

Connecting the “Dots” on the Map

By

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Can any pattern link events happening as far apart as Syria, Iran and North Korea? Are there other “dots” on the map in South America, Central Asia, the Pacific Basin and Africa that pose threats to world peace? What is the Bush administration now doing or planning to do in these scattered areas? What are the other options? These are the questions to which I turn in the concluding article of this series.

As we have seen, the United States is deeply mired in Iraqi “quicksand.” Two-thirds of its combat troops are engaged there in a war that many senior military and intelligence officers regard as unwinnable. Indeed, winning has lost any meaning. But still the fight goes on at terrible cost in suffering and death for Iraqis, with the loss over a thousand American soldiers dead and more than 10,000 seriously wounded and with over a hundred billion dollars of treasure wasted.

Israel has been engaged in a similar war for 40 years. Its casualties have been less, but the impact upon the Palestinians has been even more catastrophic. An estimated 75% now live in poverty. Much Palestinian infrastructure has been destroyed. And, unlike the Americans in Iraq, Israelis are taking land from the natives which they intend to keep. Now, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s principal aide, Dov Weisglass, has admitted that Israel intends also to block the formation of a Palestinian state. As he put it, the disengagement plan for Gaza “supplies the amount of formaldehyde that is necessary so there will not be a political process with the Palestinians...and all this with the authority and permission, all with a presidential blessing and the ratification of both houses of [the American] Congress.”¹

Israel proudly proclaims itself to be the American partner in the Middle East. As *The Washington Post* reported last year, “For the first time, a U.S. administration and a Likud government in Israel are pursuing nearly identical policies.”² The Israeli Right is, of course, delighted while Arabs regard the shift in American policy with fury. American Neoconservatives (for strategic reasons) and American Christian Fundamentalists (for their interpretation of Biblical prophecy) don’t care what the Arabs think. But, in the interests even of minimal security for us all, including the Israelis, it matters. So what do the Arabs think?

The answer is complex: all over the Middle East, Israel is regarded as a Western colonial outpost because what began as the Jewish flight from vicious European anti-Semitism has turned into a brutal war of suppression of Palestinians. Arabs believe that there is a link between what Israelis are doing in Occupied Palestine and what the

¹ John Ward Anderson, “Sharon Aide Says Goal of Gaza Plan is to Halt Road Map,” *The Washington Post*, October 7, 2004.

² Robert G. Kaiser, “Bush and Sharon Nearly Identical on Mideast Policy,” February 9, 2003.

Americans are doing in Iraq. That is not quite correct since the Americans have at least said that they plan to get out whereas Israelis obviously cannot leave. But there are links and similarities. Israel is training American forces engaged in Iraq in the techniques it has evolved to fight the Palestinians. This is paradoxical because no more than the American troops in Iraq have the Israeli forces managed to defeat the native uprising, but American-Israeli cooperation and use of the same tactics has tended to reinforce the Arab belief that Palestine and Iraq as parts of the same struggle. Israelis and Americans agree, but they define the struggle as against terrorism. Both are right: Palestinians and Iraqis are both fighting for self-determination and both are using terrorist tactics. Not having sophisticated weapons or armies, both the Iraqis and Palestinians use the weapons of the weak of which one is terrorism. To us, outsiders, suicide bombers appear maniacs. To Iraqis and Palestinians, they are freedom fighters driven to desperation and, having no other weapons than their bodies, become “martyrs.”

Allow me to dwell for a moment on two parts of this issue: suicide attacks and harming of innocent civilians.

First, on suicide attacks: although we now focus on Islam, “martyrdom” is not unique to it. Japanese *kamikaze* were comparable. Even American Strategic Air Command (SAC) aircrews knew that, if they were ordered to attack the Soviet Union, theirs was a suicide mission. War is about going “in harm’s way.” We revere those who sacrifice themselves for a cause or for their comrades with such awards as the Congressional Medal of Honor and the Victoria Cross. It should not stretch the imagination or require a racial or religious stereotype to understand that, under conditions of great stress, some people will go on suicide missions.

