President Bush and the Middle East, One Year On

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Brief Analysis

In the wake of the Cold War, certain regions of the world (e.g., Western Europe, Northeast Asia, the Western hemisphere) are both important to the United States and, for the moment, relatively stable. Several other regions (e.g., sub-Saharan Africa, former Soviet Central Asia) are unstable but not as important. The Middle East is the only region that boasts the unhappy combination of being both important and unstable.

September 11 changed the way the United States views this region. The most urgent issue facing the Bush administration today is terrorism, and al-Qaeda is its first priority. Iraq is the second priority, but there is an ongoing debate as to whether a move on Iraq will jeopardize other relationships in the area, particularly the U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia. One thing is clear: after September 11, those who advocate forcible measures to remove Saddam Husayn have a stronger case in every way, including the way that counts most -- politically.

The first and foremost constraint on U.S. activity abroad is the limit on what the American public is willing to pay for. It will not pay much -- and certainly not in blood -- for activities that it does not see as directly related to American security. This narrows the field immediately. "Antiproliferation" is a cause that commands rather substantial support in the United States. Furthermore, in the wake of September 11, the president himself has considerable political support within the United States. Therefore, if this administration chooses to conduct military operations to remove Saddam Husayn from power, it can mobilize the necessary domestic political support, even for military operations in which there will be substantial American casualties.

In addition to maintaining domestic support, the diplomatic task of forming a coalition -- one of approbation rather than participation -- for removing Saddam would not be impossible, perhaps not even formidable. Saddam does not have much support in the world, while "antiproliferation" enjoys considerable support, especially among countries that already have nuclear weapons. It would not be an impossible chore to ensure that the most powerful countries of the world -- the Europeans, the Russians, the Chinese, and the Indians -- are at least not opposed to American action, and hopefully even in favor of it. In fact, in the wake of the Cold War, one might argue that anything the American public supports seriously is something that most of the rest of the world can be brought around to supporting.

A key issue for the administration concerns Saudi Arabia, a country whose regime is politically oppressive, personally corrupt, and economically incompetent (per capita GDP is less than half what it was fifteen years ago).

The United States has had an alliance with the Saudi royal family for sixty years, whose core bargain has been "oil for protection." But that alliance was forged and has been conducted out of public sight and between the elites. On September 11, the American public suddenly realized that this long-time ally has conducted a foreign policy reminiscent of the Soviet Union and a domestic policy with powerful similarities to apartheid South Africa. Post September 11, Americans may begin to ask whether it is in U.S. interest and the interest of the world for a regime like the Saudi family to control the world's oil reserves. If there is one lesson from the events of September 11 for the Bush administration, it is that the proposition "what's good for the Saudi ruling family is good for the United States" deserves vigorous scrutiny.

ROBERT HUNTER

Iraq is a top priority in terms of American security. The United States cannot permit Saddam Husayn to acquire weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the means to deliver them. Yet, it would be very difficult to make a case linking Iraq to terrorism. Saddam has worked assiduously to avoid being caught doing anything that the United States would view as terrorism. The problem with Iraq is not terrorism, but rather the prospect of Saddam acquiring WMD, two types in particular: deliverable nuclear weapons and weaponizable biological agents, each of which poses unique challenges and each of which is quite threatening. Gaining this capacity may enable Saddam Husayn to become a different kind of player in the region, one that may seek to deter us from engaging in activities critical to our interests and that of our allies. This would pose a grave, material threat to the United States and cannot be countenanced.

The United States should start building the case now for an eventual move on Iraq. The administration must be open to various alternatives, including the introduction of an effective weapons inspection regime with the goal of getting rid of Saddam's WMD. Working with allies, especially the Europeans, will be essential. To forge partnerships that will be critical to any successful move against Iraq and its WMD capabilities requires persistent, consistent work.

Any operation itself will not be easy. It will require bases of operation in the region, which invariably means Saudi Arabia. Although addressing issues of domestic reform in Saudi Arabia are important, dealing with Iraq is a more urgent priority. Indeed, it is very difficult for any administration to assume major risks requiring the changing of existing policy in the absence of direct and immediate threats to American interests. It would not be surprising, therefore, if the current administration -- faced with the magnitude of dealing with Iraq and the problems that would ensue from trying to engineer domestic change inside Saudi Arabia -- decided to forgo the latter to focus on the former. Analytically, there is an argument to be made that a democratic Saudi Arabia may not be in America's best interests at the moment; if a free election took place in Saudi Arabia today, Osama bin Laden would likely win, hands down. Therefore, while the administration would look favorably to change within Saudi Arabia, it is not the top priority.

Most important, the United States must make clear that it is in the Middle East to stay. The Middle East is now a top priority for the United States, as was Europe after World War II. The United States must clearly show that it expects its allies to stand with it, that it will conduct an all-fronts campaign on terrorism, and that it will stick around until the job is done, even at high cost. This requires learning the lessons from past efforts -- both successful and unsuccessful -- to promote Arab-Israeli peace and to remain engaged. No other country or group of countries has the standing, history, interests, and capacity to do what the United States can to advance the cause of peace while ensuring the security of Israel.

WILLIAM KRISTOL

The administration should address Iraq first, which will lead to a rethinking of the U.S.-Saudi relationship. Replacing Saddam Husayn -- particularly with a Western, democratic regime -- will have a huge effect on the question of Saudi

Arabia, which is an important issue but of lesser urgency in terms of U.S. national security.

It is hypocritical for a superpower to say that it is committed to regime change, that it is unacceptable for Saddam to be developing WMD -- and then to purposefully and knowingly adopt policies that do nothing to curb those WMD. Although the United States should prefer not to work through the UN, some form of diplomatic process focused on weapons inspectors might be effective in gaining allies and pacifying other states in the region. Ultimately, however, the administration has to consider seriously whether it can tolerate Iraq and Iran developing WMD with no inspectors, no sanctions, and with the United States more engaged in moderating ineffectual peace talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Pulling out of Saudi Arabia as a contribution to stability while remaining diplomatically allied with the corrupt regime is unrealistic, and President Bush is unlikely to choose that path.

Before September 11, stalling on these issues was viewed by some as an acceptable policy because the threat did not seem imminent, and one could imagine that, perhaps with luck, Saddam would eventually pass the scene and developments in Iran would continue to move in a positive direction. Now, inaction itself is a choice -- one that endangers the Middle East and the rest of the world. Inaction would convey the message that America is unwilling to take risks and unwilling to shape a safer world. Such a message would have grave international consequences. America's allies would lose confidence in her, which would in turn provoke a major arms race, detrimental to our interest and that of our allies. These allies would come to believe that the United States was willing to take on the Taliban because the Taliban could not really fight back, and that any country posing a serious military threat (whether or not it has WMD) is basically safe from American action. Saudi unhappiness is not sufficiently real, or sufficiently important, that it should deter the administration from taking action that is vitally important to American security and to the security of the region.

Europeans should not be surprised when America deploys troops abroad to preserve stability and to support democracy. The United States did this in Europe for most of the last fifty years, and the Europeans are not uniquely entitled to be the beneficiaries of an American "liberal empire." Other people would like to be liberated from tyrants; other allies would like American support; other struggling democracies, no less worthy than those of Europe in the late 1940s and early 1950s, would like American assistance. Clearly, Americans will pay for most any measure that is in response to a direct attack on the United States. Yet, the American people also have a good record of supporting aggressive actions that are in their own and the world's interests, and that are for the sake of democracy and freedom. The Middle East should not remain exempt from the worldwide movement toward liberal democracy.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Rebecca Ingber.

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