

Is the “New Middle East” Off the Table?

A Message to the Global Peace Movement

By [Ali Jawad](#)

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There has been a lot of hustling and bustling in the Middle East lately, so much so that you might be forgiven for thinking that the promised winds of “change” are firmly on their way. Not since Condi Rice’s now infamous heralding of a “New Middle East” — whilst bombs rained over Southern Lebanon in the summer of 2006 — has there been so much activity on the Middle Eastern chessboard by virtually all of its players.

Despite being trailed closely by the starkest drift to the right in Israeli politics, the election of President Obama by American voters on the declared pledge of “change” has indeed led to a changed mood of diplomacy. The recent four-way ‘mini-summit’ concluded in Riyadh involving the heads of state of Saudi Arabia, Syria, Egypt and Kuwait, and an earlier visit by John Kerry to Syria, following which, he discussed the possibility of “loosening certain sanctions” on Syria “in exchange for verifiable changes in behaviour”^[1], are supposedly indicative of this new wave of diplomacy.

Given this milieu of unprecedented regional diplomacy, it is easy to be deluded into thinking that the much awaited departure of former US president Bush has not only invigorated a new dynamism into diplomatic forays, but has also changed the political set of cards in play. In this respect, an immediate threat that faces the global peace movement is precisely this self-consoling expectation of dramatic change that would at once signal an end to all the precedents set by the previous Bush administration.

If history is anything to go by, then promises of change should be viewed with a measure of suspicion. When these promises emanate from an edifice of empire, a level of mistrust given age-old historical experience to the contrary, is justified.^[2] Yet, the global peace movement and wider grassroots activist circles were never informed by the subjectivity of suspicion when they rose against the failed policies of Bush and his cohorts, rather, their principled stands for justice were driven by a pursuit and appreciation of reality. It is therefore necessary to objectively analyse the conditions surrounding the “New Middle East” experiment that was openly declared in 2006, and contrast its basic frameworks against the early moves of the Obama administration.

In the summer of 1996, an Israeli thinktank, the *Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies*, issued a paper entitled: ‘A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm’.^[3] Contained in it was not only the blueprint for the invasion and overthrow of the Saddam regime, but also a more comprehensive strategy of “redrawing the map of the Middle East”. Amongst the “prominent opinion makers” who contributed to the paper were the usual hawkish neo-cons and pro-Zionism advocates in the US — Richard Perle, Douglas Feith, James Colbert, David and Meyrav Wurmser, the latter of whom was a co-founder of the MEMRI project. More significantly, there remain three markedly relevant features in the

substance of the so-called 'clean break' strategy that have the potential to decisively influence the shaping of the current Middle East.

Firstly, the 'clean break' strategy was specifically formulated for implementation by the Netanyahu-led Likud government, which has now been elected by the Israeli electorate. Its major premise of throwing aside the "land for peace" track for a romantically phrased "peace for peace" paradigm effectively dovetails with Netanyahu's vision for how 'peace' is to be achieved in the Occupied Territories, with Syria and the wider Arab world.

Secondly, the paper places central importance on the role and strategic position of Syria. In it, its destabilization is suggested with the aim of undoing the nation's perceived role as a lynchpin in this connected chain of "dangerous threats" in the region stretching from Iran to Southern Lebanon. Particular detail is given to this factor so much so that the paper moves from offering a geostrategic appraisal to providing a surmised methodological framework on how to destabilize and/or overthrow nations; suggesting an assortment of military direct/indirect strikes, using anti-Syrian proxies (both politically and militarily), embarking on a regional strategy to effectively ostracize the country, and finally launching a massive PR campaign that would demonize Syria and would thereby "remind the world of the nature of the Syrian regime". As peace activists, it is worth storing the above points in our deeper recesses because in addition to being expressly illegal according to norms of international law — not that we are under any delusions about whether or not the neo-cons respect any law — they also outline the general methods that are employed by empires in dealing with adversaries.

Finally, the role and efficacy of regional neighbours that are allied with the US, in fostering the right conditions and pretexts for implementing this new strategy is to remain paramount in achieving the desired results. These regional players can play a significant aiding role in shaping the "strategic environment" by "weakening, containing, and even rolling back" the threats posed by the Iran-Syria-Hizbullah alliance.

Deconstructing the "New Middle East"

George W. Bush's failed promise of a "global democratic revolution" following the "watershed event" of the "establishment of a free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East"**[4]** did not only fail miserably, but instead led to several inescapable eventualities that remain a symbol of this grand strategy. Firstly, the politicization of Iran's peaceful nuclear program in order to exert pressure on Iran and to contain its' perceived threat to the stability of the region (read: desired geopolitical order). Secondly, the saliency of sectarian and ethnic divisions on the Middle Eastern socio-political landscape. Thirdly, the formation of a so-called 'Moderate-bloc' of nations constituting regional players that act as a front against the Iran-Syria-Hizbullah alliance. Finally, the declaration of a "New Middle East" created an almost mythical worldview in the Israeli mindset, whether by design or accident, which believed that the Arab-Israeli question could not only be settled on unilateral terms but also decisively, once and for all, with sheer Herculean force. On all four accounts, the Obama administration has yet to hint at any significant "change" that requires the altering of these yardsticks which remain symbolic of the "New Middle East" agenda.

