

# Neocons Aim Beyond Baghdad

By Jim Lobe | April 9, 2004

No one ever said that U.S. neoconservatives lack ambition.

When George W. Bush was still a presidential candidate, he dismissed the nation-building efforts of the Clinton administration as trivial to the national security interests of the United States. But many neoconservatives both inside and outside the Bush administration have their eyes set on something far greater than “mere” nation-building exercises in Iraq. They see Islam itself as ripe for a U.S.-led reconstruction effort.

“We need an Islamic reformation,” Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz confided on the eve of the U.S. invasion of Iraq last year, “and I think there is real hope for one.” Echoing those views one year later, another prominent neoconservative, Daniel Pipes of the Philadelphia-based Middle East Forum (MEF), recently declared that the “ultimate goal” of the war on terrorism had to be Islam’s modernization, or, as he put it, “religion-building.”

### Religion Building

Such an effort needs to be waged not only in the Islamic world, geographically speaking, added Pipes, who last year was appointed by President George W. Bush to the board of directors of the U.S. Institute for Peace (USIP), but also among Muslims in the West, where, in his view, they are too often represented by “Islamist (or militant Islamic)” organizations.

Pipes is currently seeking funding for a new organization, tentatively named the “Islamic Progress Institute” (IPI), which “can articulate a moderate, modern and pro-American viewpoint” on behalf of U.S. Muslims and that, according to a grant proposal by Pipes and two New York-based foundations, can “go head-to-head with the established Islamist institutions.”

“Through adroit media activity and political efforts,” says the proposal, “advocates for a supremacist and totalitarian form of Islam in the United States—such as the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA)—have effectively established themselves as the spokesmen for all Muslims in the country.”

“This situation is fraught with dangers for moderate Muslims as well as for non-Muslims,” the proposal contin-

ues, adding, “Islam in America must be American Islam or it will not be integrated; there can be no place for an Islam in America that functions as a seditious conspiracy aimed at wiping out American values, undermining American interfaith civility, and, in effect, dictating the form of Islam that will be followed in America.”

Leaders of the three groups named by Pipes strongly deny his characterizations of their views, and stress that they, like Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish groups in the United States that promote the interests of their members are neither more nor less radical or chauvinistic in their political or theological views than their non-Muslim counterparts.

“We are non-sectarian” said Sayyid M. Syeed, ISNA’s secretary general, who said his group has had leaders from both the Shi’a and Sunni currents of Islam and whose current vice president is a woman. “If we were Saudi-oriented, we would never have a Shi’a president or a woman in such a role,” he said, adding that his group is also actively engaged in many “interfaith partnerships.”

CAIR’s spokesman, Ibrahim Hooper, said his organization strives to represent the views of all U.S. Muslims, and pointed to a new survey of the views of mosque leaders and congregants in Detroit, which has one of the largest Muslim populations in the country, as an example of the fundamentalist moderation of U.S. Muslims and those of his group.

The survey, carried out by the Michigan-based Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, found that only about eight percent of the leadership and members of Detroit’s 33 mosques described themselves as adherents of a fundamentalist, “salafi” approach to Islam of the kind that is identified with the “Wahhabi,” or “Islamist” views of concern to Pipes and other neoconservatives, who have said that as many as 80% of U.S. mosques preach Wahhabism.

The vast majority of both mosque leaders and participants, according to the Detroit survey, were registered to vote and supported active engagement in the political process; wanted to engage in civic and educational activities with people of non-Muslim faiths; and even took part in public school or church events designed to teach others about Islam.



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“Detroit mosques are not isolationist ... and very few mosque participants hold Wahhabi views,” said Ihsan Bagby, who conducted the survey and teaches Islamic Studies at the University of Kentucky.

Pipes, who has written four books on Islam and taught Islamic studies at several leading universities, came to national prominence after the Sep. 11, 2001 attacks on New York and the Pentagon. While he has long insisted that there is nothing inherently violent about Islam, “moderate Muslims,” in his view, have been intimidated by radicals both in the Islamic world and in the United States.

“While Muslims in some Muslim-majority countries (like Turkey) have demonstrated a commitment to moderate Islam,” he writes in his grant application, “Muslim communities in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe are dominated by a leadership identified with Wahhabism and other radical trends, such as the Muslim Brethren and Deobandism ... they seek a privileging of Islam and intimidate their critics.” Within the United States, “all Muslims, unfortunately, are suspect,” Pipes wrote in a recent book, which called for the authorities to be especially vigilant toward Muslims with jobs in the military, law enforcement, or diplomacy.

Last year, he cited as evidence of this insight the arrest on suspicion of espionage of Muslim chaplain James Yee at the Guantanamo Bay detention facility that houses hundreds of prisoners from Bush’s “war on terrorism”. The Yee case later collapsed.

## Thought Police

Pipes is also the founder of Campus Watch ([www.campuswatch.org](http://www.campuswatch.org)), a group that monitors university professors of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies and exposes them for alleged anti-American or anti-Zionist views. That effort, which has been denounced by leading Middle East scholars, has become the basis for a far-reaching bill pending in Congress that would provide unprecedented government oversight of regional studies programs in universities.

Pipes has also criticized Bush for meeting with, and thus he argues legitimizing, the leaders of major Islamic organizations, including CAIR and ISNA, which he believes are pursuing radical, if partially hidden, agendas that he attempts tirelessly to expose on his personal website. CAIR has called him “the nation’s leading Islamophobe.”

Like many of his fellow-neoconservatives, Pipes has also been an outspoken supporter of positions taken by the governing Likud Party in Israel, to the extent even of opposing the U.S.-backed “road map” designed to lead to an independ-

ent Palestinian state. To encourage “moderation” among Palestinians, he has written, “the Palestinians need to be defeated even more than Israel needs to defeat them.”

In his grant proposal, Pipes writes that he is working on launching the IPI with “a group of anti-Islamist Muslims,” whom he does not identify. Contacted about the proposal, Pipes said, “I can’t confirm anything. MEF doesn’t talk about its proposals. We don’t talk about projects that have not been announced. We don’t talk about internal matters to the press.”

In a trip to Cleveland in February, Stephen Schwartz, a writer and former Trotskyite activist who claims to have converted to Islam in the mid-1990s, and Hussein Haqqani, a former Pakistani government official now with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, unveiled plans for a new “Institute for Islamic Progress and Peace” (IIPP) of which Schwartz identified himself as executive director.

Schwartz, who has praised Pipes’ work and claims to be personally close to Wolfowitz, has published articles in *The Weekly Standard* and other neoconservative publications, where Pipes’ writings also appear regularly. Schwartz was quoted by the *Cleveland Jewish Press* saying that the new group would serve as a “platform” for “people who view Islam as a private faith.”

“This is a unique chance to change the position of the Muslim community in America,” he said. “If we don’t do it, no one else will.” Schwartz and Haqqani did not return messages left at their offices.

Muslim leaders say they are not worried their membership will desert them for either new group. “There’s a big difference between organizations that emerge organically from a community in response to the demand of their constituencies and one which is manufactured for political reasons by people who dislike what the consensus views of that community are,” said Hussein Ibish of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, which has also been a target of Pipes. “For Mr. Pipes to create an organization that purports to represent the community that he makes a living systematically defaming demonstrates an amazing degree of effrontery,” he said.

“It’s a free country,” said CAIR’s Hooper. “If Pipes and his friends think they can gain legitimacy in the Islamic community, good luck, but I wouldn’t hold my breath”

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