The Post-Saddam Middle East:

A View from Israel

Apr 14, 2003

In-Depth Reports

March and April 2003 will long be remembered as defining months in forging a new Middle East scene. Before addressing the now–commonly termed challenge of the "morning after," we must look at the region as it has reacted during the war. This will be our point of departure in evaluating possible options of players on the morrow.

First, let us turn our attention to the war against terror—international, regional, and local terror. Our assessment on the eve of the Iraq war envisaged a possible rise—some thought a very steep rise—in violence and terrorism both in the region and worldwide. It was believed that the Iraqis, maybe others, would give the green light to launch operations both large and small against select, soft-belly targets— including Israeli and Jewish community targets—throughout the world. Some also foresaw a steep rise in violence in the Palestinian territories.

But all this, as you know, did not materialize. True, Palestinian terror against Israeli targets continued unabated, with grievous losses. But due to highly successful foiling measures, there was no quantum leap. Moreover, major elements with high potential like Hizballah—both its military wing deployed on our northern border and its international terrorist wing operating worldwide—stayed their fire. Let me note that this was the second time Hizballah acted in such a way. They did not lift one finger when the Israel Defense Forces moved into the West Bank in the spring of 2002, following the dastardly operation carried out against innocent noncombatant citizens in the Netanya Park Hotel on seder night. Hizballah acted then, as now, solely out of self-interest and in my understanding will continue to do so.

About a week ago, Osama bin Laden sent one of his messages, through the Qatari satellite television station al-Jazeera, exhorting his fellow believers to carry out operations against U.S., coalition, and Zionist interests. So far, this call has not yet been translated into action. Indeed, the war against the al-Qaeda threat has been pursued relentlessly, parallel to the Iraqi campaign.

How did the Arab masses react to the Iraqi war? Initially there were demonstrations bordering on violence in key cities and locations throughout the Arab world. Public sentiment by and large favored Saddam Husayn or—let us put it differently— condemned the allies and their intrusion. But as the war went into its second and third weeks, reactions became more and more muted. People began pondering the real significance of what they were seeing on their television screens. Yes, they might still be angry—very angry. But they were also coming to grips with new realities.

How did the Arab and Muslim states respond to the campaign? First, and demonstrably so, the obvious absence of any unity has given way to acute disunity. The Arab League has become a ghost entity, some already advocating its dissolution. Every state has acted on its own, based on its own national self-interest. Each negotiated separately with the United States on its role and posture. Not one state, except Syria, came to the aid of Iraq. During the war, they turned a deaf ear to the Iraqi appeal to close their air space to the allies and close facilities available to the allies on the ground. Syria, as I mentioned, was an exception. It certainly merits special attention.

But the leadership level in every state has gone through difficult and supreme tests during this war. By and large, the majority have emerged firmly in the saddle, at least for the initial formative postwar period, and they should be able to adopt reasonable, rational, and even bold positions on issues such as the Israeli-Arab conflict. Over the past year, several key Arab states and several key Arab figures within these Arab states have begun to stake out positive positions of their own on the Palestinian issue, no longer simply echoing the policies of outgoing Palestinian Authority leader Yasir Arafat. They not only oppose his views, they have disassociated themselves from them and from him, and are prepared to launch and embark on new paths in the Middle East conflict.

So in three key areas of concern—terrorism, the Arab masses, and the stability of current moderate regimes—the worst of our fears have not materialized. Why is this so? First and foremost it is because of the resounding success of the coalition forces: the show of might, combat performance, the almost unbelievable low toll of losses and injuries—given, of course, the grief for every fallen soldier—and the iron determination of the president of the United States. All this has the impact of a winning combination, and its effect has not been lost on the peoples of the region.

Moreover, the action taken by the president has demonstrated an almost unique show of credibility on the part of a statesman. Within a relatively short timespan after he delivered his speech on the axis of evil, the president moved decisively and—what is more important—moved successfully.

What does this auger for the future? One of the important outcomes of the Iraqi war will undoubtedly be the realization inside the region that attempts at political, terrorist, or other blackmail will not be met any longer by submission. If need be, in extremis, forces outside the region will intervene to preserve world order in its larger sense. Each state will primarily tend to its own interests.

The first to realize this was none other than King Abdullah II of Jordan, who several months ago, sensing what was going to happen in the region, launched a policy in Jordan called “Jordan First.” And if you travel in Jordan today, you see banners throughout the kingdom proclaiming, “Jordan First.” This policy has been in place for at least eight months.

The sooner Iraqi reconstruction gets underway and the quicker the Iraqis are able, with help, to put their political house in order, the better the chances are that the moderate regimes in the area will survive, and ultimately flourish.

