

A report from the new Middle East—and a glimpse of its possible future

BY JEFFREY GOLDBERG

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After Iraq



Not long ago, in a decrepit prison in Iraqi Kurdistan, a senior interrogator with the Kurdish intelligence service decided, for my entertainment and edification, to introduce me to an al-Qaeda terrorist named Omar. “This one is crazy,” the interrogator said. “Don’t get close, or he’ll bite you.”

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Omar was a Sunni Arab from a village outside Mosul; he was a short and weedy man, roughly 30 years old, who radiated a pure animal anger. He was also a relentless jabberer; he did not shut up from the moment we were introduced. I met him in an unventilated

interrogation room that smelled of bleach and paint. He was handcuffed, and he cursed steadily, making appalling accusations about the sexual practices of the interrogator's mother. He cursed the Kurds, in general, as pig-eaters, blasphemers, and American lackeys. As Omar ranted, the interrogator smiled. "I told you the Arabs don't like the Kurds," he said. I've known the interrogator for a while, and this is his perpetual theme: close proximity to Arabs has sabotaged Kurdish happiness.



Omar, the Kurds claim, was once an inconsequential deputy to the now-deceased terrorist chieftain Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Omar disputed this characterization. By his own telling, he accomplished prodigies of terror against the pro-American Kurdish forces in the northern provinces of Iraq. "You are worse than the Americans," he told his Kurdish interrogator. "You are the enemy of the Muslim nation. You are enemies of God." The interrogator—I will not name him here, for reasons that will become apparent in a moment—sat sturdily opposite Omar, absorbing his invective for several minutes, absentmindedly paging through a copy of the Koran.

During a break in the tirade, the interrogator asked Omar, for my benefit, to rehearse his biography. Omar's life was undistinguished. His father was a one-donkey farmer; Omar was educated in Saddam's school system, which is to say he was hardly educated; he joined the army, and then Ansar al-Islam, the al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist group that operates along the Iranian frontier. And then, on the blackest of days, as he described it, he fell prisoner to the Kurds.

The interrogator asked me if I had any questions for Omar. Yes, I said: Have you been tortured in this prison?

"No," he said.

"What would you do if you were to be released from prison right now?"

"I would get a knife and cut your head off," he said.

At this, the interrogator smacked Omar across the face with the Koran.

Omar yelled in shock. The interrogator said: "Don't talk that way to a guest!"

Now, Omar rounded the bend. A bolus of spit flew from his mouth as he screamed. The interrogator taunted Omar further. "This book of yours," he said, waving the Koran. "Cut off their heads! Cut off their heads! That's the answer for everything!" Omar cursed the interrogator's mother once again; the interrogator trumped him by cursing the Prophet Muhammad's mother.

The meeting was then adjourned.

In the hallway, I asked the interrogator, “Aren’t you Muslim?”

“Of course,” he said.

“But you’re not a big believer in the Koran?”

“The Koran’s OK,” he said. “I don’t have any criticism of Muhammad’s mother. I just say that to get him mad.”

He went on, “The Koran wasn’t written by God, you know. It was written by Arabs. The Arabs were imperialists, and they forced it on us.” This is a common belief among negligibly religious Kurds, of whom there are many millions.

“That’s your problem, then,” I said. “Arabs.”

“Of course,” he replied. “The Arabs are responsible for all our misfortunes.”

“What about the Turks?” I asked. It is the Turks, after all, who are incessantly threatening to invade Iraqi Kurdistan, which they decline to call “Iraqi Kurdistan,” in more or less the same obstreperous manner that they refuse to call the Armenian genocide a genocide.

“The Turks, too,” he said. “Everyone who denies us our right to be free is responsible for our misfortunes.”

We stepped out into the sun. “The Kurds never had friends. Now we have the most important friend, America. We’re closer to freeing ourselves from the Arabs than ever,” he said.

To the Kurds, the Arabs are bearers of great misfortune. The decades-long oppression of Iraq’s Kurds culminated during the rule of Saddam Hussein, whose Sunni Arab-dominated army committed genocide against them in the late 1980s. Yet their unfaltering faith that they will one day be free may soon be rewarded: the Kurds are finally edging close to independence. Much blood may be spilled as Kurdistan unhitches itself from Iraq—Turkey is famously sour on the idea of Kurdish independence, fearing a riptide of nationalist feeling among its own unhappy Kurds—but independence for Iraq’s Kurds seems, if not immediate, then in due course inevitable.

