

## Not in My Backyard: Iraq's Neighbors' Interests

The Bush administration's Middle East strategy has some rather expansive goals. Unwilling to content itself merely with eliminating the terrorist threat posed by Al Qaeda or forcing Saddam Hussein's regime from power, the administration has committed itself to creating a post-Saddam Iraq that will be an exemplar to the region: a nation that is strong, democratic, and free. As such, the administration is betting that the new Iraq will lead to the rise of liberty, freedom, and democracy in the Middle East; extinguish the flames of regional radicalism; and hold the key to resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. In the words of Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, one of the chief proponents of Iraqi-led political change in the region, successful political change in Iraq is "going to cast a very large shadow, starting with Syria and Iran, but across the whole Arab world."<sup>1</sup> Sadly, the administration is betting on a long shot. Even worse, it undermines its own goals by talking about them so much.

Will unfolding events in Iraq improve conditions in the region? Unfortunately, the answer is probably not, and some of the biggest impediments to any resulting improvement come from Iraq's neighbors. Some of them, such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, are U.S. allies; others, for example, Iran and Syria, are not, but all these states share something in common: they find the U.S. vision for the future of Iraq and the region deeply threatening. Even more troubling, they have the means to keep that vision from coming to pass.

Regional states still play important spoiler roles in the Middle East. Their concerns cannot be brushed away, and the United States cannot intimidate them into slavish submission. Frustrating as it may be, broad and patient en-

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gagement is a surer way forward for the United States than rapid conquest. Bold and inspirational plans concocted in Washington may have their appeal in Georgetown salons, but in the fields of the Fertile Crescent, they are likely to turn arid long before they yield democratic fruit in Baghdad—or Cairo, Riyadh, or Tehran.

## **The Reality of Democracy: All Things Considered?**

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This assessment does not argue that Arabs should be condemned to live under dictatorships nor that the U.S. government should seek a quick exit from involvement in Iraqi affairs. Few from within or outside the region would argue that the administration's vision of the Middle East is unattractive. The region's populations have too long suffered under governments that are authoritarian or worse; economic growth has been anemic while the youth unemployment rate has been high; and the people have been flirting with a radical rejectionism that threatens U.S. security but, even more fundamentally, threatens their own future. This rejectionism can take many forms, from the religious embrace of Osama bin Laden to a nationalist embrace of Palestinian suicide bombers, but it has two primary characteristics: an unrelenting sense of anger and a quixotic desire to overturn the existing order completely and replace it with an ill-defined utopian future.

When President George W. Bush said in February 2002 that “[a] new regime in Iraq would serve as a dramatic and inspiring example of freedom for other nations in the region,”<sup>2</sup> he was not setting his sights low. Although the task of establishing democracy in Iraq is not impossible, its enormity is impressive. In fact, several of the country's characteristics make it one of the more unlikely places to establish a strong democracy quickly that will inspire change throughout the Middle East. Consider:

- The people of Iraq have lived under a brutal dictatorship for a third of a century, during which dependence on authority has been nurtured and independent thought has been deadly. Changing mind-sets will have to be an educational process that will take years and decades to accomplish.
- The Ba'th regime in Iraq accentuated sectarian, ethnic, tribal, and clan differences in Iraq as a means of maintaining political control. Through this system, the government was able to reward supporters and punish dissenters. Democracies, however, rely on shifting coalitions as voters give voice to their multiple identities. If Iraqis' political interests are based solely on their ethnic identity, the result will not be democracy but factionalism. Again, changing Iraqis' self-image will be a long-term process.

- The high-stakes battle for control between insiders and outsiders in Iraq is unlikely to be short lived. The professional expatriates who cursed the regime from London and Washington—in some cases for decades—will not retreat quietly. Neither will those who suffered under Saddam's regime forgo their rewards. Added to the mix, of course, will be mid-level Ba'thists who will seek to replicate the feat of those former Soviet officials who used their privileged positions in the *ancien régime* to profit when that regime crumbled.

