



BY CHRISTOPHE VORLET FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

The Paranoid Style In Mideast Politics

*From the Gulf War to Somalia,
Fear of a Sinister Uncle Sam*

By Daniel Pipes

THE UNITED States is trying to take over the world, the evidence of which is brazenly obvious: A few weeks ago, thousands of U.S. Marines took charge of the tiny island of Haiti. And in 1992, American troops virtually seized strife-torn Somalia.

Sound like a misinterpretation of what were clearly humanitarian operations?

Try telling that to Middle Easterners. They widely believe that the U.S. government has embarked on a certain strategy to exert American will around the globe. After all, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, nothing stands in our way. And the Middle East, because it has a mix of what we like (oil) and what we supposedly don't (Islam), is target No. 1 on the U.S. attack list.

Nor, sad to say, is this some crank opinion. Rather, it is the considered conclusion of leading politicians, journalists, religious thinkers and academics. Certainly, sober voices also exist—they interpret the United States in a sensible way and they are the realists who control several governments. But America-taking-over-the-world fears are widely present in speeches, on television

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and in books. They constitute an unpleasant and dangerous reality.

In Iran and Iraq, the regimes disagree on just about everything—except their perception of the United States. Iran's Ahmad Khomeini, son of the late ayatollah, says Americans are establishing a "mastery and domination over the world."

Using almost identical language, Iraq's No. 2 strongman, Taha Yassin Ramadan, accuses Americans of seeking to impose a "unilateral U.S. hegemony over the world."

How do they know this? Because George Bush told them. His talk of a "New World Order" signaled to them a plan for American control. We Americans know that the phrase was never more than a dimly conceived, anodyne notion about politics after the Cold War, lacking importance and quickly forgotten. In the Middle East the phrase lives on, ominous and operational.

Middle Easterners cluster around three explanations for why Washington seeks world hegemony. Predictably, perhaps, fundamentalist Muslims discern hatred of Islam as the key motive. For the Muslim Brethren, "The New World Order simply aims at crushing Islam and its people in the Islamic world, in fact in the entire world," reports Baghdad Radio. This enmity results from a mix of a Christian "spirit of the Crusades" and Jewish plans for a Greater Israel.

Nationalists stress colonialist motives. According to the Libyan news agency, the CIA is putting together "a world dictatorial police system under the control of the United States where freedom, justice and democracy have no worth and where colonialism will be restored."

A Jordanian newspaper reports from an alleged National Security Council document

that the U.S. government, in effect, has plans to turn "Arabs and Muslims into the new Red Indians under the hegemony of the New World Order."

Others are convinced the chief motive powering American domination is a lust for Mideast oil resources. Baghdad media reports that Washington dreams of "securing complete and total control over the Arabian Gulf oil fields and rearranging the international scene without any obstruction or real crises."

These three themes—anti-Islam, colonialism and oil avarice—recur when Middle Easterners look at American intentions. Let's look at five specific cases.

■ *The Kuwait crisis.* Defying common sense, many in the Middle East saw the 1990 invasion of Kuwait as an American "trap" for Saddam Hussein. Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi asked rhetorically, "Who told Iraq to invade Kuwait? It was America."

Syria's defense minister developed an elaborate thesis about Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf pretending to scout out Kuwait on Iraq's behalf eight months before the Iraqi invasion actually took place.

Middle Easterners came up with some colorful (and contradictory) reasons for Washington to spin such a plot. One theory had it that the West is trying to impose "American-style Islam" on Muslims. Jerusalem is already under the Jews; the 1990 dispatch of American soldiers to Saudi Arabia brought Mecca and Medina under Christian rule.

Another theory has it that the motivations were economic. The United States sought to improve its economy by controlling Muslim oil-exporting states such as Saudi Arabia, Libya and Algeria.

Politics offered another motive. These theorists have it that the crisis slowed the tempo of unification in Europe, or maybe it provided a

way for Washington to keep the European allies obedient to its will. Others saw it as a "ballyhoo" that allowed Saddam Hussein, a confirmed U.S. lackey, to portray himself as anti-American.

■ *World Trade Center.* A New York court found a gang of four Middle Easterners guilty of bombing the World Trade Center in February 1993. Americans took them and their violently anti-Western religious leader, Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, at their word: they are fundamentalist Muslims who hate the United States and wish Americans ill. Few Middle Easterners saw things so simply. For them, the real question is: Which government was the gang working for? The American or the Israeli?

