

# Neocon 'Chaos Promotion' in the Mideast

**Exclusive:** After the Persian Gulf War in 1991, America's neocons thought no country could stand up to the high-tech U.S. military, and they realized the Soviet Union was no longer around to limit U.S. actions. So, the "regime change" strategy was born and many have died, writes ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

Former Washington insider and four-star General Wesley Clark spilled the beans several years ago on how Paul Wolfowitz and his neoconservative co-conspirators implemented their sweeping plan to destabilize key Middle Eastern countries once it became clear that post-Soviet Russia "won't stop us."

As I recently reviewed a YouTube [eight-minute clip](#) of General Clark's October 2007 speech, what leaped out at me was that the neocons had been enabled by their assessment that after the collapse of the Soviet Union Russia had become neutralized and posed no deterrent to U.S. military action in the Middle East.

While Clark's public exposé largely escaped attention in the neocon-friendly "mainstream media" (surprise, surprise!), he recounted being told by a senior general at the Pentagon shortly after the 9/11 attacks in 2001 about the Donald Rumsfeld/Paul Wolfowitz-led plan for "regime change" in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Iran.

This was startling enough, I grant you, since officially the United States presents itself as a nation that respects international law, frowns upon other powerful nations overthrowing the governments of weaker states, and in the aftermath of World War II condemned past aggressions by Nazi Germany and decried Soviet "subversion" of pro-U.S. nations.

But what caught my eye this time was the significance of Clark's depiction of Wolfowitz in 1992 gloating over what he judged to be a major lesson learned from the Desert Storm attack on Iraq in 1991; namely, "the Soviets won't stop us."

That remark directly addresses a question that has troubled me since March 2003 when George W. Bush attacked Iraq. Would the neocons widely known as "the crazies" at least among the remaining sane people of Washington have been crazy enough to opt for war to re-arrange the Middle East if the Soviet Union had not fallen apart in 1991?

The question is not an idle one. Despite the debacle in Iraq and elsewhere, the neocon "crazies" still exercise huge influence in Establishment Washington. Thus, the question now becomes whether, with Russia far more stable and much

stronger, the “crazies” are prepared to risk military escalation with Russia over Ukraine, what retired U.S. diplomat William R. Polk deemed a potentially dangerous nuclear confrontation, a “Cuban Missile Crisis in reverse.”

### **Putin’s Comment**

The geopolitical vacuum that enabled the neocons to try out their “regime change” scheme in the Middle East may have been what Russian President Vladimir Putin was referring to in his state-of-the-nation address on April 25, 2005, when he called the collapse of the Soviet Union “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [past] century.” Putin’s comment has been a favorite meme of those who seek to demonize Putin by portraying him as lusting to re-establish a powerful USSR through aggression in Europe.

But, commenting two years after the Iraq invasion, Putin seemed correct at least in how the neocons exploited the absence of the Russian counterweight to over-extend American power in ways that were harmful to the world, devastating to the people at the receiving end of the neocon interventions, and even detrimental to the United States.

If one takes a step back and attempts an unbiased look at the spread of violence in the Middle East over the past quarter-century, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Putin’s comment was on the mark. With Russia a much-weakened military power in the 1990s and early 2000s, there was nothing to deter U.S. policymakers from the kind of adventurism at Russia’s soft underbelly that, in earlier years, would have carried considerable risk of armed U.S.-USSR confrontation.

I lived in the USSR during the 1970s and would not wish that kind of restrictive regime on anyone. Until it fell apart, though, it was militarily strong enough to deter Wolfowitz-style adventurism. And I will say that for the millions of people now dead, injured or displaced by U.S. military action in the Middle East over the past dozen years the collapse of the Soviet Union as a deterrent to U.S. war-making was not only a “geopolitical catastrophe” but an unmitigated disaster.

### **Visiting Wolfowitz**

In his 2007 speech, General Clark related how in early 1991 he dropped in on Paul Wolfowitz, then Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (and later, from 2001 to 2005, Deputy Secretary of Defense). It was just after a major Shia uprising in Iraq in March 1991. President George H.W. Bush’s administration had provoked it, but then did nothing to rescue the Shia from brutal retaliation by Saddam Hussein, who had just survived his Persian Gulf defeat.

