

Exit Strategy for Iraq: Success of the Referendum is the first step

BY BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

THERE is a song in the 1970s by Joni Mitchell that, “ You don’t know what you’ve got till it is gone”. It seems that the song has come back again in the US. It is a lament for the lost tranquility of American life before the Iraqi war.

The Iraqi war has, to many Americans, demonstrated the display, not of mighty military power of their country, but of its limitations to influence course of events in Iraq that President Bush wants. The conflict reveals even a superpower with weapons of “shock and awe” can get bogged down to a guerrilla war for a prolonged period.

For a long haul in Iraq

In recent days, the US Secretary of State Dr. Condoleezza Rice had gone through a two and half hour intense questioning by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Most of the queries focused on Iraq, with Democrats and Republican Senators pressing Dr. Rice on whether the Administration had an exit strategy or a strategy for victory over the insurgency.

Dr. Rice reportedly replied: “ I have said our strategy is to hold and build. The enemy’s strategy is to infect, terrorise and pull down. Any decision to draw down the number of US forces in Iraq has to be result-based, not time-based.”

Most of the Senators reportedly seemed unconvinced. The Committee Chairman, Richard Lugar, a Republican, told Dr. Rice: “ The American people need to more fully understand the basis upon which our troops are likely to come home.”

Many Republic Senators are not fully supportive of some of the President’s decisions. They remain vocal and an embarrassment for the President. For example, the Republican chairman of the Judiciary Committee, Arlen Specter, was not satisfied with the credentials of Harriet Miers, President’s nominee for the Supreme Court.

Conservatives (vote Bank of the President) are critical of President’s nomination for the highest court of the land as she has no experience as a judge and they harbour doubts about her commitment to the anti-abortion issue.

Past Mistakes by the US in Iraq

Initially, the Bush administration through its pro-consul Paul Bremer banned Saddam army’s role in new Iraq and by doing so created unnecessarily a large number of implacable well-armed foes who had no interest in seeing the country stabilised. In fact they joined the insurgency led by non-state actors and the chief happens to be a Jordanian born Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. He has been as elusive as Osama Bin Laden, his mentor.

Furthermore, the traditional role of Iraqi tribal leaders has been marginalised by the US occupation. There has been much anger among them and they are not helping the situation.

The occupation divided the Shi’ites, Sunnis and Kurds by deliberate policy of wooing the Shi’ites and Kurds. All Sunnis were considered as supporters of Saddam Hussein and had no say in new



In the given situation, a tentative plan of an exit strategy has reportedly occupied the minds of US leaders. One of the much-talked about strategies is to open a secret line of negotiation with insurgents. It is reported that the Iraqi government has kept the line open with insurgents for a negotiated settlement to bring on board many of their leaders to play domestic political role in the country, although they publicly deny it. A year before the first American combat troops arrived in Vietnam, US President Lyndon Baines Johnson, was told by his mentor, Senator Richard Russell, that he saw no way out of the worsening mess in Vietnam: “the more we try to do for them, the less they’re willing to do for themselves.”

Iraq. This has alienated the Sunnis who are more than 25% per cent of the population.

Success of Referendum Crucial

The statement of the US Secretary of State before the Senate Committee demonstrates that the Bush administration is hoping that the successful outcome of the October 15 referendum will lead to a permanent Iraqi government in December that in turn will restore stability.

The referendum by and large took place in peaceful conditions and about 60% per cent voters have cast their ballots. Under the interim Constitution, if any three provinces out of total eighteen head rejected the draft Constitution by two-thirds majority, the whole process would have gone back to the drawing board again.

This would have meant not only the rejection of the draft Constitution but also the dissolution of the Parliament. Fresh election had had to be held to elect members of Parliament. This would have signaled a great danger for the US as the insurgency would intensify in a political vacuum.

As it stands, the draft constitution has been endorsed as had been predicted by the media and the Iraqi leadership particularly by the Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshar Zebari.

Sunni “No” campaigners had hoped to block it by taking two-thirds of the vote in at least three provinces, in line with electoral rules. But they won in only two, with the swing province of Nineveh returning 44% “Yes” votes, according to official count.

Catch 22 Situation

The US faces the Catch 22 situation. If they pull out its forces from Iraq, insurgency is more likely to intensify and they will lose face before the international community. If they don’t, US presence will remain the insurgency’s most potent recruiting tool beyond the region.

