



by Dov Fedler, The Star

## One world, a million different opinions

March 16 2003 at 08:06PM

For several months, across the world from Vancouver to Vienna to Vladivostok, pundits and ordinary people have been expressing their views - with rather more freedom in some countries than others - on a single issue. That is, does sufficient evidence of an Iraqi threat exist to justify invading Iraq?

In the court of public opinion the answer, now, is mainly negative. Indeed, most would still say "no" to war if there were a second United Nations resolution. Even in the United States, where polls have consistently shown two-thirds of Americans supporting President George Bush's call for military action, that does not mean they want it to happen immediately. Most would prefer to have United Nations support first.

The only other states where public opinion seems to be hardening in favour of a UN-backed war are Australia, whose citizens were targeted by the Bali bombing, and Israel, the victim of Iraqi missile attacks in 1991. Elsewhere, as the following reports and quotations from around the world suggest, the "nos" generally have it.

### FRANCE

Except for a few lone voices, on right and left, French public and political opinion is adamantly against a war in Iraq, even one approved by the UN security council.

The most recent survey by the IFOP polling company shows 77 percent of the French are against military action in Iraq. Of those polled, 81 percent said they had not been convinced by US arguments.

The media take a similar line. In a signed editorial in the right-wing Le Figaro, Charles Lambroschini, the deputy editor - and former Washington correspondent - said Bush should consider the words of "another empire-builder", the 19th-century German chancellor, Count Bismarck: preventative war is an act of "suicide from fear of death".



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In the centre-left Liberation, Patrick Sabatier, an assistant editor, and another former Washington correspondent, said: "The masks have fallen. Bush no longer pretends that he wants to disarm [Iraqi President] Saddam [Hussein]... he wants 'regime change'. [French President Jacques] Chirac is going to have to say which is more important: to stop a war, which he regards as just as dangerous as it is pointless; or to disarm Hussein instantly. The question of the (French) veto cannot be delayed much longer."

## **GERMANY**

In the other half of Europe's anti-war core, opinion polls seem to show the German public considers Bush a bigger threat to world peace than Hussein.

A Forsa poll shows 57 percent of Germans believe "the US is a nation of warmongers", and only six percent thought Bush was concerned with "preserving peace".

## **SPAIN**

Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar's slavish support for Washington could cost his party votes in forthcoming regional and local elections. The latest opinion poll gave the opposition Socialists a 1,7 point advantage over the ruling Popular Party for the first time in seven years. Aznar's personal popularity has also plunged: 40,7 percent of Spaniards rate his performance as bad or very bad. Only 2,3 percent of them would support a unilateral US attack on Iraq, and an additional 11,8 percent support war if approved by the UN.

Nearly 85 percent of Spaniards oppose armed action in Iraq. "The survey reveals the anti-war emotional climate that has gripped Spain," said the conservative El Mundo newspaper, which commissioned the Sigma Dos poll. "The PP must reflect and make a self-criticism. It would be a mistake to say governments must take unpopular measures. There are alternatives to an attack on Iraq, and public opinion is well aware of them."

El Pais criticises Aznar for his silence "over what Spain would do if the UN security council fails to support the new proposed resolution."

## **ITALY**

Most Italians remain hostile to the idea of a war in Iraq, even one sanctioned by the UN. At the end of last month, research by Doxa, a leading polling company, indicated that 86 percent of Italians opposed a war fought by the US alone, and 72 percent opposed it even if done with the UN's blessing. A study in Corriere della Sera by a respected independent pollster, Renato Mannheimer, suggests the proportion of those willing to back a war endorsed by the UN has risen in the past fortnight, from 41 to 44 percent. A mere 8 percent of Mannheimer's sample back the US whatever it chooses to do, and a steady 34 percent are opposed to any attack.

In other words, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who backs the Anglo-American position, is failing to get his message across. One reason is the

steadfast opposition to the war of the vatican, whose views exert a steady pull on Italians, particularly on those of the centre-right who voted for Berlusconi's House of Liberties coalition.

A good proportion of the three million (claimed by the organisers) who marched against war in Rome on February 15 were professional or lay Catholics. Catholic newspapers and magazines such as La Famiglia Cristiana, the biggest-selling Italian weekly, have strongly backed the pope's campaign against the war.

## **EASTERN EUROPE**

Further east, in the "new" European countries of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, whose leaders back Bush's stand on Iraq, public opinion is running high against a war seen as confirming the unilateralist tendencies of the US leader.

## **RUSSIA**

All Russian polls show massive and rising opposition to war. The most authoritative, and recent, by the independent Russian Fund for Public Opinion Research in Moscow in the last week of February, surveyed 1 500 Russians nationwide. Eighty-seven percent of respondents were opposed to the planned US and British military action against Iraq. Only 2 percent thought it "reasonable" to use military force.

In the same survey, 45 percent felt the international weapons inspectors must continue their work in Iraq, and 42 percent believed that "Iraq should be left in peace, the work of inspectors should be halted and international sanctions lifted".

Nikolai Petrov, an expert with the Carnegie Endowment in Moscow, said: "Few Russians see any threat whatsoever emanating from Iraq, and therefore the idea of war strikes them as extreme and unfair. Indeed, many Russians view the American inclination to use force unilaterally as a dangerous menace to world order and stability."

Alexander Konovalov, the director of the independent Institute for Strategic Assessments in Moscow, said: "Many Russians, even the young, have an instinctive revulsion to the idea of war, which comes from our history. Few in Russia are defending Hussein; most see him as a bloody dictator, but it remains difficult for people to see any case for launching a potentially disastrous war to oust him. Also, there is real suspicion of American motives. Nobody likes the idea of one country, however rich and powerful, appointing itself as a kind of global judge, jury and executioner."

