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Making War, Making Peace: The Middle East Entangles America

AUGUSTUS RICHARD NORTON

Whatever the verdict of future historians about the wisdom of President George W. Bush's foreign policies, one abiding irony will stand out: the United States became more entangled in the Middle East than at any time in its history under the leadership of a man who initially wanted to distance himself from the region. On coming to office in 2001, Bush expressed no interest in becoming ensnared in peacemaking between Israelis and Palestinians, as his predecessor had, and viewed "nation building" as a squandering of US military resources. But three years into his term, Bush finds an American role in Arab-Israeli peacemaking indispensable. Nation building, too, is now the administration's greatest foreign policy burden following the invasion of Iraq.

Yet in Iraq the United States appears to have checkmated itself, maneuvered into the calamitous position of being unable to exit easily or stay safely. Equally dismaying, the Bush administration's actions and policies have contributed to a backlash of hostility toward America throughout the Muslim world. The ignominious capture of Saddam Hussein provided a moment of celebration, but the consequences of a defiant Arab leader's humiliation have yet to play out. The war against terrorism is at best a draw, and worried US government analysts report that the pool of Al Qaeda recruits has actually increased, not least in the Middle East.

When Bush puts his bid for reelection before voters in November, his political fate may well turn on his success or failure in the Middle East. In January 2001, this possibility would have been laughably

implausible, but September 11 reordered US priorities and the Middle East now looms large.

Bush deserves great credit for making difficult and defining decisions. He is the first president to declare officially his support for an independent and viable Palestinian state. He has committed the United States to the promotion of democracy in the Middle East. He has repudiated America's long-standing commitment to stability through the support of authoritarian regimes. In September 2002 he also adopted a policy of preemptive war that provided the strategic context for invading Iraq and directly challenging key tenets of international law regarding justifications for intervention. In the process, the United States has unsettled some of its closest allies, shaken the foundations of the United Nations, and posed an enormously challenging Middle East agenda for US diplomats and soldiers.

IRAQI REALITIES

There was never much doubt that given the opportunity to topple Saddam Hussein, the Bush team would seize it. Writings, interviews, and speeches from as far back as 1991 by present administration officials and their mentors, advisers, and supporting pundits emphasized the goal of finishing the fight with Saddam. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz emphasized in an interview with *Vanity Fair* last July that the threat of weapons of mass destruction became the central public justification for invading Iraq because it was the only theme on which the administration could agree. But the thirst for finishing Saddam had a far wider rationale.

After the nightmare of 9-11, there was a desire to impart a lesson, to make a point about the costs of taunting, threatening, or attacking America. Certainly there were also those in the administration who shared the view of Israeli strategists that the

AUGUSTUS RICHARD NORTON, a *Current History* contributing editor, is a professor of anthropology and international relations at Boston University.

end of the Iraqi regime was the key to fostering a pliant Palestinian leadership and tilting further the strategic regional balance in Israel's favor. The ideal of democracy seduced others, who saw in Iraq the possibility of sending a message to adversarial regimes in Syria and Iran, as well as chilling ripples through the "friendly" autocratic regimes of the Middle East whose oppression and implacable opposition to reform had given rise to the terrorists.

Always lurking in the background was Iraq's oil wealth. But no one in Washington contemplated "stealing" the oil. Instead, it was thought that with America in control in Baghdad, the dynamics of the international oil market would change in America's favor.

Purported neoconservative conspiracies within the administration are also off the mark. Given the many arguments for toppling Saddam, all feverishly emphasizing the ease of the task and the bounty of benefits that would follow, it is not surprising that a president anxious to protect his great nation would succumb to the idea. Admittedly, wiser voices—including ranking former national security, Defense, and State Department officials—expressed their public doubts about the wisdom of attacking Iraq when the immediate challenge confronting America was the terrorism of Al Qaeda, as well as the pressing diplomatic demands of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Nonetheless, the administration won public support for invading Iraq by pressing the alleged threat of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. In retrospect, it is amply clear that the intelligence assessments of Iraqi capabilities and programs were faulty, and that leading administration officials, including Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, exaggerated the intelligence estimates and drew unsupported conclusions about the dangers posed by Iraq to America. To date, David Kay and his legions of weapons inspectors have found no evidence in Iraq that comes even remotely close to verifying remarks like those Cheney made in August 2002: "Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction."

