

The US, Iraq and the Middle East

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The United States faces a set of unparalleled challenges in the Middle East at a moment when its capacity to respond is circumscribed and the regional and global situations are deteriorating. It is far more likely that things will get worse before they get better, though there are ways of trying to improve the odds.

Iraq: US weakened, redeployment becoming inevitable

The Iraq war has seriously weakened the US. Iraq is at best a fragile state, though it may end up a fragmented or failed one. It is unlikely to break apart into three neat pieces. Iran, in particular its hardliners, has been strengthened. It is proceeding with its nuclear program, without apparent hesitation. Al Qaeda has been emboldened, enhanced and practiced. It is closer than ever to precipitating the broader Sunni/Shia war it seeks. US ground forces are tied down, higher oil prices are enriching America's adversaries, and US prestige in the Muslim world is at a new low.

The outcome of this parlous situation is uncertain, but a "most likely" scenario is emerging. This would entail drawdown of US combat forces in Iraq, to begin by January 2009 at the latest: either the current Administration will give in to Congressional and electoral pressures over the next year, or a new Administration will come to power determined to reduce US commitments in Iraq, hoping that will encourage Iraq's neighbors and its political factions to take responsibility for stabilizing the situation.

Questions remain about redeployment within Iraq and in the region. Some US forces might remain in Iraq in order to train Iraqi security forces, to strike when necessary against al Qaeda, and to protect American civilians. There is also the possibility of US redeployment in the region. The overall US political and diplomatic posture vis-à-vis Iraq also remains to be decided: will Washington continue to support the government in Baghdad? Will the civilian reconstruction effort continue, or even be enlarged? How long will any remaining US troops stay in Iraq? Will the US continue to resist Kurdistan independence and partition of Iraq along ethnic lines?

Israel/Palestine: a soluble problem

Everything in the region is made more difficult by the continuing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. This is a soluble problem. The negotiated outcome is not only well understood, but for most people on both sides continuing warfare is less satisfactory. The problem is that weak, fractured leaderships in Israel or Palestinians find it difficult to act, a difficulty compounded by lack of solid consensus between the US and Europe.

While the Hamas coup in Gaza is a severe setback for the Middle East peace process as previously conceived, it also represents an opportunity for convergence between the US and Europe in favor of building a Palestinian state in the West Bank—symbolized in Prime Minister Blair’s appointment as representative of the US/EU/UN/Russia quartet. There is also a growing sense that Iran’s rise is frightening Sunni Arab states into a modus vivendi with Israel and resolution of the Israel/Palestine conflict, with the Arab League proposal as a key element.

Iran: US needs cooperation on Iraq even while seeking to slow the nuclear program

The primary US regional priority is preventing Iran from getting nuclear weapons, which more than anything else represent a national security threat to the United States. There is broad consensus across party lines on this in the US Congress. It is more important to the US than the outcome in Iraq, and it is likely to be necessary to remove many US troops from Iraq before a credible military threat can be mounted against Iran. US troops are just too vulnerable, in particular in their current dispersed configuration.

While Europe sees Lebanon and Syria as important, Washington views them as arenas in its struggle with Iran. The US therefore resists normalization of relations with Damascus as well as a renewed peace process between Israel and Syria, which the US views as a committed Iranian ally. Likewise, the Americans view Hizbollah’s rise as a political force in Lebanon with alarm and UNIFIL as a stopgap.

Amnesia is impossible: the US remembers mistreatment of its embassy and diplomats, as well as the Beirut Marine barracks bombing, while the Iranians remember US support for Iraq in the Iran/Iraq war as well as US support for the Shah.

The current adversarial relationship between Iran and US is, however, an oversimplification. The two countries are not “natural” enemies. Geo-strategic logic favors alliance. There are bases for rapprochement. Iran is overstretched and heavily focused on perceived threats from US and Israel that are not its biggest or most immediate problems. The US is also overstretched and needs relief from its burdens in Iraq.

US and Iranian objectives in Iraq—a single, stable Iraq with a more or less democratic system and no capacity to threaten its neighbors—are theoretically identical. It remains to be seen whether they can be made congruent in practice, but the Washington/Tehran dialogue that has begun in the context of “Iraq and its neighbors” and continued in Baghdad has serious potential, even if other issues remain outstanding.

The future US administration faces difficult choices in a difficult environment

Any future US administration faces difficult questions: should it maintain first priority to the nuclear issue, one on which it may well lose in the end? Can Iran be brought around, or the regime changed? Would a renewed effort on Israel/Palestine be worthwhile? Should the US stay on in Iraq, probably for another 10 years or more? Would resolving Lebanon/Syria contribute to a more comprehensive solution?

It will undertake to answer these questions in a difficult regional and global environment. American regional democratization goals have been put on the back burner. Key Arab states (Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Kuwait) face the prospect of overflow of violence from Iraq, a massive influx of refugees, and possible challenges to regime stability. Egypt looks far from secure, especially with Hamas, a Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, taking over in Gaza, and a newly active Saudi Arabia is challenging its leadership in the Arab world.

Pakistan faces internal challenges not only from Islamists but also from democrats, even while it remains both a nuclear weapons state and a harbor for international terrorists. North Korea, watched carefully by Iran, has been getting its way with the US: it is now engaged in bilateral talks without abandoning its nuclear weapons or its nuclear weapons program. China's mercantilist oil diplomacy is challenging the relatively free world oil market, even while its economic clout and military strength are growing dramatically. Russia is seeking to counterbalance the US even as it sheds many of the pretences of democracy.

Both the US and Europe do better in this difficult world when they act together. But doing so often involves US initiative, which Europe is increasingly reluctant, or unable, to follow. While this may vary with circumstances and administration, on the whole it is getting harder, as Europe enlarges, for the US to get the kind of quick cooperation it generally seeks.

Conclusions

In this difficult situation, some moves may improve prospects for peace:

- The single most important thing the US needs to do is limit its dependence on oil, which creates pressure on prices and fills the coffers of its adversaries.
- The US needs to fix a date for at least partial withdrawal from Iraq and find ways to redeploy that prevent spread of sectarian violence from Iraq to its neighbors.
- It also needs to find ways to continue civilian state-building efforts, in order to prevent Iraq's fragmentation.
- Using Blair, the EU and US should reinvigorate West Bank state-building, including a final status concept, while preventing humanitarian disaster in Gaza.
- The US should allow the Syria/Israel negotiating track to restart.
- It should also seek to gain cooperation from Iran in Iraq even while it tries to slow Tehran's nuclear program, with the EU's assistance.
- The EU and US need to intensify their efforts to narrow differences between them and enlarge the scope of their joint action.

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