Second, about harming innocent civilians: this is the ugliest face of war. It is often deliberate. During the Algerian war, when a guerrilla leader was captured by the French, he was asked how he could possibly justify his men blowing-up a bus station filled with innocent people. He replied that, if he had aircraft he could have done it from the air, just as the French were bombing villages and killing thousands of innocent civilians, but not having aircraft, he fought with the only weapons he had, individual human beings.

Irish, Jewish, Vietnamese, Tamil, Chechen, Basque and other terrorists/freedom-fighters did the same, blowing up hotels,³ cinemas, nightclubs, apartment houses. It is hard for us to get into that mind-set. We do not regard a pilot dropping a bomb as the equivalent of a person placing a bomb by hand. The terrorist is far more “personal,” and so more monstrous, but the harsh reality is that the pilot kills far more people.

The American-Iraqi and Israeli-Palestinian struggles are the most dramatic aspects of the dangers of the Middle East. Like cancers, they metastasize throughout the area. Other Arabs, both Muslim and Christians, Iranians and others have been drawn into these conflicts. Understandably Israel feels threatened. At the same time, others feel threatened by it. Modern, technologically advanced and supported by the United States,

³ As Irgun did with the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1946, the IRA did with the Brighton Hotel in 1984 and some Arab group did with the hotel in Taba in 2004.

Israel has not only the most powerful army in the Middle East, indeed one of the most powerful in the world, and one of the world's most capable intelligence services, but also a vast array of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons of mass destruction. This power has not brought it peace or security. It is engaged in a constant battle with the Palestinians and, from time to time, in frustration and anger, it has lashed out at its neighbors. Today, it views with alarm the possibility that any Middle Eastern state, and particularly Iran, may follow its lead and acquire nuclear weapons. To prevent this, the Sharon government has made common cause with the American Neoconservatives in threats to attack Iran and overthrow its government.

Meanwhile, the Iranian government appears to have drawn a lesson from the American invasion of Iraq and the stand-off with North Korea: the lesson is that, while not having nuclear weapons did not save Saddam Husain, actually having them probably would have saved him and is now saving Kim Jong II. Thus, in the quest for "security," Iran appears determined to acquire them. Like the Soviet Union, China, India, Pakistan and Israel, it apparently has concluded that only by having the ultimate weapon can it protect itself. But, what it sees as current "defense" is read by both the Sharon government and the Bush administration as potential "offense."

Long urged by American Neoconservative strategists, the Bush administration and the Sharon government seem determined to prevent Iran from "going nuclear" and to bring about "regime change" there. This conclusion comes not only from their bellicose pronouncements but also from the just-announced American supply to Israel of at least 500 one-ton "bunker buster" bombs and long-range F-16i fighter-bombers, for which the only identified target is Iran.

A second lesson emerges from the Iraqi and North Korean quest for nuclear weapons: it is that during the process of attempting to build or acquire them, governments run great risks because their regional rivals will seek overtly or covertly to disable them (as Israel did in Iraq) or even to invade them (as America did in Iraq). But, once they have actually acquired nuclear weapons, other states will adjust to the new reality. This is so because, once a state has nuclear weapons, attacking it is simply too costly. This appears to be the lesson of North Korea. Nuclear-armed North Korea may still be subjected to espionage, threats of attack and sanctions, but it is unlikely to be invaded as was the non-nuclear state of Iraq.

Syria joins this pattern because the American Neoconservatives and the Israeli Likud identify Syria and Iran with the Palestine resistance. They are right to do so. Syria harbors anti-Israeli Palestinians while Iran supports fellow Shia partisans in Lebanon. The Likud government regards both powers and their supporters as a major reason why, despite years of gruelling warfare, the Palestinians are still struggling.

If Israel does attack Iran or, as the Neoconservatives have urged, Syria, America is likely to become engaged. It is already supplying the weapons, the delivery systems and training on how to use them; to reach Iran, American-supplied Israeli aircraft will have to overfly American-occupied Iraq; logistical problems will almost certainly require

American support; and the main strategists of the Bush administration, the Neoconservatives, want to get involved.

