

Watching the War from Israel

By Amos Carmel

ON MARCH 19, when the U.S.-led war in Iraq was launched, average Israelis, if one may posit such creatures, greeted the expected confrontation with mixed emotions. At least that was the impression one got from public discourse and the media.

As targets of Scud missiles in the 1991 Gulf War, Israelis worry about new conventional and unconventional missile offensives against the Jewish state, despite official assurances that the chances of this happening now are infinitesimal. As Middle Easterners, they have many reasons to hope for Saddam Hussein's replacement by a democratic government, but are apprehensive about the feasibility of the objective. As inhabitants of the global village, they are fully aware of the unspoken and spoken arguments for and against the U.S.-British attack on a nation belonging to the "axis of evil"; yet as citizens of a very small country greatly dependent upon the United States, they feel their relevant views have almost no influence on present events. And to some extent they wonder what the impact of the war will ultimately be on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Important chapters of Jewish history

unfolded in what is today called Iraq. It was from "Ur of the Chaldees" that Abraham, the Hebrew patriarch, set out with his family for the promised land of Canaan (Genesis 11:31). It was along the "canals of Babylon" (Psalms 137:1) that the first Jewish exiles lamented the destruction of Zion at the beginning of the sixth century BCE. Afterward, it was on the banks of the Euphrates and the Tigris that a vibrant community was formed which, over a few centuries, became the prime spiritual center of Judaism and the crucible of the Babylonian Talmud. But nothing associated with Iraq since its establishment as an independent nation in 1932 has any appeal in Jewish eyes.

In the years prior to World War II Iraqi nationalism flourished, and soon Baghdad was linking arms with Berlin. Once hostilities broke out at the end of 1939, the ruling Iraqi military junta's support of Hitler threatened British strategic interests. This prompted Britain to mount a brief, intense offensive in May 1941 that sent the junta fleeing abroad. It did not, however, prevent a pogrom that killed and tortured hundreds of Jews in Baghdad.

Although Iraq allowed its Jewish community, numbering over 100,000, to migrate (with virtually no assets) to the reborn Jewish state in the early 1950s, there has been no wavering from its call

for "obliterating Israel from the map." Iraq's various regimes have participated in every Arab military and economic effort to bring that about, beginning with the 1948 war to undo the United Nations resolution partitioning Palestine.

Saddam Hussein, the Iraq strongman since the start of the 1970s who officially assumed the reins of power in 1979, has negated Israel's existence throughout his career—when he became a Soviet ally and when he tried to approach the West, when he was a central partner of the Arab "refusal front" and when he left it, when he fought Iran and when he "appeased" it. Occasionally he has issued an ambiguous statement that could be interpreted as a shift in his rigid position. Mainly, though, he has maintained a course consistent with his early "religious" ruling that the struggle to defeat Zionism is a basic tenet of Islam. In May 1981, for example, he declared to a meeting of Muslim foreign ministers in Baghdad, "Holy Jerusalem is now under the hated Israeli occupation . . . as is all of the soil of Palestine." Less than two months ago he told veteran British Leftist Tony Benn: "The tension between the U.S.A. and Iraq is

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deeply rooted in the mere establishing of the State of Israel on the soil of Palestine, and in Zionist influence on the decisions of the American administration.”

A MAJOR milestone for Saddam, of course, has involved his pursuit of nuclear weapons. Iraq actually initiated this quest in 1959, right after a military revolt ousted the monarchy, but Saddam accelerated it. In the mid-1970s, he acquired a French 70 megawatt nuclear reactor named Osirak (later Tammuz) and installed it near Baghdad.

Israel’s military intelligence chief at the time, General Shlomo Gazit, has explained: “It was clear to us that Iraq did not need the reactor to satisfy a passion for scientific research, but in order to develop nuclear arms. This conclusion was based on reliable information and on sound analysis.” Maybe, too, on Saddam Hussein’s pronouncement in October 1979: “The struggle against Israel will be long and difficult. In its course, Israel may use the atom bomb against the Arabs. Therefore, the Arabs must prepare all the means for victory.” Obviously, he was implying an Iraqi nuclear bomb.

The degree of concern this aroused among Israel’s political elite was not uniform, nor was there a consensus about the best way to deal with the matter. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Menachem Begin persuaded his government to decide that the danger justified demolishing Tammuz. The consequent June 7, 1981 operation evoked a storm of international criticism that some observers believe accounted for Begin’s re-election a few weeks later. He then issued his “doctrine”: “We will not allow the enemy, under any circumstance, to develop a weapon of mass destruction against our people.”

