The Birth Pangs of a New Middle East?

Dr Graeme P. Herd

August 2006

The Birth Pangs of a New Middle East?

Dr Graeme P. Herd

Key Points

*   US policy towards the region undercuts Sunni elites and allies in the "new Arab centre" and bolsters the power of Iran and its Shia allies, especially Hizbullah.

*   Iraq continues the slide towards open civil war.

*   US policy misdiagnoses root causes of instability. It focuses on the presence of Hizbullah, the lack of Lebanese territorial integrity and sovereignty and the necessity of an accelerated "freedom and democracy agenda" in the "new Middle East", rather than Palestine.

*   Addressing Palestine would ameliorate Sunni/Shia rivalry and tip the struggle between the reformists and reactionaries for control of states in the region in favour of the reformers.

*   It is unlikely that a US president in his last two years of office will give the time and effort to pursue such an end, particularly in the face of strong domestic opposition.

*   The "new Middle East" will be characterised by continued Sunni-Shia cleavages and geopolitical games aimed at splintering and strengthening the Shia Crescent will continue.

*   Every point of conflict between the US and Iran in this "new Middle East" is now interlocked, and the dangers of destabilization of the region are consequently much higher.

The Birth Pangs of a New Middle East?

Dr Graeme P. Herd

Introduction

Prior to the invasion of Iraq, the US argued that that the strategic implication of regime change would be to precipitate domino democratization throughout the Middle East. The capacity for compromise demonstrated in the formation of the Iraqi government in April 2005 following the 'Purple Revolution' (the 30 January 2005 elections), represents the unleashing of a democratic ethic, a democratic spirit throughout the Middle East. The 'Cedar Revolution' in Lebanon, women's rights in Gulf States (the appointment of a cabinet minister in Kuwait in June 2005), reforms in Egypt under President Mubarak, the February-April 2005 municipal elections in Saudi Arabia, and Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in August-September 2005 are all cited in support of this contention.[1]

The destruction and dislocation in Lebanon as a result of the Israeli-Hizbullah conflict that erupted in July 2006 is described by US President George W. Bush as "a moment of opportunity" and by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice as the "birth pangs of new Middle East".[2] She stated: "I have no interest in diplomacy for the sake of returning Lebanon and Israel to the *status quo ante*. I think it would be a mistake. What we are seeing here, in a sense, is the growing – the birth pangs of a new Middle East and, whatever we do, we have to be certain that we're pushing forward to the new Middle East, not going back to the old one."[3]

The "new Middle East" that she describes is characterised by a new Arab geopolitical centre that consists of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, replacing the "old Arab centre" of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria, sealed with the Damascus Accords following the first Gulf War in the early 1990s. This "new Arab Sunni centre" fears the emergence of a Shia Crescent and the radicalism exemplified by Shia dominated and Iranian backed Hizbullah. It also fears a nuclear Shia Iran and the emergence of the first Arab Shia state in the shape of Iraq. The "new Middle East", it can be supposed, is one within which the Shiite radical group Hizbullah is broken as a military force (in terms of infrastructure if not killed or captured personnel), its political wing co-opted into the mainstream, and Lebanon becomes truly sovereign, in control of its territory (which precludes a return of Hizbullah as an armed faction). As a consequence Iran is defanged, Syria weakened and intra-regional democratic reform and modernization processes are accelerated.