In many ways, the Kurds are functionally independent already. The Kurdish regional government has its own army, collects its own taxes, and negotiates its own oil deals. For the moment, Kurdish officials say they would be satisfied with membership in a loose-jointed federation with the Shiite and Sunni Arabs to their south. But in Erbil and Sulaymani, the two main cities of the Kurdish region, the Iraqi flag is banned from flying; Arabic is scarcely heard on the streets (and is never spoken by young people, who are happily ignorant of it), and Baghdad is referred to as a foreign capital. In October, when I was last in the region, I called the office of a high official of the *peshmerga*, the Kurdish guerrilla army, but was told that he had “gone to Iraq” for the week.

The Bush administration gave many reasons for the invasion of Iraq, but the satisfaction of Kurdish national desire was not one of them. Quite the opposite: the goal was, and remains, a unified, democratic Iraq. In fact, key officials of the administration have a history of indifference to, and ignorance of, the subject of Kurdish nationalism. At a conference in 2004, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice stated, “What has been impressive to me so far is that Iraqis—whether Kurds or Shia or Sunni or the many other ethnic groups in Iraq—have demonstrated that they really want to live as one in a unified Iraq.” As Peter Galbraith, a former American diplomat and an advocate for Kurdish independence, has observed, Rice’s statement was disconnected from observable reality—shortly before she spoke, 80 percent of all Iraqi Kurdish adults had signed a petition calling for a vote on independence.

Nor were neoconservative ideologues—who had the most-elaborate visions of a liberal, democratic Iraq—interested in the Kurdish cause, or even particularly knowledgeable about its history. Just before the “Mission Accomplished” phase of the war, I spoke about Kurdistan to an audience that included Norman Podhoretz, the vicariously martial neoconservative who is now a Middle East adviser to Rudolph Giuliani. After the event, Podhoretz seemed authentically bewildered. “What’s a Kurd, anyway?” he asked me.

As America approaches the fifth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, the list of the war’s unintended consequences is without end (as opposed to the list of intended consequences, which is, so far, vanishingly brief). The list includes, notably, the likelihood that the Kurds will achieve their independence and that Iraq will go the way of Gaul and be divided into three parts—but it also includes much more than that. Across the Middle East, and into south-central Asia, the intrinsically artificial qualities of several states have been brought into focus by the omnivorous American response to the attacks of 9/11; it is not just Iraq and Afghanistan that appear to be incoherent amalgamations of disparate tribes and territories. The precariousness of such states as Lebanon and Pakistan, of course, predates the invasion of Iraq. But the wars against al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and especially Saddam Hussein have made the durability of the modern Middle East state system an open question in ways that it wasn’t a mere seven years ago.

It used to be that the most far-reaching and inventive question one could ask about the Middle East was this: How many states, one or two—Israel or a Palestinian state, or both—will one day exist on the sliver of land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River?

Today, that question seems trivial when compared with this one: How many states will there one day be between the Mediterranean and the Euphrates River? Three? Four? Five? Six? And why stop at the western bank of the Euphrates? Why not go all the way to the Indus River? Between the Mediterranean and the Indus today lie Israel and the Palestinian territories, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Long-term instability could lead to the breakup of many of these states.



All states are man-made. But some are more man-made than others. It was Winston Churchill (a bust of whom Bush keeps in the Oval Office) who, in the aftermath of World War I, roped together three provinces of the defeated and dissolved Ottoman Empire, adopted the name Iraq, and bequeathed it to a luckless branch of the Hashemite tribe of west Arabia. Churchill would eventually call the forced inclusion of the Kurds in Iraq one of his worst mistakes—but by then, there was nothing he could do about it.

The British, together with the French, gave the world the modern Middle East. In addition to manufacturing the country now called Iraq, the grand Middle East settlement shrank Turkey by the middle of the 1920s to the size of the Anatolian peninsula; granted what are now Syria and Lebanon to the French; and kept Egypt under British control. The British also broke Palestine in two, calling its eastern portion Trans-Jordan and installing a Hashemite prince, Abdullah, as its ruler, and at the same time promising Western Palestine to the Jews, while implying to the Arabs there that it was their land, too. As the historian David Fromkin puts it in *A Peace to End All Peace*, his definitive account of the machinations among the Great Powers that resulted in the modern map of the Middle East, the region

became what it is today both because the European powers undertook to re-shape it and because Britain and France failed to ensure that the dynasties, the states, and the political system that they established would permanently endure.

