The Impact of War in Iraq: Democratization or Destabilization of the Middle East?

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In the run-up to military action in Iraq, the media devoted attention to speculating on the eventual impact of a war upon the Middle East. Analysis of the post-conflict political situation inside the country tended to fall into one of three slightly hackneyed categories, which nevertheless served to sketch out the broad contours of what Iraq might look like without Saddam. The first saw Continuity with the present regime: although the war would change the all too familiar faces of Saddam’s regime, the underlying social, political and military structures would remain intact in what would essentially be a benign dictatorship. The second scenario focused on the possibility of Constitutionalism in Iraq, with a post-war reconfiguration of the political system to those elements (Kurds, Shiis, democrats) traditionally marginalized or excluded by the regime. The third scenario dwelt on the likelihood of Chaos, the fragmentation of Iraq’s territorial unity should US-UK forces prove incapable of reining in the various ethnic and religious tensions that were alleged to permeate Iraqi society.

Similarly, analysis of the wider regional ramifications upon the Middle East as a whole, although understandably more speculative or more tendentious (depending on your standpoint), seemed to polarize around two basic ideas. The first was that the Middle East would be destabilized by war in Iraq. Given the schism between intensely anti-American public opinion across the region and the apparent support (albeit reluctant) being lent to them by many Arab governments, it was felt that a US-led military campaign in Iraq would risk inflaming already high levels of feeling and precipitate protests, riots and demonstrations that might threaten existing governments. Given the nature of some regimes in the Middle East, this might not have been considered an altogether negative development were it not for the nagging suspicion that the rulers succeeding them might be even worse. The second scenario, prevalent in American rather than European analysis, was that the Middle East would be re-invigorated by the changes wrought in Iraq. Regime change would persuade sceptics of America’s genuine commitment to encouraging democratic governance in the region, a realization which would unleash a wave of democratization across the Middle East.

Up until now, neither one of these scenarios has occurred. The Arab world has indeed witnessed an almost unprecedented level of anger at the military campaign, which has manifested itself in public protests in the streets of most Arab capitals. So far, states have been able to manage the demonstrations, as yet primarily focused on the role of the US rather than the support lent to America’s military activities by their own governments. This may of course change in the coming weeks: foreign policy issues have in the Middle East frequently acted as a catalyst for underlying discontent with the political and economic status quo at home. The assessment of instability must therefore proceed on a case-by-case basis; it is the political environments of individual countries that provide the necessary context, rather than developments in the international arena.

The other scenario – that of the democratization of the Middle East – is a little more complicated. It requires political analysis at the regional level: ironically, it is arguably the international strategic situation, rather than the local political backdrop, that will inform the evolution (or implementation) of political structures more conducive to wider popular participation. War in Iraq will certainly force a re-assessment of regional security arrangements in the Gulf and it is in the context of discussing security concerns – rather than the analysis of internal Arab politics – that the idea of democratization most often rears its head.
acceptability for many in the Arab world. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s appropriation of the language and rhetoric of counter-terrorism to describe daily escalations of bipartisan violence has been greeted by scepticism by many in Europe, but it is a language which meets a ready constituency in an America upon which the profound impact of the events of 11 September 2001 is even now underestimated by states on the other side of the Atlantic divide. Jordanians see the US as not only opposed to an equitable settlement of the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians, but see it as guilty of embracing double standards. On the one hand, it accuses the Palestinian Authority of failing to restrain terrorist elements (even while its structures of authority are destroyed by Israeli); on the other, it supports Israeli state ‘terrorism’ in contradiction of its wider goals in the war on terror.

Jordanians are not now expressing support for Saddam Hussein out of loyalty to the Iraqi President, his policies or his regime; support for Iraq is rather a measure of their disapproval of American foreign policy in the region. Jordan experienced a similar situation in the 1991 Gulf War. King Hussein at the time decided to side with public opinion, fearing the popular backlash should he lend his support to the international coalition which ejected Saddam from Kuwait. After the war, Jordan suffered economically as Gulf aid packages were cancelled and remittances from expelled Palestinian workers dried up; it took several years and a re-alignment with the US before the economy improved. No doubt mindful of the price his father paid, King Abdullah simply seems to be quietly yet firmly positioning himself in the pro-Western camp. Of course, given the present popularity of the US in the Middle East, this does not entail a great commitment: King Abdullah simply needs to avoid the temptation of raising easy political capital by taking up rhetorical arms against US military action. The hope is that his efforts will be rewarded with more tangible capital flows after the end of the conflict: aid packages, loans on favourable terms, and the continuation of cut-price Israeli oil to subsidize the Jordanian economy.

