

**US Foreign Policy in West & South Asia  
(From whose perspective is the region called the Middle East?)**

**Howard Machtinger, UNC School of Education**

**What are the goals of our antiwar movement?** One of our fundamental aims is a qualitative change in US foreign policy, which we see as the root of the problem in the region, a policy that has sown the fruit of terrorist reaction. This discussion begins with a general outline of US policy in the region and its consequences, followed by specific instances and the requirements for effective policy changes.

US policy in West Asia has been a success in its own terms and in the short run, and *that's the problem*. It has led to the situation we are currently in. And it is why we should be wary of -- and strongly oppose -- another "success" in the Bush administration's "war against terrorism." Bush and most of the media have denied that there is any cause for the events of September 11 except for envy of and opposition to American freedoms, eliding the realities of the US impact in the region. In fact, continued US "success" can only lead to more resistance, in increasingly destructive forms: a war with the Islamic world, with more terrorist networks and cells. The prospect of increased resistance is already apparent in the many demonstrations throughout the region against the Bush administration's Afghanistan bombings. Thus the current US tactics play directly into the strategy of Al Qaeda by polarizing the region even further.

Since World War II, US ruling circles have tried to achieve narrowly conceived notions of "national interest" -- defined by multinational corporations and Cold Warriors -- at the expense of the people of the region. The goals of US policy have been to secure access to oil for US and allies; install and support governments which are "friendly" to US policies; help create supportive westernizing elites in these nations; and promote US economic penetration by multinational corporations including control of natural resources, and the opening of new markets for corporate interests.

The US has employed a three-pronged strategy to achieve these goals:

1. Defeat any political movements that seek an independent path. Examples of such movements during the Cold War included non-aligned nationalism such as Nasserism in Egypt, as well as any reformist, socialist or Communist tendencies. Any tendencies not under direct US control are seen as counter-productive to US goals, and therefore dangerous.
2. Economically isolate any nations that attempt to take an independent path.
3. Provide military aid, secret police training and support to repressive governments and movements and/or engage in direct military intervention.

US opinion-makers have framed and justified these activities as realpolitik since the beginning of the Cold War, and this portrayal has continued since the fall of the USSR.

However, this grand strategy has not addressed the resulting inequity, poverty, disenfranchisement, disempowerment and cultural conflict; rather they have been worsened. This is the face of US-promoted “globalization” in most of the world. The space for opposition has been narrowed more and more to stateless, fundamentalist, army-less “terror” networks.

Let us specifically examine the results of our policy in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and in the struggle between the Palestinians and the Israelis. In each case the result of US policy has been the rise of extremist fundamentalist groups and the decline of other forms of political resistance. The dynamic of foreign control by forces that are alien culturally and religiously continues the sad history of the old wars of domination of the region - from the Crusades to the more recent imposition of British imperialism.

These are US foreign policy “successes”:

1. In Iran in 1951, a reformist regime led by Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh nationalized Anglo-Persian Oil. A subsequent British-organized boycott of Iranian oil was so effective that in the next two years, Iran was able to sell only as much oil as it had previously sold in one day. In 1953 as Project Ajax, under the leadership of Teddy Roosevelt’s grandson Kermit Roosevelt, the CIA organized a coup, overthrowing Mossadegh and restoring the Shah (Reza Pahlavi), the son of an Iranian officer who had seized the throne in 1921. This was the initial Third World triumph of the CIA -- repeated in Guatemala the very next year -- and did much to enhance its reputation in US ruling circles. The result was a dictatorship, which modernized and repressed. The US trained the secret police, Savak, provided Phantom jets and relied on the Shah for support and legitimation.

