

The Motives for a Flawed War  
**Israel's Proxy War?**  
by M. SHAHID ALAM

It has been apparent to all but the purblind--a defect in understanding assiduously cultivated by America's mass media--that the war United States is ready to wage against Iraq has almost nothing to do with its security.

In an age when the people believe that their voices must be heard, the United States must sell its wars the way corporations sell their products. In the past, the people were asked to lay down their lives for visions of glory; now, governments appeal to their self-interest. The first Gulf War had to be fought to protect American jobs. If Saddam Hussain stayed in Kuwait, he would raise the price of oil, and Americans would lose their jobs. The argument this time is different. It had to be weightier than any fear of losing jobs. This new war seeks regime-change; it involves greater risks. American forces must invade Iraq, defeat the Iraqi army, occupy Baghdad, and stay around, even indefinitely. Americans understand that "regime-change" is serious business. They would not back this war unless Iraq threatened American lives. That explains why the war against Iraq had to supersede the war against terrorism, and why Saddam replaced Osama as the new icon of America's loathing.

This substitution was quite easily executed. Most Americans take the President at his word when he talks about foreign enemies; this trust comes more easily when a Republican occupies the White House. George Bush told Americans that Saddam Hussein possesses weapons of mass destruction, and he had to be stopped *before* he could transfer them to Al-Qaida. (Why hadn't he done this already?) For many Americans, it was an open and shut case. Saddam had to be removed.

The flaws in this argument did not matter. If Saddam hadn't used WMDs during the first Gulf War--when his army was being pummeled--why would he use them now? The CIA warned that a war, or the threat of it, would increase the risk of Iraq using WMDs. Others, like Scott Ritter, a former chief weapons inspector for the UN, pointed out that Iraq did not have any WMDs that mattered. More than 90 percent had been destroyed by inspectors; if any escaped, they would be past their shelf life. At least initially, few Americans gave any credence to these doubts, though that has been slowly changing. Why then *is* United States straining to go to war against Iraq?

The most popular theory on the left is that this war is about oil. According to one version of this theory, the White House, a captive of oil interests, wants to corner Iraq's oil for American oil corporations. I do not find this credible. The power brokers in United States would not allow a single industry lobby, even a powerful one, to drag the country into a war which could hurt all of them, and perhaps badly, if the war plans went awry and produced a spike in oil prices. At the least, it is doubtful if oil interests, on their own, can account for the unobstructed rush to a mad war.

There is another oil theory. It argues that the American economy needs cheaper oil; this will save tens of billion dollars. Once Saddam has been removed, and Iraq's oil supply restored to levels that existed before the first Gulf War, the oil prices will come down substantially. It is hard to reconcile this theory with a US-imposed sanctions regime that has drastically curtailed Iraq's oil output for the past twelve years. If there were concerns that Saddam might use the oil revenues for a military build-up, that could be addressed by an inspections regime and selective economic sanctions.

There is also a third oil theory, one offered recently.[1] It maintains that this war preempts the Euro threat to the hegemony of the dollar. By pegging oil to the dollar, OPEC has been a key player in the arrangements that have maintained the dollar as the currency of international reserve. In October 2000, Saddam Hussein offered the first challenge to this system by switching Iraq's dollar reserves to Euro. If OPEC follows Iraq's lead it could spell trouble for the dollar. This can only be stopped by dismantling the OPEC, and this demands war against Iraq.

An OPEC challenge to the dollar sounds naïve at best. This is hardly the kind of revolutionary action we can expect from an OPEC packed with client states like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and UAE; the oil price hike of 1974 could only occur in the backdrop of the Cold War. A precipitate dethronement of the dollar could produce consequences for United States and the world economy which would make the East Asian financial crisis of 1997 look like a storm in a teacup. Not even the EU would push for such results. On the other hand, there is a small chance that the war itself might validate this theory--if it convinced OPEC that the war aims to dismantle the oil cartel.