In spite of the deep economic crisis that has gripped world capitals, the historical 'prerogatives' (*i. Natural resources, ii. Security of the state Israel, iii. Preservation of a certain regional geopolitical order which thereby realizes a significant chapter in wider US preponderance in the Eurasian space*) held by the US for securing the strategic Middle East

region remain firmly in place. The Middle East will thus remain a focal point of Obama's foreign policy efforts. A recent talk by Zbigniew Brzezinski, a top foreign policy advisor to Obama, provides a keyhole premonition of the continuity of an age-old policy of confrontation and threat of military force against Iran.**[5]** Writing for the *Asia Times*, Pepe Escobar disclosed this new US position, contained in a letter to Russian president Dmitry Medvedev, as follows: "if you help us get rid of non-existent Iranian nuclear weapons, we'll get rid of our missile shield".**[6]**

The verbose politics of "clenched fists"**[7]** should not leave the peace movement under any illusions about the nature of things to come, just as much as new Secretary of State Ms. Clinton is under no illusions about the next steps on the empire's to-do list: "We're under no illusions. Our eyes are wide open on Iran."**[8]**

Heightened sectarian saliency in Middle Eastern politics cannot be viewed independently from a strategy of isolating Iran from regional politics. Selling anti-Iranian rhetoric to Arab kingdoms necessarily determines the nature of discourse toward the sizeable and strategically positioned Shia populations across the Persian Gulf rim. When Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak pronounced in April of 2006 that "Shias are mostly always loyal to Iran and not the countries in which they live", it was by no means a slip of the tongue but rather a well calculated move that even lead one of the 'clean break' strategy's "prominent opinion makers" to label Shias in the Persian Gulf as "Iran's Levant clients".**[9]**

It is altogether not surprising on the back of this grand regional strategy, for the tiny emirate kingdom of Bahrain to accelerate a process of 'demographic engineering' by providing citizenship to extremist anti-Shia hotheads from Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, to undercut its majority Shia population.**[10]** Although the systematic marginalization of Shias reflects a deep-rooted policy of the Bahraini Al-Khalifa monarchy, nevertheless, one can neither ignore current justifications for this suppression on rationales of the "New Middle East" agenda, nor intentional American indifference to grave human rights violations which take place in a nation that hosts the central base for the Naval Command's Fifth Fleet.

In the aftermath of recent clashes in Saudi Arabia, in which three Shia Saudi citizens were killed in the close precincts of the second-holiest site in Islam, a prominent Shia leader latched on to the occasion to highlight the deep-seated discrimination and marginalization of Shias. He also issued a resolute warning to the establishment by declaring in no uncertain terms that the "dignity" of the Shia population "is greater in worth than the unity" of the Kingdom.**[11]** Mai Yamani, a Saudi national and a visiting scholar at the *Carnegie Middle East Center*, whilst writing about these clashes notes that the suppression of Shias constitutes "part of the Kingdom's strategy to counter Iran's bid for regional hegemony".**[12]**

With respect to rising political sectarianism, the policy of the Obama administration has thus far been virtually identical in both respects, namely; in its sustenance of a political agenda that leads to heightened sectarian tensions on the one hand, and its deliberate disregard of sectarian-motivated agendas by regional 'allies' on the other, which effectively cement these divisions.

Late last December, Saudi Prince Turki Al-Faisal charted out his 'path to peace' for the Middle East in an op-ed piece in the *Washington Post*.**[13]** The central concerns outlined in his vision for peace are not only symptomatic of those shared by the wider so-called

‘Moderate-bloc’ of Arab nations, but they in fact also provide a good indication of the changing tides in the Persian Gulf that have been the cause of much unsettling for the likes of Saudi Arabia. In particular, these concerns revolve around two core headings: i) the future of the Arab Initiative, and ii) the growing influence of Iran.

Viewed from another angle, the apparent urgent emphasis provided to the Arab Initiative and the closing window of ‘opportunity’ for its implementation, reveals an interesting reality that reflects the successes achieved by the path of *Resistance*; a path that evidently stands starkly at odds with the gifted job-roles given to the so-called ‘Moderates’ in the region. The highly agitated Saudi-Jordanian-Egyptian alliance views a resistance that has forced concessions upon a hereunto invincible Israeli adversary as a major threat to their own thrones. These realities are not hidden from the Arab street, and the growing grassroots support for Hizbullah and Hamas are a testament of this shift.

