

The Future Political and Economic Architecture of the Middle East



E. Roger Owen

*T*his chapter first addresses the war on terrorism and the decision to use Iraq as a kind of showcase for the American government's policy of preemptive intervention. It then discusses the pressing issues of Iraq and democracy, Iran, and the future economic architecture of the Middle East.

THE WAR ON TERRORISM

The way the war on terrorism was presented by the American government was very disturbing to many people. The U.S. government could have petitioned the nations of the world to help confront what was essentially a criminal act. The call would have been for an intensified campaign of police and intelligence activity—building on what most nations had been heavily engaged in before September 11. Such a request would have been readily understood. (For example, Usama El-Baz, the Egyptian presidential adviser, at a meeting in Washington said clearly, “You have to know that these terrorists are, in fact, criminals.”) It would have activated the very real sense of sympathy which existed for the people of the United States at this time. It would have created alliances based not on arm-twisting but on a strong perception of mutual interest. And it could not have been interpreted in the Muslim world as a very thinly disguised attack on Islam.

You cannot really orchestrate a sensible policy when you are engaged in these large and spurious questions about conflicts between civilizations, or what's wrong with Islam, or the alleged economic underperformance of the Muslim world. It is a good stick with which to beat your enemies, if that is what you want to do. But for many reasons, such a perspective will not tell you very much about modern Iraq.

In fact, to frame policy in terms of “conflicts of civilizations” makes a proper appreciation of what is going on in Iraq—or indeed Iran or anywhere else in the Middle East—more difficult because it attaches the wrong weight to religion. Such a framework causes people to homogenize groups like the Shi’a as though they were one single entity professing one kind of view. Shi’i communities are extraordinarily faction-ridden, and the history of Shi’ism in Iraq is one of constant disputes about religious leadership, about how to engage with the government in Baghdad, and about relations with Iran. The implications of all this are fairly obvious. Perhaps most important of all in present circumstances, it becomes impossible for any single leader to deliver something you might want to call the “Shi’i vote.”

The declaration of such a war on terrorism provided a wonderful cover for all kinds of other questionable activities. This is certainly true of the attack on civil liberties in the United States. As far as the Middle East is concerned, the war gave license to the Israelis to carry out policies in the occupied territories which they might not have contemplated in other circumstances. And the war on terrorism also meant that, for all the American government’s talk of encouraging greater democracy in countries like Tunisia and Egypt, such countries, if they cooperated with America, would be exempt from serious criticism of their own human rights abuses. Such countries also could proceed with preparing for a “republican succession,” so that, for example, President Mubarak could be succeeded by his son, Gamal. Hence more green lights for America’s allies to do things which are clearly contrary to America’s longer-term interests.

Lastly, for all the often very sincere talk of the need for dialogue and discussion between Arabs and Muslims, on the one hand, and Westerners, on the other, the polarization produced by the declaration of the war on terrorism has been such that real dialogue continues to be almost impossible. Even with the best will in the world, the Arabs and Muslims feel so threatened by American policy that they cannot help but dig themselves into defensive positions from which few are clever enough, or wise enough, to extricate themselves. For their part, their Western interlocutors are caught somewhere between explaining and condemning their own governments’ policies in ways which encourage further obfuscation and misunderstanding. Meanwhile, the cherished goal of mutual tolerance and understanding becomes ever more elusive, ever more distant.

THE INVASION OF IRAQ

The war against Iraq was at best premature and misguided. The means for dealing with the particular problems posed by Iraq’s alleged weapons regime had not been exhausted, and there was no U.N. legitimacy for the course that was taken unilaterally by the United States and Great Britain. Given the extraordinary polarization of

opinion during the lead-up to the war, critics of the American government's policy were more or less automatically debarred from any discussion about how to deal with the Saddam Hussein regime or any eventual successor. As the critics of the war included most of the people who actually knew what was going on in Iraq and who might have been used to check some of the wilder claims of the pro-war members of the Iraq opposition in exile, the American government deprived itself of a vital policy-making tool. But this, of course, was exactly what its more hawkish members wanted anyway. The early nineteenth-century English wit Sidney Smith told of seeing two East London fishwives shouting at each other from their doorways on two sides of a street. He is said to have observed, "You know why they will never reach agreement? They are arguing from different premises." Such is the case now.

