The Middle East Order: The War Game

Global Research Editor's Note

This incisive excerpt from David Hirst's book published in The Guardian in September 2003 provides an understanding of the evolving conflict in the Middle East as well as Israel's role and intentions in relation to Iran.

David Hirst's account of the Arab-Israeli conflict, The Gun and the Olive Branch, caused a storm 25 years ago. In this edited extract from his new and updated edition he offers a personal and highly controversial view of the current crisis in the Middle East

By the summer of 2002, George Bush had firmly set his new course: 'regime change' and reform in the Muslim and Arab worlds, and, where necessary, American military intervention to achieve it. Hitherto, it had been assumed that the US could not go to war in one of the two great zones of Middle East crisis – Iraq and the Gulf – before it had at least calmed things down in the other, older and more explosive one, Palestine. But the American administration's neo-conservatives had a very simple answer to that. The road to war on Iraq no longer lay through peace in Palestine; peace in Palestine lay through war on Baghdad.

It was all set forth, in its most comprehensive, well-nigh megalomaniac form, by Norman Podhoretz, the neo-cons' veteran intellectual luminary, in the September 2002 issue of his magazine, Commentary. Changes in regime, he proclaimed, were 'the sine qua non throughout the region'. They might 'clear a path to the long-overdue internal reform and modernisation of Islam'.

This was a full and final elaboration of that project, 'A Clean Break', which some of his kindred spirits had first laid before Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu back in 1996. It was the apotheosis of the 'strategic alliance', at least as much an Israeli grand design as an American one.

Under the guise of forcibly divesting Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction, the US now sought to 'reshape' the entire Middle East, with this most richly endowed and pivotal of countries as the lynchpin of a whole new, pro-American geopolitical order. Witnessing such an overwhelming display of American will and power, other regimes, such as Hizbollah-supporting Syria in particular, would either have to bend to American purposes or suffer the same fate.

With the assault on Iraq, the US was not merely adopting Israel's long-established methods –

of initiative, offence and pre-emption – it was also adopting Israel's adversaries as its own. Iraq had always ranked high among those; it was one of its so-called 'faraway' enemies. These had come to be seen as more menacing than the 'near' ones, and especially since they had begun developing weapons of mass destruction.

So excited was Israeli premier Ariel Sharon about this whole new Middle East order in the making that he told the Times, 'the day after' Iraq, the US and Britain should turn to that other 'faraway' enemy – Iran. For Israel, the ayatollahs' Iran had always seemed the greater menace of the two, by virtue of its intrinsic weight, its fundamentalist, theologically anti-Zionist leadership, its more serious, diversified and supposedly Russian-assisted nuclear armaments programme, its ideological affinity with, or direct sponsorship of, such Islamist organisations as Hamas or Hizbollah.

Nothing, in fact, better illustrated the ascendancy which Israel and the American 'friends of Israel' have acquired over American policy-making than did Iran. Quite simply, said Iran expert James Bill, the 'US views Iran through spectacles manufactured in Israel'. Impressing on the US the gravity of the Iranian threat has long been a foremost Israeli preoccupation.

By the early 1990s, the former Minister Moshe Sneh was warning that Israel 'cannot possibly put up with a nuclear bomb in Iranian hands'. That could and should be collectively prevented, he said, 'since Iran threatens the interests of all rational states in the Middle East'. However: 'If the Western states don't do their duty, Israel will find itself forced to act alone, and will accomplish its task by any [ie including nuclear] means.' The hint of anti-American blackmail in that remark was nothing exceptional; it has always been a leitmotif of Israeli discourse on the subject.

The showdown with Iraq has only encouraged this kind of thinking. 'Within two years,' said John Pike, director of Globalsecurity.org, 'either the US or Israelis are going to attack Iran's [nuclear sites] or acquiesce in Iran being a nuclear state.'

