

## “Iraq and Its Neighbors”

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In the years before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, much attention was paid to the way in which Saddam Hussein was a threat to the security of the Gulf. His words—and as the people of Kuwait know all too well, his deeds—suggested to all that stability was unlikely as long as Saddam remained in power.

Each and every one of Saddam’s neighbors shared a desire to see the end of Saddam and the instability he caused. They shared this desire with every U.S. administration since the first President Bush. Their agreement, however, did not extend to agreement on what would come next in Iraq, and in some cases, their desires were very much in conflict.

I would like to discuss several things in the time I have today. The first has to do with the relative neglect that many of Iraq’s neighbors felt during the planning that led up to the war just over a year ago. The second has to do with the consequences of the U.S. working at cross-purposes with the interests of many of Iraq’s neighbors and their effects on post-conflict outcomes. I will conclude with some ideas for how coordination might be improved in the future, and how doing so would serve the interests of all parties.

In the months and weeks before war broke out in March 2003, many friends of mine in the diplomatic and ambassadorial corps in Washington complained to me that they were being left in the dark in pre-war planning. Not only were American intentions unclear, but so were American desires for the roles of others in post-conflict Iraq. As

many of you know, I was working in the State Department until October 2002, and many of us shared our friends' uncertainty about where U.S. policy was headed. Secrecy certainly has a role in planning military operations, but I think we can assess now, much of that secrecy was harmful. Let me mention a few ways. First, the secrecy discouraged skeptics inside the government from asking hard questions, because of a fear that being too critical would be perceived as disloyalty and result in being excluded from further considerations of policy. Second, the secrecy meant that many with useful knowledge were excluded from considerations. This certainly applied to many of my colleagues in the State Department. Finally, the secrecy meant that many allies outside the U.S. government could not contribute their significant knowledge, expertise and manpower to the matter at hand.

The blame here, it seems to me, can be spread broadly. Partly, too many in the administration appeared to hold a view of international leadership that such leadership consisted of telling others what to do. This stood in stark contrast to the first President Bush, whose immediate response to the Iraqi invasion of this country was to go to the UN Security Council and win universal international condemnation of the act.

But some of the blame also falls on members of the international community, who wanted to be consulted but had given inadequate thought to the outcomes they wanted and the contributions they could make to achieve such outcomes. With a fast moving and very real planning exercise being executed on the U.S. side, many U.S. officials appeared to regard talking to foreign governments more as a form of hand holding than as a step necessary to win concrete objectives.

When the U.S. went to war against in March 2003, it did so with a markedly smaller coalition than it enjoyed in 1991. One must admit that justification and goals of the wars were quite different, as well, and that even the first President Bush would have had difficulty building such a broad coalition for such a different enterprise. In any event, the narrowness of the coalition impaired U.S. effectiveness achieving its goals.

The narrowness of the coalition leads to my second point, which is how few of Iraq's neighbors shared the U.S. goals in Iraq. Indeed, complete U.S. success in Iraq, at least in terms that the U.S. government had enunciated, would have directly harmed the interests of many of America's allies. When the U.S. went to war, the goal was not merely to remove Saddam Hussein from power. It was to create out of the ashes of Saddam's Iraq a strong and flourishing democracy whose effects would reverberate throughout the region. While there was some loose talk in Washington about a "positive domino" theory, to the regional governments that would have been the falling dominoes, whether one falls in a positive or negative direction is of little interest, and the primary goal is to not be a domino at all. At its core, the U.S. government loudly announced its intention to destabilize the Middle East in what it viewed as positive and necessary directions, thereby arousing concern rather than partnership from many governments with which it enjoyed close relations.

A second fear of regional states was that a strong Iraq of any stripe would be either a threat to its immediate neighbors, a competitor for the leadership of the Arab world, or both. Its combination of population and natural wealth makes Iraq a natural leader in the region, yet few had confidence that Iraq under any coloration would lead in a direction they would want to follow.

Most of Iraq's neighbors had more modest goals. They sought to remove Saddam, and to have the resultant state be rather inert and inner-directed. Rather than the strong Iraq that many in the U.S. advertised, they sought a weak Iraq that would not threaten them.

Finally, many in the Gulf felt their future would be better if the U.S. government learned some humility. Alarmed at the prospect of an unfettered U.S. imposing its will on the region, many hoped for a less than completely successful U.S. effort in the country.

What we have seen in the last year has borne much of this out. Borders have become porous, as radicals and agitators have slipped in. Cash has poured into Iraq, not only in return for black-market goods stolen from the Iraqi people, but also in the form of subsidies for groups and movements within Iraq. Most surrounding states have avoided direct intervention in Iraq, seeking to avoid direct involvement in what many in the Middle East still view as a misguided imperial adventure.

The current state of affairs has led to conditions of real peril. Not only is Iraq's future clouded, but so too is the future of Iraq as a unitary state. Looking forward, Iraq could pass through a period like Lebanon's civil war, in which sectarian factions battle brutal wars for control of the center. Even more hauntingly, Iraq could begin to resemble Somalia—a collection warring armed factions instead of a real central government. Voices in the U.S. calling for an immediate pullout are growing louder, and while I do not believe they will be heeded in the near term, their emergence is an important indicator of the way in which many Americans have come to doubt the possibility that anything good can come of Iraq. Of course, a sudden pullout of American troops is among the most destructive thing that could happen.

The looming prospect of a complete American failure in Iraq creates an opportunity, and that opportunity is to learn from the first two points I have made: that there had been far too little consultation and partnership, and that without such partnership, neither the U.S. nor Iraq's neighbors can achieve even limited goals in Iraq.

In order for such partnership to be effective, the U.S. will need to be more consultative. The Lebanese political scientist and former minister Ghassan Salame said memorably last November, "You can work for the Americans or against the Americans, but it is hard to work *with* the Americans." This must change.

But at the same time, regional states must adapt to an environment that is fast moving and task driven. Regional states cannot afford to wait on the sidelines and wait to be asked. They must be much more creative determining what specific tasks they can do, and then effectively sell their capacities to outside planners. Inside the U.S. government, bureaucracies and offices have to fight their way to a place at the table in which decisions are made. Regional states will have to be no less aggressive and no less effective at the same task.

Finally, we all need to reach better agreement on our common goals for Iraq. Without better understanding and coordination, not only will none of us get what we want, but none of us will get what we need.

Before the war, it was hard for some to imagine any future scenario for Iraq that was worse than the status quo. Sadly, such an exercise takes less imagination now. A process that reconciles Iraq's interests with those of all of its neighbors will serve Iraqis and their neighbors, and the United States as well. Such an outcome may not be perfect, but it stands to be far more desirable than some alternate scenarios that exist.