

CURRENT HISTORY

January 2005

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The Limits of Shock and Awe: America in the Middle East

AUGUSTUS RICHARD NORTON AND FARHAD KAZEMI

If the crucible of the first term of President George W. Bush was September 11, the test of the second term is likely to come largely in the Middle East. The viability and perhaps the wisdom of the policies wrought by the self-styled “war president” will be tested in Iraq, in neighboring Iran, in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and in the region-wide success or failure of US efforts to promote political reform and democracy.

Never before has a country committed itself to such a fundamental and dramatic transformation of a major region of the world as the United States has in the Middle East since 2001. Underlying the ambitious agenda is a deep belief in salvation through freedom and in the potency of the democracy elixir. Whereas earlier US administrations viewed ambitious efforts to promote democracy as inimical to American interests because they would bring instability in their wake, Bush has pointedly impugned Washington’s infatuation with stability. In a major speech at the Army War College in May 2004, the president offered an inviting vision of the Middle East: “We believe that when all Middle Eastern peoples are finally allowed to live and think and work and worship as free men and women they will reclaim the greatness of their own heritage. And when that day comes the bitterness and burning hatreds that feed terrorism will fade and die away. America and the entire world will be safer when hope has returned to the Middle East.”

Behind the new project of spreading freedom in the Middle East is the idea of the democratic peace, with echoes of the philosopher Immanuel Kant’s 1795 essay, “Perpetual Peace,” and the more modern conclusion that democracies tend not to fight one another. But much of the scholarly writing on this subject examines the experience of developed democracies, not developing democracies. This is an important distinction because—in contrast to mature democracies, such as Sweden, Austria, and Canada—developing democracies may be quite unstable, as illustrated by the recent history of the Philippines, Indonesia, and Ghana. As appealing as the ideas of freedom and democracy may be in the abstract, there is cause to question whether a democratizing Middle East would be stable. It remains to be seen how well the rhetoric of promoting reform will weather the experience of promoting reform.

THE US PROJECT IN IRAQ

Whether or not the regional transformation agenda remains intact, the Bush administration has already embarked on a grand experiment in Iraq in which fostering democracy is a major component. The idea that the United States would install freedom in Iraq was there from the beginning. The war was ostensibly intended to stop the regime of Saddam Hussein from developing weapons of mass destruction (WMD). But the invasion was not just about weapons. The plan was to put in place a democratic regime in Baghdad that would become an exemplar for the remaining authoritarian states of the Middle East. The democracy project has gained more salience, at least rhetorically, since the WMDs proved to be phantoms, and since claims of

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substantive links between Saddam and Al Qaeda were shown to be fallacious.

The March 2003 invasion was also conceived as a demonstration of American power that would instill shock and awe in the region. Underlying the invasion's design was a skein of ideas about Arabs, Persians, and Muslims, in particular the presumption that they only understand the language of power. As they witnessed the toppling of Saddam, the region's autocratic regimes would be shaken. A quick American victory would show the wisdom of bending to the sole superpower's will. Arab publics were, in fact, dismayed and shocked by the ease with which the Iraqi regime was pushed from power. As for Saddam, he was widely disdained in the Arab world for the brutality he had unleashed on his own people, yet he was also applauded for his refusal to heel to US power.

Shock and awe did not last long. Once it became clear that the US invasion force was woefully undermanned to cope with the chaos that erupted following the fall of Baghdad, and equally unprepared for the challenges of running a dysfunctional country of more than 22 million people, Arab awe gave way to incredulity and anger.

Two months before the invasion force entered Iraq, Secretary of State Colin Powell cautioned Bush in simple but prophetic words about the difficulties that lay ahead. Powell invoked what he called the "Pottery Barn rule": "you break it, you own it." It is probably no coincidence that at about the same time, in January 2003, a National Intelligence Estimate warned of the dangers of an insurgency in Iraq and anticipated that the task of democratizing the country would be difficult and would likely take a very long time. Later, when the document was leaked, Bush said its authors were "just guessing" when they successfully predicted many of the problems the United States is confronting today in Iraq. In contrast, the Pentagon's prewar planning seems to have presumed that the bulk of US forces might be quickly extricated from Iraq.

