

Richard Haass: The New Middle East

As the Iraq war helps bring the American era to a close, a new order will begin to emerge in the region.

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- *It is early 2008.*

The new U.S. strategy for Iraq, outlined by President George W. Bush in January 2007, in the wake of the Iraq Study Group report, has come and gone with no discernible effect.

With 100,000 soldiers still on the ground, despite congressional calls for major withdrawals, "force protection" is the new catchphrase, given domestic intolerance of American casualties. No one debates any longer whether Iraq is experiencing a civil war; it's in fact part failed state, part civil war and part regional war. Insurgents, militias and terrorists are more active than ever; Iraqi casualties and deaths are higher than ever. Output of oil and electricity remains stuck at or below prewar levels. Making matters worse are the "volunteers" crossing into Iraq from Iran (to assist the Shia majority) and Syria (where Saudis and others are flocking to help the embattled Sunni minority). Turkish troops are on alert and carrying out forays into northern Iraq. Republicans fear that public discontent will lead to further losses in Congress and the Democratic capture of the White House in November.

Iraq is not the only "hybrid" conflict in the region. Lebanon's elected government has collapsed after months of assault from Iranian- and Syrian-backed Hizbullah. If Palestine existed, it would be a failed state, with Hamas and Fatah engaged in daily internecine war. Egypt's aging President Hosni Mubarak clings to power, harboring hopes for a succession by his son Gamal, while the radical Muslim Brotherhood claims the loyalty of many and possibly most Egyptians. Jordan's King Abdullah looks increasingly vulnerable as a massive influx of Iraqi refugees exacerbates longstanding social divisions. Afghanistan more and more resembles Iraq as a weak central government battles the Taliban and others schooled in the streets of Baghdad.

Iran, snubbing the U.N. Security Council, presses ahead with its nuclear program. Israel is reported to be readying a preventive attack. Rumors abound that the U.S.

president and his senior national-security team are divided, with some pushing to join the Israelis (using stealth aircraft and cruise missiles to attack Iranian nuclear sites) and others opposed, arguing that Iran would retaliate, that several friendly governments could fall and that the price of oil would rise above \$150 a barrel. The overall impression is of a Middle East spinning out of control and the United States unable to do much about it.

Is this the future? With luck, not all of this will come to pass. On the other hand, it's easy to imagine things turning out even worse. Either way, one thing is certain: the American era in the Middle East is over. More than anything else, it was the Iraq war—the enormous military, economic and diplomatic costs, the shifting internal balances in the region—that brought it to an end. Other factors contributed: the demise of the "peace process," the rise of Hamas and Hizbullah, the Israeli embrace of unilateralism and the disinclination of George W. Bush and his administration to undertake active diplomacy. The failure of traditional Arab regimes to combat the appeal of radical Islam also figures here, as does globalization. It has never been easier for individuals and groups to find money and weapons, or to spread their ideas—including violent anti-Americanism. But let's be clear: the wounds America has suffered in the region are chiefly self-inflicted.

This is not the first such tectonic geopolitical shift in the region. The modern period dates back some 200 years, beginning in 1798 with a century of weak Ottoman rule. Then came the post-World War I colonial era, dominated by Britain and France, to be followed in turn by the cold-war era, marked by the decline of war-drained Europe, the rise of Arab nationalism and the emergence of two superpowers. The demise of the Soviet Union brought about the American era. Its dominant features were the U.S.-led liberation of Kuwait, the Madrid peace conference and the Clinton administration's intense but unsuccessful peacemaking effort at Camp David. This American era coincided with the zenith of the "old Middle East": top-heavy Arab regimes that repressed their people; relatively low oil prices, for the most part; an uneasy coexistence between Israel and both the Palestinians and the Arabs; Israel alone as a nuclear power; a frustrated Iraq balancing an internally divided Iran, and American primacy.

How brief a span it was, giving way to a new era that is anything but welcome. How quaint those old visions of a "new Middle East"—a region resembling Europe in its peace, prosperity and democracy—seem today. Instead, we can now anticipate a Middle East likely to cause great harm to itself, the United States and the world. In this new world, the United States will enjoy far less influence than it did before Iraq. Former partners will chart increasingly independent paths. Russia will most likely oppose sanctioning Iran. Europe will oppose what it perceives to be uncritical U.S. support of Israel. China will focus on negotiating energy deals that guarantee it the oil it needs to continue to grow, irrespective of other geopolitical considerations.

More and more, Iran will emerge as a player, a classic imperial power with ambitions to remake the region in its image and with the capabilities to potentially translate its objectives into reality. Both Egypt and Saudi Arabia are almost certain to initiate nuclear programs of their own, if in fact Iran succeeds as North Korea has proved able to. Israel, too, looks increasingly vulnerable, burdened with the costs of occupation and multidimensional challenges to its security. There is unlikely to be any recognizable peace process for the foreseeable future in the absence of a Palestinian partner both able and willing to make compromises.

Tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims will grow throughout the region and be felt acutely in divided societies such as Lebanon, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. "Militiaization" will continue apace, with growing and increasingly powerful private armies in Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. Terrorism will escalate. Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Egypt will be targeted in terrorist campaigns to weaken and discredit their governments. Faced with such challenges and the impression that democracy feeds disorder, Arab regimes, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia, are likely to resist reform.

As for Iraq, it will remain weak, divided and violent for years. Kurds, Sunnis and Shia will live separate lives, the result of ethnic cleansing as much as preference or history. U.S. policy will evolve from achieving success to limiting costs, both in Iraq and in the wider region. This will lead to a reduction in U.S. forces, a

reorientation of their role and greater emphasis on working to prevent what is now a civil war from metastasizing into a regional one.

America's options are limited in such a context. Its thirst for the region's oil, vulnerability to terror and commitment to Israel and a moderate Arab future require it to stay engaged. But how? The U.S. experience in Iraq should serve as a caution about using military force. It has not proved effective against loosely organized militias or terrorists who are well armed, accepted by the local population and prepared to die for their cause. And despite calls from some quarters to use force to keep Iran from getting the bomb, the case for not doing so has grown more, rather than less, compelling over time, for reasons ranging from the dangers of retaliation to the likely oil shock to the global economy.

The United States should also rethink democracy as the centerpiece of foreign policy. Yes, mature democracies tend not to make war on one another. But how many decades would it take to create a genuine democracy anywhere in the region, under even the most ideal circumstances? Meanwhile, it is necessary to work with many of these same nondemocratic governments against other mutual challenges. Nor is democracy an answer, in itself, to the problem of terrorism. Societies that can offer political and economic opportunities for their young people are less prone to radicalism, to be sure. Yet Britain has hardly proved immune. That both Hamas and Hizbullah fared well in elections only to carry out violent attacks afterwards reinforces the point. Democracy is of little use when dealing with highly mobilized ideological or religious extremists. A more relevant focus might be reforms that promote education, economic liberalism and open markets and encourage Arab and Muslim authorities to speak out in ways that delegitimize terror and shame its supporters.

The United States must realize that it cannot impose a solution on Iraq. Washington should establish a regional forum akin to what existed to help manage events in Afghanistan. This would necessarily require bringing in both Iran and Syria. Syria is in a position to affect the movement of fighters into Iraq and arms into Lebanon. It also exercises considerable influence over Hamas. There is a strong case for working to get Syria to close its borders in exchange for economic benefits (provided by Arab governments, Europe and the United

States) and a commitment to restart talks aimed at resolving the status of the Golan Heights. History shows that Syria, a state that joined the U.S.-led coalition in the first Iraq war and attended the Madrid peace conference in its wake, might be open to such a deal.

Iran is a more difficult case. But given that regime change is not a near-term prospect and that military strikes would be dangerous, diplomacy is the best option. Any talks must be unconditional and comprehensive—that is, they must address Iran's nuclear program and its support of terrorism and militias. Iran would be offered an array of economic, political, security and energy-related incentives backed by broad international support, a prerequisite if the United States were to press for stiffer U.N. sanctions should diplomacy ultimately fail. The terms should be public. Ordinary Iranians must know the price they pay for their regime's radical foreign policy. The weak showing of Iran's president in recent elections suggests he may be vulnerable to such pressures from within.

The Israeli-Palestinian peace process must be revived. It is still the issue that most shapes (and radicalizes) public opinion across the Middle East. The United States should articulate what it believes ought to constitute a final settlement, stipulating that the state of Palestine would be based on 1967 borders and that Palestinians would be compensated for those territorial adjustments made to safeguard Israel's security or to reflect demographic changes. The more detailed and generous the vision, the harder it becomes for Hamas to justify choosing confrontation. If America is to ever recover its role as an "honest broker" in the region, it must be less passive than it has been in recent years.

None of this guarantees success, defined however modestly as a halt to the erosion of America's power and standing in the Middle East. Nor, strictly speaking, is there any one "solution" for the Middle East. Whatever the United States does, or does not do, the region will remain troubled for decades. But this is not a prescription for fatalism. In history, what often matters most is degree. There's a fundamental difference between a Middle East that lacks formal peace agreements and one defined by terror and war; between a region that houses a powerful Iran and one dominated by Iran; between a part of the world that has an uneasy relationship with the United States and one filled with hatred.

History shows that eras in the Middle East can last as long as a century and as briefly as fifteen years. It is clearly in America's (and the world's) interest that the current era be as brief as possible.

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