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**The Influence of Neoconservatism on US Foreign Policy Debates  
During the Obama Administration**

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**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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## ABSTRACT

Neoconservatism reached its zenith as a school of thought when it became associated with the Iraq War. Although the war was largely considered a failure, it raised the profile of neoconservatism as a school of thought. Many studies were completed which pointed to the influence of prominent members of the George W. Bush administration who were considered to be ideologically neoconservative. When Obama won the presidency in 2008, it was assumed that the influence of neoconservatives, or neoconservatism more broadly, would be over. However, given neoconservatism's historical foundations and the tenacity of its adherents it seemed important to consider whether this has been the case. Therefore, this thesis set out to answer the question: *To what extent have neoconservatives, and neoconservatism more broadly, influenced foreign policy debates during the Obama administration?*

I argue that neoconservatism has remained not only salient within foreign policy debates, but prominent in these debates, during Obama's two terms in office. An examination of US foreign policy towards the nuclear crisis in Iran and the Syrian civil war indicates that neoconservatism had a substantive influence on the policy debates and the options considered within them, particularly in Congress. In some instances, neoconservative policy entrepreneurs contributed to legislation. Furthermore, this thesis finds that neoconservatism has been the predominant approach to foreign policy within the Republican Party on the issues of Iran and Syria during the period under review.

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My passion for US politics was sparked when I attended a class on US foreign policy convened by Professor Brian Girvin in 2004. I had finally found something which completely fascinated me. This was 12 years ago, and I have never lost that feeling about the subject. When I eventually came to complete my masters in International Politics, Alasdair Young and Cian O'Driscoll were very encouraging and challenged me to understand politics in far greater depth than I had previously. With their teaching and assistance, I gradually came to believe I might be a suitable candidate to undertake a PhD.

My family have been very supportive throughout the process. My mother and father proofread this thesis more times than can have been pleasant and my sister went above and beyond by commenting on several chapters. They also steadfastly believed in my abilities.

## DECLARATION

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Printed name \_Henda Spence\_\_\_\_\_

## ABBREVIATIONS

ABC	American Broadcasting Company
ABM	Anti-Ballistic Missile
AEI	American Enterprise Institute
AIPAC	American Israel Public Affairs Committee
AUMF	Authorisation for the Use of Military Force
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BPC	Bipartisan Policy Center
BPCAN	Bipartisan Policy Center Advocacy Network
CDI	Coalition for Democracy in Iran
CEP	Centre for European Policy
CFR	Council of Foreign Relations
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CISADA	Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability and Divestment Act
CNAS	Center for New American Security
CNFI	Citizens for a Nuclear Free Iran
CNN	Cable News Network
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies
CSJ	Centre for Social Justice
CW	Chemical Weapons
DC	District of Columbia
DLC	Democratic Leadership Council
DNS	Did Not Sign
DNV	Did Not Vote
DOD	Department of Defense
EU	European Union
FDD	Foundation for Defense of Democracies

FEC	Federal Election Commission
FPA	Foreign Policy Analysis
FPDM	Foreign Policy Decision Making
FPI	Foreign Policy Initiative
FSA	Free Syrian Army
FTO	Foreign Terrorist Organisation
GOP	Grand Old Party
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
ICBM	Intercontinental Ballistic Missile
ICC	International Criminal Court
ILSA	Iran and Libya Sanctions Act
IPPR	Institute for Public Policy Research
IR	International Relations
IRS	Internal Revenue Service
ISA	Iran Sanctions Act
ISF	Information Security Forum
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
ISW	Institute for the Study of War
ITRA	Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act 2012
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
JPOA	Joint Plan of Action
MI6	Military Intelligence Section 6
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NIAC	National Iranian American Council
NIE	National Intelligence Estimate
NLF	National Liberation Front

NPT	Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons
NSA	National Security Agency
NSA	National Security Advisor
NSC	National Security Council
NSS	National Security Strategy
ORC	Opinion Research Corporation
P5+1	UN Security Council + Germany
PAC	Political Action Committee
PBS	Public Broadcasting Service
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organisation
PMD	Possible Military Dimensions
PNAC	Project for a New American Century
PPI	Progressive Policy Institute
RAND	Research and Development Corporation
SAM	Surface-to-Air Missile
SAVAK	(Persian) Organisation of intelligence and National Security
SMU	Special Mission Unit
UANI	United Against a Nuclear Iran
UN	United Nations
US	United States of America
USIP	United States Institute of Peace
USS	United States Ship
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WINEP	Washington Institute for Near East Policy
WWI	World War One
WWII	World War Two

## INTRODUCTION

1. Research Context
2. Research Question
  - Evaluating Influence
  - Theoretical Framework
  - Contribution to the Literature
3. Overview of Findings
4. Summary
5. Chapter Outline

### 1. Research Context

When Barack Obama came into office in January 2009, his election appeared to herald the end of the neoconservative influence on foreign policy that had been observed during the presidency of George W. Bush. Many have written about the influence of neoconservatives on the drive towards the US going to war in Iraq in 2003, both in terms of setting the discourse surrounding war, and with regards to influencing senior policymakers of the expediency of military action (Ahmad, 2014; Halper and Clarke, 2004; Mann, 2004; Schmitt and Williams, 2008; Unger, 2008). However, it has been argued that neoconservatism is largely finished, and no longer influential. G. John Ikenberry asserts that it is “the end of the neoconservative moment”, and argues that “As a grand strategic approach, it [neoconservatism] has failed” (Ikenberry 2004: 7). Even what might be called the ‘founding fathers’ of neoconservatism, Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz, contend that neoconservatism is over as a distinct entity, in the sense that it has become a mainstream conservative approach and therefore subsumed into the term conservatism more broadly (Kristol, 1995, Podhoretz, 1996). However, this thesis argues that neoconservatism is alive and well within the US and remains not only salient in foreign policy debates, but *prominent* in these debates, particularly within the Republican Party.

Many studies have been carried out on the history of neoconservatism’s first and second generation of adherents (Dorrien, 2004; Heilbrunn, 2008; Ryan, 2010; Vaisse, 2011); however, this research seeks to provide a contemporary examination of neoconservatives, as well as an analysis of the means by which they have tried to influence US policy on two of the most important (if not *the* two most important) foreign policy issues that Obama has wrestled with during this time in

office - the nuclear crisis with Iran and the Syrian civil war. It looks at the overall picture of how the network is currently formulated, and with the case studies of Iran and Syria, provides a close examination of how neoconservative efforts to influence government policy have played out in practice. While neoconservatism itself can be considered an ideology or school of thought, its adherents form a nebulous group which mainly coalesce around a commitment to shared ideas and preferences on issues of foreign policy. An up-to-date analysis on the ability of the neoconservatives to influence foreign policy debates is important in understanding the current relevance of neoconservatism as a political philosophy.

While some critics of neoconservatism have treated it as a kind of political anomaly, this study stresses that this is anything but the case. As Maria Ryan points out, neoconservatism did not receive a great deal of media attention in the nineties, and therefore when it was highlighted as a political phenomenon during the George W. Bush administration some were given the impression that it had appeared from nowhere (Ryan, 2010: 51). In fact, neoconservatism has a relatively long history which started in the late 1930s (although it was not named as such until sometime later). Given its heritage, therefore, neoconservatism should be more profoundly engaged with as a political school of thought. Indeed, the continued relevance of neoconservatism, particularly within the US foreign policy establishment, means that it is likely to continue to have ramifications for US foreign policy for years to come.

After he came to office in 2009, Obama was more hawkish on foreign policy than many had expected (Singh, 2014: 32), and this has had important ramifications for the Republican Party. Obama asserted his realist credentials during his first presidential election campaign, “The truth is that my foreign policy is actually a return to the traditional bipartisan realistic policy of George Bush’s father, of John F. Kennedy, of, in some ways, Ronald Reagan” (Obama, 2008). In keeping with this statement, when Obama entered office in 2009, he retained George W. Bush’s Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, for two and a half years, as well as appointing Republican, Chuck Hagel, to Secretary of Defense, both of whom are considered realists.

Faced with a president who was taking a largely realist approach to foreign policy, and who had fundamentally accepted the paradigm of the war on terror, space was created for the neoconservatives to disseminate and promote their ideas. With an overall acceptance of the principle of pre-emptive military action, as outlined in the National Security Strategy 2002, the bar for what was considered tough or aggressive foreign policy was raised. Pushing debates to the political right and ensuring more hawkish security narratives clearly has implications for US foreign policy. The neoconservatives have been able to capture this domain within the Republican Party, in particular. In order to distinguish themselves from Obama, many in the GOP have embraced neoconservatism. Justin Vaisse contends, “If the Republicans want to oppose Obama on foreign policy to score political points, they naturally tend to gravitate around neoconservative ideas” (Vaisse, 2010: 9). During Obama’s first term, Timothy J. Lynch argued that it is possible to speak of “a viable neoconservative wing within modern Republican politics” (Lynch, 2011: 19), and this only solidified during Obama’s second term.

Indeed, the Republican Party’s position on foreign affairs has been increasingly dominated by neoconservatism with the other two main approaches within the Party, isolationism and realism, occupying a minority space. Singh argues that the Republican Party’s shift further to the right has ensured that, at times, realists within the Party have found themselves more aligned with Democratic candidates. He points to Colin Powell’s endorsement of Obama in 2008 and 2012 as an example of this (Singh, 2014: 34). Referring to neoconservatism’s space within the Party, Jacob Heilbrunn, asserts that “The GOP’s approach to foreign affairs has become so uniform that any dissent from within is almost immediately slapped down” (Heilbrunn, 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 2015).

In 2012, when Mitt Romney ran as the Republican Party’s presidential candidate, he had numerous neoconservatives on his foreign policy team. Similarly, in 2015/16, many of the prospective Republican candidates for president had prominent neoconservative advisors on their foreign policy teams. Jeb Bush had Paul Wolfowitz, Ted Cruz had Elliott Abrams, and James Woolsey, Chairman of the neoconservative Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD). Marco Rubio also counted Abrams among his foreign policy advisors, as well as Robert Kagan, Eric

Edelman, and Jamie Fly, former Director of the neoconservative think tank the Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI).

## 2. Research Question

*To what extent did neoconservatives, and neoconservatism more broadly, influenced foreign policy debates during the Obama administration?*

This thesis argues that neoconservatism remains a salient and influential school of thought. It contends that during the Obama administration a neoconservative network had influence on debates in Congress, and by extension the executive, on the issues of US policy towards Iran and Syria. At times, the network also contributed to legislation, both proposed and passed. Moreover, this research provides evidence for the claims made by Heilbrunn and others that neoconservatism is currently the most prominent school of thought in the Republican Party, with regards to foreign policy (Heilbrunn, 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 2015).

This study defines the neoconservative network primarily as neoconservatives based in think tanks and publications in and around Washington DC and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Although neoconservatives are fundamentally ideological while AIPAC is a more pragmatic group, concerned with Israel's interests, AIPAC is largely allied to the neoconservatives on the two policy issues under consideration. It has the same understanding of the Iranian nuclear crisis as the neoconservatives as both groups hold similar core beliefs about Iran as a state. While AIPAC has a different conception of the policy problem in Syria, at key moments both groups have shared policy goals. This thesis focuses on the network's attempts to influence Congress, as the majority of neoconservatives were based in think tanks which are Congress-facing during Obama's time in office. When this thesis refers to neoconservatives, it simply means those that adhere to neoconservatism as a school of thought, and when it refers to the neoconservative network, it refers to neoconservatives and AIPAC.

AIPAC promotes pro-Israel policies to the executive and Congress in the US. It strives to strengthen and promote the US-Israel relationship (AIPAC, 2016). AIPAC is the largest of the pro-Israel groups and one of the strongest and most influential foreign policy lobbies in the US. Each year, the US President gives an address at

AIPAC's main conference. The Chairs of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee also give a speech annually (AIPAC, 2016). Israel has taken a hard-line approach to Iran for over two decades and argues that a nuclear Iran would be an imminent threat to Israel. Israel has also had a strained relationship with Syria, particularly as both countries remain in dispute over the Golan Heights which Israel captured from Syria in the Six-Day War in 1967. This thesis contends that interest groups can be an essential part of a network, lobbying for the network's preferred policies.

### *Evaluating Influence*

This study takes a holistic approach to evaluating influence, and therefore uses several sources to address whether the neoconservative network was successful in influencing US foreign policy. An examination of congressional hearings, both oral and written testimony, legislation, interviews, and newspaper/magazine/think tank articles, are the main methods of data collection that were employed. This research highlights two of the most important and controversial decision points during the Obama administration on Iran and Syria. Both points involve legislation that was introduced into Congress towards the end of 2013, and, if passed, both would have dramatically changed US policy towards the situations in Syria and Iran respectively. In the case of Iran, negotiations would have broken down between the P5+1 and Iran, ensuring US military action would have become more likely. In the case of Syria, US military action would have been taken towards the Assad regime after its use of chemical weapons.

In this thesis, influence is assessed as the extent to which the neoconservative network fed into policy debates on the issues of Iran and Syria, and whether actors from the network have contributed to legislation (either proposed or passed). For this study, influence is a primarily dialectical process. While this does not discount that the network had an influence on outcomes (such as the involvement in the creation of legislation), it is not restricted to this. Contributing to debates has an important role to play in how issues are understood, and ultimately to the types of policies which are considered. In order to do this, access to policymakers and their staff members is crucial. Access can occur at different stages of the policy cycle; however, networks tend to focus on the initial to middle stages of the cycle as this

is when they have the best opportunity to exert influence. Assisting in agenda-setting and framing issues are the first areas in which influence can occur, closely followed by concrete policy suggestions and help with the creation of legislation. The final stages of a policy cycle - implementation and evaluation - are the least likely areas for a policy network to be involved in.

### *Theoretical Framework*

In order to better understand the network focused on in this study, a theoretical framework primarily drawn from Sabatier's concept of advocacy coalitions was developed (Sabatier, 1987). Advanced to analyse and understand ideologically-based groups, Sabatier asserts that advocacy coalitions seek to ensure that their ideas and beliefs about an issue area dominate understandings and lead to their preferred policies being positively received, and ultimately adopted. The core of the cohesion found within these types of coalitions flows from their shared beliefs. Sabatier notes that advocacy coalitions require both political and material resources to support them in order to be effective.

As with advocacy coalitions, the goal of the network examined here is to ensure its ideas and understanding of events dominate the policy area under review. In order to develop this framework and ensure it is better suited to the analysis of the neoconservative network under examination, I chose to include, and foreground, the role of think tanks. In recent years, the number of think tanks has grown and their mode of operation has become increasingly similar to interest groups, as demonstrated by the rise of the advocacy think tank. The framework used in this thesis takes into consideration the methods used by think tanks to attempt to influence the debate, and by extension, policy.

In order to assess the extent to which influence is achieved, several indicators are studied. First of all, the degree to which the network is united or coherent on an issue is examined. Next, both political and material resources are considered. As this thesis focuses on Congress, political resources are understood as centring around access to members of Congress, and therefore to policy debates where agenda-setting and the framing of issues can take place. Appearances by members of the network in congressional committees and private meetings, as well as the

use of policy entrepreneurs by policymakers, are similarly taken as markers of influence. Access to material resources is also taken into account and understood as donors to the different actors in the network. Finally, outside factors such as public opinion are taken into consideration.

### *Contribution to the Literature*

This thesis is one of the few studies thus far to examine the reach and influence of contemporary neoconservatives. It adds to the literature on neoconservatism by examining current neoconservatives and evaluating concrete ways in which they sought to influence the debate on two central concerns of US foreign policy. It also expands on previous research by highlighting the important role of AIPAC as a central partner with the neoconservatives on these two issues. While there is often speculation and assertion as to influence of these two actors on debates and policy made within the legislature, this research seeks to assess the network's influence on the strength of data gathered. In this respect, it provides an evidence-based argument for the continued influence of neoconservatism.

Much has been written on the ways in which policy networks influence domestic policy, but less research has been undertaken on their influence on foreign policy. Notable exceptions include Janine Wedel and Maria Ryan who have examined the neoconservatives' influence on foreign policy and regard them as operating as a type of network. Wedel describes the network as a 'flex net' and focuses on a core group of affiliated neocons and their influence over the executive and Department of Defense (Wedel, 2010). Ryan focuses on the neoconservatives during the 1990s, and describes a 'neoconservative-led network' which coalesces mainly around its commitment to a unipolar world order with the US at the helm (Ryan, 2010).

This thesis feeds into debates regarding the levels of objectivity sought within policy networks. Sabatier (Sabatier, 1987), Haas (Haas, 1992), and Stone (Stone, 1996) all focus (at least in part) on aspects of policy learning that take place within policy networks. Policy learning indicates that networks respond to new knowledge and act accordingly, changing how the network understands an issue and what policies they recommend. This study's theoretical framework stresses the rigidity of ideas held by core members of the network, and argues that

ideologically-based networks are often incredibly resistant to policy learning. In this respect, they are fundamentally political. Their aim is not to function in an unbiased manner, but instead they adhere to their core beliefs and frame issues accordingly. This conceptualisation also reflects the increasingly political nature of think tanks - core elements of the network. The theoretical framework developed was operationalised to allow for an evaluation of the degree of influence exerted by an ideologically-based network on different issue areas.

This research also seeks to add to the existing literature on think tanks as it empirically examines these organisations in a way that has not been done previously. In this respect, it investigates and formalises linkages that formerly have not been systematically examined. Abelson looks at the US think tanks which had influence during the lead-up to the Iraq War and focuses on the neoconservative Project for a New American Century (PNAC), amongst others (Abelson, 2006: 222-224). While Abelson discusses the impact of PNAC, and the limitations of its influence, he relies mostly on document analysis and a small number of interviews with neoconservatives. This thesis markedly expands this type of analysis to empirically assess the ways in which think tanks try to influence policy, and how their role functions as part of a network. This research is based on extensive interviews, including with congressional staff, in order to gain insights into which think tanks were consulted on legislation. Previously, there has been a paucity of analysis on the ways in which think tank experts contribute to the policy process by contributing both ideas and language to specific pieces of legislation.

Finally, and more broadly, this thesis examines the role of ideas in the process of foreign policymaking. The findings suggest that ideas can play both a causal and constitutive role in helping policies to be promoted and adopted. It does not eschew or ignore the importance of material interests, and therefore remains rooted ontologically within the rationalist tradition. However this study indicates that when certain ideas become the dominant narrative in a particular policy area, they have a strong capacity to influence policy. In this respect, the findings of this thesis support the understanding of security environments which argues that they are cultural as well as material (Katzenstein, 1996; Williams, 2006: 2).

### 3. Overview of Findings

While the neocon network contributed heavily to the debate on both issues in Congress, neoconservative experts only managed to contribute to legislation on Iran. With regards to Iran, the administration was forced to engage in a sustained battle to prevent the passing of legislation to which the network had contributed in order to prevent the breakdown of negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 over its nuclear programme.

The neoconservative network was particularly successful on Iran in part because both the public and members of Congress are predisposed to regard Iran as a bad actor and a national security threat, given the historical enmity between the two countries. In this respect, the discourse of the network had immediate traction. Neoconservative experts were prominent during congressional hearings, along with experts sympathetic to neoconservative ideas. This ensured that neoconservative ideas and policy preferences dominated the debate. The majority of neoconservatives were strongly in favour of a military strike on Iran and had been pushing for intervention for some time. Members of the Israeli government had also talked about a possible strike, and AIPAC strongly lobbied members of Congress to pass legislation that would have re-imposed sanctions on Iran and caused negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 to break down. The neoconservative network strongly supported the proposed legislation and there is evidence to suggest that neoconservative policy entrepreneurs made a substantive contribution to the bill.

Key indicators explain the influence of the network on Iran. The network was very cohesive on this issue. It had good access to the debate within Congress (as detailed above), with policy entrepreneurs meeting with members of Congress for private discussions, as well as consulting on legislation. The network had access to substantial resources, both political and financial. While other networks existed (such as the anti-war network), they did not lead the debate in Congress in the same way as the neoconservative network. Key members of Congress were allied to the network on Iran. Finally, the issue of Iran had more salience with the US public, and they were receptive to a tough stance being taken towards the Iranian nuclear crisis.

The neoconservative network was less cohesive and effective on the issue of Syria, nevertheless it still managed to ensure it was prominent within the debate in Congress. It was most influential when US-Syria policy was cast as an issue of national security. This was evidenced by the upsurge in neoconservative think tanks and individuals asked to speak at congressional hearings when the conflict began to be framed predominantly as a security threat. Think tanks proved to be an essential part of the network as they took a lead role in contributing to debates on the issue. The fact that individuals adhering to a neoconservative outlook were frequently chosen to testify indicates that they gained the access required to influence the position taken by Congress.

While the neoconservative network supported a resolution for a military strike on Syria, there was a disconnect in the network. Both the neoconservatives and AIPAC favoured a strike, but it was a second-order issue for the interest group. AIPAC was not prepared to go 'all out' in the same way as it was on Iran. It had a narrower rationale for supporting the proposed strikes. AIPAC advocated the strikes on Syria mainly because an empty US threat to act would have weakened US credibility. This credibility was important as the US had threatened to take military action against Iran if the state did not give up its nuclear programme. The neoconservatives shared this concern with Israel but had broader ideological reasons for supporting a strike on Syria. Added to this, there was a lack of public support for intervention at that time, as evidenced by surveys conducted. Interview data further indicates that the lack of public support for action was a factor in the ultimate failure of the network to get its preferred policies adopted. Members of Congress were hesitant to go against public opinion on this issue.

As far as key indicators of influence, the picture of the neoconservative network was more varied with regards to the conflict in Syria. Crucially, the network was less cohesive on this issue, with AIPAC only becoming allied to the neoconservatives on Syria late in 2013 when Assad used chemical weapons. The neocons had access to substantial political resources but had less connection to financial resources. The network had good access to the debate in Congress and led the debate after 2013; however, there is less evidence that it contributed to legislation in any tangible way. Politically, it had the bipartisan support of the

congressional leadership for a strike after Assad's chemical weapon's attack, with Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KT) a notable exception (Everett, 10<sup>th</sup> September, 2013). However, crucially, the majority of the US public were strongly opposed to US involvement in Syria in the first years of the conflict.

#### **4. Summary**

In summation, the neoconservative network was influential in the debate on Iran and Syria in that it advocated that the US take a tougher approach on these issues with some success. Neoconservatism's increasing prominence in the Republican Party as an approach to foreign policy helped neoconservative policy proposals on Iran and Syria gain traction. Moreover, despite a continuing polarisation between both parties in Congress, congressional leaders and key members of Congress were largely allied to the network on both issues. The neoconservative network was successful in contributing substantively to the debate in Congress on both Iran and Syria. Neoconservative think tanks and policy entrepreneurs gained good access to policymakers and were prominent in congressional hearings.

Notably, on Iran, the neoconservative network contributed to legislation passed through Congress in 2010 and 2012, as well as controversial legislation that came close to passing in 2013. Despite not being able to defeat Obama's promised veto, the legislation forced the executive to engage in a sustained fight against the bill to ensure that it did not pass and cause talks between Iran and the P5+1 to break down.

With respect to Syria, while the neoconservative network still managed to exert influence in Congress, this was to a lesser degree. There was great reticence in both Congress and the executive for the US to become more involved in the conflict, particularly militarily. However, when Obama declared he would ask Congress for authorisation to conduct a military strike on Syria, the network found itself in agreement with the President. Predictions were that while close, the authorisation sought would have struggled to pass. Strong public opinion against military action combined with broad-based congressional scepticism towards intervention demonstrated the limits to the influence that the neoconservative network was able to exert in this case.

## 5. Chapter Outline

In chapter one a literature review is undertaken, first focusing on the position of ideas within IR theory before examining the subfield of foreign policy analysis. Next, a close consideration of policy networks is set out, before the theoretical framework developed is detailed. In chapter two, the methodology of the thesis is examined. Centring on two comparative case studies, it outlines why they were chosen, and how the analysis was conducted. Chapter three strives to give a sense of neoconservatism as a school of thought. Its history and key tenets are discussed, before neoconservatism is placed within its philosophical roots in the two main traditions of political thought in the US - liberalism and conservatism. This inquiry is important as it helps to give an insight into broader questions about why certain schools of thought have purchase within a particular political culture. Next, there is an appraisal of where neoconservatism can be situated within IR theory. Moving to the present, an examination of current neoconservatives and where they are based is detailed, before a closer look is taken at AIPAC and where it stands on issues of foreign policy in relation to the position of neoconservatives. Finally, the ways in which neoconservatives endeavoured to place the conflict in Syria and the nuclear crisis with Iran in well-known cultural narratives is discussed.

The two case study chapters (chapters four and five) examine the ways in which the neoconservative network managed to gain access to policy debates regarding the Iranian nuclear crisis and the Syrian conflict and contribute to these debates. The same research questions were posed regarding US policy towards both Iran and Syria. As part of this assessment, this thesis systematically maps the extent to which neoconservative foreign policy experts testified at hearings on Iran and Syria. Oral and written testimony submitted was also analysed. Further, both chapters examine the extent to which the network contributed to key pieces of legislation as well as how it strove to have the legislation enacted. Finally, the reasons why the network achieved differing success on these two central issues in US foreign policy are considered. This analysis allows for conclusions to be drawn about the extent of influence of the neoconservative network on these two core issues of foreign policy.

## CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORY CHAPTER

- 1.1 Introduction
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- 1.10 Theoretical Framework

### 1.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the theoretical approach this thesis develops in order to assess the extent to which neoconservatism had influence on US foreign policy during the Obama administration, specifically US policy towards the nuclear crisis in Iran and the conflict in Syria. First, it defines how ‘influence’ is conceptualised. Then, given this research fundamentally examines the influence of ideas, namely neoconservatism, this chapter examines debates within the literature in International Relations (IR) and how different theories conceive of the role of ideas within foreign policy. Following this, there is an examination of the IR subfield of foreign policy analysis (FPA) where more detailed actor-specific approaches are laid out, as well as the approach to FPA chosen by this work - policy network

analysis. Next, the different actors in the network are discussed before the chapter examines the different elements of the policy cycle during which a network attempts to influence policy. Finally, the theoretical framework taken by this research is detailed.

This thesis fits within a broadly constructivist frame and takes the specific approach of policy network analysis. As Thomas Risse-Kappen argues, “Ideas do not float freely. Decision makers are always exposed to several and often contradictory policy concepts” (Risse-Kappen, 1994: 187). Therefore, it is essential to ask why some ideas manage to take hold, or sustain their influence, rather than others. This study argues that policy networks are crucial in this endeavour. In this respect, it contends that ideas transmitted through policy networks can have a substantive effect on policy.

With regards to US policy towards the Middle East, there is a clear and strong link between domestic policy networks and foreign policy, and therefore it is beneficial to examine how these two areas interact. Policy network theory is little used with regards to foreign policy, yet it is a valuable way to analyse this interaction. It allows for the examination of the different actors within a network and how they collaborate with individuals in government or government agencies. The policy network framework used by this thesis draws on some of the features of an advocacy coalition approach, but modifies it to place an increased focus on think tanks as crucial elements in the process. While some more recent concepts of policy networks have included think tanks within them, there has been a paucity of analysis on their role in the creation of policy within the legislature, and on their attempts to contribute to foreign policy. The framework developed also draws on think tank literature in order to highlight the methods by which think tanks attempt to influence policy. Modifying the concept of advocacy coalitions with insights from the literature on think tanks can provide a conceptually coherent understanding of the way networks seek to influence policy.

As this study examines neoconservatism, and the extent to which it continued to influence foreign policy during the Obama administration, a focus on think tanks is necessary due to the central role their experts can play in promoting particular political philosophies. As Andrew Rich notes, “An appreciation of think tanks is

helpful not just for understanding the political role of expertise and ideas in American policy making but for accounting for how ideology informs policy making.” (Rich, 2005: 10). An understanding of policy networks which focuses on think tanks, interest groups, funders, and congressional committees as key parts of a network, will be used as these elements, in particular, represent the core of successful networks within the US.

The permeability of the political system, philanthropic culture, and generous tax system has assisted in the growth of think tanks in the US (Stone, 1996: 217), and in tandem with this, there has been a rise in their usage by policymakers. At the same time, newer think tanks have become increasingly advocacy-oriented - a move away from the traditional conception of these organisations as impartial and neutral. Interest groups, as well as political parties on both sides of the aisle, have encouraged the politicisation of think tanks by realising both the importance of ideas in policy as well as the intellectual legitimation that think tanks can bring to these ideas (Stone, 1996: 216). This research seeks to foreground the prominent role think tanks increasingly adopt within policy networks, and provide a detailed analysis of the ways in which they assist in influencing decision-makers.

## **1.2 Conceptualisation of Influence**

The conceptualisation of the term ‘influence’ is crucial to the analysis of the influence of one actor on another. While influence can be viewed in its most simplistic form as a linear process in one direction - actor A changes the position of actor B (Holsti, 1995 7<sup>th</sup> ed: 115), broader definitions are possible. A linear conceptualisation can be considered too narrow, failing to recognise other important ways in which influence can occur. It also does not always allow for counterfactuals - using only policy outcomes as an indicator of influence may miss other possible factors feeding into a decision-maker’s rationale for a particular policy. Moreover, as Donald Abelson points out, “As a result of suggesting that influence is directly tied to policy outcomes, scholars are ignoring the many access points that think tanks and other non-governmental organisations have to the policy-making process” (Abelson, 2006: 166). Assessing influence is more complex than linear models, such as that suggested by Holsti, allow (Abelson, 2006: 166). Abelson argues for a more holistic approach. He contends that, “Influence is not

tied directly to specific policy outcomes but is achieved through the interaction and exchanges between various participants who are directly involved in the policy-making process” (Abelson, 2006: 167). This does not mean that outcomes are unimportant, but simply that there are important steps before policy is agreed where influence can be observed. In this respect, gaining access to policymakers is an important initial indicator of influence. At this stage, which issues are given prominence, how they are framed (and the particular pathways this framing cuts off) are instrumental in how policy debates progress.

Further, it is more likely that policymakers repeatedly ask experts to meet with them, and provide testimony and reports, if they have a similar ideological position or worldview. As well as a shared worldview, certain factors can assist an expert from outside government gain access to policymakers. Rare technical expertise or previous experience assisting government on a specific issue can help to make a particular expert indispensable, or at the least valuable, to a policymaker who has a wide range of issues to deal with. In general, the more senior the government official with whom the individual or organisation has access, the greater the potential to exert influence. Having achieved access, experts have the possibility of becoming part of the debate surrounding a particular policy. In this conceptualisation, influence it is predominantly a dialectical process.

Therefore, in this study’s conceptualisation of influence, gaining access is a key factor which allows influence to take place. Once access is achieved, it can be expanded upon using private meetings and recommendations (Abelson, 2014: 137), where he or she is able to become an integral part of the policymaking process. During one of the many points of access to a decision-maker, new policy ideas can be mooted. Close correspondence with government officials can also allow experts to influence policy debates as officials or staff members may send draft legislation or policy positions they are considering for comment. As Peter Hall asserts, the relationship of experts with government is one of direct contact through a “narrow set of channels characterised by personal communication” (Hall, 1990: 56). Experts are also able to perform a strengthening function, providing the government official with further justifications for their favoured policy position, both in the form of research and rationales. In this respect, they may play a

validating role, reinforcing policy prescriptions suggested by policy-makers (Abelson, 2014: 129). As Holsti points out, “Influence may also be seen when A attempts to get B to continue a course of action or policy that is useful to, or in the interests of, A. The exercise of influence does not always cease, therefore, after B does X. It is often a continuing process of reinforcing B’s behaviour” (Holsti, 1995 7<sup>th</sup> ed.: 119). This study seeks to operationalise influence by examining it in discrete yet interconnected sections in order to allow for as full and holistic a picture as possible of the ways in which the neoconservative network has fed into the policy debate on Iran and Syria (this is detailed later in the chapter).

### **1.3 Debates within FPA**

Before setting out in detail the theoretical framework used by this study, it is beneficial to briefly review the debates within the literature on the role of ideas in core IR theories, as well as within foreign policy analysis (FPA). FPA is situated as a subfield of IR, and covers a broad spectrum of approaches; however, their main area of cohesion is a fundamental commitment to examining decisions made by policymakers within the realm of foreign policy. Valerie Hudson and Christopher S. Vore point out that FPA takes as its starting point “that human beings, acting individually or in collectivities, are the source of much behaviour and most change in international politics” (Hudson and Vore, 1995: 209), and also provides “an alternative to the ‘black-boxing’ of the inner workings of nations common to actor-general theories” (Hudson and Vore, 1995: 210). Jeffrey Checkel argues that in “one of IR’s main subfield’s - foreign policy analysis, there has been a long-standing disconnect between foreign policy analysis and core IR debates and theories” (Checkel, 2008: 72). This disconnect highlights the historical separation between approaches which focus on a system-level analysis as opposed to those which focus on a unit-level analysis such as FPA (Carlsnaes, 2006: 332). The former refers to international politics proper, the latter to the behaviour of individual states (Carlsnaes, 2006: 332). Or in other words, the separation between explanations which stress “the international system as the generator of behaviour” and those which stress “the importance of unit-level factors and actors for understanding and explaining state behaviour” (Carlsnaes, 2006: 332).

However, despite this disconnect, an understanding of core IR theory can help inform more detailed approaches within the field of FPA (Wohlforth, 2012 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.:45). For example, with regards to realism, William C. Wohlforth points out that, “to apply realism to FPA, one has to bridge the gap that divides highly general, ‘top-down’ theory from the ‘inside-out’ analysis of specific cases” (Wohlforth, 2012 2<sup>nd</sup> ed: 37). In this respect, Wohlforth suggests “that realism can inform the analysis of foreign policy”, but is unlikely to provide a “clear and accurate analysis” (Wohlforth, 2012 2<sup>nd</sup> ed: 47). For this endeavour, a specific approach within the subfield of FPA is often more fruitful. Similarly, Trine Flockhart asserts that “for constructivism to be really useful as an analytical framework for foreign policy, more sustained attention to agency is needed. This is precisely why there is a need for ‘actor-specific’ complements to constructivism” (Flockhart, 2012 2<sup>nd</sup> ed: 87). In this respect, core IR theories can complement, or indeed inform, actor-led approaches within FPA, as is the case with this study.

#### **1.4 Conceptualisation of Ideas by Core IR Theories**

##### *Rationalist Approaches*

Realism and liberalism, and both their neo variants, focus on the state as the individual decision maker, and therefore the main unit in foreign policy making. Realists generally take the term ‘national interest’ as a given and as strongly linked to the term ‘national security’, while liberals focus on norms and international institutions, and have a more flexible understanding of the national interest. Both focus on material capabilities, with realists giving a very limited role to ideas and norms - if not rejecting their influence outright - suggesting that they simply mirror power relationships. Although some argue that the degree to which Classical realists accord weight to the role of ideas in the international system tends to be downplayed (Williams, 2004), ideas are certainly not seen as a potentially dominant factor as far as influencing a state’s foreign policy decision making (FPDM). For neo-realists, ideas are regarded as peripheral to state interaction. Political rhetoric emphasising ideas is simply a post-hoc justification for policies pursued, which are in reality the product of material factors.

Liberalism allows more of an independent role for the influence of ideas on foreign policy, but it tends to focus on the institutionalisation of norms rather than why the norms have emerged in the first place. Liberalism acknowledges that ideas are often crucial factors in foreign policy decision-making; however, rather than reject rationalist understandings of state behaviour, it contends that ideas can contribute to that understanding, rather than replace it. Rational choice theories “treat both initial preferences and expectations as given and exogenous”, that is to say that they “do not claim to explain the expectations that *lead* to choice” (Gross Stein, 2008: 103).

For Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane, for example, ideas operate essentially as an extra layer, and can play a causal role in determining state behaviour (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993). Ideas and interests are conceptualised separately - they reject post-positivist claims that interests cannot be conceptualised outwith the ideas they stem from. They assert that, “ideas as well as interests have causal weight in explanations for human action” (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993: 4). Goldstein and Keohane are interested in the impact of certain beliefs when they are shared by a substantive number of people, as it is at this juncture that they can be regarded as having consequences on action. They are not concerned with the sources of these ideas, rather they are focused solely on the implications of these ideas (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993: 7). In this respect, Goldstein and Keohane are not interested in how ideas take hold or sustain, instead they seek to examine their effects on policy, and as such, remain within the liberal theoretical tradition. Their volume seeks to illustrate causal links between ideas and policy outcomes. However, as the authors suggest, this approach shares some elements of constructivist thought, for example when they note that “ideas define the universe of possibilities for action” (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993: 8), a notion shared by more interpretive approaches (Doty, 1993: 302). The key difference between the two approaches is that rational-choice approaches assume and state why a given actor prefers a certain outcome, but tend not to explain why. When rationalists accord significance to ideas - causal or otherwise - they usually treat them as exogenous and do not examine why they have been adopted.

## *Constructivism*

First, this section will examine constructivists who take a largely positivist approach (sometimes labelled ‘thin constructivists’) and second, it will consider those who follow an expressly post-positivist path (sometimes labelled ‘thick constructivists’). For constructivists, ideas matter and are not simply epiphenomenal. Ideas are the foundation of norms, culture and identities (none of which they consider discreet categories). Constructivism fundamentally views the world as socially constructed and approaches to foreign policy analysis which are informed by constructivism generally focus on the influence of ideas, as is the case with this research. They focus on social learning and therefore the broader social structural context, essentially the intersubjective nature of ideas (Checkel, 2001; Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001: 406). In this respect, the social world - or context in which ideas take hold - is accorded as much importance, and often more, than the material world. Emmanuelle Adler describes ‘thin’ constructivists in this way:

While accepting the notion that there is a real world out there, they nevertheless believe that it is not entirely determined by physical reality and is socially emergent. More important, they believe that the identities, interests and behaviour of political agents are socially constructed by collective meanings, interpretations and assumptions about the world (Adler, 1997: 324).

Here, Adler stresses that for him, constructivism is ontologically within the rationalist tradition, and in this sense, rather than being at odds with rationalism, it builds and expands on rationalism as an approach. In this respect, thin constructivism can be seen to be in ‘the middle ground’ divided between positivist and interpretive approaches (Adler, 1997; Checkel, 2008: 74). The former often treats ideas as causal variables while the latter examines them in order to “deconstruct and critique the knowledge claims of others” (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001: 395). Constructivist scholars take the position that once ideas become set in norms, they have a particular capacity to influence policy, constructing or restructuring conceptions of national interest (Sikkink, 1993b; Katzenstein, 1996; Williams, 2006). In this respect, ideas construct interests. Interests are endogenous or in other words, interests are constructed through social interaction (Checkel, 2008: 75; Sikkink, 1993b).

Thin constructivists stress that the degree to which ideas have causal weight within the making of foreign policy is variable and depends on the situation being assessed. Therefore, material factors may best explain a state's foreign policy decision, or ideas may play a substantive, or indeed dominant role. Changes in ideas, therefore, may precipitate changes in policies (Sikkink, 1993b: 160), which indicates a causal role for ideas in this process. Thin constructivists argue that security environments are not just material, but are also cultural (Jepperson et al, 1996: 33; Williams, 2006: 2). In both Michael C. Williams *Culture and Security* (2007) and Peter Katzenstein's edited volume *The Culture of National Security* (1996), the authors stress that they do not seek to ignore or diminish the importance of material power on a state's foreign policy, but instead want to suggest that states' interests are constructed through social interaction (Katzenstein, 1996: 2; Williams, 2006: 2). In considering why some ideas take hold and not others, constructivist research has emphasised the importance of the extent to which ideas become embedded in institutions (Checkel, 1993). Ronal L. Jepperson, Alexander Wendt, and Katzenstein break down the notion of culture within national security policies. While acknowledging that there is a degree to which agency and environment are mutually constitutive, so "a state's policies both reproduce and reconstruct cultural and institutional structure" (Jepperson et al, 1996: 63), they believe it is useful to utilise norms, culture or identities in causal arguments about national security policy - as variables, essentially. Additionally, for ideas to effectively gain or maintain traction within a state depends, in part, on "the nature of existing political discourse" and whether the ideas have an adequate fit within the discourse (Hall, 1989: 390).

Similar to Adler, Williams notes that state-centred conceptions of security studies are not necessarily in opposition to the constructivist approach (Adler, 1997: 21). In this respect, he points to neoconservatism as a particularly important example of the way in which culture can be used to further a particular understanding of security. Its continuing resonance can be explained by the fact that it taps into these deeper narratives.

Far from seeking the straightforward reassertion of the dominance of material power and military strategy and rejecting the cultural field of security, neoconservatism seeks to *revalue* the field of security by

rearticulating the relationship between culture and security in such a way that the exercise of military force becomes part of a broader cultural narrative concerning the defence of liberal-democracy and the survival of Western civilization (Williams, 2006: 93-94).

Williams notes that neoconservatism places emphasis on issues of identity and culture as it expressly aims to place ideology at the forefront of foreign policy. He also points out the fact that the “cultural power” of neoconservatism explains why traditional theories of IR have had such a difficult time in successfully countering it, and is what gives neoconservatism its “decisive strategic advantage” (Williams, 2006: 94).

In fact, part of the lack of success of traditional realist security studies in confronting neoconservatism arises from the cultural power and strategies of neoconservatives and from the relative incapacity of materialist, hard-power understandings of security analysis to engage with the cultural field within which neoconservatism operates (Williams, 2006: 94).

In a similar way, Ty Solomon highlights the ways in which neoconservative discourses have resonated in the US and he sets out how this has allowed neoconservatism to dominate security narratives at various periods (Solomon, 2015).

### *Post-positivist Approaches*

Post-positivist approaches to analysing foreign policy often focus on *how-possible* questions rather than *why* a particular outcome has occurred and as such, examine how certain narratives or interpretations create specific possibilities and preclude others (Doty, 1993: 298). Critical social constructivism (or ‘thick’ constructivism) emphasises discursive practices and the ways in which social realities are constructed through discourse. The concept of identity is often focused on by this approach. Interests are seen as stemming from a state’s identity rather than being an objective and stable part of international relations, as they are regarded, for example, by realism. Identity is a social construction and not a fact (McSweeney, 1999; Fierke, 2007).

The construction of identity is a political process and assists in legitimising the policies that are undertaken by government. Rather than separate the concepts of

identity and interests, critical constructivism regards them as constitutive - essentially inseparable; one will always have consequences for the other. Karin Fierke describes the relationship this way: “identity belongs to a field of practices, within which objective goals and thus interests are constituted” (Fierke, 2007: 80). Therefore, a focus on identity is essential when enquiring about a state’s interests, or indeed its ‘national’ interest.

Christina Rowley and Jutta Weldes contend that identity is the primary factor which accounts for US foreign policy (Rowley and Weldes, 2012: 184). They assert that, “rather than taking interests as exogenously given, critical social constructivism understands interests as constituted in relation to identity” (Rowley and Weldes, 2012: 186). For Rowley and Weldes, and critical constructivism more generally, identity is constituted through the construction of state interests and, as a result, state action (Rowley and Weldes, 2012: 186). A focus on the identity of a state is therefore of great importance as a state’s identity permits and also delimits the possibilities for state action. This also means that changes in discourse can allow for changes in practice (Laffey and Weldes, 2004: 28), and in this way, a state’s identity is not fixed. By highlighting the fact that discourses are locations of social power, as they “reflect, enact, and reify - treat as natural - relations of power” - critical constructivism seeks to disrupt these power relations (Rowley and Weldes, 2012: 191).

Fierke draws on Ludwig Wittgenstein when she argues that words and language are performative and not neutral markers of a particular ‘thing’ (Wittgenstein, 1958; Fierke, 1996; Fierke, 2007). Constructivists point to the politics of naming enemies in order to delegitimise their goals, as well as placing them within popular historical narratives in order to garner negative associations. Using a historical analogy can be extremely useful in framing an event or group in a positive or negative light. James H. Liu and Dennis J. Hilton contend:

History provides us with narratives that tell us who we are, where we came from and where we should be going. It defines a trajectory which helps construct the essence of a group’s identity, how it relates to other groups, and ascertains what its options are for facing present challenges. A group’s representation of its history will condition its sense of what it was, is, can and should be, and is thus central to the construction of its identity, norms, and values. Representations of

history help to define the social identity of peoples, especially in how they relate to other peoples and to current issues of international politics and internal diversity (Liu and Hilton, 2005: 537).

Using history in order to embed an event or political figure in citizens' understanding of that issue, or actor, is a particularly effective way of garnering support for whatever policy is chosen to deal with it. For example, Fierke notes that within the context of the Bosnian War, when the initial peace-keeping narrative collapsed, Western 'appeasement' of the Bosnian Serbs was stressed. The historical analogy of Chamberlain's appeasement of Hitler at Munich was used when support for intervention was sought (Fierke, 1996: 485). Once a name is given, the power of the act of naming is such that the process by which it was given is forgotten and a raft of motives, characteristics, and normative associations are then ascribed to the named subject (Bhatia, 2005: 5).

Constructivism has similarities with the subfield of FPA - both approaches have a commitment to the importance of agency, and therefore often complement each other well. However, constructivism focuses on social learning and therefore the broader social structural context - essentially, the intersubjective nature of ideas (Checkel, 2001; Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001: 406), while FPA focuses more often on learning at an individual level and has a more micro-level focus.

### **1.5 Foreign Policy Analysis**

As already noted, foreign policy analysis (FPA) is a subfield of IR. FPA is founded on the principle that individuals are the main actors. Individuals are not always, or even generally, rational - factors such as bounded rationality ensure that a decision maker is unlikely to be able to achieve a meaningful approximation of rationality within the arena of foreign policy decision making (FPDM). Herbert Simon describes bounded rationality as "theories that incorporate constraints on the information-processing capacities of the actor" (Simon, 1972: 162). These could include factors such as access to incomplete information about alternatives (Simon, 1972: 163). Or as Bryan D. Jones observes, "Bounded rationality asserts that decision makers are intendedly rational; that is, they are goal-orientated and adaptive, but because of human cognitive and emotional architecture, they sometimes fail, occasionally in important decisions" (Jones, 1999: 297). The

concept of bounded rationality is important in this context due to FPA's concentration on the minutia of policymakers decision making. FPA emphasises individuals - the decision makers - and, unlike many IR theories, eschews an approach which focuses on the state as the main actor. Jeffrey T. Checkel argues that FPA tends to centre around 'a loosely positivist epistemology' (Checkel, 2008: 74). He contends that "the origin of these desires and interests is typically not explored in FPA; they are taken as unproblematic and given" (Checkel, 2008: 75). Checkel goes on to suggest that FPA takes interests as given - treats them as exogenous (Checkel, 2008: 75), similar to the rationalist approaches discussed earlier. Within FPA, psychological approaches are worth examining due to their focus on ideas and belief systems.

### *Psychological Approaches*

Psychological approaches to FPA examine the belief systems, or perceptions, of policymakers, and has been a popular area of the field. Milton Rokeach defines a belief system as "the total universe of a person's beliefs about the physical world, the social world, and the self" (Rokeach, 1968: 123-4). One of the best-known studies in this area is Alexander L. George's "The Operational Code" (1969). Building on Nathan Leites' concept of the "operational code" from his work on Bolshevism (Leites, 1951), George stresses the defining role that the (necessarily) subjective perceptions of other states have on a given state's foreign policy (George, 1969: 191). He argues that belief systems concerning political life influence action in international relations. Although he mitigates this assertion by stressing that other factors should also be taken into account - belief systems are one variable, but not the only one (George, 1969: 191).

Similarly, Ole R. Holsti contends that examining the belief systems of political elites is particularly important in certain situations such as unusual, very uncertain, or stressful situations (Holsti, 1976: 16-18), factors which are often present within the making of foreign policy. However, Holsti also warns against directly relating beliefs and decisions with foreign policy actions (Holsti, 1976: 20) as some may be tempted to do. George also stresses that his use of the word "code" is a partial misnomer as what he seeks to illuminate should not be treated as a strict system that "an elite applies mechanically in its decision making"

(George, 1969: 191). Rather, George points out that what Leites meant was that an actors' beliefs,

serve, as it were, as a prism that influences the actor's perceptions and diagnoses of the flow of political events, his definitions and estimates of particular situations. These beliefs also provide norms, standards, and guidelines that influence the actor's choice of strategy and tactics, his structuring and weighing of alternative courses of action. Such a belief system influences, but does not unilaterally determine, decision-making; it is an important, but not the only, variable that shapes decision-making behaviour (George, 1969: 191).

Yaacov Vertzberger notes that one of the main consequences of belief systems is that decision makers do not ask salient and relevant questions about the validity of their assumptions. He stresses that political elites are often largely unconscious of the influence of their beliefs on their choices, and moreover are overconfident about their interpretation of the available information (Vertzberger, 1993: 120). Even more crucial, "If they later discover that the initial evidence on which their beliefs are based are false, even then the theory survives" (Vertzberger, 1993: 120). Similarly, Yuen Foong Khong has noted the importance of analogies as "intellectual devices" for policymakers which assist them in making decisions (Khong, 1992: 20). He also concludes that decision makers continue to persist with analogies even when significant flaws in these analogies have been indicated to them. Robert McNamara in his memoirs on Vietnam elucidates this difficulty well. He notes that before and during the war, he, and the rest of the administration, failed to ask basic questions regarding the threat of Vietnam. He asks why they did not consider that Vietnam and China might be on a par with Yugoslavia, another Communist state, which was not deemed an immediate concern. McNamara reflects,

Such ill-founded judgements were accepted without debate by the Kennedy administration, as they had been by its Democratic and Republican predecessors. We failed to analyse our assumptions critically, *then or later*. The foundations of our decision making were gravely flawed (McNamara, 1995: 33) - emphasis added.

Central to belief systems are the way in which a political actor views other political actors, particularly opponents. George notes that this impacts an actor's view of the essential nature of political conflict (George, 1969: 217), and he argues that it "exercises a subtle influence on many other philosophical and instrumental

beliefs in his operational code” (George, 1969: 202). How an opponent is conceptualised has a profound influence on a person’s belief system. Todd Giltin stresses the tendency of neoconservatism to adopt a Manichean approach to morality. This can be characterised as a type of “moralization”, which “creates a certain world of black and white that privileges the self and its identities” (Giner-Sorolla et al, 2012: 175).

When neoconservatism had particular influence in the executive during the George W. Bush administration, it was useful to retain an awareness of some of the issues that might arise within group dynamics. Psychologist Irving Janis is one of the best-known researchers in this area with his work *Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign Policy Decisions and Fiascos* (1972) which explores how pressures to maintain consensus within a group, as well as good relations between members, often results in poor decisions. Janis examined several examples of failures in US foreign policy - the inability to anticipate Pearl Harbour, the Bay of Pigs invasion, and Vietnam - and argued that in each case, groupthink influenced the way decisions were made, causing them to be defective (Janis, 1972). Views which diverged from the line being taken by the group, or contradicted the assumptions being made about the problem being assessed were suppressed. Members self-censored their views if they ran contrary to the dominant position being put forward by the decision-making team.

Drawing on Janis’ theoretical framework, Dina Badie has examined the decision to go to war with Iraq in 2003. She contends that, contrary to those who argue that the decision was a continuation of previous government thinking, the decision to frame the Iraqi regime and its dictator as a terrorist threat showed a marked departure from earlier positions (Badie, 2010). Badie argues that, “the decision to incorporate Iraq into the War on Terror was pathologically driven by groupthink in the post-9/11 environment, resulting in a flawed decision-making process” (Badie, 2010: 278). Groupthink could be valuable when analysing in-group behaviour within the neoconservative network, particularly in studying the policy preferences recommended by individuals and organisations within the group. However, in this instance it would not provide a comprehensive framework with which to examine the network during the Obama administration. There were no prominent

neoconservatives within the executive over this period. As the network is instead a loose informal grouping, an examination of group dynamics of the kind elaborated by Janis would not be suitable for this research.

## **1.6 Policy Networks**

There has been a breadth of research and analysis on how policy networks attempt to influence domestic policy; however, far less research has been conducted on their relationship to foreign policy, with some exceptions (Rittberger, 2001; Risse-Kappen, 1996; Ryan, 2010; Sikkink, 1993a; Wedel, 2010). This thesis helps to expand the literature on the relationship between policy networks and foreign policy. Indeed, policy network analysis is not commonly discussed as a subfield within FPA. Further to this, the research seeks to integrate literature on policy networks with literature on advocacy think tanks in order to highlight the increasingly prominent and political role that think tanks play within policy networks, and the means they use in order to try and influence policy.

A policy network is a broad term which refers to a variety of public (normally governmental) and private (e.g. think tanks, interest groups or business) individuals and organisations who come together to try to influence government policy. It may be disparate or fixed, either operating permanently or intermittently when specific types of policy become salient. Alternately it may be idea-based or interest-based; however, all types of policy network have a common ambition in their wish to impact policy. A policy network can be viewed as a specific concept in itself, but is also an umbrella term which specific, narrower types of network fall under, such as epistemic communities, policy communities, issue networks, and advocacy coalitions - all have similarities (Jordan and Schubert, 1992: 7; Stone, 1996: 90). This section will define the overarching term policy network more comprehensively, before setting out and comparing the specific types of network which fall within this broad term. It will also consider the concept of 'iron triangles' which has somewhat fallen out of use, but still has a valuable contribution to make concerning the relationships between different policy actors. Finally, it will set out the approach to policy networks taken by this research.

This thesis conceptualises a policy network as made up of key individuals, think tanks, interest groups, and funders who share a common set of policy goals. They tend to share similar ideas and values which motivate their choice of policy; however, this may not always be the case. Think tanks, or in some cases individuals within them, develop policy and strategy based on shared ideas. Interest groups work to operationalise or help convince decision-makers to adopt these policies. The network coalesces in an informal way and endeavours to influence government by accessing policymakers and becoming part of policy debates. In this study, the focus is on Congress and therefore the analysis centres on how the legislature interacts with a policy network.

This definition of a policy network is in line with that set out by Kenneth Hanf who asserts that, “the term ‘network’ merely denotes, in a suggestive manner, the fact that policy making includes a large number of public and private actors from different levels and functional areas of government and society” (Hanf, 1978: 12). Examining the broad role of policy networks, R.A.W. Rhodes outlines a comprehensive understanding, asserting that they:

limit participation in the policy process; define the roles of actors; decide which issues will be included and excluded from the policy agenda; through the rules of the game, they shape the behaviour of actors; privilege certain interests not only by according them access but also by favouring their preferred policy outcomes; substitute private government for public accountability (Rhodes, 1997: 42).

