

Introduction

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For a quarter century, Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq was a source of tension and uncertainty in the Middle East. Its demise has served to change the nature and focus of instability in the region as Iraq's neighbors confront a situation that is new and unprecedented. In many respects, instability has increased with unprecedented refugee flows, cross-border terror ties, heightened sectarian tensions, and a new, dangerous competition by Iraq's neighbors for influence in the former regional powerhouse, now humbled by years of sanctions, occupation, civil strife, and political gridlock. The U.S.-led overthrow of the Hussein regime, and the instability that followed, upended Iraq's relations with its neighbors, profoundly altered both the regional balance of power and America's role in the region, and fundamentally changed assumptions about Iraq's future. As destabilizing as the Ba'th regime was, fundamental power dynamics in the region are even more uncertain in the post-Saddam period, perhaps greater than at any time since the Iranian Revolution.

This uncertainty has been magnified by the tumultuous political upheavals throughout the Arab world that began in early 2011. Authoritarian leaders have been challenged by popular protests and opposition movements in a wave of unrest that has shaken the entire Arab political order. The quick ouster of autocratic leaders in Tunisia and Egypt had a powerful demonstration effect, reversing the numbing effect on regional reform and democratization brought about by the U.S. invasion of Iraq

and the subsequent civil war. George W. Bush promised that U.S. action in Iraq would spark democratic reform across the greater Middle East, yet this design was deferred for nearly a decade. When the “Arab Spring” did arrive, it upended politics throughout the region. Coupled with Iraq’s still emerging political order, these two transformations leave the strategic environment in flux, particularly as the United States draws down its military. Iraq and its neighbors face a new, still largely undefined regional order, complicated by divergent agendas, long histories of mistrust and conflict, and political upheavals across the region.

As the case studies in this volume demonstrate, alongside the dramatic changes brought about by the U.S. invasion and the post-Saddam political order, there is also a remarkable degree of continuity across this set of relationships. Even in the case of Iran, whose bilateral relationship with Iraq—compared with other neighbors—has been most transformed, old tensions involving boundaries, natural resources, and political identity still simmer just below the surface.

The challenge for Washington—as well as for Iraq—is to foster greater cooperation among a disparate set of actors whose narrow interests just as easily point to competition and confrontation absent a refashioned regional order. “None of Iraq’s neighbors . . . see it in their interest for the situation in Iraq to lead to aggrandized regional influence by Iran,” wrote the James A. Baker and Lee H. Hamilton–led Iraq Study Group in its late 2006 report that called for greater American engagement with Iraq’s neighbors, including Syria and Iran. “Indeed, [the neighbors] may take active steps to limit Iran’s influence, steps that could lead to an intraregional conflict. . . . Left to their own devices, these governments will tend to reinforce ethnic, sectarian, and political divisions within Iraqi society.”¹

The dominant theme of this book—that of a region unbalanced, shaped by both new and old tensions, struggling with a classic collective-action dilemma and anxiety about Iraq’s political future and America’s role in the region—suggests trouble ahead absent more concerted efforts to promote regional cooperation. Different neighbors will continue to have different responses to developments in Iraq, based on their individual interests, their influence, and their relationships with Washington. America’s role in determining the course of these relationships is profound, and under most scenarios it will continue to be so for some years to come. But Washington is not central. Neither are any of Iraq’s neighbors, on their own. There is a tendency in the United States to overemphasize America’s own role in determining outcomes, just as there is a tendency to conflate attempts by

1. James A. Baker III and Lee H. Hamilton, et al., *The Iraq Study Group Report* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 48.

neighboring countries to intervene (through political manipulation, military assistance, business dealings, or economic aid) with actual impact. The reality of how Iraqi domestic politics develops, and the outcome of the popular protest movements sweeping the region, will remain decisive in shaping regional relations. Internal dynamics remain primary, not the implementation of any outside scheme or model.

