

Condi and Syrian Regime Change

Someone should tell Condi Rice that the gig is up. With the Bush administration dissolving in illegality committed by key officials in their attempts to protect the lies that they used to justify the US invasion of Iraq, the secretary of state is trying to ramp up war against Syria.

Grasping a UN report that uses unreliable witnesses to implicate Syria in the assassination of a former Lebanese government official, Condi Rice told the BBC on October 23 that Syria's crime cannot be "left lying on the table. This really has to be dealt with."

This is amazing for many reasons. Here is the person in charge of US diplomacy acting as if she is the secretary of war unshathing military force. Whoever heard of an American diplomat wanting to start a war because a former Middle Eastern government official was assassinated?

The UN investigator, Detlev Mehlis, has no more idea who assassinated the former official than the US knows who is responsible for assassinating the many Iraqi officials under its protection. After more than two and one-half years of war in Iraq, the US still doesn't know exactly who the enemy is that it is fighting. Yet Mehlis blames Syria for an assassination on the strength of an informer described by the German news magazine, Der Spiegel, as a convicted felon and swindler.

On the basis of the word of a convicted felon and swindler, Condi Rice wants a high level UN Security Council meeting to condemn Syria so the Bush administration can bring about "regime change" in Syria.

With the US department of state doing everything it can to demonize and destabilize Syria, Condi Rice's mouthpiece, Adam Ereli, declared that Syria must end attempts to destabilize its neighbors. This is the type of propaganda we were fed about Iraq. Syria is not destabilizing any country. It is all Syria can do to maintain its own stability. The US is the great Middle Eastern destabilizer.



Syrians carry pictures of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad during a protest in Damascus, Oct. 24. (Reuters File Photo)

Isn't the secretary of state aware that the government of which she is a part is in dire difficulties because it went to war based on highly unreliable "intelligence" supplied by highly unreliable people?

Does the secretary of state read the CIA reports? Doesn't she know that the US has created extraordinary instability in Iraq? A country that formerly had no terrorists now serves as a training ground for al Qaeda, according to the CIA.

Why is Syria being demonized? Syrian troops were part of the US coalition organized by President George Herbert Walker Bush that liberated Kuwait in 1991 from Saddam Hussein. The current head of government in Syria is a mild mannered ophthalmologist who inherited the post

five years ago when his older brother was killed in a car crash.

Syria has done nothing to the US and poses no threat to the US. The Syrian government is concerned about Syria becoming unhinged by schisms like the Sunni-Shi'ite schism set loose in Iraq by the incompetent Bush administration.

Why does Condi Rice think the Bush administration has the right to decide who heads the Syrian government? According to news reports, the Bush administration has asked the Israeli and Italian governments to nominate a replacement for the current president of Syria.

A country incapable of choosing a better president than George W. Bush has no business choosing a president for any other country. In place of aggressive interference in the internal affairs of other countries, the US needs to find a competent president for itself.

Paul Craig Roberts
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Iraq

Life After The Constitution

The White House has a sound reason to feel upbeat about the referendum on the Iraqi constitution on October 15. The turnout was satisfactory, and the day passed relatively calmly. What is more, the disaffected Sunnis participated in the voting on a large scale. But this participation may not signal an end to the insurgency, facilitating the withdrawal of Anglo-American troops. Nor would the successful adoption of a democratic constitution in Iraq necessarily presage the flowering of democracy in the rest of the Middle East.

What motivated the change among Sunnis? The answer lies in the changing appreciation of their political prospects in new Iraq. In the January election, as well in the recent referendum, the overall voter turnout was 61 percent. But whereas participation of the majority Shia Arabs was constant—roughly 70 percent—there was wide variation among the two minorities, ethnic Kurds and Sunni Arabs, each of them forming one-fifth of the national population.

Last time, Kurds turned up in huge numbers at the polling stations whereas most Sunni Arabs stayed away. This time the roles were reversed. Kurds were lukewarm towards a constitution that lacks a provision for an independent Kurdistan in the near future. Sunni Arabs decided to register their opposition to a constitution. If Sunnis participate in the forthcoming parliamentary election in December and win proportionate seats, then they will be in a position to impact the parliamentary vote on the amendments to be introduced by the Special Commission in the first four months of the new Parliament. One of the proposals would extend the right to form autonomous region, presently enjoyed only by the mountainous Kurdistan, to the Mesopotamian plains. They perceive this as a preamble to the division of Iraq.

