

U.S. Middle East Policy: "Enough is Enough"

By Jim Lobe and Tom Barry

Facing mounting international criticism and concerned that intensifying Israeli-Palestinian violence is undermining its global war on terrorism, the White House is sending Secretary of State Powell as its peace emissary to the Middle East. By way of explanation for his newly awakened concern about Israeli-Palestinian relations, President Bush said, "The storms of violence cannot continue. Enough is enough."

Yet, as the Bush administration is well aware, the tenuous pre-Bush, pre-Sharon stability cannot be patched together again. Nor does it want it to be. Over the past year Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has dismantled the Palestine Authority (PA)—and with it, the nine-year-old Oslo peace process. Since he took office President Bush has stood firm against all entreaties—from both within his administration and from allies—to rein in the militarism of the Sharon government and its campaign against the PA and Arafat.

Bush's unwillingness to distance the U.S. government from Israel's hardliners and his repeated framing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a war on terror have met with enthusiastic approval from hardliners within his own administration. Also echoing this approval are members of a shadow cabinet of right-wing analysts who have been key in setting the direction of the administration's foreign policy.

Under the Bush administration, Middle East foreign policy—together with most other dimensions of U.S. foreign policy—have largely reflected the positions voiced by several right-wing front groups and think tanks, notably The Project for the New American Century (PNAC) and the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), and the opinions found in the *Wall Street Journal*, *National Review*, *Weekly Standard*, and *Washington Times*.

As international pressure mounted for the U.S. to back away from its support of Sharon's war on Palestine, PNAC sent a letter to the president commending Bush for "your strong stance in support of the Israeli government as it engages in the present campaign to fight terrorism." Among the 31 signers of the PNAC letter were the chairman of the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board, Richard Perle; former CIA director R. James Woolsey; *Weekly Standard* editor William Kristol; and former Education Secretary and drug czar William Bennett. They warned the president that:

"It can no longer be the policy of the United States to urge, much less to pressure, Israel to continue negotiating with Arafat, any more than we would be willing to be pressured to negotiate with Osama Bin Laden or Mullah Omar. Nor should the United States provide financial support to a Palestinian Authority that acts as a cog in the machine of Middle East terrorism, any more than we would approve of others providing assistance to Al Qaeda."

The PNAC letter came on the heels of a statement by Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld in which he identified Syria, Iran, and Iraq, as well as the PLO, as targets in the war against terrorism. This was the same list of alleged miscreants identified in a PNAC letter sent to Bush just nine days after the September 11 attacks. That one was signed by almost 40 prominent neo-conservatives and Christian Right activists.

As is well known, the military hardliners and right-wing policy analysts inside and outside the administration have from the beginning of the Bush presidency been troubled by Secretary of State Powell's less rigidly ideological approach to U.S. foreign policy. Often the subject of criticism from PNAC and AEI associates, Powell received favorable mention in

PNAC's recent letter for his statement that the root cause of the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict was not "the absence of a political way forward" but from "terrorism...in its rawest form." Powell's approval ratings from right-wing foreign policy thinkers have also improved because of his recent statement indicating the possibility that the U.S. would be willing to go after Saddam Hussein without the support of countries in the Middle East or elsewhere. This bolstered the hardliners' confidence that the Israel-Palestine conflict would not distract the administration from a campaign against Iraq. Indeed, Powell pointed his finger at Iraq, Iran, and Syria, saying they "may be using the Middle East conflict as an excuse for those terrorist organizations" operating in the region and threatening Israel.

As aggression, terrorism, and political instability intensifies in Israel and Palestine, the Bush administration has little choice but to demonstrate its concern by sending its chief diplomat to the Middle East. It is far from clear, however, that the Powell mission reflects a shift away from the aggressive Middle East policy advocated by the right wing and military hardliners. In announcing the mission, Bush again chastised Arafat while saying the he himself was a "committed friend of Israel." While calling for Israel to end its incursions and settlement policy, he did not demand that this be done immediately. Nor did he insist that Israel withdraw from the occupied territories.

A Two-Edged Foreign Policy Crisis

The political violence in Israel and Palestine represents not only the continuation of a long-running regional crisis but also a profound crisis in

U.S. international relations. For the hardliners who now dominate U.S. foreign policy, there is rising concern that international pressure will force the president to deviate from the aggressive agenda they have set forth. And for the more moderate right—including many officials at the State Department's Near East Bureau—the new instability in Israel and Palestine threatens to undermine the historical foundations of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

The hardline faction, whose views on the war on terrorism, Iraq, and Israel are clearly articulated by PNAC, is concerned that domestic and international criticism of Sharon's aggression might persuade the White House to deviate from its right-wing foreign policy agenda, including its campaign against Iraq and its support for the Likud. Clearly concerned that the deepening crisis would result in backsliding from that agenda, PNAC urged the president "to accelerate plans for removing Saddam Hussein from power." With regard to Israel, the PNAC statement concluded: "Israel's fight against terrorism is our fight. Israel's victory is an important part of our victory. For reasons both moral and strategic, we need to stand with Israel in its fight against terrorism."

With extremely powerful allies within the administration—Vice President Dick Cheney, Rumsfeld, and his chief deputy, Paul Wolfowitz, were PNAC charter members—they and their fellow signers have churned out scores of articles and appeared on dozens of TV talk shows since September 11, which have not only shaped the public debate on the war on terrorism and the Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) alleged role in it, but have challenged, if not overturned, four decades of traditional

U.S. thinking about the Middle East. The signers of the PNAC letter—a coalition long opposed to a land-for-peace formula and Christian Rightists some of whom believe that Israeli control of Palestine fulfills Biblical prophecy—have made the State Department itself almost as much a target of their campaign as Arafat himself.