Though there were Israelis who doubted that the doctrine would always be enforceable, practically all approved of its essence. Moreover, in the 1980s fear of the Arab dictator, who had gone far with his nuclearization program without concealing his objective—and who had unhesitatingly used chemical weapons inside Iraq against the Kurds, and outside against the Iranians—became a serious compo-

nent of the Israeli collective subconscious.

This component surfaced during the Gulf War. Even before Iraq invaded Kuwait, Saddam announced that Iraq was determined “to burn half of Israel by chemical means.” As war became imminent, he added promises to employ a mysterious “binary” weapon and ballistic missiles, and to send troops to Jordan to destabilize the region. So the Israeli government started to supply civilians with “protection kits” containing gas masks and atropine injectors. Inevitably, the connotations were bitter. The inventor and industrialist Felix Zandmann, who managed miraculously to survive the Holocaust, wrote in his recent memoir, “I felt almost as if I were returned to the ghetto, helpless, unable to fight back.”

His words referred not only to the danger Israelis faced, but also to the unique political-strategic situation imposed upon them. While organizing a multinational coalition against Iraq that included most Arab nations, Washington demanded Israeli restraint, regardless of Saddam’s provocations, to keep the fragile alliance from falling apart. In the event, Israel suffered 39 hits from Scud missiles equipped with “normal” warheads—without “disturbing” U.S. policy, and without responding to internal pressures.

Two Israelis were killed by Scuds, and 1,200 apartments were destroyed. In addition, there were deaths caused by heart attacks as well as problems with gas masks, and there was panic caused by such disturbances as families fleeing greater Tel Aviv, the main target of the missiles. “Our restraint was indicative of our strength,” Prime Minister Yitzchak Shamir would say. Others argued that the civilian panic was one of the factors that moved Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin to accept the Oslo accords in the summer of 1993. Whatever the case, the memory of that traumatic experience 12 years ago, plus the knowledge that Saddam Hussein has no inhibitions—and the fact that the Gulf War left behind a host of unsolved problems—is strikingly evident in the public dialogue here regarding the war with Iraq.

Somewhat paradoxically, at the far Left end of this dialogue a relative handful of politicians, academics and journalists

lament what they term the “nondiscussion” of pressing issues related to the U.S.’ invasion and plan to change Iraq’s regime. Several even contend that the indifference they perceive is rooted in “something Jewish from the ghetto” (to use the words of Uri Avneri, leader of the tiny radical Gush Shalom group), or is a reflection of “totalitarian thinking” (to quote Meretz Party Knesset member Roman Bronfman) that heralds the rapid demise of Israeli democracy.

But in truth there is hardly a single aspect of what is transpiring in Iraq that is not constantly discussed publicly. Those who claim otherwise represent extreme positions connected with their Leftist view that Israel is wholly responsible for the Palestinian conflict. They are angry with U.S. administrations generally, and the current one specifically, for not having imposed a full Israeli withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 lines. They say they believe Prime Minister Ariel Sharon urged President George W. Bush to rush into war, because he hoped or assumed Israel would then be given a free hand to take any action it pleased in the West Bank and Gaza, including a mass transfer of Palestinians to Arab countries. These circles dismiss the possibility that Saddam Hussein has indeed accumulated weapons of mass destruction since the Gulf War. Nor are they critical of the blatant anti-Israel and anti-Jewish propaganda that has marked so many of the huge antiwar demonstrations around the world. On the contrary, they may agree with it.

AT THE opposite end of the political spectrum one finds justification of the U.S. offensive, based less on local than on historical-universal grounds. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon recently told Knesset members of his Likud Party: “It’s impossible to free one’s self from the feeling that if in Europe, in the 1930s, there had similarly been such a leader [like Bush], it is possible that ... we, the Jewish nation, would not have paid the terrible price of losing 6 million people.”

That has also been the thrust of two prominent writers who are traditional Labor Party people. Right after the world-

wide antiwar demonstrations in mid-February, Yoram Kaniuk wrote: "France, Germany, Belgium, the Arabs, the Russians, and all the others will perhaps really succeed in putting evil America in its proper place and stopping a war aimed at defeating one of the most contemptible tyrants known to the world today. ... The 'peace camp' has done it before. ... [It] fought against America and created a spiritual alliance with the Soviet Union that legitimized Stalin's murder of millions. ... Wars against tyranny are just wars even if justice and war don't seem to go together."