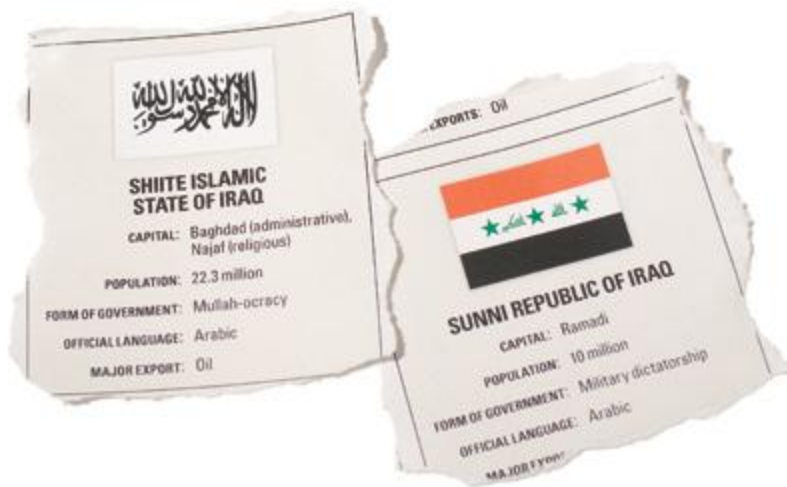
Of course, the current turbulence in the Middle East is attributable also to factors beyond the miscalculations of both the hubristic, seat-of-the-pants Bush administration and the hubristic, seat-of-the-pants French and British empires. Among other things, there is the crisis within Islam, a religion whose doctrinal triumphalism—Muslims believe the Koran to be the final, authoritative word of God—is undermined daily by the global balance of power, with predictable and terrible consequences (see: the life of Mohammed Atta et al.); and there is the related and continuing crisis of globalization, which drives people who have not yet received the message that the world is now flat to find solace and meaning in their fundamental ethnic and religious identities.

But since 9/11, America's interventions in the region—and especially in Iraq—have exacerbated the tensions there, and have laid bare how artificial, and how tenuously constructed, the current map of the Middle East really is. By invading Iraq, the Bush administration sought not only to deprive the country of its putative weapons of mass destruction, but also to shake things up in Iraq's chaotic neighborhood; toppling Saddam and planting the seeds of democracy in Iraq would, it was hoped, make possible the transformation of the region. The region is being transformed; that transformation is just

turning out to be a different, and possibly far broader, one than imagined. As Dennis Ross, who was a Middle East envoy for both Bill Clinton and George H. W. Bush, and is now with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, puts it, the Iraq War has begun to produce “wholesale change”—but “it won’t be the one envisioned by the administration.” An independent Kurdistan would be just the start.

Envisioning what the Middle East might look like five or 10 or 50 years from now is by definition a speculative exercise. But precisely because of the scope of the transformation that’s under way, imagining the future of the region, and figuring out a smart approach to it, should be at the top of America’s post-Iraq priorities. At the moment, however, neither the Bush administration nor the candidates for the presidency seem to be thinking about the future of the Middle East (beyond the immediate situation in Iraq and the specific question of what to do about Iran’s nuclear intentions) in any particularly creative way. At the State Department and on the National Security Council, there is a poverty of imagination (to borrow a phrase from the debate about the causes of chronic intelligence failure) about the shifting map of the region.

It’s not just the fragility of the post-1922 borders that has been exposed by recent history; it’s also the limitations of the leading foreign-policy philosophies—realism and neoconservatism. Formulating a foreign policy after Iraq will require coming to terms with a reshaped Middle East, and thinking about it in new ways.

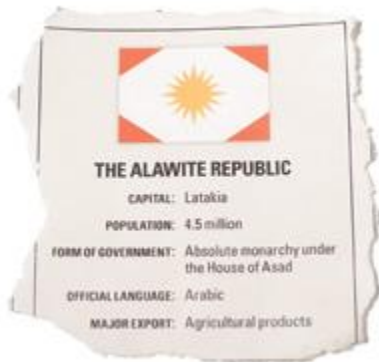


Unintended Consequences

In an effort to understand the shape of things to come in the Middle East, I spent several weeks speaking with more than 25 experts and traveling to Iraq, Jordan, the West Bank, and Israel. Many of the conversations were colored, naturally, by the ideological predispositions of those I talked with. The realists quake at instability, which threatens (as they see it) the only real American interest in the Middle East, the uninterrupted flow of Arab oil. Iranophobes see that country’s empowerment, and the threat of regional Shiite-Sunni warfare, as the greatest cause for worry. Pro-Palestinian academics blame Israel, and

its friends in Washington, for trying to force the collapse of the Arab state system. The liberal interventionists lament the poor execution of the Iraq War, and wish that the Bush administration had gone about exporting democracy to the Middle East with more subtlety and less hypocrisy. The neoconservatives, who cite the American Revolution as an example of what might be called “constructive volatility,” see no reason to regret instability (even as they concede that it’s hard to imagine a happy end to the Iraq War anytime soon). Some experts didn’t want to play at all. When I called David Fromkin and asked him to speculate about the future of the Middle East, he said morosely, “The Middle East has no future.” And when I spoke to Edward Luttwak, the iconoclastic military historian at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, he said there was no reason to engage the subject: the West is unable to shape the future of the Middle East, so why bother? “The United States could abandon Israel altogether, or embrace the general Arab cause 100 percent,” he said, but “the Arabs will find a new reason to be anti-American.”

