

Washington leaves open Israeli involvement in war against Iraq

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Efforts by the Bush administration to bring Ariel Sharon on-message with its plans for war against Iraq dominated the Israeli Prime Minister's three-day trip to Washington last week.

Sharon recently threatened to "take the proper steps to defend its citizens" if Iraq launches missiles against Israel. He told the *Jerusalem Post* that in 1991, the US "did not take enough steps to protect Israel or to prevent attacks on Israel" and if "Israel is harmed, if we suffer casualties or if nonconventional weapons of mass destruction are used against us, then definitely Israel will take the proper actions to defend its citizens".

In 1991, Israel bowed before the insistence of then President George H.W. Bush not to respond to 39 Iraqi Scud missiles in order to preserve the support of the Arab nations for war against Baghdad. Sharon is using the threat of Israeli involvement in the next Gulf War, which would spark a broader conflict in the Middle East, to extract maximum political, military and economic concessions from Bush junior.

Last month Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld warned that it would be "overwhelmingly in Israel's interest to stay out" of any US campaign against Iraq. But no such hard line was discernible during the three days of talks.

The United Nations Security Council is presently studying a US draft resolution regarding arms inspections in Iraq, designed to provide the pretext for launching hostilities against Iraq. The US faces opposition from Russia, France and China, with Moscow objecting to an "unimplementable mandate" for the inspectors.

This is on top of the opposition to military action against Iraq expressed by numerous European countries without a position on the Security Council, including Germany, and the vocal concerns expressed by the Arab states.

Yet still, Washington did not issue the clear instruction to Israel to stay out of any Mideast conflict that it did in 1991. At one point, Bush even publicly endorsed Sharon's right to retaliate. With the Israeli premier at his side in the Oval Office, he said, "If Iraq attacks Israel tomorrow, I would assume the prime minister would respond. He's got a desire to defend himself."

White House officials were forced to qualify the president's remarks so that the US was not seen to be giving carte-blanc

to Israel. A spokesman explained that whereas a country has a right to defend itself, "if there is military action in the region, that's a qualitatively different situation, and we will consult closely with all the countries in the region that face a threat from Iraq."

A senior official said, "In the event that the US goes to war with Iraq, and Israel is attacked, we would expect consultations that are military to military, and political leaders to political leaders, and the larger interests of our objectives vis-à-vis Iraq would be pre-eminent."

Even these remarks hardly closed the door on a military response from Israel. Rather the US is telling Sharon to back off for the time being in order that the US can better prepare its own war plans. Such tactical considerations can change rapidly given the fluidity of the situation and the political recklessness and bellicosity that characterises of the Bush administration. There is no agreement within Washington over the importance attached to, or even the very possibility of, building an international coalition like that assembled in 1991. A powerful section of the Republicans is urging unilateral US action unrestrained by concern for the political sensibilities of the Arab regimes or Europe. If the UN resolution were vetoed, for example, Washington would in all likelihood go to war against Iraq anyway. US Military preparations are well underway, with an army corps and a Marine Expeditionary Force being sent to Kuwait to coordinate ground force operations. A number of special forces exercises have been held in the Middle East and a team from US Central Command, which will oversee any Iraq operation, is heading for Qatar next month.

Under such conditions, Israeli participation in the war could be considered in a favourable light. Thus, Washington could make only a half-hearted effort to rein in Sharon—for the time being at least. One Israeli official commented, "There was no pressure, no threats and not even the most minimal crack in the bilateral relationship. On the contrary: We have gone up a notch in the relationship." An unnamed senior US official said the two leaders were "deliberately ambiguous" about how Israel might respond to any attack by Iraq. He went on to note, "there is some utility in keeping the nature of Israel's response vague."

On all questions other than endorsing direct Israeli

participation in war against Iraq, the Bush administration backed Sharon to the hilt. There was tacit support for his government's plan for joint operations in Iraq's western desert to disarm Scud missiles before they could be launched against Israel. The US administration promised to deploy Special Operations forces at the start of any war against Iraq. It was revealed that Israeli forces had already carried out a secret reconnaissance mission in western Iraq this summer.

Bush also made an implicit threat to Lebanon and Syria, in support of Israel. Lebanon plans to divert water from one of its rivers that feeds into the Sea of Galilee, one of Israel's principal sources of water. Sharon has threatened war in retaliation, but instead of criticising Israel, Bush focused on possible retaliation by Hezbollah, the guerrilla group backed by Lebanon and Syria. "Apart from Iraq, we expect Hezbollah not to attack our friend," he said. "And so we will work with Israel, and work with other nations, make it clear to them, our position on harbouring terrorist activities."

"We certainly want to work with Israel," he added, "and we will make it clear to Hezbollah and nations housing Hezbollah, whether in the context of Iraq or not, we expect there to be no attacks."

Bush not only expressed his "great confidence in the Israeli economy", but indicated that he would push hard for an additional \$200 million in US aid to be made available as soon as possible.

Washington announced that Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs William Burns, would visit Israel as part of a two-week trip including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank, Yemen, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait. Burns' aim is to secure agreement on a six-page draft "road map" for progress towards resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The "road map" could have been drawn up by Israeli cartographers, calling as it does for an end to terror, reform of the Palestinian Authority, the removal of Yasser Arafat and a change in Palestinian leadership, interim negotiations and only then talks on a final peace agreement. The convening of an international conference to discuss establishing a temporary Palestinian state would be held in Autumn 2003—that is after the war in Iraq is meant to be over—with a final settlement by the end of 2005. In the short term, the onus is on the Palestinians, with only a promise of jam tomorrow that may never be realised.

Sharon was well-pleased with his Washington trip. Referring to Bush, he told reporters, "We never had such relations with any president of United States as we have with you. And we never had such a cooperation in everything as we have with the current administration." But this does not mean he will be satisfied with America's present stand, either with regard to Iraq or the Palestinian question. Instead he will view Washington's present level of support as captured political territory and push on with his efforts to utilise US hostilities

against Baghdad to further Israel's own regional ambitions.

The only assurance Israel made that it would not seek to join in a war against Iraq had enough holes in it to drive a tank through. A senior official explained, "We will do our best not to be involved." The Israeli response to Washington's peace road map has also been decidedly cool. Sharon simply stated that there could be no peace with Arafat still in charge, while his adviser, Raanan Gissin, said the plan would not work because, "We are being asked to make concessions which are irreversible, to give up territory and permit the establishment of a provisional Palestinian state. We cannot do this unless there is a significant drop in the level of terrorism."

Burns arrived in Israel on October 23, in the midst of escalating tensions between Israel and the Palestinian Authority in the wake of a Palestinian suicide bombing two days earlier that killed 14 people. Though the bomb was claimed by Islamic Jihad and condemned by Arafat, the Sharon government is once again blaming the PA and threatening retaliation.

Sharon has refrained from large-scale reprisals in face of US pressure. But Interior Minister Eli Yishai indicated that this was bound up with political calculations that Iraq's destruction would enable Israel to act more decisively at a later date. He told Israel Army Radio, "There are those who say that we need to react now and immediately with all power and all force. On the other hand, we could cause difficulties for the Americans. If the Americans attack Iraq, it's in our interest as well as that of the Americans."

Earlier, Israel's ambassador to the US, Daniel Ayalon, indicated his belief that the downfall of Saddam Hussein would smooth the way towards a conclusion to the Palestinian conflict favourable to Tel Aviv. "Once the Iraqi situation will be resolved," he said, "it may bring some positive effects on our situation indirectly. I'm not concerned, certainly vis-à-vis the Palestinians."



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