

Monster of Baghdad is now hero of Arabia

Now it's a nationalist war against imperial power

So it's a "truly remarkable achievement", is it? General Tommy Franks says so. Everything is going "according to plan", according to the British. So it's an achievement that the British still have not "liberated" Basra. It is "according to plan" that the Iraqis should be able to launch a scud missile from the Faw peninsula – supposedly under "British control" for more than a week. It is an achievement, truly remarkable of course, that the Americans lose an Apache helicopter to the gun of an Iraqi peasant, spend four days trying to cross the river bridges at Nasiriyah and are then confronted by their first suicide bomber at Najaf.

One half of the entire Anglo-American force – still called 'the coalition' by journalists who like to pretend it includes 35 armies rather than two and a bit (the "bit" being the Australian special forces) – is now guarding and running the supply line through the desert. And Baghdad is bombed but not besieged.

The military "plan" is so secret, according to General Franks, that very few people have seen it all or understand it. But his plan he says, is "highly flexible"; it would have to be, to sustain the chaos of the past 12 days, and, of course, we hold the moral high ground. The Americans bomb a passenger bus close to the Syrian border and don't even apologise. An Iraqi soldier kills himself attacking US marines and it is an act of "terrorism". And now Secretary of State Colin Powell announces – to the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee, the largest Israeli lobby group in the US who of course support this illegal war – that Syria and Iran are "supporting terror groups" and will have to "face the consequences".

So what's the plan? Are we going to forget Baghdad for a few months and wheel our

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young soldiers west to surround Damascus? Where, for heaven's sake, is all this going? We were going to "liberate" Iraq. But the war could be "long and difficult", Bush now tells us – he didn't tell us that before, did he? – and, according to Tony Blair, this is "only the beginning." Really?

Strange, isn't it, how all that fuss about chemical and biological warfare has been forgotten. The "secret" weapons, the gas masks, the anti-anthrax injections, the pills and chemical suits have been erased from the story – because bullets and rocket-propelled grenades are now the real danger to British and American forces in Iraq. Even the "siege of Baghdad" – a city that is 30 miles wide and might need a quarter of a million men to surround it – is fading from the diary.

Sitting in Baghdad, listening to the God-awful propaganda rhetoric of the Iraqis but watching the often promiscuous American and British air attacks, I have a suspicion that what's gone wrong has nothing to do with plans. Indeed, I suspect there is no real overall plan. Because I rather think that this war's foundations were based not on military planning but on ideology.

Long ago, as we know, the right wing pro-Israeli lobbyists around Bush planned the overthrow of Saddam. This would destroy the most powerful Arab state in the Middle East – Israel's chief of staff, Shoal Mofaz, demanded that the war should start even earlier – and allow the map of the region to be changed forever. Powell stated just this a month ago. False intelligence information was mixed up with the desires of the corrupt and infiltrated Iraqi opposition.

Fantasies and illusions were given credibility by a kind of superpower moral overdrive. Any kind of mendacity could be used to fuel this ideological project – 11 September (oddly unmentioned now), links between Saddam and Osama bin Laden (unproven), weapons of mass destruction (hitherto unfound), human rights abuses (at which we originally connived when Saddam was our friend) and, finally, the most heroic project of all – the "liberation" of the people of Iraq.

Oil was not mentioned, although it is the dominating factor in this illegitimate conflict – no wonder General Franks admitted that his first concern, prior to the war, was the "protection" of the southern Iraqi oil fields. So it was to be "liberation" and "democracy". How boldly we crossed the border. With what lordly aims we invaded Iraq.

Few Iraqis doubt – even the ministers in Baghdad speak about this – that the Americans could, ultimately, occupy the country. They have the force and they have the weapons to smash their way into every city and rule the land by martial law. But can they make Iraqis submit to that rule? Unless the masses rise up as Bush and Blair hope, this is now a nationalist war against the most obvious kind of imperial power.

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Without Iraqi support, how can General Franks run a military dictatorship or find Iraqis willing to serve him or run the oilfields? The Americans can win the war. But if their project fails they will have lost.

Yet there is one achievement we should note. The ghastly Saddam, the most revolting dictator in the Arab world, who does indeed use heinous torture and has indeed used gas, is now leading a country that is fighting the world's only superpower and that has done so for almost two weeks without surrendering. Yes, General Tommy Franks has accomplished one "truly remarkable achievement". He has turned the monster of Baghdad into the hero of the Arab world and allowed Iraqis to teach every opponent of America how to fight their enemy. ♦