The difficulty of US presence in Iraq is that the Vietnam War was lost partly because of sharp divisions over the conflict in the US. Many political analysts confess to an “uneasy feeling” that some of those same factors are re-emerging in the US in the on-going conflict in Iraq.

The President came to the White House after “the scandal of the Clinton era” with a promise of honesty, transparency and justice. Reportedly, the President retires to bed by 9 PM, does not drink alcohol, reads his Bible and often joins friends and prays together. That daily routine sounds fantastic for the President before conservative Americans.

However, his second term has been

plagued by scandals that he wanted to avoid. The scandals relate to situations where the House Republic majority leader and a close aide of the President, Tom Delay, the “hammer”, had been indicted on corruption and conspiracy charges, where the Senate Republican majority leader Bill Frist, was being investigated over insider share trading.

Furthermore, when the CIA leak investigation by the special prosecutor, Patrick Fitzgerald, had extended to the most senior White House officials (architect of Bush’s 2004 campaign, Karl Rove and Cheney’s chief of staff Lewis Libby), including the Vice-President, Dick Cheney. The White House will be seriously weakened if Karl Rove is forced out of the White House.

The President has dismissed the scandals as “background noise” and he will not be distracted to do his duties as President.

New Strategy

Belatedly the US military and political leaders realize that Iraq’s stability will depend on internal forces, not on external ones. Local ownership, consensus and the commitment of local resources are vital for its stability.

Many political observers believe that Americans and foreign allies will not be able to bring insurgency to an end because their presence in Iraq is part of

the problem. The insurgency can come to an end if the Iraqi government strikes a political deal with insurgents.

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Although analogy of a situation is difficult to apply to another situation, some say that the Vietnam analogy applies to the current conflict in Iraq.

The ultimate test of Bush’s statecraft rests on as to how to plan an exit strategy for Iraq, without compromising America’s honour in the eyes of the international community.

The author is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Iraq is on meltdown

If that happens Americans will be able to smile for the first time over the agonies of Iraq and soon see the end of the tunnel. But peace in the immediate future will be like delusion in the desert. Americans are not a shy nation and in a deadly war. They are already dividing Iraq on ethnic and sectarian line through constitutional manoeuvre. Next will be to encourage the Sunnis to play the due political role while making splinter insurgents fight among themselves. War has no law and little principle.

BRIG GEN (RETD) JAHANGIR KABIR, ndc, psc

After blunders, arrogance and costly delays a draft constitution and referendum has finally been unfolded as per grand American design in Iraq. It took few daylight hours to complete the hugely risky voting but why so many days were taken to announce the result is not clear. After all, counting could not be more hazardous and time consuming than conducting the referendum on that volatile land. The occupation forces amazingly continue to be prone to mistakes. The Americans remain suspect in Iraq. Delay in announcing the result only reinforced that suspicion.

The restive Sunni community who is waging a fierce struggle might not have approved the draft constitution if they cared to vote. Initial result of Sunni dominated Salaheddin province reported to be 71% negative, enough for rumour mills to put the whole referendum in the dock. Timing is so important in matters of public confidence. Only negative result has its credibility intact after such a costly delay. Hope for peace is fading, worst fears are gripping Iraq.

Kurds in the hilly northern region has adopted a tactical position of relative restraint to politically gain more under the tutelage of occupation forces. Shiites with their majority are showing patience to legitimise political ascendancy in the proposed democracy. Both majority Shiites and ethnic Kurds have reasons to be suspicious. But the deprived communities are set to gain in the crisis at the cost of age-old privileges of minority Sunnis. To that end politically repressed Shiites and Kurds are collaborating with the occupation forces.

Sensing marginalisation, Sunnis are fighting and exploding their bodies for the desired destabilisation. Their focus is however on the occupation forces and all those who are cooperating with the interim arrangement. Iraq is occupied but not guilty of war crimes like defeated Japan and Germany following Second World War. Sunnis are not ready to accept a constitution from the victorious generals.

Back then when Saddam had committed the alleged crimes he was not a bad guy really. After he has been forced to be a fall guy he is now charged. In war the vanquished is always guilty of framed charges. Trial may be a diversionary move to take the attention out of the vitally important referendum. Defeated Saddam is history now, at the most a dancing doll to the whim of the captors. The trial of Saddam is no more legal than the occupation of Iraq.