According to Clark, Wolfowitz said: "We should have gotten rid of Saddam Hussein. The truth is, one thing we did learn is that we can use our military in the Middle East and the Soviets won't stop us. We've got about five or 10 years to clean up those old Soviet client regimes Syria, Iran (sic), Iraq before the next great superpower comes on to challenge us."

It's now been more than 10 years, of course. But do not be deceived into thinking Wolfowitz and his neocon colleagues believe they have failed in any major way. The unrest they initiated keeps mounting in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Somalia, Lebanon not to mention fresh violence now in full swing in Yemen and the crisis in Ukraine. Yet, the Teflon coating painted on the neocons continues to cover and protect them in the "mainstream media."

True, one neocon disappointment is Iran. It is more stable and less isolated than before; it is playing a sophisticated role in Iraq; and it is on the verge of concluding a major nuclear agreement with the West barring the throwing of a neocon/Israeli monkey wrench into the works to thwart it, as has been done in the past.

An earlier setback for the neocons came at the end of August 2013 when President Barack Obama decided not to let himself be mouse-trapped by the neocons into ordering U.S. forces to attack Syria. Wolfowitz et al. were on the threshold of having the U.S. formally join the war against Bashar al-Assad's government of Syria when there was the proverbial slip between cup and lip. With the aid of the neocons' new devil-incarnate Vladimir Putin, Obama faced them down and avoided war.

A week after it became clear that the neocons were not going to get their war in Syria, I found myself at the main CNN studio in Washington together with Paul Wolfowitz and former Sen. Joe Lieberman, another important neocon. As I reported in "How War on Syria Lost Its Way," the scene was surreal funereal, even, with both Wolfowitz and Lieberman very much down-in-the-mouth, behaving as though they had just watched their favorite team lose the Super Bowl.

### **Israeli/Neocon Preferences**

But the neocons are nothing if not resilient. Despite their grotesque disasters, like the Iraq War, and their disappointments, like not getting their war on Syria, they neither learn lessons nor change goals. They just readjust their aim, shooting now at Putin over Ukraine as a way to clear the path again for "regime change" in Syria and Iran. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Why Neocons Seek to Destabilize Russia."]

The neocons also can take some solace from their "success" at enflaming the

Middle East with Shia and Sunni now at each other's throats – a bad thing for many people of the world and certainly for the many innocent victims in the region, but not so bad for the neocons. After all, it is the view of Israeli leaders and their neocon bedfellows (and women) that the internecine wars among Muslims provide at least some short-term advantages for Israel as it consolidates control over the Palestinian West Bank.

In a Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity memorandum for President Obama on Sept. 6, 2013, we called attention to an uncommonly candid report about Israeli/neocon motivation, written by none other than the Israel-friendly New York Times Bureau Chief in Jerusalem Jodi Rudoren on Sept. 2, 2013, just two days after Obama took advantage of Putin's success in persuading the Syrians to allow their chemical weapons to be destroyed and called off the planned attack on Syria, causing consternation among neocons in Washington.

Rudoren can perhaps be excused for her naive lack of "political correctness." She had been barely a year on the job, had very little prior experience with reporting on the Middle East, and in the excitement about the almost-attack on Syria she apparently forgot the strictures normally imposed on the Times' reporting from Jerusalem. In any case, Israel's priorities became crystal clear in what Rudoren wrote.

In her article, entitled "Israel Backs Limited Strike Against Syria," Rudoren noted that the Israelis were arguing, quietly, that the best outcome for Syria's (then) 2 ½-year-old civil war, at least for the moment, was no outcome:

"For Jerusalem, the status quo, horrific as it may be from a humanitarian perspective, seems preferable to either a victory by Mr. Assad's government and his Iranian backers or a strengthening of rebel groups, increasingly dominated by Sunni jihadis.

