

# George H.W. Bush's Bitter Legacy in the Middle East

The avalanche of funeral hagiography drowned any possible discussion of what Bush did to the Middle East. As'ad AbuKhalil writes that he rallied despots against Iraq and established a new, tyrannical security order in the region.

## Sequel to 'British Betrayal' of WWI

**By As'ad AbuKhalil**

*Special to Consortium News*



Any sober assessment of late President George H.W. Bush's political legacy was drowned last week by the avalanche of hagiography by the mainstream media. This served, in part, the role of catharsis. The more loudly the members of the media praised Bush, whose family has testy relations with President Donald Trump, the more it helped them vent their animosity towards the current president.

Lost in this anti-historical, fact-free binge was any possible discussion of Bush's most important legacies, one of which is certainly his great fake-out of Arab interests in the Middle East. Almost every U.S. president since Harry S. Truman has been more pro-Israel than his predecessor. The sole exception to this was George H.W. Bush. But via the war against Iraq, his administration wound up embracing Israeli interests and regional hegemony to such a degree that it left lasting damage to peace and stability in the region.

H.W. Bush was adept at changing ideologies to suit the venue. The man who emerged from the "moderate" wing of the East Coast Republican Party became the political heir of

President Ronald Reagan, who wooed the Religious Right and made abortion a litmus test for all Supreme Court nominees.

While Bush did not leave a presidential memoir, (he is the first since Franklin D. Roosevelt not to do so), he did coauthor a book with Brent Scowcroft, his national security advisor, "A World Transformed." This offers evidence of Bush's close ties with Arab Gulf despots and the deposed Egyptian strongman Husni Mubarak, who served as his chief advisor on the region.

Bush was obviously impressed by the fabulous wealth and hospitality of Arab potentates. At one point in the book, during a stay in one of King Fahd's marble guest palaces, he marvels at the chandeliers, the air conditioning and goes on at length about a lavish state dinner. "I had never seen so much—and of nearly every conceivable type of food."

### **Wealthy Arab Friends**

Bush's ties with wealthy Arabs served him well. Lebanese businessman Najad Isam Faris and Syrian businessman Jamale Daniel helped the business career of Bush's son, Neil. With his network of Gulf associates, Bush served as a prized advisor to the Carlyle Group, the global, private equity firm based in Washington, D.C., with a specialty of investing in companies that depend on government contracts.

Bush's footprints in the region begin with his oil-business years in Texas. At that point, in the 1950s, oil companies often served as a chief lobbying force for Gulf regimes against the Israeli lobby. This was not due to any humanitarian concern for the plight of the Palestinian people. It was due to the usual financial motivation. The

Israel lobby opposed closer ties between the U.S. and all Arab countries, which compelled oil businesses to defend their Gulf suppliers. Since the Israeli lobby opposed U.S. arms sales to Middle East regimes, it had other big-business opponents as well.

Later in his life, Bush also dealt with the Middle East as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations and as director of the CIA. (The deputy chief of Saudi intelligence during Bush's time at the CIA, Prince Turki Al-Faisal, was one of the few foreign dignitaries invited to attend the funeral).

When the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, paid tribute last week to Bush he concealed a long history of Israeli detestation for the man.

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As Ronald Reagan's vice president, Bush—along with James Baker, the White House chief of staff, and Caspar Weinberger, the secretary of defense—had the coolest attitudes towards Israel of any in the administration, which was otherwise loaded with ardent Zionists. Bush was vilified for his 1991 remark that he was a “one lonely guy” battling “a thousand lobbyists on the Hill.”

Nonetheless Bush toed the pro-Israeli line and championed the cause of Soviet Jewish dissidents and the sponsorship of the emigration of Jews from Ethiopia, Syria and the former Soviet Union to Israel. He also recruited ardent Zionists (Jack Kemp, [Condoleezza Rice](#) and [Dennis Ross](#)) for his administration.

As president, Bush was branded an anti-Semite in 1991 for

“deferring” for 120 days \$10 billion in loan guarantees to Israel. He did this to prevent Israel from putting the money toward settlements in the occupied lands of 1967. Bush was also trying to persuade Israel to join the U.S.-sponsored peace process.

### **Serious About Settlements**

This was the only time the U.S. government treated the settlements and the Israeli role in the peace process as a serious matter. The Obama administration did voice mild protestations about the settlements, which violate international law. But after Bush, the settlements never again caused any serious irritation to U.S.-Israeli relations.

The Bush administration also, at one point, banned Ariel Sharon, the Israeli militarist and politician, from entering U.S. government buildings due to his statements against the U.S. role in the peace process. (When Jack Kemp, housing secretary at the time, wanted to meet with Sharon, James Baker instructed him to meet outside government offices).

