

Engaged to Terror

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Articles & Testimony

The Bush administration appears determined to lose the War on Terror. Rather than confront sponsors of terror, the State Department increasingly engages them. The logic of engagement can sound enticing. Proponents argue that dialogue and trade encourages pariah states to moderate, while isolation and confrontation encourage rogue regimes to retrench and continue terror.

At present, the most obvious manifestation of the Bush engagement policy is toward US-Palestinian Authority relations. Secretary of State Colin Powell and even President George W. Bush himself seek to restrain Israeli retaliation, while simultaneously urging dialogue. Despite a warehouse full of documentary evidence seized at Orient House and during Operation Defensive Shield linking the Palestinian Authority to terrorism, the State Department's annual "Patterns of Global Terrorism" whitewashed the PA's terror connections, in the name of diplomatic expediency. Instead of treating the PA as a sponsor of terrorism, and rebuilding anew as in Afghanistan, Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet now rushes to reconstruct the very "security services" which for two years have waged a devastating war not only against Israel but against moderate Palestinians as well.

The Bush administration's current engagement toward Arafat would not be so tragic if Washington did not already have a consistent record of failure when applying the same strategy to many other Middle Eastern regimes.

Take Sudan, a country whose hospitality to Osama bin Laden, the Abu Nidal organization, Lebanese Hizbullah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hamas, and the Islamic Salvation Front of Algeria has, since 1993, earned it secure status as a state sponsor of terrorism.

In the wake of September 11, Sudan's ambassador to the United Nations offered Washington "genuine cooperation in combating terrorism." To a State Department where rhetoric trumps reality, such lip service was enough.

Powell said that the US would enlist Sudan in the fight against "all forms of international terrorism." Without waiting for tangible results from Khartoum, the US enabled the UN Security Council to vote to lift sanctions on Sudan, effectively rehabilitating the regime. Just last month, the US upgraded its diplomatic presence in Khartoum, appointing a permanent charge d'affaires.

Has engagement worked? Sudan did arrest 30 suspected terrorists, leading to self-satisfied high-fives in Foggy Bottom. Unfortunately, those arrested were low-level recruits. Arab Sudanese merchants I interviewed during a recent trip to the opposition-held Bahr al-Ghazal province reported that many senior Palestinian, Iraqi, and Iranian "volunteers" and "instructors" had simply relocated from more visible urban camps in Khartoum, Renk, and Tokar to southern garrison towns out of sight of diplomats, aide workers, and journalists. Nevertheless, the State Department's "2001 Patterns of Global Terrorism" reported Sudan [and Libya] to be "closest to understanding what they must do to get out of the terrorism business." Such a pronouncement is curious, given Sudan's post-September 11 actions.

Three weeks after the World Trade Center attacks, Sudanese Vice President Ali Osman Taha declared in a speech to Mujahadin fighters, "The jihad is our way and we will not abandon it and will keep its banner high."

The fruits of Sudan's jihad? Over two million people dead, and twice that number displaced in a bloody campaign to impose Shari'a [the laws of Islam] on the largely Christian and animist south. While for the Palestinians there is special envoy Anthony Zinni, the Sudanese have former US senator John Danforth. Like Zinni, Danforth secured ceasefire commitments.

Unfortunately, Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir's word is as good as that of Yasser Arafat. In February, Sudan bombed villagers gathered for a UN emergency food drop. On May 22, after years of denial by Khartoum, an international commission concluded that slavery continues in Sudan aided and abetted by government militias such as the Popular Defense Force [PDF]. The same day, Sudanese warplanes bombed four villages in the Western Upper Nile province, killing 17 civilians. Sources in Sudan report that late last month, the PDF overran a UNICEF compound in Adila, slaughtering or hauling off 500 women and children recently freed from slavery.

Sudan's recent record with external terror is little better. On April 6, PDF Commander Major General Ahmad Abbas called on the Sudanese to join a "holy war" against Israel and rid Jerusalem of "Zionist filth." Sudanese television reported, "training camps are ready to receive volunteer fighters." On April 8, protesters at a state-organized rally chanted: "Strike back, bin Laden!" and "Down! Down with the USA!" On May 9, the Iraqi News Agency reported a new Iraqi-Sudanese cooperation pact designed to subvert UN sanctions upon Iraq.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of American policy toward Sudan is that the Bush administration seems determined to replicate its mistakes elsewhere, emboldening dictators and terrorist sponsors throughout the region. Take Iraq: Saddam Hussein has for 11 years systematically ignored UN commitments; last month the US responded by softening sanctions. I lived in Iraq for nine months last year and, without exception, both Arabs and Kurds said that Saddam would see "smart sanctions" as a reward for obstructionism and embolden him to further flout commitments. No wonder, then, that Iraqi Television recently broadcast calls for Muslims to "strike at US interests" through the Middle East.

Bush administration engagement has also failed with Syria, as the families of the victims of the June 5 Megiddo bus bombing know all too well. In return for Bashir Assad's promises to close the Iraqi oil pipelines through Syria, the Bush administration acquiesced in Syria's election to the UN Security Council last October, despite Syria playing host to more terrorists than any other nation. Today, Syria sits as president of the UN Security Council, while more than \$1 billion annually continues to flow through the still-opened pipeline, allowing Saddam to further his nuclear ambitions.

In Iran, too, engagement has failed. One month after Bush declared Iran to be part of the "Axis of Evil," State Department Policy Planning Director Richard Haas told foreign officials during his Middle East trip that he advocated "engagement" with the Islamic Republic. Such policy confusion only emboldens Tehran, which, on June 8, announced that it would nearly double its funding for the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

The true Bush doctrine, like that of Clinton before him, appears to coddle adversaries and bully friends. Unfortunately, Middle Eastern rogue regimes view willingness to compromise as weakness to be exploited. The result has been scores of dead civilians among the US's allies, retrenchment among the US's adversaries, and terrorists convinced that their jihad will be rewarded by yet another weak American president. ❖

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