

Let's Not Befriend This Enemy of Our Enemy

Nov 11, 2001



Articles & Testimony

When the U.N. General Assembly session begins tomorrow, Secretary of State Colin Powell and foreign ministers from Russia and Afghanistan's neighbors will meet to discuss the war on terrorism.

All eyes will be on whether Mr. Powell meets his Iranian counterpart, Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi. The State Department has argued that now is the time to warm relations with Iran. After all, both the United States and Iran oppose the Taliban. As the old saying goes, "The enemy of thy enemy is thy friend."

But where has this logic gotten the United States in the Middle East? In the 1980s, the United States helped arm Iraqi President Saddam Hussein because we had a mutual enemy in Iran. The result? A ravaged Kuwait and 182,000 dead Kurds.

In the aftermath of Sept. 11, the State Department sought closer ties with Sudan, the African country whose government is engaged in a self-declared jihad to slaughter, enslave and convert non-Muslims to Islam. The Sudanese government declared its "rejection of all kinds of violence."

It promised to close its terrorist training camps. We gave the go-ahead for the United Nations to lift sanctions on Sudan. The result? Not only did the Sudanese say the camps were still operating when I was there after Sept. 11, but the government had also resumed its bombing of Christian villages and slave raiding, killing 21 and seizing 113 women and children. Lest anyone doubt Sudan's position, on Oct. 4, Sudanese Vice President Ali Osman Mohamed Taha declared, "The jihad is our way, and we will not abandon it."

Congratulations, Mr. Powell. We now have a slave-raiding, terror-sponsoring dictatorship as an ally merely because it said it was an enemy of our enemy.

Is Iran different? Absolutely not. According to the most recent State Department terrorism report, Iran is "the most active state sponsor of terrorism." Iran hosts seven men on the FBI's most-wanted list of 22 terrorists, including Imad Mughniyeh, the chief suspect in the bombings of the U.S. Embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983.

Ahmed Sharifi, a brigadier general in Iran's Revolutionary Guards, is believed to be the mastermind of the 1996 attack on the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, which killed 19 Americans. Rather than give assistance in these cases, Iran insists that the United States apologize to it.

Mr. Powell, don't do it. To speak with, let alone apologize to, "the most active state sponsor of terrorism" gives legitimacy to an unpopular regime that is unraveling at its seams. The worst riots in 20 years in Iran erupted in October. Following a loss in a World Cup qualifying soccer match, hundreds of thousands of people took to the street across the country, chanting "Death to [Ayatollah Ali] Khameni, death to [President Mohammad] Khatami, and death to the Islamic Republic."

When Mr. Khatami came to power in 1997, he promised democracy and social freedom. But he failed to deliver, even after his supporters took control of parliament in February 2000. In the past 18 months, hard-liners have closed more than 50 papers, have shut hundreds of Internet cafes and, following last month's rioting, have seized

thousands of satellite dishes. Under Mr. Khatami, freedoms are not increasing; they are declining. Only inflation and public executions are on the way up. Just as with former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, Mr. Khatami is far more popular in the West than at home. In Iran, winning close to 80 percent in an election does not mean people like you for who you are. It means they like you for who you are not.

Most Iranians chose Mr. Khatami because he was the least offensive candidate. But the choice was limited. In the 1997 election, Mr. Khatami and three opponents stood, but the Islamic Republic banned 234 other candidates.

An enemy of our enemy need not be our friend. When I visited Iran in 1996 and 1999, Iranians repeatedly criticized governments like France and Italy that were more interested in doing business with the mullahs than defending the rights of the Iranian people. Washington was seen to stand on principle. This, not Baywatch, is why the Iranian people are not just pro-Western, but pro-American.

When Mr. Powell and Mr. Kharrazi meet in a U.N. corridor, Mr. Powell should walk by. Such a statement would be heard loud and clear, not just in Tehran, but also in Baghdad, Riyadh and Damascus: The United States does not do business with state sponsors of terrorism. ❖

Baltimore Sun

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