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THE IRAQ EFFECT

The Middle East After the Iraq War

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Summary

Close to seven years after the invasion of Iraq, the Middle East is a region in flux. Regardless of the outcome in Iraq, the ongoing conflict has shaped the surrounding strategic landscape in ways that are likely to be felt for decades to come.

The Iraq War's reverberations in the region are broad ranging, affecting relations between states, political and societal dynamics inside states, the calculations of terrorists and paramilitaries, and shifts in public views of American credibility. The balance sheet of these changes does not bode well for long-term U.S. objectives in the Middle East. That said, a better understanding of how Middle Eastern states and nonstate actors are responding to the war's aftermath can help contribute to U.S. policies that may better contain and ameliorate the negative consequences of the conflict and perhaps even increase U.S. leverage.

Key Findings

The removal of Saddam Hussein upset a traditional balance of power in the region. While largely psychological, this was nonetheless significant for Sunni Arab regimes. Until the 2003 Iraq War, the regional balance of power has always involved Arab powers and Iran. Today, that balance has shifted toward Iran, although the internal unrest within Iran following its 2009 presidential election may significantly constrain Iran's maneuverability abroad. Still, the perceived removal of the Iraqi buffer to Iran following the Iraq War led to widespread con-

cern among Arab states that Iran can more easily maneuver in the core of the Middle East, from Lebanon to Gaza. The ousting of the Iraqi leader created the perception of increased vulnerability on the Arab side, resulting in a tendency to exaggerate the specter of Iran and its associated nonstate allies. (See pp. 19–21.)

Iran is seizing opportunities the Iraq War has afforded but faces greater obstacles to expanding its influence in the region than is commonly assumed. There is no doubt that Iran skillfully exploited the strategic openings the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion and the resulting shake-up in regional order have provided. Buoyed by several years of windfall oil profits and imbued with the nationalistic outlook of Ahmadinejad's "new conservatives," Iran has endeavored since 2003 to safeguard not just its near abroad in Iraq but also to assert its primacy on the wider regional stage. This momentum was accelerated by the concurrent ascendancy of its Levantine allies—the electoral victory of HAMAS in Gaza and Hizballah's battlefield performance against the Israel Defense Forces in 2006. These events heightened the post-Saddam view in Arab capitals of Iran's inexorable rise and created the impression among Arab publics that Iran—and by extension, Shi'ism—was now the "winning" side. (See pp. 21–23.)

Yet Iran faces more constraints on its regional influence than is commonly acknowledged. The electoral losses for Hizballah in the 2009 Lebanese elections and the internal unrest in Iran following its own 2009 presidential election have further exposed Iranian vulnerabilities and limits to its regional reach. Another example of mixed regional views toward Iran became apparent when the groundswell of support it garnered among Arab publics from its role in the 2006 Lebanon war proved fleeting and was effectively reversed by widespread perceptions of Iran's misbehavior in Iraq. Tehran's policy in Iraq became even more of a liability for Iran's standing following revelations of its support to the fratricidal campaign of Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi against opposing Shi'a factions and the resulting anti-Iranian backlash within the Maliki government and among the Iraqi public. Inside Iran, Ahmadinejad's bellicose posturing on Arab issues has provoked criticism from multiple Iranian factions along the ideological

spectrum, particularly in light of the country's deteriorating economy. (See pp. 23–25.)

The perceived “rise” of Iran has not produced a consensus of opposition from Sunni Arab regimes; Arab states' responses to Iran have blended engagement, hedging, and balancing. Arab regimes and publics have responded to the rise of Iran in diverse and often contradictory ways. The Arab world holds two images of Iran. The “bad” Iran reflects Iran's influence in Iraq and its challenge to Arab regimes and Arab Sunni identity, while the “good” Iran defies the West, opposes Israel, and criticizes corrupt Arab regimes (although its ability to do so will be severely limited by the perception that its own government is not considered legitimate in the wake of the contested 2009 presidential election). (See pp. 26–28.)

In addition, Arab disagreements over how to respond to Iran are rooted in the different geostrategic imperatives of individual Arab states. Arab populations that either neighbor Iran (such as Gulf states) or have been exposed firsthand to Iranian involvement in local affairs (the Levantine states) are more wary of Iran than those that have the luxury of regarding Iran from a distance. Many Arab states have tended toward a policy of hedging and accommodation because of what they perceive as inconsistent and ambiguous U.S. policies toward the Islamic Republic and suspicions about the possibility of U.S.-Iranian collusion at their expense if rapprochement efforts move forward. (See pp. 28–32, 36–37.)

