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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## How Not to Inflame Iraq

By JAVAD ZARIF

BEFORE the United States invaded Iraq on false pretexts nearly four years ago, the overwhelming view of analysts and diplomats was that war would plunge the region and the world into greater turmoil and instability. Echoing the views of my colleagues from the region and beyond, I told the Security Council on Feb. 18, 2003, that while the ramifications of the war could go beyond anyone's calculations, "one outcome is almost certain: extremism stands to benefit enormously from an uncalculated adventure in Iraq."

This assessment came not from any sympathy for the former Iraqi dictator or his regime. Certainly Iran — which had suffered the carnage of an eight-year war with Iraq in the 1980s, and on which Saddam Hussein unleashed chemical weapons — had no affinity for him. Rather, it was based on a sober recognition of the realities of the region and the inescapable dynamics of occupation.

Now the United States administration is — unfortunately — reaping the expected bitter fruits of its ill-conceived adventurism, taking the region and the world with it to the brink of further hostility. But rather than face these unpleasant facts, the United States administration is trying to sell an escalated version of the same failed policy. It does this by trying to make Iran its scapegoat and fabricating evidence of Iranian activities in Iraq.

The United States administration also appears to be trying to forge a regional coalition to counter Iranian influence. But even if it succeeds in doing so, such a coalition will prove practically futile, dangerous to the region as a whole and internally destabilizing for Iraq. By promoting such a policy, the United States is fanning the flames of sectarianism just when they most need to be quelled.

Coalitions of convenience like the one the United States government now contemplates were a hallmark of American policy in the region in the 1980s and 1990s, and their effect then was to contribute to the creation of monsters like Saddam Hussein, Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Short memories may be responsible for this ill-advised return to old habits.

But who can forget that Saddam Hussein used the very same scare tactic, invoking the "Iranian threat" to extort money, loyalty and military hardware from the region and the world, only to turn them later against his suppliers? Who cannot remember that to contain the supposed "Shiite Crescent" after the 1979 Iranian revolution, the extremism of the fundamentalist Salafi movement was nourished by the West — only to transform later into Al Qaeda and the Taliban? Why should the same policy in the same region produce any different result now?

There are already indications that extremists are exploiting the most emotional sectarian and ethnic divides in the region in an effort to sell possible collaboration with old and new occupiers of Arab lands to a restive,

frustrated and resentful populace. Such a shortsighted campaign of hatred will compound regional problems, and it will have global implications, from the subcontinent to Europe and the United States, long after the current crisis in Iraq ends.

We need to remember that sectarian division and hatred in Iraq and the wider region was most recently instigated by none other than the leader of Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The shameful legacy of Mr. Zarqawi and his collaborators should have been buried with him. To that end, all of us in the region need to set aside shortsighted schemes and engage with the government of Iraq in a common effort to contain sectarian violence.

The Persian Gulf region is in dire need of a truly inclusive arrangement for security and cooperation. Only through such regional cooperation, with the necessary international support, can we contain the current crisis and prevent future ones. I wrote in these pages almost four years ago that the removal of Saddam Hussein provided a unique opportunity to finally realize the long sought objective of regional confidence-building and cooperation, as well as to reverse the dangerous trend of confrontation, exclusion and rivalry.

We have lost many valuable opportunities to effect this arrangement, with hundreds of thousands of innocent lives shattered in the interim. The forthcoming meeting of Iraq's neighbors, to be held in Baghdad next month, will be a good place to begin this difficult but necessary journey toward regional security.

The American administration can also contribute to ending the current nightmare — and preventing future ones — by recognizing that occupation and the threat or use of force are not merely impermissible under international law, but indeed imprudent in purely political calculations of national interest. As authoritative studies have repeatedly shown, no initiators of war in recent history have achieved the intended results; in fact, in almost all cases, those resorting to force have ultimately undermined their own security and stature.

When 140,000 American troops could not bring stability to Iraq, and in fact achieved exactly the opposite, an additional 20,000 soldiers with a dangerous new mandate can only be expected to worsen tension and increase the possibility of unintended escalation. Only a reversal of the logic of force and occupation can dry up the hotbeds of insurgency.

Similarly, forging imaginary new threats, as the United States administration is now doing with Iran, may provide some temporary domestic cover for the failure of the administration's Iraq policy, but it can hardly resolve problems that — as widely suggested — require prudence, dialogue and a genuine search for solutions.

We all need to learn from past mistakes and not stubbornly insist on repeating them against all advice — including the advice George Bush gave as a presidential candidate in 2000: “If we're an arrogant nation, they'll resent us; if we're a humble nation, but strong, they'll welcome us.”

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