We are now in an interesting period in which people are examining the efficacy of postwar policies pursued in Iraq. It is an issue of the greatest importance. But it is also vital to continue to question whether the war should have been carried out at all. Whether or not the whole thing turns out to be a disaster—and the balance of advantage for the Iraqi people as whole is likely to be a negative one—the general question of the pros and cons of forcible nation building by military intervention is one that is unlikely to go away.

America's invasion of Iraq contained a very high degree of political risk. The continuing risk, postwar, is forcing the administration to ever more expensive measures to manage the situation in Baghdad. At what stage might America come to understand that the game is not worth the candle, as President Nixon was forced to do in the case of Vietnam?

AMERICAN ADMINISTRATION IN IRAQ

However the U.S. administration is able to improve the immediate chaos in Iraq, the situation could still blow up as a result of one of those apparently trivial incidents that regularly took place in Europe's colonial past, to trigger a national or semi-national uprising that, though contained, produces a sea change in local political attitudes. For example, the way in which Kurdistan can be fitted into a new united Iraq without Turkish interference must be handled with great delicacy. In such situations, you have to think very seriously about the speed and urgency needed to attend to the most vital questions without getting bogged down in the kind of endless detail that requires more and more foreign experts to fix things. In other words, time is not on our side in postwar Iraq.

Americans can learn from Britain. The way colonial administrations imagine colonial societies very much affects the kinds of measures they take and the kinds of institutional approaches they create to facilitate local representation. In Iraq, American policy is committed to individual rights and one person/one vote.

Some American policy makers are proceeding toward one person/one vote by recognizing that Iraq is a country of communities. As a consequence, representation must come through communities, and therefore by extension political parties must be agents of communities. A good example of this line of thinking is provided by the American-sponsored Mosul Municipal Council, consisting of representatives not of districts or economic interests but of the local ethnic and religious communities. So you have a Christian and you have a Yazedi, and you have various types of Muslims. It also is true that many American policy makers assume that Iraq is a bellicose, anarchic place that can only be run by strong men. That has led to local administrations being based on a combination of communal representation and representation by ex-military officers. Such a combination makes it more difficult to create an environment in which ideological parties can flourish, in which the Iraqi people feel that there is some point to voting for parties that are other than the ones that represent them in a communal, ethnic, or religious way.

Another lesson from British colonial history is the use of empire as a kind of laboratory for experimenting with ideas which you believe have either been imperfectly implemented in your own country or not implemented at all. There is a recent book about the way in which the technique of fingerprinting was developed by police officers in Calcutta based on the widespread indigenous use of fingerprints to sign documents. But you could only do this in an Indian context where the necessary, tedious work of comparing prints could be carried out with large numbers of Indians who spoke English and who had just enough education to allow them to be trained for this type of work.

By the same token, there are many policy makers in the United States who want to use the Iraqi economy as a laboratory for free enterprise. For example, Iraq is a rentier state—that is, one where all the oil revenues pass straight into the coffers of the regime, which then uses them to maintain its own hold on power. One recent, lunatic idea to get around this problem is to simply hand over individual shares of the revenues to individual Iraqis—as if this could be done with any precision and fairness in a country with so few banks, so little trust of government, so few mechanisms for transmitting central policies from Baghdad to the provinces. Proponents of the individual handout scheme sound as though they are talking about quite a different country.

One way of trying to prevent such schemes from being implemented unilaterally in postwar Iraq is to insist on more congressional oversight, more trips to the region by congressmen, and particularly by those with staffers who know something about Iraq and about colonial situations of this type. It is also important to listen to what the World Bank has to say to the Europeans and to the representatives of the nongovernmental organizations. It may well be a frustrating process, but it should proceed with as much openness and democratic decision making as possible.

DEMOCRACY IN IRAQ AND ELSEWHERE

But there are many obstacles against democracy for Iraq, just as there are for the rest of the Arab Middle East. Let me just mention three.

One which Egyptian officials like Usama al-Baz are very conscious of is that, even with the best will in the world, any Middle Eastern regime that says it wishes to democratize faces the accusation that it is only bending to the pressure of the United States. This is, at once, the kiss of death. The obstacle can be overcome but not easily. A Middle Eastern regime that truly wants to democratize must reach back into its history. It must identify moments when democracy began to be practiced and to learn appropriate lessons as to why some of these initiatives failed and which others might have borne better fruit in slightly difficult circumstances. In the case of Iraq, for instance, there was, perhaps surprisingly to many, a reasonably open and properly contested election in 1954. (Actually, there were two elections in that year; the second was managed by the government to produce the results it wanted.)