Under the sponsorship of the United States Institute of Peace, a diverse team of country and area experts was assembled and charged with mapping out these complex, multidimensional relationships. Individual case studies have been published as part of a research series that began with Henri Barkey's 2005 study of Turkey and Iraq. Out of this series emerged a much broader effort to assess the full measure of Iraq's regional relations and their impact on the strategic environment—an effort that produced this book. The comprehensive survey of regional relationships that forms the basis of this book begins and ends with Iraq. Iraq's own political development is and will remain the key variable in the region's strategic environment. It will have an overriding impact on how this set of regional relationships develops over time.

New Tensions

Despite a long-standing set of core interests and threat perceptions that have shaped Iraq's relations with its neighbors throughout the modern era, post-Saddam Iraq presents new challenges and new sources of tension. Prior to 1991, Iraq's strength, ambition, and aggressiveness were the source of instability in the region. Saddam invaded two neighbors—Iran and Kuwait—terrorized his own population, and threatened and intimidated other neighbors. The Iraqi threat, conventional wisdom used to hold, was itself a product of Iraq's military and political strength and Saddam's ambitions. This assumption is no longer valid. The Iraqi threat for some time will be weakness, not strength—specifically, its inability to act as a counterbalance to Iran's regional ambitions and to contain the spillover effects of its fragile domestic situation. This fragility has generated new tensions, as has Iraq's new political order.

The new Iraq, as unfinished as it may appear to be, is very different than its preceding incarnations. It is a federal entity where the Kurds have an important say in both domestic and foreign policy. Neither is it a "Sunni" state, as the Shiite majority has not only secured the right to vote in competitive elections but has also repeatedly demonstrated a baseline of cohesion that defies its many intrasectarian rifts. As Turkey and Iran gain influence in the region, Middle Eastern politics may become more fractured and decidedly less "Arab." Iraq in the future will remain part of this

new order, even if the nature and degree of its participation is not certain. It is also likely to be quite unconstrained by the traditional dogmas of Arab politics, given its close ties with Iran, Turkey, and the United States. This has left Iraq's Arab neighbors uneasy, and it could be a generation or more before they are fully reconciled with Iraq's new political order.

Moreover, having been the source of regional grievance for decades, Iraq is now ruled by an aggrieved political elite, some with their own scores to settle with Iraq's neighbors, the United States, and opposing groups at home.² Out of the upheaval and violence that has characterized Iraqi politics, a new political elite has arisen that is willing to wield sectarian identity in order to prevail over its rivals, particularly over former Ba'athists and Sunnis—a trend that creates concern among many of Iraq's neighbors. Grievance and victimhood are not the defining elements of Iraqi foreign policy—interests certainly prevail—but they are unmistakable features and ones that regional players are unaccustomed to dealing with, given the Iraqi state's long history of bullying its neighbors and internal opponents.

As a result, Iraq's neighbors are faced with a complicated set of factors. They face the prospect of political instability and the ever-present threat of civil war, whether sectarian or ethnic in nature. Understandably, in a region where ethnic, sectarian, and cultural affiliations straddle boundaries, the likelihood of a regional contamination effect is of primary importance for Iraq's neighbors. The chapters on Turkey, Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia certainly reflect this heightened anxiety about the implications of Iraq's new identities. As Toby Jones points out in his chapter on Saudi Arabia, almost a decade has passed since Saddam's regime was ousted, and yet Riyadh is still not reconciled to Iraq's new politics and its altered regional posture. On the opposite side of the ledger stands Iran, where the post-Saddam order has been energetically embraced. Tehran has cultivated Iraq's new political elite and has built extensive networks of influence across Iraq, as Mohsen Milani lays out in his chapter.

Other neighbors, like Turkey, faced new challenges with the fall of Saddam and the rise of Kurdish power in Iraq. But unlike Riyadh, Ankara has managed to adapt and refashion its approach to Iraq. This shift by Turkey, from containment to engagement, is deeply intertwined with domestic political developments and the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP's) emphasis on renewing the country's regional role. As Henri Barkey argues in his chapter, Turkey's position on Iraq has moved 180 degrees over a relatively brief period.

2. For profiles of Iraq's new political class, see Phebe Marr, *Who Are Iraq's New Leaders? What Do They Want?* Special Report no. 160 (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, March 2006).