In all of their writings, they have pounded the same themes over and over again. The most important of these:

- The Palestine Liberation Organization is a terrorist organization, and Israel should not be compelled to negotiate with it.
- The U.S. should not intervene if Sharon moves to dismantle the PA and with it the Oslo process.
- The war against terrorism will not be complete until Iraqi President Saddam Hussein is ousted from power and other enemies of Israel—notably Syria, Iran, and Hizbollah in Lebanon—are put firmly in their place.
- The president should not heed the entreaties of State Department Mideast experts, or the calls of traditional U.S. Mideast allies, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, to rein in Sharon because they are themselves responsible for fostering support for terrorism against the United States.

The basic assumption underlying all of these points is well-articulated by William Bennett. Two weeks ago, Bennett, who plays a key role in linking the primarily Jewish neoconservatives with the Christian Right, wrote "America's fate and Israel's fate are one and the same."

In acquiescing to the destruction of the Oslo process and failing to seriously promote Saudi Crown Prince

Abdullah's peace initiative, it appears increasingly that the administration has effectively abandoned the "land-for-peace" formula that successive U.S. administrations have insisted must be the basis for resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict.

That alone marks a historic victory for the coalition that opposed Oslo from its inception, precisely because it meant Israel's eventual surrender of what Sharon's Likud Party still refers to by their Biblical names, Judea and Samaria.

The right's foreign policy and military agenda, which had stalled in the first months of the Bush administration, took control following 9/11, and since then military hardliners and neoconservatives have waxed triumphant. But configuring global affairs as a good vs. evil morality play is proving increasingly difficult in a world colored more gray than black and white. As criticism rises and their agenda is threatened, the radicals have stepped up their drive through PNAC and the media to keep the White House and public opinion behind their hard-line positions.

To traditional U.S. Mideast policy-makers, virtually all of the right wing's foreign policy principles are not only ludicrous on their face, but extremely dangerous. They are watching the realization of these views with growing horror. Sharon's invasion of the West Bank and humiliation of Arafat and the Palestinians, in their view is nothing less than a disaster. It is reminiscent of 20 years ago, when Reagan stood by, much as Bush is doing, as Sharon invaded Lebanon.

The present situation "in the West Bank and Gaza is an obscenity," declared the former head of the State Department's Near East Bureau and ambassador to Egypt, Nicholas

Veliotis, in an interview on CNN. He warned that the damage to U.S. interests throughout the region if Sharon were permitted to continue would be extremely severe.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, former National Security Adviser to President Carter, also paints a bleak picture of the fate of U.S. policy in the Middle East. In a television interview, he said, "The United States and Israel are increasingly isolated internationally. This could hurt our ability to conduct the war on terrorism—and this worries me a great deal. The Israelis are becoming increasingly like the white supremacist South Africans, viewing the Palestinians as a lower form of life, not hesitating to kill a great many of them and justifying this on the grounds that they are being the objects of terrorism, which is true." Brzezinski concluded that we are witnessing "a very sad spectacle and ultimately a spectacle of failure of American strategy."

But the radicals who have promoted the alliance with the Israeli hardliners and are cheerleading for an assault on Iraq believe that an overhaul of Middle East policy is long overdue. No longer should U.S. foreign policy be constrained by Arab-Israeli balance-of-power considerations. The U.S. should operate from a position of strength and power with U.S. national interests the only key determinant of policy.

"In the Middle East, America's awe—the key element that gives both us and our Israeli and Arab friends security—can only be damaged by a Bush administration publicly fretting about Ariel Sharon's prosecution of his war against the Palestinian Authority," wrote AEI scholar Reuel Marc Gerecht in the *Weekly Standard*. "Though the Near East Bureau at State hates the notion, the tougher

Sharon becomes, the stronger our image will be in the Middle East."

According to Gerecht, who directs PNAC's Middle East Initiative: "Washington needs to wean itself from viewing the Israeli-Palestinian collision as the center of the Middle East," a point echoed frequently on the editorial pages of the *Wall Street Journal*—which has insisted for the past week that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is simply a sideshow of the main event, overthrowing Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

"The path to a calmer Mideast now lies not through Jerusalem but through Baghdad," the *Wall Street Journal's* editors wrote in another example of the hawks' turning conventional wisdom on its head.

A Turning Point

Powell's trip to the Middle East is the most recent in a long line of U.S. "peace" missions to the region. But, as all observers and actors are now recognizing, the Middle East crisis has developed frightening new dimensions and the prospects of arriving at any new political settlement are dim at best.

U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East is at a critical turning point. Clearly, it has failed and needs serious renovation. Enough is enough. For too long has the U.S. supported and armed the region's repressive Arab regimes, and for too long has the U.S. turned a blind eye toward Israel's violations of international law and its illegal land occupations and settlements—all the while providing it annually with more than \$3 billion in U.S. foreign aid.

One danger is that the U.S. will simply try to muddle through the current crisis. The greater danger lies in the

likelihood that the Bush presidency—caught up in the logic of its global war on terrorism and seeing no alternatives for Middle East policy—will fully yield to the prescriptions offered by the military hardliners and the neoconservatives. Such an agenda runs exactly counter to the conclusions of virtually every independent, State Department, and CIA analyst who has studied the region. The

right-wing ideologues will continue to critique all administration statements and measures that do not unequivocally reflect their own support of the Likud and their targeting of Iraq. But the policy reality is that they have already succeeded in framing the terms of the debate about U.S. Mideast policy, and to an alarming extent U.S. policy itself.

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