

Now Syria is in Bush's gunsights

Would Pres. Assad invite a cruise missile to his palace?

So now Syria is in America's gunsights. First it's Iraq, Israel's most powerful enemy, possessor of weapons of mass destruction – none of which has been found. Now it's Syria, Israel's second most powerful enemy, possessor of weapons of mass destruction, or so President George Bush Junior tells us. No word of that possessor of real weapons of mass destruction, Israel – the number of its nuclear warheads in the Negev are now accurately listed – whose Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, has long been complaining that Damascus is the “centre of world terror”.

But Syria is a target all right. First came the US claim that Damascus was sending gas masks to the Iraqi army. The Syrians denied it – but what if it's true? Why shouldn't an Arab neighbour offer Iraqi soldiers protective clothing during an American invasion which has no international legitimacy? Then Syria was accused of sending, or allowing, Arab “volunteers” to cross into Iraq to fight the Americans. This is much harder for the Syrians to deny. I've met a few of them here in Baghdad, most anxious to return to their homes in Homs and Damascus, others – from Algeria and Morocco – telling me that they will be safe if they can reach the Syrian border because “there will be no trouble from there”. But here, too, there's a whiff of hypocrisy.

Whenever Israel goes to war, there are hundreds of “volunteers” from the United States rushing to Tel Aviv to join the Israel Defence Force, and America never complains.

But then comes the nastiest accusation: that members of the Iraqi regime have fled to Syria for safety. Given Syria's increasingly warmer relations with Saddam Hussein's Iraq in recent years, and the joint nature of their Baathist past – the Syrian Christian

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Michel Aflaq was a founder of the Baath in the days when it was a creature of both nations – it's difficult to believe that the Tariq Aziz and Taha Yassin Ramadans couldn't seek refuge in Syria.

Needless to say, the capture of Saddam's half-brother near the Syrian border has provoked the usual rash of stories. Tariq Aziz is living in Lebanon with the ladies of President Saddam's family. Untrue. The Arabic television satellite channel interviewed the ex-Iraqi information minister Mohammed Saeed al-Sahaf in Damascus. Totally untrue. And also embarrassing for the Americans. For just as they failed to capture the most brutal of the Bosnian Serb murderers, Messrs Karadjic and Mladic, so they failed to find Osama bin Laden – or even Mullah Omar – and, given the failure of American intelligence in Baghdad, it wouldn't be that surprising if the whole of the Iraqi Cabinet managed to pass safely through an American checkpoint in an orange pantechnic. But it's Syria that is being lined up for attack next, not the Saddam Cabinet.

And the signs were clear long ago. Take the article in The New York Times by Larry Collins – joint author with Dominique Lapierre of O Jerusalem! – which last month announced that the Syrian-supported Hizbollah resistance in Lebanon had 10,000 missiles that could fly to Tel Aviv and “leave in their wake devastation more terrible than anything Israel has ever known”. The missiles are a myth – I travel the roads of southern Lebanon every two weeks and there are no such missiles, as the UN force there will confirm – but this doesn't matter. And then it will be Libya who has the most sophisticated C-B weapons. Or Saudi Arabia. Or anyone else Israel wants attacked.

But this still leaves the question: could Saddam and his sons and Tariq Aziz and Ramadan and the rest have passed through Syria? Not impossible. But the idea that they would be allowed to stay seems incredible. If President Bashar Assad allowed Saddam to be a guest, it would be akin to inviting a cruise missile to his palace.

But Syria just might have provided a transit station for the Baath officials from Iraq. To where? My own favourite is Belarus – because its capital, Minsk, is awash in whisky, corruption and damp apartments (the first two of which would appeal to most Iraqi Baathists). Vladimir Putin, of course, would be asked to help to retrieve them and hand them over to Washington. And he would have a price, no doubt, a price involving oil concessions and Russia's already signed oil contracts in Baghdad ... ♦