[beirut calling]

Ominous Precedent

As Israel learned in Lebanon, military victory does not guarantee political success.

By Michael Desch

WITH COALITION FORCES now in control of Baghdad and much of the rest of Iraq, Saddam Hussein's odious regime is finished. As expected, the United States and its allies have achieved most of their military objectives. But will they be able to attain their overarching political goals as well? Israel's experience in Lebanon 20 years ago suggests that it is possible thoroughly to defeat one's adversary on the battlefield yet still not win the war. Similarities between Israel's Lebanon war and our war in Iraq raise concern that we might also find it difficult to turn military success into political triumph. Given the parallels, it is worth pondering Israel's disastrous experience in Lebanon as we consider the challenges the United States faces in post-Saddam Iraq.

Israel's Lebanon war and the U.S. war in Iraq are alike in at least four respects. Proponents of both wars regarded them as parts of larger plans to change fundamentally the strategic landscape in the Middle East. Advocates of each took liberties with the truth in making their cases for war. Both the Israelis and the Americans made some questionable alliances in the course of their wars. And finally, both sought to implement major political transformations in deeply divided societies.

The ostensible motive for Israel's June 1982 invasion of Lebanon was to drive Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) forces away from Israel's border and to eliminate the threat to its northern settlements. In reality, Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, the architect of the Lebanon war, envisioned the Israeli military campaign in Lebanon as one part of his ambitious scheme to deprive the PLO of its last base in a state bordering Israel, to reduce PLO leader Yasser Arafat's role as the symbol of Palestinian nationalism for the Arabs of the West Bank and Gaza, to topple the Hashemite kingdom in Jordan and transform it into the Palestinian homeland, to end Syrian hegemony in Lebanon, and to install a friendly Christian government in Beirut that would sign a peace treaty with the Jewish state.

The Lebanon war began auspiciously with Israel winning a series of quick and decisive military victories. In eastern Lebanon, the Israelis drove the Syrians north of the Beirut-Damascus Highway in the process inflicting a lop-sided defeat. The air battles over the Bekka Valley cost the Syrians nearly 100 planes without the Israelis losing even one of their own. In south Lebanon, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) had little trouble routing PLO fighters and forcing the survivors to retreat in disorder to Beirut. These two campaigns were over in a

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matter of days with the IDF suffering only minimal casualties. Most observers thought that Israel was on the verge of winning yet another stunning military victory against the Arabs, on a par with those of 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973.

