

Bush administration puts Syria in its gunsights

The Editorial Board
16 April 2003

Flush with its initial success in occupying Baghdad and reducing much of Iraq to chaos and ruin, the Bush administration is already setting its sights further afield—on Syria in particular. While US tanks may not be immediately heading for Damascus, a string of recent statements by Bush and his senior officials carries the unmistakable threat: unconditionally bow to US demands or face the same fate as Iraq.

Speaking in Washington on Monday, US Secretary of State Colin Powell reiterated the growing list of accusations being made against the Syrian regime—all without a shred of evidence. “We believe, in the light of the new environment, they should review their actions and their behaviour, not only with respect to who gets haven in Syria and weapons of mass destruction, but especially the support of terrorist activity,” he declared.

Asked about US claims that top Iraqi leaders have fled to Iraq, Powell was unable to provide any details. “I can’t quantify how many might be slipping across the border,” he said. While emphasising the possibility of diplomatic pressure and economic sanctions, Powell also left open the possibility of military attack. “With respect to Syria,” he said, “of course we will examine possible measures of a diplomatic, economic or other nature as we move forward.”

President Bush signalled his backing on Sunday by declaring: “I think we believe there are chemical weapons in Syria.” He warned that Syria “needs to cooperate” with the US. The following day, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer summarily dismissed Syrian denials that it had a chemical weapons program, simply declaring “it is well corroborated”. He branded Syria a “rogue state” and warned that it needed to “seriously ponder the implications” of its actions.

To underscore the military threat to Syria, US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld joined in. He repeated the accusation that “some Iraqis have been allowed into Syria, in some cases to stay and some cases to transit”. He then added his own embellishment, declaring that “we have seen chemical tests in Syria over the past 12, 15 months”. He provided no details to support the allegation.

Rumsfeld initiated the verbal offensive against Syria last month when he accused Damascus of supplying Iraq with sensitive military technology, including night goggles. “We consider such trafficking as hostile acts and will hold the Syrian government responsible.” Speaking on the CBS television show *Face the Nation* on Sunday, he declared: “The [Syrian] government is making a lot of bad mistakes, a lot of bad judgements in our view.”

Rumsfeld announced on Tuesday that US military engineers have already unilaterally shut down a crucial oil pipeline between Iraq and Syria. The step is a sharp blow against the Syrian economy, which reportedly gained as much as \$2 billion a year from a lucrative trade

selling goods to Iraq in return for heavily discounted oil.

While US officials have avoided making a direct military threat against Damascus, there is no doubt that a case for war is being made. The growing list of unsubstantiated accusations directly parallels Washington’s pretexts for invading Iraq. Moreover, even if the immediate aim is to bully Syria into compliance, there is an inexorable political logic to such threats.

Among the most militarist elements of the Bush administration, the so-called neo-conservatives, the warnings have become especially blunt. In an interview with the *International Herald Tribune* on Saturday, Richard Perle, one of the key ideologues behind the war on Iraq, declared that it would be “an act of foolishness” if Syria had taken possession of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. If the Syrians failed to terminate that threat, he said, “I don’t think anyone would rule out the use of any of our full range of capabilities.”

Perle made clear that it was not just Syria that was being targeted. “If the question is who poses a threat that the United States deal with, then that list is well known. It’s Iran. It’s North Korea. It’s Syria. It’s Libya, and I could go on,” he said. While declaring a preference for peaceful means, he left no doubt that the US military would be used against any government that refused to fall into line with American demands.

Syrian officials have reacted by strenuously denying the accusations in a desperate attempt to remove the country from Washington’s cross-hairs. Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa described the allegations as “baseless” and criticised the US for failing to establish order in Iraq. He then declared somewhat plaintively: “We have no problem if you give us any sort of evidence. What are the clues, evidence, that you have got? They don’t bring any evidence.” In Washington, Syria’s deputy ambassador to the US, Imad Moustapha, offered to throw the country open to comprehensive international weapons inspection.

Washington’s threats against Syria have provoked consternation in European capitals, particularly in London, where the Blair government has been at pains to declare that there are no plans for military action. Speaking in the House of Commons on Monday, Blair dismissed concerns about an invasion of Syria as “a conspiracy theory”. “I have the advantage of talking to the American president on a regular basis and I can assure you there are no plans to invade Syria,” he said. “Neither has anyone on the other side of the water, as far as I am aware, said there are plans.”

But as yesterday’s *Guardian* newspaper reported, fears about an attack on Damascus are far from baseless. The article explained that in recent weeks, US defence secretary Rumsfeld had ordered contingency plans for a war on Syria to be reviewed. It also made clear that the stream of accusations emanating from Washington is

part of a considered plan to provide the necessary *casus belli*.