Even if these formidable elements should prove surmountable over time, the most complicating factor in U.S. designs will remain the reality that not one of Iraq's neighbors shares the Bush administration's interests in establishing a strong and democratic state to serve as a beacon of hope and freedom to the region. Equally troubling, most of these countries have considerable experience stirring political pots beyond their borders, generally covertly and with full deniability. The boldness of the Bush administration's proclamation of its political goals for the region, then, is likely to have the opposite effect of the one intended. Rather than laying the groundwork for a democratic Iraq to inspire change throughout the Middle East, the U.S. government has only made democracy in Iraq and elsewhere even harder to achieve. A survey of the countries surrounding Iraq paints a daunting picture for would-be U.S. reformers there.

**Broad and patient engagement is a surer way forward for the U.S. than rapid conquest.**

## Iran

First on the troubling list is Iran. Having lost hundreds of thousands of soldiers in an eight-year war instigated by Saddam, one would think that the Iranian government would celebrate his downfall. Although Iran's leaders will certainly not miss Saddam in many respects, Iran has also been perfectly content to live with the conditions of the last dozen years. A long-term U.S. troop presence in the Persian Gulf checked Iraqi aggression, and sanctions imposed on Iraq by the United Nations stymied Baghdad's ability to maintain its military power, let alone rebuild it. Far from exacerbating tensions, U.S. naval forces in the Gulf worked out an informal *modus vivendi* with their Iranian counterparts several years ago, and incidents of conflict are rare. In addition, popular discontent among Gulf Arabs about the U.S. troop presence in the region benefits the Iranians. As the primary Gulf government opposed to the U.S. presence, Iran is seen at least in part

as the power balancing U.S. hegemony, not just as a threatening non-Arab power to the north.

Economically as well, Iran has benefited from the status quo. First, smuggling proceeds have provided a helpful source of revenue, especially for the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, whose forces control some of the trade. Second, a struggling Iraqi oil industry has helped protect Iran's share of the global oil market and maintain stable and sometimes high prices for oil.

Change in Baghdad alters almost all these equations to the detriment of the Iranians. A strong Iraq in pursuit of better port access could seek

Iranian territory, as Saddam did in 1980. Iranian smuggling revenues will plunge precipitously without the UN sanctions regime. An economically open Iraq would lure international petroleum investment and increase production, both of which would prove detrimental to Iranian economic interests. Post-Saddam, U.S. occupation would put enemy troops around the Iranian border, meaning U.S. troops would be stationed not only to the west of Iran but also to the east

(in Afghanistan) and to the south (in the Gulf). A free Iraq could embolden Iran's restive population to cast aside clerical rule. Finally, and perhaps most ominous, a U.S.-allied Iraq would become a platform from which the United States could pursue its attempt to win the trifecta: aiding regime change against the next member of the "axis of evil."

As Iran's rulers confront what they would likely see as existential threats, they have plenty of weapons in their arsenal. Iran's irregular forces can mount resistance against U.S. forces in Iraq, and the nation's deep involvement in Hizballah operations for two decades, combined with its support for Hamas, Palestinian Islamic jihad, and other groups, suggest that its ability to wage covert, low-scale warfare is robust. In addition, Iran has long-standing ties to a host of Iraqi parties and factions. For example, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) is Tehran based and partly Tehran supported. SCIRI has formed common cause with some U.S.-backed groups in the past, but it has also sought at times to keep considerable distance between itself and the rest of the Iraqi opposition. Iran also has long-standing ties to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan faction and its leader, Jalal Talibani. These relationships and others suggest that Iran has a long-term capability to influence the duration and intensity of political struggles within Iraq, if not always control their outcomes.

