

Apply “Libya Model” to Iran and Syria

By Ronald Bruce St John | October 21, 2004

The Bush administration does not appear to have learned any lessons from the Iraq imbroglio. The White House is now busy pursuing the same bellicose policies in Iran and Syria that led to the invasion of Iraq. While some commentators argue that the results of the Iraq War invalidate the preemptive strike strategy, this may prove to be more a reflection of wishful thinking than of Bush administration practice.

Isolation not Engagement

As the U.S. occupation of Iraq soured, the Bush administration charged Syria with multiple misdeeds which included hiding Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and facilitating the movement of “foreign fighters” into Iraq. More recently, President Bush in May 2004 imposed commercial and diplomatic sanctions on Damascus under the newly minted Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act. The Act called for the president to impose sanctions until certain conditions were met, including an end to support for terrorism, withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon, and a freeze on the development of unconventional weapons.

In early September 2004, the United States cosponsored UN Security Council Resolution 1559, demanding the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. One week later, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East William J. Burns, in the course of a visit to Israel added that Syria must take “concrete action” in cooperating with the U.S. war on terrorism by halting support for militant Palestinian factions based in Damascus. U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage weighed in the following day, suggesting Syria bore some responsibility for the recent Be’er Sheva double bus bombing due to its ties to Hamas and Hezbollah. He offered no details or specific evidence in support of this conclusion.

Following his visit to Israel, Secretary Burns journeyed to Syria in mid-September 2004 where he told reporters it was time for Damascus to end its intervention in Lebanese internal affairs and withdraw its forces from

Lebanon. About the same time, a State Department spokesperson indicated that the United States was considering the imposition of additional sanctions if Syria refused to quit Lebanon. Finally, the U.S. House of Representatives in mid-September 2004 passed Resolution 363, calling for an end to Syria’s “illegal occupation” of Lebanon. The resolution was cosponsored by the same lawmakers who had pushed for the Syria Accountability Act earlier in the year.

Tensions between Iran and the United States have also increased in recent months. The Bush administration’s current policy toward Iran, like its policy toward Syria, mixes condemnation, threat, and intimidation. The overall aim of the policy is isolation, not engagement. In a Hudson Institute speech on August 17, 2004, Undersecretary for Arms Control and International Security John R. Bolton charged that Iran had been concealing “a large-scale, covert nuclear weapons program for over eighteen years.”

All of Iran’s WMD [weapons of mass destruction] efforts—chemical weapons, biological weapons, nuclear weapons, and ballistic missiles—pose grave threats to international security. Iran’s pursuit of these deadly weapons, despite its signature on treaties that ban them, marks it as a rogue state, and it will remain so until it completely, verifiably and irreversibly dismantles its WMD-related programs.

Later in the same speech, Bolton concluded: “Iran’s actions and statements do not bode well for the success of a negotiated approach to dealing with this issue.” He then quoted National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice who had remarked two weeks earlier on Fox News: “The Iranians have been trouble for a



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very long time. And it's one reason that this regime has to be isolated in its bad behavior, not quote-unquote 'engaged'." Not surprisingly, the Bush administration's approach sparked a strong reaction from Iran, prompting more bellicose rhetoric all around.

Challenges for Iran and Syria

This is not to suggest that many of the policies of both Iran and Syria are not cause for concern. Damascus needs to withdraw from Lebanon, cooperate in the stabilization of Iraq, support the war on terrorism, abandon alleged unconventional weapons programs, and cease its support for militant Palestinian groups. Syria should also be encouraged to pursue much needed domestic economic and political reforms.

Teheran needs to cooperate in the stabilization of Iraq, support the war on terrorism, and abandon any unconventional weapons programs. Most especially, any Iranian efforts to build a nuclear weapon must be stopped. Consequently, its recent announcement that it intends to process 37 metric tons of raw uranium into uranium hexafluoride is a special concern. Uranium hexafluoride, when spun in centrifuges, produces enriched uranium which can be used both to generate power and to make nuclear warheads. This issue of enrichment is a highly sensitive one for an international community seeking to determine if Iran is using its nuclear program for peaceful purposes, as Teheran insists, or building nuclear weapons, as the United States maintains.

The International Atomic Energy Agency has asked for more time to clarify Iranian intentions, but the Bush administration wants to refer the

question to the UN Security Council, a move which would increase diplomatic pressure on Iran. As Under Secretary Bolton commented on September 10, 2004, at a Geneva press conference:

What we are saying is that Iran [’s] program, amounting as it does to a threat to international peace and security, is of sufficient gravity that we want to put the Iranian program at center stage, in the world spot light, in the forum of the Security Council, the principal political body of the United Nations, the body of the United Nations charged with dealing with threats to international peace and security.