There is no serious prospect that the United States will be defeated militarily in Iraq. But this does not erase the whiff of failure suggested by unanticipated costs (likely to exceed \$250 billion in 2005), the painfully slow pace of putting Iraqis back to work (unemployment is still between 30 percent

and 40 percent, if not higher), the inadequacy of Iraq's security forces, and the fact that America is bogged down in fighting an insurgency that war planners anticipated neither in scope nor durability. While President Bush said in May that 150,000 Iraqi police and military forces would be fully trained in time for national assembly elections in January 2005, only about 60 percent of that total have been even partially trained. Notwithstanding some commendable successes, Iraqi military forces are so inadequate generally that in late November 2004 senior military officials in Iraq estimated that as long as 10 years would be needed to complete the job.

Most of the ground combat power of the overstretched US military is either deployed to Iraq, refitting to return to Iraq, or standing down after service there. More than 150,000 US military men and women are deployed in Iraq, along with shrinking contingents of allied forces that now number about 24,000 troops. Combat has been

intense, as evidenced by 11,000 US casualties in 2004, including nearly 1,300 killed and thousands maimed or handicapped for life.

Rather than seeing light at the end of the tunnel, some seasoned observers argue that the United States is in a dark alley from which it needs to exit.

While they do not talk about it publicly, senior Pentagon officials worry privately that, should a serious conflict erupt elsewhere, the United States would be hard-pressed to find more than token forces to deploy.

The Pentagon has forestalled a serious and now looming debate about the size of the Army by resorting to involuntary extensions of those on active duty, drawing heavily on reserve units and individual reservists, and, most fundamentally, deploying too small a force to Iraq. If the United States falters there, it will be because the civilian leadership of the Defense Department demanded too much of a force that was too little for the task, notwithstanding its awesome war technology.

ELECTIONS AND THE RISE OF THE SHIITES

The outcome of the Iraqi elections scheduled for January 30 will be an interim verdict on American nation-building in Iraq. Despite threats of an election boycott by important Sunni Muslim groups, such as the pro-insurgency Association of Muslim Scholars, and calls for a six-month postponement from a variety of leading and moderate Iraqi parties, US officials have reiterated that the elections will go

forward as planned. US Ambassador John Negroponte has emphasized that the January balloting is the first of three elections scheduled for 2005, with the second and third designed to approve a constitution and elect a national government, and that any delay of the first election would throw the plans off schedule.

Clearly, there are major questions about how successfully elections will be conducted in the Sunni Muslim heartland—such as in Falluja, a key center of the insurgency and the target for a major offensive by US and limited Iraqi forces in November. Even in the predominantly Kurdish city of Mosul in the north, where nearly all of the Iraqi police deserted their stations under pressure from insurgents in late 2004, there is legitimate reason to wonder whether meaningful balloting can be held.

In order to form a party, a fee of \$5,000 must be paid and the signatures of 500 Iraqi supporters presented. Nearly 250 political parties or individual candidates have registered to run in the elections. Since the results will be calculated nationally, and since seats in the assembly will be allocated proportionally (unlike the winner-take-all system in the United States), there will be a wide range of voices represented. Without a doubt a preponderance of seats will be controlled by Islamist parties that will insist that Islamic law play a major role in shaping Iraqi society and politics. The Shiite Muslims will collectively control the national assembly that will be charged with writing a new constitution.

The most popular party, al-Dawa (“the Call,” meaning the call to Islam), is overwhelmingly Shiite. It was created by the late Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr, who was from the Arab branch of the al-Sadr family—like his nephew, the radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. Baqir al-Sadr, a revered Islamic intellectual who influenced the Islamic Republic of Iran, was executed, along with his sister, Bint al-Huda, in 1980 on the orders of Saddam Hussein. It is indicative of the likely course of Iraqi politics that the secularly oriented constitutional framework initially crafted by the US-led coalition was quickly discarded by interim Prime Minister Ayad Allawi when sovereignty was officially transferred on June 28, 2004.

