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Leading by bad example

IN January 1991, Iraq, with one of the world's largest armies, had just invaded Kuwait and looked poised to attack Saudi Arabia. The United States led the Gulf War after complying step-by-step with domestic and international law, marshalling congressional support and a broad alliance at the United Nations. President George Bush had a mandate to deter aggression against Iraq's neighbours, which was carried out with the imposition of no-fly zones, weapons inspections and other military restraints and sanctions. He could have gone further, but he chose to respect the integrity of his carefully-crafted coalition, and stick to the principle of US leadership by consent. The only available consensus on Saddam Hussein was a policy of containment.

Although UN sanctions against Iraq have come under controversy, that consensus remains to this day. There is no agreement, except by the most fawning of US allies, Israel and Britain, for anything like a "regime change" in Baghdad unless there is undeniable proof of a clear and present danger of renewed aggression. Arab leaders have warned President George W. Bush that there will be no support for an attack on Iraq while the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains unresolved. Malaysia has condemned the bombing on Friday of an air defence installation in western Iraq; Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad warned that further action against Saddam could cause the global anti-terrorism coalition to unravel.

Thus far, the US has successfully prosecuted its "war on terror" on the winning argument that international terrorism is a threat to all. But Muslim support is highly qualified, given the fact that the targets of the war are likely to be Muslims themselves. Multilateral co-operation against the very tiny minority of extremists making up the terrorist networks is in the interests of Muslim Governments. Attacking a sovereign Muslim country on an adhoc doctrine of preemption based loosely on intent is not. No matter how vile the Saddam regime appears to be, or how firmly grounded America's right of self-defence, an assault on Iraq must be based on hard evidence of a malign intent being put into practice. None of that was offered by Bush or British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who waffled on about consultation and international support after meeting the US President yesterday.

There is no cause to punish Saddam for his virulent anti-Americanism, a sentiment shared by his people and many other Muslims as well as non-Muslims worldwide. The contention that the US must exercise leadership in the enforcement of UN resolutions on Iraq's acquisition of weapons of mass destruction is, without verification, merely war-mongering. No leadership is being called upon because there is no coalition of shared interests that desires to be led. If America goes ahead and attacks Iraq, it won't be leadership that is being exercised but unilateralism, plain and simple.