

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

GEOPOLITICAL OBJECTIVES AND IMPACTS OF OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM

by

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ABSTRACT

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This paper will examine Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) from an American geopolitical perspective. It will examine possible geopolitical motives for the U.S. to have undertaken the operation, and the possible long-term consequences in the Middle East. Geopolitical motives include oil production and distribution, sending a message to the Arab world, and the attempt to spread the democratic political model. Consequences to be examined include political shifts, balance of power effects, and the importance of oil production and distribution.

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GEOPOLITICAL OBJECTIVES AND IMPACTS OF OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM

About six months after the White House released the National Security Strategy in 2002, the United States exercised one of the tenets of that policy (pre-emptive use of military force) in Iraq. Although the September 2002 National Security Strategy (NSS) asserts that "The United States has long maintained the option of preemptive action to counter a sufficient threat to our national security,"¹ Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) represents the first major application of such a policy.

The U.S. leadership cited several reasons for attacking Iraq and forcing regime change. Foremost among these stated reasons was the threat of Iraq's development of weapons of mass destruction. By launching OIF, the U.S. stepped up from its longtime policy of containment of Iraq to one of action. This containment effort had been slipping in effectiveness over several years, with most countries ignoring the U.N. mandated constraints, and with WMD inspections stopped.²

OIF can be viewed from the larger perspective of an overall global policy of assertion of U.S. interests, and domination by U.S. military might. Cold War era policies of deterrence are giving way to stronger measures, because, in President Bush's words: "we know from experience that some enemies cannot be deterred."³ Like the strategy of deterrence, the Cold War model of bipolar powers separated by ideological differences is also fading away. One model of global politics that is beginning to receive renewed interest is geopolitics. In this paper, both the U.S.'s goals in OIF, and the possible long-term results will be examined. The primary objective of the U.S. in OIF is seen as the first major application of a broad geopolitical strategy of shaping and controlling world politics. Beyond the political aspects of the policy is the shaping of the economic future of the United States and other nations in a world that is still dependent on oil as the major source of energy.

GEOPOLITICS AND IRAQ

One definition of the term "geopolitics" is "the contention between great powers and aspiring great powers for control over territory, resources, and geographic positions...."⁴ A fact that readily stands out is that Iraq is centrally located within the Arab/Muslim world, and that it possesses plentiful resources. Its geographic location is within what Zbigniew Brzezinski terms "The Global Zone of Percolating Violence".⁵ Like most proponents of geopolitical theory, Brzezinski views the Eurasian landmass as being central to world power. It has been noted that the United States contained Soviet power around the rim of this landmass throughout the Cold War. Most of the focus was then on the western edge (Western and Central Europe) and the

eastern edge. (The latter is evidenced by the importance of Taiwan, Korea, and Viet Nam as points of tension and conflict.)

In the new landscape of the world, the new center of world struggle and geopolitical competition may be the South-Central Eurasian region. This is not strictly because the Arab world is the source of terrorist threats against the West. Michael Klare notes that beginning with the end of the Cold War, U.S. forces began drawing down in Europe and in the Far East, while the United States established and manned a number of new bases in the Persian Gulf area and Central Asia. In Klare's view, "The war against Iraq was intended to provide the United States with a dominant position in the Persian Gulf region, and to serve as a springboard for further conquests and assertion of power in the region."⁶ It is readily apparent that the Middle East is also of great strategic significance due to the fact that the preponderance of known oil petroleum reserves is located in the region.

Klare's analysis, as well as those who emphasize the economic/political factors of the oil reserves, is framed in a perspective of the U.S. as hegemonic empire builder. Still, the geopolitical approach can be applied to the War's intent outside of this perspective. Geopolitical concerns can be primary when applied in a strategy of creating stability and decreasing violence among other nations. Certainly, the Middle East in general, and Iraq vis-à-vis its neighbors have been among the primary sources of unrest and uncertainty throughout the global community.

