

Regional Dimensions of the War in Iraq
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Paul R. Pillar
Georgetown University
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Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for the privilege of participating in this very important series of hearings related to the conflict in Iraq. I have been asked to address the relationship between that conflict and other trends and developments in the Middle East.

Events in other countries in the region will depend primarily on issues and conditions in those countries; in my judgment, the hoped-for beneficial demonstration effects that success in Iraq would have had on the politics of the broader Middle East have always been overly optimistic. Nonetheless, the development of a multifaceted and worsening armed conflict in Iraq does have significant implications for the rest of the region and by implication for U.S. interests in the region. Unfortunately, conflict and instability tend to have greater repercussions in a neighborhood than do success and stability.

In the case of Iraq and the Middle East, regional consequences involve concerns by neighbors about what may yet lie ahead as well as adjustments that regional actors already have made. The consequences involve regimes in the region as well as non-state actors such as terrorist groups. And they involve direct consequences of the violence in Iraq as well as more indirect reverberations from the conflict there.

I want to emphasize how much uncertainty is involved in trying to analyze the regional impact of the current war in Iraq, much less of various future scenarios or policy options. It is simply impossible to predict the full range of important regional effects, partly because of the uncertainty that clouds Iraq's own future but also because of the complexity of factors affecting events elsewhere in the Middle East. Any prognostications that speak with certainty about particular future effects ought to be met with skepticism.

With that understanding, I would identify five major dimensions on which—although specific future consequences may be uncertain—the war in Iraq already has had discernible impact elsewhere in the Middle East and is likely to have more, and which therefore are worthy of attention as debates over policy proceed. Those five are: sectarian divisions, extremism and terrorism, political change and democratization, ethnic separatism, and the alignments and relative influence of states in the region.

Sectarian Conflict

Sectarian divides within the Muslim world deserve to be discussed first, because the violence in Iraq has increasingly assumed the character of a civil war between Sunni and Shia. As such, it has intensified sectarian sentiment, suspicions, and resentments all along the Sunni-Shia fault line, only a portion of which runs through Iraq. It would be almost impossible to overstate how strongly this divide, which the Iraq war has made more salient, stokes feelings and fears among many people of the Middle East. Rooted in

centuries-old disputes over succession to the Prophet, the conflict manifests itself today in, for example, the perspective of some Sunnis (particularly the more doctrinaire Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia) that Shia are not even true Muslims. Just as important, the sectarian divide coincides with resented patterns of economic privilege and political power.

The special significance of Iraq is that, although Shiites are a minority of Muslims worldwide, they are a majority in Iraq (as well as, of course, next door in Iran). The evident conviction of many Iraqi Shiites that their time for political dominance has come cannot help but put revisionist thoughts in the minds of their co-religionists elsewhere in the region. These include the Shia minority in Saudi Arabia, who are concentrated in the oil-rich Eastern Province and see themselves treated as second-class citizens. They include the Shiites who constitute a majority in Bahrain but are still under the rule of a Sunni government. And they include Shiites in Lebanon, who probably are the fastest-growing community in that religiously divided country and who believe that current power-sharing arrangements give them an unfairly small portion of power—a sentiment exploited by Lebanese Hizballah.

The conflict in Iraq has made this sectarian divide more salient not only for Shia populations but also for regimes. The sectarian coloration of that conflict is an acute concern for Saudi leaders, for example, because of their own sympathy for Sunni Arabs in Iraq, the emotions of other Saudis over the plight of their Sunni brethren in Iraq, and any possibility of restiveness among Saudi Shiites. Looking out from Riyadh, Saudis now see themselves as encircled by a Shia arc that includes control of both of the other large Persian Gulf states—Iran and Iraq—Shia activism in Lebanon, and significant Shia populations in the Arab Gulf states as well as to their south in Yemen. King Abdullah of Jordan also has spoken publicly about such a Shia arc.