Although such an outcome would indeed meet the criteria for a "sustainable ceasefire" in the current Israel/Hizbullah conflict, attempting to achieve it is almost certain to achieve the opposite: Hizbullah wins merely by not losing. Hizbullah is deeply embedded in the population of Southern Lebanon, and thus western attacks in general and "disproportionate" Israeli air strikes on Hizbullah in particular, radicalise its popular support in Lebanon and the wider Middle East, including among Sunni Arabs; thereby undercutting support for and the legitimacy of the "new Arab centre", whose elites appear appeasers by comparison. At the same time,

1

Shia Iran and Syria, locked out of diplomatic negotiations, receive greater legitimacy and support from their populations, and their enabling role – through the transfer of weapons, finance, training and ideology to Hizbullah - is strengthened. Shia/Sunni fault-lines are thus exacerbated and the "new Arab centre" radicalised, rendering sustained reform efforts and modernization, let alone democratization, less likely and more destabilising. Increased violence in Iraq, the war in Lebanon, and Afghanistan 'close to anarchy' according to Lieutenant General David Richards, head of NATO's international security force in Afghanistan and the most senior British commander there,[4] suggest that the Middle East is now less, not more, stable than at any time since the Iraq invasion of 2003. Rather than democracy promotion and the strengthening of moderate voices in the region, it is difficult not to conclude that extremism, radicalism and anarchy are on the rise.

This paper argues the US (with UK support) attempts to play the role of mid-wife in the "new Middle East" have strengthened the position and power of Hizbullah and Iran and exacerbated tensions between elites and society in the Sunni Arab centre. US-UK policy in the region has failed for two key reasons. Firstly, quite apart from the boost to terrorism, lawlessness and crime, the failure of state building efforts in Iraq have now inextricably linked the Iraqi conflict into ongoing Sunni/Shia geopolitical rivalry. Secondly, the US continues to misdiagnose root causes of instability in the region, laying all sources of instability at the doors of Tehran and Damsascus, on Hizbullah, the lack of Lebanese state capacity and the need by elites in the region to promote the "freedom and democracy agenda", while ignoring the role of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and barely acknowledging the destabilizing impact of US-led policies in Iraq after 2003. Although Prime Minster Blair has continually stated that the root cause of instability in the region is a failure to address the 'road map' to peace between the Israelis and Palestinians, three years after the Iraqi debacle it is difficult not to conclude that UK support of US security policy continues to be an end in itself rather than a means to an end - influencing the US to support a viable and effective Middle East policy.[5]

Iraqi Instability: Civil War?

In mid-2005 both internal and external drivers in Iraq pointed to the emergence of a weak authoritarian state as the most probable outcome. It was hard to see how the insurgency could be sustained once Iraqification of security and political structures was complete and legitimacy of the post-Saddam order entrenched: the discourse would move towards framing the issue as patriots versus terrorists, rather than Jihadis versus occupiers. Under these conditions, it was argued, oil production would slowly come on line and exports increase, consolidating the Shia and Kurdish autonomy through control of the energy sector and political economy. Hence, it was likely that a weak but functioning federal state would emerge, with real power devolved down to entity level. Strong leaders within these fractious entities would likely come to the fore, adding a more authoritarian flavour to the state, though a governing federal coalition would give it a democratic facade. Indeed, a permanent unity government in Iraq, pledged to pursue national reconciliation, was constituted in June 2006, with Nuri al-Maliki as Prime Minister.

However, although Iraq has enormous reserves - an estimated 115 billion barrels of proven crude (the world's third largest after those of the Saudi Kingdom and Canada), no wealth sharing formula has been agreed. Currently, Shia parties battle for control of Basra and with it Iraq's Southern Oil Company – with the vast bulk of Iraq's wealth – while Kurds attempt to dominate Kirkuk and with it the Northern Oil Company. "Most analysts believe that there will be no major additions to Iraqi production capacity for at least two-three years, with Shell's vice-president recently

2

stating that any auction of Iraq's oilfields was unlikely before 2007."[6] The delays in establishing a permanent government in 2006 prevented the award of long term, large-scale projects, and so increased oil production and export will generate revenue for stability in 2007-08 at the earliest.

In addition, the insurgency in Iraq remains robust. It has staying power and an atomized and fragmented constellation-type structure that maximizes its prospects for longevity. There are approximately five strata in the insurgency, though split into dozens of groups, "possibly as many as 100".[7] These strata are horizontal not hierarchical, ad hoc rather than unified. With no centre of gravity this constellation structure is more difficult to decapitate than a more formal organizational structure, as evidenced by the speed at which the leadership role within al Qa'idah of Mesopotamia was filled after the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in June 2006.

