

The Wrong Road Ahead

By William R. Polk

Bad as it was before, the situation in the Middle East has taken a further plunge in recent weeks. As casualties mount daily in Iraq, the American command has opted both to close down the main highways, virtually stopping redevelopment activities, and to strike back against insurgents with what it calls “overwhelming force.” Meanwhile in Israeli-occupied Palestine, the assassination of Shaikh Ahmad Yasin has been followed by the killing of his replacement, Dr. Abdel Aziz Rantisi. In the following article, I will examine the implications of these actions, their relationship to other moves and the chances that America and Israel will accomplish their aims.

First, it is important to be clear about what those aims and those of their opponents are.

The American government originally set out, at least publicly, its objective as being to stop the supposed threat Saddam Husain’s regime posed to the United States. Despite repeated proclamations, it became evident in the months following the invasion that Iraq had no means to threaten America. Although most observers had long known this, it was certified on January 24, 2004 by David Kay the just-resigned head of the Bush administration arms inspection team who stated that he did not believe Iraq had possessed any weapons of mass destruction.

As this reason for the invasion was progressively discredited during 2003, the stated objective was changed to that of promoting a free, independent and democratic Iraq.

Doubts have long been raised that either of these proclaimed objectives was really what caused the invasion. Independent observers have often charged that the “real” objective was to control Iraqi oil and that this objective was also supplemented by the desire of major American corporations, particularly Vice President Dick Cheney’s Halliburton, to reap enormous profits from the huge task of reconstructing the country. As early as September 10, 2002, Philip Zelikow, now the executive director of the commission set up to investigate the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, alleged that the prime U.S. Government motive was to protect Israel.

The shifting objectives of American government have been revealed by such “insiders” as former National Coordinator for Security Richard Clarke and former Secretary of the Treasury Paul O’Neill. Their statements are being substantiated by documents published by the Commission set up to investigate the September 11 attacks.

Whatever the real objective, it is now certain that active planning for an invasion of Iraq was undertaken at presidential order no later than September 13, 2001, that is, two days after the attacks in New York and Washington, on the alleged and now abandoned charge that Saddam Husain was involved in those attacks and was actively colluding with Usama bin Ladin.

While we now know more about the motivations and aims of the Americans, the objectives of the Iraqis are more difficult to estimate.

The assumption of the leading American advocates of the invasion, the so-called “Neoconservatives,” was that Iraqis would greet the incoming troops with flowers as liberators. Those few Iraqis who would oppose the Americans were dismissed as “die-hard Ba’athist remnants.” As we have seen, remnants grew into mobs of tens of thousands supporting smaller

groups of increasingly skilled guerrillas while flowers were transformed into kalashnikovs and car bombs.

As resistance grew, military planners fell back on the hope that the two major religious sects, the Sunnis and Shi'is, hated one another so much that both would be more or less neutralized while the Kurds would be grateful for American protection from their long-time Turkish opponents.

These assumptions too have withered in the last year: as *New York Times* correspondent Jeffrey Gettleman reported from Baghdad on April 12, the Sunnis and Shi'is have found common cause in growing hatred of Americans. When Shi'is came under siege, Sunnis began delivering supplies even to their mosques to help them resist American troops. The newly formed Iraqi army, which American officials have conceded is essential to success, refused to fight fellow Iraqis of any persuasion. If the Kurds manifest less, they are probably more motivated by fear of the Turks than by affection for Americans. The simple fact, which at least experienced observers have emphasized from before the invasion, is that Iraqis are nationalists and would almost certainly oppose foreigners, particularly foreign soldiers, who sought to rule them.

Turning to Israel, we can discern with even more brutal clarity trends similar to those now becoming evident in Iraq. There are, of course, major differences and it is important to understand these.

The most important difference between Iraq and Israel is that when Jewish settlers began to arrive in significant numbers, at the end of the First World War, unlike the Americans in Iraq, they always intended to stay. They were in the Palestine Mandate to create a new country, Israel, as a Jewish state.

A series of attempts to find a means to accommodate both the Arabic-speaking natives and the Hebrew-speaking immigrants in the same small piece of territory began in the 1930s. Time after time, British officials, United Nations envoys, diplomats from several countries – even American presidents -- and private citizens have tried to find means to divide both the land and the sovereignty to bring about peace. The map has been drawn and redrawn a score of times. The latest in this long procession is the so-called “Road Map.”

The fundamental problem is that both the Israelis and the Palestinians have the same objective: each wants to live there without the other.