The second concern i.e., the growing influence of Iran or what Prince Turki Al-Faisal conveniently terms ‘*Iranian obstructionism*’, bears many commonalities with the first but transcends it in one vital respect: Iran symbolizes the possibility of the success of the ‘alternate path’. In the Arab consciousness, Iran provides a successful paradigm of a state that is self-dependent and stands up to imperialism in spite of long years of imposed wars and backbreaking sanctions. The findings in last year’s poll carried out by the *University of Maryland* and *Zogby International* hardly come as a surprise in this regard.**[14]** Additionally, Iran has not been shy to recognize the path of resistance and in showing its’ unreserved support for it, whereas the standard position of the so-called ‘Moderate-bloc’ of Arab nations has been to undermine the path of resistance. This factor has also played a major contributory role in developing a positive view of Iran on the Arab street.

On the basis of this outlook, the geostrategic importance of Syria as a nation that stands by the side of the resistance, as well as an Arab state that positions itself outside of the so-called ‘Moderate-bloc’ and its chosen political agenda, becomes not only apparent but very significant. When President Bashar Al-Assad announced in the Doha Summit (during the height of the brutal war on Gaza) that the Arab Initiative was “dead” and all that remained was to “transfer the registry of this Initiative from the registry of the living to that of the dead”**[15]**, it left the likes of Saudi Arabia shuffling their cards as they weighed their next options.

In very crude terms, the death of the Arab Initiative would at once spell the exclusion of the Saudi-Jordanian-Egyptian alliance from the Middle Eastern chessboard or at least mark their modest insignificance. The recent overtures made to Syria by the US and the Saudi-Jordanian-Egyptian alliance thus need to be viewed against this context. From the standpoint of the US and its Arab allies, the popular ‘public anarchy’ on the Arab street — in support of resistance movements — can no longer be contained except by fragmenting the Iran-Syria-Hizbullah alliance, even if this were to require swallowing bitter pills.

The victory of the Netanyahu-Liebermann coalition in Israel presents an immense challenge to the Arab coalition’s attempts to effectively sell this façade of a viable ‘peace track’ to Syria and to the Arab world in general. Even by the shoddy standards of truth that we have become accustomed to in our times, the sudden metamorphosis of a racist-bigot like Liebermann, whose comments about the ‘transfer’ of Arabs are not concealed from the Arab world**[16]**, into a ‘kingmaker’ for a track of peace comes across as simply ridiculous. In this respect, one of the salient but less spoken about roles that is presently being played out by the Saudi-Jordanian-Egyptian alliance, is its transformation into a mouthpiece replacement

for Israeli silence.

Nevertheless, it is important to underline the mounting support within Israel for engaging in Syrian peace talks as evinced by the recent advice offered to Netanyahu by a panel consisting of “prominent figures who formerly served in key posts in the defense establishment, government and the business community”.**[17]** Writing in a *Ha’aretz* op-ed, diplomatic editor Aluf Benn emphasised the need for Netanyahu’s government to accede to the track of the Arab initiative — a stance that is antithetical to the classical Likud position — by noting:

“Netanyahu can go further than previous prime ministers and announce that the Arab initiative is an unprecedented opportunity for closing ranks against the threat of Iran and the extremists in the region...”**[18]**

At any rate, selling an image of Israel as the sincere peacemaker at times and expansionist war-monger on others does little to straighten out any ‘path to peace’. On March 2nd 2009, the Israeli advocacy group *Peace Now* released a report saying that the Israeli Ministry of Construction and Housing had plans to build 73,302 housing units in the Occupied West Bank — of which 15,000 units have already been approved. The report noted that if all the plans are realized “the number of settlers in the Territories will be doubled”.**[19]** In a confidential EU report leaked to the *Guardian*, Israel was noted to be “actively pursuing the illegal annexation” of East Jerusalem with present settlements expansion progressing at a “rapid pace”.**[20]** In the face of these terminal threats to the two-state solution, the Obama administration has responded with a timid and pathetic characterisation of Israel’s actions as “unhelpful”.**[21]**

The Challenges Ahead

Whether this geopolitical tug of war to redraw the battle lines in the sands of the Middle East will end up in the favour of the US, Israel and their Arab allies is yet to be seen. Recent comments by Syrian top officials indicate that Damascus is not about to be moved by mere words and promises of change.

