

What now in the Middle East?

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The political and security situation in the vast region between the Indus Valley and the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean is a cause for grave concern. When the United States intervened militarily in Iraq in 1991, the intention was to effect fundamental change in the entire region. Today it is clear that hardly any aspect of this policy has succeeded. Even the success of free elections in Iraq is threatening to divide rather than unite the country.

The existing power relations in the Middle East have indeed been permanently shaken and, indeed, revolutionized. The effect however, has not been a domino-like democratization; instead we are threatened with a domino effect of descent into chaos.

The decision to go to war against Iraq to liberate Kuwait, back in 1991, marked the beginning of America's role as the sole hegemonic military power in the region. The decision to go to war against Iraq for a second time, and then to occupy the country in March 2003, transformed this hegemony into direct U.S. responsibility for the future of the Middle East.

Two outcomes could flow from America's adopted role as the decisive power in the Middle East. Were the United States to succeed in using its military strength, it would create a new, democratic Middle East. But were it, despite its military might, to fail, it would create a power vacuum and destabilize the region. The second scenario — which was foreseeable from the outset — has now become a reality.

The very character of the war in Iraq has been transformed from a democratizing mission into a stabilizing mission high in casualties and in cost. Instead of the intended radical realignment of power relations in the region, the aim is now to simply maintain the status quo.

The most the United States can hope for at this point is a withdrawal that saves face. The November elections in America were a referendum on the war in Iraq. Their results, in fact, set a timetable for the "Iraqization" and U.S. withdrawal — before the next presidential election.

Behind the all-too-foreseeable end of the American stabilizing mission lurks a civil war in Iraq, which threatens to turn into an Arab-Iranian proxy war for dominance in Iraq, the Persian Gulf, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, and beyond. Moreover, there is an acute risk that the power vacuum created in Iraq will fuse the Israeli-Arab conflict, Iraq and Afghanistan into one regional mega-crisis.

In light of America's impending withdrawal, the regional powers are reassessing their interests and objectives. Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Pakistan, Turkey and Israel

will be the main players. With the war in Iraq, the United States has lost its unilateral-power position in the Middle East, and elsewhere. In the future, various global powers will be active in the Middle East – primarily the United States, Russia, China, India. Let's hope Europe is among them, because its security is defined there.

So at stake is not just Iraq, but rather the future of the entire region. We can count ourselves lucky if the emerging chaos can be contained in Iraq.

Washington's realization that Iraq can no longer be won or even stabilized unless the regional framework changes, has come late — perhaps too late. The United States will have to find agreement with its allies and enter into direct talks with all the other players to try to achieve a new regional consensus.

If this policy shift had taken place a year ago or even early last summer, the prospects would have been better. And with every passing day, America's position in the region is weakening further and the chances of a successful new political strategy become more remote.

The greatest danger stems from Iran, the clear beneficiary of the Iraqi power vacuum. Iran harbors hegemonic ambitions, which it seeks to realize by means of its military potential, oil and gas reserves, its nuclear program, its influence over Shiites throughout the region, and its efforts to upset the status quo within the Arab Muslim world.

Yet Iran is also relatively isolated. Its only allies in the region are Syria and Hezbollah. What's more, it is threatened by a de-facto anti-Iranian coalition of all other regional powers, united by their fear of Iranian ascendancy.

If the West — America and Europe — acts swiftly, decisively and with a joint strategy, there remains a chance to stabilize the situation. But to achieve this, it will be necessary to offset, or at least balance, the interests of the most important actors in the region. This means a strategy based on political leverage not a threat of military intervention or regime change. In their stead must come direct talks, security guarantees and support in political and economic integration. To be successful, this strategy also requires a realistic threat of isolation of those who continue to undermine regional stability, as well as substantial progress in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

A new Middle East policy will thus have to concentrate primarily on four aspects:

- 1) a comprehensive offer to Syria to detach the country from Iran and settle open conflicts;
- 2) an offer to Iran for direct talks about the perspective of a full normalization of relations;
- 3) a decisive and realistic initiative to resolve the Israeli-Arab conflict
- 4) a regional security architecture that centers on stabilizing Iraq and Afghanistan.

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