Many experts I spoke to ventured that it would be foolish to predict what will happen in the Middle East next Tuesday, let alone in 2018, or in 2028—but that it would also be foolish not to be actively thinking about, and preparing for, what might come next.



S

o what might, in fact, come next? The most important

first-order consequence of the Iraq invasion, envisioned by many of those I spoke to, is the possibility of a regional conflict between Sunnis and Shiites for theological and political supremacy in the Middle East. This is a war that could be fought by proxies of Saudi Arabia, the Sunni flag-bearer, against Iran—or perhaps by Iran and Saudi Arabia themselves—on battlefields across Iraq, in Lebanon and Syria, and in Saudi Arabia’s largely Shiite Eastern Province, under which most of the kingdom’s oil lies. In 2004, King Abdullah II of Jordan, a Sunni, spoke of the creation of a Shiite “crescent,” running from Iran, through Iraq, and into Syria and Lebanon, that would destabilize the Arab world. Jordan, which is an indispensably important American ally, is a Sunni country, but its population is also majority-Palestinian, and many of those Palestinians support the Islamist Hamas movement, one of whose main sponsors is Shiite Iran.

There are likely second-order consequences, as well. Rampant Kurdish nationalism, unleashed by the invasion, may spill over into the Kurdish areas of Turkey and Iran. America’s reliance on anti-democratic regimes, such as Egypt’s, for help in its campaign against Islamist terrorism could strengthen the Islamist opposition in those countries. An American decision to confront Iran could have an enduring impact on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process—a tenuous undertaking to begin with—because the chief enemies of compromise are the Iranian-backed terror groups Hamas and Hezbollah.



Then there are third-order consequences: in the next 20 years, new states could emerge as old ones shrink, fracture, or disappear. Khuzestan, a mostly Arab province of majority-Persian Iran, could become independent. Lebanon, whose existence is perpetually inexplicable, could become partly absorbed by Syria, whose future is also uncertain. The Alawites who rule Syria are members of a Shiite splinter sect, and they are a tiny minority in their own, mostly Sunni country (the Alawites briefly ruled an independent state in the mountains above the Mediterranean). Syria, out of a population of 20 million, has roughly 2 million Kurds, who are mostly indifferent, and sometimes hostile, to the government in Damascus.

Kuwait is another state whose future looks unstable; after all, it has already been subsumed once, and could be again—though, under another scenario, it could gain territory and population, if Iraq’s Sunnis seek an alliance with it as a way of protecting themselves from their country’s newly powerful Shiites. Bahrain, a majority-Shiite country ruled by Sunnis, could well be annexed by Iran (which already claims it), and Yemen could expand its territory at Saudi Arabia’s expense. And the next decades might see the birth of one or two Palestinian states—and, perhaps, the end of Israel as a Jewish state, a fervent dream of much of the Muslim world.

And let’s not forget Pakistan, whose artificiality I was reminded of by Pervez Musharraf, the Pakistani dictator, during an interview in the garrison city of Rawalpindi some years ago. At one point, he took exception to the idea that the Baluch, the quasi-nomadic people who inhabit the large deserts of Pakistan’s west (and Iran’s southeast), might feel unattached to the government in Islamabad. In so doing, he undermined the idea of Pakistan as a naturally unitary state. “I know many residents of Baluchistan who are appreciative of Pakistan and the many programs and the like that Pakistan has for Baluchistan,” he said, referring to one of his states as if it were another country. He continued: “Why [is Pakistan] thought of as artificial and not others? Didn’t your country almost come to an end in a civil war? You faced larger problems than we ever have.”

Musharraf also made passing reference to the Afghan-Pakistan border, the so-called Durand Line. It was named after the English official who in 1893 forced the Afghans to accept it as their border with British India, even though it sliced through the territory of a large ethnic group, the truculent Pashtuns, who dominate Afghan politics and warmaking and who have always disliked and, accordingly, disrespected the line. Musharraf warned about the hazards of even thinking about the line. “Why would there be such a desire to change existing situations?” he said. “There would be instability to come out of this situation, should this question be put on the table. It is best to leave borders alone. If you start asking about this and that border or this and that arrangement ...” He didn’t finish the sentence.

