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US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has accused Syria of continuing to help Iraq with military supplies. Syria has been one of the most vocal critics of the war, voicing the anger of many in the Arab world. But there may be more to the government's Iraq policy than meets the eye.

It's noon in downtown Damascus and the traffic does not stop for a handful of demonstrators in Salhiyyah square. The tightly controlled Syrian society is not used to street protests, but they have become a more familiar sight since the outbreak of the war in neighbouring Iraq.

Even though they are officially sanctioned - and more than likely instigated - the demonstrations express real anger at what people here call the illegal, colonialist invasion of Iraq. What is different about this demonstration though, is that it is not aimed at the US and Britain but rather at a popular local cartoonist who has dared to keep criticising Saddam Hussein.

"The Iraqi people have to be united around their leadership so they can resist the foreign invasion better," says one of the protesters. "How do you expect the Iraqi people to fight when you are criticising their leadership? We have to encourage the Iraqis to set aside their feelings for their leadership now."

Scapegoat

The target of the dozen or so protesters is Ali Ferzat, who last year received the Dutch Prince Claus award for his outstanding work as a cartoonist and as the owner of one of Syria's two independent newspapers. He has made a career out of poking fun at the repressive regimes in the

Ali Ferzat's cartoons: thorn in the side of repressive regimes in the region, including his own. This has not made him popular in government circles and he says he would have been closed down long ago if it weren't for his international standing.

This week, the government-controlled Teshreen newspaper launched a campaign against him, running full-page stories for two days in a row, condemning his cartoons of Saddam Hussein. But Ferzat is fighting back:

"There should always be a dialogue, even during a war we should recognise our own faults. I'm still against war, against

human rights abuses and with the people. You don't stop being a patriot just because you are being critical."

The Teshreen newspaper would never have launched its attack on Ferzat without government approval. This raises the spectre of the regime using the war in Iraq to silence its domestic critics.

The nation is united

State run television, like the other official media, is pumping a steady stream of anti-war invective combined with pictures of civilian casualties and stories of Iraq's heroic resistance into Syrian living rooms. The government is doing everything it can to whip up the anti-war fever. Buthaina Shaaban, the spokesperson for Syria's Foreign Ministry, who also belongs to president Bashar al-Assad's inner circle of advisers, says all this is just an expression of the will of the people:

"The Syrian government and people are united in their opposition and in their understanding of the reasons behind this war. I think if you look at the Arab people, even in countries like Jordan or Egypt, were the government didn't take such vocal opposition of the war as Syria did, you find the people there are extremely opposed to the war."

Damascus capitalizes on the mood

This explanation is somewhat too benign for many domestic and foreign observers to accept. The regime seems to be using the popular sentiment against the war for its own purposes. Sadeq al-Azem, a prominent Syrian intellectual and professor of philosophy at Damascus University, believes the fiery anti-war stance is partly designed to bring the regime some tangible benefits.

"Syria, in its opposition to the war, has reasserted its traditional Arab nationalist credentials and a narrowing of the gap that has widened over the years between Syrian society and the regime."

Many in Damascus believe that the regime will use this new closeness to further crack down on its few remaining domestic critics. That seems to be happening already in the case of Ali Ferzat. The cartoonist, though, has stored up some credit with the public himself for his daring and humorous drawings. One leading demonstrator against him has already apologised, saying that he was misled by the government-controlled Teshreen newspaper.