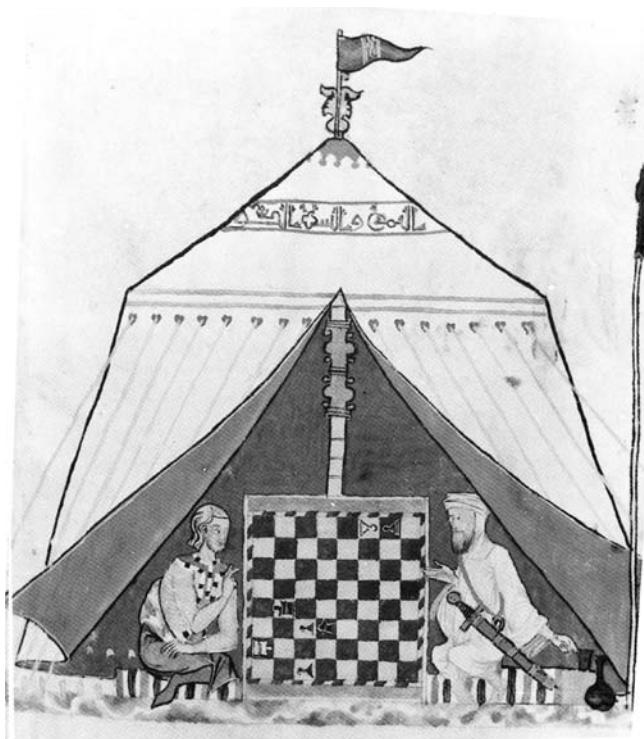


# Lebanon, Iran and the ‘Long War’ in the ‘Wider Middle East’



## Introduction

Following the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as President in July 2005, there was a decisive shift in Iranian foreign policy to a more strident and defiant attitude towards the USA. Ahmadinejad's rhetoric of 'wiping Israel off the map', Iran's increasing covert meddling in the fractious politics of Iraq and, most importantly, his decision to recommence Iran's uranium enrichment programme, all caused increasing alarm in Washington. The issue of Iran, which had become overshadowed by the problems arising from the prolonged occupation of Iraq, re-emerged on America's foreign policy agenda. There arose an increasing clamour, from both inside and outside the Bush regime, for a more robust and confrontational attitude towards Iran's defiance of the 'rules of the game' of the international bourgeois community, which by the beginning of 2006 had reached a crescendo.

Drawing together the increasingly bellicose statements coming from the more hawkish elements of the neoconservative circles in and around the Bush administration, with the shifts in both military doctrines and plans that have emanated in recent years from the Pentagon, many in the anti-war movement, on both sides of the Atlantic, jumped to the conclusion that Bush was already gearing up for a pre-emptive air strike against Iran's uranium enrichment programme, which, it was insisted, could well involve the use of bunker busting tactical nuclear weapons. Feeding the febrile atmosphere that such conclusions were creating within the anti-war movement, John Pilger went further. In an article in the *New Statesman*, Pilger revealed that the US had plans to invade the Iranian province of

Bushehr on the coast of the Persian Gulf and thereby seize the bulk of Iran's oil fields. By the Spring, many antiwar activists had convinced themselves that once the diplomatic formalities were disposed of, Bush was hellbent on launching some form of devastating attack on Iran. War, it was asserted, was merely a matter of months away.<sup>1</sup>

These fears seemed to be given further credence by Seymour Hersh's interviews with a wide range of leading figures in the Bush administration.<sup>2</sup> However, although these interviews showed that a more bellicose attitude towards Iran was gaining ground in Washington, it also showed that many in and around the Bush administration were not only alarmed by the advance of such attitudes, but, by agreeing to be interviewed by Hersh, wanted their alarm to be known. Therefore a more subtle reading of Hersh's report on these interviews indicated that there were important divisions within the Bush administration concerning the direction of foreign policy towards Iran.

Furthermore, on closer inspection, the military plans that were cited to support the contention that Bush was planning an imminent attack on Iran turned out to be either shifts in broad long-term military doctrines or else detailed contingency plans. The fact that the Pentagon had accepted that under certain circumstances the US army might use tactical nuclear weapons, or that plans existed for the invasion of Iran did not mean that Bush was intending to implement such plans. This was clearly the case with Pilger's revelation that the US had plans to invade the province of Bushehr. These versions of such plans dated back more than twenty years!

The Socialist Workers' Party (SWP), through the Stop the War Coalition (StWC), were quick to jump on the 'Don't Attack Iran' bandwagon in their typically opportunistic manner.<sup>3</sup> Following the success of the StWC in mobilising mass national anti-war demonstrations in the run up to the invasion of Iraq in 2002, the SWP promptly ditched their erstwhile Trotskyist allies in the Socialist Alliance and attempted to build on the links they had established through the StWC with various political Islamic groups such as the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB) to form a broad anti-war electoral front. Yet, despite being prepared to jettison, or at least play down, certain left-wing 'shibboleths' - such as gay rights, abortion and so forth - in order not to offend the

<sup>1</sup>On the influential Global Research website F.W. Engdahl, writing at the end of January 2006, predicted that war against Iran was likely to begin sometime after the Israeli elections scheduled for March 28<sup>th</sup> and the mid-term US congressional elections in November. 'Calculating the risk of war in Iran'. See also Michel Chossudovsky who argued in two articles – 'Nuclear War against Iran', dated January 3<sup>rd</sup> and 'Is the Bush Administration Planning a Nuclear Holocaust?' dated February 22<sup>nd</sup> - that any such attack was likely to use tactical nuclear weapons. All three articles are available at [www.globalresearch.ca](http://www.globalresearch.ca).

<sup>2</sup> Seymour Hersh, 'Would President Bush go to war to stop Tehran from getting the bomb?', *The New Yorker*, April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> The SWP effectively control the StWC with support of their junior partners the Communist Party of Britain (CPB).

conservative sensitivities of their prospective political allies, the SWP was rebuffed by MAB and the other main Muslim organisations. Although still attempting to appeal to anti-war Muslim opinion, the SWP was obliged to be content with a more restricted (un)Popular Front with the maverick ex-Labour MP George Galloway and various small Trotskyist groups, which was to result in the formation of Respect.

However, any hopes the leadership of the SWP may have had that Respect would provide the vehicle through which they could ride the wave of anti-war/anti-Blair sentiment in order to break into the big time of bourgeois electoral politics have been all but shattered. The electoral success of Respect has been mainly confined to Tower Hamlets in east London, where George Galloway was able to capture the Parliamentary seat, and where Respect is represented on the local council by a number of opportunistic local Asian politicians - whose loyalty is rather suspect to say the least. Outside Tower Hamlets, Respect's share of the vote, - in either the General Election of 2005, or in local elections - has for the most part been derisory.

Yet the reality facing the leadership of the SWP in the winter of 2006 was not merely that their Respect project had stalled, but that it was close to becoming a laughing stock following George Galloway's surprise, but ill-advised, attempt at self-promotion by participating in the 'Big Brother' reality TV show. At the same time, the StWC's uncritical support for the Iraqi resistance was becoming increasingly problematic as Iraq teetered on the verge of civil war. As the StWC welcomed prominent supporters of Sadr on its platforms, Sadrists death squads were pursuing a policy of sectarian murder in Baghdad, making the StWC an easy target for Blairites and pro-war liberals.

It is perhaps of little surprise then that the leadership of the SWP jumped at the chance of reviving the anti-war movement under the slogan 'Don't Attack Iran', which could then serve to kick start Respect. By stressing the imminence of the feared attack on Iran, the SWP leadership could hope, at least in the short-term, to throw the foot soldiers of Respect and the SWP into a frenzy of activity in which they could forget their recent electoral disappointments and humiliation at the hands of George Galloway.

As we pointed out at the time,<sup>4</sup> during the run up to the invasion of Iraq in 2002 the StWC had been merely one element in a broad and multifaceted anti-war movement. Its main function had been to organise national demonstrations and in doing so reflect the lowest common denominator of the anti-war movement – a function it must be conceded it did quite ably. The sheer size and enthusiasm of the anti-war movement meant that the ability of the StWC to corral it in any particular direction had been limited. However, in the past three years the movement has subsided and become dissipated. Now, as many local groups have shrunk to a hardcore of activists a large proportion of which being SWP/Respect members, the StWC is in a much stronger position to dictate the politics and activity of a much smaller anti-war movement. A position that the SWP has sought to exploit to the full.

In pushing the line that the US was gearing up to attack Iran in the next few months, the StWC coalition adopted the rather crass and disingenuous argument that

simply inverted the Manichean rhetoric of Bush. The response to anyone questioning why the US should take such a big gamble in attacking Iran in the present circumstances was to simply assert that the Bush administration was dominated by neoconservatives who were so mad and evil that they were hell-bent on war. Not only this, through Action for Iran – a group closely linked to the StWC – an argument began to be propagated that the viciously anti-working class and brutally repressive Iranian regime was somehow 'progressive' and had the 'right' to obtain nuclear weapons and as such ought to be defended by the anti-war movement. While the arguments of Action for Iran were aimed at the liberal elements in the anti-war movement, the SWP itself, attempting to retain some vestige of its Trotskyist past, began to stress the 'anti-imperialism' of the Iranian regime in order to defend its move towards critical support for Iran.

The SWP's opportunism has not only led them to peddle rather crass and disingenuous arguments, but has also led to certain inconsistencies between these arguments and their more serious writings. While through the StWC the SWP pushes the line that Bush is simply mad and evil, the SWP's theoreticians still see that US foreign policy in the Middle East is driven by its rational and material interest in securing oil and the profits from oil. However, following their theoretical mentor Hillel Ticktin, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) has put forward a more consistent and sophisticated, indeed 'Marxist', version of the argument that Bush's foreign policy is irrational.<sup>5</sup> Like Ticktin, the CPGB dismiss the argument that the fundamental cause of the Iraq war was oil (or more strictly speaking oil rents).<sup>6</sup> Drawing on Ticktin's theory of decadence, the CPGB argue that the 'real cause' arises from the fact that capitalism, or at least American capitalism', has entered into the terminal stage of its decline.<sup>7</sup> As a result US foreign policy is becoming increasingly irrational as it adopts evermore desperate short-term and short sighted policies to ward off the inevitability of its demise. On this basis the CPGB loudly

<sup>5</sup> See Mike Macnair, 'U.S.: Double or Quits', *Weekly Worker*, March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2006 and Hillel Ticktin, 'Iraq and the Myths of Oil Determinism', *Weekly Worker*, August 28<sup>th</sup> 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Ticktin dismisses the argument that the war on Iraq was a 'war for oil' on grounds that the major oil companies already control the world's oil industry. However, this notion that the major American oil corporations control most of the world's production and distribution of oil is more than twenty years out of date! It is true that in the 1970s what Anthony Sampson dubbed the Seven Sisters – that is the seven largest oil companies, five of which were American – controlled the production and distribution of 90% of all the oil extracted in the world. There was no real oil market. The price of oil was 'posted' rather arbitrarily by the Seven Sisters who sold oil mainly to their own subsidiaries. Following the 1970s oil shocks the world's oil industry has been transformed with the emergence of small and medium sized independent oil companies and the growth of national oil companies, which has led to a global oil market. Through mergers the Seven Sisters have become the five majors. The five majors market share has fallen to around 13% and is set to fall far faster as their main oil fields enter into decline. Now 90% of all proven oil reserves are owned by national oil corporations, mainly in Asia and the Persian Gulf.

