



## EXECUTIVE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIAN JEWRY Inc.

### **THE AUSTRALIAN: Editorial: Stakes rising in the Middle East**

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*The war on terror still has a long way to run and the US must learn the lessons of history, including Iraq*

FOR the second time since World War II, the US is staring at the possibility of a defeat of its own making as the Democrats use their new control of Congress to push the Bush administration out of Iraq. For this to happen would be a disaster for the Iraqi people. It would ignore the lessons of Vietnam 30 years ago when the American political establishment first lost the stomach for the fight against communism and then abandoned the South Vietnamese to their fate to assuage the anger of the American public. The Fall of Saigon consigned Vietnam to decades of misery. The sectarian violence now occurring in Iraq leaves no room to doubt that the same will occur there if the US military retreats before the Iraqis are able to deal with the internal terror threat. The question is whether the Americans will really cut and run again. For all the posturing in Congress, it is most likely that a large number of US troops will remain in Iraq for years to come. Politically, however, the Iraq campaign is now being firmly fed into the US presidential election cycle. The Democrats are seeking to set a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq, putting forward a series of benchmarks that must be met in quelling the sectarian violence on the streets of Baghdad. House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi says the strategy will be given time to work but if the President cannot certify that progress is being made by July America should begin the redeployment of combat troops. Everything in the war on terror is now being seen through a debate rooted in the cost of US failure to secure a peaceful transition from dictatorship in Iraq under Saddam Hussein to democracy. And America's enemies, both in Iraq and the West, are willing the US to fail. But it is unwise to see the campaign through this narrow prism for two reasons. Firstly, the war on terror is wider than Iraq and has its origins in a global campaign against the West which reached crisis point with the 9/11 attack on US soil. Secondly, in the much-troubled Middle East, Iraq is only part of a very complex jigsaw.

The Australian agrees with the assessment of Australia's ambassador to the US, Dennis Richardson, that the war on terror is just beginning, a fact broadly recognised by both sides of US politics. Mr Richardson, a former director-general of ASIO, says that despite the political theatre in the US, a large number of troops will remain on the ground for the foreseeable future. The inevitable change of president, because George W. Bush cannot recontest, and even a Democrat win, will not result in a sudden change in approach by the US in Iraq. Rather, the US is politically resigned to a long campaign which both sides acknowledge is not yet 10 per cent complete. It is necessary to disentangle the disintegration of Iraq from the war on terror. Though disheartening on one level, Mr Richardson's estimate that the war is only 10 per cent waged, puts the Iraq campaign into perspective, acknowledging the progress has been made, albeit slowly. The Bush administration's failings in Iraq are well documented. It failed to estimate the size of the task or the number of people required to succeed. Most of all, it did not adequately plan for success, repeating the mistake it made when the Cold War was won against the Soviet Union. Having defeated communism, there was no plan to win the peace. As a consequence, the former Soviet states have splintered, some providing a breeding ground for terrorists, and control of Russia has returned to an overbearing former KGB head while organised crime and corruption continues to flourish. And the signs now are that having failed to be properly prepared for the post-liberation reality, the US has been forced to double-up on its entire Middle East strategy to counter the rise of Iran, which was a foreseeable but unintended consequence of the Iraq campaign.

The extent of the strategic shift in US policy in the Middle East and the complex reforming of allegiances as a consequence of the US intervention in Iraq should not be underestimated. It is

abundantly clear that the main division in the region is not between Jew and Arab, East and West or the First and Third Worlds. As Seymour Hersh outlined this month in *The New Yorker* magazine, the conflict in Iraq has magnified the historical reality that in the Middle East everything is anchored in the seventh century split between Shi'ites and Sunni Muslims over who should succeed the Prophet Mohammed. Sunnis dominated the medieval caliphate and the Ottoman Empire, and Shi'ites, traditionally, have been regarded more as outsiders. Worldwide, 90 per cent of Muslims are Sunni, but Shi'ites are a majority in Iran, Iraq and Bahrain, and are the largest Muslim group in Lebanon. Hersh writes that the main regional challenge for the US is to counter Iran and as a consequence increase contact and favour with the Sunnis. It represents a dramatic departure from the dominant view in the Bush administration before the 2003 invasion of Iraq when it was assumed that a government dominated by the Shia majority which had been oppressed under Saddam Hussein would provide a pro-American balance to Sunni extremists. This naive proposition ignored warnings from the intelligence community about the ties between Iraqi Shia leaders and Iran, where some had lived in exile for years. In the light of those warnings, it should be no surprise that Iran has now forged a close relationship with the Shia-dominated Government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. The new strategic alignment of the US in the Middle East, as outlined to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, has generated some perverse results. The policy shift has brought Saudi Arabia and Israel into a new strategic embrace, united by the perceived threat posed by Iran. The Saudis have become more involved in Arab-Israeli negotiations because they believe that greater stability in Israel and Palestine will give Iran less leverage in the region. It reflects a series of informal understandings developed between the Saudis, Israel and the Bush administration over the past year. Israel has been assured that its security is paramount and that Washington, Saudi Arabia and other Sunni states shared their concern.

The Saudis have agreed to urge Hamas, the Islamist Palestinian party that has received support from Iran, to curtail its anti-Israeli aggression and to begin serious talks about sharing leadership with Fatah, the more secular Palestinian group. The Bush administration would in turn work more directly with Sunni nations to counteract Shia ascendance in the region. And the Saudi Government would provide funds and logistical aid to weaken the Government of President Bashar al-Assad of Syria. An insight into Mr Bush's state of mind on the issue is provided by columnist Irwin Stelzer who attended a private forum with the President to discuss Andrew Roberts's *History of the English-Speaking Peoples Since 1900*. Stelzer found Bush's conviction intact and the President ready to heed the lessons outlined by Roberts. These included; Not setting a deadline for withdrawal as was done in India leading to the slaughter of 700,000 to 1 million people; That will trump wealth as discovered by the Romans and the tsars; That enemies should be interned until victory; That the alliance of the English-speaking peoples must be preserved and; The enemy cannot be appeased.

When it comes to the war on terror, The Australian believes this final point has particular significance. We have said from the beginning that ideologically the war on terror is no different to past ideological struggles such as that against communism. Those who criticise America's response underestimated the ideological foundations of the enemy. The terrorists know their best friend in an ideological war against the West can always be found in elements of the Western media who will always side with the "other". The nature of fundamentalism is to not negotiate. This misunderstanding lies at the root of the breakaway Jewish group, Independent Australian Jewish Voices, which launched its campaign this week in support of a just peace. As Geoffrey Zygier, executive director, Executive Council of Australian Jewry Inc, has indicated it is intractable Islamists whom need to sign up to a two-state solution as shown by Yasser Arafat's rejection of Israel Prime Minister Ehud Barak's offer of 2000 for the creation of a Palestinian state.

The world's biggest strategic interest in the Middle East remains preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons, which would almost certainly provoke a regional arms race and create much greater instability. The interests of peace are best served by the US remaining fully engaged in trying to stabilise the Middle East. For this reason we should be thankful that disagreements over the progress of Iraq aside, the US still has its eye on the long-term war against terror. As a newspaper, we believe liberal democracies most clearly align with the human spirit. We don't believe the future of the world involves a radical overthrow of the Western world's liberties. But we are realistic enough to acknowledge that there remains those who would try to achieve it.