

Ending the neoconservative nightmare

By Daniel Levy

Witnessing the near-perfect symmetry of Israeli and American policy has been one of the more noteworthy aspects of the latest Lebanon war. A true friend in the White House. No deescalate and stabilize, honest-broker, diplomatic jaw-jaw from this president. Great. Except that Israel was actually in need of an early exit strategy, had its diplomatic options narrowed by American weakness and marginalization in the region, and found itself ratcheting up aerial and ground operations in ways that largely worked to Hezbollah's advantage, the Qana tragedy included. The American ladder had gone AWOL

More worrying, while everyone here can identify an Israeli interest in securing the northern border and the justification in responding to Hezbollah, the goal of saving Lebanon's fragile Cedar Revolution sounds less distinctly Israeli. Perhaps an agenda invented elsewhere. As hostilities intensified, the phrase "proxy war" gained resonance.

Israelis have grown used to a different kind of American embrace - less instrumental, more emotional, but also responsible. A dependable friend, ready to lend a guiding hand back to the path of stabilization when necessary. After this crisis will Israel belatedly wake up to the implications of the tectonic shift that has taken place in U.S.-Middle East policy?

In 1996 a group of then opposition U.S. policy agitators, including Richard Perle and Douglas Feith, presented a paper entitled "**A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm**" to incoming Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The "clean break" was from the prevailing peace process, advocating that Israel pursue a combination of roll-back, destabilization and containment in the region, including striking at Syria and removing Saddam Hussein from power in favor of "Hashemite control in Iraq." The Israeli horse they backed then was not up to the task.

Ten years later, as Netanyahu languishes in the opposition, as head of a small Likud faction, Perle, Feith and their neoconservative friends have justifiably earned a reputation as awesome wielders of foreign-policy influence under George W. Bush.

The key neocon protagonists, their think tanks and publications may be unfamiliar to many Israelis, but they are redefining the region we live in. This tight-knit group of "defense intellectuals" - centered around [Bill Kristol](#), [Michael Ledeen](#), [Elliott Abrams](#), [Perle](#), [Feith](#) and [others](#) - were considered somewhat off-beat until they teamed up with hawkish well-connected Republicans like [Dick Cheney](#), [Donald Rumsfeld](#) and [Newt Gingrich](#), and with the emerging powerhouse of the [Christian right](#). Their agenda was an aggressive unilateralist U.S. global supremacy, a radical vision of transformative regime-change democratization, with a fixation on the Middle East, an obsession with Iraq and an affinity to "old Likud" politics in Israel. Their extended moment in the sun arrived after 9/11.

Finding themselves somewhat bogged down in the Iraqi quagmire, the neoconservatives are reveling in the latest crisis, displaying their customary hubris in re-seizing the initiative. The U.S. press and blogosphere is awash with neocon-inspired calls for indefinite shooting, no talking and extension of hostilities to Syria and Iran, [with Gingrich calling this a third world war](#) to "defend civilization."

Disentangling Israeli interests from the rubble of neocon "creative destruction" in the Middle East has become an urgent challenge for Israeli policy-makers. An America that seeks to reshape the region through an unsophisticated mixture of bombs and ballots, devoid of local contextual understanding, alliance-building or redressing of grievances, ultimately undermines both itself and Israel. The sight this week of Secretary of State Rice homeward bound, unable to touch down in any Arab capital, should have a sobering effect in Washington and Jerusalem. Afghanistan is yet to be secured, Iraq is an exporter of instability and perhaps terror, too, Iranian hard-liners have been strengthened and encouraged, while the public throughout the region is ever-more radicalized, and in the yet-to-be "transformed" regimes of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, is certainly more hostile to Israel and America than its leaders. Neither listening nor talking to important, if problematic, actors in the region has only impoverished policy-making capacity.

Israel does have enemies, interests and security imperatives, but there is no logic in the country volunteering itself for the frontline of an ideologically misguided and avoidable war of civilizations.

So what should be done, on both sides of the ocean?

It is admittedly difficult for Israel to have a regional strategy that is out-of-step with the U.S. administration-of-the-day. However, the neocon approach is not unchallenged, and Israel should not be providing its ticket back to the ascendancy. A U.S. return to proactive diplomacy, realism and multilateralism, with sustained and hard engagement that delivers concrete progress, would best serve its own, Israeli and regional interests. Israel should encourage this. [Israel may even have to lead, for instance, in rethinking policy on Hamas or Syria](#), and should certainly work intensely with Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas in encouraging his efforts to reach a Palestinian national understanding as a basis for stable governance, security quiet and future peace negotiations. A policy that comes with a Jerusalem kosher stamp of approval might be viewed as less of an abomination in Washington.

Beyond that, Israel and its friends in the United States [should seriously reconsider their alliances not only with the neocons, but also with the Christian Right](#). The largest "pro-Israel" lobby day during this crisis was mobilized by Pastor John Hagee and his Christians United For Israel, a [believer in Armageddon](#) with all its implications for a rather particular end to the Jewish story. This is just asking to become the mother of all [dumb, self-defeating and morally abhorrent alliances](#).

Internationalist Republicans, Democrats and mainstream Israelis must construct an alternative narrative to the neocon nightmare, identifying shared interests in a policy that reestablishes American leadership, respect and credibility in the region by facilitating security and stability, pursuing conflict resolution and promoting the conditions for more open societies (as opposed to narrow election-worship). The last two years of the Bush presidency can be an opportunity for progress or an exercise in desperate damage limitation. It sounds counter-intuitive, but Israel should reflect on and even help reorient American expectations.

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