Libyan Model

There is general agreement on the need for policy change in Damascus and Teheran. The contentious issue is how best to encourage and foster the desired change. Reminiscent of the build-up to the invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration has been strong on rhetoric but absent a comprehensive, coherent plan to shape future events in either Iran or Syria. The United States has also failed, once again, to secure the full coordination and support of interested allies, like France, Germany, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union.

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The prolonged negotiations which eventually led Libya in December 2003 to renounce unconventional weapons of its own "free will" offer a more productive model for dialogue with Iran and Syria than the "take no prisoner" approach being pursued by the Bush administration. Talks with Libya began in mid-1999 at a time when the United States was indicating it sought policy change but not regime change in

Libya. In this initial stage, the involved parties agreed to tone down the rhetoric and begin a meaningful dialogue in pursuit of a step-by-step process.

These early negotiations with Libya were based from the outset on an explicit quid pro quo as Ambassador Martin Indyk, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State who opened talks with Libya in mid-1999, later indicated in a *Washington Post* op-ed article. The talks aimed at Libya satisfying all of its obligations under applicable UN resolutions and were predicated on two conditions:

Libyan agreement both to keep the negotiations quiet and to cease lobbying to have the UN sanctions permanently lifted. The Clinton administration elected not to pursue the unconventional weapons question at this time because its priority remained resolution of the Pan Am flight 103 issue.

Tripartite talks opened between Great Britain, Libya, and the United States in January 2001 were also based on a “script” that indicated what Libya must say and do to resolve the Pan Am flight 103 issue and to cause the UN sanctions to be lifted. According to Flynt Leverett, senior director for Middle East Politics at the National Security Council in 2002-03, the final round of negotiations with Libya, which began in March 2003, also centered on an explicit quid pro quo. In this case, the United States told Libya that, in return for a verifiable dismantlement of its unconventional weapons programs, Washington would lift its bilateral sanctions on Tripoli, perhaps before end 2004.

As the prolonged negotiations with Libya suggest, the United States needs to engage Iran and Syria on a broad range of interrelated

issues, taking one step at a time. Narrow contact on the highly charged nuclear issue in the case of Iran or Syria’s occupation of Lebanon, tied to the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights and Israel-Syria peace talks, is unlikely to work. On the contrary, Washington needs to engage Teheran on a basket of related issues, like Iranian fears of regime destabilization, a regional security architecture that includes Iran and its neighbors, and Iranian support for radical groups in Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine. In turn, U.S. talks with Syria need to expand to include border and water issues with Israel and support for militant Palestinian groups as well as alleged unconventional weapons programs, support in stabilizing Iraq, and ongoing cooperation in the war on terrorism.

Unfortunately, it may prove difficult, if not impossible, for the White House to engage Iran and Syria on this wider list of issues. The linkage of U.S. policy under the Bush administration to Israeli policies in the region has become virtually seamless, and the Israeli government

of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has shown little inclination to negotiate with any of its neighbors, especially Syria. The respected Israeli newspaper, *Haaretz*, reported on September 14, 2004, that Sharon had rejected in 2003 a U.S. proposal for Israel to resume talks with Syria. Sharon was quoted by the newspaper as saying: “It was immediately taken off the agenda and they’re not raising it any more.” Syrian President Bashar Assad restated his desire to restart peace talks with Israel as recently as early September 2004.

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Backwards to the Future

The Bush administration seems intent on polishing its macho image in the final weeks before the November presidential elections. Occasional reports of a lack of policy consensus within the administration on either Iran or Syria, which might suggest future room for engagement, lack credible foundation. White House policies toward both Iran and Syria, reflecting a failure to learn from the Iraqi experience, remain closely tied to Israeli interests in the region, specifically its policy of not allowing any Middle East neighbor to challenge its nuclear monopoly.

Where a process of engagement with Tripoli led to its renouncing unconventional weapons and rejoining the international community with no loss of life, Washington's belligerent policy of isolation is provoking the opposite reaction in Damascus and Teheran. Both states have hunkered down under the verbal onslaught from the White House and shown little inclination or ability to cooperate on Washington's terms. Unfortunately, if such pre-election antics prove a reliable guide, meaningful dialogue with

either Damascus or Teheran would also appear unlikely in a second Bush administration. That brings us to the frightening prospect of a return to the Bush Doctrine and its preemptive strike strategy if President Bush is reelected.

*Ronald Bruce St John, an analyst for Foreign Policy in Focus, has published widely on Middle Eastern issues. His latest book on the region is *Libya and the United States: Two Centuries of Strife* (Penn Press, 2002).*

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