One of the unintended consequences of the invasion of Iraq has been to propel the country’s Shiites to a position of geopolitical salience. US strategists assumed that the Shiite Muslims of Iraq were predominantly secular in orientation and were shocked to discover that this is not so. The coalition tried initially to dismiss Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani as a marginal figure, only to discover that he is probably

the most influential leader in Iraq. The dream of Iraq as a liberal democracy, however admirable, is infeasible presently, and the most realistic course for the Bush administration is a hybrid government that at best bears more resemblance to the aspirations of Iran’s President Mohammed Khatami than America’s deputy secretary of defense, Paul Wolfowitz.

At present *taifiyya* (sectarianism), not democracy, is the most potent element of political solidarity in Iraq. To take a case in point, when the US occupation authority was creating the interim Governing Council, the majority Shiites were not concerned about the ideology of members so long as they were nominally Shiite. By the same token, the Shiite community’s commitment to democracy is premised on its control of the political system, which will only harden sectarian identities among the Sunni and Kurdish Iraqis, among others. Intersectarian violence is already taking place frequently, and the situation may be only a few unfortunate steps from civil war.

Any postponement of the January election would suggest that the United States is more bogged down in Iraq than it publicly admits. More important, the elections will represent a definitive transfer of political authority from the former Sunni-dominated regime to the majority Shiite community, which accounts for about 60 percent of Iraq’s total population. Grand Ayatollah Sistani, through his associates, has left no doubt that he expects the elections to go forward as scheduled. To do otherwise would risk further turmoil and resistance from the Shiite community, such as that posed in the shrine city of Najaf by Muqtada al-Sadr and his Mahdi militia in the summer of 2004. While Sadr’s forces suffered heavy casualties when US troops regained control of Najaf in August, the fiery cleric still enjoys popularity among Shiites second only to Sistani.

FEAR AND INSURGENCY

In general, US officials have tended to underestimate the social resilience of the insurgency in Iraq. By way of comparison, until the Israeli army withdrew unilaterally from Lebanon in May 2000, it faced a resistance force with a full-time cadre of less than 500 members. Other fighters were part-time mujahideen—mechanics, optometrists, bakers—who disappeared for a few days on an operation and then returned to work. In Iraq, as in Lebanon, a small village force draws strength from cousins, friends, and co-religionists and grows accordion-like: five insurgents become twenty-five very easily. In the fall of 2004, US officials estimated

there were 10,000 to 12,000 insurgents, more than double the number estimated in late 2003, but even these numbers are probably off the mark by 100 percent or more. Because the insurgency's roots extend deep into the Iraqi social fabric, precise numbers are not meaningful.

Nationalism and resentment of the occupation have fed the insurgency, but its vibrant core resides in the now disempowered Sunni community where religious identity is being aggressively asserted. The pace of attacks—still escalating—has left the occupation forces preoccupied with force protection and at times too quick to respond to perceived threats, with sometimes disastrous results for innocent Iraqis. It is no pleasure to write that horribly vicious assaults on civilians—including indiscriminate car bombings and the execution of hapless civilians—have been successful. The grisly campaign of terror and intimidation has prompted humanitarian non-governmental organizations to flee Iraq and contractors to button down rather than move forward with key reconstruction projects.

Following the battle of Falluja in November, the marine commander claimed that US forces had “broken the back of the insurgency.” Dead rebels may be piled up like cordwood, but so long as the insurgents can maintain a climate of fear and intimidation any US claim to have gained the upper hand rings empty.