I expect many eyes will now be turned toward Baghdad. There will be those who will rush to help positive, creative tendencies take the fore; and there will be those who will act clandestinely to promote instability and strife. Iraq’s future will become a test case, not in the sense of the allied military campaign’s success, but in the sense of a population that has been given a unique opportunity to engage in nation building almost from scratch. Much will depend on how this time is exploited by the victors.

On the other side of the region, Egypt will most probably engage in stocktaking following the departure of Saddam Husayn, a deadly enemy and a rival for leadership in the Arab world. But Egypt will have an opportunity to turn events to its advantage. The year 2002 was a relatively poor year for Cairo. It was unable to prevail in the Arab arena, it lost leverage and clout in the Palestinian camp, and it gave way, perhaps temporarily, to Saudi Arabia in promoting ideas and concepts in the context of Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

But Egypt has strong potential, and on many key issues it played its cards very wisely. Egypt sided against al-Qaeda on terrorism. It refused to bend to Palestinian pressure in March 2002 to change the profile of its relations with Israel. And on the Iraq war, it ended up intact, basically on the right side.

If Egypt were to swing behind the developing American concept of the Palestinian- Israeli conflict—that whatever documents or principles any outsider might draw up, the center of gravity will always be direct negotiations between the two parties— it could play a positive and significant role, given that in advance it would normalize its relations with the incumbent Israeli government. I even hazard a guess that, if Abu Mazen were consulted these days, he

would prefer direct confidential negotiations with Israel to any other mode of dialogue.

We must ask ourselves if there is any danger of a backlash in the region following the defeat of Saddam Husayn. There are those who predict a wave of anti-American sentiment, greater terrorism threats, heightened fundamentalism, and anti-Israel and anti-Semitic action. So far, I see no immediate signs of this. And indeed, what could be a greater threat in the field of international terrorism than the already known challenges of the Osama bin Ladin/al-Qaeda setup?

I do not believe that the Iraqi campaign has changed this for the worse, not by one iota. In fact, the campaign might even prove to have a salutary effect on the terrorist fringe. I am aware of the general tendency to prefer and advocate worstcase scenarios. Recent events at least prove that better-case scenarios have an equal chance of realization.

In short, the "day after" in Iraq is pregnant with enormous possibilities for creative, positive diplomacy and affirmative action. If Iraq becomes a model not only of nation building but also of rapid economic rehabilitation—for example, if it becomes a magnet for international investment—then other countries in the region will stand to benefit.

Is there a possibility of this happening? Well, the speed whereby the European states who opposed the United States on the war are rushing to join the bandwagon hurtling to Baghdad seems to me to indicate that they, at least, have become very quick to sense the impending change.

Generally speaking, the moderate or pro-American regimes in the region have emerged basically unscathed from the Iraqi campaign. I grant that this is a sweeping statement. If you look closely at Jordan, Egypt, the Gulf states, and even Saudi Arabia, you will not detect, for the present, any domestic energy building up to protest or mourn the destruction of Saddam Husayn's regime. As long as Saddam was riding high, he was a focal point of fear, admiration, and in many cases identification. For many, he represented the ultimate modern-day success of the Arab nation standing up against the foreigner, the Westerner, the infidel. As such, he was a rallying point.

A posthumous Saddam is something else, at best a legend whose departure may be regretted, but nonetheless a relic of the past. The masses opposed to American so-called imperialism will have to find a replacement. And this might take quite some time. In this respect, all of us can use this time to good advantage, as I have just indicated.

Where does this leave us with the revolutionary regimes in the region? How will they react? What has the impact of the war been on them? First, let me say a few words about Syria. The truth is that Bashar al-Asad has so far been one of our most bitter disappointments and most serious concerns. Not long after he succeeded his father, Hafiz al-Asad, we were treated to a long stream of harangues against Israel. And this has continued unabated until the present day. But what has been more ominous is that the young Bashar has shown himself to be adventuresome, irresponsible, and prone to bad influence. His relationship with Hizballah is a case in point. Whereas his father met Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hizballah, only once, Bashar has met him on many occasions already. And there is evidence that Nasrallah has a very strong influence over his young companion.

On one issue, that of al-Qaeda, Bashar has apparently cooperated in a limited way with the United States. But on all other issues, including terrorism, Bashar has been singularly uncooperative. I could mention the ten refusal-front Palestinian organizations headquartered in Damascus, some of whose volunteers found their way to Iraq to fight against U.S. forces in the recent Iraq campaign. We should also be reminded of the three Hizballah operatives—Hizballah being under the aegis of Syria—on the famous American short list of terrorists wanted for the murder of American servicemen. This is surely an open account that must be closed.

