

How analysts in the Arab world see the Iraq war

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LONDON -- Policymakers and strategic analysts in the Arab world have little confidence that current US troop surge in Iraq will do much more than – at best – postpone a complete political-security breakdown in Iraq, which, they fear, could then spread across the Middle East. During my lengthy recent discussions with experts in Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, and with some well-connected Iraqis in Jordan, I heard a lot about how Iraq's collapse has been affecting these Arab societies.



The news from my Iraqi friends – leaders in quasi-governmental and nongovernmental organizations – was grim. These were people who (on human rights grounds) had supported the US invasion in 2003, and who then worked hard to build an effective, democratic order in their country. Now, I found them downhearted – but thoughtful, as they tried to pinpoint the worst of many US mistakes in Iraq. They told piercingly tragic stories about the violence and sectarianism that affects everyone there.

I asked one of these friends what he thought would happen if US forces leave Iraq in the near future. He said there's a possibility this would concentrate the minds of his countrymen on the need to find a workable reconciliation. "But if the Americans stay, we can expect the situation to remain bad," he said. This man was visiting Jordan for only a few days. But he was planning, soon, to return for much longer. After four years of trying to build strong public-sector institutions in Iraq, he was giving up the effort and preparing to join the 2-million-plus other Iraqis who have fled their country since the war began.

The continuing social and political catastrophe in Iraq has sent shock waves throughout the other Arab states, too. In Cairo, senior analysts at the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies talked about how Arabs had long viewed the Iraqi state as a bulwark against the extension of Iranian power from the east. But, now, with that bulwark largely destroyed, they saw Iran's influence extending deep into Iraq and directly threatening the stability of many other Arab states, especially in the Persian Gulf.

These analysts talked about other threats that Egyptians and other Arabs feel in the wake of Iraq's collapse, including their fear of a regional spread of disorder, militancy, and sectarianism. One particular anxiety: the threat posed by the return to their homes of militant Arab Islamists who had spent time in the lawless, Sunni-dominated regions of Iraq and there acquired many skills in extremist operations and organizing.

This group also talked about the region-wide fallout from the US troops' current quagmirelike deployment in Iraq. They all expected to see a substantial drawdown – or perhaps a complete withdrawal – of US troops from Iraq within the next 12 to 18 months, regardless of whether Washington concludes an explicit agreement with Tehran. Dr. Abdel Moneim Said Aly, director of the Al-Ahram Center, noted that such an agreement could entail mere military coordination or a "grand bargain" between the two governments, in which all their outstanding disputes – including over Iran's nuclear program and its role in the broader Middle East – would be resolved. Agreement at any level would have vast consequences for the whole region – and the world.

Meanwhile, the broad deployment of US troops in Iraq has been transformed from an American asset in the region into a liability that erodes US power and standing.

Here in London, strategic thinker Hussein Agha told me that, for now, all of Iraq's neighbors prefer that US troops stay tied down inside Iraq, rather than withdraw. For some countries, the status quo lessens the likelihood of US attacks against them. For others, it represents a situation preferable to the regional turmoil they fear might follow US withdrawal.

Mr. Agha's judgment seems generally valid. Four years later, President Bush's decision to invade Iraq looks increasingly like British Prime Minister Anthony Eden's decision to invade Egypt's Suez region in 1956: an exercise in ill-considered military over-reach that hastened the subsequent shrinkage of a quasi-imperial power.

The burning question is how the fallout from Iraq can best be managed and the dangers that loom be minimized. Everyone I spoke to was adamant that Washington needs urgently to build a new, more straightforward relationship with Iran in which the tensions in and around Iraq can be de-escalated more effectively than currently seems possible.

They also all saw a clear linkage between US influence in the region as a whole and US policy toward the Palestinians. They argued forcefully that making real progress on attaining a final Palestinian-Israeli peace could significantly help the US manage the situation in and around Iraq. Palestinian and Arab leaders, they say, are ready for serious peace talks. They wonder if Washington has the vision and decisiveness required for real progress.

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