<sup>7</sup> There is a difference here between Ticktin and the CPGB. For Ticktin it is capitalism as such that is now in terminal decline. The CPGB seem less sure as to whether it is capitalism as such, or merely the hegemony of US capitalism, that is in terminal decline.

<sup>4</sup> 'A phenomenal anti-war movement', *Aufheben* #12.

echoed the predictions made by the StWC last March that the Bush regime was preparing an imminent attack on Iran.

Yet, as American policy appears to have taken a more decisively diplomatic tack, the alarm over an imminent attack on Iran has abated. Indeed, as it turned out, the Summer saw not a US attack on Iran but an Israeli attack on Lebanon. Indeed, with Iran backing Hezbollah and the US backing Israel, it must be asked if Bush had been planning an imminent attack on Iran why did he not take the opportunity of escalating the conflict in Lebanon?

In this article we shall seek to understand the current relations between the US and Iran in the context of long-term and rational plans put forward by the neoconservatives to reorder the oil rich regions of what has become known as the wider Middle East – and how these plans are conditioned by the class struggle in both the USA and Iran. We shall conclude that, although a major US attack on Iran cannot be ruled out in the medium- and long-term, it is unlikely any time soon.

### **Oil, neoconservatives and the geo-politics of the 'Wider Middle East'**

During Clinton's Presidency many of the more forward-looking foreign policy makers and analysts in the USA had become increasingly concerned at the prospect of a major shift in the global geo-politics of oil. As was observed, many of the major oil and natural gas fields outside of OPEC, which had been rapidly developed in response to the oil shocks of the 1970s and which had come on stream in the early 1980s, were nearing their peak of production and were expected to go into decline in the early years of the new century. As a result, it was expected that there would have to be a major restructuring and relocation of the world's oil industry. Yet it was by no means certain that the salient position of the US oil corporations could be maintained through such a restructuring without a major shift in foreign policy, particularly towards the Persian Gulf states where much of the remaining oil reserves of the world were concentrated.<sup>8</sup>

By designating Iran and Iraq as pariah states, which had to be excluded from the international bourgeois community, and insisting on the imposition of multilateral economic sanctions, existing American foreign policy had served to keep the second and third largest reserves of oil respectively off the world oil market. At a time when there was a large excess of capacity in the world oil industry, this greatly facilitated America's close ally Saudi Arabia in policing OPEC's oil quotas, which were necessary to prevent an oversupply of oil and the collapse in the oil price that would have had rendered American investments in high cost oil production elsewhere in world, such as the North Sea and Alaska, uneconomic.

Yet it was becoming clear that at some point in the first decade of the twentieth century a policy that restricted the investment of American capital in the development of both Iran's and Iraq's vast and cheap oil reserves would have to be reversed. How was this to be done? The first option, and one favoured by Japan and most of the great powers of

Europe, was to rehabilitate both Iran and Iraq and persuade them to do a deal. The problem with this option, particularly from America's point of view, was that as the old oil fields elsewhere declined, excess capacity of the world's oil industry would also decline. As a result, the bargaining position of the Gulf States would be decisively strengthened as overcapacity gave way to an oil shortage. Iran and Iraq could decide to develop their own oil production and lock out productive investment from American oil corporations. Even if they did allow foreign investment, which could bring with it much needed technology, they would be in a position to demand the lion's share of the oil rents that accrued.

The second option was to bring about regime change in both Iraq and Iran, either through some form of coup or popular revolt, or through military intervention. This would allow the US to install a pro-American regime, which would throw open the gates for American investment. Yet such an option was fraught with problems. An internal regime change required reliable and cohesive pro-American oppositions capable of overthrowing the regimes. As events were to show, neither in Iran or Iraq was there much prospect of such oppositions developing. However, regime change brought about by military intervention faced even more formidable obstacles which more or less ruled it out for the American foreign policy establishment at the time.

Firstly, the American ruling class, and even more so the US military high command, were still haunted by the ghost of Vietnam. It was feared that any invasion may become bogged down in a lengthy occupation that would become increasingly unpopular at home and lead to falling morale and rising insubordination in the armed forces. Secondly, any invasion would be prohibitively expensive at a time when the US government was committed to balancing its budget after the large deficits which had been run up under Reagan in the 1980s. Thirdly, any invasion would be constrained by America's commitment to the multilateralism of the New World Order – which required securing the unanimity of the United Nations (UN) Security Council and compliance with the strictures of international law.

A third option was for American oil capital to move into the largely untapped oil fields surrounding the Caspian Sea, which had been opened by the collapse of the USSR. This option also had its problems. Firstly, the extract of oil from this region required large and sustained investments. The region was landlocked and hence oil had to be pumped large distances, either through existing pipelines controlled by Moscow, or major new pipelines had to be built to go round Russia. Secondly, this region was outside America's traditional sphere of influence and, so long as this remained the case, the security of investments in oil extraction from it was vulnerable to the adverse policy of both Russia and China, as well as the action of various Islamic and ethnic separatist groups that now abounded in this rather unstable part of the world.

In the 1990s, the prospect of a major restructuring of the world's oil industry still lay in the future. Under Clinton, America's foreign policy with regard to the Persian Gulf was, for the most part, to defend the *status quo*. The US resolutely opposed attempts by the Europeans both to relax the punitive economic sanctions on Iraq, which had been imposed after the Second Gulf War of 1991, and to entice Iran back into the international bourgeois community. Instead, in 1996 Madeleine Albright announced that it was

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed examination of the how the prospect of the restructuring of the world's oil industry lead to the Iraq war see 'Oil Wars and World Orders New and Old', Aufheben #12.

American policy to bring about ‘regime change in Iraq’. However, with large scale military intervention ruled out, the only options were either a *coup d'état* or a popular insurrection. However, subsequent attempts by the CIA to implement both a *coup d'état* and a popular insurrection in Iraq were half-hearted and ill-conceived - and in both cases ended up in a farce. As a consequence, ‘regime change in Iraq’ became a ‘long-term policy goal’, which could be taken up if necessary when the issue of unlocking Iraq’s oil reserves became urgent.

However, the late 1990s did see increasing investment by the American oil companies in the oil and natural gas fields of the former USSR. This was supported by Clinton’s continuation of his predecessor’s policy towards Russia. Of course, Bush (snr) had welcomed the disintegration of the USSR. However, it was feared that if the dynamic of disintegration went too far it would lead to Russia breaking up into a multiplicity of nuclear armed mini-states, which would be too complex to handle. Bush (snr) had therefore adopted a policy of maintaining a unified Russia open to American business, but at the same time too weak to have much sway over the former republics of the USSR. Although neither Clinton nor Bush (snr) were able to prevent the Russian state’s oil and gas companies being sold off on the cheap to what were to become known as the Russian oligarchs, Clinton was able to begin to extend US-influence into the oil rich Caucasus region allowing important oil deals to be struck between governments there and American oil companies.

### Planning for a New American Century

In the mid-1990s, the Project for the New American Century brought together a wide range of right-wing thinkers who were critical of the orthodoxy of the American foreign policy establishment that had emerged following the fall of the Eastern Bloc. The conclusions of the debates within the Project for the New American Century came to define the broad doctrines of what was to become known as neoconservativism.

This doctrine argued that existing orthodox foreign policy thinking was far too timid, cautious and pragmatic. This, it was argued, was due to the legacy of the Cold War, when American foreign policy had been hemmed in by the threat of all-out nuclear war with the USSR, and the trauma that had followed defeat in Vietnam, which had made the American ruling class reluctant to engage in prolonged military commitments. However, with the fall of the USSR, the US was now the world’s sole superpower.

Furthermore, the neoconservatives were highly critical of the timidity of the military high command, which they saw as inhibiting the ability of the US to ‘project’ its power across the globe. Many of the US military high command had begun their careers during the time of the Vietnam War. As a consequence, many of them had direct experience of the fraying of officers, widespread insubordination and more general opposition to war that occurred during the Vietnam War. As a result they were reluctant to commit US forces to another prolonged imperialist adventure far from home, which might once again push the patriotism of US troops beyond breaking point.

However, as the neoconservative chicken-hawks recognised, the insubordination of the army in Vietnam had been part of a broader upsurge in class struggle and social

conflict that had occurred during the 1960s and 1970s. Wildcat strikes and the revolt against work, together with social movements like the civil rights movement, had all been easily transmitted into the army by the largely working class, and disproportionately black, recruits. Now, after two decades of restructuring and class defeat, which had seen the re-imposition of work and authority, the neoconservatives could argue that US troops could be pushed far further before reaching their breaking point. The ghost haunting the US ruling class, and the military high command in particular, could now be exorcised.

Yet, if it was to preserve its status as the global hegemonic power into the twenty-first century, the US had to be prepared to forcibly assert its power across the globe, both to pre-empt the emergence of any economic or military rival and to secure its vital economic interests. This would mean that, where necessary, the US would have to be both willing and able to cut through the multilateral entanglements of the New World Order and act unilaterally in order to impose its will.

With the US economy dependent on an abundant supply of energy, of paramount importance to securing America’s economic interests was control of the world’s oil and natural gas fields. With much of the world’s remaining oil and natural gas fields concentrated around the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, the neoconservatives could only conclude that the US would have to take action, preferably sooner rather than later, to politically re-order what they now began to term the oil producing regions of the *wider Middle East*.

Central to this bold strategic project was Iran. Iran is not only in possession of the world’s third largest oil reserves, as well as vast reserves of natural gas, it also straddles the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea. As such it is at the centre of the wider Middle East.

With the rather dubious election of Bush (jnr) in 2000, several of the more prominent figures amongst the neoconservatives were brought to high office. However, despite the appointment of Dick Cheney as Vice-President, Donald Rumsfeld as Defence Secretary and Condoleezza Rice as National Security Advisor, the neoconservatives were far from having a decisive say over American foreign policy. The continued influence of the circle of policy advisor surrounding Bush (snr) and the foreign policy establishment based in the State Department advocating a maintaining of a cautious multilateralism, a military high command wary of a repeat of Vietnam and a growing tendency towards isolationism within the Republican Party all served to hold the neoconservatives in check. Indeed, the fear of many European commentators at the time was that the new Bush administration would retreat into a new isolationism. All this changed with the attack on the Twin Towers.

Following the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, the neoconservatives were able to seize the political initiative and, under the rubric of the ‘war on terror’, press their plans for a radical re-ordering of the wider Middle East. With three swift strikes – the overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the overthrow of the theocratic regime in Iran - the neoconservatives proposed to cut through the Gordian knot of diplomatic ties that had built up over decades around the Middle East and

resolve the prospective problems of global geo-politics of oil in favour of the USA.

At first the plan went surprisingly well. With the aid of the northern warlords, US forces swept the Taliban from power within weeks. Although several million Afghanis had been obliged to flee their homes during the war, fears that the onset of winter would lead to a major humanitarian disaster were proved wrong. But perhaps more satisfying for the neoconservatives was that the warnings of those who pointed to the bitter lesson learnt by both the British and the Russians in attempting to subdue Afghanistan also seemed to have been proved wrong.