Minority Sunnis ruled Iraq for eighty years under various forms of government, from absolute monarchy to ruthless dictatorship under Saddam. Fairness was not questioned then. A century old vested interests and generations of doled out privileges are threatened overnight by occupation forces. Therein lies the pathological hatred of Arab Sunnis for the Americans in Iraq. Kurds, Shiites and the occupation forces are joining hands to isolate, divide and fight the Sunnis. A combination of carrot, stick and divide and rule doctrine is in play for the Sunni Arabs in particular and others in general. Iraq is on meltdown, most likely a transition from war to civil war. Threat is looming evermore menacingly. It is difficult to assess at this stage how it is going to affect other improvised Arab neighbours.

The first apparent thrust of American policy

appears to drive a wedge between Al Qaeda inspired most violent insurgents and the nationalist forces. Al Qaeda no 2 Ayman al Zawari’s intercepted letter asking not to target mosques and congregations are signs that all the resistance forces are not pursuing a uniform policy. The insurgent leadership is splintered in various groups and shades. Without centralised command and policy framework violence is still possible but the political objective is difficult to achieve. It is not entirely unimaginable that the steam of fragmented Sunni resistance will get loosely synchronised, but most likely they will plummet under combined pressure.

If that happens Americans will be able to smile for the first time over the agonies of Iraq and soon see the end of the tunnel. But peace in the immediate future will be like delusion in the desert. Americans are not a shy nation and in a deadly war. They are already dividing Iraq on ethnic and sectarian line through constitutional manoeuvre. Next will be to encourage the Sunnis to play the due political role while making splinter insurgents fight among themselves. War has no law and little principle. If it was not so Americans should not be in Iraq in the first place. The United States has already taken a stand in Iraq that politics is not always made by the rules of grammar. But it will be foolhardy to ignore that Arabs all over are deeply frustrated with the American policies. If Palestine is not enough, arrogance of power has created in Iraq another cancer for the Middle East. The challenge will be ever more for the Americans in the restive Muslim countries.

With 2000 Americans already dead, war and the credibility of President Bush is at the lowest ebb. The US President must be a worried politician; but much more nervous are his fellow Republicans. If elections are held today fewer republicans will return to their offices. War in Iraq is increasingly turning into a political liability.

But America is not isolated like the erstwhile USSR in Afghanistan. There is no visible source of supply & replenishment for the Iraqi insurgents. Internationally, no political or institutional support for the resistance forces is seen; faint noises in the intellectual circles are close to inconsequence.

What is the moral standing of American in adopting such a mean policy?

First, circumstances will unfold the tragedy without Americans asking for it. For the satisfaction of the conscious world the Americans are ready to oppose internecine warfare with eye-catching diversions, but not really to stop it. What else the forlorn super power can do now! To satisfy the long arm of strategy and commercial mission in the Middle East the tight rope of ‘divide and let them fight’ is the cheapest available option in spite of inherent dangers of boomerang. It is impossible for the Americans to withdraw from Iraq without offering democracy. Unfortunately, democracy and constitutionalism is plunging the restive Iraqis into a civil strife. That’s what happens when an impatient Goliath rams dozers through a perennially ill society.

At times I carry a feeling that the technology driven Americans have little patience for the complex human minds.

The author is a freelancer.

War criminal hunter Simon Wiesenthal dies aged 96

BILLY T’ AHMED

SIMON Wiesenthal was born on December 13, 1908, in Buczacz. An architectural engineer by training received his degree in 1932. Wiesenthal married Cyla Mueller in 1936, who bore him a daughter Pauline. The two settled in Lvov, Poland until the German invasion in 1939, at the outbreak of Second World War.

As a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Soviet Union occupied Lvov. Wiesenthal’s stepfather and stepbrother were killed at the hands of the NKVD, the Soviet Secret Police, and Wiesenthal himself was forced to close his firm and work in a factory.

When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, Wiesenthal and his family became hostages of the Nazi. Wiesenthal’s wife was able to hide her Jewish identity from the Nazis because of her blonde hair and the false papers provided to her by the Polish Underground in exchange for diagrams of railroad junctions drawn by Wiesenthal. However, Simon was not so fortunate. He was interned in twelve concentration camps; here he barely escaped execution a number of occasions.

Six million Jews were murdered in

the Nazi death camps of World War II, along with thousands of Gypsies, disabled people and political dissidents.