All of this is very confusing, of course. Many Americans (including, until not so long ago, President Bush) do not know the difference between a Shiite and a Sunni, let alone between a Sindhi and a Punjabi. Just try to imagine, say, Secretary of State Podhoretz briefing President Giuliani on his first meeting with the leaders of the Baluchistan Liberation Army, and it becomes obvious that we may be entering a new and hazardous era.



Mapping the New Middle East

“Nobody is thinking about whether or not the map is still viable,” Ralph Peters told me. Peters is a retired Army lieutenant colonel and intelligence expert who writes frequent critiques of U.S. strategy in the Middle East. “It’s not a question about how America wants the map to look; it’s a question of how the map is going to look, whether we like it or not.”

In the [June 2006 issue of *Armed Forces Journal*](#), Peters published [a map](#) of what he thought a more logical Middle East might look like. Rather than following the European-drawn borders, he made his map by tracing the region’s “blood borders,” invisible lines that would separate battling ethnic and sectarian groups. He wrote of his map,

While the Middle East has far more problems than dysfunctional borders alone—from cultural stagnation through scandalous inequality to deadly religious extremism—the greatest taboo in striving to understand the region’s comprehensive failure isn’t Islam but the awful-but-sacrosanct international boundaries worshipped by our own diplomats.

Peters drew onto his map an independent Kurdistan and an abridged Turkey; he shrank Iran (handing over Khuzestan to an as-yet-imaginary Arab-Shiite state he carved out of what is now southern Iraq); he placed Jordan and Yemen on a steroid regimen; and he dismembered Saudi Arabia because he sees it as a primary enemy of Muslim modernization.

It was an act of knowing whimsy, he said. But it was seen by the Middle East’s more fevered minds as a window onto the American imperial planning process. “The reaction was pure paranoia, just hysterics,” Peters told me. “The Turks in particular got very upset.” Peters explained how he made the map. “The art department gave me a blank map, and I took a crayon and drew on it. After it came out, people started arguing on the Internet that this border should, in fact, be 50 miles this way, and that border 50 miles that way, but the width of the crayon itself was 200 miles.”

Given the preexisting sensitivities in the Middle East to white men wielding crayons, it's not surprising that his map would be met with such anxiety. There is a belief, prevalent in the Middle East and among pro-Palestinian American academics, that the Bush administration's actual goal—or the goal, at least, of its favored theoreticians—is to rip up the existing map of the Arab Middle East in order to help Israel.

“One of the most evil things that is happening is that a bunch of people who are fundamentally opposed to the existence of these nation-states have gotten into the control room,” Rashid Khalidi, who is the Edward Said Professor of Arab Studies at Columbia University, told me. “They are irresponsible and highly ideological neoconservatives, generally, and they have been trying to smash the Arab state system. Their basic philosophy is, the smaller the Arab state, the better.”

Neoconservatives inside the administration deny this. “We never had the creation of new states as a goal,” Douglas Feith, the former undersecretary of defense for policy, told me, and indeed, there is no proof that the administration sought the breakup of Iraq. On the contrary: shortly after the invasion, I saw Paul Wolfowitz, then the deputy secretary of defense, at the White House Correspondents' Association dinner, and I told him I had just returned from Kurdistan. Maybe he was just feeling snappish (a few minutes earlier he had had a confrontation with Al Franken that ended with Wolfowitz saying “Fuck you” to the comedian), but Wolfowitz looked at me and, as though he were channeling the Turkish foreign minister, said, “We call it northern Iraq. Northern *Iraq*.”

Peters said he noticed early on as well that the administration was committed to a unified Iraq, and to the preexisting, European-drawn map of the Middle East. “This is how strange things are—the greatest force for democracy in the world has signed up for the maintenance of the European model of the world,” he said. “Even the neocons, who look like revolutionaries, just want to substitute Bourbons for Hapsburgs,” he continued, and added, “Not just in Iraq.” (Peters acknowledged that neoconservatives outside the administration were more radical than those on the inside, like Feith and Wolfowitz.)

