

Domino effect jigsaw

*On the*AGENDA



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The theme of games has played a huge role in the Iraq war – like the issuing of a deck of playing cards with Iraq's most wanted, and the talk of the "domino effect" of democracy that is supposed to spread to the rest of the Middle East as a result of it taking root in Iraq.

So the first piece of the jigsaw is in place – Iraq free of Saddam Hussein, a name that has already begun to be forgotten. The next segment is democracy.

Will this begin a sequence of benign knock-on effects, is the question that hangs in the air. The idea of the domino effect comes from the opposite of the old theory that unless the US fought in Vietnam, South-east Asia would fall like dominos to the threat of communism. Of course this didn't happen.

And a lot didn't happen in this war either that was supposed to. So far it hasn't destabilised the Middle East. Before the war, that was the prominent argument that so many put forward as the end result of the US attacking Iraq.

Terrorism so far isn't on the steep rise that was also predicted by the doom-mongers. In fact, Hizbollah, the terrorist group, did not fire on Israel, which would have probably brought it into the war.

Even Osama bin Laden's apparent videotaped clarion call to Muslims on al-Jazeera TV channel last week to commit terrorist acts in support of Iraq has had no effect. Nor has the Arab world risen up, although Arabs around the world did demonstrate.

The "demonstration effect" that democracy in Iraq is supposed to have on the Middle East states is unlikely to transpire. The best-case scenario is that Iraq will shake up the Arab states with the idea of nation-building and democracy.

But in Saudi Arabia, for example, that is unlikely to hold much sway. No doubt

the Saudis are wary of events in Iraq as a dangerous precedent. Any flowering of a democratic tradition would only be regarded as a potential threat to the power of the ruling al-Sauds, who as a thank-you to Saddam for defending them against Iranian fundamentalists presented him with the luxury yacht which the Americans blew up.

Iran will have complex feelings about the demise of their arch-enemy who dragged them through a hideous eight-year war. On the positive side from their point of view, Shia Iran may be able to influence the Shi'ites of Iraq, the majority

of the population who have for so long been powerless. But now Iran is surrounded by American-supporting regimes – such as Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Syria has truly made the US hopping mad by aligning themselves too closely with Saddam Hussein and hosting 10 Palestinian groups in Damascus. Despite this, the Americans are unlikely to be marching on the Syrian capital just yet, although they will do all they can to get Syria in line.

Until now it has been political suicide for any Arab government to admit the war was anything other than catastrophic, but that is going to be hard to square in the long-term with the obvious relief of Iraqis.

The argument that they couldn't do it themselves – which is a humiliation for the Arab world – has no currency. Under Saddam's iron rule, any internal uprising would have been impossible for any people or nation. Perhaps this liberation is the best example of globalisation.

Oddly enough, this campaign may have had the reverse effect on terrorism, as it is seen as a form of blackmail that will not work. George Bush may be disliked in the Arab world but unlike the former president, Bill Clinton, he is seen as a strong leader who says what he means, means what he says, and does what he says he is going to do.

The search for democracy will probably take years, and it will be a complicated process. Already, though, in Basra local councillors have asked the British for help in showing them how things are done. Democracy springs up from the grassroots level, so that's a good start.

As the US isn't doing anything obvious to spread democracy in the rest of the Middle East, so far that process is a nice thought, if a rather idealistic one.