

Impact of an Iraq Confrontation on Gulf States:

Foreign Policy and Domestic Politics

by [Shafeeq Ghabra \(/experts/shafeeq-ghabra\)](/experts/shafeeq-ghabra)

Jan 27, 2003

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Shafeeq Ghabra \(/experts/shafeeq-ghabra\)](/experts/shafeeq-ghabra)

Dr. Shafeeq Ghabra is a professor of Political Science at Kuwait University.



Brief Analysis

Regime change in Baghdad could do more than make Iraq a positive force in the Middle East instead of a source of trouble; it could also give a strong boost to liberalizing trends throughout the Middle East. Therefore, a war to topple Saddam Husayn's regime would create both opportunities and dangers for the region.

Iraq, Post-Saddam

Iraqis have suffered tremendously under the wars and sanctions that Saddam has forced them to endure, and this shared experience might give birth to an enhanced sense of Iraqi nationalism. Such sentiment could well lead Iraqis to reject the concept that they should sacrifice for the sake of the larger Arab world, or umma. Many Arabs have learned the hard way that doing things for the sake of the umma at the expense of one's own country can sometimes end up reducing that country to ashes. In any case, Iraqi nationalism post-Saddam could take several forms, from a secular, unifying nationalism to some type of liberal Islamic nationalism.

Inevitably, tension will arise in post-Saddam Iraq between the need for nation building and the need for democracy. The outcome of this tension will depend on what sort of government replaces Saddam's. Will the new regime focus solely on security, or will it make the best out of such tension and strive to reach a viable balance over time?

Whatever the case, post-Saddam Iraq will enjoy a great deal of sympathy from the governments and the peoples of the region, and this sympathy could be used to facilitate the country's reconstruction. Kuwait and other Gulf Cooperation Council states will play an important role in any such reconstruction process. Indeed, Kuwaitis are already debating about how they would respond to a new government in Baghdad. Most liberals have argued that Kuwait should immediately forgive Iraq's debts and Gulf War reparations obligations in the event of regime change, while Kuwaiti Islamists are less enthusiastic.

The Impact of Regime Change on the Gulf

Support for post-Saddam Iraq's reintegration into the region would be strongly felt and would have a major impact region-wide, particularly if the new regime were willing to play a positive, progressive role that infused new values into the Gulf. At its heart, Iraq is a Gulf country as much as it is a Levant country. It has fought two major wars in the Gulf, while its role in the Levant has only been secondary. Therefore, Iraq's reintegration into the Gulf will be a central challenge in the aftermath of regime change, requiring extensive efforts toward rebuilding, friendship, and cooperation.

A new Iraq could play an important role in supporting liberalism throughout the region, in contrast to the radicalizing role that Baghdad has played in the past. Hence, countries such as Iran would be significantly affected by regime change in Iraq. For one thing, Iran would likely replace Iraq as the principal justification for the presence of U.S. troops in the Gulf. Indeed, some elements within Iran fear the prospect of an increased U.S. Gulf presence and already feel encircled and targeted. Other elements view such scenarios differently, though. Currently, Iran is in the process of changing into a modern, post-Islamic society, and regime change in Iraq would have important repercussions on that process. A secular orientation toward Islam seems to be emerging in Iran, and this new openness may eventually have a profound impact on the entire world of Islam, perhaps leading to its secularization. In fact, one might argue that the gradual liberalization of the Muslim world has already begun with the Shi'is, just as much of the radicalization of Islam that began decades ago can be attributed to this same faction. Hence, the Shi'i majority of Iraq, along with the Shi'is of a reformed Iran, could have a key role to play in the future of Islam.

Wahhabism will also be affected by the changes that may occur in Iraq and that are already taking place within the world of Shia. In the past, wahhabism played an important function in uniting countries such as Saudi Arabia, even serving as a buffer against communism during the Cold War. Over time, however, wahhabism took on a dangerous life of its own, eventually leading to the attacks of September 11, 2001. Consequently, wahhabism is now under scrutiny, and many realize that it is greatly in need of "repackaging." Certain enlightened members of the Saudi royal family are capable of forming a modernizing coalition and performing such a function. In general, radical versions of Islam, whether Shi'i or Sunni, have failed to offer solutions to the problems of the Middle East. Instead, they have created even more troubles for the region and therefore can no longer be viewed as sources of legitimacy for governments. Legitimacy must now be sought elsewhere, through elections and reforms. Regime change in Iraq would present the region's governments with an ideal occasion to move toward reform; it remains to be seen whether they will take advantage of this opportunity.

Prospects for Regime Change

The threatening U.S. military presence in the region is the only factor that has managed to wrangle concessions out of Saddam; if the U.S. pressure were reduced, Baghdad would quickly resort to its old ways. Indeed, U.S. inaction would have several negative consequences: Washington would lose credibility in the region; the Saddam model would be reinforced; the sanctions regime would collapse; and Arab countries, even Kuwait, would gradually be pressured into reconciling with the existing regime in Baghdad.

Currently, the region is filled with a sense of anxiety regarding the possibility of war in Iraq, and ordinary citizens and elites alike remain divided on the issue. One fear is that a war would take too long and would create hundreds of thousands of refugees. Another concern is that a cornered Saddam would use weapons of mass destruction against his neighbors. Many also believe that Washington's chief goal is oil. The durability of this impression, along with many other conspiracy theories still circulating in the Arab world, will depend on the manner in which the United States conducts itself following regime change. Whatever the feeling in the region as a whole, Iraqis themselves look forward to ending the status quo. From their perspective, the current regime has destroyed their lives and taken them from one war to another.

Politically speaking, the GCC's current position regarding post-Saddam Iraq lacks clarity. GCC members have taken clear stances on certain issues, such as maintaining Iraq's territorial integrity and addressing the Arab-Israeli quandary as part of new regional security arrangements in the wake of regime change. Yet, GCC governments must put more effort into convincing their citizens that the perpetuation of Saddam's regime is not in their best interests and that change is therefore necessary.

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)

TOPICS

[Gulf & Energy Policy \(/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy\)](/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iraq \(/policy-analysis/iraq\)](/policy-analysis/iraq)

[Gulf States \(/policy-analysis/gulf-states\)](/policy-analysis/gulf-states)