In invading Afghanistan the US not only secured the eastern border of Iran but also gained a vital foothold in Central Asia. The Central Asian republics had been threatened by political Islamic groups backed by the Taliban. As such, they not only welcomed the US invasion of Afghanistan but were also prepared to accept US military bases on their soil as part of the ‘War on Terrorism’.

Flush with their success in Afghanistan the neoconservatives sought to maintain the political momentum by turning their attentions to Iraq. In not much more than a year, using far less troops than the US military command had originally deemed necessary, the demoralised Iraqi army had been swept aside, again in matter of weeks. On May 1<sup>st</sup> 2003, in a speech delivered on the decks of an aircraft carrier, which has since come back to haunt him, Bush (jnr) declared that the mission in Iraq had been accomplished.

The neoconservatives seemed to be on a roll. Having seized Afghanistan to the east and Iraq to its west, Iran now appeared be in the sights for an US invasion. The only questions that remained was whether the Bush regime would make a detour to take-out Israel’s bane Syria first and how long would it be before the US was ready to invade. Yet, despite its initial success, the neoconservative’s bold plan to bring about a swift re-ordering of the wider Middle East by sheer force of arms was soon to run into the sands of the Iraqi resistance.

### Failure in Iraq

Perhaps due to the need to avoid dissension over the future of Iraq, and thereby maintain the pro-war consensus within the Bush administration, most of the pre-invasion planning seems to have concentrated on winning the war swiftly and with the minimum of causalities. Plans for the post-war reconstruction of Iraq seem to have been based on little more than the wishful thinking of neoconservative ideologues and the barely disguised greed of the likes of Haliburton.

Yet, given America’s record, it would not have been difficult to predict that the imposition of *Pax Americana* in Iraq was not going to be easy. Having supported the Ba’athist regime in the 1980s, the Americans had bombed and invaded in Iraq in 1991. Having then called for the people of Iraq to rise up and overthrow Saddam Hussein, the Americans had then stood by and allowed him to brutally repress the uprising. Then, after more than ten years of punitive sanctions, which led to the deaths of an estimated one and half million people, the Americans had bombed and invaded Iraq again. It is hardly surprising that the vast majority of Iraqis were not a little suspicious of the good intentions of the American occupying forces. Whatever goodwill the Americans may have enjoyed for ridding Iraqis of the hated regime of Saddam Hussein was soon squandered

by their ill thought out plans to engineer a velvet-style bourgeois Revolution in Iraq.

The neoconservative ideologues had expected that by destroying the Ba’athist state, a grateful Iraqi people would rise up and sweep a bunch of pro-American Iraqi exiles led by Chalabi to power. Chalabi’s government would then establish a minimal state, which would then allow the miraculous powers of the free market and American capital to reconstruct a new and prosperous Iraq. Such ill-conceived expectations were to prove a disaster.

Firstly, following the suppression of the Communist Party of Iraq, and the popular organisations associated with it, in the early 1980s, the only political and social organisations that had been allowed to exist outside the Ba’athist Party had centred on the Mosques. As a consequence, out of the chaos of looting and rioting that erupted at the end of the war, it was not Chalabi and his followers who emerged as the Party of Order and Authority, as the Americans had hoped, but the Iranian-backed clerics and militias of political Islam, which began to fill the political vacuum.

Secondly, since the state had been the major employer in Iraq, and state employment often depended on membership of the Ba’athist Party, it was little surprise that the policy of the purging of the state apparatus of ‘Ba’athists’ led to mass unemployment. This was further compounded with the disbanding of the million-strong Iraqi army. This provided a pool of dissatisfied men and weapons that was to increasingly fuel the Iraqi resistance.

Thirdly, there was the abysmal failure of American Capital to bring about economic reconstruction. Months after the war, basic utilities such as water and electricity supply had not even been restored to the rather dilapidated state they had been in before the invasion. As the resistance grew, the prospects of economic reconstruction became worse as American companies became reluctant to invest in Iraq.

The Provisional Coalition Authority (CPA), safely secluded in the green zone, frittered away the early months of the occupation by insisting that once the small Ba’athist remnants had been mopped up things would start to get better. However, their complacency was shattered in April 2004 with the uprising in Fallujah and the capture of the holy city of Najaf by Sadr’s militia. The Americans, now fearing they would not be able to forestall a general uprising for long, dumped Chalabi, and with the disbanding of the CPA, handed over formal power to the former Ba’athist strongman Allawi.

Yet Allawi soon proved ineffective in countering the growing resistance. The Americans were obliged to change track again. In entering a deal with the Iranian-born cleric Sistani to resolve the stand-off in Najaf, the Americans adopted a new policy of divide and rule. Sistani and his allied Shi’ite politicians agreed to stand aside while the US troops crushed the insurrection in Fallujah. In return the Americans had to abandon any hopes of installing a secular pro-American government and agree to elections that would bring the Shi’ite parties to power.

As a result of the elections in 2005, Iraq now has a government dominated by Shi’ite parties, some of which are closely aligned with Iran. Secular opposition has been marginalized, if not crushed. Meanwhile Shi’ite militia have been allowed to take over Iraq’s security forces and impose Islamic laws and social codes. Although by dividing Iraq



along ethnic and sectarian lines may have weakened the resistance to the American occupation, it has only done so by increasing the risk of all out civil war.

The US may have won the war but they have so far lost the peace in Iraq.

### Consequences of the US occupation of Iraq

Even at the best of times a full-scale invasion and occupation of Iran would be a far more daunting prospect for the US than that it faced with Iraq. Firstly, unlike Iraq, Iran has a formidable military capability. It has a large well-equipped army and air force. Secondly, a full-scale invasion of Iran would have to deal with a far more difficult mountainous terrain than the desert and river valleys of Iraq. Thirdly, Iran has far more retaliatory capabilities. Its missiles are certainly able to hit America's potential allies in the region - Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey - and may even be able to strike as far as Central Europe. In addition its client groups, such as Hizballah, as was shown by the recent conflict in Lebanon, also have the ability to strike at Israel if not elsewhere in the Middle East. However, with a large part of the US army tied down by a low-intensity insurgency in Iraq, and a vociferous anti-war movement at home, even the most ardent hawks in and around the Bush administration had been obliged to concede that it might be better to postpone any further military adventures until after Iraq had been pacified.

Indeed, the failure to pacify Iraq had served to reveal the limitations of US military power. Despite all its awesome firepower and technological wizardry, US military operations were still severely strained by the political imperative to minimize casualties. The American ruling class had still failed to fully exorcise the ghost of Vietnam and still could not be sure that its economically conscripted army could be used as cannon fodder for its imperialist ventures.

By the beginning of 2005 it was becoming clear, even for its most committed apologists, that the post 9/11 plan to

bring about a swift re-ordering of the wider Middle East by sheer force of arms had stalled, if not failed. Yet, nevertheless, the rise of China and the revival of Russia as a major power, only served to convince neoconservatives that the need to 'project' American power in the wider Middle East was all the more important. Indeed, it was now evident that China's rapid economic growth was unlikely to stop any time soon. As she began to use her growing economic strength to pursue a more active and global foreign policy as well as to build up her military capabilities, it was becoming clear that China was emerging as a possible future military and economic rival, which one day may wrest the crown of global hegemony from the USA.

More immediately, China's voracious appetite for energy necessary to fuel its economic growth meant that it had begun eyeing-up oil reserves across the globe, but most particularly in Central Asia. At the same time, following the election of Vladimir Putin in 1999, Russia had begun to take a more assertive foreign policy stance. With the re-nationalisation of the oil companies that had been flogged-off on the cheap to Russia's 'oligarchs' under Yeltsin, and buoyed by rising oil revenues, Putin had become far less reticent in exploiting Russia's position as 'gatekeeper' to the vast oil and natural gas fields of the former USSR.<sup>9</sup> For neoconservatives, both China and Russia could only be emboldened by the perceived limitations of the military power of the USA.

As a consequence, the Bush administration has sought to pursue its objectives of reordering the wider Middle East by other means - that is through the use of diplomacy and by covert political action. This has entailed 'going round Iran'; both to secure a foothold in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and to isolate and weaken Iran itself. This has involved a re-engagement with multilateralist diplomacy, through such vehicles as the UN, as the US has sought to persuade the international bourgeois community to isolate Iran. But, far more spectacular in its results, was the adoption of covert political actions that were to lead to the 'colored (sic) revolutions'.

Following the success of the 'Rose Revolution' in Georgia in December 2003, the US sought to bring about simulated 'Velvet' liberal-democratic revolutions, modelled on those that had occurred with the break-up of the Eastern Bloc in the 1980s, across the states of the former USSR. With the impetus given by Bush's re-election, the US sought to get the ball rolling with what became dubbed the 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine. Using techniques developed in Serbia, US agencies banged the heads together of various

<sup>9</sup> Of course, the overall economic interests of both Russia and China require them to maintain good diplomatic relations with the USA, which after all remains the centre of the global accumulation of capital. Nevertheless, this has not prevented them from manoeuvring for their own advantage, particularly when it comes to issues surrounding the geo-politics of oil.

opposition groups in order to form a united front. It then provided generous funding together with media and public relations expertise to launch a concerted anti-government campaign. As a result thousands were brought onto the streets leading to the annulment of the election of the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych in favour of the more pro-American Viktor Yuschenko and Yulia Tymoshenko.

The well publicised success of the ‘Orange Revolution’ encouraged the Bush regime to seize the opportunity to repeat the feat in Lebanon a few months later in what was to become known as the ‘Cedar Revolution’, or as the ‘Gucci revolution’, even by its supporters!<sup>10</sup> Through the ‘Cedar Revolution’ Bush sought to mobilise the Lebanon middle classes against the continued influence of Syria.

However, despite its initial success the policy of engineering ‘colored (sic) revolutions’ did not fare well for long. Within a year the pro-American alliance of Yuschenko and Tymoshenko fell apart leading to the return to power of Yanukovych as Prime Minister in a coalition government in August 2006. Furthermore, attempts to spread the ‘colored (sic) revolutions’ across Central Asia simply met with repression. What is more, the governments of Central Asia, facing obvious US-inspired subversion, turned towards Russia and China. This led to a reinvigoration of the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO). The SCO had been set up in 2001 as an intergovernmental organisation to promote co-operation over economic and security matters between Russia, China and four of the five Central Asian republics: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

At the annual meeting of SCO in July 2005, major economic deals were struck including an agreement to build an oil pipeline from Kazakhstan to China. In addition there was a joint statement calling on the USA to withdraw its military bases from Central Asia. Following up this statement a few weeks later, the Uzbekistan government announced the expulsion of the American troops based on its soil. Its was only a frantic lightening tour of the region by Donald Rumsfeld which prevented the other Central Asian republics from following suit in the weeks that followed. The US is now at risk of losing its toehold in Central Asia, which it gained during its war on Afghanistan.

