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**U.S FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST, 2003-2008:
THE POWER OF NEOCONSERVATISM**

By

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**U.S POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST, 2003-2008:
THE POWER OF NEOCONSERVATISM**

Hassan Kabalan

ABSTRACT

U.S. foreign policy under George W. Bush went from distancing itself from nation-building efforts to embrace a full-scale nation-building adventure in Iraq. The “Bush Doctrine,” developed by neoconservatives in the Bush administration, pushed for preemptive wars against imminent threats, using its democracy agenda as a cover for other agendas and objective. This thesis investigates US policy in the Middle East during Bush's presidency and the geopolitical consequences it had on the region. To this end, it examines, among other factors, how the neoconservatives' ideology and commitment to Israel shaped America's foreign policy objectives toward Iraq and Lebanon. The thesis uses these two case studies to contrast the Bush administration's geopolitical objectives in the Middle East after the 9/11 terrorist attacks against its democratization discourse.

Keywords: Neoconservatives, Oil, Middle East, Iraq, Lebanon, July war

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1- Situating the Thesis

America has long had strategic interests in the Middle East, which resulted in significant political and military engagement in this crucial part of the world. The Middle East's location, its vast natural resources, different ethnicities, recurrent crises and conflicts, and Israel's place in this region has long attracted the attention of the US government. American interests in the Middle East are twofold: a military presence to secure strategic routes and the protection of Israel.

Under George W. Bush, America went from distancing itself from “nation-building” to become, following the September 2001 terrorist attacks, the most nation-building supporter in the world (Sniegowski, 2008). Bush's efforts, which were largely focused on the Middle East, were, to a significant extent, unsuccessful. Bush had worldwide international support when US troops attacked Afghanistan in October 2001. However, the administration's extension of the “war on terror” to justify the invasion of Iraq in 2003 did not receive the same international recognition. Bush, who anticipated the overthrow of the Baathist regime in Iraq as a crucial step in the democratization of the Middle East, faced many obstacles during the eight years that he spent in the White House.

While he advocated democracy expansion in the Middle East in most of his speeches, Bush supported authoritarian regimes in many MENA states. In this regard, the administration's foreign policy was described as hypocritical and its credibility was lost. By 2006, as Iraq sunk into sectarian violence, Hezbollah gained tremendous popular support following the summer 2006 war with Israel and Hamas achieved a historical victory in the parliamentary elections in Gaza, the neocons' democracy promotion project was halt.

Understanding US policy in the Middle East requires using varying levels of analysis. For instance, US policy for most of the pre-1990 period was mainly driven by protecting oil supplies (Gause, 2010). The first major change in this policy was symbolized by George W Bush's war on terrorism, which required direct American military presence in Iraq under the name of democracy and nation building (Leffler, 2011). Until 9/11, US policy was directed toward preserving the current geopolitical conditions in the region in which American oil privileges were secured. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, a new strategy that emphasized nation-building and political reforms prevailed. Indeed, major consequences of the 9/11 attacks were focused on the Middle East, especially the Persian Gulf region. Nevertheless, Explaining US foreign policy under Bush is subject to a critical debate between neo-conservatism and advocates of others schools of international relations, namely realism.

What were the objectives of the Bush administration's foreign policy in the Middle East? This research aims to evaluate Washington's objectives in the Middle East between 2003 and 2008. It investigates US policy in the Middle East under President George W. Bush and the resulting geopolitical struggle. To this end, it examines, among

other factors, how the neoconservatives' ideology and commitment to Israel shaped America's foreign policy toward Iraq and Lebanon.

1.2- Research Questions

The main research question addressed in this thesis is the following: What were the objectives of the Bush administration's foreign policy in the Middle East? Additionally, a secondary question is raised: Was the alleged intention of spreading democracy a real objective for the administration, or was this a cover for other hidden goals? Answering these two questions would shed the light on an extremely important period of the modern Middle East.

As stated earlier, during George W. Bush's election campaign, his foreign policy planning emphasized a reduction of US involvement in nation-building. Before 2001, Bush never mentioned the need to spread democracy in the Middle East. Then came the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which resulted in a more confrontational foreign policy. For instance, Bush did forsake his alleged realism and embraced the neocons' revolutionary foreign policy (Owens, 2009).

1.3- Methodology and Case Selection

The qualitative approach is used to explain the dynamics of American foreign policy in the Middle East from 2003, which resemble the date of US invasion of Iraq, till 2008, the date of Doha Accord. The thesis is based on two case studies, Iraq and Lebanon, in order to examine how US policy in the Middle East used these two countries to achieve its regional objectives, especially vis-à-vis Iran and Syria.

There are different reasons for choosing Iraq and Lebanon as case studies to explain Washington's objectives in the Middle East. First, the decision to invade Iraq had seismic effects in the Middle East. The Iraq War's reverberations in the region are broad ranging, affecting relations between states, political and societal dynamics inside states, the calculations of terrorists and paramilitaries, and shifts in public views of American credibility (Wehrey, Kaye, Jessica, Martin, & Guffey, 2009). Additionally, the 2003 invasion of Iraq led to the first direct geopolitical confrontation between Iran and America. For the past three decades, Iran has been perceived as a direct threat to American interests in the Persian Gulf and this situation is not likely to improve anytime soon. Sustaining American forward-based forces in Iraq was thus perceived as a crucial geopolitical advantage, given the continuous importance of the Persian Gulf for the US. Moreover, the importance of the region's energy resources, an increase in US ambitions in the post-Cold war, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and the alleged link between Saddam Hussein's regime and al Qaeda, led to a growing need for a sustained US military presence in the Persian Gulf, namely in Iraq (Gause, 2010).

Lebanon, a smaller country than Iraq, with almost no natural resources at that time, was also subject of U.S intervention. One could argue that the American policy toward Lebanon was historically highly dependent on the U.S position with respect to Syria, and recently, part of the geopolitical "chessboard" with Iran (Ashkar& Chomsky). Washington's backing of the pro-Western camp in Lebanon, known as the March 14 coalition, was part of the efforts to put pressure on Syria and to balance Tehran's quest for geopolitical primacy in the Middle East (Sniegoski, 2008). Thus, Lebanon, a historical playground for regional and global rivals, was also an important

aspect of U.S interventionism in the Middle East.

1.4- Map of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into five chapters. The first chapter introduces the research, and the second one examines the various explanations of US policy in the Middle East under George W. Bush. The third and fourth chapters investigate American foreign policy toward Iraq and Lebanon. Finally, the fifth chapter summarizes the previous chapters, answers the research question, and spells out the implications of this research.

CHAPTER TWO

US MIDDLE EASTERN FOREIGN POLICY AFTER 9/11

2.1- Introduction

The U.S invasion of Iraq was based on Baghdad's alleged WMD and Saddam Hussein's presumed ties to Osama Bin Laden's al-Qaeda. This made the Baath regime a dangerous threat to the US and the world, one which needed an immediate intervention. American policy-makers constantly declared that their objective was to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime because it was developing WMDs, harboring and supporting terrorist groups and defying the humanitarian demands of the United Nations. Additional rationales for the war have also been advanced, such as the quest to reshape the Middle East as part of the war on terror to prevent any support for terrorist organizations through the political transformation of the states that harbor them (Clark, 2003; Hirst, 2010).

So why elaborate more on the administration's decision making process after 9/11? The main reason is that the Bush administration was accused of fabricating false evidence regarding the reasons for invading Iraq, even though supporters of the war deny such accusations and constantly claim that the threat posed by Saddam Hussein was real. In fact, there has been a strong suspicion that the Bush administration used 9/11 as a pretext to lay out a pre-existing war plan in the region, namely toward Iraq

(Ashkar& Chomsky, 2007). This argument is also defended by retired General Wesley Clark and former secretary of the Secretary Paul O'Neill (Clark, 2003). For many, the decision to invade Iraq was part of a bigger strategy of U.S imperialism in the Middle East, mainly its quest to control oil and preserve Israel's dominance and security in the region (Sniegoski, 2008; Pelletiere, 2004; Klare, 2004). Certainly, failing to find any WMDs, which was the initial rationale for the war, did nothing but prove that this war was about something else. When criticism of the Iraq invasion increased, Bush's supporters dismissed such accusations, labeling their advocates as "conspiracy theorists" and insisting that Bush decided in favor of the invasion out of concern about Saddam's WMD and his regime's links to al-Qaeda. Not surprisingly, the fact that Iraq contained one of the world's largest oil reserves was left out of the administration's rationale for war. This chapter examines the various competing hypotheses that explain U.S foreign policy in the Middle East under George W. Bush. In particular, the debate about the 2003 Iraq invasion between realism and neo-conservatism was heated. The next section lays out the neo-conservative strategy later challenged by realism.

2.2- Neoconservative Views

Before 9/11, Bush had clearly distanced himself from the neoconservative school of thought, which repeatedly lobbied the Clinton administration to engage in nation-building in the Middle East. As stated in the previous chapter, the 9/11 attacks caused a major shift in Bush's foreign policy in the Middle East. Rationales such as Iraq's WMD programs, Saddam Hussein's ties to al Qaeda and his alleged role in the

9/11 attacks and efforts to initiate political reforms in this part of the world, were employed to explain Washington's Middle Eastern policy shift.

2.2.1- Iraq's WMD and its Ties to al Qaeda

One of the most important rationales for the war advanced by the US government was that Saddam Hussein's regime possessed weapons that constituted a direct threat to America and its allies all over the world (Gause, 2010). This argument was essential and was understood to be the most significant American justification for invading Iraq, which sheds light on the danger posed by Iraq's development of such weapons. The administration based its decision on the allegations that Saddam was trying to develop fatal weapons, including nuclear ones. Hence, the critical need to prevent him from gaining such capabilities (Woodward, 2007). Even though those allegations were never based on strong evidence, Bush and his closest advisors firmly believed in them despite internal and international opposition (Gause, 2010). Gause argues that Bush's decision to attack Iraq stemmed significantly from his pre-existing beliefs about Saddam's ambitions and regional objectives, which would not be attained without developing highly developed weapons. The nuclear threat posed by Iraq was overestimated and was part of personal beliefs shared by many leaders of the administration and not supported by strong evidence.

In addition to claims about Baghdad's development of weapons of mass destruction, another rational for the war was the alleged link between Iraq and terrorist groups, namely al Qaeda. The Bush Administration's decision to invade Iraq was seen as a crucial part of their new "war on terrorism" plans. In explaining the relationship

between Iraq and al Qaeda, Washington's main focus was about the alleged ties between Saddam Hussein and Abu Moussab al-Zarqawi, whom Colin Powell described as the collaborator of Bin Laden (Woodward, 2007). However, arguments of such link were rejected by many American intelligence bureaus, including the CIA (Gardner, 2009). Nevertheless, Dick Cheney and other prominent American leaders insisted that a tie did exist between al Qaeda and Saddam. Again, the lack of evidence linking Iraq and al-Qaeda meant that there had been no evidence of Baghdad's involvement in the 9/11 attacks (Gause, 2010). As in the case of WMDs, Gause argues that American leaders were mainly motivated by their psychological bias while dealing with this issue. America's decision to condemn Baghdad resulted significantly from a pre-existing belief about Saddam's ambitions and regional objectives.

2.2.2- Democratization of the Middle East

Neoconservatives strongly advocated the notion that US foreign policy should seek to spread democracy in the world, especially in the Middle East. Charles Krauthammer argues that the promotion of democracy should become the cornerstone of US foreign policy (Krauthammer, 1990). By committing themselves to promoting democracy globally, the neocons pictured themselves as "the heirs of Wilsonian liberalism" (Williams & Schmidt, 2007). Hence, invading Baghdad was perceived as the first step in the democratization of the entire Middle East. Washington concluded that democracy was the solution for all problems in the Arab world, namely terrorism. One of the main rationales for the Iraq war was that by overthrowing Saddam Hussein, democracy would be promoted in Iraq and the whole Middle East. Following the 9/11

attacks, many U.S officials addressed the issue of the absence of US democracy planning in the Middle East. They signaled the need for democratic institutions as means to fight terrorism and promote stability in this part of the world (Rice, 2011; Sharansky & Dermer, 2004). Most notably, Bush shifted from his initial non-interventionism and adopted a confrontational foreign policy. This shift advocated global intervention and underlined the need for democratic openings in the Middle East in order to undermine terrorism. Also, Bush claimed that America would act unilaterally without the consent of other international players or the UN when it came to US security interests, which represented a retreat from past American policies (Pelletiere, 2004). Hence, Washington adopted a new diplomatic approach that underlined the need for political reform in the Middle East, and the invasion of Iraq initiated the administration's new Middle Eastern plans (Ignatius, 2008).

Natan Sharansky and Ron Dermer (2004) argue that replacing authoritarian regimes in the Middle East with democratic ones is a crucial step in ensuring the region's stability. In their book *The Case for Democracy*, the authors contend that the use of military power to spread democracy in the region is morally legitimate and strategically sound and would spread freedom and human rights in the Arab countries. Jonathan Monten also underscores the importance of democracy promotion in the Middle East (2005). The democratization project was vital for America's grand strategy of economic and political expansion globally.