True, each has conceded a minor role to the other. As the 1936 British Royal Commission put it, the Zionists were willing to go back to the *Old Testament* (Joshua 10), seeing the natives as later-day Canaanites, “hewers of wood and drawers of water” for them. Conversely, the Palestinians were prepared to accept the incoming Jews only as a protected minority, like the traditional *millet*, in the Arab state. Prophetically, the Royal Commissioners wrote that “...conflict was inherent in the situation from the outset [and it] has grown steadily more bitter...The conflict will go on, the gulf between Arabs and Jews will widen.”

In the seventy years since those words were written, while there have been interludes of peace and even of diplomatic encounters – perhaps the most famous being the Camp David meetings in 1978 – the “normal relationship” has been one of overt war (1948-1949, 1956, 1967, 1973, 1982-1985) or less formal hostilities (1921, 1929, 1935-1938, and numerous less identified attacks, raids, assassinations, bombings, etc., leading to the *intifadas* of 1987-1990 and 2002-to the present).

Meanwhile, Israel has grown into the strongest state in the Middle East: its population is nearly ten times as large as in 1918, its army has become one of the most modern and powerful in the world and is backed by a full arsenal of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons; its economy has benefited by nearly \$100 billion worth of American aid and is linked to the American economy by a range of preferential trade agreements; and it is supported politically, diplomatically, financially and militarily by vigorous, well-financed and generous American citizens. Ideologically descended from Vladimir Jabotinsky, founder of the “muscular” or Militant Revisionist wing of the Zionist movement, through Menachem Begin and Itzhak Shamir, Ariel Sharon sees no benefit in any kind of understanding with the Palestinians. Force, not negotiation, is his answer to Palestinian demands.

But, as numerous Israeli critics have pointed out, no matter how draconian the application of force, it has not given Israelis enhanced security. Worse, they point out, the methods employed have brutalized an increasingly large portion of the Israeli population and have tended to undercut the very principles on which the early Zionists founded their movement. But, apparently, few Israelis today believe that any sort of compromise with the increasingly militant Palestinians is possible. In their eyes, Israel will live or die by the sword. Like the ancient Hebrews, they intend to “smite” their foes. The killing of Shaikh Ahmad Yasin three weeks ago and of Dr. Abdel Aziz Rantisi yesterday are the latest examples of this policy.

For their part, the Arabs have always bitterly resented the loss of their land. They attribute western, particularly British, policy toward them to two causes: the first was the desire of the British government during the First World War to use the Zionist movement to keep Revolutionary Russia actively engaged and to subvert the German army. The second, they believe, is the desire of many Westerners to rid their societies of unwanted Jews. They point out that anti-Semitism is a Western, not an Arab disease. And they scoff at Jewish claims to Palestine, pointing out that if Jews had a historical claim on Palestine, such a claim was no stronger, at least chronologically, than the claim Europeans would have to lands in Central Asia from which their ancestors migrated about the same time as the Jewish diaspora from Palestine.

More causative of their actions, the Arabs, like the Jews, have been infected by the spirit of nationalism. Nationalism has been hammered into both Arabs and Jews by the bloody turmoil of the Twentieth century. The Arab diaspora too has created a longing for a mythic homeland, and their time in the wilderness of refugee camps, like Moses’s time in the desert, has created a new generation believing in its “sacred” mission to acquire that homeland.

If that is their strategic aim, tactically the Palestinians have found it virtually impossible to compromise. With the little they still have of the original Palestinian mandate, they are dependent upon Israel for almost everything they eat or drink. Feeling desperate, they strike out in the way even a cornered animal will. As the Royal Commissioners predicted in 1936, the situation can only get worse. Each tightening of the screw by the Israelis must increase their desperation. And, lacking other weapons to match those supplied by America to Israel, they will fight with what they have, even if that means personal suicide.

Clearly, employing “overwhelming force” in both Palestine and Iraq is likely to increase insecurity. Yet that is what both the American and Israeli governments seem determined to do.

The alternatives for Israel and America are, in principle, simple: allow the Palestinians a state and get out of Iraq. Allowing self-determination is the only feasible solution. But implementation is complex. It is also problematic. Worse, it poses the worst of dangers to

politicians: they would have to concede the failure of their policies. Sharon is temperamentally and ideologically unlikely to do this while President Bush must believe that his chance of re-election rides on avoiding apparent failure in Iraq.

Thus, as the tragic events unfold in both Iraq and Palestine, we are unlikely to see increased security and almost certainly unlikely to see "peace." Rather, the resort of force will provoke responses that will kill many and make even larger numbers on all four sides – the Israelis and Palestinians and the Americans and Iraqis -- even less likely to experiment with moves toward peace. Perhaps even more significant over the coming months are the likely spread of the view that the wars in Palestine and Iraq are aspects of the same Western hostility to Arabs and Muslims. Then indeed we will live in a world of crusades in which all of us become targets.

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