

Israel's Not the Issue; Pass It On

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As U.S. and British forces readied for battle Sunday, President Bush telephoned a handful of world leaders to give them warning. Prominent among them: Israel. Why?

The answer should be clear, given the democratic values we share and the common enemies we face. Based on its size and population, no country has suffered more from the same sort of terrorism that hit the World Trade Center and the Pentagon than Israel.

To some, however, Israel is just reaping what it sowed. In Arab and Muslim capitals, political and religious leaders daily intone on the distinction between "terrorism," which they condemn, and "legitimate resistance to occupation" -- a catch-all phrase that lumps together teenage rock throwers, dynamite-laden suicide bombers and Katyusha-lobbing guerrillas operating from Lebanon.

Remarkably, a more politically correct variant of this argument has some adherents in Washington. Last week, the State Department's official spokesman actually said that terrorism against Americans and terrorism against Israelis are "two different things." The former, he said, concerns "violent people trying to destroy societies," whereas the latter revolves around "political issues that need to be addressed." From that skewed logic comes the contrast of U.S. diplomacy performing an exemplary job of forging an international coalition against the perpetrators of the Sept. 11 attacks while ceding vital ground in the war against terror in the Arab-Israeli arena.

A case in point is Syria. On Sept. 28, the United Nations Security Council approved a resolution empowering the international community to take "all necessary steps" against terrorist groups and those states that support them. Syria -- a charter member of the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism -- hosts more officially designated terrorist groups than any other country in the world and, according to U.S. government documents, violates virtually every paragraph of that new Security Council resolution.

Nevertheless, on Monday, one day after Bush promised an anti-terrorist campaign against "any government [that] sponsors the outlaws and killers of innocents," the United States raised not a single word of protest as the U.N. General Assembly voted to let Syria sit on the Security Council -- the body empowered with enforcing the U.N.'s anti-terror effort.

The ignominy of inaction on Syria's U.N. candidacy is the clearest, but not the sole, example of U.S. diplomats

refusing to implement what may eventually be known as the Bush doctrine. In recent weeks, the State Department has urged Congress not to tighten legislation designed to pressure Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to rein in terrorist groups operating in territory he controls and signaled a willingness to work more closely with Iran, the principal patron of Hezbollah, the terrorist group that, prior to Sept. 11, had killed more Americans than any other.

If most Americans knew about such inside-the-Beltway shenanigans, they would be aghast. After all, large majorities tell pollsters they support Israel, oppose reducing ties with Israel to lower the threat of terrorism and doubt whether making Israel pay a diplomatic price would in any way diminish the threat of terrorist attacks against the United States.

That is because most Americans have the common sense to know that Israel is not the sole or even the leading motivation for Osama Bin Laden and his ilk, despite its status as a free-market democracy in a region that knows too little of both. According to a just-published Newsweek poll, more Americans view the "U.S. military and economic power in general" as a more powerful rationale for anti-U.S. terrorism than U.S. support for Israel.

And they are right. In his video message broadcast Sunday, Bin Laden may have identified his cause with "Palestine," but that is a recent -- and almost surely opportunistic -- phenomenon. Traditionally, Israel has been just one of many members of Bin Laden's pantheon of evils, alongside India (for its role in Kashmir), Russia (for its suppression of the Chechens) and the Serbs (for atrocities against Bosnian Muslims). Of much greater importance to Bin Laden have been the goals of evicting Americans from the Arabian peninsula and overthrowing pro-Western regimes in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

In the fight against terrorism, as in the fight for peace, most Americans know that Israel is part of the solution, not part of the problem. Bush's telephone call to the Israeli prime minister Sunday reflected that basic reality. Let's hope the rest of his administration was listening. ❖

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