After a quarter of a century, in which left and reformist forces were isolated, jailed, tortured, and murdered, the shah was overthrown by the fundamentalist forces led by the Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979. It was the time of the “hostage” crisis. In 1980, the Carter Doctrine proclaimed the Persian Gulf as an area of vital US interests; this Doctrine became part of George Bush’s rationale for the Persian Gulf War. The US’s strategic reaction was to isolate Iran economically and to support Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), a war which resulted in at least a million deaths. (This strategy was not entirely consistent in that Oliver North and his cronies attempted a secret arms sale to Iran to fund the brutal “contras” in Nicaragua, another counter-revolutionary project of the US in Central America).

2. In Saudi Arabia, ARAMCO (Arabian American Oil Company, now Saudi Aramco) was set up in 1933. In 1945, FDR and King Abdel Aziz ibn Saud reached an understanding that guaranteed US access to Saudi oil at a “reasonable” price in exchange for the defense of the Saudi royal family. This understanding became even stronger with

the withdrawal of British military forces from the region in 1972. Saudi Arabia is a theocratic state with a strong fundamentalist tradition in which there is no constitution or any semblance of a Bill of Rights. Women's rights are severely limited as well. There is no space for any sort of political opposition.

When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, the first rationale for US intervention was the defense of Saudi Arabia. Osama Bin Laden, then a Saudi citizen, petitioned the monarchy to allow the organization of a popular defense against Saddam by the tens of thousands of veterans of the 1980s war in Afghanistan, which we will discuss later. The monarchy opted for the US military option. The presence of US "infidels" in the Persian Gulf War, and their continuing presence, is a core issue for Bin Laden and the Al Qaeda network.

There had been strong Saudi monetary support for the mujihadeen rebels in Afghanistan, as well as for the Taliban and the Al Qaeda network. At the same time, there have been numerous attacks purportedly by the Bin Laden network in Saudi Arabia, in 1995 and 1996, which also resulted in US military deaths.

3. In Iraq, America's former ally, Saddam Hussein, was demonized as the next Hitler by the previous President Bush during the Persian Gulf War of 1991. After the criminal carpet bombing of retreating Iraqi troops, when the Iraqi government had already surrendered, the US instituted a regime of sanctions against Iraq which have led to the deaths of a half a million children and as many other civilians without dislodging Saddam Hussein. He was not a particularly popular figure in the region in 1991. Our sanctions policy has transformed him into a victim and a martyr of a heartless policy.

When questioned by Lesley Stahl: "We have heard that half a million children have died. I mean, that's more children than died in Hiroshima. And, you know, is the price worth it?" Clinton's Secretary of State Madeleine Albright replied, "I think this is a very hard choice, but the price? We think the price is worth it." This interview was re-broadcast and repeated throughout the region.

US policy toward Iraq demonstrates that foreign policy has not been based on whether a leader is tyrannical, dictatorial, or immoral: characteristics of the entire history of Saddam Hussein's regime; but only whether that leader serves the narrow policy of the moment. Inevitably the relationship breaks down and the former ally becomes demonized.

4. This also holds true in Afghanistan and among the Al Qaeda network. In the 1980s, while Nelson Mandela graced the US lists of "terrorists," we were allying ourselves with Osama bin Laden.

The Soviet Union sent troops into Afghanistan in 1979 in the wake of civil war, after the US was already engaged in covert operations to aid the Mujahideen. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's National Security adviser, stated the goal of these operations: "In my opinion, this aid would result in military intervention by the Soviets... We didn't push

the Russians to intervene, but we consciously increased the probability that they would do so.”

Brzezinski soon appeared in Pakistan adorned with a turban, urging on the Mujahideen: “Allah is On Your Side.” The US strategy, implemented by the CIA, was to rally Muslim fundamentalists against the Soviet Union. The Pakistan/ Afghan border area became a virtual university for fundamentalists, who became the base for Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Tens of thousands of Muslims from more than 40 Muslim countries gathered and networked to fight a holy war against the Soviet Union.

