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America's War against Islam

By Patrick Seale

It must now be clear to everyone that President Barack Obama has failed to keep his promise to the Muslim world. In Cairo last year, and on subsequent occasions, he pledged that the United States was not, and would never be, at war with Islam. These words awakened immense hope throughout the Muslim world, but that hope has now given way to an equally immense disillusion. Most Muslims see little difference between Obama and his belligerent predecessor, George W Bush. For them, America *is* at war with Islam.

And some of them intend to fight back.

Two Views of President Obama¹

There is an element of perplexing ambiguity about President Obama. He sends mixed signals. According to one view – a view I myself have held for some time -- he is a man of the Third World. His father was a Muslim. He spent some early years in Indonesia. He is the first black president of the United States. Everything about this background would suggest that he knows what needs to be done to defuse Muslim hostility and protect Western and American vital interests.

But there is another view of him, which has come to the fore, namely that he is really an all-American boy, who grew up in Hawaii, went to Harvard and then to Chicago, a very American town, and that he simply doesn't really understand why Muslims are angry.

Obama may *prefer* America *not* to be at war with Islam, but he has done nothing about it except to utter a few emollient words – such as his speech a week or two ago in Jakarta -- as if Muslim hostility to the United States were only an unfortunate misunderstanding to be lifted by a little good will.

Instead of acting resolutely to defuse Muslim anger, he has placed himself in the hands of the very same people who have been making America's disastrous Middle East policy under both parties for the past several decades. He has bowed to domestic pressures from powerful pro-Israeli lobbies and their affiliated think-tanks, from the US Congress, from a phalanx of neo-conservatives whose influence still reaches deep inside the Administration, from the higher ranks of the U.S. military, from hectoring TV channels such as Fox News, and from an ignorant and increasingly right-wing and Islamophobic American public, still demanding vengeance for the attacks on the American heartland of 11 September 2001.

As America wages war against Islam more ferociously than ever, so the threat of attack from radical Islamic groups has *grown* rather than retreated under Obama's presidency.

At the start of his mandate, Obama outlined three clear goals: to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict on the basis of a two-state solution; to resolve by negotiation America's

¹ Headings and bold emphasis added by Robert Steele prior to posting at Phi Beta Iota.

conflict with Iran over its nuclear programme; and to withdraw from Iraq. On the first count, he has been defeated by Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. On the second, he was deflected from his goal of reaching out to Iran by the 'Green revolution' which erupted last year following President Mahmud Ahmadinejad's rigged re-election.

Be that as it may, gone today is any real attempt at reconciliation with Tehran. Instead, Obama has resorted to increasingly punitive sanctions. He may have thought this was the only way to tame the hawks, both American and Israeli, who clamoured for military action. But cranking up sanctions has caused great bitterness in Tehran, where the United States is seen more than ever as the enemy. This is hardly the right climate for reaching a reasonable compromise on the nuclear issue.

On Iraq, Obama *has* so far kept his pledge: 90,000 combat soldiers have left the country. But the United States has far from disengaged. 50,000 US soldiers remain in Iraq. And the vast fortified US embassy – the biggest in the world – bears witness to America's ambitions in that country. Meanwhile, the situation remains highly dangerous and unstable. 'Al-Qaida in Iraq' has sprung menacingly to life – as was brought home by the recent grisly slaughter of Christian worshippers in the Syriac Catholic Cathedral in Baghdad.

Just who started the war between the United States and Islam is not my concern here. To answer that, one would have to examine the way the United States, after World War Two, inherited a neo-imperial role in the Middle East from its enfeebled European allies, Britain and France – who themselves laid the foundations for many of today's conflicts by the way they chopped up and disposed of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire after World War One, including, of course, Britain's support for Zionist aims in Palestine.

My concern is to try and understand the present situation – a situation in which a number of radical Islamic groups have struck at American and European targets, and have threatened to strike again. Although ten years have passed, the 11 September 2001 attacks on New York and Washington are still in everyone's mind. But there have been several others: the earlier attack on the World Trade Center in 1993; the assault on two of America's East African embassies in 1998 which killed over 200 people; the suicide bombing of the *USS Cole* in Aden harbour in 2000 which killed 17 US sailors; the attack on a train in Madrid in March 2004 which killed 191 people, the suicide bombings in London's transport system in July 2005 when 52 people died. Other, potentially devastating, attacks – such as the packages of explosives recently sent from Yemen -- have fortunately been foiled.

Western security chiefs --Jonathan Evans, head of Britain's MI5, and Bernard Squarcini, his French opposite number -- have drawn particular attention to the danger posed by British- French- or American-born youths who, having been radicalised by action in Yemen or Somalia, might seek on their return to strike at Europe or the United States.

Some would argue that terrorist threats such as these can best be dealt with by police and intelligence services, by electronic intercepts, by counter-terrorist operations and surgical strikes. Clearly, Western security agencies are now on high alert, while the CIA is waging a shadow war against extremists in a dozen countries –

in the mountains of Pakistan and the deserts of the Sahara, in Somalia and East Africa, in Central Asia, and increasingly in Yemen.

The Key Question

The key question, it seems to me, is this: are such methods sufficient on their own to deal with the threat or is a fundamental revision required of current Western policies? Hostility to the West has spread far beyond the confines of small militant groups, such as al-Qaida. Indeed, most Muslims would probably reject Al-Qaida's violent methods, but this does not mean that they are not stirred by anger and humiliation at America's wars against Muslim countries, at the situation in Palestine, at the insulting way Muslims and their religion are treated in the West.

We are witnessing, if not yet a global insurgency, then something like a world-wide movement of Islamic resistance. Potential recruits for *jihad* are legion.

Three Reasons West and US Arouse Muslim Hatred

Why has the West -- and the U.S. in particular -- aroused such hatred in the Muslim world? At the risk of over-simplifying a complex subject, I would suggest at least three main reasons.

