

What Staying on Course Really Means

By [Robert Dreyfuss](#)

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Nearly three years into the war in Iraq, the Bush administration tells us that it wasn't about weapons of mass destruction or Iraqi ties to al-Qaeda, but about America's holy mission to spread democracy to the benighted regions of the Middle East. However, postwar Iraq is anything but a democracy. In fact, if Iraq manages to avoid all-out civil war, it is likely to end up with a government that is fiercely undemocratic – a Shi'ite theocratic dictatorship that rules by terror, torture, and armed might.

What President George W Bush has wrought in Iraq is just the latest in a long string of US efforts to make common cause with the Islamic right. But like the Sorcerer's Apprentice, whose naive and inexperienced use of magic blows up in his face, American efforts to play with the forces of political Islam have proved to be dangerous, volatile and often uncontrollable.

The problem goes far beyond the Shi'ites in Iraq. In the Sunni parts of the country, the power of Islamism is growing, too – and by this I do not mean the forces associated with al-Qaeda. but the radical-right Muslim Brotherhood, represented there by the Iraqi Islamic Party, and other manifestations of the Salafi and Wahhabi-style religious right.

In Egypt, Syria and elsewhere, the radical religious right is also gaining strength. Meanwhile; sometimes deliberately, sometimes by sheer ignorance and incompetence, the Bush administration is encouraging the spread of political Islam. Were the US to “stay the course,” not only Iraq but much of the rest of the Middle East could fall to the Islamic right.

Does this mean that al-Qaeda-style fanatics will take power? No. Whether in the form of Iraq's Shi'ite theocrats or the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood in Syria and Egypt, the Islamic right cannot be compared to al-Qaeda. Yet, just as the US Christian right has its abortion clinic bombers, just as the Israeli Jewish right spawned the assassin of Yitzhak Rabin and settler-extremists who kill dozens at Muslim holy sites, the Islamic right provides ideological support and theological justification for more extreme (and, yes, terrorist) offspring.

Even the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization with a long history of violence, which once maintained a covert “secret apparatus” and a paramilitary arm, has not convincingly renounced its past, nor demonstrated that it sees democracy as anything more than a tool it can use to seize power.

Shi'ite “Islamofascists” rule Iraq

The case of Iraq could not be clearer. In 2002, as Vice President Dick Cheney pushed the White House and the Pentagon inexorably toward war, it was increasingly obvious to experienced Iraq hands that post-Saddam Hussein Iraq would be ruled by its restive Shi'ite

majority. It was no less obvious that the dominant force within that Shi'ite majority would be the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, or SCIRI, and a parallel force associated with al-Dawa (The Islamic Call), a 45-year-old Shi'ite underground terrorist party.

From the mid-1990s on, and especially after 2001, the US provided overt and covert assistance to these organizations as part of the effort to force regime change in Iraq. Like Ahmed Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress, with which both worked closely and which had offices in Tehran, SCIRI and Dawa were based in Iran. SCIRI, in fact, was founded in 1982 by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and its paramilitary arm, the Badr Brigade, was trained and armed by Iran's Revolutionary Guards. Certainly, to the Bush administration, SCIRI and Dawa were known quantities.

David Phillips, the former adviser to the State Department's war-planning effort and author of *Losing Iraq: Inside the Postwar Reconstruction Fiasco*, has assured me that, in the run-up to the war, many of his colleagues were well aware that SCIRI-type Islamists, not Chalabi, would inherit post-Saddam Iraq. Other insiders, too, have told me of foreign-policy professionals and Iraq specialists in the US intelligence community who warned (to no avail) that SCIRI would be a major force in Iraq after any invasion. The point is, whether they bothered to pay attention or not, the Bush-Cheney team was informed, well in advance, that by toppling Saddam there was a strong possibility they would be installing a Shi'ite theocracy.

Today, the unpleasant reality is that 150,000 US troops, who are dying at a rate of about 100 a month, are the Praetorian Guard for that radical-right theocracy. It is a regime that sponsors Shi'ite-led death squads carrying out assassinations from Basra (where freelance reporter Steven Vincent, himself murdered by such a unit, wrote that "hundreds" of former Ba'athists, secular leaders and Sunnis were being killed every month) to Baghdad. Scores of bodies of Sunnis regularly turn up shot to death, execution-style.