Factionalism and sectarianism in Iraq are exemplified by Shia control of the key Interior Ministry, which directs the police, border guards and internal intelligence services. It is not clear to what extent this ministry is under Iranian influence or indeed control, but it is clear that Shia militias have infiltrated state structures, such as Interior Ministry troops, and elite commando units have become sectarian forces of revenge and reprisal, rather than national structures that uphold state stability and operate under the rule of law. Badr organization supporters who infiltrated the Interior Ministry, for example, ran death squads, created and operated a network of secret prisons and carried out extrajudicial arrests, according to Gen. Muntadhar Muhi al-Samaraee, former head of special forces at the Interior Ministry.[8] Few of the armed forces in Iraq support a non-sectarian Iraq.

Muqtada al-Sadr created the largest militia in Iraq. His "Mahdi Army", as part insurgent/part social movement/part political party highlights the prevalence of intra-Shia factionalism.[9] Unlike the other Shia parties which maintain militias, Sadr has a military capability that moonlights as political party, rather in the mould of Hizbullah. While the "Mahdi Army" has been less active as an anti-US force since the Iraqi parliamentary elections in December 2005, reflecting their desire for a unitary rather than federal Iraq (unlike SCIRI which wants a federal rather than unitary state), recent events in Iraq and Lebanon might reintroduce this element to the equation. The Shia, and al-Sadr in particular, have stated that they might attack US forces in Iraq in support of Hizbullah. There has certainly been an increase in confrontations between US and Mahdi Army forces in Baghdad since the start of the conflict in Lebanon.

By mid-2006 a UN report noted that 100 Iraqi civilians were dying each day and in the first six months of 2006 14,338 violent civilian deaths were recorded.[10] It is within the context of escalating sectarian violence and ethnic cleansing in Iraq that a low level, if not full-scale and widespread, civil war is now apparent. Britain's outgoing ambassador in Baghdad, William Patey, warned in a confidential memo that civil war is a more likely outcome in Iraq than democracy, predicting a break-up of Iraq along ethnic lines: "the position is not hopeless", but would be "messy" for five to 10 years. "If we are to avoid a descent into civil war and anarchy then preventing the Jaish al-Mahdi (the Mahdi Army) from developing into a state within a state, as Hezbollah has done in Lebanon, will be a priority."[11] Senior Iraqi officials admit the government is deeply divided, the prime minister increasingly isolated, and "Iraq as a political project is dead. The parties have to move to plan B. There is serious talk of Baghdad being divided into a Shia east and Sunni west."[12] Growing sectarianism and the ability of ethnic factions to colonise state structures, as evidenced through the first five months of 2006 by the desperate efforts to balance Shia control of the Ministry of Interior with Sunni influence in the Ministry

of Defence, cannot be undone. De facto civil war is underway and the drive towards a much weaker and more divided confederal state cannot be reversed.

Saudi Arabia and Iran: Sunni-Shia Geopolitics?

It is in the interests of status-quo regimes in the Middle East, of which Saudi Arabia and Iran are prime examples, to foster a weak Iraq, and it is likely the US will accede to this outcome, for lack of viable alternatives. Such an end state has multiple benefits for these two states, if not for the US. It reduces pressure on the reform process, weakens the prospect of Iraq emerging as a united strategic competitor, keeps the US engaged in the region but with reduced leverage and not focused primarily on Iran, Saudi reform or Syria and it limits the power of jihadis to upset these regimes. If a weak authoritarian outcome occurs, then the intervention and its consequences will have weakened the US's position in the region and its freedom of action to manage global security threats unilaterally. But the only other likely outcome – full scale civil war with regional spill over – represents strategic failure for them and for the US.