The first is what one might call the militarisation of America's foreign policy. US forces are now deployed in about a thousand bases, stations and outposts throughout the world -- including several in the Arab and Muslim world, where the most violent confrontations are taking place. America's 2010 military budget runs to the titanic figure of over \$700bn -- more than the defence budgets of the whole of the rest of the world combined.

Washington seems to have assumed a God-given right to interfere forcibly in the affairs of other nations. It has waged wars and destroyed whole societies -- allegedly in the interest of liberating them from local tyrants or of introducing them to the benefits of Western-style democracy. Any country daring to defy the United States is dubbed a 'rogue state'. In the last two or three decades, America's national triumphalism has turned into a project to control the world through the expansion of American military power.

This is a theme explored by the distinguished American commentator William Pfaff in a brilliant essay, *The Irony of Manifest Destiny*, published earlier this year. Pfaff explains how America's dominant political ideology -- its confidence in the superiority of its democracy, of its institutions, of its values -- has in recent years been recast into a policy of aggressive international intervention -- even, when necessary, of military pre-emption. The enemy is defined as Islamic radicalism.

In his second inaugural address, George W Bush went so far as to say that America's mission was nothing less than 'to abolish evil in the world' -- 'evil' defined as Islamic militancy! Bush's Global War On Terror -- or GWOT -- was the clearest example of this aggressive forward policy. As a consequence, American military operations killed -- and are killing -- large numbers of Muslims in many parts of the globe, arousing great anger. Many Muslims have come to see America as a destroyer rather than a liberator.

The US never paused to ask itself why it was attacked on 11 September 2001, why educated young Muslims like Muhammad Ata were ready to sacrifice their lives in order to strike at America. The US response to 9/11 could, and perhaps should, have been a police or special-forces operation to find Bin Laden and his associates. Instead, George W Bush invaded Afghanistan in 2001 and overthrew the Taliban government to punish it for giving house-room to al-Qaida's leadership, little aware that the Pashtun tribal code demands that hospitality and protection be afforded to strangers. Rather than adopting a policy which might have separated the Pashtun tribesmen from their dangerous guests, Bush's invasion -- and the on-going nine-year war that has followed -- have cemented the alliance between the Taliban and al-Qaida in the common goal of expelling foreign forces.

Obama may have dropped the GWOT catch-phrase, but the unfortunate reality is that far from scaling back the war against Islamic militants he has *expanded* it. His many military operations have *widened* the circle of America's enemies.

Is it surprising that many Muslims consider that America is at war with Islam?

Let me turn to another major reason for Muslim and Arab hostility to the United States. It is the unlimited backing which America has given Israel over more than forty years -- and continues to give today with ever more lavish generosity. The massive flow of aid – military, financial and political – reflects the very great influence which Israel and its American friends have secured over America's Middle East policy.

An extraordinary recent example was the letter Dennis Ross, a well-known advocate of Israel inside the Administration, drafted for Obama to send to Israel's Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu to persuade him to extend the partial settlement freeze in the occupied territories. Ross's draft has aroused anger and incredulity in the Arab and Muslim world. In exchange for a mere 60-day extension of the very partial freeze, Ross proposed that Obama offer Israel a pledge not to ask for any further extensions after this one; an increase in military aid (over and above the more than \$3.2bn Israel is getting this year); support for Israel's bid to remain in the Jordan Valley (which makes nonsense of any idea of a viable Palestinian state); a pledge to veto any Security Council resolutions hostile to Israel during the first year of negotiations, and more in the same vein. Even the *New York Times*, not known for its criticism of Israel, called the package 'overly generous.' Netanyahu turned down the offer. He obviously thought he could get more – and he succeeded! In a seven-hour bargaining session with Secretary of State Hilary Clinton he secured an even more generous security and diplomatic package: another squadron of F-35s worth \$3bn; a US pledge to veto any attempt to win recognition of a Palestinian state at the UN Security Council and much more, against an extension of the partial freeze from 60 to 90 days (excluding East Jerusalem.)

As Geoffrey Aronson of the Foundation for Middle East Peace commented: In return for a temporary tactical concession by Netanyahu, Obama appears ready to provide wide-ranging American territorial and security assurances that have a direct bearing on the shape of a final status agreement.

America's extravagant commitments to Israel were first made by Henry Kissinger in the 1970s. As President Nixon sank into the Watergate scandal, Kissinger rose to become the tsar of Washington's diplomacy, with almost presidential powers. To win

support from leading members of the Administration whose commitment to Israel was less fervent than his own, Kissinger portrayed Israel as an American strategic asset in the global struggle against the Soviet Union. The figures are eloquent. In 1970, Israel received a mere \$30 million in US credits and arms deliveries; in 1971, after the 'Black September' crisis in Jordan in which Kissinger called on Israel to help protect King Husain, US aid rose to \$545 million. And during the October War of 1973, Kissinger called for a \$3 billion aid bill. It has remained at about that level ever since. A major landmark on the road to America's alignment with Israel was the promise Kissinger made that the US would make no move in the Middle East peace process without first consulting Israel.

Even more far reaching was the subsequent US commitment to guarantee Israel's military superiority over all its neighbours, its so-called Qualitative Military Edge -- or QME. The US has honoured this guarantee for the past 30 years. What is more, the guarantee was written into US law in 2008 and is therefore binding on this and every future President.

The QME is defined as an American guarantee to ensure Israel's ability to counter and *defeat* any military threat from any state, coalition of states or non-state actors, while itself sustaining minimal casualties or damage.