To where this Israeli-American, neo-conservative blueprint for the Middle East will lead is impossible to forecast. What can be said for sure is that it could easily turn out to be as calamitous in its consequences, for the region, America and Israel, as it is preposterously partisan in motivation, fantastically ambitious in design and terribly risky in practice.

Even if, to begin with, it achieves what, by its authors' estimate, is an outward, short-term measure of success, it will not end the violence in the Middle East. Far more likely is that, in the medium or the long term, it will make it very much worse. For the violence truly to end, its roots must be eradicated, too, and the noxious soil that feeds them cleansed.

It is late, but perhaps not too late, for that to happen. The historic – and historically generous – compromise offer which Yasser Arafat, back in 1988, first put forward for the sharing of Palestine between its indigenous people and the Zionists who drove most of them out still officially stands. It is completely obvious by now that, without external persuasion, Israel will never accept it; that the persuasion can only come from Israel's last real friend in the world, the US; that, for the persuasion to work, there has to be 'reform' or 'regime change' in Israel quite as far-reaching as any to be wrought on the other side.

Given the partisanship, it is, admittedly, highly unlikely to happen any time soon. But if it doesn't happen in the reasonably foreseeable future, there may come a time when it can no longer happen at all. The Palestinian leadership may withdraw its offer, having concluded,

like many of its people already have, that, however conciliatory it becomes, whatever fresh concessions it makes, it will never be enough for an adversary that seems to want all.

The Hamas rejectionists, and/or those, secular as well as religious, who think like them, may take over the leadership. The whole, broader, Arab-Israeli peace process which Anwar Sadat began, and which came to be seen as irreversible, may prove to be reversible after all. In which case, the time may also come when the cost to the US of continuing to support its infinitely importunate protégé in a never-ending conflict against an ever-widening circle of adversaries is greater than its will and resources to sustain it.

That would very likely be a time when Israel itself is already in dire peril. And if it were, then America would very likely discover something else: that the friend and ally it has succoured all these years is not only a colonial state, not only extremist by temperament, racist in practice, and increasingly fundamentalist in the ideology that drives it, it is also eminently capable of becoming an 'irrational' state at America's expense as well as its own.

The threatening of wild, irrational violence, in response to political pressure, has been an Israeli impulse from the very earliest days. It was first authoritatively documented, in the 1950s, by Moshe Sharett, the dovish Prime Minister, who wrote of his Defence Minister, Pinhas Lavon, that he 'constantly preached for acts of madness' or 'going crazy' if ever Israel were crossed. Without a 'just, comprehensive and lasting' peace which only America can bring to pass, Israel will remain at least as likely a candidate as Iran, and a far more enduring one, for the role of 'nuclear-crazy' state.

Iran can never be threatened in its very existence. Israel can. Indeed, such a threat could even grow out of the current intifada. That, at least, is the pessimistic opinion of Martin van Creveld, professor of military history at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. 'If it went on much longer,' he said, 'the Israeli government [would] lose control of the people. In campaigns like this, the anti-terror forces lose, because they don't win, and the rebels win by not losing. I regard a total Israeli defeat as unavoidable. That will mean the collapse of the Israeli state and society. We'll destroy ourselves.'

In this situation, he went on, more and more Israelis were coming to regard the 'transfer' of the Palestinians as the only salvation; resort to it was growing 'more probable' with each passing day. Sharon 'wants to escalate the conflict and knows that nothing else will succeed'.

But would the world permit such ethnic cleansing? 'That depends on who does it and how quickly it happens. We possess several hundred atomic warheads and rockets and can launch them at targets in all directions, perhaps even at Rome. Most European capitals are targets for our air force. Let me quote General Moshe Dayan: "Israel must be like a mad dog, too dangerous to bother." I consider it all hopeless at this point. We shall have to try to prevent things from coming to that, if at all possible. Our armed forces, however, are not the thirtieth strongest in the world, but rather the second or third. We have the capability to take the world down with us. And I can assure you that that will happen before Israel goes under.'

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