While Rhodes was referring to British networks, rather than those I wish to examine in the US, this description operates well for the type of network this research focuses. It also highlights one of the main normative issues that networks throw up, which is accountability. Clearly, elements of networks that include interest groups and think tanks are not elected representatives and therefore are largely unaccountable. Policy networks allow for the inclusion of private interests in the policy-making process, and the dominance at times of these networks raises questions about whether their presence leads to a reduction in democracy. Drawing on arguments made by T.J. Lowi, who asserts that ‘interest group liberalism’ distorts democratic government (Lowi’s term for the clientelism which has been a result of the expansion of public programmes in the US) (Lowi 1969:

288), Marsh and Rhodes contend, “Policy networks destroy political responsibility by shutting out the public; create privileged oligarchies; and are conservative in their impact because, for example, the rules of the game and access favour established interests” (Marsh and Rhodes 1992: 197). In this respect, policy networks are able to shift governance into the private realm and may coalesce around special interests.

Table 1.1 SUMMARY OF POLICY NETWORK GROUP TYPE CHARACTERISTICS

Group Type	Closed or Open	Ideas	Values and Beliefs	Permanence	Key Features	Type of Influence
Epistemic Community	Closed	Receptivity to new ideas.	Has normative goals, and is also expressly independent from government or vested interests.	Disappears after it achieves its policy project.	Claim authority on the basis of their scientific expertise. Normally agents of innovation.	Expert knowledge and the authority it brings. Mobilise groups to build public support.
	Open	Little consensus regarding problem definition.	Lack of common values, conflicting interests.	Access fluctuates significantly.	Creates a complex policy-making milieu.	Power struggles among constituents of the network to achieve their preferred outcome.
Policy Community	Restrictions on participants	Shared commitment to certain policies and programmes.	Diverse congregation of interests, but share basic values.	Stable	Associated with policy continuity and can constrain change.	Established link to policymakers and bureaucrats.
	Relatively open	Belief systems shape their ideology and interests. Recognise process of policy learning.	Emphasis on belief systems. Share basic values, problem perceptions.	Relatively stable	Overtly political and advocacy-based approach. Can help explain policy change.	Have most influence when consensus is questioned. Attempts to change the dominant belief system of an issue area.

(created using: Stone, 1996; Ulrich, 2004)

### *Epistemic Communities*

Each of the four types of network has its own particular features. The most avowedly independent from government or vested interests are epistemic communities (Stone, 1996: 87), as they make knowledge claims based on their expertise in a particular field. Peter Haas defines an epistemic community as “a network of professionals with recognised expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area” (Haas 1992: 3). Members of epistemic communities share common ideas and values as well as “normative and principled beliefs which provide the value based rationales for their action” (Stone, 1996: 87). They share a world view about cause and effect relationships which pertain to their area of interest (Haas, 1989: 16). Epistemic communities are also open to policy learning. Highlighting the significance of policy learning, Diane Stone notes, “one of the most important features of a community is its receptivity to new knowledge and the constant re-examination of prevailing beliefs about cause and effect” (Stone, 1996: 87). Epistemic communities achieve influence over policy by using their expert knowledge to bring authority to their policy prescriptions.

### *Policy Communities and Issue Networks*

Policy communities are conceptualised slightly differently from epistemic communities. They are generally smaller and narrower than epistemic communities, which have a broader and less consistent membership - epistemic communities disappear after they have achieved their goals (Stone, 1996: 92). Rhodes and Marsh set out their understanding of the term policy community, noting that they: have a very limited number of members, interact frequently, have consistent values and membership, are hierarchical, and there is a positive-sum relationship between members (Rhodes and Marsh, 1992: 187). In contrast, issue networks are notably different in style as they are large, encompass a range of affected interests, their contacts fluctuate in frequency and intensity, and they have a zero-sum relationship between members (Rhodes and Marsh, 1992: 187). Policy communities exert their influence by having established links to policymakers and bureaucrats which they use to persuade and convince officials about their preferred policies.

In an often-cited 1978 article, Hugh Hecló noticed that there had been a shift in the policy-making world from small, cohesive policy communities and well-structured policy networks to issue networks (Hecló, 1978). Issue networks are conceptualised as fragmented, open and complex, and as a result, they are “ill-structured for resolving conflicts and reaching authoritative decisions” (Jordan, 1981: 95). For Hecló, policy is made by issue networks who are “fairly open networks of people that increasingly impinge on government” (Hecló, 1978: 88). They are subjective, interest-oriented coalitions and the least stable of all the network types. An issue network is, in essence, an often disparate group of people who have coalesced over their common concern for a specific issue. Participants generally have competing interests, a lack of common values, and scant consensus regarding the definition of the problem or the outcome they seek (Stone, 1996: 90). This means that it is largely a power struggle between participants to achieve their preferred outcome.

### *Advocacy Coalitions*

Paul Sabatier developed the concept of advocacy coalitions, and defines it as “people from a variety of positions (elected agency officials, interest group leaders, researchers, etc.) who share a particular belief system - i.e. a set of basic values, causal assumptions, problem perceptions - and who show a nontrivial degree of coordinated activity over time” (Sabatier, 1988: 139). An advocacy coalition can include a wide range of policy actors, though it is not as disparate a grouping as an issue network. While policy communities and issues networks emphasise the interests of the actors involved, an advocacy coalition framework rejects the idea that actors are mainly motivated by self-interest (Sabatier, 1988: 141).

A feature of advocacy coalitions is their focus on ideas and belief systems, and how they affect the policies promoted by the coalition. As Heidi Ullrich notes, “a key distinguishing variable of advocacy coalitions is the emphasis on the belief system rather than knowledge in itself. The beliefs of members guide their actions rather than knowledge in itself” (Ullrich, 2004: 64). This overarching focus on ideas and beliefs, rather than knowledge, is the main factor which tends to contribute to the

political nature of the policies an advocacy coalition endorses. In this respect, it is the shared beliefs of members which binds an advocacy coalition together, and coalitions endeavour to convert these beliefs into public policy (Sabatier, 1988: 141, 142). Sabatier describes gradations within the advocacy coalition and notes that not all of the actors within it will have exactly the same beliefs. His framework proposes that the belief systems of the members of a coalition have different elements composing “a Deep Core of fundamental normative and ontological axioms, a Policy Core of basic policy choices and causal assumptions, and a set of Secondary (implementing) Aspects (Sabatier, 1988: 158). Coalition members will be quicker to give up their positions on the secondary aspects of their beliefs than to acknowledge problems or weaknesses in the ‘Deep Core’ or ‘Policy Core’ (Sabatier, 1988: 146).

Advocacy coalitions (like epistemic communities) acknowledge a dynamic of policy learning. Sabatier highlights this dynamic within his advocacy coalition framework. He attributes policy change to policy-oriented learning, as well as real world changes such as socioeconomic conditions and the turnover of personnel. Sabatier argues that advocacy coalitions may take on board new knowledge and integrate it with the group’s fundamental values and causal assumptions which then become part of its core beliefs (Sabatier, 1987: 654). However, “every effort will be made to restrict change to the secondary aspects, thus keeping one’s core intact” (Sabatier, 1988: 150).

Sabatier focuses on policy subsystems as the aggregate unit of analysis within his advocacy coalition framework (Sabatier, 1987: 654). He describes policy subsystems as “those actors from a variety of public and private organisations who are actively concerned with a policy problem” and argues it should be broadened from interest groups, legislative committees, and administrative agencies - the core of iron triangles - to “include actors at various levels of government active in policy formulation and implementation, as well as journalists, researchers, and policy analysts who play important roles in the generation, dissemination, and evaluation of policy ideas” (Sabatier, 1987: 652). Within the concept of policy subsystems, Sabatier further notes that a subsystem can be further broken down

into a number of advocacy coalitions who share a consensus on a set of normative and causal beliefs and may act in a co-ordinated or competing fashion (Sabatier, 1987: 652). He asserts that conflicting strategies from a number of advocacy coalitions are mediated by “policy brokers” who try to find a compromise (Sabatier, 1987: 652). While focusing on the beliefs of actors within a coalition, Sabatier does not ignore the role material interests and political resources play in order for a coalition to be successful at translating its beliefs into policy.

While belief systems will determine the *direction* in which an advocacy coalition (or any other political actor) will seek to move governmental programs, *its ability to do so* will be critically dependent upon its resources. These include such things as money, expertise, number of supporters, and legal authority (Sabatier, 1988: 143).

Thus the actions of advocacy coalitions - informed by their core beliefs, as well as their resources - are important for shaping policy. When seeking policy change, coalitions strive to alter the dominant belief systems in a policy area. In order to do this, the different actors in a coalition need to hold similar ideas and beliefs in order to create a strong ideological foundation for the group and common understanding of policy problems and its solutions.

### *Similarities and Divergences*

There are many similarities between the types of network. All four seek to define a particular policy issue. Haas notes that epistemic communities articulate problems for a state and therefore help a state to define its interests (Haas 1992: 2). Similarly, Rhodes points out that policy networks are important as they decide which issues will be considered appropriate for a state to focus on (Rhodes, 1997: 42). In this respect, policy networks can play an agenda-setting role (Marsh and Smith, 2000: 6). In addition, by framing the issue for debate, the goal of all four network types is also to influence what the possible outcomes can be. In this respect, it is possible to create new patterns of state behaviour (Haas 1992: 2). Indeed, the concept of bounded rationality comes into play here. “If rationality is bounded, epistemic communities may be responsible for circumscribing the boundaries and delimitating the options” (Haas 1992: 16). This description would

also apply to the other three types of group defined above as they create a similar dynamic.

Despite the similarity of aims, epistemic communities have a slight divergence from the other three groups. The crucial difference between them is the avowed independence from government and special interests (Stone, 1996: 87). Issue networks, advocacy coalitions, and policy communities are all expressly subjective and in this respect more overtly political than epistemic communities. Further, epistemic communities, issue networks, and advocacy coalitions are more associated with policy change and innovation whereas policy communities are more commonly linked to policy continuity.

Permanence varies also - policy communities and advocacy coalitions are relatively stable, consistently seeking to contribute to policy, while issue networks and epistemic communities are far less stable. Membership of an issue network tends to fluctuate, particularly because it is interest-based. When a member decides it has had its interests protected on a certain issue, it will leave. Similarly, when an epistemic community achieves its issue-based objective, it disappears (Stone, 1996: 92). In contrast, as a policy community or advocacy coalition is more stable as they coalesce because they share belief systems and values which are more permanent.

### *Iron Triangles*

The concept of an iron triangle has been largely cast aside in contemporary debates, but remains an expedient starting point for thinking about the different actors who feed into the policy-making process. It was developed in the 1950s and 1960s, and can be defined as “a structure linking executive bureaus, congressional committees and interest group clienteles” (Jordan, 1981: 99). It is hard to gain access to these triangles, and they tend to have stable relations, and a limited number of participants (Jordan, 1981). The concept of iron triangles advances the idea that government policies develop from the communication, bargaining, and negotiation among select members from these three groups (Overman and Simanton, 1986: 584). As Vernon et al note, “The model builds on the assumption that whenever the fortunes of an organised special interest group are at stake in

the US federal structure, a small set of individuals can be found dominating the process and repelling all outsiders” (Vernon et al, 1991). The iron triangle concept is useful insofar as it helpfully draws attention to the tight networks that operate within an issue area, with key people exerting influence both within and outside the executive and the legislature. A. Grant Jordan contends that, “while ‘iron triangles’ have been invaded by more groups and value-changing groups, much of the order, mutual learning and accommodation of the iron triangle imagery remains” (Jordan, 1981: 103).

Many have argued that the notion of iron triangles fails to comprehensively capture the increasing number of actors in the policymaking process (Heclo, 1978; Jordan, 1981, Vernon et al, 1991). Indeed, dissatisfaction with the concept initiated the rise in the concept of policy networks. However, while the policy network under examination in this research may be open to a wider range of actors than concept of iron triangles suggests, it is not as open and easy to access in the way that Heclo’s definition of issue networks, for example, implies. A modified understanding of iron triangles is useful as brings back to the fore the rigidity of networks and their emphasis on shared resources. However, it does not take into account the presence of competing clusters of influence, and therefore is not fully able to theorise the policy areas under consideration. For example, on both sides of a given debate there will be advocacy think tanks/interest groups, allied members of Congress, as well as allies in central government. With many policy issues, these factions can be regarded as competing one against the other in a bid to set policy. As Marsh and Smith suggest one important constraint on a network is other networks,

The context within which networks operate is composed, in part, of other networks and this aspect of the context has a clear impact on the operation of the network, upon change in the network and upon policy outcomes (Marsh and Smith, 2000: 8).

Networks are not operating in isolation or without competition. This understanding of competing networks within a policy area is similar to that outlined by Paul Sabatier when he asserts that ‘policy subsystems’ contain a number of advocacy coalitions (Sabatier, 1987).

## 1.7 The Exercise of Influence

Policy networks achieve influence, or indeed attempt to achieve influence, by getting involved in the different stages of a policy cycle, particularly the initial stages (Rich, 2001: 54; Abelson, 2006: 126). Robert Hoppe defines policy cycle as “a dynamic and interdependent set of actions concerning ideology formation, agenda setting, and policy design/adoption, implementation, and evaluation” (Hoppe, 1993: 82). In the main, policy networks are involved in the first three elements of the process.

### *Ideology Formation - Expert Authority and Credibility*

Ideas need organisations, and the experts within them, to bring them to the fore and into consideration by government decision-makers as they are ultimately responsible for converting ideas into policy (Stone, 1996: 1). Many think tanks, especially the newer institutions have chosen to have clear, ideological aims (Rich, 2001: 54, 59). As Stone points out, “Policy analysis is inherently political and value ridden and some institutes do not attempt to disguise it. Objectivity, as a standard, is elusive” (Stone, 1996: 115).

There is a constitutive element when it comes to the ideological influence of a policy network on government institutions. Networks have a greater chance of gaining access to policymakers if they already share a similar worldview to the decision-maker in question. Referring to interest groups, Ken Kollman contends that “there is a systematic tendency for the ideology of interest groups to be similar to the ideology of the members of the [congressional] committee” that they seek to access (Kollman, 1997: 539). It is at this stage that influence over more specific policy or legislation can occur. Further, if the chairperson of a particular congressional committee adheres to the same ideological position as the interest group or think tank seeking access, the organisation’s ideas can gain exposure to other policymakers with differing ideological stances by invitation to hearings or private group meetings within a committee. Martin J. Smith stresses the dynamics that ideology brings into play within policymaking.

Ideology [also] plays a major role in affecting how groups are perceived and what policy options are conceivable. Within each policy sector

certain beliefs tend to dominate the policy process and provide the parameters for acceptable options. As a result interest groups which do not conform to these beliefs are ignored or excluded from the political process (Smith, 1993: 4).

Gaining access to policymakers is vital for an individual or organisation to have a chance to make an impact on the direction policy will take. The perceived ideological reliability of an organisation by members of Congress is an essential part of why this is able to happen.

The experts and executives at think tanks are often the channel through which ideas find their way into the policymaking process. These individuals are sometimes termed 'policy entrepreneurs' to illustrate the way in which they attempt to market ideas (Mintrom and Vergari, 1996: 422-424; Stone, 1996: 122). Policy entrepreneurs also promote their ideas in several ways. As Michael Mintrom and Sandra Vergari point out, they identify problems, shape the terms of policy debates, network in these debates, and build coalitions (Mintrom and Vergari, 1996: 423). They go on to note that policy entrepreneurs will spend a significant amount of time networking in and around government in order to ascertain which arguments will have most traction with potential supporters (Mintrom and Vergari, 1996: 423). It also ensures they have high visibility in policymaking circles which help them to construct a reputation for being trustworthy and credible (Mintrom and Vergari, 1996: 423). Policy experts often become synonymous in policymakers' minds with the ideas they are advocating.

In Washington, the marketing of ideas is often indistinguishable from the promotion of people who are capable of articulating them - individuals who, by one means or another (and think tanks are now the accepted means) can establish themselves as authorities in a given field (Smith, 1991: 206).

Certain experts succeed in becoming invaluable to policymakers on a certain topic by gaining specific expertise and technical know-how that other individuals are unable to match. When an expert becomes the go-to person on the issue, they are more likely to dominate the consultancy process and influence which other experts are invited to consultations. Experts, and the networks or organisations they belong to, "provide for them the normative arguments, empirical evidence and techno-rational policy language that had become the currency of policy debates"

(Stone, 1996: 121). Further, technical expertise and the inclusion of ‘techno-rational policy language’ assist in the appearance of impartiality and neutrality, obscuring the ideological preferences of the expert or institution being consulted.

An expert is more likely to gain access if they have not only ideological coherence but previous experience. If a policy analyst had formerly worked within government they likely to have valuable links within government, and this past experience tends to provide their policy recommendations with extra authority. In the US, members of the administration can come from any field, and frequently they are drawn from politically-sympathetic think tanks. There has always been a ‘revolving door’ between think tanks and government in the US (Abelson, 2014: 131). It is often the case that think tanks operate as talent pools for incoming administrations or conversely as posts for ex-administration members (Weaver, 1989: 569). Former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta highlighted this dynamic, noting of the Center for New American Security (CNAS), “You can’t walk long in the E-ring there at the Pentagon and not bump into someone from that organisation” (Panetta, 20<sup>th</sup> November, 2012). It is unsurprising that members of think tanks who have served/or go on to serve in government administrations are likely to have close links with policymakers, and are therefore valuable assets to think tanks. Their ability to influence policy is likely to be stronger than that of other think tank employees.

### *Agenda-setting and Framing*

An initial way in which think tanks can get involved in the policy-making process is to shape the terms in which policy debates are conducted. They may help to set the agenda, deciding which issues should be given prominence for consideration. “It is during this agenda-setting moment in the policy process that think tanks and policy experts generally have historically had their best chance to make substantive contributions to how policy looks” (Rich, 2001: 59). Members of Congress have constant time and resource constraints where they often lack detailed, in-depth knowledge of an issue and therefore are reliant on think tanks and interest groups to fill this deficit of information. It is an ideal time for organisations to propose new ideas and recommendations on how to approach a specific policy issue. This can be achieved through private meetings as well as

invitations to give testimony and discuss the issue during congressional hearings. As M. Idrees Ahmad notes, “On Capitol Hill, the think tanks target both the Congresspersons and their staffers, inviting them to seminars, keeping an eye on policy proposals, monitoring congressional hearings and using congressional testimonies to plant new ideas” (Ahmad, 2014: 13). Some think tanks, particularly those who are more advocacy-oriented, provide daily email bulletins detailing - and at the same time framing, the issues they regard as core to the policy agenda. They provide concise summaries and are consciously created to be useful to time-pressed members of Congress.

It is important to advocacy groups to influence congressional staff as this is one mechanism through which an organisation’s ideas can be promoted. Committee staff have the capability to choose information that can be presented at a critical moment in the congressional decision process, and therefore they have an important place in the power structure (Patterson, 1970: 35). Following from this, Kollman states that committees “exert considerable gatekeeping and agenda-setting powers”, and goes on to argue that “even small biases in committee representation and interest group information to committees can aggregate into large changes in the law when several key committee members threaten to delay or even kill legislation” (Kollman, 1997: 522). It is therefore essential to assess which advocacy groups are being utilised by staff members, be that through meetings or documents produced.

Think tanks are often keen to shape the way issues are discussed - helping to decide not only what the problems are, but what solutions are possible. This is a key facet of a policy network, which ensures that think tanks are a valuable element of a network. Think tanks in particular, “help provide the conceptual language, the ruling paradigms, and the empirical examples that become the accepted assumptions for those in charge of making policy” (Stone, 1996: 110). In this way, by setting out the policy problem, think tanks can influence the range of possibly solutions to the problem.

Think tanks are particularly effective in creating the framework within which public debate on an issue will take place (Abelson 2006: 127). Scholars argue that framing affects not only the beliefs people hold, but the relative importance they

attach to those beliefs (Nelson and Oxley, 1999). Thomas E. Nelson and Zoe M. Oxley note that, “Through framing, communicators seek to establish a dominant definition or construction of an issue” and go on to add, “We maintain that frames influence opinion by suggesting which of many, possibly conflicting, considerations should predominate” (Nelson and Oxley, 1999: 1509). An issue can be viewed from many perspectives, some of which are competing, and framing an issue essentially decides which perspective should be foremost. A debate then takes place but within a particular conception of the policy problem. If an organisation or policy network succeeds in establishing the dominant understanding of an issue, this immediately helps delimit the possible solutions. For example, William G. Jacoby demonstrates that Democratic and Republican issue frames markedly affected support for government spending by changing how the issue was presented (Jacoby, 2000). Rich also argues this may be the most critical part of the process, and that while conservative think tanks have become very visible in policy debates of high salience, “More substantive and important opportunities for think tanks to be influential may come earlier in the policymaking process when they can affect the framing of issues and the types of alternatives available to address new problems” (Rich, 2001: 55).

### *Policy Design and Adoption*

Given that influence is often indirect, it is difficult to assess the extent to which policy design and legislation is influenced by think tanks or interest groups. As John Gaffney points out, “Neither think-tanks nor government would enhance their image if the former claimed that they were they were the architects of a democratic government’s policy or if the latter admitted accepting ready-to-use, off-the-peg policies” (Gaffney, 1991: 11). Nevertheless, it appears that certain think tanks and interest groups do attempt to become closely involved in creating government policy. There is a paucity of evidence on this for the reasons outlined by Gaffney above, something which this thesis strives to help correct.

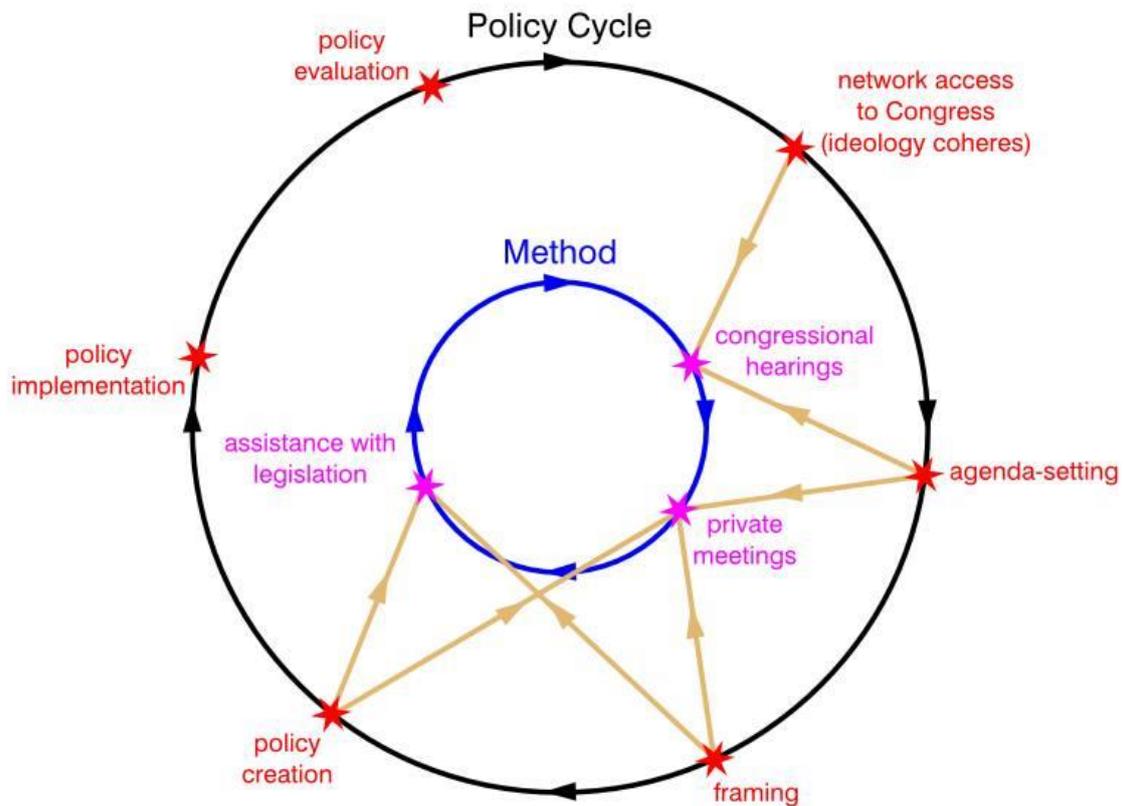
Some researchers have examined policy ideas and specific documents produced by think tanks and sought to link them to subsequent government policy. Hartwig Pautz examined the UK Labour Party’s 1997 election documents and compared

them to the policy ideas and ‘storylines’ advocated by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), Demos, the Centre for European Policy (CEP), and the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) - the ‘congruence test’, as he puts it (Pautz, 2012: 82). Pautz notes that the juxtaposition of policy programme with think tank output shows that the “IPPR, CSJ, and Demos had produced a discourse very similar to that which New Labour adopted for the 1997 elections” (Pautz, 2012: 83). Further, he observes that CEP contributed more in terms of detailed policy, and highlights the participation of two key members of the think tank in the writing of Labour’s 1997 manifesto (Pautz, 2012: 83). Similarly, there are the US cases mentioned later in the chapter, regarding the influence of the Heritage Foundation’s publication *Mandate for Change* on the policies of Ronald Reagan’s administration, as well as the influence of PPI on the Clinton administration.

There is a scarcity of evidence concerning think tank or interest group participation on specific pieces of legislation. Nevertheless, AIPAC is widely considered to have had a significant input in crafting the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) in 1996 (Leverett and Leverett, 2013: 310; Parsi, 2007: 188). Weiss reports that some congressional aides find it useful when advocacy groups suggest specific changes to existing legislation. A staffer described the dynamic, “A lobbyist says, ‘I know your legislation. Our problems are with sections 1, 6, and 12. Here’s what you should do. It’ll fulfil your purpose and ours.’ They’re giving you political and substantive information” (Weiss, 1989: 421). While there may be numerous other examples of this kind of co-operation, as noted, it is very difficult to find specific examples in the literature as it would not be expedient for either side to highlight such collaboration.

Figure 1.1

## Policy Influence



A network can achieve policy influence when it gains access to policymakers in several ways (diagram above). It initially gains access by having a broadly compatible ideology to a particular member of Congress, congressional committee chairperson or ranking member, for example. After this has been achieved, think tanks within a network can seek to obtain invitations to testify at relevant congressional hearings, and to arrange meetings with members of Congress in order to help set the agenda and frame the debate. At this stage, they argue which issues are most pressing and salient, as well as circumscribing how these issues should be discussed and understood. After these initial steps, elements within the network - generally think tanks, but also interest groups - seek to involve themselves with legislation either by consulting on bills or suggesting amendments. The last two stages of a policy cycle - policy implementation and evaluation - are those in which a network is least likely to attempt to involve themselves.

## 1.8 Elements of a Policy Network

### *Think tanks*

While a great deal has been written on the ways in which think tanks seek to influence policy, the place of think tanks within policy networks is under researched, particularly in the realm of foreign policy. Diane Stone has written most on the place of think tanks within policy networks (Stone, 1996: 86-104); however, it remains an underdeveloped literature, ready for expansion and empirical research. This study draws on the literature on advocacy think tanks and Sabatier's advocacy coalition framework to develop a new understanding of how think tanks operate within policy networks. Think tanks have become more political, as the following two sections explain, and this has had important consequences for the level to which they seek to influence policy, and the ways in which they attempt to do this. The case studies in this thesis empirically explore these last two points.

Think tanks have a key role within policy networks, and often seek to frame policy debates, and contribute to legislation. It is important to consider different types of think tanks, their scope of influence, and their funding sources in relation to the positions they take within policy debates. Before discussing the place of think tanks within the structure of policymaking, it is first necessary to define what is meant by the term. Abelson notes that, "'think tank' generally refers to a non-profit-making, tax exempt, non-partisan (not to be confused with non-ideological) institution engaged in research and analysis on one or more issues related to public policy, whether foreign or domestic" (Abelson, 2014: 127). The US, and Washington DC, in particular, houses hundreds of think tanks. The US government regularly works with think tanks, and the Department of State lists 59 think tanks it liaises with, and describes this interaction as one of the key functions of its Policy Planning staff (US Department of State, 2015). The role think tanks play in policymaking within the US system is normally providing original research, short analysis pieces, and policy recommendations.

Think tanks are currently the main places where neoconservative ideas are found. Focusing on think tanks allows for an examination of the extent to which ideas promulgated by the neoconservative network were taken on board by government policymakers. While it is normally impossible to infer a direct causal link between the two, this strategy will nonetheless allow associations and correlations to be made and potential causations to be discussed. Higgott and Stone argue that think tanks can be actors in the development of policy change (Higgott and Stone, 1994: 25). For example, Inderjeet Parmar has shown in detail how the Rockefeller Foundation had a key impact on foreign policy thinking between 1939 and 1945, helping to ensure the pre-eminence of an internationalist approach to foreign policy rather than one that was rooted in isolationism (Parmar, 2002). Similarly, Colin S. Gray laid out how RAND personnel were brought into the Pentagon in order to assist in broad strategic changes, noting that “their intellectual dominance in the early 1960s was nearly absolute” (Gray, 1971: 116). This study takes as its starting point the notion that think tanks, and more specifically key individuals within them, can have a substantive contribution to the development of government policy in both the executive and Congress. This may come in the form of agenda-setting and framing debates or consulting on, and contributing to, policy.

Rather than long, involved reports or book-length texts, short briefings for policymakers are favoured. Think tanks are now more focussed on providing policy ideas to government decision-makers in a manageable quick-to-read format on current policy debates, rather than the traditional long, often book-length research studies (Abelson, 2014: 137). These brief analyses are specifically intended to influence debates in the short term.

Think tanks do not just seek to liaise with policymakers, they attach a substantial value in attempting to influence public opinion (usually via access to the media). In this respect, they employ both a top-down *and* bottom-up approach when they endeavour to influence policy. In seeking to promote their organisation’s ideas in the media, think tanks commonly encourage their researchers or policy advocates to write op-ed pieces for the mainstream press. However, demands by the media to display neutrality and present two sides of a debate have encouraged

partisanship within think tanks as there is increasing demand to pair “rival experts with ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’ leanings” (Weaver, 1989: 572). As Weaver notes, “A clear ideological image may be the easiest way for a think tank to increase its visibility in the media” (Weaver 1989: 572).

Think tanks constitute a substantial part of a policy network as they seek to influence policymakers, promoting the policies they regard as optimum. Ideological dependability is one of the key reasons why think tanks are used and some policymakers and members of Congress favour think tanks as they can rely on them to provide this consistency. Stone notes that policy institutes, “have ideological commitments and require funding and organisational support which place limits on what is acceptable or legitimate policy analysis. Their policy research is used by them or others to become partisans of particular policy positions” (Stone, 1996: 114). In this respect, by receiving advice from certain think tanks, members of Congress keep themselves ‘safe’ from the criticism of their constituents, but also, importantly, from those who have contributed to their campaign for ideological reasons. The Heritage Foundation is the prototype of this kind of think tank; however, this is true of many of the advocacy-oriented tanks, and has resonance whether a member of Congress considers themselves liberal or conservative. Looking for ideas or policy positions from think tanks which are ideologically-aligned with the member or party is a quick and easy way to generate strategy or legislation. Ideological compatibility is more likely to ensure access, and this is what is needed in order for organisations to try to influence policy more specifically.

Further, when think tanks provide research studies or policy recommendations for members of Congress, it often serves to help support a specific course of action that the party or member was already keen to pursue (Rich, 2005: 76; Weiss, 1989: 425). In this respect, think tank research often functions as a tool to justify or validate a chosen course of action or provide “ammunition for fights with opponents” (Rich, 2005: 76). The input of scientists, including social scientists, gives a chosen policy an appearance of objectivity and credibility, even when this may be far from the reality (Haas, 1992: 11; Abelson, 2006: 99). Additionally,

relying on ideologically-aligned think tanks to provide justificatory arguments or research is a reliable way of backing up policy positions.

### *Advocacy Think Tanks and Interest Groups*

The popular perception that think tanks provide either objective research or analysis has changed markedly in the last two or three decades, particularly with the coming to prominence of the advocacy think tank. Higgott and Stone commented on this growing change in the purpose of think tanks in 1994, and it appears to remain true today.

Old guard organisations have made major contributions to the theorising in international relations. By contrast, the new breed of think tank is more concerned to bend the policy making community to its thinking on foreign policy issues relevant to its agenda (Higgott and Stone, 1994: 29).

Indeed, since the early 1970s, advocacy think tanks have become the most common type of think tank to appear in the US and other Western democracies (Abelson, 2006: 47). The advocacy think tank was being discussed as a new model by R. Kent Weaver in 1989.

Advocacy tanks combine a strong policy, partisan or ideological bent with aggressive salesmanship, and an effort to influence current policy debates. Advocacy tanks synthesize and put a distinctive 'spin' on existing research rather than carrying out original research. What may be lacking in scholarship is made up for in their accessibility to policymakers (Weaver 1989: 567).

For this reason, Stone argues that contemporary think tanks are "becoming more like interest groups" (Stone, 1996: 225). This thesis defines an 'interest group' as an association of individuals or organisations, normally formally organised, which attempts to influence public policy on one or a small range of issues. This research also uses the term lobby group or advocacy group as it considers lobbying' or advocacy as the central function of an interest group. Interestingly, a study in 2005, which surveyed congressional staff and journalists, found that only 29% of congressional staff recognised a clear difference between think tanks and advocacy organisations, while 63% saw no clear distinction between them (Rich, 2005: 79).

The development of advocacy tanks was spurred on by the large growth in conservative think tanks. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, many conservative academics were becoming frustrated by what they perceived as the increasing liberal bias in US universities (Abelson and Carberry, 1997: 681). To counter this perceived liberal bias, there was a rise in think tanks that are expressly and unapologetically ideological. Andrew Rich also links this phenomenon to a surge in policy debates which are conducted on the basis of competing ideologies.

So as contending ideas and ideologies have risen in profile as the principle fodder of political and policy debates, and as think tanks have themselves become often more ideological - frequently conservative - and aggressively promotional, think tanks and their products have come to warrant greater attention (Rich, 2005: 10).

One of the best known think tanks operating in this vein is the conservative Heritage Foundation. It was one of the first very successful conservative advocacy think tanks, particularly during the Reagan administration (Abelson and Carberry, 1997: 683). Famously, it produced the document “Mandate for Leadership: Policy Management in a Conservative Administration” (The Heritage Foundation, 1981), in which Heritage set out over 2,000 proposals on a wide range of issues. The think tank’s president at the time, Edwin Feulner gave a copy of the pamphlet to Reagan’s 1980 presidential campaign Chief of Staff, Edwin Meese III, in mid-November 1980 (Abelson, 2006: 34). According to Meese, “President Reagan gave a copy of the book to each member of his cabinet and directed them to read it” (Meese, 1992, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed: 60). Conservative think tanks are not the only organisations who seek to influence policy in this way, although they are arguably the most successful. Clinton spent less time interacting with think tanks than Reagan, although he was associated with the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) whose main mandate was to shift the Democratic Party from the left to the centre of the political scene (Abelson, 2009: 111). He helped set up the Progressive Policy Institute (PPI), which was the DLC’s policy arm, and used many of its policy ideas during his campaign for president (Abelson, 2009: 111).

This newer breed of advocacy think tank is careful to remain bipartisan (in name at least), as it is usually important to think tanks to work with both Republicans and Democrats in order to achieve as wide a reach of influence as possible. These

think tanks are also keenly aware of their status as 501(c)(3) organisations, whose status is charitable, non-profit, and tax privileged. However, that does not prevent them from advocating particular policy positions. Among other advantages, being a 501(c)(3) organisation means that contributions are tax deductible (there are limits to the percentage that is deductible from income tax). As the Harvard Law Review points out, “By forgoing tax revenues on deductible contributions, the federal government is, in effect, subsidising charitable organisations” (Harvard Law Review, 2002: 1505). Exempt status encourages contributions, and also makes it easier for private foundations to donate money as it will not be deemed part of the restricted amount they are allowed to donate to political parties or candidates. While private foundations can also give money to organisations without 501(c)(3) status, they have to exercise “expenditure responsibility” to make sure the money donated is spent for a charitable purpose. This is not required if the recipient is a 501(c)(3) institution (Harvard Law Review, 2002: 1505). There are clear rules for a 501(c)(3) institution, but this does not prevent a think tank from taking an ideological or partisan position. However, it does place limits on its capacity to lobby and support or oppose candidates for political office; lobbying activities must not be a “substantial part” of their activities. Clearly, if certain think tanks are involved in the construction or design of legislation, the boundary between lobbying for a specific bill and merely providing advice can become blurred.

In this way, advocacy think tanks have begun to exhibit elements of political action committees (PACs). PACs are organisations created in order to raise and spend money with the goal of electing or defeating political candidates, and therefore tend to be only nominally independent of a party or candidate. In the high-profile case of *Citizens United v Federal Election Commission* in 2010, it was ruled that political spending is protected under the First Amendment “meaning corporations and unions could spend unlimited amounts of money on political activities, as long as it was done independently of a party or candidate” (Levy, 21<sup>st</sup> January, 2015). In this way, both PACs and advocacy think tanks enable donors to attempt to influence the political process.

There are several reasons why it is tempting for an individual seeking to advance his or her political objectives to use a think tank (or a PAC) to try and do this.

Firstly, contributions to political parties and candidates are not tax deductible by the donor, and political organisations are not able to receive donations from private foundations or 501(c)(3) institutions. Secondly, lobby organisations and individuals who lobby Congress, as well as those who donate to political campaigns, must be disclosed by the receiving body (Harvard Law Review, 2002: 1515). Think tanks offer a way for donors to circumvent this transparency whilst still getting involved in the political realm. James J. Fisherman and Stephen Schwarz argue that avoiding disclosure can be a major driver for the use of think tanks and other 501(c)(3) institutions as a means to promote a particular ideology or position (Fishman and Schwarz, 2000: 576).

Some think tanks have developed specific sister organisations in order to lobby, with the explicit aim of influencing policy-making. For example, the Heritage Foundation has Heritage Action, the Center for American Progress has the Center for American Progress Action Fund, and the Bipartisan Policy Center has the Bipartisan Policy Center Advocacy Network (BPCAN). BPCAN asserts on its website its expertise in liaising with Congress. “In 2011 alone, BPCAN held nearly 300 meetings with members of Congress and their staffs as well as hosting more than two dozen committee briefings, and public events on Capitol Hill”. The website stresses that its projects involve “influencing legislative language” as well as “changing minds” and “changing laws” (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2015). Heritage Action is probably the most controversial, and possibly the most effective, organisation in this vein (Khim, 24<sup>th</sup> January, 2013). Strongly aligned with the Tea Party movement, it was reported to have had a significant hand in the partial US government shut down of September 2013 (Miller, 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2013), which was caused by the two houses of Congress failing to agree a budget (BBC News, 1<sup>st</sup> October, 2013). It employs a fairly aggressive approach to keep members of Congress in line with its conservative ethos. “It uses a three-pronged strategy to twist arms on Capitol Hill: lobbying members on hot-button issues, ranking them publicly on how they vote, and getting word out far and wide when lawmakers buck the conservative line” (Miller, 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2013). As these types of organisations strive to keep members in check ideologically, the tactics to which they resort have become increasingly coercive. President of the Progressive Policy

Institute, Will Marshall, asserts, “Heritage Action is one of these kinds of groups now. It’s become a very aggressive group that really threatens Republicans. If you don’t toe a certain ideological line, you could find they’re supporting Primary challengers to you” (Interview, Marshall, 5<sup>th</sup> November 2013). This is similar to the practices of traditional lobby organisations. AIPAC used to produce a booklet entitled “AIPAC Insider” (it is unclear whether this is still produced), which keeps a record of how members of Congress vote on issues important to Israel. While the booklet states that AIPAC does not “rate or endorse candidates,” it does have a section headed “Voting Record Descriptions”. This section lists key legislation, bills, resolutions, and sign-on letters, that AIPAC considers important, and there is a “voting record key” which explains how a “+” is placed after the legislation or other initiative if a member has supported a pro-Israel position, and a “-“ if they voted against a pro-Israel position. It also notes whether a member did not vote or did not sign a letter (DNV and DNS, respectively) (Freidman, 29<sup>th</sup> September, 2010).

As directly-influencing policymakers is the main goal of advocacy tanks, experts at this type of think tank place great importance on developing and maintaining links with members of the administration as well as Congress. Given that Congress often uses think tanks as unofficial staff, liaising with Congress is usually easier for think tanks than gaining access to the administration. Think tank staff are also sensitive to this situation. Matt Bennett from the think tank Third Way contends that Congress is the most effective domain for think tanks to try to get their ideas adopted because the legislature has a relatively small staff. Even if the US president is of their own party, members of Congress have very little access to the expertise in the administration (C-Span, 10<sup>th</sup> January, 2014). This deficit of information and research means Congress have to rely on think tanks in a way the State Department does not.

As well as providing tailored research for Congress, think tanks are aware that how they construct issues matters for how they are dealt with by policymakers. In seeking to influence legislation, the way in which issues are framed is an ideal way to do this. In this respect, opposing arguments are given their voice in the different think tanks advocating them. With think tanks all too aware of Congress’

reliance on them to provide assistance on how to approach issue areas, if an organisation seeks to frame and have an influence over the direction which policy will take, creating draft legislation may be one of the optimum ways to do this.

However, not all members of staff within Congress appreciate the growing role for think tanks, particularly as they have become increasingly advocacy-orientated. Some question the level of expertise of the specialist being consulted, and the objectivity of their policy advice is at times disputed. As Rich observes, “As more think tanks have emerged whose missions include advancing clear ideologies rather than neutral research, the substantive value of their work - and the work of think tanks generally - has been called into greater question” (Rich, 2005: 25). In addition, he contends that due to time pressures, members of Congress and their staff, as well as members of the media, do not pay a great deal of attention to evaluating think tanks, including the strength of their research and analysis (Rich, 2005: 77). Instead, congressional staffers rely on information that fits their requirements. Rather than scrutinise the sources of the analysis emanating from think tanks, they are content to use it if it bolsters their member of Congress’ preferred position.

### *Funders*

Notably, the role of funders in a policy network is often overlooked. However, funders have an increasing role in steering the kind of research that is undertaken by think tanks. Despite the large growth in think tanks since the 1970s, it can be difficult to determine their sources of private funding (Harvard Law Review, 2002: 1502). Even if you are a non-profit organisation, you need to be sensitive to the desires of your funders. The American Enterprise Institute (AEI) went through a severe cut in funding in the 1980s when it became regarded by some of its conservative funders as too centrist (Weaver, 1989: 572).

Indeed, “in some degree, institutes are beholden to agendas established by foundation executives and other sponsors” (Higgott and Stone, 1994: 32). This dynamic was highlighted by the *New York Times* in September 2014 when it ran a controversial front-page story with the headline “Foreign Powers Buy Influence at Think Tanks” (Lipton et al, 6<sup>th</sup> September, 2014). The article highlighted the fact

that over twelve Washington-based research institutes had taken donations from foreign governments “while pushing United States government officials to adopt policies that often reflect the donors’ priorities” (Lipton et al, 6<sup>th</sup> September, 2014). The article asserts that this dynamic is turning think tanks into another way in which overseas governments can lobby the US government. It also suggests that if think tanks take on an advocacy, and therefore representative, role for a foreign government(s) whilst not registering themselves as such with the US government, this may be an omission which “appears, in some cases, to be a violation of federal law” (Lipton et al, 6<sup>th</sup> September, 2014). The article points out that the policymakers who use think tanks as a source of information and policy ideas tend to be oblivious of the role of foreign governments in the financing of the research. Interestingly, the institutions flagged up by the piece as recipients of this funding include the Brookings Institution, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and the Atlantic Council. Particularly surprising to many was the presence of Brookings which from its founding has emphasised its thorough academic standards of objectivity (Weaver, 1989: 567). This situation underscores the clash between think tanks’ funding imperatives and their aspirations, or at least claims, of objectivity and independence. “There is a fundamental, inevitable tension within the contract research organization model between the norm of objectivity and the organization’s financial dependence on one or a few agencies” (Weaver, 1989: 567).

In some respects, a concentration on income is inevitable. An institute needs to ensure it is financed adequately or, as with AEI in the 1980s, it will come near to closure. Clearly this motivation can be at odds with think tanks’ frequent claims to be working for the public interest.

Rather than advocating the public interest, think tanks are sometimes interested in, firstly, empire building. This is most evident when the winning of grants or contracts becomes an end in itself. The corporate interest in expanding programmes, raising funds, publishing more books, securing media coverage and political patronage, and so forth, are essential to organizational sustainability and growth, as well as to the protection of jobs (Stone, 2007: 270).

In addition, examining how an organisation is funded is one factor which can be useful in helping to understand the approach it adopts on policy matters, including

foreign policy. Organisations may not be told how to structure the findings of the research they undertake; however, most are keenly aware of the political preferences of those financing the project. Diane Stone describes the relationship between think tanks and their funder(s),

In some degree, institutes are beholden to the funding priorities of foundations. Foundation executives and other sponsors have the ability to define what are emerging policy agendas (such as development studies in the 1960s) and to legitimate particular kinds of professional expertise. In the interests of continued existence and financial viability, institutes need to accommodate some of the expectations of funders (Stone, 2000: 163).

This dynamic is somewhat in opposition to the claims of objectivity and non-partisanship often made by think tanks. They do this, in part, to main their non-profit and independent status (Stone, 2000: 161). However, non-profit status as a marker of objectivity is insufficient, and these claims are challenged in the literature. Some have suggested that think tanks who assert that they are either providing a representational role or providing new policy ideas should be cautious in these claims (Stone, 2000: 172; Abelson, 2006, Parmar, 2006), but there has been a lack of in-depth analysis in this area.

As noted, advocacy think tanks perform a similar role to interest groups. Commenting on the dynamic between interest groups and Congress, Richard L. Hall and Frank W. Wayman assert, “Interest groups seek, among other things, favourable action on legislation that will affect them; members of Congress seek financial and political support from particular groups”, and go on to say, “the relationship between legislators and interest groups is one of implicit exchange” (Hall and Wayman, 1990: 799). Funders may influence the agenda regarding which issues interest groups (as well as advocacy think tanks) promote, by virtue of the fact that research and the policy recommendations that flows from it requires financing. This selection bias can have an impact on the types of research being conducted, setting the agenda in a specific direction depending on from where funding is being drawn. Generally, both policy networks, and the think tanks within them, have an ideological leaning. This interplay may have ramifications

towards the extent to which researchers can conduct objective research within think tanks.

## 1.9 Congressional Committees

Congressional committees are key parts of the policymaking process towards which think tanks and interest groups face, and they can operate as important allies to a network, particularly the chairperson and ranking minority member. They are the main organising structure which the US Congress developed to achieve the necessary expertise and division of tasks in the legislature (Patterson, 1970: 22). The primary place where debates over policy take place, it is important for think tanks to access them and the hearings they hold.

Testifying before a high-profile congressional committee can offer think tanks a valuable opportunity to plant ideas in the minds of influential members of Congress who are either looking for a different perspective on important and controversial policy matters or for some additional reinforcement for their position (Abelson, 2006).

Indeed, committees are relatively independent and largely autonomous mini-legislatures, occupying a prominent place in the congressional decision-making process (Jewell and Patterson, 1966: 202-230). The destiny of most national policy is determined in congressional committees (DeGregorio, 1992: 981). Therefore, it is clearly important to examine who has influence within the committee. Two main elements of the committee system stand out, the committee staff and the chairperson (and to a lesser extent the ranking minority member).

### *Committee Staff*

Committee staff can have substantial influence within committees as they conduct much of the analysis which is undertaken, reading reports, as well as doing the preparatory work for legislation (Weiss, 1989: 412). As Samuel C. Patterson notes,

Committee staff personnel have a great deal of influence on public policy, since (1) they gather and analyze much of the information upon which policy is based; (2) they plan and largely execute public hearings

and investigations; and (3) they draft legislation and committee reports which not only justify committee recommendations of bills but also make policy (Patterson, 1970: 28).

Carol H. Weiss concurs, “If analysis is influential, it will be largely through its influence on the work of the staff” (Weiss, 1989: 412). Given this, it is evident why Washington lobbyists and experts based at think tanks are keen to create and maintain good working relationships with congressional staff. Interest groups often work closely with committee or subcommittee members when decisions are being made (Kollman, 1997: 522), and this is increasingly also the case regarding members of think tanks. Overall, many interest groups and think tanks dedicate a significant amount of time to liaising with congressional committees. For think tanks in particular, “gaining access to members of Congress and their staff, as well as important committees and subcommittees, is critical in waging successful battles in the war of ideas” (Abelson, 2006: 117).

However, committee staff do not have free reign to decide which policies or positions to advocate, they operate within a particular ideological frame. Majority staff are hired by the chairperson of the committee or subcommittee and they are expected to be loyal to him/her. With regards to minority staff, they are hired, and therefore are expected to be loyal, to the ranking minority member (Weiss, 1989: 414; Patterson, 1970: 31). Regarding the balance of witness selection, if a chamber is Republican controlled, they usually choose two witnesses while the Democrats choose one and vice versa if a chamber is controlled by the Democrats. Committee personnel and committee leaders have a frequent and close working relationship (Patterson, 1970: 25). Committee staff get to know the position of their member of Congress and committee chairperson well and tailor their advice accordingly (Weiss, 1989: 412). One Senate staff member noted, “It’s hard to draw the line between what the Senator thinks and what I think” (Patterson, 1970: 30). Staff need to be able to access evidence and research which accords with their member’s position, and think tanks can be a vital resource in this endeavour. As Weiss stresses, committee staff “operate in an environment in which there are few rewards for dispassionate analysis” (Weiss, 1989: 413).

## *Chairperson*

The chairperson of the committee or subcommittee, and to a lesser extent, the ranking minority member, have more opportunities for effective action, particularly as they hire and fire the committee staff (Hall, 1987: 113). The chairperson of the committee confides in his or her staff director, delegates to them the task of planning and organising hearings, as well as inviting speakers to testify (DeGregorio, 1992: 974). One congressional staff member noted that “The chairman and his staff do control, in large part, which witnesses will appear” (DeGregorio, 1992: 979). This power of selection largely controls which views members are exposed to during hearings. In this respect, the hearing can be a time to sell the chairperson’s point of view to the other members of the committee (DeGregorio, 1992: 979). Christine DeGregorio asserts, “When chairs want to realize a particular legislative outcome they may work proposals in such a way that targeted bills are returned to them for subsequent hearings and markups. She goes on to say, “they can use the hearings to promote or to foil the turn of events” (DeGregorio, 1992: 972). Similarly, committee chairs have substantial influence over when bills are both referred to, and handled by, the committee (Hall, 1987: 113). In sum, the dynamics of the system ensure that “the views of the committee chairpersons are dominant” (Shepsle and Weingast, 1987: 95).

### **1.10 Theoretical Framework**

This thesis examines the extent to which neoconservatives, and neoconservatism more broadly, had an influence on foreign policy debates during the Obama administration. Starting from a broadly constructivist position, in this thesis ideas are understood as having the potential to possess causal weight. With this in mind, it is vital to try and ascertain their level of influence. Currently neoconservatism, as an ideology and political approach, is mainly located in US think tanks either in the form of the overarching principles which guide the organisation, or as the philosophy held by certain individuals within the institute (Singh, 2014). Abelson argues that academics who study American foreign policy have been slow to acknowledge and examine the role that think tanks play in the policymaking process (Abelson 2006: 127-8, 142), and suggests that it is instead scholars within

the areas of public policy and public administration who have paid them closer attention (Abelson 2006: 142). With this in mind, this framework advances the study of policy networks in relation to foreign policy and foregrounds the role of think tanks within policy networks, capturing their increasingly advocacy-oriented function within policymaking.

This study also includes AIPAC part of the network. While not premised on ideology in the same way that the neoconservatives are, AIPAC (and by extension Israel) have shared a common understanding of the Iranian nuclear crisis, and at times, a common conception of the Syrian civil war. The support of an interest group can be critical in order for think tanks achieve the momentum required for their ideas to be put into action

Moving from context to process we wish to argue that think tank influence on the policy making process will vary over time and according to a range of factors. Specifically, while ideas matter, and while think tanks are an important source of ideas, they lack clout in the absence of an existing 'constellation of institutions' - such as political parties, government bureaucracies and interest groups - to *operationalize* these ideas" (Higgott and Stone, 1994: 30) - emphasis added.

Having the power and resources to operationalise the ideas or preferred policies of a network is crucial and interest groups have the potential to augment these factors. While formulating, promoting, and providing a rationale for the policies being advocated is an essential part of the network, having the power and resources to provide the extra push that achieves the enactment of a particular policy or legislative bill, is vital. Moreover, having a network to push a certain position or policy preference is more effective than one institution, or one type of organisation, alone. Interest groups often have key contacts and strong links to members of Congress which can allow them to significantly impact the likelihood of a piece of given legislation being adopted. Finally, congressional committees are important allies for a network as they have the ability to translate ideas into policy. Close links between these elements of a network are crucial in order for ideas to achieve influence over government policy.

The network of neoconservative think tanks and individuals, interest groups (in this case, AIPAC), and funders can best be considered through the policy network framework of advocacy coalitions as developed by Sabatier (Sabatier, 1987). The

features of the neoconservative network exemplify many of the features of an advocacy coalition. Sabatier's concept emphasises the highly political and advocacy-based approach of such a grouping. He also highlights the common belief system and shared ideas held by those within the network. Where Sabatier underscores his view that advocacy coalitions are essentially "ideologically-based coalitions" (Sabatier, 1987: 654), this research takes a similar approach as it provides a framework which is crucial for understanding neoconservative influence on foreign policy debates. Further, this framework follows that of advocacy coalitions in that it contends that resources, be they material or political, are essential in ensuring a network is successful. This study conceives of 'material resources' as those that fund the network, and 'political resources' as their links and contacts within government, particularly members of Congress and congressional committees. It highlights the shared resources between the different elements of the network which help to solidify their links with each other. Following Sabatier's framework, there will be different networks operating within a specific policy issue which will either co-ordinate or compete. It is clear that within the two policy issues under examination in this thesis, there were other networks operating, anti-war coalitions, for example.

Where this research differs from the concept of advocacy coalitions is in respect to policy learning. Sabatier ascribes policy change in part to policy-oriented learning and suggests that advocacy coalitions assimilate new knowledge, and may incorporate it into the group's core beliefs, though these beliefs are most resistant to change. More often changes will be restricted to secondary aspects of a group's beliefs but these may nevertheless initiate "policy-oriented learning" (Sabatier, 1988: 151). This thesis' framework largely rejects the notion that acquiring knowledge will cause the network to modify either its core beliefs or secondary aspects of these beliefs. In this respect, the core beliefs of members of a network remain the same. It is precisely the focus on core values and beliefs that causes a network's ideas to remain fairly rigid. The network coalesces because of a shared ideology on which it bases its policy prescriptions. In this respect, the framework of this study jettisons the notion of policy learning within such a network. Moreover, it also dispenses with the notion of policy brokers as those who mediate

between different networks in an issue area or policy subsystem for a more adversarial understanding of the process.