Whether the United States indeed uses the overthrow of Iraq as a first step in a series of dominating moves against other countries remains to be seen. A continuation of aggressive moves could be considered as strategic "sequels" to OIF, and if these occur they may take place over a rather a long period of time. In any case, there are a number of measures that lie in a wide spectrum between empire building on one extreme, and benevolent long-term peacekeeping goals on the other. There are, for example, shades of gray concerning protecting/enhancing ones access to oil, and using power to depress long-term oil prices.

Despite its violent history, the Middle East has had only minor geopolitical shifts in recent decades. Wars among Arab states, and wars between the Arabs and Israel have resulted in few major political shifts. Operation Iraqi Freedom has disrupted the balance of power in the region, as well as the balance between the Middle East players and the U.S. The present conditions in Iraq may wear on for some time, but when order is finally restored, there will be a significantly different political landscape in the region. The landscape has the potential to be one of increased stability, economic growth, democratization, improved human rights, and a more equitable distribution of wealth.

Notwithstanding the fertility of the soil in the Tigris/Euphrates basin, agriculture is a distant second-place finisher to oil production in the future of Iraq's economic well being. Oil is obviously of great importance to United States, its allies, and the growing economies of the world. The fast growing economies include two of the most populous countries of the world, China and India. That being said, there are indications that the future economic health of India at least, is not closely correlated to the consumption of oil, at least in its industrial segment. India is growing predominately in the area of software development and online service sectors.

THE UNITED STATES IN ITS POSITION OF PRIMACY

The break-up of the Soviet Union and the subsequent failure of Russia to build its economic strength and maintain its military strength have left the United States in a position of global primacy, whether potential or exercised. As noted by Brzezinski, a democracy has never aspired for and attained true primacy. The institution and its founding principles are seen as generally inconsistent with empire making. "The pursuit of power and especially the economic costs and human sacrifice that the exercise of such power often requires are not generally congenial to democratic instincts. Democratization is inimical to imperial mobilization."⁷ Brzezinski's opinion is widely held by historians and political scientists.

Contrary to this widely held view, there are numerous prime proponents of an assertive U.S. foreign policy in the Bush Administration. These individuals, including Vice President Cheney, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, and his Deputy Secretary, Paul Wolfowitz were all signatories on a report entitled "Rebuilding America's defenses: Strategy, Forces, and Resources for a New Century, September, 2000." This document was released by the Project for the New American Century (PNAC)⁸. The report was the result of an analysis that PNAC began in 1998. The analysis and resulting report took place when the PNAC was active in refuting the defense policies of the Clinton Administration.

PNAC's report states, "While the unresolved conflict with Iraq provides the immediate justification, the need for a substantial American force presence in the Gulf transcends the issue of Saddam Hussein."⁹ Clearly, some of the men who would become President Bush's top advisors were promoting a policy of toppling the Hussein regime. Moreover, they strongly inferred that the invasion of Iraq would "provide the justification" for an agenda that extends beyond Iraq and its internal and external instability. Another neoconservative who became influential in the Bush Administration, Richard Perle, in his role as chair of the Defense Policy Board, was quoted as saying "we could deliver a short message, a two word message: 'you're next.'"¹⁰

OIF: STABILIZER OR DE-STABILIZER?

Operation Iraqi Freedom came as no surprise to anyone, as the months preceding it were characterized by a steady build-up and a broad spectrum information operations program concerning weapons of mass destruction, Iraqi Government abuses, and the dangers of allowing Saddam Hussein to remain in power. The Bush Administration had clearly signaled that regime change in Iraq was high on the agenda of U.S. policy initiatives. In the world of journalism and political pundits, as in the realm of international opinion, there were more dissenting views on whether the war was justified than there were supportive views. The following section will examine pre-War perceptions in general, while country-specific impacts will be addressed in subsequent paragraphs.

