

# 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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Israel’s Overlooked Strategic Losses in

# Wars Against Arabs

After conventional Arab armies failed to deter Israeli invasions, Lebanese and Palestinian volunteers have changed the strategic balance in the Middle East, writes As`ad AbuKhalil.

## 2006 Lebanese War Changed Power Calculus

**By As`ad AbuKhalil**

*Special to Consortium News*



In South Lebanon, the Museum for Resistance, also known as the Mlita Museum, for the town in which it is located, is a wildly popular tourist attraction and a place where you can run into Arabs visiting from around the region.

In it, Hizbullah—the political party with an armed wing that, with Iranian assistance, emerged in response to the Israeli invasion of 1982—celebrates its military successes, displaying weapons captured from the occupation army and replicas of some of its military tunnels.

The museum enshrines an important realization for the country: that while conventional Arab armies failed to deter Israeli invasions, Lebanese and Palestinian volunteers succeeded in holding the mighty Israeli army at bay and have become the real defenders against Israeli attacks and occupation. As such, the museum offers testimony to the current nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The U.S. and other Western powers want to disarm Hizbullah while denying

the Lebanese Army the weapons to deter Israel. In other words, they want to return Lebanon to its former state of weakness.

The problems this situation poses for Israel are often overlooked given its apparently clear strategic advantage.

Israel's arsenal of weapons of mass destruction is still being protected by Western countries from scrutiny or even criticism. The Obama administration guaranteed Israel a most generous financial assistance program for the next decade. Israeli's 100-percent occupation of Palestine remains immune from U.N. or other international condemnation. Israeli citizens' settlement building in Palestine territories—despite violating international law—has not caused a rift between Israel and either the European Union or the U.S.

Egypt, meanwhile, remains committed to the peace treaty with Israel and to security coordination with the occupation state, as does Jordan. And Israel does not fear an assault from any Arab state or a combination of Arab states. (Arab threats—largely rhetorical—have only been intended to pacify popular anger.)

But things are not as secure for Israel as they might seem.

### **The Resistance Persists**

A century after the Balfour Declaration, the Arab-Israeli conflict has not ended. Early Zionist thinkers and leaders—influenced by racist European attitudes about the natives—never considered that the Palestinians would continue to resist Zionism for so long. This in itself is a



big failure for Zionism as it defies the long-held belief that force is the only language that Arabs understand. At the same time, economic offers and political ploys have not deceived the Palestinians—or Arabs—into accepting the Israeli occupation project either.

The resistance is not only tenacious, its effectiveness reached a new level in 2000. That year, after an escalating pattern of resistance operations that began in 1982—first by secular (communist and Syrian nationalist) groups and later by Hizbullah—the Israeli occupation army was forced to withdraw from South Lebanon.

Israel's biggest strategic loss came in 2006 during the [Lebanese-Israeli War](#), when armed groups (not part of an Arab conventional army) resisted Israeli assaults and deterred a ground offensive against Arab territory. Unless you have studied the performance of the Palestine Liberation Organization in Lebanon between 1970 and 1982, it's difficult to fathom how seriously this changed the power calculus of Lebanese and Palestinian resistance groups vis-à-vis Israel.

But the significance of that war—and most importantly on Arab perceptions of it—was obscured by Saudi regime propaganda intent on undermining the standing of any resistance, leftist or Islamist, Sunni or Shi'ite. The House of Saud began to promote sectarian hatred and agitation and emphasize the losses for the Arab side to downplay the precedent set by the war. (Examples of this are so pervasive it would be unfair to single out any one broadcaster or publication.)

During the invasions of Gaza, Israel failed again to advance or even to prevent primitive Hamas rockets from firing; all claims to the (fake) successes of the Iron Dome air defense system notwithstanding.

This is a marked contrast to previous confrontations. In 1978, Israel invaded Lebanon and the PLO's resistance was disorganized and largely spontaneous. Four years later, in the face of the 1982 massive Israel invasion, the PLO failed again to formulate a joint resistance plan. Fighting was stiff in some cases, such as at the refugee camp`Ayn Al-Hilwi and the medieval-era Beuafort castle. And later at Khaldah, on the outskirts of Beirut, the PLO did implement a defense plan for Beirut (designed by West Point graduate Abu Al-Walid), which explains why Israel never dared to invade West Beirut until after the evacuation of PLO forces from Lebanon. Overall, however, the PLO resistance record pales in comparison to that of Hamas and Hizbullah, in Gaza and South Lebanon, respectively.

### **Former Psychological Advantage**

Israeli strategy in dealing with the Arabs was based on massive, indiscriminate use of force and the promotion of the Israeli soldier as invincible and terrifying. This produced a psychological advantage that, from 1948 to 1967, sowed fear and resignation.

More recently, however, the image of the mighty Israeli soldier and a fearful Arab resistance has been reversed. In the 2006 war, Israeli soldiers in South Lebanon were terrified by Hizbullah fighters who prevented the enemy army from advancing one inch into Lebanese territory. I grew up

in Lebanon in the 1960s and 1970s, when Israel used to bomb and invade at will. This no longer happens because Israel has come to fear Hizbullah.

Another problem for Israel is its once-vaunted intelligence, which has developed a reputation for clumsiness. The failed raid in Gaza (by an elite unit of the Israeli occupation army) is the most recent example. In 2010, Dubai police plastered the faces of top agents of Mossad, the intelligence agency, around the world in the wake of the [assassination of Mahmoud Al-Mabhouh](#), a co-founder of the military wing of Hamas. Before that, in 1997, there was the botched assassination attempt on Khalid Misha`l', the Doha-based former leader of Hamas, by Mossad agents.

In the 2006 war with Lebanon, Israel's intelligence failures included the famous and (almost) comical kidnapping of a poor man whose only crime was that his name was Hasan Nasrallah, the same as that of the Hizbullah leader. Presumably, Mossad experts on the Arab world assumed there was only one Hasan Nasrallah in all of Lebanon.

Hizbullah and Hamas, meanwhile, have run intelligence operations that the PLO has rarely ever matched. Hizbullah's 2012 kidnapping of Israeli soldiers is an example of careful preparations and reliable intelligence. Hizbullah and Hamas have special operatives monitoring the communications of the Israeli military. Hizbullah has its own Hebrew language school. PLO organizations, by contrast, had so few Hebrew speakers they often had to rely on Hebrew teachers from the Institute of Palestine Studies in Beirut to translate important documents.

The Arab-Israeli conflict is not about to end anytime soon. Trump's ["Deal of the Century"](#) hinges on the belief that [Saudi Arabia's Mohammad bin Salman](#) can convince the Palestinians to give up their cause. This is a conflict that is unlikely to end in compromise, and the Israeli occupation state has made it clear that historical Palestine belongs to the Jewish people and that the Palestinians represent a mere nuisance on the land.

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