

# What if the United States Fails in Iraq

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American president George Bush is adamant: the United States will not withdraw its forces from Iraq before its mission – to secure a free and democratic Iraq – is complete. He said so back in May 2003, after Saddam's statue was toppled, and he has repeated it since, yet again in his January 2006 State of the Union address. In October 2005, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice defined the American objectives in

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Iraq in the following manner: "break the back of the insurgency...keep Iraq from becoming a safe haven [for terrorists] ...[have it] turn the corner financially and economically...[and] build truly national institutions [that will] bridge sects and ethnic groups... [and] deliver essential services."<sup>1</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that she did not rule out the possibility that American troops will still be in Iraq ten years hence.

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And yet, the specter of failure is there, significantly enhanced by the repercussions from the Samarra bombing. Even if Shiites and Sunnis avoid an all out civil war this time, there is a reasonable chance recurring provocations will, in the end, succeed in undermining the American project in Iraq. It would therefore do well to prepare for a scenario of failure: an American evacuation before the mission is completed, and before Bush vacates the White House in January 2009.<sup>2</sup> True, given the president's determination such a scenario is highly improbable. Nevertheless, a "what if" speculation is useful in explicating what is at stake.

An evacuation-in-failure could take place due to a protracted political deadlock in Iraq, ongoing guerilla warfare and terror activities with no end in sight, or deterioration into a full scale civil war (perhaps resulting in an increase in American casualties). Such circumstances might force American decision-makers to realize that the mission cannot be achieved and/or that potential fallout, in terms of foreign policy or domestic politics, is too risky. Arguments along these lines are already being made not only by Democrats but also by various Republican groups: Buchananite isolationists, small-government conser-

vatives worried about the financial cost, and foreign policy realists (e.g., Brent Scowcroft) concerned with the diplomatic price tag. Public opinion is evenly divided, fluctuating according to circumstances and perceptions. In February 2006, 50 percent preferred to keep the troops in Iraq (up 2 percent from January) versus 46 percent who wanted to bring them home (down 2 percent).<sup>3</sup> Since a scenario of evacuation-in-failure is possible, it raises the question: what would be its ramifications?

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## Domestic Implications

Domestically, not only would the Bush administration be discredited, but the Republicans might pay a long-term price. The advantage they currently enjoy over the "squeamish" Democrats on matters of national security would probably disappear. President

Bush is already perceived as "a drag" on Republican electoral prospects in the forthcoming 2006 midterm elections.<sup>4</sup> True, elections are usually not about foreign policy. However, should terror and/or the Middle East be major issues during the 2008 campaign, the Democrats might regain the reins of power in Washington. On the one hand, Democratic left wingers (e.g. Al Gore, Howard Dean, Senator Russ Feingold), advocating early withdrawal, could cry "we told you so." On the other hand, centrists such as House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi or Senator Hillary Clinton would retain their "strong on defense" stature. Pelosi is advocating a reasonable exit strategy in order for the United States to focus on what she sees as more pressing issues: the war on terror and the two nuclear threats (Iran and North Korea). Clinton, the front runner for the Democratic presidential nomination, would be assisted by the disappearance of the Iraq issue, because she is currently attacked by the anti-war advocates on the left.

In terms of national security doctrine, the United States would move beyond the current route of extreme neo-conservatism: democratization through occupation. The emergence of a neo-isolationist "Iraq syndrome" (reminiscent of the "Vietnam syndrome") would probably be detrimental to the Bush doctrine, based on unilateralism and preemption.<sup>5</sup> Whether this means that the use of limited force for limited aims (à la Kosovo) would also be eschewed depends on the depth and length of the backlash

against a debacle in Iraq. Forty-two percent of Americans (the highest level since the mid-seventies) agree that the United States "should mind its own business internationally."<sup>6</sup> At the same time, there is a bipartisan elite that believes that the United States must stay engaged and should continue to project a forward presence.

### Regional and International Implications

In Iraq, the departure of the American balancing policeman could mean a number of not mutually exclusive developments: prolonged civil war, Lebanonization (including foreign intervention), partition (formal or de facto) of the country, or total repression of the Sunni minority by the Shiite majority (a reversal of the order under Saddam). Much less probable but not unimaginable is the forcible extinction of Kurdish autonomy, applauded by Iraq's neighbors. Two outcomes are almost certain: the succession-state would be Shiite; and a revisionist "Sunniistan" would emerge.

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*US senator John McCain (l) with Iraqi prime minister Ibrahim Jaafari in Baghdad*

ready emerging. Even if diplomatic niceties are observed, at the very least this would increase consternation among the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Saudi Arabia would have cause to be much more

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on guard vis-à-vis its Shiite minority in the northeast; Iranian meddling in the quasi-insurgency by the Shiite population in Yemen is already a disconcerting sign. American credibility will be undermined precisely when it is most required. An American failure in Iraq coupled with an emboldened nuclearizing Iran might cause the Gulf states to question the viability of the American security connection. In order to obstruct a shift to Iranian hegemony, the United States would have to offer ironclad and more generous assurances, and even that might not suffice.<sup>7</sup> In terms of oil, ongoing chaos in Iraq will continue to drive up prices; a stable Iraq closer to Iran might strengthen intra-OPEC solidarity. Both scenarios are inauspicious.