Last July, Andrew J Shapiro, Assistant Secretary for Political-Military Affairs at the State Department and a well-known pro-Israeli hawk, told an audience at Washington's Saban Center that a prime responsibility of his job was to preserve Israel's QME. This involved the unprecedented commitment, made in 2007, to provide Israel with \$30bn in security assistance over ten years, together with an extra \$205m this year, over and above the \$3bn, to help finance Israel's new 'Iron Dome' multi-layered defence system designed to neutralise Hizballah's short-range rockets. The US has worked to shut down the flow of weapons into Gaza, to mop up so-called 'terrorist' financing, to protect Israel's nuclear monopoly. The US maintains a War Reserve Stockpile in Israel, which the IDF can draw on in an emergency, and has given Israel access to millions of dollars each year in free or discounted military equipment under the Defense Department's Excess Defense Articles program. Shapiro himself is the US representative on the US-Israel Joint Political-Military Group which ensures the closest defence ties between the two allies.

Meanwhile, another pro-Israeli hawk, Stuart Levey, undersecretary at the US Treasury, is eagerly and relentlessly putting the squeeze on Iran. His aim (in his own words) is 'dramatically to isolate Iran financially and commercially' from the rest of the world.

The US has, in fact, embraced as its own Israel's security doctrine, first elaborated by David Ben Gurion sixty years ago. This doctrine holds that Israel's security can be guaranteed only by military supremacy over the entire region. Israel must be stronger than any possible combination of its neighbours. Ariel Sharon used to say that Israel's sphere of influence extends as far as an F-15 can fly. This sphere will soon be extended since Israel is to get twenty F-35s, the very latest American warplane -- paid for by the American tax-payer.

It is of course perfectly understandable and legitimate for Israel to seek maximum security for itself, and for the United States to help it to do so. That is not

the issue. The problem with the QME is that it encourages Israel to over-reach. Israel demands security for itself but at the cost of the insecurity of its neighbours. These neighbours have no right to defend themselves, but must meekly submit to Israel's American-guaranteed military supremacy. Anyone who dares resist is called a 'terrorist!'

The QME does more than provide Israel with security. It gives it the power to strike its neighbours whenever they show defiance -- a power which has led to repeated wars, military incursions, massacres, and to a permanent state of nervous insecurity in the region, such as we are witnessing today. The QME has also allowed Israel to *expand* at the expense of its neighbours. The US is thus complicit in Israel's prolonged occupation of the Syrian Golan and in the relentless seizure of Palestinian land by fanatical Jewish settlers and Greater Israel ideologues.

To an outside observer, it would seem that the United States has allowed the relationship with Israel to get out of hand.

There is another aspect of Israeli policy which arouses great anger – that is, its systematic attempts to penetrate, disrupt and enfeeble its Arab neighbours. Over the past several decades, Israel has incited the Kurds against Baghdad; the southern Sudanese against Khartoum; the Lebanese Maronites against Syria, to mention only some of its ventures. Israel has also frequently resorted to murdering suspected enemies both inside the Palestinian territories and abroad – such as the killing of a Hamas official in a hotel in Dubai not so long ago. All these actions have contributed to a steady build-up of hostility to Israel and the United States—as well as to a growing determination to *resist* whatever the cost. One should not be surprised that crowds in many a Muslim city cry 'Death to Israel!' and 'Death to America!'

A third reason for Muslim hostility to America and to the West in general is the virulent strain of Islamophobia that has broken surface in the U.S. and in several European countries. Now that Communism has collapsed, many Americans, and an increasing number of Europeans, choose to depict Islam as the 'new enemy'. A chorus has arisen denigrating and demonising Islam as an irredeemably violent religion which must be defeated if the West and Israel are to be safe.

Inflammatory actions have contributed to poisoning the atmosphere – such as a readiness to burn the Qur'an, which Muslims consider the living word of God; vandalising Muslim cemeteries, as has happened in France; or the noisy demonstrations in Manhattan against the project to build an Islamic community centre, Cordoba House, three blocks from Ground Zero. Obama's defence of the project prompted a reader of *The Washington Post* to say that this proved conclusively that the President was 'neither an American nor a Christian.' The Anti-Defamation League, the biggest Jewish American organisation engaged in the struggle against anti-Semitism, has come out strongly against the mosque project, as have Christian Zionists and the Baptist preacher Pat Robertson, honorary president of the Christian Coalition of America, who has repeatedly charged that Islam is a 'satanic power' which seeks to impose its law on Judeo-Christian civilization.

In these quarters, Obama's pledge – which, alas, has proved empty -- that the US is not at war with Islam is seen as cowardly appeasement. Christopher Caldwell, a senior editor on the *Weekly Standard*, the main organ of Washington's

neoconservatives, scornfully dismissed Obama's Cairo speech as 'penitent, humbled and even sycophantic'. Its purpose, he asserted, was 'to break faith with Israel'.

In Europe, the success of far-right parties – in Holland, Sweden, Denmark, Austria, Switzerland – has sent a clear signal to Muslim immigrants that they are not welcome. Germany, too, is in the grip of a great debate about whether or not its three million Turks can ever be fully integrated. German Chancellor Angela Merkel has herself admitted that multiculturalism has failed. In France, President Sarkozy has adopted a clear anti-Muslim policy: he has confronted Iran over its nuclear programme; he has sent troops to fight in Afghanistan; he has strenuously opposed Turkish membership of the EU, apparently in the belief that there are more than enough Muslims in Europe already. He has also linked Muslim immigration to crime, and has launched a controversial debate about France's 'national identity' – widely seen as an attempt to garner far right votes ahead of the 2012 presidential election.

Is it surprising that some Muslims feel that the West is at war with them?

Many Other Reasons

There are, of course, many other reasons for the present Islamist ferment. All too often, Muslim militants are at war with their own governments as well as with the US -- for being enslaved, as they would see it, to Western powers; for failing to contain, let alone defeat, Israel over the past six decades; for endangering Muslim cultural identity. There is a widespread feeling among them that secular nationalism has failed to protect Muslim interests, that Arab nationalism, in particular, is an empty slogan which has not resulted in any effective joint action, let alone Arab unity.

