

Perspective

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Articles & Testimony

Americans are discovering that Iraqi regime change will be no cakewalk. Even before the Battle of Baghdad, dozens of Coalition deaths have been confirmed, with several American soldiers held in captivity. In southern Iraq, where much of the fighting has thus far taken place, we have not been greeted as enthusiastically as we were in 1991. Not only has Iraqi resistance at times been surprisingly fierce (as in the southern city of Nasiriyah), it has also been dirty -- through fake surrenders, Iraqis are targeting our troops. Yet a little perspective is needed here. Nine nightmare scenarios have thus far not played out.

During the interminable buildup to war, a number of people predicted that invading Iraq would unleash the proverbial "Arab street." Last summer, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak warned in a televised speech, "If you strike at the Iraqi people a state of disorder and chaos may prevail in the region." In January, Iraqi vice president Taha Yassin Ramadan threatened that if U.S. forces took aim at Saddam, "the Arab masses and their vanguard forces" would rise up "by any available means."

Saddam Hussein has indeed tried to rile the masses by peppering his televised speeches with Koranic verses, references to jihad, and anti-Israel rants. So far, however, the "Arab street" has remained relatively quiescent. As expected, there have been demonstrations in Cairo and Amman, but no government is on the verge of cracking. In comparison to last April's so-called Jenin massacre -- when the Israel Defense Forces mounted successful anti-terrorist operations throughout the West Bank, with minimal civilian casualties -- the Arab world has been downright sleepy. If anything, we are witnessing the breakdown of the pan-Arab ideal. Jordan has allowed considerable use of its airspace, the Gulf monarchies are bending over backwards to support the war effort, and Iran is holding firm on the sidelines.

U.S. officials also cautioned that wartime would pose "the moment of maximum danger" for terrorist attacks against America. And Saddam warned, "When the enemy starts a large-scale battle, he must realize that the battle between us will be open wherever there is sky, land, or water in the entire world."

But, thus far, the duct tape has remained packed away.

War critics foresaw a bloodbath for American soldiers. This also has not been the case. Colin Powell was on the mark when he said Monday that "casualties have been light." To date, only a few dozen Coalition soldiers have fallen victim to Saddam's guerrilla tactics. Four times that number of American soldiers would have to perish to even rival the last Gulf War, in which a remarkable 1 out of 1,500 servicemen were killed.

Just a few weeks ago, Kim Jong Il was not only flaunting his illegal nuclear development program, but expelling the International Atomic Energy Agency and provocatively intercepting American spy planes. The Pentagon promptly dispatched a fleet of B-52 bombers to Guam. Retired military generals were making their rounds on the television circuit, fielding questions about whether we could deal with two Axis of Evil countries at once.

Luckily, we haven't had to.

Before the war, we feared that Israel would again be struck by a barrage of Iraqi Scud missiles. The potential for

disaster was there -- not only in that innocent Israelis would be killed, but that the Jewish state would retaliate, drawing the wrath of the Arab world. The Carnegie Endowment warned that an attack against Israel -- especially one using weapons of mass destruction -- could "open the gates of hell."

Today, Israel appears almost in the clear. U.S. Special Forces have taken two critical western airfields known as H-2 and H-3, which Iraq had used in 1991 as launching pads for the 39 Scuds it launched at Israel's main population centers. The improved ballistic missile killer -- both the Patriot PAC-3 and PAC-2 GEM Plus -- has also worked well; in Kuwait, all six of Iraq's missile attempts have been intercepted using the shared U.S.-Israeli technology. True, Israel has not yet ended the state of alert imposed at the start of the war; there is still some concern that coalition forces do not have complete control of the Scud zone and that Saddam could still strike using aircraft or unmanned drones. But as Rumsfeld noted on Sunday: "We can feel much better today than yesterday or the day before with respect to that issue."

Pentagon officials reported last week that they had "information" that an Iraqi Republican Guard division deployed in southern Iraq would unleash chemical weapons. The Iraqi general appointed to lead the defense there was none other than "Chemical Ali" -- the man responsible for spearheading the gassing of 10,000 Kurds in northern Iraq in 1988.

The heart of the southern campaign is winding to a close, and thus far Saddam has wisely opted not use his stash of weapons of mass destruction.

In the lead-up to the war, many commentators alleged that the war would not have popular support.

Although American cities have seen millions of war protesters -- in contrast, ironically, to the Arab world -- they are the vociferous minority. Since the onset of war, polls consistently show upwards of 70 percent of Americans supporting the war. Britain has also rallied behind its leader: Despite the casualties, a Saturday ICBM poll showed Blair's domestic support up to a solid 56 percent -- 16 points higher than the week before.

Doomsayers predicted that the war would kill tens of thousands of innocent Iraqi civilians. Hosni Mubarak warned in December, "If some people want to get their hands on one person [Saddam Hussein], some 20,000 or 50,000 people might be killed." A prominent Canadian research group determined in January that the war would "possibly kill hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children."

Thankfully, nothing on this scale has taken place.

Another key fear was that Saddam would torch his oil fields. After all, he set afire 700 wells upon fleeing Kuwait in the 1991 Gulf War, making it necessary for coalition partners to spend over \$20 billion rebuilding Kuwait's oil infrastructure. The Pentagon has estimated that the Iraqi infrastructure is worth considerably more, and with less international assistance this round, postwar reconstruction will doubtless rely on Iraq's prodigious oil revenues.

By Monday, however, British and American forces had gained control of the Ramallah oil fields in southern Iraq -- Iraq's key producer, at 1.25 million barrels per day. Only seven oil wells had been set ablaze. And the evidence suggests that the supply of oil will remain relatively stable. Both the Saudis and the Kuwaitis are producing at very high levels. In fact, OPEC countries are now fearing an oil glut, not a shortage.

The Battle of Baghdad will be the key campaign in Operation Iraqi Freedom. We should continue to evaluate the war with caution -- and perspective. ❖

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