While Sabatier cites researchers and policy analysts as possible actors in an advocacy coalition, he does not expressly refer to think tanks. This research highlights the importance of think tanks as vehicles which help to translate ideas into policy, and as such, they are crucial elements of a policy network. Modifying Sabatier's concept, this study draws on the literature which examines think tanks, particularly advocacy think tanks. This literature emphasises the way think tanks have become increasingly like interest groups owing to the fact that both actively attempt to influence policy debates and legislation. Advocacy think tanks are also often expressly ideological and this can result in them operating as important players in a network. They try to set the agenda by pushing certain issues up the policy agenda, frame how these issues should be understood, and contribute to debates in Congress, particularly through congressional hearings. They can provide the intellectual rationale and legitimation for policies for the network and this is crucial in order to direct, and if possible dominate, debates.

This theoretical framework applies policy network analysis to the realm of foreign policy. Modifying Sabatier's advocacy coalition approach, it maintains an emphasis on the cohesive and binding effects of a group of actors who share a common ideology, while developing it to expressly include think tanks as a key element in the network. As prominent players, think tanks have specific ways in which they seek to feed into debates and, if possible, concretely effect legislation. With the rise in advocacy think tanks, it is necessary to create a framework which foregrounds these institutions and allows for an analysis of their influence.

Moving beyond conceptualisation, it is important to have a framework with which to operationalise and evaluate the ways in which the neoconservative network has influenced US policy on Iran and Syria. First of all, drawing on an advocacy coalition framework, change is understood as resulting from fluctuations in the dominant belief system. The first indicator of influence which assists in deciding whether a particular coalition's ideas will dominate include the extent to which the different actors in the network hold beliefs which are cohesive (Sabatier, 1987:

654). Whether they are in accord in how they understand the policy problem impacts on the solutions they will advocate, thereby strengthening the network.

Next, the strength of the neoconservative network's political resources on these two issues is calibrated. To assess the degree to which the network fed into debates on Iran and Syria, the extent to which they gained access to policymakers is examined. In order to gauge this, the amount of exposure to neoconservative views in congressional hearings is taken into account which is calculated by examining how often neoconservative experts are asked to testify. Congressional testimony is also analysed to support an examination of agenda setting, how policy issues are framed, and the types of policies which the neoconservatives have advocated. While dynamics such as agenda-setting and framing can be hard to pin down, they have an important impact on the possible solutions which are then deemed acceptable - they set the parameters for policy. In complement to this, interviews allow for an appraisal of the extent to which meetings between members of the network and members of Congress take place (both publicly and privately).

A further indicator of influence looks specifically at policy entrepreneurs and their role in enabling the adoption of ideas. Exploring further into the policy cycle, there is an evaluation of whether these policy entrepreneurs had a substantive input into the construction of legislation or other forms of policy creation. Contributing to legislation is viewed as a direct form of policy influence. Next, whether congressional leaders, chairpersons or ranking minority members from key congressional committees, or members of the administration are allied to the network's preferred policies is examined. The views of committee chairpersons tend to dominate, and they usually decide which witnesses will testify, and in this way they are often able to promote or frustrate which issues are examined, the ways in which are framed, and when proposed legislation is considered. It is therefore important for a network to gain the support of key members of Congress.

Additionally, the importance of material resources is assessed, and in this study I focus on funders within the network. Donors to think tanks and interest groups can help to steer the type of research a think tank conducts and affect the sort of policies an interest group promotes. Their resources can also help to amplify and

strengthen the promotion of a particular policy. Lastly, as a final indicator of a network's ability to influence policymakers, public opinion is considered and assessed through the use of polling data.

The operationalisation of the theoretical framework set out here will allow for the evaluation of the extent to which neoconservative ideas were disseminated and promoted in Washington DC on these two key issues and the degree to which they can be assessed as successful.

## **CHAPTER 2 - METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 Introduction**

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## **2.1 Introduction**

This thesis assesses the extent to which neoconservative foreign policy preferences were engaged with and adopted by the US government, and Congress in particular, through two case studies. The analysis spans from the start of Obama's presidency in January 2009 until September 2015, which allows for a longitudinal analysis of the majority of Obama's time in office. A school of thought can be regarded as having influence, not only through its prominence within policy debates, but also from the types of potential policy options with which an administration is compelled to engage. For example, succeeding in framing the language of a debate can be an important way to influence policy during the initial process. If an administration is forced to engage with neoconservative policy preferences, particularly if they are exerted through Congress, then these will have a substantive level of influence, regardless of whether the administration finally adheres to them in the exact form that the neoconservatives' desire. This chapter details the rationale for choosing the case studies of Iran and Syria. It then focuses on the data collection process which was used in order to assess the influence of neoconservatism, and why strategy was chosen. Finally, it explains the triangulation and analysis process.

## **2.2 Case Study Method**

A case study approach, encompassing several methods of data gathering (neoconservative texts, newspaper and magazine articles, congressional hearings

and written testimony, and interviews), allows the development of a broad picture of neoconservative influence on two specific policy issues - the nuclear crisis in Iran and the Syrian civil war. The use of case studies provides a detailed and in-depth understanding of a particular issue (Lewis, 2003), and the cross-checking of information enabled by converging multiple sources of information allows for more robust conclusions.

Neoconservatives target their efforts to achieve policy influence on areas with which they are particularly concerned, specifically foreign policy (Singh, 2014: 30). Therefore, it would be less constructive, in terms of the goals of this study, to assess whether neoconservatives had influence on areas in which they were not attempting to do so. This research examines and follows where areas of neoconservative influence may be found within each respective case study. Given that neoconservatives are currently mostly based in think tanks and within Washington DC (Singh, 2014: 30), and that these organisations are primarily Congress-facing, the case studies principally sought to trace their influence on Congress, and by extension the executive.

### *Comparative Approach*

A method of structured, focused comparison was employed which involved asking the same questions of each case study in order to structure and standardise data collection, to the extent that this was possible. This approach allowed the research to uncover which variables were crucial to the achievement of influence by the neoconservative network in each policy area. This method is focused in the sense that it does not deal with every element of the case under consideration but picks out specific areas for comparative purposes. Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett note that the comparative method “was devised to study historical experience in ways that would yield useful generic knowledge of important foreign policy problems” in order to “discourage decision-makers from relying on a single historical analogy in dealing with a new case” (George et al, 2005: 67). This approach was chosen to highlight not only when and why the neoconservative network was more successful in one case than the other, but also to illuminate the elements of the policy process on which it was most effective.

This research examines the processes that have led to particular results (in this case, the level of neoconservative influence). This inductive method operates as an investigation, exploring the mechanisms and dynamics which have been at play. Additionally, by using a comparative case study, it is possible to track the range of factors that may account for an outcome, therefore assisting with a deeper theoretical understanding of potential lines of influence. It was not expected that a linear causality would be found, but rather a more complex process where several factors would come into play. Policy network theory, as outlined in the following chapter, is used to develop the analysis. The study aims to identify key interacting factors involved in the dynamic by which neoconservatism had influence on policy.

### **2.3 Rationale for Case Studies Chosen**

Neoconservatives promote their ideas predominantly on issues of foreign policy. They take a very limited interest in domestic politics except in areas which can be seen to have a direct bearing on foreign policy, such as the defense budget. As neocon Max Boot notes, “This was a movement founded on foreign policy, and it is still here that neoconservatism carries the greatest meaning” (Boot, 30<sup>th</sup> December, 2002). Neoconservatives have a particular interest in the Middle East and are generally very supportive of Israel. Israel is a key US ally in the Middle East, and neoconservatives often stress that it is one of the region’s few democracies. However, as discussed in following chapters, the preferred policies of the neoconservatives and Israel are not always aligned. Neoconservatives are also concerned with other states that might threaten the power of the US such as China; however, they have been generally content to use a Cold War paradigm of containment and deterrence towards China, particularly as there is no realistic prospect of US military intervention (Ryan, 2010: 145-158).

Having promoted the idea of pre-emptive war successfully within the George W. Bush administration, neoconservatives in the US continue to push for further pre-emptive wars. Academics and commentators have suggested that neoconservatives are ill-advised to continue to support and advance such an agenda, given the second Iraq war was widely considered a failure (Tucker and Hendrickson, 2005; Fukuyama, 2006). However, as will be discussed in chapter four, many

neoconservatives do not accept the premise that the Iraq War was a failure, or a mistake, and for most neoconservatives, policies which include regime change are still considered favourably.

The nuclear crisis with Iran and the Syrian civil war were chosen as case studies because of their location in the Middle East and the questions around military action which make them likely to be of concern to proponents of neoconservatism. They were also chosen as case studies with which to examine the strength of neoconservatism's ability to influence policy in Washington because they speak to the main tenets of neoconservatism as a political philosophy: a preference for military intervention for reasons of regime change (ostensibly in order to create democracy); an approach to foreign policy focused on a binary view of morality (i.e. good/evil dichotomies); and a preference for unilateral action or ad-hoc coalitions, favouring a strong demonstration of US power as an expression of US exceptionalism. All of these elements can be clearly seen in the US Iran and Syria policy advocated by neoconservatives.

Neoconservatives have consistently pushed for the overthrow of the Islamic Republic, whether through military action or through supporting opposition groups. They invariably describe the Iranian regime as fanatical and evil in order to justify military action because by definition, diplomacy will not work against such a system. Most have supported crippling sanctions to assist in such an overthrow. The neocons view the Iranian regime as a clear case of Islamist fundamentalism that directly threatens the US as well as Israel and must be defeated. They believe that Iran has ambitions to become the pre-eminent regional power and view this as dangerous. Arguably, this role is held currently by the US and Israel as an alliance, and the neocons would like this to continue.

The Syrian civil war was chosen as the second case study as neoconservatives have also pushed for the removal of the Assad regime. Syria's civil war contains many similar elements to the situation in Iran. Syria is a dictatorship and therefore justifications such as initiating regime change in order to bring democracy apply here. It is also Iran's main ally in the region, and gives a great deal of support to Hezbollah, which has strong links to Iran. Neoconservatives generally believe that US-Syria policy should be an extension of its Iran policy. They stress that the

position of Israel is directly affected by US policy towards both Iran and Syria. Historically, the neoconservative focus on Syria has been far less intense than that of Iran; however, neoconservatives tend to believe that the overthrow of the Assad dictatorship will benefit the US and Israel, and greatly assist in weakening Syria's main strategic ally, Iran. With the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2013/14, the threat posed by Islamic fundamentalism was added to the stated reasons for urgent and comprehensive US military involvement in Syria (Kagan, 23<sup>rd</sup> August, 2014).

This research investigated each case to allow for an assessment of the level of neoconservative influence on each policy area, and also for a comparison and exploration of the key factors that determined neoconservative influence in each case. In this respect, the research was inductive as the level of influence or key factors involved were not known or hypothesised at the outset of the research. The main hypothesis was that there would be a degree of neoconservative influence.

#### *Sub-Questions Posed in Both Cases*

- How often were neoconservative think tanks or individuals asked to testify at congressional hearings on Iran and Syria during the Obama administration?
- To what extent did neoconservative individuals and organisations contribute to the debate on these two issues?
- To what extent did neoconservative individuals and organisations advocate, or contribute to, legislation on these two issues?
- To what extent did congressional leaders agree with the neoconservative network's preferred policies?
- Were material resources (e.g. interest groups, common funders within the network) important in the success of the network on Iran and Syria?
- Was public opinion a factor in the success of the network on these two issues?

## 2.4 Data Collection

Data collection took the form of three main types of evidence - texts written by neoconservatives, congressional testimony (both written and oral), and elite interviews. Donald Abelson proposes an examination of how frequently a think tank is asked to testify at congressional hearings as an indicator of influence (Abelson, 2006: 176). He also recommends that quantitative methods such as this need to be complemented by qualitative data such as interviews (Abelson, 2006: 178-181). This thesis builds on this approach but expands it to include textual analysis. It studies the written and oral testimony given by think tanks at these hearings as well as examining legislation both passed and proposed on the two policy issues under consideration.

### *Neoconservative Texts*

Before influence can be assessed, neoconservative preferences towards US policy on both Iran and Syria had to be considered separately. I examined texts from prominent neoconservative individuals, as well as neoconservative think tanks and magazines. I also analysed articles written by a range of neoconservative thinkers either published in newspapers, magazines or books, or on the website of the organisation to which they are attached. Two think tanks were mined in depth as they can be considered neoconservative in overall outlook. They are the Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI) (Drolet, 2011: 2, 15, 152) - a new version of the now disbanded Project for a New American Century, and the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) (Heilbrunn, 2008: 274, 279). Similarly, I examined articles from the neoconservative publications *The Weekly Standard* and *Commentary*, as well as surveying articles from the *Wall Street Journal*, as the newspaper often carries op-eds written by neoconservatives. With regards to these publications and think tanks, I focused specifically on individuals who either extol views which are neoconservative, and are widely referred to as such in print, or those who self-identify as neoconservative.

I reviewed articles and policy documents published by these organisations and individuals to ascertain the preferred neoconservative position on US foreign policy towards the two case studies. The policy preferences outlined will not be used to

suggest influence, but rather to anchor and confirm which policies neoconservatives advocated that the US take towards Iran and Syria. There are small differences in position among neoconservatives about how to approach these two policy issues; however, the neoconservative policy preferences on both Iran and Syria conform well to the core tenets of neoconservatism, allowing for the use of a coherent baseline to evaluate the extent to which neoconservatism can inform and influence foreign policy.

### *Interviews - Process and Participants*

The analysis is also based on 40 elite interviews (with 37 different individuals) conducted during two trips to Washington DC. Three of the interviews were follow-up meetings with those spoken to during the first visit in 2013. These took place over approximately a five-week period from the last week in October 2013 until the end of November 2013, and a further period of approximately four weeks during September 2014. The majority of interviewees had direct experience working on Iran or Syria policy in the Bush or Obama administrations either in Congress or the administration. The interviewees also included ten experts based at think tanks who had given testimony to Congress on Iran or Syria during the period under examination. Some interviewees wish to remain anonymous; however, the majority were happy to be named in this work. With respect to anonymity, this is maintained by ensuring that references are not made to the interviewee's positions in a way that would make them identifiable.

Those interviewed who have given permission to be identified include:

**Elliott Abrams**, former National Security Adviser to George W. Bush

**Dr Jon Alterman**, Senior Vice President, Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Gestrategy, and Director, Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies

**Doug Bloomfield**, Legislative Director and Chief Lobbyist for the AIPAC for 9 years in the 1980s

**Daniel Brumberg**, Special Advisor - Iran and North Africa at the United States Institute for Peace (USIP)

**Dr Daniel Byman**, Senior Fellow and Director of Research at the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution

**Chris Griffin**, Executive Director of the Foreign Policy Initiative

**Jacob Heilbrunn**, Editor of the *National Interest* and author of *They Knew They Were Right: The Rise of the Neocons*

**Dr Colin Kahl**, Deputy Assistant to President Obama and National Security Adviser to Vice President Joe Biden

**Matthew Kroenig**, Senior Fellow in the Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security at The Atlantic Council

**Flynt Leverett**, Senior Director for Middle East Affairs on the National Security Council (NSC) during George W. Bush's first term

**Hillary Mann Leverett**, former Director for Iran, Afghanistan and Persian Gulf Affairs on the NSC

**George Lopez**, Vice President of the USIP's Academy for International Conflict Management and Peacebuilding and expert on economic sanctions

**Will Marshall**, President and founder of the Progressive Policy Institute

**Blaise Misztal**, Director of National Security at the Bipartisan Policy Center

**Dr Trita Parsi**, President of the National American Iranian Council

**Paul Pillar**, Former senior official and 28-year veteran of the CIA

**Dr Yleem Poblete**, Chief of Staff to the House Foreign Affairs Committee until 2013

**Dr Steven Rosen**, Director of Foreign Policy Issues at AIPAC for 23 years until 2005

**Michael Singh**, Managing Director at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy and former Senior Director for Middle East Affairs at the NSC under George W. Bush

**Jeremy Shapiro**, Foreign Policy Expert at the Brookings Institution, former member of the US State Department's policy planning staff

**Col. Lawrence Wilkerson**, Colin Powell's former Chief of Staff between 2002 - 2005

**Dr Stephen Zunes**, Professor of Politics and International Studies at the University of San Francisco

Those who wished to remain anonymous included seven current congressional staff members, two former congressional staff members, one expert based at a liberal think tank, one expert based at a conservative think tank, one journalist, two interest group executives, and a former senior staff member on the NSC.

### *Interview Structure*

Interviews were semi-structured using open-ended questions, as this format is particularly suited to interviewing elites because it enables depth to be gained from the interviewee whilst maintaining focus on key issues (Leech, 2002: 665). During these interviews, I gathered general information about US policy during the time period under consideration, I also asked questions to garner information on legislation both introduced into Congress and passed by Congress regarding Syria and Iran. We also discussed the input of think tanks into the policy-making process, as well as more specifically during the Obama administration. These discussions involved conversations about think tanks regularly asked to give testimony on the issues of Iran and Syria, depending on the knowledge and expertise of the interviewee. Lastly, the discussion also took into consideration neoconservatism more broadly as a school of thought. I used roughly the same script for all the interviewees in the sense that the script contained questions on specific issues, such as legislation, being considered in both issue areas; however, I modified questions asked depending on the interviewee's expertise and position. I also allowed some flexibility to allow the interview to go in different directions so that an inductive approach could be taken on occasion to explore any issues that I had overlooked that might provide the case studies with richer, more comprehensive material.

The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and two hours, depending on the time available, and they were all recorded apart from two. Before the start of the interview, the interviewees were asked to sign a consent form with three options offered: to remain anonymous, to remain anonymous but allow for the institution

to which they belonged to be named (if this did not give away their position and therefore their identity), and finally for their name to be freely used in any writing or publications that arose from the work. Most interviewees were happy to be referred to by name; however, several wished to remain anonymous, with two wishing to be interviewed without the recording of the conversation in any format, allowing the interview for the purposes of background knowledge. The interviews were conducted in private, generally in the place of work of the interviewee or on occasion in a coffee shop or restaurant.

Interviews were useful to probe important themes further and provide more depth about specific information. They assisted by filling in knowledge gaps and allowing for a greater understanding of decisions made or confirming hypotheses. Interviews helped to ascertain the extent to which neoconservative think tanks and key neoconservative individuals have access to government, be that the executive or Congress, and at what level. I was cognisant of the role all of the interviewees played in the policymaking process, and therefore what bias or interest they may be expected to have, particularly if they had a political affiliation. I was mindful of this dynamic and endeavoured to explore and consider biases by interviewing a range of policymakers. Those interviewed were drawn from both the Democratic and Republican parties, and from both liberal and conservative standpoints.

Steinar Kvale suggests that there are two main ways that interviews can be regarded in social science. The first treats the knowledge gained from interviews largely as a 'given' (Kvale, 1996). In this conceptualisation, "knowledge is understood as buried metal and the interviewer is a miner who unearths the valuable metal... [T]he knowledge is waiting in the subject's interior to be uncovered, uncontaminated by the miner" (Kvale, 1996: 3). The second approach to understanding interviewing as a method "falls within the constructivist research model in which knowledge is not given but is created and negotiated" (Legard et al, 2003: 139). The questions asked allow the interviewer to 'travel' with the interviewee as they both learn more about the interviewee's experience and understanding of the event or process being discussed (Kvale, 1996: 4). However, this process also does not indicate that the interview cannot generate substantive knowledge. Miller and Glassner note that "While the interview is itself a symbolic

interaction, this does not discount the possibility that knowledge of the social world beyond the interaction can be obtained” (Miller and Glassner, 1997: 100). In this respect, knowledge is not just uncovered, but also constructed, from the interaction between the two parties - interviewee and interviewer.

As noted, these interviews were semi-structured and, in this respect, exploratory in nature. The conceptualisation of interviews taken by this research in the first set of interviews in 2013 is close to the definition given by Miller and Glassner. The discussions were focused on a time period and issue area; however, they were sufficiently open to investigate different possibilities as to how neoconservatives, and their extended network, attempted to influence policy. By contrast, the second stage of interviews, conducted in September 2014, came closer in style to the conceptualisation of interviews elucidated by Kale in his former description where he describes the interviewer as a “miner” uncovering information. While this description of uncovering information which is uncontaminated, or unbiased, is clearly problematic as no person is able to achieve complete objectivity, even if they wish to, the fact that this second round of interviews was more structured means they came closer to Kale’s first conceptualisation of interviews. This time, the interviews contained more precise and less open-ended questions which required discrete and at times binary answers. The second session of interviews was used not only to delve into processes, but to corroborate previous findings and confirm further hypotheses developed after the first round of interviews.

### *Congressional Hearings and Written Testimony*

All congressional hearings regarding Iran were examined over the period January 2009 - September 2015, and all congressional hearings on Syria were examined over the period from March 2011 - September 2015 (the start date was taken from the month the war began). A simple keyword search for each country was performed for the time-span under consideration. The database ProQuest Congressional was used to ensure that the search results included all hearings for both countries in every congressional committee. These were mainly held in the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, but also included the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, amongst others. This

wide-ranging examination was conducted in order to provide a comprehensive picture of the information being given to members of Congress both by government and outside experts. All experts who gave testimony were noted down in order to allow for a simple calculation of the think tanks and other non-governmental organisations who were invited to contribute their analysis and policy recommendations.

Hearings featuring testimonies from members of the government were studied to ascertain the executive's position and policies. In tandem with this assessment, hearings in which witnesses from outside the government appeared were studied. Normally those invited to speak were from US think tanks, and on average three to five witnesses per hearing gave testimony to members of the House or Senate. Video recordings of hearings are also useful, in this regard. As well as their spoken testimony, which included their discussions with members of Congress during the hearing itself, written testimonies from the witnesses were examined. All written testimonies by experts appearing were analysed to build an overall picture of the policies that were suggested to Congress. This analysis was conducted for both case studies.

## **2.5 Triangulation of Data and Analysis of Influence**

I converged data from all three methods of data collection - interviews, congressional hearings and document analysis - in order to provide reliable findings. Triangulation was conducted in two ways, initially by pulling out themes, and then by converging the data, analysing both similarities and divergences. The multiple sources of data allowed a comprehensive picture of the dynamics at play within the policy process. The triangulation of data is particularly useful when using qualitative methods as it allows for the cross-checking of results and therefore for a greater confidence in the ultimate findings of the research (Bryman, 2004: 455).

In order to operationalise 'influence' as a concept, this study breaks down the analysis into several different (though interconnected) areas of examination. This process was conducted for both case studies. Firstly, the ways in which the neoconservatives became involved in the debate conducted around each issue

were examined and secondly, the extent to which the neoconservative network was involved in the creation of legislation in some form.

When assessing how the neoconservative network attempted to influence the debate on Iran and Syria, it was useful to further break down how they tried to do this into three related areas. Firstly, experts are only usually asked to meet either publically or privately with members or staffers if they are considered to be ideologically in tune. An individual or organisation's ideological coherence with a member of Congress or aide is therefore critical. After access is achieved, neoconservatives sought to set the agenda surrounding both Iran and Syria by suggesting which issues should be given prominence in the debate. Further, neoconservatives also attempted to frame the debate, helping to decide how issues would be discussed. This was assessed in several ways. Liaising with members or congressional staff is an effective way in which to contribute to the debate and therefore have an opportunity ultimately to influence policy. Congressional aides and members of Congress meet with think tank experts, as well as advocacy groups, when deciding their stance on an issue. Committee hearings are also important indicators of influence. Contact with policymakers whether during committee hearings or through meetings held before hearings, is a key step when seeking to influence government officials. This is one important way in which many think tanks try to impact policy making. The experts called to give testimony at congressional hearings are generally chosen because they are a good reflection of the discussions which have already been held with members of the House or Senate. Therefore, recording how many times a neoconservative expert was asked to give testimony is a useful way in which to assess their influence over an issue area, not just in terms of persuading policymakers to consider the policies they suggest, but also in terms of influencing the parameters of the debate.

It is also important to recognise that the role of the committee chair has a great deal of power when it comes to choosing witnesses. If that chairperson is already sympathetic to neoconservative ideas and policy recommendations, then it follows that they are more likely to request neoconservative thinkers. Similarly, sympathetic members of Congress are invited to speak at events hosted by neoconservative institutes, cementing connections between them. The analysis

will, therefore, also consider the chairperson's particular links to neoconservative think tanks or institutes within the examination of which experts were asked to testify. Whether the two respective congressional chambers are controlled by the Republican Party or the Democratic Party will also be taken into consideration in order to assess what influence, if any, this can be seen to have had on witness selection.

Interviews can assist in garnering more specific and detailed information about the extent to which neoconservatives succeeded in accessing congressional staffers and members of Congress. The role of interviews is to probe key themes further. They assist in filling in knowledge gaps, enable a breadth of understanding, and allow us to learn more about decisions made or confirm hypotheses. Speaking to those directly involved in formulating bills and asking questions about which people or organisations they relied on to create the text is crucial in enabling not only a more nuanced understanding of the process, but also to cross-check information in order to ensure robust findings.

If a particular individual or organisation has a significant presence in congressional hearings, it can be posited that they may take part in meetings before the hearings where potential policies are discussed. Interviews allow for direct questions to be asked about whether specific individuals were consulted, and if so, how frequently. Congressional staff members may proffer this information, but so might individuals who are involved in the policy area outside government. While colleagues, and those sympathetic to the expert's position, may have a stake in suggesting that an individual is regularly consulted by government, confirmation of their use by those holding opposing views strengthens the case regarding the expert in question. As well as confirming the use of certain individuals, interviews also provide vital information about the context of a particular situation or policy process. Amongst other benefits, they assist in contextualising the bills and documents being analysed.

The second way in which influence of the neoconservative network can be assessed is to examine the policies advocated by neoconservatives and study proposed congressional legislation to see if there are significant similarities with the policies being put forward. This is a useful gauge of influence, especially when used in

conjunction with other indicators such as interview data, as this can identify who inputs into final details of legislation. It assists in situating the specific influence of neoconservatives over bills that were introduced into Congress. Think tanks and interest groups often have expertise and specialised knowledge on issues which mean that when drafting bills, congressional staffers and members of Congress turn to them for their in-depth familiarity with the issues. Written congressional testimony was compared to legislation put forward, or passed, by either the House or the Senate. Document analysis was used to closely analyse and unpack the texts in order to look for semantic similarities and comparable inter-textual themes between the documents. Strong similarities between policies advocated by the neoconservative network and those adopted, along with interview corroboration, were taken as an indicator of influence.

In summary, data gathering involved exploring texts to ascertain the position of neoconservatives on the US policy issues of the Iran and Syria. This established the policy positions they wished the US to take on these two issues. Following this, an analysis of the number of times a think tank was asked to testify was recorded in order to assess their prominence within the debate on Iran or Syria. Further, written and oral testimony was analysed in order to understand the policies being advocated as well as the extent to which neoconservative arguments were able to gain traction within Congress. To complement this data, interviews were conducted in Washington DC in 2013 and 2014 with key policymakers and experts from think tanks and interest groups. Testimony, legislation, and interviews were triangulated to assess the degree to which neoconservatism has influenced US policy on Iran and Syria. Themes were drawn out, developed and analysed with the assistance of policy network theory. This was done in order to provide a detailed evaluation of the ways in which neoconservatism has influenced policy in these two core areas of US foreign affairs.

## **2.6 Limitations of the Research**

The two main ways in which the research is limited are the choice of cases and focus on Congress. The two cases examine the most likely issues in which we would expect to see neoconservatives attempting to have influence. As noted previously, these were chosen as they exemplify the issues with which neoconservatives are

concerned so it could be assumed that they would seek to exert influence in these areas of foreign policy. While these cases were chosen on the grounds that the Obama administration was an unlikely presidency in which to find neoconservative influence, and therefore operated as a hard case, further research should look at other cases during the same administration to assess whether there was neoconservative influence on additional issue areas.

Similarly, Congress was the focus in this study as this is the main area of government where the neoconservatives might be expected to have influence during this period. Most neoconservative thinkers were based at think tanks over the course of Obama's two terms in office and therefore it can be assumed that Congress would be their main focus. Neoconservatives have been aligned mainly with the Republican Party since Reagan entered office in 1981 and therefore neoconservatives are less likely to hold positions of influence within Democratic administrations. This has been the case during the Obama administration. Further, access to current members of the executive is incredibly difficult. While I was able to interview former members of the executive, most had served under George W. Bush with only a few having served under Obama. These interviewees also confirmed that the influence of neoconservatives could be mostly seen in their interactions with the legislature. Nevertheless, a limitation of the research is that it has not been able to acquire a picture of the extent to which there has been neoconservative influence within the executive. For example, neoconservatives such as Robert Kagan are on the US Department of State's Foreign Affairs Policy Board during Obama's tenure (the board provides the Secretary of State, the Deputy Secretaries of State, and the Director of Policy Planning with independent, informed advice and opinion concerning matters of US foreign policy); however, it was mostly beyond the scope of this research to assess direct neoconservative influence on the executive.

## CHAPTER 3 - NEOCONSERVATISM

### 3.1 Introduction

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#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to explore neoconservatism, and how it is relevant to the current political environment in the US. It begins with a brief review of the history of neoconservatism, before laying out the key principles of the approach. Next, in order to understand the lineage of neoconservatism, it is necessary to situate it within the two main traditions of American political thought. Following this, neoconservatism's place in relation to theories of International Relations (IR) will be considered. Finally, it examines the current neoconservatives in the US, as well as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and its position in relation to neoconservatism.

As this chapter will argue, neoconservatism draws upon aspects of both liberalism and conservatism which accounts, in large part, for its staying power within US politics. Embedded in principles from these two schools of thought, familiar to the US public, neoconservatism has immediate cultural resonance. Neoconservatism is arguably the predominant approach to foreign policy within the Republican Party, and its close cousin, liberal interventionism, remains popular with Democrats (Lynch, 2011: 349). Its relatively recent preoccupation with the promotion of democracy has meant that neoconservatives have become well known for supporting regime change - by way of a strong US military - as a means of effecting this systemic change.

Having placed neoconservatism within the two main political philosophies of the US, this chapter takes as its starting point Michael C. Williams' contention that "there is a pressing need for IR to treat neoconservatism *as* a theory of international politics" (Williams, 2005: 324), and seeks to situate it within the main approaches in the field. Neoconservatism is frequently confused with realism (analyses of the Iraq War often provide an example of this confusion), and therefore it is particularly important to assess the differences and similarities between the two. This chapter determines that the two schools of thought have little in common. Realism is at odds with neoconservatism on issues of militarism, unipolarity, and morality. Further, each approach has a very different conception of the national interest (Williams, 2005). Ultimately, neoconservatism is most similar to liberal interventionism, and both come under the broad umbrella of 'internationalist' approaches - a premise for foreign policy that remains dominant in the US (Parmar, 2009).

During the Obama administration, neoconservatives did not make it to the upper echelons of the executive, and so they focused most of their energies on promoting the adoption of their favoured policies by working with Congress. While not always in alignment, fortuitously they largely shared these preferred policies with AIPAC, markedly strengthening the neoconservatives, enabling them to exert a greater influence on Congress, and by extension, the executive. The alignment between the neoconservatives and AIPAC regarding policies toward Iran and Syria meant they operated broadly as a network. For the most part, neoconservatives can presently be found working as foreign policy experts in various think tanks and publications within Washington DC (Ryan, 2010: 52). Three think tanks, in particular, can be regarded as working within a paradigm of neoconservatism - the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), the Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI), and the Institute for the Study of War (ISW). In sum, this chapter contends that the resilience of neoconservatism as a school of thought is in large part due to its hybrid roots in both liberalism and conservatism and the political traction these roots confer. It also seeks to lay out a comprehensive understanding of neoconservatism upon which subsequent chapters can build, examining the extent to which this approach, and the network by which it is promoted, has exercised influence over US foreign policy.

### 3.2 A Brief History of Neoconservatism

Irving Kristol, considered instrumental in the founding of neoconservatism, described it as a “persuasion” and a “mode of thought”, refusing to define it as a movement (Kristol, 2011; Kristol 1983: 75). Historian Justin Vaisse refers to it as an “elite school of thought”, and also rejects any attempts to label it as a popular movement (Vaisse, 2010: 3). In slight contrast, Williams describes neoconservatism as an “intellectual movement” and advocates that it be taken seriously as a “theory of international politics” (Williams, 2005: 208, 342). I would argue that neoconservatism should be conceived of, fundamentally, as an ideology as well as a school of thought. ‘Ideology’ can be defined as “a body of ideas that reflects the beliefs and interests of a nation, political system etc. and underlies political action” (Collins, 1998), and this is an accurate description of neoconservatism. As Williams points out, in neoconservatism, “one would be hard pressed to find a contemporary position more committed to the proposition that ideas matter in politics and that theoretical commitments and debates have practical consequences” (Williams, 2005: 308). Moreover, Kristol also argues that in the US both liberalism and conservatism lack ideological conviction or direction when it comes to foreign policy (Kristol, 1983: 255), a void he believed can be filled by neoconservatism.

Some academics and commentators cite the philosopher Leo Strauss as having had a profound influence on neoconservative thought (Drolet, 2011; Heilbrunn, 2008). Kristol, one of the few neoconservatives to accept and embrace the term, has described the writings of Strauss as “important” (Kristol, 1983: 76; Kristol, 1995) and has emphasised his admiration for the philosopher because Strauss “opened modernity to serious, critical thought” noting that “the premodern political philosophers served Strauss...as a force for liberation from the contemporary progressive, liberal, or conventionally conservative outlook that prevails among our intellectual classes” (Kristol, 1995: 9). However, many critics of neoconservatism highlight Strauss’ concept of the “noble lie” and suggest that this has expressly motivated neoconservatism. Jim George points to “their [the neoconservatives] reliance on esoteric deception as a way of protecting themselves while (secretly) informing their most talented followers about the

nihilist reality of human life and society” (George, 2005: 177). He suggests that this aspect of Strauss’ philosophy particularly motivated neoconservatives with regards to the Iraq War, and more specifically, the justifications given to the public for why the war was necessary, i.e. that it was necessary to lie to the US public about weapons of mass destruction in order to garner support for the war. This has given particular credence to the idea that neoconservatives are a cabal or secretive group. However, there appears to be little substantive evidence for this. Neoconservatives promote their views assiduously, and expressly set out their vision of America’s role in the world - all of their views are clearly stated. In his written work, Kristol railed vociferously against the deceits used by government to justify policy. In 1985, he wrote, “One of the most distressing aspects of American foreign policy today is the felt need of our government to lie to the American people when it takes action, or adopts a policy, that it believes to be necessary for the integrity of our national interests” (Kristol, 2011: 214). Maria Ryan also argues that too great a link has been made between the neoconservatives and Strauss, and notes that while some neoconservatives have drawn on Strauss’ philosophy to guide their ideas (Ryan, 2010: 8), “in fact, the philosopher had neither written about foreign policy nor suggested telling ‘noble lies’” (Ryan, 2010: 52).

It is widely asserted that the term ‘neoconservative’ was coined by Michael Harrington (Dorrien, 2004; Kristol, 1983: 74) when he used it in a 1973 article for *Dissent* magazine entitled “The Welfare State and Its Neoconservative Critics”. However, Harrington himself noted that the term was already “in common use among *Dissent* editors and other associates of mine” (Ross, 2007). Gary Dorrien comments that Harrington and his associates at *Dissent* used the label of ‘neoconservative’ to describe their former socialist associates who had politically swung to the right, “as an act of dissociation” (Dorrien, 2004: 7). Nevertheless, many use the term neoconservative in a pejorative manner, and this may be why some prominent neoconservatives - such as Paul Wolfowitz and Robert Kagan reject the label. Seymour Martin Lipset points out that describing this group as neoconservatives is an example of “labelling” as it caused many former friends and allies on the left to reject them, while traditional conservatives were more inclined to accept them (Lipset, 1996: 193).

Many of the first wave of neoconservatives began on the left and were ex-Trotskyists. Kristol, describes how he attended the City College in New York in the late 1930s, and gathered with like-minded students to discuss the political issues of the day. He recalls how they defined themselves as part of the anti-Stalinist left, and met in the lunchroom in alcove no.1, where they sparred politically with the students in alcove no.2, who were part of the pro-Stalinist left (Kristol, 1983: 6). Extremely critical of the students' movements of the 1960s, and particularly of the anti-Vietnam left, they became right-wing hawkish social democrats and supported the Vietnam War. While taking a positive approach to overseas intervention, domestically, the early neoconservatives were supportive of the welfare state and New Deal policies. They were initially allied to the Democratic Party and the first organisation to which they were involved was the Coalition for a Democratic Majority, founded in 1972 by Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson who headed the conservative wing of the Democratic Party.

In this respect, neoconservatism has its roots in its first generation of adherents' dissatisfaction with liberalism and specifically the New Left. "Unlike the liberalism of the establishment, which prized stability above all else, their liberalism was adversarial, self-righteous and eager to redress social injustices" (Dorrien, 2004: 28). Reaching its pinnacle in the 1960s, the New Left became more radical as well as militant and combative. By the mid-1960s it had started to abandon its commitment to non-violence, and embraced a strategy of allying itself with Third World liberation struggles (Dorrien, 2004: 29). The attitude and privilege of many of the anti-war protestors riled a great number of Americans, with their criticism coming across as derision of the US and its history (Abrams, 2008: 229). At anti-war demonstrations and protests, chants of "Ho-Ho, Ho Chi Minh, the NLF is gonna win" were vexing to many other anti-war protestors marching along with them (Abrams, 2008: 229). Appalled by this movement, neoconservatives allied with traditional conservatives and the Christian Right to denounce it. Kristol regarded the New Left (he also referred to them as "new liberals") as almost the antithesis of liberalism and more aligned with "the Left", as Europeans understand the term. He asserts,

The Left in Europe, whether 'totalitarian' or 'democratic', have consistently been antiliberal. That is to say, it vigorously repudiates the intellectual traditions of liberalism - as expressed, say, by Locke,

Montesquieu, Adam Smith, and Tocqueville - and with equal vigor rejects the key institution of liberalism: the (relatively) free market (which necessarily implies limited government). The Left emerges out of a rebellion against the 'anarchy' and 'vulgarity' of a civilization that is shaped by individuals engaged in market transactions (Kristol, 1983: 209).

Kristol saw the New Left, and the counterculture movement, with its anti-establishment ethos, and cultural and moral relativism (as he saw it), as a threat to American values. The neoconservatives believed there had been a negative shift away from the universalist commitments of liberalism. Jeane Kirkpatrick, a first-generation neoconservative and one of the founding members of the Coalition for a Democratic Majority, describes the evolution:

The neocon had embraced liberal values and quite possibly never abandoned them, but was unhappy with the political turns taken by many in the liberal ranks. Voila!, I thought, the neoconservative was born from a reaction to the counter-culture that dominated American politics through the sixties and seventies (Kirkpatrick, 2004: 235).

Similarly, American Enterprise Institute (AEI) scholar Joshua Muravchik notes that he felt compelled, along with other future neoconservatives, to move from the political Left to the Right because of the events of the 1960s. Describing this migration, he asserts, "The left had driven us from the Democratic Party, stolen the 'liberal' label, and successfully affixed to us the name 'neoconservative'" (Muravchick, 16<sup>th</sup> October, 2009). In this respect, as Drolet argues, the crumbling of the liberal consensus is one of the most important events, if not *the* most important event in the evolution of neoconservatism as an ideology (Drolet, 2011: 31).

The neocons crossed over *en masse* to the Republican Party with the coming to office of Reagan in the 1980s - to whom neocons tend to refer with great fondness (Kristol, W. and Kagan, R. 1996), but who many, in fact, criticised while he was in office for appearing to "appease" the Soviets (Podhoretz, 1982). At this juncture, they began to gain a proper foothold within the US administration. This was supported by the network of institutions and publications that they began to develop or take over, and which became enduring, sustaining them when they had less access to the power of political office (Heilbrunn, 2008: 68). Reagan appointed Kirkpatrick as his foreign policy advisor during his campaign for the presidency,

and later on as his Ambassador to the UN, largely because of an article she had written in 1979 in the avowedly neoconservative *Commentary* magazine (Halper and Clarke, 2004: 46). Kirkpatrick contends that there is a key difference between Communist regimes and right-wing authoritarian regimes, and argues that the latter systemically contain more possibilities for developing into democracies. She asserts, “Although there is no instance of a revolutionary ‘socialist’ or Communist society being democratised, right-wing autocracies do sometimes evolve into democracies” (Kirkpatrick, 1979: 32). For Kirkpatrick, the US should undoubtedly promote liberal democratic values, but this should not take precedence over geopolitical considerations. Neoconservative attitudes to the necessity of democracy promotion have evolved from the attitude of many of the earlier neocons, such as Kirkpatrick and Kristol, to those who are presently active in Washington DC. Current neocons are a great deal more fervent in their focus on facilitating the emergence of democracies, in rhetoric at least (this development will be discussed later in the chapter).

The next point at which neoconservatives held significant sway as a group within the US government was during the George W. Bush administration. While much has been written on the influence of neocons since the advent of the “war on terror”, it is clear that all the senior members of the administration were not neoconservatives. With this in mind, it is also beneficial to talk about the influence of neoconservative ideas during this period. There were key members of government who can be classified conservative nationalists (or assertive nationalists), e.g. Condoleeza Rice, Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney (Daalder and Lindsay, 2003: 14-15, 47), and those that can be considered neoconservatives, e.g. Wolfowitz, John Bolton, Richard Perle, Douglas Feith, and Elliott Abrams. Both approaches influence and draw upon each other and share many core ideas. Each school of thought helped the other flourish within the administration and assisted in creating a foreign policy environment where these ideas came to dominate. Importantly, their dominance assisted in the marginalisation of alternative foreign policy preferences. It is possible to map the influence of the neoconservatives in the administration on the hardening of the views of the conservative nationalists. Specific policy ideas originally promoted by the neocons, in particular Wolfowitz and Feith, can be shown to have been adopted by and assimilated into the policy

of the conservative nationalists - the Iraq War being the most well-known. The key difference between the two groups centres on the scepticism of conservative nationalists about the value of democracy promotion and nation building. McDougall describes minor distinctions between the two approaches, noting, “One useful way of understanding this difference is that conservative nationalists limit their ambitions to creating a ‘world safe for democracy’ while neo-conservatives want to make the world democratic” (McDougall, 2000: 40). Stephen Hurst notes that post-September 11<sup>th</sup>, “ideas more associated with neo-conservatives than conservative nationalists took on a new prominence in his [Bush’s] speeches”, and that Bush “invoked the neo-conservative claim of the universal validity of ‘American’ values” (Hurst, 2005: 86). Although Hurst observes that both Bush and Rumsfeld at several points indicated a disinclination towards nation-building (Hurst, 2005: 88), in reality the US spent the best part of 10 years doing just that in both Iraq and Afghanistan. In this way, the administration of George W. Bush while not overwhelmingly neoconservative in outlook, or indeed completely cohesive in its foreign policy preferences, was influenced by core neoconservative ideas.

The US National Security Strategy (NSS) 2002 codified the influence of neoconservatism on American foreign policy during the Bush administration. The strategy was published a year after the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, and was controversial as it set out a doctrine of pre-emption. It broadened the definition of imminent threat from that previously recognised by legal scholars, who based the legitimacy of pre-emption on the visible mobilisation of military forces, asserting, “We must adapt the concept of imminent threat to the capabilities and objectives of today’s adversaries” (The White House, September, 2002: 19). The document also outlined a policy of military hegemony stating, “Our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in the hopes of surpassing, or equalling, the power of the United States” (The White House, September, 2002: 33). Democracy promotion took a prominent position within the strategy, with an emphasis on the idea that it should be liberal democracies that are helped into existence. Alongside democracy, the key tenets of neoliberalism were commonly elucidated. For example, “We will actively work to bring the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade to

every corner of the world” (The White House, September, 2002: 4). John Lewis Gaddis analysed the approach set out in the NSS 2002:

Bush insists the ultimate goal of US strategy must be to spread democracy everywhere. The United States must finish the job that Wilson started. The world, quite literally, must be made safe for democracy, even those parts of it, like the Middle East that have so far resisted that tendency (Gaddis, 2002: 53).

It seems clear that democracy promotion has ostensibly become a defining feature of neoconservative thought. While many point to the failure of the Iraq War as evidence of the inherent failing of neoconservatism as an ideology, neoconservatives themselves (with the notable exception of Francis Fukuyama) tend not to view the war in these terms. Many believe that the war was mismanaged (Muravchik, 19<sup>th</sup> November, 2006) and that had the troop surge of 2007 been implemented sooner, the outcome would have been different. Indeed, self-proclaimed neocons such as Muravchik believe neoconservatism has a respectable legacy. He asserts, “Neoconservative ideas have been vindicated again and again on a string of major issues, including the Cold War, Bosnia and NATO expansion” (Muravchik, 19<sup>th</sup> November, 2006). Muravchik goes on to note,

Even if the invasion of Iraq proves to have been a mistake, that would not mean that the neoconservative belief in democracy as an antidote to troubles in the Middle East is wrong, nor would it confirm that neoconservatism’s combination of strength with idealism is misguided (Muravchik, 19<sup>th</sup> November, 2006).

Similarly, during a congressional hearing in 2013 on Syria, neocon Danielle Pletka at AEI asserted “I’m a big supporter of the Iraq War. I think the Iraqi people are pretty grateful to have been liberated” (Pletka, 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2013). While most neoconservatives do not accept that the Iraq War was a mistake (or at least do not accept that the premise of the war was a mistake) Fukuyama is a notable exception. A former neoconservative, Fukuyama, describes attending the annual dinner of AEI in February 2004 where Charles Krauthammer gave the annual ‘Irving Kristol Address’. He recalls,

This speech, given almost a year after the US invasion of Iraq, treated the war as a virtually unqualified success. I could not understand why everyone around me was applauding the speech enthusiastically, given the United States had found no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, was

bogged down in a vicious insurgency, and had almost totally isolated itself from the rest of the world by following the kind of unipolar strategy advocated by Krauthammer (Fukuyama, 2006: ix).

Fukuyama cites their refusal to take this failure on board as his reason for disavowing neoconservatism (Fukuyama, 2006: viii-ix). However, as noted, his position is an isolated one amongst neoconservatives.

Although many prominent neoconservatives, such as Wolfowitz, Feith and Perle, left during Bush's second term, neocons outside government did not give up on their main objectives. By 2006, with the Iraq War an ongoing reality, neoconservatives were focussed on the Iranian threat that Israel and AIPAC had been promoting since well before the war. When the Second Lebanon War began in July of that year, neoconservatives expressly linked the war between Israel and Hezbollah to Iran. Similarly, William Kristol, founder and editor of the neoconservative *The Weekly Standard*, and co-founder of the Project for a New American Century (PNAC) and later FPI, stressed the same link. During the Second Lebanon War, he argued that the US should confront Iran, and pursue regime change in both Iran and Syria, as they are state sponsors of terrorist groups - Hezbollah, in particular. Ultimately, the neoconservatives who were keen on regime change in both Iran and Syria were left with unfulfilled objectives regarding the trajectory of US policy towards the two states during the presidency of George W. Bush.

Later in 2006, AEI-based neoconservative, Frederick Kagan, held a strategy meeting at the think tank with the goal of developing a way to win the war in Iraq. It was provocatively titled "The Real Iraq Study Group" (Kagan, 2006), after the Iraq Study Group appointed by Congress earlier in the year, led by James Baker and Lee H. Hamilton. Kimberly Kagan is President of the neoconservative think tank, the Institute for the Study of War (ISW). Both Frederick and Kimberly Kagan, as well as retired General Jack Keane, former Vice-Chief of Staff of the Army and a member of the advisory Defense Policy Review Board, carried out research following on from the session at AEI, which resulted in a report titled "Choosing Victory: A Plan for Success in Iraq". General Keane and Frederick Kagan met with Vice President Dick Cheney in December 2006 to discuss what became known as 'the surge'. They "found an ally in Cheney and another in Senator John McCain,

who played a key role in selling the idea to President Bush” (Abelson, 2014: 140). Ultimately, this policy plan proved very successful, and established the strategic underpinning for the troop surge Bush authorised at the start of 2007 (Chandrasekaran, 18<sup>th</sup> December, 2012).

By 2012, neoconservative stalwarts, Cofer Black, Eliot Cohen, Eric Edelman, Dan Senor and Robert Kagan, were among the 2012 Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney’s team of foreign policy advisers. Although, Bolton was not an official member of the team, it was reported that he was “an influential policy voice in Romney’s circle” (Berman, 2012). Eight of his advisors had signed the 1998 PNAC letter to Bill Clinton urging him to attack Iraq (PNAC, 26<sup>th</sup> January, 1998). Romney himself advocates US pre-eminence in the world, releasing a book entitled *No Apology: The Case for American Greatness* (2010). He remarked in June 2012 that he was willing to take military action towards Iran if necessary, and that he did not believe that he would require congressional approval to do so (Wolverton, 2012). Writer Ari Berman argues that Romney was susceptible to the neocons’ worldview, making it easy for them to shape his decisions on foreign policy (Berman, 2012). Some conservative commentators in the US media criticised what they saw as Romney’s neoconservative approach to foreign policy, urging him to mediate his rhetoric and policies. Jacob Heilbrunn, Editor of *The National Interest* and author of *They Knew They Were Right: The Rise of the Neocons*, suggested that Romney’s insistence on articulating a neoconservative foreign policy would ruin his campaign (Heilbrunn, 19<sup>th</sup> October, 2012).

Although neoconservatives have far more prominence in the Republican Party, they are not always natural bedfellows of either party, as can be observed from their history. For example, neoconservatives often have more in common with liberal hawks as opposed to conservative isolationists. However, by attaching themselves to Romney, they forced Obama to engage with their ideas and their preferred policies. This may be part of the reason why Obama chose to expressly note that Robert Kagan’s article “Not Fade Away: The Myth of American Decline” (drawn from his 2012 book *The World America Made*), had been an influence on his 2012 State of the Union address (Kagan, 2012a; Kagan, 2012b). In that address he stressed that, “Anyone who tells you otherwise, anyone who tells you that America

is in decline or that our influence has waned, doesn't know what they're talking about.” He continued, “America remains the one indispensable nation in world affairs - and as long as I'm President, I intend to keep it that way”. Further, it has been reported that Obama recommended that his National Security Council staff read *The World America Made* by Kagan (Heilbrunn, 2012).

Obama started his presidency with some hawkish appointments, including Dennis Ross, who was appointed as Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's Special Advisor for the Gulf and Southwest Asia. While in office, Ross urged Obama to take a hybrid option to dealing with Iran which consisted of pursuing a policy of engagement while tightening sanctions. This approach was adopted by Obama (Parsi, 2012: 46, 54-58). One of the reasons that Ross has been regarded as at least sympathetic to the neoconservatives is his affiliation with the hawkish Washington Institute for Near East Policy (commonly referred to as the Washington Institute), a think tank set up by former officials at AIPAC. This connection is one of the reasons why his appointment disappointed both moderate and hard-line Iranians (Parsi, 2012). Many commentators such as Bob Dreyfuss have described him as close to the neocons. Dreyfuss comments, “Ross, like his neoconservative co-thinkers, is explicitly skeptical about the usefulness of diplomacy with Iran” (Dreyfuss, 8<sup>th</sup> April, 2009). Others, such as Stephen Walt, suggest that, as a former employee of the Washington Institute, Ross was likely to propose foreign policies towards the Middle East which are skewed towards Israel (Walt, 2010). However, Ross largely discounted any military strikes on Iran by the US, and in 2012 was contending that sanctions were working and that “Iran is ready to talk” (Ross, 2012). In contrast, Frederick Kagan and Maseh Zarif, Deputy Director of Kagan's Critical Threats Project, explicitly rebuffed Ross' claim that Iran was ready for talks and argued that “Americans are being played for fools by Iran - and are fooling themselves” (Kagan and Zarif, 27<sup>th</sup> February, 2012).

Though he has been critical of Obama's foreign policy choices, Frederick Kagan has himself worked as an advisor for the Defense Department during Obama's presidency. In 2009, General Stanley McChrystal, the recently-appointed Commander of US forces in Afghanistan, employed Kagan to work on strategy in Afghanistan. Following this, both Frederick and Kimberly Kagan worked for almost

a year as advisors to General David H. Petraeus while he was Commander of the US forces in Afghanistan. Petraeus made them “de facto senior advisers, a status that afforded them numerous private meetings in his office, priority travel across the war zone and the ability to read highly secretive transcripts of intercepted communications” (Chandrasekaran, 18<sup>th</sup> December, 2012). This level of access gave the Kagans a great deal of information and influence with respect to war strategy. Some in the Defense Department welcomed this while others did not (Chandrasekaran, 18<sup>th</sup> December, 2012). During this time, the Kagans were not remunerated for their work, and continued to receive salaries from their respective think tanks during their work for the Defense Department. Speaking at a private event held by ISW, Petraeus quipped, “What the Kagans do is they grade my work on a daily basis” (Chandrasekaran, 18<sup>th</sup> December, 2012). Having well-known neoconservative scholars working at a high level on war strategy and analysis during the Obama administration indicates the continued salience of this school of thought within US policy circles. Frederick and Kimberly Kagan have also been influential with their work on Syria which is discussed in chapter five.

### 3.3 Key Principles of Neoconservatism

#### *Militarism*

Neoconservatives commonly favour an increase in military spending with regards to conventional military forces, and are against any form of nuclear disarmament or arms limitation agreements. This was made clear throughout the Cold War and persists to this day. During the Reagan administration they were strong advocates of maintaining the US nuclear deterrent threat. Young graduate students, and future neocons Wolfowitz and Perle were employed by Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson to help Jackson present a case to the Senate on the feasibility of the anti-ballistic missile (ABM) system which was under debate at the time (Dorrien, 2004: 47).

Irving Kristol wrote an article in 1983 criticising NATO and arguing that Western Europe must increase its conventional military spending and stop relying on the US to provide its defense against the Soviet threat (Kristol, 1995). He contends that the nuclear umbrella was no longer credible given the USSR’s advancement in the

capabilities of their weapons systems, and therefore that Western Europe's excessive reliance on nuclear weapons for purposes of deterrence was folly. Kristol posits that a key reason why this dynamic occurred is that the Western European states did not take the Soviet threat seriously enough and they refused to see it for what it really was - a fundamentally ideological confrontation. This advocacy of moral clarity and a willingness to regard such conflicts in terms of ideological struggles is prescient of the way in which the current neoconservative network has characterised the US's confrontation with Iran on its nuclear programme. If a conflict is understood as fundamentally ideological, then negotiations are likely to be of limited use and military options become more probable.

