

U.S.-Israeli Consultation on Iraq Likely to Be Key in Bush-Sharon Meeting

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Oct 15, 2002

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Brief Analysis

Tomorrow, October 16, President George W. Bush hosts Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon. Although the two have met frequently in the year and a half since they assumed office, this session is likely to be different from previous encounters. Undoubtedly, they will discuss the situation with the Palestinians; this will be their first meeting since Bush's June 24, 2002, speech calling for a new Palestinian leadership capable of establishing a peaceful and democratic Palestine alongside Israel, perhaps as soon as 2005. The main focus of this White House discussion, however, will likely be the impact that a U.S. attack on Iraq would have on the U.S.-Israel relationship.

Until now, the United States has preferred to avoid serious discussions with Israel on this topic, fearing that such discussions would be interpreted as evidence that U.S. military plans were more advanced than they actually are in practice. In the wake of last week's congressional resolutions, however, it seems that both countries recognize that it is time to initiate high-level discussion covering, at the very least, scenarios that could ensue as a result of an attack on Iraq. Despite the instinctive tendency to delegate knotty issues to the bureaucratic level, it is absolutely necessary that the political leaders work out principles to guide the generals and the bureaucrats, who would otherwise fight and squabble amongst themselves.

Although the potential parameters of Israeli retaliation in the event of an Iraqi attack are paramount, several other issues need to be addressed as well. As the two parties consult on the possibility of a future attack against Iraq, they would do well to consider the last Gulf War.

U.S.-Israeli Communication

The period leading up to the Gulf War in 1991 was accompanied by profound suspicion between the first Bush administration and the government of Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Shamir. The poor relationship between the two leaders predated the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and only intensified thereafter. Washington feared that Israel would preempt any Iraqi attack against Israel itself and thereby complicate U.S. war efforts. Trust frayed further when Israel learned about the test-firing of an Iraqi Scud missile from CNN rather than from official U.S. channels. Moreover, on the eve of the war, then-Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger personally told Shamir that all Iraqi Scud launchers would be knocked out at the beginning of the U.S. campaign, when in fact the U.S. did not

succeed in knocking out a single mobile Scud launcher during the course of the fighting. Suspicions intensified during the war itself when U.S. commander Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf suggested that civilians were unlikely to be killed by Scuds.

Taken together, these facts have likely made Israel wary of more recent U.S. predictions that Scuds from western Iraq would not pose a threat to Israel, despite estimates by the British government and others that the amount of Scud launchers at Saddam Husayn's disposal are few, and despite the fact that U.S. "scud hunting" tactics and technology have significantly improved in the decade since the Gulf War. Such wariness reinforces the importance of good communication at all levels between the United States and Israel during the current Gulf crisis. Israel is likely to request that Washington provide it with early warning of any attack on Iraq, so that it can be on full alert at the onset of U.S. action.

Fortunately, despite the rocky start to U.S.-Israeli cooperation during the previous Gulf War, communication did improve over the course of the war itself. While refusing other Israeli requests, the United States dispatched a general attached to the Pentagon unit assisting the Joint Chiefs of Staff to serve as a liaison with Israeli military leaders. This added a key layer to the network of secure communications created between the defense establishments of both countries before the start of the war.

Moreover, although intelligence sharing remains an important facet of bilateral consultation, at least one potential point of friction is unlikely to reappear. During the Gulf War, tension emerged between Shamir and Eagleburger regarding the timeliness of U.S. satellite photography of western Iraq. Today, however, Israel has its own Ofek-5 reconnaissance satellite capability, thus reducing its dependence on the United States. Similarly, past friction over the performance of the Patriot missile-defense system is unlikely to reoccur, in part because the United States has continued funding for Israel's Arrow anti-missile program over the intervening decade. Washington has reportedly offered to provide Israel with Patriot missiles in the event of another Gulf war, but so far Israel has yet to reply. Nevertheless, Israel has already deployed two Arrow batteries that could be used to counter Iraqi Scud missiles.

Deterrence

During the Geneva meeting between then-Secretary of State James Baker and his Iraqi counterpart Tariq Aziz just days before the Gulf War, Baker made it abundantly clear that catastrophic consequences would follow any Iraqi attempts to launch chemical or biological attacks. As he recounted in his 1995 memoirs, Baker told Aziz that if any such weapons were used against U.S. forces, "our objective won't just be the liberation of Kuwait, but the elimination of the current Iraqi regime"; he also warned that "anyone responsible for using those weapons would be held accountable."

