American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research

After the War: Reflections on Post-Saddam Iraq

By Efraim Karsh

Presented at the American Enterprise Institute on

March 3, 2003

There have been numerous arguments advanced in defense of military action against Iraq, but the one most noticeable by its absence form the public debate has been the idea that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein would be conducive to, indeed indispensable for, the preservation of Iraq's independence and territorial integrity. It has of course been suggested that the tyrant's fall will liberate the Iraqi people from decades of brutal repression but not that it would also safeguard the country's continued existence as a unified whole. Quite the reverse, in fact. In the wake of the 1991 Gulf War, when Saddam's survival lay in the balance, the Allies preferred to let him remain in power and refrained from supporting the popular uprisings in southern and northern Iraq. Their reasoning was apparently that a defeated and weakened Saddam would be easier to contain than an unknown successor, particularly a pro-Iranian Shi'ite regime in Baghdad, and that Saddam was the only person capable of preventing the disintegration of Iraq into Sunni, Kurdish, and Shi'ite states.

While the first consideration quickly proved to be largely misconceived - having restored his domestic authority in an extraordinary display of blood and iron, Saddam has remained as defiant as ever – the validity of the second assumption has remained unquestioned and has become one of the foremost anti-war arguments. It is arguable, of course, that only a firm hand can safely run Iraq's volatile political system and that Saddam, for all his ruthlessness, is the most qualified person to offer such a hand. Yet this assumption is fundamentally flawed for the simple reason that Saddam can scarcely be considered the protector of Iraq's territorial integrity. Not only has he failed to cement the disparate components of Iraqi society into a unified whole, but he has significantly exacerbated domestic factionalism and, no less alarmingly, brought his country on several occasions to the verge of disintegration. He did so in the early 1970s when, due to his short-sighted policies, a general uprising in Kurdistan and an extensive Iranian military intervention brought Iraq to the verge of an abyss. He raised the fearful specter of Iraq's disintegration in 1980 by triggering a futile eight-year war against Iran, and yet again - by embarking on his ill-conceived Kuwaiti adventure in the summer of 1990. In between these catastrophes, he managed to alienate Iraq's majority Shi'ite community from its Sunni counterpart and the ruling Ba'th Party.

All this means that far from ensuring Iraq's survival as a nation state, Saddam's continued rule poses the gravest threat in this respect. Given his irrevocable alienation from the vast majority of his subjects, the dire straits to which he has driven Iraq, his paranoiac

worldview, and the precarious nature of his personal rule, Saddam is bound to embark sooner or later on a new foreign aggression or a higher form of domestic repression.

But then, if a brutal tyrant like Saddam has so miserably failed to ensure Iraq's domestic stability, how realistic is it to expect a successor regime to fare any better given the country's precarious ethnic and political makeup and its ruthless political system in which naked force has constituted the sole agent of political change? For Iraq is a land of rival ambitions and contradictions. It is a country with a glorious imperial past, stretching back thousands of years, and far-reaching dreams for the future. Yet it is also geo-politically handicapped: virtually landlocked and surrounded by six neighbors, with at least two - Turkey and Iran - larger than Iraq and irredentist. It is a country that aspires to champion the cause of pan-Arabism while at the same time being, in the words of its first modern ruler, King Faisal I, no more than "unimaginable masses of human beings, devoid of any patriotic idea, imbued with religious traditions and absurdities... and prone to anarchy." It is a land torn by ethnic and religious divisions, a land where the main non-Arab community, the Kurds, has been constantly suppressed, and where the majority of the population, the Shi'ites, have been ruled since the inception of the Iraqi state as an underprivileged class by a minority group, the Sunnis, less than one third their size.

This wide gap between dreams of grandeur and the grim realities of weakness and fragmentation has created a political legacy of frustration and insecurity. Confronted with a roiling domestic cauldron, as well as formidable external challenges, the ruling oligarchy in Iraq has been condemned to a constant rearguard action for political legitimacy and personal survival. The result has more often than not been political violence. When in the summer of 1933 the tiny Assyrian community in northern Iraq demanded ethnic and religious recognition, it was subjected to large-scale massacres by the Iraqi army that were lauded by the masses as an act of national heroism. When in July 1958 the Hashemite dynasty, which had ruled Iraq since its inception in 1921, was overthrown by a military coup headed by General Abd al-Karim Qassem, the mutilated body of the Iraqi regent, Abd al-Ilah, was dragged by a raging mob through the streets of Baghdad before being hung at the gate of the Ministry of Defense. Four years later, Qassem's bullet-ridden corpse was screened on Iraqi television to the entire nation. Qassem's successor, the Ba'th, Saddam's own party, was no gentler in its treatment of political opponents. When it was overthrown in November 1963, after merely nine months at the helm, all sorts of loathsome instruments of torture were found in the cellars of Qasr al-Nihaya - the Palace of the End - a royal palace turned detention and interrogation center by the Ba'th, including "electric wires with pincers, pointed iron stakes on which prisoners were made to sit, and a machine which still bore traces of chopped-off fingers. Small hips of blooded clothing were scattered about, and there were pools on the floor and stains over the wall."