2.3- Neo-Conservatives versus Realism

As a response to the administration's explanation of the 2003 Iraq invasion,

a number of realists argued that it was unwise for Washington to go to war against Baghdad. They foresaw a set of problems and obstacles that would eventually accompany America's occupation of Iraq and found it extremely counterproductive to invade the country (Starobin, 2006).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Bush went from distancing America from “nation-building” to become, following the September 2001 terrorist attacks, a fierce promoter of nation-building (Sniegoski, 2008). Many intellectuals argue that the administration’s policy in the wake of the attacks can only be explained by its ambitious hegemonic (Jervis, 2003; Sniegoski, 2008; Ashkar & Chomsky, 2007). For instance, Michael Klare claims that to safely extract oil and in order to ensure the preservation of US hegemony in the Persian Gulf, the US had to develop a plan, months before 9/11, which put the removal of Saddam Hussein and the need for a military presence in Iraq as a top priority for the Bush administration (2004). Klare contends that the use of military force by senior American policymakers was a US tool to ensure the control of foreign oil resources. The author insists that every US president had never been hesitant to use force when protecting American oil interests in the region against any imminent threat. This assumption was a critical factor in the administration’s decision in March 2003 to invade Iraq (Klare, 2005).

Noam Chomsky and Gilbert Ashkar suggest that the cornerstone of American foreign policy in the Middle East is controlling access to oil. They argue that if the Middle East did not contain large oil reserves, the US would not have interfered much in the region. Hence, preserving the existing regimes that would help maintaining this status quo is critical to Americans global hegemonic plan (Ashkar & Chomsky, 2007).

Fareed Zakaria made a similar argument. He suggests that under the pretext of exporting democracy, US foreign policy in the Middle East is imperial rather than strategic (Zakaria, 2009). Eventually, Bush's foreign policy was criticized because it was seeking to control the region's energy resources. The famous slogan "no blood for oil" became a famous protest cry well before 2003 Iraq invasion.

Gregory Gause concedes that oil is a vital factor in the geopolitics of the Middle East, but he argues that it was neither a sufficient nor a direct cause for the 2003 US invasion of Iraq (Gause, 2010). He contends that if America invaded Iraq to control its oil, then it is very surprising that the US could not achieve this goal in the post-war period. Likewise, Raymond Hinnebusch points out the importance of the existence of oil in the Middle East, but he argues that this explanation is very limited since America did not have to invade Iraq to acquire its oil supplies. In other words, oil cannot be the sole rationale for the war (Hinnebusch, 2007). Stephen Sniegowski also debates the argument that oil was the cause of US war against Iraq. He contends that since major US oil companies opposed the 2003 invasion, oil cannot be considered as a major factor in explaining the US invasion of Iraq (Sniegowski, 2008).

For instance, Gause claims that there is no evidence which emphasize that the 9/11 attacks were used as a pretext to implement a pre-existing US plan. Prominent neocons- such as Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Douglas Faith, Richard Armitage- and many other members of the Bush administration who signed a Public letter in 1998 calling the Clinton administration to develop a military and political plan to topple Saddam Hussein's regime, were not the sole decision-takers in the Bush administration. In other words, the neoconservatives were eager to push America toward invading Iraq

and to overthrow the Baath regime in Baghdad, but there were other opposing voices in the administration as well (Gause, 2010). Gause explains the shift in US policy by emphasizing on the effects of the 9/11 attacks. He argues that the attacks changed the administration's view of the threats emerging from the Middle East. Even though he questions and criticizes the decision to invade Iraq, Gause concedes that Bush and his closest advisors did firmly believe in the danger posed by Saddam Hussein. For Washington, launching a preemptive war against a dangerous threat was clearly justified (Gause, 2010).

John Mearsheimer argues that the neocons believed that America was the most powerful military power in the world. Most importantly, they relied on such power to reshape the world in a way that suits their interests. In short, as military power was preferred over diplomacy, the Bush doctrine endorsed "big-stick diplomacy" (Mearsheimer, 2005). Since 2001, Washington was keen to break the prevailing status quo in the Middle East. The Bush administration thought that by overthrowing the regime in Baghdad, other Middle Eastern countries would soon surrender to US power. In particular, regimes in Tehran and Damascus would willingly follow U.S demands (Mearsheimer, 2005). Accordingly, Mearsheimer claims that the Bush doctrine emphasized the significance of democracy as the most powerful ideology. The author describes the Bush Doctrine as being "Wilsonianism with teeth". The doctrine has an idealist strand and a power strand: "Wilsonianism provides the idealism, an emphasis on military power provides the teeth" (Mearsheimer, 2005).

In contrast to the neocons declarations that democracy is the most appealing and powerful ideology in the world, many realists emphasized the importance of

nationalism (Williams & Schmidt, 2007). The Bush administration discounted the impact of nationalism and strongly believed that US troops would be welcomed as liberators. One could argue that the George H.W. Bush administration sensed the dangers of occupying a country like Iraq and thus decided to end its forces' presence once Kuwait was liberated. Additionally, Walt (2005) disagrees with the neoconservative claim that, by invading Baghdad and overthrowing Saddam Hussein's regime, other states would also be subject to political reform and align with Washington. He argues that states do not bandwagon because it actually results in conceding power to an enemy. Likewise, Mearsheimer contends that rather than choosing to surrender, states tend to balance against a common enemy as a way to defend their interests against an emerging threat (Mearsheimer, 2005). Thus, for many realists, containing a weak and toothless Iraq is a far more favorable alternative that would allow Washington to concentrate its struggle on al Qaeda. The next section examines the power of the Israeli lobby in shaping the Bush administration's policy in the Middle East.

2.4- Israel and U.S Foreign Policy

Sniegowski argues that Bush's foreign policy was created by a group of neoconservatives who viewed politics in the Middle East through the lenses of Israel's interests. The author does not claim that the neocons sought to advance Israel's interest at the expense of America, but they perceived advancing Israel's interest in the Middle East as vital to US power and influence in the region (Sniegowski, 2008). In addition to the neocons' relations with the foreign policy makers in Israel, Sniegowski presents a set

of documents proving that the administration was mainly concerned with the advancement of Israel's interest. He assembles a set of evidence to explain his argument, beginning with a 1982 article by ex-Israeli government advisor Oded Yinon that advocates the fragmentation the Middle East, especially countries such as Lebanon and Iraq. Yinon considers this vital to achieve Israel's long term security. Thus, in accordance with an old Israeli objective, many intellectuals argue that Washington pursued a strategy of divide and rule in Iraq in order to fragment the country on ethnic and religious lines (Ashkar& Chomsky, 2007; Pelletiere, 2004; Gardner, 2009).

Accordingly, Walt and Mearsheimer (2007) point out to the power of the Israeli lobby in shaping US foreign policy. They describe the Israeli lobby in America as an organization actively seeking to direct American foreign policy toward achieving Israel's interests, consequently damaging both countries' national interests. Washington's support for Israel was perceived as the cornerstone of American foreign policy, which threatened American interests globally. In particular, the power of AIPAC inside America was decisive in shaping Washington's strategy to reshape the Middle East. The organization played an instrumental role in forging the decision to invade Iraq and put pressure on Syria and Iran (Walt & Mearsheimer, 2007).

2.5- Critical Assessment

The Bush Doctrine, defined by Charles Krauthammer as a synonym of the "neoconservative foreign policy", embraces the idea that America became the most powerful state in the world and seeks to preserve its hegemonic position for the indefinite future (Williams & Schmidt, 2007). The rise of this doctrine was influenced

by the increasing power of neoconservatives in shaping US foreign policy. Neo-conservatism revolved around the failure of Realpolitik under President Reagan to contain US enemies, and that those enemies must be dealt with and destroyed pre-emptively using America's available resources and means before they could cause any harm (Kaufman, 2007).

In analyzing Bush's foreign policy, one cannot but notice different positions within the administration regarding a number of foreign policy issues, especially the 2003 Iraq war (Gause, 2010; Woodward, 2007). Wolfowitz and Rumsfeld were clear advocates of an aggressive military campaign against Saddam Hussein's regime, while Colin Powell disagreed with this view. Bush, the central and most important player of the administration, did not initially advocate any military confrontation with Iraq. Then came the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which resulted in a more confrontational foreign policy by the administration. For instance, Bush forsake his alleged realism and embraced the neocons' revolutionary foreign policy (Owens, 2009). The importance of 9/11 is that it caused a major shift in US foreign policy shift (Gause, 2010). The administration's policy in the wake of the attacks can only be explained by its quest to use 9/11 to accomplish many geopolitical goals. It allowed the neocons to control the country's national policy and pushed toward confrontation with "rogue" states such as Iraq, Iran and Syria.

This chapter focused on the ongoing debate regarding US foreign policy in the Middle East under Bush. As seen in many sections in this chapter, the neoconservative ideology was one of the most important drivers behind the Bush administration's aggressive foreign policy, which differed significantly from past administration's

policies. Certainly, this shift in foreign policy would not have occurred without the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which presented a vital opportunity for the neocons to advance their own agenda in the region.

The fact that many of the administration's initial allegations were not based on strong evidence raised suspicions that Washington used 9/11 to lay out a pre-existing war plan in the region. The objectives of US Middle Eastern policy under Bush were to ensure the flow of oil and to reinforce America and Israel's security conditions and hegemonic powers (Pelletiere, 2004; Ashkar & Chomsky, 2007).

The strategic importance of oil resources and its significance for American policy makers cannot be questioned (Hinnbebusch, 2007; Gause, 2010). The principal motive for U.S intervention in the Middle East is oil, which has always been at the core of US interest since its early engagement in the region. Oil's strategic importance was definitely part of the decision making process during the past 60 years of US intervention in the Middle East (Cohen, 2009). In fact, many of the administration's leaders repeatedly stressed the importance of Middle East's oil, including the president himself (Pelletiere, 2004). Donald Rumsfeld, Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz and many other prominent neoconservatives were among the signatories of the 1998 PNAC letter to President Bill Clinton, which stressed the importance of oil as a strategic objective for US foreign policy in the region. Not surprisingly, 11 of the 18 persons who signed the letter became part of President Bush's administration (Sniegowski, 2008).

The importance of oil does not rest solely in its economic benefits. Besides its economic benefits, and considering the nature of oil, there is a strategic value for oil in achieving American global supremacy. For instance, this policy is significant for two

reasons. First, controlling Middle Eastern oil would manage US allies' access to oil, hence increasing these countries' dependency on America as a source for energy. Second, this would eventually lead to the dependency of its rivals, such as China and Russia (Ashkar&Chomsky, 2007). Accordingly, the Bush administration, like past administrations, acknowledged the importance of the Middle East as strategically important in its quest for global supremacy.

Another important factor is Israel's role in shaping Bush's foreign policy. The origins of the neocons foreign policy revolve around advancing Israeli interests, which coincided with US interests in the region. For many intellectuals, the neoconservatives were driven by their close correspondence with the Jewish state. The evidence cited for the neoconservatives' firm connection with Israel is overwhelming. One of the most important features of the neoconservatives' ideology is the alignment of their foreign policy with that of the Israeli Likud (Sniegoski, 2008; Pelletiere, 2010). In fact, the neocons do not hide their support for Israel, as seen in the 1996 Clean Break manifesto. The document advocates an aggressive U.S foreign policy and stress on the importance of overthrowing Saddam Hussein in order to advance US and Israeli interests. Under the neocons' leadership, America shifted toward a new hard line on the Arab-Israeli struggle, invaded Iraq, and aggressively targeted Iran and Syria, the remaining two nations that could balance Israel's military superiority in the Middle East. Thus, the decision to invade Iraq and support the pro-Western camp in Lebanon was seen by many as part of an old Israeli plan executed by the neocons, who were pursuing an American foreign policy "through the lens of Israeli interests" (Sniegoski, 2008). This entailed undermining and fragmentizing Israel's enemies in the Middle East. Tel Aviv's

objective was to preserve its military leverage and prevent the emergence of any country that could destabilize the status quo (Walt & Mearsheimer, 2007; Sniegoski, 2008)

2.6- Conclusion

This chapter argued that after the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration was eager to strategically reshape the Middle East. By invading Iraq, the US was in a strategic position to launch preemptive strikes on its enemies, especially Iran and Syria, who are Israel's biggest threats. Even if no military attacks would take place, Washington could ensure a geopolitical advantage over these rogue states by threatening them if they do not comply with American and Israeli demands. Thus, by trying to eliminate the threats posed against Israel, the neocons were trying to shift the traditional balance of power in the region, maybe permanently, in favor of Israel. The US invasion of Iraq eliminated one of Washington's deadliest enemies in the region and secured a strangle hold over Israel's main enemies in the Middle East: Iran and Syria. The next chapter examines Iraq as a case study for US foreign policy in the Middle East.

CHAPTER THREE

IRAQ: A GEOPOLITICAL BATTLEGROUND

3.1- Introduction

U.S foreign policy shifted significantly after the 9/11 attacks. The decision to invade Iraq and assumptions about the post-invasion period were debated within the Bush administration. The bulk of the debate was related to America's foreign policy in the Middle East, mainly the decision to occupy Iraq, as well as US plans for the post-war period: precisely how to stabilize a war torn Iraq.

Gregory Gause asserts that the most dangerous perceptions in the administration concerned neither the regime's ties to al-Qaeda nor its WMDs, but the vision of post-war Iraq (Gause, 2010). As was the case with the rationales for invading Iraq, there was also an extensive debate within the administration about how to stabilize Iraq and how would a post-war Iraq, with its various ethnic and religious groups, look alike.

This chapter focuses on US foreign policy toward Iraq since 2003, and its major consequences. It is divided into two parts. The first part examines US policies and planning in Iraq during the post-war period, including how the Bush administration planned to reshape Iraq as a model of democracy at the heart of the Middle East. The second examines US geopolitical confrontations in Iraq and how other nations involved

in this struggle, namely Israel, Iran, Syria and Saudi Arabia, perceived America's Middle Eastern plans.

After years of supporting authoritarian regimes, the Bush administration signaled that democracy was the solution for all problems in the Middle East, especially the rise of terrorism (Williams & Schmidt, 2007). One of the rationales for invading Iraq rested on the claim that by overthrowing the Baath regime, democracy would prevail in Baghdad. Iraq was meant to become a model of democratic transformation in the Middle East. However, the fact that such political transformation in the Middle East was at odds with those previously advertised by the administration exacerbated criticism of neoconservative foreign policy.