Baker's threat was echoed in a significant public statement by President Bush on October 8: "An Iraqi regime faced with its own demise may attempt cruel and desperate measures. If Saddam Husayn orders such measures, his generals would be well advised to refuse those orders. If they do not refuse, they must understand that all war criminals will be pursued and punished. If we have to act, we will take every precaution that is possible. We will plan carefully. We will act with the full power of the United States military." This time around, it is particularly important that Saddam's field commanders—not just Saddam himself—understand the consequences of a nonconventional attack.

Retaliation

Last month, under questioning by the Senate Armed Services Committee regarding the prospect of Israeli retaliation against Iraq, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld stated, "In my view, it would be overwhelmingly in Israel's interest to stay out in the event that a conflict were to occur prospectively." Indeed, both Sharon and Israel Defense Forces chief of staff Moshe Ya'alon made clear in separate public statements during the last few weeks that, given the

sensitivities surrounding a U.S. attack against Iraq, Israeli retaliation would not be automatic, but instead situational. Sharon also made clear that Israel would exercise its right to self-defense if it were hit with chemical weapons or suffered significant casualties due to Iraqi aggression.

At the time of the Gulf War, the United States was concerned about fracturing the Arab coalition to liberate Kuwait. The situation was complex. On one hand, Baker recounted his quiet, prewar diplomacy as follows: "I had been able to secure agreements from all our Arab coalition partners that if Saddam attacked Israel first and Israel struck back, they would remain firm." A top Egyptian official publicly said the same thing at the time. Yet, Baker also said that the United States did not view these commitments as iron-clad, given concern by some Arabs of public reaction. The context today is different from 1990. The Gulf crisis in 1990 was principally an Arab/Arab affair (Iraq invades Kuwait), while the confrontation today concerns Iraq repeatedly violating UN resolutions on inspections and disarmament, with Israel having perhaps more at stake than any other international actor in the pursuit of such disarmament.

Unlike the last Gulf War, so far, there are no Arab partners for a fighting coalition. Yet, U.S. sensitivities will remain high given U.S. military-base requirements for such a war throughout the Gulf states. Thus, it remains possible that the United States and Israel may be looking at the issue of retaliation through different prisms. Indeed, Israel's consideration of retaliation may be driven by a wider strategic objective. During the last Gulf War, the Israelis felt that their own operation would be more effective in locating Scud launchers—a concern not shared by the United States, which, as the war progressed, had begun devoting sizable resources to bombing western Iraq and putting special forces on the ground. Yet, as Shaul Mofaz, Ya'alon's immediate predecessor as IDF chief of staff, said during a Washington Institute conference this month, the country would be motivated less by the prospect of scoring an operational success in western Iraq that could not be secured by the United States, than by inflicting damage on Iraq in a bid to deter other potential aggressors who may be emboldened if Israel remains passive again in the face of serious Iraqi attacks. Israel will likely argue that a retaliation that comes in the wake of a serious Iraqi attack will not fracture Arab support, but rather will be viewed regionally as acceptable in light of the provocation.

Israel's focus on deterrence has been spurred by statements of Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah on the heels of Israel's unilateral pullout from Lebanon two years ago, to the effect that Israel is not as fierce as it appears. Amid differences with Israel during the Gulf War, the first Bush administration refused to provide what is known as the IFF (Identity Friend or Foe) electronic codes, nor was it willing to have American aircraft "deconflict" so there would be an air corridor for Israeli retaliation.

Leading up to the talks in Washington, there have been reports that Sharon will assure Bush that Israel will not retaliate without prior coordination. During the last Gulf War, the United States did not want any automatic Israeli action, but favored consultation that was tantamount to prior U.S. approval before any Israeli action. U.S. concerns are likely to extend beyond a retaliation scenario and extend to the possibility that during a new Gulf War, there may be Hizballah and Palestinian provocations that would trigger Israel to wipe out the presence of thousands of Hizballah rockets on its northern border or to exile Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat. Bush is likely to urge avoiding escalation with the Palestinians in the run-up to another war.

Apart from the possible different scenarios and permutations and prospect of provocation by an array of regional actors more complex than the last Gulf War, another issue that could weigh on the future is the value of American wartime promises. Baker admitted in his memoirs that he told Shamir during the Gulf War that if Israel demonstrated restraint, it would "also help repair bilateral relations, which we both knew were in some considerable disrepair." This did not come to pass for different reasons. For his part, Shamir would blame the first Bush administration for his fall from government a year and a half later. In general, it can be said that approach to wartime coordination is likely to be a key factor in postwar planning and prioritization.

Veterans of the first Bush administration such as Richard Cheney, Colin Powell, and Paul Wolfowitz are aware of this history. Thus, there are many issues related to U.S.-Israeli consultations—which may be given fresh impetus by the two leaders tomorrow—that require thorough discussion before any outbreak of hostilities.

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