, since the US-led war in Iraq would be perceived throughout the Muslim worlds as an act to control Iraq’s oil and control the region, the price of invasion could be a heavy one for Americans. Without evidence that Saddam’s regime broke its obligation to dismantle its weapons of mass destruction, a war in Iraq would be void of legitimacy and lack broad international support. In short, Diamond worried that an “extended, unilateral American military occupation of Iraq” would “turn American soldiers from liberators to occupiers.”

Diamond’s prophetic assessment, stated just a few months before the war, best articulates the situation that the US government faces in post-Saddam Iraq. Although the administration continues to boast about the positive impact of invading Iraq in building schools, roads, public institutions and securing an elected government come January 2005, the US presence in the region has increasingly been viewed around the world as an imperialist aggression in an attempt to dominate the international oil market and maintain a military presence in the Middle East. Correspondingly, Muslims have easily interpreted the administration’s calls for democratization and claim of freedom not as liberating Iraq from Saddam Hussein, but as subduing the region for self-interested objectives. A serious anti-American reaction based on the administration’s perceived malicious intentions has certainly developed within Iraq, and the region, against a US-led process of democratization.

The administration’s pre-war claim that the invasion of Iraq would be a huge victory in the ongoing war on terror by dislodging Saddam Hussein, which would ultimately open the way to bring democracy in the Middle East, can now be easily dismissed. In reality, the March 2003 invasion has provided a new camping ground for Islamist terrorist organizations to launch attacks against the “infidel” invaders. Accordingly, much to the dismay of the neo-conservative’s dream of a pro-American liberal democratic Middle East, the insurgency’s sabotage of oil pipelines in Iraq has (indirectly) assisted authoritarian regimes in Iran and Saudi Arabia to maintain power with the increase in oil prices, boosting the sway of non-democratic states in the region.

¹ See Larry Diamond, “Diamond Replies” in Tony Smith and Larry Diamond “Was Iraq a Fool’s Errand?” <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20041101faresponse83612/tony-smith-larry-diamond/was-iraq-a-fool-s-errand.html>

With regard to the institutionalization of democracy in Iraq, the US-backed interim government also experiences a serious legitimacy problem. While the insurgency shows no sign of abating, even during the US-led military invasion of Fellujia and Sammara, Iraq's interim government continues to face a crisis of legitimacy, in being regarded a "puppet regime", as it prepares for the general election due by the end of January. The recent declaration of a state of emergency by the Allawi government shows how daunting a challenge it can be to establish a legitimate and indigenous democratic polity in post-Saddam Iraq, which brings with it the prospect of the US military continuing to occupy the country for years to come.

Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Failure of a Partial Policy

The second Palestinian Intifada in 2000 underscored the continuation of the US foreign policy in regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Despite repeated efforts to jump-start the Oslo Peace process through a set of negotiations (with the objective that peace between Palestinians and Israelis would reach the entire Arab world by offering concrete dividends that could be redistributed to the population), the first Bush administration by and large has failed to play the important role of an impartial broker to establish a multipurpose peace process. For the most part, the US foreign policy has continued its favorable stance toward Israel and showed little interest in acknowledging the Palestinians' predicament in the occupied territories. Despite the administration's claim in support of a "viable Palestinian state", the Palestinian population remains under siege by the Israeli army and the advancing march of extremist Jewish settlers in their territories.

Although some of the blame can (and should) also be attributed to the PLO and Yassar Arafat's corrupt and inept leadership's inability to control the Islamist and secular-nationalist groups and their army of suicide bombers, the administration has shown little interest in curtailing the right-wing Israeli government in its military onslaught of the Palestinian civilian population and expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and the Gaza strip. Not since Ariel Sharon's now famous deliberately provocative walk on the esplanade of the Haram Sharif in Jerusalem on September 28, 2000, and Arafat's misguided call to launch the Al-Aqsa second Intifada, has the Israeli-Palestinian relation

seen a greater deepening of distrust, anger and hatred, showing little sign of recovery even with the effect of the death of Arafat at a Paris hospital.

How to restore a necessary condition for the two sides to return to the negotiation table has become a central dilemma for Mr. Bush's future foreign policy. This dilemma will continue to haunt the administration into its second term, as the neo-conservatives seek greater influence in the policy making process in the next four years.

Iran: A Brave New “Axis of Evil”?

