

The Us must talk to Iran and Syria

by Lord Norman Lamont



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Some commentators believe that Israel in the Lebanon is acting as America's proxy, and that the real intended target is Iran. This may well not be true. But the rhetoric of American politicians increasingly focuses both on Syria and particularly Iran.

Comments by American

officials may well overstate the influence of outside parties on Hezbollah. Syria may be a supply route and a safe haven, and Iran the financier and ideological ally. But this does not mean that Hezbollah just takes orders from Tehran and Damascus. Hezbollah is rooted in Lebanon's Shi'ite community,

which is 45% of the population.

But if Iran and Syria do control Hezbollah as closely as America says, it seems odd for the US not to talk directly to them. A State Department official was recently quoted as saying words to the effect, Syria may be the problem but Syria won't act and therefore talking has no point.

A key feature of American foreign policy in recent years has been the belief that overwhelming military advantage, or the threat of it, will always bring an opponent to heel. And yet America seems surprised when other countries do not fall quickly in line with their demands.

There are obvious limits on the threat to use military power: one, it can't be used everywhere simultaneously, and secondly it is demonstrably counter productive when used indiscriminately.

American foreign policy increasingly seems to have no conception that other countries have their viewpoints and interests as well. America's attitude towards Iran has been hugely affected to this day by the American Embassy hostage crisis of 1979. But there is little awareness in the American consciousness of Iran's insecurity after the shooting down of a civilian Iranian aircraft by an American warship, or the 250 thousand to half a million dead in the Iraq war. There seems no realisation that if Iran is constantly threatened with regime change it must be in its interest to keep the US bogged down in Iraq. And to show that if it is attacked, Israel could be threatened by another strategic ally Hezbollah.

American diplomats call it «joining up the dots» - the phrase they use to describe the

«sinister» contacts between countries that are enemies of America. But if countries are isolated or threatened they will seek to support each other when like Iran and Venezuela they have little in common, or like Iran and Syria even conflicting interests.

Many would argue that Iran could have been made life very much more difficult for coalition troops in Iraq. Iran did, play a constructive role in helping America in Afghanistan by helping the Northern Alliance and supporting the Karzai Government. For its pains it was shortly afterwards labelled part of the «Axis of Evil».

After the invasion of Iraq the US refused to allow Iran, to play any part in the economic reconstruction of Iraq although there were many Iranian firms that could have helped, as they did in Afghanistan.

Of course Iran has contributed to its own stereotyping. But President Ahmadinejad's rantings about Israel do not represent the view of most Iranians and probably not the view of the Iranian Government towards a two state solution acceptable to the Palestinians. What Iran certainly does want, and this is the purpose of Ahmadinejad's remarks, is to be a leading power in the Islamic world.

America denounces Iran for precisely that. But like it or not

Iran is already a regional power. It has a population of nearly 70 million, is a significant oil producer, and its influence has been immensely increased by the American invasion of Iraq, and the creation of the Shiite crescent.

As an article by James Dobbins in the current edition of Foreign Affairs points out when states are failing competing factions for power inevitably turn to neighbouring countries and external sponsors. One may deplore such activity, but it is dangerous to ignore neighbours and difficult to prevent them exercising their powerful influence. When the US invaded Afghanistan it was careful first to secure the support of Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. If it had announced its intention to democratise all these countries it certainly would not have had their support.

America has offered to talk to Iran about the nuclear issue, but in terms that make clear what the conclusion of the talks will be. What is needed is talks without preconditions between Syria, Iran and America about the whole Middle East including Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq. It is senseless to pretend that these countries don't matter or that military action or isolation will bring them to heel. America would almost certainly discover it has strategic interests in common with those to whom it blindly refuses to talk.