The question is whether the Jordanian leadership can keep public order until the post-war pay off begins to trickle through. Since the mid-1990s, demonstrations have been focused on the southern city of Ma’an, where a local tradition of political violence seems to have evolved, almost in isolation from the rest of the country. Once a thriving political and economic hub, Ma’an has undergone a period of rapid decline over the last twenty years or so. Social frustration is pronounced and fuelled by a sense of Ma’ani particularism – there is a widespread notion that the city is different from the rest of Jordan and operates according to different norms. Tribal culture is firmly rooted there: many locals identify with Saudi tribesmen across the border as much as they do with cosmopolitan inhabitants of the capital Amman and tribal system prevails over modern legal codes. Added to this mix the local penchant for bearing arms, and it is easy to see how Ma’an has incubated a tradition of repeated violent uprisings. As the war continues in Iraq, it is likely that Ma’an will once again witness similar demonstrations. In a way, the situation in Ma’an serves as a warning signal for the situation in the south. Although Amman may see demonstrations, the Jordanian authorities will more likely as not be able to keep control of the capital. It is the situation in Ma’an, however, that international observers should watch for indications of instability that might genuinely threaten the Jordanian regime.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is also experiencing some of the difficulties of reconciling its long-term strategic interests with the short-term imperatives of keeping domestic opinion happy. Given the battering that US-Saudi relations have taken in the post-9/11 period, Saudi Arabia stands to lose a great deal unless its burnt bridges are rebuilt. True, Saudi Arabia has declined to allow US facilities in the country (such as the Prince Sultan air base) to be used to launch attacks against Iraq as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Such a move would have provoked an immense wave of public anger. No doubt the Saudi public would be nearly as concerned were they to be informed that the US is continuing to use its bases in Saudi Arabia as command and control facilities for operations in Iraq. Understandably, the Saudis are less than eager to publicize this often overlooked aspect of their cooperation with America.

Ironically perhaps, it is not public opinion that should most concern the Al Saud at present. Despite the potential for unrest, it should be remembered that the demise of the Royal Family has been predicted for decades. It has proved remarkably tenacious in the face of repeated challenges to its legitimacy. The Saudi establishment seems to be quite well prepared to deal with popular uprisings, insurrections or relatively obvious opposition. The 1979 seizure of the Great Mosque was ended with a certain amount of efficiency; the success of this venture means it has served as a model for quelling rebellions ever since. Rather than the conventional threats it has faced over the last twenty-five years, however, the Saudis are now confronted by the challenge of clandestine underground movements – a threat they seem unaccustomed to dealing with. Periodic incidents of violence against Westerners in Saudi Arabia are often attributed to turf wars between expatriate groups competing for control of the lucrative illegal alcohol trade. There is a nagging suspicion that this explanation covers a more profound problem with Islamic militancy within the Kingdom. If this is indeed the case, then war with Iraq may provide the Islamic underground with the veneer of legitimacy it needs to begin causing trouble inside Saudi Arabia, targeting not only American and European interests in the country, but also the interests of the Saudi regime itself. Such a threat would require first and foremost the admission that it exists – which does not yet seem to be on the agenda – and then the restructuring of internal security agencies in order to mitigate the threat.

Remaking the Middle East: Democracy, Hegemony and Neo-Conservative Fantasy

The expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1991 ended with the imposition of what has since come to be termed ‘classic’ security arrangements in the Gulf region. This essentially involved two inter-linked policies: the ‘dual containment’ of Iraq and Iran on the one hand, and the cultivation of a symbiotic dependence between the US and Saudi Arabia on the other.

Iraq was successfully kept ‘inside its box’ for most of the 1990s. As so often noted by opponents of the present military campaign, Western policy did indeed manage to dissuade Iraq from invading any of its neighbours after its ill-fated expedition in Kuwait. Sanctions hit Iraq’s military hard: it was unable to keep such a large army under arms and lost its ability to maintain its military hardware at optimal levels of repair. Arguably, it also lost much of its capacity to develop its chemical and biological weapons programmes any further. Yet this success could only be maintained as long as the international consensus over Iraq’s isolation remained intact. As this consensus began to crumble (simultaneous to the erosion of UN sanctions as Iraq’s neighbours found it impossible to resist the pull of Baghdad’s economic gravity), it grew increasingly difficult to deny Iraq’s demand that it should play a real role in regional politics.