For the United States, this intensification of sectarian conflict carries several hazards, only one of which is the specter of direct intervention by other regional actors in the Iraqi civil war. There also are issues of stability in the other countries that must manage their own part of the Sunni-Shia divide. And not least, there is the difficulty of the United States doing almost anything in Iraq without it being perceived, fairly or unfairly, as favoring one community over the other and thereby antagonizing either Sunnis or Shiites, or perhaps both, elsewhere in the region.

Extremism and Terrorism

A second dimension on which the war in Iraq is having repercussions throughout the Middle East—and in this case even beyond—concerns extremist sentiment and the threat of international terrorism, particularly from Islamist terrorists often styled as “*jihadists*”. Other wars in other Muslim lands have served as *jihad*s in recent years, including in Bosnia, Chechnya, Kosovo, and especially Afghanistan. The Afghan *jihad* against the Soviets served as an inspiration to radical Islamists, a training ground for terrorists, and a networking opportunity for *jihadists* of diverse nationalities. We have seen the effects in much of the international terrorism of the past decade and a half. Iraq is now the biggest and most prominent *jihad*. It may ultimately have effects at least as significant as those of earlier *jihad*s, because it is taking place in a large and important country that is part of the core of the Arab and Muslim worlds, and because it is partly a

struggle against the United States, the sole remaining superpower and the leader of the West.

The effects of the war in Iraq on international terrorism were aptly summarized in the National Intelligence Estimate on international terrorism that was partially declassified last fall. In the words of the estimators, the war in Iraq has become a “cause celebre” for *ihadists*, is “shaping a new generation of terrorist leaders and operatives,” is one of the major factors fueling the spread of the global jihadist movement, and is being exploited by Al-Qa’ida “to attract new recruits and donors.” I concur with those judgments, as I believe would almost any other serious student of international terrorism.

The full effects on terrorism of the war in Iraq, as of the earlier anti-Soviet campaign in Afghanistan, will not be seen and felt for a good number of years. But some of the possible effects within the surrounding region may already be seen in, for example, the suicide bombings in Amman, Jordan in November 2005, which were perpetrated by Iraqis who belonged to the “Al-Qa’ida in Iraq” organization. Another possible effect is the recent use in Afghanistan of suicide bombings, a tactic not previously part of the repertoire of insurgents there but perhaps partly exported from, or inspired by, Iraq, where the tactic has been used extensively.

I believe that the most important variable in Iraq in the months or years ahead as far as the effects on international terrorism are concerned is the sheer continuation of the war, as well as the continued US participation in it. “*Jihad*” means, literally, “struggle”. What is important to the *ihadist*, more so than any particular outcome, is participation in a struggle. As long as the *ihadists*’ struggle in Iraq is not completely extinguished, it will continue to inspire the Islamist rank-and-file and to be exploited by the likes of Al-Qa’ida.

Political Change and Democratization

A third important regional dimension is the possibility of political change within Middle Eastern countries, especially change in the favorable direction of more democracy and more civil and political liberties in what is still, by most measures, the most undemocratic and illiberal region of the world. One hopeful development in the Middle East over the last few years has been an increase in open discussion of issues of political change. There has been, at least, more talk about the subject; it has been more of a live topic in more Middle Eastern countries than a few years earlier. I believe the current U.S. administration, with its rhetorical emphasis on democratization, deserves a share of the credit for this.

In looking not just for talk but for meaningful action, however, it is harder to be encouraged. What passes for political reform in the Middle East has generally been slow, fragmentary, very cautious, subject to backsliding, and more a matter of form than of substance.

It is difficult to point convincingly to effects, in one direction or another, that the war in Iraq has had on political reform in other Middle Eastern states. Inspired statesmanship should have good reason to move ahead with reform regardless of what is happening in Iraq. But most Middle Eastern statesmanship is not inspired. And in my judgment, the all-too-glaring troubles in Iraq have tended, on balance, to discourage political reform in other Middle Eastern countries, for two reasons.

First, the demonstration of what can go wrong—in a very violent and destructive way—has been a disincentive to experiment with political change. Middle Eastern leaders, like leaders anywhere, tend to stick with what they've got and with what has worked for them so far, when confronted with such frightening and uncertain consequences of political change. If today's Iraq is the face of a new Middle East, then most Middle Eastern leaders, not to mention most publics, do not want to be part of it.