In his 1983 article, Kristol claims that Western Europe was abdicating its proper responsibilities for protecting its territory against the Soviets and instead relying on the US to provide its security - a position which allowed Western Europe to instead pour money into social welfare programmes. He writes, "In effect, the governments of Western Europe are asking the United States to run the risk of a nuclear holocaust so that they don't have to cut their social welfare budgets" (Kristol, 1995: 209). A similar argument was echoed by fellow neoconservative Robert Kagan in his 2003 book *Paradise and Power* where he asserts that most Europeans have been "understandably content" that the US is a great power given its "willingness to assume the responsibility for protecting other nations" (Kagan, 2003: 34). Both Kristol and Kagan argue that if conventional military expenditure is not given the appropriate priority, this will be exponentially harmful to a state's foreign policy. Moreover, both highlight America's role in the world as a benign superpower, stressing the need for the US to maintain its position of military predominance given the lack of available, and positive, alternatives.

### *Unilateralism and International Law*

Neoconservatives believe that the US should favour unilateralism rather than seek to work multilaterally or within institutions. In this view, it is the responsibility of the US to decide what is in her best interests, and fundamentally, neoconservatives believe that what is in the best interests of the US tends to be in the best interests of the rest of the world. It is therefore unsurprising that neocons tend to be highly critical of international institutions such as the United Nations or

the International Criminal Court, as they argue that the constraints that these institutions place on states are often ignored, particularly by “rogue states” which are those most likely to be a threat to the international community. The appointment by George W. Bush of Bolton to the position of Ambassador to the UN exemplifies the administration’s lack of faith in the institution as Bolton has always been a fierce critic of the UN, once commenting, “There is no such thing as the UN. There is only the international community, which can only be led by the only remaining superpower, which is the United States” (Bolton quoted in Ahmed and Vulliamy, 12<sup>th</sup> January, 2003). Similarly, Kristol insists that it is important, “that we realise that the UN, as it has developed, is an entity hostile to American interests” (Kristol, 1983: 229).

Related to their lack of faith in international institutions, neocons are highly sceptical of the efficacy of international law. Bolton remarks, “International law is not law; it is a series of political and moral arrangements that stand or fall on their own merits, and anything else is simply theology and superstition masquerading as law” (Bolton, 2000: 48). This is one of the rare instances where neocons take a realist approach to foreign policy. Like realists, they simply do not accept that states are constrained by international law, but rather, it is the balance of power which ensures whether states adhere to a specific “law”. And in the case of the US, they do not believe it is in America’s national interest to be constrained by international law given the US is the global hegemon, with unrivalled military superiority. Kristol derides what he describes as the State Department’s basic assumption, arguing “that we live in a world in which foreign policy (the expression of national interest) is ‘progressively’ being superseded by the ‘rule of law’ in international relations - a lovely goal but unattainable short of a Second Coming” (Kristol, 1983: 228-229).

### *Military Intervention and Democratisation*

Neoconservatives differ from many traditional conservatives as they often advocate military intervention, commonly with a view to implementing democracy. The principle of regime change can be brought about by means other than military intervention, but whatever the means employed, most neocons are open in their support of regime change in specific countries. “Exerting influence

abroad...means not just supporting US friends and gently pressuring other nations but actively pursuing policies - in Iran, Cuba, or China, for instance - ultimately intended to bring about a change of regime” (Kristol, W. and Kagan, R., 1996: 28).

Writing in 1973, towards the end of the Vietnam War, Irving Kristol criticises those who believe that the US should adopt an isolationist foreign policy as populist and naive. He notes, “We have too much power to disclaim responsibility for what happens to our friends and neighbours, and as a democratic republic have too much conscience to steel ourselves to utter indifference to the fate of others” (Kristol, 2011: 199). He laments the common preference for isolationism within US politics and is particularly scathing of the intellectual class who adhere to this preference. Kristol argues that intellectuals have a particularly important type of power, one termed “moral authority” (Kristol, 1995: 75), and that is why the views of American intellectuals on foreign policy are important. His essay “American Intellectuals and Policy” can be read as a call-to-arms to American intellectuals to formulate a blueprint for foreign policy which is both ideological and practical. He contends, “It is much to be doubted that the United States can continue to play an imperial role without the endorsement of its intellectual class” (Kristol, 1995: 86). Kristol argues that US intellectuals should play a more active role in politics in support of government and, in many ways, in defense of government. He urges intellectuals to accept a stronger, more assertive role for the US in world affairs as a more realistic and natural position for a great power.

Unlike many contemporary neoconservatives, these first generation neocons like Kristol and Kirkpatrick were sceptical of the idea of democracy promotion. This was clear from Kirkpatrick’s essay on dictatorship, and from Kristol’s comments on the burgeoning penchant for this type of thinking among both liberals and conservatives. “In the entire history of the US, we have successfully ‘exported’ our democratic institutions to only two nations - Japan and Germany, after war and an occupation. We have failed to establish a viable democracy in the Philippines, or in Panama, or anywhere in Central America” (Kristol, 7<sup>th</sup> June, 1990). In contrast, second and third generation neocons, such as Abrams and Kagan, have embraced democracy promotion as a tool to preserve and promote American hegemony. Encapsulating this thinking, Muravchik published *Exporting Democracy: Fulfilling*

*America's Destiny* in which he advocates making “the promotion of democracy...the centerpiece of American foreign policy” (Muravchik, 1992). This shift in the foreign policy discourse of neoconservatives was part of the Reagan administration’s policy shift that went from supporting right-wing regimes to promoting democracy, embodied through the establishment of the National Endowment for Democracy (Nau, 2013: 138). This turn towards explicit democracy promotion was most clearly evidenced by the neoconservative drive to go to war with Iraq. Drolet points out that, for neoconservatives, “Democracy promotion is not only an end, but also an indispensable geostrategic instrument for securing American interests” (Drolet, 2011:129). Indeed, as far as neoconservatives are concerned, “For America, democracy was not just a mode of political organisation, but an existential vocation” (Drolet, 2011: 134). Spreading liberal democratic values not only gives purpose to US foreign policy, it guards against the decline of American hegemony (Drolet, 2011: 138).

#### *US Hegemony and Exceptionalism*

Neocons believe that US hegemony is the optimal world order illustrated in Robert Kagan and William Kristol’s suggestion that the role of the US should be “benevolent global hegemony” (Kristol, W. and Kagan, R. 1996: 20). They continue, “American hegemony is the only reliable defense against a breakdown of peace and international order. The appropriate goal of American foreign policy, therefore, is to preserve that hegemony as far into the future as possible. To achieve this goal, the United States needs a neo-Reaganite foreign policy of military supremacy and moral confidence.” (Kristol, W. and Kagan, R., 1996: 23). Retaining America’s role as the world’s pre-eminent power was one of the key objectives put forward in the first draft of the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance document written by Wolfowitz, Scooter Libby and Zalmay Khalilzad. The draft read, “Our first objective is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival” (New York Times, 1992). After the document was leaked to the press this section was substantially re-written.

The argument for the US’s rightful role as the world’s hegemon is defended partly in terms of its exceptional nature. This is particularly important when it comes to interventionism. America’s role in the world is conceived of as exceptional in part

because of its self-perception as an intrinsically-moral society. This has meant that, as Lipset stresses, “To endorse war and call on people to kill others and die for the country, Americans must define their role in a conflict as being on God’s side against Satan - for morality, against evil. The United States goes to war against evil, not, in its self-perception, to defend material interests” (Lipset, 1996: 20). Clearly, this conceptualisation was propagated during the Cold War and recently in the ‘war on terror’.

### **3.4 Neoconservatism in Relation to Traditions of American Thought and IR Theory**

This section explores the two main strains of American political thought in relation to neoconservatism. It also aims to place neoconservatism within the context of international relations (IR) theory, particularly realism. Realism and neoconservatism are often considered as having a great deal in common. However, as this section illustrates, the two schools of thought are very different. As noted in the introduction, Williams argues that neoconservatism should be considered a theory of IR and that as such, other theories should engage with it in this context (Williams, 2005: 308). Theory is defined as “a set of hypotheses related by logical or mathematical arguments to explain and predict a wide variety of connected phenomena in general terms” (Collins, 1998). While a theory should be predictive as well as explanatory - something neoconservatism is light on at best - neoconservatism does seek to account for why certain political ideas do or do not work, e.g. the failure of international institutions or the welfare state. As an ideology, it contains an idealism most easily compared to aspects of liberalism rather elements of conservatism. Its advocacy of policies such as democracy promotion and nation building make it expressly normative, and it is strongly against realism. “In this [neoconservative] vision, Realism is not only theoretically misleading, it is destructive of the political virtue of a society, and thus is a threat to the very existence of the polity itself” (Williams, 2005: 310).

#### *Liberalism*

In many respects, neoconservatism sits neatly between the American traditions of conservatism and liberalism because it draws on both. As noted previously, the early neoconservatives in the 1930s, such as Kristol, were liberals who became

increasingly dissatisfied with what liberalism had begun to stand for. They felt that traditional liberal principles were being lost and distorted. Most were particularly disillusioned with the student, and more broadly liberal, protests during the Vietnam War. Rather than believing that the US should have exited Vietnam sooner, the neocon position was that the war should have been escalated and won.

Given that the term 'neoconservative' began as a derogatory label, applied by liberals in order to distance themselves from their former political allies, it is perhaps unsurprising that neocons have a great deal of empathy with liberalism, having originally come out of the liberal tradition. Famously, Kristol described a neoconservative as a "liberal who has been mugged by reality" (Kristol, 1983: 98). In fact, in many ways, the term neoconservative is something of a misnomer. Many of the first and second wave of neoconservatives were wary of the term, not only because of its pejorative connotations but also, as Podhoretz notes, because many still considered themselves liberals, and were keen "to reclaim the traditional principles of liberalism from the leftists who had hijacked and corrupted it" (Podhoretz, 1996). He also notes that the early neocons were ex-radicals and when thought of in this context, it is less surprising that the neoconservatives went on to develop their relatively radical ideology. Rather than working within the existing cultural discourse, the neocons believed that it would be more effective to replace it with another, a strategy which would not have been unfamiliar to ex-radicals from the Communist tradition.

Liberalism, as a tradition of political thought in the US, has changed markedly in different periods. During the late 19th and early 20th century, Progressivism became a popular movement. City-based, the Progressives were concerned with the way in which capitalism while producing affluence, also resulted in corruption, and a degree of social degeneration. The Progressives were particularly interested in reinvigorating a culture of morality. It was the Progressive movement which not only struggled to achieve Prohibition, but also strove to curtail immigration with campaigns such as "100 percent Americanism" (Foley, 2007: 13). This strand of liberalism stands in stark contrast to the popular view of liberalism today. Gary Gerstle notes that, "For many Progressives, the emphasis on morality expressed the Protestant faith instilled in them as children. Even those who had turned their

backs on formal religion were still certain that society would benefit from sustained and secularised campaigns for moral improvement” (Gerstle, 1994: 1050).

Similarly, neoconservatives often stress the important role of religion in their desire to revive and strengthen morality within American society. In the case of the neoconservatives, this endorsement was despite whether they adhered to religious doctrine themselves. Some of the early neocons, such as Kristol, remained atheists after their shift from Trotskyism to what became neoconservatism, but strongly supported religion in an effort to buttress a culture of morality. They considered this essential not only in order to counter the cultural relativism espoused by strands of liberalism in the 1960s, but also to counter the logic inherent to neoliberalism which is that the individual should prioritise his or her ambitions and desires through “a rational cost-benefit analysis” (Drolet, 2011: 100). Kristol asserts, “Who wants to live in a society in which selfishness and self-seeking are celebrated as primary virtues?” (Kristol, 1972: 97-8). Religion provides an answer to this problem. Kristol’s close colleague, Daniel Bell, argues, “What religion can restore is the continuity of generations, returning us to the existential predicaments which are the ground of humility and care for others” (Bell, 1978: 28-9). This conscious strategising can be recognised in other neocon policies and approaches, and is one of the reasons why they are often labelled as Straussian. For neoconservatives, liberal capitalist culture requires religion in order to counteract the logic of self-interest inherent to the system.

Prompted by the Great Depression, between 1933 and 1938, the Roosevelt administration implemented a series of reforms known as the New Deal - a landmark in the history and development of contemporary liberalism. Many of the early neoconservatives were supporters of these reforms. As Michael Foley notes, the New Deal represented a profound shift “in the relationship between American society, the state and the individual”, where “the role and responsibility of federal government was in essence reconfigured into a centre of proactive intervention geared towards economic management, financial regulation, and social welfare” (Foley, 2007: 13). This major shift, which set the place of government more prominently in society, aligns with the broad attitude of neocons towards the

state. In general, neocons generally accept the growth of the state as an inescapable necessity within an expanding society. Kristol notes that, “Neoconservatism is not at all hostile to the idea of a welfare state, but it is critical of the Great Society version of this welfare state” (Kristol, 2011: 149).

Neoliberals largely eschew the type of interventionist liberalism of the New Deal and in its place support a smaller state role in society through deregulation, privatisation, and state support for the private sector. They intrinsically connect economic freedom - *laissez-fair* capitalism with political freedom (Smith, 1988). In this respect, “a market economy is the economic form of a political democracy” (Freidrich, 1955: 511). However, like the neocons, neoliberals are keen that government should be strong within its remit. But neoliberals remain very much against government interfering in all areas of civic life. This preference is encapsulated in Alexander Rustow’s remark “Free Economy - Strong State” (Rustow quoted in Freidrich, 1955: 512). Friedrich notes that neoliberals regularly quote Benjamin Constant, “The government beyond its proper sphere ought not to have any power; within its sphere it cannot have enough of it” (Freidrich, 1955: 513). For neoliberals, strong government is essential in order to maintain the free market.

Neocons share neoliberals’ enthusiasm for free markets because of “the unprecedented level of personal freedoms and class mobility generated by capitalist social relations” (Drolet, 2011: 95). Neoconservatives regard the expansion of government as somewhat inevitable. While they do not particularly encourage the growth of the state, they also do not regard this dynamic as a development with which to be concerned. In this respect, neocons and neoliberals share a similar attitude to the role of government. Neocons also tend to regard capitalism as the best option in terms of avoiding the negative side-effects of a directed and planned economy, although they are more likely to regard it as the least-worst option, rather than a panacea.

One of the chief criticisms of liberalism made by conservatives is that liberals put too much emphasis on the role of government in ameliorating social conditions for citizens. Critics have suggested that this has created government which is concerned with catering to different interest groups and protecting individualism

at the expense of the wider societal good. These criticisms are similar to those made by the neoconservatives regarding the follies of liberalism. Kristol argues that liberal welfare programmes create unforeseen problems, such as the break-up of the family unit (Kristol, 2011: 95-98). Kristol contends that new social programmes, help serve and perpetuate the careers of a new managerial class, rather than helping lift people out of poverty (Dorrien, 2004: 9). Dorrien notes that the early neoconservatives believed, “[L]iberal economics penalised achievers, prevented wealth creation, and created a bloated welfare state”, while benefitting “a ‘new class’ of parasitic bureaucrats and social workers” (Dorrien, 2004: 9). Similarly, conservatives have taken a comparable view, criticising liberal government for creating its own self-perpetuating constituencies and continuing government welfare programmes regardless of their utility (Foley, 2007: 28).

However, in contrast to the liberal view, which believes in the ability of people to progress, the neocons, like conservatives, do not accept this fundamentally positive view of human nature (although they reject it to different extents). Neoconservatives believe that progress can be made within the political realm; however, they do not believe it can be made within intrinsic human nature. Kristol stresses that modern politics “consists of political beliefs that are oriented in a melioristic way - a ‘progressive’ way, as one says - toward the future. It is impossible for any set of political beliefs in the modern era to engage popular sentiments without such basic orientation” (Kristol, 1983: x). However, neocons regard the liberal conception of human behaviour as naive. In this respect, neocons find a natural allegiance with conservatives. Kirkpatrick criticised liberals in the 1980s “[f]rom a self-consciously ‘neo-conservative’ position...for failing to acknowledge the existence of human wickedness, taking refuge in ‘pale euphemisms and blind theories of human progress’” (Dumbrell, 1997: 7). The idea of any kind of perfectibility of human nature, expressed in the idea of a ‘perpetual peace’ as articulated by Kant in 1795, is dismissed. Progress can be accomplished through better organisation, but there is no attempt to believe that war or conflict has any chance of being eliminated.

When considering the idea of progress in the political realm, some more of the complexities within neoconservatism can be revealed. While some neocons

expressly advocate a foreign policy built on the desire to promote - and indeed, at times install - democracy in other states, they do not necessarily favour this at any cost. Kirkpatrick's article "Dictators and Double Standards" argues that rapid democratisation and liberalisation are not always the best approach and gradual reform in the interests of stability is often preferable (Kirkpatrick, 1979). As a result, Kirkpatrick did not support the Iraq War in 2003. It is the most recent generation of neoconservatives - sometimes described as the third generation - who were the strongest advocates of that war. This is but one example of how, like all other schools of thought, neoconservatives can sometimes diverge on their approach to key issues.

Michael Foley has pointed out that it is "American liberalism has had a close historical association with US military intervention and war" (Foley, 2007: 31). Despite the current popular inclination to align aggressive interventionist foreign policy with conservative Republicans (particularly due to the foreign policy of the George W. Bush administration), international intervention has been historically associated with liberalism and the Democratic Party (Lynch, 2009: 46). Charles A. Kupchan and Peter L. Trubowitz assert that liberal internationalism has been the predominant trend in US foreign policy since the Second World War on both sides of the political spectrum. They describe liberal internationalism as "the coupling of power and international partnership" and outline how it has enjoyed broad, bipartisan support (Kupchan and Trubowitz, 2007: 8). Like many other commentators, they point out that unipolarity has encouraged the US to eschew multilateralism and pursue a more unilateral path. Kupchan and Trubowitz argue that the unilateralism preferred by George W. Bush was not a deviation but rather a predictable shift, describing his administration's strategy as "a symptom, as much as a cause, of the unravelling of the liberal internationalist compact that guided the United States for much of the second half of the twentieth century" (Kupchan and Trubowitz, 2007: 8). While, during the Bush administration, the emphasis fell away from pursuing multilateralism within the context of intervention, the idea that foreign policy should be driven by ideas and values was retained.

As mentioned previously, neoconservatives are highly critical of isolationism. Whether emanating from the conservative right or the liberal left, neoconservatives not only seek to achieve a strong American input in the affairs of other countries, but are generally pro-military intervention. In this respect, the ideology draws strongly on liberal interventionism. This is why in some cases, for example, neoconservatives have referred to themselves as “hard Wilsonians” (Boot and Kirkpatrick, 2002). Like Woodrow Wilson, they believe spreading democracy should be a normative goal of foreign policy. However, neoconservatives stress that military action is a key part of this strategy, and unlike Wilson, are openly contemptuous of international institutions. But it is valuable to note that neoconservative support of pre-emptive military action outlined in the US NSS 2002 arguably had its precursor in Wilson’s League of Nations founded in 1920. In the Covenant of the League, Article 11 sets out a principle of pre-emptive action, albeit collective, stating, “Any war or *threat of war*, whether immediately affecting any of the Members of the League or not, is hereby declared a matter of concern to the whole League, and the League *shall take any action* that may be deemed wise and effectual to safeguard the peace of nations” - emphasis added. The neoconservative position can be located within the Idealist inter-war strain of liberalism - in the sense that it advocates that US foreign policy should be driven by values. Krauthammer argues,

America cannot and will not live by Realpolitik alone. Our foreign policy must be driven by something beyond power. Unless conservatives present ideals to challenge the liberal ideal of a domesticated international community, they will lose the debate. Which is why among American conservatives, another, more idealistic school has arisen that sees American’s national interest as an expression of values (Krauthammer, 10<sup>th</sup> February, 2004).

However, some scholars argue that when neoconservatives assert their interest in the promotion of moral ideals and democracy, this is almost wholly a rhetorical strategy rather than one with any substantive foundation (Drolet, 2011; Heilbrunn, 2008; Ryan, 2010).

While many stress that the US was fundamentally founded on liberal values such as freedom, democracy, equality and progress, Foley asserts that characterising oneself as a liberal has fallen out of favour with American citizens. He argues that

most politicians are careful to avoid describing themselves as liberal and notes that only two in ten Americans class themselves as liberal (Foley, 2007: 32). “Whether it is because liberal reforms are associated with cultural division, elitist privilege, and historical failure, or the interventionist state, the term ‘liberal’ continues to have pariah status in the popular vocabulary of American politics” (Foley, 2007: 32). Given that being described as liberal has lost appeal in the US, it appears to be fortuitous for the neoconservatives that they were given their label, even if it was originally created as a pejorative term.

### *Conservatism*

Although the US was founded on fundamentally liberal principles, conservatism has enjoyed a resurgence in the past few decades, with Foley arguing that it is now the hegemonic political philosophy within US society (Foley, 2007: 9). Louis Hartz asserts that given America’s founding principles, conservatism is necessarily an offshoot of liberalism (Hartz, 1955). Similarly, Clinton Rossiter in *Conservatism in America* stresses that the political tradition in the US is essentially liberal with regards to its fundamental values (Rossiter, 1955). He, therefore, views conservatism as an addition to the liberal core. In this imagining, liberalism has remained relevant and maintained its significance because of the existence of conservatism and its principles of “tradition, loyalty, unity, patriotism, morality, constitutionalism, religion, higher law, property, and community” (Rossiter, 1955: 45). Rossiter effectively views conservatism as a “corrective force”, which prevents liberalism from realising its more negative machinations (Rossiter, 1955).

Traditional conservatives, like neoconservatives, take a negative approach to human progress, given their belief in the imperfectability of human nature. “Their belief in humanity’s inner drive towards greed, violence and destruction in the limitation and fallibility of human reason leads them to the conclusion that the human condition is inherently imperfect” (Foley, 2007: 4). This fundamentally different view of the world from that espoused by liberals causes conservatives to adopt very different policies, particularly when it comes to the welfare state. Conservatives more readily accept inequalities in income and access to services because they do not believe it is possible to create a society in which all citizens are equal. Kristol argues that while neoconservatism accepts the core liberal value

of 'equality' as fundamental to society, it rejects egalitarianism as something government should endeavour to achieve, as this would necessarily end up stifling liberty. Citizens should be equal in their opportunities but, by the nature of a free society, they will not ultimately receive an equal share of its wealth (Kristol, 2011: 150).

Neoconservatives and traditional conservatives find agreement most often on domestic policy, due to their similarly negative approach to the idea of the welfare state. However, unlike traditional conservatives, neocons are less likely to support the lowering of taxes. In order for America to retain its military pre-eminence and its high quality of life, neoconservatives advocate an increase in military spending, a core neocon policy since their inception, necessitating substantive taxation. Krauthammer contends that, "[w]hat created an economy of debt unrivalled in American history is not foreign adventures but the low tax ideology of the 1980s, coupled with America's insatiable desire for yet higher standards of living without paying any of the cost" (Krauthammer, 1990/1: 27). Krauthammer, like most neocons, is strongly critical of the resurgence of isolationism in the US and believes that an interventionist foreign policy is a "necessity" in order to ensure the best conditions for the nation to prosper (Krauthammer, 1990/1: 27).

Their attitude toward immigration is another area in which the neoconservatives and traditional conservatives part company. It is common for conservatives to decry immigration as a threat to jobs and a unified culture, while neoconservatives usually hold the opposite position. Podhoretz stresses his frustration with conservatives who declare their concerns over immigration, and points out that similar arguments were voiced when there was mass Jewish immigration around the turn of the 20th Century. He notes that these concerns were proved to be unfounded (Podhoretz, 1982). The key difference between the two groups, who share a socially-conservative position, is their attitude towards military intervention. While both groups share a sceptical view of big government, the neocons are in favour of strong government in the realm of foreign policy. After Vietnam, isolationism was back on the ascendance; however, with George W. Bush's NSS 2002 in particular, strategies based on military intervention moved to

the fore of the foreign policy agenda. Historically, conservatives have been wary of interventionist policies, particularly if they are not in the immediate national interest of the United States, narrowly conceived. In contrast, neoconservatives have attempted to redefine what constitutes the US national interest, expanding it significantly and placing values at the forefront.

In summation, the neocons are positioned almost exactly between liberalism and conservatism when it comes to the concepts of progress and equality, and also of the role of the state in society. While liberalism takes a positive position on both, and conservatives take a correspondingly negative stance, neoconservatism is largely placed between the two schools of thought. Neoconservatism holds that political progress is possible in the form of increasing democratisation; however, due to man's intrinsic nature, it is highly sceptical that war and conflict has any possibility of being eradicated. Similarly, neoconservatism, like liberalism, take citizen's equality as a starting point, but differs on its views on the ability of society to remain equal - it does not regard this as achievable, or indeed preferable. While they were historically supporters of the welfare state, the neocons have moved away from this position to one which takes a mostly pessimistic approach to the ability of the state to ameliorate social conditions. Neoconservatism developed to a position which comes close to the neoliberal stance which is content to see a strong state within a carefully limited remit, and particularly in the area of foreign policy.

### *Realism/IR Theory*

While neoconservatives advocate a policy of militarism, realists are generally highly sceptical of such an approach. Hans J. Morgenthau describes militarism as an "intellectual error", and contends that the equating of state power with military power is a mistake. He suggests that the key oversight in emphasising militarism is that it overlooks the "intangibles of power" and fails to recognise the necessity of legitimacy in order to successfully govern. It may be possible to defeat another nation with military power, but this does not necessarily indicate that the nation in question will accept the dominance of the victor (Morgenthau, 1948, 2006(ed): 174). Morgenthau also advises that the rarer the use of military force, the more effective it will be (Morgenthau, 1948, 2006(ed): 174), guidance clearly

rejected by the ethos of neoconservatism. Neorealists tend to be more positive about militarism as a strategy, particularly John J. Mearsheimer's 'offensive realism' which postulates that great powers, including a hegemon, will still try to expand even if their security situation is secure. However, even 'offensive realism' states that great powers tend to try and enlarge only when opportunities present themselves and when they can take action with little risk (Mearsheimer, 2003). Realists were largely against the war in Iraq in 2003 (Mearsheimer et al, 26<sup>th</sup> September, 2002), and have opposed military action in Syria as well as Iran (Mearsheimer, January/February, 2014; Waltz, July/August, 2012). This stands in direct contrast to the neocon strategy of intervention based on militarism which actively looks for scenarios in which military action can be taken, not only to ensure that American interests are protected, but also to demonstrate, and therefore emphasise, US leadership in the world. This is exemplified in the neocons' preferred policies with regards to Syria and Iran (Boot, 2012; Kroenig, 2012)

The Republican Party is currently split between those who favour an assertive, internationalist approach to foreign policy and those who believe the party should take a far more cautious approach to intervention. This position is epitomised by isolationists, such as the small (but arguably growing) libertarian wing of the party, of which Senator Rand Paul (R-KN) is probably the best known. Adherents to the Tea Party movement also tend to take an isolationist stance to foreign policy. Some members of the Republican Party who advocate realist approaches to international relations have attempted to bridge the gap between the two differing stances. For example, in 2012 Henry Kissinger wrote an article entitled "Meshing Realism and Idealism in the Middle East" in which he points out that, "Realists judge the events from the perspective of security strategy; idealists see them as an opportunity to promote democracy" (Kissinger, 2012). Arguing for a shift to a more realist approach, he contends that the US should try to do more to shape the outcome of the changes occurring in the Middle East since the Arab Spring. Kissinger advocates that the US move to assist its preferred actors in the conflict in Syria, and has criticised the Obama administration for not doing enough to protect American interests in post-Mubarak Egypt (Kissinger, 2012). Similarly,

Dennis Ross advocates intervention in Syria as part of this congressional testimony by framing it in terms of synthesising realist and idealist approaches.

It is rare that idealists and realists find common ground and agree on threats. Ironically, Syria is a place where idealists and realists should come together. There is a moral imperative to try to find a way to affect what is happening on the ground, but there is also a strong national security imperative at least to contain the conflict in Syria, ensure that its CW do not disappear, and prevent the neighbourhood from being destabilised (Ross, 11<sup>th</sup> April, 2013).

For neoconservatives, nationalism is a core element of its *raison d'être*. This is acknowledged by Kristol who asserts that “Patriotism springs from a love of the nation’s past; nationalism arises out of hope for the nation’s future, distinctive greatness” (Kristol, 1983: xiii). While neoconservatism embraces nationalism as a foreign policy imperative, realism regards nationalism as a fact of the current international system without revering it as a necessarily positive force. Morgenthau argues that when nationalism and universal morality come into conflict, nationalism generally triumphs (Morgenthau, 1948, 2006(ed): 260). Without passing a normative judgement on this dynamic, he contends that this is an “inevitable outgrowth of the conditions under which nations exist and pursue their aim”, rather than “the handiwork of a few wicked men” (Morgenthau, 1948, 2006 (ed): 261). This conception of universal morality, or any attempt to achieve such an end, stands in direct contrast to the neoconservative position on international morality. Neoconservatives regard upholding and promoting universal morality as a vital part of US foreign policy. Williams stresses that the idea of national greatness is a core part of America’s national interest for the neocons (Williams, 2005: 318). This concept combined with democracy is key to how neoconservatives would like to see American politics develop. In their view, realists underestimate the importance of morality and identity, and how these concepts are essential to the construction of a successful foreign policy. As Drolet points out, this is not a new criticism of realism since constructivists have been making it for some time. However, neoconservatives’ criticism is distinct in that “neoconservatives instrumentalise and politicise that knowledge” (Drolet, 2011: 125).

Williams notes that for neoconservatives, the national interest is a far broader concept than it is for realists (Williams, 2005: 309). As opposed to simply

protecting strategic material interests, the neocon formulation encapsulates an express promotion and celebration of American leadership based on material interests and values. As such, neoconservatism is an expressly and intensely normative ideology. This is one of the main ways in which neoconservatism parts company with realism. For neoconservatives, as Williams suggests, “Realism is not only theoretically misleading, it is destructive of the political virtue of a society, and thus is a threat to the very existence of the polity itself” (Williams, 2005: 310). Therefore, the absence of any moral prescription within realism makes it a threat to the nation rather than any kind of useful tool with which to conduct policy.

Neoconservatism prefers stability and order in the international system, and it believes that this can be achieved only through strong American leadership in a unipolar world. In contrast, realism regards a bi-polar or multi-polar system as the best way to ensure peace, while liberalism believes that international institutions are the best way to promote order. Krauthammer insists that international stability is never the norm and can only be achieved by the “self-conscious action by the great powers, and most particularly of the greatest power, which now and for the foreseeable future is the United States” (Krauthammer, 1990/1: 29).

Realists view world hegemony as a problem through the issue of international law. While Morgenthau accepts that international law exists, he notes that this acknowledgement does not mean that as a system of rules it has any effective agency on regulating or containing struggles for power (Morgenthau, 2006: 285-288). Morgenthau indicates that in a unipolar system, international law has the potential to break down entirely. He notes, “Where there is neither community of interest nor balance of power, there is no international law.” (Morgenthau, 2006: 286). In other words, a world hegemon will always ignore international law if it suits. This is why, for realists, the optimum world order is not hegemonic, but consists of two or more great powers, or at least a balance of power.

Neoconservatives are more robust in their conception of international law. They do not believe that it constrains political actors, and moreover, in the case of the US, they do not believe that it should have any bearing whatsoever on America’s ability to protect its interests (which for neocons are broadly conceived). Bolton

criticises this dynamic using the example of the International Criminal Court (ICC). He avers that, “the ICC, in fact, amounts to a giant opportunity to second-guess the United States and the actions we take in self-defense” (Bolton, 2011). Bolton goes further, indicating that he believes international law violates the US Constitution (Bolton, 2011).

Neoconservatism is also an expressly ideological movement. Kristol claimed in 1982 that it was “an era of ideological politics” and urged Reagan to make bolder ideological affirmations (Kristol, 1983: 256). Realism, in contrast, makes no claim to ideology and instead cautions against reading anything other than self-interest into claims that are made under the auspices of a certain ideology. Morgenthau argues that politicians will always cloak the real motivations for adopting certain policies with ideological justifications (Morgenthau, 1948, 2006(ed): 97). Ideology is simply used as a post-hoc rationalisation with no particular basis in reality. He also notes that statesmen are not always fully conscious of this dynamic.

Politicians have an ineradicable tendency to deceive themselves about what they are doing by referring to their policies not in terms of power but in terms of either ethical or legal principles or biological necessities. In other words, while all politics is necessarily pursuit of power, ideologies render involvement in that contest for power psychologically and morally acceptable to the actors and their audience (Morgenthau, 1948, 2006(ed): 98).

Further, he stresses that political actors are compelled to behave in this way as it would be simply too unpalatable for their audience to accept other rationale. Indeed, a state that did not use ideological or moral reasons to justify its foreign policy actions would put itself at a considerable disadvantage in its pursuit of power (Morgenthau, 1948, 2006(ed): 99). Neoconservatism, by contrast, draws its strength and purpose from its ideological motivations. Begun as an overtly anti-Communist movement, it remains explicitly ideological.

Robert O. Keohane points out that much of the debate between liberals and realists centres on the extent to which they allow that international institutions have any real influence within world politics (Keohane, 1986). Both classical realists and neorealists believe that they have little influence on constraining or altering the behaviour of the great powers. In fact, Mearsheimer suggests that institutions allow great powers to not only maintain, but at times increase, their

power in the international system (Mearsheimer, 2003: 364). He contends that “[w]hat is most impressive about international institutions is how little independent effect they seem to have on great-power behaviour” (Mearsheimer, 2003: 364). Morgenthau is also negative about the power of international institutions. Neoconservatives have a similar position on international institutions in that they believe them to be largely useless in effecting change in world politics. However, rather than lament this reality, neocons celebrate the power that the weakness of institutions bestows on the pre-eminent power, namely the US. Their assertion of the virtue and desirability of American hegemony accounts for this stance.

### **3.5 Neoconservatives during the Obama Administration**

Although the neoconservatives did not have the degree of influence during the Obama administration that they had during the George W. Bush administration, they did not disappear. They remained important voices on foreign policy within the Republican Party, with libertarian and Tea Party isolationist voices occupying a minority position. Tea Party adherents lost substantial ground surrounding the 2013 stand-off over the budget which culminated in the Speaker of the House of Representatives, John Boehner, declaring that they had “lost all credibility” (Kane and Gold, 12<sup>th</sup> December, 2013). Heilbrunn contends that neoconservatism has become the uniformly dominant approach to foreign affairs within the Republican Party (Heilbrunn, 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 2015), an argument which the findings of this thesis supports.

While neoconservative ideas are relatively uniform, neoconservatives themselves are a very loose-knit group. Indeed, there is “[nothing] remotely approaching a neoconservative ‘central committee’, prepared to lay down the party line to adherents” (Grondin, 2005/6: 228). They are an informal group of like-minded thinkers who can be found dotted around DC primarily, and are mainly situated in prominent positions in think tanks, publications, and as advisors to members of the Republican Party. As Ryan points out, “the amount of direct contact neoconservatives and their sympathisers may or may not have had with each other is tangential, not only because their ideas stand or fall on their own merit, but

because, for the most part, where the network really coalesced was in print” (Ryan, 2010: 53).

Unlike during the George W. Bush administration, under Obama, the executive had almost no top officials who could be considered neoconservative, and this meant that their influence over policy was severely curtailed. However, this situation should not be misread as an indication that neoconservatism and its proponents somehow faded into obscurity. Lawrence B. Wilkerson, former Chief of Staff to Colin Powell, argues,

[Neoconservatism] did not wholly disappear. The principal means by which that influence adhered was in the tendency of the executive branch never to surrender powers that it happens to gain - indeed, to attempt to gain even more power unto itself. In this regard, the Obama administration surrendered nothing - an executive order banning torture notwithstanding - and began immediately to augment and expand the powers that neoconservatives, for the most part, had assembled, and legally justified, for the executive (Interview, Wilkerson, 21<sup>st</sup> November 2013).

Executive powers notwithstanding, Congress is the primary domain in which neoconservatism can still be said to exert significant influence. It has endured as an influential approach to foreign policy particularly within the Republican Party, as noted by most of those interviewed for this study. Both Jon Alterman, Middle East expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and Colin Kahl, Deputy Assistant to President Obama, note that there are conflicting approaches to foreign policy within the Republican Party at present. Alterman asserts, “I think there are three strands - you have a realist strand, a neoconservative strand and a neo-isolationist strand. They can’t figure out where they want to be” (Interview, Alterman, 7<sup>th</sup> November, 2013, Interview, Kahl, 20<sup>th</sup> November, 2013). But, as confirmed by Heilbrunn, neoconservatism stands out as the most prominent among the three. “Definitely the Republican Party remains sympathetic to a very militant foreign policy. ..the Rand Paul wing is not as influential as the neoconservative or great power wing of the Republican Party” (Interview, Heilbrunn, 14<sup>th</sup> November 2013).

While different approaches have different traction relative to different areas of policy, neo-isolationism and realism remain the least prevalent philosophies. A

senior former NSC official notes that, “The realists are a pretty minor voice in the Republican Party right now” (Interview, former NSC official, 26<sup>th</sup> November, 2013). While Democrats are more likely to expressly eschew neoconservatism, some of the key tenets of the philosophy can be found within liberal interventionism, which remains a prominent strand of thinking within the Party. The staying power of neoconservative ideas is assisted by this. Usha Sahay argues, “liberal internationalism...is at the core of the worldviews of most Democrats”, and goes on to emphasise that it is a “fairly mainstream school of foreign-policy thought in their party” (Sahay, 3<sup>rd</sup> February, 2014). In this respect, neoconservatives and liberal interventionists are ideological cousins.

As many interviewees noted, most neoconservatives are based within think tanks in Washington DC. Heilbrunn describes the situation as “the professionalization of the neoconservative movement” and contends that it is now mainly an institutional force (Heilbrunn, 2008: 274). Think tanks such as the Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI) and Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) consistently recommend and espouse neoconservative policy and principles (Drolet, 2011: 2, 15, 152; Heilbrunn, 2008: 274, 279). With a firm commitment to promoting military spending in order to maintain US hegemony, FPI’s mission statement sets out its aims to promote:

continued US engagement - diplomatic, economic, and military—in the world and rejection of policies that would lead us down the path to isolationism; robust support for America’s democratic allies and opposition to rogue regimes that threaten American interests; the human rights of those oppressed by their governments, and US leadership in working to spread political and economic freedom; a strong military with the defense budget needed to ensure that America is ready to confront the threats of the 21st century; international economic engagement as a key element of US foreign policy in this time of great economic dislocation (Foreign Policy Initiative, 2016).

Founded in 2009 by Robert Kagan, William Kristol, and Dan Senor, FPI is widely regarded as the new version of PNAC, which closed in 2006. Established by Kristol and Kagan in 1997, PNAC also called for a strong military to underwrite US global leadership, and the promotion of US values abroad. Its 2000 report entitled “Rebuilding America’s Defenses: Strategy, Forces, and Resources for a New Century” (PNAC, September, 2000) set out this vision at length. Heilbrunn describes PNAC as “essentially a front organisation” set up to promote “the

democratic crusade”, and asserts that it “became a kind of blueprint for the foreign policy of the George W. Bush administration” (Heilbrunn, 2008: 217, 201). PNAC sent an open letter to Bush nine days after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks advocating the overthrow of Saddam Hussein - essentially regime change. The list of signatories included central figures associated with the movement: William Kristol; Midge Decter; Fukuyama; Reuel Marc Gerech; Robert Kagan; Kirkpatrick; Krauthammer; Clifford May; Perle; Podhoretz, amongst others (PNAC, 2001).

Similarly, as suggested by its name, FDD focuses heavily on democracy promotion, noting that it “was founded shortly after 9/11 by a group of visionary philanthropists and policymakers who understood the threat facing America, Israel, and the West” (Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 2015), and is an organisation which adheres to a neoconservative political philosophy. The organisation centres on the Middle East and terrorism, highlighting its research and analysis of both Iran and Syria, with individual projects devoted to each country. One of FDD’s experts, Michael Ledeen, has previously held several senior government advisory positions, and founded the Coalition for Democracy in Iran (CDI) in 2002 with Morris Amitay, former executive director of AIPAC. FDD’s advisors include neoconservatives Krauthammer, William Kristol, and the *Wall Street Journal* columnist, Bret Stephens (Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 2015).

Other think tanks are sympathetic to neocon ideas. AEI employs many neocon thinkers, including, Michael Rubin, Joshua Muravchik, Frederick Kagan, and Danielle Pletka, while the Council of Foreign Relations (CFR) houses Abrams and Max Boot. Robert Kagan is based at the Brookings Institution. Some of these foreign policy experts expressly describe themselves as neoconservatives such as Abrams (Interview, Abrams, 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2014) and Muravchik (Muravchik, Sept-Oct 2008), while others can be regarded as such based on the views and policy recommendations they consistently advocate. Likewise, magazines such as *Commentary*, and *The Weekly Standard* perform a similar role. *Commentary* was founded by the American Jewish Committee in 1945 and its editor from 1959 to 1995 was the prominent neoconservative Norman Podhoretz (Heilbrunn, 2008: 77). *The Weekly Standard* was founded in 1995 by its editor William Kristol (son of

Irving Kristol), and John Podhoretz (son of Norman Podhoretz) (Wedel, 2010: 184), and was considered a mainstay for neoconservative writers (Boot and Kirkpatrick, 2002).

Through their network of think tanks and publications as well as their establishment links, the neocons have managed to maintain good access to the media. In this respect, it has been relatively easy for the most recent wave of neocons to continue to promote their ideas to the public. Vice President for Defense and Foreign Policy Studies at the libertarian think tank the Cato Institute, Christopher A. Preble, commented on this dynamic, acknowledging,

The neoconservatives, I'll concede, have a very good ground game. They have a network of institutions in Washington that are very effective and vocal. They have a friendly audience in many of the editorial pages of the major newspapers and magazine. That gives them a significant leg up in terms of making these arguments (quoted in Berman, 2012).

To assist in the drive towards war with Iraq in 2003, these neoconservative public intellectuals advocated relentlessly for the invasion on television and radio broadcasts, in the pages of the aforementioned publications, and in the op-ed pages of sympathetic newspapers, such as the *Wall Street Journal*. In a similar fashion, many of the same people have pushed tirelessly for policies of regime change in respect to Iran and Syria.

Due to the present situation that finds neoconservatives mostly working within think tanks, neoconservatism currently has most traction within Congress. And while the executive normally leads on issues of foreign policy, Congress, nevertheless, plays a significant role. Will Marshall, Director of the Progressive Policy Institute (PPI), observes, "The executive branch and Congress dual over who's in charge of foreign policy - usually the executive has the upper hand but Congress has a voice and is often obstructive as they're being now". He went on to say that the President "has very limited power to roll back sanctions unilaterally by Executive Order (Interview, Marshall, 5<sup>th</sup> November 2013). Most of these are legislatively imposed - not all, but most of them". Both Heilbrunn (Interview, Heilbrunn, 14<sup>th</sup> November, 2013) and Doug Bloomfield, former Legislative Director and Chief Lobbyist for AIPAC, noted that Netanyahu uses Congress as a pressure device on Obama (Bloomfield, 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 2013). If AIPAC can succeed in

influencing Congress to adopt its preferred policies, usually in the form of tough legislation, then the executive is forced to engage with these policies and, at times, mediate its own favoured approach to a given issue.

While not explicitly part of the network, the Washington Institute is generally sympathetic to neoconservative arguments. Perle and James Woolsey (and formerly Kirkpatrick) are on the Institute's Board of Advisors (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2015). Founded in 1985 by Martin Indyk (former Research Director at AIPAC) as Executive Director, and Barbi Weinberg (former Director of AIPAC) as President, the Washington Institute initially focused on Congress. However, as Steve Rosen, former Foreign Policy Director at AIPAC, reports, the Washington Institute helped to expand AIPAC's influence from the legislative to the executive branch.

Well, I came to AIPAC and I said, 'No, we don't have to look at the State Department as a hostile place, permanently and forever hostile to us. Yes, there's been some problems but we can change the State Department. We can have friends in high places in the State Department'. So when one of our own, Martin Indyk, became Assistant Secretary of State this was like proof of concept. It was like an illustration of how the State Department doesn't have to be a black box that you just take as an adversary for the rest of history. And the way he got to the State Department, first through ideas and later on by going over there, was by being the head of the Washington Institute because the place where government experts interface with the public is actually think tanks (Interview, Rosen, 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2013).

Therefore, the Washington Institute has been closely aligned with AIPAC, especially during its formative years. It still has significant links and some overlap in donors. Discussing the links between AIPAC and the Washington Institute, Alterman, who spent a year working at the Institute noted,

And so they [AIPAC] created the Washington Institute as a distinct organisation with an overlapping donor base. And so if you compare the donor list, they are similar donors, but they are very different organisations - very different purposes with very different targets because the way to affect Capitol Hill is so different from the way to affect the administration. To affect the administration and to affect journalists you need a cadre of experts - that's not what you need to work with Capitol Hill (Interview, Alterman, 7<sup>th</sup> November, 2013).

Nevertheless, despite being set up to deal primarily with the executive by former members of AIPAC, the Washington Institute has become somewhat more independent than this history suggests, although its funders do still overlap to an extent. “As of 2006, fourteen members of the 100-plus Board of Trustees had served on the AIPAC executive board and some were founders or Directors of pro-Israel Political Action Committees” (Ryan, 2010: 57). It also has a prominent position working with Congress on issues of foreign policy. Experts from the organisation are regularly consulted with, and asked to give congressional testimony. As we will see in chapters four and five, the Washington Institute is one of the most frequently consulted think tanks on foreign policy by Congress.

### **3.6 The Neoconservatives and their Relationship to AIPAC**

While there are several pro-Israel interest groups in the US, by far the largest and most important in terms of power and influence is AIPAC. Founded in 1953, AIPAC regularly funds educational trips for Congressmen and women to visit Israel. The US President and the Chairs of both the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee give annual addresses to AIPAC.

Although neoconservatives are often bracketed together with AIPAC and Israel; it is important to note that the two are not synonymous and should not be confused. While there is frequently a confluence of objectives, the two groups have differed on many occasions on the foreign policies they believe the US should adopt. As Heilbrunn points out, “People forget that people genuinely believe in these ideas. It’s not a conspiracy or something. I don’t think AIPAC hands out marching orders to AEI or things like that. I just think they have similar views and are working towards a similar objective” (Interview, Heilbrunn, 14<sup>th</sup> November, 2013). This section will examine some of the diverging preferences seen in recent history.

The threat that Iran poses to the state of Israel was first clearly articulated during the Clinton administration. In June 1992, Labor won the Israeli election over Likud, and Yitzhak Rabin took over from Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir. This change in power had a significant effect on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. As historian Avi Shlaim points out, “Whereas Labor is a pragmatic party committed to territorial compromise, the Likud is an ideological party committed to maintaining

the West Bank as part of the ancestral Land of Israel” (Shlaim, 2005: 243). Official talks which started at the Madrid Conference at the end of October 1991 had got nowhere, particularly because the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) was excluded as a result of supporting Iraq during its 1990 invasion of Kuwait. Therefore, a back channel was sought (Shlaim, 2005: 242). A decision was made to hold direct talks between Israel and the PLO by Prime Minister Rabin, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, and Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin (Shlaim, 2005: 243). There are differing accounts as to why Iran began to be regarded as a threat to Israel, but the first is set out by Steve Rosen, AIPAC’s Director of Foreign Policy at the time:

To have these secret negotiations in Oslo, President Clinton was much impressed that Rabin was taking such a risk for peace and he formed a close relationship with Rabin. And he said to Rabin, ‘I wanna help you’. And Rabin said to Clinton, ‘I can take care of the Palestinians, although it’s good to have America as a partner. But where I really need you is Iran’. And it was Yitzak Rabin who persuaded Bill Clinton that there was a looming Iranian threat (Interview, Rosen, 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2013).

Rosen goes on to say that Clinton asked Rabin what he could do to help Israel in this regard, and Rabin asked for the US to undertake a strategy of economic pressure on Iran - sanctions that would hurt the Iranian economy. In 1995, Clinton oversaw a significant intensification of US sanctions, as well as a number of Executive Orders against Iran. This was followed by the passing of the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) by Congress in 1996, which prevented practically all economic trade with Iran and penalised other countries who invested in Iran’s energy sector (Maloney, 2010: 139). AIPAC is said to have had a heavy influence on the legislation, with many claiming that the bill was largely authored by the interest group (Leverett et al, 2013: 310; Parsi, 2007: 188).

An alternative reading of the development of Iran as a major threat to Israel is laid out by former Chief Lobbyist at AIPAC, Douglas Bloomfield.

The reason AIPAC took on the Iran cause was because Rabin did not trust them and wanted to make sure they didn't screw up the peace process he was about to launch when he came to office 20 years ago. There were those at AIPAC who he specifically distrusted and knew from first-hand experience had tried in the past to sabotage peace efforts by Labor; he was prepared to publicly disavow AIPAC - in effect, take away its franchise - but after pleas from some of its deep-pocketed backers

he relented and told them to go after Iran, but keep out of the peace process (Interview, Bloomfield, 14<sup>th</sup> November, 2013).

Whatever the precise reason for the focus on Iran, it was nevertheless conceived of as a pre-eminent security threat to Israel. While the neoconservatives worked on making the case to go to war in Iraq in 2003, pro-Israel advocates were far less involved, and were lobbying, even at that time, for stronger action against Iran. President of the National American Iranian Council (NIAC), Trita Parsi, reports that Israeli officials came to Washington in 2002, just before the Iraq War, to argue that the real threat was Iran, and in fact, Iraq was necessary as a balance against Iran (Parsi, 2007: 239). When they failed to convince the administration to focus on Iran instead of Iraq, Israel changed tactic and accepted the decision to overthrow Saddam Hussein, though in the belief that Iran would be next on the list (Parsi, 2007: 240). In early 2002, Sharon revealed Israel's objective when he urged Washington to invade Iran "the day after" Iraq was crushed (Parsi, 2007: 240). In fact, groups like AIPAC largely 'went along' with Iraq, but found the push to go to war a digression and, for Rosen, this was inexplicable. He recalls,

We said, Saddam Hussain's in a box... He was weak. In 1991 we destroyed his armed forces, by 1997 he was pathetic. Yes, he was stealing some oil for food money, but that's all he had - peanuts! Whereas next door in Iran there was this giant growing - why are you so obsessed with Iraq and not Iran? (Interview, Rosen, 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2013).

In fact, the divergence created tensions between AIPAC and neoconservatives at the time. Rosen notes that, although there was (and is) an alliance between the neocons and AIPAC, it was an "imperfect relationship". He asserts,

The neocons were mad at AIPAC for not giving more support to the Iraq War. They were mad at people like me for not having closer relations with the Iraqi exiles - Chalabi and people like that. I had, I can tell you, some very difficult moments in my friendship with Dani Pletka and also with Michael Ledeen, who worked with Dani Pletka, about the Iraqi exiles. 'How come you're not meeting with them? They want to meet with you - they want your help. You're AIPAC, you can help them.' But I said, 'No', and they were pissed off. Conversely, we [AIPAC] were a little pissed off that they were just Iraq, Iraq, Iraq, all the time (Interview, Rosen, 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2013).

With regards to Syria, neoconservatives have been pushing hard for military intervention in the conflict since it began. However, AIPAC and Israel were initially

far less keen on this possibility (as discussed in chapter five). Similarly, the neoconservatives have differed markedly with AIPAC, as well as Israel, on their approach to the 2011 revolution in Egypt, and President Morsi's subsequent removal from power by the military in 2013. As a prominent neoconservative, Abrams pointed to the debate between many neoconservatives and some Israelis. He notes that Israel was in favour of supporting Mubarak, and now backs the current president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Abrams reports that his friends in Israel tell him, "He's on our side - he's against ISIS, he's against the Brotherhood, he's against Islamism, come on!" (Interview, Abrams, 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2014). However, as a strong advocate of liberal democracy, one of the key tenets of neoconservatism, Abrams believes that leaders such as el-Sisi are untenable in the long run:

But today what Sisi is doing is simply crushing political life in Egypt of all sorts, left, right and centre. And that'll work for a while, couple of years maybe. It won't work in the long run, particularly now, after the Arab Spring, that is people have, to a greater degree, found their voice and voted, freely (Interview, Abrams, 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2014).

Rosen confirms the disagreement between the two groups asserting that he "profoundly disagrees" with the view espoused by Abrams - and more widely by neoconservatism as an ideology - on democratisation. "I think that his [Abrams'] belief that democracies don't make war, and that if only we could bring about more representative governments in these societies that the region would be more stable and would be more benign, I don't think is true" (Interview, Rosen, 24<sup>th</sup> September, 2014). Rosen contests the assertion that democracies necessarily produce more benevolent and stable governments, and also disagrees with the contention that autocracies cannot have a long lifespan.

However, despite some of the significant differences outlined, AIPAC has often shared common goals with the neoconservatives depending on the issue. As is the case with many groups in the capital, Rosen notes that AIPAC and the neoconservatives work together when it is in their interests to do so. When neoconservatives had a strong presence in the executive during George W. Bush's first term, they had less need to seek the strength of AIPAC to promote their preferred policies. After 2005/6, the alliance between the two camps became

more efficacious as neoconservatives grappled with a diminution of power. During the Obama administration, the neoconservatives and AIPAC were closely aligned on the Syrian conflict, and almost completely in agreement on the Iran nuclear crisis. This has given strength to the network, and as we will see in later chapters, the level of agreement between these two elements of the network correlates closely with the realisation of its desired policy outcomes. In this thesis, when the neoconservatives are referred to as a discrete group, this indicates the neocon adherents based at think tanks and publications. However, when the neoconservative network is referred to, this indicates neoconservative thinkers plus AIPAC.

### 3.7 Neoconservative Narratives on Iran and Syria

Neoconservatives placed the policies they advocate towards Iran and Syria within well-known historical narratives during Obama's time in office in order to try to position it within conceptions of US the national interest. Neoconservatism, as a school of thought, is particularly well positioned to do this as it ties its formulation of the national interest to conceptions of national identity. As Ty Solomon points out, "Neoconservative discourse evokes a variety of images and narratives of American national identity, and much of its resonance is rooted in how it mobilises those elements of national identity" (Solomon, 2015: 114). This mobilisation has historically drawn on the definition of threats, and existential threats, in particular. The neoconservatives' first focus in this regard was Communism, and the ideological and existential threat they believed it to pose to the US, and indeed all liberal democracies. In this respect, with its Manichean<sup>1</sup> approach to the world, and emphasis on US exceptionalism, neoconservatism provides an ideal narrative with which to counter a threat so-conceived. Former neoconservative Francis Fukuyama notes that a degree of idealism, of the type neoconservatism contains, fits well with America's national identity and gives it traction as a school of thought, which other approaches may lack.