It quickly became evident, however, that the Israelis were having difficulty consolidating their initial military gains.
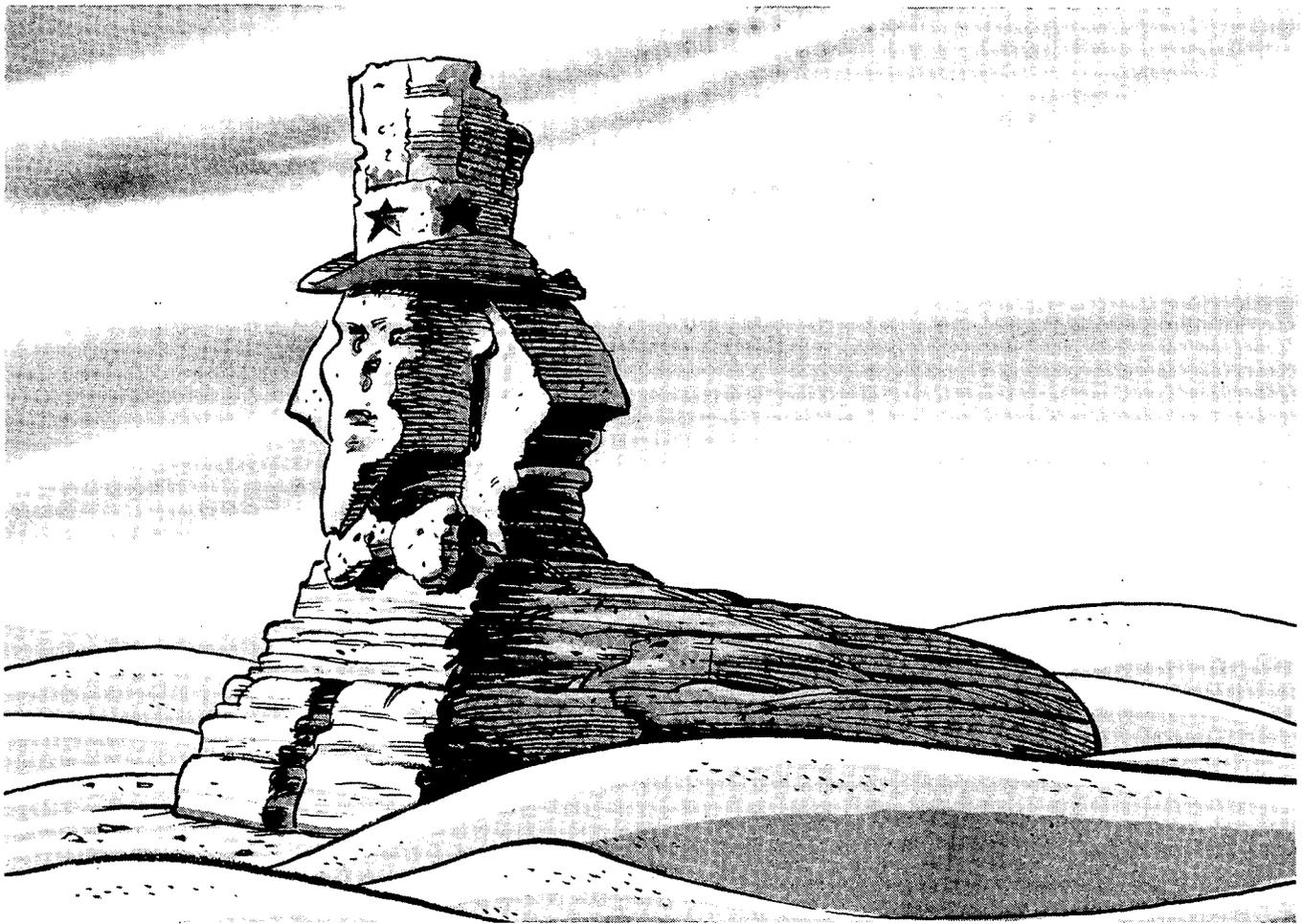
Despite the defeats they inflicted upon the Syrians, the Israelis never drove them completely out of Lebanon. PLO forces hunkered down in Beirut, and Israeli troops were reluctant to engage them in the city, fearing prolonged and bloody fighting in its streets. Instead, the IDF and its Lebanese Christian allies surrounded West Beirut and tried to reduce Arafat's last redoubt by artillery barrages and air strikes. They inflicted little damage on PLO fighters but caused great suffering among innocent civilians.

Israel also lost the war for public opinion. As Israeli casualties mounted and it became clear that the invasion was more than just a limited operation intended to drive PLO forces out of artillery range of the northern frontier settlements, the Israeli public soon tired of the war. Daily press reports of civilian casualties in the besieged Lebanese capital turned international public opinion against Israel. Arafat and his remaining PLO fighters defied the Israelis and held out in Beirut for over two months, earn-ing sympathy and respect from many quarters before finally agreeing to evac-uate Beirut for Tunisia.

Even though they won a series of mil-itary victories, the Israelis achieved none of their larger political objectives in Leb-anon. They were unable to install a pro-Israel regime. Neither did they succeed in reducing Syrian influence in Lebanon. And as a result of his defiance of the IDF during the siege of Beirut, Arafat en-hanced his stature as leader of the Pales-tinian independence movement. In the final analysis, the war in Lebanon and the subsequent occupation cost Israel near-ly 1,000 killed and over 1,200 wounded, all to no avail.

It is important for Americans to re-member Israel's experience in Lebanon because it bears uncanny resemblance to our own predicament in Iraq.