Even if consensus on confrontation existed among Arab states, there is currently no viable Arab state “balancer” to Iran. The result is that the most viable state powers in the region are now non-Arab: Israel, Turkey, Iran, and the United States. (See pp. 18–21.)

Uncertainty about U.S. intentions and capabilities in the region has increased local states' receptivity to assistance from China and Russia. Post-invasion disarray in the Arab world was accompanied by a corresponding erosion of confidence in the United States as a security guarantor, stemming from the perception of U.S. entanglement in Iraq, which some viewed as limiting both U.S. capabilities and willingness to intervene elsewhere. The net effect has been the increased willingness of traditional U.S. Arab allies to consider patronage from

other extraregional powers—most notably Russia and China. (See pp. 50–55.)

The foreign policy of these two powers since 2003 has been marked by a new assertiveness and interest in the Middle East. Russia appears to be particularly active in challenging traditional domains of U.S. influence, claiming to be a more-balanced mediator on the Arab-Israeli front and through such symbolic gestures as its engagement with HAMAS. Yet the full potential of Russian influence is constrained by Moscow's historical "baggage" in the region and its frequent strategic blunders, such as its decision to brand the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization. (See pp. 62–73.) For its part, China appears more narrowly focused on energy security, and it remains much more economically significant than politically or militarily influential in regional affairs. (See pp. 55–62.)

Our fieldwork suggests that while some Arab voices may welcome Moscow and Beijing's activism as a check against unrestrained U.S. hegemony, Arab regimes ultimately see Russian and Chinese assistance as a way to supplement, but not supplant, the traditional U.S.-led regional security order.

The war has heightened awareness of Shi'a and Sunni identity, yet in many cases, regimes have cynically exploited these loyalties to discredit oppositionists and blunt Iranian influence. Iraq's descent into sectarian strife in 2006 reverberated inside a number of states in the region, creating new pressures on regimes and stoking societal tensions. Although the threat of a direct spillover of the fighting has not materialized, Sunni-Shi'a and tribal divisions have sharpened as forms of substate identities. (See pp. 88–92.) The effects of the war in this area are felt most strongly in states marked by authoritarianism and/or a fractured body politic—Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon. Kuwait is an important case in which the negative effects of the war on Sunni-Shi'a relations were mitigated by a more liberal and participatory political culture. (See pp. 77–83, 85–88.)

Warnings of increased Shi'a activism, however, have emanated from regimes that have relatively little to fear from Shi'a agitation, such as Egypt and Jordan. This dynamic illustrates the political utility of fear-mongering on the sectarian issue. In many cases, authoritarian

rulers have skillfully exploited the fear of Shi'a ascendancy to counter Iranian populist appeal at home, discredit and divide the political opposition along sectarian lines, and portray themselves as the only viable "buffers" against the chaos and uncertainty unleashed by the war. (See pp. 83–84.)

The war has stalled or reversed the momentum of Arab political reform; local regimes perceive that U.S. distraction in Iraq and the subsequent focus on Iran have given them a reprieve on domestic liberalization. In tandem with sectarian tensions, the war has produced a stalling or backtracking on post-9/11 progress on reform, however halting and incomplete. RAND discussions with activists and reformists in the Gulf and the Levant yielded a near consensus that 2003 was a turning point in reform, with authoritarian rulers sensing reduced U.S. interest in their domestic affairs and a subsequent return to Cold War–style balancing politics against Iran. Similarly, preemptive counterterrorism measures against returning jihadists provided a convenient pretext for the dragnet arrests of a broad spectrum of domestic opponents. (See pp. 80–83.)

In several instances, the war appears to have increased toleration and even the support of Arab publics for unpopular rulers who, whatever their faults, are still preferable to the unknown. Some of this may stem from the declining cachet of democratization, given its image as a "U.S. project" whose forcible implementation in Iraq was widely blamed for sowing the seeds of the country's descent into sectarian violence. (See pp. 102–103.)

Increased Kurdish agitation in Syria, Turkey, and Iran is the war's most pronounced and visible spillover effect. The 2003 invasion and the subsequent push by Iraqi Kurds for increased federalism has animated Kurdish activism in neighboring states, offering both inspiration and more-tangible support, such as a physical safe haven. Such events as the election of Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) leader Jalal Talabani as Iraq's president and the signing of the Transitional Administrative Law sparked celebratory rioting among Iranian Kurds and a serious uprising in Syria that left 40 dead. Violent Kurdish groups, such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey and the Free Life Party of

Kurdistan (PJAK), have enjoyed increased sanctuary in postinvasion northern Iraq, posing new threats to domestic stability in Turkey and Iran. This challenge is spurring tripartite intelligence and operational coordination between Damascus, Ankara, and Tehran that will complicate U.S. diplomacy to pry Syria from Iran's orbit and solicit meaningful Turkish cooperation against Iran. In Turkey, the effects are particularly worrisome because intensified PKK activity threatens to undermine many of Turkey's recent gains in human rights, possibly even sabotaging its efforts to join the European Union. (See pp. 92–95.)