Support for the Mujahideen became the largest US covert operation since World War II, about \$2-3 billion a year during the 1980s. In 1986 William Casey, Reagan’s CIA director, sent Stinger anti-aircraft missiles to these forces. (How many are still available to the Taliban and Bin Laden?) Mujahideen made armed incursions made into Tajikistan in the former Soviet Union. The US policy was successful as the Soviet army was forced out of Afghanistan in 1989.

In 1980, Osama Bin Laden arrived in Peshawar, Pakistan for the first time, as a representative of the Saudi monarchy. Heir to a large fortune derived from his father’s construction empire, he settled in the region in 1982. Originally he was a bankroller of construction projects for the Mujahideen, including the Khost tunnel complex, and worked in alliance with the CIA. By 1986 he controlled a training camp. Reports are that by 1989 he was central in organizing Al Qaeda (“Military Base”).

As noted above, he advocated the organization of a popular defense against Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War (1990-91). By 1992, he was operating out of Sudan seemingly with the support of Sudanese leader, Hassan Turabi. In 1994, Saudi Arabia revoked his citizenship, though apparently he retains strong ties with elements of the Saudi security forces and many Saudi financiers.

By 1996, he had returned to Afghanistan, and as the Taliban captured Kabul, he cemented a working alliance with them, including Mullah Mohammed Omar. The Taliban emerged as a unified force in 1994 after being trained in religious schools (madrassas) “paid for by the United states and Britain,” in the words of former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. The Taliban, at this point, controls more than 90% of Afghanistan. It is a repressive regime, which forbids women to work or to be educated. It enforces a rigid fundamentalism, which violently suppresses any alternative tendencies, religious or political. In the last year, it attracted international attention and condemnation for destroying ancient, giant statues of Buddha in Afghanistan.

In 1998, Bin Laden called for an International Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders, a clear description of his goals and strategy. He has targeted opponents in the Muslim world as well as the US and its allies. Al Qaeda has been held responsible for the bombings of US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya later that year, as well as the attacks in Saudi Arabia noted above, attacks on Turkish intellectuals, physical attacks in Muslim women, as well as a foiled 1997 plot to blow up the heads of Islamic states

meeting in Pakistan's capital Islamabad. There are also reports that Al Qaeda has made attempts to acquire chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons.

All of these reports may not be accurate, but it is clear that the US anti-Soviet strategy in the 1980s in Afghanistan played a crucial role in helping generate the Al Qaeda network, which now confronts it in violent opposition. Again, US policy has helped create the enemy it now demonizes. Al Qaeda credits the mujahideen victory in Afghanistan over the Soviets as the cause of the downfall of the Soviet Union and sees the September 11 attack as the first blow in the downfall of the US.

5. Pakistan, because of its location bordering China, the former Soviet Union, and India, was seen by the US as a key ally during the Cold War, as distinct from India, which pursued a non-aligned, neutralist policy -- a policy that the US perceived as pro-Soviet. Pakistan was a member of the CENTO, the Central Treaty Organization, a pro-US alliance.

In 1977, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was overthrown in a military coup led by General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq. In part because of the mujahideen buildup in Pakistan for the war against the Soviet Union, Zia politically supported and promoted Islamic fundamentalist law and education. After Zia's death in a plane crash, along with the American ambassador, there was a succession of leaders including Benazir Bhutto (the daughter of Ali Bhutto), head of the Pakistan People's Party, and Nawaz Sharif, leader of the Muslim League.

The long-standing struggle with India over Kashmir led to dueling nuclear tests between India and Pakistan in 1998, which resulted in US sanctions. Al Qaeda cadres have reportedly become active in the Kashmir struggle. The current Prime Minister of Pakistan is Pervez Musharraf who came to power in a military coup in 1999. Musharraf has decided to support US efforts in the current crisis, but there is widespread sympathy and support for Bin Laden in the Pakistan military, intelligence agencies, and among the masses. The current situation in Pakistan is, to the say the least, unstable.

6. In the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, most Muslims see the United States as the key supporter of the Israeli strategy to deny Palestinians a homeland. The US has provided Israel with massive amounts of military and economic aid.

