

The Regional Implications of Pursuing 'Regime Change' in Iraq (Part III)

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In-Depth Reports

I would like to preface my remarks with some thoughts about the fine speech that Zalmay Khalilzad made earlier in these proceedings. As good a speech as it was, it made our job on this panel more difficult. I am more confused now about what kind of Iraq the United States seeks to create than I was when I woke up this morning, because of the very careful but limited statements that Mr. Khalilzad made -- statements that were, no doubt, carefully considered by the National Security Council and perhaps by the president as well. I do not know whether the United States really seeks, in the short term, the solution often described as "Saddam light" -- that is, another, presumably Sunni, military leader who would maintain order in a period of transition that could last years -- or whether it seeks a democratic Iraq on a much shorter timeframe.

I did, however, hear a clear message to the Iraqi people with an emphasis on the unity and territorial integrity of Iraq. Mr. Khalilzad also stressed the rule of law. This is meant to reassure those members of the military or the Ba'ath Party who saw no alternative to obeying the regime and who have not committed crimes against humanity that vengeful mob rule will not prevail, or at least that the United States does not want it to. Finally, I heard an emphasis on the idea that this is a war of liberation, not of conquest. So, maybe the important thing is what people in Baghdad hear, not what we in Washington hear as the fine points of the current policy debate.

One of the pleasures of my work as editor of the International Herald Tribune is that I get to travel all over the world. I spend more time thinking about Shanghai and Beijing than about Beirut and Baghdad. I see a world that is changing quickly. In so many places -- in China, in Russia, in almost every place that I visit -- young people and their ideas and energy are driving the future. I feel a palpable sense of a future being built by young people, much as we felt here during the 1990s.

The Middle East, as we all know, is different. It is, for the most part, a region of old men, stale ideas, and a sense of blockage. It seems to be a place where history stopped decades ago. When you see the rest of the world changing so much, this reality seems especially sad, and Iraq, it seems to me, has come to be a symbol of that blockage.

So, the idea of making Iraq an example of change is irresistible. Even hardheaded commentators such as myself become sentimental when they begin writing about a democratic Iraq. These are ideals that we feel deeply as Americans, Israelis, and, I hope, as Europeans. Nevertheless, I want to offer some cold-blooded observations about the effect that regime change in Iraq could have on the rest of the Arab world.

First, it matters immensely how regime change happens. If it is quick, decisive, and greeted by cheers from joyous Iraqis, then President George W. Bush can relax, go back to giving interviews to *Runner's World*, and conduct his presidency.

But if there is a protracted battle, concentrated in Baghdad and other urban areas, met by a hostile Iraqi population, and requiring the military occupation of a hostile country, then it will be, to quote one former secretary of state who lived through the Vietnam War, a disaster. This former official, whom I cannot identify further, said recently that if a

U.S.-Iraq war lasts six weeks or more, he expects there will be demonstrations around the world, including in the United States, of increasing intensity.

So, the critical questions are whether the war will be quick and whether the Iraqis will welcome liberation. We will be risking a lot on unknowable factors, and the penalty for being wrong here -- especially as it affects Israel -- could be very large. It is difficult to reduce or hedge our bets in this case. I have heard the upbeat intelligence assessments regarding the potential speed and reception of a military campaign. I have been talking with members of the Iraqi opposition for fifteen years, so I have heard all the hopes. Still, I wish I knew more, and I am sure that Zalmay and others at the National Security Council would say the same thing. These unknowables are a key measure of the difficulty of the decision that President Bush faces.

Second, it matters enormously whether regime change in Iraq is viewed as an imposition on the Iraqi people or as a story of Iraqis fighting for their liberation with the help of American allies. As Professor Lewis has suggested elsewhere, the Arabs need a "win." Arabs are on a centuries-old losing streak and they feel it deeply. If regime change in Iraq is to have maximum benefit, it must be part of a win, not simply for the Arabs, but for good ideas, notions of progress, and the kind of decent society that Professor Lewis described.

Third, there is no viable formula for a postwar Iraq that does not hinge on federalism. Any solution must begin with the idea that the Kurds in the north, the Sunnis in the center, and the Shi'is in the south need to find a measure of selfgovernment, such as we Americans have in our states, which were our first and strongest elements of government. But a federal Kurdistan would have immense consequences for Kurds elsewhere, especially in Turkey. The Turkish response to this reality will be crucial. A federal Shi'i polity in southern Iraq would have immense implications as well, and not simply in Iran. The center of Shi'a Islam may be moving west toward Karbala and Najaf, away from Iran, which is itself an interesting consequence. But it will also have major consequences for the Arab Shi'is in Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and, perhaps most significant, the eastern province of Saudi Arabia.

Finally and most importantly, regime change will have decisive consequences for the other tent poles of the Arab world. Traditionally, they are Baghdad, Cairo, and Damascus. If Baghdad undergoes fundamental change, we will have embarked on a process that will lead to change -- perhaps with some instability first -- in the other poles.

Read remarks by the other participants on this panel: [Bernard Lewis, \(templateC07.php?CID=114\)](#) [Abdel Ilah Khatib, \(templateC07.php?CID=115\)](#) and [Saad al-Ajmi \(templateC07.php?CID=117\)](#) ❖

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