A certain degree of messianic universalism with regard to American values and institutions has always been an inescapable component of American national identity: Americans were never comfortable with the

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<sup>1</sup> Manichaeism is an ancient religion that breaks everything down into good or evil. It can also mean "duality", therefore if your thinking is *Manichean*, you see things in black and white.

kinds of moral compromises that a strict realist position entails (Fukuyama, 2004).

Solomon points to Podhoretz's 1976 *Commentary* article "Making the World Safe for Communism" as an example of particularly effective neoconservative discourse (Solomon, 2015). Podhoretz lays out why the US must be more aggressive against the Communist threat, a threat he characterises as impossible to deter (Podhoretz, 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1976). In this article, Podhoretz laments liberal and conservative tendencies towards isolationism after the Vietnam War, something he labels 'Vietnam Syndrome', after the US defeat. He contends that the US needs to overcome this lack of "will" which was causing an inward turn. The shift against foreign interventions after Vietnam is comparable to the mood witnessed in the US today where there has been scant public interest in the US getting involved militarily in the Middle East after the 2003 Iraq War. Neoconservatives have endeavoured to galvanise policymakers towards tougher US action on both Iran and Syria. Many have railed against the national mood against involvement, which is seen as a result of failures in the execution of the 2003 Iraq War. Kagan's much-discussed article in the *New Republic* in 2014 "Superpowers Don't Get to Retire: What our tired country still owes the world" is a call-to-arms reminiscent of Podhoretz's article in 1976. In it, Kagan makes the case for continued American internationalism, stressing that the US remains the most powerful country in the world and reminding readers that since WWII, America has promoted a liberal world order benefitting not only itself, but many other countries as well. He refers back to other periods when the US made a turn inward - deciding not to label this as isolationism (as Podhoretz did), preferring instead to call it "a search for normalcy". Kagan notes that the US made such a shift after the First World War,

To most Americans in the 1920s, the greatest risk to America came not from foreign powers but from those misguided 'internationalists' and the greedy bankers and war profiteers who would involve the nation in foreign conflicts that were none of America's business (Kagan, 2014: 5).

Of course, it would be easy to substitute the "1920s" for the current decade with complete plausibility, and this is part of Kagan's argument - that the US always seeks to turn inwards at regular junctures but then realises, or events force it to realise, that it cannot. It must stay engaged in the world, not just economically or diplomatically, but militarily. Kagan asserts that "The world judges that, were it

not for American war-weariness the United States probably would by now have used force in Syria” (Kagan, 2014: 29). He goes on to point out that for younger policymakers “the lesson of their generation” is that which has been drawn from the lengthy US wars in Iraq in 2003 and Afghanistan, “that America has neither the power nor the understanding nor the skill to fix all the problems in the world”. However, Kagan argues that this approach is “escapism”, and ultimately represents a flawed understanding of how the world functions, with some policymakers believing past problems were easier to fix than they are today.

The last section of Kagan’s essay refers to Steven Pinker’s observation that since 1945, the number of deaths, war, ethnic conflict, and military coups has declined, which Pinker contends is due to the world’s citizens becoming ‘socialised’ in favour of peace and non-violence. Kagan infers that this has occurred since the “American world order was established after World War II”, and that this trend gathered pace in the last two decades of the twentieth century when the Soviet Union crumbled, is not a coincidence. As he puts it, “The date when these changes began ought to be a tip-off” (Kagan, 2014: 31). In this way, he builds his case for the continued necessity of US interventions abroad, most pressingly in Syria.

While Communism was the original existential threat around which neoconservatism coalesced, since September 11 2001, Islamism or militant Islam has arguably become the main focus. As Heilbrunn argues,

I think the neoconservatives did have a coherent message and still do, which is that liberals in the United States are not to be trusted with defending American national security and that only by prosecuting a war against what they call Islamo-facism, can the United States protect itself (quoted in Smith, 19<sup>th</sup> February, 2008).

Neoconservatives David Frum and Richard Perle describe this phenomenon as “global jihad” in their book *An End to Evil: How to Win the War on Terror* (Frum and Perle, 2004: 106). They regard the ‘war on terror’ as an ongoing ideological struggle comparable to the struggle of previous decades against Communism. Frum and Perle assert that “We must destroy regimes implicated in anti-American terrorism”, and go on to stress, “We must discredit and defeat the extremist Islamic ideology that justifies and sustains terrorism” (Frum and Perle, 2004: 82).

Both the government in Iran, as well as ISIS in both Syria and Iraq, are described as examples of the growing danger of radical Islam, a problem that the neoconservative network casts as an existential threat to the US and the rest of world.

### **3.8 Conclusion**

Neoconservatism is a specific and identifiable movement which has its roots in the two main traditions of American political thought - liberalism and conservatism. Despite suggestions that the influence of neoconservatism has passed (Ikenberry, 2004), this thesis argues that it is still influential. This is due to not only to the ideology's roots in the mainstays of American political philosophy, but also to the impressive way in which the neoconservatives have succeeded in shifting the parameters of the debate with regards to foreign policy. Since the advent of the doctrine of pre-emption laid out in the NSS 2002, isolationist or dovish voices on foreign policy have been drowned out, while more aggressive, hard-line opinions have become the norm.

An expressly normative theory, neoconservatism has similarities to Idealism in the sense that it concentrates on what could and should be. Its principle of militarism serves to ensure American hegemony and also to guarantee the ability of the US to intervene abroad. Through the exercise of this principle, neoconservatism takes an expansive conception of America's national interest. The specifically ideological ethos of neoconservatism, combined with a propensity for military intervention, has come to define the movement.

Some, such as Williams, argue that neoconservatism should be more fully engaged with as theory of IR. He also stresses that the cultural resonance of its core tenets have ensured its durability as an approach.

Taking seriously the foundations of neoconservatism might thus lead one to be more reticent in predicting its imminent decline. This resilience, combined with its sophisticated intellectual foundations and considerable influence in foreign policy debates, makes it even more important that IR theory begin to engage critically with neoconservatism at the level of its theoretical foundations (Williams, 2005: 329).

This chapter sought to place neoconservatism within the context of IR theory, particularly realism, highlighting the similarities and differences between them in order to better enable an understanding of how neoconservatism approaches core issues in IR. Crucially, neoconservatism holds an expansive definition of the national interest, one which believes that this interest should be rooted in, and a reflection of, US values. Though it is frequently described as analogous to realism, neoconservatism has more differences with realism than it has similarities. The main stance shared by the two theories is on the efficacy of international institutions and international law, or lack thereof. Realism believes that both international law and institutions do not have an independent worth as they are merely a reflection of the balance of power. Neoconservatism regards them as an unnecessary constraint on US hegemony. Apart from this, there is little upon which realism and neoconservatism agree. They differ on their understanding of the efficacy of militarism, belief in unipolarity, conception of the national interest, and the value of taking an ideological approach to foreign policy.

During the Obama administration, neoconservative thinkers were based mostly in think tanks and publications. There are three think tanks which can be considered wholly neoconservative in orientation - FDD, FPI, and ISW, with further neoconservative experts in foreign policy based in think tanks such as AEI, CFR, and Brookings. These neoconservatives have mainly endeavoured to influence Congress. Neoconservatives have often diverged with AIPAC on what they believe the priorities and policies of US foreign policy ought to be, notably on the 2003 Iraq War and more recently on the Egyptian coup in 2013. However, on the issues of Syria and Iran their preferences for US policy coalesced, and they worked as a loose network. The remainder of this thesis examines the ways in which the neoconservative network endeavoured to influence US foreign policy towards the network's preferences on these two issues.

## CHAPTER 4 - IRAN: A CASE STUDY

### 4.1 Introduction

### 4.2 Historical Context - US-Iran Relations

### 4.3 Neoconservative Preferences towards Iran

### 4.4 Iran Policy during the Obama Administration

Executive Divergence from the Bush Administration and Congress

Congress and Iran

Think Tanks and Congress

### 4.5 Neoconservative Agenda Setting, Framing, and Legislation

Think Tanks and Policy Entrepreneurs

Congressional Hearings on Iran

Congressional Chairpersons

Legislation

### 4.6 Material Resources

### 4.7 Conclusion

## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter examines US-Iran relations during Obama's two terms in office, with a focus on the nuclear crisis. It argues that the neoconservative network not only succeeded in influencing the debate on Iran, particularly by promoting the tightening of sanctions, but also ensured that the threat of military force against Iran remained a salient part of the discussion within Congress, and by extension, the executive. Importantly, the network promoted contentious proposed legislation which intensified sanctions, denied Iran had the right to enrich uranium for any purpose, and committed the US to join military action against Iran if Israel were to begin strikes. The legislation ultimately did not pass; however, the fight in which the administration was forced to engage to prevent this bill from being enacted is testament to the continued influence of the neoconservative network. The network was able to ensure that it was successful on two key indicators of influence - its ideas became a prominent part of the debate, and actors within the network contributed to the creation of legislation.

From the start of the policy cycle to the creation of a bill, the network fed into the policy process in an effective way. In order to help set the agenda regarding US policy towards Iran, the neocon network was able to access key members of Congress and advocate policy positions, particularly to committee chairs and ranking minority members on the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the Senate

Foreign Relations Committee. These members are important as their position gives them stronger opportunities to set the agenda and make pivotal decisions with respect to bringing proposed legislation to the floor. This access was gained as key members of Congress held ideological preferences which are somewhat sympathetic to the network. Having gained access to members and congressional staff, the network was able to feed into the initial stages of a policy cycle by setting the agenda and framing the debate. At this stage, possible policy options are delineated, and others are marginalised or left off the agenda altogether. The network successfully contributed to the way the debate was framed, particularly as a significant number of neoconservative experts were invited to hearings. This allowed the network's preferences on policy to gain good exposure in Congress, ensuring it contributed heavily to framing the debate. In addition to hearings, individuals in the network met with members of Congress and their staff through private meetings and open briefings on Capitol Hill in order to try and influence the debate. Following this, key neoconservative policy entrepreneurs were able to assist with the formulation of legislation (actual and proposed), a direct route with which to influence policy.

The neoconservative network sought to frame the debate around four key issues. Firstly, the network refused to accept the possibility that any form of enrichment by the Iranian regime should be accepted by the US, even if it were for peaceful purposes. Secondly, it advocated escalating the sanctions on Iran with the stated purpose of strengthening the US's hand in negotiations, though some expressed the hope that the sanctions would cause the regime to collapse. Thirdly, and in partial contradiction to the previous frame, negotiations were presented as largely pointless, with the Iranian regime portrayed as at best irrational, and at worst apocalyptic. And finally, the network strove to ensure that military action was kept on the agenda, with many in the network arguing for regime change. On all four aspects of the issue, the neoconservative network took a stance at odds with the policy of the administration.

The network argued that introducing further legislation towards Iran was the main way in which Congress would have the ability to toughen the negotiating process between the permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (P5+1)

and Iran; opponents believed it would simply wreck any possible deal. Hawkish members of Congress, as well as the neoconservative network, also thought that it was likely to cause negotiations to break down. However, they considered negotiations to be largely futile because they believed Iran was not negotiating in good faith and had no intention of giving up (what they judged to be) its ultimate quest for a nuclear weapon. On all sides of the debate, it was acknowledged that a break-down in negotiations would put the US nearer to a military confrontation with Iran.

This case study highlights the contentious sanctions bill that was introduced into Congress shortly after the initial Joint Plan of Action (JPOA) was signed between Iran and the P5+1 on the 24<sup>th</sup> November, 2013. This interim agreement stated that Iran would roll-back and suspend elements of its nuclear programme in return for some limited relief from sanctions. The neoconservative network, as well as many in Congress, were unhappy with the agreement, which they saw as a 'bad deal'. Less than a month later, on the 19<sup>th</sup> December 2013, Senator Robert Menendez (D-NJ) introduced the *Nuclear Weapon Free Iran Act 2013* with Mark Kirk (R-IL) as co-sponsor, which stated that Iran did not have an inherent right to enrichment under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). It also stated that the US should continue to impose sanctions, and further, that if Israel took military action against Iran's nuclear weapon programme, the United States should provide Israel with diplomatic, military, and economic support. The Act was controversial as it laid bare the schism between the policy preferences of many in Congress and that of the executive on this issue, with Obama asserting in his State of the Union address that he would veto the bill if it succeeded in passing through the legislature (Obama, 28<sup>th</sup> January, 2014). The Iranian Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, stated that the negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 would break down if the US passed any further sanctions (Wright, 9<sup>th</sup> December 2013).

The fact that the bill came near to passing is testament to the power of the neoconservative network which not only assisted in creating the intellectual underpinning for the Act, but also engaged in consultations over the proposed legislation. As an important ally of the network, interview data indicated that AIPAC lobbied harder than it had for two decades in order to push for the bill to be

passed. Ultimately the network failed. While the neocon network was influential, the executive fought back hard, and this meant that the legislation did not pass. The fight in which the executive was forced to engage in order to prevent the bill from passing was a demonstration of the strength and power of the network.

The proposed legislation was adjusted and introduced again to the Senate on the 27<sup>th</sup> January 2015 as the *Nuclear Weapon Free Iran Act 2015*. Again, the administration lobbied hard to persuade members of Congress, and Democrats, in particular, not to support the bill which threatened to re-impose the sanctions that had been lifted on Iran immediately, as well as imposing an escalating series of new sanctions if a deal was not reached by the 6<sup>th</sup> July 2015. The final deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), between the P5+1 and Iran was signed on the 14<sup>th</sup> June 2015. A majority of members of Congress were against the JCPOA, and on 10<sup>th</sup> September, the Senate moved to block the deal by voting against it, by 58-42 (Siddiqui, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2015). The Democrats filibustered the vote (60 votes would have been required to overcome that filibuster). Had it not been filibustered, a vote against the deal would have passed easily through the House of Representatives (Phillips, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2015). Again, Obama declared that he would veto any congressional rejection of the agreement. This could have been overridden by Congress with a two-thirds vote in each chamber. However, in August, the Democrats secured enough votes - 34 - in support of the agreement to ensure that if Congress tried to override Obama's veto, it would fail (Phillips, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2015).

Speaking at the American University in Washington DC on the 5<sup>th</sup> August 2015, Obama described the deal as being firmly within the US tradition of strong, principled diplomacy. Stressing President Kennedy's commitment to peace, he observed how Kennedy "rejected the prevailing attitude among some foreign policy circles that equated security with a perpetual war footing" (Obama, 5<sup>th</sup> August 2015). Obama argued that opposition to the deal stems from the same worldview, and many of the same people, who argued for the invasion of Iraq in 2003. He asserted,

Now, when I ran for President eight years ago as a candidate who had opposed the decision to go to war in Iraq, I said that America didn't just

have to end that war, we had to end the mindset that got us there in the first place. It was a mindset characterized by a preference for military action over diplomacy; a mindset that put a premium on unilateral US action over the painstaking work of building international consensus; a mindset that exaggerated threats beyond what the intelligence supported (Obama, 5<sup>th</sup> August 2015).

Obama went on to say, “So let’s not mince words, the choice we face is ultimately between some form of diplomacy or some form of war”. In this speech, Obama appears to criticise neoconservatism as a school of thought.

First, this chapter sets out the historical context for the animosity which exists between Iran and the US. It then outlines neoconservative preferences for US policy towards Iran. Next, there is a focus on the Obama administration’s policies on Iran, before an examination of the preferences of Congress and the extent to which they cohered with neoconservative approaches. Following this, there is a detailed assessment of the neoconservatives who were involved in the policy process based mainly on interview data. Further, an examination of the think tanks asked to speak at congressional hearings is conducted before congressional testimony, both written and oral, is analysed. This analysis is in order to calculate not only how frequently neoconservative experts were asked to testify - and therefore the extent to which their ideas gained exposure - but also to evaluate the extent to which they succeeded in framing the debate. The chapter then turns to an examination of the controversial sanctions legislation proposed at the end of 2013, before focusing on AIPAC’s role in promoting the legislation. Finally, the chapter explores the role of funders within the network.

## **4.2 Historical Context: US-Iran Relations**

Iran and the US have a history of animosity which has now developed into a paradigm of enmity. Both sides hold grievances, and both have fashioned their foreign policies, in part, in opposition to the other. For Iran, the animosity dates back to the 1953 CIA and M16-backed coup, Operation Ajax, which removed the democratically-elected Mohammad Mosaddeq and replaced him with the Shah. After the installation of the Shah, the US and Iran were functional allies, and the CIA assisted the Shah in setting up a centralised secret police - the SAVAK - in 1957. The SAVAK helped the Shah to crush opposition to his dictatorship; however,

when in 1957, the Chief of Military Intelligence General Valiollah Qarani tried to overthrow the Shah, he became distrustful of the CIA and attempted to replace CIA officials with advisors from Mossad - the Israeli secret intelligence service (Ghanji, 2006: 30). This was not the first time, nor would it be the last, when the Israelis would work with Iran on security issues (Parsi, 2007).

Iranian resentment was deepened by American support for Iraq in the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq War. Iraq invaded Iranian territory on 22nd September 1980; however, it took the international community (via the UN) until the 1991 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait to acknowledge that Iraq was the aggressor. Joost Hiltermann suggests, having examined Iran's correspondence to the UN over this period, that the number one priority for Iran was to receive an acknowledgment that Iraq had started the war (Blight et al, 2013: 77). He argues that this issue has tremendous significance for the Iranian narrative (Blight et al, 2013: 78), and underscores its importance in subsequent Iranian mistrust towards the US. Hiltermann contends,

In my opinion, the way the Security Council responded to the invasion deeply colored the way the Iranians view the conflict retrospectively, and it also deeply colors their view of the United States as a mortal enemy of the Islamic Republic (Blight et al, 2013: 76).

In addition, the lack of condemnation from the US administration over the Iraqi use of chemical weapons, as well as the continued US support for Iraq after these attacks took place, helped solidify Iranian animosity towards the US. Iraq used chemical weapons throughout the war against Iran, and there is a wealth of evidence that the US explicitly knew that this was happening (Tyler, 2009: 329). In March 1988, Saddam Hussain's worst attack took place against the Kurds in Halabja in which approximately 5,000 people died (Human Rights Watch, 11<sup>th</sup> March 1991). Later investigations of Iraqi secret police documents and declassified US government documents, along with interviews with Iraqi defectors, former US intelligence officers, and also survivors of the attack, indicate that the US knew Iraq was responsible for the attack but accused Iran of being partly responsible (Hiltermann, 17<sup>th</sup> January 2003). Indeed, "The State Department instructed its diplomats to say that Iran was partly to blame" (Hiltermann, 17<sup>th</sup> January 2003).

The shooting down of Iran Air Flight 655 on 3rd July 1988 by the US Navy in Iranian airspace further solidified the enmity felt by Iran. The USS Vincennes shot the

plane down killing all 290 passengers and crew. When the crew of the Vincennes saw the plane on their radar, they came to the conclusion it was an F-14 Iranian warplane. They thought the aircraft was descending towards the ship, when in fact it was ascending from Bandar Abbas airport in Iran (Axworthy, 2014: 276). Another US ship that was close by, the USS Sides, came to the correct conclusion with the same data, and investigations found that the crew on the Vincennes experienced a phenomenon called “scenario fulfilment syndrome”, which is when information that does not fit with the chosen interpretation of events is discounted (Axworthy, 2014: 276). Unsurprisingly, given these events, and the fact that the Vincennes was in Iranian waters as part of US actions to guard shipping carrying Iraqi oil in the Persian Gulf (Axworthy, 2014: 275), Iran came to the conclusion the attack was deliberate.

The Iranian Revolution in 1979 was a surprise to the US administration. Former CIA agent, Charles Cogan, remarked, “The Islamic Revolution came as a big shock to the US. We didn’t expect it, we didn’t understand it, and we didn’t know what to do about it” (Blight et al, 2013: 63). The ousted Shah was ill with cancer and sought medical treatment in the US; however, Bruce Laingen, the Chargé d’affaires or head of the diplomatic mission and one of the US officials held during the hostage crisis, warned the administration against allowing this to go ahead shortly before the ensuing crisis (Blight et al, 2013: 57). President Carter was the last person in the administration to agree to let the Shah into the US, and Hamilton Jordan (Chief of Staff to Carter) reports that Carter specifically noted to his advisors that he hoped they had a plan if the American embassy was taken over (Blight et al, 2013: 61). It turns out, of course, that this is exactly what occurred, and the taking of hostages in the US embassy sparked a national public resentment in US towards Iran, which has largely lasted until the present day.

The taking of hostages from the US embassy in Tehran by Iranian students on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1979, was a defining moment in the conceptualisation of Iran for many Americans. The hostages were held for 444 days, and this crisis, as well as the aborted rescue mission ordered by Carter, received unprecedented television coverage. Network news channel, ABC, broadcast a late-night special “America Held Hostage”, which quickly became a daily show. By 1980 it was renamed

“Nightline” and presented by Ted Koppel. Well-known news anchor, Walter Cronkite, finished his week-night newscast with a sign-off noting the number of days the hostages had been held in captivity. As James F. Larson points out, “The Iran hostage crisis was quintessentially visual in nature” and for many Americans evokes scenes of angry Iranian crowds, and armed students taking control of the embassy, as well as images of dead servicemen from a crashed helicopter which had been due to take part in the rescue mission (Larson, 1986: 108). For Kurt Lang and Gladys Engle Lang, the event became a shared experience for the American public seared in the memories of the millions of viewers who watched it (Lang and Lang, 1984: 213). It is also a shared memory for many members of the present-day US government. Former Chief of Staff of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Yleem Poblete, recalls being very young and watching images of the crisis unfold. “I remember vividly asking my parents for permission to watch television late at night. Every night I would watch what later became “Nightline”. I remember that vividly” (Interview, Poblete, 25th September 2014).

American hostility towards Iran deepened when, in October 1983, a suicide bomber driving a truck drove into the US Marine barracks in Beirut killing 241 American servicemen. 20 seconds later, another suicide bomber drove into the French barracks headquarters in Beirut killing 59 French Paratroopers (Fisk, 2001: 515; Tyler, 2009: 291). It is suggested the bombers were Lebanese (Tyler, 2009: 520); however, evidence pointed to collusion with Iran (Tyler, 2009: 292). Augustus Richard Norton asserts that there is little doubt that the bombings were undertaken by Lebanese Shia militants under the direction of Iran, and that Iran is believed to have been responsible for the destruction of the US embassy in Beirut by a suicide bomber earlier the same year (Norton, 2007: 71). In any case, The US ascribed the attack to Iran. This attack was a huge blow to the Reagan administration with the US losing more men on that day than on any single day during the Vietnam War (Fisk, 2001: 515), and further entrenched American attitudes towards Iran.

In sum, for the past 35 years, the US and Iran have held widespread popular narratives in which each condemns the other as a fundamental enemy. In many ways, the Islamic Republic of Iran was set up as a revisionist state in opposition to

the US, but also to Russia. This *raison d'être* has meant that many in the US regard Iran as impossible to negotiate with. Kissinger pointed to this dynamic in 2008 when he urged negotiations between the two states, but stressed that Iran needed to decide "whether it is a nation or a cause" before it is possible for it to take its place in the international system (Kissinger, 24<sup>th</sup>/25<sup>th</sup> May 2008). Crucially, after the Revolution, decision makers in Iran thought of Israel as almost synonymous with the US. "Often no distinction was made between Washington and Tel Aviv; while the United States was the 'Great Satan', Israel was 'Little America' (Parsi, 2007: 83). Iran supported UN Resolution 242 which called for Israel to give back the land it captured in the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, and in the early 1970s urged the US to pressure Israel to make peace with the Arab states (Parsi, 2007: 71). Rather like the US, in Iran "the Jewish State was commonly seen as an aggressive, imperialist power" (Parsi, 2007: 62). Therefore, opposition to the US quickly and easily solidified and coalesced with opposition to Israel. Trita Parsi convincingly contends that animosity between Iran and Israel is fundamentally a rivalry based on both states' quest for regional hegemony rather than an ideological clash (Parsi, 2007). During his reign, the Shah allied with the US and was sharply critical of Israel, particularly over its treatment of the Palestinians, whilst continuing to collaborate clandestinely with Israel on security issues (Parsi, 2007).

In the eyes of the Iranian revolutionaries, and possibly still today, the US has sought to prevent Iran from taking what they regard as its rightful place as regional hegemon. While the Shah sought to achieve regional dominance by allying with the US, whilst rhetorically criticising Israel and giving large loans to neighbouring Arab countries, the revolutionaries tried to achieve this by befriending neighbouring Arab states and by attempting to "bridge the Arab-Persian divide through political Islam" (Parsi, 2007: 89).

Recent history saw Iran co-operate with, and even assist, the US when it came to its war in Afghanistan in 2001. Iran did not have good relations with the Taliban regime, and these relations got worse in September 1998 when nine Iranian diplomats were killed in the course of a Taliban offensive in northern Afghanistan. At this juncture, Iran and the Taliban nearly came into direct conflict when Iran threatened military action, and moved a large number of Iranian troops to the

border (Boon et al, 2001: 480). Iran co-operated with the US during the 2001 war to oust the Taliban and offered search and rescue assistance to the US, as well as allowing humanitarian aid to travel through Iran on its way to Afghanistan. Iran also moved to assist in setting up the new Afghan government with the US at the December 2001 conference in Bonn (Boon et al, 2001: 480). The Iranians' lead negotiator at the time, Zarif, is cited as the only person who was able to persuade the Northern Alliance's representative, Yunus Qanooni, to accept fewer of the 24 government ministries than it was originally demanding, which meant the conference succeeded in reaching an agreement (Parsi, 2007: 229). However, initial tentative co-operation between the US and Iran on Afghanistan turned sour with the interception of the ship *Karine A* by Israel in international waters in the Red Sea. There are several differing accounts about what happened regarding *Karine A*; however, the ship was carrying 50 tonnes of Iranian-made weapons which Israel claims were destined for use by the Palestinian Authority (Whitaker, 21<sup>st</sup> January 2002). Khatami told the US government, through the Swiss, that the Iranian regime had no knowledge of the shipment (Axworthy, 2014: 358). James Dobbins, the Bush administration's special envoy to Afghanistan, recounts that Zarif asserted the same at the Tokyo conference of donors to Afghanistan which took place a few days after the ship had been seized (Dobbins, January 2010: 155). What is certain is that both Israel and the US believed that there was Hezbollah involvement, and the capturing of the ship in January 2002 meant that co-operation between the US and Iran faltered. Zarif noted that "In a matter of a few days, a policy of co-operation was transformed into a policy of confrontation" (Parsi, 2007: 234).

Shortly after the *Karine A* affair, George W. Bush made his State of the Union address in which he referred to Iran as part of an "axis of evil", an axis which included Iraq and North Korea (Bush, 29<sup>th</sup> January, 2002). The speech was written by Bush's chief speechwriter Michael Gerson, and the phrase "axis of evil" incorporated part of a memo on Iraq written by fellow administration speechwriter and neoconservative, David Frum. As Frum recounts, "To my amazement, my Iraq memo was incorporated almost verbatim. Gerson wanted to use the theological language that Bush had made his own since September 11<sup>th</sup> - so 'axis of hatred' became 'axis of evil'" (Frum, 2003: 238). The phrase became infamous and Iran

was deeply offended not only by the sentiment, but by being placed alongside Iraq and North Korea as part of the axis (Axworthy, 2014: 359).

Once the Taliban had been toppled in 2001 and US forces had occupied Baghdad by 9<sup>th</sup> April, 2003, Iran saw that the US controlled the countries on two of its key borders. At this point, the Iranians came up with a proposal that has become known as the “grand bargain”. According to Parsi, leaders in Iran made this offer to try to prevent the US from targeting Iran next, in a continuation of what they saw as a US policy of regime change. They were alarmed when they saw neoconservative think tanks and institutes in Washington DC advocating this course of action (Parsi, 2007: 240). The first draft was written by the Iran’s ambassador to France, Sadegh Kharrazi. It was then sent to the Supreme Leader Khamenei for approval, and then finally to Zarif, who was UN Ambassador at the time, for review and final edits (Parsi, 2007: 243). The “bargain” consisted of the Iranians proposing that they would: stop assisting Hamas and Islamic Jihad; support the disarmament of Hezbollah to turn into a solely political organisation; agree to intrusive international inspections of its nuclear programme; give full co-operation against terrorist organisations; and finally accept the Beirut Declaration of the Arab League from 2002 in which the Arab states had offered to make peace with Israel as a group (Parsi, 2007: 224). This proposal was sent to Washington via the Swiss Ambassador, Tim Guldemann. Because there were no formal diplomatic relations between the US and Iran, Switzerland was acting as protector of US interests in Iran, and therefore was sought out in order to deliver the communication to the US (Parsi, 2007:246). However, the Bush administration did not respond to the document (Leverett et al, 2013: 123; Dobbins, January 2010: 157).

Not all of those involved accept that the offer was genuine. Neocon Elliott Abrams, Bush’s National Security Advisor at the time, contends that it was “entirely fictitious”, and almost entirely the creation of the ambassador who he describes as quite ambitious and excessively officious.

He may have had some indications from some people in the Iranian government but I do not believe - and none of us who were in the government then believed that this was a serious offer from the Supreme Leader of a “grand bargain” for the United States. Therefore,

we don't regret not accepting, we regret the creation of a myth (Interview, Abrams, 18<sup>th</sup> September 2014).

Other neoconservatives, such as Michael Rubin, have written similar critiques (Rubin, 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2007). Similarly, Michael Singh, in government at the time, states that “it was not considered an authoritative offer” (Interview, Singh, 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2014). However, many dispute this, and refer to a schism in the Bush administration between those, such as Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Advisor Condoleeza Rice, who thought the offer should be positively considered and those, such as Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who decided it should be dismissed out of hand (Axworthy, 2014: 361). In September 2014, at an event held by the Council of Foreign Relations, Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif appeared to refer to the offer made in 2002 while discussing the current sanctions in place against Iran,

Before these sanctions were imposed, I suggested a package that everybody now says we wish we would have accepted that package, that would have limited Iran's enrichment program to a very small number of centrifuges. That package was rejected so that sanctions could be imposed (Zarif, 17<sup>th</sup> September 2014).

Whether a deal was offered or not, no deal was made. Iran was in a weak position, with the US appearing to have had a swift victory in Iraq at that juncture. President Khatami's chief nuclear negotiator, (future President) Hassan Rouhani, agreed to sign the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) Additional Protocol which accepts more rigorous inspections at Iran's nuclear sites. It was never ratified, nonetheless, the Additional Protocol was implemented from 2003 to 2006 (The Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, 14<sup>th</sup> July 2015). In 2004, Iran agreed to suspend enrichment, a decision that was criticised and quickly rejected when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came to power in June 2005.

Towards the end of 2006, speculation was increasing in the press that either the US or Israel would launch an attack on Iran's nuclear sites (Baker et al, 9<sup>th</sup> April 2006). There were even some who suggested the Second Lebanon War between Israel and Lebanon in 2006 was supported by the US because “[it] could ease Israel's security concerns and also serve as a prelude to a potential American pre-emptive attack to destroy Iran's nuclear installations” (Hersh, 2006). However, the Bush administration was increasingly tied up in Iraq with Iran consistently gaining

influence within the country due to its majority Shi'a population. General David Petraeus told the Senate:

It is increasingly apparent to both coalition and Iraqi leaders that Iran, through the use of the Iranian Republican Guard Corp Quds Force, seeks to turn the Shi'a militia extremists into a Hezbollah-like force to serve its interests and fight a proxy war against the Iraqi state and coalition forces (Petraeus, 24<sup>th</sup> September 2007).

Plans were made by both the US and Israel to strike Iran, in particular during 2006/7; however, with the ongoing conflict in Iraq, there were many in the US military and intelligence services who believed such a strike would be a mistake (Baker et al, 9<sup>th</sup> April 2006). Some advocated engagement with Iran. For example, at the end of 2006, the Baker-Hamilton Commission - set up to report on the Iraq War - delivered its report, and recommended Bush to engage with Iran and Syria; however, that was rejected.

Since 2006, Israel started to warn that it would strike Iran's nuclear facilities if its programme was not stopped by other means (Axworthy, 2014: 385). There were also some in the US administration - led by Bush and Cheney who seriously considered military action against Iran; however, senior military commanders were strongly against this idea (Axworthy, 2014: 386). Around this time, the 2007 US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) assessed "with high confidence that, in the fall of 2004, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons programme" (National intelligence Estimate, November 2007; Axworthy, 2014). Some suggested that the NIE, which played down the risk emanating from Iran, was the vehicle with which intelligence experts in the US system pushed back against any proposals for military action (Axworthy, 2014: 386).

Nevertheless, despite being unconvinced of the case for a strike on their nuclear facilities, Bush saw Iran as a pre-eminent threat to the US and to the rest of the world. He framed the threat from Iran in terms of the promotion of fundamentalism. Speaking to journalist Robert Draper, Bush asserted,

The Iranian issue is the strategic threat right now facing a generation of Americans, because Iran is promoting an extreme form of religion. Iran's a destabilising force. And instability in that part of the world has deeply adverse consequences, like energy falling into the hands of extremist people that would use it to blackmail the West. And to couple all of that

with a nuclear weapon, then you've got a dangerous situation (quoted in Draper, 2008: xii).

This assertion of the imminent threat from Iran was made more pressing by the breakdown of talks between the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and Iran, and a bellicose Ahmadinejad who regularly made provocative remarks towards either the US or Israel. The hostile atmosphere between the US and Iran was not eased when Ahmadinejad was re-elected after a controversial election in June 2009.

### 4.3 Neoconservative Preferences

It is necessary to establish neoconservative preferences on policy towards Iran in order to assess the extent to which their ideas were adopted. As might be expected, given the key tenets of neoconservatism set out in chapter three, neoconservatives attempted to influence US policy towards a more hawkish position on Iran. They also sought to set the terms of the debate, i.e. influence the discourse surrounding the crisis. Referring to US-Iran policy, Jacob Heilbrunn argues that the neoconservatives are “trying to create the context in which a war becomes inevitable” (Interview, Heilbrunn, 14<sup>th</sup> November 2013).

Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson, Colin Powell's former Chief of Staff similarly contends that Iran policy is a key area of concern for neoconservatives. He asserts that while neoconservative influence reached its “zenith” when it was “allied with the hyper-nationalism of national security elites such as Richard Cheney, David Addington<sup>2</sup>, and others in the first George W. Bush administration, 2001-2005”, it did not “wholly disappear”.

Moreover, neoconservative influence over foreign and security policy - from outside of government principally but from time to time inside as well - has been most readily apparent in US-Iran policy, particularly as that influence displays itself in intense efforts to derail the Obama administration's diplomatic approach to the Iranian nuclear challenge. Simply stated, the neoconservatives want in Iran what they think they achieved in Iraq: regime change (Interview, Wilkerson, 21<sup>st</sup> November 2013).

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<sup>2</sup> David Addington was the Chief of Staff to former Vice President Dick Cheney.

Neoconservatives have been pushing for military action on Iran for some years. Indeed, the neoconservatives who were influential in pushing for war with Iraq, were also very keen to see regime change take place in Iran (Ehsani and Toensing 2004: 10). Despite this, and although Ariel Sharon had been stressing that Iran is an “existential threat” to Israel and a threat to American security as early as 2002, the neoconservatives in the US at the time were engaged with presenting Iraq as the most imminent threat to US security. To the chagrin of Israel (and AIPAC) Iran was not at the top of their agenda. In an interview with *The Times* on November 5th, 2002, Sharon described Iran as the “centre of world terror” and emphasised that after the Iraq war is over, he would try and ensure that Iran was at the top of the US “to do” list (quoted in Fayazmanesh, 2008: 118).

In 2003, after the start of the Iraq War, neocons Richard Perle and David Frum wrote *An End To Evil* where they began to set out their case for regime change in Iran. They were adamant, “The mullahs are pursuing a bomb” and argue that Iran had learnt lessons from Israel’s air strikes against Iraq’s Osirak reactor and placed their facilities all over the country (Frum and Perle, 2004: 93). Perle and Frum declared, “In any event, the problem in Iran is much bigger than the weapons. The problem is the terrorist regime which seeks the weapons. The regime must go” (Frum and Perle, 2004: 93). Other prominent neoconservatives were also calling for the fall of the Iranian regime. Founder and editor of the neoconservative *The Weekly Standard* and co-founder of the Project for a New American Century, William Kristol, wrote, “the liberation of Iraq was the first great battle for the future of the Middle East... But the next great battle - not, we hope, a military battle - will be for Iran” (Kristol, 12<sup>th</sup> May 2003). Similarly, Michael Ledeen, former consultant to the National Security Council, State Department and the Department of Defense, and currently Freedom Scholar at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), wrote,

There is no more time for diplomatic ‘solutions’. We will have to deal with the terror masters, here and now. Iran, at least, offers us the possibility of a memorable victory, because the Iranian people openly loathe the regime, and will enthusiastically combat it, if only the United States supports them in their just struggle (Ledeen, 4<sup>th</sup> April 2003).

By 2006, with the Iraq war already a reality, the neoconservatives began to focus on the Iranian threat. During the Second Lebanon war in July 2006, neoconservatives expressly linked the war between Israel and Hezbollah to Iran. During the war, Ledeen, asserted:

No one should have any lingering doubts as to what is going on in the Middle East, it's war [and] there is a common prime mover, and that is the Iranian mullahcracy, and the revolutionary Islamic fascist state that declared war on us 27 years ago and has yet to be held accountable (Ledeen, 2006a).

William Kristol stressed the same link. During the war, he argued that the US should confront Iran, and pursue regime change in Iran and Syria, as both states sponsor terrorist groups - Hezbollah, in particular. Kristol suggested, "We might consider countering this act of Iranian aggression with a military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities. Why wait? ..This is our war too." (Kristol 2006). For neoconservatives, the preference is to go after the state backers who fund and support terrorist groups rather than take on groups such as Hezbollah individually.

Neoconservatives have been depicting the regime in Iran as an irrational actor governed by religious extremists for around two decades (Parsi 2007). This characterisation has become largely accepted in the US, as a result of the historical animosity between the two countries since the Iranian Revolution. This has important implications as it serves to enable US military action against Iran to be constructed as an acceptable, and even at some stage necessary, eventuality (Adib-Moghaddam 2007; Parsi 2007; Parsi 2012). Prominent neoconservative voices have been bellicose in their preference for a military strike on Iran. For the most part, disagreement within the network tends to be over whether the US should conduct limited strikes directed only at nuclear facilities (Boot, 2012; Kroenig, 2012) or whether strikes should be more comprehensive taking in a broad range of targets with the express goal of regime change (Fly and Schmitt, 2012).

Neoconservative policy preferences have particular traction as part of a network, and on the issue of Iran AIPAC is an important element of the network. As this thesis argues, when a network contains a powerful interest group such as AIPAC, it

not surprisingly has more chance of tangibly shaping, and influencing the debate. This has been notable on the area of Iran and the nuclear crisis. As far as helping to drive the political decision to impose sanctions, the influence of AIPAC was often set out by interviewees as an important factor. Heilbrunn notes that, “They’re [the neocons] constantly looking to push the debate. And Iran is the prime example right now.” He continues, “The neocons obviously would like to promote a new war against Iran” (Interview, Heilbrunn, 14<sup>th</sup> November 2013).

#### **4.4 Iran Policy during the Obama Administration**

##### *Executive Divergence from the Bush administration and Congress*

The executive diverged with the previous administration as well as the neoconservative network, and many in Congress, to implicitly accept Iran’s right to enrich uranium after the interim agreement between the P5+1 and Iran in 2013. On the issue of Iran, AIPAC and the neoconservatives’ views were aligned allowing them to work together as a strong and unified network. While some in Congress supported sanctions against Iran in order to put pressure on the Iranians and force them to the negotiating table, others supported sanctions as a step towards regime change. The neoconservative network was in favour of this route, which is why it did not support the interim agreement.

While Obama declared that he sought engagement with Iran from the start of his presidency, he kept the existing sanctions in place. He quickly declared his willingness to participate in direct talks. In a Nowruz<sup>3</sup> video message directed to the citizens of Iran he asserted, “We seek...engagement that is honest and grounded in mutual respect” (Obama, 20<sup>th</sup> March 2009). Obama also sent two private letters to Khamenei offering not only reconciliation but reassurance that he was not seeking to overthrow the Iranian government (Pollack, 2013: 123).

However, this effort towards engagement was hampered when Ahmadinejad was re-elected by what many, including a significant portion of Iranians, saw as a rigged vote (Axworthy, 2014: 402). Obama continued the carrot-and-stick approach that Bush had adopted during his presidency, although his policy was more carrot than stick, in contrast to Bush who had emphasised the opposite (Pollack, 2013:

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<sup>3</sup> Nowruz marks the beginning of the year in the Persian calendar.

121-122). The approach was labelled the 'Dual-Track' policy and was effectively a combination of sanctions and diplomacy. Congress was particularly keen on tightening and increasing sanctions. As argued in this chapter, the neoconservative network, in particular, advocated the escalation of sanctions, with many expressly indicating a preference for regime change. Iran's failed talks with the P5+1 in October 2009, helped give hard-line voices within Congress traction. Parsi contends that, "The pressure from Congress hardened the administration's approach towards Iran and inhibited the White House's manoeuvrability" (Parsi, 2012: 105).

In 2010, Obama signed the *2010 Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act* (CISADA), which amended the *Iran Sanctions Act* (ISA) to make sales of gasoline and related equipment and material also subject to sanctions. Further, in November 2011, Obama signed Executive Order 13590 which expanded ISA again to cover sales from the energy sector (including petrochemical) equipment and services (Katzman, 16<sup>th</sup> July 2012: 4). The European Union (EU) also adopted tougher policies towards Iran from Obama's first term. In June 2010, in a move similar to the prohibitions set out by Congress, EU firms were banned from investing or providing assistance to Iran's energy sector (European Commission, 19<sup>th</sup> November 2013).

The election of Hassan Rouhani on the 4th of August 2013 signalled that the regime was under increasing pressure to reform. Sanctions had had a substantial effect on Iran's economy, not least due to the loss of oil revenue. Oil exports finance almost half of Iran's government expenditures (Katzman, 2013). Katzman reports that the loss of oil revenues and Iran's exclusion from the international banking system caused a sharp fall in the rial which increased inflation to over 50%, depleted Iran's reserves of foreign exchange, and meant a lot of Iran's oil revenues went unused in third-country accounts (Katzman, 2013). This situation caused many observers to suggest that the increase in sanctions over Obama's first term had had an impact in bringing Iran to the negotiating table increasingly willing to strike a deal. This was the general line taken by the administration. Others, mainly in Congress, argued that, as sanctions brought Iran back to the table, they needed to be augmented in order to increase the pressure on its leaders to suspend the

enrichment of uranium altogether. This divergence of opinion reflected a split between those in the US government who were tacitly willing to accept Iran's right to enrich uranium for peaceful civilian energy purposes, and those (including the neoconservative network) who rejected that Iran has any right to enrich uranium whatsoever.

While the Obama administration had the same stated goal as that of George W. Bush - to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon - the two presidents had different bottom lines, and this had important ramifications. Bush made it clear throughout both of his terms in office that the US would not accept any enrichment of uranium by Iran. Obama was far less clear on this issue. While the Bush administration would only begin talks with Iran after Iran suspended enriching uranium, the Obama administration did not set such a precondition. And further, after the initial Joint Plan was agreed at the end of 2013 (the interim agreement), it was clear that there had been an implicit acceptance of that right. The opening of the agreement states that, "The goal for these negotiations is to reach a mutually-agreed long-term comprehensive solution that would ensure Iran's nuclear program will be exclusively peaceful". By acknowledging the programme into the future, the plan appeared to accept its ongoing existence. It goes on to say that, "This comprehensive solution would enable Iran to fully enjoy its right to nuclear energy for peaceful purposes under the relevant articles of the NPT in conformity with its obligations therein" (Iran and the P5+1, 24<sup>th</sup> November 2013). Former Director of the National Security Agency (NSA) and the CIA, Michael Hayden, agrees, "Let's be honest with ourselves, we have accepted Iranian uranium enrichment. There is no question about that" (Miller, 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2013).

### *Congress and Iran*

Neoconservative understandings of the nuclear crisis with Iran found a receptive audience from many in Congress, particularly sections of the Republican Party. Given the historical enmity between the US and Iran, neocon ideas also resonated with the public. The neoconservative network framed Iran as a country whose leaders are religious radicals with whom it is futile to negotiate, and therefore they advocated regime change. In retaining this goal, the network also worked hard to ensure the option of military action remained in discussions.

Iran policy, as far as Congress is concerned, has mainly taken the form of sanctions since the Iranian revolution in 1979, and in particular since the enactment of the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) in August 1996. ILSA was designed to prevent Iran from obtaining the resources to develop its nuclear programme, as well as to try and stop, or roll back, Iran's support for organisations such as Hezbollah and Hamas. While it is not the only programme of US sanctions against Iran, it is notable because it is an 'extra-territorial' sanction in that it authorises sanctions against foreign firms, some of which are based in countries allied to the US (Katzman, 2013: 1). Kenneth Katzman, Iran expert at the Congressional Research Service, who has been directly involved in Iran sanctions since ILSA, notes that, "The opportunity for the United States to try and harm Iran's energy sector came in November 1995, when Iran opened the sector to foreign investment" (Katzman, 2013: 2). Several interviewees also noted that AIPAC took a large role in helping draft ILSA. For example, Dr Jon Alterman, Director, Middle East Program at CSIS, notes that "The Iran Sanctions Act, I think was initially drafted by AIPAC" (Interview, Alterman, 7<sup>th</sup> November 2013). Flynt Leverett, former Senior Director for Middle East Affairs on the National Security Council (NSC), Hillary Mann Leverett, former Director for Iran, Afghanistan and Persian Gulf Affairs on the NSC, and Trita Parsi concur with this understanding (Parsi, 2007: 188; Leverett and Leverett, 2013: 310). When it was due to expire in 2001, AIPAC lobbied for the bill to be renewed with minor modifications. It was renamed the Iran Sanctions Act (ISA) and the amended bill eventually passed with large majorities in both chambers (Parsi, 2007: 224-225). From 2006, the UN Security Council also imposed sanctions on Iran for its nuclear activities, sanctions it eventually lifted in accordance with the JCPOA in 2015.

Members of Congress are overwhelmingly negatively-disposed towards Iran, as most interviewees noted, something which helped to create the space for neoconservative ideas to gain traction. Politicians in both parties consistently voice concern over Iran and stress the necessity of confronting the state (Pillar, 2013: 211). Former Chief Lobbyist at AIPAC, Doug Bloomfield, describes this dynamic, "On Iran, there's not a single person in the US Congress that would call themselves friendly to Iran, even well-disposed or open-minded to Iran. So Iran is the ultimate bad guy. There is no trouble running against a bad guy" (Interview,

Bloomfield, 14<sup>th</sup> November 2013). Being tough on foreign policy in general is popular with the public, something understood by members of Congress. In this context, neoconservative policy preferences on Iran find a receptive audience. Many of the ideological preferences of congressional members align well with neoconservative conceptions of the nuclear crisis. While this is more accurate with respect to Republicans, it is also true of many key figures in the Democratic Party. When Obama came to office, the Democrats had control of both the House and the Senate. This changed in November 2010 when the Republicans retook the House, and again in January 2015 when they also took control of the Senate. Overall, the Democrats are more in favour of placing an emphasis on diplomacy; however, some Democrats in particular positions of influence, for example chairpersons and ranking minority members, were sympathetic to an approach to Iran which fits well within a neoconservative frame.

Deputy Assistant to President Obama, Colin Kahl, explains why neoconservative arguments resonate so readily with the US public when it comes to Iran. “Iran is [a] country that fits very easily in that category where the frame that neoconservatives would use to describe adversaries fits perfectly with how most Americans already perceive Iran”. He elaborates on this,

I think it’s because their core argument about this is an evil regime that does evil things and is pursuing evil weapons and therefore must be destroyed in one way or another, either through economic ruin or military action, is something that deeply resonates with how most Americans think about the Islamic Republic of Iran. So they don’t have to fight an uphill battle (Interview, Kahl, 20<sup>th</sup> November 2013).

As noted, since the Revolution in 1979, the US and Iran have pursued a relationship of deep enmity which has run through each nation’s cultural narrative. While diplomacy is popular, public opinion is consistently wary of Iran. When asked whether they would support military action if necessary in order to stop Iran’s nuclear programme, 64% of US citizens were in favour (Pew Research Center, 19<sup>th</sup> March, 2013). The JCPOA also garnered limited public support (Pew Research Center, 21<sup>st</sup> July 2015). Congress and the US public were predisposed to regard Iran very negatively, providing a relatively sympathetic audience for the neoconservative network’s framing of the debate.

There are, nevertheless, differences within Congress on how to view the issue of Iran and its nuclear programme - it can be divided into three groups. The three camps are: a small camp, mainly Democrats, who basically supported Obama's position; then there is a second large group who believed the executive was trying to roll-back the Iranian programme, but that it did not necessarily have the right strategy and Congress needed to toughen that strategy; and lastly there is another group of substantial size, mostly Republicans,

[who] are basically against anything that he [Obama] does. And on the Iran issue assume that he's basically too weak and he's not telling the truth, and that if Congress doesn't solve this problem, nobody will. I think the neoconservative arguments actually have a lot of traction with those folk and then a subset of that middle category. Because they can make the argument that, you know, tougher sanctions allow Congress to be the bad cop (Interview, Kahl, 20<sup>th</sup> November 2013).

This third camp regard the Iranian regime as made up of religious radicals who cannot be relied upon to act rationally on the world stage and therefore a policy of deterrence is useless. Neocon ideas have traction with this group. It tends to believe the regime has little popular support and therefore the possibilities for internal regime change are relatively high. Finally, this outlook favours far-reaching sanctions in order to bring the Iranian regime to its knees, with many hoping that this will cause the government to collapse entirely. A sizeable portion of this camp would like to see US or Israeli military action against Iran in order to ensure that its nuclear programme is stopped. In Congress, "Frequent and evidently serious references are made to launching a military attack against Iran" (Pillar, 2013: 211). In order to keep this option present, those in favour of military action ensured that it became impossible for the administration not to refer to military action. In almost every speech Obama gave on the nuclear crisis, he repeated the phrase "All options are on the table", generally taken to indicate that a military option remains possible. Even if it were ruled out, a rationale had to be provided to justify this. The necessity of having a policy position on military action was due to the way the problem had been framed, and continued to be framed by important key groups, in particular the neoconservative network.

## *Think Tanks and Congress*

Within the neoconservative network think tanks are important actors, given their role in framing and providing the intellectual rationale and justification for the way an issue should be understood. However, the role of think tanks has not been without controversy because of the often political nature of their advice and policy suggestions. Most interviewees highlighted the symbiotic relationship between Congress and think tanks. Will Marshall, President of the Progressive Policy Institute, stresses this dynamic,

Some think tanks - I don't want to name names - on both sides have *very* close relationships with the policymakers on the Hill. Their bread and butter is to go up there, and they get very involved. And they're doing talking points with the members all the time and they're conniving with them on strategy, and sometimes they're writing bills and amendments (Interview, Marshall, 5<sup>th</sup> November 2013).

He goes on to note that, "They [think tanks] work cheek-by-jowl with Hill staffers and they write legislation... To my way of thinking...crosses the line. I don't know, I'll let the IRS figure that out". This situation has partly arisen because of the revolving door which exists between think tanks and government. Some think tanks function, in essence, as the government in exile and most of their senior members have held government positions previously. Personal relationships as well as expertise assist in creating this dynamic. As a congressional staffer points out,

Especially since the Republicans took over the House in '94, then sort of continuing, our budgets have shrunk considerably, our staff have shrunk considerably - when you have fewer staff and less expertise, you need to turn to outsiders to help more and more because you just can't do everything yourself" (Interview, congressional staff member, 30<sup>th</sup> October 2013).

With think tanks all too aware of Congress' reliance on them to provide assistance on how to approach issue areas and consult on legislation, they sometimes go further and offer to draft legislation to fill the gap in expertise in Congress. If an organisation seeks to frame and have influence over the direction which policy will take, creating draft legislation is clearly one of the optimum ways with which to do this. Former AIPAC lobbyist, Bloomfield, comments on this important and

effective way, in which think tanks can influence the policy process within Congress.

So once this legislation is introduced or offered to a member of Congress by a think tank, they can either throw it aside, they can resent that you've tried to influence them or they can take it and work from that. Remember, in any process, the one that dominates is the first draft. So you want to get into that member of Congress' first draft of legislation, the first draft of a speech, the first draft of a background paper, whatever it is. And then they work from that. So then, as the think tank, I'm influencing just the discussion, in the initial context, the material I provide you (Interview, Bloomfield, 14<sup>th</sup> November 2013).

However, not all members of Congress appreciate the growing role for think tanks, particular as they have become increasingly advocacy-orientated. Some question the level of expertise of the specialists being consulted, and further, given the increasingly political nature of advocacy think tanks, the objectivity of their policy advice is often disputed. One congressional staffer highlights his aggravation with the level of input and credence given to voices within think tanks with regards to the Iran nuclear issue.

Oftentimes I'll get a call saying, well, you know, this think tank is recommending blank, what do I think? A lot of times that will be frustrating. Sometimes I'll lash out a little bit, and say, 'They're not an expert on Iran. This is a political suggestion they're giving you.' ..Very political. So that is very frustrating (Interview, congressional staff member, 13<sup>th</sup> November 2013).

Nevertheless, think tanks play a key role in providing information and recommending policy, and often take centre stage within hearings in both the House and Senate.

#### **4.5 Neoconservative Agenda Setting, Framing, and Legislation**

##### *Neoconservative Think Tanks and Policy Entrepreneurs*

In order for ideas to gain traction, they require organisations and individuals with the relevant knowledge and technical expertise to promote them. Having a broad ideological compatibility with key members of Congress is important in enabling the neoconservative network to gain access to both Congresspersons and their staff. When access is achieved, either in person or by correspondence, influence can be exerted in a number of ways but the initial steps fall mostly within the

areas of agenda-setting and framing. By attempting to set the agenda, think tanks and policy experts try to ensure the policy areas to which they attach the most importance are high on the list of issues to be debated. When this has been achieved, ensuring that a specific issue of concern is discussed, or framed, in a certain way serves to delineate (and often restrict) the types of policies which can be considered. Prominent think tanks in the neoconservative network, such as FDD, were named as influential by interviewees. Neoconservative think tanks, and individual neoconservatives housed at other DC-based think tanks, provide the theoretical rationale for the network's preferred policies. Most of those interviewed also brought up the influence of AIPAC in helping to get support for policies on issues, such as the Iranian nuclear crisis, which affects Israel. AIPAC lobbied hard on this issue. This section will focus mainly on the role of neoconservative think tanks within the network while the section entitled legislation will focus particularly on AIPAC.