Saudi Arabian state interest in Iraq relates to its impact on Saudi internal stability and foreign policy. One tenth of the Saudi population is Shia and in the 1970s three quarters of them lived atop Saudi oil wealth in the east. With the revolution in Iran in 1979 these Shia were considered to constitute a security risk and as a consequence the bar to employment in key posts was raised, including the military, civil service, diplomatic corps and oil production sector. In addition, Shia numbers were diluted through the influx of oil related workers from other parts of the kingdom. The Saudi state policy of sensitivity towards domestic Shia was ameliorated in the 1980s as the threat from the Khomeini revolution subsided - a substantial part of Aramco's leadership is now Shia and the military and civil servant career path are now open. The fear of Saudi Shia falling under Iranian influence and integrating into a Shia Crescent stretching from Iran through the Iraqi South, Syria and Southern Lebanon has been diminished, but is still present.

There are two sources of political change in the kingdom: violent jihadis and liberal reformers. Hitherto Saudi elites, while recognising the need for political and economic reform, have wanted to manage the pace of this process in order to minimise instability and maximise political participation that reflects the historical, tribal and cultural tradition of the society. Such an approach also diminishes the appearance of "Americanisation". The 1990s reflected a stagnation in the reform process and the political vacuum indirectly facilitated the rise of radicalism.

Iraq now provides an object lesson and example for a Saudi elite determined to undertake a long-term managed modernization process: without reform a brutal secular dictatorship emerges; uncontrolled reform leads to anarchy; existing elites can best drive forward and rein in the "reform through modernization" process. In foreign policy terms, it would appear that a weak, but stable and confederal Iraq in which the Shia could not dominate foreign and security policy-making, would best suit Saudi interests. Such an outcome ensures checks and balances, through Sunni and Kurdish voices and vetoes in the Iraqi foreign and security policy making process. A three state confederal outcome would allow Saudi Arabia to slowly boost the soft power of the Sunnis and Kurds of Iraq (to counter Iranian and Israeli influence respectively): through investments in industry, infrastructure and education the Sunni position within the state could be maximised.

4

However, the conflicts in Iraq and Southern Lebanon highlight two destabilising trends for Saudi Arabia which it will be harder to manage or contain. Firstly, the rise of transnational forces of Arabism and Islam (the imagined community of Arabs and Moslems) that supersedes the state. Secondly, the proliferation of sub-national tribal/ethnic dynamics that are being strengthened by the insurgency in Iraq. They raise a fundamental question concerning the nature of peoples' identity in the Middle East and the ability of that identity to be contained within state structures.

A primary Iranian foreign policy goal is for the US to leave Iraq. Failing that, Iran does not want a stable unitary Iraq, but rather one that is federal as this maximises the power and influence of the Shia majority.[13] In the meantime, an attrition war between the US and the Iranian Shia communities, and a low intensity conflict between Kurds and Sunni Arab populations would tie down coalition troops and disrupt unity efforts. In addition, with Hizbullah under attack in Lebanon, Iran can use Shia militias in Iraq to attack coalition forces, to exact a price for support of Israel, a state whose very right to exist is denounced by President Ahmadinezhad.

It is in Iran's strategic interest to have a weak authoritarian and Shia dominated or failed state in Iraq. This gives Iran maximum leverage over Iraq and the US minimum leverage over Iran. Hardliners are in the ascendancy in Iran and with oil prices at a peak of 78 dollars per barrel have less need to reform the economy, are less dependent on the West, and thus feel freer to develop the Iranian nuclear programme.

Internal and external drivers in Iraq push towards the emergence of a confederal system in which Iran has influence over the largest and now most powerful ethnic group – the Shia. Under such a system Iraq will have a weak foreign and security policy, one that also suits Saudi interests. An uneasy balance of power between the three key ethnic groups will prevail, with each receiving different levels of support from external state actors – Iranian Shia, Saudi Sunni, Israeli and US Kurdish support will maintain the balance.

Addressing Symptoms Not Root Causes?