It is apparent that the current Bush administration had little focus on the Middle East in the first year. Energies were focused on the large international state powers, Russia and China. Matters concerning the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, missile defense, and challenging China's emerging regional power¹¹ received emphasis. The attack of 9/11/01 changed all that, as it became apparent that while the Middle East had a "balance of power" it was extremely unstable. Al Qaeda and other non-state groups and alliances, operating across borders and overseas represent the clearest threat against the U.S. population and interests. It is a mistaken view to consider the pre-OIF Middle East as being stable at all, as such a view can only be explained by a myopic view of power being available only to states as political/military players. Clearly, the global trend away from the nation-state, and towards non-state, ethnically and religiously oriented non-state actors have introduced an instability that cannot be solved at a bargaining table.

Such a perspective was in play after the 1991 Gulf War. Western analysts considered a balance of power among the states to be representative of a stable environment. Decision makers considered it imperative to permit Iraq to maintain enough military presence to prevent an Iranian invasion. It is clear there was a very differing view of how to achieve stability in the Middle East in 2003. Prior to the war's beginning, the Bush administration's vision was interpreted as follows:

...the Bush team believes that the elimination of the Iraqi regime will send a decisive message to friends and adversaries throughout the Middle East: threaten the United States and its friends in the region and you will pay a terrible price. The development of a freer, democratic Iraq allied to the United States would show the entire Arab world that siding with the United States can bring peace, prosperity and freedom, whereas opposing it can have heavy costs.¹²

As noted, there was rampant debate in political journals concerning the possible impacts of war with Iraq. In addition to upsetting the balance of power between Iran and Iraq, there was concern over the rise of anti-American sentiments in Pakistan, which could result in the overthrow of a cooperative regime, concern over Turkey's perception of a threat represented by an upsurge in Kurdish nationalism, and vague words of warning from Egypt's President Mubarak about destabilization and chaos. Proponents of this point of view also invoked a flip side to the region's relations with the U.S.: that the United States has received cooperation from some of the Gulf states *because* of the presence of Saddam and the threat he represented.¹³

Many political analysts view the U.S.'s military activities and diplomatic stance as a gradual shift towards an unstable unipolar situation. It has taken a number of years for this view to develop, but when the balance of power that existed between the United States and the Soviet Union broke down, it was virtually inevitable that the U.S. would begin asserting its dominance.¹⁴ The tightening bond of the European Union, and warming relations between Russia and China can be viewed as reactions to the U.S.'s sole superpower role. In terms of the instability typified by the Islamic radical groups, the United States can be perceived as either a target or as a causal factor. In the latter view: "The instability of the new era did not stem from the emergence of 'irrational' non-state actors that were prepared to engage in 'asymmetric warfare' It came from the transformation of the balance of power in the global state system."¹⁵

It would seem that most of these potential negative impacts would have already manifested themselves in the months since the U.S. offensive. Instead, in the wake of Turkish non-support for the War, that country has now offered military assistance to the Coalition. Pakistan's government is still firmly in place, and in fact Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Khurshid Kasuri, refuted the Secretary General of the Organization of Islamic Conference's call for American withdrawal from Iraq. At the recent OIC, Kasuri noted that the U.S.'s presence was absolutely necessary to maintain stability in Iraq and the region.¹⁶ In spite of President Mubarak's stated fears, there are no indications of Middle East destabilization outside of Iraq. The longer term should continue the stabilization trend, because the United States' presence and influence in the midst of the region should be regarded by the Gulf States as a long term matter of fact. That same presence should yield significant intelligence benefits concerning non-state terrorist activities, and the geographical proximity necessary to combat the terrorists.