The consequences of the ‘Cedar Revolution’ for the narrow Middle East have not been that much more satisfactory for US interests than the ‘Orange Revolution’ has been for Central Asia and the Caucasus. The ‘Cedar Revolution’ certainly succeeded in curtailing Syria’s direct influence within Lebanon. Yet in doing so it has increased the political and military strength of both Hizballah, and,

<sup>10</sup> “Some people here are jokingly calling the phenomenon ‘the Gucci revolution’ - not because they are dismissive of the demonstrations, but because so many of those waving the Lebanese flag on the street are really very unlikely protestors. There are girls in tight skirts and high heels, carrying expensive leather bags, as well as men in business suits or trendy tennis shoes. And in one unforgettable scene an elderly lady, her hair all done up, was demonstrating alongside her Sri Lankan domestic helper, telling her to wave the flag and teaching her the Arabic words of the slogans ... what has been fascinating to observe is how Lebanon’s middle and upper classes have been woken from their usual lethargy by the assassination of Hariri.” – [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from\\_our\\_own\\_correspondent/4318395.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/4318395.stm)

indirectly, of Iran. Following Israel’s withdrawal from south Lebanon in 2000, the US had welcomed what they then saw as the stabilising influence of Syria in Lebanon’s sectarian politics. Syrian influence was seen as a check on the advance of Hizballah buoyed from its success in driving out both the Americans and Israel. Curtailing Syrian influence only served to give Hizballah greater room for manoeuvre in Lebanese politics.

Furthermore, as we have seen, the ‘Cedar Revolution’ had mobilized the middle class Maronite Christians and Sunni Muslims, in what was a barely disguised assertion of class power. In the entrenched religious and sectarian politics of Lebanon, the only organisation able to counter this assertion of class power by the rich and middle classes was Hizballah. Against the well-publicised demonstrations of the ‘Cedar Revolution’, Hizballah were able to mobilise much large counter-demonstrations. In doing so they were able to cement their position as the representatives of the poor Shi’ite masses throughout Lebanon.

The ‘Cedar Revolution’ also underlined America’s hostile attitude to the Ba’athist regime in Syria. In doing so it served to strengthen Syria’s unholy alliance with both Iran and Hizballah.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps, rather ironically, the main winner of America’s war on Iraq and Afghanistan has been Iran. By toppling the Sunni Taliban in Afghanistan the Americans have weakened one of the Iranian regime’s main rivals for leadership of political Islam. By toppling the secular Ba’athist regime in Iraq, the Americans have achieved what Iran failed to do despite eight years of war in the 1980s. Not only this, but the US forces which might otherwise be threatening Iran, are now tied down in Iraq. Furthermore, with pro-Iranian groups in Iraq, such as the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution (SCIR), now part of the ruling coalition there, Iran can hope to have a compliant Shi’ite sister-state in either southern Iraq or in Iraq as a whole when the US eventually withdraws.

Yet, while Iran’s external geo-political position has been greatly enhanced, it faces formidable internal contradictions. Indeed, as we shall now see, Ahmadinejad’s more defiant attitude towards the USA can be seen as a means of using this enhanced geo-political strength to shore up the Iranian regime’s weak domestic position.

### Class struggle rise of the ‘neoconservatives’ in Iran

Until recently, bourgeois commentators tended to see Iranian politics as a two-sided contest between ‘the conservatives’, typified by the ‘Supreme Leader’ Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and ‘the reformers’, typified by former President Mohammad Khatami. The conservatives were characterised as the guardians of the 1979 ‘Islamic Revolution’<sup>12</sup> – staunchly anti-Western, and in particular anti-American, as well as authoritarian and socially conservative, insisting on strict

<sup>11</sup> See Iason Athanasiadis, ‘Iran Keeps Syria on side – for now’, *Asia Times*, September 19, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> This phrasing is a bourgeois one, which erases from history the proletarian character of revolution of 1978/9. It is perhaps better to talk of the Islamic *Counter*-revolution – the widespread experiments in workers’ control that followed the popular revolution being wiped out by the clerical reaction of Ayotollah Khomeini. See <http://libcom.org/history/1978-1979-the-iranian-revolution>

Islamic laws with regard to music, clothing, the role of women etc. The reformers on the other hand were presented as relatively pro-West, interested in a “*dialogue among civilizations*”,<sup>13</sup> and (relatively) socially progressive.

However, in the last couple of years two intertwined dynamics have disturbed this simplified view – an upsurge in class struggle and the rise of Iran’s own neoconservatives. The latter – particularly with the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as President in June 2005 -- has generated much discussion in the bourgeois press, though unsurprisingly you’d be hard pushed to find a mention of the former! In order to chart these developments, it is worth briefly surveying the recent circumstances out of which they have arisen.

**Background: Corruption, structural adjustment, the IMF**  
 Iran’s economy has had persistent problems with inflation, unemployment, and a chronic budget deficit stemming largely from multibillion dollar state subsidies, particularly on petrol and foodstuffs. However, this has not prevented sufficient economic growth to allow the creation of a cultural middle class, from which the reformers have historically drawn much of their support. The economy has traditionally been a mixture of central planning and state ownership for the oil and other large-scale industries, alongside village-based agriculture and a private sector consisting mostly of small-scale traders.

IMF-pleasing neoliberal structural adjustment programs, a.k.a. ‘market reforms’ have been pursued since the 8-year presidency of Rafsanjani began in 1989 and were continued under the presidency of Khatami, meaning widespread privatisations and layoffs. Notionally to attract loans to improve the economy, they have instead mainly consisted of the usual IMF affair; officials selling themselves state assets at knock-down prices, then slashing workers wages and imposing casualisation in order to improve profitability. Thus despite their public rhetoric condemning ‘Western decadence’, both reformers and conservatives have succeeded in enriching themselves despite the general economic stagnation, and have been anxious to do business with Western investors to continue that (corrupt) ‘success’.

In particular they have courted non-American Western oil giants such as Total, as well as pursuing a policy of ‘south-south integration’ to further economic ties with, and capital investment by, countries such as India, China and Venezuela as part of a strategy of diversifying the economy away from its oil-centric focus.

Politically, there has been a chronic crisis in the Iranian regime almost since its inception, with the ruling clerics constructing an intricate system of inter-related state functions in order to consolidate their power and mediate between the plethora of rival factions. From ‘the Supreme Leader’ whose power is effectively unlimited as commander-in-chief, but is nonetheless appointed and in theory dismissed by ‘the Assembly of Experts’, to the second highest position in the hierarchy, that of President, who is elected but where candidates are vetted by ‘the Council of Guardians’, half of whom are appointed by the Supreme Leader. This is without mentioning the *Majiles*, or parliament, which is again elected

but whose candidates and laws are also subject to the approval of the Council of Guardians, or the raft of minor miscellaneous committees that have authority over each other in various intermeshed ways.

It has been said that “*the most important function of elections in the Islamic republic rests precisely here: namely the redistribution of power among the various ruling factions.*”<sup>14</sup> This complex arrangement has thus developed to accommodate factional struggles within a continuous regime, a well as to allow token popular participation to mitigate the distinct lack of popular interest in living in a theocratic state. Alongside this a vast military and secret police apparatus has been constructed to ensure respect for the ‘Islamic principles and values’ on which the cleric’s authority is based.

Nonetheless, support for the ultra-conservative clerics has never spread much beyond the military and the direct recipients of its Islamic charities – never exceeding 25% of the votes cast. The reformers, who drew on the growing middle class in the 1990s for support, also began to run out of steam when the re-election of the reformist Khatami in 2001 failed to produce any significant change. The reformers thus ceased to act as a pressure-release valve for discontent with the clerical elite.

### The rise of the Iranian neocons

This then is the situation out of which Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected in June 2005. The former Tehran mayor is an ex-military man, not a cleric – a rarity for an Iranian President - and the most prominent of those who have been labelled the “*radical new conservatives*” – or if you prefer, Iran’s very own neocons. The Iranian neocons are advocates of a strong, centralised state capable of preventing factional splits impeding their aims. They style themselves as opposed to the corruption of both the old conservatives and the reformers; opposing the soft-on-America reformers with a hard-line foreign policy including talk that Israel should be “*wiped off the map*”,<sup>15</sup> and opposing the conceited old guard with populist rhetoric about “taking the oil money back to the people’s table”.<sup>16</sup> However, while opposing what the old guard have become, there is also a simultaneous move to try and recapture the religious idealism and ‘Islamic principles and values’ of 1979, with the de-secularisation of the universities and so forth. But in doing this from a military rather than a clerical background, the neocons do represent the emergence of a new current in the Iranian ruling class.

For us however, it is the populist aspect of this neocon current that is most noteworthy, as it represents an attempt to rebuild the social base of the regime which has been eroded after years of stagnation and disillusionment among Iranian workers. It should be noted that while Ahmadinejad took 61% of the second-round votes to secure the presidency, the turnout was little over 58% according to official figures (i.e. including the accepted practices of ballot stuffing, count massaging etc, which are meant not to serve any one candidate but enhance the legitimacy of the process). This means that even including the most-likely inflated official figures, only around a third of eligible voters actually voted for Ahmadinejad, and thus his populist rhetoric has not

<sup>13</sup> Khatami’s phrase. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohammad\\_Khatami#Dialogue\\_Among\\_Civilizations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohammad_Khatami#Dialogue_Among_Civilizations)

<sup>14</sup> Mehrdad & Kia 2005; [http://www.iran-bulletin.org/IB-MEF-3/presidentialelections\\_edited.htm](http://www.iran-bulletin.org/IB-MEF-3/presidentialelections_edited.htm)

<sup>15</sup> Quoted here for example:

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/4387852.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4387852.stm)

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Mehrdad & Kia 2005, *op cit*.

translated into a mass movement, unlike say with Chavez in Venezuela.<sup>17</sup>

An explanation for this might lie in the fact that Ahmadinejad's policies have so far proved to be more of the same, only more far-reaching; to the point where Ayatollah Khamenei has had to recently 'reinterpret' the Islamic constitution, the '*Qanun-e Asasi*' or 'Fundamental Law' in order to allow mass privatisations in the hope of attracting foreign capital. In fact Ahmadinejad's welcoming of European, Chinese and Japanese capital, amongst others, has formed part of an effort, behind the fiery rhetoric, to show that Iran can be a part of the international (bourgeois) community without any need for regime change. Iran has even been pressing for the US to lift its embargo to allow US capital free access to its casualised workforce. So judging by the actions of successive Islamic governments the *Qanun-e Asasi* is not in fact a document, but simply the requirements of capital!<sup>18</sup>

Accordingly, the neocon populism has failed to secure a significant social base (and of course a supply of willing cannon fodder for any conflict with the US), because its policies aggravate the very causes of popular disillusionment – the stagnant economy, social conservatism and declining living standards through wage cuts, casualisation and other capital-friendly neoliberal reforms. In fact a law announced in August 2006 that makes it easier for bosses to sack workers with no notice and replace them immediately with casualised contract staff has already provoked two major strikes. Therefore it is here that we turn to the other major dynamic in contemporary Iran: the upsurge in class struggle.

### Class struggle in Iran today

In mid 2003, a wave of strikes and worker-student demonstrations were brutally suppressed with over 4,000 arrests. In the autumn of 2004, copper miners in the city of Babak staged sit-ins against compulsory redundancies. The state responded by sending in special commando units that fired on miners and their families from helicopters. In response to this repression, workers in Babak and Khatoonabad launched a general strike. Early in 2005, textile workers in Sanandaj, western Iran went on strike. Mobilising support from workers across the country, their 2-month strike won major concessions; including the reinstatement of sacked workers, strike pay, treatment for sick workers, the introduction of permanent contracts and safer machinery. In fact according to the Iranian government's own figures, in the period from April to July last year there were more than 2000 workers' actions, including strikes, occupations and road blockades.