If the Sunnis are not massacred or "cleansed" or totally repressed, Fallujah could replace Kabul as the



capital of the terror world, hosting terror groups and radiating trouble especially toward Saudi Arabia and a weakened Jordan (as opposed to an emboldened Syria). American democratizing efforts will also suffer a blow, though practical ramifications are unclear. If by then progress may have been made elsewhere through creeping home grown democratization, Iraq could be held as a failure "only" of hastily implanted democracy. Unlike the relative stability that emerged in Southeast Asia after the American debacle in Vietnam, instability would apparently be the result of an American failure in the Middle East. The region would be a more dangerous place than it was before March 2003.

Internationally, American stature will suffer. Osama bin Laden will declare victory: the United States was defeated by terrorists because it could not stand the mounting number of casualties. Europeans will claim, yet again but with renewed vigor, that their Venus outshines the American Mars; that the American failure in Iraq proves that use of force exacerbates problems rather than solves them; that even as a last resort force must be agreed upon multilat-

erally by the Security Council; and that such an international consensus, possible only through American patience, might have made the difference in a successful reconstruction of a stable Iraq. A failure in Iraq will also strengthen the balancing-containing-obstructionist attitude of Russia and China vis-à-vis the United States. American prestige will hit a new low; American ability to deter might be undermined, at the very least in cases with potential for long-term military engagement. The United States will be perceived not just as a "Texan cowboy," but an ineffective one at that. And the weakening in American resolve will project to the world – states and dictators and terrorists – that the United States not only can do less but also wants to do less.<sup>8</sup>



### The Israeli Arena

Much has been said and written about the connection between the American project in Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation, or more accurately put, about the perception thereof. It has been argued that the roadmap was a price the United States paid to Britain and to world opinion. On a different note, American officials claimed that the removal of Saddam would promote a more moderate atmosphere in the Middle East, congenial to peacemaking. Such theses are sketchy at best, and arguments about the connection between the two problems can be made both ways. This is also true regarding the implications of an American failure in Iraq. On the one hand, the United States might decide that it cannot permit another hotspot to fester in the Middle East. Following a withdrawal from Iraq it would therefore re-energize its efforts in the Holy Land, in the hope that the specter of failure would be countered with a vision of success. On the other hand, the United States in an introspective and disappointed mood might conclude that intractable Middle Eastern problems cannot be solved but should rather be contained. Fearing an additional failure,

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the United States would limit its involvement. It is difficult to predict which line will be taken. Policy will depend much more on Israeli-Palestinian circumstances than on the fallout from Iraq.

Which brings us to the issue of implications for Israel and its policy. Given that the United States is Israel's greatest friend and ally, it is safe to say that as a rule, any American failure is bad for Israel. Any global constellation in which the United States is weakened cannot bode well for Israel, because other (strengthened) international actors will be less favorably inclined toward Israel. That said, were the United States to partially disengage due to impatience with Palestinian rejectionism and terrorism (along the lines of Bush's impatience with Arafat), Israel's position will be strengthened.

Beyond the immediate Palestinian issue, any American attempt to forge some kind of regional response to a Shiite potential ascendancy and/or to a Sunni terror center will not include Israel. As the prelude to the 1991 Gulf War proved, Israel is perceived as a coalition breaker. Nevertheless, Israel will have to prepare itself for increased security threats, such as a Sunni terror center (with ties to Hamas?) and/or a Shiite-empowered Hizbollah in Lebanon. There may well be ground for covert cooperation with Jordan and Kurdistan against common threats.

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The conventional threat posed to Israel by Iraq was removed in 1991; the nuclear one proved to be non-existing. An American failure in Iraq would transform the once ominous "eastern front" from a relatively minor threat to a new source of terror and instability.

## Notes

1. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/55303.htm>. See also a similar definition of American objectives, in *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq*, National Security Council, November 2005.
2. An evacuation before the mission is completed is also possible during the next administration. However, such a scenario depends on the next president's past and future attitude toward Iraq, an unknown variable that cannot be analyzed.
3. Pew Center February 2006 poll, <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=269>.
4. Pew Center February 2006 poll, [http://www.pewtrusts.com/ideas/ideas\\_item.cfm?content\\_item\\_id=3247&content\\_type\\_id=18&issue\\_name=Public%20opinion%20and%20polls&issue=11&page=18&name=Public%20Opinion%20Polls%20and%20Survey%20Results](http://www.pewtrusts.com/ideas/ideas_item.cfm?content_item_id=3247&content_type_id=18&issue_name=Public%20opinion%20and%20polls&issue=11&page=18&name=Public%20Opinion%20Polls%20and%20Survey%20Results)
5. John Mueller, "The Iraq Syndrome," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 6 (November-December 2005).
6. *The Economist*, February 11, 2006, p. 45.
7. On the other hand, should the Americans succeed in shaking off the Iraqi failure in a constructive manner, without the shackles of Iraq the United States would be better situated to deal with Iran.
8. This might lead to a tendency to over-compensate, in order to prove that the United States is not a paper tiger.