

## Self-critical foreign policies could enhance our security

### Baltimore Sun

September 24, 2001

By James Ron

MONTREAL - In 1995, a Human Rights Watch report found that American support for Turkey's war on Kurdish rebels had enabled terrible abuses, including the forced displacement of at least 500,000 civilians.

American weapons were involved, and U.S. officials were aware of Turkey's scorched earth policy. Washington continued its support for Turkey, however, because the country was an important strategic ally.

As researcher for that study, I heard dozens of heart-wrenching stories from desperate refugees. But it was my translator, a Turk, who said something I'll never forget: "You Americans are like viruses and anti-viruses, aren't you? You send weapons that oppress the people, and then send human rights experts to build democracy."

Her comment beautifully articulated the contradictions of American foreign policy. After the atrocity of Sept. 11, her words seemed especially poignant.

Most North Americans see only one side of the story, the benevolent "anti-virus" we learn about in school. When unspeakable attacks take place, we become particularly myopic. Consequently, we cannot fathom why some people greeted that gruesome act with guarded support, or even joy.

It is vital that we explore anti-American sentiment. It is especially urgent that we study America's Middle East policy, with emphasis on U.S. dealings with Iraq and Israel.

Throughout the 1990s, America insisted on an increasingly painful sanctions policy for Iraq. Having destroyed the country's infrastructure during the Persian Gulf War, America persuaded the international community to impose a draconian embargo to contain Saddam Hussein's military.

That goal was laudable, but the sanctions killed hundreds of thousands of innocents by creating a public health crisis of immense proportions. A

study by Columbia University researcher Richard Garfield determined that from 106,000 to 220,000 children up to age five died needlessly between 1991 and 1998.

North Americans ignored Iraq's civilian suffering, but the Arab world watched with horror - similar to our feelings for the Sept. 11 attacks, but in slow motion, over many years. Some also recalled America's early support for Iraq in the 1980s, when that country conducted genocide against its northern Kurds.

U.S. backing for Israel has proved another source of frustration for some. Like the United States, Israel has good and bad qualities. It provides haven for Jews, but also displaces and oppresses Palestinians. That duality, however, often escapes North Americans.

The Gaza Strip, to take one example, has become a vast prison camp where more than 1 million people are sentenced to life without hope or dignity, guarded by Israeli troops armed with U.S. weapons. We forget that most Gazans hail from Israeli-destroyed villages, but many Middle Easterners do not. Given U.S. policy, outrage at Israel often translates into anger at America; thus the terrible pictures of some Palestinians celebrating the Sept. 11 suicide attacks.

Efforts to make the United States more secure against terrorism will be strengthened if we address the sympathy some feel for anti-American attacks. Washington does not have to drop its allies or cater to every ill-founded grievance, but it must make a genuine, self-critical effort. The world's most powerful country will always be resented by some, but there is much America can do to combat such sentiments.

One beginning would be to appoint a high profile commission of scholars, politicians and human rights experts to examine U.S. foreign policy. It could convene in different parts of the world and policymakers could debate with legitimate representatives of aggrieved parties. The discussion would be immensely cathartic, as South Africans discovered with their post-apartheid truth commission.

America could also sign and ratify the international treaties it has long ignored, including the one setting up an international criminal court.

This alone would go a long way toward changing popular perceptions abroad of the United States as a unilateralist bully.

A more self-critical and ethical foreign policy alone will not stop terror, but it will enhance North American security by reducing support for anti-American acts. Over time, this may prove as hard-nosed and effective as any purely military response.

James Ron is Canada Research Chair in Conflict and Human Rights at McGill University.

Copyright © 2001, The Baltimore Sun