One could trace the roots of this conflict back to 1948, with the creation of the state of Israel through a UN partition and the resulting war.. In 1967, during the Six-Day War, Israel captured the area known as the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, as well as the Golan Heights and the Sinai desert, the last returned to Egypt in 1979. The West Bank and the Gaza Strip became known as the Occupied Territories. UN Resolution 242 calls for the recognition of the right to exist of all nations in the region, including Israel, and the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Occupied Territories.

Initially, the Israeli government denied that there existed a Palestinian people who had any right to a homeland. It followed a strategy based on military strength aimed at

intimidating and dividing Arab support for the Palestinian cause. One key example of this strategy was Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 in the midst of a civil war. Its attempt to destroy Palestinian camps in Lebanon resulted in the massacre of hundreds of Palestinian civilians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. The Israeli commander who gave the green light for these massacres was Ariel Sharon, the current Prime Minister of Israel.

By 1993, partly in response to the first Palestinian intifada, which began in 1987, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin officially abandoned the strategy of denial by negotiating the Oslo Accords with the leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Yassir Arafat. While these accords fell short of providing for an independent Palestinian state, they did begin a process of negotiation between Israel and the Palestinians. This process was disrupted by the assassination of Rabin by an Israeli rightist in 1996.

The abortive "peace process" has become even more troubled since then. So far the Israeli government has offered little more than a territory crisscrossed with Israeli military bases and checkpoints, unacceptable to any Palestinian nationalist. The increasing number of Israeli settlements in the West Bank is also an obstacle to a settlement.

The election of the hard-line Ariel Sharon as Prime Minister marked the end of hopes for a peaceful settlement in the period. The result has been an increase in conflict, including suicide bombings and Israeli commando attacks. It seems as if the Israelis have returned to a purely military solution to a political and moral problem, a recipe for a worsening conflict. Up until September 11, the Bush Administration had turned a blind eye to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, thereby providing Sharon with a green light for his "search and destroy" strategy.

The Palestinian opposition is divided. Arafat, the leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) staked his political reputation on the process of negotiations initiated in Oslo and so far has little to show for it. Hamas, a fundamentalist group which opposed the Oslo process and the PLO, has escalated its military activities since Sharon took office.

The Palestinian cause is central to the overwhelming majority of Arabs and Muslims in the world. There is no hope for peace in the region unless Palestinian rights to a viable homeland are recognized and supported.

The above represents a sketchy outline of a complicated history. Limited as this outline is, it demonstrates clearly that US policy, while often a short-term "success", has consistently led to a more explosive situation in the Middle East. The lesson is clear. There will be no success in a "war against terrorism" unless the US abandons its narrow and self-serving political goals.

A focus on outside control of natural resources and foreign investment is inevitably anti-democratic. Supporting and legitimizing repressive elites results in increased

impoverishment. A unilateral approach will only further polarize the situation. The US sits on the region and plays crude power politics. Then the US complains bitterly when it is assaulted by unseen networks -- which it helped conceive and nourish -- who won't come out and fight fair. Rather than a beacon of freedom, the US is one more in a series of arrogant foreign powers, who have sought to bend the people of the region to its will. The US is reaping what its policy has sown.

How secure do we really feel giving the Bush administration a blank check for a secret and unending war? The world needs an approach that addresses issues of inequity, poverty, political disenfranchisement, and cultural conflict. The US could begin by ending its destructive policy of sanctions against Iraq and by supporting the creation of a viable Palestinian state.

Otherwise, if it continues to ignore and deepen the basic problems confronting the region by indulging in a blind exercise of violent power, US foreign policy is in grave danger of falling into Bin Laden and Al Qaeda's trap of provoking a broader and more dangerous war. Let's get to the roots of the problems that engender terror and terrorism, not just in the United States, but also throughout the world. There can be no peace in the world without justice.