In recent months, the young Asad openly flouted the United States and worked diligently to promote a warm relationship with Baghdad. During the run-up to the war, it became patently clear that something very sinister was afoot, and intimacy reached very real proportions. As the war unfolded, Bashar not only openly condemned the

United States but also sent arms to Baghdad. Syria also acted as a lifeline for Saddam's Iraq once the Jordanian border became problematic for the Iraqis. Bashar aligned himself clearly with Saddam Husayn. And now that the war is ending with the tyrant's defeat, it is obvious that Bashar cannot be left to his old tricks.

Secretary of State Colin Powell has said that the United States did not plan to go to war against Syria and Iran. However, there are many measures short of war that can be employed to draw the fangs of the young, arrogant, and inexperienced president of Syria. Indeed, by far the most troublesome aspect of the current situation is Bashar's singular lack of good judgment. Syria has a considerable arsenal of missiles and other weapons—including chemical weapons, as stated just yesterday by President George W. Bush—and a miscalculation on Syria's part could have very serious consequences.

I have seen indications that knowledgeable Syrians have become conscious of their difficult predicament now that the war is ending. It remains to be seen if they will succeed in sobering the approach of their brash president, and if the clear statement by President Bush yesterday will penetrate the hitherto impenetrable wall of Syrian rejection.

The second major revolutionary state that warrants our attention is, of course, Iran. For Tehran, the Iraqi campaign carries with it a mixed blessing. First and foremost, Iran is rid of its archenemy, who waged an eight-year bloody war against it, inflicting upon it hundreds of thousands of dead and wounded. They are rid of any real threat from Baghdad for a long time to come. Second, the American-led coalition operation in Iraq relieves Iran of any real fear that they might be the object of a similar operation in the foreseeable future. And third, Iran can now contemplate extending real influence into Iraq through Iraq's Shi'i majority. All this gives Iran a stronger hand in the Persian Gulf.

However, there is a debit side to this. Iran is now virtually surrounded by American or pro-American countries. The United States appears determined not to stop now in pursuit of the "axis of evil." And, as said above in relation to Syria, there are so many measures short of war that could be employed in containing Iran and its most ambitious pursuit of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

One must hope or assume that people in Tehran are pondering the true significance to Iran of the allied campaign. There are also internal Iranian forces who may draw strength and encouragement from the U.S. commitment to deal with the axis of evil and who might now be emboldened to change the regime from within. In Israel, I am a minority view of one on this, but I still think there is an outside chance of such a scenario developing.

In the meantime, Iran's rush to construct and develop nuclear facilities must be a source of the gravest concern. The most recent visit to Tehran by the directorgeneral of the International Atomic Energy Agency at the end of February 2003 produced much disturbing data. In certain respects, Iraq's removal from the equation for the foreseeable future gives added urgency to the whole issue. And in conclusion, one way or another, the growing Iranian threat will loom even higher on the horizon and will consume ever greater international attention.

A few days ago, the spiritual leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Hossein Khamenei, delivered a Friday sermon condemning the evil regime of Saddam Husayn but simultaneously lambasting the U.S. presence on Iraqi soil. For the first time in a long period, he spoke in Arabic and not in Farsi. He was addressing the larger Arab world, and it was a strident statement. There are other sounds emanating from Tehran that should be heard, but at the same time, we must not allow ourselves to be misled by them.

The Iraqi denouement will influence other players. How will a man like Muammar Qadhafi translate what he heard and saw in Baghdad into policy? And how does Qadhafi compute President Bush's reiteration of his commitment to the issue of WMD proliferation? It would be wrong for us to second guess what is passing through the minds of those in Tripoli. The scope and nature of the operation in Iraq was of such significance as to merit reflection throughout the region—from the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf. This will take time—not too much time, but there will be a hiatus and we should take maximum advantage of it.

There is one note of caution I would like to sound. Whereas the victory in Iraq is resounding and complete, there is also much apprehension throughout the region that the installation of what might be construed as a puppet regime could reflect negatively on existing pro-American leaders in Arab states. This issue will surely be handled with infinite patience and care. I have listened carefully to statements made by President Bush and British prime minister Tony Blair on this very point—most recently at the end of their meeting in Northern Ireland—and they are clearly aware of this potential. It is a concern I have heard from several senior Arab interlocutors in recent weeks.

One last thought on the morning after. In the eyes of any resident in any Arab or Muslim state peering out into the wide world from his original vantage point, looking at the run-up to the war—the dispute between Russia, Germany, and France versus the United States—it is so obvious that, whatever weight should rightly be attached to Europe, no one from the outside can really hope to play off the United States against Europe and gain political dividends. On the major formative issues of the day, the leadership of the United States is virtually unsurpassed and undisputed.

No European support can offset or negate a firm U.S. position and policy in the Middle East. Moreover, Europe itself cannot sustain an alternative policy on any key issue in the region. Europe, neither united nor divided, can or would wish, really, to go it alone. And this, of course, has never been better understood in the Middle East of today. ❖

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