

New Cheney Foreign Policy Adviser Sets Sights on Syria

By Jim Lobe | October 22, 2003

Vice President Dick Cheney's office continues to grow as a homebase for prominent neoconservative foreign policy strategists. Earlier this year Aaron Friedberg, a prominent neoconservative China hawk joined Cheney's staff, (*China Hawk Settles in Neocons' Nest*, <http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2003/0305friedberg.html>). The latest addition is David Wurmser, a neoconservative strategist who has long called for the United States and Israel to work together to "roll back" the Ba'ath-led government in Syria, who joins Cheney's staff as an adviser on the Middle East. Wurmser, who had been working for Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton, joined Cheney's staff under its powerful national security director, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, in mid-September, according to Cheney's office.

The move is significant, not only because Cheney is seen increasingly as the dominant foreign-policy influence on President George W. Bush, but also because it adds to the notion that neoconservatives remain a formidable force under Bush despite the sharp plunge in public confidence in Bush's handling of post-war Iraq resulting from the faulty assumptions propagated by the "neocons" before the war.

Given the recent intensification of tensions between Washington and Damascus—most recently touched off by this month's U.S. veto of a UN Security Council resolution deploring an Israeli air attack on an alleged Palestinian camp outside Damascus and approval by the House of Representatives of a bill that would impose new economic and diplomatic sanctions against Syria—Wurmser's rise takes on added significance.

Perle Protégé

His status as a favored protégé of arch-hawk and former Defense Policy Board chairman Richard Perle at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) also speaks loudly to Middle East specialists who note Perle's long-time close association with Cheney, Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld, and Rumsfeld's chief deputy, Paul Wolfowitz.

Wolfowitz was the first senior administration official to suggest that Washington might take action against Syria amid reports last April that Damascus was sheltering senior Iraqi leaders and weapons of mass destruction in the wake of the U.S. invasion. "There's got to be a change in Syria," Wolfowitz said at the time, accusing the government of President Bashar Assad of "extreme ruthlessness." Rumsfeld subsequently accused Syria of permitting Islamic "jihadis" to infiltrate Iraq to fight U.S. troops.

Perle, who last week was in Israel to receive a special award from the "Jerusalem Summit," an international group of right-wing Jews and Christian Zionists who

describe themselves as defenders of "civilization" against "Islamic fundamentalism," has made no secret of his own desires for confrontation with Damascus.

In a series of interviews, Perle applauded Israel's attack on Syrian territory—the first since the 1967 war—in alleged retaliation for a Palestinian suicide bombing in Israel. "I am happy to see the message was delivered to Syria by the Israeli air force, and I hope it is the first of many such messages," he said. Perle also said he "hope(d)" the U.S. would itself take action against Damascus, particularly if it turned out that Syria was acting as a financial or recruitment base for the insurgency in Iraq. "Syria is itself a terrorist organization," he asserted, insisting that Washington would not find it difficult to send troops to Damascus despite its commitment in Iraq. "Syria is militarily very weak," he said.

Damascus has been in Wurmser's sights at least since he began working with Perle at AEI in the mid-1990s. For the latter part of the decade, he wrote frequently in support of a joint U.S.-Israeli effort to undermine then-President Hafez Assad in hopes of destroying Baathist rule and hastening the creation of a new order in the Levant to be dominated by "tribal, familial, and clan unions under limited governments."

Indeed, it was precisely because of the strategic importance of the Levant that Wurmser advocated overthrowing Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in favor of an Iraqi National Congress (INC) closely tied to the Hashemite monarchy in Jordan. "[W]hoever inherits Iraq dominates the entire Levant strategically," he wrote in one 1996 paper for the Jerusalem-based Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies (IASPS).

Reshaping the Middle East

Wurmser, whose Israeli-born spouse, Meyrav Wurmser, heads Middle East studies at the neoconservative Hudson Institute, was the main author of a 1996 report by a task force convened by the IASPS and headed by Perle, called the "Study Group

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on a New Israeli Strategy Toward 2000.” The paper, called “A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm” (www.israeleconomy.org/strat1.htm), was directed at incoming Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu.

It featured a series of recommendations designed to end the process of Israel trading “land for peace” by transforming the “balance of power” in the Middle East in favor of an axis consisting of Israel, Turkey, and Jordan. To do so, it called for ousting Saddam Hussein and installing a Hashemite leader in Baghdad. From that point, the strategy would be largely focused on Syria and, at the least, reducing its influence in Lebanon.

Among other steps, the report called for Israeli sponsorship of attacks on Syrian territory by “Israeli proxy forces” based in Lebanon and “striking Syrian military targets in Lebanon, and should that prove insufficient, striking at select targets in Syria proper.”

“Israel can shape its strategic environment, in cooperation with Turkey and Jordan, by weakening, containing, even rolling back Syria,” the report argued, to create a “natural axis” between Israel, Jordan, a Hashemite Iraq, and Turkey that “would squeeze and detach Syria from the Saudi Peninsula. For Syria, this could be the prelude to a redrawing of the map of the Middle East which could threaten Syria’s territorial integrity.”

A follow-up report, also written by Wurmser and entitled “Coping with Crumbling States” (www.israeleconomy.org/strat2a.htm), also favored a substantial redrawing of the Middle East along tribal and familial lines in light of what he called an “emerging phenomenon—the crumbling of Arab secular-nationalist nations.” “Such unions and limited governments, in turn, are the hope for the Arab world, since they alone can develop into real nations.”

Washington’s and the West’s penchant for backing secular-nationalist states against the threat of militant Islamic fundamentalism was a strategic error, warned Wurmser in the second study, a conclusion that he repeated in a 1999 book, *Tyranny’s Ally*, that included a laudatory foreword by Perle and was published by AEI.

While the book was more targeted on Iraq than Syria, it elaborated on Wurmser’s previous arguments by attacking regional specialists in U.S. universities, the State Department, and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) who, according to him, were too wedded to strong secular states in the Arab world as the preferred guarantors of regional stability. “(O)ur Middle East scholarly and policy elite are informed by bad ideas about the region that lead them to bad policies,” he charged, echoing a position often taken by Perle.

In the acknowledgments section of the book, Wurmser praised those by whom he had been most influenced in his work, a veritable “who’s who” of those neocons most closely tied to Israel’s far right, including Perle himself; another AEI scholar, Michael Ledeen; Undersecretary of Defense for Policy and the man in charge of post-Iraq war planning, Douglas Feith; former CIA director James Woolsey, who has called the conflict in Syria the early stages of “World War IV;” Harold Rhode, a Feith aide who has also called himself Wolfowitz’s “Islamic Affairs adviser;” and INC leader Ahmed Chalabi.

Wurmser also gave thanks to Irving Moskowitz, a major casino operator and long-time funder of Israel’s settlement movement, whom he described as a “gentle man whose generous support of AEI allows me to be here.”

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