One faction contends that Rahman is a CIA agent who serves his master by discrediting Islam. According to a Cairo magazine, "The West is working to explode Islam from inside by attracting people" like him. He received U.S. funds to promote terrorism in the Middle East. Why an explosion in New York City? Because that's the most effective place to discredit Islam in the eyes of Americans.

Others say that Israeli intelligence stood behind the World Trade Center bombing. Egyptian columnist Ihsan Bakr speculated about an attempt to discredit Palestinians. "No Palestinian party . . . would have undertaken such an operation because it would harm all of them."

■ *Somalia.* The same themes pop up about the Somalia intervention. Americans may think their troops went to that forlorn country to save the lives of starving Somalis, but a Jordanian newspaper saw mass starvation as a new U.S. "scheme aimed at creating further tension" to justify "the dispatch of its war machine." The People's Arab and Islamic Congress, a fundamentalist group, claimed the U.S. purpose was not feeding people but just the reverse: "genocide" against the Somali people.

Many groups and governments accused Washington of establishing a new colonialism in Somalia. They differed only in the extent of

their fears. The Iraqi news service portrayed American entry "through the gate of death and starvation" leading to control over Somalia. A Beirut newspaper saw the tragedy as an "excuse to intervene to reshape the political situation in the Horn of Africa and the entire center of Africa."

Others smelled oil. Never mind that Somalia has none, it is in the general vicinity of the Persian Gulf, and that was enough for the Jordanian news agency to call Somalia an "important strategic region" and Iranian radio to refer to its "strategic location." The editors of a Palestinian newspaper in Jerusalem concluded that the Somalia expedition's objective was to tighten an American "grip over Arab oil."

■ *The Cairo population conference.* The conference last September featured a contest between the Vatican and the Clinton administration over the morality of abortion, right? Wrong. It was really a stage for the West to weaken Islam by undercutting Muslim birth rates. In an astonishing but typical statement, a leading Egyptian religious figure announced that Western efforts to spread birth control are "prompted solely by the growing vitality of Muslims. Should Muslims disappear from the surface of the earth, this debate would come to an end and all people will be left to propagate at will."

A spokesman for the Muslim Brethren read much meaning into the conference locale: "It is no coincidence that they chose Cairo, the heart of Islam, to unleash this attack An attempt is underway to change the world, starting with an attack on Islam." If the conference succeeded, an Iraqi daily stated, the West would destroy the Muslim world "by fanning wars and crises, causing famines, spreading fatal epidemics, disintegrating the family system and encouraging the collapse of social values."

■ *Satellite dishes.* New technology that allows individuals to receive programs directly from the sky through satellite dishes promises to provide the United States a fertile battleground for advancing its ambitious policies. Along with an Egyptian fundamentalist writer,

many Muslims believe that "The West has directed these dishes at us." Why so? Because, an Iranian ayatollah explains, the television fare amounts to a "cultural onslaught" that undermines the sanctities of Islam: "The satellite is exactly against the honorable Prophet, exactly against the Koran."

Similar suspicions color the understanding of almost every U.S. government action in the Middle East, including the U.S.-Israel bond and the peace process. In the aggregate, this distrust creates a deeply mistaken perception of the United States and its goals in the Middle East.

And things are getting worse. More than ever, the Muslim and Western worlds operate on separate wave lengths. The planet gets smaller, contact proliferates, but Middle Easterners and Westerners understand each other less and less. Rudyard Kipling's famous lament, "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," seems today more true than ever.

While Americans can't right these distorted perceptions, they can be mindful of them and take steps to address them head on. The high road—not dignifying the outrageous with a response—does not work. Better to do as Middle Easterners often do: reply promptly. For example, when the Palestine Liberation Organization spread rumors about Israelis making up part of the American expeditionary force in Saudi Arabia to fight Saddam Hussein, both the Israelis and Saudis immediately denounced the report.

In some cases, denying American perfidy may work. Egypt's Anwar Sadat credited his own enlightenment to Henry Kissinger, who convinced Sadat that the U.S. government does not have aggressive intentions. Other Middle East leaders might also see this country more accurately if American politicians make the effort explicitly to deny the many fears about U.S. intentions.