So local traditions do exist which you can go back to and, it would seem to me, use to bypass the endless and completely futile discussion about whether Islam is compatible with democracy. At the very least, by going back in history, you can demonstrate that, by and large, the failure of the system of contested elections in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq in the 1930s and 1940s had little if anything to do with religion and much more to do with the problems of managing a one person/one vote system in what were then predominantly peasant societies dominated by a small rural elite. It would be nice to imagine—although still impossible to prove—that the huge increase in Middle Eastern urbanization in the past few decades has made this particular problem easier to address.

A second potential obstacle to democracy will be the way in which America manages Iraq. Management of Iraq is supposed to be a shining beacon, of course, at least as far as the American government is concerned. But if it isn't, what kinds of lessons will the other peoples of the Middle East draw about this experience, its possibilities, and its limitations?

A third potential obstacle is illustrated by the debate in Washington, Baghdad, and many other places about the uses and abuses of the electoral process. As Fareed Zakaria has correctly asserted in his recent book, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, the fact that, say, the ruling regimes in Russia or Venezuela hold regular elections does not mean that they need to pay more than rhetorical respect to human rights or the rule of law. Such a claim might be used as an argument for going slowly, for saying that you first need to establish all kinds of other institutions, like efficient police and courts, before democracy can proceed. This occurred in the former British Empire, where the prescribed conditions for electoral democracy never actually materialized, often because the stresses and strains

of a period of enforced waiting for new institutions undermined the very conditions needed for success. Listening to American officials talking from Baghdad, one sometimes gets the impression that there will never be a moment in which the United States believes the Iraqis ready for such a test.

Clearly, the practice of regular elections is very easy to abuse. It can be subject to endless manipulation, as in Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco, and still be used to maintain the impression in Washington or the European Union that things are moving in the right direction. Nevertheless, elections have several very important characteristics which make them indispensable as part of any process of regime change. They are the only way of establishing regime legitimacy. They encourage a vital sense of participation among the citizens. And they provide the best way for competing political parties to bring their programs and policies to the attention of a national audience.

In the Middle East, as in many other regions of the non-European world, elections are the only way of sending certain kinds of signals about the sincerity of an administration's wish to encourage greater popular participation, to allow some kind of accountability, to permit pro-government parties to be overthrown and opposition parties to come to power. Elections also produce a sense of popular empowerment. Witness the excitement produced by the first election after the overthrow of a dictatorial regime, as in, say, South Africa, with the people willing to line up for hours and hours to vote. It matters. It is part of the process of making people feel that what they say and do is of some political significance.

The obvious conclusion to be drawn from all this is that all timetables must be carefully followed and there should be a movement toward freely contested elections in Iraq as quickly as possible. The more that this can be done under international auspices and in cooperation with the Europeans, the better.

RELATIONS WITH IRAN

The most important thing to observe about Iran is that it is in the middle of a hugely significant process of mutation from a kind of monolithic Islamic government to a pluralistic Islamic one. This is so important to the global history of the twenty-first century that it must be allowed to continue and to work its way through with the real prospect that this mutation will, over time, lead to a more secular pluralism with religion confined to the place where most people believe religion ought to be—in the mosques but not in the offices of government.

But the Iranians have to be left alone to work this out for themselves. Unfortunately for them, and for the rest of the world, this is not going to be an easy passage. There are the repercussions from the American administration's wilder talk

about regime change. There is the proximity to Iraq, which means that if things go wrong there they will spill over to Iran, the more so as the Tehran regime is inevitably held responsible for a large part of it.

There also is the question of Iran's nuclear ambitions. It seems to me from talking to the Iranians that there is a considerable consensus among them that they should get themselves into a position where they could produce a bomb if that seemed vital for national self-defense. For one thing, they live in a region with several nuclear powers already: Israel, Pakistan, and India. For another, the obvious lesson to be drawn from the different American policies toward Iraq and North Korea is the need to get quickly to a position where you can produce a bomb at short notice to preempt a potential American attack. This is a complicated equation. You may bring on the very thing you want to avoid. The nuclear issue is enormous and too dangerous to tackle on a unilateral or piecemeal basis.