Reports have persisted that the United States and Iran struck some sort of accommodating deal over Afghanistan to prevent a clash. Perhaps, but striking a similar deal over Iraq would be much harder for several reasons:

**Not a single one of Iraq's neighbors shares the Bush administration's interests.**

- Afghanistan operates under a system that might best be called warlord federalism. The central government is exceedingly weak, and local warlords have maximal autonomy. As such, U.S. forces have generally been content to remain in the capital city of Kabul and pursue Al Qaeda remnants on the Pakistani border, while allowing the Iranians to build client-like relations in the western regions of the country. Two factors make it unlikely that Iraq will have such a decentralized government. First, the central government of Iraq controlled the country's main source of income, oil. Second, Iraq's neighbors, including the U.S. NATO ally Turkey, all have a strong preference for the territorial integrity of Iraq.
- The U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan is only a fraction of what it is likely to be in Iraq for some time to come. The United States entered Iraq with a far larger ground force than that with which it entered Afghanistan, and it has received far more international support for peacekeeping in Afghanistan than it is likely to receive in Iraq.
- The Iranians were desperate for a change from the Taliban regime, whose aggressive opium operations had led to the rise of heavily armed drug-running cartels along Iran's eastern border and had promoted an epidemic of heroin use in Iran. Iran had little to fear from the antebellum status quo in Iraq.
- The United States did not set regional political change as a measure of success in the Afghanistan operation.

## **Saudi Arabia**

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Regime change in Iraq has topped Saudi officials' wish list for years. Saddam maintained a far larger army than Saudi Arabia, could easily reach Saudi cities with weapons of mass destruction, and had long been spewing anti-Saudi rhetoric. Yet, Saudi fears of political change within their own borders run deep, and the Bush administration's proclaimed political goals in Iraq have only exacerbated them.

Some quarters of the Saudi government remain deeply concerned about the direction of events in the kingdom. Public sympathy for bin Laden is rife, and the government is finding it exceedingly difficult to gain control over local charities, at least some of which are tied to groups that pursue acts of violence against civilians. In March 2002, unprecedented public protests erupted over Israeli military operations in the West Bank. Saudi Arabia has too few jobs for young Saudis and too few young Saudis with the skills

needed to compete effectively on an international level. Although the situation in Saudi Arabia does not quite constitute the making of a revolution, conditions suggest that the status quo cannot be sustained indefinitely.

Crown Prince Abdullah has been trying to move the Saudi political system in the direction of reform for several years, and his efforts became more intense after the events of September 11, 2001. Clearly driven by the fact that so many of the September 11 hijackers grew up in the kingdom, Abdullah has pushed forward with efforts to reform the Saudi educational system, increase the number of young Saudis entering the workforce, and jump-start the economy.

**Change in Baghdad alters almost all these equations to the detriment of the Iranians.**

In addition, Abdullah's language on the need for broader reform throughout the Arab world has become increasingly blunt, starting with his December 2001 statement at a Gulf Cooperation Council meeting. In January 2003, Abdullah floated an Arab reform initiative for Arab League action and also let it be known that he favored estab-

lishing an elected Chamber of Representatives in Saudi Arabia in six years.

However, Abdullah's moves are defensive, and he has to contend with an entrenched array of interests wedded to the status quo. He is cautiously seeking to adapt Saudi Arabia's system, careful neither to provoke undue resistance nor to open the floodgates of uncontrollable change. A political order in Iraq that would inspire Saudis to move for change in their own system would thus deeply threaten Saudi Arabia's current course of gradual reform.

Some might argue that Saudi politics move too slowly in any event, and an outside driver that compels change would be a constructive way to force the Saudis to move more quickly. From this perspective, forcing change in Saudi Arabia is the only way to ensure that the kingdom opens up and begins acting like a "normal" state rather than the unique monarchical theocracy that it is currently.

Rather than move more quickly toward reform in response to an external stimulus, however, the Saudis may instead seek to affect that stimulus. Threatened by republicanism in Yemen starting in the 1960s, Saudi Arabia supported royalist forces in the country for years. More recently, Yemenis have pointed to Saudi meddling in their internal affairs, accusing the kingdom of inciting southern secessionists in 1994 and of supporting the Islamist Islah ("Reform") Party today. Closer to home, Gulf politicians often talk of having to consider Saudi sensitivities as they plan for political reform in their own countries.

