

Bush's bankrupt vision

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June 1, 2008

In mid-May, President Bush travelled to the Middle East to establish his legacy more firmly in the part of the world that has been the prime focus of his presidency.

The trip had two principal destinations, each chosen to celebrate a major anniversary: Israel, the 60th anniversary of its founding and recognition by the United States, and Saudi Arabia, the 75th anniversary of US recognition of the newly founded kingdom. The choices made good sense in the light of history and the enduring character of US Middle East policy: control of oil, and support of the proxies who help maintain it.

An omission, however, was not lost on the people of the region. Though Bush celebrated the founding of Israel, he did not recognise (let alone commemorate) the paired event from 60 years ago: the destruction of Palestine, the Nakba, as Palestinians refer to the events that expelled them from their lands.

During his three days in Jerusalem, the president was an enthusiastic participant in lavish events and made sure to go to Masada, a near-sacred site of Jewish nationalism.

But he did not visit the seat of the Palestinian authority in Ramallah, or Gaza City, or a refugee camp, or the town of Qalqilya Ñ strangled by the Separation Wall, now becoming an Annexation Wall under the illegal Israeli settlement and development programmes that Bush has endorsed officially, the first president to do so.

And it was out of the question that he would have any contact with Hamas leaders and parliamentarians, chosen in the only free election in the Arab world, many of them in Israeli jails with no pretense of judicial proceedings.

The pretexts for this stance scarcely withstand a moment's analysis. Also of no moment is the fact that Hamas has repeatedly called for a two-state settlement in accord with the international consensus that the United States and Israel have rejected, virtually alone, for more than 30 years, and still do.

Bush did allow the US favourite, Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, to participate in meetings in Egypt with many regional leaders. Bush's last visit to Saudi Arabia was in January. On both trips, he sought, without success, to draw the kingdom into the anti-Iranian alliance he has been seeking to forge. That is no small task, despite the concern of the Sunni rulers over the "Shia crescent" and growing Iranian influence, regularly termed "aggressiveness."

For the Saudi rulers, accommodation with Iran may be preferable to confrontation. And though public opinion is marginalised, it cannot be completely dismissed. In a recent poll of Saudis, Bush

ranked far above Osama bin Laden in the “very unfavourable” category, and more than twice as high as Iranian President Ahmadinejad and Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Hezbollah, Iran’s Shia ally in Lebanon.

US-Saudi relations date to the recognition of the Kingdom in 1933 – not coincidentally, the year when Standard of California obtained a petroleum concession and American geologists began to explore what turned out to be the world’s largest reserves of oil.

The United States quickly moved to ensure its own control, important steps in a process by which the United States took over world dominance from Britain, which was slowly reduced to a “junior partner,” as the British Foreign Office lamented, unable to counter “the economic imperialism of American business interests, which is quite active under the cloak of a benevolent and avuncular internationalism” and is “attempting to elbow us out.”

The strong US-Israel alliance took its present form in 1967, when Israel performed a major service to the United States by destroying the main center of secular Arab nationalism, Nasser’s Egypt, also safeguarding the Saudi rulers from the secular nationalist threat. US planners had recognised a decade earlier that a “logical corollary” of US opposition to “radical” (that is, independent) Arab nationalism would be “to support Israel as the only strong pro-Western power left in the Middle East.”

Investment by US corporations in Israeli high-tech industry has sharply increased, including Intel, Hewlett Packard, Microsoft, Warren Buffett and others, joined by major investors from Japan and India – in the latter case, one facet of a growing US-Israel-India strategic alliance.

To be sure, other factors underlie the US-Israeli relationship. In Jerusalem, Bush invoked “the bonds of the book,” the faith “shared by Christians like himself and Jews,” the Australian Press reported, but apparently not shared by Muslims or even Christian Arabs, like those in Bethlehem, now barred from occupied Jerusalem, a few kilometres away, by illegal Israeli construction projects.

The Saudi Gazette bitterly condemned Bush’s “audacity to call Israel the ‘homeland for the chosen people’ – the terminology of ultrareligious Israeli hardliners. The Gazette added that Bush’s “particular brand of moral bankruptcy was on full display when he made only passing mention of a Palestinian state in his vision of the region 60 years hence.”

It is not difficult to discern why Bush’s chosen legacy should stress relations with Israel and Saudi Arabia, with a side glance at Egypt, along with disdain for the Palestinians and their miserable plight, apart from a few ritual phrases.

We need not tarry on the thought that the president’s choices have anything to do with justice, human rights or the vision of “democracy promotion” that gripped his soul as soon as the pretexts for the invasion of Iraq had collapsed.

But the choices do accord with a general principle, observed with considerable consistency: Rights are assigned in accord with service to power.

Palestinians are poor, weak, dispersed and friendless. It is elementary, then, that they should have no rights. In sharp contrast, Saudi Arabia has incomparable resources of energy, Egypt is the major Arab state, and Israel is a rich Western country and the regional powerhouse, with air and armoured forces that are larger and technologically more advanced than any NATO power (apart from its patron) along with hundreds of nuclear weapons, and with an advanced and largely militarised economy closely linked to the United States.

The contours of the intended legacy are therefore quite predictable.

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Retrieved on 19th February 2022 from chomsky.info
Published in the *Khaleej Times*.

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