Of course, unions and strikes are illegal in Iran, which makes these events even more significant; yet they were themselves overshadowed by the massive Tehran transit

<sup>17</sup> This relative failure has not prevented a 'strategic alliance' between Ahmadinejad and Chavez. On a recent state visit to Caracas, Ahmadinejad was warmly embraced by Chavez, and commented that "*we have a common thinking, common interests*" - how very true! See:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/5354812.stm>

<sup>18</sup> Here the situation echoes the teachings of an altogether different religious text: "the most fundamental right under the law of capital is the equal exploitation of labour-power by all capitalists" (*Capital* Vol.I p. 405), "Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets!" (*Capital* Vol. I p. 742).

strike in January this year involving 17,000 workers. Within hours of the start of the strike hundreds of workers' homes were raided by agents of the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), the notorious secret police. Hundreds were arrested and imprisoned without charge.<sup>19</sup> Thousands were laid off, and there were violent clashes between demonstrators and the security services. The wives and children of striking workers were snatched from their beds and beaten, presumably to underline the populist character of the regime which talked of "*taking the oil money back to the people's table*".

Undeterred, demonstrations and strikes, including a no-fares action where drivers let people ride for free to attack profits directly, continued, both over the initial dispute over pay and the right to organise and for the release of workers imprisoned for months since the start of the strikes. The transit workers strikes continued into April and sparked a new wave of strikes over unpaid salaries and low wages which spread across the country – with walkouts in the northern provincial capital of Rasht, the western province of Elam, pharmaceutical workers in Tehran and coalminers in the northern town of Gilan.

In July 2006, Iran-Khodro car factory workers walked out demanding the introduction of a minimum wage. In August workers at the Par-ris mill struck over differential contracts which awarded 1-month, 3-month or 1-year contracts to workers on the basis of their previous passivity to the bosses' demands. After a week on strike, riot police attacked the picket with batons and tear gas, injuring several workers and arresting many, most of whom escaped en route to detention by jumping and running from the police buses, while two – a reporter and a worker from another factory who was on the picket in solidarity - were imprisoned overnight.

The company, in full co-operation with the police declared none of the workers' demands would be met and that one worker identified as an organiser was to be immediately sacked, meaning he would not be eligible for any social security because he was dismissed for organising activities. This prompted a solidarity statement co-signed by many (illegal) unions and workers groups across Iran, including the Tehran bus drivers, signifying the building of links between workers of different industries *as workers*.

As of September this year, around 3,000 workers are involved in strikes at the Khodro diesel factory over massive pay cuts. One worker reportedly tried to hang himself in protest, while bosses are threatening mass sackings unless the workers concede to their demands. It should be remembered that the Iranian revolution itself started after 50,000 slum-dwellers successfully resisted police evictions in 1977,<sup>20</sup> then after the police massacred 40 religious protesters a wave of strikes spread across the country. With martial law imposed thousands of demonstrators were gunned down on 'Black Friday' in September 1978. Workers' organisations spread and peasant farmers began to seize the land. Workers were setting up *shoras* (workers' councils) across the country to run industry and armed

<sup>19</sup> Of course we should not pretend that independent unions are legal in the UK, as any IWW member will tell you. Nor for that matter should we pretend that liberal democracies don't violently repress strikes or lock people up without charge!

<sup>20</sup> On this, see <http://libcom.org/history/1978-1979-the-iranian-revolution>

grassroots neighbourhood defence *komitehs* patrolled the streets.

However, the proletarian character of the revolution was swept away by the clerical counter-revolution, a.k.a. ‘the Islamic revolution’ in 1979. The following decades saw up to 100,000 socialists, Communists, feminists and others murdered by the state. But class struggle is on the rise again in Iran, and so far neither the populist attempts to incorporate the working class into the neoliberal state nor brute repression have succeeded in suppressing it.

### **Iran and the divisions within the US neoconservatives**

In contrast to Iranian neoconservatism, American neoconservatism has been born out of military, social and economic strength. The end of the Cold War has left the USA as the world’s sole superpower. At the same time, as we have argued elsewhere,<sup>21</sup> the economic restructuring of the 1970s and ’80s, has allowed the US to reassert itself as the centre of the world accumulation of capital.

On the basis of the underlying strength of the American economy, Bush was not only able to reflate the economy out of the recession that followed the Dot.Com crash of 2000 by tax cuts and low interest rates, but also engineer a pre-election boom, without creating an inflationary crisis. As a result, he was able to secure his re-election as President despite the problems besetting his foreign policy.

With the government reshuffle that followed 2004 election it appeared that the neoconservatives’ grip on the Bush regime had tightened. Colin Powell was eased out of the all-important State Department and replaced by Condoleezza Rice. The arch-critic of the UN and multilateralism, and one of the leading proponents of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, John Bolton, was appointed as ambassador to the UN. While, at the same time, Porter J. Goss (a CIA operative in Latin America during the Cold War) was appointed head of the CIA with a remit of restructuring the intelligence agency, which had been critical of Bush’s foreign policy. As a result, many in the anti-war movement concluded that if his foreign policy had not been fully dominated by the neoconservatives in the first term, it would certainly be in the second when Bush would have no need to worry about re-election.

In the autumn of 2004, Bush had been able to present the defeat of the insurgents by the wholesale destruction of Fallujah and the scheduling of elections for the Iraqi Constitutional Assembly as marking a vital turning point in Iraq. Bush could proclaim that the worst was over and Iraq was now on the road to ‘democracy’. Yet it soon became apparent that this was yet another false dawn. It was not until March that the squabbling Iraqi politicians were able to form an interim government. The violence in Iraq, which had briefly abated around the elections, resumed. Then came the shocking revelations of the torture and mistreatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison and the growing international concern at the continuing anomaly of Guantanamo Bay. All this, combined with what now seemed a never-ending stream of dead and wounded American troops coming back from Iraq, served to fuel the arguments of the anti-war movement

that the invasion of Iraq had been a major foreign policy blunder.

As support for the Iraq war fell in the polls, Bush’s woes were compounded by events at home, which indicated cracks within the social peace. In the summer 2005, Bush’s image as a patriotic, ordinary, middle American took a battering because of his callous and blatantly class- biased response towards New Orleans in the wake of hurricane Katrina. The mobilisation and organisation of resources that had gone into the invasion of Iraq stood in stark contrast to Bush’s abysmal attempts to save the poor of New Orleans.

As Bush’s popularity plummeted, his critics in both the Democratic and Republican parties, which had for so long remained timid, now became increasingly vocal – particularly with regard to foreign policy. Many conservatives, including the circle surrounding Bush’s own father, called for a return to the caution, pragmatism and multilateralism of old *realpolitik*, which had sought to maintain the *status quo* in international affairs, and the abandonment of radical plans to re-order the world. It was argued that not only had such plans dismally failed, but that they had led to the neglect of American interests elsewhere. Thus, for instance, while the neoconservatives had been seeking to reorder the wider Middle East, anti-American left-wing governments had swept to power in South America.

Along with these calls for a return to the old *realpolitik*, came a revival of calls for a more isolationist policy, which had been silenced by the fall of the Twin Towers. Why waste so much blood and treasure on futile foreign adventures it was argued, when there were more pressing problems at home?

So, within months of the triumphant re-election of Bush, when they had seemed to consolidate their hold on power, the neoconservatives found themselves on the political defensive. As it becomes evident that their attempt at a swift re-ordering of the wider Middle East has failed, the neoconservatives found themselves in a particularly weak position. As a result, cracks have emerged within the neoconservative coalition. It is true that the diplomatic confrontation with Iran, which has followed the election of Ahmadinejad, has served to rally the retreating neoconservatives and given them something of a second wind, yet it has not resolved their underlying differences – indeed, if anything it has exacerbated them. To understand America’s confrontation with Iran and the possibilities of its future development, it is necessary for us to examine these differences a little more closely.

### **Differences within the neoconservatives**

The Project for the New American Century brought together a wide range of right wing thinkers who were critical of the existing orthodoxy of the foreign policy establishment. The Project drew together academics, research fellows of leading right-wing think tanks, former government foreign policy advisors, journalists, propagandists, as well as lobbyists and representatives of the military-industrial complex, Israel and the American oil industry. As a result, it included at one extreme idealists, including as has often been observed, disillusioned former Trotskyists and liberals, through those schooled in the practical realities and compromises of actual foreign policy formation, to those who were little more than cynical prize fighters paid to secure a bigger slice of government spending for their paymasters.

<sup>21</sup> See ‘China and world capitalism’ in *Aufheben* #14 (1997).

Originally, the unity of this diverse coalition of neoconservative thinkers was perhaps secured by the rather general and long-term nature of the policy conclusions that were drawn from the deliberations of the Project for the New American Century. Following the attack on the Twin Towers this unity was forged through the opportunity of putting their doctrines into practice and initial success that was achieved. With the failure of the neoconservatives' attempts to bring about a swift re-ordering of the wider Middle East after the attack on the Twin Towers now having run aground divisions in this coalition have inevitably emerged.

#### *The neoconservative hawks*

Many neoconservatives have become increasingly impatient at what they see as the timidity of the Bush administration's foreign policy, which they blame on the failure of the neoconservative project. Indeed, in the pages of the neoconservative journals, Condoleezza Rice, in particular, has been singled out and denounced for going native amongst the 'liberals' at the State Department and becoming a traitor to the neoconservative cause.

For these neoconservatives time is running out. The window of opportunity opened up by the attack on the Twin Towers is closing. Bush is in his last years as President and the neoconservatives may well find themselves out of office. At the same time, the notion that the USA is somehow really at war with 'terrorism' becomes more difficult to sustain. As memories of 9/11 fade, the siren voices of the liberal multilateralists and the conservative isolationists can only become more seductive to the 'American people'.

Most neoconservatives had been prepared to accept that regime change in Iran had to wait until Iraq had been pacified. However, as the pacification of Iraq has effectively become postponed indefinitely, and as calls for the US to cut its losses and withdraw have grown ever louder, this is no longer the case. Blaming the troubles of Iraq, not on the American occupation of course, but on the meddling of Iran, many of what we may term the neoconservative hawks have concluded that 'victory in Baghdad lies in victory over Tehran'. As such they have called for the Bush regime to be prepared to launch a military attack on Iran – an attack made all the more urgent with Ahmadinejad's decision to obtain nuclear weapons. However, in advocating a policy of 'double or quits' the neoconservative hawks have been obliged to confront the realities of the strengthened geo-political position of Iran that the policies they have previously supported have created.

Most of the neoconservative hawks accept that, with the US army already over-stretched occupying Iraq, a ground invasion of Iran is out of the question. What has been advocated is an air strike aimed at destroying Iran's uranium enrichment programme. However, even limited to air strikes such a military confrontation in the current circumstances faces formidable problems.

Iran's programme of uranium enrichment is being carried out with the use of hundreds of centrifuges hidden in deep bunkers across Iran. Hence, unlike the situation in 1981 when the Israeli air force was able to halt Iraq's nuclear programme by a single air strike on one nuclear plant, any attempt to halt Iran's nuclear programme would require both a large number of air strikes with special bunker-busting bombs and precise intelligence to know where the bunkers are hidden. Yet, to be sure that targets could be reached and

destroyed, any air strike would also have to overcome Iran's air defences. An air strike would have to be on a sufficient scale to destroy Iran's air force and surface-to-air missile systems in order to establish air supremacy over much of Iran.