The influx of an estimated 2 million Iraqi refugees has created socioeconomic stresses in Syria and Jordan; the resulting public discontent and demographic changes could challenge stability in these states over the long term. The Iraq War created the largest refugee crisis in the Middle East since the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, potentially jeopardizing the long-term stability of Jordan, Syria, and—to a lesser extent—Lebanon. At least in the short term, the refugee challenge has not transformed into a security risk to the degree anticipated. Indeed, some studies have pointed to beneficial effects, such as the injection of capital by the mostly middle-class refugee population in Jordan following the war, which reportedly fueled Amman's housing boom during that period. That said, as resources run out for these refugees, their situation is becoming more dire, particularly because most are unable to find legal work and are reportedly charged inflated rates for housing. Prostitution and female trafficking have become significant problems, particularly in Syria. Still, the Iraqi refugees have not yet carried Iraq's political and sectarian violence to neighboring soil. Most Iraqi refugees in neighboring states appear more concerned with surviving than with fomenting instability in their host countries.

Yet a strong tendency exists to scapegoat the refugees. The refugees are increasingly blamed for the end of fuel subsidies, unemployment, inflation, and housing shortages. The effect over the long term may be pressure on regimes from key constituents to curtail and reduce services for Iraqis. The Jordanian and Syrian governments have already toughened their policies, and Jordan has largely closed its doors to new refugees. After significant international pressure, children have been allowed to go to school in some host countries (including Jordan and

Syria), but few do because parents fear that attendance may compromise their illegal or quasi-legal presence in the country and because many children work illegally to keep their families housed and fed. Another worrisome trend is the presence of unemployed college-age Iraqi males whose profile of displacement and anomie could make them vulnerable recruits to Salafi-jihadism. Previous refugee crises in the region and globally suggest that poverty and resentment can feed radicalization among the displaced and host populations.

Finally, the long-term urban demographics of refugee settlement bear watching; thus far, the Syrian and Jordanian governments have avoided constructing any parallel institutions—schools, clinics, and camps specifically for Iraqis—to prevent a repeat of the Palestinian camp experience. But certain urban areas are nevertheless becoming increasingly Iraqi in character, displacing indigenous populations and possibly sowing the seeds of future discord. Moreover, if future instability in Iraq led to renewed refugee flows, Jordan and Syria would be unlikely to accept them as they have done to date, and refugee camps could develop. A large Iraqi diaspora, combined with continuing conflict in Iraq, has the potential to spread conflict to neighbors as Iraqis living abroad funnel support to Iraqi groups, are recruited to fight, or lobby governments to provide aid to combatants. If camps are indeed set up, these risks increase, as camps have often been a primary source of militant recruiting for fighting and unrest in other cases (e.g., Lebanon). (See pp. 95–101.)

The war offered a universalizing narrative of resistance to occupation that has proven attractive to potential jihadist recruits, but al-Qa'ida in Iraq's abhorrent tactics have undermined this appeal. The invasion was an initial boon to al-Qa'ida, offering a compelling arena to conduct defensive jihad against an occupying force that had defiled Muslim honor, even if the original grievances of many of its recruits were more local and parochial.

While initially receiving applause from Arab publics and even tacit approval from the media, al-Qa'ida's battlefield emir in Iraq, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, squandered this capital through the negative publicity generated by his abhorrent tactics, and in particular, the fallout in public opinion from the Amman hotel bombings. Populations that

had previously cheered al-Qa'ida from afar now turned against it when afflicted with its violence firsthand, as in the cases of Saudi Arabia and Jordan, or when forced to live under its stifling social mores, as were the Anbar tribes. Although this downturn in public opinion may not significantly affect potential recruits, it has bolstered the ability of neighboring regimes to absorb and mitigate the threat from returning veterans of the Iraq jihad. (See pp. 106–126.)