Might the destruction of Hizbullah defang Iran and so lessen sectarian violence in Iraq and provide a "new Middle East" context for the stabilization of Iraq? Will the corner at last be turned? It appears that in US eyes a "sustainable ceasefire" occurs when Hizbullah are militarily incapable of attacking Israel, their leadership decapitated, and their political wing disbanded or co-opted into mainstream Lebanese politics. Ultimately, logic suggests that for this to occur either the Lebanese government and military are able to take control of its territory in the south and can sever ties between Hizbullah, Damascus and Tehran, or regime change in Syria and Iran severs those ties, irrespective of the Lebanese ability to control its own territory. Indeed, the war with Hizbullah can also be viewed as preparing the battlefield for a US war with Iran, in that it demonstrates the utility (or not) of airpower against underground missiles and command and control complexes and reduces the retaliatory strike capacity of Hizbullah should such a war occur.[14]

An alternative approach has been suggested by the "new Arab centre" and UK amongst others. Iranian power and power projection capability is continually bolstered by Iranian support for the Palestinian cause and its extreme criticism of Israel, a support and criticism that outstrips those of Sunni Arab rulers, so undercutting their legitimacy in the ubiquitous Sunni Arab street. This suggests

that were the root causes of such Iranian support to be removed, the scope for Iranian influence would be diminished. Does, then, the road to Baghdad run through Tyre and Ramallah? If the US, Israel and the wider international community, with support from the new Arab (Sunni) centre, concentrate on addressing the root cause of instability – the Palestinian question – then the prospects for a stable "new Middle East" are much higher.

The prospects for such a root-and-branch approach – addressing both symptoms and the real root causes - appear bleak. It is only in the last two years of a second term US presidency that presidents, without the distraction of re-election, are able to find room to manoeuvre and address this issue. However, it appears highly unlikely that President Bush will give the time and effort to pursue such an end, particularly if it is in the face of strong domestic opposition from the religious right. Nor is it clear that if Hamas were to recognise Israel's right to exist, any Israeli government could effectively settle UN Resolution 242 (a return to the 1967 border with some modifications?) and UN Resolution 338, East Jerusalem status (the Geneva Accords pointed the way?) and the return of refugees issue (through multinational compensation?), and still remain in power. The birth pangs of the "new Middle East" heard by the US Secretary of State will herald, sadly, yet another stillborn child.

In either case it is likely Iran will look to destabilise Iraq further, making use of the Mahdi Army and Badr Organization, to compensate for attacks on Hizbullah (and using Hizbullah to test its anti-ship and anti-tank missiles, rendering it more resilient to a potential US attack). Indeed, were the international community to focus on Palestine, then funds, sustained external support and concern for Iraq would all be diminished. Where a desire not to return to the status quo ante translates into dealing with the symptoms only, a weak confederal Iraq will take its place in a Middle East body politic that will be continually prone to destabilization. The "new Middle East" will be characterised by continued Sunni-Shia cleavages, with a Shia Persian nuclear state balanced in short order by a Sunni Saudi equivalent, and geopolitical games aimed at splintering the Shia Crescent will continue.

Addressing only symptoms – the presence of Hizbullah, the lack of Lebanese territorial integrity and sovereignty and the necessity of an accelerated "freedom and democracy agenda" in the "new Middle East" - and misdiagnosing the real root causes of instability – which must include a good faith effort to broker a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – will allow a chronically unstable Iraq to join Palestine and Lebanon as geopolitical pawns. The region will fall further behind global patterns of modernization and development, and the cancer will spread, and, in time, infect the global body politic.

Addressing Palestine would ameliorate Sunni/Shia rivalry and the struggle between the reformists and reactionaries for control of states in the region. Refusing to address Palestine creates a dangerous and unprecedented situation within which every point of conflict between the US and Iran in this "new Middle East" is now interlocked, and the dangers of destabilization of the region are consequently much higher. It can only be hoped that US (with UK support?) failed policy prescriptions are not now compounded by a decision to invade Iran.