The latest revelation is that SCIRI's Badr Brigade, now a 20,000-strong militia, operated a secret torture prison in Baghdad holding hundreds of Sunni detainees. There, prisoners had their skin flayed off, electric shocks applied to their genitals, or power drills driven into their bones. SCIRI and Dawa are the senior partners in an Iraqi government which has imposed a unilateralist constitution on the country that elevates the power of the Shi'ite-dominated provinces and enshrines their vision of Islam in the body politic.

Two weeks ago, during his visit to Washington, DC, I asked Adel Abdul Mahdi, a top SCIRI official and Iraq's deputy president, about the charges of death squads and brutality. "All of the terrorists are on the other side," he sniffed. "What you refer to is a reaction to that."

Perhaps the ultimate irony of Bush's war on terrorism is this: while the president asserts that the war in Iraq is the central front in the struggle against what he describes as "Islamofascism", real "Islamofascists" are already in power in Baghdad – and they are, shamefully, America's allies.

Of course, among the Iraqi opposition, too, the Islamic right is growing. The forces of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's al-Qaeda in Iraq have gained some limited support from Iraqis, and Zarqawi is using the war to rally support from jihadis throughout the region.

More broadly, the US occupation is pushing ever larger numbers of Sunni Arabs toward support for Islamists. In Iraq, the Muslim Brotherhood is represented by the Iraqi Islamic

Party (IIP). Although it draws much of its strength from radicalized Sunnis who hate the occupation, the IIP has shown itself to be the part of the Sunni opposition most willing to cooperate with the US-allied Shi'ite theocrats.

It has, from time to time, taken part in the various interim governments that the US has set up in post-war Iraq; and, in October, the IIP endorsed the ersatz Iraqi constitution, setting itself apart from the vast majority of Iraq's Sunnis. (For that, its headquarters in Baghdad was attacked by the resistance, and many of its offices around the country were blown up or assaulted.)

Still, the growth of the IIP and other similar manifestations of the Islamic right among Iraq's Sunnis has encouraged some Shi'ite theocrats to envision a Sunni-Shi'ite Islamist partnership in the country. However unlikely that may be, given the passions that have already been inflamed, the growth of the radical right among Sunnis cannot possibly be a good thing for Iraq, for the region, or for US interests.

Syria: The Muslim Brotherhood waits

Now, consider the broader issue of Bush's supposed push for regional democracy. That effort, it should be noted, is being coordinated under the know-nothing supervision of none other than Elizabeth Cheney, the vice president's daughter. She is currently the principal deputy assistant secretary of state for Near East affairs and is charged with the task of democracy-building in the "Greater Middle East".

Undeterred by the failure of the US experiment in installing democracy in Iraq, next on the chopping block – that is, next to receive the benefits of US-imposed democracy – is Syria. That small, oil-poor, militarily weak state is, at the moment, feeling the full force of Bush administration pressure. Its army and security forces have been driven out of Lebanon, at the risk of sparking civil war in that country again.

The country has been targeted by the Syrian Accountability Act (reminiscent of the 1998 Iraq Liberation Act) and hit with related US economic sanctions. It has been accused, by John Bolton and other neo-conservatives, of maintaining a weapons-of-mass-destruction program far beyond the very limited chemical arms it probably possesses. It is accused, by many US officials, including the US ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, of sponsoring the resistance fighters in Iraq – though there is nearly zero evidence that it is doing so. Liz Cheney and other top US officials are already meeting with Chalabi-like Syrian exile leaders to plot "regime change".

As in Iraq, where Islamic fundamentalist Shi'ites stepped in to fill the vacuum, so in Syria the most likely power waiting in the wings to replace the government of President Bashar Assad is not some group of Syrian secular democrats and nationalists but Syria's Muslim Brotherhood.

The Brotherhood, founded in Egypt in 1928, is an underground secret society with a long history of terrorism and the use of assassination. With financial and organizational help from Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi establishment, the Brotherhood has spread to every corner of the Muslim world.