Israel's Lebanon war and the U.S. war in Iraq were originally conceived as the first phases of far-reaching schemes to reorder the political situation in the Mid-dle East. Sharon's grand plan involved social engineering on a massive scale in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and among the Palestinians. His effort to solve all of Israel's strategic problems by installing a pro-Israel regime in Lebanon was as breathtaking in ambition as it was flawed in conception.

Iraq's role in a possible U.S. plan to change the strategic landscape of the Middle East was revealed in a July 10, 2002 RAND Corporation briefing pre-sented to Richard Perle's Defense Policy Board, the blue-ribbon advisory panel to the Secretary of Defense. At its core was a democratic version of the domino the-ory that cast the toppling of Saddam Hussein and the establishment of a pro-Western, democratic regime in Iraq as the initial step in a process that would pressure Saudi Arabia and Egypt to reform and solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by forcing the Palestinian Authority to jettison Arafat and democra-tize. Neoconservatives like James Wool-sey characterize our war against Sad-dam as the opening campaign in World

War IV. While administration spokesmen have been more circumspect than hawks outside government, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's recent warnings to Syria and Iran sound ominously like pretexts for future action against those regimes.

Both wars were also justified in part by obfuscation, deception, and outright lies. Sharon and Likud Prime Minister Menachem Begin used the assassination attempt on Israel's Ambassador in London, Shlomo Agrov, as the pretext for their invasion of Lebanon—even though Israeli intelligence had informed them that it was carried out not by Arafat's Lebanon-based PLO but by the anti-Arafat Abu Nidal group. Sharon also concealed from the Israeli Cabinet and public the fact that his plan envisioned an Israeli drive into Lebanon well beyond the 40-kilometer buffer zone he claimed to be establishing to secure Israel's northern settlements. Sharon further deceived his colleagues in government and his fellow citizens about his intention to provoke a fight with the Syrian forces in Lebanon. Finally, he lied about his knowledge of, and even complicity in, the Christian Phalange massacres in the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla.

unfounded claims. Initially, they peddled stories that 9/11 ringleader Mohamed Atta met with an Iraqi intelligence officer in Prague before the attacks. When those claims were discredited by the Czech government, they turned tenuous connections between Baghdad and an al-Qaeda-linked fundamentalist group —Ansar al Islam—based in the Kurdish-controlled region into the "smoking gun" that Saddam and Osama bin Ladin were working hand-in-glove. Without directly imputing Iraqi involvement in the attacks, Bush administration officials regularly cite 9/11 as the rationale for disarming Iraq of weapons of mass destruction. This strategy of subliminal suggestion has succeeded: a recent *Los Angeles Times* poll found that eight out of ten Americans believed there was an Iraq/al-Qaeda "axis of evil" that justified the war with Iraq.

In both wars, the Israelis and the Americans counted upon allies of dubious reliability. Begin and Sharon both thought that Lebanon's Maronite Christian minority—particularly the Phalange Party—could serve as Israeli proxies. But after the assassination of Phalange leader Bashir Gemayel on Sept. 14, 1982, his brother Amin reneged on all his pre-

ments for Saddam and his Ba'athist Party. Neither the State Department nor the Central Intelligence Agency, however, regard the INC as either a credible source of information or a viable post-Saddam political force.

Both wars also sought to impose new regimes on fractious and deeply divided societies. Lebanon was a multi-confessional democracy made up of Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims, Druze, and Christians. Its precarious political equilibrium collapsed into civil war in the early 1970s with the arrival of large numbers of Palestinians from Jordan. The civil war drew in the Syrian Army, which could only impose a very fragile order. It is not surprising that Israel subsequently had no success in unifying Lebanon under the Christian minority.

Iraq is also a country deeply divided along religious (Sunni versus Shi'ite Muslim) and ethnic (Arab versus Kurd) lines. Saddam's ruthless dictatorship had to put down Kurdish and Shi'ite rebellions against the regime of his Sunni-Arab-dominated Ba'ath Party. Any post-Saddam regime we install will undoubtedly have to meet the challenges of managing these intractable religious and ethnic differences.