Saddam has undoubtedly been the most savage and capable player in this violent system. Yet, for all his brutal methods he has largely become the victim of his own success. Like many tyrants before him, he has gradually maneuvered himself into domestic, regional, and global positions that require raising the stakes incessantly in order to survive. Each new acquisition of power engenders a greater fear of losing it. In the violent manner of Iraqi politics, either one subdues the system or is devoured by it. Saddam managed to subject the system to his will, at an exorbitant cost of domestic repression and external aggression. But he has failed to eradicate all potential dangers. By way of deflecting the Iranian threat, he created an economic monster that was about to destroy him; by way of fighting this economic monster, he managed to implicate himself in a far more complex and costly action in Kuwait, one that pitted him against the world and resulted in ever greater threats to his survival.

The truth of the matter is that in the violent politics of the Middle East, Saddam's vision of a wild jungle where only the strongest and most adaptable survive has kept him in power for over three decades. Yet, even this stark approach can last only as long as the leader's ceaseless surveillance and tyrannical control of the country's governing mechanisms last. Unless democracy emerges in Iraq, there will

be no solution to the fundamental predicament confronting the person at the top of the political pyramid. Whether Sunni or Shi'ite, Ba'thist or Islamic fundamentalist, military or civilian, he will continue to confront dissent and disaster at every turn, and will be constantly preoccupied with his personal survival.

But then again, can Iraq be realistically transformed into the first-ever Arab democracy? Israel (and to a lesser extent Turkey) excepted, the Middle East is still a place where the role of the absolute leader supersedes the role of political institutions, and where citizenship is largely synonymous with submission. Power in Arab countries is often concentrated in the hands of small and oppressive minorities (Alawites in Syria, Sunnis in Iraq); religious, ethnic, and tribal conflicts abound; for sovereigns, the overriding preoccupation is survival. In such circumstances, where the main, if not the sole, instrument of political discourse is physical force, it is hardly surprising that the Western ideal of liberal democracy is totally alien to Middle Eastern political culture. There is no grassroots yearning for democracy in the Arab world, and any American attempt to impose such a system is bound to encounter stiff resistance and to be viewed by the local populations as neo-imperialism or a latter-day imposition of the "white man's burden."

These weighty reservations notwithstanding, the September 11th atrocities have dramatically changed the overall calculus of cost and benefit, if only because they have so starkly demonstrated that the consequences of failing to address the Middle East's endemic malaise are to horrendous to contemplate. This in turn imbues the idea of "Iraq first" - as a steppingstone to a wider attempt to democratize the Arab world, or significant parts of it – with new and far-reaching consequences that have hitherto been inconceivable.

The difficulties of such an endeavor, however, are not to be underestimated. It will require a *sustained* and determined effort by the United States, ideally but not necessarily backed by the other democratic powers, to establish and cultivate a representative political system, and, far more important, to transform deeply entrenched attitudes and perceptions among both the Iraqi ruling elites and the public at large.

Much has been said about the supposedly artificial nature of the modern Middle East state system. According to the received wisdom, the European powers, long having set their sights on the territories of the declining Ottoman Empire, exploited the latter's entry into the First World War to carve out artificial states from this defunct entity. In so doing, they paid attention only to their imperial interests and completely disregarded local yearnings for political unity.

What this standard version fails to note, however, is the great influence wielded by Britain's local war allies – Hussein ibn Ali of the Hashemite family, the Sharif of Mecca, and his four sons, perpetrators of the "Great Arab Revolt" - who managed to manipulate the great powers into giving them vast territories of the defunct Ottoman Empire. The Emirate of Ttansjordan (latterly the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan) was established in 1921 to satisfy the imperial ambitions of Hussein's second son, Abdallah, while the modern state of Iraq was created the same year on behalf of Abdallah's younger brother, Faisal, and very much at his initiative. In their eagerness to placate Faisal the British disregarded the realities on the ground by imposing a foreign Sunni ruler (Faisal came from the Hijaz, in today's Saudi Arabia) on a predominantly Shi'ite population, and incorporating a large non-Arab Kurdish minority into the newly-created state.