The jails of Egypt, Iraq, Algeria, Syria, Jordan, Yemen are full of different varieties of rebellious Islamic militants. Saudi Arabia is perhaps the one Arab country to have launched a reasonably successful programme of re-education and rehabilitation for such extremists. But not all Saudi extremists have seen the light. The Kingdom remains al-Qaida's number one target. All too often, Arab regimes have had to face the backlash from American military operations. When the US kills Muslims – in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen or wherever – it is the local rulers who lose legitimacy in the eyes of their own people.

Aggressive Western Interventions

Aggressive Western interventions in the affairs of the Muslim world have often had unintended and usually unwelcome consequences. Let me remind you of a few such cases.

Iran

***The most familiar one is perhaps that of the covert Anglo-American coup in Iran in 1953, which overthrew Muhammad Mosaddiq, the charismatic anti-colonial prime minister and passionate opponent of foreign intervention. Mosaddiq's crime was to attempt to nationalise the all-powerful Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. After his fall, the US lavished weapons on the Shah to build him up into a gendarme of Western interests in the Gulf and lent support to his so-called 'white revolution', which was largely directed against the Shi'ite religious establishment.

Had Britain and the United States not overthrown Mossadig, it is very probable that the 1979 revolution – in effect an Islamic counter-revolution -- would not have occurred. There would have been no virulently anti-American Islamic Republic of Iran. Washington's breach with Tehran has now lasted more than 30 years.

Lebanon

***Lebanon provides another example of unforeseen consequences. When the Israelis first invaded Lebanon in 1978, President Jimmy Carter ordered them out. They eventually complied, leaving a proxy Lebanese force behind. But in 1982, the then US Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, gave Israel a green light to invade Lebanon again. Its war aims were to destroy the PLO, expel Syrian influence and put an Israeli vassal in power in Beirut. Israeli forces laid siege to Beirut – killing some 17,000 people. The US then sought to reward Israel for its aggression by brokering a peace treaty between Lebanon and Israel -- the so-called 17 May 1983 accord -- which would have put Lebanon into Israel's orbit. Syria mobilised its local allies and destroyed the accord. Unlike Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan then decided to '*negotiate*' Israel out of Lebanon. It stayed for 18 years.

Hizballah, Lebanon's Shi'i resistance movement, was formed as a direct result of Israel's repeated incursions, invasions, massacres and occupations. Although Israel and the United States persist in calling it a terrorist organisation, Hizballah's mission is first of all to protect the Shi'a community, which accounts for some 35 to 40 per cent of the population; secondly, to deter any further Israeli assaults such as its 2006 war, which was also sanctioned by Washington. That many Lebanese feel nothing but bitter, vengeful hostility to Israel and its US patron is not altogether surprising.

Iraq

***Another, rather less well-known, example of unforeseen consequences concerns Iraq. In the 1970s, shortly after clawing his way to the top as Iraq's strong man, Saddam Hussein was confronted by a Kurdish rebellion, armed, encouraged and financed by the Shah of Iran, by Israel and the United States. To get these external actors to drop their support for the Kurds, Saddam agreed -- with great reluctance -- to put his signature to the Algiers Agreement of 1975, by which he surrendered to Iran control over half the Shatt al-Arab waterway up to the thalweg line, that is the deepest channel. Formed by the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates, the Shatt is the estuary which channels the waters of these two great rivers into the Gulf. It is Iraq's only access to the sea. Before the Algiers Agreement, Iraq's control of the Shatt extended to the Iranian shore.

Iraq's loss of full control over the Shatt continued to rankle. In 1980, Saddam tore up the Algiers Agreement and went to war against the new-born Islamic Republic. The Iran-Iraq war lasted eight long years, 1980-88. It caused an estimated one million deaths and untold destruction on both sides. The US backed Iraq, opening a second front against Iran in the Gulf -- and even shooting down an Iranian civilian airliner. Israel did its best to keep the war going by selling arms clandestinely to Iran, thus breaching America's embargo. (This was the so-called Iran-Contra affair).

The war ended when both sides were exhausted. But its unforeseen consequences are with us still. Mahmud Ahmadinejad, Iran's combative President,

and the commanders of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, were shaped by the life-and-death struggle with Iraq. America is now confronted by men who bear an enormous, and some might say legitimate, grievance against it.

Afghanistan

***While the Iraq-Iran war was raging, another struggle was taking place in Afghanistan – this was the proxy war between the United States and the Soviet Union. It was to provide another notorious case of unforeseen consequences. With the help of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, the United States recruited, trained and armed tens of thousands of Muslim youths to fight the Soviets. These *mujahidin* -- volunteer fighters in the cause of Islam -- were drawn from many countries. Over 25,000 came from Yemen, for example. Many came from Algeria and other places across the region. Their names and personal details were entered into the data-base of a fervent opponent of the Soviet military presence: Osama Bin Laden.

But, once the Soviets cut their losses and quit Afghanistan in 1989, the United States had no further use for the *mujahidin*. Thoughtlessly, it dropped them. Funding dried up. Thousands of alienated and unemployed youth, often unwanted back in their own countries, turned against their former patrons. Some turned against Saudi Arabia, when it invited half a million US soldiers on to its territory in 1990 – a territory Muslims consider 'sacred' -- to expel Iraq from Kuwait. Many more former *mujahidin* turned violently against America.

The creation of al-Qaida was thus a direct result of America's mobilisation of the *mujahidin* to destroy Soviet power in Afghanistan.

Iraq Again

***Saddam Hussein emerged from the Iraq-Iran with a grievance. Iraq had fought and bled to contain revolutionary Iran. In doing so, it had protected the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia, as well as Western oil interests. Not unnaturally, Saddam expected a reward. He wanted Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to write off his wartime debts. He felt that the Western powers should recognise him as their prime interlocutor in the Gulf. But instead of rewarding him, attempts were made to cut him down to size. Kuwait refused to write off his debts. Israel made threatening noises.

