

Why Bush Must Still Confront Rogue States

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With less than a year to go in office, the Bush administration may feel powerless as it attempts to deal with rogue states that support terrorists and proliferate weapons of mass destruction.

But there is still a lot President Bush and his team can do about the likes of Iran and Syria if they act now to keep these regimes in the international spotlight. On Sunday, the United States assumed the presidency of the United Nations Security Council (the seat rotates every month). This gives Mr. Bush an opportunity to launch a campaign to isolate these countries.

The first step could be to present the known and internationally accepted facts of the regimes' misdeeds. At the very least, this would put Mr. Bush back in the driver's seat of the domestic debate, compelling Barack Obama and John McCain to spell out how they would deal with such problems.

The case against Iran is especially strong. Even among rogue governments, Tehran stands alone, mixing disgusting deeds and despicable words. The State Department has fingered Iran as a state sponsor of terror since 1984; today it has become Terrorism Central.

Tehran has signed the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), but has pursued a nuclear weapons program anyway. There is compelling evidence that the regime has trained and funded Iraqi insurgents who target U.S. and Iraqi soldiers. Iran has furnished weapons — particularly long-range missiles — and training to Hamas and Hezbollah. These weapons are used for indiscriminate attacks on Israeli civilians. Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has openly called for Israel to be "wiped off" the map and freely dispenses anti-Semitic propaganda and Holocaust denial.

There is a similarly compelling case to be made against Syria, which has been listed as a state sponsor of terror since 1979. Damascus gives sanctuary to terrorists from Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah — and has done so for years. It has also, judging by recent intelligence disclosures, embarked on a clandestine nuclear program in conjunction with North Korea and in defiance of NPT obligations.

Syria's brutal campaign to dominate Lebanon also makes it an international problem. Damascus is blocking, through Lebanese proxies, the U.N. investigation and prosecution of Syrian officials for the 2005 assassination of Rafiq Hariri, a former Lebanese prime minister. Lebanese authorities have arrested Syrian terrorists for two February 2007 bus bombings — attacks that Lebanese officials say Syria carried out. Lebanese politicians, military officers and journalists opposed to Syrian dominance have been assassinated. These acts violate the U.N. Charter and U.N. Security Council resolution 1373, forbidding the "active or passive" support of terrorism by member states.

Mr. Bush's critics claim the real problem is that the U.S. hasn't opened high-level talks with Iran and Syria. But opening up talks at this point — while these regimes are engaging in abhorrent behavior — would be a serious mistake, particularly when the West faces a major security challenge from state-sponsored terrorism. Doing so would certainly bolster these leaders in the region and normalize their behavior.

When private groups like al Qaeda launch terror campaigns, they create critical security problems. When sovereign states behave in this manner, they challenge international law itself. And when this challenge remains unanswered, unlawful conduct is legitimized and it becomes extremely difficult to restore civilized norms.

In short, our policy should be to isolate Tehran and Damascus.

The administration should make it clear that Iranian efforts to destabilize Iraq are themselves an act of war — and could constitute a legitimate *casus belli* for the U.S. This is a matter that the Security Council must consider.

The administration should also focus on Iranian ideology. It is a malignant force that needs to be challenged with as much vigor as we summoned during the ideological battles of the Cold War. So far, Iran has been allowed to "dumb down" global moral and legal norms. America is now in a position to challenge U.N. inaction and even hypocrisy, whereby the international body dispatches one rapporteur after another to investigate racism in the U.S., while Mr. Ahmadinejad spews poisonous propaganda without opprobrium.

Mr. Bush should make it clear that international law does not selectively burden the U.S. or other Western democracies.

All states must comply with the same legal and moral rules. And there can be no special rules or shortcuts for Third World regimes or "national liberation movements" that allow them to skirt their international obligations.

A diplomatic and legal offensive touched off by the U.S. at the Security Council would not resolve all of the problems presented to us by state sponsors of terror. It may not even result in any new resolutions.

However, such a campaign would enable the administration to frame the problem clearly and compellingly, and thereby bequeath to its successor a viable framework for sustained pressure on Iran and Syria. Armed with this Bush legacy, the next president would be better positioned to exercise robust diplomatic, economic and – should it become necessary – military options down the road. This is the best that can be done at this time. And it must be done.

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