

## A THIRD MIDDLE EASTERN WAR?

By William R. Polk

The tiny Euphrates river village of al-Qaim is likely to be the flash point of the third Middle Eastern war.

For thousands of years, since the camel came into widespread use, it has been a camping ground (the Arabic meaning of its name, al-Qaim) for nomadic tribes ranging the Great Syrian Desert. There the Euphrates River nourished flocks of sheep and herds of camels while the bedouin worked as seasonal laborers in its farmlands.

Al-Qaim was also a stopping place for the soldiers, merchants and travelers who journeyed down the Euphrates from the Mediterranean through Baghdad to the Persian Gulf.

Then, at the end of the First World War, when Britain and France divided the Middle East into their spheres of influence, al-Qaim became a part of Britain's League of Nations mandate of Iraq.

When I first visited it half a century ago, al-Qaim was a sleepy little village, surrounded by lush fields irrigated by the mighty Euphrates. It was a most unlikely site for dramatic events.

Now those dramatic events may be near.

Having conquered Iraq without finding any weapons of mass destruction, which its government had repeatedly denied having and also without having captured its former

leaders, the Bush administration began additional moves: first, it published on packs of playing cards complete with rankings and faces a “most wanted” list of the Baath party leaders it wants to apprehend; second, it stepped up patrols along the routes to Syria where it assumes the leaders and their families might try to flee; and third, it has begun a “diplomatic” campaign to threaten the Syrians.

In my last talk with Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz, in February, I was struck by how seriously he swore that he would never flee Iraq. “I was born here,” he said, “and I will die here. This is my homeland.” Of course, no one can know what a person will do when faced with death, but I think that he and perhaps most of the still-living leaders of the government will try to remain in hiding in Iraq. I cannot imagine that Saddam Husain, particularly, will wish to appear in Arab memory as a coward who fled.

Disappearing is an old political tradition. And not just among the Arabs. Like the Islamic “hidden” imam, the hidden tsar has been a revolutionary figure in Russian history. In times of stress, rumors of his “return” rally the disaffected. Saddam, I imagine, will wish to find his place in history in such an unsolved mystery and that is why the Americans need to kill him.

What about the others? In my experience, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, when those of us managing the crisis in the American government thought a nuclear war was likely, some sent wives and children away from Washington to what they hoped would be safety. Today for Iraqi leaders, that possible sanctuary is Syria.

Could they get there and would the Syrians accept them?

The answer to the first question is simple: on the eve of the war they could certainly have driven from Baghdad across the highway to the Euphrates at ar-Ramadi. I

did it myself twice two months ago. There were no controls or obstacles. To travel up the Euphrates from ar-Ramadi to al-Qaim could easily be accomplished overnight by car or, somewhat slower, by boat. Trucks, buses, barges, and riverboats swarmed along that route until the invading American forces reached almost to Baghdad.

Would the Syrians would accept the refugees? The short answer is yes. In all societies imbued with tribal values, granting asylum is an absolute duty. Dating back to the time before Islam, failure to honor this imperative brought down the most damning loss of reputation a people could incur. This is not only Arab: we see that the tribal peoples along the Afghan-Pakistan frontier, wretchedly poor though they are, will not rise to the bait of a to-them almost unimaginable bribe to reveal anything about Usama bin Ladin. For the Syrians to turn away the Iraqi refugees would “blacken their faces” in shame for generations.

There is another bond that must have affected the Syrians: the governments of both Syria and Iraq were inspired by a radical form of secular nationalism known as Baathism (the creed of [national] awakening). Some years ago, the two branches of this movement split and have often since opposed one another, but both retained at least a respect for the original, shared movement.

More important is what the Syrians must see as the lesson of Iraq. What will they see?

As Tariq Aziz told me and his colleagues asserted, the United States Government had determined to attack Iraq regardless of anything they did or what the UN inspectors reported. Their opinion has recently been confirmed by Hans Blix: in a scathing attack

on the Bush administration he said that the US had fabricated evidence and had decided upon war from the start. Could Syria expect less?

More important, American policy was spelled out in proposals by the “neoconservative hawks.” What are these documents and what do they say?

In 1992, Paul Wolfowitz, then under-secretary of defense, produced a policy paper advocating preemptive attack on Iraq and on any nation that could challenge the United States. When the paper was published, it was disavowed, but it was to form the basis for what is now the “U.S. National Security Strategy.” The idea of an attack on Iraq and Syria was pushed forward in 1996 by Richard Perle and other neoconservatives in a paper written for incoming Israeli extreme rightist (Likud) Prime Minister. The neoconservative plan to remove (first) the Iraqi regime was presented to President Bill Clinton two years later. Then in the 2000 “Project for the New American Century” the neoconservatives laid out what was to become the basis for the Bush administration’s foreign policy. Paul Wolfowitz and others seized the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center in New York which they blamed on Iraq to implement what they had long advocated, the total restructuring of the Arab Middle East in collaboration with Israel. Iraq was to be the first target; Syria, the second.

As Secretary of State Colin Powell warned on April 13, Syria has been a concern for a long period of time.”

What will now happen? My prediction is a period of perhaps six months in which great pressure will be brought to bear on Syria to rid itself of presumed weapons of mass destruction and to sever all ties with Islamic fundamentalists. What the Syrians do will not be satisfactory; regime change will be demanded. That can probably be accomplished

only by invasion. Invasion will require time; I guess late fall is likely since so much weaponry was used up in the Iraq war that new supplies will be needed and summer is difficult for campaigning. Also, the Bush administration will seek again the support of the United Nations.

But if or when an attack on Syria is mounted, it is likely to come in part from the new American base in Iraq; so the village of al-Qaim is the place to watch.

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