Saddam had long resented Iraq's very narrow frontage on the Gulf, which made the country virtually land-locked. Britain had drawn the frontier in such a way as to prevent Iraq from interfering with the Gulf shaikhdoms on Britain's sea-route to India. Anyway, to compensate him for the narrow frontage, Saddam wanted Kuwait to give him, or lease him, two small uninhabited islands which obstruct Iraq's access to the sea. But Kuwait refused. Saddam accused it of flooding the market with oil to force down the price and bankrupt him. Tension mounted between them. On 2 August 1990, an enraged Saddam invaded Kuwait.

The invasion shocked Arab leaders and struck a blow at Arab solidarity. Saddam's aggressive move aroused fears in the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia, and also in the West. Within six months, the US had put together a grand coalition, which included Britain and France, but also Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Syria. The campaign opened with an aerial bombardment followed by a ground

assault. Iraqi forces were soon routed and Kuwait was liberated. This was the first Gulf War of 1991, also known as Operation Desert Storm.

But the war was far from popular with opinion across the Arab and Muslim world. Many sided with Iraq, and were even ready to fight for it. There was great anger at the way Saddam's troops were savagely bombed as they fled Kuwait. The long punitive 13-year blockade of Iraq which followed seemed unnecessarily cruel and is said to have caused the death of half a million Iraqi babies.

In 1991, Yemen, for one, refused to join the anti-Iraq coalition. In retaliation, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States expelled about a million Yemeni workers. Remittances from these workers had been the mainstay of Yemen's economy. Their loss crippled the country and is a major reason why Yemen is today a 'failing state' and a sanctuary for 'al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula'.

Iraq and Israel

***There was yet another major unforeseen consequence of the Iran-Iraq war. Even though Iraq was gravely weakened by the 8-year struggle, Israel still viewed it as potentially dangerous. In an angry verbal exchange with Israel shortly after the war, Saddam was rash enough to declare that if Israel were to attack him he would 'burn half of Israel.' Unknowingly, he had signed his own death warrant.

From then on, Israeli strategists started to worry about a potentially hostile 'Eastern front', which might, they thought, take the form of an Iraqi thrust through Jordan. Israel had neutralised Egypt to the south by the 1979 peace treaty. But Iraq, to the east, was still on its feet. Throughout the 1990s, Israel and its neo-conservative friends in the United States plotted, campaigned and pressured America to attack Iraq. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 gave them their chance.

In making the case for war, the role played by Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and his colleague Douglas Feith at the Pentagon, and by David Wurmser, Louis 'Scooter' Libby and others in Vice President Cheney's office, has been well documented. They were among the most prominent of the large number of pro-Israeli neocons deeply embedded in George W Bush's administration. Fraudulent intelligence was peddled to make the case that Saddam was linked to al-Qaida and was developing weapons of mass destruction.

The American Neo-Conservative Campaign Plan

In order to persuade the US to attack Iraq in the aftermath of 9/11, the neocons produced a self-serving explanation of Islamic terror. Such terror, they argued, had nothing to do with America's armed interventions in the Muslim world and nothing to do with its lavish support for Israel. America was blameless. America was good. Islamic terror, they said, was the product of a violent and fanatical religion. For America and Israel to be safe, the Middle East had to be reformed and restructured – if necessary by force.

The US could begin by restructuring Iraq, and then move on to Syria, Iran, Lebanon, even in due course to Egypt and Saudi Arabia as well. The neocons' dream was to harness American power to deal a terminal blow to Islamic militancy, Arab nationalism, and Palestinian resistance.

The immediate aim of this geopolitical fantasy was nothing less than the disarmament of Iraq, Iran and Syria, and the destruction of Hizballah and Hamas, the two defiant non-state actors. The US was persuaded to shift its focus from Afghanistan to Iraq. The result was the 2003 invasion and occupation.

Pro-Israeli neocons were, of course, not the only ones pressing for war against Iraq. After 9/11, George W Bush wanted to teach the Arabs a lesson they would never forget. Defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld felt the need for a small war to overcome opposition from the top brass to his plans to reshape the US military. He had his eye on a US strategic base in Iraq. Vice President Dick Cheney – who had spent five years at the head of the oil services giant Haliburton – imagined that Iraq's oil could serve as a replacement for Saudi oil. US relations with Saudi Arabia were strained since fifteen of the twenty-one 9/11 hijackers were Saudi.

Be that as it may, without the intense pressure and manipulation of intelligence by the neocons, America would not have gone to war. Wolfowitz and his friends insisted that the Iraqi Ba'th party be outlawed and the Iraq army disbanded, throwing 400,000 men on to the street. These happened to be the two institutions that kept the country together. The evident neocon ambition was to weaken Iraq *permanently* by remaking it as loose federal state. They may well have succeeded. We shall have to see.

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the long occupation which followed must be counted among the great crimes of our time. A major Arab country was destroyed. The country's infrastructure – the little that had survived 13 years of punitive sanctions – was shattered. A human tragedy of epic proportions was enacted. Hundreds of thousands died and millions more were forcibly displaced from their homes or fled abroad. The documents recently released by Wikileaks remind one of the horrors of the American occupation – the torture, kidnappings and killings, the trigger-happy private contractors, the unpunished war crimes.

Three Consequences of the First Gulf War

The war has had grave consequences, of which three are perhaps worth mentioning.

*First, the destruction of Iraq overturned the regional balance. Without the counterweight of Iraq, Iran was able to emerge as the major power in the Gulf region. Today, it can no longer be ignored. To seek to isolate it, subvert it or strike at it, is to take grave risks. Such hostile actions will not easily be forgiven or forgotten.

*Second, the war released sectarian demons in Iraq and across the region. It widened the ancient Shi'a-Sunni split in the Muslim world, stoking particular fears in countries with large Shi'a communities -- in Lebanon, Bahrain, Kuwait, Yemen and Saudi Arabia itself. It also aroused enmity between Muslims and Christians, since the latter are widely seen as friendly to the West. Iraqi Christians have been especially hard hit and have fled the country in large numbers.