OPTIONS FOR US POLICY

The present course of action is premised on the hope that the January 2005 elections will be held as scheduled and will isolate the insurgents from the Iraqi population by lending momentum to the establishment of an independent and legitimate Iraqi national assembly charged with writing a new constitution. Many observers intone that the United States cannot afford to fail in Iraq; one certainly hopes that the elections will catalyze a national resolve to embrace the path of reform anticipated by the United States. Obviously, if the elections are not marked by serious boycotts or widespread violence and disruption, the chance of this hopeful scenario developing will be increased. Success in this regard would lend confidence to the Iraqi security forces and buy time for further training and reconstruction. It would also increase the possibility that other countries might agree to contribute to Iraq's reconstruction.

More likely, however, the insurgency will continue at a serious level even after the elections. This implies a sustained heavy commitment of US forces,

which will continue to stretch the Army, in particular, very thin. The pace of training Iraqi security forces has been slow and there is little doubt that some Iraqi police and military members are sympathetic to the insurgency.

Rather than seeing light at the end of the tunnel, some seasoned observers argue that the United States is in a dark alley from which it needs to exit. Some have urged the Bush administration to use a planned withdrawal from Iraq to focus international attention and help “internationalize” efforts to rebuild Iraq. Of course, this gambit could fail, leaving the United States with the unsavory choice of leaving behind an Iraq in turmoil or continuing to tough it out. Notwithstanding a sensible commitment to prevent Iraq from becoming a cockpit for anti-American terrorism, there will be a strong urge to find ways to reduce the size of an unsustainable deployment, even if this incurs a degree of risk. There will also be a tendency for the United States to look the other way as the Iraqi government shades into authoritarianism while retaining a patina of democratic institutions.

ENGAGING IRAN

With senior administration officials predicting that it may take four or five years to completely restore order in Iraq, and given the emerging dominance of the Shiite Muslim community in Iraqi politics, it will become even more important for the United States to reach an understanding with Iraq's neighbor, Iran. The Shiites of Iran enjoy significant capacity for troublemaking among their co-religionists in Iraq.

The relationship between the United States and Iran since the 1979 Islamic revolution can best be characterized as a failure of foreign policy on both sides. Ever since the revolution, the ensuing hostage crisis, and the severance of diplomatic relations, the two protagonists have been on a collision course short of actual warfare. Some observers have dubbed Iran a “Bermuda Triangle” for American presidents, beginning with Jimmy Carter and the hostage crisis, continuing with Ronald Reagan and the Iran-contra scandal, and concluding with the current President Bush and his State of the Union address in which he named Iran a part of an “axis of evil.” It is clear that conflict and tension have been the modal patterns of US-Iran relations for nearly a quarter of a century. This has been the case despite occasional positive developments and several instances of common interests regarding Afghanistan, Iraq, and control of transnational drug traffic.

With the Islamic revolution 25 years ago, Iran and the United States, which had been close allies and friends, became adversaries overnight. And a country that had been ostensibly one of the most secular in the Middle East became a theocratic state. The sources of tension between the two sides have been many, but they have generally centered on charges that the Iranian government has been supporting terrorism abroad and abusing human rights at home, giving assistance to radical fundamentalist groups in the Arab world, undermining the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians, and building up offensive weapons to dominate the Persian Gulf while at the same time seeking weapons of mass destruction. The 1993 US policy of “dual containment” (of Iraq and Iran) and the May 1995 decision to proceed with a full trade embargo of Iran have been among the most notable responses by the US government.

After leveling its own charges against American support of the shah of Iran (including a CIA-engineered coup in August 1953 that brought the shah back to power), the Iranian government dismisses American allegations. It argues that its activities are defensive and necessary in a hostile world and especially in the volatile Middle East. It points to the instability of the region, beginning with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of six new nations in its neighborhood, the Iran-Iraq War, two Gulf wars, and the continuing Palestinian-Israeli conflict, as reasons for defense measures. It further notes that it is a signatory to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and maintains that it needs nuclear energy for peaceful domestic use only.