Although it now officially eschews violence, in recent years it has given succor to, and even spawned, far more radical versions of itself. One of its chief theoreticians, Sayyid Qutb,

created the theological justification for Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda. Even today, the Brotherhood and al-Qaeda are at least fellow travelers. It is far from clear how to draw the line between the Muslim Brotherhood and other forces of "conservative" political Islam and those associated with radical-right, violence-prone Islamists. Certainly, many experienced US diplomats and intelligence officers disagree about where one stops and the other starts.

Because Syria – with a mostly Sunni population (though, as in Iraq, highly complex with a rich mix of minorities) – is a closed society, it is impossible to say just how powerful the Muslim Brotherhood is there. But with an exile leadership in London and other cities in Western Europe, with a network of supporters among the Sunni Arab petit bourgeoisie, and with power centers in a string of cities from Damascus to Homs, Hama, and Aleppo, it is widely considered a major player in future Syrian politics.

Recently, the Brotherhood joined with secular intellectuals and others in an ad hoc, anti-Assad coalition, but the rest of the coalition has few forces on the ground. Only the Brotherhood has "troops". In that, this coalition is reminiscent of the one that formed in 1978 to overthrow the Shah of Iran. After the Shah's fall, Khomeini's gang picked off its erstwhile allies one by one – the communists, the National Front (the remnant of the nationalist forces associated with prime minister Mohammad Mossadegh in the 1950s), the intellectuals, and finally the moderate Islamists such as president Abolhassan Bani-Sadr – to establish the authoritarian theocracy that is the Islamic Republic of Iran.

It cannot be that the Bush administration is unaware of the power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria. Rather, they evidently simply don't care. Their enmity for the Assad government is so all-powerful that, as in Iraq, they evidently are willing to risk an Islamist regime. How can it be that Mr War on Terrorism blithely condones one Islamic extremist regime in Baghdad and courts another in Damascus?

History shows that there is precedent. In the 1970s and early 1980s, two US allies – Israel and Jordan – actively supported the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in a bloody civil war against the government of president Hafez Assad, Bashar's father. The Israeli and Jordanian-sponsored terrorists killed hundreds of Syrians, exploded car bombs and assassinated Soviet diplomats and military personnel in Syrian cities.

All of this was known to the US at the time – and viewed benignly. The Syrian civil war came to a brutal end when Rifaat Assad, the president's brother, led elite units of the military into Hama, where the Muslim Brotherhood had seized power and where hundreds of Syrian government officials had been dragged from their offices and murdered. Rifaat Assad carried out a massive repression in which many thousands died. Yet the forces of the Brotherhood recovered, and today the Bush administration seems content to squeeze the brittle Assad government until it collapses, even if it means that the Muslim Brotherhood takes power.

Middle Eastern dominos?

Aficionados of the Cold War domino theory often suggested that communism, allowed to topple a single state, would then be able to topple country after country; that if communism was victorious in South Vietnam, then Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines and other distant lands would follow. That may have been silly, but in the Middle East a domino theory might actually have some application.

At the very least, it is important to understand that the Muslim Brotherhood is a supranational force, not simply a country-by-country phenomenon. From Algeria to Pakistan, its leaders know each other, talk to each other and work together. In addition, the virulent force of religious fanaticism, fed by anger, bitterness, and despair, knows no national boundaries.

Egypt, the anchor of the Arab world and by far its most populous country, is threatened with a Muslim Brotherhood-style regime. Virtually all observers of Egyptian politics agree that the Muslim Brotherhood is the chief opposition party in Egypt. Mere prudence suggests that the US should not press Egypt too hard for democracy and free elections, given how difficult it is to transition from an authoritarian state to a democratic one. Moreover, it is arguably none of America's business what sort of government Egypt has. The very idea that democracy is the antidote for terrorism has been proven false, most authoritatively by F Gregory Gause in his essay, "Can Democracy Stop Terrorism?" in the September/October issue of Foreign Affairs magazine.

Yet the Bush administration is pushing hard for its brand of democracy. Two weeks ago, at a regional forum in the Gulf, Egyptian officials bluntly rebuffed the imperial US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who seemed stunned that the government in Cairo did not want meddlers from the National Endowment for Democracy, USAID and other agencies pouring money into Egyptian opposition groups.

President Hosni Mubarak, a long-time American ally, was considered indispensable by a succession of administrations during the Cold War. A fierce anti-communist who kept the peace with Israel and helped the US in its anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and again in the 1991 Gulf War, is now regularly denounced as a dictator by the likes of Newt Gingrich and Richard Perle.