*Third, the United States has paid – and continues to pay -- a very heavy price in men and treasure. The full bill has yet to come it. The catastrophic Iraq war is said to have cost the American tax payer upwards of a trillion dollars! But there are less

visible costs as well – the blow to America’s reputation, to its morale, to the fighting spirit of its troops.

Another cost is the immense Muslim fury against the United States and Israel aroused by the war and its aftermath. The unwelcome consequences of the Iraq war are likely to be with us for a very long time.

A Bit About Blair

Allow me to say a brief word about Tony Blair’s role. As we all know, he is unrepentant. But he has not come clean about his real reasons for committing Britain to the war. It seems highly probable that he joined George Bush’s war because, unlike Jacques Chirac of France who openly opposed the war, he dared not put at risk Britain’s close security, defence and intelligence ties with the United States -- such as the world-wide sharing of signals intelligence under the UKUSA agreement; Britain’s participation in the development of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, the American missiles on Britain’s nuclear submarines, and much else besides. Once Blair decided that he had no option but to follow Bush’s lead, he also had no option but to fall in with the neocon’s analysis of the Iraqi threat, because the neocons were dictating Middle East policy in Washington.

Blair has faced opprobrium for committing Britain to the Iraq war, but he has also been amply rewarded: last year Tel Aviv University gave him its Dan David prize, worth one million dollars, for what it described as his ‘exceptional leadership’, and last month the Washington Institute for Near Policy, a pillar with AIPAC of the pro-Israeli lobby, gave him its Scholar-Statesman award. It was an occasion at which he chose to parrot the line that an Iranian bomb was a threat to mankind and that Muslim ‘extremists’ challenged the values of the entire civilised world.

When Tony Blair was interviewed on French radio last September, I heard him say that if Iran got the bomb it would use it. This was highly irresponsible. Blair must surely know that nuclear weapons are essentially defensive weapons. Their only real purpose is to deter a hostile attack. They have no offensive value unless linked to a secure second-strike capability, which Iran is very far indeed from having. Some time ago, Jacques Chirac punctured scare-mongering about Iran’s nuclear ambitions by reminding everyone that Iran would be reduced to cinders in a flash, if it so much as attempted to launch a nuclear-armed missile. Israel’s clamour about an ‘existential threat’ from Iran has no basis in truth, as its Defence Minister Ehud Barak has himself admitted.

Iran Nuclear versus Israel Nuclear

What *is* true, however, is that if Iran were to acquire a nuclear capability, or even if it were merely to reach the so-called threshold stage, this could curtail Israel’s freedom of action; it could limit its unfettered ability to bash its neighbours at will. I do not think Israel would have launched its destructive assaults on Lebanon in 2006 or on Gaza in 2008-9 – nor would it feel able openly and repeatedly to threaten Iran with attack -- if there were something like a balance of power in the region.

Israel is adamantly opposed to any of its neighbours acquiring a deterrent capability. It jealously guards its nuclear monopoly precisely because it wants to be able to hit without being hit back. It is against any compromise which might allow Iran

to continue enriching uranium, even for civilian purposes. It wants Iran disarmed, just as Iraq was disarmed. It wants Hizballah and Hamas destroyed. Late last month Susan Rice, America's UN ambassador, railed against Iran and Syria for daring to arm Hizballah. Clearly, in American eyes, Israel's neighbours have no right to defend themselves!

Fortunately, Catherine Ashton, the EU's foreign affairs high representative, has taken the initiative to convene nuclear talks with Iran this December. Iran seems to have responded favourably, but it does not want to negotiate under threat of attack. President Ahmadinejad has said repeatedly that he favoured an agreement under which Iran would export some of its low-enriched uranium to Turkey in return for nuclear fuel for a civilian reactor in Tehran. Some months ago Turkey and Brazil reached an agreement with Iran on these lines which could have provided the basis for a comprehensive settlement. But Washington pooh-poohed it, and instead pressed for enhanced sanctions. Obama may have been persuaded that tougher sanctions on Iran might induce Israel to make concessions to the Palestinians. He must surely now be cured of such illusions.

The present clamour for war against Iran is nothing less than a scandal. The clamour comes from Prime Minister Netanyahu and other Israeli leaders, from a host of American politicians and neoconservatives – the same people who pushed for war against Iraq. John McCain's advice to 'bomb, bomb, bomb' Iran has been taken up by William Kristol of the *Weekly Standard*, by Joseph Lieberman, an independent US senator, by Howard Berman, chairman of the House of Representatives' foreign affairs committee (shortly to be replaced by Eleana Ros-Lehtinen, who is even more fervently pro-Israeli than him), by John Vinocur, an influential pro-Israeli columnist on the *International Herald Tribune*, and by many others on both sides of the Atlantic. In an article on October 5, Vinocur scolded the Obama administration for its lack of military determination. Israel, he wrote, 'is very unlikely to wait for a less hesitant US policy on Tehran's nuclear ambitions.' It will not shy from 'a determined response, if its own red lines are crossed by the mullahs.' Benny Morris, an Israeli 'New Historian' tuned fervent right-wing nationalist, has urged Israeli leaders to nuke Iran (according to Yossi Melman, *Haaretz*, 7 October 2010.)

We don't know if Iran is seeking to acquire a nuclear weapon. It has denied it. But we need to remember that nuclear proliferation and nuclear disarmament are two sides of the same coin. So long as Israel refuses to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty or submit to IAEA inspections, Iran will press ahead with its nuclear programme. The more Israel and its American friends beat the drums of war, the more Iran will seek to acquire a deterrent. Not to do so would indeed be foolhardy.

Which Is the Rogue Nuclear State? Iran or Israel?