The really big surprise was that the administration was so utterly unprepared to cope with Iraq once the despised regime was toppled. If there was a conspiracy, it was a conspiracy of ignorance. No experts in academe, government, or the Iraqi opposition could claim a serious appreciation for domestic Iraqi politics. Judith Yaphe, a leading government specialist on Iraq, put it succinctly a month before the invasion: "There's nobody in this country who

really knows the internal dynamics, the fabric of how Iraq works."

AMERICAN ILLUSIONS

When the United States invaded Iraq in March 2003 it did so with promises that American soldiers would be greeted as "liberators," to quote Cheney. Much of this optimism flowed from the hardly disinterested Iraqi opposition to Saddam. Kanaan Makiya, a leading opposition intellectual, predicted to Bush in a White House meeting that the invading force would be met with "sweets and flowers" (a prediction he now admits was wrong). A handful of academic pundits also stoked the cries for war.

Now that the illusion has met reality, there is a much different picture. The American military's insouciance during the looting that followed the conquest of Baghdad, and not least Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's unedifying explanation that "things happen," seem to have quickly soured the mood among Iraqis, especially in the capital. The embarrassingly inept effort to consolidate victory and restore order and public services undermined America's claims that it sought only to help the Iraqis realize the fruits of freedom. There is little doubt that the Iraqis are happy to be free of the former regime, but the US occupation has not worn well. The people of the Middle East have a sensitive nose for colonialism, and suspicions of America's intentions are rife inside and outside of Iraq.

Despite President Bush's claim on May 1, 2003, that major combat had ended, the resistance to occupation in Iraq has continued to gain momentum. More than 300 US servicepeople have been killed, more than half since the flight suit-accessorized Bush congratulated the crew of the USS *Abraham Lincoln* for its role in the victory while standing beneath a "Mission Accomplished" banner. The mission is not accomplished. The war is far from over. More than 100,000 US troops remain deployed in Iraq, two and a half times the number anticipated in the prewar plans of Defense Secretary Rumsfeld.

Costs, too, were vastly underestimated. Prewar plans assumed that Iraq would be able largely to finance its own reconstruction from oil revenues. The assumption has proved false because the oil fields are dilapidated and saboteurs have kept much of the oil from market. Congressional approval in November of an \$87 billion package for occupation-related expenses and reconstruction is only the first large installment of a total bill that will likely run into the hundreds of billions.

From a military standpoint, the United States faces a severe structural problem because of the Iraq occupation. The US army is strained to the breaking point, unable to sustain the number of troops deployed. For every soldier in the field in Iraq there is a long tail of support. Hence, keeping more than 100,000 soldiers in Iraq involves much of the army's capability. This limits the military's ability to meet challenges elsewhere. Only one fully equipped brigade (three battalions) is available for deployment in a new crisis area. To solve this problem, the United States needs support from other countries, more reservists, or a bigger army.

Given the unpopularity and the real dangers of the US occupation of Iraq, foreign support has been modest in terms of both troops and wealth. Thus, the United States has had to draw heavily on the reserves and National Guard. In November, 48,000 more reservists were alerted for service in Iraq. The reserve pool is being drained, and some generals fear that the overuse of reserves will permanently hinder recruitment and retention.

The third option—increasing the size of the active-duty army—appears inevitable, and it will have to grow by more than 100,000 people if reserve force activations decline. This is why quiet discussions have begun about the need to reactivate the selective service system. From a political standpoint, being the president who restarted the draft could prove highly unattractive in the run-up to an election. It is easy to understand how such an option would push a politician to grapple with an endgame to get out of Iraq.

Also adding to the case for cutting losses is the deteriorating environment in Iraq. In early November, a hard-hitting CIA report found that Iraqis, especially Sunnis but also some Shiites, were “flooding to the ranks of the guerrillas”; that Iraqis who had previously sat on the fence now saw the chance to “inflict bodily harm” on Americans and their allies; and that ammunition was “readily available.” (It was this report that preceded US proconsul Paul “Jerry” Bremer's rushed visit to Washington in November.)

Whereas US officials originally envisaged a long-term occupation in Iraq lasting as many as five years, the United States now plans to turn over sovereignty to the Iraqis by the summer of 2004, if not sooner. Of course, US forces will still need to stay in Iraq, and to that end America is busily constructing as many as four bases in the country. Yet it is questionable

whether the US presence will be tenable, even with an ostensibly sovereign Iraqi government.

What is not questionable is the fact that the Iraqi war has actually exacerbated the terrorism threat. It has done so in part by feeding enmity toward America. This is revealed in several polls, most authoritatively in an October 1 report by the Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim World, chaired by retired diplomat Edward P. Djerejian. The Djerejian group's report found distressing levels of anti-Americanism and concluded that “the bottom has fallen out of support for the United States.”