But in Iraq, the Bush administration began the process of removing a regime that the Israel government had been complaining about for years. This was before Israel discovered the Iranian danger. It was also many years after Israel rid itself of the Egyptian danger thanks to the Camp David Accords between the despotic Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and the Israeli government under the auspices of the American human rights president, Jimmy Carter. Going forward, the U.S. bombed everything on Israel’s bombing wish list in Iraq.

Bush was intent on going to war against Iraq in 1990. He sent Dick Cheney, then secretary of defense, and Colin Powell, then chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, to Riyadh to persuade the king that U.S. troops were needed on the ground in Saudi Arabia to protect the kingdom from an Iraqi invasion (U.S. ships had moved before Cheney stepped foot on Saudi soil).

### **Rallying Against Iraq**

The H.W. Bush administration rallied Arab despots against Iraq and established a regional tyrannical order. Even the Syrian regime rose above its previous conflicts with the U.S. and got on board. Together, they denied Saddam Hussein, Iraq's president, the one condition that he sought for withdrawal. As Bush admits in the book he coauthored, that sole condition was access to the Persian Gulf.

From 1991 on, most members of the U.S. armed forces—especially the Air Force—began to train over (or on) Arab lands. Today that means bases and military activities in Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Oman, UAE, Syria (illegally), not to mention other places where the U.S. maintains secret military and intelligence bases (it was leaked to the press a few years ago that Dubai hosts one of the largest CIA bases in the world).

Bush exploited the Gulf War to impose a security regime where the U.S.—and not the local despotic clients—called the shots. Furthermore, Bush introduced the misuse of the U.N. as “an added cloak of political cover for U.S. wars and actions,” as is described on page 416 of the book he coauthored.

In targeting Iraq, Bush begin to eliminate the biggest (albeit exaggerated) Arab military power. He also pushed Arab governments to sit face-to-face with Israel in Madrid without securing any concessions from Israel at all.

The “peace process” under Bush was just as it had been under his predecessors and successors. It amounted to empty promises of U.S. rewards for Arab participation in the war on Iraq. It was a repeat of the “British betrayal” of World War I, when, in exchange for help fighting against the Ottoman Empire, Arabs thought they would earn independence.

As’ad AbuKhalil is a Lebanese-American professor of political science at California State University, Stanislaus. He is the author of the “Historical Dictionary of Lebanon” (1998), “Bin Laden, Islam and America’s New War on Terrorism (2002), and “The Battle for Saudi Arabia” (2004). He tweets as @asadabukhalil

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A Concise History of Consortium News by

# Robert Parry

During the 2011 Winter Fund Drive, ex-CIA analyst (and peace activist) Ray McGovern suggested that the late Bob Parry write a brief narrative to explain Consortium News' history and goals.

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## A Brief Narrative of Consortium News

By Robert Parry

*Special to Consortium News*



In 1995, after more than two decades in the mainstream news media (AP, Newsweek and PBS), I founded Consortiumnews.com as a home for the serious journalism that no longer had a place in an American news business that had lost its way.

At the time, I was the lead journalist on what had become known as the Iran-Contra scandal, and I had watched first-hand as senior news executives chose to squelch that inquiry apparently out of fear that it would cause another impeachment crisis around another Republican president, Ronald Reagan.

Such a possibility was deemed “not good for the country,” a view held both inside Congress and in the boardrooms of the elite national news media. But I refused to accept the judgment. I continued to pursue the many loose ends of the scandal, from evidence of drug trafficking by Reagan’s beloved Nicaraguan Contras to suspicions that the arms-for-hostages deals with Iran started much earlier, possibly even during the 1980 presidential campaign.

My insistence on getting to the bottom of this historically

important story alienated me from my senior editors at Newsweek and from many of my journalistic colleagues who simply wanted to keep their jobs and avoid trouble. But it offended me that the national press corps was signing off on what amounted to a high-level cover-up.

The era of Watergate had come full circle. Instead of exposing crimes and cover-ups, the Washington press corps' job had changed into harassing and mocking serious investigators the likes of Iran-Contra special prosecutor Lawrence Walsh who stayed on the trail.

Consistency and persistence were oh so passe'. The Washington news media had drifted into a culture of careerism where top jobs paid well into the six- and even seven-figures. Your hair style and glib presentation on TV were far more important than the quality of your reporting. And the most important thing was to avoid the wrath of right-wing attack groups who would "controversialize" you.

By the mid-90s, it had become clear to me that there was no feasible way to do the work that had to be done within the confines of the mainstream media. The pressures on everyone had grown too intense. No matter how solid the reporting, many issues were simply off limits, particularly scandals that reflected badly on the admired duo of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush.

Even when I obtained highly classified government documents in 1994-95 shedding light on how U.S. policies toward Iraq and Iran had evolved at the start of the Reagan-Bush era, this information could find no home even in the liberal outliers of the mainstream media.