Which is the rogue nuclear state? Iran which has never attacked anyone and possesses no nuclear weapons, or Israel which has repeatedly attacked its neighbours, which occupies, oppresses and steadily dispossesses the Palestinians, and which has a large nuclear arsenal? What if Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman had his finger on the nuclear trigger? Could one still say that Israel was a responsible nuclear power? Wasn't he the man who suggested bombing Egypt's Aswan Dam?

Obama's Lost Opportunity

It is the greatest pity that Obama did not seize the opportunity of his triumphant election two years ago to announce a withdrawal from Afghanistan as well as from Iraq. Instead -- evidently not wanting to be portrayed as a wimp -- he declared that the war in Afghanistan was a 'necessary' war, necessary for the struggle against al-Qaida. This was probably his greatest single mistake. Following his election, he should have called at once for a tribal council, or *Loya Jirga*, of Afghanistan's chieftains to discuss peace. He should have declared an immediate ceasefire, rallied Afghanistan's neighbours to support a settlement, promised massive development aid, and ordered as early a withdrawal as possible of US forces. He should indeed have followed his own instinct and not agreed to a military surge. But, as Bob Woodward relates in his latest book, **Obama was defeated by his own military**. The war has since spread to Pakistan, with potentially very unpleasant consequences for all concerned.

There is now talk at last of negotiations with the Taliban. President Hamid Karzai says he has been in contact with Taliban leaders, although we don't yet know at what level. He has named 68 top religious, ethnic and faction leaders to a High Peace Council, and given them authority to conduct talks. He is evidently seeking his own way out of the war. However, Robert Gates, the US Defence Secretary, still says that the Taliban must be defeated, or at least held in check, before high level talks can proceed. His policy seems to be: Kill them first, and talk to them afterwards! This is not a policy likely to bring them to the table.

Ahmad Rashid, one of the best experts on Afghanistan, wrote in the *Financial Times* on October 6 that: 'There are compelling reasons why the West -- unless prepared to countenance another 5 to 10 years in Afghanistan -- needs to start negotiations with the Taliban. The first thing Mr Obama needs to do ...is to push aside the military pundits and base his decisions on realities on the ground...'

John Chipman, head of the fairly hawkish London-based International Institute of Strategic Studies, believes that the Afghan Taliban pose no external threat to the West. In a recent article, he wrote: 'The present counterinsurgency strategy is too ambitious, too draining and out of proportion to the threat. An effective containment and deterrence strategy could ensure that the Taliban did not invite al-Qaida back in when western forces withdraw.' (*International Herald Tribune* 11-12 September 2010.)

There are some 40 million Pashtun tribesmen in Afghanistan. They provide the backbone of the Taliban. Tribal, fervently Muslim and xenophobic, they are determined to protect their traditions, their religion and their homeland. They have rarely, if ever, been conquered. Their age-old impulse is to resist foreign occupation. They should be left alone to find their own way to modernity. (anecdote)

The CIA's greatly increased use of drones to kill militants in the north-west of Pakistan is, in my view, a serious mistake. Has the insurgency been tamed by such strikes? What if Bin Laden himself were killed by a drone? Would that end the insurgency or, on the contrary, provoke it to greater militancy? This year, missile strikes have killed several hundred militants as well as some of their leaders. But such strikes inevitably cause civilian deaths as well, and arouse violent anti-American feeling.

The United States has long been pressuring Pakistan to make war on militants in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Some months ago Pakistan was persuaded to launch a military operation against Swat. The result was calamitous. Very large numbers of innocent people were displaced from their homes. The militants have been provoked to hit back. Pakistan has suffered three years of virtually non-stop suicide bombings, and has been gravely destabilised. Its leaders have lost legitimacy. Undaunted, the US is now pressing Pakistan to attack North Waziristan as well. General David Petraeus has even issued veiled warnings to top Pakistan commanders that, if Pakistan did not do so, the US could itself launch ground operations in North Waziristan. **This is sheer folly.**

Over the past nine years, the US has spent over \$350 billion on the war in Afghanistan. This year alone some 600 soldiers of the international force have been killed. For what noble cause have these young men died? Seeking to impose a Western model of society on Afghanistan is a doomed enterprise.

What needs to be done?

May I end by making some policy recommendations, which many might consider utopian.

First, America and its allies should stop killing Muslims! They should end their military interventions in Muslim countries and adopt a policy of containment (as George Kennan once recommended for dealing with the Soviet Union). Does the US really need vast military bases in the Gulf? Would not an 'over the horizon' presence be less provocative and as effective?

In seeking an end to the Afghan conflict, the help of major states in the region should urgently be sought –Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, China, all have an interest in Afghan stability. In view of its widely different regions and ethnicities, a more decentralised form of government might suit Afghanistan best. The US should allow the Afghans to choose their own form of government, and it should forget about exporting Western-style democracy.

Afghanistan is said to be rich in mineral resources. China will snap them all up unless the West withdraws its forces rapidly and seeks to repair the ravages of war with massive economic aid. Prosperity could bring peace.

Yemen has been much in the news. The US has opened a new war-front in that country – with drone attacks and operations by Special Forces. Washington has agreed to provide Yemen with some \$50m a year in development aid, but is now said to be considering giving it \$1.2 billion in military assistance -- to fight al-Qaida. The figures should be reversed. Yemen needs economic aid far more than guns. Yemen is a poor country. It is very short of drinking water. Its water table and its oil output are both falling. Hunger is a major problem. It faces a rebellion in the north, a secessionist movement in the south, as well as al-Qaida militants, inflamed against the government and its Western backers. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Yemen also gives asylum to close to 170,000 registered Somali refugees fleeing the violence in their own country. Yemeni sources say the number of Somali and Ethiopian migrants is closer to one million. About 3,000 wretched Somalis drown

each year trying to reach the Yemeni shore. Economic development may be the only way to rob 'Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula' of its local support.