Endnotes

[1] Saad Eddin Ibrahim, 'Mid-East's Spring time of democracy', *The Jordan Times*, 26 May 2005; Reuel Marc Gerecht, 'Birth of a Democracy', *The Weekly Standard*, 14-21 February 2005.

[2] Rama Khouri, "Condi Rice's Mid-East Fantasy Ride", AlterNet, 24 July 2006.

[3] Robert Scheer, "Labour Pains of a Stillborn Foreign Policy", Truthdig.com, 25 July 2006.

[4] Richard Norton-Taylor, "Afghanistan close to anarchy, warns general", *The Guardian*, 21 July 2006: http://www.guardian.co.uk/afghanistan/story/0,,1826303,00.html

[5] This appears to cause increasing tensions within the UK cabinet.   A senior Downing Street source reported that, privately, Prime Minster Blair agrees with Deputy Prime Minster Prescott, who said President Bush's record on the issue was 'crap'. Prescott is reported to "have had a heated exchange with Lord Chancellor Lord Falconer, one of the few Cabinet Ministers to defend Mr Blair's stance on Israel's war with Hezbollah, when the conflict was raised during a Cabinet meeting and Lord Falconer denied that Ministers had disagreed on the issue. Mr Prescott, one of the Ministers who led the revolt, allegedly snapped at Lord Falconer: "Of course they f****** did, you were f****** there." See: Simon Walters, **"**Blair "Feels Betrayed by Bush on Lebanon**"**, *The Daily Mail,* 19 August 2006**.**

[6] Mirian Amie, "US Sees Iraq's Oil Production Chocked for Years", Mail & Guardian Online, 10 January 2006:
http://www.mg.co.za/articlepage.aspx?area=/breaking_news/breaking_news__business&articleid=260957

[7] Dexter Filkins, "Profusion of Rebel Groups Helps Them Survive Iraq", *The New York Times*, 2 December 2005.

[8] Tom Lasseter, 'Iran Gains Influence, Power in Iraq through Militia', *Knight Ridder Newspapers*, 12 December 2005.

[9] Jakub Cerny, "Death Squad Operations in Iraq", *Conflict Studies Research Centre,* Middle East Series, 06/28, June 2006, pp. 1-12. I am grateful for comments by David Africa on this issue.

[10] Dahr Jamail, 'Lebanon Bleeds, Iraq Burns, People Flee', t r u t h o u t | Perspective, 25 July 2006: http://www.truthout.org/docs_2006/072506Z.shtml

[11] 'Iraq Civil War Warning for Blair', BBC News, 3 August 2006:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/5240808.stm

[12] Patrick Coburn, 'Sectarian Break-Up of Iraq is Now Inevitable, Admit Officials', *The Independent*, 24 July 2006.

[13] Babak Ganji, "A Shi`i Enclave? Iranian Policy Towards Iraq", *Conflict Studies Research Centre,* Middle East Series, 06/09, March 2006, pp. 1-27.

[14] Seymour Hersh, "Watching Lebanon", *The New Yorker*, 21 August 2006:
http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/articles/060821fa_fact

Dr. Graeme P. Herd is Joint Director, International Training Course and Master of Advanced Studies in International and European Security, Geneva Centre for Security Policy and an Associate Fellow at Chatham House, London. His latest book is entitled: *Divided West: Transatlantic Relations and European Security* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

Want to Know More …?

See:

Jakub Cerny, "Death Squad Operations in Iraq", *Conflict Studies Research Centre,* Middle East Series, 06/28, June 2006, pp. 1-12.

Babak Ganji, "A Shi`i Enclave? Iranian Policy Towards Iraq", *Conflict Studies Research Centre,* Middle East Series, 06/09, March 2006, pp. 1-27.

Seymour Hersh, "Watching Lebanon", *The New Yorker*, 21 August 2006: http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/articles/060821fa_fact

Disclaimer