

Forget the Domino Theories

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Articles & Testimony

The wise men (and woman) don't know their history. In boldly suggesting that "all key issues in the Middle East are inextricably linked," the authors of the Iraq Study Group report seem stunningly indifferent to the past 25 years of Middle East politics.

The basic proposition -- linkage -- is not new. President George H.W. Bush and his secretary of state, James Baker, tried 15 years ago to build an Arab-Israeli peace process on American success in the Persian Gulf War. In the current Bush administration, some advocates of toppling Saddam Hussein echoed that argument when they predicted that a change in Iraq would open new avenues for Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking.

Linkage also has its more ominous side. The most common is the fear that, left unresolved, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could explode into a Middle East-wide war. A second variation locates the epicenter of regional instability in the Persian Gulf. A generation ago the fear was that the export of Iran's Islamic revolution would undermine pro-West Arab states. Today, as Defense Secretary Robert Gates said during his confirmation hearings, the fear is that Sunni-Shiite violence in Iraq will spread like a contagion through the region, leaving ethnic bloodletting in its wake.

The problem with all these theories is that after a generation of theorizing about Middle East dominoes, the evidence is piling up: The linkages simply don't exist.

First, military success in the Gulf does not translate into diplomatic success in the region. The Madrid process, a regional initiative, may have had a promising opening session, but once it got down to real bargaining, it ran up against the stark realities of the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian divides. And the idea of building on Saddam Hussein's demise to promote change on the Israeli-Palestinian front may have hastened Yasser Arafat's movement into irrelevance, but it ran aground on the dismal intra-Palestinian political realities of what followed him.

Second, local disasters do not translate into regional disasters. Despite Iran's subversion, terrorism, bullying and threats, every Arab state survived the export of the Islamic revolution. And despite the near unanimity of received wisdom about the Middle East, there is no evidence to support the proposition that Israeli-Palestinian violence has substantial regional repercussions, let alone that it could lead to regional war.

The best evidence for this counterintuitive conclusion comes from the Palestinian uprising that began after the collapse of the Camp David summit in 2000. With more than 3,000 Palestinian and 1,000 Israeli fatalities, the bloodshed in the subsequent three years was the worst in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yet the regional impact was virtually zero.

Not one Arab state threatened to fight alongside the Palestinians, and none even came to their aid militarily; indeed, only faraway Iran tried to send weapons. The Arab "street" did not rise in protest. Neither Jordan nor Egypt severed its peace treaty with Israel, and no Arab state faced significant protests. The conflict -- certainly a horrible experience for Israelis and Palestinians -- was contained.

The lesson of the past generation is that most states in the Arab Middle East have grown stronger, not weaker. Arab leaders are interested first and foremost in survival, which means protecting their national interests, not

subscribing to romantic notions of ethnic or religious ideology. That is why, for example, Gates's warning about Arab states intervening in Iraq to defend fellow Sunni Arabs from Shiite ethnic cleansing is far-fetched.

Will the vaunted Saudi armed forces invade Iraq? To the contrary, the Saudis are contemplating construction of an Israeli-style "security barrier" along the Iraqi border because they want to keep the Iraq problem inside Iraq. Will the fearsome Syrian military intervene? Hardly. The Alawites who run Damascus may enjoy seeing America squirm in Iraq, but there's little chance they will fight on the side of the very people they fear most at home: Sunni extremists. And, of course, don't expect the Kuwaitis to rush across the border to help out.

The sober reality is that if Shiite militias attempt an ethnic cleansing of Sunni Arabs, Washington should not expect Iraq's Arab neighbors to do anything but man the barricades to prevent a massive flight of Iraqi refugees. Just as was the case when Muslims faced the carnage of war in Kuwait, Bosnia and Kosovo, the country most likely to come to the aid of Muslims in danger inside Iraq will be the United States.

Of course, the strengthening of Arab states is neither uniform -- Syria is an exception -- nor is it wholly good news. The most negative repercussion has been the rise of secret-police regimes: governments that cycle virtually every marginal dollar into all-encompassing intelligence services that in turn snuff out liberal dissent in the name of security. The bottom line is that for better or worse, these regimes know how to take care of themselves.

America needs to focus on a set of distinct problems in the Middle East -- from the Arab-Israeli conflict to Iran's nuclear ambitions -- each important and worthy of attention in its own right. The road to Baghdad does not pass through Tehran, Damascus, Jerusalem or Gaza -- it is a cul-de-sac that begins and ends in Iraq.

The writer is executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of [Among the Righteous: Lost Stories From the Holocaust's Long Reach Into Arab Lands](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=255) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=255>). ❖

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