Second, the identification of the United States with both the cause of democratization and the war in Iraq has led the former to be tarnished with some of the ill will and controversy associated with the latter. This connection is, of course, illogical. But it should not be surprising, given that some in the Middle East had already tended to view liberal democracy with suspicion as an alien import from the West.

The issue of political change and democratization is important for many Middle Eastern countries, but I would mention two as being of particular significance. One is Egypt, the most populous Arab country and a keystone of U.S. policy in the region. The Mubarak government has evidently seen the need at least to appear to be open to reform, as manifested in the holding in 2005 of an ostensibly competitive presidential election, in place of the prior procedure of a one-candidate referendum. But such procedural change has not reflected any significant loosening of Mubarak's hold on power. A continuing emergency law helps to maintain that hold, opposition presidential candidates have not been treated fairly, and the most popular and effective opposition party remains outlawed.

The other key country is Saudi Arabia, in which neither the form nor the reality is remotely democratic, and in which power is still in the hands of a privileged royal family in alliance with a religious establishment. King Abdullah appears to recognize the need for reform if Saudi Arabia is not to fall victim to more sudden and destructive kinds of change. He faces stubborn opposition, however, not least from within the royal family. Anything in the regional environment that makes political reform appear riskier will make his task harder.

Ethnic Separatism

The fourth major issue, and an important one for three of the states that border Iraq, is ethnic separatism. This really means the issue of the Kurds, who ever since the peace of Versailles have been the prototypical stateless ethnic group. Kurdish separatism is a concern for Syria, in which Kurds, who are concentrated in the northeast part of the country, constitute a bit less than 10% of the Syrian population. It also is a concern in multi-ethnic Iran, where Kurds in the northwest represent about 7% of Iran's population. Kurdish dissatisfaction led to deadly riots in Syria in 2004 and in Iran in 2005. The strongest worries, however, are in Turkey, where Kurds constitute about 20% of the population and where the organization usually known as the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, waged an insurgent and terrorist campaign that has left an estimated 35,000 people dead. Ankara has been very sensitive about any suggestion of independence for Iraqi Kurdistan, because of worries about rekindling separatist sentiment among the Kurds of southeastern Turkey. The government of Turkey also has a strong interest in the status of PKK fighters who have taken refuge in northern Iraq, and it has been unhappy about what it considers to be insufficient US or Iraqi efforts against those fighters.

The views of regional governments toward the Kurds, as events in Iraq play out over the coming months, will depend at least as much on the legal and political forms

applied to Iraqi Kurdistan as on the practical facts on the ground. After all, since 1991 the Iraqi Kurds have enjoyed—and neighboring governments have lived with—what has largely been *de facto* independence, despite Kurdish participation in politics in Baghdad. The situation may be similar to that of Taiwan in the Far East, in which *de facto* independence is tolerated but any move to make it *de jure* would be destabilizing.

Alignments and Power of Neighboring States

The final set of issues I would highlight concerns the effects the situation in Iraq is having on the geopolitics of the Middle East—that is, the effects on the relative power, and the foreign policies, of neighboring states. The geopolitical impact stems from at least three aspects of that situation: the change in the ideological map of the region resulting from removal of the Iraqi Ba’athist regime; the competition of neighboring states for influence within Iraq; and the debilitating effects of the war itself, which has greatly weakened what had been one of the stronger states in the area.

Among the neighbors, the largest winner has been Iran. The war has not only toppled the dictator who initiated an earlier war that killed hundreds of thousands of Iranians; it also has crippled what had been the largest regional counterweight to Iranian influence. Meanwhile, the all-consuming preoccupation that the Iraq war has become for the United States, along with the growing unpopularity of the war among Americans, probably has made Iranian leaders less fearful than they otherwise might have been about forceful U.S. action, including military action, against Iran. This confidence is tempered, however, by the fact that the occupation of Iraq has completed a U.S. military encirclement of Iran, a posture that nonetheless suits the internal political purposes of Iranian hardliners as they play off an image of confrontation with Washington.