"'This is a playoff situation in which you need both teams to lose, but at least you don't want one to win, we'll settle for a tie,' said Alon Pinkas, a former Israeli consul general in New York. 'Let them both bleed, hemorrhage to death: that's the strategic thinking here. As long as this lingers, there's no real threat from Syria.'"

Clear enough? If this is the way Israel's leaders continue to regard the situation in Syria, then they look on deeper U.S. involvement overt or covert as likely to ensure that there is no early resolution of the conflict there. The longer Sunni and Shia are killing each other, not only in Syria but also across the region as a whole, the safer Tel Aviv's leaders calculate Israel is.

## **Favoring Jihadis**

But Israeli leaders have also made clear that if one side must win, they would prefer the Sunni side, despite its bloody extremists from Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. In September 2013, shortly after Rudoren's article, Israeli Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren, then a close adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, told the Jerusalem Post that Israel favored the Sunni extremists over Assad.

"The greatest danger to Israel is by the strategic arc that extends from Tehran, to Damascus to Beirut. And we saw the Assad regime as the keystone in that arc," Oren said in [an interview](#). "We always wanted Bashar Assad to go, we always preferred the bad guys who weren't backed by Iran to the bad guys who were backed by Iran." He said this was the case even if the "bad guys" were affiliated with Al-Qaeda.

In June 2014, Oren then speaking as a former ambassador [said](#) Israel would even prefer a victory by the Islamic State, which was massacring captured Iraqi soldiers and beheading Westerners, than the continuation of the Iranian-backed Assad in Syria. "From Israel's perspective, if there's got to be an evil that's got to prevail, let the Sunni evil prevail," Oren said.

Netanyahu sounded a similar theme in his March 3, 2015 speech to the U.S. Congress in which he trivialized the threat from the Islamic State with its "butcher knives, captured weapons and YouTube" when compared to Iran, which he accused of "gobbling up the nations" of the Middle East.

That Syria's main ally is Iran with which it has a mutual defense treaty plays a role in Israeli calculations. Accordingly, while some Western leaders would like to achieve a realistic if imperfect settlement of the Syrian civil war, others who enjoy considerable influence in Washington would just as soon see the Assad government and the entire region bleed out.

As cynical and cruel as this strategy is, it isn't all that hard to understand. Yet, it seems to be one of those complicated, politically charged situations well above the pay-grade of the sophomores advising President Obama who, sad to say, are no match for the neocons in the Washington Establishment. Not to mention the Netanyahu-mesmerized Congress.

### **Corker Uncorked**

Speaking of Congress, a year after Rudoren's report, Sen. Bob Corker, R-Tennessee, who now chairs the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, [divulged some details](#) about the military attack that had been planned against Syria, while lamenting that it was canceled.

In doing so, Corker called Obama's abrupt change on Aug. 31, 2013, in opting for

negotiations over open war on Syria, “the worst moment in U.S. foreign policy since I’ve been here.” Following the neocon script, Corker blasted the deal (since fully implemented) with Putin and the Syrians to rid Syria of its chemical weapons.

Corker complained, “In essence I’m sorry to be slightly rhetorical we jumped into Putin’s lap.” A big No-No, of course especially in Congress to “jump into Putin’s lap” even though Obama was able to achieve the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons without the United States jumping into another Middle East war.

It would have been nice, of course, if General Clark had thought to share his inside-Pentagon information earlier with the rest of us. In no way should he be seen as a whistleblower.

At the time of his September 2007 speech, he was deep into his quixotic attempt to win the Democratic nomination for president in 2008. In other words, Clark broke the omerta code of silence observed by virtually all U.S. generals, even post-retirement, merely to put some distance between himself and the debacle in Iraq and win some favor among anti-war Democrats. It didn’t work, so he endorsed Hillary Clinton; that didn’t work, so he endorsed Barack Obama.

Wolfowitz, typically, has landed on his feet. He is now presidential hopeful Jeb Bush’s foreign policy/defense adviser, no doubt outlining his preferred approach to the Middle East chessboard to his new boss. Does anyone know the plural of “bedlam?”

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