Wiesenthal was liberated by US troops in May 1945 from Mauthausen death camp in Austria.

He was 37 years old weighed less than 100 pounds in frail health when freed. Shortly after Wiesenthal health improved, he went to work for the US Army gathering information for the Nazi crime trails.

In 1947 he and thirty other volunteers founded the Jewish Documentation Center in Linz, Austria, in order to gather information for future trials. With passage of time the trails of the war crimes began fading; both US and the Soviet Union lost interest. This led the volunteers to wander; yet Wiesenthal stuck to his pursue to track the war criminals. He worked relentlessly for sixty years most of the time globetrotting to find the Nazi fugitives.

In the 1950s, Mr. Wiesenthal helped to track down Eichmann, a Nazi bureaucrat and one of the chief architects of Adolf Hitler’s Final Solution targeted to exterminate the Jews, in Argentina.

Five years latter, meticulous



investigating work contributed by Wiesenthal, Mossad agent arrested Eichmann in Argentina and took him to Jerusalem for trial and latter executed in 1961.

He was one of some 6,000 cases that Wiesenthal has investigated, of which 1,100 Nazis were brought to justice.

Wiesenthal’s work also led to the

capture of the Nazi head of the Treblinka death camp, and of the Nazi officer who arrested the Dutch teenager Anne Frank. The officer was working as a Vienna policeman when

Wiesenthal unmasked him. Then, Hermine Braunsteiner, a housewife living in Queens, New York who had supervised the murder of hundreds of children during the war was arrested.

In the early 1970s, Wiesenthal unmasked several Austrian cabinet members as former Nazi party members. He exposed Friedrich Peter, then leader of the rightwing Freedom party, as a former SS officer. In a country then in utter denial about its complicity in Nazism, the response was venomous. Bruno Kreisky, Austria’s Social Democrat and Jewish chancellor, dubbed Wiesenthal public enemy number one, and libelled him as a Nazi collaborator. Wiesenthal sued the chancellor and eventually won damages.

Wiesenthal’s dedication to justice went beyond the Holocaust and acts of anti-Semitism. He was an active supporter of dissidents around the world, including the late Soviet physicist Andrei Sakharov and the Dalai Lama. In 1977 Rabbi Abraham Cooper and Canadian Rabbi Marvin Hoir sought Wiesenthal permission to lend his name to the LA based centre they were planning to launch. He agreed but with one condition:

that the organisation not simply address Jewish issues, but human right concerns on an international scale as well.

Simon Wiesenthal’s achievements are acknowledged by a host of awards and accolades, from the Dutch Freedom Medal to the US Congressional Gold Medal to UN League for the Help of Refugees Award.

Wiesenthal had received many death threats and, in 1982, a bomb placed by German and Austrian neo-Nazis exploded outside his house in Vienna.

In April 2003, Wiesenthal announced his retirement, saying that he had found the mass murderers he had been looking for: “I have survived them all. If there were any left, they’d be too old and weak to stand trial today. My work is done.” According to Wiesenthal, the last major Austrian war criminal still alive is Alois Brunner, Eichmann’s right-hand man, who is said to be in hiding.

Biographers, foes and even friends have, at any given time, described him as a bully, hustler and zealot, as fiercely idiosyncratic, insolent and individualistic as he is fearless.

No matter how complex a figure Wiesenthal cuts, however, the fact

that he survived the Holocaust makes the purpose of his life painfully simple.

His unimpeachable record of opposing all crimes against humanity, in fact, is cited as a key factor in the global outcry over war crimes in Bosnia and Rwanda, and in encouraging the founding of a permanent United Nations agency to track and arrest mass murderers.

He not only hunted Nazi war criminals but was also an activist for an array of modern-day human rights causes, a tale of courage, tenacity and spiritual strength worth repeating to as wide an audience as possible.

“Justice not vengeance” was the slogan by which Wiesenthal operated after surviving the war in which 89 members of his family were killed.

Simon Wiesenthal, the Holocaust survivor, Nazi-hunter and an activist of modern day human rights, died on 20 September, at his home in Vienna at the age of 96.

Wiesenthal has lived through one of the horrific and dangerous events in our recent history.

After the first memorial service in Vienna, his body was flown to Israel, to be buried beside his wife.

The author is a columnist and researcher.