But this is not all. It would also be necessary to preempt Iran's capabilities of seriously disrupting the world's oil supplies. The unanticipated growth in the demand for oil over the past five years, due largely to the rapid economic growth of China and East Asia, has lead to a very tight oil market. With little spare productive capacity, even minor disruptions in the supply of oil can lead to sharp speculative rises in the price of oil on the world market. Forty per cent of the world's oil supply is presently produced in the Persian Gulf and must pass the narrow Straits of Hormuz, which separate Iran from the Arabian peninsula. Although the US 5<sup>th</sup> fleet presently stationed in the Gulf is probably more than sufficient to prevent Iran closing down the shipping lanes altogether, the amount of oil that could be shipped out of the Persian Gulf could be substantially reduced. However, perhaps more importantly is the vulnerability of the Arabian oil terminals and associated infrastructure, which lie on the opposite side of the Gulf from Iran, which are well within range of Iran's Shabab missiles. If Iran was allowed to retaliate by launching a full-scale missile attack on these oil facilities it could substantially reduce the supply of oil from the Persian Gulf for months if not years – that is until they could be rebuilt.

In 2001, the Bush ordered the replenishment of the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, which is an emergency reserve of oil, that had become seriously depleted since the 1970s. This Reserve currently consists of nearly 700 million barrels of oil. The US Strategic Petroleum Reserve, combined with an equal amount of oil stored in other Government controlled emergency oil reserves across the world, is sufficient to replace the entire output of oil from the Persian Gulf for around six weeks. This would probably be more than enough to offset any attempt by Iran to restrict shipments through the Hormuz Straits for a prolonged period. However, it may well not be enough if Iran was able to inflict substantial damage to the Arabian oil industry across the Gulf. Thus, any air strike on Iran would not only have to be able to destroy Iran's numerous well-protected centrifuges and its air defences but also pre-empt any possibility of a retaliatory counter-attack on the oil infrastructure in the Persian Gulf. The sheer scale necessary for such an air strike is indicated by Lt. General Thomas McInerney (retired) in an article published by the arch-neoconservative, *Weekly Standard*:

What would an effective military response look like? It would consist of a powerful air campaign led by 60 stealth aircraft (B-2s, F-117s, F-22s) and more than 400 nonstealth aircraft including B-52s, B-1s, F-15s, F-16s, Tornados, and F-18s. Roughly 150 refuelling tankers and other support aircraft would be deployed, along with 100 unmanned aerial vehicles for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, and 500 cruise missiles. In other words, overwhelming force would be used.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Thomas McInerney, 'Target: Iran' *Weekly Standard*, April 13<sup>th</sup> 2006.

Yet, even if an overwhelming air strike succeeded in both halting Iran's nuclear programme and pre-empted Iran launching any retaliatory missile strikes, either in the Persian Gulf or elsewhere, American troops could find themselves under attack from Iranian backed militias in Iraq.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, with US forces hard pressed to keep the lid on the current situation, it is quite possible that in the face of a concerted Iranian-backed insurgency they could lose control of Iraq.

If it succeeded in its objectives such an attack on Iran would set back the Iranian nuclear project by five years. Yet it would carry grave economic and political risks. If nothing else an attack on Iran, particularly if it involved tactical nuclear weapons, could have major diplomatic and political costs. Furthermore, if things did not go according to plan, and Iran was able to retaliate, oil prices could soar and the world could be plunged into a recession. But even if the air strike succeeded in its objectives the American might risk losing Iraq. As such, in present circumstances, an American attack on Iran is a high risk gamble with little to gain and much to lose.



#### *Proponents of the 'Long War'*

As its name clearly implied, the Project for the New American Century was concerned with taking a long-term strategic view of US foreign policy. Indeed, it sought to oppose its long-term viewpoint to the short-term muddling through that was seen as characterising the old foreign policy orthodoxy.

In his efforts to orientate US defence strategy from Cold War doctrines to those of fighting 'rogue and failed states' and 'non-state forces' in accordance with the doctrines set out by the Project for the New American Century, Donald Rumsfeld has developed the notion of the 'Long War'. Although Rumsfeld has had an uphill task attempting to re-orientate America's military against its high command, the notion of the 'Long War' has gained ground amongst more 'centrist' elements amongst the neoconservatives in and around the Bush regime.

<sup>23</sup> See Gareth Porter, 'US troops in Iraq are Tehran's "hostages", *Asia Times*, September 22nd 2006.

On the one hand, against conservative and liberal critics of the neoconservatives' direction of foreign policy since the attack on the Twin Towers, it may be conceded that the attempt to radically re-order the wider Middle East has so far fallen short of its original objectives. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the attempts to bring about 'Colored (sic) Revolutions' in the wider Middle East, were merely the early battles in a new long war. Just as the USA had to fight a long drawn out Cold War against the USSR – a war which lasted more than forty years – so it would now have to fight a long drawn out war against political Islam and rogue states if it is to preserve its global hegemony. As such, it is asserted, there can be no return to outdated over-cautious and pragmatic policies of the Cold War. The radical re-ordering of the wider Middle East must remain a key long-term policy objective.

On the other hand, proponents of the 'Long War' caution against the impatience of the neoconservative hawks. Although it may be admitted that if the Iranian regime was to develop nuclear weapons then this would make it far more difficult to bring about a regime change, which as we have seen is pivotal to the 'Long War' to re-order the wider Middle East, the warnings of some neoconservative hawks that Iran will be able to obtain nuclear weapons within as little as two years can easily be dismissed as alarmist. Against the hawks' clamour for an immediate military confrontation with the Iranian regime, the proponents of the 'Long War' prefer to continue the strategy of going round Iran.

The first, and most immediate, task of such a strategy is the pacification and consolidation of Iraq. Of course, it cannot be said that this will be an easy task. After so many false dawns, Iraq is teetering on the edge of all out civil war, while after three years the US forces have failed to defeat the insurgency. Nevertheless, if the increasing demands made by isolationists and the anti-war movement for the troops to be brought home can be held in check, the proponents of the Long War have reasons to hope that all is not lost in Iraq.

Firstly, although the Iranian regime has sought to use its influence to destabilize Iraq in order to tie down America's military might, a descent into a full-scale civil war is not in Iran's interest. A civil war in Iraq would almost certainly compel Iraq's other neighbours – i.e. Turkey, Syria and Saudi Arabia – to become involved to the detriment of Iran. Iran's best bet is to maintain the current levels of instability and to wait until the US becomes weary of attempting to hold on to Iraq and quit.

Secondly, there are the growing divisions amongst Iraq's main political parties. During the first elections held at the beginning of 2005 all the main parties and candidate lists had demanded at the very least a timetable for the early withdrawal of US troops. Now fearing civil war and the advance of the Shi'ite parties and militias the main politicians who claim to represent the Sunni population of Iraq are desperate for US troops to stay. This is a position that is also likely to be echoed by the secularist parties that have now coalesced around Allawi.

Furthermore, even the ruling United Iraq Alliance is deeply divided over the fundamental questions concerning the future unity of Iraq. Muqtada Sadr, whose main basis of support lies in Baghdad, is strongly opposed to any proposal that might lead to the break-up of Iraq along religious line or ethnic lines. The division of Iraq favoured by his fellow

Shi'ite coalition partners, the SCIR, which would see an oil rich Kurdistan break away to the north and an oil rich Shi'ite state break away to the South, would leave Sadr supporters in a minority in an impoverished Sunni-dominated rump of Iraq.

Thirdly, there is the venality and narrow self-interest of Iraq's politicians and militia leaders. Iraq's politicians have shown that they are quite prepared to collude with the Americans and there is little doubt that in the right circumstances they could be easily be bought off. Indeed, for all their professed piety and anti-Americanism, leading politicians of SCIR have been more than willing as Ministers in Iraq's provisional government to sign contracts effectively selling off the country's oil to American oil companies on the cheap.

Hence, given enough time, and playing their cards deftly, the proponents of the 'Long War' can still hope to establish a pro-American moderate Islamic government in Iraq; which could provide political stability, allow the establishment of US forward military bases on Iraq soil and open the floodgates for US capital to exploit Iraq's resources.

Meanwhile, efforts can be made to tighten the noose around Iran and undermine its stability. Firstly, under the pretext of Iran's 'violation' of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, the US can use its diplomatic muscle to press the great powers of the world to impose increasingly punitive economic sanctions on Iran. As with Iraq, it can be hoped that prolonged sanctions could seriously weaken Iran both economically and militarily.

Secondly, overt and covert political methods can be deployed to destabilise Iran. In March, Condoleezza Rice announced a large increase in the propaganda budget aimed at Iran. This will be used to fund pro-American Iranian opposition groups as well as to set up television and radio stations to beam propaganda into Iran. At the same time, the Pentagon has been promoting the Mujahedin e-Khalq (MEZ) opposition group - which had formerly been designated as a 'terrorist organisation' by the CIA.

However, it must be said that in the current situation, when even the more pro-Western Iranian middle classes can quite clearly see what the US is doing next door in Iraq, neither of these tactics are likely to bear fruit soon, at least in terms of Iran as a whole. American propaganda broadcasts are likely to have as much impact as those of Lord Haw Haw in the Second World War, while, at present, the MEZ has very little support inside Iran.

Yet, such tactics may serve to supplement those proposed by the neoconservative think-tank, American Enterprise Institute, to undermine, if not break up Iran by stirring up ethnic divisions. With the Iranian government having already accused coalition forces in Iraq of supplying arms and support to ethnic separatist groups in Iran, and with the recent revelations that Israeli mercenaries are providing intensive military training to Kurdish peshmerga guerrilla forces, it would seem to suggest that this tactic of stirring up ethnic divisions in Iran is already being implemented.<sup>24</sup>

In the next couple of years many of the large investments on developing the oil and natural gas fields

<sup>24</sup> Also see James Brandon, 'Iran's Kurdish Threat' in *Global Terrorism Analysis*, The Jamestown Foundation, June 15, 2006, and Chris Zambelis, 'Violence and Rebellion in Iranian Balochistan', *Global Terrorism Analysis*, The Jamestown Foundation, June 29 2006.

around the Caspian Sea and elsewhere will begin to come fully on stream easing the current tightness in the world's oil markets, at least for a few years. By then, the proponents of the 'Long War' can have hoped that both Iraq has been pacified, and Iran has been seriously weakened militarily, economically and politically. Thus, against the neoconservative hawks' insistence on an immediate military confrontation with Iran, the proponents of the 'Long War' can argue that it is wiser to wait until a more auspicious time, and then be sure of bringing about regime change.

### *Third Option*

If nothing else the current situation in both Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrates the limits of US power to radically reshape the world in its own interests. As such, however much they have sought to deny it, it also marks the weakness of the doctrines of the neoconservatives. The decision of Ahmadinejad to recommence Iran's uranium enrichment programme may have served to check the increasing influence of both isolationism and the American anti-war movement by allowing the neoconservatives to focus attention on the apparent threat of Iran. However, the consequent stand off with Iran has served to bring to the fore the divisions amongst the neoconservatives themselves and the very weakness of their underlying foreign policy.

