

The Neocons' next War

Hardliners in the Bush administration are trying to widen the Middle East conflict to Iran and Syria

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By secretly providing NSA intelligence to Israel and undermining the hapless Condi Rice, hardliners in the Bush administration are trying to widen the Middle East conflict to Iran and Syria, not stop it.

The National Security Agency is providing signal intelligence to Israel to monitor whether Syria and Iran are supplying new armaments to Hezbollah as it fires hundreds of missiles into northern Israel, according to a national security official with direct knowledge of the operation. President Bush has approved the secret program.

Inside the administration, neoconservatives on Vice President Dick Cheney's national security staff and [Elliott Abrams](#), the neoconservative senior director for the Near East on the National Security Council, are prime movers behind sharing NSA intelligence with Israel, and they have discussed Syrian and Iranian supply activities as a potential pretext for Israeli bombing of both countries, the source privy to conversations about the program says. (Intelligence, including that gathered by the NSA, has been provided to Israel in the past for various purposes.) The neoconservatives are described as enthusiastic about the possibility of using NSA intelligence as a lever to widen the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah and Israel and Hamas into a four-front war.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is said to have been "briefed" and to be "on board," but she is not a central actor in pushing the covert neoconservative scenario. Her "briefing" appears to be an aspect of an internal struggle to intimidate and marginalize her. Recently she has come under fire from prominent neoconservatives who oppose her support for diplomatic negotiations with Iran to prevent its development of nuclear weaponry.

Rice's [diplomacy in the Middle East](#) has erratically veered from initially calling on Israel for "restraint," to categorically opposing a cease-fire, to proposing terms for a cease-fire guaranteed to conflict with the European proposal, and thus to thwarting diplomacy, prolonging the time available for the Israeli offensive to achieve its stated aim of driving Hezbollah out of southern Lebanon. But the neocon scenario extends far beyond that objective to pushing Israel into a "cleansing war" with Syria and Iran, says the national security official, which somehow will redeem Bush's beleaguered policy in the entire region.

In order to try to understand the neoconservative road map, senior national security professionals have begun circulating among themselves a 1996 [neocon manifesto](#) against the Middle East peace process. Titled "A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm," its half-dozen authors included neoconservatives highly influential with the Bush administration — Richard Perle, first-term chairman of the Defense Policy Board; Douglas

Feith, former undersecretary of defense; and David Wurmser, Cheney's chief Middle East aide.

"A Clean Break" was written at the request of incoming Likud Party Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and intended to provide "a new set of ideas" for jettisoning the policies of assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Instead of trading "land for peace," the neocons advocated tossing aside the Oslo agreements that established negotiations and demanding unconditional Palestinian acceptance of Likud's terms, "peace for peace." Rather than negotiations with Syria, they proposed "weakening, containing, and even rolling back Syria." They also advanced a wild scenario to "redefine Iraq." Then King Hussein of Jordan would somehow become its ruler; and somehow this Sunni monarch would gain "control" of the Iraqi Shiites, and through them "wean the south Lebanese Shia away from Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria."

Netanyahu, at first, attempted to follow the "clean break" strategy, but under persistent pressure from the Clinton administration he felt compelled to enter into U.S.-led negotiations with the Palestinians. In the 1998 Wye River accords, concluded through the personal involvement of President Clinton and a dying King Hussein, the Palestinians agreed to acknowledge the legitimacy of Israel and Netanyahu agreed to withdraw from a portion of the occupied West Bank. Further negotiations, conducted by his successor Ehud Barak, that nearly settled the conflict ended in dramatic failure, but potentially set the stage for new ones.

At his first National Security Council meeting, President George W. Bush stunned his first secretary of state, Colin Powell, by rejecting any effort to revive the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. When Powell warned that "the consequences of that could be dire, especially for the Palestinians," Bush snapped, "Sometimes a show for force by one side can really clarify things." He was making a "clean break" not only with his immediate predecessor but also with the policies of his father.

In the current Middle East crisis, once again, the elder Bush's wise men have stepped forward to offer unsolicited and unheeded advice. (In private they are scathing.) Edward Djerejian, a former ambassador to Israel and Syria and now the director of the James Baker Institute at Rice University, urged on July 23, on CNN, negotiations with Syria and Iran. "I come from the school of diplomacy that you negotiate conflict resolution and peace with your enemies and adversaries, not with your friends," he said. "We've done it in the past, we can do it again."

