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From the Mind of Sha'i ben-Tekoa

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Get Saddam. Then Get Out.

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Bat Ayin, Judea

As an Israeli who remembers our country's doleful occupation of southern Lebanon (1982-2000), some words of advice to our American friends: Get Saddam, then get out of Iraq as fast you can. Drop the idea of trying to build a new society there.

On Sunday July 13th, on NBC, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld drew an analogy between America's occupation of Iraq and those of Japan and Germany, as many have. But L. Paul Bremer III is not Douglas MacArthur, and the Arabs in old Mesopotamia are neither Japanese nor Germans, two peoples with long histories of social cohesion. If you think you can create the first Western-style liberal democracy in the Arab world, think again.

There are 147,000 GIs embedded in 25,000,000 Iraqis, with the latter now not only playing on their home court but "fighting" as they like to, which is not as conventional soldiers but street fighters and bush-whackers. The Iraqis as conventional soldiers were routed by the US in 1991, and again three months ago they less melted away than never got into battle formations.

But now they are much more in their element. What Arabs prefer is not the combat of conventional warfare between armies in uniform on battlefields, engaged in *e.g.* artillery duels, flanking actions or bayonet charges. They like firefights with small arms in urban locales.

Their preferred weapons systems are not modern tanks or mobile artillery pieces, which require teamwork; they favor hand-held weapons like RPG-capable assault rifles.

Arabs throughout history have rarely fielded large armies led by far-seeing generals; where is their Caesar, Napoleon, Wellington, Rommel or Patton famous for directing large formations of troops? They have always preferred operating in small groups, or alone, with weapons no heavier than one man can carry and use unassisted.

In medieval Tunis, the Arabs' greatest historian ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), author of the classic *Al-Muqaddimah*, the philosophical prolegomena to his 19-volume history of the world, explained this phenomenon of Arabs not being very good at fighting in large, coordinated, rank and file military organizations. What they lacked was unit cohesion and the discipline found in the armies of more civilized peoples. The Arabs gravitate to small unit ambushes, and not necessarily

against only enemy soldiers on a battlefield but unsuspecting enemy civilians in villages and towns, a/k/a terrorism.

At this very moment in fact, as you read these words, there is a probability that somewhere in Algeria someone is having his throat slit, or a family is being decapitated. These are routine occurrences in more than a decade of civil war there, where the fighting style is very different from Western conceptions. During the American Civil War (1861-65), the Blue army fought the Gray army; in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), Loyalists fought Republicans, *etc.* while in Algeria, since 1992, more than 100,000 people have been basically murdered, the majority of them not soldiers in uniform on battlefields but unsuspecting civilians surprised in their daily routines by “terrorists.”

Lebanon's civil war (1975-89) was much the same. We saw no television news footage of tanks maneuvering in clouds of dust, or commandos jumping out of trenches to storm an enemy fort; it was all young men in t-shirts, jeans and running shoes in the neighborhoods where they lived firing off bursts with their treasured Kalatchnikovs.

The American expeditionary force is inside a country with no shortage of young men itching to test their mettle by bagging an infidel or two. The military posture of US forces there has also mutated from that of army on the offensive to static, constabulary force. American soldiers are not now being targeted as they advance in battle but stand in line to buy a soft drink.

Pres. Bush's schoolyard dare, “Bring ‘em on” hit a sour note because while appropriate pre-war before the anticipated clash of armies in uniform, this is no longer a contest between soldiers on both sides, but soldiers not trained to be cops versus streetwise locals.

Israel's experience in southern Lebanon (1982-2000) is a lesson worth learning. The political Left here likes to portray our bitter experience of our security zone there as the fault of the Likud, and especially Ariel Sharon, when in fact that zone was a creation of none other than Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres in 1985, three years after Sharon left government. Those two future architects of the Oslo fiasco first dreamed up the Lebanese security zone fiasco when they witlessly ignored Israel's great military strengths of maneuver and improvisation. What they built was a series of bases Gen. Maginot would have been proud of. Bunkering down in increasingly hardened forts, Israeli soldiers turned themselves into static targets. It was only a matter of time before they were driven out.

And the reasons for establishing that misconceived zone were not only defensive but to feed a lingering wish to influence and control events in Lebanon to Israel's advantage.

On the contrary, in 1982, after what then Defense Minister Sharon did to the PLO in Lebanon - what George Bush would do to the Baathists in Iraq - Israeli forces should have immediately made a mad dash for the international border, gone back home and let the locals pick up the pieces.

Instead, the fantasy continued of somehow alchemically changing that ethnic stew of a pseudo-nation into something more to Israel's liking than it could not be.

This is the mistake the US is now making in Iraq. The projected “nation-building” there reflects a provincial inability to realize just how different Arab societies are. After World War I, the British created the modern state of “Iraq” and appropriated the name of what historically was never more than old Mesopotamia--the area between the Tigris and Euphrates--and annexed to

it territories north and south that were home to a half-dozen sub-national groups that never had identified “nationally” with Sunni “Iraq.”

Likewise the French cobbled together the state of “Lebanon” which historically had never been more than the name of a mountain. France annexed communities to the Christian core of the new state by including sub-national groups who did not ask for that union either

The United States owes it to the people of Iraq and to itself to find and kill Saddam and sons, then get out and not worry too much about the next kind of regime.

It is always possible to return, if necessary. An “in-and-out” strategy might be more successful and cheaper in blood and money in the long term than an indefinite occupation taking casualties all the time. There are countless kinds of medical conditions that require more than one application of a treatment, and if there arises in Iraq another menacing dictatorship, then another invasion will be needed.

And maybe even a third or fourth until the locals find a way of governing themselves under a political system that no longer throws up tyrants like Saddam Hussein.

Predictably, Secretary Rumsfeld is now saying that he needs more troops and more soldiers. And when will that end? That never happened in Germany and Japan, two societies that accepted defeat and had the good sense to learn from their conquerors a better system of government that improved their lives and made them members in good standing of the free and democratic nations of the world.

To repeat: Arabs are not Germans or Japanese. Forget the grandiose nation-building. Do what has to be done, then go.

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