So just what did the neoconservatives, the most influential foreign-policy school of the Bush years, have in mind? Feith, whose (inevitable) book on the invasion and its aftermath will be published in March, told me that the neoconservatives—at least those inside the administration—did not hope to create new borders, but did see a value in “instability,” especially since, in his view, the Middle East was already destabilized by the presence of Saddam Hussein. “There is something I once heard attributed to Goethe,” he said, “that ‘Disorder is worse than injustice.’ We have an interest in stability, of course, but we should not overemphasize the value of stability when there is an opportunity to make the world a better or safer place for us. For example, during the Nixon presidency, and the George H. W. Bush presidency, the emphasis was on stabilizing relations with the Soviet Union. During the Reagan administration, the goal was to put the Communists on the ash heap of history. Those Americans who argued for stability tried to preserve the Soviet Union. But it was Reagan who was right.” Feith had hoped that the demise of Iraq's Baath regime would allow a new sort of governance to take hold in an Arab country. “We understood that if you did something as big as replacing Saddam, then there are going to be all kinds of consequences, many of which you can't possibly anticipate. Something good may come, something negative might come out.”

So far, it's been mainly negative. The neoconservatives' big idea was that American-style democracy would quickly take hold in Iraq, spread through the Arab Middle East, and then be followed by the collapse of al-Qaeda, who would no longer have American-backed authoritarian Arab regimes to rally against. But democracy has turned out to be a habit not easily cultivated, and the idea that Arab political culture is capable of absorbing democratic notions of governance has fallen into disfavor.

In December of 2006, I went to the Israeli Embassy in Washington for a ceremony honoring Natan Sharansky, who had just received the Medal of Freedom from President Bush. Sharansky, the former Soviet dissident, had become the president's tutor on the importance of democratic reform in the Arab world, and during the ceremony, he praised the president for pursuing unpopular policies. As he talked, the man next to me, a senior Israeli security official, whispered, "What a child."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"It's not smart ... He wants Jordan to be more democratic. Do you know what that would mean for Israel and America? If you were me, would you rather have a stable monarch who is secular and who has a good intelligence service on your eastern border, or would you rather have a state run by Hamas? That's what he would get if there were no more monarchy in Jordan."

After the ceremony, I spoke with Sharansky about this critique. He acknowledged that he is virtually the lone neoconservative thinker in Israel, and one of the few who still believes that democracy is exportable to the Arab world, by force or otherwise.

"After I came back from Washington once," he said, "I saw [Prime Minister Ariel] Sharon in the Knesset, and he said, 'Mazel tov, Natan. You've convinced President Bush of something that doesn't exist.'"

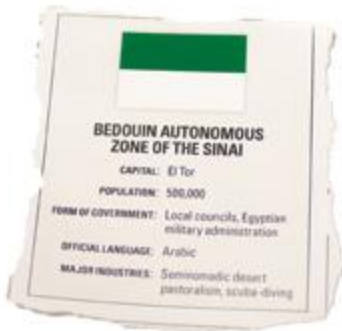
A War about Nothing?

It is true that the neoconservatives' dream of Middle East democracy has proved to be a mirage. But it's not as though the neocons' principal foils, the foreign-policy realists, who view stability as a paramount virtue, have covered themselves in glory in the post-9/11 era. Brent Scowcroft, President George H. W. Bush's national security adviser and Washington's senior advocate of foreign-policy realism, told me not long ago of a conversation he had had with his onetime protégée Condoleezza Rice. "She says, 'We're going to democratize Iraq,' and I said, 'Condi, you're not going to democratize Iraq,' and she said, 'You know, you're just stuck in the old days,' and she comes back to this thing, that we've tolerated an autocratic Middle East for 50 years, and so on and so forth. But we've had 50 years of peace." Of course, what Scowcroft fails to note here is that al-Qaeda attacked us in part because America is the prime backer of its enemies, the autocratic rulers of Egypt and Saudi Arabia. It is conceivable, if paradoxical, that the actual outcome of the recent turmoil in the Middle East could be a new era of stability, fostered by realists in this country and in the region itself. This might be the most unlikely potential outcome of the Iraq invasion—that it turns out to be the Seinfeld War, a war about nothing (except, of course, the loss of a great many lives and vast sums of money). Everything changes if America attacks Iranian nuclear sites,

of course—but the latest National Intelligence Estimate, which came out in early December and reported that Iran had shut down its covert nuclear- weapons program in 2003, makes it unlikely that the Bush administration will pursue this option. And the next one or two U.S. presidents, who will be inheriting both the Iraq and Afghanistan portfolios, will probably be hesitant to attack any more Muslim countries. It's not impossible to imagine that, in 20 years, the map of the Middle East will look exactly like it does today.

“We tend to underestimate the power of states,” Robert Satloff, the director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, told me. “The PC way of looking at the 21st century is that non-state actors—al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, general chaos—have replaced states as the key players in the Middle East. But states are more resilient than that.” He added that a newfound fear of instability might even buttress existing states.