Whatever the validity of these claims and counter-claims, it is clear that—on the issue of nuclear policies—neither the US government, the European allies, nor the UN inspectors are in full agreement with Iran. The real policy issue in the second Bush administration is whether it is possible to have constructive engagement with Iran given the history of mutual distrust and conflict and the possibility that Iran aspires ultimately to develop nuclear weapons. The options are not easy, nor do they necessarily lead to a trajectory that ends with a resolution of the disputes.

For Arab leaders, Iraq is the new cautionary tale, illustrating, as Algeria once did, the merits of status quo and stability against the risks of loosening a tight grip on power.

A recent Council on Foreign Relations task force co-chaired by former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and former CIA director Robert M. Gates proposes that the United States “offer Iran a direct dialogue on specific issues of regional stabilization” and also deal with issues concerning terrorism, Afghanistan, and Iraq. It recommends that, in coordination with European allies, the United States press Iran to verify its nuclear activities fully and suspend “all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities.” The task force is also quite clear in its view that it would be best to expand America’s political, economic, and cultural linkages with Iran.

It is apparent to most observers of US-Iran relations that the policy of sanctions and ever-expanding political conflict has not been fruitful for either side. The time may have arrived for both countries

to see the benefits in constructive mutual engagement. But this must be a two-way process. At a minimum, it will require transparency on the nuclear issue and an agreement not just to suspend but to stop

the uranium-enrichment process and subject it to verification. In return, the United States must agree to abandon its embargo and trade sanctions on Iran.

BACK TO THE PEACE PROCESS?

Central to any effort to stabilize the Middle East is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. History teaches that it cannot be resolved without direct American involvement. The horrible bloodshed and loss of life on both sides have had a major negative impact on the US image in the Arab world, and have severely damaged America’s public diplomacy with Muslims. President Bush is viewed as intensely favoring Israel, and with cause: he is arguably the most pro-Israeli US chief of state ever. Faltering efforts to promote a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict ended in 2002, when Prime Minister Ariel Sharon stiff-armed President Bush and other US officials when they raised questions about Israeli military actions in the West Bank and Gaza that were strangling the Palestinian economy and costing many innocent lives. Since then, the Bush administration has effectively put resolution of the conflict on the back burner.

The death of Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat in November 2004 and the resultant elections sched-

uled for January may make interlocutors available again for negotiations. The change of Palestinian leadership provides an opportune moment for the United States to resume its role as the essential peacemaker in the conflict. President Bush has recommitted his administration to the search for a settlement. "I believe we've got a great chance to establish a Palestinian state, and I intend to use the next four years to spend the capital of the United States on such a state," he said in November 2004. Progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front could mitigate some of the complaints about America and its motives in Iraq.

There is a potential trap awaiting the United States, however, and that is Sharon's plan to unilaterally withdraw Israeli forces, 17 settlements, and 7,000 settlers from the Gaza Strip in late spring of 2005. If, as many in Washington hope, the Gaza withdrawal is the first stage in a series of withdrawals that will later extend to the West Bank, then that will prove a substantial step toward peace. But for Sharon and his right-wing allies, the real prize is the West Bank. (Many Israelis regret that the late Prime Minister Menachem Begin did not insist more vehemently that Egypt accept responsibility for Gaza in the 1979 Camp David treaty.) Sharon's own words indicate that he does not plan

to withdraw from most of the occupied West Bank or, for that matter, permit the Palestinians to establish a territorially coherent and independent state, which President Bush insists is the goal of the United States.

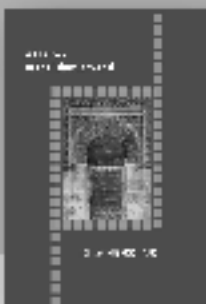
If the Gaza withdrawal is merely a means of consolidating Israel's grip on the West Bank—where about 200,000 Israelis live in 150 settlements (strictly speaking in terms of international law, colonies)—and East Jerusalem, where 170,000 Israelis now live, then the United States will merely be complicit in Israel's attempt to thwart a viable solution. This would be deleterious for America's standing nearly everywhere.