3.2- US Plans for post-War Iraq

The Bush administration failed to plan effectively the post-war period in Iraq (Gause, 2010; Pelletiere, 2010). During the build-up to the invasion, the liberation policy and vision presented by the neocons assumed an unhindered abolishment of the old Iraqi leadership, paving the way for the new political elite to swiftly inherit the functioning ministries and security forces. The rise of insurgents and the transformation of Iraq into the Mecca for many jihadists seemingly did not cross the neocons' mind. Moreover, the amount of troops needed to stabilize Iraq was very much under-estimated in the Pentagon (Woodward, 2007; Pelletiere, 2010). The failure to introduce a strong post-war strategy and the state of political deadlock after the invasion was catastrophic for all parties involved in Iraq.

Experts argue that President Bush and his closest circle of aids spent the bulk of their efforts in planning how to defeat Saddam Hussein's weak army while neglecting the crucial need of rehabilitating and stabilizing the new Iraq (Pelletiere, 2010; Klare, 2004; Cohen, 2009). The neocons' failure to effectively plan for the post-invasion period is well documented. For example, Bob Woodward asserts that the different visions between the Pentagon and the State of Department were clear (Woodward, 2007). Donald Rumsfeld and his aides were accused of ignoring plenty of studies that carefully discuss the level of U.S troops needed to stabilize a post-war Iraq, as well as other documents that gave advice on how to ensure an effective rebuilding of the country (Woodward, 2007; Rumsfeld, 2011; Rice, 2011). Many US officials did also acknowledge the critical mistake of dismantling the Iraqi army, a decision that hindered security conditions in Iraq, and led to the rise of anti-American sentiments among Iraqis (Andrews, 2007). The results of this vision were catastrophic, as not only did the lack of troops not stabilize the country's long and dangerous borders, but also the number of insurgents was always increasing.

The decision to maintain a low level of US troops could be attributed to Donald Rumsfeld's new concept of the reconfiguration of the American military (Woodward, 2007; Rumsfeld, 2011; Pelletiere, 2010). Rumsfeld underscored the need to benefit from America's technological capabilities to revolutionize warfare and declared that the US military should benefit from its technological superiority to fight wars anywhere from the air without deploying large ground troops (Gause, 2010; Woodward, 2007; Pelletiere, 2010). During the buildup of the 2003 invasion, Rumsfeld played a crucial role in lowering the number of US troops, constantly pressuring the military generals to

reduce the level of US troops. In fact, Rumsfeld's new strategic vision fitted well with the neocons' established plans, which assumed that the invasion would leave the Iraqi state ministries and public organizations with minimum harm (Gause, 2010). This assumption proved to be woefully untrue as it contradicted the advice of many government agencies that predicted that the whole public order in the country will collapse after the war, hence the vital need to deploy larger forces.

Moreover, the decision by Paul Bremer, the Head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) to dissolve the Iraqi army was criticized and led to disastrous consequences. The disbanding order was a clear sign of how the Bush administration and the majority of Iraqi nationalists were having contradictory visions on how to stabilize the country and ensure order after the end of the war. More importantly, this was a sign that Washington's intention was to destroy Iraq as a functioning state (Pelletiere, 2010). The high number of looting and the rise of insurgency were clear signs of how bad the decision to dissolve the Iraqi army was. Certainly, it is very doubtful that this decision was solely taken by Paul Bremer without referring to his powerful subordinates in Washington (Andrews, 2007).

In addition to criticizing the small and insufficient numbers of US military troops in Iraq, the neocons' plans for the post-war phase were ineffective (Gause, 2010). America was woefully unprepared for the widespread chaos that followed the invasion, in term of assuming that the Iraqis, deeply oppressed under Saddam, will not rise against foreign troops. In fact, shortly after the war, Paul Wolfowitz, one of the most important architects of the war, acknowledged that America's initial beliefs about the period and intensity of insurgency were badly underestimated

(Slevin & Priest, 2003). Such assumptions were also influenced by the neocons' tight association with the Israeli Likud, as many Israeli intelligence reports were extremely positive, claiming that US troops will be welcomed as liberators rather than as an invasive force (Pelletiere, 2010).

Soon after the invasion, many resistance groups and anti-US militias launched attacks against Iraqi and American targets. This resulted in high numbers of casualties as Iraq sunk into a state of chaos. Pelletiere argues that the Baathist leaders took lessons from the first Gulf war and decided to change their military strategies on the battlefield by applying an irregular warfare strategy (Pelletiere, 2010). Initially, attacks were mainly launched against US and foreign targets and did cause havoc throughout the country. Shortly afterwards, when foreigners were more protected or when they simply fled out of the country, Iraq sunk into its most dangerous sectarian conflict as attacks against fellow Iraqi civilians by Islamist Jihadist groups took place and resulted in thousands of casualties.

Since 2003, insurgency and terrorist attacks in Iraq formed a new trend in warfare history. Suicide bombings had already been employed as a tactic in other armed conflicts, but never at the same frequency and brutality that hit Iraqis (Williams C. J., 2012). For instance, many reports conducted by global organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, referred to al Qaeda and its main allies, such as the Islamic State of Iraq, as being directly responsible for most of the terrorist attacks that hit civilian targets in Iraq (Human Rights Watch, 2005). These terrorist attacks that took place in mosques, *Husainiyas*, and markets among other civilian targets threatened to destabilize not only Iraq, but the whole Middle East (Hazleton, 2009).

With its low level of troops on the ground, and the failure to effectively plan for the post-invasion period, America failed to prevent such attacks, which did nothing but aroused anti-American suspicion and behavior among most Iraqis. According to many official reports, by June 2004, America's casualties on the battlefield constituted a minority (less than 10%) of the overall death toll with the Iraqis forming a majority of 90% of the losses (Pirnie & O'Connell, 2008). By intensifying their attacks against Iraqi civilians, the insurgents were eager to reveal the fragility of the US-Iraqi security and reconstruction plans, pressure and warn anyone willing to collaborate with the new Iraqi state, and most importantly, carry out violent sectarian revenge against other communities of the Iraqi population. Additionally, Iraq's neighbors, mainly Iran and Syria, were keen to fuel the insurgency against as part of their geopolitical struggle with America. While the neocons' project of restoring Iraq as a functioning state proved to be catastrophic, US investments in post-war Iraq, examined in the next section, were also subjected to heavy criticism.

3.2.1-Investment in Post-2003 Iraq

Investment in Iraq was one of the most controversial subjects during the post-invasion period, since many U.S corporations were accused of corruption with a total absence of accountability (Juhasz, 2006). In fact, it was almost impossible to evaluate the accomplishments of corporations operating in Iraq after March 2003. In addition to economic reformation, various projects were planned to restore and develop Iraq's infrastructure, electricity, universities, houses and apartments, and transportation systems. Much of these projects were funded by the Iraq Relief and Reconstruction

Fund (IRRF), an organization established by the US congress and the CPA, as well as aids generated by the Madrid Conference on Reconstruction attended by representatives of over 22 countries (Pan 2003). For instance, while the American Congress provided funds for the reconstruction projects, it also did pass new legislation to investigate the use of these funds. The Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR) was created to supervise and audit the CPA's operations.

Even though the SIGIR was responsible for regulating America's spending on the reconstruction phase in Iraq, corporations in Iraq were almost working under no supervision. Antonia Juhasz contends that of the 13,578 projects funded by the Bush administration, SIGIR assessed only 65 projects (2006). Hence, with the absence of needed supervision, global companies were able to gain billions of dollars, something that certainly raises a question about the real intentions of these corporations during the reconstruction phase. Nevertheless, even with limited oversight performed by the SIGIR, questions could be raised about US performance in the reconstruction phase. In one of the reports exerted by SIGIR, it is possible to examine the inefficiency, if not the failure, of America's reconstruction of Iraq. For instance, regarding the electricity sector, less than 50% of the overall planned projects were accomplished, while more than 21% were not even launched by Spring 2006. Thus, on the national level, an oil-rich country like Iraq was enjoying just eleven hours of electricity per day, while in Baghdad, the capital and the heart of the country, the number was between four to eight hours per day.

Although the reconstruction efforts made partial progress, namely in the water and sewage projects, many problems arose during the implementation phase. Drawbacks such as poor security conditions, the disbandment of the Baath party,

prevalent corruption, the absence of coordination among different organizations dealing with the reconstruction projects and the past totalitarian realities of the Iraqi society hindered the overall reconstruction of the country. Indeed, a poor understanding of the Iraqi society by the different international agencies did not improve the situation. For instance, the Bush administration was also criticized for its role in providing US companies with much needed legal protection regardless of their performance. More importantly, due to a controversial law decreed by the CPA that provides foreign contractors in Iraq protection from all Iraqi legal power, legal actions against U.S contractors, who were believed to have stolen Iraqi assets, were not possible (Stockman, 2006). The next section examines investments in the oil sector.

3.2.2- Oil Plans

Pre-war critics had referred to oil as a major rationale for the US invasion of Iraq. Although Collin Powell emphasized that oil was never considered a goal for America during the build-up for the war, oil was at the heart of the struggle and one of its major motivations (Klare, 2004). Iraqi oil has far more strategic value for the US. Washington was keen to reduce dependency on the non-democratic oil producing nations and undermine and pressure the oil-producers countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran to undergo economic and political reform in order to advance the neo-conservative plans of global democratic expansion (Sykes, 2010). Indeed, oil was never the only motive for the war, but many US officials had Iraqi oil clearly in their sight. In

particular, US Vice President Dick Cheney highlighted the need to control Persian oil supplies in one of his pre-war speeches. In addition to the purely economic benefits of controlling Iraqi oil, the administration saw control over Persian Gulf energy resources as crucial in balancing the ascending political role of its direct rivals, namely China and Russia (Ashkar& Chomsky, 2006).

For instance, no-bid oil contracts were given to major US corporations, such as Halliburton and Bechtel. Particularly, Halliburton, a US organization closely related to then vice-president Cheney, did receive what is understood to be Iraqi favoritism to rebuild the oil infrastructure in Iraq (Glanz, 2006). Iraq's major oil contracts were given to American corporations, such as Bechtel, a large contributor to the Republicans Party. The appointment of Philipp Carroll, a former Shell CEO, as the head of the team responsible for managing the Iraqi oil sector, was a clear sign of these corporations' political power (Pelletiere, 2010). Indeed, by shielding them from any accountability regarding their activities in Iraq, Bush gave these companies absolute legal protection (Juhasz, 2006).

The Iraq oil Law, mentioned as the hydrocarbon law, is a US suggested law proposed to the Iraqi parliament in 2007. Although the bill was written in 2004 by the US government, it was approved by the Maliki government in February 2007, only to be blocked by the Iraqi parliament as it created political tensions around the country. The law was extremely unpopular among Iraqis, as it gives foreign companies 10 years of exclusive development and exploration rights. Once the exploration deals expire, these corporations have the right to negotiate new ones that consist of producing the oil

for another 20 years, but this time through partnering with the Iraq National Oil Company (INOC). These foreign firms would only pay the Iraqi government 12.5% allowance of the oil value, with an option of exporting whatever oil explored (Walt, 2007).

Such plans were not welcomed among Iraqis as many groups protested against what they believed were excessively generous oil deals, which Iraq would eventually regret after the war. Critics argued that this new law is unnecessary since Iraq's oil is among the cheapest and easiest to extract. Others pointed to the fact that Iraq's refineries were not heavily damaged during the invasion, hence there would be no serious need for its reconstruction (Fortson, 2009). Certainly, U.S oil companies were trying to benefit from America's military presence in Iraq to get no-bid contracts since many other non-American corporations would provide the Iraqis with the same amount of service at a lower cost.

Unsurprisingly, the privatization of the oil sector was part of the neo-cons post-war of Iraq strategy. Pelletiere contends that in promoting the Iraq take-over, the pro-Israel lobby in the administration was hoping to acquire a source of oil for Israel (Pelletiere, 2010). According to many reports, shortly after the invasion, there were plans to construct a new pipeline to pump oil from Northern Iraq to refineries in Haifa (Vuillamy, 2003). By providing its regional ally with cheap oil resources, the Bush administration was eager to solve Israel's energy headache. Accordingly, Joe Vialls argues that the war on Iraq was highly influenced by Israel's energy needs. He claims that the Iraq War was designed to provide Israel with large economic benefits from Iraqi oil as well as eliminating Israel's dependency on Russian's energy sources (Vialls,

2003). In other words, the war was fought on behalf of Israel in order to secure Tel Aviv's oil needs. The next section examines the neocons' plans to create a new democratic system in Iraq and their efforts to spread democracy throughout the Middle East.

3.2.3- A New Middle East

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the US administration was eager to launch a new policy in the region, often referred to as the New Middle East, with the decision to invade Iraq as the most important driver of this new approach (Williams & Schmidt, 2007). The neocons saw the toppling of Saddam Hussein and the creation of a free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East as a landmark in reshaping the whole region. As discussed in the preceding chapter, installing a democratic government in Iraq was the first step to spread democracy to other countries in the Middle East. Bush (2010), Cheney (2012) and Rice (2011) did stress the importance of overthrowing Saddam Hussein as a first and vital step to promote democracy and bring peace to Iraq and they claimed that this would soon expand to the greater states of the Middle Eastern. The neocons were convinced that terrorism, which for them is the root of the problem in this region, was due to the absence of democratic systems in most of the Middle Eastern states (Dermer & Sharansky, 2004). Consequently, they held that direct and unilateral military actions were totally justified. Washington held that its enemies were trying to use terrorism as a war of ideology against America. Thus, the administration's

responsibility was to protect its citizens by trying to promote democracy as an opposing ideology (Bush, 2010; Salomon, 2007).