While the United States has won a major military victory in Iraq, difficult tasks remain: we must bring the war to a close quickly and with little additional bloodshed, keep Iraq's restive ethnic groups from killing each other or breaking away, establish a stable democratic regime in Baghdad, and preserve regional stability. To accomplish even a few of these tasks will be a challenge.

Large numbers of Iraqi soldiers— Republican Guard, Special Republican Guard, Fedayeen Saddam, and members of the various security services—remain at large. These Iraqis were no match for coalition forces in conventional combat in the open desert. They demonstrated, though, that by waging guerrilla warfare

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Hawks in the Bush administration have assiduously cultivated the myth that Saddam's regime was somehow implicated in the al-Qaeda-sponsored attacks on the United States on Sept. 11 to gain public support for war against Iraq. In so doing, they politicized the U.S. intelligence community and polluted the public debate with a series of misleading or

decessor's commitment to co-operate with Israel. There is plenty of evidence that even if he had lived, Bashir would not have been a very reliable ally for the Jewish state.

Hawks in the Pentagon tout the exiled Iraqi National Congress (INC) and its leader Ahmed Chalabi as sources of reliable intelligence and potential replace-

in the cities of Umm Qasr, Nasariyah, Najaf, Karbala, and Basra they could drag out the conflict and inflict casualties. Should large numbers continue to resist in Baghdad or other parts of the country, they could further prolong the war and raise its human toll on both sides. The coalition has won a remarkable victory, but more fighting may be ahead.

The ethnic mix in Iraq is volatile. The Kurds have long suffered under Arab oppression and are not likely to forgive and forget. They are also divided into competing factions that did not get along well before the war and are unlikely to resolve their differences any time soon. The Sunni and Shi'ite Arabs have such a long history of bitter conflict that many scores will undoubtedly be settled in the coming weeks and months. Preventing ethnic conflict and secession in post-Saddam Iraq will be difficult.

There is no credible democratic political movement inside Iraq that we can turn power over to any time soon. The external Iraqi opposition is divided and lacks a constituency in the country. Moreover, the prospects for establishing a stable democratic regime in Iraq are poor: the country has few, if any, of the economic, political, and cultural prerequisites for the emergence of a stable democratic political system.

Finally, Iraq's borders are rife with potential conflicts. Even before the war the ethnic politics of Iraq complicated the war effort. The Turks refused to let U.S. forces operate from their territory unless the United States allowed them to deploy troops in the Kurdish region of Iraq to ensure that Kurdish separatism did not spill over the border into Turkey. Both Syria and Iran are wary of the coalition's future intentions and may support anti-American factions in Iraq to keep us bogged down there.

Given the magnitude of the challenges we face in post-Saddam Iraq, we may find that fighting the war was easier than winning the peace. If we want to avoid Israel's 1982 fate in our current war in Iraq, we need to take to heart certain lessons from its political failure in Lebanon.

Israel suffered more casualties in Lebanon after the PLO departed than it did during the war. Just because the Iraqi Army and Republican Guard have been defeated does not mean we will not continue to face resistance from paramilitaries and other irregulars. The pro-Saddam complexion of these forces will probably fade but could be replaced with a criminal or warlord orientation. Suicide bombing, the weapon of choice for weaker powers in the Middle East, made its debut against the Israelis in Lebanon. U.S. forces have already been attacked in this way and should expect more of it in the future.

Israel foundered in Lebanon in part because Sharon and Begin allied with the Maronites against the advice of many of their intelligence advisors and other experts on Lebanon. We would be unwise to depend upon unreliable allies like the Iraqi National Congress. They were of little value to us before the war, and there is scant reason to think that they will become any more reliable in the future.

Just as the Israelis discovered that military victory in Lebanon did not solve the rest of their security problems, we need to realize that our military victory in Iraq will be no panacea. The biggest problem the United States faces in the region is not the corrupt regimes in moderate, pro-U.S. Arab states like Egypt or Saudi Arabia but the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We should focus on resolving it through the prompt implementation of the "road map."