Shi'a insurgents have proven the most proficient at using technological innovations against the United States because of the provisions and training Iran's Quds Force has provided, yet the potential for widespread migration is offset by Tehran's control. Much of the focus on terrorist spillover from Iraq has focused on Sunni jihadists, but Shi'a Iraqi insurgents have actually been the most adept at using technological innovations against U.S. and Iraqi forces. These groups have benefited from strong external links to Lebanese Hizballah and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)–Quds Force. U.S. forces accused the Lebanese Hizballah of training Iraqi insurgents in improvised explosive device ambush techniques and imparting technology it had honed during its campaign against the Israel Defense Forces during the 1990s. In tandem, the Quds Force has provided training and supplied explosively formed projectiles and rocket-assisted mortars that have penetrated U.S. armor and challenged the best defenses of coalition air bases and other facilities.

A cyclical sharing network has likely emerged, with Iraqi Shi'a groups honing techniques Hizballah has imparted, then briefing Hizballah and the Quds Force on the battlefield applications, and then transferring the lessons back to the Quds Force training camps inside Iran, from which they have migrated eastward to the Taliban. Yet the potential for truly widespread and unregulated dispersal of these tactics, techniques, and procedures is partially offset by Tehran's sensitivity to crossing certain "redlines," i.e., giving the United States an unequivocal pretext to attack Iran or provoking an intolerable anti-Iranian backlash among Arab audiences—as was the case in Iraq following the mid-2008 violence by Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi and its splinter militias known as "special groups." (See pp. 126–134.)

Policy Recommendations

Taking these emerging trends and dynamics into account, we offer the following policy recommendations to mitigate evolving threats and to better position the United States to seize unexpected opportunities (see pp. 152–157):

Pursue a U.S. regional security strategy that recognizes local preferences for hedging and that seeks to encourage more-positive Iranian behavior. In terms of adapting to regional strategic shifts, particularly to Iran’s growing influence in regional affairs, the United States faces the challenge of regional allies more interested in hedging and even accommodating Iran than in balancing it. Arab regional allies (particularly governments) no doubt worry about and dislike Iran, but they will not unequivocally antagonize and provoke it. Indeed, many of our closest allies, particularly Turkey, found new reasons to expand their ties to Tehran in the years following the Iraq War. U.S. policy should thus steer away from efforts to forge an anti-Iranian regional alliance of Arab “moderates” (e.g., the Gulf Cooperation Council states, Jordan, Egypt) to counter Iranian influence.

Such an alliance is not only unrealistic but may also backfire by bolstering Iranian hard-liners at a time of unprecedented internal factionalism and escalating regional tensions. And the focus on Arab states, particularly the Saudis, as bulwarks against Iran misreads regional capabilities and interests. While the United States should continue to demonstrate support for key regional allies through continued security cooperation activities and exercises, such cooperation should remain low-key and bilateral to avoid the impression that the United States is attempting to create a broad Cold War–style collective security organization arrayed against Iran.

Explore multilateral security and confidence-building measures between Iran and its neighbors. The United States can engage in efforts to create multilateral regional security structures that leave the door open to Iran and that focus on confidence-building measures and dialogues in areas of common interest, such as counterterrorism, narcotics trafficking, and maritime security. Regional security dialogues involving military personnel, including Air Force officials, can allow

the airing of threat perceptions and avoid unintended conflict. They can also open up an indirect line of communication between Iran and Israel to avoid an unintended military confrontation, particularly if Iranian nuclear capabilities remain ambiguous. Although Iranian involvement in regional security discussions is unlikely in the aftermath of the contested 2009 election, such options should be developed and available for when political conditions in Iran improve. If such security dialogues eventually transpire and do not lead to a change in Iranian behavior, the United States will still gain important insights into Iranian decisionmaking and garner greater regional and international support for tougher actions against Iran should they become necessary. If they succeed, such dialogues can lead to enhanced security cooperation and a less threatening regional security environment where the potential for armed conflict is reduced.

Strengthen U.S. relations with Turkey, leveraging its unique role as a geopolitical bridge to mediate between Syria, Iran, and the Arab world. Another policy focus at the regional level that flows from our analysis is the need to strengthen U.S. relations with Turkey. Turkey can serve as a bridge for improving relations and modifying the behavior of current adversaries, such as Iran and Syria (as mentioned earlier, Turkey's relationship with both countries has strengthened because of common concerns over Kurdish separatism and terrorist acts within their nations in the aftermath of the Iraq War). Turkey has already demonstrated an interest in regional mediation by facilitating indirect dialogue between Israel and Syria, and the United States should encourage such efforts. Rather than force our allies into a bloclike containment approach, we should view regional allies' relationships with such countries as Iran and Syria as an opportunity and leverage their roles to the extent possible.