Neoconservative think tanks the Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI) and FDD had significant success in contributing to the important first three stages of the policy cycle on Iran. FPI focused on agenda-setting and framing foreign policy issues while FDD also focused on these first two stages, while additionally seeking to contribute to specific legislation. Both FPI and FDD consistently sought to frame the debate, carrying articles on their websites arguing that sanctions on Iran had failed thus far and that diplomacy was futile. Strong proponents of regime change from the start of Obama's first term, FPI hosted a half-day conference entitled "Iran: Prospects for Regime Change" in April 2010. The conference's two moderators were neoconservatives William Kristol and Robert Kagan, with panellists including neocons Reuel Gerecht, Elliott Abrams and Danielle Pletka. There is little doubt as to the neoconservative commitment to regime change in Iran, only the means by which it should be realised. In Obama's second term, FPI organised another notable attempt to influence the debate on Iran by convincing 77 former US government and foreign policy experts to sign a letter urging congressional leaders to ensure Iran's full compliance with the interim agreement<sup>4</sup>. While giving a nod to diplomacy, the letter, sent in January 2014, ensured military action was kept in

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<sup>4</sup> The congressional leaders the letter was sent to were Speaker John Boehner (R), Representative Nancy Pelosi (D), Senator Harry Reid (D), and Senator Mitch McConnell (R).

the frame. It advocated “the use of diplomacy and non-military pressure, backed up by the military option, to persuade Iran to comply with numerous UN Security Council Resolutions and verifiably abandon its efforts to attain nuclear weapons-making capability” (Former US government officials and foreign policy experts, January 2014). Later that year, FPI, FDD, and the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) hosted a Capitol Hill briefing on the impending deal with Iran. Entitled “Are We Headed Towards a Bad Deal with Iran?”, the answer was resounding in the affirmative (Foreign Policy Initiative et al, 30<sup>th</sup> September 2014). BPC, though officially bipartisan, has taken a tough approach to Iran and has aligned itself with the neoconservative network on this issue.

FPI regularly sends out concise information in an email bulletin for members of Congress and their staff designed to save them time researching and condensing material for use in hearings and meetings. While other think tanks in Washington DC do the same, FPI was highlighted as particularly useful. “What they’re most known for is their morning email with their compilation of all the stories, which is a useful resource” (Interview, congressional staff member, 13<sup>th</sup> November, 2013). The think tank often sends out suggested questions to be asked at specific hearings. For example, after the JCPOA had been signed, a Senate hearing was scheduled and FPI sent out a comprehensive set of suggested questions as part of their email bulletin service. The think tank framed the questions in terms that assumed the breakdown of the agreement and made it clear how it felt the issue should be approached. Questions such as, “Would you agree that stonewalling the investigation of Possible Military Dimensions (PMD) sets a precedent for blocking inspectors’ access to suspicious sites?” and “If the United States ignores Iran’s past and ongoing deception concerning PMD, why would Iran hesitate to deceive us in the future?” are indicative of the tone (Foreign Policy Initiative, 16<sup>th</sup> December 2015). FPI are one of the few think tanks to send out proposed questions - a direct way in which to attempt to set the agenda in congressional debates.

In order to frame the debate more widely, neoconservatives used articles and op-eds in prominent US newspapers. While this study does not have the scope for a full analysis of the coverage of neoconservative views in the media, a brief focus on articles written by key neocon figures, such as those who acted as policy

entrepreneurs, assists in gaining an understanding of the policy preferences of core members of the network with regards to Iran. FDD is a vocal advocate of military intervention to effect regime change in favour of democracy. Ledeen, one of its experts, suggests that “democratic revolution” would be preferable to current Iran policy of “making deals with their evil tyrants” (Ledeen, 26<sup>th</sup> January 2014).

Similarly, FDD’s main experts on Iran, Mark Dubowitz, Executive Director at FDD, and Reuel Marc Gerecht, Senior Fellow at FDD, called for the US to pursue a policy of regime change albeit through the use of sanctions, contending, “If we are going to pursue tougher international sanctions against Iran - and we should - the goal should be regime change in Iran, not stopping proliferation” (Gerecht and Dubowitz, 16<sup>th</sup> January 2012). This is in clear contrast to the US government’s position which was that the goal of sanctions was to put pressure on the regime in order to strengthen the US’s hand in negotiations. These public assertions by figures in the neocon network helped garner suspicion and doubt from Iran’s leaders. Ayatollah Khamenei has repeatedly stated that he believes the US seeks regime change in Iran (Reuters, 8<sup>th</sup> February 2014). In October 2013, Dubowitz and Gerecht set out their position on the Iranian leadership as well as on new sanctions - sanctions Dubowitz had a significant role in crafting. They assert, “The Iranian President Hassan Rouhani is lying when he says that the Islamic Republic has never had any intention of building a nuclear weapon.” And recommend, “The administration and Congress would be wise to hit Tehran with more sanctions immediately” (Gerecht and Dubowitz, 12<sup>th</sup> October 2013). By framing the Iranian regime as duplicitous and impossible to negotiate with, Dubowitz and Gerecht limit the possible credible policy options of the US. The policy problem is set out to be the irrational nature of the regime.

Interview data indicated the importance of think tanks in coming up with new ideas on how to implement sanctions, as well as their involvement in the formation of specific legislation. A congressional staff member referred to the benefit of the expertise offered by these specialists, some of whom had been previously employed by the executive. Importantly, in terms of achieving influence, they note that specific think tanks had been influential over the direction that sanctions policy had taken, even to the point of assisting in the drafting of legislation.

I would say on Iran sanctions that certain think tanks have been very influential. Some of them have been real generators of ideas - new ways to impose sanctions. Some have helped draft revisions. Some of the think tanks have former administration officials so they know how things work, they know how the law works. They know the gaps in sanctions and so I would say, in the case of Iran sanctions they have been quite influential in both the direction the policy takes and the way it's drafted (Interview, congressional staff member, 13<sup>th</sup> November 2013).

While not being the sole drivers of the decision to impose sanctions on Iran, think tanks such as FDD were deeply involved in the process. By developing in-depth knowledge of financial sanctions, FDD carved out an indispensable role with regards to Iran sanctions. It was involved in crafting sanctions on Iran throughout Obama's time in office. Poblete points to FDD as one of the organisations consulted by members of Congress on the *Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012* (ITRA). She notes that for the aspects of the legislation that had to do with financial sanctions, they brought in experts from FDD and Matthew Levitt from the Washington Institute, as well as consulting the US Treasury's technical experts and the European governments that were directly involved (Interview, Poblete, 25<sup>th</sup> September 2014). In fact, there was a consensus from the interviews that FDD had been the most influential think tank with regards to Iran sanctions, and more specifically Dubowitz. It was stressed that FDD have helped with specific language in legislation, such as CISADA.

On Iran sanctions I would say FDD has been quite influential. In terms of the think tanks, probably *the* most influential. You know, I think that's sort of their *raison d'être* is Iran. And they've sort of branched out into some other areas, but that's really why they formed, I think, is to drive this debate. And they *have* had a significant influence. To say that they wrote the 2010 bill [CISADA] is a huge overstatement, but they contributed ideas - I think in certain cases they did contribute specific language - suggested language - which I don't think we ever incorporated lock, stock, and barrel, but, you know, used as a starting point (Interview, congressional staff member, 13<sup>th</sup> November 2013).

Interviews indicated that congressional staff members concerned with foreign policy welcomed the help given by individuals at FDD because of their high level of technical expertise in the area. While there was a general awareness of the ideological leaning of the think tank, this element appeared to be of secondary importance to the expertise it was able to provide. Contributing specific ideas and language is a direct way to give not only substantive, but also political information

to congressional staff. Staff use experts from think tanks like FDD in part because they believe them to be an ideological fit with their Member of Congress.

Blaise Misztal, Director of National Security at BPC, also stresses that FDD were heavily involved in the creation of sanctions legislation. He describes the process which bills progress through. In the first stage, a congressional staffer seeks to develop an initial description of a bill. They might sit down with an expert at a think tank and discuss what they want to do - for example, place sanctions on Iran. Secondly, a staffer writes the legislation with help from outside lawyers, who have expertise in writing legislation, to draft some of the language for the bill. And lastly, after a bill is written, staffers often send it round to chosen experts to solicit feedback. Misztal also highlights that FDD played a fairly exceptional role in this process by getting involved in writing legislation.

We've more been on the first and third of those sides, so saying you might want to think about a bill that does X or commenting on a piece of draft legislation saying you might want to change this around in this or that way. I think FDD has been heavily involved in that middle part as well. And I think that makes them fairly unique, as far as I know (Interview, Misztal, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2014).

Misztal goes on to assert, "Mark Dubowitz has probably been the most directly influential on Iran sanctions". Specific experts and organisations mentioned regularly in interviews were primarily Dubowitz and FDD, and at times Michael Singh, Managing Director at the Washington Institute, and finally BPC. Congressional staff members recalled that the Washington Institute and BPC put out reports and made the case that more sanctions are needed, and in this way they played a role in the overall debate. Misztal confirms, "Congress was trying to figure out how it should react to the interim deal. We were part of the discussion about the framework of how that should look" (Interview, Misztal, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2014). However, again, FDD was regarded as playing a more specific role in terms of contributing to legislation. "I think FDD is different in that they play more of a nuts and bolts, practical role, in terms of here's a specific banking sanction. They're really into the weeds on this stuff. I think that's what distinguishes them in my mind from some of these others" (Interview, congressional staff member, 13<sup>th</sup> November 2013).

It was clear from interview data that Dubowitz from FDD had been a highly influential actor in the policy process in terms of Iran sanctions. Based at FDD, Dubowitz can be regarded as a neoconservative. He has operated as a policy entrepreneur on this issue. Dubowitz has carved out a reputation for expertise on Iran, particularly on sanctions, and he has assisted in identifying what the policy problems are and has helped to shape how they should be considered. Dubowitz's high visibility in policymaking circles assisted in helping him network effectively on Iran sanctions as he is regarded as an authority on this issue. Interviewees noted that Dubowitz met with other members of the neocon network at times in order to strengthen the support for its preferred policies. It is, therefore, unsurprising that he is often asked by congressional committees to talk on this issue. In a Senate hearing entitled *Negotiations on Iran's Nuclear Programme*, ranking minority member Bob Corker (R-TN) referred to this process, "Mr Dubowitz, you talked orally today, written testimony... I know we had a long meeting with you yesterday." Dubowitz has been consulted on the sanctions regime towards Iran by Congress and by both parties throughout Obama's first and second terms, and has become relied upon for his technical expertise and historic knowledge of the issue.

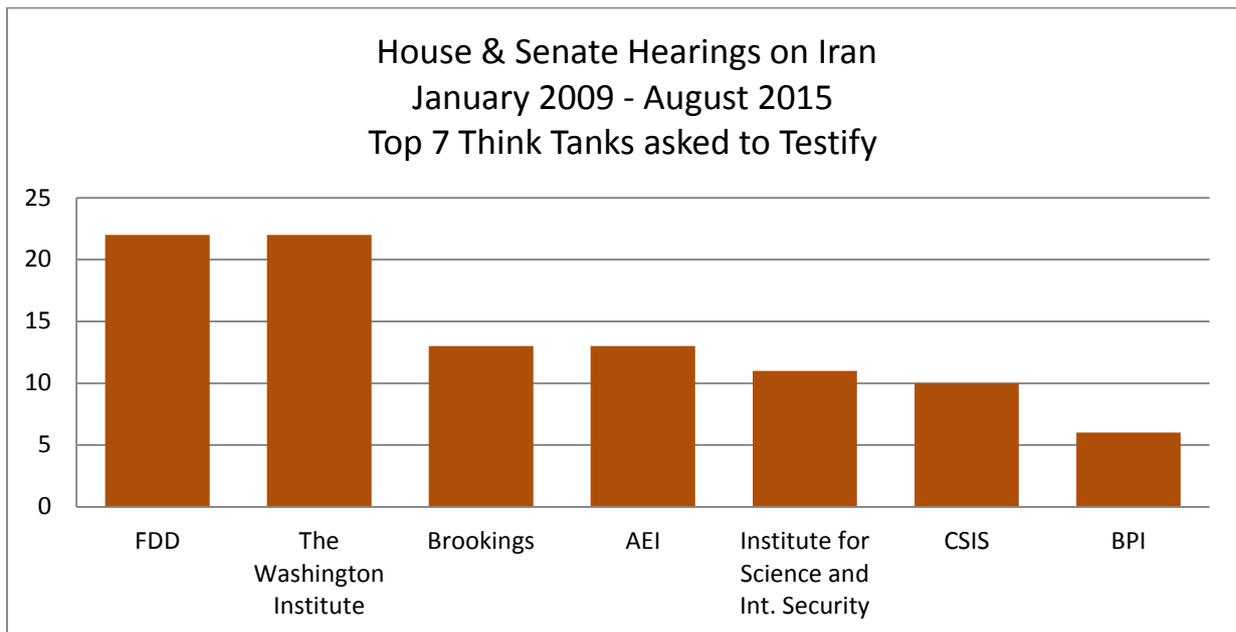
At times FDD managed to work with members of Congress in a surprisingly bipartisan way, thereby extending its reach, as well as the exposure of Democrats to neoconservative ideas. While Democratic staff members interviewed acknowledged what they regarded as FDD's conservative credentials and considered it to be a Republican-oriented think tank, they noted that Democratic members of Congress who are 'conservative' (as they term it) on foreign policy issues also consult with FDD. It is important to acknowledge the ideological position of a neoconservative think tank which houses trusted and widely-used policy entrepreneurs such as Dubowitz. While he has technical expertise and a great depth of knowledge on the Iran nuclear issue, he also has policy goals. Along with colleagues such as Gerecht and other neoconservatives, he publically advocates sanctions on Iran with the goal of regime change. By contributing to the process in such an integral way within Congress, the neoconservative agenda is kept in the frame and is deftly able to influence the debate as well as legislation.

### *Congressional Hearings on Iran*

Since the start of the first Obama administration in 2009 until the end of August 2015, which was near to the end of the second administration, Congress held 90 hearings on Iran (53 in the House and 37 in the Senate). Of those sessions, 66 included speakers from outside government who were invited to give testimony. These were predominantly experts drawn from think tanks. The most commonly-invited think tank that was represented was jointly FDD and the Washington Institute with 22 speakers testifying each. The second most common was jointly AEI and Brookings with 13 hearings each. This was followed by the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) with 11 hearings, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) with 10, and the BPC with 6.

This finding gives support to interview claims that experts from FDD were influential on Iran policy within Congress. It is also interesting to note that the experts from AEI - Danielle Pletka, Michael Rubin, John Bolton, Frederick Kagan, and Will Fulton - can be considered to be neoconservative in persuasion. Therefore, with FDD and AEI providing between them 35 speakers giving testimony, the neoconservative standpoint, in policy terms, was strongly represented in Congress - the majority of hearings which included outside experts had a neoconservative voice present. Further, as previously mentioned, the Washington Institute provides a stance sympathetic to Israel, and has a close alliance with neoconservatives over certain issues, Iran being one.

Table 4.1



While it is largely unsurprising that a Republican-controlled House should choose primarily Republican-leaning, conservative think tanks, it is nonetheless interesting to note the positions taken by these experts. While, as previously noted, Republican foreign policy can be categorised as split between isolationists, realists, and neoconservatives, the voice of the neoconservative strand was predominant in the testimonies of the think tank representatives. The Washington Institute, FDD, and AEI took positions which can be described as pro-sanction - as well as in favour of increasing sanctions. FDD, and several of the experts at AEI, in particular, went further, and are also pro-regime change. This is not to say that these three think tanks take the same position on all issues of foreign policy, as they do not; however, on Iran their chosen experts took a similar and very hard-line position, with FDD, as an organisation, taking the most hawkish approach. During Obama's time in office, neoconservative experts framed the Iranian regime as an irrational actor which could not be deterred. Orde F. Kittrie, Senior Fellow at FDD, suggests that within the next decade a "nuclear 9/11" is likely to take place in the US, with a similar attack on Tel Aviv even more probable. He also asserts that such an attack would likely come from Iran and contends that deterring the regime may be impossible due to its "apocalyptic messianism and exaltation of martyrdom" (Kittrie, 12<sup>th</sup> March 2009). In this hearing as in others, Kittrie underscores more than once his belief that it is the ideology of the regime that

accounts for why it places importance on nuclear proliferation as well as funding terrorism.

Similarly, in June 2011 at a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing, Bolton took a very hawkish line and contended that when it comes to dealing with Iran, sanctions are not enough. He explicitly argues for regime change.

I am all in favour of sanctions. I think anything that destabilises the Iranian regime is a good thing because I think regime change in Iran should be our national policy, but I don't think that we can operate under the view that sanctions can stop the Iranian effort to achieve nuclear weapons in a timely way (Bolton, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2011).

Having noted a preference for regime change, Bolton goes on to contend that unless “pre-emptive force” is used, Iran will develop nuclear weapons. When asked whether he was arguing for military action, Bolton replied in the affirmative and noted that he had been advocating this for the previous three and a half years (Bolton, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2011). Bolton came out again in early 2015 with an op-ed in the *New York Times* entitled “To Stop Iran’s Bomb, Bomb Iran”, in which he advocated a US attack on Iran’s infrastructure. Bolton contends that, “The United States could do a thorough job of destruction, but Israel alone can do what’s necessary. Such action should be combined with vigorous American support for Iran’s opposition, aimed at regime change in Tehran” (Bolton, 26<sup>th</sup> March 2015). A few months later, he spoke out vociferously against the Iran Deal in the neoconservative publication *The Weekly Standard* (Bolton, 14<sup>th</sup> July 2015).

Around a month before the *Nuclear Weapon Free Iran Act 2013* was introduced to the Senate, a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing was held entitled “Examining Nuclear Negotiations: Iran After Rouhani’s First 100 Days”. Danielle Pletka (AEI), Mark Dubowitz (FDD), and Colin Kahl (Center for New American Security) were called to testify. The two neoconservatives testifying, Pletka and Dubowitz, make it clear that they do not think that it is possible to negotiate with the current Iranian regime and favour an increase in sanctions against Iran (House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 13<sup>th</sup> November 2013). Having set out this position, Dubowitz contends that Iran is seeking long-range missiles in order to threaten the United States.

There's certainly open source reporting that the Iranians are building an intercontinental ballistic missile programme. They don't need ICBMs to hit Tel Aviv or Jerusalem; they need ICBMs to hit the United States. ..The intelligence community believes that they may have ICBM capability by 2015 (Dubowitz, 13<sup>th</sup> November 2013).

Dubowitz uses this claim to underscore his opposition to diplomacy, and argues that the US is currently providing "no credible military threat" against Iranian actions. As FDD, and Dubowitz in particular, were heavily involved with helping draft and amend Iran sanctions legislation, this view is likely to have had implications for government policy.

The bill highlighted in this case study, the *Nuclear Weapon Free Iran Act of 2013*, states that Iran does not have an inherent right to enrichment and reprocessing capabilities under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, that sanctions on Iran should be strengthened - and increased if there is a violation of the interim or final agreement, and that if Israel decides to take military action against Iran's nuclear weapons programme, the US "should provide Israel with diplomatic, military, and economic support". Dubowitz's written testimony, given several weeks before the introduction of the bill to Congress, set out largely congruent proposals. In his recommendations, Dubowitz supports the cessation of all enrichment and reprocessing, advocates that sanctions should be escalated with detailed suggestions on how this ought to happen, and stresses the importance of a credible military threat against the Iranian regime, once again ensuring the military option is kept in the frame.

The Obama administration has also undermined the deterrent effect of the US military option. Senior administration officials have repeatedly warned about the grave dangers of US or Israeli pre-emptive military strikes. The botched messaging and the ultimate decision to shrink away from threat of military force against the Assad regime in Syria in September also diminished US credibility. With enhanced economic measures and the military option off the table, the Obama administration is now hoping it can constrain the nuclear ambitions of the Islamic Republic by diplomacy alone, leading to a verification and inspection regime based on trust with an Iranian leadership that has a three decades-long track record of utter mendacity (Dubowitz, 13<sup>th</sup> November 2013).

Dubowitz's analysis cohered with the proposed legislation; however, it differed markedly from the administration's evaluation. He stresses the imminence of the

threat from Iran, asserting that “Iran could produce a sufficient quantity of weapons-grade uranium for a bomb in one to two months’ time” and that “Obama administration officials know that Rouhani is lying when he says that the Islamic Republic has never had any intention of building an atomic weapon” (Dubowitz, 13<sup>th</sup> November 2013). In contrast, the 2014 “Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community” presented a different case, and reported that Iran seeks the capability to develop a nuclear weapon if it chooses to do so (Clapper, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2014). The report consistently referred the Iran developing a nuclear weapon as a possible choice, indicating that the intelligence community were not certain the Iranian regime has decided to develop a weapon.

Other experts at FDD provided a similarly critical approach to the administration’s Iran policy. At the start of 2015, Tony Badran asserted to the House Foreign Affairs Committee that the US had “acquiesce[d] to their [Iran’s] bid for regional hegemony”. He went on to say that the Obama administration has a “de facto partnership with Iran across the region” which had not only alienated the US’s traditional allies, but was “intent on replacing the US as the dominant power in the Middle East”. John Hannah at FDD, and Michael Singh at the Washington Institute made it clear in testimony that they believe there should never have been a concession made by the administration to allow Iran to enrich uranium as part of a civil nuclear programme, underscoring again their rejection of the way the administration sought to frame the issue.

### *Committee Chairpersons*

Chairpersons on committees specifically concerned with foreign policy are often more hawkish than the members of the committee and Congress as a whole, and are keen that the US take a proactive role in the world. This is important as the chairperson and their staff largely choose which witnesses appear in a hearing, and in this respect, control which views other members are exposed to, giving them the chance to foreground the framing of the issue that they prefer. As Jeremy Shapiro, Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution asserts, “It is passing rare to find a foreign policy expert who isn’t interested in American leadership, who doesn’t support American leadership” (Interview, Shapiro, 12<sup>th</sup> September 2014). This often translates into a greater propensity to adopt tough stances on issues of

foreign policy than those taken by other members. As a result, there is often less of a policy division between Republican and Democratic committee leaders in the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee than between congressional members as a whole, and this was the case on the issue of the Iran.

During the Obama administration, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee was initially chaired by John Kerry (D-MA) until Robert Menendez (D-NJ) took over from February 2013 to January 2015. Even though Menendez is a Democrat, he took a hard-line on Iran and was the main sponsor of the *Nuclear Weapon Free Iran Act 2013*. Both he and his Republican successor, Bob Corker (R-TN) urged Congress to reject the deal made with Iran (the JCPOA) (Corker, 17<sup>th</sup> August 2015; Menendez, 18<sup>th</sup> August 2015). Similarly, ranking minority member of the committee Ben Cardin (D-MD) also opposed the deal (Cardin, 4<sup>th</sup> September 2015).

With regards to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Howard Berman (D-CA) chaired the committee until his retirement in January 2013 at which point Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) took over. Interviews with congressional staff suggest that Ros-Lehtinen made greater use of think tanks for the provision of research and increased the partisan nature of the committee. Ros-Lehtinen is well-known for being tough on foreign policy issues. Her successor Ed Royce (R-CA) has taken a similar stance and the ranking minority member Eliot Engel (D-NY) also has a track record of taking a firm position on foreign policy, authoring several bills seeking to hold the Syrian regime to account (the following chapter will detail more on this). In February 2013, Royce and Engel introduced the *Nuclear Iran Prevention Act 2013* which sought to expand the sanctions regime enacted by CISADA in 2010. It passed the House with 218 Republican votes and 160 Democratic, displaying the often bipartisan position on Iran taken by the House of Representatives. Regarding the JCPOA agreed in 2015, Royce, Ros-Lehtinen, and Engel did not support the deal with Iran (Engel, 8<sup>th</sup> June 2015; Ros-Lehtinen, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2015; Royce, 11<sup>th</sup> September 2015). Apart from Engel, other notable House Democrats against the deal included Brad Sherman (D-CA) - a senior member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and Ted Deutch (D-CA) - the ranking minority member of the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa.

Senior Democratic Members of Congress are often hawkish on issues of foreign policy, particularly if it concerns the Middle East. Generally, in a standard hearing, the majority party is able to choose two witnesses, while the minority party chooses one.

Why it gets so screwy on these issues or issues that involve Israeli policy is because the senior Democrats on these committees, particularly on the House side, tend to have hawkish views, even equally hawkish views to the Republicans when it comes to Middle East issues. So instead of putting a genuine balancing voice in their one slot, they'll choose someone who might be a half-turn more centrist, from a more reasonable organisation, but is still in no way an intellectually honest counterweight to the two right wing hawks, that the Republicans have chosen to put on that three-person panel (Interview, lobbyist, 24<sup>th</sup> September 2014).

In this respect, where it might be expected that the Democrats would choose an expert from the centre ground, this did not necessarily take place. Nevertheless, and crucially, Democratic leadership in both Houses ultimately remained with the President by supporting the Iran Deal (albeit reluctantly in some cases), with one exception, Chuck Schumer (D-NY). Schumer was the first Democrat to come out against the deal. It was considered unlikely that Schumer, who has been described as “an AIPAC stalwart” and has boasted that he is Netanyahu’s best friend on Capitol Hill, would support the deal (Bruck, 17<sup>th</sup> August 2015; Bloomfield, 13<sup>th</sup> July 2015). Republican leadership stayed firmly opposed in the House and either opposed or leaned towards opposing the deal in the Senate.

### *Legislation*

As negotiations for the interim agreement continued towards the end of 2013, a controversial new bill - the *Nuclear Weapon Free Iran Act 2013* - was brought by lead sponsor and Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Robert Menendez (D-NJ). It was initially co-sponsored by 59 of 100 senators, including 16 Democrats. “Legislators can publicly express support for a piece of legislation by co-sponsoring it” (Fowler, 2006: 454). This is significant as at 60 votes, a bill becomes filibuster-proof.

The legislation did not pass, partially because Reid, Senate leader at the time, kept the bill at bay by not scheduling it for the floor. There was widespread

recognition in Congress that passing further sanctions at that time would have made war between the US and Iran more likely. A congressional aide asserted, “I think he’s [Reid] holding the line because in addition to the obvious answer that he’s carrying the administration’s water, I don’t think Harry Reid fancies himself a warmonger”. Reid understood that, “these negotiations are the best option we have for preventing a war with Iran and ending its nuclear program” (Starks, 28<sup>th</sup> January 2014). However, other commentators, including Bloomfield and Dubowitz, pointed out at the time that Reid would not be able to delay the bill forever. There was pressure from the White House towards Congress not to de-rail the administration’s deal with Iran. When asked what the consequence would be if Congress were to adopt more sanctions, Zarif, the Iranian Foreign Minister replied that it would mean “The entire deal is dead” (Wright, 9<sup>th</sup> December 2013).

In his State of the Union Address on the 28<sup>th</sup> January 2014, Obama stressed that he would not allow the legislature to overturn the interim agreement with Iran by passing the *Nuclear Weapon Free Iran Act 2013* which had been introduced into Congress a month earlier.

The sanctions that we put in place helped make this opportunity possible. But let me be clear, if this Congress sends me a new sanctions bill now, that threatens to derail these talks, I will veto it. For the sake of our national security, we must give diplomacy a chance to succeed (Obama, 28<sup>th</sup> January 2014).

Finally, a 60<sup>th</sup> name was added to the list at the end of April 2014, several months after the last co-sponsor had added their name, but by that time it was immaterial. At that point, six or seven Democrats who had sponsored the bill early on came out and said that although they supported the main thrust of the Act, they were not in favour of legislating at that juncture. That meant that the bill would need more than 60 co-sponsors as it would have to be taken into account that a significant number of members would vote no on the cloture motion<sup>5</sup>.

However, the neocon network strongly supported the *Nuclear Weapon Free Iran Act 2013* and challenged Obama and the administration by fervently advocating the new legislation. Former Foreign Policy Director at AIPAC, Steve Rosen, notes that,

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<sup>5</sup> To get over a filibuster, a cloture allows the Senate to end a debate with a two-thirds majority vote.

regarding AIPAC's part, it had been a daring attempt to derail the stated foreign policy of the President.

It's fair to say that in that episode, AIPAC was defeated. But what the people that make that point ignore is that AIPAC never attempted anything so bold before in its history. And it came close to succeeding. AIPAC never attempted to defeat an incumbent president on a core issue of his policy, at the height of his popularity, they'd never attempted such a thing (Interview, Rosen, 24<sup>th</sup> September 2014).

Not only that, but he points out that AIPAC, and all those supporting the bill were making a bid to go against prevailing public opinion.

Let's remember the public opinion polls were showing that the American people were in favour of negotiations with Iran, and the search for a grand bargain by something like two or three to one. And it wasn't an incidental part of Obama's policy, it was very central to his policy. He had announced before he became president that he wanted to go down this road. So AIPAC made an effort to take a value of an incumbent president at the height of his popularity, and go against it in a veto-override situation. It was a very bold initiative (Interview, Rosen, 24<sup>th</sup> September 2014).

It was, in part, the public's lack of support which prevented the bill gaining enough support to be able to pass. Pro-diplomacy and anti-war groups harnessed public sentiment against any assertive US action against Iran and made huge efforts to either keep Democrats from backing the bill or persuade some to relinquish their support for it at that point. A letter was organised with around 85 big Democratic donors, many of them Jewish, saying that they were concerned that the American public wanted to see diplomacy succeed and therefore, on that basis, they wanted to see this bill fail (Democratic Donors, 27<sup>th</sup> February 2014). It was sent to both the House and Senate. The administration also lobbied hard against the bill being passed. White House Spokesman, Jay Carney, urged Congress to reconsider any plans to introduce new sanctions while negotiations continued. He stressed that, "The American public does not want a march to war" (Haaretz, 13<sup>th</sup> November 2013).

Brad Gordon, legislative official at AIPAC noted, "I have not seen the administration act with such force and sustained effort...since Obama became President" (Bruck, 1<sup>st</sup> September 2014). AIPAC continued to lobby in favour of the

bill, and another senior lobbyist concurred with Rosen that the effort made by AIPAC to get the bill passed was unprecedented in its recent history.

AIPAC really hasn't had to lobby for twenty years or so. They call up, they get people on their bill and that's it. They were facing real resistance and they didn't know how to react, people didn't know how to react. So you actually had AIPAC key contacts and others calling up senators, getting them on the phone and threatening them, 'We won't be able to raise any more money for you, or we won't raise any more money for you if you don't co-sponsor this'. That pissed senators off (Interview, lobbyist, 24<sup>th</sup> September 2014).

With the proposed legislation stalled in the Senate, the JPOA (the interim agreement) and nuclear negotiations extended, renewed calls for regime change began by the neocon network in at the start of 2015. Senior Fellow at FDD, John Hannah, argued that it was time for regime change in Iran as the US has a 'proven track record' of using a policy of regime change to curtail states from acquiring or maintaining a nuclear weapons capability. While the neoconservative network had suffered a defeat, it was not about to relinquish one of its main policy objectives.

By 27<sup>th</sup> January 2015, the bill had been re-worked and introduced into the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs. On the same day, 10 Democratic senators led by Senator Menendez, wrote President Obama a letter noting their scepticism as to whether Iran was serious about making concessions on its nuclear programme. They declared their support of the bill and pointed out that the bill would only impose sanctions on Iran if it failed to reach a comprehensive agreement by negotiations' deadline of June 30th. As a framework for the agreement was to be agreed by 24th of March, they declared they would wait until this date before voting in support of the legislation. The senators wrote,

In acknowledgement of your concern regarding congressional action on legislation at this moment, we will not vote for this legislation on the Senate floor before March 24. After March 24, we will only vote for this legislation on the Senate floor if Iran fails to reach agreement on a political framework that addresses all parameters of a comprehensive agreement (Menendez, 27<sup>th</sup> January 2015).

In the hearing, the administration's officials strove to persuade the senators not to pass the bill at any juncture, with a heated exchange taking place between

Senator Menendez and Deputy Secretary of State Tony Blinken (Senate Committee on Banking, 27<sup>th</sup> January 2015).

Just over a month later, Senator Tom Cotton (R-AR), as well as 46 other Republican members of the 100-strong Senate sent an open letter to the ‘Leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran’. The letter opened by saying that the Iranian leaders “may not fully understand” the US constitutional system, and went on to explain that there is no term limit for senators unlike presidents, indicating the importance of congressional approval of any deal. It ended noting the fragility of any agreement between the US and Iran asserting, “The next president could revoke such an executive agreement with the stroke of a pen and future Congresses could modify the terms of the agreement at any time” (Cotton et al, 9<sup>th</sup> March 2015). Needless to say, this was regarded by the executive as an unhelpful move which undermined the President. Adding to the push against the deal, AIPAC formed a lobbying group specifically to oppose the agreement. The group - Citizens for a Nuclear Free Iran - launched a national campaign on what it regards as the flaws in the deal, and it was reported it planned to spend over \$20 million on the effort (Hirschfield Davis, 17<sup>th</sup> July 2015).

#### **4.6 Material Resources**

The ability of a network to translate its beliefs into policies will depend, in part, on the material resources it has at its disposal, as well as the political resources. Rather than ‘buying’ the positions of think tanks or individuals within a network, the argument made here is that material resources help to create a financial support base for the shared ideas within a network. Donors assist in amplifying these common ideas and beliefs by helping to ensure that organisations are well resourced. This does not mean that financial backers are necessarily setting an institute’s research agenda, although it could have an impact. Rather, a donor may decide to fund a particular organisation because they have a broadly-shared worldview. Contact between the donor and the organisation’s members may then have the capacity to broadly influence the type of research an institute conducts. However, if an organisation understands that they will attract funding if they become more ideological, then this could implicitly push it in a certain direction in order to attract potential financial backers.

Generally, both policy networks, and the think tanks within them, have an ideological leaning and this is clearly true of the neoconservative network. Abelson notes that, “one can observe the transformation of think tanks from non-partisan research institutions to avowedly ideological organisations committed to influencing Washington’s political agenda” (Abelson, 2004: 216). The interplay has implications towards the type of funding a think tank might attract. Donors who are keen to support a particular ideological stance are more likely to fund such organisations.

Indeed, interviewees voiced concerns that funders might influence the type of research that think tanks undertake. Kahl argues, “I do think it matters where think tanks get their money. I do think it matters how central to a think tank’s mission they view direct advocacy for a particular position based on a particular ideological position” (Interview, Kahl, 20<sup>th</sup> November 2013). In fact, becoming more partisan or ideological has become advantageous for think tanks when trying to attract funding. Since the 1970s, and the rise of the advocacy think tank, there has been a wider adoption of more activist agendas, in part as a necessity to appeal to wealthy donors who have a political stance they wish to buttress. Misztal at BPC underscores this dynamic. Reflecting on motivations for donations to institutes he notes, “A lot of it is on ideological grounds”, and suggested that the further from the centre on the political scale an organisation is, the easier it can be to attract funding (Interview, Misztal, 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2014).

Many interviewees suggested that there was a correlation between donors and the positions taken by think tanks, which is notable with the case of Iran. However, influence in this area appears to be mostly constitutive, with actors with similar ideas seeking to reinforce and promote those shared ideas. Rather than donors necessarily directly dictating the research agenda of think tanks, there is an implicit understanding about what kind of research is sought. In this respect, there can be a constitutive process at play where the research findings of these organisations serve to strengthen the beliefs to which many of the donors already adhere.

FDD received over \$20 million between 2008 and 2011, and the majority of this income came from mainly Republican donors who are sharp critics of the Obama

administration, particularly its foreign policy. Bernard Marcus, Paul Singer, and Sheldon Adelson (in that order) were the three largest donors to FDD, contributing almost \$15 million in total (Clifton, 5<sup>th</sup> August 2013). Bloomfield discussed the funding dynamic with particular reference to Adelson. He notes, “Sheldon Adelson - the mogul of casinos - multibillionaire - has just put in a huge amount of money into groups opposing the Iran negotiations - the Emergency Committee for Israel, The Foundation for Democracy [FDD]...”, and goes on to point out that, “Adelson is also a primary contributor to Netanyahu’s campaign. He owns the biggest newspaper in Israel. He put \$100 million dollars into Republican campaigns last year. He supports, essentially, the neocon position (Interview, Bloomfield, 14<sup>th</sup> November, 2013).

Whether Adelson’s position is wholly neoconservative is debatable; however, it is certainly extremely hard-line and he seeks to fund organisations and individuals with a similarly uncompromising outlook. Speaking at Yeshiva University in New York in October 2013, Adelson was asked whether he supported negotiations with Iran and he replied, “What do you mean ‘support negotiations’? What are we going to negotiate about?” (Rayman, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2013). He then advocated that the US administration launch an atomic missile to hit Iran, first in the desert as a warning, and then - if Iran did not cease its nuclear programme - on Tehran, before declaring, “You want to be wiped out? Go ahead and take a tough position and continue with your nuclear development” (Rayman, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2013). Adelson has regularly taken a position to the right of AIPAC, for example, in 2007 Adelson became unhappy with AIPAC because it supported the Annapolis peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians, and he threatened to withdraw funding for the organisation (Clifton, 5<sup>th</sup> August 2013). One interviewee described FDD as,

in a sense an organisation that was created by former funders of AIPAC, and I think people who still fund AIPAC to some extent, but who are certainly on the right wing of AIPAC’s funders, when they became dissatisfied with AIPAC’s, you know, equivocating in the name of bipartisanship (Interview, lobbyist, 24<sup>th</sup> September 2014).

Due to FDD’s assertive and unwavering stance, aggressively promoting far-reaching US sanctions on Iran, it has been able to court funding from the more hawkish of

AIPAC's funders. Adelson also backs the hard-line organisation United Against a Nuclear Iran (UANI). Its two top donors for the tax year 2013 are a family foundation operated by Adelson and his wife and a trust associated with Thomas Kaplan (Clifton, 6<sup>th</sup> July 2015). The funding by the two donors combined made up more than three-quarters of the organisation's total revenue of \$1.7 million for that year (Clifton, 6<sup>th</sup> July 2015). In the run-up to the deal reached by Iran and the P5+1 in July 2015, UANI launched a campaign costing millions of dollars in a bid to encourage members of Congress to take a sceptical stance on the Iran negotiations (Everett, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2015).

Funding dynamics can also have implications when it comes to think tanks' contribution to policymaking in Congress. A former congressional staffer who was involved in picking witnesses for hearings regarding foreign policy describes the interplay between witnesses and members of Congress. They note that when picking witnesses, the goal is to ensure the person asked to testify "will not get my boss in trouble ideologically". They go on to say, "There will at no point be an occasion where my boss has to explain him or herself to angry people back home, especially if those people write cheques" (Interview, former congressional staff member, 19<sup>th</sup> September 2014).

When asked whether they paid attention to who funded the organisation they were planning to ask to testify, they replied, "Of course!" and went on to note again that one of the main aims was to ensure the boss was ideologically safe with whichever expert they asked to attend the hearing. Commenting about Dubowitz from FDD specifically, they assert, "Having Dubowitz as a witness, it's a trifecta. That's win-win-win. Ideologically sound. Makes the boss' rich friend happy, is going to say what I want them to say. Win-win-win. (draws a triangle in the air)" (Interview, former congressional staff member, 19<sup>th</sup> September 2014).

Others referred to a similar situation where the same funders are donating to the campaigns of members of Congress, the lobby organisations, and think tanks.

If you have basically a group of funders who donate directly to the campaigns of the members sitting on the Committee, donate to the lobby shops that lobby them, like AIPAC, and then donate to think tanks - not just donate but provide, in some of these cases, substantial

funding, major blocks of funding, that is a perfect triangle, which skews the actual policy debate (Interview, lobbyist, 24<sup>th</sup> September 2014).

Given that congressional hearings are the primary way in which both House and Senate committees gather, analyse, and debate legislative policy, this interplay may have the capacity to influence policy debates.

#### 4.7 Conclusion

Neoconservatives were successful, to a large extent, in setting out and promoting the core ideas on which their recommended policies on Iran were based. In this respect, they created the intellectual foundation for the preferred policies of the neoconservative network. AIPAC, in complement to this strategy, was focused on lobbying members of Congress to support sanctions legislation. While a bid to pass legislation to tighten the sanctions on Iran ultimately failed, it ensured the debate included a strong emphasis on increasing sanctions as well as keeping possible military action in the frame.

The ideological preferences of many members of Congress, including Democratic leaders provided a receptive audience to the policy positions taken by the neoconservative network on this issue. As Kahl asserts,

If one believes that the neoconservatives are in favour of extraordinarily hawkish foreign policies in the service of coercing and compelling our adversaries, and in extremis changing the regimes, then yes, I think it [Iran policy preferences for many in Congress] sits comfortably with the neoconservative frame (Interview, Kahl, 20<sup>th</sup> November 2013).

While not all of Congress specifically seek regime change in Iran, many of those who supported an increase in sanctions in the period leading up to, and after, the JCPOA, have largely become allied to proponents of neoconservative ideas. In 2013, the House of Representatives was Republican-controlled and extremely hawkish on Iran; however, the Senate, although majority Democrat, also took a relatively hard line. Importantly, leaders of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee reacted to the Iran Deal in a bipartisan way, with all four advocating Congress reject the deal.

The *Nuclear Weapon Free Iran Act 2013*, introduced into Congress very soon after the interim agreement was signed, came very close to being enacted - initially

lacking only one signature of co-sponsorship in a Democratically-controlled Senate at a time when it was projected that it would have then moved easily through the House. The fact that this legislation would have caused talks to break down between the US and Iran at a critical juncture in the negotiations shows the power that the bill held with regards to US-Iran policy. For Obama to be forced to state unequivocally in this 2014 State of the Union address that he would veto the legislation should it pass, laid bare the schism between Congress and the executive on one of the most important foreign policy issues of Obama's presidency. In turn, the neoconservative advocacy of the bill, and the individuals and organisations involved with its creation and promotion, demonstrates the influence of the neoconservative network. That the executive was forced to lobby extremely hard itself towards Congress in order that the legislation did not pass, was in part, testament of the strength of the network on this issue.

The neoconservative network was successful in feeding into the debate on Iran. Neoconservative think tanks FPI and FDD managed to consistently gain coverage in Congress for the policies they were advocating. They helped set the agenda regarding which issues should remain in discussion, specifically emphasising zero enrichment, the failure of diplomacy, an increase in sanctions, and regime change. They also framed the debate by helping to delineate the way the terms in which issues were discussed, for example ensuring that military action was consistently kept within the parameters of possible action. The neocon network's ideas and policy preferences were given good exposure during congressional hearings. The prominence in congressional hearings of FDD, a relatively-small neoconservative think tank, alongside the large, established, Washington Institute, illustrates how organisations in favour of an escalation of sanctions succeeded in dominating the debate. Moreover, the fact that FDD, as well as the neoconservative experts at AEI, made it clear that it would like to see US policy try to effect regime change in Iran is illustrative of the hard line that the neoconservatives were advocating. Add to this, members of Congress sympathetic to these ideas and an echo chamber built up on this issue. This dynamic does not, of course, mean that no other views are heard within Congress, this chapter merely asserts that the ideas put forward and promoted by the neoconservative network were very effective in leading the debate. Added to this, neoconservative experts consulted on, and contributed to,

legislation either proposed or passed (*The Nuclear Weapon Free Iran Act 2013* and CISADA 2010 respectively). Dubowitz at FDD, in particular, acted as a policy entrepreneur on this issue. While the network failed to get the ultimate policy outcome it sought, it did; however, succeed in demonstrating its continued ability to influence US foreign policy on this matter.

The coherence of the beliefs and ideas held within the network on Iran contributed to its strength. While this chapter does not suggest that ideas flow towards members of Congress in a unidirectional capacity, it does however contend that when a group or network manages to capture the parameters, language, and also technical expertise surrounding a given policy issue, that network has placed itself in a particularly strong and influential position.

The neoconservative network had both the political and material resources to successfully influence Congress on this issue. With respect to political resources, through think tanks, the network had excellent access to the committees dealing with foreign policy in both the House and the Senate. Shared or common ideas with key members of Congress played a pivotal role in ensuring the proposal of certain policies gained traction. The neoconservatives and AIPAC shared a common understanding and conception of the Iranian treat and therefore the network was cohesive on this issue. The interest group's extensive contacts with policymakers and political resources allowed it to lobby fervently for the goals of the network. Further, prominent donors were able to support the network by financing think tanks and organisations which share the common ideas around which it coalesces. Rather than operating as a central factor in the policy-making process, funders' contributions served to buttress the network strengthening its ability to operate effectively.

Neoconservative think tanks played a prominent role in the network on Iran. They provided the normative arguments, empirical evidence, and technical language which made up the intellectual underpinnings for the policies being promoted by the network. Neoconservative policy entrepreneurs succeeded in becoming part of the process of creating legislation. In this respect, neoconservative think tanks played a fundamental role in the policy process, one which has hitherto been underappreciated.

## CHAPTER 5 - SYRIA: A CASE STUDY

### 5.1 Introduction

### 5.2 Historical Context - US-Syria Relations

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## 5.1 Introduction

Neoconservatives were influential in shaping the debate on US-Syria policy within Congress during Obama's two terms; however, there were significant limitations to their influence. While the neoconservatives were prominent in the debate on the Syrian conflict, their ideas did not gain sufficient traction to have a substantive impact on policy. A combination of low public support for their favoured policies and a disconnect with AIPAC, which had a different understanding of the Syria issue, meant that the neoconservative network had less influence than it achieved on US-Iran policy.

Even after the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), US government policy still fell short of the policies promoted by the neoconservatives. Nevertheless, neoconservatives remained prominent in congressional debates throughout the Syrian conflict, where they had increasing success in framing discussions, assisted by changing events on the ground. Congressional leaders took policy positions which were sympathetic to neoconservative arguments. Policies which the neoconservatives advocated had most traction when the issue of Syria was cast within a national security framework.

Neoconservatives lacked well-known historical narratives within which to fit their favoured policies in the way they had with Iran. In this regard, casting Syria as a threat to US national security had less cultural salience than with the issue of Iran.

This is reflected in the fact that the US public was largely against any kind of US intervention or military action in Syria until late 2014 and the rise of the ISIS. Added to this, the neoconservatives did not have the coherence and unity on this issue with AIPAC that it had on Iran, and this meant the neocon network's influence was of a lesser degree. At the start of the conflict, Israel was far less keen on the removal of Assad, who, while not an ally, had been a stable neighbour to Israel for decades. AIPAC and the neoconservatives only really came together and started to push for action against Assad after the confirmed use of chemical weapons in September 2013. At this point, US credibility was at stake as Obama had drawn a red line over the use of chemical weapons.

The neoconservatives framed discussions over the conflict in Syria to focus on regime change, democracy promotion, and military action. They also endeavoured to fit the conflict within the paradigm of the 'war on terror', focusing on the threat of militant Islam. The neoconservative Foundation for Defense of Democracies' (FDD) website describes the organisation as "promoting regime change in Syria" (Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 2014). Similarly, the neocon think tank, the Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI) presented the case for direct intervention in Syria early on in the conflict in 2012 (Foreign Policy Initiative, 15<sup>th</sup> March, 2012), a position consistently taken by the organisation. Neoconservatives worked hard to shape the debate, but ultimately failed to get the extent of military action they sought, such as a no-fly zone or latterly, ground forces. As Jacob Heilbrunn, notes, "Syria did demonstrate that in many ways the neocons are on the defensive" (Interview, Heilbrunn, 14<sup>th</sup> November, 2013). When Obama finally ordered military strikes in Syria on August 8<sup>th</sup> 2014, it was after the beheadings of a number of US citizens captured by ISIS, rather than the result of any substantive desire to intervene in the Syrian conflict.

Nonetheless, despite failing to achieve the extent of the intervention sought, neoconservatism remains a key strand of thought within Congress on areas of foreign policy such as Syria. As this chapter demonstrates, some of the bills outlining policies favoured by neoconservatives were introduced by Democrats. Moreover, on this issue, neoconservatives found themselves, to some extent, on the same side as liberal interventionists within the administration who also sought

to increase intervention in Syria, albeit on a smaller scale. In this respect, the policy recommendations being advocated by the network, along with the prominence of neoconservative voices in congressional hearings, assisted in creating a repeated refrain for greater US involvement. US military action was promoted first, as necessary in order to get rid of the Syrian regime, and then, as the group emerged, as vital in destroying ISIS.

A resolution proposed mid-way through Obama's second term, and two years into the Syrian civil war, the *Authorisation for the Use of Military Force Against the Government of Syria to Respond to the Use of Chemical Weapons 2013* was formulated when Bashar al-Assad used chemical weapons against Syrian civilians in August 2013. The neoconservative network lobbied in support of a 'yes' vote on action against the Syrian regime. However, on this issue, despite a shared policy preference, there was a disconnect between the neoconservatives and AIPAC which weakened the network's strength. While neoconservatives were fervent in their support of action against Assad (and in support of moderate opposition groups), AIPAC was less willing to expend significant political capital on lobbying in Congress for the adoption of the resolution. At this time, AIPAC had a particular focus on Iran, with the nuclear crisis an on-going issue, and a couple of months later went 'all out' to get legislation through Congress that would effectively reimpose sanctions on Iran and collapse the talks between the P5+1 (permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) and Iran. Nevertheless, the neoconservative network and AIPAC came together and pushed for a military strike on Syria. However, with low public support for action against the Syrian regime, there were mixed predictions on whether the authorisation for the use of military force (AUMF) would pass. For AIPAC and Israel, a strike would have sent a message to Iran underscoring the credibility of US threats to use force. For the neoconservatives it would have served to underscore US hegemony, but importantly, it would have also been the start of a military campaign against Assad.

This chapter lays out the historical context for US-Syria relations in brief, before setting out neoconservative preferences for US policy towards Syria. It then appraises US policy towards Syria during the Obama administration as well as

Congress' broad stance on the conflict. This is followed by an evaluation of neoconservative attempts to set the agenda and frame the debate within Congress and an assessment of the presence and nature of neoconservative views in congressional hearings. An analysis of AIPAC's preferences on policy is detailed separately as the disconnect between the neoconservatives and AIPAC is one of the key factors as to why the network was less effective on the issue of Syria than on Iran. Next, the legislation promoted by the neoconservative network is considered, before a focus on public opinion is undertaken.

## **5.2 Historical Context: US-Syria Relations**

Syria was established in its modern form after WWI and was controlled by France before it gained its independence in 1945 when it became one of the founding members of the United Nations (UN) - French troops left the country the following year. The ensuing period was tumultuous - Syria had four different constitutions and 20 different cabinets during its first ten years (Kaplan, 2008: 109). The country became wary of the US after its intervention in Iran against the government of Mossadeq in 1953 and then the Omega memorandum of 1956 which sought to reduce the influence of the Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser in the region (Gani, 2014: 2). Suspicion of the US was heightened after the Syrian-American crisis in 1957, "in which the United States planned (but failed) to organise a coup against the weak and pro-Soviet Syrian government" and "established Syria's lasting perceptions of the United States as 'second-generation imperialists'" (Gani, 2014: 2).

Syria's borders changed with the loss of the Golan Heights to Israel in the 1967 war (Kaplan, 2008: 109) and Washington's support for Israel after that war increased tensions again between the US and Syria (Gani, 2014: 206). When Hafez al-Assad seized power in 1970, he brought stability to Syria, and as a Ba'thist, was heavily supportive of Arab nationalism (Rabil, 2006: 25). Ba'thism is an Arab nationalist ideology which is socialist as well as secular, something which was useful to al-Assad. Being a member of the Alawi sect (roughly 12% of the Syrian population - the majority are Sunni) (Kaplan, 2008: 108), the secular nature of the Ba'th party allowed al-Assad to mitigate Syria's sectarian divisions and therefore rule more effectively. Crucially, Assad also created a very developed and highly coercive

police state apparatus to put down any threats to the regime, be they real or simply perceived (Leverett, 2005: 24). Despite assuaging and co-opting key figures in the Sunni community, these efforts did not manage to fully close the sectarian divide in Syria. The Muslim Brotherhood fought against the Assad regime in the late 1970s and early 1980s, culminating in its uprising in 1982 in Hama - Syria's fourth-largest city. Assad brutally suppressed the insurrection, resulting in the deaths of around 20,000 people and the destruction of most of the old city in Hama (Kaplan, 2008: 110).

Bashar al-Assad came to power in 2000, when his father Hafez died after 30 years in power. He was a British-trained ophthalmologist and only 34 years old. The Syrian parliament had to change the constitution to allow him to become president as there was a stipulation that the head of state had to be at least 40 (Tabler, 2011: 4). With the election of George W. Bush, and the September 11th attacks in 2001 which produced the 'war on terror', US policy towards the Middle East polarised further, with countries judged on whether they supported the new security paradigm that the US had ushered in. Syria initially supported the 'war on terror', co-operating with the US against al-Qaeda, even though the US kept Syria on its list of state sponsors of terrorism as Syria continued to allow Palestinian groups that the US considered terrorist organisations to operate out of its territory (Scheller, 2013: 55).

This very temporary co-operation disappeared when the Syrian regime opposed the Iraq War in 2003 and "Syria became a de facto member of the axis of evil" (Rabil, 2006: 121-122). Assad explicitly came out against the impending war in June 2002, and when 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' was launched by the US in March 2003, the Syrian Foreign Minister Farouq al-Shara declared that "Syria has a national interest in the expulsion of the invaders from Iraq" (Prados, 10<sup>th</sup> October, 2003). To that end, Syria provided Iraq with military equipment, gave Iraqi officials refuge in Syria, and allowed jihadis to pass through Syria into Iraq (Rabil, 2006: 134). This did not go unnoticed by the US - Bush's National Security Advisor Elliott Abrams asserts that the administration made "one gigantic mistake" with Syria, and that was not managing to stop the jihadis from surrounding countries travelling through Syria into Iraq. Abrams recollects arguing with military leaders in an effort to shut

down Damascus Airport, “We did one raid into Syria in the eight years of Bush, one! I would have liked to have seen fifty raids into Syria, again, to just deliver the message this has to stop” (Interview, Abrams, 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2014).

Former Senior Director for Middle East Affairs at the National Security Council (NSC) during the Bush administration, Michael Singh, notes that the emphasis during the first years of the administration was more on engaging the Syrian regime whilst delivering strong warnings.

There were a number of envoys would go - I think Terje Rod-Larsen from the UN was despatched, Bill Burns went. I think Colin Powell went to raise things like sheltering Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, foreign fighters going to Iraq, a whole host of issues. It really didn't get anywhere (Interview, Singh, 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 2014).