In May 2005, Iran's current president, Mohammad Khatami, who was elected into office in 1997 after a popular vote on a platform of reform, will leave his job. In his place, the US will face a conservative parliament and possibly, given the electoral constraints set up by the hardliner Guardian Council, a conservative president in Iran, a country that Mr. Bush labeled in his 2002 State of the Union Speech as an “axis of evil”.

Having defeated the reformers through bureaucratic infighting, imprisonment of reformist activists and organized violence, the conservatives now openly reject the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty with signs of increase of uranium enrichment activities for the possible production of weapons of mass destruction. On October 31st, Iran's conservative-dominated parliament approved the basis of a bill to develop fully a nuclear capability, a decision that clearly defied the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA); the UN's nuclear watchdog, which earlier demanded Tehran to suspend all uranium enrichment and plutonium-reprocessing activities.

Although the EU could play an important role in the negotiation process in the future, the newly resurgent conservatives pose a serious challenge to the (disengaged) US foreign policy with regard to Iran's nuclear ambitions. The key problem, however, is not merely the degree to which Iranian politics will deal with its political factionalism, which promises to be an ongoing struggle between reformists and conservatives in years to come, about how to resolve its problem with the West, but how the US will handle Tehran's alignment with China.

When China, an important member of the UN Security Council with a veto power, signed a lucrative deal on October 30, 2004 to extract and purchase huge quantities of Iranian oil and gas in exchange of developing Iran's oil fields, Iranians have clearly

shown that they will be seeking China's protection if other UN council members, notably the US, try to have them sanctioned for their advancing nuclear technology. With the backing of its other ally, Russia, Tehran's main civilian nuclear supplier and another member of the UN Security Council, the Islamic Republic's conservative regime is now preparing to face the second Bush administration; this time, however, with the confidence that the US will not launch attacks against its suspected nuclear installation since such move is fraught with risk.

Iran's hardliners in a sense are fully aware that the US military is overstretched, and prospects of a regime change by a military invasion, similar to the Iraqi case, remains highly unlikely. With over 100,000 troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US cannot wage another invasion due to the fact that wars are costly, and with little international support, it is highly improbable that the Americans will engage in another misguided militaristic venture to Iran.

It seems that US can best dissuade Iran from continuing its production of uranium and plutonium through negotiation, but the first Bush administration failed to engage with the Iranian regime to offer incentives for a change of behavior. Armed with neo-conservative ideology and apocalyptic terminology such "axis of evil", it is very unlikely that the Iranians will perceive America as a potential partner at a negotiation table.

Such foreign policy can have further negative ramifications for the newly elected US government. With the extension of a policy of disengagement toward Iran, thanks to the hawkish faction of the American government, the US could face further problems in Afghanistan and Iraq as it continues to ignore Iran's potentially positive influence in the reconstruction of the two countries.

What remains certain is that the US foreign policy in regard to the above-mentioned key issues must undergo a radical shift of paradigm if it is to give legitimacy to its alleged benign intentions and rhetoric in advancing freedom and promoting democracy in the Middle East.

Confessions of a Neo-conservative: A New Foreign Policy?

The greatest paradox of the first Bush administration was that while it highlighted the promotion of democracy for the advancement of peace as its primary foreign policy objective in the Middle East, it largely turned its back on international institutions that

most proponents of democracy champion. In the last four years Mr. Bush has shown little patience for international institutions, which play an integral role in the institutionalization of democracy in significant ways. The cause of this dilemma mainly lies in the neo-conservative takeover of the Republican administration after September 11, 2001, which calls for the dissemination of the American model of democracy in the region by whatever means necessary--including military force and excluding international organizations.

The neoconservative project to restructure the world along ideological lines appears now to resurface with a stronger voice after the November 2nd elections. Consider the following statement by Frank Gaffney, an influential foreign-policy neo-conservative and a student of Richard Perle with long-standing ties to the Bush administration. Gaffney, the founder and president of the Center for Security Policy (CSP), has laid out what he calls “a checklist of the work the world will demand of this president and his subordinates in a second term.”² Beginning with “the reduction in detail of Fallujah and other safe havens utilized by freedoms’ enemies in Iraq,” the list includes a pursuit of an aggressive foreign policy of regime change in Iran and Korea, creating new strategies to tackle China’s increasingly “fascistic trade and military policies”, and defeat the “worldwide spread of Islamofascism”.