So there are three messages which should be sent to American policy makers. First: Be very, very careful. Let the indigenous Iranian process take its time. Second: It will take much longer than you imagine. Don't be beguiled by Thomas Friedman's notion that the Iranian young people who listen to pop music and access American pornographic sites are the shock troops of revolutionary change in Iran. The demand for change will not be organized in that kind of way. Third: There needs to be an international approach best achieved by returning to the old notion of a nuclear-free Middle East. That of course raises the difficult problem of Israel, but solutions, however difficult, are possible, as Chris Toensing has articulated in chapter 16. If you try and pick off countries one by one, then you simply store up more trouble for the future by encouraging the idea that the only way to defend yourself is to go the North Korean route.

ECONOMIC INTEGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT

One of the consequences of the first Gulf War was the prominence given to the notion of Middle East North Africa as a way of establishing a new economic architecture for the region. The idea was to encourage better economic relations between Israel and its Arab neighbors as a vital underpinning for the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The whole project was developed through four Middle Eastern economic summits in which representatives of the national private sectors played a prominent role. There was much stress on the establishment of new pan-Middle Eastern institutions, like a development bank tentatively promised to Cairo. The initiative then came to an untimely end with the sharp deterioration of Arab-Israeli relations, which marked the period of the Netanyahu government, elected in 1996.

Now it seems that the American government wants to create a new architecture of the Middle East based not on regional institution building but on bilateral arrangements focused on the offer of specific free trade agreements between the United States and certain favored Middle Eastern countries like Bahrain and Morocco.

Paradoxically, this reproduces one of the worst features of the European agreements with the Middle East, in which efforts to encourage greater economic integration are also based on the promotion of bilateral relationships between the European Union and its regional partners. But the European Union process does at least have the great advantage of providing aid targeted to some of those specific industries most likely to suffer once the free trade provisions of the new treaties kick in after ten years. As the Europeans said to the Tunisians and the Egyptians: In ten years' time, you are going to have to reduce your tariffs on textile imports, so give us a list of your textile factories and let us help you update them so that they have some chance of competing with us down the road.

This seems to me a sensible way of going about things, and one which it would be good for the United States to copy. But it isn't the whole answer if the aim really is to promote greater regional economic integration, as the United States apparently desires. A better way forward would certainly be to revive the Middle East North Africa strategy via a new series of multinational conferences.

Nevertheless, we also have to ask ourselves if there aren't even better methods of encouraging the larger goal of more rapid Middle Eastern development. One method would be not only to get as many of the region's states into the World Trade Organization as we can but also to make sure that the World Trade Organization itself monitors the whole process effectively enough to ensure that the promises to open up, to lower tariffs, to pursue best global economic practice are properly implemented. This should probably involve giving the World Trade Organization secretariat sufficient power to go around and say to governments, if necessary, that they are not living up to their obligations. Meanwhile, let the global community take heart from the findings of a new international survey by the Pew Research Center that a larger proportion of people in the non-European world than was previously supposed do believe in the importance of greater openness and more trade, so long as the whole process does not affect their own core values.

It will be a hard battle. The fear of American intentions and American anger is so great at the moment that officials in the World Bank, in the European Community, and elsewhere are crippled in their efforts to develop new ways to promote Middle Eastern economic progress. Yet there is also some hope that, as a result of Washington's need for international assistance in Iraq, it will be forced to become more flexible in its approach.

THE FUTURE OF THE MIDDLE EAST

In sum, America needs to hand over responsibility in Iraq to an international coalition led by the United Nations, including the United States. This coalition should then organize elections for a provisional government responsible for creating a constituent assembly to draw up a permanent constitution. Then, after a nationwide general election, a legitimate Iraqi government should be allowed to negotiate the terms under which foreign companies (including oil companies) are allowed to operate in the country, foreign aid is provided, and those foreign troops necessary can provide internal security until a new Iraqi army and police force are able to perform these duties by themselves operate.

In Iran, the United States needs to join with the European community to maintain a creative engagement with the Iranian government designed to encourage a transition toward a parliamentary democracy based on the rule of law. In the Middle East at large, the United States needs to abandon its present policy of bilateral economic negotiations with favored individual states and work with all to try to create a regionwide free trade area.

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