The Bush administration was particularly focused on stopping the revenues from Iraqi oil flowing into Syria from being used to buy weapons, and to this end, in February 2001, Powell managed to persuade Assad to put the revenues into a temporary UN account (Rabil, 2006: 129). However, Assad reneged on this pledge and by May 2003 Powell was making it plain to the US media that Assad had broken his promise (CNN, 4<sup>th</sup> May, 2003). These events they meant the US administration began to shift its strategy towards Syria to a tougher approach. “Assad would give assurances, then renege on assurances, and so I would say in the second term there was more of an emphasis on pressure, sanctions, and other forms of pressure.” (Interview, Singh, 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 2014).

More sanctions were placed on the Syrian regime with *the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act*, which was enacted at the end of 2003. The legislation was prompted by the safe passage (and support) that Syria was providing for volunteers to go to fight against US forces in Iraq. The bill placed sanctions on Syria and insisted the regime withdraw completely from Lebanon. It also declared Syria should bear responsibility for any attacks carried out by Hezbollah or other terrorist groups based in Syrian or Syrian-occupied territory. Congressman Elliot Engel (D-NY) authored the Act and has continued to take a hard-line on Syria. Stephen Zunes, contends that the bill could have served as justification for military action against Syria (Zunes, 2004: 66). However, the Bush administration did not use force against the Syrian regime.

By 2007, Syria was building a nuclear reactor. After Israel received the intelligence, which was confirmed by US sources, it bombed the reactor in Dair Alzair (ElBaradei, 2011; Abrams, 2013). Abrams was keen for Israel to bomb the site asserting, “I thought Israelis (as opposed to the US) should bomb the reactor, restoring their credibility after the *annus horribilis* of 2006 with the Second Lebanon War and then the Hamas takeover of Gaza” (Abrams, 2013). Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) at the time, Mohammed ElBaradei, notes that in photos taken at the site, an individual was spotted who the IAEA recognised from their dealings with North Korea. Traces of uranium were also discovered in inspections after the strike. Abrams states that the reactor was almost an exact copy of the Yongbyon reactor in North Korea, and the North Koreans had helped develop it (Abrams, 2013). However, Bush was uncertain of its status as a weapons programme, and declared he could not sanction either the US or Israel bombing the reactor. In the end, Israel went ahead and made the US aware of the bombing as it was taking place (Abrams, 2013). In sum, since its independence in 1945, Syria has had a troubled relationship with the US with a particularly deep rift occurring over its stance towards the Iraq war in 2003.

### *Syria and Iran - Allies*

It is important to note in the context of the two case studies examined in this thesis that Iran and Syria have been allies since the Iranian Revolution in 1979. In some ways, they are unusual allies as the Syrian state’s ideology has been Ba’thist and secular while Iran’s ideology is overtly religious and opposed to any form of atheism, hence its title since 1979 - the Islamic Republic. Yet they have shared common strategic aims, one of which has been to thwart the regional goals of the US, as well as those of Israel and Iraq. Both Iran and Syria got involved in Iraq aiding and abetting insurgents in the aftermath of the US invasion in 2003. Indeed, as Rola El Hussein points out, the alliances between Syria, Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas “has become part of a ‘rejectionist’ axis that seeks to oppose perceived imperialism in the Middle East” (El Hussein, 2010: 803). Hezbollah has very close links to Iran and grew out of an organisation which was set up by an Iranian cleric, Musa al-Sadr, called Amal. When Israel invaded and subsequently occupied southern Lebanon in 1982, a group of clerics and laymen left Amal and set up a

militia to fight against the Israeli occupation - this militia became Hezbollah (El Husseini, 2010: 806). Iran is an important source of military and financial support for Hezbollah. It sent members of its Revolutionary Guards to Lebanon during the First Lebanon War between Israel and Lebanon to train and support Hezbollah (Fisk, 2001; Qassem, 2005: 240), and did the same during the Second Lebanon War in 2006.

More recently, Iran has lent enormous support to Syria during its civil war. Early on in the war, the Syrian government lost a great deal of ground. However, by mid-2013, early 2014, with Iran's assistance, it managed to turn its fortunes around (Goodarzi, 30<sup>th</sup> June, 2015: 2). The Syrian Army was reported to have suffered 80,000 to 100,000 dead and wounded in the first four years of the conflict (Blanford, 27<sup>th</sup> April, 2015). To assist the Syrian Army, Iran sent thousands of its Revolutionary Guard Corp soldiers, fighters from Hezbollah, and Shi'a paramilitary forces from Iraq and Afghanistan (Blanford, 27<sup>th</sup> April, 2015). Moreover, "Iran has bolstered the military manpower of the Syrian government by gradually building up an auxiliary force in Syria called the National Defense Forces, composed of Alawites, Shi'as, and regime loyalists to assist the Syrian army in the conflict" (Goodarzi, 30<sup>th</sup> June, 2015: 2).

Since the winter of 2011, the Syrian conflict has become a proxy war with Saudi Arabia and Qatar backing the rebels, (Purple, 5<sup>th</sup> October, 2015), including those with Islamist ideologies, though not ISIS (Sengupta, 12<sup>th</sup> May, 2015). In this respect, the conflict in Syria has become part of a wider regional power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran. By May of 2013, there were increasing reports that members of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) were losing fighters to Jabhat al-Nusra, an Islamist organisation with links to al-Qaeda that had developed into one of the most motivated, well financed, and best-equipped forces fighting against the Syrian regime (Mahmood and Black, 8<sup>th</sup> May, 2013). At that time, Iran also began to provide support to Houthi rebels in Yemen, which is Saudi Arabia's neighbour in the Arabian Peninsula. By March 2015, Saudi Arabia had decided to intervene in Yemen on behalf of the government and against the Houthis, commencing an air campaign. Adding to the proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, has been the differing positions taken by Russia and the US. From the start of the civil war,

Russia vetoed UN resolutions condemning Syrian regime repression and calling for targeted international sanctions. Since September 2015, it has been involved militarily in Syria fighting alongside Assad's forces.

### 5.3 Neoconservative Preferences towards Syria

In order to understand how the neoconservatives view Syria, and the type of policies they are keen to see enacted, this section examines the views of prominent neocons. During the George W. Bush administration, neoconservatives Richard Perle and David Frum expressed their contempt for the Syrian regime, and advocated that the US should employ a new policy towards the state. Both were prominent members of the Bush administration: Perle was the Chairman of the Defense Policy Board Advisory Committee, and Frum worked as a speechwriter for Bush, famously coining phrase the "axis of evil" about Iraq, Iran and North Korea. Making their frustration and disgust with the regime clear, they wrote,

If all our problems were as easy as Syria, the war on terror would have ended a year ago. Here is a regime that is surrounded by US and allied forces; that depends for fuel on oil exports from Iraq; and whose economy is a pitiful shambles. Really, there is only one question to ask about Syria: Why have we put up with it as long as we have? (Frum and Perle, 2004: 97).

Indeed, in the early days of Bush's second term, it was reported that Perle was eager to continue the momentum of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and keen that regime change in Syria be on the agenda. Perle commented that Assad "had never been weaker, and we should take advantage of that" (New York Times, 13<sup>th</sup> September, 2005). Voicing similar sentiments, William Kristol wrote a piece in *The Weekly Standard* in which he stopped short of advocating regime change, but nonetheless supported a robust policy. Drawing together some of the key tenets of neoconservatism - militarism, military intervention, and the promotion of human rights - he asserts,

Talk has failed. Syria is a weak country with a weak regime. We now need to take action to punish and deter Assad's regime. It would be good, of course, if Rumsfeld had increased the size and strength of our army so that we now had more options. He didn't, and we must use the assets we have. Still, real options exist. We could bomb Syrian military facilities; we could go across the border in force to stop infiltration; we

could occupy the town of Abu Kamal in eastern Syria, a few miles from the border, which seems to be the planning and organising centre for Syrian activities in Iraq; we could covertly help or overtly support the Syrian opposition (pro-human rights demonstrators recently tried to take to the streets of Damascus to protest the regime's abuses). This hardly exhausts all the possible forms of pressure and coercion. But it's time to get serious about dealing with Syria as part of winning in Iraq, and in the broader Middle East (Kristol, 10<sup>th</sup> December, 2004).

Kristol's recommendations echo the previously noted reflections of Abrams during the same period. In 2004, the neoconservatives were particularly keen for a strong response against Syria because of its activities in Iraq.

About a year and a half later, during the Second Lebanon War between Hezbollah in Lebanon and Israel, it was reported that neoconservative advisors to the White House were keen for the war to be expanded to Syria. Journalist Tom Regan cited an Israeli source which commented that Bush had voiced an interest in this action; however, it was considered very negatively by some senior Israeli officials (Regan, 2006). William Kristol began advocating regime change. He avers,

For while Syria and Iran are enemies of Israel, they are also enemies of the United States. We have done a poor job of standing up to them and weakening them. The right response is renewed strength in supporting the governments of Iraq and Afghanistan, in standing with Israel, and in pursuing regime change in Syria and Iran (Kristol, 2006).

Similarly, on July 15, 2006, Ledeen also wrote that the war presented a perfect opportunity to get rid of Assad as well as Hezbollah, and suggested that the first step towards the removal of Assad would be for the President and Secretary of State "to call for regime change" (Ledeen, 2006b).

Since March 2011, Syria has been engaged in a civil war, and neoconservatives in the US immediately pushed for greater involvement in the conflict in support of the rebel forces of the FSA. On March 15, 2012, the Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI) presented the case for direct intervention in Syria. It noted that a few days earlier Senators John McCain (R-AZ), Joe Lieberman (D-CT), and Lindsey Graham (R-SC) had released a joint statement urging that, "If requested by the Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army, the United States should help organize an international effort to protect civilian population centres in Syria through airstrikes

on Assad's forces" (McCain et al, 6<sup>th</sup> March, 2012). Concurring with this approach, FPI suggested that as well as increasing contact and assistance with the FSA, the US should "use limited retaliatory airstrikes against select Syrian military targets in order to protect the safe zones" (Foreign Policy Initiative, 2012). McCain is a particular ally of the neoconservatives as he is a foreign policy hawk and often supportive of US intervention. Indeed, at a conference held by FPI entitled "Restoring American Leadership", FPI Chief Executive Chris Griffin referred to Senator McCain in his opening remarks.

As you may know, FPI's an organisation - we were created to make the case for American leadership on behalf of both our interests and our values - a strong national defence and an open economy. Perhaps no senator's career has better embodied those values than Senator McCain, and I don't believe any thought leader has better advanced those ideas than Bob Kagan (Foreign Policy Initiative, 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 2014).

Other neocons based in think tanks within Washington DC were in agreement from the start of the civil war that the US must play a substantive role in bringing down the Assad regime. Abrams, currently based at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), asserts, "Pundits are used to analysing the gap between what our ideals suggest and what our security interests require. In Syria, there is no such gap. ..So the fall of the regime should be an American policy goal, and in this we will have considerable Arab and European support" (Abrams, 21<sup>st</sup> February, 2012). He went on to say, "The United States should encourage the arming and funding of the opposition, to give them a better chance to defend themselves and the protesters and to overthrow the regime" (Abrams, 21<sup>st</sup> February, 2012). This is a position Abrams has consistently supported throughout the conflict. Similarly, Danielle Peltka at AEI and General Jack Keane at the neoconservative think tank the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), have advocated arming the rebels with anti-aircraft weapons and conducting air strikes to degrade Assad's air power (Keane and Pletka, 22<sup>nd</sup> May, 2013). Two years into the war, neoconservatives were presciently warning that the lack of US intervention was creating a vacuum which was being filled by extremist groups. Robert Kagan opined, "By not supporting those more moderate elements, we have left the field open to the jihadists, and if we continue to do nothing, they get stronger and stronger" (Kagan, 6<sup>th</sup> September,

2013). This warning was also made repeatedly by other neoconservatives during their congressional testimony, which will be focused on later in this chapter.

#### **5.4 Syria Policy during the Obama Administration**

In order to understand why key members of the administration agreed with the neoconservatives that the US should intervene in the Syrian civil war, albeit with a different rationale and overall strategy, it is necessary to examine the administration's stance towards the conflict. Members of the administration found that their goals coalesced with those of the neoconservative network in September 2013 after the Assad regime launched a chemical weapons attack on civilians in a rebel-held suburb of Damascus.

At the start of Obama's presidency in 2009, there were attempts by the administration to bridge some of the divisions and problems that had occurred between the US and Syria during the George W. Bush administration. Obama made tentative moves towards the renewal of peace talks, and at the beginning of 2010, the US appointed its first ambassador to Syria since 2005 - Robert Ford (Scheller, 2013: 62). This initiative was halted by the start of the Syrian conflict at the beginning of 2011. The Obama administration did not immediately express support for the rebels, or more accurately, protesters, as they were at that time. Indeed, the administration initially indicated that it felt that Assad could deal with the discontent being expressed. Bente Scheller notes that "In a CBS interview at the end of March 2011, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton referred to Bashar al-Assad as a reformer and underlined that she saw no need at that point to intervene militarily" (Scheller, 2013: 63).

By 2012, everything had changed and a schism was emerging in the White House between two different approaches to the conflict. The President and his Chief of Staff Denis McDonough were set against intervening in any meaningful way in the Syrian conflict, taking what could be loosely described as a realist approach. John J. Mearsheimer has argued, for example, that Syria is not of vital strategic interest to the US and there is not a compelling moral case to intervene (Mearsheimer, January/February, 2014). In contrast, Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, (until February 2013) and then Secretary of State, John Kerry, US Ambassador to the UN,

Samantha Power, Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta, (until February 2013), and CIA Director David Petraeus (until November 2012) all advocated a more robust US policy, which could be broadly labelled liberal interventionist. All of the latter group were in favour of arming moderate rebels at this point. In the summer of 2012, Petraeus presented a plan for the CIA to covertly arm the rebels from bases in Jordan which was supported by Clinton and Panetta. He went ahead with the operation (PBS Frontline, 26<sup>th</sup> May, 2015). PBS reported that “Petraeus’ covert plan gave the administration plausible deniability if legal issues arose concerning the attempted overthrow of a sovereign government or if the weapons turned up in the wrong hands” (PBS Frontline, 26<sup>th</sup> May, 2015). General Keane, based at the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), claims that the Institute was instrumental in convincing Petraeus to adopt this strategy, and that Petraeus gave a presentation to Clinton, Dempsey and Panetta which helped persuade them as to the utility of such action (Keane, 21<sup>st</sup> May, 2015). Panetta recalls, “My view was if we really want the rebels to succeed, the only way we could do that, the only way we were going to get credibility with those that were fighting on the streets and dying was to be able to provide the weapons they needed in order to confront Assad” (PBS Frontline, 26<sup>th</sup> May, 2015). Similarly, Secretary Clinton was in favour of a more vigorous US response, which included doing more to arm the rebels at that time (Balz, 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 2013).

In August 2012, Obama held a press conference where he discussed a range of issues, but when it came to reporters’ questions, the last one that was asked was on the administration’s Syria policy. Obama stated, “We have been very clear to the Assad regime that a red line for us is if we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilised. That would change my calculus”. He went on to say, “There would be enormous consequences if we see movement on the chemical weapons front or the use of chemical weapons” (Obama, 20<sup>th</sup> August, 2012). David Rothkopf, CEO and Editor of *Foreign Policy* asserts that this was an impromptu threat and not planned (PBS Frontline, 26<sup>th</sup> May, 2015). Whatever the genesis of the threat, it was widely taken to indicate that the US would take military action should the Syrian regime use chemical weapons (Hendrickson, 2015: 3). On August 21st, 2013, the Assad regime used sarin gas on the rebel-held Damascus suburb of Ghouta killing approximately 1,429

people, including 426 children (BBC News, 24<sup>th</sup> September, 2013; Hendrickson, 2015: 3). Immediately afterwards the administration asked the Defense Department to prepare for a strike on Syria, which was planned for August 31<sup>st</sup> (Hendrickson, 2015: 3; PBS Frontline, 26<sup>th</sup> May, 2015). Secretary of Defense, Chuck Hagel, stated that US forces had “moved assets in place to be able to fulfil and comply with whatever option the President wishes to take.” Hagel said, “We are ready to go.” (Cowell et al, 27<sup>th</sup> August, 2013).

Then Obama suddenly hesitated, and after discussions with McDonough, he decided to ask Congress to vote to approve the military action first. This was not an expected turn of events, given that Obama had authorised two major troop surges in Afghanistan, hundreds of drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia, and intervened in Libya without seeking approval from Congress (Hendrickson, 2015: 1). As Ryan C. Hendrickson points out, “In this respect, Obama’s sudden procedural change and turn to Congress surprised many in the political arena” (Hendrickson, 2015: 4). There were many that felt that Obama had lost his nerve or had never really meant to threaten military action in the first place. Others pointed to low public support for a strike as a factor (Lewis, 1<sup>st</sup> September, 2013). *The New York Times* described it as one of the “riskiest gambles of his presidency” (Baker and Weisman, 31<sup>st</sup> August, 2013). Obama gave a statement asserting,

Now, after careful deliberation, I have decided that the United States should take military action against Syrian regime targets. This would not be an open-ended intervention. We would not put boots on the ground. Instead, our action would be designed to be limited in duration and scope. But I'm confident we can hold the Assad regime accountable for their use of chemical weapons, deter this kind of behaviour, and degrade their capacity to carry it out (Obama, 31<sup>st</sup> August, 2013).

He went on to say, “Yet, while I believe I have the authority to carry out this military action without specific congressional authorization, I know that the country will be stronger if we take this course, and our actions will be even more effective” (Obama, 31<sup>st</sup> August, 2013). The President then sent a letter to the heads of the House and Senate urging them to support the action. Kerry was strongly in favour of the Syrian regime being held to account for its use of chemical weapons (Gordon and Landler, 26<sup>th</sup> August, 2013). Similarly, well-known

advocate of liberal intervention, Power, made an impassioned speech to the Center for American Progress where she outlined why she believed military action to be vital at this juncture.

We should agree that there are lines in this world that cannot be crossed and limits on murderous behaviour, especially with weapons of mass destruction, that must be enforced. If we cannot act when the evidence is clear, and when the action being contemplated is limited, then our ability to lead in the world is compromised (Power, 6<sup>th</sup> September, 2013).

However, at the last minute, Russia intervened and convinced Obama to use diplomatic measures instead. Military action was averted and the vote was called off. In the end, Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov agreed on a plan for accounting, inspection control, and elimination of Syria's chemical weapons on the 14<sup>th</sup> September 2013 (Arms Control Association, 2015).

By May 2014, Obama declared he would increase US activity in Syria. In a speech at West Point Obama laid out his guiding principles and overall approach to foreign policy, and he acknowledged that he had increased support to the rebels in Syria. "I will work with Congress to ramp up support for those in the Syrian opposition who offer the best alternative to terrorists and a brutal dictator" (Obama, 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2014). The neoconservatives had advocated this policy from the beginning, and had won support from senators such as McCain and Marco Rubio (R-FL). By August 2014, Obama had authorised limited air strikes on Iraq, as the largest city, Erbil, in the autonomous Kurdish region, looked like it was about to fall to ISIS (Cooper et al, 7<sup>th</sup> August, 2014). After the rise of ISIS in 2014 and the beheadings of Western journalists and aid workers which began in August 2014 with journalist James Foley, public support increased for more robust action. Congress authorised funding for military strikes in Syria and Iraq, as well as official training and weapons for moderate rebel forces on the 17<sup>th</sup> September 2014.

### *Congress and Syria*

It was difficult for either neoconservative or indeed liberal interventionist arguments to gain traction in Congress in large part because of the Libyan civil war, which began in February 2011 (a month later NATO forces, including the US,

intervened). Alongside this, many Republican members of Congress, including those who had been pressing for intervention in Syria, were loath to give Obama the authorisation to use military force that he had requested as they were keen to weaken the President.

Despite a substantive amount of congressional testimony, primarily by neoconservatives, urging the US to take military action towards the Syrian regime from the start of the conflict in March 2011, there was reticence to adopt such a policy, particularly initially. Former Chief of Staff to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs until 2013, Yleem Poblete, noted that when the war in Syria began, many in Congress proceeded with extreme caution due to the parallels they felt there was with what had happened in Libya (Interview, Poblete, 25<sup>th</sup> September, 2014). During that intervention, rebel groups received weapons from the US and its allies (Arsu and Erlanger, 15<sup>th</sup> July, 2011), many of which ended up in the wrong hands (Risen et al, 5<sup>th</sup> December, 2012). The growing chaos after the revolution in Libya culminated in an al-Qaeda-inspired group murdering the US Ambassador in Benghazi on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2012 (DeYoung et al, 12<sup>th</sup> September, 2012).

Poblete points out that at the start of the Syrian conflict, many organisations urged action on humanitarian grounds; however, she contends that this is generally considered an insufficient basis for military action. “When you are calling for arming rebels, training and equipping rebels, when you’re talking about air strikes, when you’re talking about possible military intervention of some kind, it has to be for security reasons” (Interview, Poblete, 25<sup>th</sup> September, 2014). She argues that, at that point in time, the case for action was not being made strongly enough within a security rationale. Chairwoman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee from January 2011-2013, Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) (who is generally hawkish on issues of foreign policy) was firmly against arming the rebels at this juncture. “I have always, and will continue to believe, that we should not arm the rebels” (Ros-Lehtinen, 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2013). Disquiet about the types of groups that arms might fall into was top of the list of concerns, particularly with the Iranians heavily involved in the conflict on the side of their regional ally, Assad. Poblete explains,

The question was asked, how can we be sure that if we train and equip, that our vetting is going to prevent or safeguard against training and

equipping and arming al-Nusra or Hezbollah, for that matter? Or benefitting the Quds force, the Iranian Quds force<sup>6</sup>. They were all there. Hezbollah was embedded with the rebels, and the Quds force also embedded with the rebels, even though the regime supports the Assad regime - they were embedded with the rebels precisely to find out who is planning what against the Assad regime (Interview, Poblete, 25<sup>th</sup> September, 2014).

Al-Nusra had just been designated a foreign terrorist organisation (FTO), and there were concerns amongst members that the criteria for vetting rebel groups had not been fully, or adequately, developed, either by the military or the intelligence services.

For these reasons, at the start of the conflict, there was a focus on humanitarian concerns and increasing sanctions on the Syrian regime. Ros-Lehtinen introduced the *Syria Freedom Support Act 2011* which amended the *Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act 2003* to increase the scope of sanctions towards Syria and eliminate presidential authority to waive these sanctions. It also authorised the President to provide support for the transition to a democratically-elected government. This was approved a year later on March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2012. Ros-Lehtinen also sponsored the *Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act 2012* which expanded the sanctions regime on Iran as well as sanctioning “persons who engage in censorship that prohibits, limits, or penalizes freedom of expression by Syrian citizens”.

However, this dynamic shifted somewhat towards the end of 2013, which was highlighted by the outside speakers who were asked to give testimony to Congress. By 2013, there was a turn from a humanitarian focus to an emphasis on security, a change in focus that was underscored by the predominant use of think tank FDD. This was reflected in the legislation introduced to Congress at this stage. Several bills, both introduced and passed, urged the Obama administration to intervene further in Syria, and these bills gained fervent support from neoconservatives. This is detailed later in the chapter.

Congressional leaders, in particular, were tougher and more supportive of the administration taking a robust approach to the conflict than other members of

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<sup>6</sup> The Iranian Quds force is a special forces unit of the Revolutionary Guards responsible for their extraterritorial operations.

Congress. When Assad used chemical weapons in August 2013, “senior leaders of both parties actively backed Obama both before and after Obama requested congressional approval for military action” (Hendrickson, 2015): 1). Almost all Republican and Democratic leaders indicated they would vote in favour of strikes. This included House Speaker, John Boehner (R-OH), House Majority Leader, Eric Cantor (R-VA), House Minority Leader, Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) and Pelosi’s deputy Steny Hoyer (D-MD) (Richter and Memoli, 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 2013). Similarly, Senate Majority Leader, Harry Reid (D-NV), was in favour of strikes (Andrews et al, 13<sup>th</sup> September, 2013). Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KT) was against taking military action (Everett, 10<sup>th</sup> September, 2013). In this respect, supporting a strike on Syria was largely a bipartisan position when it came to congressional leadership.

Not all members of Congress supported strikes. A few days before Obama had declared he would ask for authorisation from Congress, Congressman Scott Rigell (R-VA), collected the signatures of 116 members of Congress in a letter to the President stating their opposition to any unilateral decision by the President to take military action in Syria (Fuller, 28<sup>th</sup> August, 2013). Others, who had previously pressed vociferously for intervention, such as Marco Rubio, said that he would not support the proposed strike as he argued it was too limited in scope (Rubio, 4<sup>th</sup> September, 2013). This led many interviewees to speculate about the political nature of the position taken by these members of Congress.

Often allied to the neoconservatives, Senators McCain (R-AZ) and Lindsey Graham (R-SC) were quick to support the proposed strike, and expressed the view that Obama should have taken military action immediately after the use of chemical weapons. Eliot Engel (D-NJ) conveyed the same view, “I think we have to respond, and we have to act rather quickly. We can’t afford to sit back and wait for the United Nations. ...We can destroy the Syrian air force” (Hendrickson, 2015: 5). Other notable Democrats that supported military action were some of those who went on to be against the Iran Deal in 2015 (the JCPOA) - Chuck Schumer (D-NY), Brad Sherman (D-CA), and Ted Deutch (D-CA), possibly due to the influence of AIPAC. In this respect, the stance advocated by the neoconservative network had a significant degree of support from key members of Congress.

## 5.5 Neoconservative Agenda Setting, Framing, and Legislation

### *Think Tanks and Policy Entrepreneurs*

Several neoconservative think tanks were prominent in the debate on US-Syria policy during Obama's presidency. FPI, FDD, and ISW endeavoured to feed into the debate on the US response to the Syrian conflict albeit in different ways. All three helped to set the agenda and frame the discussion - FPI was focused on email briefs and meetings with members of Congress, while FDD was prominent during congressional testimony. Lastly, ISW provided the most technical expertise on the issue for congressional staff members as well as becoming predominant in congressional hearings from the latter half of 2014 when the debate shifted to a security rationale.

Congressional hearings are not the sole forum in which a think tank can try to exert influence by contributing to debates. As noted in chapter one, experts from think tanks can input in several ways to the process of developing policy. Private meetings, newsletters, regular emails, and briefings on Capitol Hill, are all ways to set the agenda and shape the debate in Congress. FPI sends an overnight brief by email every day to policymakers and their staffers which provides news clippings and opinion pieces from major newspapers. Several congressional staff members interviewed noted the convenience and efficacy of this service. Additionally, FPI sends fact sheets, in-house opinion pieces, and recommended questions before hearings. While this information is promoted as educational, like most think tanks, FPI has a clear and cohesive ideological standpoint which it advocates. Senior members of FPI staff are open about the way in which they seek to frame issues in order to promote the core values of the organisation, which are neoconservative. Executive Director of FPI, Chris Griffin, explicitly notes the way in which FPI frames its materials to match the overarching ideology of the organisation.

Of course, they are framed by the perspective of the organisation that we bring to our work, where we are committed to promoting American leadership and engagement in the world, standing and working with our allies, standing up against tyranny and also supporting the spread of human rights and democracy. So that's the perspective that frames everything we do (Interview, Griffin, 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 2014).

While such efforts are clearly designed to influence policy, it is important to note again that influence does not often take the form of a direct linear route between one actor and another. In the case of policymakers and congressional staffers, they are usually broadly aware of the overarching position of the organisation they are using. In this respect, influence should be viewed as a constitutive process where ideas get reinforced and expanded upon, rather than necessarily imposed.

With minor differences about the form intervention should take, neoconservative voices were largely unified in their recommendations for US-Syria policy. FDD continued to push for the provision of lethal force for the rebels. As noted, FDD were pre-eminent as an organisation in promoting a neoconservative Syria policy from the first year of the conflict. At the end of that year, FDD, along with two colleagues at FPI, wrote comprehensive testimony for the record for the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Central Asian Affairs (Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 9<sup>th</sup> November, 2011). They noted the moral obligation that the US had to act in Syria, and made several recommendations for US policy. Understanding the problem in terms of the necessity of regime change, they framed their suggested policies accordingly. First, they stressed the need for tougher sanctions, including extra-territorial sanctions on Syria. Secondly, they urged Washington to engage more with the Syrian opposition with a range of suggestions for support, both non-lethal such as providing communications equipment, and lethal with “arm-related assistance”. This, it is suggested, could be provided by the US or alternatively by its partners in the region. Given the subsequent rise of ISIS, the testimony presciently notes that “A key objective would be to help empower the moderate members of the Syrian opposition vis-à-vis the Islamist elements”. Thirdly, they advocated limited air strikes on regime military targets, and lastly, they suggested that the administration consider imposing a no-fly zone or no-go zones in Syria, and pointed out that “Any such mission will likely require use of American military assets to defeat Syria’s extensive air defense and air forces” (Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 9<sup>th</sup> November, 2011). As such, neoconservative organisations like FDD and FPI were advocating the use of the US military in Syria (and indeed Iraq) right from the start of the conflict. Only John Bolton proved to be a somewhat dissenting voice (although Bolton adheres to most of the principles of

neoconservatism, he does not express support for compelling or assisting in the democratisation of states). While he continued to advocate strongly for an attack on Iran, by July 2013 he had decided it was too late to intervene militarily in Syria. At this time; however, Bolton was strongly advocating regime change in Iran through military intervention (Bolton, 31<sup>st</sup> July, 2013).

Like FPI and FDD, ISW promotes values and policies which are in-line with neoconservative thought, as well as collaborating with key neoconservatives on policy documents. ISW was also described by congressional staff interviewed as having been very influential on the issue of Syria. This is backed up by the number of congressional hearings at which the Institute was invited to give testimony since substantive military action was taken by the US in 2014. President of ISW, Kimberly Kagan, similar to her husband Frederick Kagan at AEI, consistently advocated for more significant intervention in Syria. They consistently understood the policy problem as the regime and ensured discussions were framed in terms of regime change through lethal force. A congressional staffer points to ISW as having provided particularly useful information on the conflict, putting out maps and daily reports. He notes,

I use them (ISW's resources) and I think a lot of other people do too. Of course, they have a very sort of interventionist philosophy, and Fred Kagan wants to put 25,000 boots on the ground, which ain't going to fly. But that's one think tank that's been very involved and has become more prominent in this discussion (Interview, congressional staff member, 22<sup>nd</sup> September, 2014).

This corresponds to the Institute's own assessment of its impact. On its website, it asserts,

ISW's forecasts and maps of the rise of the Islamic State and the conflict in Syria reach millions of people via premier media outlets from The New York Times to CNN to the Economist and more. ISW's analysts have had a clear impact on how senior decision makers formulate and execute policy (Institute for the Study of War, 2015).

While it is not unusual for a think tank to hold a very positive view of its influence over policymakers - after all, impact is important when trying to generate donations - ISW has used its technical expertise to make itself a key resource in

terms of providing materials and military analysis. In this respect, its experts used their technical knowledge to operate as policy entrepreneurs.

Given their access to both Congress and key members of the administration, it is important to understand the stance taken by ISW. In September 2014, ISW published “A Strategy to Defeat the Islamic State”, written by Kimberly Kagan, Fred Kagan (AEI), and Jessica Lewis (ISW), within which they assert that, “The US must also engage much more vigorously in efforts to develop an inclusive government-in-waiting in Syria. We must do more than trying to unify what is left of the moderate opposition” (Kagan et al, September, 2014). The report goes on to say that, these political efforts will require sending US forces to Iraq and Syria as part of a military strategy, and it was one of first documents to call for troops to be deployed. The report notes, “This phase of the strategy will require a significant commitment of US forces - perhaps as many as 25,000 ground troops in all in Iraq and Syria” (Kagan et al, September, 2014). The Kagans are prominent commentators on US strategy in the Middle East, generally calling for more forceful military action. They have also continued their call for a ground force in newspapers such as the LA Times (Kagan and Kagan, 6<sup>th</sup> October, 2014).

### *AIPAC's Support for Action*

The neoconservatives and AIPAC did not share a common goal in seeking regime change in Syria until the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons, as highlighted by interview data. This initial lack of coherence weakened the network. Unlike most neoconservatives, at the start of the Syrian civil war Israel was initially divided over whether the US should intervene in some way (Interview, Abrams, 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2014). Whilst never allies, Israel and Syria have lived in relative peace with each other since 1973. During the Six-Day-War in June 1967, Syria lost the Golan Heights to Israel, and in 1973 Syria and Egypt counterattacked. In May of the following year, Kissinger engaged in shuttle diplomacy, and assisted in arranging a Syrian-Israeli disengagement (US Department of State, 21<sup>st</sup> October, 2013). Despite Syria and Israel clashing many times indirectly since, particularly during the Lebanese civil war, this disengagement has technically remained in effect until the present day. While Assad has hardly been a popular figure in Israel, many felt that the stability he provided was better than some of the possible alternatives. Former

Foreign Policy Director at AIPAC, Steve Rosen asserts, “Well, they were split on it. For Israel, the war between Assad and the Salafis is a no-win proposition. You either get al-Qaeda or... And Israelis are divided on which is worse, Assad or al-Qaeda” (Interview, Rosen, 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2013). Similarly, Abrams describes how Israel weighed up the options towards their northern neighbour, “They [Israel] were basically saying, ‘Ok, we could get something worse, like the kind of ISIS, Salafi lunatics’” (Interview Abrams, 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2014). In this respect, the neoconservative’s ideological preferences for military action were not initially shared by Israel, or indeed AIPAC. A senior House staffer noted that without the support of a key ally in the region like Israel, members of Congress were less keen to get involved.

However, after the President’s red line was crossed, Israel wanted to see it enforced because of the damage to US credibility - particularly on the Iran nuclear issue - if it were not (Rosen, 4<sup>th</sup> September, 2013). Rosen also suggests two other reasons why Israel’s strategic calculations changed after the red line had been crossed. First, he notes that the Israelis care a great deal about chemical weapons. Second, if Obama were to bomb Syria it likely would be to destroy the Syrian air force and air defences, and to do that he would need to take out their surface-to-air missiles (SAMs).

For Israel, those SAMs are a real problem, and if Obama would neutralise them, which he’s eminently capable of doing, it’d be a gift to Israel. Even better, get rid of the Syrian air-force. It’s true the Syrian air force is a lousy air force, but Israel has to divert assets in order to go hard against the danger that Assad will actually try to use its air-force (Interview, Rosen, 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2013).

He goes on to suggest that some of Netanyahu’s national security officials were looking forward to the prospect of the US bombing Syria to weaken the regime, pointing out that whoever wins the conflict and ends up in power, it would be better for Israel if they did not have a strong air force or air defences. Rosen contends that for Israel, the key objective was that Obama should punish Syria but not try to influence the outcome of the civil war. This was reflected in the way AIPAC framed its support for military action. It came out relatively quickly and issued a press release urging Congress to grant the President the authority he had requested, to “protect America’s national security interests and dissuade the

Syrian regime's further use of unconventional weapons" (AIPAC, 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 2013). Indeed, most of the pro-Israel lobby backed the planned strike (The Times of Israel, 4<sup>th</sup> September, 2013).

While AIPAC endorsed the proposed action, it was clear to many that the vote on whether to strike the Syrian regime was less important for the interest group than the question of taking tougher action against Iran. Commenting on AIPAC's stance on the issue in Congress, a lobbyist notes, "I think they [members of Congress] could get a sense from AIPAC that this wasn't the same thing as not voting for a measure that AIPAC was really pushing on - they knew it was a lower bar" (Interview, lobbyist, 24<sup>th</sup> September, 2014). While not keen on advocating military action, for Israel and AIPAC, the risk presented by the US not acting would have undermined US leadership on global security to a dangerous extent. Others interviewed agreed that AIPAC was reluctant to expend too much political capital on the issue, but felt that lobbying in favour of the resolution was also good politics vis-à-vis the Obama administration. Indeed, the former Israeli Ambassador to the US, Michael Oren, writes in his memoirs that Obama's National Security Adviser, Susan Rice, personally asked AIPAC to lobby in favour of a yes vote in Congress (Oren, 2015). At the same time, AIPAC was focused on preventing a deal with Iran that it saw as irretrievably flawed.

Whatever the political calculation, AIPAC did try to persuade members of Congress to back the authorisation. Shortly before the proposed vote, FDD held an event, "Crossing the Red Line: The Crisis in Syria and the US Red Line". At this discussion, the dynamic between AIPAC and the administration was highlighted by two of FDD's senior executives. Hannah, asserts:

I don't want Israel to be in the middle of this but the fact is, I can tell you for sure, that the entire organised pro-Jewish community in this town is going up and quietly and discreetly talking to people on the Hill and saying that a disaster for Israel would be a no-vote here, and the complete loss and collapse of American credibility and deterrence in the Middle East. ..But I can tell you, the administration - and it's been widely reported - is depending on Israel and it's using Israel, and is using the threat of Iran, and the threat of Iran to Israel, if this goes badly for the administration, to try and whip these people who maybe won't be convinced by anything else regarding the President and his credibility and his word, but if they understand the ramifications of this on Israel's

security, maybe just maybe those guys change their calculations and become a yes vote (Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 2013).

To which FDD President, Clifford D. May, added,

And what an odd situation - and I hope I'm not oversimplifying this too much - the President can get the support of his own party only with the help of AIPAC. Isn't that what we're saying here, really?" (Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 2013).

There was huge public reluctance to get involved militarily once more in the Middle East, and therefore to give the preferred policy of the neoconservatives any hope of passing required the pressure of a powerful interest group such as AIPAC. This illustrates again how an interest group can be vital in helping to operationalise the ideology of a smaller, core group such as the neoconservatives. The links and communication between pro-Israel lobby groups, and neoconservative organisations such as FDD and FPI are key when gaining the required momentum to push policies through. In this sense, think tanks or individual experts function as the strategists of policies they would like to see implemented, working out the details of their preferred course of action. Interest groups such as AIPAC can help provide the authority necessary to get policy enacted, provided their interests align. Interviews indicated that key members of neocon think tanks meet relatively regularly with members of AIPAC or other pro-Israel groups or individuals, if their interests accord.

Nevertheless, as noted, it was clear to most in Congress that Syria was a second-order issue for AIPAC. And while there were some Syrian organisations who attempted to be the AIPAC of the Syrian opposition (Interview, Misztal, 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 2014), quickly generating the power and support-base similar to long-established organisations such as AIPAC would clearly be incredibly difficult. As one former staffer notes, "there is no inch-wide, mile-deep support for Syria and the Syrian revolution" (Interview, former congressional staffer, 19<sup>th</sup> September, 2014) meaning that there are a lack of wealthy and powerful individuals who are willing to fund groups who would lobby for US action in Syria. Given that a policy network will have a far higher opportunity of achieving its preferred policy if the network includes the backing of a strong interest group, the lack of a group willing to consistently push hard for a policy and expend political capital on Syria, had a

significant impact on the debate in Congress. As Blaise Misztal, Director of National Security at BPC comments, it is difficult to gain traction for a policy “if there’s not popular support for something or if there’s no strong interest group pushing it” (Interview, Misztal, 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 2014).

### *Congressional Hearings on Syria*

Despite the ultimate lack of support for the strike in 2013, neoconservative ideas were a prominent part of the debate on Syria. Congressional hearings contained a significant number of neoconservative experts who were requested to give testimony. This increased when strikes on Syria began to be carried out by the administration in 2014 and the neoconservative think tank ISW was frequently asked to testify. The analysis of congressional hearings was undertaken in two sections. First of all, from the start of the conflict until the end of June 2014 and then from July 2014 until the end of August 2015 to allow for an analysis before and after the US administration embarked on military action.

The start of the Syrian conflict is dated as March 2011. There were 34 hearings between March 2011 and end of June 2014 (22 in the House, and 12 in the Senate). The pattern of think tanks and organisations being asked to give testimony was similar to those invited to the hearings on Iran. Of the total of 34 hearings, 19 contained speakers from outside government (with roughly 3 experts asked to testify per hearing), almost all of whom were drawn from think tanks. The most commonly-invited think tank was the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (the Washington Institute) with 10 experts asked to give testimony. This was followed by FDD with 7 speakers, the Council of Foreign Relations with 4, and lastly representatives from AEI, CSIS, and Human Rights Watch (HRW) with 3 witnesses each<sup>7</sup>. During the remainder of 2011, and throughout 2012, most of the hearings which included outside speakers focused on human rights and the humanitarian situation in the Syria. By 2013, this had shifted to a greater focus on security. That year, FDD was by far the think tank with the most presence in the House on the

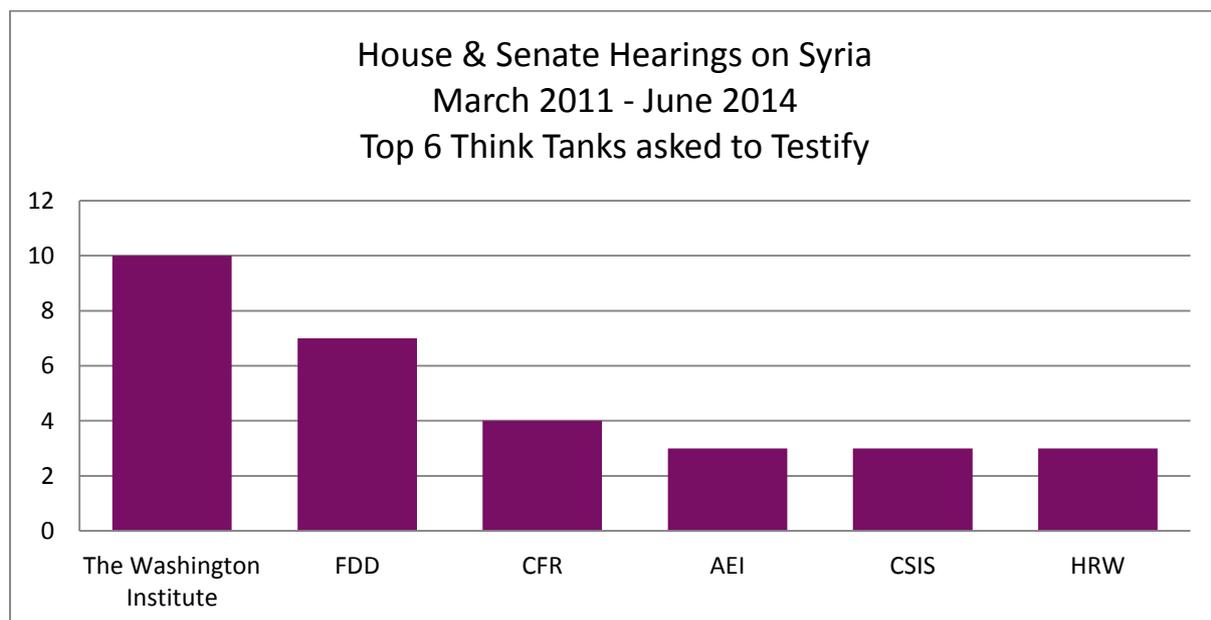
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<sup>7</sup> As there were only 12 hearings in the Senate, and there are a higher proportion of witnesses drawn from government, it would not be expedient to consider the hearings separately from the two chambers of Congress.

issue of Syria. It was invited to give testimony at all except three of the hearings which contained experts outside government.

Overall, despite not being quite as strong as during the hearings on Iran, it is clear that neoconservative views were still well represented. It is also important to note that as well as members of the neoconservative FDD, several well-known neoconservatives were also asked to testify, attached to various think tanks: John Bolton and Danielle Pletka at AEI, and Elliott Abrams at CFR. During the congressional hearings on Syria, neoconservatives argued strongly and consistently for greater involvement from the start of the conflict in 2011. Other pro-Israel groups, in particular, the Washington Institute, also argued for greater involvement; however, its experts tended to stop short of advocating direct US military action until 2013. While both groups pushed for more engagement, it is the neoconservatives who consistently pushed for the strongest action in Syria.

Table 5.1



Since the start of the conflict, neoconservatives made the argument for more involvement predominantly in relation to Syria’s connection with Iran. US policy towards both Syria and Iran was expressly linked during congressional hearings, with some covering both states, e.g. “Iran and Syria: Next Steps” and “Breaking the Iran, North Korea, and Syria Nexus”. However, even in hearings specifically on Syria policy, neoconservative arguments for increased involvement focused in part

on the importance of defeating the Syrian regime in order to weaken Iran. For example, in written testimony for a hearing on Syria in 2013, Abrams contends that, “the rise of Iranian power in the region would be seen to have been stopped if the Assad regime falls”. He also asserts that if the US does not ensure the Assad regime falls, that would be seen as a “defeat by Iran” (Abrams, 17<sup>th</sup> July, 2013). Similarly, in a hearing on Syria in the same year, Tony Badran from FDD suggests that Iran is the US’s main enemy in the Middle East and therefore, “Seeing Iran emerge with its interest unharmed in Syria will be nothing short of a humiliating defeat for the US” (Badran, 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2013).

There are few who would deny the strategic security relationship between Iran and Syria, and all the experts invited to give testimony refer to it. However, common to both neoconservatives and pro-Israel think tanks such as the Washington Institute, was a tendency to frame the war in Syria as fundamentally a battle between Iran and its allies, and the US and its allies. Concern for providing credible deterrence against the spectre of a possible Iranian nuclear weapon was also frequently raised. Counselor at the Washington Institute, Dennis Ross, stressed this linkage in early 2013 arguing, “The more we are seen as being prepared to compete there [Syria], meaning we’re prepared to raise the price to the Iranians of what they’re doing in Syria” (Ross, 11<sup>th</sup> April, 2013). Links were consistently made between a lack of involvement in Syria and a perception that the Iranians did not believe ‘all options were on the table’ when it came to the US’s willingness to consider military action to stop Iran from developing a nuclear weapon.

During their testimonies, neocons framed the policy problem in Syria as a threat to national security rather than a humanitarian crisis, hence their linkage of the conflict to the Iranian threat. Neocon witnesses focused on democracy promotion, regime change and military action, be that in the form of a no-fly zone, arming rebels, or ground troops. Few neoconservatives went further than Pletka at AEI to encourage more intervention in the conflict. In written testimony for a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee hearing in June 2013, Pletka clearly stated her position, “It is in our nation’s vital national security interest to intervene in Syria” (Pletka, 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2013). She went on to outline a very hawkish position that was echoed to a large extent in Abrams’ testimony a month later. Pletka advocated

vetting and arming rebels “who embrace democratic norms”, using Tomahawk missiles to disable Syrian airfields, considering a no-fly zone, and imposing new sanctions on Hezbollah. In a style reflective of the neoconservative approach to the national interest, she notes that it was important that the US act in Syria in a way which reflects, and is consistent with, US “values and ideals”. Pletka iterates these as democratic rule, equal rights, secularism, the protection of minorities, women’s rights, and free markets. Promoting and underscoring most of the main tenets of neoconservatism, she also laments the lack of US leadership on its Syria policy (Pletka, 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2013). While calls for this type of action became more common after the rise of ISIS, at this juncture there were few experts advocating this kind of intervention.

The neoconservative approach to foreign policy that Pletka was advocating did not go unnoticed or without criticism by some in Congress. When, at the same hearing, Pletka suggests that the US had been lacking in its response to the recent crises in the Middle East, Gerry Connolly (D-VA) responds with this interesting exchange in which he emphasises the recent history of neoconservatism.

Hearing you, I hear echoes of neocon arguments about Iraq a decade ago, and I want to give you an opportunity... But you use phrases like, ‘We have done absolutely nothing’ - I beg to differ. The United States has most clearly done something in the Arab Spring with limited options. It’s hard to argue we did nothing in Libya (Connolly, 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2013).

Pletka replies saying, “I’m a big supporter of the Iraq War. I think the Iraqi people are grateful to have been liberated.” With Connolly ending his questions stating, “I can tell you in my own district, Syrian minorities have very mixed feelings about what’s unfolding in Syria. It’s not the Manichean world Ms Pletka would have us see.” Clearly aware of the main tenets of neoconservatism, Connolly notes its preference for viewing the world in sharp binaries of good and evil. However, it is important to note that while Connolly drew attention to the neoconservative nature of Pletka’s policy recommendations in a way that suggested his clear dissatisfaction with the approach, Pletka also carried a good deal of support throughout the hearing. This was illustrated by Adam Kinzinger (R-IL) who described Pletka’s testimony as “an incredible five minutes on what we need to do”. Similarly, at the same hearing, Tony Badran, Research Fellow at FDD,

proposed that the US should target Damascus Airport, and other airfields controlled by the regime, as well as help to organise, train, and equip vetted rebel forces. In his written testimony he makes it clear that regime change is essential, and getting rid of Assad will not be sufficient (Badran, 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2013). It is consistent with the salience of the approach on this issue, that two out of three speakers asked to give testimony at the hearing were espousing neoconservative ideas.

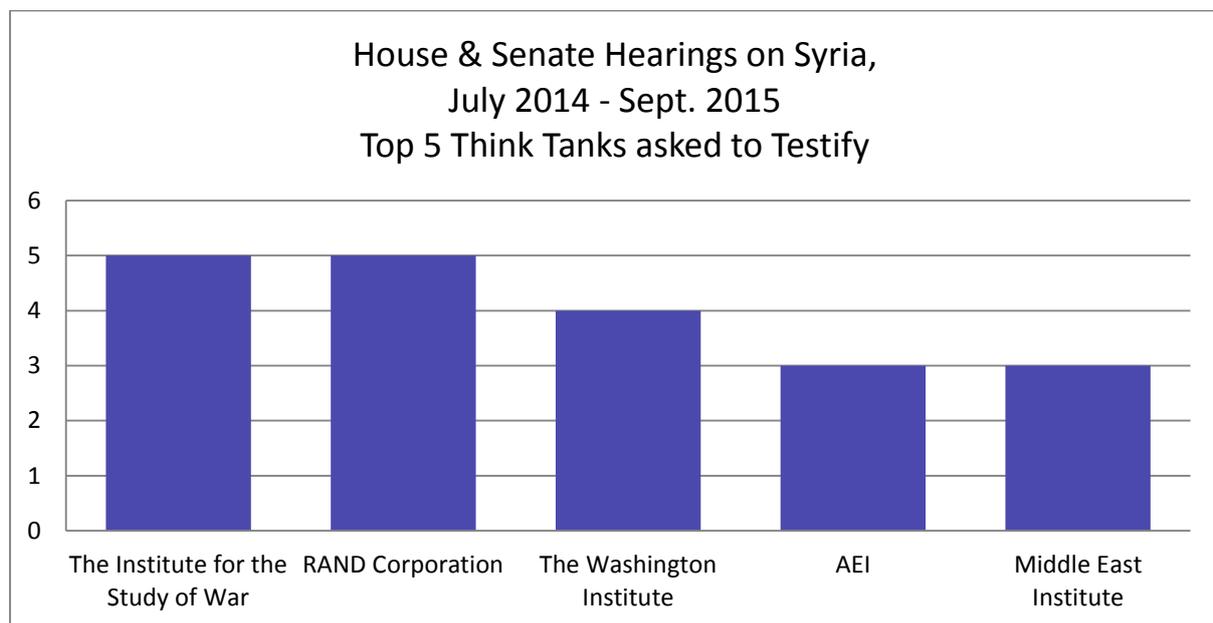
Indeed, the pre-eminence of neoconservatism as an approach to foreign policy within the Republican Party was displayed by the prevalence of neoconservative experts invited to give testimony when the issue was placed within a security framework. At a hearing on Syria a month later, Abrams echoed many of Pletka's policy recommendations. He suggested that the US should vet and then arm the rebels in Syria whilst also using the US military to strike the Syrian regime's air assets and air bases (Abrams, 17<sup>th</sup> July, 2013).

Pro-Israel groups, such as the Washington Institute, made similar arguments for more involvement in Syria. However, as with the neoconservatives, there was some variation among the suggestions proposed. While some of the Washington Institute's experts, such as Ross, argued for greater US military involvement, others were more cautious on this specific issue. Their main Syria expert, Andrew Tabler, argued from the start that the US needed to be more involved and supportive of the rebels, but was less clear on whether the US should become militarily involved. In 2012, he stated in written testimony that the US needed to take "more robust action, including support for the opposition within Syria" (Tabler, 27<sup>th</sup> March, 2012). However, by late 2013, Tabler noted the enormous problem that had developed with the rise of extremist groups in the opposition, and pointed out that a clear distance needed to be drawn between nationalist forces and ideological groups fighting the regime in order to allow the US to fund the rebellion (Tabler, 20<sup>th</sup> November, 2013). Whilst in contrast, in a hearing before the Senate in April 2013, Ross stated "I do believe we have to provide lethal assistance", and also noted that he was also in favour of a no-fly zone (Ross, 11<sup>th</sup> April, 2013).

The experts who gave testimony predicting the rise of extremist groups - initially groups such as the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra (now known as the al-Nusra Front), and later ISIS - turned out to be accurate. Between 2014 and 2015, ISIS became well established in Syria and Iraq, occupying many cities including Mosul, Iraq's fourth-largest city and Raqqa in Syria.

Given these developments, between July 2014 and September 2015, there was an increase in hearings, though many were solely with administration officials. There were 35 hearings: 23 in the House and 12 in the Senate. 15 had outside speakers, therefore the majority (20) were administration officials, and a number were closed hearings, which is reflective of the fact the administration had begun air strikes on ISIS-held areas of Syria and Iraq. Of the outside experts, the top five think tanks represented were the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) and RAND Corporation with five experts each, The Washington Institute with 4, and AEI and the Middle East Institute with 3 each.

Table 5.2



Similar to FDD, ISW endeavoured to make itself an indispensable part of the policy process on Syria, and indeed Iraq, by providing detailed maps and information on the conflict, as well as policy recommendations. As well as experts from ISW, those invited to testify from AEI were both neoconservatives; Frederick Kagan (testified

both in the House and Senate), and Michael Rubin. And finally, neoconservative Abrams from CFR also testified.

Speaking at a hearing towards the end of 2014, Kimberly Kagan stressed a key tenet of neoconservative thinking - US military pre-eminence - as part of her key recommendations for the US to be successful in its campaign against ISIS.

You need to take on sequester and ensure that we have the defence of the United States and the ability to project power in a way that our allies and our enemies can recognise not only now but over time, and ensure that we have the greatest military in the world (Kagan, 19<sup>th</sup> November, 2014).

As US strikes became more frequent and were expanded into Syria, Keane at ISW was increasingly asked to testify. By May 2015, with the continuing rise of ISIS, in a hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Keane stressed that air power was not enough, “We have no strategy to defeat ISIS in Syria. We have no ground force, which is the defeat mechanism” (Keane, 21<sup>st</sup> May, 2015). He discussed the calls that had been made previously by ISW, and other groups, to arm the Free Syrian Army, and highlighted ISW’s role in convincing the CIA, and Petraeus more specifically, to advocate this policy to the administration.

