

{OCTOBER 15, 2005}

WHAT AWAITS SAMIRA?

A few days ago, at a conference in Europe, I met a charming young lady. Intelligent, well educated, versed in several languages, and, well, very attractive. After a few hours of shopping, she was as elegant as a model, dressed in the very latest fashion. She happens to be a Shiite from Baghdad, where she has now returned. Let's call her Samira.

What struck me most about Samira was her pessimism. The situation is bad, she said, and, whatever happens, it is going to get worse.

For a young, professional woman, the outlook is bleak indeed. The Shiite community is in the grip of the ayatollahs, who are out to enforce a rigid religious attitude towards women. Perhaps not as strict as in the Taliban's Afghanistan or in Khomeini's Iran, but strict enough to make it impossible for a woman to dress as she likes or to pursue the career she wants. Already, Samira is hiding her profession from her neighbors in a well-to-do part of Baghdad, for fear of attracting the attentions of one of the numerous armed militias.

What is life like without a regular electricity and water supply in 40 degrees Centigrade, dependent on generators and improvisation, in a perpetual state of fear, while tanks roam the streets? It's very, very bad, she says, and not getting any better.

The prospect for Iraq? She sees several possibilities, all of them bad. Perhaps a break-up of the state. Maybe a civil war. Certainly an ever growing bloody insurgency. No chance at all for a new, prosperous, democratic, multicultural society.

Iraq looks now like a broken toy, taken apart by a willful, mindless child.

I have avoided writing about Iraq for several months, while still following events there with unflinching fascination, because it is almost impossible to write about it without saying "Told you so!"

The world (and especially Israel) is full of politicians, generals, journalists, academics, intelligence agents and suchlike who have been invariably wrong about everything they have forecast (with rare exceptions, just as a broken clock still shows the right time twice a day.) Yet strangely enough, they remain in demand, their

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mistakes forgiven and forgotten, even if they had catastrophic results, as often happens in the case of generals and politicians.

Long experience has taught me that “told you so” is by far the most infuriating thing one can say. While the public can forgive commentators who are proven wrong, it will never forgive those who are shown to have been right.

So let’s avoid that phrase. Let’s just hint that some of the things I said before the war have been proven to be not so very wrong.

Two of these deserve consideration at this time.

First: That the real aim of the war on Iraq was to station a permanent American garrison in that country, supported by a local Quisling regime, in order to secure direct control of the vast oil resources of Iraq itself and indirectly of the oil reserves of the region – Saudi Arabia, the other Gulf states and the Caspian basin. No “Mass Destruction Weapons”, no “Removal of a blood-thirsty Tyrant”, no “Spreading Democracy”, no “Axis of Evil”.

Second: That the main result of the war will be the breakup of the country into three mutually hostile components – Sunni Arabs, Shiites and Kurds. Whether this breakup of the Iraqi state is disguised as a “loose federation” or in some other way is immaterial. The important point is whether control over the oil resources is vested in the central or the local authorities.

It was clear that the Kurds would settle for nothing less than de facto independence, keeping their oil revenues for themselves. It was also clear that this would arouse the most profound fears in Turkey, Iran and Syria, all of which have an oppressed Kurdish population which dreams of the eventual establishment of a great, united Kurdistan.

It was also clear that the Iraqi Shiite state would be led by religious figures, most of whom have lived in Iran, who would impose the Islamic code of law, the Sharia. These clerics, while not necessarily becoming stooges of Tehran, will certainly lean in that direction. They will, of course, try to keep the huge oil revenues of their region to themselves.

One does not have to be a prophet of Biblical dimensions to have foreseen that the Arab Sunnis would not accept this lying down. In such a “federation” they will lose power and oil revenues, being thrown from the heights of their might into an abyss of impotence. This led to an “insurgency” which grows ten new heads for every one cut off, because it results from an insoluble problem. Neither the Kurdish nor the Shiite leaders are the kind of people who would relinquish any of their long-yearned-for advantages, for the sake of an Iraq they neither loved nor identified with from the start.

All this could have been easily avoided, if the only superpower in the world had not been led by a tenth-rate politician; if policy had not been shaped by neo-conservatives

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blinded by a fanatical obsession; if Tony Blair, who should have known better, had not been an incorrigible opportunist.

Millions of decent, innocent Iraqis of all communities, like my new friend Samira, are paying the price.