Although it is difficult to imagine that the Saudi government would go so far as to encourage individuals to kill U.S. officials in Iraq, it is not at all difficult to imagine that the Saudi government might take actions—or not take actions—that would have the effect of greatly complicating the establishment of a new, stable, and democratic political order in Baghdad. Were the Saudis to act, they would do so to prevent an undesirable outcome rather than to ensure a specific positive one, and they would almost certainly act largely through unofficial channels.

Another potentially complicating Saudi action would be to offer strong support to Islamist forces in Iraq who may oppose the U.S. government's goals there. Presumably, such support would be primarily financial, but it could also include providing teaching materials, training, and relief infrastructure. From the Saudi perspective, supporting Islamists in Iraq would prove beneficial in that it would spread Saudi political values: charity, adherence to authority, and the Saudi version of religious orthodoxy. The kingdom values these ideals in much the same way Americans value their understanding of individualism, freedom, democracy, and secular governance. Equally important, a shift toward Islamist politics in Iraq could serve Saudi interests by blunting U.S. enthusiasm for democracy in the Middle East, thereby eliminating a driver for change that the Saudis find threatening and difficult to control.

Yet another way that the Saudis could influence post-Saddam Iraq to their benefit would be to provide extensive support to Sunni Arab claimants to power at the expense of other, more numerous groups in the country. As such, Saudi clients could accentuate the sectarian nature of post-Saddam Iraq and further aggrieve groups such as the Shi'a, which are far more numerous than the Sunni Arabs but have often been unable to rise to power. Similarly, Saudi Arabia could find clients among Iraqi tribes with historic or ethnic ties to the Saudi kingdom, thereby ensuring that they could play a heightened role in the future of Iraq.

Saudi Arabia will not have any kind of veto over the political system in post-Saddam Iraq, but to the extent that Saudis see the situation there as affecting their own domestic political interests, they may seek to shape it. Because the Saudis' primary goal would be to limit the demonstration effect of Iraqi democracy on neighboring governments, their interests may directly conflict with some of the more expansive thinking in the U.S. government.

## **Jordan and Syria**

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Jordan and Syria have fragile political systems under their respective new leaders. Both King Abdullah and President Bashar al-Asad have been trying to navigate the shoals of governance that their fathers had mastered over

decades. Each new ruler benefited from the antebellum status quo in Iraq—Jordan through the cheap and discounted Iraqi oil it obtained aboveboard, and Syria through the Iraqi oil it smuggled under the table. Jordan has been trying valiantly to build close ties with the United States for the better part of a decade, and Syria appears periodically to be looking for ways to change its status as a pariah in the eyes of the United States.

For all these reasons, both of these countries are likely to be cautious. Yet, in their caution, they will almost certainly try to hedge their bets on

**Saudi fears of political change within their own borders run deep.**

Iraq's future. Although Jordan and Syria are unlikely to provide clear support to individual factions in Iraq, the leaders will probably show a willingness to tolerate Iraqi expatriates whom the United States might find unpalatable. Syria's alleged harboring of leadership families during the war was an early indication of this hedging, as was the departure of partisan fighters from Syria to Iraq. The bluntness of the resultant U.S. threats illustrates how

few tools the United States has at its disposal when dealing with Syria, which is both unlikely to be fully compliant with the United States or provide it with a *casus belli*.

## Turkey

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As a long-time NATO ally, Turkey may be a surprising obstacle to U.S. plans for democracy in Iraq. Turkey has intimate ties to Iraq through its own Kurdish community in Turkey's southeast and through its long-standing desire to project power into the Kurdish communities of surrounding states. The antebellum balance in northern Iraq was a delicate one—Turks and Kurds both benefited from having a more moderate buffer area on the Turkish border, and smuggling proceeds supported both sides. A unified, democratic Iraq, however, puts the whole Kurdish question into play.

