

US Hawks Smell Blood

Neocons favor escalation of Middle East War

By [Jim Lobe](#)

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19 July 2006, IPS WASHINGTON -Seeing a major opportunity to regain influence lost as a result of setbacks in Iraq, prominent neo-conservatives are calling for unconditional US support for Israel's military offensives in Gaza and Lebanon and "regime change" in Syria and Iran, as well as possible US attacks on Tehran's nuclear facilities in retaliation for its support of Hezbollah.

In a Weekly Standard column titled "Our war", editor William Kristol called Iran "the prime mover behind the terrorist groups who have started this war", which, he argued, should be considered part of "the global struggle against radical Islamism".

He complained that Washington recently had done a "poor job of standing up and weakening Syria and Iran" and called on President George W Bush to fly directly from the "silly [Group of Eight] summit in St Petersburg ... to Jerusalem, the capital of a nation that stands with us, and is willing to fight with us, against our common enemies".

"This is our war, too," said Kristol, who was also a founder and co-chairman of the recently lapsed Project for the New American Century (PNAC).

Echoed Larry Kudlow, a neo-conservative commentator, at the Standard's right-wing competitor, the National Review: "All of us in the free world owe Israel an enormous thank-you for defending freedom, democracy and security against the Iranian cat's-paw wholly owned terrorist subsidiaries Hezbollah and Hamas.

"They are defending their own homeland and very existence, but they are also defending America's homeland as our frontline democratic ally in the Middle East," according to Kudlow, who, like Kristol and other like-minded polemicists, also named Syria, "which is also directed by Iran", as a promising target as the conflict expands.

The two columns are just the latest examples of a slew of commentaries that have appeared in US print and broadcast media since Israel began bombing targets in Lebanon in retaliation for Hezbollah's fatal cross-border attack last Wednesday.

They appear to be part of a deliberate campaign by neo-conservatives and some of their right-wing supporters to depict the current conflict as part of global struggle pitting Israel, as the forward base of Western civilization, against Islamist extremism organized and directed by Iran and its junior partner, Syria.

This view was perhaps most dramatically expressed by the former Republican Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, in an appearance on the National Broadcasting Co's Meet the

Press on Sunday when he described the conflict as “the early stages of ... the Third World War”.

The effort to frame the current round of violence as part of a much larger struggle – and Israel’s role as Washington’s most loyal front-line ally – recalls the neo-conservatives’ early reaction to the terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001.

Just nine days after September 11, Kristol and PNAC – whose charter members included Vice President Dick Cheney, Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld and half a dozen other senior Bush administration officials – released an open letter to Bush that called for the United States to retaliate not only against al-Qaeda and Afghanistan, but also against Israel’s main regional foes, beginning with Iraqi president Saddam Hussein and Palestine Liberation Organization chairman Yasser Arafat.

In addition, the letter advised, “any war against terrorism must target Hezbollah. We believe that the administration should demand that Iran and Syria immediately cease all military, financial and political support for Hezbollah and its operations. Should Iran and Syria refuse to comply, the administration should consider appropriate measures of retaliation against these state sponsors of terrorism.

“Israel has been and remains America’s staunchest ally against international terrorism, especially in the Middle East,” the letter asserted. “The United States should fully support our fellow democracy in its fight against terrorism.”

While the Iraqi and Palestinian components of PNAC’s agenda were soon adopted as policy and in essence achieved, neo-conservative hopes that Bush would move on Hezbollah – as well as Syria and Iran – eventually stalled as US military forces became bogged down in an increasingly bloody and costly counter-insurgency war in Iraq.

As the situation in Iraq worsened, neo-conservative influence in and on the administration also declined to the benefit of “realists” based primarily in the State Department who favored a less aggressive policy designed to secure Damascus’ and Tehran’s cooperation in stabilizing Iraq and strengthen the elected Lebanese government of which Hezbollah was made a part.

In that context, the current conflict represents a golden opportunity for the neo-conservatives to reassert their influence and reactivate their Israel-centered agenda against Hezbollah and its two state sponsors.

“Iran’s proxy war”, blazed the cover of this week’s Standard, which also featured no fewer than three other articles, besides Kristol’s editorial, underlining Iran’s sponsorship of Hezbollah and Hamas and the necessity of the US standing with Israel, if not taking independent action against Tehran and/or Damascus as recommended by Kristol himself.

A major theme of the new campaign is that the more conciliatory “realist” policies toward Syria and Iran pursued by the State Department have actually backfired by making Washington look weak.

“They are now testing us more boldly than one would have thought possible a few years ago,” wrote Kristol. “Weakness is provocative. We have been too weak, and have allowed ourselves to be perceived as weak,” he went on, adding that “the right response is renewed

strength”, notably “in pursuing regime change in Syria and Iran [and] consider[ing] countering this act of Iranian aggression with a military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities”.

The notion that US policy in the region has become far too flaccid and accommodating is echoed by a number of other neo-conservatives, particularly Michael Rubin, a prolific analyst at the hardline American Enterprise Institute and protege of Cheney confidant and former Defense Policy Board chairman Richard Perle.

In a companion Standard article, Rubin qualified recent State Department policy as “all talk and no strategy” that had emboldened enemies, especially Iran, to challenge Washington and its allies.

In another article for the National Review on Monday, bluntly titled “Eradication first”, Rubin elaborated on that theme, arguing that diplomacy in the current crisis will only be successful “if it commences both after the eradication of Hezbollah and Hamas, and after their paymasters pay a terrible cost for their support. If ... peace is the aim, it is imperative to punish the Syrian and Iranian leadership,” he wrote.

Above all, according to the neo-conservatives, the US position in the region is now inextricably tied to the success or failure of Israel’s military campaign.

In yet another Standard article, titled “The rogues strike back: Iran, Syria, Hamas and Hezbollah vs Israel”, Robert Satloff, executive director of the hawkish, pro-Israel Washington Institute for Near East Policy, argued that “defeat for Israel – either on the battlefield or via coerced compromises to achieve flawed ceasefires – is a defeat for US interests; it will inspire radicals of every stripe, release Iran and Syria to spread more mayhem inside Iraq, and make more likely our own eventual confrontation with this emboldened alliance of extremists.”

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