Within a few months of the invasion of Iraq, senior counterterrorism officials in Europe were reporting a spike in recruitment for Al Qaeda. In October, the London-based International Institute for Security Studies reported that “war in Iraq has probably inflamed radical passions among Muslims and thus increased Al Qaeda's recruiting power

and morale [and], at least marginally, its operational capability.” In 2003 terrorist attacks inspired, if not organized, by Al Qaeda struck the

Philippines, Saudi Arabia (twice), Morocco, Indonesia, Iraq, and Turkey (twice), taking nearly 250 lives.

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ISRAEL, PALESTINE, AMERICA

US policy in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict also helps to enflame Muslims' strongly negative assessments of America. Public opinion data show clearly that even in Indonesia, there is deep empathy with the Palestinian Arabs and strong concern for the fate of occupied Jerusalem.

One school of thought holds that the best policy is simply to support Israel, America's staunch friend and ally. Thus, Dennis Ross, the former US diplomat, argues that peace in the Middle East will never occur “if Israel isn't strong and if there isn't a strong relationship between the United States and Israel.” The neoconservative *Weekly Standard* editorializes against realpolitik and in favor of identifying with Israeli ideals. “The mediator role had value as long as the Oslo process was alive,” wrote the magazine's David Brooks (now a *New York Times* columnist). “But it's dead now, and what has taken its place is a war over moral visions.”

As satisfying as adopting a one-sided position might be in US domestic politics, the geopolitical factors point in a different direction. This is espe-

cially true in the face of current Israeli policies, including continued settlement expansion, the building of a security wall in the West Bank, and efforts to undermine Palestinian political leaders. These seem aimed at striking a terrible blow to Palestinian nationalism and encouraging the Palestinians, according to historian Geoffrey Wheatcroft's assessment, "to decide that being part of a Jordanian entity is more conducive to goals like daily living." Some of this has the ring of a movie we have already seen. In fact, the premise of Ariel Sharon's 1982 invasion of Lebanon was that he could strike a fatal blow to Palestinian nationalism.

Former Ambassador Hermann F. Eilts puts it simply: "Without Bush being engaged, nothing will happen and the situation will get worse." Indeed, just after US troops took control of Iraq, President Bush traveled to the Middle East. On June 4, 2003, in Aqaba, Jordan, he committed himself firmly to the so-called road map, a peace settlement outline crafted by the United States in cooperation with the Europeans, Russia, and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. Israeli analysts had expected that Israel would face nominal US pressure following the Iraq war, but they were surprised to witness the Bush administration's vehemence. Apparently reliable reports point to strong comments from Bush to Sharon. As a riposte to Sharon's demands for Palestinian action to move the peace process forward, Bush told Sharon: "We all know what the Palestinians need to do, but now we're focusing on what your commitments are." (A month earlier, meeting with leading Jewish figures in the White House, Bush reportedly said, "I saved Sharon's ass in Iraq. He owes me, and I'm going to collect.")

Bush's dramatic speech to the UN General Assembly in November 2001 signaled the beginning of his shift: "We are working toward the day," he said, "when two states—Israel and Palestine—live peacefully together within secure and recognized borders." For America, this is not only an appropriate challenge to pursue for moral reasons, but also an indispensable goal for sustaining the base of broad, international support that will be required in the difficult years ahead.

DEMOCRATIZATION

As if pacifying Iraq and mediating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were not daunting enough, Bush has set for himself another enormous challenge: fostering democracy in a region noted for its absence. During the 1990s, Western diplomats and political leaders paid lip service to the idea of encouraging

democracy in the Middle East. There was little real pressure on the region's autocratic governments to permit their citizens an expanded voice in politics. Major powers, including the United States, preferred stability over the uncertainty of democratization.

Rampant government corruption and inefficiency often provoked dissatisfaction and complaining in Middle Eastern societies, but officials were able to fragment or suppress those groups that were calling most strenuously for reform. The best-organized opposition forces, the Islamist political movements of various stripes, posed a direct challenge to the ruling elites' monopoly on power. Thus, the contemplation of democracy in the Middle East prompted major outside powers and local dictators to see eye-to-eye on the virtue of continuing the status quo and sustaining stability.