How much autonomy from Baghdad will Iraq's Kurds enjoy, and will their transnational links with other Kurds increase or decrease? What happens to trade and to the smuggling proceeds that are so important to the economies of the region? Will Turkey be allowed to project more influence in Iraqi Kurdistan, or will Iraqi interests push Turkish interests back to the border? What will be the nature of Iraqi federalism, and what demonstration effect might it have on surrounding states? Will Turkey attempt to divide the Iraqi Kurds to keep them as a weak and fractured political force? None of these questions have been answered, but all will need to be.

The Turks inevitably will seek solutions favorable to Turkish interests, and those solutions may not be the same ones sought by their U.S. ally. U.S. policymakers are still smarting from the Turkish Grand National Assembly's refusal to allow attacks on Iraq out of U.S. bases in Turkey, highlighting rather clearly the extent to which U.S. and Turkish interests can differ on issues of regional security.

### **Show Me the Money**

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One might argue that the desires of the surrounding states are irrelevant because the U.S. will to achieve military and political success in Iraq is so great, but is it? One can draw mixed conclusions from the U.S. record in Afghanistan. A highly touted January 2002 donor conference in Tokyo attracted billions of dollars in pledges for Afghani reconstruction from around the globe, but converting the pledges to dollars and euros has been an uphill battle. Indeed, a year after the fall of the Taliban regime, Afghanistan's foreign minister described some countries' records of disbursing their pledges as "very poor"<sup>3</sup>—and this assessment came from a diplomat. In a meeting with the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee in February 2003, President Hamid Karzai clearly indicated his concern that the United States might suffer from a wandering eye, as solving problems in the next hot spot would diminish U.S. attention toward Afghanistan. "Don't forget us if Iraq happens," Karzai pleaded with the committee.<sup>4</sup>

Karzai truly remains in dire need of help. More than a year after taking office, he controls little outside of Kabul, and regional warlords have been ascendant throughout the country. Karzai has 3,000 troops under his command, whereas between 100,000 and 700,000 members of locally controlled militia groups roam the countryside.<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Watch complains that, "[b]eyond Kabul, poor security, generalized criminality, and limited regard for basic human rights have marked the year since the signing of the Bonn Agreement. ... The solution offered by the U.S., to have warlords provide security outside of Kabul while the international community trains a future Afghan army, has proven to be a failure."<sup>6</sup>

In April 2003, Karzai's brother took the extraordinary step of coauthoring an op-ed in the *Washington Post* accusing the U.S. government of backing Afghan warlords and putting Afghanistan squarely on the path toward violence, poverty, corruption, and repression.<sup>7</sup> The Taliban have indeed been routed, but it is difficult to argue that that regime has been replaced by something looking much like a democracy. Rather, Afghanistan has returned to being Afghanistan—a country with a relatively cosmopolitan capital and a countryside controlled by tribal factions whose allegiance can be easily rented but never completely bought.

The Balkans might be seen as a success story, but that situation differed from the one in Iraq currently in key respects. First, operations in the Balkans enjoyed far broader international support than U.S. activities in Iraq have. U.S. troops did not always like conducting military operations with their NATO allies; however, those allies were there for the pedestrian and expensive tasks that required a large supply of personnel to provide policing, humanitarian assistance, and reconstruction. Europe was heavily committed to success in the Balkans from the beginning, while Europe's commitment to success in rebuilding Iraq is less clear.

Even more important, though, the Balkans benefited from a neighborhood that basically wanted the multilateral operation to succeed. Working to resolve internecine conflicts in the Balkans was difficult, but surrounding countries such as Austria, Hungary, and Italy did not seek to perpetuate conflict there. U.S. operations in Iraq have no such luxury.