Jordan is an interesting example of this phenomenon. While it would seem eminently vulnerable to the chaos—Iraq is to its east, the Palestinians and Israel to its west, and Syria to the north—Jordan is, in fact, almost tranquil, in part because it is led by a savvy king (scion of a family, the Hashemites, who are quite used to living on the balls of their feet) and in part because most of its people, having viewed from orchestra seats the bedlam in Iraq, want quiet, even if that means forgoing all the features of Western democracy.



Jordan might be an exception, however. Even a passing look at a country like Saudi Arabia suggests that internally driven regime changes are real possibilities. In Egypt the aging Hosni Mubarak is trying to engineer his unproven younger son, Gamal, into the presidency. It does not seem likely, at the moment, that Gamal would succeed in the job. Egypt was once a country that could project its power into Syria; now its leaders are having trouble controlling the Sinai Peninsula, home to a couple hundred thousand Bedouin, who are Pashtun-like in their stiff-neckedness and who seem more and more unwilling to accept Cairo's rule. America, of course, continues to embrace Mubarak, seeing no alternative except the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood. This pattern is familiar in American diplomacy; President Bush's long embrace of Musharraf comes to mind, and there are various, bipartisan antecedents—such as, most notably, Jimmy Carter's support for the Shah of Iran.

Beyond Realism and Neoconservatism

In the years since his Iraq project fell into disrepair, President Bush has acted like a realist while speaking like a utopian neoconservative. He has touted the virtues of democracy to the

very people subjugated by pro-American dictators. This is probably not a good long-term policy for managing chaos in the Middle East.

The problem is that Iraq has already proven—and Iran continues to prove—that Americans cannot make Middle Easterners do what is in America's best interest. "Whether the Middle East is unimportant or terrifically important, when it comes to doing anything about it, the actions undertaken are all ineffectual or counterproductive," Edward Luttwak told me. "In the Middle East, it doesn't help to be nice to them, or to bomb them."

A first step in restoring America's influence in the Middle East is to accept with humility the notion that America—like Britain before it—cannot organize the region according to its own interests. (Ideologues of varying positions tend to quote for their own benefit the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr on the proper use of American power—but perhaps what the debate needs is a version of Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer: "God grant me the courage to change the regimes I can, the grace to accept the regimes I can't ...") What's called for is a foreign policy in which the neoconservative's belief in the liberating power of democracy is yoked to the realist's understanding of unintended consequences.

Of course, winning in Iraq—or at least not losing— would help fortify America's deterrent power, and check Iran's involvement in Lebanon, Gaza, and elsewhere. America's situation in Iraq is not quite so dire as it was a year ago; the troop surge has worked to suppress much violence, and there have been tentative steps by both Shiite and Sunni leaders to prevent all-out sectarian war. To be sure, very few experts predict with any assurance an optimistic future for Iraq. "Ten years is a reasonable time period to think that the sectarian conflict will need to play out," Martin Indyk, the director of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, told me. "The parties will eventually exhaust themselves. Perhaps they have already, although I fear that the surge has just provided a break for Sunnis and Shias to better position themselves for further conflict when American forces are drawn down. There's no indication yet that the Shias are prepared to share power or that the Sunnis are prepared to live as a minority under Shia majoritarian rule."

Erstwhile optimists about the prospects for democracy in the Middle East, myself included, have been chastened by recent events. But the U.S. would do well not to abandon the long-term hope that democracy, exported carefully, and slowly, can change reality. This would be not a five-year project, but a 50-year one. It would focus on aiding Middle Eastern journalists and democracy activists, on building strong universities and independent judiciaries—and on being discerning enough *not* to aid Muslim democracy activists when American help would undermine their credibility. If Arab moderates and democrats "begin this work now, in 10 or 15 years we will have a horse in this race," said Omran Salman, the head of an Arab reform organization called Aafaq. "We've sacrificed democracy for stability, but it's a fabricated stability. When someone's sitting on your head, it's not stable." Salman, a Shiite from Bahrain, said he opposes Western military intervention in certain cases, preferring American "moral intervention." The Americans "have to keep pressure on regimes to force them to make reforms and open their societies. Now what the regimes do is oppress liberals."

One problem is that American moral capital has been depleted, which only underscores the practical importance to national security of, among other things, banning torture, and considering carefully the impact an American strike on Iran would have on the typical Iranian. After 30 years of oppressive fundamentalist Muslim rule, many of Iran's people are

pro-American; that could change, however, if American bombs begin to fall on their country.

