

The Road to Damascus

By Ian Williams | November 24, 2003

At this time last year, it was difficult to get people to take the threat of war on Iraq seriously. This year, the threat to Syria is much more explicit than that against Saddam Hussein, but too many people dismiss any such thought.

But paranoia pays. We should have noted by now that this administration is motivated in mysterious ways, but does clearly signal its intentions no matter how seemingly irrational they appear to others. The neocons and their friends in the administration may, as the current unplanned Iraqi occupation experience indicates, be out of tune with reality in the rest of the world. But the fact that they achieved their first goal—the invasion and occupation of Iraq—indicates that they know all too well how Washington works. Which should make us worry about their second goal; most of them are on the record supporting Ariel Sharon's suggestion that Syria is next.

The passage of the Syria Accountability Act in the House of Representatives with only 4 votes against it on October 15 could be dismissed as mere pandering by legislators eager to prove how earnestly pro-Israel they are in the run-up to a costly election campaign. But even if Representatives only voted for it out of callow expediency, the Act threatens to mean much more.

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In fact, the honorable gentlemen and women have lent their names and votes to a set of assertions that paves a forensic trail for tanks on the Road to Damascus. The Accountability Act sets out, in even more detail than the administration had done over Iraq, a host of reasons for an invasion of Syria. And of course President Bush did not forget to mention the lack of democracy in Syria in his speech to the National Endowment for Democracy on November 6th, where he invoked democratization as his expediently retrospective rationale for invading Iraq.

The Accountability Act and a host of statements from the usual suspects in the administration, invoke every spurious reason for action against Damascus that led to the current quicksand in Baghdad. Support for terrorism, possession of weapons of mass destruction, and indeed harboring Iraqi Ba'athists and the missing weapons. Congressmen who may well oppose the idea of another war would find it difficult to deny their votes of alleged Syrian perfidy that matches anything concocted against Iraq.

The warnings began immediately after the Iraq invasion—but have now resumed. In May, Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton alleged, "The United States also knows that Syria has long had a chemical warfare program. It has a stockpile of the nerve agent sarin

and is engaged in research and development of the more toxic and persistent nerve agent VX. Syria... is pursuing the development of biological weapons and is able to produce at least small amounts of biological warfare agents."

Soon after the attack on Iraq, Bolton had rushed to reassure Arabs on American financed Arabic radio station Radio Sawa that Iraq is indeed just the start of the crusades. "We are hoping that the elimination of the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein and the elimination of all of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction would be important lessons to other countries in the region, particularly Syria, Libya, and Iran, that the cost of their pursuit of weapons of mass destruction is potentially quite high."

The statement had considerable implications, coming as it did from the man who went to Israel two months before to promise Ariel Sharon that "it will be necessary to deal with threats from Syria, Iran, and North Korea afterwards."

The Accountability Act also accuses Syria of occupying Lebanon, but it is the other frontier that is more worrying. As the U.S. Occupation in Iraq sinks deeper into the mire, the Act cites as gospel Rumsfeld's claim back in March to "have information that shipments of military supplies have been crossing the border from Syria into Iraq, including night-vision goggles ... These deliveries pose a direct threat to the lives of coalition forces. We consider such trafficking as hostile acts, and will hold the Syrian government accountable for such shipments."

A month later, he claimed that Syrian fighters were crossing into Iraq by the "busloads" with cash and leaflets offering rewards for dead American soldiers. As Baghdad fell Rumsfeld accused Damascus of harboring Iraqi leaders, "We are getting scraps of intelligence saying that Syria has been cooperative in facilitating the move of the people out of Iraq and into Syria," he inelegantly told press in Washington. In other words—if we can't find Saddam in Iraq, he may be in Syria.

The Act also reiterated previous American and Israeli claims of Syrian sponsorship of "terrorist" organizations like Hizbollah. Although no one except Israel and Washington defines Hizbollah as a terrorist organization, the administration's promiscuous use of the word, "terrorist," is geared toward a domestic audience—a strategy that worked very well for the war in Iraq. The formula that worked so well before, flashing pictures of "Osama Bin Laden equals Saddam Hussein" on

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prime time television under the rubric of “War on Terror,” will work just as well with an added Arab, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad. There is every bit as much evidence connecting him to September 11 as there was for Saddam Hussein.

Reality Bites Back

The accusations against Syria dropped off during the summer as the Pentagonistas suffered a little from the reality check on their prognostications for Iraq, but in recent weeks they are building up again, with the Accountability Act just one part of a chorus singing a hymn of hate. UN Security Resolution 1511 was about Iraq, but the U.S. slipped in a clause threatening countries that allowed terrorists to pass into Iraq... and there is only one being mentioned at the moment. As if to prove it was a stupid, as well as a bad regime that was being framed, the Syrian delegate actually voted for the resolution.

Its reward was immediate. In October, when Israel bombed targets inside Syria in complete violation of the UN Charter, the U.S. threatened to veto any resolution condemning it, and made public statements in support of the Israeli action.

At first glance, that looks like a set up for an Israeli first strike. But while Israel has long been used to the U.S. paying for its wars, since March, Ariel Sharon could be said to have succeeded in getting the U.S. to actually fight Israel’s wars for it. Since then, he, the neocons, and their allies in the U.S. administration have been pushing hard for Syria to be dealt with.

A New Scapegoat

There is a worrying logic to it in an election year. Retreat from Iraq is unthinkable, but as in Vietnam, where the logic led to Cambodia and Laos to stop the supply lines, Syria is the perfect scapegoat for failure in Iraq, for the missing weapons, for the missing Ba’athist leaders, for the continuing attacks on U.S. troops, when we all know how glad Iraqis were to be liberated.

Syria has not actually made things easy for itself. The current president’s predecessor and father, Hafez al-Assad

seems to have turned down a genuine offer to negotiate a settlement from then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak. Assad turned it down because it did not include mandatory Palestinian territory that Syria had occupied in 1948 and was demilitarized (officially at least) until 1967. He could have passed on his claim to the Palestinian Authority to put in as a bargaining chip, but he never had much time for Palestinians he did not control.

His son also did an amazing imitation of a rat jumping on a sinking ship by healing the decades long intra-Ba’athist blood feud with Baghdad, just in time for the Bush administration to get its teeth into Iraq. And it is true that Syria is indeed a tyrannical and undemocratic regime in fact, as well by the particular Washington definition of one that is anti-Israeli and not easily manipulable by Washington.

It could be objected that Syria has helped the CIA against Islamic fundamentalists, but that seems to cut no ice with the likes of John Bolton, who does not even show gratitude that Syria, and the others in the axis of evil he reviles so, often were his only allies in voting against the International Criminal Court.

The neocon chorus and Vice President Cheney made it possible—in defiance of the UN, major allies, and much of Congress—to stampede the U.S. into a paroxysm of righteous patriotism against Iraq by manipulating claims of WMDs, terrorism, and similar bogeys. They have made it plain that they would like to do it again for Syria, and they may find allies in the White House who are more expedient in their views about Damascus. Syria would be a good scapegoat for continuing failure in Iraq during an election year. Taking another capital in the Spring is unlikely to hinder Republican prospects in the Fall. To paraphrase Woody Allen, just because I’m paranoid does not mean that they won’t try to follow Iraq with Syria.

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