

The Incidental Saddam Hussain

Asma Barlas

As this goes to press, the tragedy and travesty of the US-UK “war” against Iraq is still unfolding (I put “war” in quotes because this is a unilateral, unprovoked, and unlawful act of aggression by the US-UK whereas a war is based in mutual hostilities and is rule-bound). The blitzkrieg by the US air force, which involved throwing “bunker buster” and cluster bombs on the historic city of Baghdad and its civilians has not thus far induced an Iraqi surrender, though it is anybody’s guess how long a nation that has no air force nor much of a navy and where about half the population is sixteen years old or younger and around 86% malnourished (due to twelve years of sanctions), can hold out.

While this makes it easy to understand the US-UK coalition’s willingness to attack Iraq, the two reasons it has given for doing so contradict one another. One is to “liberate” the Iraqi people from Saddam Hussain, which represents the Iraqis as hapless victims unable to do much (the same Iraqis that the US-backed and UN imposed sanctions regime has been decimating while the world has sat idly by). The other is to secure the US/ West against future terrorism, which represents the Iraqis as deranged criminals who are out to get the US/West even though not a single Iraqi was implicated in 9/11.

The only reason that the US-UK governments can continue to peddle this contradiction is popular hatred for Saddam Hussain even though the man himself may be incidental to the “war;” indeed the only way that this “war” is about him is that he provides a focal point for it. But if he did not exist, this particular US administration would have had to invent him because it needs Iraq as a launching pad for its quest for global supremacy. This is the unavoidable conclusion suggested by a series of damning exposes in the media about the neoconservative agenda that underpins the Bush administration’s foreign policies.

One of the most recent is by well-known conservative, Patrick Buchanan, who writes that the neocons in the Bush administration (whose ideologues include Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle) are staunch advocates of the so-called “Leeden doctrine,” named after a former Pentagon official Michael Leeden. This doctrine can be “described thus: ‘Every ten years or so, the United States needs to pick up some small crappy little country and throw it against the wall, just to show that we mean business.’” Indeed, Leeden counsels destroying “the Big Three: Iran, Iraq, and Syria. And then we have to come to grips with Saudi Arabia” (Buchanan, “Whose War?” *The American Conservative*, March 24, 2003).

Among other neocons who also have called for a “war against militant Islam” is Norman Podhoretz who visualizes toppling “five or six or seven more tyrannies in the Islamic world (including that other sponsor of terrorism, Yasir Arafat’s Palestinian Authority). I can even [imagine] the turmoil of this war leading to some new species of an imperial mission for America . . . I can also envisage the establishment of some kind of American protectorate over the oil fields of Saudi Arabia, as we more and more come to wonder why 7,000 princes should go on being permitted to exert so much leverage over us and everyone else.” Meanwhile, at Perle’s behest, one Laurent Murawiec advised the Defense

Policy Board that the US should give the Saudis an ultimatum that they either “‘prosecute or isolate those involved in the terror chain’... and end all propaganda against Israel, or we invade your country, seize your oil fields and occupy Mecca.” In Murawiec’s “Grand Strategy... ‘Iraq is the tactical pivot, Saudi Arabia the strategic pivot, Egypt the prize.’” So fixated are the neocons on this dangerous vision that they lobbied Bill Clinton in 1998 when he was president, “to make removal of Saddam Hussein’s regime the ‘aim of American foreign policy’ and to use military action because ‘diplomacy is failing.’”

Given Buchanan’s own racist politics, one may quail at his charge that the neocons want “to conscript American blood to make the world safe for Israel. They want the peace of the sword imposed on Islam and American soldiers to die if necessary to impose it.” But there is now ample evidence to suggest that the neocons have collapsed the “national interests” of the US and Israel. In an article published last December, two former CIA analysts document the “dual loyalties” of Bush administration officials in detail:

“The neo-con strategy papers half a dozen years ago were dotted with concepts like ‘redefining Iraq,’ ‘redrawing the map of the Middle East,’ ‘nurturing alternatives to Arafat,’ all of which have in recent months become familiar parts of the Bush administration’s diplomatic lingo. Objectives laid out in these papers as important strategic goals for Israel including the ouster of Saddam Hussein, the strategic transformation of the entire Middle East, the death of the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, regime change wherever the U.S. and Israel don’t happen to like the existing government, the abandonment of any effort to forge a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace or even a narrower Palestinian-Israeli peace have now become, under the guidance of this group of pro-Israel neo-cons, important strategic goals for the United States. The enthusiasm with which senior administration officials like Bush himself, Cheney, and Rumsfeld have adopted strategic themes originally defined for Israel’s guidance and did so in many cases well before September 11 and the so-called war on terror testifies to the persuasiveness of a neo-con philosophy focused narrowly on Israel and the pervasiveness of the network throughout policymaking councils” (Kathleen and Bill Christison “A Rose by Another Other Name,” *Counterpunch*, December 13, 2002).

More recently, writing in the influential Israeli paper, *Ha’aretz*, Ari Shavit agrees that the war against Iraq was promoted by a small group of 25 or 30 neoconservatives, almost all of them Jewish, almost all of them intellectuals . . . people who are mutual friends and cultivate one another and are convinced that political ideas are a major driving force of history” (“White Man’s Burden, April 6, 2003). Does this mean, Shavit asks one of them, William Kristol, “that the war in Iraq is effectively a neoconservative war? That’s what people are saying, Kristol replies, laughing. But the truth is that it’s an American war. The neoconservatives succeeded because they touched the bedrock of America. The thing is that America has a profound sense of mission....”

Thomas Friedman, the noted Jewish journalist, disagrees. In response to Shavit’s query whether the Iraq war is “the great neoconservative war” he replies that “It’s the war the

neoconservatives wanted...It's the war the neoconservatives marketed. Those people had an idea to sell when September 11 came, and they sold it. Oh boy, did they sell it. So this is not a war that the masses demanded. This is a war of an elite. Friedman laughs: I could give you the names of 25 people (all of whom are at this moment within a five-block radius of this office) who, if you had exiled them to a desert island a year and a half ago, the Iraq war would not have happened.” And, yet, it isn't that simple, after all. “Friedman retracts. It's not some fantasy the neoconservatives invented. It's not that 25 people hijacked America. ...what fomented the war is America's over-reaction to September 11. The genuine sense of anxiety that spread in America after September 11. It is not only the neoconservatives who led us to the outskirts of Baghdad. What led us to the outskirts of Baghdad is a very American combination of anxiety and hubris.”

And so, this “war” is only incidentally about Saddam Hussain; after all, US officials said at the end of Gulf War I that they never intended to remove him for fear of destabilizing the region. And yet, thousands of people—mostly Iraqis, but also US—were sent to their deaths in his name. The same scenario is being replayed today with far graver results, which is why quibbling about Hussain seems pointless. The truth is that Iraq, once poised to become the Middle East's first modern Muslim state, now destroyed by sanctions, has become that “small crappy little country” that the US can “throw against the wall” as the first step in its march towards empire. Mr. Bush is right in at least one thing: this is going to be a long war, unlike any other war, as all wars for empire almost invariably are.