Charles Freeman, the elder Bush's ambassador to Saudi Arabia, remarked, "The irony now is that the most likely candidate to back Hezbollah in the long term is no longer Iran but the Arab Shiite tyranny of the majority we have installed in Baghdad." Indeed, when Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki came to Washington in the last week of July he preceded his visit with harsh statements against Israel. And in a closed meeting with U.S. senators, when asked to offer criticism of Hezbollah, he steadfastly refused.

Richard Haass, the Middle East advisor on the elder Bush's National Security Council and President Bush's first-term State Department policy planning director, and now president of the Council on Foreign Relations, openly scoffed at Bush's Middle East policy in an interview on July 30 in the Washington Post: "The arrows are all pointing in the wrong direction. The biggest danger in the short run is it just increases frustration and alienation from the United

States in the Arab world. Not just the Arab world, but in Europe and around the world. People will get a daily drumbeat of suffering in Lebanon and this will just drive up anti-Americanism to new heights.” When asked about the president’s optimism, he replied, “An opportunity? Lord, spare me. I don’t laugh a lot. That’s the funniest thing I’ve heard in a long time. If this is an opportunity, what’s Iraq? A once-in-a-lifetime chance?”

The same day that Haass’ comments appeared Brent Scowcroft, the elder Bush’s national security advisor and still his close friend, published an Op-Ed in the Washington Post written more or less as an open letter to his erstwhile and errant protégé Condoleezza Rice. Undoubtedly, Scowcroft reflects the views of the former President Bush. Adopting the tone of an instructor to a stubborn pupil, Scowcroft detailed a plan for an immediate end to the Israel-Hezbollah conflict and for restarting the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, “the source of the problem.” His program is a last attempt to turn the president back to the ways of his father. If the elder Bush and his team were in power and following the Scowcroft plan, a cease-fire would have been declared. But Scowcroft’s plan resembles that of the Europeans, already rejected by the Bush administration, and Rice is the one offering a counterproposal that has put diplomacy into a stall.

Despite Rice’s shunning of the advice of the Bush I sages, the neoconservatives have made her a convenient target in their effort to undermine all diplomatic initiatives. “Dump Condi,” read the headline in the right-wing Insight Magazine on July 25. “Conservative national security allies of President Bush are in revolt against Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, saying that she is incompetent and has reversed the administration’s national security and foreign policy agenda,” the article reported. Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, a member of the Defense Policy Board, was quoted: “We are sending signals today that no matter how much you provoke us, no matter how viciously you describe things in public, no matter how many things you’re doing with missiles and nuclear weapons, the most you’ll get out of us is talk.”

A month earlier, Perle, in a June 25 Op-Ed in the Washington Post, revived an old trope from the height of the Cold War, accusing those who propose diplomacy of being like Neville Chamberlain, the British prime minister who tried to appease Hitler. “Condoleezza Rice,” wrote Perle, “has moved from the White House to Foggy Bottom, a mere mile or so away. What matters is not that she is further removed from the Oval Office; Rice’s influence on the president is undiminished. It is, rather, that she is now in the midst of and increasingly represents a diplomatic establishment that is driven to accommodate its allies even when (or, it seems, especially when) such allies counsel the appeasement of our adversaries.”

Rice, agent of the nefarious State Department, is supposedly the enemy within. “We are in the early stages of World War III,” Gingrich told Insight. “Our bureaucracies are not responding fast enough. We don’t have the right attitude.”

Confused, ineffectual and incapable of filling her office with power, Rice has become the voodoo doll that Powell was in the first term. Even her feeble and counterproductive gestures toward diplomacy leave her open to the harshest attacks from neoconservatives. Scowcroft and the Bush I team are simply ignored. The sustained assault on Rice is a means to an end — restoring the ascendancy of neoconservatism.

Bush’s rejection of and reluctance to embrace the peace process concluded with the victory of Hamas in the Palestinian elections. This failure was followed by a refusal to engage Hamas, potentially splitting its new governmental ministers from its more radical leadership

in Damascus. Predictably, the most radical elements of Hamas found a way to lash out. And Hezbollah seized the moment by staging its own provocation.

Having failed in the Middle East, the administration is attempting to salvage its credibility by equating Israel's predicament with the U.S. quagmire in Iraq. Neoconservatives, for their part, see the latest risk to Israel's national security as a chance to scuttle U.S. negotiations with Iran, perhaps the last opportunity to realize the fantasies of "A Clean Break."

By using NSA intelligence to set an invisible tripwire, the Bush administration is laying the condition for regional conflagration with untold consequences — from Pakistan to Afghanistan, from Iraq to Israel. Secretly devising a scheme that might thrust Israel into a ring of fire cannot be construed as a blunder. It is a deliberate, calculated and methodical plot.

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