Iranians today view the war in Iraq with a mixture of motives. The current leadership in Tehran probably is pleased to see the United States continue to be bogged down, and bleeding, in Iraq for the time being. But it also has no reason to want escalating and unending disorder on its western border. Tehran seems determined to exercise as much influence as it can inside Iraq as whatever process of political reconstruction there unfolds. It has been reaching out, and providing assistance to, a wide variety of Iraqi groups, not just its traditional allies such as the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. Although some of this assistance may help to make trouble for U.S. forces, it is best understood as an effort by Tehran to throw out as many lines of influence as it can so that whenever the dust in Iraq finally settles, it will have a good chance of having the friendship of, or at least access to, whoever is in power. Iranian leaders probably realize that creation in Iraq of a duplicate of their own system of clerical rule is not feasible, but they at least want to avoid a regime in Baghdad that is hostile to Iran.

Iranian leaders almost certainly hoped prior to March 2003 that they would be able—as was the case in Afghanistan—to work cooperatively with the United States on the political reconstruction of Iraq. That, of course, did not happen. But the shared US and Iranian interest in avoiding escalating and unending disorder in Iraq probably would make Tehran, despite all the ill will that has transpired over other issues, receptive to engagement with Washington. The Iranians would want such engagement, however, not to be limited to any one issue—be it Iraq, or the nuclear program, or anything else—but instead to address all matters in dispute.

Syria is another neighbor that faces a significantly changed geopolitical environment as a result of events in Iraq. The bitter and longstanding rivalry between the Syrian and Iraqi wings of the Ba'athist movement had been a major determinant of Syrian foreign policy. It was the principal factor that led Damascus to break ranks with its Arab brethren and to ally with Iran, and later to participate in Operation Desert Storm, which reversed Saddam Hussein's aggression in Kuwait. With the demise of the Iraqi Ba'athist regime, the foreign policy equation for Syria has changed. Syria restored relations with Iraq in November 2006. Although the economic ties between Syria and Iran are substantial, Syria's main reason for its otherwise counterintuitive alliance with Tehran is over. The sectarian dimension also must influence thinking in Damascus, because the regime is dominated by the minority Alawite sect but rules a Sunni majority. The implication of all these factors is that there is significant potential for coaxing Syria away from the alignment with Iran and its client Hizballah, and toward more cooperation with the United States, with the hope for Syria of realizing what is still its main foreign policy goal—the return of the Golan Heights.

Other regional states, including the Gulf Arabs, are conscious of the strength that Iraq once had and that, if it were again to become stable and united, could be the basis for Iraq once again throwing its weight around. They also are conscious of the fact that the issues involved in previous conflicts involving Iraq were not all the creation of Saddam Hussein. The longstanding enmity between Persian and Arab that underlay the Iran-Iraq war certainly was not. And Kuwaitis viewing the turmoil to their north know that the notion of Kuwait as rightfully the 19th province of Iraq also predated Saddam, and has been part of the undercurrent of relations with Iraq ever since Kuwait became independent.

I have highlighted several of the main issues that involve the regional impact of the Iraq war. They are not the only issues. A major concern, for example, of another of Iraq's immediate neighbors—Jordan—is the influx of approximately 700,000 Iraqi refugees. Syria and other neighbors also are facing a significant Iraqi refugee problem. Oil is another issue of high interest to several Middle Eastern states, given the effects that different levels of Iraqi production and export could have on oil prices and consequently on the finances and economies of those states.

A concluding point concerns the United States directly. Given how much the war in Iraq has become a preoccupation for the United States, it necessarily colors virtually all of our other dealings with the Middle East and with countries in the region. It has been one of the chief reasons for the slide in the standing of the United States among publics in the region, as recorded by opinion polls taken over the last several years. It has been a reason for concern and doubt among governments regarding the attention and commitment that Washington can give to other endeavors. And Middle Eastern governments know that it has in effect relegated to a lower priority almost every other U.S. interest in the region.