There is little chance that U.S. activities in Iraq will turn into another Somalia. In that case, a weakly motivated United States committed troops to an international force with an ill-defined mission and unclear rules of engagement. U.S. troops became sitting ducks for attack, and the loss of 18 U.S. Army Rangers led to an ignominious retreat. Iraq could become another Beirut, however, where a highly motivated adversary was able to penetrate a single U.S. installation in 1982, cause catastrophic casualties, and force a change in U.S. strategy.

## **Beyond Rhetoric: Building Political Partnerships**

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Regime change in Iraq unquestionably provides opportunities to provoke positive political change throughout the Middle East. An Arab democracy serving as a successful model could inspire populations throughout the region and provide a path for governments and populations to escape the mounting pressures under the current authoritarian systems in their homelands.

Under what conditions would such an effect be most likely? Many leaders in the Middle East have long viewed increased democratization as a threat and have acted to obstruct it. The Bush administration appears to have done little to mitigate that sense of threat. In fact, its rhetoric, both in background briefings and by well-connected proxies such as Richard Perle and James Woolsey, seeks to accentuate it. Consider the following quotation from an April 2003 speech by Woolsey, directed toward the governments of Egypt and Saudi Arabia:

We want you nervous. We want you to realize that now, for the fourth time in 100 years, this country and its allies are on the march, and that we are on the side of those whom you, the Mubaraks, the Saudi royal family, most fear. We are on the side of your own people.<sup>8</sup>

Was Woolsey speaking for the administration? The individual that introduced him noted that day's *Washington Post* article floating his name as a potential administrator for Iraq. Woolsey clearly sought to give the impression that he was stating what the administration thought but could not say.

There are two problems with the sort of strategy for reform that Woolsey and some administration hawks appear to espouse. First, it motivates governments to block U.S. efforts to promote moderation and reform, even in cases when reform is in those governments' own interest. By putting regional governments on the defensive, statements such as Woolsey's make every effort at constructive interaction more difficult and thus make the kinds of obstruction described above more likely.

Equally troubling, Woolsey's words attract governmental obstruction while getting nothing in return. Middle Eastern populations are far more hostile to U.S. policy than they are to their own governments, and they doubt that the United States could possibly be serious about giving them a greater voice. When they do speak, they evince dismay over U.S. policy toward Israel and the Palestinians; resent American cultural dominance; and fear U.S. domination of their economies. No easy trade-off exists for the United States; it cannot quickly ditch unsavory governments to inspire their oppressed peoples. In fact, a strategy like the one Woolsey advocates is far more likely to result in the loss of the support of both the governments and the people of the Middle East, making the United States more of an isolated garrison state than a source of inspiration and hope.

By talking so boldly and optimistically about making Iraq into a democratic showcase, U.S. government officials effectively decrease the likelihood that Iraq will be such a model by highlighting the challenges a democratic Iraq will pose for the status quo in the region and thus energizing the defenders of the status quo to protect their interests. With every additional statement on how regime change in Iraq can catalyze democracy throughout the Middle East, Iraq's neighbors are prompted to concentrate on obstructing U.S. objectives in Iraq rather than on reforming their own systems. Such an outcome would prove lose-lose for the United States because it would impede reform both narrowly in Iraq and more broadly in the Middle East.

If the United States were serious about promoting political reform in the Middle East, a more promising course would be to exercise leadership that is practical more than rhetorical. The people of the region are skeptical of

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speeches, they are tired of them, and they have long ceased to find them inspiring. If the United States is to play a constructive role in effecting change in the Middle East, the government needs to do it by patiently and quietly building partnerships on the ground. Far more productive than all the rhetoric would be a subtler policy that, on one hand, builds a viable system in Iraq and, on the other, highlights how demographic and technological change, geopolitical shifts, and the ideological sterility of political debate in the region collectively ensure that political tools that have worked well in the past will prove far less effective in the future. The more U.S. officials strut and shout, the more they make the United States a target. Rather than inspiring democracy, they make it more likely that friends and adversaries in the region will move to protect their own interests, thereby frustrating those of the United States in the process.

## Notes

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