As stated earlier in the chapter, the neocons' main objective was to plant democracy in Iraq through military intervention in order to expand it throughout the Arab world. Nevertheless, whether or not Iraqis accepted such a foreign imposition of democracy is debatable. Even if Iraq and other countries were embracing democratic norms such as elections and parliaments, they were not doing so for the sake of true liberal democratic transformations (Wehrey et al., 2009). Moreover, even though the dictatorial regime was ousted, Iraq fell into a destructive civil war that resulted in hundred thousands of Iraqi casualties and enormous negative socioeconomic effects (Carothers, 2007). Hopes of regional democratic expansions were halted by increasing tensions in Iraq. Thomas Carothers argues that as the images of hundreds of Arabs dying as a result of a “democratic experiment” were spread all over the world, the Arab leaders were able to use the war to reinforce their long-standing message to their citizens about the perils of rapid democratic change in their region. The consequences of the Iraq war were indeed felt all over the Middle East. The increasing number of Iraqi refugees, the rise of terrorist organization and the alarming growth of the Shia–Sunni conflict were used by Arab regimes to counter demands for domestic political openings (Carothers, 2007).

3.2.4- Critical assessment

In 2008, the Middle East was a very different region than that in the pre-9/11 period. The invasion of Iraq was crucial and vital in this transformation. However, the transformations that took place were certainly not what the neocons had in mind. Despite partial improvement in the country's security conditions, Iraq continued to be politically unstable and ethnically divided (Ashkar & Chomsky, 2007). Based on the behavior of the Bush administration, it is believed that the neocons' plan in Iraq was neither to rebuild the country nor to rehabilitate it.

The American decision to invade and occupy Iraq increased sectarian tensions in the country. This was in part a consequence of a US-Israeli plan to reshape the region and fragment it into a set of ethnic states, itself an old Israeli plan to redraw the map of the Middle East (Ashkar & Chomsky, 2007; Sniegowski, 2008). The 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq unleashed a destructive sectarian Sunni-Shia contest that has reshaped the geopolitics of the region. Far from solving many of their enduring problems, Iraqis will have, for decades to come, to live with the disastrous consequences of the American invasion of their country and the geopolitical struggle that was initiated. Indeed, the US failure to effectively rebuild Iraq was also caused by the geopolitical struggles that took place in the country. The next section examines US geopolitical struggles in Iraq, and its direct implications on the Middle East.

3.3-The Geopolitical Struggle in Iraq

After the 2003 invasion, Iraq became a key pillar in the geopolitical struggle between America and Iran. This struggle for power in the region was initially shaped by the eight years long Iran-Iraq War, the first Gulf war in 1991, and finally by the decision to invade Iraq in 2003. It is a long-lasting quest for geopolitical supremacy created by Iraq's unsettled politics as well as the social structure of Iraq and its abundant oil resources. This geopolitical struggle was felt around the Middle East, but Iraq was the eventual playground where most regional players were trying to claim supremacy (Pelletiere, 2010; Gause, 2010). Regardless of the outcomes of the geopolitical struggle initiated in 2003, the struggle in Iraq strategically shaped the balance of power in the Middle East in for decades to come (Wehrey et al., 2009). Frederic Wehrey, Dalia Kaye, Jessica Watkins, Jeffrey Martin and Robert Guffey (2009) argue that the Iraq War's reverberations in the region are broad ranging, affecting relations between states, political and societal dynamics inside states, the calculations of terrorists and paramilitaries, and shifts in public views of American credibility. The Bush administration was long keen to establish a base in Iraq in order to spread its dominance throughout the Middle East (Sniegoski, 2008; Ashkar & Chomsky, 2007; Pelletiere, 2010). Certainly, many of the actors involved in Iraq were considered as major obstacles for America's ambition in the region. This section examines how the Iraq war initiated new regional dynamics in the Middle East. The main struggle initiated by the war was the one between America and Iran, but other countries were also involved, especially Syria and Saudi Arabia. Israel, a longtime backer of the war, was also an important figure in this struggle. The overthrow of the

Baath regime in Baghdad disturbed the longstanding balance of power in the region, which shifted toward Iran (Wehrey et al., 2009). Wehrey et al. (2009) contend that the perceived removal of the Iraqi buffer to Iran following the Iraq War led to widespread concern among Arab states that Iran can more easily maneuver in the core of the Middle East, from Lebanon to Gaza. The new conditions in Iraq resulted in perceptions of an increased vulnerability of the Arab Sunni regimes.

3.3.1- A War for Israel

Israeli plans to oust Saddam Hussein had been on place for years (Walt & Mearsheimer, 2007). In 1996, then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu framed a grand strategy for Israel in the Middle East, which was entitled "A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm" and written under the auspices of an Israeli think tank, the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies (Weber, 2008). The document recommends that America should focus its efforts on ousting Saddam Hussein's, a vital objective for Israel. With support from Tel Aviv and the powerful Israeli lobby in America, and largely influenced by the neocons in his administration, Bush decided to invade Iraq and wipe out one of Israel's fiercest enemies (Walt & Mearsheimer, 2007).

Israel's geopolitical supremacy was among the most important rationales for the Iraq invasion in 2003 (Pelletiere, 2010; Walt & Mearsheimer, 2007). Walt and Mearsheimer (2007) argue that pressure from Tel Aviv and the Israeli lobby was the not the sole factor behind Washington's decision to invade Iraq, yet it was a critical one.

The authors contend that the decision to invade Iraq was driven by the neoconservatives' desire to make Israel more secure. Philip Zelikow, then executive director of the body set up to investigate the 9/11 attacks, claims that Iraq Saddam Hussein was not a threat to America, but he was to Israel, which is one reason why the Bush administration decided to invade Iraq in 2003 (Mekay, 2004). Likewise, Robert Novak asserts that Israel's security was one of the main rationales of the war.

For instance, the Iraq war perceived as the first step of a larger plan to reshape the Middle East in ways that would enhance Israel's security and increase America's geopolitical power. Walt and Mearsheimer (2007) claim that the driving force behind the invasion was the neoconservatives who were keen to strategically reshape the Middle East. The Iraq war was meant to trigger democratic openings. Reshaping the Middle East was meant to ensure that democratic regimes, friendly to Israel and America, would replace the old authoritarian governments. By installing US military bases in Iraq, the threat posed by Tel Aviv's enemies would be neutralized. Sniegowski contends that the neocons in the Bush administration were eager to reshape the Middle East in order to achieve a long term Israeli goal. Reshaping the region was central to the neocons in order to weaken Israel's regional foes. For Israel, reshaping the Middle East would enhance its security and preserve its regional hegemony (Sniegowski, 2008).

For instance, some experts claim that the decision to invade Iraq did not benefit Israel. The main concern for Tel Aviv resulting from this war was related to the growing role of Tehran (Wehrey et al., 2009). Wehrey et al . (2009) argue that Israel has long been concerned about Iranian regional ambitions and hostility and subsequent Israeli officials perceive Tehran as the most serious, even existential, threat. The rising

power of Tehran after 2003 and the country's emerging nuclear crisis, coupled with the provocative discourse of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, heightened Israeli fears of a nuclear Iran. The post-war regional rise of Iran, coupled with its growing support for anti-Israel organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas, weakened Israel's geopolitical condition. The war increased hostility against Tel Aviv by most Arabs and the ascendant role of pro-Iran organizations, such as Hezbollah and Hamas, significantly damaged Israel's security condition. After the war, Israel's geopolitical condition was certainly weakened with the regional rise of Iran. Certainly, Tel Aviv's ambitions in post-war Iraq were sometimes balanced by the growing Iranian power. The next section examines US geopolitical struggle with Iran and its implications.

3.3.2-Iran: the Emerging Threat

The traditional Middle East regional system since 1945 has been governed by continuous engagement and struggle for primacy between Iran and numerous Arab countries. To ensure that no power would prevail over the other, these regional powers have long been backed by military assistance and political support from great powers, such as America and the Soviet Union. The 2003 Iraq war caused a fundamental shift in the regional balance of power toward non-Arab states, especially Iran (Wehrey et al., 2009). On the one hand, the outset of the Baath regime, long considered as the balancing power to Iran's regional ambition, was exploited by Tehran. On the other hand, the war increased Washington's leverage in the Persian Gulf as the genuine regional power. Indeed, the Bush administration greater tried to benefit from its military

presence in Iraq to counter Iran in its quest for regional supremacy. Ironically, the decision to invade Iraq went to a large extent in Iran's favor and not the opposite. The war strengthened an Iranian-led axis running through Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Iran emerged as a far more powerful player in the Middle East since the overthrow of the Baathist regime in Baghdad and the total collapse of the Iraqi state (Pelletiere, 2010). Certainly, this situation was neither envisaged nor perceived by the main architects of the invasion, who saw the war as a vital first step toward reshaping the region, ultimately pushing toward the overthrow of the mullahs in Tehran as well. Surprisingly for many, with the toppling of the Baathist regime in Baghdad, the balance of power in the region has shifted in Iran's favor, resulting in an increase in its influence in the Persian Gulf and the Levant (Nasr, 2006; Pelletiere, 2010).

In the wake of the Iraq invasion, Tehran grew aggressive in its foreign policy approach, characterized by its nuclear ambitions and regional expansion. Various studies since the war indicated that most of the Shia political factions in Iraq have long standing ties to Tehran (Wehrey et al., 2009). Most of Iraq's problems could not be solved without coordinating with its Persian neighbor and it was nearly impossible to come up with solutions in Iraq without referring back to Iran. The same can be said regarding the political level, as both countries formed a cluster which only strengthens Iran's ascending role in the region (Ottaway, Hamzawy, Brown, Sadjadpour, and Salem, 2008). Faced with such new political circumstances, the Bush administration decision making undermined America's role compared to the Iranian one and a new reality prevailed: America had to overcome a far more powerful Iran in its geopolitical struggle in Iraq.

Five years after the invasion, Iraq became a failed state. The war discharged a new power struggle in the country that lasted for years, something that prevented the government in Baghdad from performing effectively. With the country unable to overcome the insurgency, and as violence erupted in most of Iraq, Tehran assumed an important role in Iraqi affairs. Robert Baer contends that Iran believed that once tripped in the Iraq turmoil, America will eventually acknowledge the ascendant Iranian role in Iraq and the whole Middle East. Accordingly, Baer argues that Iran was using its experience in Lebanon to replicate its success elsewhere across the whole Middle East, repeatedly trying to claim geopolitical and economic advantage over its rivals, especially when it comes to oil and energy resources. In fact, Baer suggests that Tehran clearly understood how vulnerable America is when it comes to oil. Hence, Tehran focused its sights on securing the Iraqi oil, which, combined with their own reserves, would mean that Iran would be able to control up to 55% of the world's known oil reserves. Indeed, no foreign oil company would have the right to bid on Iraqi field exploration without consulting Tehran. Baer points out that ExxonMobil, which faced with the bitter reality of the economic sanctions on Iran, decided not to apply for any bids to explore the Iraqi oil fields (Baer, 2008).

Through its proxies in Iraq and its close relations with the diverse political organizations, Tehran was able to exert overwhelming influence in Baghdad (Baer, 2008). Although it significantly grew after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Tehran's influence grew in the 1980s and the 1990s of the past century. During this period, many of the Iraqi Shia leaders were seeking refuge in Iran, as they fled away from Saddam's oppressive regime. While it was very normal for an Islamic Shia regime to protect its

fellow threatened leaders, Tehran had certainly more than religion in mind. In fact, the Iranians were trying to benefit from this situation by organizing the various Shia political organizations and arming their military wings. Eventually, the main politically and militarily active organizations in Iraq after 2003 were trained and armed in Tehran during the 1990s period (Nasr, 2006).

Generally speaking, Iran worked for the formation of a pro-Iranian Shia dominated government in Baghdad, and tried to keep America caught up in Iraq's internal politics. Iran's top strategic priority is to establish a friendly, preferably Shiite government that is sufficiently powerful to impose order but not powerful enough to pose a serious security threat to Iraq (Milani, 2009). By doing so, Tehran encouraged elections as a way to ensure ethnic majority rule, i.e. Shia one, as well as backing and financing diverse, even competing, Iraqi organizations (Baer, 2008). Consequently, Tehran positioned itself to defend its interest whatever were the political conditions. Through its support for various Iraqi militias and organizations, including Sunni ones, Iran's quest to dominate Iraq was clear. Tehran was trying to ensure its supremacy both under military conditions and under democratic scenarios.

Tehran became a far more dominant player after 2003, ruled by a radical government, and seeking to exploit this new situation to expand its influence throughout the whole region. The shocking images of the eight years Iran-Iraq war, which did halt Iran's pursuit for regional domination, were past and totally forgotten. By overthrowing the Baathists, hence breaking the status quo in the Persian Gulf, America initiated the rise of the Persian state in the region. Accordingly, the election of the conservative AhmadiNejad as president of Iran, as well as the sudden shift in oil prices, partially

affected by the 2003 war, allowed Tehran to benefit from the favorable opportunities offered by the decision to invade Iraq. Iran eventually sought to fortify its coalition with Syria, increasing its support for Hezbollah and Hamas, but also drawing suspicion from many Arab leaders, as the term “Shia crescent” became familiar with the regional rise of Tehran. Additionally, as part of its enduring war of ideology with America, Tehran sought cooperation with distant states, like Venezuela, as well as supporting groups like Taliban with whom it only share its animosity to America (Ottaway et al., 2008).

