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Doubts grow over US war claims

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With only one or two Iraqi cities firmly held by US-led forces in the third week of their invasion, experts are questioning the effectiveness of the American war plan, and the credibility of messages being relayed by US diplomats.

"We are almost in control of their country, and we'll be in complete control soon," said US Secretary of State Colin Powell on Friday.

Former congressional official Joseph Cirincione respectfully disagrees.

"It would be more correct to say we are operating in most areas of the country but we control very little," said Cirincione, also Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

Claims made by other Bush officials, such as Defence Secretary Rumsfeld's assertion that Saddam Hussein would fall "at the first whiff of gunpowder" or Vice president Dick Cheney's defiant pronouncement that the Iraqi military would "fall like a house of cards," have fallen far short of expectations, he said.

"Clearly the senior civilian leadership in US was surprised by the level of resistance. They honestly believed people would rise up when they entered and that hasn't happened," Cirincione said.

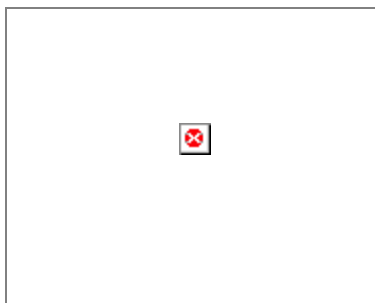
Coalition forces have overestimated their control over Iraqi cities, said the commander of Egyptian forces in the 1991 Gulf war, Mohammed Bilal.

"How can they announce the capture of certain cities when they confess to pockets of resistance?" he asked in an interview with Al Jazeera.

"How can they claim they've taken a city when they're still being fired upon, or when they continue shelling a town centre? This means that they must not have troops there," he said.

Coalition forces are actually seizing the outskirts of cities, according to Bilal, where the public is not involved in the the defence of a city. A city's defence plan does not include the outskirts, he said.

The US military is winning substantial



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victories against conventional forces, Cirincione said. "We have defeated most of the Republican Guard. No one thought it would be a contest."

But "real control" only comes when US forces walk the streets of a city. "And that's still a long way off," he said.

Despite the "awesome" power of the US military, it is highly vulnerable to attacks by guerrilla or irregular forces.

Such forces do not attack frontline positions, he said. "They engage the enemy wherever it is weakest, such as fuel trucks and ammunition dumps."

And the level of resistance witnessed so far indicates it will be a "very difficult" occupation, he said.

"The greatest challenge is still ahead trying to occupy a country where the larger part of the population opposes American force."

Even if half of Baghdad's six million residents welcome US troops, deep antagonism, possibly emanating from 12 years of crippling sanctions, may reside in the hearts of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of Iraqis in Baghdad or elsewhere.

Having based the war plan on very optimistic assessments, the US military "grossly underestimated" the power of nationalism, "both Iraqi nationalism and Arab nationalism," Cirincione said.

A tense air of suspicion may reign over trigger-trained young American boys occupying Baghdad; unable to speak the language, and having trouble discerning between innocents and combatants.

In Beirut, US troops were welcomed in the 1980s only to be subjected to the worst attack in military history, a few months after their entry.

"Suicide attacks will be increasingly active in the future," said retired General Mustapha Maher formerly with the Egyptian military.

"The Iraqis are relying on the factor of time," he said. "The longer the war lasts, the greater US and the British losses will be."

American citizens may not be prepared for casualties from a protracted conflict, due in part to highly optimistic media coverage, said Cirincione.

"When you look at American media this war is being shown from the perspective of the firing hand, and in the Arab world, this war is being viewed on receiving end, with an emphasis on those being killed."

"In America it looks heroic, but in the Arab world it looks like slaughter," he said. "The American public does not understand the level of hatred growing in the Muslim world as a result of this war." --- **Al Jazeera**

