

## *Neoconservatives Consolidate Control over U.S. Mideast Policy*

By Jim Lobe

Neoconservative hawks in the administration of President George W. Bush have won a major battle against the State Department in the fight for control of U.S. Mideast policy with the surprise appointment of Iran-Contra figure Elliott Abrams to the region's top policy spot in the National Security Council (NSC).

For the first time, someone who has publicly assailed the "land-for-peace" formula that has guided U.S. policy in the Arab-Israeli conflict since the 1967 war has been appointed to a top spot in Mideast policy.

Abrams, appointed by the White House December 2, 2002, first came to national prominence as a controversial political appointee in the Reagan administration. He later pleaded guilty to lying to Congress regarding the Iran-Contra scandal, and has also opposed the Oslo peace process and called for Washington to "stand by Israel," rather than act as a neutral mediator between Israel and the Palestinians.

In *Present Dangers*, a book produced by the Project for the New American Century (PNAC) in 2000, Abrams outlined a new U.S. Mideast policy that called for "regime change" in Iraq and for cracking down on the Palestinian Authority. Foreshadowing the current U.S. policy based on superior military power, Abrams recommended that in the Middle East "our military strength and willingness to use it" should be the "key factor in our ability to promote peace."

"Yet another American Likudnik is moving to a position where they control Washington's agenda in the Mideast," said Rashid Khalidi, a Mideast historian at the University of Chicago. "This is a tragedy for the Israeli and American

people." Likud is the rightwing Israeli party headed by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Currently the NSC staff chief for Democracy, Human Rights, and International Operations, Abrams will become Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director on the NSC for Near East and North African Affairs.

As such, he will be in charge of presenting policy papers and options for National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, whose own opinions have proven decisive in cases where the president receives conflicting views from hawks, represented by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney, and the more dovish Secretary of State, Colin Powell, who is often backed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the uniformed military. Rice, a Russia specialist, had no experience with Mideast issues until her current job.

Abrams will replace Zalmay Khalilzad, a prominent foreign policy strategist whose views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are considered much more neutral than Abrams'. Khalilzad succeeded Clinton holdover Bruce Reidel early last year but was quickly consumed with his native-born Afghanistan after being named special envoy to the interim president, Hamid Karzai. Khalilzad will now become "ambassador-at-large for free Iraqis" and is expected to play a key role in sorting out internal conflicts among the Iraqi opposition. Both Khalilzad and Abrams were among the signatories of the 1997 founding statement of principles of the Project for the New American Century, whose neoconservative and hawkish foreign policy positions have found a home in the Bush administration.

## Beloved by the Right

Beloved by right-wingers, who hail him as a hero for his championship of the Nicaraguan contras during the 1980s, Abrams first gained prominence as a leading neoconservative when he served as Reagan's Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights in the early 1980s and then as Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs.

In both positions, he clashed frequently and angrily with mainstream church groups and human rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, who often accused him of covering up horrendous abuses committed by U.S.-backed governments, such as those in El Salvador and Guatemala, and rebel forces, such as the Contras and Angola's Unita, while at the same time exaggerating abuses by U.S. foes.

He was indicted by the Iran-Contra special prosecutor for giving false testimony about his role in illicitly raising money for the Contras, but pleaded guilty to two lesser offenses of withholding information to Congress in order to avoid a trial and a possible jail term. President George H.W. Bush pardoned Abrams along with a number of other Iran-Contra defendants in 1992.

His credibility for truth-telling was so low that at one point he was required to take an oath before testifying before congressional committees. Most analysts here believe that he was given an NSC post by the new Bush administration because any other position would have required Senate confirmation.

After Reagan left office in 1989, Abrams, like a number of other prominent neoconservatives, was not invited to serve in the Bush Sr.

administration. Instead, he worked for a number of think tanks and eventually became head of the Ethics and Public Policy Center (EPPC) where he wrote widely on foreign policy issues, including the Middle East, and the threats posed by U.S. secular society to Jewish identity. He also remained an integral part of the tight-knit neoconservative foreign policy community in Washington that revolved around one of his early mentors, Richard Perle, and former UN Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI).

Then-House of Representatives Speaker Newt Gingrich furthered his public rehabilitation by appointing him to the new U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom in 1999, for which he also served as chairman in 2000-01. Muslim groups here have complained about his refusal to criticize Israeli practices in the occupied territories and Jerusalem, such as sealing off Muslim holy sites, as violations of religious freedom.

## Peace through Boldness

He is not known as an Arab-Israeli specialist but has long favored Likud positions on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and even assailed former Likud Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu for caving in to U.S. pressure to respect the Oslo peace process. Shortly after the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifida at the end of September 2000, he criticized mainstream Jewish groups for calling for a resumption of peace talks between the Palestinian Authority and Israel, as well as a halt to the violence. Writing during the 2000 presidential campaign, Abrams observed that the coming decade "will present enormous opportunities to advance

American interests in the Middle East." But these opportunities will be realized "not for the most part through painstaking negotiations of documents." Abrams called for a policy of "boldly asserting our support of our friends and opposing with equal boldness our enemies."

Like Perle, as well as Rumsfeld's civilian advisers like Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith and Cheney's top deputy, I. Lewis Libby, he has favored a Mideast strategy based on the overwhelming military power of both the United States and Israel and on a military alliance between Israel and Turkey against hostile Arab states, particularly Syria and Iraq, in order to create a "broader strategic context" that would ensure whatever state might emerge on Palestinian territory would be friendly to U.S. and Israeli interests and that could force Syria to withdraw from Lebanon. He has long favored forceful action to oust Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

He has also long accused Palestinian Authority leader Yassir Arafat of being an untrustworthy partner under the Oslo process and is believed to have used his previous NSC Democracy position to push for his ouster from power as part of a thorough reform process. That view, which was strongly backed by Rumsfeld and Cheney's offices, was eventually accepted by Bush last June, over strenuous objections by the State Department and senior aides for Bush's father, notably his former national security adviser, Brent Scowcroft.

In his new position, according to John Prados, a historian who has written about the National Security Council, Abrams should be in an excellent position to influence U.S. policy on the Mideast, particularly in

“delaying and/or halting policy on the ‘roadmap’” that is being developed by the “Quartet”—the U.S., European Union, Russia, and the United Nations—on resuming political negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

Indeed, it already appears that British hopes for a major meeting of the Quartet on the roadmap before the end of the year are fading quickly.

Abrams is expected to support Israel’s recent requests both to put off discus-

sion of the roadmap until after Israel’s elections at the end of next month and for some 14 billion dollars in military aid and loan guarantees to help the country cope with economic hard times.

James Zogby, the director of the Arab-American Institute (AAI), said Abrams’ appointment sends “a very dangerous message to the Arab world” and adds to the “lock that the neocon set now has on all the major

instruments of decisionmaking except for the State Department.”

Khalidi also pointed to Abrams’ history of being less than forthcoming with information that may contradict his own views. “He will be yet another filter blocking reality from reaching the president,” he said.

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