Turkey's interests in and extensive economic ties with northern Iraq also present an opportunity for assisting in U.S. efforts to rebuild Iraq. Indeed, unlike Iraq's Arab neighbors, Turkey has proven far more forthcoming in contributing to Iraqi stability and reconstruction, even though, like Iraq's other neighbors, it opposed the war. As a consequence, The U.S. Air Force should continue assisting the Turkish military with counterterrorism operations in Northern Iraq and

increase security cooperation activities and training with the Turkish air force. In the current threat environment, U.S. security cooperation with Turkey may be as or more critical than security cooperation with America's Arab allies.

Continue the policy of encouraging responsible stakeholder involvement from China and, to the extent possible, Russia; harness these countries' respective niche interests to promote regional economic growth and stability. In the same vein, the U.S. should avoid alarmist reactions to Chinese or Russian influence in the region, particularly their economic activities, because many of these activities are more likely to complement, rather than supplant, U.S. regional interests. For example, China and the United States have a strong converging interest in creating a stable regional security order conducive to the flow of the region's oil and gas. U.S. policy should also distinguish among extraregional powers' pursuit of their economic interests and more-aggressive attempts to move the regional system toward multipolarity, which is a greater concern in the case of Russia than China.

Encourage Arab regimes to adopt incremental yet meaningful political reform as part of a long-term push to counter radicalization and ensure the viability of key U.S. partners. To mitigate the war's effects inside key regional states, U.S. policy should focus both on ensuring that governing regimes do not abuse their newly entrenched power to crack down on domestic opposition and should take measures to prevent weakening state conditions from evolving into failed states (with all the accompanying problems that involves: shelter for extremists, a magnified proliferation danger, greater potential for massive human rights abuses). This suggests that U.S. policy should recognize the long-term security implications of continued repression and should avoid putting regional reform on the back burner, even if the focus shifts from holding elections to strengthening democratic institutions and practices.

Provide U.S. assistance for Iraqi refugees and encourage more regional support to mitigate the potentially destabilizing consequences of the influx. The Iraqi refugee population is placing a strain on the domestic infrastructures of Jordan and Syria, particularly their education systems. The long-term political ramifications of the Iraqi refugee community are still unclear but could prove destabilizing to key allies, such as

Jordan. Rather than ignore the extent of this problem because of political sensitivities (the Jordanian government refuses to use the term refugee, for example, preferring guests because the latter assumes an eventual return to Iraq), the United States should be actively addressing this new regional challenge. The United States can continue to support efforts to relocate Iraqis to other countries (including the United States) and can provide and marshal significant financial assistance (particularly from Arab Gulf allies) to improve housing and education opportunities in both Syria and Jordan. Such policies could capitalize on this otherwise negative development and humanitarian crisis by improving long-term infrastructure and human development needs in key Arab states, reducing the possibility for future radicalization and challenges to friendly regimes.

In partnership with local allies, use strategic communications to broadcast al-Qa'ida's failures in Iraq across the region to further discredit the jihadist movement in the eyes of public audiences. The terrorist trends emerging over the last six years also suggest a number of U.S. policy actions that can enhance opportunities for U.S. influence. The United States should exploit al-Qa'ida's failure to appeal to some of its target audiences, in particular the Sunni tribes and nationalist Islamic groups. Forging better regional intelligence sharing, tracking Iraq War veterans, and identifying recruitment networks are also important policy initiatives that can capitalize on the declining cachet of al-Qa'ida following its brutal tactics in Iraq. Other policy actions include encouraging greater involvement of women in regional security services to conduct female searches in the light of the growing trend of female suicide bombers and refocusing efforts on the potential establishment of Shi'a militant networks outside of Iraq, such as the IRGC-Quds Force's transfers of tactics, techniques, and procedures to Hizballah in Lebanon.

Prepare the U.S. Air Force to shoulder new responsibilities in America's post-Iraq strategy. The threats and opportunities the aftermath of the Iraq War presents will likely demand a broad continuum of strategic options that airpower is uniquely positioned to provide. The Iranian challenge, for instance, will demand that U.S. policy adopt a new balance among deterrence, the reassurance of local allies, and even the

possibility of limited and incremental military-to-military engagement with Iran down the road. Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets will be in high demand to mitigate the potential “bleed-out” of terrorists from Iraq. Air Force regional engagement strategy should be used to encourage local militaries to respect civil society and support a liberalizing political culture as part of a more-comprehensive view of long-term regional security.