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Confronting the evil empire

THE upcoming military strike on Iraq is not about weapons of mass destruction. Whatever substantial measure of disarmament done by Iraq will be seen by the United States as "a catalogue of non-co-operation". There is no moral case for war against Iraq because it is not about the liberation of an oppressed people. Nor is it about terrorism.

It is about the imposition of a Pax Americana on the Middle East. All the justifications - democracy, human rights and regional stability - echo the double-talk used by 19th century European imperialists who conquered and plundered Africa and Asia to bring godliness and civilisation to the heathens. This is as plain as can be to the world, with the exception of Britain and a few vassal regimes of the US, and to some in the 57-member Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC).

Yet it seems a gargantuan task for the OIC to acknowledge these realities and speak, swiftly and stridently, against any US-led assault on Iraq. True, the one-day emergency gathering in Doha on Wednesday (held not far from a US military garrison), which was intended to forge a unified position, saw the OIC's unanimous rejection of war. But it also revealed sharp differences among the members on the extent of their anti-war commitment. Ideally and as originally stated in the draft statement of the Doha summit, the members should refuse to grant any military facilities to the US that could be used to invade Iraq. But this was rejected and replaced with a consensus against active participation in such a war.

Soothing as it may sound, the declaration was not an assertion of substantive strategies and goals expected from the OIC, particularly in a security situation leading to an open-ended war of recolonisation. The future of Iraq is a major Arab question. It is also a major question of the preservation of the independence of sovereign countries. As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said, "Everyone knows what is at stake. There is a clear opinion that invading another country is not the way to overcome problems... if this is allowed, then other countries would suffer the same fate."

But while the mind seems to be clear on what the stake is, the heart seems to be faltering over the choices to be made. This is no surprise. America has been known to cajole vulnerable governments such as Turkey's to allow it access to support military operations from their territories. Its military presence in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain suggests these Gulf members may serve as America's forward command headquarters.

The truth is harsh: American political influence is a major force in some parts of the Middle East. When the bombs rain on Iraq the second time around, American hegemony will be shown to be triumphant in the Arab world. Arab unity slogans ring as hollow as the pending wasteland of Baghdad. They would rather quarrel, as evidenced from past as well as present inter-Arab rivalries, or hold revenge in mind than work with single-mindedness to solve the Palestinian and Iraqi crises.

Let not this lack of unity be the fate of the OIC and the Arab League. Dr Mahathir underscored the OIC's abysmal state of affairs when he said that "important decisions affecting the Muslim ummah have been decided and imposed upon us from the outside". It is often seen as an institutional invalid in the international arena. It must now close ranks, speak with one voice and re-think its strategies or face, as Dr Mahathir warned,

continued marginalisation.