With the exception of Israel, where there is considerable support for the United States and not least for President Bush, America's reputation in the Middle East has fallen to an all-time low. While serious movement toward a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would not insure peace and tranquility across the Middle East, or end the threat of terrorism, it would dramatically improve the strategic environment that the United States encounters in the region.

This point was addressed at length in a comprehensive study on "Strategic Communication" prepared by the Pentagon's Defense Science Board in

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September 2004. “Muslims,” it concluded, “do not ‘hate our freedom,’ but rather hate our policies. The overwhelming majority voice their objections to what they see as one-sided support in favor of Israel and against Palestinian rights, and the longstanding, even increasing support for what Muslims collectively see as tyrannies, most notably Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Pakistan and the Gulf states.”

THE FATE OF GRAND AMBITIONS

American foreign policy in the Middle East over the next four years will depend on several key policy choices and outcomes. Assuming that Afghanistan continues on a trajectory of incremental stability and progress toward democracy, the three critical problems of Iraq, Iran, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will prove central to the Bush presidency. The foreign policy performance of the first Bush administration does not inspire confidence that the second will be marked by strong success in the Middle East.

Even some of the Iraq War’s advocates now suggest that the grand ambitions with which the United States leaped into that country represent a “bridge too far.” The war risks becoming a catastrophe for America. The dilemmas posed by Sunni insurgency and Shiite ambitions loom large. Without progress on the security front, US forces will remain deeply enmeshed in Iraq and casualties will continue to mount. In all likelihood, exit strategies will be much debated following the January elections.

Exacerbating the uncertainty in Iraq is the potential for Iran to make matters even worse. The apparent absence of direct contact and negotiations between the United States and Iran adds fuel to an already tense situation. The key questions are whether mutual benefits can be shown for such contacts, and whether Iran will abide by agreements on nuclear issues and other points of common interest. In part because both countries would benefit from a stable Iraq, it is likely that US-Iranian relations will receive new attention. It is conceivable that, despite residual suspicion and hostility, the coming year may find the adversaries seeking avenues for cooperation.

The Bush administration could play a positive role in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The question is: Will it do so? If the president makes

good on his commitment to the creation of an independent Palestinian state, that achievement would contribute importantly to promoting US interests in the region. The United States is now so coupled to Israel that a failure to move substantively toward a Palestinian state will not surprise many regional observers, but it will further harden the deeply worrying regional antipathy.

There is no doubt that Middle Easterners’ quest for a better life and for a politics free of corruption and coercion will continue. This is evident in many countries across the region—including Egypt, where President Hosni Mubarak is facing unaccustomed criticism; in Saudi Arabia, where halting steps toward political reform are under way; in tiny Bahrain, where citizens are taking the king’s promise of democracy seriously; and in Lebanon, where oppositional politics is finding a second wind.

Yet abiding suspicions of America’s motives often contaminate the project of reform that America espouses. Although the topic of reform is the subject of lively debates, so is the apparent hypocrisy of Washington’s discourse on democracy. A further complication is that Iraq, intended to be the poster child for political reform, has become something else for ruling elites in the region’s capitals. For Arab leaders, Iraq is the new cautionary tale, illustrating, as Algeria once did, the merits of status quo and stability against the risks of loosening a tight grip on power.

Although the Iraq War will not produce the grand benefits that the Bush administration envisaged in 2002 and 2003, and although the invasion has complicated rather than contributed to ending the challenge of Al Qaeda terrorism, important opportunities may yet emerge from the US campaign in Iraq. While the shape of a new Iraqi state remains to be discovered, there is little doubt it will feature a strong Shiite coloration, with religion defining the Iraqi polity in ways the Washington war planners scarcely imagined. If the United States can develop a good working relationship with such a government, this would redound to the advantage of America’s image in the Muslim world. But the converse is also true, and much can go wrong. Either way, the Bush administration’s historical legacy will turn on the fate of its attempt to transform Iraq and the Middle East. ■