

Playing skittles with Saddam

The gameplan among Washington's hawks has long been to reshape the Middle East along US-Israeli lines

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2 September 2002

The Guardian

In a televised speech last week, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt predicted devastating consequences for the Middle East if Iraq is attacked.

"We fear a state of disorder and chaos may prevail in the region," he said. Mr Mubarak is an old-fashioned kind of Arab leader and, in the brave new post-September-11 world, he doesn't quite get the point.

What on earth did he expect the Pentagon's hawks to do when they heard his words of warning? Throw up their hands in dismay? -- "Gee, thanks, Hosni. We never thought of that. Better call the whole thing off right away."

They are probably still splitting their sides with laughter in the Pentagon. But Mr Mubarak and the hawks do agree on one thing: war with Iraq could spell disaster for several regimes in the Middle East. Mr Mubarak believes that would be bad. The hawks, though, believe it would be good.

For the hawks, disorder and chaos sweeping through the region would not be an unfortunate side-effect of war with Iraq, but a sign that everything is going according to plan.

In their eyes, Iraq is just the starting point -- or, as a recent presentation at the Pentagon put it, "the tactical pivot" -- for re-moulding the Middle East on Israeli-American lines.

This reverses the usual approach in international relations where stability is seen as the key to peace, and whether or not you like your neighbours, you have to find ways of living with them. No, say the hawks. If you don't like the neighbours, get rid of them.

The hawks claim that President Bush has already accepted their plan and made destabilisation of "despotic regimes" a central goal of his foreign policy. They cite passages from his recent speeches as proof of this, though whether Mr Bush really knows what he has accepted is unclear. The "skittles theory" of the Middle East -- that one ball aimed at Iraq can knock down several regimes -- has been around for some time on the wilder fringes of politics but has come to the fore in the United States on the back of the "war against terrorism".

Its roots can be traced, at least in part, to a paper published in 1996 by an Israeli thinktank, the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies. Entitled "A clean break: a new strategy for securing the realm", it was intended as a political blueprint for the incoming

government of Binyamin Netanyahu. As the title indicates, it advised the right-wing Mr Netanyahu to make a complete break with the past by adopting a strategy "based on an entirely new intellectual foundation, one that restores strategic initiative and provides the nation the room to engage every possible energy on rebuilding Zionism . . ."

Among other things, it suggested that the recently-signed Oslo accords might be dispensed with -- "Israel has no obligations under the Oslo agreements if the PLO does not fulfil its obligations" -- and that "alternatives to [Yasser] Arafat's base of power" could be cultivated. "Jordan has ideas on this," it added.

It also urged Israel to abandon any thought of trading land for peace with the Arabs, which it described as "cultural, economic, political, diplomatic, and military retreat".

"Our claim to the land -- to which we have clung for hope for 2,000 years -- is legitimate and noble," it continued. "Only the unconditional acceptance by Arabs of our rights, especially in their territorial dimension, 'peace for peace', is a solid basis for the future."

The paper set out a plan by which Israel would "shape its strategic environment", beginning with the removal of Saddam Hussein and the installation of a Hashemite monarchy in Baghdad.

With Saddam out of the way and Iraq thus brought under Jordanian Hashemite influence, Jordan and Turkey would form an axis along with Israel to weaken and "roll back" Syria. Jordan, it suggested, could also sort out Lebanon by "weaning" the Shia Muslim population away from Syria and Iran, and re-establishing their former ties with the Shia in the new Hashemite kingdom of Iraq. "Israel will not only contain its foes; it will transcend them", the paper concluded.

To succeed, the paper stressed, Israel would have to win broad American support for these new policies -- and it advised Mr Netanyahu to formulate them "in language familiar to the Americans by tapping into themes of American administrations during the cold war which apply well to Israel".

At first glance, there's not much to distinguish the 1996 "Clean Break" paper from the outpourings of other right-wing and ultra-Zionist thinktanks . . . except for the names of its authors.

The leader of the "prominent opinion makers" who wrote it was Richard Perle -- now chairman of the Defence Policy Board at the Pentagon.

Also among the eight-person team was Douglas Feith, a neo-conservative lawyer, who now holds one of the top four posts at the Pentagon as under-secretary of policy.

Mr Feith has objected to most of the peace deals made by Israel over the years, and views the Middle East in the same good-versus-evil terms that he previously viewed the cold war. He regarded the Oslo peace process as nothing more than a unilateral withdrawal which "raises life-and-death issues for the Jewish state".

Two other opinion-makers in the team were David Wurmser and his wife, Meyrav (see US thinktanks give lessons in foreign policy , August 19). Mrs Wurmser was co-founder of Memri , a Washington-based charity that distributes articles translated from Arabic newspapers portraying Arabs in a bad light. After working with Mr Perle at the American Enterprise Institute, David Wurmser is now at the State Department, as a special assistant to John Bolton, the under-secretary for arms control and international security.

A fifth member of the team was James Colbert, of the Washington-based Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (Jinsa) -- a bastion of neo-conservative hawkery whose advisory board was previously graced by Dick Cheney (now US vice-president), John Bolton and Douglas Feith.

One of Jinsa's stated aims is "to inform the American defence and foreign affairs community about the important role Israel can and does play in bolstering democratic interests in the Mediterranean and the Middle East". In practice, a lot of its effort goes into sending retired American military brass on jaunts to Israel -- after which many of them write suitably hawkish newspaper articles or letters to the editor.

Jinsa's activities are examined in detail by Jason Vest in the September 2 issue of *The Nation*. The article notes some interesting business relationships between retired US military officers on Jinsa's board and American companies supplying weapons to Israel.

With several of the "Clean Break" paper's authors now holding key positions in Washington, the plan for Israel to "transcend" its foes by reshaping the Middle East looks a good deal more achievable today than it did in 1996. Americans may even be persuaded to give up their lives to achieve it.

The six-year-old plan for Israel's "strategic environment" remains more or less intact, though two extra skittles -- Saudi Arabia and Iran -- have joined Iraq, Syria and Lebanon on the hit list.

Whatever members of the Iraqi opposition may think, the plan to replace Saddam Hussein with a Hashemite monarch -- descendants of the Prophet Muhammad who rule Jordan -- is also very much alive. Evidence of this was strengthened by the surprise arrival of Prince Hassan, former heir to the Jordanian throne, at a meeting of exiled Iraqi officers in London last July.

The task of promoting Prince Hassan as Iraq's future king has fallen to Michael Rubin, who currently works at the American Enterprise Institute but will shortly take up a new job at the Pentagon, dealing with post-Saddam Iraq.

One of the curious aspects of this neo-conservative intrigue is that so few people outside the United States and Israel take it seriously. Perhaps, like President Mubarak, they can't imagine that anyone who holds a powerful position in the United States could be quite so reckless.

But nobody can accuse the neo-conservatives of concealing their intentions: they write about them constantly in American newspapers. Just two weeks ago, an article in the *Washington*

Times by Tom Neumann, executive director of Jinsa, spelled out the plan in clear, cold terms:

"Jordan will likely survive the coming war with U.S. assistance, so will some of the sheikhdoms. The current Saudi regime will likely not. The Iran dissident movement would be helped enormously by the demise of Saddam, and the Palestinians would have to know that the future lies with the West. Syria's Ba'athist dictatorship will likely fall unmourned, liberating Lebanon as well. Israel and Turkey, the only current democracies in the region, will find themselves in a far better neighbourhood."

Would anyone like to bet on that?

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