The overthrow of Saddam and the ruling Ba'th Party will thus create a real opportunity, for the first time in nearly a century, to place the Iraqi state on a far more representative basis that reflects the "general will" through the creation of a federal system in which the main three ethnic and religious groups comprising the Iraqi state – Shi'ites, Sunnis, and Kurds – will be given a proportional share in national power, with the Kurds enjoying extensive cultural and political autonomy within territory in northern Iraq. This may fall short of the longstanding, and fully justified, Kurdish yearning for independence, yet will nevertheless be a significant historic change.

A distinct ethnic group of Indo-European origins and of Muslim, mainly Sunni faith, the Kurdish community comprises about 20

percent of Iraq's population, and resides in the northern part of the country. In the wake of World War I, as the great powers carved the Middle East following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Kurds were promised autonomy by the Treaty of Sevres (1920), with an option for complete independence, only to realize three years later that they had been cheated out of this pledge: the Treaty of Lausanne between Turkey and the victorious allies bore no specific reference to the Kurds, promising only tolerance for minorities in general.

Since then the Kurds have been one of the largest aggrieved national minorities in the Middle East, the intractability of their situation stemming from their dispersion in four Middle Eastern countries – Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria - each having a vested interest in suppressing the Kurds' national aspirations. As this geopolitical reality remains as valid today is it was a century ago, the most that the Kurds can realistically aspire to is the consolidation and expansion of the autonomy they have enjoyed since the 1991 Gulf War and its transformation into an integral part of the new Iraq rather than a temporary arrangement made possible by Western bayonets.

An even more revolutionary change will be the Shi'ite rise to political preeminence. As noted above, from its creation in 1921 the modern state of Iraq has been dominated by the minority Sunni community (20 percent of the population), with the far larger Shi'ite community not only failing to play a role commensurate with its size (60 percent of the population) but also ruled as an underprivileged class. Thus, for example, under the monarchy Arab Sunnis held 44 percent of all governmental posts and 60 percent of the top posts, as compared with 32 and 21 percent, respectively, held by Shi'ites. In the decade following the overthrow of the monarchy the Sunnis occupied 80 percent of the top posts, while Shi'ites held merely 16 percent.

Dating back to Ottoman times, where Shi'ites had been excluded from power and persecuted by the authorities, this predicament was further compounded by the hostile, and violent, Shi''ite response to Faisal's ascendancy to the throne, which reflected their fear of continued Sunni domination in the newly established state of Iraq, gaining considerable momentum under the Ba'th regime. This frustration with the rule of the few over the many was exacerbated by the economic and social dislocations attending the migration of large numbers of Shi'ites to the cities during the 1970s, as a result of Saddam's urbanizing and modernizing development plans. Finding themselves substituting a miserable suburban existence for their rural poverty, the newly underprivileged urban Shi'ites became a fertile soil for anti-regime sentiments. The professed secularism of the Ba'th only fueled the resentment by upsetting the Muslim foundations of social order and antagonizing the religious Shi'ite authorities, the *ulama*, whose traditional position was fundamentally threatened by the Party's tight control over the state apparatus.

Organized Shi'ite opposition to the regime began surfacing as early as the 1960s, when an underground religious party, *al-Da'wa al-Islamiyya, the Islamic Call,* was formed. Inspired by the teachings of the prominent Iraqi Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, the *Da'wa* was not merely a reformist movement but rather a revolutionary party, preaching the replacement of the modern secular state by an Islamic socio-political order. This vision could not have been more unwelcome to Saddam who feared that the spread of religious fundamentalism might undermine the stability of the Ba'th regime, and by the mid-1970s an unspecified number of Shi'ite *ulama* had been secretly executed to deter organized opposition to the regime.

Though this harsh measure did not prevent the resurfacing of violent Shi'ite opposition following the 1979 overthrow of the Iranian Shah and the creation of the Islamic Republic, the Shi'ites' behavior during the Iran-Iraq War demonstrated that Saddam's fears of the community's disloyalty had been grossly exaggerated. Not only did they fail to welcome their self-styled Iranian liberators, but they fought shoulder to shoulder with their Arab compatriots to rebuff the Iranian threat. Hence, with the exception of isolated terrorist activities, the Shi'ite community sealed its social contract with the Iraqi state with the blood of its sons. They just would not fight alongside the Iranians against their Arab brothers.