Prior to OIF, many analysts were predicting that a U.S. attack on Iraq would push Islamic states towards an even stronger anti-Western stance. Speaking on the neoconservatives' agenda, former Secretary of State for Near East Affairs Edward S. Walker stated that "They

want to pressure Quaddafi in Libya and they want to destabilize Saudi Arabia because they believe that instability there is better than the current situation. And out of this, they think, comes Pax Americana.”¹⁷

Concerning Libya, developments of the last several months have provided strong indication that the “pressure on Quaddafi” may have been an idea whose time had come. Libya had already begun to emerge from its long term status as a rogue state by agreeing to compensate the families of Flight 103. Still, the unilateral decision to disarm its weapons of mass destruction under UN watch was surprising, and could be attributed to Libya’s recognition that the U.S. is playing hardball now.

One other stabilizing factor concerns non-state terrorists and should be considered. In establishing a presence in Iraq, the U.S. no longer requires bases in Saudi Arabia. This is a matter of no small importance, considering that many Saudi nationalists are also Al Qaeda members, and that the presence of U.S. forces on “sacred” Saudi soil has been a source of anger within and beyond Saudi Arabia.¹⁸ Removal of a United States military presence from this breeding ground of Islamic militant activity could have a modest dampening effect on terrorist recruiting.

OIL AND THE WORLD ECONOMY AFTER OIF

Oil, as the primary source of energy to power manufacturing and transportation, is obviously hugely important to developed and developing countries. Environmentalists lament the failure of world governments and industrial leaders to pursue renewable, non-polluting energy sources, and often use the limited supply of oil as a rationale to pursue the environmentalist agenda. In reality, known oil reserves (“oil...that has been discovered and remaining in the ground, but could be extracted quickly and economically using today’s technology.”)¹⁹ increased by 70 percent in the last 25 years.²⁰ More and more sophisticated geological search methods and the technology for extraction together have increased known reserves in spite of enormous consumption. A large share off the known reserves is in the Middle East. A list of the 7 largest known oil reserves by country follows:²¹

<u>Country</u>	<u>Reserves (Billion of Barrels)</u>
Saudi Arabia	261.8
Iraq	112.5
UAE	97.8
Kuwait	96.5
Iran	89.7
Venezuela	77.7
Russia	48.6

No other countries have known reserves over 30 billion barrels. The worldwide total is slightly over a trillion barrels.²² Therefore, Saudi Arabia alone has 25% of the world's known oil reserves, and the top seven countries together have about three fourths of the reserves. The concentration of known oil reserves in just a handful of states has been a shaping factor in world politics and economics for decades. The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) wavered in terms of the interaction of its members and their rate of success in stabilizing production and prices. The first instance of oil used as a political weapon occurred in late 1973, when Saudi Arabia declared an oil embargo against the United States, in retaliation for U.S. assistance to the Israeli military.²³ Also, OPEC instituted some lesser interruptions to the oil supply later in the 1970's and established a pattern of using oil as an economic weapon.

By 1980, U.S. leadership had acknowledged "the overwhelming dependence of the Western democracies on oil supplies from the Middle East."²⁴ These words, from Jimmy Carter's last State of the Union Message, were followed later in the speech with some of the toughest words of his presidency:

Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.²⁵

Perhaps because of the hard-edged rhetoric from the United States, OPEC has followed a much more even-handed and responsible policy over the intervening decades. The last few years, however, have seen oil prices fluctuating more than in the last two decades. This has had a negative impact on worldwide exploration and drilling activities.²⁶ Consequently, although sufficient known reserves exist to keep supplies steady, there is a risk that production activities and supply shortages could bring about future instability. For example, although Russia has ample oil reserves, its production costs, due to geological factors, are higher than most producers. In addition to its political instability, oil price instability is hampering the inflow of investments required to extract the oil, from which Russia desperately needs the revenue.²⁷

An example of how OPEC interests view the effects of OIF is contained in an article by Sadek Boussena, former Algerian Minister of Energy and OPEC President: "a redistribution of Iraq's upstream oil infrastructure to US companies, and a policy of rapid production increase, even if this means (Iraq's) going against OPEC, and perhaps eventually leaving the organization."²⁸ Boussena goes on to predict "the use of Iraq as a basis for developing a free oil market in the Middle East, thus encouraging the expansion of production, reductions in prices...."²⁹ Essentially, OPEC fears that the United States will force low prices on the world market for its own benefit.

