

Syria – the next target

BY TAYYAB SIDDIQUI

The US invasion of Iraq has been a huge embarrassment and unmitigated disaster for Bush Administration. Overwhelming evidence has surfaced to establish that Bush administration was pushing hard for an invasion even though there was no evidence of any stockpiles of WMDs, nor it posed "an imminent threat to US security."

In view of these revelations and international opposition to US policies, it was expected that Bush in his second term would abjure force as the only determinant of its foreign policy. However his re-election has vindicated the neocons in his cabinet who it appears are likely to audaciously continue to pursue their agenda. Recent developments suggest that Bush is centralising power in the White House and the troika of Dick Cheney, Karl Rove and Condoleezza Rice would steer the foreign policy in a militaristic fashion. Press reports indicate that they may be getting ready for yet another adventure in the Middle East. Now it is the turn of Syria.

Since the death of President Assad, Syria has been under severe pressure from Washington on flimsy pretexts. In May, Bush labelled Syria "an unusual and extra ordinary threat" and imposed ban on exports. He also severed banking relations with the Commercial Bank of Syria, froze assets of Syrians and Syrian entities suspected of involvement in terrorism or WMD development. Syrian flights to and from the United States were also suspended. The sanctions were chosen from the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act, which the President signed into law in December 2003.

Syria was later included in the "Axis of Evil" along with Iran and North Korea. It was asked to withdraw its forces from Lebanon, which had been stationed there under the 1989 Taef National Reconciliation agreement, which put an end to the country's devastating 15 years civil war, and set no date of its withdrawal. Syria and Lebanon are also linked by 1991 "Treaty of Fraternity, Friendship and Cooperation."

Despite the fact that Lebanon did not demand the Syrian withdrawal, the US pressure has continued. It succeeded in having resolution 1559 passed by the UNSC calling for the withdrawal of foreign forces and respect for Lebanon's sovereignty. Sanctions were imposed on Syria for its failure to comply with resolution 1559, which also demanded the disarming of militias in the country.

Bush, neocon advisors, who in fact are following a Zionist agenda and feel that current international disarray and paralysis of Muslim states is an ideal opportunity to implement its agenda of making Israel. Henry Kissinger once remarked that there cannot be a war in the Middle East without Egypt and peace without Syria. Former President Assad during his 30-year rule refused to submit to the threats and blandishments and insisted on total and complete Israeli withdrawal from Golan Heights, before peace could be agreed upon. The invasion of Iraq, without any shred of evidence or justification has emboldened the hawks in the Bush Administration to replicate Iraq experience, again without any justification or concern for the consequences.

A Syrian exile Farid Ghadri, like Ahmed Chalabi of Iraq is being groomed to organise similar anti-regime movement. He is lobbying for the pending "Syria liberation Act" which would commit Bush Administration to regime change in Damascus.

A neo-conservative lobby group, "Committee on the Present Danger (CPD) established in August 2004, invited Ghadri to a symposium in collaboration with "Foundation for defense of Democracies" (FDD),

Syria was later included in the "Axis of Evil" along with Iran and North Korea.

created two day after September 2001 and whose views reflect those of die hard pro-Israel activists. The FDD Board of advisors include former Deputy Secretary Defense Richard Perle, former CIA Director James Woolsey and former US Ambassador to the UN Jean Krik Patrick.

The anti Syria strategy remained in abeyance due to November elections, but now with Bush's second term in White House, the neocons are eager to put their plans into operation and have begun a sustained campaign with a variety of allegations. Syria is being accused of supporting terrorism, pursuing weapon of mass destruction, complicity with Iran, and now of support to Iraqi insurgents.

The *Washington Post* has in a recent report quoted unnamed official that former President Saddam's loyalists operating in Syria were providing money and other support to rebels fighting the US backed interim Iraqi government. The statements of King Abdullah of Jordan and President Ghazi Al-Yawer of Iraq claiming that "foreign fighters are coming across the Syrian border that have been trained in Syria" have been given wide publicity, ignoring the fact that "Iraqi fugitive officials were never welcome in Syria" as asserted by Syrian Ambassador to Washington.

