Don't 'Engage' Rogue Regimes

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Articles & Testimony

Now that the reign of the Taliban appears over, the question for President Bush is how to confront other state sponsors of terrorism. There are two choices: "engagement" or confrontation. In Afghanistan, he chose confrontation. It looks increasingly likely that the White House will also choose confrontation in Iraq. Yet despite President Bush's harsh rhetoric, Washington still relies on engagement with other terrorism sponsors, which means trying to entice these regimes into cooperating without using force or economic sanctions.

In the wake of Sept. 11, for example, the Bush administration decided to engage with the Islamist regime in Sudan -- Osama bin Laden's home between 1991 and 1996, and a country on the U.S. list of states sponsoring terrorism since 1993. Unlike Iraq, where President Saddam Hussein gloated over the deaths of 4,000 Americans, or Iran, where Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei accused Israel of being behind the attacks, in Sudan President Omar el-Bashir played his diplomatic cards well and quickly condemned "all forms of violence."

Appeasing Sudan

The Bush administration responded on Sept. 19 by killing the Sudan Peace Act, which had passed the House of Representatives 422-2, and would have imposed sanctions on companies doing business with Khartoum. Nine days later, by abstaining in a United Nations Security Council vote, Washington enabled the U.N. to lift international sanctions on Sudan imposed after Khartoum provided safe haven to perpetrators of the 1995 assassination attempt on Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. To further the dialogue, Mr. Bush appointed former Sen. John Danforth as his special envoy to Sudan. Mr. Danforth, who went to Khartoum on Nov. 13, has expressed pessimism. The Sudanese government later complained that Mr. Danforth expected too many concessions from them.

To see how well engagement works, I traveled to Sudan. Because Khartoum restricts the movement of visitors and tightly monitors with whom they speak, I went into the war-torn south of the country, where Muslims and Christians, Arabs and blacks meet and trade in the countryside and small towns outside of government control.

All Sudanese I met scoffed at the notion that anything beyond Khartoum's rhetoric had changed since Sept. 11. Rather, they warned that their government had interpreted Washington's willingness to engage as a green light to carry on the regime's decade-old jihad against Christians and other non-Muslims in the country's south. Indeed, on Oct. 4, Sudanese Vice President Ali Uthman Taha declared, "The jihad is our way and we will not abandon it and will keep its banner high."

Mr. Taha's speech was not mere rhetoric. Between Oct. 23-26, Sudanese government troops attacked villages near the southern town of Aweil, killing 93 men and enslaving 85 women and children. Then, on Nov. 2, the Sudanese military attacked villages near the town of Nyamlell, carrying off another 113 women and children. A Kenyan aide worker was also abducted, and has not been seen since.

What's Sudanese slavery like? One 11-year-old Christian boy told me about his first days in captivity: "I was told to be a Muslim several times, and I refused, which is why they cut off my finger." Twelve-year-old Alokor Ngor Deng was taken as a slave in 1993. She has not seen her mother since the slave raiders sold the two to different masters.

Thirteen-year-old Akon was seized by Sudanese military while in her village five years ago. She was gang-raped by six government soldiers, and witnessed seven executions before being sold to a Sudanese Arab.

Many freed slaves bore signs of beatings, burnings and other tortures. More than three-quarters of formerly enslaved women and girls reported rapes.

While nongovernmental organizations argue over how to end slavery, few deny the existence of the practice. And, while estimates of the number of blacks now enslaved in Sudan vary from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands (not counting those sold as forced labor in Libya), the exact figure is irrelevant. Washington should hardly want as a partner any regime that is complicit in slavery. There should be very little to discuss.

Some may argue that the Bush administration's new engagement policy should only be graded for its contribution to the war against terror, but even there Sudan does not measure up. As a sign of its cooperation, Khartoum reportedly arrested 30 individuals associated with a number of different terrorist groups, but none was reported to be significant.

Sudanese I interviewed indicated that in the wake of the World Trade Center attack, most Iraqi, Iranian, Pakistani and Palestinian residents of Sudanese terrorist training camps merely migrated south to government garrison towns where they would be out of sight of Khartoum-based diplomats and journalists. Former members of the military indicated that the Sudanese government still maintains chemical weapons stockpiles (allegedly acquired with Iraqi assistance) at the Juba airport, its stronghold in the far south of the country. Indeed, throughout the 1990s, Sudan not only provided a safe-haven for al Qaeda, but it also gave one to Iraqis working to develop chemical weapons, outside the view of U.N. weapons inspectors.

On Nov. 19, Undersecretary of State John Bolton named Sudan along with Iran and North Korea (two other countries with which Washington has sought dialogue) as developing chemical and biological weapons. Dialogue sounds good, but it is no panacea. If applied carelessly, the policy merely absolves, if not rewards, rogue regimes.

In the Islamic world, confrontation may work better than dialogue. As the Taliban were driven from Kabul, Afghans spontaneously celebrated, cheering America in the streets. This need not be an isolated occurrence. When I traveled to Kabul 18 months ago, ordinary Afghans repeatedly asked why the United States did not come to their assistance and force the Taliban away. The situation was much the same in Iraq, where I lived for nine months last year. Ordinary Iraqis complained not of U.S. sanctions, but of Washington being too willing to compromise with Saddam. I was in Iraq the day after a relaxation of sanctions was announced. An Iraqi farmer asked me, "Why does the United States talk about [SADDAM'S]war crimes one day, and reward Saddam the next?"

I lived in Iran both before and after the rise of President Mohammad Khatami. One thing remains constant: Most Iranians are not simply pro-Western but pro-American. This is precisely why Washington should not seek to engage with the Islamic Republic. Iranians see European states like France and Italy that encourage engagement as merely seeking to appease the ayatollahs in order to make a quick buck. They see Washington as standing on principle. After all, when the hard-liners control almost all import-export trade in Iran, only a fool would believe that investment in Iran does anything but hurt the true proponents of reform. Any new business with Iran will simply accelerate completion of the Islamic Republic's nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile programs.

A Lesson From Libya

Secretary of State Colin Powell should remember what happened in 1999, when Britain renewed diplomatic relations with Libya in response to dictator Moammar Gadhafi's alleged moderation: Within months, British authorities had confiscated 32 crates of missile parts that Mr. Gadhafi had attempted to use to advance his weapons program. Let's not make the same mistake now.

Washington should not negotiate with rogue regimes, at least not until they move beyond mere rhetoric and unilaterally cease all weapons proliferation and terror sponsorship without precondition. Perhaps State Department bureaucrats believe they can be party to a great compromise in Sudan or Iran, but in Khartoum and Tehran the people know the truth will be quite the opposite. As one Sudanese Arab merchant put it, "If America wants Sudan to be a friend, they should not talk to Omar. They should just end his jihad." ❖

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