

'Israelisation' of US Middle East policy proceeds apace

David Hirst

Few disputed at the time that Israel was a factor that pushed US President George W Bush to go to war on Iraq. Just how much weight it had among all the other factors was the only controversial question. But what is clear, six months on, is that Israel is now a very important one indeed in the stumbling neoimperial venture that Iraq has become.

This "Israelisation" of US policy crossed a new threshold with the two blows dealt to Syria in the past fortnight — Bush's endorsement of Israel's Oct 5 air raid on its territory and the Syrian Accountability Act passed by the House of Representatives last week. A community of US-Israeli purpose pushed to unprecedented lengths is now operational as well as ideological.

For the US, the main battlefield is Iraq, and any state that sponsors or encourages resistance to its occupation; for Israel it is occupied Palestine, its "terrorists" and their external backers. These common objectives converge on Syria.

Of course, with his raid, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had his own specifically Israeli agenda, growing out of frustration at his failure to crush the *intifada*. Breaking the "rules" that have "contained" Israeli-Syrian conflict these past 30 years, he signalled his readiness to visit on Israel's Arab neighbours the same punitive techniques he uses on the Palestinians.

But whereas such an escalation might have had some deterrent logic when these neighbours truly did sponsor or harbour Palestinian resistance, it doesn't now. An essential feature of the *intifada* is that, spontaneous and popular, it derives almost all its impetus from within; nothing illustrated that like Hanadi Jaradat, the young woman from Jenin whose very personal grief and vengeance prompted, on Oct 4, the atrocious, self-sacrificial deed that in turn prompted the raid. So, other than brief emotional gratification to the Israeli public, Sharon's action achieved nothing.

But that will not deter Sharon. Having embarked on this course, he has little choice but to continue it; more importantly, violence has always been the indispensable means by which, in the guise of fighting terror, he pursues his long-term aims, the building of "Greater Israel" and the crushing of any opposition to it.

But Sharon is also, he believes, serving an American agenda. At least no one in Washington says he is not. There was a time, even under the current US administration, the most pro-Israeli administration ever, when America would have strenuously distanced itself from such an act by its protegee; a time when, mindful

of the linkage between the two great Middle East zones of crisis, it would have recognised that too close an identification with the aims and actions of Israel in Palestine and its environs would complicate its task in Iraq. No more, apparently. Now these aims and actions either matter little to America, or even, in Syria's case, complement its own.

True, constraints persist even now. Bush still balks at Israel's projected "removal" of Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat. On the other hand, he has effectively "disengaged" once more from the peacemaking, endorsed the Israeli view that Arafat alone is responsible for its breakdown and left Sharon a freer hand than ever to conduct the Israeli share of their common "war on terror."

It was partly because he couldn't go after Arafat that Sharon turned on Syria instead. Again, Bush urged caution — but then called it legitimate "self defence" of a kind America itself would have resorted to. It was Palestinian "terrorists" Israel struck, but in American eyes, these are a piece of those other "terrorists" — Arabs or Muslims — whose passage into Iraq Syria supposedly permits or does little to impede.

Bush's endorsement of the raid — together with his signalled readiness to sign into law the Syrian Accountability against which he has long held out — means that, where Syria is concerned, he has now veered strongly in favour of the neo-conservative wing of his administration. Its members are so closely linked, personally, ideologically and even institutionally, to the Israeli rightwing that it is impossible to disentangle what is American in their thinking from what is Sharon and the Likud's — and nowhere, Western diplomats in Damascus say, is this more obvious than it is with regard to Syria.

The Accountability Act — which calls for sanctions against Syria till it stops supporting terrorism, withdraws its forces from Lebanon, ceases development of weapons of mass destruction and enters "serious, unconditional" peace negotiations with Israel — is something the US neocons have been working for since the mid-1990s. That was when they first proposed their joint Israeli-American strategy for "regime change" in Syria as well as Iraq, to be accomplished by such means as attacks on Syria by "Israeli proxy forces" based in Lebanon, Israeli attacks on Syrian targets in Lebanon and "select" targets in Syria itself.

The deepening US-Israeli alliance is all too liable to backfire. What the US is permitting Israel to do in Palestine and Syria will further inflame Arab and Muslim hostility to what it is doing in Iraq. The effects of that will be felt at the popular level; as despised Arab regimes look ever more incapable of fulfilling the fun-

damental duty of any government: defence against foreign attack and domination. The militants among their people — like Hanadi Jaradat in Palestine — assume that duty themselves; they become terrorists and suicide bombers wherever motive and opportunity for it most potentially coincide. Iraq and Palestine are one and the same. "Those," said Beirut's *Daily Star*, "who cannot take revenge on Israeli occupation will happily visit it on US troops in Tikrit."

As for the regimes, Syria has so far opted for restraint. Aware that its only hope of securing its future in a general Middle East settlement is via the United States, it may become even more conciliatory than it already is. But if Sharon keeps up his attacks, there will surely be a limit to such restraint, set by tactical necessity, domestic public opinion and its own perception of itself as a last bastion of Arab steadfastness.

Damascus has intimated that, at some point, it will hit back — perhaps by really adopting the spoiler's role in Iraq that the US unconvincingly attributes to it already, or, more likely, by activating Hezbollah against Israel. Of course that would be very risky, given Israel's vast superiority over it in conventional military terms. But — as Damascus will no doubt calculate — can the US, floundering in Iraq, really afford another Middle East conflagration of its ally's making?

The "Israelisation" of America, as a key ingredient in the ever more noxious Middle East brew, is not an extravagant term for a relationship in which, typically, Sharon leads and Bush lamely follows. The pattern constantly repeats itself. Bush may have misgivings about what Sharon does — at his military excesses, his relentless settlement drive, his "wall" and now his attack on Syria — and he may stammer out mild admonitions, but he always accommodates him in the end.

With Iraq itself eating away at his prospects of election for a second term, Bush will be more accommodating than ever, more deferential to all the "friends of Israel" in America from whom Sharon draws most of his power to lead — or mislead — him.

With the next suicide bomber will Sharon reply against the offices of "terrorist" organisations in Damascus itself — as he has clearly intimidated he might? One thing is sure: If, somewhere down such a road, lies an American disaster in Iraq and a monumental scuttling, the Israeli partner in this most extraordinary and counterproductive of alliances will pay higher price than America itself.

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