

[Print this Page](#)[Close Window](#)

The Atlantic Monthly | November 2002

A POST-SADDAM SCENARIO

Iraq could become America's primary staging ground in the Middle East. And the greatest beneficial effect could come next door, in Iran

BY ROBERT D. KAPLAN

.....

The constellation of overseas bases with which the United States sustained its strategic posture throughout the Cold War was a matter not of design but of where Allied troops just happened to be when World War II and its aftershocks—the Greek Civil War and the Korean War—finally ended. The United States found itself with basing rights in western Germany, Japan, Korea, the eastern Mediterranean, and elsewhere. In particular, our former archenemy, Germany, precisely because America had played a large role in dismantling its Nazi regime, became the chief basing platform for U.S. troops in Eurasia—to such a degree that two generations of American soldiers became intimately familiar with Germany, learning its language and in many cases marrying its nationals. If the U.S. Army has any localitis, it is for Germany.

A vaguely similar scenario could follow an invasion of Iraq, which is the most logical place to relocate Middle Eastern U.S. bases in the twenty-first century. This conclusion stems not from any imperialist triumphalism but from its opposite: the realization that not only do our current bases in Saudi Arabia have a bleak future, but the Middle East in general is on the brink of an epochal passage that will weaken U.S. influence there in many places. Indeed, the relocation of our bases to Iraq would constitute an acceptance of dynamic change rather than a perpetuation of the status quo.

Two features of the current reality are particularly untenable: the presence of "unclean" infidel troops in the very Saudi kingdom charged with protecting the Muslim holy places, and the domination by Israeli overlords of three million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Neither will stand indefinitely. President Bush's refusal to force the Israelis out of the West Bank has heartened neoconservatives, but it is a temporary phenomenon—merely a matter of sequencing.

Only after we have achieved something more decisive in our war against al Qaeda, or have removed the Iraqi leadership, or both, can we pressure the Israelis into a staged withdrawal from the occupied territories. We would then be doing so from a position of newfound strength and would not appear to be giving in to the blackmail of those September 11-category criminals, the Palestinian suicide bombers. But after the Israelis have reduced the frequency of suicide bombings (through whatever tactics are necessary), and after, say, the right-wing Israeli leader Ariel Sharon has passed from the scene, Bush, if he achieves a second term and thus faces no future elections, will act.

But first the immediate issue: Iraq. The level of repression in Iraq equals that in Romania under the Communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu or in the Soviet Union under Stalin; thus public opinion there is unknowable. Nevertheless, two historical cultural tendencies stand out in Iraq: urban secularism and a grim subservience. Whenever I visited Baghdad in the past, the office workers at their computer keyboards had the expressions that one imagines on slaves carrying buckets of mud up the steps of ancient ziggurats. These office workers labored incessantly; a cliché among Middle East specialists is that the Iraqis are the Germans of the Arab world (and the Egyptians are the Italians). Iraq was the most fiercely modernizing of Arab societies in the mid twentieth century, and all coups there since the toppling

of the Hashemite dynasty, in 1958, have been avowedly secular.

Given the long climate of repression, the next regime change in Iraq might even resurrect the reputation not of any religious figure but of the brilliant, pro-Western, secular Prime Minister Nuri Said, who did more than any other Iraqi to build his country in the 1940s and 1950s. As in Romania, where the downfall of Ceausescu resurrected the memory of Ion Antonescu, the pro-Hitler nationalist executed in 1946 by the new Communist government, the downfall of Iraq's similarly suffocating autocracy could return the memory of the last great local politician murdered in the coup that set the country on the path to Saddam Hussein's tyranny.

Iraq has a one-man thugocracy, so the removal of Saddam would threaten to disintegrate the entire ethnically riven country if we weren't to act fast and pragmatically install people who could actually govern. Therefore we should forswear any evangelical lust to implement democracy overnight in a country with no tradition of it.

Our goal in Iraq should be a transitional secular dictatorship that unites the merchant classes across sectarian lines and may in time, after the rebuilding of institutions and the economy, lead to a democratic alternative. In particular, a deliberately ambiguous relationship between the new Iraqi regime and the Kurds must be negotiated in advance of our invasion, so that the Kurds can claim real autonomy while the central government in Baghdad can also claim that the Kurdish areas are under its control. A transitional regime, not incidentally, would grant us the right to use local bases other than those in the northern, Kurdish-dominated free zone.

Keep in mind that the Middle East is a laboratory of pure power politics. For example, nothing impressed the Iranians so much as our accidental shooting down of an Iranian civilian airliner in 1988, which they believed was not an accident. Iran's subsequent cease-fire with Iraq was partly the result of that belief. Our dismantling the Iraqi regime would concentrate the minds of Iran's leaders as little else could.

Iran, with its 66 million people, is the Middle East's universal joint. Its internal politics are so complex that at times the country appears to have three competing governments: the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Khamenei and the goons in the security service; President Mohammad Khatami and his Western-tending elected government; and the former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, whose *bazaar* power base has made him a mediator between the other two. Sometimes Iranian policy is the result of subtle arrangements among these three forces; other times it is the result of competition. The regimes of Iraq and Iran are fundamentally different, and so, therefore, are our challenges in the two countries.