Foreign Minister Walid Moallem underlined that Damascus would not accept any less than a complete return to the 1967 borders and respect for the natural rights of Palestine: “Syria would be willing to renew only indirect talks, on two conditions: Israel’s commitment to withdraw to the 1967 borders, as well as its commitment that the Syrian channel will not be used to harm the Palestinians.”**[22]** Muhsin Bilal, the Syrian Information Minister, was less reserved with his choice of words when he declared that the victories exacted by the Lebanese and Palestinian resistances against the “Zionist” entity had botched the “New Middle East” agenda.**[23]**

Regional developments such as the growing mediating role of a pragmatic Qatar and increasing Turkish buoyancy, have also worked in the favour of the Iran-Syria-Hizbullah alliance by somewhat distorting the traditional ‘power blocs’. In addition to these regional changes, a sense of Syrian ‘realism’ in dealing with a ‘defeated’ Israel, augmented by the natural dynamism and unequal grassroots support for Iran and resistance movements in the region, present a formidable and hitherto undefeated opponent.

To peace activists, the success or failure of this political squabbling is insignificant when placed against the grave human price that is almost certain to result from the pursuit of

such a political agenda. For Western politicians who still value rational strategic planning; the analysis of ‘facts’ — and not engineered ‘truths’ — and their synthesis in forming a balanced perspective of reality, the inescapable calamities that would be the necessary resultant of adopting this aggressive, confrontational political agenda cannot be overlooked.

At this juncture, it is important to highlight a common fallacy that is epidemic in the Western media and unfortunately, one that has also trickled into the discourse of certain sections of the peace movement. Neo-con and pro-Zionist voices were quick to highlight that any sort of engagement with the likes of Iran, Hizbullah and Hamas (collectively homogenized as radical ‘Islamists’) poses a high-risk to the ‘civilized world’. These radical Islamists, we were told, can simply not be engaged with; talks with Iran would run parallel to the building of the ‘bomb’, talks with Hizbullah would create a ‘state within a state’, engaging with Hamas would signal the exclusion of (the illegitimate) president Mahmoud Abbas.**[24]** Although the truth is far distant from these sensationally irrational spurts, unfortunately, the ‘radical Islamist’ tag has remained firmly embedded in building perspectives towards the likes of Hizbullah and Hamas within some quarters of the peace movement.

In addition to being a classical tactic to ‘otherize’ the enemy if a process to ‘dehumanize’ it fails, we should note that despite adhering to a different kind of politics, these entities are neither irrational political players nor is their existence qualified by a ‘culture of death’. For the sake of example, the Hizbullah resistance movement overlooks an extensive social programs network that is virtually unequalled throughout the entire Middle East. Its longstanding record of peaceful coexistence and a highly-advanced integration paradigm (*infithah*) within the public sphere of a multi-sectarian Lebanese topography are doubted by none. The same however, cannot be said of US-Saudi sponsored Salafist client groups in Lebanon for whom the tag ‘Islamist’ fits rather well.**[25]** All in all, resistance movements like Hizbullah and Hamas enjoy a great deal of popular support on the Arab streets. They have also shown a great degree of tolerance towards the West in spite of the long list of grievances that have resulted from negative Western interference in their countries. Here, it is highly beneficial to refer to a speech delivered by Nadine Rosa-Rosso at the ‘*International Forum for Resistance, Anti-Imperialism, Solidarity between Peoples and Alternatives*’ that was held earlier this year in Beirut.**[26]**

In summary, the politicization of the Iranian nuclear programme and the recycling of false pretexts by Israel to launch regional wars should not be viewed as haphazard aberrations, but rather as logical consequences of a grand regional geopolitical strategy. The “New Middle East” agenda is the infrastructure upon which an imperial superstructure of hegemony, sustained by the disregard of law and rule of brute force, is raised to control this region. Human rights activists and lawyers who advocate against the innumerable abuses that have occurred so far in this “War on Terror” cannot ignore this political agenda which is in fact the origin of all ills.

One cannot speak of dealing with the looming threat of military strikes against Iran without first dealing with the “New Middle East” agenda. Similarly, one cannot speak of a post-Bush era or lavishly mark “new beginnings” without first doing away with the lasting remnants of a policy that has brought on so much suffering to the region, and continues to leave it on a knife’s edge. Strangely, most would say criminally, the experiences of the failures in Afghanistan and Iraq appear to have done little to develop a more informed US foreign policy in its dealings with this region. If there is any special disgust within the global peace movement with respect to these failed wars, it lies in the fear that a repeat is as likely to occur.

With the proclaimed advent of a “new beginning” by the Obama administration, there is a pressing need for the peace movement to engage in a comprehensive study of the “New Middle East” agenda in its different aspects and dimensions. Our collective failure to critically examine this agenda on the one hand, and to circulate its underlying assumptions and necessary consequences to the Western public on the other, will inevitably expose the peace movement to accusations of adherence to an outdated, dogmatic discourse.

The “New Middle East” agenda is inherently confrontational and raises the spectre of war in the region. For as long as it remains on the table, the whole Middle East will teeter on the brink of unspeakable calamities.

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Ali Jawad is a political activist and a member of the AhlulBayt Islamic Mission (AIM);

<http://www.aimislam.com/>

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