## **Quitting the Mainstream**

So, on the advice of my oldest son Sam, who told me about this strange new phenomenon called the Internet, I started this Web site in fall 1995.

Besides seeing Consortiumnews.com as a place for serious



journalism, I also envisioned it as a refuge for quality journalists who faced the same frustrations that I did. I thought we could provide editing and financial support, as well as an outlet that would distribute their stories to the public. Hence, the rather clunky name, Consortiumnews. At the time, I thought I could raise a significant amount of money for the project.

However, during my initial contacts with public-interest and liberal foundations, I was told that a major objection to funding journalism was the cost. The feeling was that information was an expensive luxury. But I thought I could prove that assumption wrong by applying old-fashioned journalistic standards to this new medium.

To start the Web site the first of its kind on the Internet I cashed out my Newsweek retirement fund and we began producing groundbreaking reporting original to the Web. Over time, we showed that quality journalism could be done at a bargain-basement price.

Yet, despite our journalistic success, foundations and large funders remained skittish. We became an IRS-recognized 501-c-3 non-profit in 1999 (as the Consortium for Independent Journalism) and received some modest grants, but we have never been funded at the level that I had hoped.

Indeed, at the start of the crucial 2000 presidential campaign, our financial situation had grown so dire that I was forced to take an editing job at Bloomberg News and put the Web site on a part-time basis. We still published some important stories about the campaign, including how unfairly the Washington press corps was treating Al Gore and how outrageous the Florida recount was, but we didn't have the impact that we could have had.

During the run-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2002-03, we also challenged Washington's conventional wisdom, which was solidly behind George W. Bush's case for war. But again our voice was muted.

Finally, in early 2004, I felt it was important to pull together our volumes of original material about the Bush Family before that year's election. For personal financial reasons, I couldn't leave Bloomberg News until April (and I must admit it wasn't easy stepping away from a six-figure salary). But I felt I had no choice.

After quitting, I accelerated the pace at Consortiumnews.com and got to work on a book that became *Secrecy & Privilege*, the history of the Bush Dynasty.

After George W. Bush got his second term, we still kept at it at Consortiumnews.com, contesting his claims about the Iraq War and his broader neoconservative strategy, which combined violence in the Middle East with an assault on civil liberties at home. I felt it was especially crucial to explain the real history of U.S. relations with Iran and Iraq, a narrative that had been grossly distorted by the cover-ups in the 1980s and early 1990s.

## **MSM and CIA Parallels**

To my great satisfaction, we also began developing what might be regarded as unlikely relationships with former CIA analysts, such as Ray McGovern, Peter Dickson, Melvin Goodman and Elizabeth Murray. Though these CIA folks had been trained not to talk to journalists like me, it turned out they also were looking for places to impart their important knowledge.

I found that our experiences had run on parallel tracks. In the 1980s, as the Washington press corps was facing intense pressure to toe the Reagan-Bush line, the CIA analysts were experiencing the same thing inside their offices at Langley. It became clear to me that the Right's central strategy of that era had been to seize control of the information flows out of Washington.

To do so required transforming both CIA analysts and Washington journalists into propagandists. The crowning achievement of that

project had been the cowering CIA “analysis” and the fawning “journalism” that had been used to whip up popular support for George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq in 2003.

And that is where I fear we still stand, stuck in a dangerous swamp of disinformation, spin and lies.

Though the election of Barack Obama in 2008 showed that the Right’s propaganda machine is not all-powerful, it remains the most intimidating political force in the United States. It can literally create scandals out of nothing, like the “birther” controversy that persuaded many Americans that Obama was born in Kenya despite clear evidence to the contrary. On economic topics, millions of Americans are convinced to oppose their own best interests.

Today, the Right along with much of the Washington mainstream media is reprising the propagandistic treatment of Iraq regarding Iran, with a new conflict increasingly likely as the American public again gets whipped up into a war frenzy.

Still, my hope remains that we can finally gain the financial backing that we need at Consortiumnews.com to be a strong voice for truth and a way to maintain the best principles of journalism in order to counteract the exaggerations and hysteria that are again taking hold in America.

If you want to help us, you can make a donation by credit card at the Web site or by check to Consortium for Independent Journalism (CIJ); 2200 Wilson Blvd.; Suite 102-231; Arlington VA 22201. Or you can use PayPal (our account is named after our e-mail address “consortnew@aol.com”).

Since we are a 501-c-3 non-profit, your donation may be tax-deductible. We appreciate any size donation that you can afford.

Here are some other ways you can help us continue our work:

If you’d rather spread out your support in smaller amounts, you can

sign up for a monthly donation.

As always, thanks for your support.

Robert Parry

**The late Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. He founded Consortiumnews.com in 1995 as the Internet's first investigative magazine. He saw it as a way to combine modern technology and old-fashioned journalism to counter the increasing triviality of the mainstream U.S. news media.**

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