The Bush administration did not have the deterrence abilities to force a change in Tehran's policies. At times, Iran seemed to be willing to cooperate, but on its own terms. Washington was never in a strong position to force Tehran to follow its orders. America was bogged down in the Iraqi turmoil and with oil prices constantly reaching higher values, the situation could not get better for the neocons, as neither the sanctions- which was never respected by all states - nor the military option- which seemed far from being a realistic option- seemed to force Tehran to change its policy in the Middle East (Ottaway et al., 2008).Iran was not the sole obstacle for US geopolitical plans in Iraq; Syria and Saudi Arabia were also important players in this struggle.

3.3.2- Syria: a Struggle for Survival

Damascus firmly stood against the decision to invade Iraq, emphasizing the importance of preserving the independence of the country while supporting its political development, and later repeatedly requesting a time table for the withdrawal of U.S forces from Iraq. During the build up to the war and while America was preparing to

wage the war against Iraq, Damascus quickly opposed the war by hosting Iraqi officials. Also, Syria attempted to thwart US effort to gain international support for such war, an act that inflicted tension with Washington. American Officials accused Syria of acting malignly in Baghdad, by transmitting into its Iraqi borders Muslim extremists in order to fuel insurgency against U.S led troops. Not only officials were condemning Damascus for encouraging and supporting Arab fighters in their jihad against U.S forces, but also Damascus was accused of arming many Iraqi organizations as well as providing refuge for many Baathist leaders (Horan, 2003). Unsurprisingly, the Bush administration also claimed that Syria acquired chemical weapons, an allegation Damascus constantly denied. Similar to the Iranian case, the U.S government hoped that regime change in Iraq and the creation of a new pro-American government would eventually force a change a regime change in Damascus as well, or at least a change in its political behavior in the region, namely cutting of its support for Hezbollah and Hamas (Zisser,2007)

Critics condemned Syria for trying to manipulate anti-US sentiments in Iraq by supporting Islamist extremist, while at the same time repressing them in its own territories. Although Damascus denied those declarations, it acknowledged that some fighters did cross into Iraq from its borders (Sands, 2010).Some experts argue that Syria's support of jihadist movements in Iraq should be seen as a mix of ideological inspiration as well as a self-defense tactic employed by the regime (Rubin, 2007). The regime's support of anti-US movements was mainly because Damascus wanted to strengthen its position in the eyes of the Syrians and Arabs, as well as being threatened by a U.S victory which could eventually harm Syria in the future. By opposing the war

and by frequently criticizing America's decision to invade Iraq, Damascus was picturing itself ideologically as the head of the opposing Arab camp (Zisser, 2003). Trying to gain support of the Arab masses, Syria accused the Bush administration of having imperial ambitions regarding their quest for Iraqi oil resources and trying to redraw the regional map.

Syria turned a blind eye to the transfer of arms into Iraq via its borders and allowed volunteers to cross its borders in order to fight foreign forces. As Damascus sensed the danger of U.S victory in Iraq, it hoped that once bogged down in the Iraqi turmoil, the Bush administration would have no other choice but to look toward reconciliation with Damascus in order to prevent total chaos in the country. Consequently, the regime's behavior in Iraq after 2003 pushed the U.S administration to embrace an unprecedented severe tone against Syria and led to the further deterioration of the two countries' relations. For instance, Saudi Arabia was also at the heart of the struggle for Iraq. The next section examines Riyadh's role in this ongoing geopolitical battle.

3.3.3- Saudi Arabia: an Ally or Foe?

The 2003 Iraq war took place at a time when America was pressing Saudi Arabia to cut off its links with al-Qaeda. Baer asserts that nearly all the funding of al-Qaeda and other Islamic Jihadist groups came from sources in Riyadh (Baer, 2003). The Bush administration aimed to cut such support and pressured the Saudi regime to collaborate with their demands. The two countries' close alliance depended heavily on

oil, as Saudi Arabia was always a key to global oil stability, especially during periods of political instability (Pelletiere, 2010). While America depended on Saudi oil to assure global stability, the rulers of Saudi Arabia depended on U.S military protection against any external or even internal threats.

From a Saudi geopolitical perspective, the decision to invade Iraq was a sign that the relationship between both countries would not remain the same. Since oil resources in Iraq were considered to constitute the only cheap alternative of the Saudi ones, Riyadh feared that US dependency on its oil would eventually decrease sometimes in the future, thus undermining its geopolitical role in the Middle East (Sykes, 2010). In fact, many neocons claimed that toppling Saddam Hussein and installing a democratic, pro-American government in Baghdad, would mean that Iraq would soon grow into the main energy exporter to the West, thus allowing America to unconditionally face Riyadh in its global war on terrorism (Eland, 2002). Hence, reducing America and the West's reliance on Saudi oil would eventually be one of the most important components of the administration's war on terrorism that erupted in the wake of 9/11 attacks, and would eventually smooth Washington's way toward forcing a regime change in Riyadh as well.

Moreover, U.S military bases in Iraq were viewed as the substitute for America's bases in Saudi Arabia. Similar to the oil issue, American bases in Iraq would put the regime in Riyadh under both external and internal threats, especially with the regional rise of Iran. Like many other Sunni Muslim regimes in the Middle East, the Saudis were also worried that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein would most likely expand Iranian influence in the region, namely in Iraq, as Tehran did form strong ties

with many of the exiled Shia leaders during the past two decades (Wehrey et al., 2009). Thus, by installing new bases in Iraq, the neocons were sending a clear message to Riyadh about the new geopolitical realities in the Gulf. Finally, and perhaps most frightening to the Saudi ruling family, the invasion of Iraq would mean that, like the Iranian and Syrian cases, the Bush administration was hoping that a new democratic Iraq would lead toward reforms, even regime change, in Saudi Arabia. Baer claims that prior to invading Iraq, many U.S officials threatened many of their Saudi counterparts that in case they did not end their support of al-Qaeda, they will also be attacked (Baer, 2003). Thus, fearing that any American victory in Iraq would constitute a direct threat to their regime stability, Riyadh opposed the war on Iraq, even though they initially perceived Saddam Hussein's regional ambitions as a direct threat to their own stability.

After the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the balance of power in the Persian Gulf region shifted, negatively impacting relationships between Tehran and Riyadh (Jahner, 2012). Saudi Arabia was reportedly financing and supporting insurgents in Iraq. Many U.S intelligent reports mention that there had been hundreds of Saudi fighters in Iraq. Other reports suggested that roughly 25% of non-Iraqi fighters came through Saudi Arabia (Prados & Blanchard, 2006). By funding the Sunni movements in Iraq, the Saudis were trying to counter the growing Iranian role in Baghdad and supporting Iraqi Sunnis in their political struggle against their fellow Iraqi Shia (Cooper, 2007). More importantly, by supporting the insurgency against American troops, Riyadh was trying to prevent an American victory in Iraq which would push for reforms in the Kingdom in the future.

3.4-Conclusion

This chapter explored U.S post-war plans in Iraq and the geopolitical struggle that took place in the country. Always influenced by their close ties to Israel, this chapter suggests that the neocons' quest for reshaping the Middle East was a significant aspect of the Bush administration's Middle Eastern foreign policy. Ironically, Iran and Saudi Arabia, supposedly two countries with opposing regional ambitions, had one common goal which was to prevent U.S seizure of Iraq' oil. Both states, alongside Syria, fueled and supported insurgency against U.S troops. Iraq's neighboring countries heavily interfered in its internal politics in order to counter U.S regional ambitions, as the neocons sought to force regime changes in many of Iraq's neighboring nations in their attempts to reshape the Middle East. Therefore, trying to prevent a regime change at home, Baghdad's neighbors wanted to see America bogged down in Iraq. The next chapter investigates US policies toward Lebanon under George W. Bush, and how the country became the battleground for an intense geopolitical struggle between, on the one hand, the US and Israel and, on the other, Iran and Syria.

Chapter Four

Lebanon: Another Geopolitical Battleground

4.1-Introduction

For the past fifty years, US policy in the Middle East was governed by a number of objectives: the quest for oil and the protection of Israel. Since its early engagements in the region, supporting pro-American governments was pivotal. At some point, as a response to new geopolitical conditions, shifts in US policies took place, including cautious engagements with so-called rogue states such as Syria and Iran. Lebanon, one of the smallest Middle Eastern countries, has always attracted international attention disproportionate to its small size. With its relatively small size, pivotal geopolitical location, long term sectarian tensions, and most importantly, the increasing international involvement in its matters, Lebanon has always been a battleground for the conflicts of others. Unsurprisingly, the French term '*libanisation*' became officially part of the French dictionary, referring to any process of fragmentation of a state as a result of confrontation between diverse communities (Hirst, 2010).

Political conditions in the Middle East significantly shaped American- Lebanese relations. For instance, various domestic factors in both countries influenced US policy toward Beirut. However, the power of such factors in shaping US policy towards Beirut

has been limited largely by US regional considerations that went beyond Lebanon. This chapter investigates American foreign policy in Lebanon from 2003 through 2008. US policies toward Beirut are largely intertwined with American considerations at the regional level. In order to analyze the neocons' policy in Lebanon and the major challenges that took place in this country during the last decade, it is vital to consider Washington's geopolitical struggle in the region, mainly its struggle against Syria and Iran. During this period, the major considerations shaping American policy toward Beirut were rarely related to Lebanon, but part of the broader geopolitical struggle in the Middle East in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

4.2- U.S-Lebanese Relations after 9/11

Lebanon was not considered a priority to the Bush administration's Middle East diplomacy until the 9/11 attacks, which created a new global reality for Washington. Reacting to new realities in the Middle East, American officials put Syria and Lebanon on the top of their political agenda. Indeed, Israel and its lobby in Washington significantly influenced US government policy toward Damascus after 9/11. Walt and Mearsheimer (2007) argue that Israel, backed by the neocons in the Bush administration, worked hard to convince the US government to treat Syria as a hostile and dangerous enemy. Ironically, the war on terrorism launched by the neocons was perceived as a potential point for US-Syrian cooperation. The regime in Syria complied with post-9/11 American requests and provided the US government with intelligence

reports on Al-Qaida's activities against American targets(Crane, 2005). However, Damascus refused American demands to end its military and political support for anti-Israeli organizations, such as Hezbollah and Hamas, and did not accept to end its alliance with Iran.

The decision to invade Iraq in 2003 deepened disagreements between the US and Syria, which made the cooperation between both countries almost impossible. In the aftermath of the fall of Saddam's regime in Baghdad, officials in Tel Aviv urged the Bush administration to pressure and threaten the regime in Syria to comply with a set of Israeli demands. Successfully wiping out Saddam Hussein's regional threat, Tel Aviv tried to convince the US government that Bashar al Assad was more dangerous to regional stability(Walt &Mearsheimer, 2007). Growing highly suspicious of US-Israeli intentions, Damascus opposed Washington's plans to launch a war against Iraq. Fearing a similar invasion in the future, Damascus was reluctant to support Washington's invasion of Iraq.

The 2003 Iraq war exacerbated relations between Washington and Damascus. As part of the existing geopolitical struggle with Damascus, America openly objected to Syria's dominance in Lebanon. On December 12, 2003, and under the "Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act", the Bush administration challenged Damascus' presence in Lebanon by imposing sanctions and downgrading its diplomatic ties with Syria. The power of AIPAC significantly shaped such decision. According to Michael Blanford, the US congress threatened to impose sanctions on Damascus unless it fulfilled a host of conditions that appeared to suit the security needs of Israel rather than Lebanon's sovereignty (Blanford, 2009). Walt and

Mearsheimer(2007)contend that the legislation was significantly endorsed by AIPAC and framed by some of Israel’s best friends in congress. The law was meant to pressure Syria and end its support for Jihadist organizations, cease fuelling insurgency in Iraq, and more significantly, end its military presence in Lebanon.

Unsurprisingly, Lebanon became a geopolitical battleground between America and Syria. In summer 2004, as the Lebanese parliament extended the term of the Pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud, UN Security Council Resolution 1559 was adopted, which called for the disarmament of non-state militias, namely Hezbollah, as well as the immediate withdrawal of remaining security forces, in reference to Syria(Hirschfeld, 2006). As critics of the resolution argued that such demands echoed Israel’s requests, Lebanon plunged into a heated political debate, which peaked with the brutal assassination of Rafic Hariri.

4.2.1- The Assassination of Rafic Hariri

On February 14, 2005, former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri was assassinated in Beirut. As international accusations pointed to the Syrian role in Hariri’s murder, the Bush administration inaugurated a new era of US policy in Lebanon. With its support for the anti-Syrian 14 March coalition, America increased its pressure on Syria to withdraw its forces from Lebanon and comply with international demands (Hirst, 2010). Thus, the Bush administration was fully engaged in the battle against Syria in Lebanon.

Hariri’s murder and the subsequent withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon opened a new era in US policy in Lebanon. In reaction to the assassination, Washington

demanded the immediate withdrawal of Syria's security forces from Lebanon and requested the fulfillment of UNSCR 1559. The Bush administration supported efforts to establish a UN independent committee to investigate Hariri's assassination, which was used to increase the pressure on the Syrian regime (Heydemann & Sallam, 2009). America also supported efforts to form a Special Tribunal for Lebanon to summon those found guilty for Hariri's murder. Washington provided 40% of the Tribunal's first year's budget. Indeed, the Tribunal was a valuable tool used by the Bush administration in its geopolitical struggle with Damascus. Nicholas Blanford argues that Washington and Paris perceived the Hariri Tribunal as a useful mean to pressure the regime in Syria to comply with American requests in regard to its behavior in Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine (Blanford, 2009). Lebanon was thus meant to become the focal point of pressure against Damascus.