If it isn't oil, then, is this civilizational war, a war of the Christian West against Islam? This conjecture flies in the face of some obvious facts. First, this is America's war. It is opposed by two key Western allies, France and Germany; and apart from Britain and Israel, the support of other Western countries lacks depth. More to the point, the overwhelming majority of Westerners outside the United States oppose this war. In United States itself, the anti-war sentiment has grown rapidly, and the most recent polls indicate a majority against the war if it happens without the support of the United Nations.

Is it then America's war against Islamists? Even that is doubtful. Apart from the right-wing Christian extremists, led by the likes of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, nearly all Christian denominations have come out against the war. Everyone would agree that Al-Qaida constitutes the most serious Islamist threat to United States; they had proved it on September 11, 2001. And yet, we are ready to push this threat aside in order to wage war against one of the most decidedly secular of Arab states, one that spent ten years waging war against 'fundamentalist' Iran? Why not Wahhabi Saudi Arabia which supplied 16 of the 19 hijackers of September 11. Why not Shiite Iran? Their turn too will come, one hears neoconservative voices, to be followed by Syria, Egypt and Pakistan.

Why then is United States ready to wage this war against Iraq, ostensibly against its own best interests? Most sensible people agree that this is a war whose consequences cannot

be controlled, or even foreseen. It may destabilize friendly regimes, bringing radical Islamists to power in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. It may disrupt oil supplies, causing a price hike at a time when the global economy already weak and vulnerable to shocks. It may force Saddam to use his chemical and biological weapons--if he has them--leading United States to nuke Baghdad or Basra. It may fuel global terrorism for years to come, leading to attacks on American interests globally.

These anomalies quickly melt away if we are willing to entertain a sel-dom-aired hypothesis. This may not be America's war at all, much less a war of the West against Islam or Islamists. Instead, could this be Israel's war against the Arabs fought through a proxy, the only proxy that can take on the Arabs? This will most likely provoke derisive skepticism. Could the world's only superpower be persuaded to fight Israel's war? Is it even possible? Could the tail wag this great dog?

Consider first Israel's motives. Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria and Pakistan do not threaten the United States; but they are a threat to Israel's hegemonic ambitions over the region. This conflict between Israel and her neighbors was written into the Zionist script. A Jewish state could only be inserted into Palestine by resort to a massive ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. After such inauspicious beginnings, Israel could only sustain itself by keeping its neighbors weak, divided, and disoriented. It has since waged wars against Egypt in 1956; against Egypt, Syria and Jordan in 1967; against Iraq in 1981; against Lebanon, since 1982; and against Palestinians continuously since 1948.

Israel's contradictions have deepened since the mounting of the second Intifada. When the Palestinians rejected the Bantustans offered at Oslo, Israel chose Ariel Sharon, a war criminal, to ratchet its war against Palestinian civilians. Faced with Apaches, F-16s, tanks and artillery, in desperation, the Palestinians turned increasingly to suicide bombings. Sharon's brutal war was not working, and Israel's losses began to catch up with Palestinian casualties. In April 2002, Israeli tanks reoccupied the Palestinian towns, destroyed Palestinian civilian infrastructure, increasingly placing Palestinians under curfews, sieges, destroying their workshops, stores, hospitals, orchards and farms. This was the new strategy of slow ethnic cleansing through starvation.

This slow ethnic cleansing is only a stopgap. The most serious threat which Palestinians pose is demographic: their growing population could soon turn the Jews into a minority inside greater Israel. Since the Palestinians won't live under an Israeli apartheid, the Likud, with growing popular support, is turning to Israel's second option. If the apartheid plan were to fail, Israel would engage in large-scale ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, more massive than the ones implemented in 1948 and 1967.

But Israel cannot do this alone. This ethnic cleansing can only be implemented in the shadow of a major war against the Arabs, a war to Balkanize the region, a war to bring about regime-change in Iraq, Syria and Iran, a war that only United States can wage. Israel *needs* United States to wage a proxy war on behalf of Israel.

It should be clear that Israel has the motive; but does it also possess the capability to pull this off? Is it possible for a small power to use a great power--the only superpower, in this case--to wage its own wars. Historically, great powers have often waged wars through lesser proxies; but that does not mean that this relationship can never get inverted.