As we have seen, the neoconservative hawks' advocacy of an air strike against Iran to take out its uranium enrichment programme offers high risks with little gain. In the current situation it would not seem to be a viable option. Yet, the option proposed by the proponents of the 'Long War', which seems to have the ascendancy in the Bush regime, is not a great deal better. As we have seen, although it may be plausible, it is a strategy based on reasonable hopes rather than realistic expectations.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, given its record over the past three years, it is far from certain that the US will be able to both pacify Iraq and seriously destabilize Iran as the proponents of the 'Long War' envisage.

However, at least with respect to Iran, there is a third option. Although arguably this is not completely incompatible with the longer term aim of the neoconservatives of re-ordering the wider Middle East, this option finds support mainly amongst the old school of foreign policy makers in the State Department and within the wider circles of the American ruling class and has yet to be publicly voiced from within the Bush regime itself. This third option may be termed the 'Grand Deal'.

This 'Grand Deal' would involve the US abandoning its policy of regime change in Iran and giving the Iranian regime cast-iron security guarantees. In return the Iranian regime would support America's efforts to pacify Iraq and open up Iran's economy to foreign capital. Through such a deal the Iranian regime would be rehabilitated and Iran's ruling class brought within the international bourgeois community.

As we have seen, despite all their anti-Western rhetoric, the Iranian regime has long been more than willing to impose neo-liberal policies and obey the dictates of the IMF. The Iranian ruling class would welcome an end to

<sup>25</sup> England may have a 'reasonable hope' of winning Euro 2008, after all Greece won it last time, but they do not have a 'realistic expectation' of winning it.

Iran's isolation and the inflow of foreign capital – particularly if it could be sure of taking its cut of the profits.

However, such a 'Grand Deal' would face two important obstacles. Firstly, as we have seen, the external threat posed by US imperialism has become of crucial importance in maintaining social peace at home. Defiance of the US has allowed Ahmadinejad to unite the middle classes behind the regime and contain the recent resurgence class struggle. In the current situation, supping with the Great Satan will not be easy for Ahmadinejad.

Secondly, if Iran was simply opened up for foreign capital then US capital would find itself at the back of the queue. As we have pointed out, US foreign policy towards Iran was put on a back burner once it became clear that sorting out Iraq was going to take longer than expected. The issue of Iran's breach of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, which had originally been raised in 2002 as a possible pretext for a future confrontation with Iran, was handed over to the Europeans (the EU-3 comprising the UK, France and Germany). Meanwhile, the US maintained its unilateral economic sanctions effectively locking US capital out of Iran. As a consequence, America's rivals were able to position themselves for the future rehabilitation of Iran and the opening up of its vast oil reserves for exploitation. Through their negotiations over Iran's compliance with the nuclear non-proliferation treaty the EU-3 powers were able strengthen their links with the Iranian regime. Russia offered a deal to help Iran develop its civil nuclear power programme. China and India went further. Risking the ire of the US they struck a joint oil deal with Iran in 2005.

Of course, for the neoconservatives such manoeuvrings did not matter that much since their plans for regime change in Iran would sooner or later have rendered all such agreements and understandings null and void. However, to be satisfactory, any 'Grand Deal' that left existing regime intact would have to allow America's oil corporations to jump the queue.

#### *Keeping all options open*

Throughout the stand-off between America and Iran, which has followed Ahmadinejad's announcement that Iran was to recommence its uranium enrichment programme, President Bush (jnr) has consistently insisted that he was 'keeping all options open' – thereby implying he was not ruling out taking military action. Bush's repeated refusal to rule out taking military action has been taken by many as evidence that he is hell-bent on war. But it would seem far more likely that when he says that he is 'keeping all options open' that is precisely what he means!

By doing this Bush cannot only keep his cards close to his chest in what can be seen as a tough poker game, but also reconcile divergences of opinion both within his administration and wider ruling class circles. By not ruling out military action Bush can appease the neoconservative hawks. Confident that all other options will sooner rather than later prove futile the neoconservatives can be assured that their policy will soon be adopted.

For the proponents of the 'Long War', the sabre-rattling on the part of the neoconservative hawks can serve as a means to persuade the other great powers that the Americans might be mad enough to launch an attack on Iran. While such action would be a 'high-risk - low-gain' for the US, it would be a 'high-risk - no gain' for everyone else.

Facing the threat of war the other great powers may then be willing to accept the lesser evil of sanctions. Furthermore, the proponents of the 'Grand Deal' would not be adverse to maintaining a perceived threat of war, since this would strengthen America's hand in the bargaining process with Iran and the other interested powers.

#### **The US – Iran stand-off and the war in Lebanon**

Much has been made of the revelations of Hersh that the recent attack on Lebanon had not only been planned well in advance by Israel but that such plans had been known and approved by both Bush (jnr) and his faithful servant Tony Blair.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, many, particularly within the anti-war movement, have concluded from such revelations that Israel's attack on Lebanon was at the behest of the Americans and foreshadowed an Israeli-led strike on Iran on behalf of the US. It was even suggested during the course of the month long conflict that Bush was planning to escalate the war in Lebanon into an attack on Syria if not also Iran.<sup>27</sup>

However, it would have been very surprising if Israel had not planned to launch such a pre-emptive strike against Hizballah in south Lebanon and had not sought approval of the Americans before implementing such a plan. There is little doubt that Israeli intelligence was aware of the build up of Hizballah's stockpile of Shahab rockets and the threat that this posed to the towns and cities of northern Israel. The Israeli military would have no doubt been required to draw up contingency plans to deal with this threat in the event of heightened tensions in the Middle East. The overriding constraint on the military planners in drawing up such contingency would have been that no Israeli government was likely to countenance yet another prolonged and costly military occupation of south Lebanon.

As has become evident, the plan the Israelis came up with was for a short and sharp military campaign, which would push Hizballah and their rockets away from Israel's northern border, and then, with the diplomatic support of the US in establishing a buffer zone in southern Lebanon. The first phase of the military campaign was to launch a massive and overwhelming air attack on southern Lebanon. This, it was hoped, would drive out the civilian population leaving Hizballah fighters exposed, and to destroy Hizballah's rockets and thereby their ability to strike back at Israel. The second phase would then be to move in with ground troops to dislodge the shell-shocked Hizballah from southern Lebanon. All the Americans had to do was to procrastinate long enough for the Israeli forces to achieve their objectives and then call for a ceasefire and arrange an international peace-keeping force to police southern Lebanon. With a buffer zone established in southern Lebanon preventing the return of

<sup>26</sup> Seymour Hersh 'Washington's Interest in Israel's War' in *The New Yorker*, August 21<sup>st</sup> 2006.

<sup>27</sup> Sidney Blumenthal, former foreign policy advisor to Clinton, on August 7<sup>th</sup> argued that hardliners in the Bush administration were attempting to widen the war by providing Israel with the intelligence it needed to implicate Syria in continuing to supply Hizballah weapons. With Iran committed to defend its ally if it was attacked, an attack by Israel on Syria could have led to war with Iran in which the US would have been obliged to join. However, as it turned out, Israel was very careful not to involve Syria in its war. 'The neocons' next war', available at [www.globalresearch.ca](http://www.globalresearch.ca).

Hizballah to its former positions the Israeli army could withdraw.

Obviously such a plan, and the timing of its implementation, required both the prior approval and co-operation of the Americans. Certainly it is likely that the Bush administration would have been well-disposed to such a plan. A decisive defeat of Hizballah would have strengthened America's hand against both Iran and Syria. Important lessons could also be learnt concerning the effectiveness of aerial bombardment on Iranian-style rocket systems, which could be useful in any future confrontation with Iran. And all this could be gained without putting US troops at risk.

But although it required the Bush administration's prior approval and co-operation, this does not mean that Israel's attack on Lebanon was at the behest of the US. On the contrary, it would certainly seem to be the case that Israel went to war for internal political reasons.<sup>28</sup>

As has often been observed, it was perhaps only due to his reputation as both a military commander and an arch-Zionist that allowed Sharon to pull off the major shift in policy towards the Palestinian question and the consequent dramatic realignment of Israeli politics. Although withdrawal from Gaza and his proposal to abandon the more outlying settlements on the West Bank was to be accompanied by a more intensive programme of settlements within the lands annexed by the new Wall, Sharon's new policy was widely seen as a betrayal of the long standing commitment of Likud to a Greater Israel. As we have argued elsewhere,<sup>29</sup> this notion of a Greater Israel, and the expansion of Israeli settlements that it has served to justify, has played an increasing role in binding the Israeli working class to the state with the decline of labour Zionism in face of the adoption of neo-liberal policies. Indeed, the new settlements within the Wall appear designed to be more conducive to the extraction of surplus value than as a means to provide a surrogate welfare system for the Israeli working class.

In order to bring about his radical policy shift, Sharon was obliged to split his own party Likud and the Labour Party opposition to form Kadima creating political enemies in the process. Yet in the midst of the huge political upheavals that he had created Sharon went into a coma. This has left his successor Ehud Olmert in a vulnerable position having to sort out the consequences of Sharon's radical new policies without the advantages of Sharon's reputation and *gravitas*.

The right wing critics, who had warned that Sharon's decision to withdraw from Gaza would be seen as a sign of weakness that would encourage Palestinian militants, claimed to be vindicated when the Palestinian elections resulted in the victory of Hamas. In response, with the backing of the US and European governments, Olmert took a hard line with the new Palestinian authority, cutting off its funding and refusing to negotiate with the new Palestinian ministers until Hamas capitulated and recognised Israel's 'right of existence'. Hamas militants responded by attempting to force Olmert to negotiate by kidnapping Israeli soldiers and ending their ceasefire.

<sup>28</sup> With Iran given until the end of August to respond to the UN call for a suspension of their uranium enrichment programme, Israel's attack on Lebanon would seem to have been a bit premature as a pretext for starting a war with Iran.

<sup>29</sup> 'Behind the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Intifada', *Aufheben* #10 (2002).

However, Olmert responded by refusing all negotiations. Instead the Israeli army was sent on punitive incursions into the Gaza strip. Yet his attempt to appease the Right met with little success. The incursions into Gaza did not lead to the return of the kidnapped soldiers and failed to stop the rocket attacks against Israel. At the same time, these incursions appeared to be leading to the re-occupation of Gaza, thereby reversing the most controversial actions of the new policy Olmert had inherited from Sharon and which had led to the formation of Kadima in the first place.

It was at this point that Hizballah kidnapped three Israeli soldiers. There is no reason not to accept Nasrallah's subsequent protestations that he had miscalculated Israel's response to such kidnappings. After all, as has been pointed out, there had been numerous incidents of a similar nature before between Hizballah and the Israeli army without triggering a major military confrontation. Indeed, there had existed a tacit agreement that such incidents should not lead to attacks on civilians on either side. However, Olmert seeking to demonstrate his hard line credentials triggered the contingency plans for a pre-emptive strike on Hizballah. Yet far from the short sharp military campaign planned, the conflict lasted over a month leading to the humiliating defeat of Israel.

## Conclusion

With the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and with Iraq teetering on the verge of an all-out civil war, it is now clear that the attempt by the Bush regime to bring about a swift re-ordering of the oil rich regions of the wider Middle East by sheer force of arms has failed. Far from securing its vital interests and 'projecting' its global power, the failure to impose a *pax Americana* on Afghanistan and Iraq has only served to demonstrate the limitations of American power. Furthermore, the US is perhaps now in a weaker geo-political position than it had been in 2001 – with both its state and non-state adversaries and potential rivals taking advantage of America's perceived weakness.