“His [Rumsfeld’s] undersecretary for policy, Doug Feith, and William Luti, the head of the Pentagon’s office of special plans, were asked to put together a briefing paper on the case for war against Syria, outlining its role in supplying weapons to Saddam Hussein, its links with Middle East terrorist groups and its allegedly advanced chemical weapons program. Mr Feith and Mr Luti were both instrumental in persuading the White House to go to war in Iraq,” the newspaper stated.

According to the *Guardian* source, “The talk about Syria didn’t go anywhere.” But this small disclaimer ignores the obvious campaign being waged by the Bush administration and the factors pressing the US to war against Damascus. The public statements emanating from Washington are a sharp warning that there is a real possibility that the invasion of Iraq may be extended to neighbouring Syria in the near future.

As far as Pentagon planners are concerned, the invasion of Syria makes military sense. US troops and a vast array of military hardware are already in place. The US is in the process of establishing a long-term military occupation of Iraq in a highly unstable situation and is already encountering sharp opposition from Iraqis. As far as a section of the US top brass is concerned, Syria represents an exposed flank which should be dealt with sooner rather than later by replacing the Ba’athist regime in Damascus with a puppet amenable to US dictates.

Such an objective has long been part of plans by the most rightwing sections of the Republican party for refashioning the Middle East—spelt out most explicitly by the neo-conservatives. As long ago as 1996, Perle, Feith and others, writing under the auspices of the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies, produced a document for the incoming Netanyahu government in Israel which outlined an aggressive regional strategy that included “removing Saddam Hussein from power” and “weakening, containing and even rolling back Syria.”

Immediately after the September 11 attacks on New York, the extreme rightwing seized the opportunity to push ahead with its plans. An open letter to Bush from the “Project for the New American Century” group targetted Iraq, Syria and Iran as sponsors of terrorism. It called on the US president to demand that Syria and Iran immediately cease all assistance to the Hezbollah militia and declared: “Should Iran and Syria refuse to comply, the administration should consider appropriate measures of retaliation.”

More recently, the agenda of these fascistic layers was explicitly advanced by former CIA director James Woolsey, who has been mooted to head the Information Ministry in Baghdad. Speaking to an audience of college students at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) on April 2, Woolsey expounded on his theory that the US is already in the midst of World War IV—counting the Cold War as World War III.

“This fourth world war, I think, will last considerably longer than either World Wars I and II did for us. Hopefully not the full four-plus decades of the Cold War,” Woolsey declared. He included among the immediate enemies in this war: the religious rulers of Iran, the “fascist regimes” of Iraq and Syria, and Islamic extremist groups like Al Qaeda. His remarks were also targetted at Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and the leaders of Saudi Arabia.

As far as Woolsey is concerned, a war on Syria and its transformation into a quasi-colony of the United States is just one more step in a far broader plan, in league with Israel as junior partner, to control the Middle East and its vast oil reserves. The installation of

a US puppet in Damascus has as its corollary, the transformation of the Lebanon into an Israeli fiefdom. Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz has signalled Israel’s willingness to work with the US declaring: “We have a long list of issues that we are thinking of demanding of the Syrians and it is proper that it should be done through the Americans.”

Bush is under immense pressure, both public and private, from the most rightwing sections of his own Republican party to give the green light for war against Damascus. Among these layers, any drawing back would be a sign of impermissible weakness, if not outright treachery. These extremists are already implicitly comparing any retreat by Bush on a Syrian invasion to the failure of his father to seize the opportunity in the 1990-91 Gulf War to march on Baghdad.

Far from opposing a war on Syria, sections of the Democrats are seeking to outdo the Bush administration. Presidential candidate Bob Graham told the *Orlando Sentinel* over the weekend: “We threw a few cruise missiles into the terrorist training camps in Afghanistan... that’s what we may have to do in Syria.” While other figures have taken a more moderate approach, there is no doubt that the party, as it did in the case of Iraq, would rapidly fall into line with any attack on Damascus launched by the Bush administration.

In the final analysis, the driving force for an invasion of Syria is the immense social and economic contradictions in the United States itself. The Bush administration plunged into war with Iraq in the vain hope of offsetting the economic crisis at home, deflecting public attention from its rapacious domestic policies and turning the social tensions generated by deepening poverty and social inequality outwards. But having resolved nothing, Washington has no alternative but to press head with further military adventures.

Such is the inexorable logic of militarism. In a desperate bid to sustain itself in office, the Bush administration is compelled to be either involved in a war or planning the next one.



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