Similarly, Washington’s notion of containing Iran was undermined by the complete absence of a consensus over the desirability of such a policy – not just among Iran’s neighbours, but (more importantly) among America’s European allies. Europe’s policy of ‘constructive engagement’, with the objective of encouraging Iranian reformists in their power struggle with the hard-liners, meant that Iran’s containment was an impossibility from the very beginning. Containment was only ever a viable option so long as the Arab states of the Gulf kept their distance from Tehran, whose revolutionary ideology (and the effect it might have on Shi minority at home) was always a source of consternation. The election of reformist President Khatami in 1997 represented the beginnings of a thaw in relations between Iran and several of the Gulf states. His election was interpreted as an essential step in ‘institutionalizing the revolution’ in Iran.raison d’etat was seen to be replacing the revolutionary rationality of Iran under Khomeni. Fears that Iran was seeking to stir up trouble amongst the Arab Shis of the Gulf were gradually allayed, as demonstrated by the recent political reforms in Bahrain, which give the Shi community a great deal more influence in the political system. Qatar and Oman were at the forefront of advocating closer ties with Iran; Saudi Arabia remained more cautious, but by 1998-9 the process of détente was well and truly underway. Just as the first two pillars of US
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policy in the Gulf were being undermined in the late 1990s, the foundations of the third pillar—a relationship of co-dependency with Saudi Arabia—became the object of increased scrutiny in the wake of 9/11. In the US, many noted that fifteen of the nineteen hijackers were of Saudi origin and accused the Saudi regime of contributing to the rise of militant Islam across the world by exporting its own Wahhabi brand of Islam. In Saudi Arabia, there was disbelief at how such criticism could be publicly voiced by a key ally: criticism remains an alien concept to the Al Saud and is best aired in private, if at all. The prevalent suspicion was that an orchestrated media campaign was being waged to slur the name of Saudi Arabia. A media campaign was being orchestrated by the administration’s ‘dual containment’ of Iraq and Iran, which assumed the public image of the traditional dependence on the US do sour in the future, the fact it could be justly proud, the success in Baghdad will be short-lived unless it can be replicated in Jerusalem. Neo-conservatives play down the importance of an equitable settlement, assuming that American success in Iraq will weaken the Palestinians’ capability to resist a solution imposed by the Israelis. Yet the peace process is the key issue in winning the hearts and minds of the Arab world: the issue of Palestine touches a nerve that Iraq never could. If the US is serious about addressing fears of regional instability and of encouraging a democratic transition founded on politics and not security, then success in Iraq must be followed by success in brokering a lasting and viable settlement between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Washington offices do have a certain undeniable logic, yet it is the same circular logic which characterizes any self-contained, hermetically sealed body of beliefs. The analysis of domestic governments’ politics at the ‘grand strategy’ level tends to work well on paper, but always fails to survive the transition from abstract theory to concrete reality. The essential factor missing from the grand designs being drawn up for the Middle East is the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Even in the unlikely eventuality of a post-war Iraq of which theBush administration can be justly proud, the success in Baghdad will be short-lived unless it can be replicated in Jerusalem. Neo-conservatives play down the importance of an equitable settlement, assuming that American success in Iraq will weaken the Palestinians’ capability to resist a solution imposed by the Israelis. Yet the peace process is the key issue in winning the hearts and minds of the Arab world: the issue of Palestine touches a nerve that Iraq never could. If the US is serious about addressing fears of regional instability and of encouraging a democratic transition founded on politics and not security, then success in Iraq must be followed by success in brokering a lasting and viable settlement between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

The impact of an Iraq without Saddam on the Middle East could be profound. If the war is relatively swift and easy—proceeding according to the most optimistic of the scenarios relentlessly sketched out in the international newspapers during the interminable lull between UNSCR 1441 and the beginning of military action, where Iraq’s fate swung in the balance—then post-war Iraq could well be a new ‘beacon’ in the Middle East. Of course, this would require the US to resist the temptation of installing an American military governor in Baghdad to oversee the country’s reconstruction by American private sector companies awarded contracts paid for by the enthralled Iraqi oil industry. Installing a more participatory political system, even if it falls short of functional Western liberal democracy, would be the best way to bestow retrospective legitimacy upon the US-UK military action in the eyes of Arab public opinion.

Yet the notion that a rehabilitated Iraq will herald the beginning of a new wave of democratization inside the Arab world is far-fetched and naive. The notion is much favoured by the most visionary members of the Bush administration, who see the Middle East being inspired by the freedom soon to be enjoyed by the liberated Iraqis. However, the concept is most frequently promulgated by the administration’s more numerous neo-conservative elements, which use it as shorthand for a more complex set of geopolitical shifts that the overthrow of Saddam will trigger. The idea is that a new Iraq will eventually challenge Saudi Arabia. Despite its recent history, Iraq is seen as having the potential to be a pillar of US Gulf policy in the future. Its political culture—based on solid and modern secular credentials—is a better bet than the lottery of playing with fundamentalist religious governments; its population is young and well educated; its oil reserves are second only to those of Saudi Arabia itself. With Iraq as the cornerstone of US policy, supported by an array of the smaller states in the Gulf, Arab moderates such as Egypt and Jordan, Turkey (which will inevitably return to the fold) and (of course) Israel, the neo-conservatives have in mind a concatenation of factors which will essentially render irrelevant the traditional dependence on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Oil is less of a factor than might first be assumed— even if the Saudi regime’s relations with the US do sour in the future, the fact it has failed to diversify its economy to any tangible degree means that even if it does send tremors thorough the oil markets for a while, it is essentially forced to export its oil at some point. For all its uses, petroleum cannot be eaten. The neo-conservatives therefore see war in Iraq as ushering in a new era in the international relations of the Middle East, one where an ‘atmosphere of pro-Americanism’—i.e., hegemony (in the Gramscian sense of the word, rather than the more commonplace strategic sense)—replaces that of anger directed toward Washington.

The musings of neo-conservatives playing fantasy politics in their