The Next Phase



There is a way to go beyond merely managing the current instability, and to capitalize on it. I'm aware that this is not the most opportune moment in American history to disinter Wilsonian idealism, but America does now have the chance to help right some historic wrongs—for one thing, wrongs committed against the Kurds. (There are other peoples, of course, in the Middle East that the U.S. could stand up for, if it weren't quite so committed to the preservation of the existing map; the blacks in the south of Sudan—one of the most disastrous countries created by Europe—would surely like to be free from the Arab government that rules them from Khartoum.)

Iraq has been unstable since its creation because its Kurds and Shiites did not want to be ruled from Baghdad by a Sunni minority. So why not remove one source of instability—the perennially oppressed Kurds—from the formula? Kurdish independence was—literally—one of Wilson's famous Fourteen Points (No. 12, to be precise), and it is quite obviously a moral cause (and no less moral than the cause that preoccupies the West—that of Palestinian independence). There is danger here, of course: Kurdish freedom might spark secessionist impulses among other Middle Eastern ethnic groups. But these impulses already exist, and one lesson from the British and French management of the Middle East is that people cannot be suppressed forever.

For the moment, the Kurds of Iraq are playing the American game, officially supporting the U.S. and its flawed vision of Iraqi federalism, in part because the Turks fear Kurdish independence. Turkey has been an important American ally except for the one time when Turkey's friendship would have truly mattered—at the outset of the Iraq War, when Turkey refused to let the American 4th Infantry Division invade northern Iraq from its territory. The U.S. does not owe Turkey quite as much as its advocates think. The Kurds, on the other hand, are the most stalwart U.S. allies in Iraq, and their leaders are certainly the most responsible, working for the country's unity even while hoping for something better for their own people. "If Iraq fails, no one will be able to blame the Kurds," said Barham Salih, a Kurd who is Iraq's deputy prime minister.

The next phase of Middle East history could start 160 miles north of Baghdad, in Kirkuk, which the Kurds consider their Jerusalem. One day, in the home of Abdul Rahman Mustafa,

the Kurdish-Iraqi governor there, I learned about the mature position the Kurds are adopting. Over the course of its 20 years, Saddam's regime expelled Kurds from Kirkuk and gave their homes to Arabs from the south. The government now is slowly—too slowly for many Kurds—reversing the expulsions. A group of dignitaries had come to see the governor on Eid al-Fitr, the holiday that marks the end of the holy month of Ramadan. To reach the governor's office, you must navigate an endless series of barricades manned by tense-seeming Kurdish soldiers. The house itself is surrounded by blast walls. Kirkuk has a vigorous Sunni terrorist underground, and an enormous car bomb had killed seven people the day before.

I asked the governor, who is an unexcitable lawyer of about 60, if “his people”—I phrased it this way—were seeking independence from Iraq. “My people,” he said, “are all the people of Kirkuk.” The men seated about his living room nodded in agreement. “My job is to help all the people of Kirkuk have better lives.” More nodding. “My friends here all know that we will have justice for those who were hurt in the regime of Saddam, but we will not hurt others in order to get justice.” Even more nodding, and mumblings of approval.

Four men eventually got up to leave. They kissed the governor and then left the house. The governor turned to me and said, “One of those men is Arab. Everyone is welcome here.”

I told him I would like to ask my question again. “Do your people want independence from Iraq?”

“Yes, of course my people, most of them, want a new, different situation,” he said. “I think—I will be careful now—I think that we will have what we need soon. Please don't ask me any more specific questions about what we need and want.”

I asked, instead, for his analysis of the situation—did he think the Sunni-Shiite struggle would become worse, or would it burn out? He laughed. “I cannot predict anything about this country. I would never have predicted that I would be governor of Kirkuk. This is a city that expelled Kurds like me until the Americans came. So I couldn't predict my own future. I only know that we won't go back to the way it was before.”

He went on, “I listen to television about the future, but I don't believe anything I hear.”

Later that evening, as I was looking over my notes of the conversation, I recalled another comment, made by a man who thought he understood the Middle East. A little over a year ago, I ran into Paul Bremer, the ex-grand vizier of the Coalition Provisional Authority, the man who disbanded the Iraqi army, among other achievements. We were at Reagan National Airport; it was the day after the Iraq Study Group report was released, and I asked Bremer what he thought of it. He said he had not yet read it. I told him that from what I could tell, the experts were already divided on its recommendations. Bremer laughed, and said, with what I'm fairly sure was a complete lack of self-awareness, “Who really is an Iraq expert, anyway?”