Another Al-Qaida franchise – 'Al-Qaida au Maghreb Islamique' – or AQMI -- operates in a vast, poverty-stricken zone of the Sahel comprising parts of Mauritania, Mali, Niger and southern Algeria, where memories of French colonialism are still fresh. In the past two years, AQMI has kidnapped 20 Westerners including, most recently, five French people seized last September from the uranium mining town of Arlit in northern Niger. AQMI has branded President Nicolas Sarkozy an enemy of Allah. It wants him to withdraw French troops from Afghanistan and rescind the ban on the *burqa*, the full face veil.

Niger, Mali and Mauritania are all in dire need of a major international effort to relieve poverty, hunger and desperate under-development. A large aid programme, rather than military operations, may be the best, perhaps the only way, to tame AQMI.

If putting an end to killing Muslims is one way to quell Muslim hostility, a second must surely be the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict – a conflict which has poisoned every political relationship in the region, and especially the relationship between the West and Islam. A small fraction of the colossal sums spent on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan could have been used to compensate Palestinian refugees, pay Israeli settlers to return to Israel, and spread prosperity and peace throughout the Middle East.

Instead of guaranteeing Israel's military supremacy, the US should promote the emergence of a regional balance of power. History shows that a balance of power keeps the peace, whereas an imbalance causes war, as the stronger party will always seek to impose its will by force. Instead of security for Israel alone, the aim should be security for all.

If the US is crippled by domestic constraints, other states must have the courage to act -- and why not Britain in the lead since it bears a historic responsibility for the problem? Britain, some of its European partners and Russia, together with other members of the international community, should use their muscle in insisting on a global settlement, involving Syria and Lebanon as well as the Palestinians. There is no reason why Israel should not face sanctions to persuade it to withdraw from the Golan, dismantle its illegal West Bank settlements, and allow the birth of a Palestinian state. That would go a very long way to defusing Islamic anger and restoring the West's battered reputation.

Israel's present behaviour is far more damaging to Western interests and security than anything Iran is doing. If the Greater Israel project is not checked, the West will pay a very heavy price. Muslim rage will not easily be contained. It is safe to predict that an unprecedented tragedy will befall the whole region, from which the Arabs, Israel and its Western backers will not escape.

Some far-sighted Israelis are aware that their country is on a dangerous course -- a concern which seems to be shared by many American Jews. They are alarmed at the racist and fascist trends in Israeli society as well as the cruel behaviour of the IDF, which have badly damaged Israel's image.

At the same time, in spite of America's massive help, Israel's strategic environment is deteriorating. A Tehran-Damascus-Hizballah axis is challenging the regional hegemony of both Israel and its American ally. Hizballah's asymmetric warfare forced Israel out of south Lebanon in 2000 after an 18-year stay. In a bid to destroy the movement, Israel invaded Lebanon yet again in 2006. It failed to achieve its goal, but it killed some fifteen hundred Lebanese. In like manner, Israel attacked Gaza in 2008-9, but failed to destroy Hamas. Some fourteen hundred Palestinians died. Having lost Iran thirty years ago, Israel is now in danger of losing Turkey, two countries which were once its major regional allies. Clearly, its security doctrine needs rethinking.

Yet Israel still insists on military supremacy. As has often been said, peace with its neighbours and integration into the region would be a far better recipe for its long-term security. **The Arab peace Initiative is still on the table. It offers Israel recognition and normal relations with all 22 members of the Arab League, indeed with all 59 Muslim-majority countries. In return, Israel would have to withdraw to the 1967 borders and allow the establishment of a viable Palestinian state.** The real challenge for Israel is to know when and where to stop. Hubris, if unchecked, can lead to nemesis.

The modern state of Iran, heir to an ancient civilization, needs to be treated with the respect it deserves as a major regional power of 70 million inhabitants. Its right to the peaceful enrichment of uranium should be recognised. The military option should be taken off the table, once and for all. The US should issue a public warning to Israel not to consider military action. In return, Iran should sign the additional protocol of the NPT, and allow intensive inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

An Israeli or American attack on Iran would be catastrophic for Western interests and for the vulnerable Gulf States -- the one Arab pole of prosperity and development, which would find itself in the line of fire.

Instead of seeking to isolate it, Iran should be drawn into the security architecture of the Gulf region. Instead of attempting to mobilise the Arabs against Iran, the Arab Gulf States should be encouraged to conclude a security pact with the Islamic Republic. Both Qatar and Oman have friendly relations with Iran. Others should follow their example. The basis of a security pact exists: Iran could pledge not to use Shi'ite communities to undermine the political order in the Gulf, while the Gulf States could pledge not to allow their territories to be used for an attack on Iran.

Iranian society is in a highly delicate state. The regime is being challenged by the professional middle classes and by a rising generation of educated young people. More than two million Iranians are at university. After thirty years of the Islamic Republic, many Iranians are eager for a different, less theocratic model of society. The West would be wise to allow the process of change to take its course without external intervention.

The West should also recognise the vital role Turkey can play in resolving regional conflicts. It may be the one country which, if given the right support and encouragement, could defuse the dangerous crises in both Iran and Afghanistan, and help draw the poison from the Arab-Israeli conflict. The US is making a vast mistake in

allowing Turkey's strained relations with Israel to influence its own attitude towards Turkey.

Evidently, there is an urgent need to end the war between Islam and the West. In dealing with terrorism, police and counter-terrorist methods are obviously necessary, but they are not sufficient. **The flow of angry recruits into militant organisations must be staunched. The only way to do so is to bring about a radical change in Western policies and attitudes towards the Arab and Muslim world and its conflicts.**

Is there a realistic chance of any of this happening any time soon? I must admit that I don't think so. Obama has been weakened; Europe remains divided; Israel is unrelenting; islamophobia is on the upswing. It looks as if the struggle will continue. We may indeed have to expect further calamities.

End