

Reshaping Israel's strategic environment



Among the principles of the aggression launched on Iraq is to reshape the strategic environment in the Middle East. Destroy Israel. Destroy the military capability of Iraq is step one in the direction. Step two is meeting out a similar treatment to Syria and Iran which Israel holds responsible for supporting the Hizbullah and other militant groups. Iran which is seen to be a potential nuclear power armed with a delivery system is particularly feared by Israel.

On Friday Rumsfeld warned the two countries to desist from helping Iraq. This reminds one of the fable in which the lion warns the lamb drinking water downstream not to muddy the water flowing to him. Syria was accused by the Defence Secretary of allowing night vision goggles to be exported to Iraq, and Iran of allowing militants to cross the border into Iraq to fight the coalition forces. Rumsfeld has been joined now by Secretary Powell who has warned Iran to end what he describes as support for terrorists including groups violently opposed to Israel and to the Middle East peace process. "Tehran must also stop pursuing weapons of mass destruction and the means to deliver them."

Turning then to Syria he asked its leadership to decide whether it wanted "to continue direct support for terrorist groups and the dying regime of Saddam Hussein" or embark on "a different and more hopeful course". Either way Syria bears the responsibility for its choices and for the consequences, he said. The remarks were made during Powell's address to American Israel Public Affairs Committee, a powerful Zionist lobby group.

The Bush administration is apparently keen to take on Syria and Iran after it has finished with Saddam Hussein. Excuses can be created to attack. Israeli Intelligence's Gen Yosi Kupperwasser has already suggested Iraq might have stored its weapons of mass destruction in Syria. What could make US desist from the venture is the prolongation of war in Iraq, mounting casualties there, and its consequences. But how long will it last? There are a number of imponderables.

14 days into the war, and the coalition forces supposed to reach Baghdad in less than a week, are still 75 miles away from the capital where they face tough resistance from the Republican Guards. The war which Dick Cheney said would end in weeks rather than months is now near conclusion. The shock and awe method that included dropping 1300 bombs and missiles on Iraq on the first day, followed by daily bombardment of Baghdad, killing an average of 100 civilians a day, have failed to cow the Iraqis.

The allies have failed to occupy a single major city and their over-

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stretched 350-mile supply line starting from Arifjan in Kuwait to Kerbala in Iraq is constantly under attack. The expectations of Shi'as rebelling have not been fulfilled and instead of being received with garlands by a grateful population the invaders are being offered stiff resistance by fedayeen irregulars using guerrilla tactics. The coalition forces expect more suicide attacks after one killed four US soldiers. The unexpected partisan warfare has led Lt Gen William Wallace, who was to lead 5 Corps to attack Baghdad, complain that the enemy the coalition confronted was "different from the one we'd war-gamed against".

The longer the war continues the greater the problems for President Bush and Prime Minister Blair. The hawkish pro-Israel Rumsfeld, who formulated the war strategy overruling the professionals, is increasingly under attack from several retired generals. Voices of dissent are coming even from the battlefield, from General Wallace down to the wounded American sergeant who told *The Washington Post*, "Nassiriya

was supposed to be a six hour fight, it has already been five days. Five days of non-stop 24-hour fighting."

US public opinion, fed on dreams of a cakewalk in Iraq, could turn against it as the number of bodybags continues to increase. As the war prolongs, differences can crop up within the coalition. Britain has indicated it could withdraw the bulk of its forces if the war lasts over six months. With the hunt for WMDs unsuccessful, it would become increasingly difficult for the Bush Administration to defend the war.

The killing of innocent civilians, particularly children, has been condemned worldwide. Fear of suicide bombers is making coalition troops kill more civilians. In one incident, seven women and children were shot down at a checkpoint in Najaf where the suicide bombing had taken place. As the coalition forces finally enter Baghdad to fight street battles, civilian casualties will multiply. Any major disaster would shock world opinion, allowing the opponents of war in the Security Council to press for an end.

The bombardment of Iraq continuing for long would enflame an already restive Arab world, destabilising the pro-US governments. Public sentiment is so strong that Arab TV, including those controlled by dynasties, continue to show pictures of devastation and of excesses against civilians.

All depends on how long the Iraqis keep the invaders engaged. So far

the fedayeen have inflicted the greatest casualties on the coalition forces. The shadowy paramilitary force set up by Saddam's son Uday in 1995 has a reported strength of 40,000. Organised in nine to 12 battalions of 600 men each, these irregulars, discredited by US military planners, slowed down the advance from Nassiriya to Najaf. The Third Infantry Division units taking on the Republican Guards on Monday despite continuous daring fedayeen attacks on supply lines indicates they need to do much more. But have they the capacity?

The crack Republican Guard Divisions south of Baghdad-Medina and Baghdad Divisions-already subjected to heavy pounding by American warplanes and artillery had their first encounter with the American marine and infantry units on Monday. The Hammourabi and Nebuchadnezzar Divisions, supposed to reinforce the units, were also attacked. With the coalition enjoying air supremacy, one is not sure how long the Republican Guards can take the punishment.

The battle of Baghdad will be a test of the mettle of the Special Republican Guard, inside the city. The morale of the nearly 6 million population will be crucial. If American casualties reach five figures, the Bush Administration may have to think twice before taking on Syria and Iraq. The people of Baghdad would thus be fighting a battle the results of which would affect Israel's fortunes.

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