And Aharon Megeg wrote: "This intensive resistance to war against a regime of cruel tyranny, on the part of elements thought to be democratic and humanist, reminds one of the bitter experience in the early days of World War II. Then, too, there was a great movement of 'good-will people' in



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the West, people who preached and even demonstrated against fighting Hitler, in the name of 'peace.' ... If the demonstrators are motivated by humanistic emotions alone ... why don't they protest the murders commissioned by extremist Muslims in Algeria? Is it far from the truth to assume that one of the main motives of the demonstrations is fear of the increasing power of Islam in the West?"

Between the two poles there is extensive debate of a broad range of questions. For instance: Do the long oppressed Iraqis deserve to suffer a war against their awful dictator? Is he so dangerous that a war to oust him is worth the disintegration of the Western alliance and the further decline of the UN even as an international forum? Isn't Israel taking too great a risk by identifying with the U.S. and thereby implying a breakup with Europe?

But the most discussed question seems to be: Do Bush and his advisers really know what they have gotten into in Iraq? Israeli observers across the spectrum are

skeptical. Some note that, America's enormous might notwithstanding, the targets of war as presented will require complex military activity within dense urban populations. The killing of Iraqi citizens beyond a critical level, an Iraqi ambush that costs U.S. lives beyond a (presumably different) critical level, the burning of oil fields, a desperate decision by Saddam Hussein to engage in chemical and biological warfare, a megaterrorist act far from the battlefield, meteorological troubles on the battlefield itself—all these could jam the wheels of the American war machine.

Others caution that even a relatively swift victory will not assure a palatable political arrangement in Iraq. Given the absence of democracy in the surrounding Arab and Muslim world, and the Iraqis' extended compliance with totalitarianism, they reason, the odds of an unpopular conquering superpower quickly convincing them to adopt Western norms of life do not appear high.

Demography, Israelis point out, doesn't help in this case either. Iraq is composed roughly of 55 per cent Shi'ite Arabs, 22 per cent Sunni Arabs (the sect of Saddam Hussein and his clan), 20 per cent Sunni Kurds—three mutually hostile sects—and a few small minorities. The mixture does not exactly suggest rapid, comfortable or stable democratic reform. Tensions between Iraq and Iran on the one hand, and the Kurdish problem that agitates both Turkey and Iran on the other, are cited as additional complications.

Thus there are serious doubts here about whether the United States has the patience necessary to cope with this barrel of explosives so far from home, and from the immediate interest of American voters. Furthermore, the series of U.S. diplomatic failures in recruiting old allies to the war in Iraq is viewed as a dangerous sign for the anticipated scenario in a defeated country riven by internal conflicts.

THOSE AND OTHER heavy concerns may explain the Israeli public's fairly low degree of attention at present to the war's potential effect on the Israeli-Palestinian stalemate. Yes, President Bush has announced that "success in Iraq could ... set in motion progress toward a truly democratic Palestinian state." He has also indicated that Yasir Arafat would be the next to go after the passing of Saddam Hussein (in his words, the constructive Palestinians "will be in better position to choose new leaders"). And no one can forget the political initiatives in the Middle East after the Gulf War that resulted in the Madrid peace conference. But George Bush senior was able to present a definite achievement—the expulsion of the Iraqi invaders from Kuwait—and to ignore the massive bloodshed that broke out inside Iraq. Now, even Israeli observers see that George W. Bush may himself be bogged down in a murky situation which can hardly be used as a lever to promote his "road map," especially with the 2004 U.S. Presidential elections looming on the horizon. Small wonder, then, that Israelis find it difficult at this juncture to discuss details of the region's future.

The thinking in Israel the night the bombs began falling on Baghdad—again, if one may generalize—was perhaps best captured weeks earlier in an editorial in *Ha'aretz*, the country's leading liberal newspaper: "Israel, being in a region saturated with threats, must weigh the balance of profit and loss, chances and risks, due to the continued existence of a nuclearized totalitarian regime, against a military blow which could rid the world of him ... help Jordan and moderates in the Palestinian leadership, and clarify to Iran, Syria and the Hezbollah the price of ongoing hostility toward the U.S. and Israel at the expense of damage to regional stability. In this situation, the scales tip in the direction of Israeli support of the policy of Bush and [Secretary of State Colin L.] Powell."

Realistic Israelis, whatever their reservations, agree with that conclusion. As one columnist put it: "We have to choose between bad and worse, and the choice now is clear."