Where parliamentary elections were held the Islamists' participation was often carefully circumscribed (as in Egypt) if not outlawed completely (as in Tunisia). When Islamists were allowed to fully participate in elections in Algeria, they proved a popular alternative to the discredited secular ruling party. In 1992, when the Islamic Salvation Front seemed certain to win an overwhelming majority in Algeria's first-ever competitive parliamentary elections, the army staged a coup that evoked little more than mild rebukes in Europe and North America. When the thwarted victors—whose commitment to democratic rules was uncertain—resorted to violence, civil war erupted. In the ensuing decade more than 100,000 Algerians died. What had been a promising experiment in democratization became a horrible cautionary tale.

President Bill Clinton spoke often and eloquently in the 1990s about the promotion of democracy around the globe, but like his predecessors in the White House, he did little to put his words into practice in the Middle East. In many corners of Washington it was feared that democracy would empower anti-American and anti-Israeli voices that would pose a threat to the region's stability. The Algerian debacle underscored the risks.

But US foreign policy may be in the midst of a major shift now on the question of democracy in the Middle East. In major speeches during November 2003 in Washington and during his state visit to London, President Bush forcefully challenged the West's fondness for stability over democracy and pronounced a sea change in US policy. "Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe," Bush said, "because in the long run

stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty. As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export.”

After 9-11, leading officials referred frequently to the “freedom deficit” in the Middle East, and concluded that economic failure and political oppression fed despair and conditioned people to succumb to ideologies of hatred and violence. President Bush declared in February 2003 that the “world has a clear interest in the spread of democratic values, because stable and free nations do not breed ideologies of murder.”

Bush’s assertion may be accurate, but it is almost irrelevant to the present Middle East, where democracy is inchoate at best. Democratizing states are not necessarily stable and are actually more prone to instability than authoritarian systems. Thus, while there are other good reasons to work for more freedom and prosperity in the Middle East, the project of democratization is unlikely in the foreseeable future to produce the democratic peace presumed by Bush and other US officials.

When the United States and Britain invaded Iraq in March 2003, it was widely asserted by those who wanted to see Saddam toppled that Iraq would be transformed from a republic of fear into a republic of freedom. One of the most influential Iraqi advocates of this transformation has been Kanaan Makiya, who observed in 1989 that Saddam’s regime had obliterated civil society—the middle space between citizen and state—leaving Iraqis exposed to the naked power of the state and able to find security only in the basic institutions of family and tribe and sometimes not even there.

Durable democracy does require a vibrant civil society, but the latter requires much more time than the architects of the 2003 invasion of Iraq initially anticipated. If the United States is to persevere in promoting democracy, a long-term view is certainly appropriate. As the president himself noted in November, “working democracies always need time to develop—as did our own.”

RESOLVING THE CONTRADICTIONS

The contradictions in US Middle East policy are obvious. The promotion of democracy in Iraq will require a deeper, longer-term engagement than the exit strategy that seems to be implied by the present announced policies. The president has assailed the idea that stability should be the ultimate goal of US policy in the Middle East. Yet there is not much doubt which option America would prefer, given

the choice between a democratizing but unstable Iraq and a stable but only nominally democratic Iraq—especially if the size of the US military deployment could be drastically reduced.

The war on terrorism is one of the leitmotifs of the Bush administration. But it is a war that is going to continue for generations if the supply of terrorists continues to grow faster than America and its allies can capture, incapacitate, or kill them. Unfortunately, US policies in Iraq and in the Israeli-Palestinian zone continue to foster enmity toward America and help breed an ideal environment for Al Qaeda recruiters.

Is the United States going to continue to deal with the threat of terrorism at the retail end, at the point of destruction and havoc, or will it truly address the wholesale questions of the supply of terrorists? If the latter, then America is going to have to get serious about ending its occupation of Iraq and the Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank. The Bush administration must accept the face that stabilizing Iraq will require a much expanded role for both European allies and the UN. As for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, US statesmen know well the contours of a settlement. But the president must be willing to use the prestige of his office and his considerable political capital as a friend of Israel to break the gruesome deadlock. ■

A Current History Snapshot . . .



“The great majority of Israelis value the lives of their sons more highly than the graves of their ancestors. However, even Israel’s narrow security claims conflict with the minimum requirements of the Palestinians and the Arab states. Though the outcome of the Camp David talks left open for future negotiations the settlement of the Palestinian question, the future of the West Bank and Gaza, and the final disposition of the Golan Heights, the situation at the end of 1978 raised greater hope of real diplomatic movement in the Middle East than has existed for 30 years.”

“Egypt and Israel after Camp David”
Current History, January 1979
 Steven J. Rosen and Francis Fukuyama,
 Rand Corporation