Even if the constitution is ratified (the article was published on Oct. 20), as seems probable, the vote count will establish in concrete terms the extent of their disapproval. Notwithstanding the exact outcome of last week's referendum, the Sunnis are likely to participate in the forthcoming parliamentary elections. The interim parliament resolved that if its successor passes amendments to the constitution (as recommended by a special commission) by a simple majority within the first four months, then the amended constitution would be put to referendum for ratification. This decision has made Sunni Arabs hopeful that they can still impact the country's fledgling constitutional machinery. Whether or not they will is a matter of conjecture.

What is certain, though, is that there will be no lessening of the Sunni resistance to the foreign occupation of Iraq. Most Sunnis remain hostile to the occupiers, partly out of rage at being ousted from their traditionally dominant position in Iraq, and partly out of nationalist sentiment.

Reflecting the prevalent Sunni view, Amir Ismail, a 45-year-old former army colonel in Falluja, told the Guardian that the ballot box was a complement for armed revolt, not a substitute. That is, participation in the referendum and offering armed resistance to occupation are not mutually exclusive, as Irish nationalists in Northern Ireland have demonstrated for many years.

By now, the insurgency has become deeply rooted in central and northwestern Iraq, including Greater Baghdad which has a quarter of the national population. September was the most violent month in the capital, with 900 corpses arriving at the main morgue.

The alliance between Arab nationalists, represented by the Baath Party, and Islamists remains in place. The allies share the goal of expelling the Anglo-American forces from Iraq. Their well-informed leaders are aware that the latest poll in the United States shows that 59 percent of Americans want the US troops withdrawn "as soon as possible even if Iraq is not completely stable."

Even though the insurgency continues, would the rise of a constitutional state in Iraq inspire democracy elsewhere in the region? Judging by the disparate nature of the multi-ethnic states in the Middle East the answer probably would be, "Not so fast." One size does not fit all.

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When Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi of Japan last week made his fifth visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, the protests from other Asian nations fell on deaf ears. If Koizumi's determination is plain, so too are the real issue in the debate over Yasukuni, where Japan's war dead are remembered. Tokyo's readiness to stoke tensions by ignoring the concerns of its neighbors undermines its efforts to play a leading role in the region.

Koizumi pledged four years ago that he would visit Yasukuni every year if elected head of his party. He has done so, determined to keep a promise to constituents, but also to honor the country's war dead, to reinvigorate and legitimate healthy patriotism in Japan, to underscore his government's commitment to peace, and to push his country closer to "normalcy" in international relations.

After this week's visit, China reacted with vitriol, saying it "hurt the feeling and dignity" of victims of Japanese aggression during World War II and that it "seriously undermined Chinese-Japanese relations." Senior-level meetings between the two countries were canceled, as was a visit by Japan's foreign minister, Machimura Nobutaka, to discuss the oil field dispute in the South China Sea.

South Korea's Foreign Ministry expressed "disappointment and outrage," while Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon canceled his visit to Japan this month and a similar fate is likely for the meeting scheduled later this year between Koizumi and South Korea's president, Roh Moo Hyun.



Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi prays during a visit to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, Oct. 17. (AFP File Photo)

Significantly, even Southeast Asians have been upset by the visit. Singapore's Straits Times editorialized that the visit showed Japan "clearly does not value" relations with neighboring countries.

That is the most important point. There is no disputing a Japanese prime minister's right to honor the country's war dead or to instill a healthy patriotism in the Japanese public. But the determination to play to domestic audiences has a high and rising international price: It isolates Japan and forfeits Tokyo's claim to a leading role in Asia.

Even Singapore, which favors deepened Japanese engagement with the region, has been forced to complain. The concern isn't revamped militarism, but Tokyo's seeming indifference to the consequences of its actions.