For Gaffney, the second Bush administration should tackle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict head on by “keeping faith with Israel, whose destruction remains a priority for the same people who want to destroy us (and...for our shared moral values) especially in the face of Yasser Arafat’s demise and the inevitable, post-election pressure to ‘solve’ the Middle East problem by forcing the Israelis to abandon defensible boundaries.” But could such a neo-conservative road map underline the future agenda of the State Department and Pentagon in an attempt to, as Gaffney puts it, “imprint moral values on American security policy[,] in a way[,] and to an extent[,] not seen since Ronald Reagan’s first term”?

Mr. Cheney’s November 3rd assertion that the newly reelected president has now a “mandate” to follow through a “clear agenda” to continue the “war on terrorism”, should

² Frank J. Gaffney, “World Wide Value: Bush’s appreciation of freedom shapes his foreign policy,” November 5, 2004: <http://www.nationalreview.com/guffney/gaffney.asp>.

provide us with some clues. In a way, the election is viewed by the administration as a confirmation that they are on the right track, and that with a bigger margin of victory and a Republican Congress, Mr. Bush may now feel he has no reason to disappoint the hawkish faction of his party who supported him in his reelection campaign, which won him the presidency. What we should expect from the second Bush administration then should not be viewed in terms of moderation, bipartisanship or application of a new multilateral foreign policy approach, but an *expansion* of the neo-conservative agenda of unilateralism tied with distrust of international institutions.

While we should expect a reshuffling of posts in the second term, a new Bush administration will most likely consist of a fresh aggressive stance to extend the “Bush doctrine” of preemption to its logical conclusion. A hardliner foreign policy is now more firmly intact and we should expect for Mr. Bush to do whatever he can do to pursue its “democratic” missionary objectives in the region.

As Colin Powell best articulates it, Mr. Bush would not alter his policies abroad in his second term nor is he “going to trim his sails or pull back.”³ According to Powell, the future US foreign policy will be a “continuation of his principles, his policies, his beliefs.” This is the path of moral certitude that will most likely guide America’s stance toward the region.

A Future that could Fail

Such neo-conservative ambitions of “democratic” conquests to seemingly save the native’s souls by spreading democracy will surely face opposition from various camps, including the traditional conservative Republicans that have already shown resistance to the most sweeping elements of Mr. Bush’s foreign policy approach. To be sure, the cost of such ventures, at the economic, militaristic and human levels, will certainly be high, and Iraq’s advancing state of disarray could make a huge impact on the expected US budget deficit to be built up in the next four years.

Iraq should expect a long-term upsurge of resistant movements by various insurgency groups (both secularists and religious) in an effort to challenge the US military presence

³ “US to remain ‘aggressive’ abroad,” *BBC News*, November 9, 2004:
<http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk>.

in the country. As the problem of security looms over the prospect of democratizing Iraq, so will the extension (and the possible expansion) of the US army in the country. This could cause a major legitimacy problem for a future democratic political order in Iraq as the country faces the prospect of occupation by foreign troops for years to come. A call for a more “aggressive” US foreign policy in Iraq will only enhance the cause of the insurgency, coupled with American presence and the mounting civilian losses as a result of military operations aimed at destroying opposition to the Alawi government.

The post-Arafat situation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will most likely increase the administration’s support of Israel, as the new secular-nationalist and radical Islamist groups engage in a power struggle in the West Bank and, notably, the Gaza strip, followed by new military strategies to fight against Israel. In this respect, a possible extension of closer ties between US and the Jewish state could lead to an increase in the wrath of numerous well-armed militants who increasingly see Americans as the sole protector of Israel.

With a growing sense of distrust of US foreign policy, Iran could see a rise in the power of hardliners as they continue to label any form of domestic dissent as an American effort for regime change. What the hardliners in Tehran and neo-conservatives in Washington share is the ambition to maintain the belief in the phantom of a monolithic, demonic and an absolutely immoral enemy, which requires the unconditional loyalty of the country’s citizens and the affirmation of a culture of fear with the belief in the destructive and belligerent will of a foreign adversary. This in return can hamper civil society and dissent in a post-Khatami Iran.

In the failure of Mr. Bush’s visionary projection of democracy and stability in Iraq lies the failure of the neo-conservative ambitions, now likely to expand beyond the next four years of administration’s time in office. In this regard, the greatest challenge to the neo-conservative make up of the US foreign policy is not the extent to which it can maneuver so as to tackle possible threats lurking in hostile regions like the Middle East, but how to march on the offensive as it continues to create more enemies than it can defeat in the process.