Weakening Damascus was not the only objective for US policy in Lebanon. Washington was eager to counter the Iranian influence in the Middle East, which had dramatically grown after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. America dealt with the ascending power of Hezbollah as part of its geopolitical struggle with Iran. Blanford argues that by undermining Damascus' influence in Beirut, the Bush administration was also keen to counter Tehran's growing power in the region. Washington viewed the political scene in Lebanon as largely exposed to external factors, especially those originating from Tehran, Riyadh, Damascus and Tel Aviv (Heydemann & Sallam, 2009). Most importantly, Tel Aviv's animosity toward Damascus and Tehran largely influenced the Bush administration's policy toward Iran and Syria.

The Hariri murder unleashed severe international pressure on Damascus, most importantly from America and France. After the withdrawal of Syrian forces in 2005, U.S government supported the anti-Syria coalition in Lebanon, commonly referred to as the March 14 coalition. Steven Heydemann and Hecham Sallam (2009) argue that US aid to Lebanon expanded significantly after 2005. Averaging annually around \$27 million per year till 2004, American economic assistance to the Lebanese government reached \$202.8 in 2007. Fitting well with US objective of countering Iranian and Syrian influence in the Middle East, the March 14 alliance fiercely opposed Damascus and Tehran's growing influence in Lebanon. Most importantly, the March 14 coalition, backed by significant popular support, strongly supported the establishment of the international Hariri Tribunal, which was perceived as a valuable tool to undermine the Syrian regime.

The Bush administration's policy toward Beirut revolved around backing the Lebanese government against the growing influence of Syria and Iran. Struggling to rebuild institutions and failing to exert total control over its entire territories, the Lebanese government was faced with several critical issues. Most importantly, Found Siniora's government struggled to cope with the rising power and influence of Hezbollah, which was backed by strong regional actors. The main challenges for the Lebanese government centered on unresolved disputes alongside its borders, the rising power of extremist groups in Lebanon, and most importantly, its inability to cope with American demands regarding the disarmament of Hezbollah and other Palestinian groups. The next section examines the geopolitical struggle in Lebanon, particularly the growing power of Hezbollah and how regional powers perceived its role.

4.3- Hezbollah's Geopolitical Uses for Syria and Iran

In the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Bush administration viewed Iran and Syria's ties to Hezbollah as a direct threat to its influence in the region. Certainly, Syria and Iran were responsible for the growing power of Hezbollah (Hirst, 2010). Jeremy Sharp et al. (2006) argues that Iran and Syria were supporting, arming, training, and financing Hezbollah, increasingly using the organization as a proxy to accomplish their own goals in the Middle East. On one hand, through their primary role in supporting Hezbollah, Tehran and Damascus held regional ambitions to rise as the unchallenged powers in the region. On the other hand, both countries were keen to spread their influence within Lebanon, a small but strategic country.

Supporting Hezbollah provided Syria and Iran several geopolitical benefits. Tehran certainly benefited from such ties to counter western pressures regarding its nuclear program (Nakhle, 2007; Rubin, 2007; Pan, 2006). Looking to deflect international censure over its nuclear program, Tehran was keen to strengthen Hezbollah's power in Lebanon and use the "Hezbollah card" to force the West to engage it in direct negotiation regarding its nuclear objectives.

As international pressure dramatically grew on it after 2004, Syria was similarly keen to support and strengthen Hezbollah's status in Lebanon in order to counter such pressure. Emile el-Hokayem argues that Syria's political gain from its alliance with Hezbollah eventually became tangible in 2004 (2007). As UNSCR 1559 was passed, and in the aftermath of Hariri assassination in February 2005, Damascus was subject to

extreme international pressure to withdraw its forces from Lebanon and cut its support to Hezbollah, an act that would undermine Syria's geopolitical status. To counter such Western efforts, the regime in Syria relied heavily on Hezbollah to oppose the US-led plans, describing such efforts as illegitimate interference in both countries' internal affairs. Damascus' close ties with Hezbollah, an Islamic organization with strong anti-Israeli sentiments, became the central achievement of the regime in Syria, presenting itself as directly responsible for Hezbollah's successes. By fostering its ties with the Lebanese Shiite organization, Damascus hoped to resist international isolation and defend its geopolitical role as a central power in the Middle East. In other words, similar to Tehran's case, Damascus was eager to deflect international pressure and push toward more Western engagement by empowering Hezbollah in Lebanon by using it as a political tool in its negotiations with many Western countries, especially amid its peace negotiations with Israel.

Esther Pan argues that as Syria broke away from most Arab countries and supported Iran during its war with Iraq, Tehran supported Damascus after the February 2005 murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri. The author claims that both countries dramatically improved their relations after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. In particular, Damascus felt vulnerable and pushed toward a mutual defense pact with Tehran, which included improving Syria's relationship with Hezbollah. Tehran and Damascus used Hezbollah as part of the ongoing geopolitical struggle in the Levant. Surrounded by enemies, both countries strengthened their ties as a way to counter the growing geopolitical power of their adversaries and to avoid a fate similar to that of the

Baath regime in Baghdad. The next section examines how the Bush administration perceived Hezbollah and its plans to undermine it.

4.3.1- Washington's Confrontation with Hezbollah

Hezbollah constituted one of the greatest obstacles to the neocons' plans in Lebanon. With the party exerting a growing influence inside the Lebanese Shia society as well as gaining popular support throughout the Middle East following its successful military struggle against Israel, Hezbollah became an important player in the Middle Eastern geopolitical struggle (Wehrey et al., 2009). The movement's close ties with Iran, and its strategic relationship with Syria, threatened to counter US plans not only in Lebanon, but in the broader Middle East.

American officials constantly demanded complete government control over all of Lebanon, especially the southern part and the Palestinian camps. Officials argued that with the absence of such control, organizations perceived as terrorist ones, namely Hezbollah, would be able to operate freely. US support UNSCR 1559 was largely shaped by Israeli concerns about the growing military arsenal of Hezbollah, which was perceived as a threat to Tel Aviv. Accordingly, US requests for the Lebanese government to exert total control and extend the central government's authority over its territories were to counter Hezbollah's power in Lebanon and as part of the wider geopolitical struggle against both Iran and Syria.

Hezbollah always occupied a prominent position in US geopolitical plans in Lebanon (Heydemann & Sallam, 2009). The threat of the organization was identified as

early as 1980s after being linked with the US embassy bombing in Beirut, one of the deadliest attacks ever directed against US diplomats. Hezbollah threatens American interests on many scales. As a non-state actor, it is viewed by Washington as an important barrier to the rebuilding of post-civil war Lebanon as well as preventing the central government from exerting its total control over the country, consequently undermining Lebanon's security conditions. Hezbollah's unwillingness to disarm, its refusal to implement many UN security resolutions calling for its disarmament, and most importantly, its growing military power, which threatened to destabilize the long-standing status quo in favor of Israel, as seen in the June 2006 war, were all perceived as direct threats to US geopolitical interests in the Middle East. Such perceptions did not change even with Hezbollah's decision to participate in Lebanese political life and state institutions.

Hezbollah was also perceived as being part of the Iranian network in the Middle East and was regarded as a direct threat to American interests in the region (Wehrey et al., 2009). The Bush administration viewed Hezbollah's Iranian ties as raising the possibility of armed struggle between Lebanon and Israel, and such ties were used to deter the possibility of attacks against Tehran's nuclear programs (Hirst, 2010). Heydemann and Sallam (2009) view such ties as the framework within which Hezbollah has provided training and other forms of support to pro-Iranian actors in Iraq and Palestine, and to anti-Israeli and anti-American actors more broadly (Heydemann & Sallam, 2009). As Tehran's influence expanded in the Middle East after the toppling of Saddam Hussein, America perceived the growing power of Hezbollah as part of the ascending geopolitical role of Iran. Through its support to radical, anti-US regimes and

groups, Hezbollah was viewed as a critical threat to American interests on the regional level, especially regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict. Anti-Syrian and anti-Iranian demonstrations that took place in Beirut in February 2005 offered the Bush administration an ideal opportunity to counter Tehran's growing influence in the Middle East.

Hezbollah's relationship with Syria, which had been overshadowed by the group's ties to Iran, was regarded by the Bush administration as boosting Damascus's geopolitical position in the Levant, especially in its peace negotiations with Israel. Most importantly, Damascus was always criticized for its role as the geo-strategic linchpin connecting Iran to Hezbollah or as the intermediary between Tehran and its proxy in Lebanon (Blanford,2009). Both the United Nations and Israel were concerned with the fact that Tehran provided Hezbollah with high amount of rockets via Syria, calling upon Damascus to stop such violating acts. Hezbollah's support for anti-Israel Palestinian groups, particularly Islamic Jihad and Hamas, was viewed as much threatening for the same reasons. Heydemann and Sallam (2009) contend that Hezbollah was more than willing to supply the Palestinian organizations with much needed financial, logistical, and material support after the Israeli siege on Gaza. Hezbollah provided extensive military training and huge financial aid to many Palestinian organizations, acting as a role model for Hamas in particular. In fact, the two organizations shared the same political doctrine, i.e., liberating Palestine, employed the same military tactics, and shared close ties to Tehran (Sharp, et al., 2006).

Hezbollah was also seen by the Bush administration as a huge threat to its efforts of supporting moderate Middle Eastern governments while at the same trying to

isolate radicals Islamic groups. The organization's growing popularity in the Middle East at that time, largely shaped by its ability to spread its messages effectively via its own media platforms, namely the television network al-Manar, did successfully counter American efforts to undermine it (Heydemann & Sallam, 2009). Yelena Osipova contends that Hezbollah was largely successful in its media related objectives, not only within Lebanon but also globally, gradually attracting support and consolidating its political status (Osipova, 2011). Certainly, Hezbollah's prominent usage of various communication outlets enhanced its image throughout the Islamic world. The group acquired a growing legitimacy by carefully managing its public image in the Middle East, effectively balancing its military, political and social activities.

Finally, the Bush administration was aware of the growing threat posed by Hezbollah to Israel. American concerns for Tel Aviv stemmed from domestic and social concerns, as well as from the rising power of the Israeli Lobby (AIPAC) and the growing influence of the neoconservatives in the Bush administration (Hirst, 2010; Walt & Mearsheimer, 2007). As Hezbollah's power was increasing and Iran's geopolitical power was growing, the neocons were keen to alter the status quo on the Lebanese-Israeli borders. Since Hezbollah's foundation in the early 1980s, the organization's leaders repeatedly argued about the importance of military struggle against Israel. In fact, eliminating Israel was always one of Hezbollah's foremost goals. Amal Saad Ghorayeb argues that the group's animosity toward the Jews had always been motivated by Islam's hostility toward Judaism, which minimizes the role of political motivations in this struggle (2002). Indeed, the organization firmly opposes

Israel's existence and rejects international plans to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict based on the recognition of Israel's right to exist.

Washington's and Tel Aviv's perceptions about such threat led to extensive military agreements between both countries, trying to fend off the organization's growing threat. Patrick Devenny contends that Hezbollah's threat to Israel expanded not only in quantity, but also in quality. With the organization's missiles arsenal growing extensively after the 2000 Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon, and with the introduction of new developed Iranian-made ones, American and Israeli interests in the Middle East were threatened. Consequently Washington's war on terror was undermined.

Heydemann and Sallam (2009) assert that while there exists broad agreement within the U.S. political system about the threats associated with Hezbollah, this has been accompanied by persistent, at times intense, bargaining and competition around specific policies to address the threat. Participants in such debates, in addition to US officials, have been representatives of NGO's, think tanks and even members of the Lebanese lobby in America. Many participants have been eager to support aggressive American plans to undermine Hezbollah, which include increasing pressure on the organization by imposing more damaging sanctions, or by increasing military and economic aid to Israel. Others supported a more moderate approach, and distinguished between Hezbollah's political role and its military branch. Certainly, increasingly influenced by the growing power of the neoconservatives in his administration, Bush was keen to aggressively confront Hezbollah rather than engage in a dialogue with the organization.

As Hezbollah constituted a severe threat to US interests in Lebanon and the Middle East and with the new regional balance of power created by the organization's ascending power, the Bush administration imposed vast sanctions on the party. America officially included Hezbollah on its terror organization list and imposed huge financial restrictions on the organization and its supporters. Washington also prohibited political and diplomatic ties with Hezbollah, restricting American citizens from providing material support or financial aid to the organization. Accordingly, the US government strongly advocated plans to financially support the Lebanese central government and backed plans to expand its authority to the areas controlled by Hezbollah. Moreover, starting in 2006, and as part of its effort to undermine Hezbollah, the Bush administration granted more than half a billion dollars to Lebanon in the form of military assistance, with more than \$80 million of the amount given to the Internal Security Forces (ISF). This matter became a debatable issue in Lebanese political life and subject to fierce criticism by the anti-US camp in Lebanon (Kollock, 2010).

Most importantly, as part of its war on terror, the Bush administration augmented its military assistance to Israel to unprecedented levels. Sensing the danger on Israel's northern border, the Pentagon delivered \$10.5 billion to its ally, its biggest military aid program and granted Tel Aviv \$6.3 billion in arms deliveries (Fernandez, 2009). Indeed, as Hezbollah significantly grew powerful and as part of the geopolitical struggle with Syria and Iran, the neocons were eager to push Israel to attack Hezbollah and eliminate its threat (Walt & Mearsheimer, 2007). Yusuf Fernandez argues that Bush gave Tel Aviv the green light to attack Hezbollah, which was to be the first step in a broader campaign against Damascus and Tehran (Fernandez, 2009). Israel used

Hezbollah's attack against its troops, which resulted in the capture of two Israeli soldiers as well as killing three others, as a pretext to initiate the 33 days war. The next section examines this war and its geopolitical implications.

