

# Washington's warnings to Iran and Syria part of a broader agenda

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Within two weeks of launching its invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration has issued bellicose warnings to Iran and Syria, effectively putting them on notice that they could be the next targets.

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld lashed out at Syria last Friday, accusing it of supplying sensitive military technology to the Iraqi army, night-vision goggles in particular. Such equipment “poses a direct threat to coalition forces,” he said. “We consider such trafficking as hostile acts and will hold the Syrian government responsible.”

He provided no evidence of any shipments nor could he point to any involvement by the Syrian government. “They control the border,” he declared, and “to the extent that military supplies or equipment or people are moving across the borders between Iraq and Syria, it vastly complicates our situation.” In other words, shut the border or face the consequences.

Asked if he was threatening Damascus with military action, Rumsfeld did not rule out the option. “I’m saying exactly what I’m saying,” he said. “It was carefully phrased.”

Turning his attention to Iran, Rumsfeld demanded that Tehran rein in the Badr Corps, the armed militia of the Shiite-based Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). He alleged that the fighters, who are Iraqi exiles, were not only armed and trained by Iran but under its control. To the extent that they interfere with the US military, he said, “they would have to be considered [hostile] combatants”.

Rumsfeld’s remarks about the Badr Corps were somewhat unexpected, given that SCIRI is one of six Iraqi opposition groups officially recognised by Washington. Its leaders have held talks with senior White House officials and it has been strongly represented at US-sponsored meetings of Iraqi exiles over the past year. Rumsfeld’s objection seems to be that SCIRI, unlike the two pro-US Kurdish groups in northern Iraq, has refused to directly subordinate its fighters to the US military.

Both Syria and Iran reacted angrily to Rumsfeld’s remarks. Iranian government spokesman Abdollah Ramezanzadeh said the “comments are baseless”. He reiterated Iran’s policy of formal neutrality in the conflict, declaring: “Tehran does not allow any military activities on its border [with Iraq] in favour or against any of the belligerent parties.”

Syrian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Bouthaine Shaban said Rumsfeld had made “an absolutely unfounded, irresponsible statement”. Information Minister Adnan Omran went further, warning: “It takes only a madman to widen the circle of war. The Pentagon is in real difficulties. He [Rumsfeld] has to throw the blame here and there.”

No one believes that Rumsfeld’s comments were simply about night-goggles from Syria or Iran’s connections to the Badr Corps. They were meant as a warning to governments throughout the Middle East against providing any assistance to Iraq and as a means to step up pressure on Damascus and Tehran in particular. His remarks underscore the fact that the war in Iraq is part of broader US plans to politically reorganise the Middle East and subordinate the region to US interests.

In January 2002, President Bush branded Iran as part of an “axis of evil” along with Iraq and North Korea. Last May, US Undersecretary of State John Bolton accused Syria of pursuing chemical and biological weapons programs, declaring it was one step away from joining the “axis of evil”. In recent weeks, Washington has reiterated warnings over Iran’s nuclear program and its alleged “weapons of mass destruction”.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell reinforced the message last Sunday in a speech to a prominent pro-Israel lobby group—the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. Speaking alongside Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, Powell accused Syria and Iran of providing support for terrorist groups in the Middle East and bluntly warned that there would be consequences.

“Syria now faces a critical choice,” Powell declared. “Syria can continue to support terrorist groups and the dying regime of Saddam Hussein, or it can embark on a different and more hopeful course... Syria bears the responsibility for its choices, and for the consequences.” He demanded that Iran “end its support for terrorists, including groups violently opposed to Israel and to the Middle East peace process” and “stop pursuing weapons of mass destruction”.

Like other countries in the region, Iran and Syria are involved in delicate balancing acts. Confronted with growing antiwar protests at home, both governments have been publicly critical of the US-led assault on Iraq. At the same time, however, they are anxious to reach an accommodation with Washington to

head off a direct confrontation and to defend their own interests in the region.