Vastly more developed politically than Iraq, Iran has a system rather than a mere regime, however labyrinthine and inconvenient to our purposes that system may be. Nineteenth-century court diplomacy of the kind that Henry Kissinger successfully employed in China with Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai will not work in Iran, simply because it has too many important political players. Indeed, because so many major issues are matters of internal bargaining, the Iranian system is the very opposite of dynamic. Iran's foreign policy will change only when its collective leadership believes there is no other choice.

Iranian leaders were disappointed not to see an American diplomatic initiative in 1991, after the United States bombed Baghdad—which, like the shooting down of the civilian jet, had greatly impressed them. Also likely to have been impressive to them was President George W. Bush's "axis of evil" speech (Iran's orchestrated denunciations notwithstanding). Overtures to the moderates in Iran's elected government, as the White House has already admitted, have not helped us—we will have to deal directly with the radicals, and that can be done only through a decisive military shock that affects their balance-of-power calculations.

The Iranian population is the most pro-American in the region, owing to the disastrous economic consequences of the Islamic revolution. A sea change in its leadership is a matter of when, not if. But a

soft landing in Iran—rather than a violent counter-revolution, with the besieged clergy resorting to terrorism abroad—might be possible only if general amnesty is promised for those officials guilty of even the gravest human-rights violations.

Achieving an altered Iranian foreign policy would be vindication enough for dismantling the regime in Iraq. This would undermine the Iranian-supported Hizbollah, in Lebanon, on Israel's northern border; would remove a strategic missile threat to Israel; and would prod Syria toward moderation. And it would allow for the creation of an informal, non-Arab alliance of the Near Eastern periphery, to include Iran, Israel, Turkey, and Eritrea. The Turks already have a military alliance with Israel. The Eritreans, whose long war with the formerly Marxist Ethiopia has inculcated in them a spirit of monastic isolation from their immediate neighbors, have also been developing strong ties to Israel. Eritrea has a secularized population and offers a strategic location with good port facilities near the Bab el Mandeb Strait. All of this would help to provide a supportive context for a gradual Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza. A problem with the peace plan envisioned by President Bill Clinton and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, in the summer of 2000, was that coming so soon after Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon, it was perceived by many Arabs as an act of weakness rather than of strength. That is why Israel must be seen to improve its strategic position before it can again offer such a pullback.

Of course, many Palestinians will be unsatisfied until all of Israel is conquered. But in time, when no Israeli soldiers are to be seen in their towns, the seething frustration, particularly among youths, will turn inward toward the Palestinians' own Westernized and Christianized elites, in Ramallah and similar places, and also eastward toward Amman.

In regards to Jordan and our other allies, U.S. administrations, whether Republican or Democratic, are simply going to have to adapt to sustained turbulence in the years to come. They will get no sympathy from the media, or from an academic community that subscribes to the fallacy of good outcomes, according to which there should always be a better alternative to dictators such as Hosni Mubarak, in Egypt; the Saudi royal family; and Pervez Musharraf, in Pakistan. Often there isn't. Indeed, the weakening of the brutal regime of Islam Karimov, in Uzbekistan, will not necessarily lead to a more enlightened alternative. It could just as likely ignite a civil war between Uzbeks and the ethnic Tajiks who dominate the cities of Samarkand and Bukhara. Because Uzbekistan is demographically and politically the fulcrum of post-Soviet Central Asia, those advocating "nation-building" in Afghanistan should realize that in the coming years there could be quite a few more nations to rebuild in the region. For this reason some in the Pentagon are intrigued by a basing strategy that gives us options throughout Central Asia, even if some countries collapse and we have to deal with ethnic khanates.

Our success in the war on terrorism will be defined by our ability to keep Afghanistan and other places free of anti-American terrorists. And in many parts of the world that task will be carried out more efficiently by warlords of long standing, who have made their bones in previous conflicts, than by feeble central governments aping Western models. Of course we need to eliminate anti-American radicals (Gulbuddin Hekmatyar is a case in point) who are trying to topple Hamid Karzai's pro-Western regime. But that doesn't mean we should see Karzai's government as the only sovereign force in the country. Given that the apex of Afghan national cohesion, in the mid twentieth century, saw the Kabul-based regime of King Zahir Shah controlling little more than the major cities and towns and the ring road connecting them, the prospects for full-fledged nation-building in Afghanistan are not only dim but also peripheral to the war on terrorism. We forget that the December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan did not spark the *mujahideen* uprising. The spark came in April of 1978, in the form of the Kabul regime's attempt to extend the power of the central government to the villages. However brutal and incompetent the methods were, one must keep in mind that Afghans have less of a tradition of a modern state than do Arabs or Persians.

In any case, the changes that may be about to unfold in the Middle East will clear Afghanistan from the front pages. In the late nineteenth century the Ottoman Empire, despite its weakness, tottered on. Its collapse had to wait for the cataclysm of World War I. Likewise, the Middle East is characterized by

many weak regimes that will totter on until the next cataclysm—which the U.S. invasion of Iraq might well constitute. The real question is not whether the American military can topple Saddam's regime but whether the American public has the stomach for imperial involvement of a kind we have not known since the United States occupied Germany and Japan.

The URL for this page is <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2002/11/kaplan.htm>.

Print this Page

Close Window

SUBSCRIBE TO THE ATLANTIC TODAY!

Take advantage of our great rate to subscribe to a year of The Atlantic Monthly. Go to the following Web address to sign up today:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/subscribe12>

All material copyright The Atlantic Monthly Group. All rights reserved.