This lack of concern for foreign sentiment makes it harder for other countries, such as China, to compromise on key issues, like territorial disputes. Tokyo can expect no sympathy as it tries to rally support for its demand that North Korea address the abductee issue in multilateral negotiations. The Yasukuni visit plainly undermines the country's bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

Isolated within the region, Tokyo is pushed closer to the United States. While that may help the alliance in the short-term, it could be dangerous over time. No country should ever be seen as lacking options, which encourages allies and partners to take it for granted. There is a real risk that U.S. "support" might one day be seen as "indulgence."

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Koizumi's Dangerous Promise

Islam Dot Com

During Ramadan, when Muslims dedicate more time to matters of the spirit, the Internet triumphs over other sources of information for convenience and variety. Sermons, Qur'anic recitations, taraweeh (Ramadan-specific extra evening prayers during which long portions of the Qur'an are recited), prayers from Mecca, and the answer to any imaginable question about fasting are literally just a click away.

This sort of strong and varied online Islamic presence is nothing new. The first Islamic texts to appear on the web-scanned translations of the Qur'an and hadith (Prophet Mohamed's (PBUH) teachings)—were posted by Muslim students or professionals working in the high-tech

precincts that spawned the Internet in the early 1980s. According to Jon Anderson, co-editor of New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere, "they were motivated to use their skills to assure a place for Islam in the on-line medium, and whose potential to reach a new public they understood. That is, they were laying claim for their religion... Their tools were command of the technology and the core texts."

These Muslim web pioneers were aided by the fact that, unlike previous technological advancements that produced television, for example, religious institutions have never frowned on or questioned the legitimacy of the IT world. Perhaps the main criticism leveled at the web concerns its double-

Victory for Brazil Gun Lobby

Brazilians flatly rejected a plan to ban the commercial sale of firearms and ammunition in a historic national referendum on Sunday. The vote is a victory for Brazil's wealthy gun lobby which opponents say used strategies learned from the National Rifle Association to shift public opinion.

An estimated 122 million citizens took part in the referendum—the first of its kind in the world—and preliminary counts showed 64 percent went against the ban while 36 percent backed it. The referendum—which asked the simple question "Should the commercial sale of guns and ammunition to civilians be prohibited?"—divided the country, a world leader in gun deaths, into "no" and "sim" camps.

Two months ago, polls showed 60 to 80 percent of Brazilians favored the ban as a way to control the estimated 17 million small arms that are circulating in the country. But as the vote neared, and as both sides of the issue were given free television time, a slick media blitz by the gun lobby appears to have shifted enough voter opinion.

"The 'no' vote shows that the gun lobby successfully used its power and wealth to play on Brazilians' fear and lack of confidence in the state's ability to provide security," said Jessica Galeria of Viva Rio, a

Brazilian gun control group. "But the results of the referendum don't mean that Brazil believes having more guns will bring peace. We will keep fighting for full implementation of the good gun laws introduced in 2003, which saved 3,234 lives the following year."

Some 39,000 Brazilians lost their lives to guns in 2003, according to the United Nations, which also says 500,000 Brazilians died from arms between 1979 and 2003. Like other Latin American nations where weak gun laws and sporadic enforcement are problems, Brazil also has porous borders, especially the Triple Border area, a widely recognized hub of contraband located at the border intersection of Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil. That helps explain how in Rio de Janeiro, for example, the gun death rate among young people is 239 per 100,000 residents, twenty times more than America and 2,000 times greater than Japan's, according to IANSA.

Brazil's gun control laws are already strict. In 2003, lawmakers passed a landmark law that, among other things, dramatically restricted gun sales and outlawed the carrying of guns by civilians. The Disarmament Statute of 2003, which also mandated Sunday's referendum, caused a 13 percent drop in gun deaths last year, according to Brazilian government statistics. For his part, President Lula da Silva supported the ban but his Vice President and Minister of Defense José Alencar did not. Speaking to local media in early October, Alencar said he opposed the ban "because he is in favor of liberty" and that a prohibition would only "encourage bandits" who "will always be armed."

Activists groups such as the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA), a UK-based global network consisting of more than 700 gun control groups, were hoping for a "yes" vote in part for the momentum it would give movements in other countries. But in the end they could not match the gun industry's money and what some critics are calling shady campaign tactics.

All of which just goes to show that whether or not the Internet will profoundly change the Islamic world in the long run, cyberspace—by its very nature—will continue to catalyze an ongoing dialogue about being Muslim in the modern world.

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