There is also tension concerning the United States' long-term influence and presence in Iraq, concomitant with a military relationship that will invariably include arms sales, a novel development given the long-term enmity that had characterized relations between Baghdad and Washington. The nature of America's role in Iraq is still an open question, but one that poses a variety of dilemmas for Iraq's neighbors—whether adversaries, like Iran and Syria, or allies, like Jordan, Kuwait, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. It also poses a major dilemma for Iraq itself, perhaps the greatest foreign policy test for Iraq's post-Saddam leadership. Balancing Iraq's reliance on U.S. security assistance with the country's own homegrown nationalist sentiments—not to mention Iraq's newfound and strong ties with Iran—will be no easy feat. Reconciling Iraq's domestic politics with these two pivotal relationships—Washington and Tehran—would go a long way toward reducing regional tensions.

Continuities

Iraq's fragility, its altered political landscape, and the U.S. intervention may have led to new tensions, but these coexist with a high degree of continuity in Iraq's regional relations. Iraq's unresolved boundary and natural resource and financial disputes with its neighbors are no less prominent than in years past. As Phebe Marr and Sam Parker argue in their chapter on Iraq, the traditional cross-border tensions Saddam so eagerly exploited have not disappeared and are likely to plague regional relations for years to come. Political rivalries have also not faded, as with Iraq's uneasy relations with Syria. "Hostility and rivalry then are the norm," Mona Yacoubian writes in her chapter.

Iraq's hydrocarbon wealth and the ways in which it shapes regional relations represent another point of continuity. Iraq's oil infrastructure suffered terribly from Saddam's wars and the panoply of sanctions imposed by the international community. A rejuvenated Iraqi oil industry may once again return Iraq to a position of regional power broker. Moreover, Iraq will reemerge as an oil and gas exporter. Given the devastation caused by successive wars, oil and gas provide the fastest means to marshalling the resources Iraq will need to rebuild its infrastructure and improve its citizens' standard of living. As of 2010, Iraqi oil exports were not very significant for world consumption. However, the expansion of its oil production capacity—especially considering that very little in the form of modern-day exploration has taken place since 1980—will make Iraq a formidable power in oil markets, and potentially a competitor once again with Saudi Arabia, given differing outlooks on price and production levels. While increasing its capacity may be desirable for Iraq, neighbors may not be as

keen. In this context it is worth remembering that Iraq is an almost landlocked country; it will be in need of its neighbors for commerce and trade, especially the export of oil and gas.³ For the foreseeable future, oil could continue to shape ties with other neighbors, like Turkey and Syria—which seek to be outlets for Iraqi exports—and with Jordan, which hopes to perpetuate its Saddam-era oil perks, as Scott Lasensky explores in his chapter. Environmental challenges plaguing Iraq and its neighbors have also been long in the making, but the pace of change has accelerated them. Water may be the most prominent among these, and is certain to complicate Iraq's ties with Iran, Syria, and Turkey for the foreseeable future.

Some of the continuity is regionwide, as with the case of Arab political reform. Despite the expressed intentions and hopes of the Bush administration—not to mention Arab reformers themselves—the net impact of the post-Saddam political order has been to stunt political development, as authoritarian regimes have used Iraq's instability to tighten their grip on power. As Hesham Sallam argues in his chapter, disparate reformist camps initially united in opposition to the U.S. occupation, but as Iraq began to come apart at the seams the ruling Arab regimes regained the upper hand. Iraq's demonstration effect may very well be the opposite of what George W. Bush had hoped for.

Collective-Action Dilemma

Iraq, the United States, and Iraq's neighbors share a common interest in a cohesive, stable Iraq. But nearly a decade after the fall of Saddam there's no consensus on how to achieve stability. It is a classic collective-action dilemma that is exacerbated by metaconflicts between Arabs and Iran, and between the United States and Iran. As Ken Pollack argues in his chapter, the need for collective action is two-fold. Most urgently, it is needed to prevent another civil war. But over time, there is also a shared interest in preventing Iraq's reemergence as a powerhouse that could again threaten its neighbors. The Bush administration, following recommendations of the Iraq Study Group, reluctantly initiated a regional diplomacy process in 2007, but its commitment to engage with adversaries like Syria and Iran was half-hearted at best. Moreover, Iraqis soon grew to resent this multilateral process. They felt like the region's charity case and instead opted to deal with the neighbors and the United States in a more ad hoc, direct way.

