

The impact of war with Iraq on US relations with Islamic world

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The outbreak of military hostilities against Iraq will certainly have some adverse effect on US relations with the Islamic world, especially with the Muslim people. Less clear is how serious and lasting this impact will be. Already, anti-US sentiments, partly generated by the crisis over Iraq and the movement toward war, has been on the rise in the Muslim world. At times, these sentiments have been expressed through mass demonstration, especially in the Arab world.

According to press reports, there were anti-US demonstrations, of varying sizes, in Yemen, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain, and Sudan on 27 January 2003. In this regard, there is a sharp disconnect between popular and official attitudes and sentiments in the Muslim world. Thus, while many key Muslim countries are anxious to safeguard their relations with Washington, even if there is war with Iraq, their populations staunchly oppose military action.

Nevertheless, while not insignificant, popular demonstrations and other acts of protest have not been of a magnitude to endanger the survival of current governments. This fact indicates that popular reaction to a US attack on Iraq may not be as strongly negative and potentially destabilizing as one may fear. This reality could lead to the conclusion that the adverse consequences of a US attack on Iraq on long-term US relations with the Islamic world may not be too serious and long-lasting.

Of course, it is difficult to determine even with a reasonable degree of certainty the exact nature and duration of Muslim reaction to US war on Iraq. But it is possible to identify the factors which are likely to influence that reaction:

1. *Convincing proof of Iraq's lack of cooperation with the UN inspectors and the continuing existence of chemical-biological weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.* Such proof would go a long way to legitimizing US-led military operations, at least with part of the Muslim population;
2. *The multilateral sanctioning of military operations.* It is already clear that a UN Security Council resolution supporting military action against Iraq would help limit the adverse consequences of war on Muslim views of the US. This would not completely satisfy hardcore opponents of US military action, but it would help with the broader public. This would also help Arab and Muslim governments to be at least non-critical of the US if not actually cooperative with it;
3. *The duration of the war and its severity.* A short war that does not lead to large-scale civilian casualties or massive destruction in Iraq will have a less adverse and lasting effect on US-Muslim relations. By contrast, a long war leading to large numbers of Iraqi deaths is likely to trigger more negative and anti-US demonstrations. It could also increase the risk of terrorist acts against the US and,

in the long-term, might encourage extremist tendencies of various shades, including Islamist;

4. *Handling of post-war Iraq.* Muslim attitudes will also be affected by the way the United States handles the situation in post-war Iraq. If the US guarantees the survival of Iraq and its territorial integrity, and it helps with Iraq's economic and political revitalization, this would go a long way to dampen anti-US sentiments. The time it would take to achieve these goals and hence the duration of the US military presence in Iraq would also impact on Muslim, especially Arab, attitudes. However, if Iraq fragments or experiences a long period of turmoil, the risk of growing anti-American sentiment in Muslim world would increase;
5. *Regional fallout.* Should the war on Iraq lead to broader instability in the neighboring areas, including Turkey and Iran and potentially Jordan, this would inflame Muslim sentiment against the US. However, if such destabilizing developments are averted, Muslim reaction would be more muted; and
6. *The prompt resumption of US-led Middle East peace-making.* A significant factor in the recent rise of anti-Americanism in the Arab and Muslim worlds is the crisis in Israeli-Palestinian relations and the seemingly-unending cycle of terrorism, suicide bombings, and Israeli retaliation. Thus US efforts to end this cycle of violence and to generate hopes for the resumption of peace talks will reduce anti-US sentiment and – if the US presses for a resolution of the crisis -- might lead to a reversal of the present trend.

In sum, the US must expect some negative fallout from a war with Iraq on its relations with the Islamic world, particularly Muslim populations. The damage on the governmental level is likely to be limited, unless the war unleashes unexpectedly strong popular reaction. However, this fallout need not be too serious and long lasting, provided the US acts wisely and effectively afterwards. Whether the fallout is limited will also depend on the inevitable uncertainties of the war's conduct.

There are measures that the US can take before the start of hostilities and after the war's end to mitigate any long-term negative impact on its relations with the Muslim world. In addition to garnering as much international support as possible for invading Iraq, having a comprehensive plan for Iraq's post conflict reconstruction, for controlling the negative fallout of the war on neighboring areas, and for helping to end the cycle of violence in the Arab-Israeli conflict will be critical.