

Only Arabs can save US from a new Vietnam

In a strongly worded speech this week, President George W. Bush vowed that America would "stay on the offensive" in Iraq "as long as terrorism and its allies plot to harm America. America is at war." But behind this tough talk, there is growing anxiety. The United States is beginning to realise that the task of pacifying and reconstructing Iraq may well be beyond its resources.

With American troops facing daily attacks from a hostile population, the situation in Iraq is already being described as, potentially, a new Vietnam. In American opinion, the latest polls suggest that support for the occupation is fast fading. The cries of victory which accompanied the fall of Saddam Hussain have fallen silent and the question now being asked in Washington is: Does the U.S. have an exit strategy?

With its own forces spread thin and needing to be rotated, the U.S. has asked some 70 countries for troop contributions. Only 10 have so far responded and small contingents from countries like Poland, or even larger numbers from India, are unlikely to make much of a difference. As Carl Levin, a senior Democratic senator, concluded after a fact-finding visit to Iraq, the current level of U.S. troops would be needed "for a number of years."

But why troops from Poland and not from Egypt, say? Why India and not Morocco? It is time for an "Arab solution" to an Arab crisis. Should not the Arabs wake up to their responsibilities in their own backyard? Over the past several months, Arab feelings have fluctuated wildly in response to the unfolding tragedy.

At first, as the debates continued in the UN Security Council, and as France, Germany and Russia voiced their opposition to American policy, many Arabs clung to the hope that war could be avoided and that a diplomatic solution could somehow be found.

Then came the great shock of the American and British attack in March, the violent overthrow of Saddam's government and the occupation of Iraq.

The shock at the popular level was all the greater because of the complicity of some Arab regimes with the invasion, the evident impotence of others, and Baghdad's own perplexingly-swift collapse. Many Arabs felt that the long years of anti-colonial struggle between the world wars, and their post-war experience of independence, suddenly counted for nothing and were wiped out of the history books! Once again, as in 1920, the "land of the two rivers" was overtaken by western armies and subject to foreign military rule.

Today, the hit-and-run attacks against coalition troops have become a source of some national pride, resulting in a modest revival of Arab self-esteem after the painful humiliations of recent months. But, for all the agitation of the Arab street, Arab leaders seem lethargic spectators to this Arab catastrophe, without actively considering that it is now urgent to play an active role.

Patrick Seale

It is fashionable, mainly in the Gulf these days, to deride the Arab League and dismiss it as a toothless body. Crippled by feuds of its member states, it issues statements and passes resolutions which are rarely implemented. But this is as unfair as it is inexact. The League, which traces its origins back to 1944-45, is the sole political expression of the fact that the Arabs are one family, united even today by far more than divides them.

I happen to believe, as a long-time student of the Arab League, under its secretary-general Amr Moussa, a man of exceptional talents and experience, can play a major role in the present crisis. I remember that when the Iraqi leader, Abd al-Karim Qasim, threatened to seize Kuwait in 1961, the Kuwaitis asked British troops to deter him. But, very shortly afterwards, Britain handed over the task to an Arab League force, resolving the crisis in that manner.

In Iraq today, one of the key problems is security. Until security is restored, there can be no reconstruction, either political or economic. But far from improving, the security situation is getting worse by the day. Paul Bremer, the American administrator of the country, has blamed the attacks on "terrorists with connections to Iran, Al Qaida and other countries in the region."

Other senior American officials appear to believe that the elusive Saddam is behind the mounting resistance, and that once he is captured or killed, calm will be restored. But such analysis is mistaken. The Saddam era is over. There is no widespread support for its restoration. The attacks are the work of Iraqi partisans, angry at the destruction of their country, enraged by America's heavy-handed policing, frustrated by its inability to restore basic services, and anxious above all to take their destiny into their own hands — something the US seems reluctant to do, despite its "democracy" slogans!

The Arabs must be involved in the rebuilding of this major Arab state. No one else can, or should, do the job. It is perfectly possible to imagine the deployment, under Arab League auspices, of 100,000 Arab troops, with contingents from, say, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Morocco. Egypt would be well placed to take overall military command, with the U.S. and the European Union providing funding and logistical support.

An Arab force in Iraq would be far more acceptable to the local population than American and British troops, and would be better able to undertake the two key security tasks which are, first, reconquering Iraqi police and security services (as Egypt and Jordan are now helping the Palestinians to do), and second, restoring law and order throughout the country.

Political reconstruction should be left to the Iraqis, and only to them. Economic reconstruction should be under the control of the United Nations, with funds and expertise provided by all the

leading industrial nations, not only the U.S. and Britain. If such a programme was adopted, future problems and dangers could well be avoided.

Some colonial arrogance — and a reluctance to appear to be running away — might prevent Washington and London from accepting such an "Arab solution". But it would be both sensible and statesmanlike for them to consider it seriously. The coalition could claim the credit of having rid Iraq of a brutal dictator without facing the present charge of imperialism.

As things stand at present, the Americans could face a situation in Iraq even more difficult than in Vietnam. In Vietnam, they had partners fighting on their side. They had a client state, a client local leadership, a client army. In Iraq, they have none of these things. Having destroyed the state, they find themselves friendless and isolated.

Their situation now resembles that of Israel in the occupied Palestinian territories, but on an even vaster scale. Already, there are brutal U.S. echoes in Iraq of Israeli tactics in the lethal raids, the use of informers, the mass arrests and harsh interrogations — tactics which corrupt both the American occupier and the Iraqi occupied.

An Iraqi cleric was quoted this week as saying that when the Americans arrest someone, "they put a bag on his head, handcuff him, and leave him lying in the sun for two hours." This is what Iraq does to the Palestinians. It is hardly the way to be accepted or respected.

The Arabs do not want more colonial experience. Iraq, once the most advanced Arab state, is the least likely to accept long-term foreign occupation. Even individuals and groups who welcomed the overthrow of Saddam have grown impatient at American delays in handing over power to an interim Iraqi administration.

Washington and London should begin immediate negotiations with leading Arab states, and with the Arab League secretary-general, with a view to placing responsibility for Iraq in Arab hands. The benefits for all sides would be immediate. The killing and wounding of American and British troops would come to an end. Formidable Iraqi enemies would be released and harnessed to the reconstruction of their country. Arab differences over Iraq would be healed, and so would the rift between the US and leading European states.

The Arabs as a whole would feel empowered and their self-respect restored. The Americans, concerned with the threat from terrorism and with the current wave of anti-Americanism throughout the world, would find their reputation and authority enhanced. Putting an end to their imperial project in Iraq — and insisting on a just settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict — are the only ways to achieve security for them. They should remember that the longer they stay in Iraq, the more difficult it will be to extract themselves with dignity or honour.