3. See Joseph McMillan, *Saudi Arabia and Iraq: Oil, Religion, and an Enduring Rivalry*, Special Report no. 157 (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, January 2006).

President Barack Obama, despite a stronger commitment to regional diplomacy, did not fare much better in his first two years—an attempt to cooperate with Syria vis-à-vis Iraq was vetoed by Baghdad; outreach to Iran stalled early; and entreaties to Saudi Arabia to engage Iraq appear to have fallen on deaf ears. With the United States drawing down, Iraq still too weak to lead, none of Iraq's neighbors positioned to drive a regional process, and revolutionary contagion sweeping the region, the collective-action dilemma appears likely to persist.

Uncertainty

Fourth, and last, the case studies in this volume highlight a common theme of uncertainty. As Marr and Parker lay out, there are radically divergent futures for Iraq, each of which would suggest a different set of regional relationships. The uncertainty reigning over Iraq's future creates myriad temptations for the neighbors to intervene. In the pursuit of greater influence in Baghdad and around the country, the neighbors intercede not just to shape future events and policies so as to better align them with their own interests, but also to deny others, be they other neighbors or the United States, from achieving any gains at their own expense. The temptation to intervene is not always malevolent in intent but predicated by concerns over self-preservation, as may be the case with preventing ethnic or sectarian spillover effects, or even spurred by benign intentions designed to help a struggling neighbor. Nonetheless, what is important is how these interventions are perceived by neighbors and other interested parties.

As the neighbors plan and execute their policies on Iraq, they will not just be influencing events in that country; their actions will have regional implications, including the possibility for triggering chain reactions that could contribute to furthering instability in the region. The unintended consequences of their behavior loom large over the future of Iraq and the region. Were they to engage in an intense round of competition among themselves for influence, they stand the possibility of undermining their own relations with each other. Moreover, given the wide diversity of interests among the neighbors and the high probability of miscalculation and error, understanding how they view Iraq and interact with it is of critical importance to the United States, not only to fully understand the threat, but also to appreciate the opportunities that lay ahead. As the Iraq Study Group said in 2006,

The United States must build a new international consensus for stability in Iraq and the region. In order to foster such consensus, [it] should embark on a robust

diplomatic effort to establish an international support structure intended to stabilize Iraq and ease tensions in other countries in the region. This support structure should include every country that has an interest in averting a chaotic Iraq, including all of Iraq's neighbors—Iran and Syria among them. Despite the well-known differences between many of these countries, they all share an interest in avoiding the horrific consequences that would flow from a chaotic Iraq, particularly a humanitarian catastrophe and regional destabilization.⁴

President Obama echoed these ideas in a major Iraq policy address early in his administration:

The future of Iraq is inseparable from the future of the broader Middle East, so we must work with our friends and partners to establish a new framework that advances Iraq's security and the region's. It is time for Iraq to be a full partner in a regional dialogue, and for Iraq's neighbors to establish productive and normalized relations with Iraq. And going forward, the United States will pursue principled and sustained engagement with all of the nations in the region, and that will include Iran and Syria.⁵

The U.S. decision to disengage from Iraq is in principle not contingent solely on developments in Iraq; the fact remains that the pace of the withdrawal and nature of U.S. involvement will be determined by progress in Iraq, actions of neighbors, and America's ability to promote the kind of international support structure first outlined by the Iraq Study Group.⁶

Methodology

The bulk of this book is devoted to analyses of Iraq's immediate neighbors. These case studies adhere to a common analytical framework. First, they are designed to probe various interests and threat perceptions of the neighbors. How have threat perceptions developed/changed throughout various historical eras? What is the impact of domestic politics, and the neighbors' broader foreign policy objectives—specifically, are there political divides that impact Iraq policy? Second, they focus on each neighbor's vectors of influence in Iraq—economic, political, etc. How does each neighbor use its influence? What are the limiting or enabling factors to the country's influence in Iraq? How do they perceive their influence, both on its own, and also in relation to the influence of other regional actors? Lastly, the book looks at how the neighbors' interests and influence intersect with those of the United States. Are they compatible or problematic? How can differences be reconciled?