4.3.2- Goals of the July war

As stated in the previous chapter, many experts assert that the Bush administration's Middle Eastern policies were affected by the power of the pro-Israeli neoconservatives in the administration (Sniegoski, 2008; Walt & Mearsheimer, 2007). Undoubtedly, the neocons were directly responsible for the decision to invade Iraq as the first step in a plan to reshape the Middle East as well as advance Israel's interest and preserve its regional hegemony. Shortly after the war, America initiated its plans toward Lebanon and Syria. For instance, as America sunk into the Iraqi turmoil, the neocons' plans were halted in Iraq, and Lebanon, precisely Hezbollah, became the focal point of US foreign policy.

The 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel was initiated as Hezbollah kidnapped two Israeli soldiers on 12 July 2006. Many reports suggest that plans for the war were established long before Hezbollah's attacks (Fernandez, 2009; Hirst, 2010; Walt & Mersheimer, 2007). Sniegoski asserts that Israel's onslaught on Lebanon was not simply a response to the attacks on its troops (2008). Increasingly over the previous six years, Tel Aviv had grown frustrated over the growing military arsenal of Hezbollah, and watched the ever-growing flow of arms. Consequently, it urged the Bush administration to pressure its allies in Lebanon in order to implement UNSCR

1559, namely the disarmament of Hezbollah and other Palestinian movements. Washington hoped that the central government in Beirut could peacefully resolve this matter, but as this option failed, an Israeli military warfare against Hezbollah proved impossible to avoid.

On the regional level, although the July 2006 war was fought between Hezbollah and Israel, many foreign actors took part in the conflict, namely Syria and Iran. Not only were the U.S and Israeli governments keen to use the armed struggle in Lebanon as an opportunity to undermine Hezbollah, but such war was also directed against the organization's main regional sponsors: Iran and Syria. The July war, fought between Hezbollah and Israel, was a struggle for geopolitical supremacy between Iran and Syria on one side, and America and Israel on the other (Hirst, 2010; Sharp et al., 2006; Gambill, 2007). Certainly, one of the major rationales for the July war was to counter Syria and Iran in the ongoing geopolitical struggle in the Middle East. Hany Nakhleh argues that the July 2006 warfare should be directly linked to the struggle for geopolitical supremacy in the Middle East between the main regional players (Nakhle, 2007). For the regimes in Damascus and Tehran, the war was a chance to counter the Bush administration's plans after 2003. Both countries were eager to turn the tables on Washington and Tel Aviv and demonstrate their ability to strike against their plans to redesign the Middle East. Hence, Lebanon seemed fated to be a pawn in a broader geopolitical struggle in the region, pitting the growing axis of Iran, Syria and Hezbollah against the influence of the West, namely American and Israel (Blanford, 2009).

As Iran and Syria were extensively providing Hezbollah with weapons and political support, the war was perceived by many Israeli officials as strategically

critical. In particular, Tel Aviv was keen to deter and counter the growing Iranian influence in the Middle East. Hirst argues that terminating Tehran's nuclear programme was the ultimate objective of Tel-Aviv, so striking Hezbollah was only the start of a larger strike against Iran (Hirst, 2010). Unsurprisingly, countering the Iranian influence in the region converged neatly with US and Western goal of undermining Tehran's growing geopolitical goal, as well as Saudi Arabia's objective of balancing the Iranian power in the region.

On the other hand, Hezbollah's decision to attack Israel was influenced by its ties to Iran and Syria. Accordingly, Jeremy Sharp argues that Tehran and Damascus supported, armed and financed Hezbollah, using the Lebanese Shiite organization as a proxy to expand their geopolitical role in the Middle East (Sharp et al., 2006). Perceiving US presence in Iraq as a direct threat to their regime stability, Tehran and Damascus were keen to counter America's influence in the region by supporting Hezbollah in its struggle against Israel. Hezbollah's attack initiated a devastating full scale war by Israel, which demonstrated that Tel Aviv had already planned for such warfare even before Hezbollah attacked its soldiers. In fact, even before the outbreak of the war, Tel Aviv wanted to disarm Hezbollah and nullify its threat, eliminate its military arsenal, and restore its hegemony over its Northern borders.

Gary Gambill argues that Israel had a number of military, diplomatic, and strategic objectives that influenced such aggressive response to Hezbollah's attack (Gambill, 2007). Tel- Aviv was eager to destroy and disarm Hezbollah, thus restricting its threat. Phyllis Bennis contends that Tel Aviv aimed at establishing unchallenged and unchallengeable military control over all of its borders, perhaps including a direct on-

the-ground occupation, to wipe out all existing or potential resistance to its domination, and to transform the strategic map of the Middle East (2006). Sniegowski contends that the most limited Israeli goal was to remove Hezbollah from southern Lebanon. Indeed, by removing Hezbollah from its northern borders, Tel Aviv would protect itself from any future attacks and would eliminate the sole force in Lebanon able to prevent its hegemony over the entire country. In addition, Israel wanted to deploy multinational forces which would prohibit the emergence of any other anti-Israel organization. In fact, Washington and Tel Aviv were considering a UN proposal draft that would deploy international troops in southern Lebanon operating under Chapter 7, thus allowing the usage of force against Hezbollah (Bennis, 2006).

Not surprisingly, the July war was critical for many of the Bush administration's policy issues in the Middle East. Precisely, the neocons' goal of strategically reshaping the Middle East, the growing geopolitical power of Tehran, Damascus and Hezbollah were alarming matters for officials in Washington and Tel-Aviv. The next section investigates the link between the July 2006 war and the Bush administration's plans for a new Middle East.

4.3.3- The July War and the New Middle East

Bennis contends that the July War between Hezbollah and Israel, depicted as self-defense, was a US-Israeli war for hegemony and domination. She argues that such struggle was initiated to redraw the map of the contemporary Middle East, an increasingly important objective for officials in Washington and Tel-Aviv (2006).

Certainly, the fact that the Bush administration did not seek a rapid ceasefire highlights its determination to destroy Hezbollah. Rather, America was eager to redraw the Middle Eastern map in a way that would ensure Tel-Aviv's hegemony (Sniegoski, 2008; Hirst, 2010; Bennis, 2006). While the invasion of Iraq was the first pillar of the neocons' plans in the Middle East, undermining anti-Israel Islamic organizations and abolishing their threat to Tel-Aviv was supposed to be the next step. In 2006, many of the main architects of the Iraq war were already out of the White house, such as Paul Wolfowitz. However, their intellectual legacy was significantly powerful and certainly did influence Bush's decisions regarding Lebanon and Hezbollah. Bush stuck with US unilateralism, adopted a confrontational foreign policy, and wanted to benefit from the superiority of US military (Bennis, 2006). Sniegoski argues that Tel Aviv, fully backed by the Bush administration through political, military and financial support, was keen to maintain a fragmented Lebanon which had long been an ultimate Israeli security objective (Sniegoski, 2008). This objective simultaneously converged with US foreign policy initiated after 9/11, which was aiming to redraw the Middle East in a manner that wipes out any resistance to total US control.

Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya argues that during the July War, the Bush administration's plans to redraw the Middle East were introduced publicly. He claims that this war was expected to realign the whole region and thereby unleash the power of constructive chaos (Nazemroaya, 2006). This strategy of violence and chaos in the Middle East was employed to effectively redraw the map of the region in accordance with US-Israeli geopolitical goals and objectives. For instance, as then U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice publicly spoke about "the birth of a new Middle East", the war

was perceived critical to US plans to reshape the region. Mark Levine argues that the neo-conservatives were keen to exert their strategy of creative chaos as a tool to create their new world order. For the neocons, this strategy of chaos was a powerful revolutionary force that would force change in a manner that advances Washington's interests in the Middle East (2006). Certainly, Israel's onslaught against Lebanon, fully backed by the Bush administration, did further validate claims about the existence of strategic geopolitical goals behind this war.

For instance, US colonel Ralph Peters argues that without a fundamental reform of existing boundaries, peace would never prevail in the Middle East (Peters, 2006). He contends that since the Middle East had always been a region that exports terrorism to the whole world, redrawing the map of the region would certainly aid in promoting global peace and stability. He also claims that the current Middle Eastern boundaries will only exacerbate the situation. For instance, Peters developed a controversial map for the Middle East, published in the June 2006 issue of the *Armed Forces Journal*. Arguing that the Middle East is significantly similar to the Balkans and Central-Eastern Europe during the build-up of the World War I, Peters reshaped and redrew the boundaries of the Middle East from the Eastern Mediterranean shores of Lebanon and Syria to Anatolia (Asia Minor), Arabia, the Persian Gulf, and the Iranian Plateau (Nazemroaya, 2006). Peters' new borders were totally based on ethnic lines between countries. Nazemroaya argues that since mid-2006, the map has been flowing around many strategic, official, NATO, policy and military departments. He contends that this map was allowed to publicly appear in an attempt to build general consent and to gradually prepare the general public for such devastating changes in the region. The

author indicates that although it does not reflect the Pentagon's official policy, the map was used in a training program at NATO's Defense College for senior military officers (Nazemroaya, 2006).

Nazir Husain also suggests that complying with the old Israeli plans to fragment Israel's enemies and envisaging a new Middle East in which US hegemony would be secured, the neo-cons were eager to redraw the map of the Middle East based on ethnic and sectarian foundation (Husain, 2007). As the concept of the New Middle East was subsequently declared by Rice during the July 2006 Israeli war against Lebanon, undermining Hezbollah and wiping it out was an ultimate need in order to force such change in the Middle East. The next section examines the results of the war and its major regional implications.

4.3.4- A War Won by Both Sides

Drafted by Washington and Paris, UNSCR 1701 signaled the end of the 2006 war. Even though Tel Aviv was not able to achieve most of its pre-war objectives, the resolution was considered by many to favor Israel (Tur, 2007). Bush argued that Hezbollah had a fantastic propaganda machine that was spreading claims about the organization's victory and perceived 1701 as a strategic reserve for Hezbollah and his regional protégés (Hirst, 2010). In fact, the resolution not only urged Hezbollah to stop its missile attacks and release the two Israeli soldiers, it also allowed Tel-Aviv to keep its armed forces in Lebanon until the deployment of both the Lebanese Army and

UNIFIL troops in the area. Surprisingly, the resolution was met with a degree of relief by Tel Aviv, Hezbollah and the central government in Beirut.

On one hand, Tel Aviv did support the resolution because it perceived it as limiting Hezbollah's activities through the deployment of the reinforced UNIFIL forces and the Lebanese Army all over Lebanon's southern borders, with no similar actions on its own northern borders. On the other hand, Hezbollah approved the reinforcement of the UNIFIL forces "as long as it abides with its mission" and not turn into a direct threat on the organization. Accordingly, the Lebanese government also underlined the importance of the UNSCR 1701, constantly pledging to abide by it. On 17 August 2006, troops of the Lebanese army were deployed to the southern side of the Litany River.

Ironically, shortly after the war, both sides announced their victory (Walt & Mearsheimer, 2007). Then Israeli PM Ehud Olmert quickly underlined the achievements and success of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). He claimed that as Hezbollah was pushed back from Israel's northern borders, Tel Aviv successfully achieved its pre-war objectives. However, this was not everyone's opinion in Israel. Hirst argues that the U.S-Israeli victory depended on the mere adoption of 1701 and not on any successful military accomplishment. In addition to the IDF's failure to prevent rocket attacks on Israel throughout the war, the war failed to nullify Hezbollah's threat, which was still imminent at that time. Unsurprisingly, the Winograd Commission heavily criticized Olmert for his mismanagement and inexperience during the war. For many, the stunning images of the IDF being defeated by an irregular force were catastrophic and eventually pushed toward the resignation of Israel Chief of Staff Dan Halutz and other key commanders in 2007.

On the other hand, Hezbollah's popularity significantly increased in Lebanon and in the Middle East. As Tel Aviv failed to carry out its pre-war objectives and although the Lebanese Army and the UNIFIL forces were deployed to the southern part of the Litany River, Hezbollah grew stronger, and the organization established itself as one of the most powerful actors in the Middle East (Hirst, 2010; Walt & Mearsheimer, 2007). Certainly, considering Tel-Aviv's aims of crushing the organization, Hezbollah's aim was to merely survive during the war. In fact, Hezbollah's growing deterrent power against Israel was one of the most strategic consequences of the war. However, not all Lebanese political parties recognized Hezbollah's victory. Shortly after the war, the Lebanese government, namely the 14 March groups, condemned Hezbollah for its 'adventurism' by provoking Israel, and for being directly responsible for Lebanon's huge economic damages that resulted from Israel's aggressive response. As expected, the post-war period was characterized by the important debate regarding the controversial July War.

The July War resulted in critical domestic and regional geopolitical consequences. As Hezbollah's domestic and regional popularity increased in the aftermath of the war, domestic political tensions dramatically increased soon after the ceasefire. Much of the cross-sectarian cooperation and union that had developed during the war quickly faded (Wehrey et al., 2009). In fact, the war deepened the political fracture in the country between the two camps. For instance, the Hezbollah-led opposition tried to ensure the expansion of its share of power at the expense of the traditional Christian and Sunni elites and pressured the Lebanese government to conduct a series of political reforms, calling for the formation of a national unity

government that would rule by consensus (Norton, 2009). The March 14 camp complied with US requests and set up the international tribunal for the Hariri assassination, which was certainly envisaged as a political tool to put pressure on Damascus and Hezbollah. The March 14 group, firmly backed by Washington and the West, perceived Hezbollah's objections to the tribunal as an attempt to protect Syria (Norton, 2009; Hirst, 2010).