The Israelis overestimated their ability to reshape Lebanon's domestic political system in their favor. Iraq's political soil is not fertile, and so it is unlikely that the seeds of democracy and stability we

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plant will grow easily. We need to be realistic about the prospects for nation-building and other forms of international social engineering in Iraq.

Finally, the Israelis were welcomed by the Lebanese Shi'ites as liberators in June but reviled as oppressors by September 1982. We should not make the mistake of believing that just because Iraqis hate Saddam, they will love us. Nationalism and self-determination are powerful ideological forces in the Middle East, as they are around the world. Conquerors, especially those bringing freedom, are often welcomed, but liberators can quickly become hated occupiers. We need to be careful not to overstay our welcome in Iraq.

Niccolò Machiavelli wrote 500 years ago in *The Prince*, "There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things." The Israelis learned this the hard way in Lebanon. The United States may discover the same thing in Iraq. ■

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[james zogby]

An Arab-American Perspective

The Israeli-Palestinian question is still paramount.

Shortly before the war began, AC spoke with Dr. James Zogby, president and founder of the Arab-American Institute, a Washington-based organization devoted to making the views of Arab-Americans resonate more strongly in American politics. With the U.S. now committed to indefinite military involvement in the Middle East that will affect American ties with the Arab world at every level, it seemed appropriate to hear from one of the country's most prominent Arab-Americans.

After the Oslo Peace Accords were signed in 1993, Zogby was asked by Vice President Gore to head Builders for Peace, a private partnership promoting economic development on the West Bank. In 1994, Zogby, along with former Congressman Mel Levine (D-Calif.), led the U.S. delegation to the signing of the Israeli-Palestinian agreement in Cairo. Following are excerpts from our conversation:

AC: What do you think are the likely consequences of war? Will it unlock the door to democracy in the Arab world and be some springtime for peoples of the Middle East?

Zogby: I call that the neoconservative infantile fantasy. But theirs is not the only movement with infantile fantasies. Trostkyism was like that. Maoism was like that. Anarchism was like that. Religious fundamentalism is like that. The

notion that out of upheaval good things fall in place is the apocalyptic vision of good spontaneously coming out of chaos. I've always thought that we need to put these people on a couch and take notes.

Democracy is never formed out of a war. There have to be pre-conditions for democracy. In fact, I think the war's more likely outcome is that some countries in the Middle East, allies of ours, will become more repressive because their people will internalize the anger brought on by the war, and in order to stabilize the situation, the governments will have to crack down more. And sadly, we will probably support that crackdown.

AC: Let's assume the U.S. wins easily. Do you think that would open possibilities to restart the Israel-Palestinian peace talks?

Zogby: I think our allies in the region are worried that what we are going to do is establish military hegemony and leave them with the consequences. The question is are we going to stick around as all of these feuds begin, as all of these problems unfold, as all of these countries become destabilized? Can we have one foot in Afghanistan? One foot in Iraq? One foot in Pakistan and Jordan and maybe in the Gulf, in the North with Turkey and the Kurds, and still focus on the Israeli-Palestinian issue?

AC: What ramifications or consequences do you see this having on the peace process?

Zogby: There is no peace process anymore. This administration abandoned it early on and let the parties move on this downward spiral to unending violence that has poisoned the well on both sides. American leadership is nowhere to be found.

When the explosions began last year, the president had an opportunity and gave a speech that laid out some conditions to both sides: Sharon must do this and Arafat must do that. But two weeks later, after hearing public protests from Gary Bauer, Bill Bennett, and Ralph Reed, the president got scared off. To protect his base vote, he announced two weeks later that Sharon is a man of peace, and Arafat has got to go.

The result is that Sharon has been emboldened, Arafat has been discredited, and the policy that Likud laid out five years ago has practically been implemented. There is no Palestinian Authority on the ground. The only thing that remains is that while the Israelis have virtually devastated the West Bank and its infrastructure and Gaza and its infrastructure, they have not fully occupied the cities for a callous reason: they don't want to be paying for the civil administration. So what they've done is dig trenches, put their troops around them, periodically make entrances and demol-