

Puzzle of the Iraqi jigsaw

On the AGENDA



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Iraq is a country worth fighting over. The main target for any possible American-led war would be seizing control of the country, not necessarily capturing Saddam.

From his point of view, the best case scenario is that he will be a fugitive in his own country, rather like Osama bin Laden.

He would unlikely pose a threat of regaining control because it is speculated that within the country he has no support and out of a population of 26-million he could count on just 3 000 soldiers to defend him (some claim it is 100 000).

This is the view of the main opposition, the Iraqi National Congress (INC), which is based in London but has a network of contacts in Iraq that have been established over the years.

According to them, news from inside is that people cannot wait for regime change, if not for war. They openly talk about how soon it will all be over, and the jokes in the country are about Saddam and his family fleeing.

The INC, which was established in 1992, has fought long and hard to have any recognition by either Washington or Whitehall. After years of aggravation and alienation they are receiving some.

The road to recovery may not be easy but it is easier than Afghanistan, because Iraq has oil and they can pump it to pay to rebuild a new Iraq.

They're working on the "day after" scenario, when Saddam is no longer in power; they believe the Ba'athists will disappear like the Taliban.

Others believe getting rid of Saddam is the first goal, the second to rid the country of his influence and finally, some time in the future a purge of the ruling Ba'athists.

The INC is working with the Americans on a two-year plan in which they would play a significant role as the tran-

sitional government.

As such, Ahmed Chalabi, the nominal head of the opposition, is waiting in Tehran, Iran, on his way to Iraq.

The end of that period would result in elections. At this point America would like to see a coalition with as many different opposition forces as possible, although they realise it would be a mistake to impose anything. Rather, they want to wait and see what forces rise up in Iraq.

The INC becomes defunct as soon as change in Iraq takes place; once there is a coalition. Another option that is talked about seriously by the Americans is that a US military governor would be in

charge for six months after which he would hand over to a transitional civilian government, remaining close by until the transition was complete.

There is also much speculation that other Arab governments would actually prefer the latter scenario, fearing, say many, the establishment of the first Arab democracy in the region.

Military success seems guaranteed, with Saddam Hussein unlikely to withstand such superior American might, but it is dangerous to predict the future and far too many variables exist.

For the Iraqis, a swift bloodless campaign would allay their fears of America going overboard and contributing to a messy transition. UN experts talk about one million refugees, but that's only if there is devastation.

Such success would also boost the chances of a transition to democracy. But more than that, getting to Baghdad quickly – they are anticipating a week long aerial campaign, and the tanks are going to roll into the capital regardless – could offset the ferocious bloodletting that 30 years of repression and brutality may possibly unleash.

Saddam Hussein himself has often stated that Iraq is "more than a geographical expression".

Created originally by the British in 1920 out of the three Ottoman provinces of Mosul, Basra and Baghdad, a new Mesopotamia would be a pluralistic federal state.

The Kurds are landlocked, and despite the horrendous Anfal campaigns, the Arabs of Iraq are the Kurds closest friends.

The Americans will also disarm the Kurds as one of Turkey's pre-conditions for supporting the US position.

The whole pattern looks neat – in theory. Now we wait to see if the pieces of the jigsaw all fit together.