What makes this eminently possible is the way an indirect democracy--in particular, democracy in United States--works. The *demos* elect candidates picked by powerful lobbies, ethnic, industry and labor lobbies; once elected, the officials work for the lobbies. By far the most powerful political lobby in this country works for Israel, led by American Israel Public Action Committee (AIPAC). There is scarcely a member of the Congress whose election campaigns have not been funded by AIPAC; several are funded quite heavily.[2] The power of the pro-Israel lobby in United States, however, does not start or end with AIPAC. The result of this massive power is a Congress packed with Israeli yes-men. No member of the Congress has dared to contradict Israeli interests and remained in office. Just last year, two members of Congress, Earl Hilliard and Cynthia McKenny, were defeated by pro-Israeli money because they had stepped out of line. Consider some of the achievements of the pro-Israeli lobby over the years. First, an estimate of the cost of Israel to US taxpayers. Since 1985, without debate or demurrals, the Congress has sheepishly voted an annual foreign aid package of \$3 billion to Israel, nearly two thirds of this in outright grants, and constituting one-third of *all* US foreign assistance. When estimated in 2001 constant dollars, the total foreign aid to Israel since 1967 adds up to \$143 billion.[3] That amounts to a transfer of \$28,600 for every Jewish citizen of Israel.

The official aid is only a small part of the cost of Israel to the US economy. We need to account for loan guarantees and write-offs, bribes paid to Egypt and Jordan in support of our Israeli policy, subsidies to Israel's military R&D, boost in oil prices (attributed to US support for Israel in the 1967 war), losses due to trade sanctions imposed on Israel's enemies, etc. When Thomas Stauffer, a consulting economist in Washington, added up all these costs, he concluded that since 1973 Israel has cost the United States about \$1.6 trillion.[4] In per capita terms, this amounts to \$320,000 for every Jewish citizen of Israel.

The US record on vetoes cast in UN Security Council constitutes another major achievement of the pro-Israel lobby. The US has cast 73 vetoes out of the 248 cast by all permanent members of the Security Council. On 38 occasions, these vetoes were cast to shield Israel from any criticism directed against its violation of human rights of Palestinians or the territorial rights of its neighbors. On another 25 occasions, US abstained from such a vote.[5] This does not include the votes cast by United States--along with Israel, Tuvalu and Nauru--against UN General Assembly resolutions criticizing Israeli violations of human rights or Security Council resolutions. It would be difficult to maintain that the strategic interests of United States always demanded such a consistent voting record on Palestine.

I am aware that the notion of an Israeli proxy war against Iraq will be greeted with skepticism by not a few. I hope to have established that Israel possess in abundance both

the motive and capability for such a war. There is some evidence that it has demonstrated this capability in the past also. In the words of Lloyd George, then Prime Minister of Britain, the Zionist leaders promised that if the Allies supported the creation of "a national home for the Jews in Palestine, they would do their best to rally Jewish sentiment and support throughout the world to the Allied Cause. They kept their word." [6] It is doubtful if Zionist influence now is weaker than it was in 1917.

This is not to argue that the pro-Israeli lobby is the only reason for the projected US war against Iraq. At present, there are several forces in United States that are pushing for this war. Prominent among these indigenous forces are the oil corporations, the arms manufacturers, the aerospace industry, and the right-wing Christian evangelists. However, it is doubtful if these indigenous groups, on their own, could have pushed United States so decisively towards the present catastrophic confrontation with the Islamic world. Certainly, the intellectual justifications for this hazardous confrontation have come almost entirely from the pro-Israeli lobby. And their intellectual input may have been vital.

**Notes:**

[1] <http://www.sierratimes.com/03/02/07/arpubwc020703.htm>

[2] <http://www.wrmea.com/html/aipac.htm>.

[3] <http://www.counterpunch.org/rooij1116.html>

[4] <http://www.csmonitor.com/2002/1209/p16s01-wmgn.html>

[5] <http://middleeastinfo.org/print.php?sid=63>

[6] Lilienthal, Alfred M., *What price Israel*(Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953): 20-21.

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