It might be more accurate to assert that the United States has attempted over the last few decades to *stabilize* oil supplies and prices, not reduce prices precipitously. This policy applies not only to U.S. consumption, but also for world economies in general.³⁰ Motivation for this policy stems from the correlation of oil availability and political stability, as well as the economic reality that in the era of complex economic interdependence, the fortunes of most of the world's countries will rise or fall together. Excessively high production from low-cost wells would push marginal producers (mostly in poorer countries) out of the market. As noted above, this applies to Russia in particular as that country will only be able to produce oil if prices are stable at a moderate level. Continuously low prices would be even more damaging than unstable prices to a country in which the United States has a keen interest in terms of its political stability and economic growth.

Shortly after the successful invasion of Iraq was completed, the Coalition found that their efforts to maintain the oil production infrastructure against sabotage were almost irrelevant, given the poor state of maintenance of the wells and drilling apparatus. This has inhibited the generation of revenues for the Iraqi economy, but this is a short term problem. As noted above, Iraq has the second greatest oil reserves in the world, and should begin reaping economic benefit with a few years. At the same time, the United States' greater presence in the Middle East should add regional stability to the adjoining Southwest Asia region. This region is one in which oil exploration activities are still running high, and known reserves are growing rapidly. Further production, as well as pipeline construction, could be aided by a stabilizing U.S. presence.

U.S. RELATIONS WITH TWO MIDDLE EAST COUNTRIES: IRAN AND SYRIA

If an intention of establishing greater general regional stability as well as greater U.S. influence was a primary factor in deciding to go to war, then it would be very useful to accurately analyze the changing relationship of the United States with Iran and Syria. These two countries and the factions living within them are important to the United States for several reasons. They both share long borders with Iraq, creating a geopolitical and transportation link. The two countries are among the strongest in the region and both have displayed some hegemonic tendencies in their respective pasts. Also, both countries have, at best, strained relations with the United States, largely because of their belligerent activities and their known sponsorship of terrorism. From a geopolitical standpoint, the American presence in Iraq places the U.S. in a "pivotal strategic position dominating the Arab/Moslem world and its oil. And will facilitate invasion or at least containment of both Syria and Iran."³¹

Regarding Iran, the U.S. specifically defines “areas of objectionable Iranian behavior as: Iranian efforts to acquire nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, and it’s support for and involvement in international terrorism.”³² The U.S. State Department considers normal relations with Iran to be impossible, until that country abandons its objectionable behavior and changes its policies regarding anti-U.S. and anti-Israel stances, and its efforts to export Muslim revolutionary ideas.³³ Under its present regime, dominated by the clergy, Iran represents a double threat: religious as well as state-driven hegemonic tendencies.

Despite the negative relationship between the United States and Iran, there are informal discussions between the two countries regarding the situation in Iraq. Nearly all the current difficulties the U.S. forces face in Iraq are generated by the remains of Saddam’s ruling party, based in the Sunni branch of Islam. Some analysts believe that the U.S. needs to court the Iraqi Shiites to a greater extent, and that Iran’s Shiite government and population could bolster the U.S.’s position with the Iraqi majority.³⁴ Whether the Iranians still desire this slight warming of relations in the wake of Saddam’s capture remains to be seen. The personage of Saddam, while still alive and not in custody, may have been part of the Iranian’s motivation for holding discussions with the United States.³⁵

Concurrently with the Bush Administration’s behind the scenes talks with Iran, the administration has repeatedly sounded out its concerns over the continued drive by Iran to develop nuclear weapons. It would appear that even in the short term, the Bush Administration is attempting to test its influence with Iran. Although long-term results may be slow in developing, it would seem that Iran is more secure defensively with an American presence to its west than with a Saddam/Baath Party presence. Additionally, it would seem that an overt Iranian move into Iraqi territory would be a very foolish move. If the Iranian government wishes to cooperate with the U.S., it could promote its own interests in the region without military action or threat.