Because of Egypt's history as an ally, no Bush administration official (and not even many neo-cons) dare say that they want "regime change" in Cairo, but that is precisely what they do want, and many of them may be willing to risk the creation of a Muslim Brotherhood-style regime to get it. Reuel Marc Gerecht, a leading neo-conservative strategist and former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officer who is now a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, wrote the following in his book *The Islamic Paradox*, comparing Khomeini favorably to Mubarak:

"Khomeini submitted the idea of an Islamic republic to an up-or-down popular vote in 1979, and regular elections with some element of competition are morally essential to the regime's conception of its own legitimacy, something not at all the case with President Hosni Mubarak's dictatorship in Egypt ... Anti-Americanism is the common denominator of the Arab states with "pro-American" dictators. By comparison, Iran is a profoundly pro-American country.

True, Mubarak rigs Egyptian elections, but in recent parliamentary elections, the Muslim Brotherhood still showed tremendous strength. With a third round of elections still to go, it is on track to win up to a quarter of the seats in the new national assembly.

Gerecht isn't worried: "It is certainly possible," he writes, "that fundamentalists, if they gained power in Egypt, would try to end representative government ... But the United States would still be better off with this alternative than with a secular dictatorship."

In the 1950s, British intelligence and the CIA worked with the Muslim Brothers against Gamal Abdel Nasser, the founder of modern Arab nationalism. Said Ramadan, the son-in-law of Muslim Brotherhood founder, Hassan al-Banna, who set up the organization's global nerve center in Geneva, Switzerland, was a CIA agent. Twice, in 1954 and in 1965, the Brotherhood tried to assassinate Nasser. From this period to the present, the Brotherhood has received financial support from the ultra-right Saudi establishment.

A formula for endless war

Iraq, Syria and Egypt are not the only places threatened by fundamentalism. In recent Palestinian elections, Hamas – the official branch of the Muslim Brotherhood there – has shown remarkable strength, threatening to undo the Palestinian Authority's accomplishments and wreck any chance of a Palestinian-Israeli accord.

Ironically, a great deal of Hamas' present power exists only because of the support offered its founders by the Israeli military authorities in decades past. From the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967 well into the 1980s, Israel supported the growth of Hamas-style Islamism as a counterweight to the nationalists in the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Ahmed Yassin, Hamas' founder, was backed by Israel during those years, as his followers clashed with PLO supporters in Gaza and the West Bank. Too late, Israel recognized that it had created a monster and began to wage war on Hamas, including assassinating Yassin.

From Israel and Palestine to Egypt, Syria, Iraq and beyond – in Algeria, Sudan, the Gulf states, Pakistan and even Saudi Arabia – the region is beset by Islamist movements. The right way to combat this upsurge is not through military action or a Bush administration-style "war on terrorism". That, as many observers have pointed out, is likely to further fuel the growth of such movements, not subdue them.

Only if the temperature is lowered throughout the region might the momentum of the Islamic right be slowed and, someday, reversed. Unfortunately, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have raised that temperature to the boiling point. So has the long-term American military build-up in the Persian Gulf and Central Asia.

So have the proclamations from Bush and Co about a nonsensical "World War IV" against "Islamofascism". So has the Israeli policy of expanding settlements and building a giant barrier that virtually annexes huge swaths of the West Bank for greater Israel. All of these policies cause Islamist sympathies to grow – and out of them bubble recruits not only for organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood, but for al-Qaeda-style terrorist groups.

The Bush administration has put into operation an utterly paradoxical and self-defeating strategy. First, its policies inflame the region, feeding the growth of political Islam and its extremist as well as terrorist offshoots. Then, as in Iraq – and as seems to be the case in Syria and Egypt – it seeks "regime change" in countries where it knows that the chief opposition and likely inheritor of power will be the Muslim Brotherhood or its ilk. This is a formula for endless war in the region.

Robert Dreyfuss is the author of Devil's Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam. He covers national security for Rolling Stone and writes frequently for The American Prospect, Mother Jones, and the Nation. He is also a regular contributor to TomPaine.com, the Huffington Post, and other sites, and writes the blog, "The Dreyfuss

Report," at his web site.

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