Despite its position of “neutrality” on the war, Tehran has been tacitly assisting US military forces. According to a report in the *Australian Financial Review*, US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad met Iranian officials in Geneva on March 16 to reach an arrangement for the handing back of any US pilots shot down over Iran. The newspaper explained: “Iran also agreed not to send any military forces across the border,” including those of the Badr Corps.

Last week, as US special forces and Kurdish militias in northern Iraq were pounding the positions of Ansar al-Islam, a group alleged to have ties with Al Qaeda, Iran sealed the border. Even wounded Ansar fighters were denied access to medical treatment. As a result, Washington has been able to claim a success, killing some 200 out of an estimated 700 Ansar members.

In the case of Syria, President Bashar Assad has described the US-led invasion as “a clear occupation and a flagrant aggression against a United Nations member state”. But for all its proclamations of support for its Arab brothers in Iraq, the Ba’ath regime in Damascus has been a long-time rival of its counterpart in Baghdad and lined up to support the original UN Security Council resolution allowing UN inspectors back into Iraq.

While it subsequently joined France, Germany, Russia and other members in blocking a second resolution authorising a US war on Iraq, Syria’s main preoccupation is with the impact of the war on its economy. Damascus made a healthy profit out of circumventing the UN embargo by selling goods to Iraq in return for heavily discounted oil. According to a report by the Royal Institute of International Affairs in Britain, the lucrative trade was worth around \$2 billion a year.

It is not only Tehran and Damascus that have reacted sharply to the comments of Rumsfeld and Powell. Washington’s threats against Syria and Iran cut directly across the plans of European powers in the Middle East, including America’s closest ally Britain.

Commenting in the London-based *Times*, the newspaper’s foreign editor Bronwen Maddox noted the dismay among British officials, particularly over the remarks of Powell, who has been viewed in European ruling circles as something of a counterweight to the hardliners in the Bush administration.

“From Donald Rumsfeld, it was not surprising; from Colin Powell, it was astounding,” she declared. The location of Powell’s speech—before “Israel’s most powerful lobby group in the United States”—will be “inflammatory to Arab countries already contemptuous of the Bush administration’s claim to be fighting this war for their advancement,” she warned.

“But the real significance [of the speech] is the breach it heralds with Downing Street,” Maddox wrote, pointing out that it cut across Washington’s “commitment to a Israeli-Palestinian ‘road map’ that the Prime Minister [Blair]

wants—and needs.” Moreover the “twin bombardment” undermined British attempts to keep “lines open to at least part of the deeply divided leadership in Tehran. British diplomats argue that Iran could be extremely useful in winning the Iraq war—adding that, as a matter of fact, it already has been, albeit in covert ways.”

There is not the slightest indication, however, that Washington will alter its course, even if that means a break with the Blair government in Britain. The Bush administration is now putting into practice in Iraq and the Middle East plans that were drawn up and pushed by rightwing ideologues and conservative thinktanks from the beginning of the 1990s.

The reasoning behind the current threats against Syria and Iran is outlined in a policy document written by the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies in 1996 for the incoming Netanyahu government in Israel. Among the authors were Richard Perle and Douglas Feith, both of whom have been prominent “neo-conservatives” in the Bush administration. The document argued for a “clean break” with the “land for peace” strategy of the previous Labour government and a far more aggressive policy toward Israel’s Arab neighbours.

“Israel can shape its strategic environment, in cooperation with Turkey and Jordan, by weakening, containing, and even rolling back Syria. This effect can focus on removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq—an important strategic objective in its own right—as a means of foiling Syria’s regional ambitions... Damascus fears that the ‘natural axis’ with Israel on one side, central Iraq and Turkey on the other, and Jordan in the centre would squeeze and detach Syria from the Saudi Peninsula. For Syria, this could be the prelude to a redrawing of the map of the Middle East which would threaten Syria’s territorial integrity.”

These sweeping plans for redrawing the Middle East map were conceived, of course, to be in the interests of Washington as well as Israel. Seven years later, these same figures wield extensive influence in the White House and are pressing ahead with their reckless strategy—with breakneck speed and scant regard for the consequences.



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