Some Russians are even putting their anti-American views into practice: about 2 000 Russians have volunteered to fight against the Americans in Iraq, and been accepted by Baghdad. The Iraqi embassy in Moscow is still receiving a steady flow of applications.

## **TURKEY**

In Turkey, public opinion has demonstrated that it does matter. With more than 90 percent of Turks opposed to a war, Turkish MPs defied pressure from their leaders by rejecting a government-backed

from their leaders by rejecting a government-backed motion that would have allowed up to 62 000 US troops to be stationed at Turkish bases as part of a Bush plan to attack Iraq from the north.

At least 90 MPs from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), many of them elected for the first time in November, joined the opposition in voting against the bill. Feelings against the war are running high in the mainly Muslim but officially secular nation which shares a 330km border with Iraq. Turks are fearful that a war will cripple the economy, cause chaos on their borders, and lead to retaliatory attacks.

The parliament vote was greeted with joy and hundreds of anti-war protesters gathered in the capital, Ankara, to celebrate. Prime Minister Abdullah Gul's negotiators had spent months working out a deal with Washington that would have given Turkey up to \$30-billion (R240-billion) in grants and loans, as well as some say in the future of Kurdish-controlled north Iraq, in exchange for allowing US troops in.

## **ISRAEL**

In Israel - a country which some commentators have accused of driving the pro-war agenda in the US - the public is beginning to look beyond a domestic agenda dominated by the formation of the new Sharon coalition, and, as a result, is beginning to focus on the likely side effects of war in Iraq.

Many Israelis remain traumatised by their experience in the last Gulf war, when 39 Iraqi Scud missiles landed among them, killing one person and causing widespread panic.

A poll by the daily Ma'ariv reflected the polarisation between Israel's Jewish and Arab citizens, revealing that a slender majority of Israeli Jews would prefer the military option. The poll asked: "Over the past few days, the UN Security Council has been presented with two proposals. One proposal means declaring war against Iraq, whereas the other proposal means continuing the work of the inspectors and solving the problem peacefully. Which of the proposals do you support more?"

In favour of war were 45 percent of respondents, while 49 percent preferred to continue the inspections. The sample included Jewish and Arab citizens. In the sample breakdown, the Jews voted 51-44 for war, the Arabs 75-8 for inspectors.

## **ARAB STATES**

Opinion in Arab states is harder to gauge accurately, given the relative lack of free speech in such countries. But the impression on the street is of firm opposition to military action against a fellow Muslim country. Arab leaders, however, are divided, depending on the extent to which their countries are beholden to the Americans financially.

After the Arab summit failed to endorse a proposal from the United Arab Emirates calling on Hussein to step down to avert war, the Gulf News said: "It is unfortunate that the Arab world has yet to make up its collective mind on defending its right to stability and security. If anything, the League summit at Sharm El Sheikh emphasises divides that have kept the Arab nation from achieving progress and global



standing."

## **AFRICA**

Africa's three non-permanent members in the UN security council - Angola, Guinea and Cameroon - are sitting on the fence in the diplomatic battle over a second resolution. Among their general population, voices are being raised against military action, particularly in Muslim communities across the continent. South African opinion is particularly anti-war, a position reflected in its government's stance.

## **PAKISTAN**

In Pakistan, 100 000 people demonstrated against the war, emphasising popular discontent at President Pervez Musharraf's participation in the US war on terror and the looming conflict with Iraq.

## **AUSTRALIA**

Australia has had its biggest anti-war protests since Vietnam, with half a million people taking to the streets on a weekend of demonstrations last month. But away from the chanting and the placards, public opinion is hardening in favour of military action. An opinion poll in the Sun Herald newspaper a week ago found 24 percent of people supported Australian participation in a war, even without UN backing. With UN approval, the figure rose to 67 percent.

Within government, there is unanimity about the need to go to war. Australia has already sent troops to the Gulf, the only nation to do so apart from the US and Britain, although Prime Minister John Howard claims he has not yet decided whether to commit them to action.

Commentators are divided. In the Sydney Morning Herald, Robert Manne, a professor of politics at La Trobe University, said it was absurd to compare Hussein with Hitler. "Hussein has always been, and remains, a foul and criminal dictator," he wrote. "But the danger his regime now poses is to his own people and not his neighbours, let alone the West."

Another columnist, Padraic McGuinness, said opposition to war was motivated mainly by anti-Americanism and that the best hope of peace lay in the UN passing the second resolution. Faced with this outcome, he argued, "Hussein's last defence would crumble".

## **UNITED STATES**

A recent ABC News-Washington Post survey found 56 percent of American respondents favouring taking more time to win the necessary number of votes at the UN. The numbers suggest uneasiness among Americans over the need for a war and the extent to which it would be justified. Getting a positive decision out of the UN might allay some of that.

"They're looking for an authoritative voice to tell them that the information is there to justify an attack," leading pollster Warren Mitofsky said. "They're willing to support the president, but they'd

like to be a little more convinced."

If and when war starts, it is likely most Americans will quickly rally behind their leader and their troops. But Robert Shapiro, a Columbia University political scientist, said that today's uneasiness could resurface if a conflict goes badly. "There is an undercurrent of ambivalence and suspicion that might come into play," he said, "depending on how the war played out."

● By Anne Penketh, David Osborne, John Lichfield, Peter Popham, Elizabeth Nash, Fred Weir, Pelin Turgut and Kathy Marks

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