

# U.S.-Israel Tension in the Aftermath of September 11

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Brief Analysis

**A**s the world has focused on the U.S. effort against Osama bin Laden in the aftermath of September 11, friction has been building between the United States and Israel. The growing feeling in Israel has been that U.S. coalition-building with the Arabs against terrorism has involved tradeoffs which come at Israel's expense and thus compromises Israeli security concerns. The tension peaked at the end of last week when Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon made intemperate remarks, implying a potential comparison between President George W. Bush and Neville Chamberlain's Munich capitulation to the Nazis. The White House immediately termed such comments "unacceptable" -- Sharon quickly apologized, calling it a misunderstanding.

While hardly any voices in Israel endorse remarks that Sharon himself has disavowed, it is important to note that the underlying fear is not the prime minister's exclusive preserve. The liberal-leaning Haaretz daily, which is often critical of Sharon, opined in its Sunday editorial that while Sharon could have found better language, he needed to speak out. The editorial stated, "It appears to have been required so as to direct the attention of the heads of the U.S. Administration to the fact that Israel is unable to continue sacrificing its citizens to murderous terrorism without an appropriate response, just so that the chances of bringing dubious regimes into the antiterror coalition would improve." Without any face-to-face contact between senior U.S. and Israeli officials since September 11, differences between the two sides can fester and deepen. The not too distant history recalls the Gulf War and the poor relationship at time of crisis between G.W.H. Bush and Likud premier of the day, Yitzhak Shamir. The current president has worked harder with Sharon than his father did with Shamir (and even called to give him advance notice of the attack), but due to a variety of events, a downward spiral in the bilateral relationship cannot be overlooked.

## Origins of Tension

In the first days after the attacks, Israel discerned nervousness by the Arab leadership not wanting to be on the wrong side of the effort against terrorism. For instance, Palestinian Authority (PA) Chairman Yasir Arafat rushed to give blood, his security services confiscated video recording "celebrations" of some Palestinians responding to September 11; and Syrian leader Bashar al-Asad penned a condolence note to President Bush. Thus, Israel anticipated that September 11 would lead to the United States demanding tough action from problematic countries that desired to join the antiterrorism coalition. This view seemed to be reinforced by Bush's stirring speech to

Congress, which declared war on terrorism. Yet actions inside the Administration moved in a different direction. Secretary of State Powell let the word out that the United States was seeking Arab coalition partners in the effort against Osama bin Laden. Suddenly, these and other Arab parties believed that they, not the United States, possessed leverage.

For its part, Israel was content to provide its own intelligence information to the United States on bin Laden, but stayed outside of the public coalition amid U.S. requests that it remain in low profile. (Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, for example, did not visit Israel on his regional swing last week.) However, Israel reacted in dismay as it viewed Washington parceling out concessions as it did in 1990, when it enabled Syria to enter Beirut in return for Damascus' support against Iraq. No less significant, it is concerned that American body language is signaling to the Arabs that there are different degrees of terrorism, and perhaps like 1991, the implication will be that Israel is politically hamstrung during this period. Here are some of the examples that have upset Israel:

**Syria.**The Bush administration did not oppose Syrias bid for a rotating seat on the UN Security Council and has said little about the activities of Syrian-based Islamic Jihad and Hizballah, both of which have undertaken attacks against Israel since September 11. Moreover, the United States did not mention any Syrian-based groups among those whose assets frozen last month. (Some Administration officials insist that groups like Hizballah are already restricted by previous lists, but the new list has tighter restrictions and stronger penalties.)

**Russia/Iran.**Bush administration denials notwithstanding, Russia is perceived now to be immune to criticism on its ongoing nuclear arms deals with Iran. There was a weak-to-nonexistent U.S. response to a \$300 million Russian arms sales to Iran last week. This is seen to be a payoff for American and British efforts to enlist Iran in efforts against the Taliban.

**Palestinians.**The timing of Bush's statement on Palestinian statehood, coming on the heels of press reports that Powell had been planning to deliver a speech endorsing the vision of a Palestinian state at peace with Israel, suggested that U.S. officials were trying to mollify Arab leaders at a time when PA Chairman Arafat was not cracking down on violence -- despite the agreement of a ceasefire with Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres. The stories came on the heels of statements by Powell opposing congressional efforts to put the Fatah Tanzim and Arafat's Force-17 on the State Department Terrorism List. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher differentiated between terrorism practiced by bin Laden and Hamas terrorism directed against Israel. Coming against the backdrop of accelerated killings in the last couple weeks, the Boucher statement became interpreted in Israel as a signal from Washington that terrorism in this context is legitimate. As such, Israel is extremely concerned about a perception that could reemerge in the Arab world as it did during the Gulf War of 1991. At the time, Israel was seen as having no room to attack or retaliate amid American concerns that it remain in low profile.

To be sure, the United States has some of its own concerns. For example, some in Washington feared that Sharon enabled the Israeli military to enter Rafah shortly after the Peres-Arafat ceasefire in order to undermine it amid pressure from his own right-wing. Israel denies this, saying that it needed to stop the discovered flow of dangerous explosives. The United States also wonders if Israel's incursion into Hebron over the weekend is taking advantage of a situation while world attention is preoccupied. However, amid concerns that the United States has abandoned holding Arafat to any standard of compliance, Sharon believes that Bush has held the line against those in his cabinet who want him to act against Hamas the way that the United States is acting against bin Laden.

## Conclusion

The U.S.-led war against terrorism is likely to take many twists and turns in the weeks to come. Since September 11, leaders or foreign ministers of the following Middle East countries have visited Washington: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Qatar, but no Israelis. Given Israel's intrinsic connection to the fight against terror, having suffered one

of the highest national tolls on September 11, high-level, bilateral consultations are needed to lend weight both to the substance and the perception of U.S.-Israel cooperation. While a Sharon visit to the United States might not be appropriate given the two sides' desire to maintain a low-profile approach (and a lower-level Israeli delegation cancelled its visit this week due to American preoccupation with crisis inside Afghanistan), it probably would be useful to dispatch to Israel someone of the caliber of Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage. He is known not just as Powell's deputy, but as one of his best friends. Moreover, he is a recognized quantity in Israel, and like Sharon, he has an extensive military background. That sort of visit may serve to dispel some of the current difficulties in bilateral links.

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