Autumn 2006 witnessed a dramatic increase in the political tension. As the 14 March coalition rejected requests to form a national unity government, it soon faced widespread demonstrations all over the country. Accordingly, six members of the government, including the five Shia ministers, resigned in November 2006, rendering the government illegitimate in the eyes of the opposition groups. Claiming that the Taif Agreement required the representation of every major sect in the government, the opposition questioned the legitimacy of the Siniora government and considered its decisions null, especially those related to the International Tribunal (Norton, 2007). As Speaker Nabih Berri refused to hold a parliamentary meeting to vote on the tribunal, and in an act that underlined its geo-political importance, the UN Security council complied with the Lebanese government's request and approved the tribunal in May 2007 under the terms of Chapter Seven of the Charter, which deepened further the political rift in the country. Furthermore, as Emile Lahoud's presidency came to an end in November 2007, Lebanon was stuck in total political deadlock. Unsurprisingly, the presidential election in Lebanon was also a new front line for the on-going geopolitical struggle between the two domestic and regional camps.

In May 2008, after 17 months of tense political crisis, the tensions reached a peak when the Lebanese government took a series of decisions, including a decision to shut down Hezbollah's telecommunication network. This provocative decision could not have been taken without the firm backing of Washington and its Arab allies (Hirst, 2010). The Lebanese government accused the organization of trying to organize terrorist attacks, which was widely dismissed and condemned by Hezbollah. Hezbollah perceived this decision as a declaration of war against the party and requested an immediate reversal of the decision. Soon military clashes erupted throughout Lebanon between Hezbollah-led opposition militants and supporters of the government, leaving dozens of dead and wounded. The opposition was soon able to seize the battle areas and handed them over to the Lebanese Army, which left the government with no choice but to reserve its decision regarding Hezbollah's telecommunication network. On May 21, 2008, rival Lebanese leaders flew to Doha to end the 18-month political that almost drove the country into a new civil war. Referred to as the Doha Agreement, the Lebanese opposition secured its initial demand of forming a new unity government. After months of high political tension in the country, the Doha did improve the political conditions in Lebanon.

Hezbollah benefited the most from the agreement. According to Christopher Daaboul, the March 14 coalition, backed by the United States and Saudi Arabia, made a significant concession by giving Hezbollah and its allies veto power in the government (2008). Although the organization pledged not to utilize its weapons again domestically, the critical question regarding Hezbollah's weapons was expelled to the "never-never", clearly underscoring the rising power of the party (Hirst, 2010). The Bush

administration was among the biggest losers. In fact, the Doha agreement and the rising power of Hezbollah on the domestic level highlighted the emerging power of Iran and Syria, something that underlined the significant power of both regimes in the Middle East. Always trying to counter the growing power of its adversaries, Washington was dealt a heavy blow with the signing of the agreement in Doha, albeit temporary (Daaboul,2008).

4.5- Conclusion

Highly influenced by the rising power of the neoconservatives, the Bush administration's policy of non-negotiation with its adversaries in the Middle East undermined its plans in the region. As stated early in the chapter, since 2001 US policy toward Lebanon was shifting. Hariri's murder initiated ripples that were to spread across the broader Middle East (Hirst, 2010). The US government was keen to cement the emerging geopolitical conditions in the Middle East, spawned by the decision to invade Iraq in 2003. The Bush administration perceived the Hariri tribunal as a valuable political tool to pressure its rival and was eager to undermine the ascending political role of Iran and Syria. Accordingly, the July 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah was meant to crush Hezbollah, signaling new geopolitical conditions in the region.

However, Washington found its Middle Eastern goals constantly undermined by its regional rivals. The Hezbollah-led opposition stood fiercely against US plans to pressure Damascus and the 2008 Doha agreement was just another example of the

failure of the Bush administration to achieve its desired objectives. Accordingly, Israel's failure to abolish Hezbollah's threat was another blow to the neocons' plans in the Levant. The next chapter assesses and concludes the findings of this research.

Conclusion

US Foreign Policy under Bush: A Critical Assessment

5.1- General Findings and Conclusion

US foreign policy in the Middle East under George W Bush was at best imperial. This thesis suggests that the Bush administration's core objective was to preserve its core interests in the Middle East: ensuring the flow of oil and advancing Israel's hegemony. Following the 9/11 attacks, US Middle East policy shifted significantly. The administration's policy in the wake of the attacks can only be explained by the quest to use 9/11 to accomplish its geopolitical goals. As a response to the attacks, the administration aggressively confronted "rogue" states such as Iraq, Iran and Syria. Similar to other US administrations, the Bush administration was eager to defend its oil interests in the Middle East, and to preserve Israel's regional security and ensure its hegemony.

After 9/11, the neocons shaped US foreign policy in the Middle East. With their close ties to the Likud, the group was eager to advance Israeli interests in the region. Undoubtedly, the drastic shift in US foreign policy was directly linked to the 9/11 attacks. The neocons' revolutionary foreign policy was intended to preserve US global

hegemony and stabilize the post-cold war world order. Their ideology and fierce commitment to Israel shaped America's relations with many Middle Eastern states, especially toward Iraq and Lebanon. The central argument of the thesis is that the main objective of US foreign policy under the neocons was to preserve Israel's security and interests, secure strategic oil privileges in Iraq and spread American hegemony across the Middle East.

This argument was unpacked using two case studies: Iraq and Lebanon. Always influenced by the power of the neocons in the administration, Washington was keen to secure energy supplies from Iraq as a cheaper alternative compared to the Saudi one. The Bush administration used its military presence in Iraq and its support for the March 14 camp in Lebanon in order to counter the growing geopolitical role of its regional enemies. The next section assesses Bush's foreign policy in the Middle East.

5.2- Critical Assessment

The Bush administration wanted to cement the emerging geopolitical conditions in the Middle East, initiated by the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Reshaping the Middle East was the central objective of Bush's foreign policy. The intense diplomatic confrontation over the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 deprived Washington of much needed support among many international actors, even among its traditional allies. Washington's efforts to overthrow the regime in Iraq lacked international legitimacy, as many of the stated rationales for invading Baghdad were proven untrue, namely the allegations that Baghdad had a WMDs programs and ties to al-Qaeda.

The Bush administration's confrontational policy against its enemies undermined its plans in the Middle East. However, Washington's Middle East plans were countered by the growing geopolitical power of Iran, and to a lesser extent, Syria. Consequently, the power of America to shape international relations was significantly diminished under Bush. The administration's failure to reshape the Middle East and impose a new order was apparent. Andreas Wenger argues that America was undisputedly the leading power in the world before George W. Bush came to power and Bush is likely to go down in history with one of the worst foreign-policy records of all US presidents (2008). Eight years after Bush's election as a president, America sunk into a deep financial crisis and saw its geopolitical role largely undermined by its enemies in the Middle East.

The neocons' failure to accomplish their objectives in the Middle East could be attributed to their underestimation of the geopolitical power of their adversaries. In particular, the ascending regional power of Tehran was a barrier to US plans in the Middle East. In many ways, Washington's failure to carry out its pre-war objective in Iraq signaled the rise of Iran as the most powerful regional power and symbolized the decline of Washington as the regional hegemon. After the surprisingly rapid overthrow of the Baathist regime, coupled with the toppling of Taliban, Tehran grew significantly stronger and was able to consolidate its rising geopolitical status, through undermining not only Washington, but also its traditional Arab moderate regimes in the region.

Second, I argue that the impact of the Israeli lobby in shaping the neocons' foreign policy did nothing, but damage Washington's legacy in the Middle East. The Bush administration's unconditional support of Israel fueled anti-US feeling throughout

the Islamic world. While focusing on Tehran's nuclear ambitions, Washington turned a blind eye to Tel Aviv's nuclear arsenal. In many respects, the neocons' ties to the Israeli Likud weakened Washington's efforts to impose political reforms and reshape the Middle East. Always pre-occupied by Israel's security needs, the Bush administration's policy of non-negotiation with its adversaries in the Middle East undermined its position vis-à-vis its regional enemies. This thesis also suggests that AIPAC's influence led Washington to a disastrous war in Iraq and encouraged Tel Aviv to launch a 33 days war against Hezbollah. However, this neither destroyed Hezbollah in Lebanon nor weakened the opposing camp led by Iran. AIPAC thus bears significant responsibility for the failure of US Middle Eastern policy after 9/11. Ironically, many neoconservative figures have tried to link the Arab Spring with Bush's plans to reshape and democratize the Arab and Islamic world. The next section examines the impact of the Bush administration's foreign policy on current political events in the Middle East.

5.3- The Bush Administration and the Arab Spring

Many governments and international organizations view the radical changes occurring today in the Arab World with apprehension. The current transformations in the Middle East represent a set of opportunities for reshaping the region and introducing democratic reforms in many Arab countries. For instance, the Arab Spring can best be described as an unexpected uprising of public anger throughout the Arab World. The uprising in Tunisia triggered revolts throughout the Arab region. The old order, characterized by authoritarianism, repressive power, lack of individual freedom, human

rights abuse, economic mismanagement and poverty, was no longer tenable. Similar to other important revolutions, the uprising in the Middle East was born out of many long standing intertwined causes.

It is impossible to deny the role played by America in the unfolding of events after the uprisings and in their outcomes. However, assuming causality between the two is misleading (Basturk, 2012). As recent polls show, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, US popularity among Arab citizens was declining. Another survey carried by the *Doha Center* reveals that two-third of Arabs perceive America and Israel as a threat. Indeed, such perceptions are clear manifestations of the increasing bitterness against the long-standing political conditions in the Middle East. For decades, Washington's Middle Eastern policies consisted of backing authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, opting for political stability over pushing for democratic alternatives. Such political conditions were imposed and patronized by Washington to guarantee US geopolitical supremacy and to preserve Tel Aviv's security and hegemony, as well as supporting regimes in oil-rich Gulf countries in order to sustain the flow of oil to the West.

Although the uprisings in the Arab world denounced the existing status quo backed and imposed by the US and its allies, many voices praise the positive role played by Washington in shaping the Arab Spring. The Bush administration was identified for its role in inspiring and supporting the uprisings in the Middle East. Levent Ba türk argues that many commentators and former US officials claim that by making the issue of democratization in the Middle East a US national priority, Bush's democracy agenda planted the seeds of change in the Arab World (Basturk, 2012). Rice, Cheney and Charles Krauthammer mentioned that the Arab Spring was a mere result of

the Bush administration's foreign policy in the Middle East, namely the liberation and democratization of Iraq. In other words, Bush and his neocons inner circle are praised for being responsible for the uprisings taking place in the Middle East.

Despite the Bush administration's rhetoric about promoting democracy and reforms, it continued to regard many authoritarian regimes as vital guarantors for regional stability. Moreover, in the aftermath of the 2005 and 2006 parliamentary elections in Egypt and Palestine respectively, the rise of Islamic parties was met with skepticism by the Bush administration. In fact, Washington became less enthusiastic about its democracy objectives and increased its support for ruling regimes in these two countries. Instead of supporting free elections, Bush supported Tel Aviv in its 2008 aggressive assault against Hamas, severely damaging the administration's reputation and popularity in the Middle East. Accordingly, Bush, a so-called fierce democracy promoter, praised Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, former dictator of Tunisia, during an official visit to the White House in 2004. Bush even welcomed Ben Ali's so-called reforms and support for free and competitive elections (Basturk, 2012). Ironically, during Bush's tenure as president, Rashed al-Ghannushi, leader of the largest party in Tunisia after the overthrow of Ben Ali, was not even granted a US visa.

As argued in this thesis, Washington's Middle Eastern policies have many objectives. Preventing the rise of a regional power other than Israel, ensuring easy access to oil, and most importantly preserving Israel's security and advancing its interests are the cores of US policy in the Middle East. However, the existing order was no longer sustainable, and many rulers were overthrown, including Hosni Mubarak, a long time US ally. Initially, Washington's democracy project was designed to reform the

Middle East over a period of generations. In other words, the plan called for gradually transforming the Middle East in a manner that does not undermine US interests in the region. Although it called for reforms in many Middle Eastern countries, Washington was always looking for unopposed access to energy resources, the movement of military and commercial traffic through the Suez Canal, the security of regional allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, and cooperation on military, counter-terrorism, and counter-proliferation issues (Hassan, 2012). Increasingly, the uprisings in the Arab World destabilized the status quo and threatened Washington's geopolitical position.

When the uprisings engulfed Cairo and Tunis, many Western governments assumed that democracy and political reforms will prevail in many other Arab countries. As Islamic groups hijacked the uprisings in the Middle East, hopes for the prevalence of democratic systems across the Middle East subsided. Recent events suggest that the uprisings have become part of a broader geopolitical struggle in the Middle East, and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism may lead to greater conflict. Whether or not democratization will converge with U.S interests in the Middle East is a debatable matter. With anti-Israel organizations coming to power throughout the Middle East, the early signs of the Arab Spring were not encouraging for Washington. Certainly, such political instability is hardly the sign of successful American policy in the region. Nevertheless, instead of opposing the will of the masses, the Obama administration decided to follow a pragmatic approach. In order not to lose more influence in the Middle East, Washington acted in harmony with the new regional conditions (Basturk, 2012). The Obama administration seeks to inspire and manipulate the developments in many Arab countries in a way that does not threaten its geopolitical

interests in the Middle East. Based on this new approach, Washington, for the first time, is trying to reconcile and accommodate its policy with the rising power of many Islamist parties throughout the Middle East.

However, given the fundamental nature of events in many Arab countries and as the region is significantly shifting toward a new political reality, the lack of a profound shift in Washington's Freedom Agenda seems quite problematic. This is not to claim that Washington had been pursuing stable democracy promotion programmes, but rather that the Obama administration was lacking policy innovations. Washington's aim of gradually introducing reforms in the Middle East failed, and there had been no alternative plans in place. Certainly, American foreign policy in the Middle East requires the introduction of a new paradigm. Yet, this is not an easy task given those democratic openings in the Arab World create a complicated situation for Washington. Rather than supporting authoritarian regimes and governments, Washington needs to comply with the will of the masses, and adjust its foreign policy accordingly.

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