

The Arab 'Street' Poses No Real Threat to U.S.

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Congressional friends of Israel, from both parties, offered hard-to-swallow advice to Israel's leaders this week. If attacked by Iraq, they counseled, sit tight and let America fight your fight. Retaliation would inflame Arabs and other Muslims, they warned, and may even provoke menacing riots against U.S. embassies and interests.

Pretty scary stuff. The only problem is that this argument has no basis in experience or recent history.

To be sure, there may well be sound reasons for the United States to reprise the 1991 scenario and caution against Israeli military response to Iraqi attack. Without proper coordination, Israeli operations could indeed complicate the prosecution of America's war effort. The benefits to Israel of having American power defang Iraq and perhaps compel a change in Saddam Hussein's regime may in fact compensate for the loss of Israeli deterrent strength that would come from Israeli restraint. On that point, reasonable people can disagree.

But no serious case can be made for counseling Israeli restraint based on the fear that "every U.S. embassy in the Middle East [would be] burned to the ground," as suggested by Sen. Joseph Biden, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and echoed by others across party lines. The record of the past two decades suggests with unusual clarity that the United States should not adopt policies on the presumption that Arab or other Muslim popular action -- mobs, riots, revolts -- will either threaten friendly local rulers or target U.S. interests. The situation is different with regard to terrorists, of course. The possibility of them operating against U.S. interests is real, but terrorists will ply their trade without regard to this or that action by Israel or the United States.

Since Iranian rebels took over the U.S. embassy in Tehran in 1979, there have been numerous attacks on our embassies in Arab and other Muslim countries but almost always by small groups of terrorists rather than wild mobs. Indeed, when gangs of angry, young men take to the streets in Arab countries, they are often acting with the acquiescence, consent or even the encouragement of their governments. Such was the case, for example, when the U.S. embassy in Tripoli, Libya, was sacked in 1979 and, apparently, when the American ambassador's residence was overrun in Damascus, Syria, during Operation Desert Fox against Iraq in 1998.

The best evidence of the listlessness of the Arab "street" is the lack of consistent and compelling support offered to the Palestinians since their uprising against Israel began two years ago this week. While there have been numerous pro-Palestinian demonstrations, the real news is that not one Arab country felt so pressed by its people as to lend

material support to the uprising.

Moreover, since the uprising began, only twice did anti-American demonstrations turn violent -- once in Amman, Jordan; once in Manama, Bahrain. While Arab dislike for Washington's unprecedented support for Israel is real, this sentiment rarely takes a form more violent than a Berkeley-style flag-burning. This is despite the many unfortunate deaths of Palestinian civilians in military operations of the Israel Defense Forces, the lengthy closures of Palestinian cities, the various sieges of Yasser Arafat's headquarters, the tempest of outrage at the Jenin "massacre" and the daily diet of sensationalist news fed by Arab satellite television stations.

Why will the vaunted Arab "street" stay quiet this time, too? There are two main reasons.

First, in the 23 years since the fall of the shah of Iran, Mideast governments have gotten very good about protecting their domestic security. While they may dawdle on economic reform and jaw-jaw on political opening, they have invested huge sums into protecting themselves and their "homeland." Arab leaders know riots against U.S. targets would open the door for attacks on them, too.

Second, Arabs are more sophisticated than many in Washington give them credit for. They know that Baghdad 2002, with a hated dictator posing a real threat of lobbing chemicals and germs on Israeli civilians, is a far cry from Beirut 1982, when Israel was viewed as invading to control an Arab capital. They also know the difference between unprovoked attack and legitimate retaliation.

So let the debate among Americans and Israelis rage on, as it should, over how these allies can advance their common interests in the event Israel suffers an Iraqi attack. But let the debate be informed by realism and experience, not warped by unfounded fear. ❖

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