

Headline: Don't make Saddam mad, make him lonely  
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(BEIRUT)Chibli Mallat has a plan. Concerned that ousting Saddam Hussein by force could actually lead to the use of weapons of mass destruction, this Lebanese international law professor is one of the driving forces behind an initiative that hopes to halt the current US-led move toward armed conflict.

The plan, dubbed "Democratic Iraq," aims to isolate the apparatus of Mr. Hussein's regime by promoting Iraqi opposition leaders, relaxing sanctions that hurt Iraqi citizens but not the regime leadership, cutting off transportation routes for the country's military and intelligence, and pursuing Hussein's indictment for war crimes. Backed by a senior UN official, a European ambassador to the UN, a leading member of the Iraqi opposition, and human rights activists, the plan supports the use of force - but to hurt, not to depose, the Iraqi leader.

"Everyone is horrified at the thought of weapons of mass destruction being used," Mr. Mallat says. "The Democratic Iraq initiative would deflect a doomsday scenario which extremists in the area are hoping will develop."

On Thursday, President Bush is scheduled to address the United Nations to press Washington's case for toppling Hussein. But a full-scale US-led assault against Iraq raises the possibility that Hussein might, in a final desperate act of defiance, unleash his arsenal of chemical and biological weapons - possibly against Israel. Israel, which is thought to possess in excess of 200 nuclear missiles, has said that if attacked, it will respond in kind.

"As the war develops, the logic of Saddam using [weapons of mass destruction] is obvious," says Mallat, who has been involved in the campaign to indict Hussein, and is also one of three lawyers seeking to prosecute Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon for his role in the massacre of Palestinians and Lebanese in Beirut in 1982. "It's humanly unacceptable to have them used either on Israelis or on Iraqis."

Democratic Iraq has already attracted the attention of officials in Washington, the UN, and Europe - as well as among the Iraqi opposition. The initiative aims to create international consensus on the best way to encourage regime change in Baghdad - means amenable to both the international community and the Iraqi people.

"The emphasis is on an effective distinction between Saddam and Iraqis," says a memorandum detailing the plan. "Any use of force is ... to introduce effective mechanisms for accountability and democracy in the country and to minimize the risk of weapons of mass destruction use

by the current government."

The plan does call for continuing threats of military force against Baghdad. At the same time, it would give leading Iraqi opposition figures the diplomatic exposure necessary to build their credibility as potential leaders in the pre- and post-Hussein period.

It would also relax UN sanctions that affect ordinary Iraqis, while tightening restrictions on the regime's leadership. And it would seek to further isolate that leadership through war crimes indictments.

"If you indict [Deputy Prime Minister] Tariq Aziz, for instance ... it would make it much more difficult for Arab countries to deal with them," says Salem Shalabi, an Iraqi lawyer in London. "It delegitimizes [Hussein] and effectively prohibits his ability to maneuver internationally."

The initiative would also transform current No Fly Zones in northern and southern Iraq, which cover about two-thirds of the country, into No Drive Zones - denying access not only to the Iraqi Air Force but also to the Army and intelligence services.

Further, it would establish a third No Drive Zone, linking the northern and southern zones, in the Western Desert along the Syrian border.

A UN Security Council resolution would authorize the No Drive Zones - and the use of force, by Special Forces troops with air support, to protect them.

Weapons inspectors and human rights monitors would also be deployed in the zones to assist the local leadership in maintaining order. Mallat says their deployment is key to the plan's success. "They would monitor and prevent uncontrolled acts of revenge and ensure that international standards are the measure of any emerging forces," he says.

A leading Iraqi opposition leader confirmed to the Monitor his backing for Democratic Iraq, and said that he had already approached the Bush administration to win support for the deployment of human rights monitors in Iraq.

It is likely to be a tough sell, however. The administration has clearly stated its preference for regime change by force.

Juan Cole, professor of history at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, argues that the "more influential hawks" in the Bush administration are closely linked to Israel's Likud Party, "and they wish to remove Saddam because he is the only credible military rival to Israel in the region. I do not believe that the Democratic Iraq initiative will be acceptable in Washington, because it is premised on the good faith of the Bush administration's stated reason for concern,"

he says.

Nonetheless, the lack of international support for an attack on Iraq appears to have spurred President Bush to grant the UN a last chance to mediate a more peaceful alternative.

The 'Democratic Iraq' initiative

- \* Continue military buildup - and talk of democratic change in Iraq, not of deposing Saddam Hussein.
- \* Increase public exposure to democratic credentials of Iraqi opposition leaders.
- \* Relax UN sanctions affecting the Iraqi people. Tighten those affecting the Iraqi regime.
- \* Transform existing No Fly Zones in northern and southern Iraq into No Drive Zones, to deny access to Iraqi military and intelligence. Create a third No Drive Zone in the Western Desert.
- \* Enforce respect for No Drive Zones through deployment of Special Forces backed by air support. Deploy weapons inspectors and human rights monitors.
- \* Indict Saddam Hussein for war crimes.