Campaign against Syria in gathering momentum. Analysts associated with FDD and other right wing think tanks are painting scary scenario of Syria's mischief potential and openly urging administration to take military action against Syria for its alleged "material support to terrorist groups killing American soldier in Iraq", "Syria is a hostile regime. We had sweet talk and tough talk. Talk has failed – we now need to take action to punish and deter Assad's regime."

Recent editorials and articles in US papers like *The Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post* and *Washington Times* have brazenly recommended military action against Syria. "We could bomb Syrian military facilities. We could go across the border in force to stop infiltration" was the recommendation of William Krsitol, the guru of neocons. The Administration is accordingly raising pressure on Damascus. Deputy Secretary of State Armitage warned Syria on December 21 that "Syria's failure to accept UNSC Resolution 1559 regarding 'withdrawal of troops from Lebanon is defiance of international community" and the US would press the SC to consider the issue in January 2005, when it discusses renewing UNIFIL (United nations Interim Force in Lebanon) deployed in South Lebanon since 1978 Israeli invasion while accusing Syria of SC Resolution's defiance it is conveniently ignored that Israel has defied 29 UNSC resolutions urging it to vacate occupied Palestinian territories and stop its brutal policies.

Historically, Syria and Iraq have remained divided by party schism, by geo-political rivalry and by the personal animosities of their leaders. For years the

two countries had played hosts to each other's exiles and enemies and the Syrian and Iraqi Ba'ath parties were driven by mutual distrust as each was convinced that the other had planted a Trojan horse in its ranks. The emergence of Islamic Republic of Iran greatly sharpened the mutual antagonism. Assad condemned Saddam's war as the wrong war against the wrong enemy at the wrong time. Against this background, to accuse Syria of "supporting" Saddam's remnants, who are trying to bring the vicious dictatorship of Saddam back "is patently absurd".

However regardless of these facts the neocons, driven by right wing ideology and determined to stoke the fires, seem determined to deceive the world with scary scenarios of Syrian training and arming the terrorists, and cooperating with Iran and Hizbollah.

The official statements and media report are ominously reminiscent of those that preceded the invasion of Iraq. Bush interprets his victory as endorsement of his policy of truculent unilateralism. Arthur Schlesinger, advisor to President Kennedy has rightly characterised Bush as "a militant idealist acting as the world's judge, jury and executioner."

He laments that "never in American history has the Republic been so unpopular abroad, so mistrusted, feared even hated" Bush and his superhawks are not deterred by such criticism and with their belief in the right of Israel to biblical boundaries are keen to redraw the map of Middle East and help realise the Zionist dream of creating a Greater Israel stretching from the Nile to the Euphrates.

Syria realises that heavy odds are stacked against it, and is following a policy of caution and circumspection to defuse the situation. President Bashar has offered to reopen negotiations with Israel on Golan Heights. But both Israel and US dismissed it with contempt. President Bush saying that "now Assad needs to wait first for peace between Israel and Palestine, and then we will see what to do with Syria."

These ominous developments suggest that neocons have Syria as their next target. Renowned rightist columnist and a former presidential candidate against Reagan, Pat Buchanan has exposed the true agenda of the neocons - "To neocons this war was never about WMDs or any alleged Iraqi ties to 9/11. Their real reason was empire, and making the Middle East safe for Israel. The neocons' agenda means escalation; enlarging the army, more troops in Iraq, widening the war to Syria and Iran and indefinite occupation of the Middle East, as we forcibly alter the mindset of the Islamic world to embrace democracy and Israel."

Syria, at this critical juncture needs a high degree of statesmanship and diplomatic trapeze to avert the impending danger. The US coercive diplomacy has already humbled and humiliated the once revolutionary Libya. Iran has also buckled under US pressure and warnings on the nuclear issue and suggested direct talks with the once 'Great Satan'. The situation for Syria is highly explosive. It must address Paul Wolfowitz's warning gravely. "Our military expedition to Afghanistan and Iraq are unlikely to be the last such excursion in the global war on terrorism. We may need to effect change in the governance of a country that is blatantly sustaining support for terrorism" - the perfect charge sheet for Syria.

The writer is a former Ambassador of Pakistan
Email: tayyabsiddiqui@diplomats.com