This historical record should go a long way to dispelling the persistent fears that the Iraqi Shi'ites are made of the same fabric as their Iranian co-religionists, and that Shi'ite pre-eminence in a post-Saddam Iraq will automatically mean that the country will fall under the sway of Iranian militancy. Besides, there is no fundamental hostility between Shi'ite Islam and the West just as there is no inherent affinity between the West and Sunni Islam. Prior to the 1979 Islamic revolution, it was Shi'ite Iran that served as America's foremost Middle Eastern ally and the protector of the (Sunni) monarchies in the Gulf, while successive radical Sunni regimes in Baghdad, Cairo, and Damascus since the 1950s were a constant irritant to their Arab neighbors and the West.

If the creation of a federal system is a necessary institutional condition for Iraq's possible democratization, the changing of the Iraqis' political outlook is no less indispensable for this monumental transformation. For Iraq's violent political legacy, and for that matter the Middle East's endemic volatility, stems first and foremost from the cognitive dissonance created by the failure of local political and intellectual elites to internalize the reality of state nationalism and their continued subscription to dated notions of imperialism.

These notions are deeply rooted in indigenous soil; the story of the Middle East has long been the story of the rise and fall of universal empires and, no less importantly, of imperial dreams. This has been so from the ancient empires of Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent (for example, Egypt, Greece, Rome, Carthage, Persia, Assyria, Babylon, and so on), through the early Muslim states and the Ottoman Empire. Politics during this lengthy period were characterized by a constant struggle for regional mastery; again and again, the dominant power sought to subdue, and preferably to eliminate, all potential challengers, so as to bring the entire region under its domination. Such imperialist ambitions, however, often remained largely unsatisfied as the unswerving pursuit of absolutism was matched by the equally formidable forces of fragmentation and degeneration. This wide gap between delusions of grandeur and the stark realities of weakness, between the imperial dream and the centrifugal forces of parochialism and local patriotism, has survived the demise of the Ottoman Empire to haunt Middle Eastern politics for generations to come.

The Afro-Asian (mainly Arabic-speaking) provinces of the Ottoman Empire did not experience the processes of secularization and modernization that created modern Western nationalism in Europe in the late 1700s. That nationalism proved a blessing to the West, because it meant that nation-states were ready to step into the breach when the intra-European empires (Austria-Hungary being one such example) collapsed after the First World War. When the Ottoman Empire collapsed, however, its Middle Eastern populations still thought only in local and/or imperial terms. Their intricate webs of local loyalties (to one's clan, tribe, village, town, religious sect, or localized ethnic minority) were superseded only by submission to the Ottoman sultan-caliph in his capacity as the religious and temporal head of world Muslim community. They were wholly unfamiliar with the idea of national self-determination and so created no pressure for nation-states.

Ambitious political leaders entered this vacuum, speaking the Western rhetoric "Arab nationalism," but actually aiming to create new empires for themselves. This was hugely problematic as the extreme diversity and fragmentation of the Arabic-speaking world had made its disparate societies better disposed to local patriotism than to a unified regional order. But then, rather than allow this disposition to run its natural course and develop into modern-day state nationalism (or *wataniyya*) Arab rulers taught their peoples that the independent existence of their respective states was a temporary aberration that would be rectified in the short term. This generated a devastating dissonance between the reality of state nationalism and the dream of an empire packaged as a unified "Arab nation" articulated most forcefully by the Ba'th regimes in Iraq and Syria. Just as the challenge to the continental order by the European "pan-" movements, notably pan-Germanism and pan-Slavism, led to mass suffering and dislocation, so the rejection of the contemporary Middle Eastern state system by pan-Arabs and pan-Islamists has triggered many wars among Arabs

and Jews, Arabs and Arabs, Arabs and Kurds, Arabs and Iranians, and others.

It is only when the “pan-“ factor is banished from the Middle East's political scene and replaced by general acceptance of the region's diversity will its inhabitants look forward to a better future. Only when the political elites reconcile themselves to the reality of state nationalism (*wataniya*) and forswear the imperial dream (*qawmiyya*) is there some hope that Saddam Hussein and his like will be discredited, and that life in the twenty-first century Middle East will be less “nasty” and “brutish” and more promising of peace and freedom.

Efraim Karsh is professor of Mediterranean Studies at the University of London.