Iran’s alleged exportation of terrorism has come under close scrutiny. The Iranian leadership was surprised at being categorized with North Korea in the “Axis of Evil”. Most analysts consider Iran to more stable than that characterization. Iran’s future political behavior will be influenced by their awareness that “in the current political climate of the region, being perceived as exporters of Islamic revolution could bring them the combined wrath of the United States and its Arab allies.”³⁶

Concerning Syria, the U.S. Government has had formal relations with the Syrian Government since 1974. These relations have seen some high points, notably with Syria’s cooperation and participation in the Gulf War of 1991. Still the United States State Department

acknowledges that there are serious differences with Syria, which has been on the list of states that sponsor terrorism since 1979, where Syria is described as providing safe haven for terrorists. The State Department does not accuse the Syrians of planning or executing terrorist activities, but in allowing such to occur within its borders.³⁷

As is the case with Iran, long-term effects of OIF on U.S. – Syrian relations will need to be tracked over the long run. Still, actions being taken in the short run can provide insight into the Bush Administration's perception of how OIF has changed the relationship. Early indications are that the United States will approach Syria with a tougher stance in the post-OIF Middle East. In the Pentagon, the more hawkish officials have openly discussed regime change in Syria, and there has been talk of Syria "being next" (after Iraq.) An anonymous State Department official was recently quoted as saying "Syria is living on borrowed time."³⁸ The official State Department analysis of Syria from 2002 states that "while the status quo is not good for Syria, growing regional stability is even worse."³⁹ Stability, in this view, is a detractor from Syria's regional influence, and a key to its being in a leadership role.

The assessments of Syria that have emanated from both the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State can be seen as factors in Israel's recent decision to bomb facilities in Syria. While the bombing raid can clearly be tied to a major suicide attack on Israeli citizens, serious attacks have been the norm the past several years, and Israel has avoided any counter-attacks in Syria. In fact, relations have generally improved between the two countries and were appearing hopeful with the exchange of prisoners. It is very likely that the Israeli leadership has evaluated the United States' tougher position on Syria, and has modified its own approach accordingly, even at some risk to the peace-building process.

CONCLUSION

In the wake of the 9/11/01 attack, U.S. foreign policy changed its primary focus from Central and Eastern Asia to the Middle East. Prior to the 9/11/01 attack, there were neo-conservative elements describing something resembling a "Pax Americana", which either for good and noble cause or for U.S.-centric cause, considered that a United States insertion into the Middle East would be beneficial for regional and world stability. It is my belief that the primary underlying cause for attacking Iraq and reshaping that country was to upset the "unstable status quo", and through the application of a geopolitical strategy, try to radically recast the region. The goals may be hegemonic (spreading U.S. dominance and the western style of democracy and/or securing vast oil reserves for the U.S.), or they may be regarded as relatively benign. Increased stability among the states, ethnic groups, and religions and

religious sub-groups in the Middle East is a noble cause and certainly should be pursued in its own right.

If the goal of stability is the driver, my opinion is that the United States needs to tread lightly now that the U.S. presence is established. Even if the American goal is more hegemonic in its derivation, it is time to move slowly, as the ongoing insurgency and the dispersion of American forces so rightly indicates. Efforts to involve other nations and the UN in Iraq should be intensified, and more than anything the U.S. needs to show more flexibility. Heavy-handedness within Iraq, or a rush to topple the Syrian leadership would certainly cement the notion that this is an American empire building process. The U.S. should focus on stabilizing Iraq and move slowly (and diplomatically) in trying to effect further changes in the region

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³⁸ Warren P. Strobel, "Harsher U.S. view on Syria emerging", Knight Ridder, October 7, 2003

³⁹ Department of State Report on Syria, 3

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