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AN UPDATE ON POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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THE WAR AND ITS AFTERMATH

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There is little doubt that the superiority of U.S. and British armed forces will enable them to defeat the Iraqi military formations arrayed against them, particularly those outside urban areas, and achieve the immediate objectives of the campaign: the removal of Saddam Hussein, his sons and cohorts from power and the destruction of Iraq's stocks of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the production facilities. But the future of Iraq and of the Middle East at large are likely to be affected by a much wider array of factors and considerations, and the ability of the coalition to translate its expected military victory into more comprehensive and durable political achievements remains unclear.

The coalition forces' most difficult test will be their ability to avoid an entanglement in the heavily populated urban area of Baghdad that might be associated with considerable American, British, and Iraqi civilian casualties. Heavy allied casualties could erode the domestic support needed to sustain the campaign until its political and strategic objectives are achieved. In this respect, the danger is not that Baghdad would become another Stalingrad but rather that the battle in Baghdad would become a larger-scale repeat of what was experienced in Beirut, Mogadishu, and Jenin.

And heavy Iraqi civilian casualties will undermine the coalition's ability to affect Iraq's future and influence the political landscape of the Middle East in the aftermath of the war because horrific images of war will be broadcast to Arab homes throughout the region by the new regional media, notably Al-Jezira television. If this occurs, it will be exceedingly difficult for the Bush Administration to persuade Arab publics that the war was truly intended to liberate the Iraqi population and equally difficult for Arab leaders to prevent a further outpouring of anti-American and anti-Western popular emotions – the first manifestations of which were already seen during the past few days in massive street demonstrations, especially in Cairo.

The third major variable is the extent to which the coalition will succeed in destroying the military and security forces loyal to Saddam Hussein – principally the Republican Guard divisions – while keeping a sufficient number of other Iraqi military units intact. The purpose of this would be to prevent the disintegration of Iraq and a bloodbath that might well take place in the

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aftermath of Saddam's downfall. Unfortunately, other than the military there is no institution in Iraq capable of holding the country together. Consequently, the destruction of the army would mean the disintegration of Iraq, with the establishment of a Kurdish state in the north and a Shi'ite state associated with Iran in the south.

This would completely alter the balance of power in the Persian Gulf and would be particularly destabilizing given that it would coincide with Iran's rapid progress toward the acquisition of a wide array of WMD and delivery systems, including ballistic missiles. Anticipating these destabilizing effects, Turkey is already reported to have moved forces into northern Iraq, in the hope of preventing the creation of an independent state of Kurdistan. The alarm with which this move was greeted regionally and internationally points to the different dangers involved in Iraq's possible disintegration.

Finally, the region would be affected by the speed with which the coalition withdraws the bulk of its forces from Iraq once Saddam Hussein and his cohorts are removed from power and Iraq's WMD and the facilities for their production are destroyed. An extended presence of coalition forces in Iraq, in a futile attempt to transform the country into a western-style democracy, is likely to result in a political catastrophe. Such an extended presence will make the coalition partners – primarily the U.S. and the U.K. – responsible for the wellbeing of Iraq's civilian population. In the Arab world, such a presence would be depicted as "occupation," providing more ammunition for the opponents of the U.S. to argue that the war was launched in order to restore western colonialism in the Middle East and to gain control over the region's oilfields.

Conversely, if none of the possible negative developments enumerated here materializes, the effects of the war on Iraq's future as well as on the Middle East at large are likely to be very positive. To recount, this would require that the war is executed swiftly and successfully, with few casualties among coalition troops and among Iraq's civilian population; with enough of the Iraqi military intact to prevent the country's disintegration; and with a rapid withdrawal of most coalition forces from Iraq before they are widely seen as "occupiers" of Arab land.

Should this best-case scenario materialize, the U.S. would be in a far better position to affect political developments in the region. Specifically, it would allow the Bush Administration to restart the Middle East peace process well before the 2004 elections, thus reversing the deadly course that Palestinian-Israeli relations have taken since September 2000. It might also cause Iran to reconsider its support of terrorism and the development of WMD, so as to avoid giving reasons for the Bush Administration to move against a second member of the "axis of evil." For similar reasons, U.S. success may well lead Syria to reevaluate its support of Hizbullah and its alliance with Iran.

More broadly, effectively transforming Iraq into another Egypt will change the balance of forces in the Middle East. Iraq, a country that combines a robust population base with huge potential wealth, will have been transferred from the "axis of evil" to the coalition of the "good guys" – Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, who supported the Saudi peace initiative in the March 2002 Beirut summit of the Arab League. While such a change will fall short of transforming the region's states into pluralist democracies, it would promise to affect positively many facets of political life in the Middle East.

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