

Iraq Is Still the Key to U.S. Efforts to Stabilize the Arab World

Michael Wahid Hanna | Wednesday, April 18, 2018

As it approaches parliamentary elections next month, Iraq is not poised for either a major political transformation or massive security improvements. Instead, as a U.S. official who has worked on Iraq for many years has often noted to me, “Iraq is like a cancer patient, but a patient that we have some idea how to treat.” Despite that prognosis, the country should still be at the center of any U.S. regional strategy to stabilize the Arab world. With Iraq emerging from a period of acute crisis after the Islamic State’s territorial advances were reversed, at great cost, the United States has a significant opportunity to assist in ameliorating its chronic ills.



U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis stands in front of a map of Syria and Iraq during a news conference at the Pentagon, May 19, 2017 (AP photo by Jacquelyn Martin).

The effects of America’s ill-fated and legally dubious 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq point to the potential benefits of a different approach, one that is, instead, consistent, realistic and modest. Consider everything that has happened Iraq, and its impact on U.S. policy in the Middle East. Without in any way suggesting nostalgia for the autocratic and repressive order imposed by Saddam Hussein, the overthrow of the Baathist regime ensnared the United States in a costly military endeavor that eroded its strategic and moral position; produced the conditions for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis; created a huge opening for the projection of Iranian power; revitalized and provided strategic depth to transnational jihadism; cemented Iraqi isolation from much of the Arab world; and sharpened sectarian polarization in the Middle East and beyond.

This is a truly damning record that is a critical factor in the period of destabilization in which the region is mired. It also highlights how central Iraq remains to regional peace and security.

Much of Iraq’s political class is still eager to cultivate ties with the U.S. and understands the benefits of continued American engagement. But accumulated Iraqi resentments against the U.S. are real, figuring perhaps even more prominently in the imaginations of Iraqi citizens. This is not surprising given that America has been engaged in various kinds of violence and hostilities against and in Iraq since Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

Nonetheless, and accentuated by Iraq's more recent history, there is also an awareness among Iraqis of what the U.S. can productively offer in terms of security and intelligence cooperation, regional diplomacy, and even Iraq's tangled domestic politics. The tensions that exist in bilateral ties should not be seen as an insurmountable hurdle to productive and predictable U.S.-Iraqi relations. After all, key U.S. ties in the region—with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Israel—have all been fraught at various times in recent years, with frequent tensions and significant divergences in interests. U.S. relations with Iraq will remain complex and difficult to manage, but shared interests and longstanding working relationships form a real foundation for bilateral relations.

Given the current political disputes in the U.S. about its role in the Middle East, much continues to be made of the American withdrawal from Iraq that was completed in December 2011. But these discussions are often a caricature of that moment and the decisions that led up to it, denying Iraqis agency in the process that culminated in the withdrawal. Nevertheless, the ensuing period was handled poorly by both an exhausted U.S. and an overconfident Iraq. This is not to suggest that the drawdown of ground forces itself was fatally flawed, but that other, less obtrusive forms of continued collaboration were eschewed at the time.

As U.S. officials and diplomats have noted in private discussions, when Baghdad was preparing for the symbolically significant hosting of the Arab League summit in May 2012, Washington offered to help Iraq secure the high-profile diplomatic gathering, but was rebuffed. While the gathering itself was poorly attended, the meetings proceeded without any threats or major disruptions. The successes of that early period lulled the U.S. and Iraq into an exaggerated sense of security.

Iraq is where the regional order was shattered. But it could play a key role in bridging current divides and establishing a functional model of equilibrium.

Absent the shocks of the Syrian civil war, while Iraqi security would likely still have deteriorated following the regrouping of the Islamic State, it would not have been on the staggering scale that the country witnessed. As it happened, the war in Syria created strategic depth for the extremist group, revitalizing its recruitment, boosting its resources and expanding its imagination. That unexpected trigger exposed the frailties of the Iraqi security forces and the limits of U.S. awareness and influence. A more focused and intelligence-driven U.S. presence in Baghdad may have mitigated the rapid deteriorations in security witnessed in 2013 and 2014. The U.S.-led international coalition against the Islamic State since then has provided critical support for the Iraqi campaign to dislodge the jihadi group from its territorial proto-

state, providing a foundation for future collaboration. Critically, it is collaboration that Iraq is keen to maintain and is driven by Iraq's operational priorities.

On a regional level, the U.S. has long sought to reintegrate Iraq into the Arab world after decades of isolation. Those efforts were hamstrung by the sectarian polarization that came to dominate regional affairs after the outbreak of Iraq's own sectarian civil war. Following Saddam's ouster, Iraq's Arab neighbors, wary of its close and growing relations with Iran, embraced a myopic approach that kept Iraq at a distance and only boosted Iranian influence. Only recently have some key Arab states signaled a shift in their approach to Iraq, particularly Saudi Arabia, which reopened its embassy in Baghdad in 2015 for the first time in 25 years and has since upped its soft power outreach and sought to deepen economic ties.

This change in Saudi policy in Iraq is just one plank of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's impulsive and ambitious agenda, which has been more destabilizing elsewhere, especially in Yemen. But in Iraq, it is welcome and overdue. The U.S. should capitalize on these improving ties and look to engage Iraq and its neighbors on a host of regional security issues, such as intelligence-sharing on counterterrorism, maritime security and cooperation, and military transparency. It should also push forward the already emerging commercial links between Iraq and the Gulf.

Deepening and diversifying Iraq's regional relations would have important knock-on effects within Iraqi domestic politics, which are another important arena for the U.S., if Washington is clear-eyed about the realities. Iraq's geography is immutable, and the U.S. cannot seek to displace Iran from Iraqi politics. Zero-sum approaches to Iraq cannot succeed. A stable Iraq requires positive relations with Iran, a country that still possesses significant capacity to function as a spoiler. But the U.S. should not succumb to exaggerated portrayals of Iranian power or overlook the resilience of Iraqi nationalism and Arab identity, which remain significant sources of both pride and independence.

In cumulative terms, Iraq has the potential to help bridge current regional divides and establish a functional model of equilibrium. It is where the regional order was shattered, but because of its centrality, its demography and its existing relationships, it is also the most likely candidate to manage the countervailing pressures and sectarian polarization that have destabilized the Middle East over the past 15 years. Competition in Iraq among the U.S., Iran and the Gulf states is inevitable, but it does not have to have winners and losers, or take the form of militarized conflict. Establishing an arrangement that acknowledges those realities would represent an important regional precedent.

Most importantly, the United States should approach these issues with patience and a realistic timeline. In the midst of the so-called surge of U.S. forces in 2007 and 2008, analysts and commentators, myself included, often pointed to the need for Iraqi political leaders to take advantage of improved security conditions to advance the process of political reconciliation. Unfortunately, those exhortations, though well-intentioned, were divorced from Iraqi realities. While they were convenient from the perspective of

an exhausted and over-extended foreign power, they could not account for the grievances and divides of Iraqi society, aggravated and magnified by the war and its aftermath. Political reconciliation, a term that was thrown about promiscuously then, will require patience this time. Such processes are more than just the construction of electoral coalitions or the formation of governments, exercises that continue to be fraught in the context of Iraq.

Iraq faces continued challenges from corruption, sectarianism, insurgency and fundamental questions about its political and economic capacity—challenges that will not change dramatically when the next government is formed. But the United States should still focus on those chronic conditions, since even incremental improvements will benefit Iraqis themselves and the wider regional environment.

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