And then the CIA became convinced that we could actually vet the Free Syrian Army, and I will say that the Institute for the Study of War had some impact on providing them with information that assisted them with that conclusion - and General Petraeus would admit that, as the Director at the time. He presented a briefing to Secretaries Clinton, Panetta and Dempsey, General Dempsey, and they agreed with him that this force could, in fact, be armed, equipped and trained robustly. But the administration did not do that (Keane, 21<sup>st</sup> May, 2015).

This is the same policy mentioned earlier in the chapter, when Petraeus decided to use the CIA to arm the rebels covertly through bases in Jordan. In this respect, Keane and Kimberly Kagan at ISW as well as Frederick Kagan, operated as policy entrepreneurs on this issue. Their valuable links with senior officials such as Petraeus (they have a history of working together, for example in Afghanistan in 2009) allowed them to propose ideas and share information at the highest levels. At the same hearing, Frederick Kagan emphasised the moral imperative for the US to take action against ISIS. He argued that 15-20,000 troops were required, and asserted, “This is unacceptable from a moral perspective and a US national

security perspective to just watch a group like this succeed in this way”. Kagan went on to contend that “the armed forces budget needs to be increased significantly” (Kagan, 21<sup>st</sup> May, 2015). In this way, he stressed two key tenets of neoconservative thought. At the end of the hearing in May, he re-emphasised the moral necessity to act and expressly tied it to American values, asserting,

America is not historically a country that watches these kind of atrocities on this scale occur and does nothing. It actually is a core American value to take a stand against these kind of... We do it very late, we try to talk ourselves out of it, we have long arguments about it, but ultimately we generally do it, and that’s one of the things that makes us America and I think that we shouldn’t lose sight of that moral imperative as we talk about this (Kagan, 21<sup>st</sup> May, 2015).

A month later, in a House Armed Services hearing in June, 2015, Frederick Kagan contended that in order to make airpower effective in Iraq constraints on civilian casualties should be relaxed. He also argued again that thousands of ground troops are needed against ISIS.

Our special mission units (SMUs) can and should conduct frequent raids against ISIS leaders and staff positions in support of both offensive and defensive ISF operations. ..A larger number of American advisors could facilitate communications, planning, intelligence analysis, and many other supporting functions essential to the effective prosecution of war. I will not try to detail here the specific force requirements for this kind of operation except to note that the total overall force needed is likely in the vicinity of 20,000 US troops (Kagan, 24<sup>th</sup> June, 2015).

It should be noted that while Frederick Kagan consistently advocated tens of thousands of ground troops, not all neoconservatives went this far. Notably, neoconservative Michael Rubin, fellow scholar at AEI, was more cautious about the efficacy of sending US troops, without an AUMF (Rubin, 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 2015).

Neoconservatives largely attempted to place the conflict in Syria within the ‘war on terror’ and the existential threat of militant Islam. As neoconservatism has a value-based conception of the US national interest, ideological threats provide a particularly galvanising focal point for this school of thought. They had limited success with this approach within the Syrian context due of a lack of popular historical narratives concerning Syria within the US. War fatigue such as that experienced after Vietnam, and now currently with Iraq, has also hampered

neoconservative efforts to build a cultural narrative around intervening more forcefully in Syria.

At a House hearing in June 2015, Michael Rubin was forthright in his views on the religious underpinnings of ISIS. He argued that, “The religious exegesis underpinning the Islamic State’s actions is both real and legitimate, even if it is a minority interpretation which many Muslims eschew” (Rubin, 3rd June, 2015). Other neoconservatives have employed historic cases of US intervention to help make the case for increased intervention in Syria. Framing the conflict in Manichean terms of good and evil, Frederick Kagan evoked the genocide of the Jews during the Second World War to make a comparison with the depth of evil displayed by ISIS. In a Senate hearing in May 2015, he described driving past the Holocaust Museum in Virginia and seeing the sign which reads “Never Again”, before making the case for intervention in Syria (Kagan, 21<sup>st</sup> May, 2015).

With Russia beginning air strikes on Syria in October 2015, Max Boot described a Russia-Syria-Iran axis as a “new Axis of Evil” (Boot, 28<sup>th</sup> September, 2015), clearly harking back to the ‘axis of evil’ phrase used by George W. Bush in his 2002 State of the Union Address to describe Iran, Syria, and North Korea shortly after the ‘war on terror’ began (Bush, 29<sup>th</sup> January, 2002). Also referring to the alliance of Syria, Iran and Russia as “The New Axis of Evil at War in Syria”, Ledeen described the intervention of Russia in Syria due to the failure of Iran and Syria to defeat the opposition with similarly WWII analogies. As he puts it, Putin’s decision is a response to an Iranian failure”, and, “If it turns out badly for the new Axis, it’ll be like Hitler having to bail out Mussolini in WWII” (Ledeen, 14<sup>th</sup> October, 2015).

The Washington Institute, though slightly less present in the second period (mid 2014-2015), suggested more engagement, albeit in a more moderate way. For example, in mid-2014, James Jeffrey advocated that the US begin limited strikes against ISIL (Jeffrey, 15<sup>th</sup> July, 2014), while Michael Eisenstadt, also at the Institute, wrote, “Don’t over-react and don’t intervene - at least not yet”, also noting, “Extremists often rely on their enemies overreaching” (Eisenstadt, 15<sup>th</sup> July, 2015). This reticence, in comparison to neocon voices, was similar to the disconnect that there was between the neoconservatives and AIPAC around the proposed vote in September 2013. As noted in the previous section, though both

AIPAC and neoconservatives were pushing for the enactment of the same policy, AIPAC were far less keen to expend political capital on this issue in comparison to the Iran nuclear issue.

By 2015, most of the congressional testimonies from outside experts suggested that the US needed to be more involved in Syria in some way; however, neoconservative individuals presented the case for the most far-reaching involvement. As they had from the start, they also tended to present their case for action within a neoconservative framework, that is to say, highlighting key tenets of neoconservatism and linking their policy recommendations to them. With a strong presence in congressional hearings, they framed the debate around the need for military intervention in order to achieve regime change, and increasingly stressed the threat of Islamism from groups such as the Nusra Front and ISIS.

### *Committee Chairpersons*

Both the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Robert Menendez (D-NJ) and ranking minority member Bob Corker (R-TN) supported military strikes. The ranking minority member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee Engel (D-NJ) also supported strikes - in a hearing on the issue he argued that a strike was necessary in order to send a message not only to Assad, but to Iran and Hezbollah. However, Chairman Ed Royce (R-CA) was undecided (Gordon and Shanker, 4<sup>th</sup> September, 2013).

Corker and Menendez, as well as Engel, were very supportive of US military action towards the Syrian regime during Obama's time in office. All three introduced legislation to try and strengthen the administration's position towards the conflict. Given their preferences for tougher action, it is unsurprising that many neoconservative thinkers were asked to testify. The committee system is set up in such a way that the chairperson's views tend to dominate in a hearing. Referring to the bias of the chairperson in the selection of witnesses, Abrams comments on why he had been selected to testify during a hearing on Syria in the House Armed Services Committee in July 2013.

You know how witnesses are selected? They are selected by the chairman and the ranking member from the other party. So I think if you

look at most of those committees, they are pretty friendly to - not the committee, the committee leadership, the two top guys - to the kind of view that I was espousing (Interview, Abrams, 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2014).

At that time, the committee was chaired by Buck McKeon (R-CA). Similarly, a senior lobbyist asserts that the committee chairs tend to be particularly hard-line on foreign policy. He also argues that there are links between a member's position on an issue of foreign policy and where they draw their donations from.

Particularly when it comes to the Syria question and intervention, and to a certain extent when it comes to the Iran question, and the choice is clear between diplomacy and a military strike, the concentration of hawkishness gets greater and greater as you get to the committee head. And then when you're talking a committee chair, you're talking *the* most hawkish people who again, have made a career catering to people like Sheldon Adelson and other neocons on the Republican side, and on the Democratic side, catering to AIPAC-affiliated people who, while they might be progressive on domestic social issues, are incredibly hawkish when it comes to Middle East security issues (Interview, lobbyist, 24<sup>th</sup> September, 2014).

When Senator McCain (R-AZ) became Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee in January 2015, he brought in many neoconservatives to testify. Heilbrunn contends that with several relatively new Republican senators sympathetic to a neocon agenda such as Iraq War veterans Tom Cotton (R-AR) and Joni Ernst (R-IA), McCain will get support for his preferred policies. "The influx of such politicians will allow Senator John McCain, the incoming head of the Armed Services Committee, to attempt to implement the neocon wishlist" (Heilbrunn, 11<sup>th</sup> November, 2014).

### *Legislation*

Neoconservative think tanks endeavour to work closely with senators and representatives to help with specific legislation, even if that takes the form of backing particular bills. In March 2013, Engel (D-NY) introduced the *Free Syria Act 2013* which authorised the President "to provide appropriate assistance, including limited lethal equipment, to vetted Syrian opposition members" (Engel, 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2013). The legislation received strong support from FDD. Senior Counselor at FDD, Hannah asserts,

One can only hope that Representative Engel's outstanding leadership might finally spur the administration as well as Congress to realize that, as difficult as the situation in Syria has become, doing nothing poses the greatest risks of all to the interests of the United States and its allies by surrendering the fate of this vital region to Assad's killing machine, Iran's Revolutionary Guards, and the black flag of Al Qaeda (quoted in Pecquet, 18<sup>th</sup> March, 2013).

Similarly, a couple of months later in May, Menendez (D-NJ) and Corker (R-TN) introduced the *Syria Transition Support Act 2013*. This bill sought to, amongst other things, "provide arms, military training and non-lethal supplies to the Syrian armed opposition". In his written testimony in April 2013, ex-CIA Director and current Chairman of FDD, James Woolsey, expressly named and thanked the representatives and senators responsible for introducing the *Free Syria Act of 2013*, and the *Syria Democratic Transition Act of 2013*, which both sought to authorise humanitarian and non-lethal or restricted military aid to the Syrian opposition (Woolsey, 11<sup>th</sup> April, 2013). Neither bill passed, however.

Woolsey also commended the March 2013 open letter sent to Obama by Senators McCain (R-AZ) and Carl Levin (D-MI) in which they urged Obama to take more assertive action in Syria including "limited military options" which would entail giving "robust assistance" to opposition forces and conducting air strikes to destroy the Assad regime's aircraft (Levin and McCain, 21<sup>st</sup> March, 2013). Such co-operation on legislation and correspondence to the executive continues a pattern of assistance, which mirrors the close working relationship that has occurred on Iran policy. Heilbrunn notes the link between neoconservatives and McCain, "What McCain offers to the neocons is two things - one is access to power", he continues, "The other thing the neocons like about McCain is simply his emphasis on valour and on national greatness. McCain and the neocons really see eye-to-eye on where America should be headed" (quoted in Smith, 19<sup>th</sup> February, 2008).

When Obama declared he would seek congressional approval for a strike on Syria, both Democrats and Republicans in Congress were wary. Hawkish members of Congress, many sympathetic to neoconservative arguments such as McCain, Lindsey Graham (R-SC), and Engel, felt that the President should have acted far earlier by intervening to supply arms and training to vetted rebel groups, and by enforcing a no-fly zone over the country. These congressmen would have voted for the action.

However, projections for the vote suggest that Obama would have struggled to get it to pass in the House of Representatives (Landler and Weisman, 10<sup>th</sup> September, 2013). Jon Alterman notes that many Democratic members were furious that Obama had asked Congress to vote on the issue - they described it as a lose-lose situation (Interview, Alterman, 7<sup>th</sup> November 2013). With military action in the Middle East incredibly unpopular among the American public, they felt they were being put in a very difficult position where they were required to either take a position unfavourable to their constituents or vote against the administration and allow Obama to be dramatically weakened as president. While some were keen for a more interventionist posture by arming the rebels, there was also enormous hesitation about the US taking military action.

Republicans were reluctant to support the vote. There was a great deal of anti-war sentiment in both parties. Most of the newer Representatives, those elected in 2010 or 2012 were against authorising a strike, Rep. Justin Amash (R-MI) stressed, "People have seen wars that have dragged on for more than a decade. ..We're tired of wars without end" (Fuller, 10<sup>th</sup> September, 2013). Members of Congress who declared they would vote against a strike covered a very broad range of foreign policy preferences. There were those who were ideologically against intervention such as libertarians and Tea Partiers, as well as many liberals who feared slippery slopes and escalation. But interestingly, there were many hawkish members of Congress who stated that they would not back proposed action because they felt it did not go far enough. Many of them had been calling for intervention in Syria for years. FPI Director, Chris Griffin, averred that the very limited approach proposed by the administration appeared to merely check the box on enforcing the red line rather than outline a broader, more comprehensive strategy which, to his mind, would have helped garner support for the action. This assessment was shared by FDD and fellow neoconservative foreign policy experts, amongst others. In this respect, the proposed strike managed to alienate both foreign policy hawks and doves within Congress, leaving an uncertain number of members who would have voted for the resolution (Interview, Griffin, 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 2014).

The former approach largely encapsulates the position taken by Senator Rubio. Considered a foreign policy hawk, Rubio has a number of neoconservative advisors, including Jamie Fly (former Executive Director of FPI) as his Counselor for Foreign and National Security Affairs. The senator had been arguing since the start of the conflict for stronger support for the rebels (Lucas, 17<sup>th</sup> June, 2013). However, when asked whether he would back a limited US strike on the Assad regime in September 2013, he stressed he would not (Rubio, 4<sup>th</sup> September, 2013). As with many in Congress, Rubio argued that Obama was considering taking action too late in the day. For some, this volte-face was largely political. As one senior staffer notes, “I felt like there were some Republicans who just wanted to deny Obama the authority, just because they wanted to stick it to him. ..I think there was definitely some politics involved in that” (Interview, congressional staff member, 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 2014). Brookings scholar, and former member of the State Department’s Policy Planning staff, Jeremy Shapiro, similarly points to the fact that those in Congress who had been pushing for more action suddenly drew back when it looked like force might actually be used.

You saw that come to a head last September when the President actually decided he was gonna move over and adopt, to a degree, the views of those five or six Republican senators who have been screaming at him for two years, and the Congress abandoned him in a red-hot second! (Interview, Shapiro, 12<sup>th</sup> September, 2014).

Neoconservatives, and those sympathetic to neoconservative ideas, had no such doubts about supporting a strike. Foreign policy commentators and former government officials, amongst them many neocons, sent an open letter to the President, roughly a week after the chemical weapons attack, expressly urging immediate military action. The letter outlined policy that went well beyond a one-off strike, suggesting that the US and its allies should “target the Syrian dictatorship’s military units that were involved in the recent large-scale use of chemical weapons”, while also arming “vetted moderate elements”, and further urged Obama to also “consider direct military strikes against the pillars of the Assad regime” (Open Letter to Barack Obama, 22<sup>nd</sup> August, 2013). The signatories also made it clear that they felt the regime in Iran would be emboldened if the US did not respond.

Ultimately, the neoconservative network was not fully tested on this occasion as, in the end, Obama decided not to ask Congress to vote on a military strike against Assad. Instead, Russia sought to assist in the transfer of the Syrian regime's stockpile of chemical weapons in a bid to avert an attack by the US, whilst also seizing the diplomatic initiative. Rosen asserts that both Obama's Secretary of Defense, Chuck Hagel, and his Secretary of State, John Kerry, had thought there would be limited military action against Assad up until the last minute. After all, both Kerry and Hagel had gone before the House Armed Services Committee on the 10<sup>th</sup> September 2013 at the hearing "Proposed Authorisation to Use Military Force in Syria", and implored representatives for almost four hours to vote *for* the action. Rosen discusses the fact that Obama's Chief of Staff, Denis McDonough, helped convince the President at the eleventh hour not to order a strike on Syria, but instead pass the decision to Congress.

They [Hagel and Kerry] went to sleep, and he [Obama] took a walk in the White House garden with this 30-year-old or 40-year-old guy, Denis McDonough, who nobody ever heard of, and strolling across the White House lawn with Metternich, the great strategic thinker, he changes his mind! (Interview, Rosen, 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2014).

Discussing the same event at FDD's Washington Forum, former CIA Director, Michael Hayden, remembers that he believed that Obama was on the brink of ordering a strike, and he was shocked when it did not happen, saying, "My raw emotion, watching it from the outside was just embarrassment". He recalls, "What he said was, [Chief of Staff] Denis [McDonough] and I took a walk on the South Lawn last night and we decided we'll toss this to Congress - they'll decide" (Hayden, 1<sup>st</sup> May, 2014). It appears that Hayden was not the only person to be surprised by the change in direction. Rosen, close associate of Martin Indyk (Rosen was Indyk's PhD supervisor, amongst other connections) states that Obama did not discuss his decision not to take military action with Secretary Kerry.

And the Secretary of State, I can tell you this, found out about it - he was going to the secret wedding of Martin Indyk. That very weekend, Martin Indyk was getting married in Nantucket - which is a very pretty place in Cape Cod - and Kerry had secretly gone up there to go to Martin's wedding only to find out that his President had taken a stroll with junior here. What?!" (Interview, Rosen, 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2013).

This disconnect reflected the schism within the administration over how to deal with the situation in Syria. Indeed, Kerry, Rice, and Hagel were only informed after the decision had been made (Thrush, January/February, 2016).

Given that neoconservatism clearly outlines American leadership as essential to world order, it is unsurprising that some of the strongest criticism came from the neoconservatives. Obama consistently said that ‘all options were on the table’ when it came to resolving the Iran nuclear crisis, which is generally accepted as alluding to leaving the possibility for military action open. The credibility of that threat was seen as particularly important to those who wish to bring overwhelming pressure to bear over the Iranian government. In fact, it was one of the arguments made by Kerry at the Senate hearing on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sept. 2013 in which he sought consent for a strike.

Iran, I guarantee you, is hoping we look the other way. And surely they will interpret America’s unwillingness to act against weapons of mass destruction as an unwillingness to act against weapons of mass destruction. And we will fight for the credibility to make the deterrence against a nuclear weapon as meaningful as it should be without that fight (Kerry, 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 2013).

On this issue, the neoconservatives and pro-Israel groups, including AIPAC, were in agreement about the damage that has been done by Obama’s climb-down over his red line on the use of chemical weapons. Rosen declares, “We have Barack Obama backing down... We got lucky, Putin pulled our irons out of the fire. That back down was terrifying!” (Interview, Rosen, 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2013).

## **5.6 Public Opinion**

Neoconservatives tried to build a degree of cultural salience for intervention in Syria early on in the conflict; however, this was not very successful. Part of the problem was the lack of a historical popular cultural narrative around Syria, unlike that which has built up around the Iranian regime. This added to lack of public support for intervention. As Misztal, from BPC, notes,

I think, even if you had a Syrian AIPAC, so throwing tonnes of money at members of Congress to support a more hawkish Syria policy, if the US public was opposed - if you had 65% of Americans saying they don’t want to be engaged in Syria, then it wouldn’t matter (Interview, Misztal, 22<sup>nd</sup> September, 2014).

Almost all of those interviewed pointed to public resistance to war as a major, if not predominant factor in why military action was not taken in September 2013 after the chemical weapons attack. Some suggested that Obama strategically shifted the responsibility for action onto Congress knowing that the public were not in favour of action, therefore ensuring Congress would take a good portion of the blame for public dissatisfaction.

Several interviewees posited that although AIPAC was aware that the vote was far from a done deal, they were unaware of the extent of resistance both from the public and members of Congress. One source close to pro-Israel lobby groups explains,

In terms of politics vis-à-vis Congress, and the American people, they [AIPAC] knew they were walking into a dicey situation. I don't think they knew they were walking into a loser... I think a lot of people were surprised by the real grass-roots resistance to that campaign or that possible campaign that the President had proposed (Interview, lobbyist, 24<sup>th</sup> September, 2014).

In a Pew Poll taken between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> September (shortly before the proposed vote), 63% of Americans were opposed to US airstrikes in Syria (Pew Research Center, 9<sup>th</sup> September, 2013). A CNN/ORC poll, taken between the 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> September, indicated a similar level of dissent with 59% of those surveyed stating that they did not think Congress should authorise a strike (CNN/ORC, 9<sup>th</sup> September, 2013). In the lead-up to the vote, former Secretary of State Colin Powell's Chief of Staff, Lawrence Wilkerson, reports that a long-time acquaintance and member of Congress told him, "Larry, there's not going to be a vote because the American people don't want one. You won't believe the cards, letters, emails and telephone calls that we have received in the last 96 hours" (Interview, Wilkerson, 2<sup>nd</sup> October, 2014). The strength of public opinion against taking military action at that time could not be ignored, even by those members who are normally sympathetic to taking an interventionist approach to foreign affairs.

Unsurprisingly, neoconservatives interviewed largely blamed the lack of public support for intervening in Syria on a lack of leadership from the White House. They contend that from the start, Obama failed to make the case to the American public and Congress in order to garner the requisite support for action. The

President had not adopted a comprehensive strategy which formulated why it was in the US's national interest to get involved. By late 2014 this had changed somewhat with the rise to public prominence of ISIS, and the beheadings of several US (as well as British) journalists and aid workers. In October 2014, 57% of those surveyed expressed support for the US campaign against Islamic militants (Pew Research Center, 22<sup>nd</sup> October, 2014).

## 5.7 Conclusion

The different actors within the neoconservative network did not consistently cohere on their understanding of the conflict in Syria, and therefore it was only after the chemical weapons attack by the Assad regime in Ghouta that they began to agree on the policy they sought from the Obama administration. This weakened the network on this issue. The neoconservatives and AIPAC had a somewhat different agenda. They began from different starting points. Neoconservatives are fundamentally ideological and this affects their reading and analysis of situations, such as the conflict in Syria. Lobbyists from AIPAC and, to some extent, experts from organisations such as the Washington Institute tend to be more pragmatic. While all are avowedly pro-Israel, their different starting points mean that they view the conflict slightly differently. Neoconservatives commonly regard democracy promotion as inherently beneficial to a given situation, whereas more pragmatic organisations are likely to take a more realist approach. AIPAC supports Israel's best interests, and it was unclear at the start of the conflict in Syria that Israel would benefit from the overthrow of Assad. However, after the chemical weapons attack, both the neoconservatives and AIPAC argued for more forceful intervention in Syria.

Neoconservative preferences regarding action towards the Syrian conflict were widely heard and considered in Congress. From 2013, the policies advocated began to be framed within a security rationale rather than primarily as a humanitarian response, as they had been previously during the first two years of the conflict. At this point, neoconservative think tanks such as FDD, and from mid-2014 onwards ISW, became dominant during congressional hearings. Recommended policies focused on military intervention, no-fly zones, and latterly, ground troops. With a Republican-controlled Congress by January 2013 (when the Senate became

majority Republican), it was unclear whether a resolution for authorising military force would pass. While neoconservatism has become a prominent strand of thinking on foreign policy within the Party, a combination of public opposition to intervention and the desire to frustrate Obama's expressed policy goal meant that many Republican members of Congress were keen to vote against authorising a military strike in 2013. However, it should be emphasised that congressional leaders were largely in agreement regarding a strike on Syria in 2013.

As well as remaining prominent within the debate, certain neoconservatives had good private access to members of government. ISW, and the Kagans specifically, have excellent links with Petraeus and were part of the discussions which resulted in Petraeus deciding to use the CIA to covertly arm Syrian rebels in 2012. In this respect, the Kagans can be regarded as having acted as policy entrepreneurs on the Syrian conflict. ISW's resources on Syria are also widely used by congressional staff. Gaining admittance to discussions at this level is a key precursor to influence being exerted, whether or not policy outcomes are achieved.

After Obama drew a red line over the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime, and that line was crossed, the proposed resolution *Authorisation for the Use of Military Force Against the Government of Syria to Respond to the Use of Chemical Weapons 2013* was strongly supported by both elements of the neoconservative network but for partly differing reasons. The neoconservatives were keen to finally achieve the military intervention they had been pushing for since the start of the conflict. The situation in Syria exemplified the rationale for neoconservative interventionism - the projection of US power for its own sake, and also for the purpose of maintaining order in the region, democracy promotion, human rights abuses, and latterly (with the rise of ISIS), the existential threat to the US, and the West more broadly, from Islamic fundamentalism. In contrast, AIPAC's position in favour of the vote was in part due to Israel's concern over the Syrian regime's weaponry, such as its SAMs and chemical weapons, and therefore it was in favour of anything that would weaken the regime. It was also concerned about US credibility in the wake of a climb down over a threat to take military action. AIPAC, whilst setting out its stance on the proposed resolution early on and meeting members of Congress to lobby for a vote in favour, was unwilling to

expend too much political capital on the issue as it was seen as having secondary importance to the continuing nuclear crisis with Iran. Part of AIPAC's calculations for lobbying in favour of the resolution was that it was politically expedient with regards to the administration, who itself recognised the power of the AIPAC to get votes passed. This disconnect within the neoconservative network, combined with strong public resistance to a strike (or any form of intervention at this juncture) meant that the network looked unlikely to achieve its policy goal of getting a resolution for a strike approved. Nonetheless, the neoconservatives succeeded in ensuring the prominence of their ideological agenda within the debate on Syria in Congress.

While there was neoconservative influence on the issue of Syria during the Obama administration, it was to a lesser degree than on Iran. The first key factor that accounts for this was that the consistency of the neocon network's beliefs on the issue fluctuated and were less coherent, thereby weakening its strength. Further, while neocon policy entrepreneurs had access to Congress through debates and congressional staff members, they did not contribute directly to legislation. Finally, public opinion was initially firmly against military action in 2013, and then after strikes began, strongly against the insertion of ground troops by the US. Nevertheless, neoconservative think tanks FDD and ISW gained extensive exposure for their policy recommendations. They were able to take a lead role in congressional hearings, framing the issue as well as recommending solutions. The dominance of neoconservative voices within policy debates in Congress reflected some of the sympathies both Republican and Democratic leadership had for a more robust response to the crisis. This was enabled by the prominence of neoconservative thinking on foreign policy within the Republican Party and a liberal interventionist strain within the Democratic Party which was being advocated by senior members of the administration. There was a majority of support among congressional leadership for stronger action towards Syria in 2013. Ultimately, the initial push for military action after the chemical weapons attack failed, and was only successful when events on the ground in Iraq and Syria changed Obama's calculus and also public opinion.

## CONCLUSION

1. Main Arguments
2. Neoconservatism
3. Overview of Main Findings
4. Theoretical Contribution
5. Further Research

### 1. Main Arguments

When Barack Obama came to office at the beginning of 2009, it appeared to mark the end of any residual influence of neoconservatism within the US government. The school of thought was largely considered to be finished as an approach to foreign policy as it had been discredited by the failures of the Iraq War in 2003 (Ikenberry, 2004). By that time, any remaining neoconservatives within the Bush administration had left office. This research argues that neoconservatism is alive and well and remains a salient approach to foreign affairs, especially within the Republican Party. An examination of US foreign policy towards the nuclear crisis in Iran and the Syrian civil war during the Obama administration indicates that neoconservatism had a substantive influence on the policy debates and the options considered within them. In some instances, neoconservative policy entrepreneurs contributed to legislation.

Indeed, neoconservatism does not look like it is going to diminish in relevance any time soon. Robert Singh points to the myriad of think tanks and publications in Washington DC which carry neoconservative opinion as an important way in which they have ensured that they have an enduring presence within foreign policy debates. He asserts that “the institutionalisation of the neocons in Washington makes them a permanent and influential presence in the Republican Party, in debates over US foreign policy, and as part of the wider conservative movement” (Singh, 2014: 37). This research contends that there are three main approaches to foreign policy currently within the Republican Party - isolationism, realism and neoconservatism, with neoconservatism predominant. This finding is a mark of the staying power of a school of thought which has been written off on several occasions (Halper and Clarke, 2004: 338; Ikenberry, 2004; Judis, 1995). As Jacob Heilbrunn points out, “the fact that the neocons are driving the debate in the Republican Party and putting Mr Obama on the defensive is itself a remarkable

tribute to their resilience” (Heilbrunn, 11<sup>th</sup> November, 2014). When the neoconservative network managed to influence Congress on a certain issue, this meant that Obama had to respond and it put the administration under pressure. This is the main way in which neoconservatism succeeded in influencing the executive during the Obama administration. As Heilbrunn argues, “They [the neocons] do help shape the debate in the Republican Party”, which requires Obama “to counter it rhetorically” (Interview, Heilbrunn, 14<sup>th</sup> November, 2013).

## 2. Neoconservatism

As well as investigate specific cases, this thesis contextualises neoconservatism in order to help explain why the school of thought has continued to have salience in US politics. Neoconservatism has strong philosophical foundations in the US, something frequently overlooked by commentators who seek to characterise it as having appeared unexpectedly after September 11th. Its roots in the two main strands of US political thought, liberalism and conservatism, have given the approach its resonance and longevity. It draws on key aspects of both, ensuring its appeal is broader than might appear at first glance.

While its core beliefs are firmly embedded in the two main political philosophies of the US, it is also with its championing of American exceptionalism that neoconservatism demonstrates its persistent appeal. The US polity has a tendency to regard itself as exceptional partly because of its self-perception as a fundamentally moral society. This factor, combined with its military strength means that neoconservatism has a natural advantage in the US. In some respects, Robert Kagan was correct when he argued for the disconnect between the US and Europe in his book *Of Paradise And Power* (2003). The two differing philosophical positions on the use of power - the US’s focus on hard power and Europe’s turn away from power or rather, movement “beyond power into a self-contained world of laws and rules and transnational negotiation and cooperation” - are the natural consequence of the US’s current possession of military power and Europe’s deficit of power (Kagan, 2003: 3). The US and Europe’s different conceptions of themselves have important ramifications for the approaches to foreign policy which are able to gain traction within their polity. Due to its emphasis on American exceptionalism and military power, neoconservatism has been able to acquire and

retain purchase in the US. Ty Solomon argues that neoconservative discourses have, to varying degrees, effectively managed to “define society’s common sense because of the particular fantasies they offered to American audiences” (Solomon, 2015: 136). While Michael C. Williams focuses on the ‘cultural’ traction of neoconservatism and contends that as it “possesses a powerful political logic and a rhetorical strategy - it is unlikely simply to fade away” (Williams, 2005: 329).

Williams has argued that neoconservatism should be taken seriously as a theory of IR (Williams, 2005). While this thesis stops short of making this claim, it does; however, contend that neoconservatism holds prescriptive beliefs about IR and is salient as a school of thought for foreign policy practitioners. Neoconservatives argue that US hegemony is necessary for the maintenance of world order, that a strong US military is the optimum way in which to guarantee such an order, and that a democratic system is the best organising model for states. Often compared to realism, they have little in common other than a belief in the ineffectiveness of institutions, and multilateralism more broadly. In fact, neoconservatism has elements in common with liberal interventionism with both approaches containing many of the same prescriptions about international affairs, though based on different rationales. Neoconservatism privileges US power and primacy in ways that liberal interventionism does not, and it eschews multilateralism, advocating US unilateralism instead.

Finally, neoconservatism is normative, and this is encapsulated best in its conception of the national interest. In contrast to realism, it stresses the need for a ‘moral’ approach to foreign policy based on values which not only galvanise the public, but simultaneously strengthen their values (Williams, 2005: 323). As this study has demonstrated, neoconservatives had coherent and specific policy recommendations for the two cases under review. Their worldview means that they have particular understandings of the situations in both Iran and Syria, causing them to frame the events in certain ways and advocate predictable solutions.

### 3. Overview of Main Findings

Congress was the main area of government where neoconservative think tanks and individuals attempted to exert influence over policy during Obama's presidency. Neocons are particularly focused on the Middle East, therefore this study chose to examine Iran and Syria, which were core areas of foreign policy throughout Obama's time in office. These two policy areas particularly galvanised neoconservatives as they saw a space in which to put their ideological principles into practice. They stress that the Islamic Republic's religious ideology is a security risk to both the US and Israel. The Syrian civil war was initially considered a security threat predominantly because of its long-time alliance with Iran; however, with the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), neoconservatives increasingly highlighted the threat of Islamic fundamentalism in Syria, warning against the rise of extremist groups in congressional hearings early on in the conflict. Neoconservatives advocated US military action in order to bring about regime change in both countries and cast this policy in terms of enabling democratisation as well as protecting the security of US allies and the US itself.

This thesis finds that during the Obama administration neoconservatives were most successful in influencing Congress when they worked as part of a broader coalition, which included AIPAC. It defines the neoconservative network as neoconservative think tanks and publications, neoconservative thinkers based at a variety of think tanks and publications, funders, and AIPAC. It is important to stress that the neoconservatives and AIPAC are not always in agreement. They initially disagreed on whether the US should attack Iraq in 2003, Israel (and by extension, AIPAC) believed that Iran was the main threat that needed to be dealt with. They were also split on whether the coup against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 2013 was a positive development - many neocons such as Robert Kagan believed it was not (Kagan, 1<sup>st</sup> May, 2014). However, on the issues of Iran and Syria, they largely strived for common goals. In this respect, AIPAC and the neocons worked as a network on these two issues and when they were most cohesive this had important ramifications for their success in influencing the debate on US policy towards both countries.

The concept of 'influence' within this study was gauged not simply by policy outcomes but by the extent to which the neoconservative network succeeded in contributing to the policy debates in question. By attempting to set the agenda - decide which issues were discussed, and also frame *how* they were discussed - the network sought to demarcate the policies that could be considered. Narrowing possible policy options assists a network in restricting the scope of the policy debate surrounding an issue, and gain support for its proposed policies. The extent to which neoconservative experts were invited to testify at congressional hearings was viewed as a key indicator of feeding into policy debates. Similarly, gaining access to members of Congress and their staff was viewed as a marker of contributing to the debate. Finally, the extent to which neoconservative policy entrepreneurs effectively managed to contribute to legislation was assessed.

A policy network is an ideal conduit through which ideas can travel into the executive and legislature. This study highlights the importance of think tanks within these networks. The expansion in number, and growing politicisation of think tanks, mean that they have become increasingly important within networks, and policymaking more broadly. Think tanks are crucial in fostering policy ideas and liaising with decision-makers. They have proved vital for the neoconservatives as they are perfect bases with which to develop ideas into policy recommendations. The access to Congress that individuals based at think tanks can achieve through congressional hearings and meetings make them essential in the promotion of ideas. In this respect, think tanks inhabit a distinct space somewhat apart from interest groups and government. Interest groups have a constituency for whom they advocate, while think tanks are able to market themselves as impartial and non-partisan. This is important in terms of seeking bipartisan support and garnering legitimacy for their ideas and recommendations. In complement to this, interest groups such as AIPAC, can play a valuable role either within a policy network or allied to that network. Both interest groups and think tanks meet with members of Congress and their staff and discuss policy. A large interest group's material resources and contacts within government often mean that they are in an ideal position to help lobby for the preferred policies of a particular network.

Overall, the neoconservative network had more success influencing Congress on the Iranian nuclear issue than the Syrian conflict. This was evaluated by examining the indicators of influence set out in the theoretical framework. Firstly, the coherence of the network on the issue is a vital indicator - as many actors as possible in the network need to focus on advocating a common approach. Strong political and material resources are then vital. This study conceptualises political resources as how well a network feeds into policy debates. As a crucial part of the network, the extent to which think tank experts are asked to testify at congressional hearings is taken as an important indicator. Congressional staff members are aware not only of the expertise, but the ideological proclivities of a think tank, and whichever member of staff they ask to testify - they tend to be broadly aligned with the views of the chairperson or ranking member. Think tank experts may meet privately with members of Congress or staffers to hold discussions on the policy area in question. Whether this occurred was ascertained primarily from interview data, but also through comments made within congressional hearings. Further, prominent members of Congress who ally with the network on an issue is understood as a political resource. Within this theoretical framework, the strength of a network's material resources is indicated by the extent to which it has strong (and often overlapping) donors. The financial support of donors can assist in magnifying the ideas and policy position promoted by the network. Finally, public opinion is taken into account. Regardless of the strength of a network, public opinion is an important factor in whether a policy idea is ultimately able to gain the traction required to be enacted.

The neoconservative network was strong and cohesive on the issue of Iran. For decades, and particularly since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the US has constructed Iran as a bad actor and imminent national security threat. AIPAC and the neoconservatives framed the problem of Iran in a similar way, understanding the state as an irrational actor and existential threat to Israel. This also led both actors to believe negotiations and diplomacy to be futile and military action to be preferable. However, with regards to Syria, there was far less cultural resonance on which the neoconservatives could build in order to advance their narrative in favour of intervention. Moreover, the neoconservatives and AIPAC were not as strong or unified on the issue as they were on Iran. Israel initially saw Bashar al-

Assad as a stable force, and possibly better than the available alternatives. It was only after Assad crossed Obama's 'red line' by using chemical weapons that Israel decided it would be a serious issue for US credibility if the threat to take military action were not followed through. For Israel, this mattered because of Obama's claim that 'all options were on the table' with respect to the nuclear crisis with Iran. As many in the Israeli government regard a nuclear Iran as an existential threat to Israel, this was of particular importance to Israel. In this respect, the neoconservatives and AIPAC were operating from different starting points. Without this coherence, and the support of a key partner throughout, the network's influence on this issue was less substantive. In fact, after the proposed resolution, AIPAC largely dropped out of the network with respect to neoconservative efforts to get increased US military action in Syria.

On Iran, the neoconservative network was able to lead the debate in Congress as a substantive number of neoconservative experts were asked to testify. The neoconservative think tank the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) came joint top with the Washington Institute of the think tanks whose experts were most asked to testify. As a smaller and more recently-founded think tank, it is notable to observe FDD alongside the more recognised and established Washington Institute. It is also interesting to observe that the foreign policy experts who were asked to testify from the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), (which came joint second with the Brookings Institution) were almost all neoconservatives. Neoconservative approaches to the Iranian nuclear issue dominated the debate in congressional committees.

However, while neoconservatism was less able to dominate the debate in Congress with respect to the conflict in Syria, it was still prominent. And by 2013, when the war was more widely accepted as a security issue for the US, neoconservative think tanks led the debate. Before the US had taken any military action towards the Syrian regime or ISIS (from the start of the war in March 2011 until the end of June 2014), FDD came second to the Washington Institute overall as far as the number of experts asked to testify. Although it is worth noting that by 2013, as the conflict was accepted as a security threat, FDD had become the think tank most requested to testify. AEI and CFR came third and fourth and again, it

was predominantly neoconservative experts based at these think tanks who were asked to testify. As was the case with Iran, neoconservative approaches featured heavily within the debate in Congress. Moreover, after the administration became involved in military action, neoconservative think tank the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), as well as the RAND Corporation, were asked to testify most frequently. Once again, many neoconservative experts at AEI were invited to testify, ensuring neoconservative voices were predominant within the debate on Syria at this juncture.

On Iran, there was a degree of bipartisan support *for* the sanctions legislation the *Nuclear Weapon Free Iran Act 2013* and *against* the Iran Deal (the JCPOA). 59 members of the Senate, both Republican (43) and Democrat (16), co-sponsored the proposed legislation which the administration feared would cause the negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 to break down. The main sponsor on the legislation was Democrat Robert Menendez (D-NJ), Chair of the Foreign Relations Committee. Most of these same members of Congress did not support the Iran Deal when it was agreed just over a year later in July 2015. Both the chairman and ranking minority member of the Senate Foreign Affairs and House Foreign Affairs Committees (as well as the former chairpersons) were against the deal. In the end, the administration managed to keep the Democratic leadership in both houses in favour of the agreement; however, they engaged in a significant battle to keep the proposed legislation from reaching the amount of support required to pass in the Senate and overcome a veto by Obama (it was projected that it would have moved easily through the House). The fight in which the administration was forced to engage indicated the strength of the network which was promoting the bill. While the neoconservatives helped to create the intellectual rationale for the proposed legislation and against the deal, AIPAC lobbied hard to encourage members of Congress to support the bill and oppose the deal. While they ultimately failed, the network came close, having 59 signatures in support of the bill at the start of 2014. The political resources of the neoconservative network were robust on this issue given the strong neoconservative presence in congressional hearings, key allied members of Congress, and strong lobbying organisation in the form of AIPAC.

With regards to Syria, when it came to supporting the proposed *Authorisation for the Use of Military Force Against the Government of Syria to Respond to the Use of Chemical Weapons 2013*, there was somewhat less bipartisan backing. While the chairman and ranking minority member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee were both in favour of a military strike, as was the ranking minority member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, the Chairman Ed Royce was undecided. Congressional leadership in both Houses were broadly supportive of a strike. In respect to the Democrats, this was in large part because it was the administration who was seeking support. Liberal interventionists in the administration were somewhat allied to neoconservatives on this issue, albeit with somewhat different rationales for why they sought intervention. Notably, some of the Republican members of Congress who had taken a very hawkish position on Syria advocating intervention of some respect early on in the conflict such as Marco Rubio (R-FL) decided they would not back a strike as they did not think it went far enough. Interview data suggests that many felt that this position was taken for political reasons in order to weaken Obama.

Key neoconservatives operated as policy entrepreneurs on the issue of Iran. Mark Dubowitz stands out as the most prominent having been asked to assist with legislation on Iran throughout Obama's two terms. Interview data indicated that he contributed language to CISADA 2010 and consulted on ITRA 2012, as well as the proposed *Nuclear Weapon Free Iran Act 2013*. Frederick and Kimberly Kagan worked with General David Petraeus on Syria and advocated that the CIA covertly arm the Syrian rebels from bases in Jordan, a plan which went ahead. In this respect, they can be considered policy entrepreneurs on the issue of Syria. ISW were also a prominent part of the debate in Congress after the administration had taken action; however, there is no evidence that they took part in either drafting or contributing to legislation.

The network had good access to material resources on Iran in the form of large donors who supported more than one of the actors within the network. This backing helped to facilitate the promotion of the network's main ideas and beliefs by ensuring that the organisations within the network were well resourced. In the case of Syria, this was markedly less. While some of the same organisations were

involved in pushing for military action and regime change in Syria - FDD, FPI and ISW, in particular - AIPAC did not ascribe the same level of importance to this goal, and there is no evidence of the significant backing of donors on the issue of Syria.

With respect to US public opinion, it is consistently wary of Iran. In 2013, 64% of US citizens said they would favour stopping Iran's nuclear programme, even if that meant taking military action (Pew Research Center, 19<sup>th</sup> March, 2013). There was also limited support for the JCPOA amongst the public. In this respect, the US public and Congress were predisposed to regard Iran extremely negatively, creating a receptive audience for the neoconservative network's framing of the debate and preferred policies. In contrast, there was no such accord when it came to Syria. During the week of the proposed vote on the AUMF, the majority of the public were against the US taking any military action in Syria and this was cited as a key reason by interviewees as to why the proposed authorisation would not have passed.

The findings of this research indicate that in order to gain optimum influence over policy, a cohesive network containing think tank experts, funders, and strong interest group is an important way in which influence can be achieved in Congress, and by extension, the executive. Experts from think tanks provide the scholarly purchase for ideas or policy recommendations while interest groups are better able to operationalise ideas as they tend to have the connections with constituents as well as the material means to exert pressure over elected officials. Having the backing of key members of Congress is also important as they can operate as allies to the network, gathering support for a particular narrative and the policy which flows from it. Finally, the extent to which US public opinion is sympathetic to the characterisation of the threat propagated by a network matters.

The prevalence of neoconservative thinkers within congressional debates on two core issues of US foreign policy - the nuclear crisis with Iran and the Iranian civil war - provides evidence to support the claim that neoconservatism is the pre-eminent school of thought on foreign policy within the Republican Party. Previous to this study, assertions have been made as to the prominence of neoconservatism within the GOP during Obama's presidency mainly by focusing on Romney's use of neocon advisors in his 2012 campaign for President (Singh, 2014) and the neocons

bid to expand as an ideological force after the Republican gains in the mid-term elections in 2014 (Heilbrunn, 11<sup>th</sup> November, 2014). This thesis uses data collected over an extended period of time to provide new empirical evidence for the contention that neoconservatism is the pre-eminent school of thought on foreign policy in the Republican Party.

#### **4. Theoretical Contribution**

This study expands the existing literature on neoconservatism, bringing it up-to-date by focusing on neoconservative influence on Congress during Obama's two terms in office. Hitherto this thesis, little attempt has been made to examine neoconservative influence on the legislature. This research demonstrates in detail the ways in which the neoconservatives fed into foreign policy debates in Congress on two key security issues for the US. It highlights the fact that the neoconservatives remained significant players in US foreign policy even during a Democratic administration. The prominent use of neoconservatives within congressional hearings, and the outsized presence of the small neoconservative think tank FDD within these hearings, indicates the continued influence of this school of thought.

In this thesis, data gathering was limited to a focus on neoconservative influence on the US legislature, and by extension the executive. Previous research on neoconservatism's influence on US foreign policy has been discussed in terms of key neoconservative individuals' impact on policy within the executive and the Department of Defense. As neoconservatives did not hold prominent positions of power in the executive or Department of Defense during the period under examination, this study observes that the main realm in which neoconservatives attempted to exert influence was towards the legislature. Added to this, investigating the influence of neoconservatism on the executive during the Obama administration was more difficult in terms of gaining access to officials who were serving, as well as obtaining official documents, as the data collection took place while Obama was in office. To achieve a more comprehensive picture of overall neoconservative influence over this period, and the limits of this influence, an assessment of the executive and the Department of Defense over the same time period would be required.

This research expands the literature with regards to the ways in which think tanks contribute to policymaking. There is a paucity of evidence on how think tanks assist with the creation of legislation, either by consulting on a bill or suggesting specific language or amendments. Data in this area is hard to generate given the charitable 501c(3) status of most think tanks which states that they may carry out a limited amount of lobbying to try and influence legislation, but insists that “no substantial part” of a 501c(3) organisation’s activities can go to lobbying. They are also “absolutely prohibited” from campaigning on behalf of a political candidate. Therefore, advocacy think tanks tend to be cautious in extolling the level of input or consultation with policymakers that they undertake regarding specific legislation or policies. This research develops our knowledge of the collaborations which can occur between think tanks and policymakers. It indicates that some think tanks work far more closely with policymakers than had previously been recognised. It also highlights the tight networks that exist on certain areas of foreign policy which facilitates the presence of certain organisations more than others in congressional hearings.

This thesis argues that think tanks are crucial elements in the policymaking process, providing a discreet outlet for ideology to inform policymaking. They can also deliver intellectual legitimation for the preferred policies of allied interest groups or other interested actors such individual donors. Many, particularly newer think tanks, are advocacy-based and can also offer a route for donors seeking to influence policy. Making contributions to 501c(3) organisations allows donors to reduce their own taxable incomes by subtracting the amount of their donations. Moreover, a think tank’s charitable status ensures that the contributions are exempt from counting as political donations (which are capped in the US). In this respect, think tanks can offer a similar function (albeit on a smaller scale) to Super Political Action Committees (PACs). On 22<sup>nd</sup> July, 2010 the Federal Election Commission (FEC) permitted the creation of Super PACs. This occurred due to a controversial Supreme Court decision in the *Citizens United v. the Federal Election Commission* case which lifted restrictions on corporate spending in elections (Warren, 19<sup>th</sup> September, 2011). “Super PACs are political organizations that can take unlimited sums from individuals, corporations and labour unions to spend in support of, or opposition to, federal candidates” (Hasen, 9<sup>th</sup> January, 2012).

However, while Super PACs are controversial, little attention has been focused on advocacy think tanks. While not on the same scale, similar to Super PACs, advocacy think tanks also provide an outlet for donors with a particular agenda to try and influence the political process. While Super PACs are often involved with promoting political candidates, something 501c(3) organisations are prohibited from doing, think tanks can nevertheless contribute to the policymaking process, as this research has outlined.

This thesis, therefore, highlights issues surrounding the political system in the US and the democratic deficit which can arise when special interests are able to capture the dominant narrative in a policy debate. The use of advocacy think tanks is problematic as they operate largely like interest groups, which raises questions of accountability. If private interests - which are by definition unelected - are able to have a significant degree of influence over policy, this should be cause for concern.

More broadly, the findings of this thesis feed into debates on the importance of public opinion. This research suggests that where public opinion stands on an issue is important. This is contrary, for example, to the Almond-Lipmann Consensus which argues that policymakers should pay little heed to public opinion. Both Gabriel Almond (1950) and Walter Lipmann (1955) found public opinion to be mostly irrational and erratic, with ordinary citizens largely uninterested and uninformed about matters of foreign policy. They argue that public opinion should be, and largely is, ignored by policy makers on such issues. This argument is broadly in accord with realist conceptions which largely discount the influence of public opinion on foreign policy. For example, Hans Morgenthau suggests that, "The rational requirements of a good foreign policy cannot from the outset count upon the support of a public opinion whose preferences are emotional rather than rational" (Morgenthau 1978: 558).

More recent research has challenged this conclusion and suggested that the influence of public opinion is greater than this approach allows (Cohen, 1994; Mermin, 1997; Robinson, 1999). The findings of this study cohere with this research and indicates that public opinion can play an important role in the uptake of policy. Members of Congress have constituents whose opinions they must take into

consideration in order to ensure they are re-elected and anti-war sentiment was a prominent concern, particularly on the issue of Syria.

This study also underlines the importance of paying attention to ideas within foreign policy and indicates that they can play a causal role. It supports the constructivist approach detailed by Katzenstein, Wendt, Adler, and Williams, for example, who all allow for the possibility that ideas can operate as one of many variables which may influence foreign policy. They do not discount the importance of material interests, but argue that they do not necessarily supersede ideas. Indeed, this thesis also regards security environments to be not only material but also cultural.

A comparison of the two case studies outlines the importance of creating a dominant narrative when attempting to successfully influence policy. When the two main elements of the network under examination aligned, its impact on policy was greater and more likely to become embedded in an institution, in this case, Congress. The traction of the narrative elucidated was also stronger when it had cultural salience among the populace. In this respect, ideas are also constitutive, and can play a reinforcing role when an institution's policies both reaffirm and recreate cultural narratives. Constructing a new conception of a security threat is far harder to achieve if it is not being drawn from familiar cultural narratives, or adequately placed within historical analogies. As Williams points out, neoconservatism strives to emphasise issues of culture and identity, giving the school of thought its strategic power; however, conversely, it is weaker when it lacks these cultural narratives to tap into or fails to successfully create them. This study serves to underscore the extent to which foreign policy is socially constructed.

## **5. Further Research**

This study used the Obama administration as a 'hard' case with which to look for neoconservative influence on policy as the common assumption is that finding such influence would be unlikely. Iran and Syria were chosen as they were the most likely places to find neoconservative influence in juxtaposition to the overall environment of the Obama presidency which provided an unlikely context.

However, now this research has established that there was influence within these two areas, further case studies could be conducted. Research on current neoconservative attempts to influence policy towards both China and Russia would be valuable. Given that neoconservatives are generally most focused on the Middle East, case studies on either China or Russia would provide 'hard' cases to test the influence of neoconservatism as it is quite clear, for example, that regime change - certainly by military intervention - would not be a viable option for the US in either instance. Neoconservative think tanks and individual experts write and make policy recommendations on both states therefore it would be possible to conduct cases studies on these countries.

Additionally, further research might seek to analyse neoconservative efforts to impact the debate in the media. This thesis did not have the space to do this; however, evaluating neoconservative discourses in the media over the same timespan would be beneficial. Neoconservatives are often found commentating on foreign policy issues on news networks as this is one important way in which they can try to gain public support for the policies they advocate. More than this, appearances in the media, be they in print or on television, can allow neoconservatives to promote a certain framing or understanding of an issue thus creating a space favourable to their preferred policies.

The theoretical framework developed by this thesis should be relevant to other areas, and is potentially generalisable both in terms of domestic policy and foreign policy. Possible further areas of research might examine whether groups such as the Cuban lobby work in concert with sympathetic experts based in think tanks to endeavour to exert influence by becoming a substantive part of the debate, and potentially impact policy. Similarly, with regards to domestic policy, it is foreseeable that groups such as environmental and human rights groups or even the gun lobby might work with ideologically-aligned individuals based in think tanks to make the case for their preferred policies. This theoretical framework allows for an examination not only of how networks operate, but also the certain conditions under which they can be viewed as influencing policy. It presents a concrete way in which to understand the inherently fluid concept of policy influence.

As it expands our understanding of the extent to which neoconservatism remains a salient school of thought within the US, this thesis also develops a theoretical framework drawn from policy network analysis to understand and analyse how networks endeavour to influence the legislature. It seeks to fill a gap in FPA which has struggled to account for how ideas, and the policy preferences that flow from them, gain traction and are fed into policy debates within Congress. Previous research which has taken a network approach in order to appraise the influence of neoconservatism has mainly focused on the executive.

Given that neoconservatism is front and centre of foreign policy within the Republican Party, it seems clear that further research on the ways in which neoconservatives seek to influence US foreign policy will be important. In the 2016 US presidential nomination race Marco Rubio adopted the most neoconservative foreign policy agenda. Rubio declared he would renege on the Iran nuclear deal (the JCPOA) and vowed to be strong supporter of Israel. He described Obama's denunciation of Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem as "deplorable" (Cox, 3<sup>rd</sup> October, 2014). His advisers included neoconservatives Elliott Abrams, Robert Kagan, Eric Edelman, and Jamie Fly, former director of FPI, and notable for the fact he co-authored an article with Gary Schmitt advocating a US attack on Iran, not only to disrupt the nuclear programme, but to "destabilise the regime" (Fly and Schmitt, 2012). Rubio attracted the endorsement of some of the same large campaign donors as neoconservative organisations such as FDD. He won the endorsement of both Paul Singer (Clifton, 11<sup>th</sup> December, 2015) and of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, owned by Sheldon Adelson (Peters, 5<sup>th</sup> February, 2016)<sup>8</sup> demonstrating again possible connections between foreign policy and political funding.

As neoconservatism consolidates itself as the leading approach to foreign policy in the Republican Party, and liberal interventionism remains strong in the Democratic Party, realism may find itself on the decline after Obama leaves office. Certainly, as this research underscores, neoconservatism appears to have "won the battle against their archenemies, the realists, for the soul of the Republican Party"

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<sup>8</sup> Note that the paper has explicitly distanced the Adelson family from the endorsement; however, it is considered unlikely that the paper will deviate significantly from the owner's personal political viewpoint.

(Vaisse, 2010: 266). While the neoconservatives have cemented their place as part of the foreign policy establishment in Washington DC, anchored as they are in think tanks and publications, they have focused on exerting influence over Congress during Obama's time in office. This thesis argues that they achieved substantive success with this. However, the fact that they had to concentrate on the legislature in itself indicates the limitations of their influence as it currently stands, as "genuine foreign policy heft depends critically on a strong presence in the councils of the executive branch's decision-making apparatus" (Singh, 2014: 37). Nevertheless, given their strong grip within the Republican Party, it is surely only a matter of time before neoconservatives regain key positions within the executive and it will be interesting to observe the strength of their influence when they do.

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