Apart from the political and moral issues in an attack on Iran and/or other countries, American forces face a major problem, manpower. They are stretched nearly to the limit in Iraq, Afghanistan and South Korea. With the additional stationing of smaller groups in West Africa, off-shore from East Africa, in Central Asia, the Philippines, the Caribbean and Latin America -- American forces are now actively involved in nearly half the world's states -- the shortage of soldiers is already acute. Any further hostilities in the Middle East or elsewhere could not be met by existing American forces. So what will America do?

First, create a bigger military force: To lure new recruits, bonuses have risen to between \$10,000 and \$15,000. That is netting few volunteers. Troops from the National Guard can probably not be kept embodied much longer without a severe backlash against the Administration. Many soldiers in the "Ready Reserve" are nearing retirement so this is a dwindling source of manpower. The remaining option is to draft into the armed forces a large number of young American men and women.

A draft would be profoundly unpopular in America, and President Bush has said that he will not order it, but two bills are now pending in Congress to draft young Americans between the ages of 18 and 26. Draft boards have already been alerted to get prepared. To prevent any draftees from fleeing to Canada, as some did during the Vietnam war, a new border agreement with Canada is being negotiated.

The second option is to try to create an Iraqi force to fight the war there. But, as the professor of strategy at the Air War College, Jeffrey Record, said, "The idea that we're going to have an Iraqi force trained to defeat an enemy we can't defeat stretches the imagination."⁴

Increased military force was the Vietnam option. Under the influence of the Neoconservatives, President Bush embraced that option. "America is following a new strategy," he proclaimed in October 2003. "We are not waiting for further attacks. We are striking our enemies before they can strike us again."

Continuous war has been embraced as the key element of the Neoconservatives' ideal American policy. Under the threat it poses and the actual destruction it entails, they believe, foreign opponents would be cowed or destroyed while domestic opponents would be unbalanced, carried along in a tide of events and silenced by the imperatives of patriotism.⁵ War would thus give them what Trotsky thought revolution would give

⁴ Sidney Blumenthal, "Far Graver than Vietnam," *The Guardian*, September 18, 2004.

⁵ Drawing on his own experience in helping to destroy a democratic society, Herman Göring at the Nuremberg trials gave a modern Machiavellian interpretation of the effect on a nation of warfare when he said, "...people don't want to go to war...But, after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine the policy and it's always a simple matter to drag the people along whether it's a democracy or a fascist dictatorship or a parliament or a communist dictatorship...Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is to tell them they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to greater danger. It works the same way in any country."

Communism: irresistible force. The result, rather, was to make the Communist system into tyranny.

In addition to a loss of freedom; war infects and dehumanizes the victors. We saw this in Vietnam and now see it in Iraq and Israel. In the quest for victory, the dominant party is drawn into practices that it normally abhors. That is not new. When the Freedom of Information Act was still functioning, Pentagon documents were released that showed that the U.S. Army had been training Latin American military officers during the Reagan and first Bush administrations in techniques of blackmail, torture and extra-legal executions. Some of the thousands of graduates participated in coups, death-squad actions and drug dealings.⁶ Involvement in these affairs ultimately sullies everyone. A French writer referred to the “dirty” war in Algeria as “the cancer of democracy.” It nearly wrecked French society.

While “special warfare” takes fewer troops, it will destroy the image of America throughout the world – its “soft power” -- and, ultimately, damage American freedom.

If not bigger armies or “dirty war,” what could be done to create a more peaceful environment? I think that a “winning package” could be put together that would include the following policy goals:

- 1) Regional nuclear disarmament in both the Middle East and the Pacific basin;
- 2) The creation of a Palestinian state -- without which there can be no peace;
- 3) Getting out of Iraq while fostering a robust role for the United Nations;
- 4) Satisfying enough of their desire for self-determination that societies will cease to support and even curtail their terrorists -- as has repeatedly happened all over the world.
- 5) At the same time, of course, maintaining reasonable self-protective measures against attacks by fanatics. But, if the positive steps were vigorously pursued, these measures would become progressively less massive or intrusive.

America cannot be the world’s policeman and the world in which it must live is pluralistic. It was generally safe when it recognized these two facts and in danger when it did not. There are no “quick fixes” but the only “light at the end of the tunnel” is, in Thomas Jefferson’s phrase, “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind.”

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⁶ *Washington Post* reporter Dana Priest in *The Guardian Weekly* on September 29, 1996.

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