4. Baker and Hamilton, et al., *Iraq Study Group Report*, 32.

5. President Barack Obama, "Responsibly Ending the War in Iraq" (speech, Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, February 27, 2009).

6. Baker and Hamilton, et al., *Iraq Study Group Report*, 32–36.

In addition, a centerpiece of the book is a chapter on Iraq's threat perceptions and expectations vis-à-vis its neighbors—a treatment that captures the range of Iraqi views, and sets forth a variety of alternative futures (Marr and Parker). Individual snapshots of Iraqi views on particular neighbors are woven into each case study. In an attempt to widen the lens, the book also includes two broadly defined thematic chapters. The first explores how post-Saddam Iraq has affected political contestation in the Arab world and what impact it has had on relations between regimes and the opposition (Sallam). The second addresses the American role in Iraq and how Iraq's regional relations have affected long-term U.S. strategic interests and the regional order as a whole. This chapeau essay draws upon the individual chapters and assesses the broader impact of these relationships and Iraq's radically changed position in the regional order (Pollack).⁷

Collectively, these chapters focus on the differing interests and motivations of the neighbors and Iraq and aim at providing context and understanding to future policy choices. The book does not aim at predicting future courses of action. It does, however, factor in both Iraqi and American views in that it tries to also answer how Iraqis perceive their neighbors. Iraq, needless to say, is also an actor in the drama unfolding in the region. The policies and the positions taken by its constituent groups and parties are shaping the country's future.

Finally, the United States does not face easy choices in Iraq. Washington will continue to maintain its large diplomatic and assistance missions in Iraq, not to mention its military assets that are deployed close to Iraq's borders. That said, there is a process of drawdown under way, and it will inevitably lessen America's ability to assert itself as

- an arbiter of Iraqi domestic political disputes;
- the principal provider of external assistance to the new Iraqi state;
- a defender of Iraq's interests and sovereignty in regional and international fora.

America also confronts a paradox. Reassuring Iraqis (and the neighbors) about the lasting nature of U.S. involvement may undermine steps Iraqis and the neighbors need to take to reconcile. But the opposite message that Washington intends to pull out lock, stock, and barrel could set off a

7. Two case studies—Israel and Egypt—were not included in this volume. Historically, Israeli-Iraqi tension has been an important factor shaping Arab politics and the Arab-Israeli conflict. But with the fall of Saddam and Iraq's increasing preoccupation with its new participatory politics, the Israel factor has receded. While not unimportant, Israel falls outside the framework of this study, as does Egypt. Cairo and Baghdad have a long, often troubled history as competitors for Arab leadership. There is also a post-Saddam story involving Iraqi refugees, Arab opposition to the U.S. occupation, and halting attempts at regional and Iraqi reconciliation. Still, the organizing principle for this book from the outset has been Iraq's immediate neighbors.

regional rush to exploit the power vacuum and set off domestic power plays. In this respect, the current approach of a measured drawdown, combined with increased engagement with Iraq's neighbors, strikes a good balance. It is effectively the policy Bush handed off to Obama, though rarely cast that way for political reasons. If anything, the Obama administration learned in its first two years the merits of the policy it was handed, even if the larger Iraq issue was infused with deep-seated political acrimony.

The likelihood for complex challenges emerging at a moment's notice will necessitate deeper diplomatic engagement between the United States, Iraq, and Iraq's neighbors. With this in mind, we believe that the book has unique value in the breadth of its findings and in the common framework of analysis employed by the research team and hope that it will provide the policy community, scholars, and students with a comprehensive picture of the role that Iraq's neighbors could play in advancing the country's transition to security and stability.