Nevertheless, the USA remains the world's sole superpower. Indeed, it is the only state power capable of carrying out large-scale military adventures across the globe. Furthermore, with sluggish capital accumulation in Europe, and with China unlikely to become a serious rival until well into the next decade, the US, at least for the time being, remains the world's dominant economic power.

Neoconservative doctrines did not arise as short-term expedients to arrest the terminal decline of US power. On the contrary, as we have pointed out, these doctrines were developed as long-term plans to exercise America's enhanced geo-political position following the demise of the only other superpower – the USSR – in order to preserve US hegemony well into the twenty-first century. The subsequent failure of neoconservative foreign policy has not been due to it being somehow 'irrational'. The neoconservative policies involved high-risk strategies that did not pay off. If anything their failure was due more to mistakes and miscalculations born out of an arrogant overconfidence – which itself can be seen as the result of the post-Cold War triumphalism of the American bourgeoisie – rather than desperation. This must be borne in mind when considering the possible outcome of the current stand-off between the USA and Iran, and the implications of their proxy war in Lebanon.

As we have seen, Ahmadinejad's decision to recommence Iran's uranium enrichment programme served to expose the differences both within the Bush administration as a whole and within the neoconservatives. Yet, despite such differences of opinion, all could agree that America had to appear to take a tough stand and threaten the use of force unless Iran backed down.

However, although Bush (jnr) was able to secure Iran's referral to the UN Security Council for its alleged breach of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, not only Iran but the great powers, particularly China and Russia, seem to have called America's bluff. Not only have the threats of military action receded but it now seems unlikely that anything more than token sanctions will be applied against Iran. At the same time, the US has had to accept that it might have to enter into direct negotiations with Iran for the first time since 1979.

However, as the neoconservatives remain in the ascendancy in Washington, and consequently regime change in Iran remains a long-term objective of American foreign policy, an attack on Iran cannot be ruled out in the future. However, what at present seems more likely is covert political action to stir up ethnic tensions in Iran.

This could have its own deleterious effects on the emerging class struggle in Iran as sanctions or war. In such a case, we must maintain our opposition to American imperialist intervention as well as to the theocratic Iranian regime.

### Appendix: Who are Hizballah?

The recent Israeli assault on Lebanon has thrust the Lebanese group Hizballah back into the spotlight - denounced by the right as a 'terrorist organisation' and defended by many on the left as a 'legitimate national liberation group' (1). While both of these definitions contain partial truths, both eschew the complex nature of Hizballah in favour of arguing a 'good guys or bad guys' dichotomy. In order to try and understand the situation in Lebanon today, a more complete picture is required.

Hizballah, or 'the party of God', announced its existence in 1985 with "*An Open Letter to the Downtrodden in Lebanon and the World*" (2), although the militia groups which comprised it had been active against the Israeli occupation since it began in 1982. The vaguely leftist/internationalist sentiment of the Open Letter is not incidental, as a brief look at the context of their origins shows. The Lebanese state is 'multi-confessional', which means that political power is distributed among religious groups on a quota basis, the quota being worked out according to the religious composition at the time of the 1932 census (the only one available). From the end of the French mandate in 1943, an informal pact divided power roughly equally between Maronite Christians and Sunni Muslims. Shia Muslims were a minority, and so had little share of political power. This became a more pressing issue as the Shia population grew relative to the other sects, and politicians tended to divert resources to 'their own', the result was disproportionate poverty amongst Lebanese Shia by the 1960s (3), which was also the beginning of mass urbanisation/proletarianisation of the mostly Shia rural poor. However, the initial reaction to this rising poverty was, if not really on class lines, not on sectarian ones either (4). For example, the (pro-USSR) Lebanese Communist Party (LCP) was legalised in 1970 and enjoyed a resurgence in popularity, and although it failed to win any parliamentary seats and never became a mass organisation, its rank-and-file were mostly drawn from the various sects of

the urban poor. Although the LCP's membership was mostly Christian, it also attracted many impoverished Shia. The LCP organised a cross-sect militia - the 'Popular Guard' - which nonetheless participated in the Lebanese civil war on the side of the Lebanese Nationalist/Palestinian/Muslim factions against the Israeli-backed Christian sects. But by the early 80s the organisation - and the broadly non-sectarian grassroots sentiment it represented - was in decline. As the Communist star waned, the star of militant political Islam was rising.

Militant Islam's appeal amongst poor Lebanese grew for several reasons, which can all be traced to the period between 1978 and 1982. Firstly, the Israeli invasion of 1978 reinvigorated the Shia 'movement of the deprived', Amal, which had been founded in 1975 by the respected cleric Sayyid Musa al-Sadr (not related to the al-Sadr of Iraqi insurgency fame). Al-Sadr's unexplained disappearance earlier that year in Libya had already returned him to the spotlight and boosted his popularity (he was never found). When the Israelis invaded in pursuit of PLO fighters, Amal fought the PLO, and was thereby seen to be defending the southern Shia population from the conflict by attacking its immediate cause, namely the PLO's use of Lebanese territory to launch attacks on Israel. Amal's (moderate) Islamic ideology also offered an ideological basis for resistance that was independent of both the reigning superpowers, which tessellated well with the nationalist sentiments inspired by the invasion. The 1979 'Islamic Revolution' in Iran also had a catalysing effect on the ascent of militant Islam, as was made explicit in the founding statement of Hizballah six years later (5) - the impact is perhaps somewhat analogous to that of the 'success' of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution on the wider workers' movement, which boosted the statist parties at the expense of the libertarians, arguably right up to the collapse of the USSR and certainly until Stalin took power. Then came the second Israeli invasion of 1982, a watershed event which cemented the dual perceptions that the left had failed to protect the Shia poor from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and that the moderate Amal group was no longer representative of the Shia poor after its drift into patronage politics. A loose network of former Amal militants and others formed to resist the occupation under an Islamic banner, a network that was to coalesce and announce itself in 1985 as 'the Party of God', Hizb Allah.

Right from the time of its origins in these Shia resistance groups, Hizballah was keen to stress its desire to "satisfy the interests of the oppressed masses", stating "we reject both the USSR and the US, both Capitalism and Communism", and that "we don't want Islam to reign in Lebanon by force" - as well as significant quantities of anti-imperialist/national liberation language (6). These sentiments have by-and-large been borne out by Hizballah's subsequent development into an umbrella organisation which incorporates an armed wing ('the Islamic Resistance'), a legal political party which forms part of the largest voting bloc in the Lebanese parliament today (i.e. September 2006), and an extensive network of social services including hospitals, schools and a civil reconstruction program. Although we obviously reject the idea that Hizballah is anticapitalist - it is quite clearly a faction of Lebanese national capital (7) - its opposition to the both US and domestic neoliberal policies alongside its social programmes have nonetheless won it some anticapitalist kudos with the Lebanese working class. During the most recent explosion of class struggle in Lebanon - the 2004 general strike against the neoliberal regime of Rafik Hariri (8) (whose 2005 assassination lead to the 'Cedar Revolution') - Hizballah played a mediating role, maintaining their credibility as representatives of the mostly Shia urban poor while diffusing the raw class anger on the streets which threatened to escalate as the Lebanese army fired live

rounds at demonstrating workers, killing five and injuring many more. The fact Hizballah has largely maintained its support amongst the poor on account of its seeming commitment to its founding values was manifested by the huge counter-demonstrations they organised in opposition to the 'Cedar Revolution', which were at least as big as those of the middle/upper class 'revolutionaries' and drew on the working class in general and poor Shias in particular - which is even more impressive given the fact the assassinated Hariri was a hated figure amongst the working class for his neoliberal policies (even though he protected wanted Hizballah figures). In addition, Hizballah's nationalism, and its recent practical expressions as the armed defence of Lebanese territorial sovereignty has been attracting increasing numbers of middle class and upwardly mobile Lebanese too (9). Hizballah has always received military backing from Iran as well as financial backing from Iran and Syria, which together with donations from wealthy Lebanese and the proceeds of the annual *khum* (a rudimentary taxation system of 20% of surplus income paid by all Shia) finances their operations. Despite this, their policy has always been distinctly nationalist and fairly independent of their state sponsors. Thus, Hizballah today is much more than a simple armed group or an Iranian/Syrian proxy force. It is perhaps possible to think of it as a sort of state-within-a-state, complete with military and welfare wings, a tax system, the task of maintaining law and order (in the south at least), and the role of mediating between the requirements of capital and the demands of the working class, a role which requires it maintains a certain working class base.

(1) For example the slogan 'he are all Hezbollah' featured prominently and fairly uncontroversially at the national Stop the War Lebanon demo, while George Galloway celebrated Hezbollah giving Israel 'a bloody good hiding' in an interview on Sky News. Evidently terms like 'the right' and 'the left' are problematic, but adequate approximations in this context.

(2) The Open Letter: see  
[http://www.ict.org.il/Articles/Hiz\\_letter.htm](http://www.ict.org.il/Articles/Hiz_letter.htm)

(3) Of course Shia politicians, like the others, were generally of ruling class background (mostly feudal landowners), and so tended to represent their sectarian class interest over that of their serfs. - it obviously it goes without saying that politicians are ruling class once they become politicians, by definition!

(4) See Lara Deeb;

<http://www.globalresearch.ca/PrintArticle.php?articleId=2897>

(5) "We are the sons of the *umma* (Muslim community)

- the party of God (Hizb Allah) the vanguard of which was made victorious by God in Iran. There the vanguard succeeded to lay down the bases of a Muslim state which plays a central role in the world. We obey the orders of one leader, wise and just, that of our tutor and *faqih* (jurist) who fulfills all the necessary conditions: Ruhollah Musawi Khomeini. God save him!", the Open Letter.

(6) Open Letter.

(7) By which we mean as a political party, a part of the government and a pseudo-state in its own right, Hizballah is a part of the Lebanese ruling class apparatus, albeit an apparatus that requires a significant working class base to function.

(8) See the Beirut Indymedia film 'Leaded/Unleaded' available for free download here:  
<http://users.resist.ca/~leaded/>

(9) The middle classes have always been a part of Hizballah's cross-class nationalist project, but their size has grown of late.

#### Aufheben Commentaries

This article is a much expanded and updated version of our first 'Commentaries' pamphlet, 'War in Iran? Why we must oppose sanctions', which was produced in early 2006 to coincide with the national anti-war demo on March the 18<sup>th</sup>. At this time, there was an expectation that the US would launch air strikes or, perhaps more likely, sanctions, against Iran. The pamphlet was written as an intervention to encourage resistance to any such sanctions – particularly in the light of the failure of the official anti-war movement previously to oppose sanctions at the time of the first Gulf War. (The ill-judged call of the official anti-war movement for 'sanctions not war' was exposed when the devastating effects on the sanctions on the health of millions of Iraqis – and on the ability of the Iraqi working class to mobilize – soon became evident.)

Our 'Commentaries' pamphlets will be produced on an occasional basis to supplement the annual magazine by providing a topical analysis when needed. The pamphlets will be given away free at relevant events and at some outlets and eventually uploaded onto our website. (See inside back page of this issue for details.)

