

The Fragmentation of Iraq--The negative fallout for Israel

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The possible fragmentation of Iraq is a most unwelcome prospect from the Israeli point of view. Some observers, locked in perceptions of an era long passed, might still think otherwise. In the 1960s and 1970s, when Israel was deeply involved in conflict with the states of the Arab core of the Middle East, Egypt, Syria and Jordan, it was extremely apprehensive with respect to possible Iraqi military assistance to its Arab enemies in time of war. Israel consequently developed a particularly friendly relationship with the non-Arab periphery of the region--Iran of the Shah--and actively pursued a covert relationship with the Kurds in Iraq in support of their secessionist struggle against the central government in Baghdad. Israel's interests have, however, radically changed since then, as have the concepts of core and periphery in the Middle East.

Israel has made its peace with the key players of the Arab core, Egypt and Jordan. It maintains an uneasy *modus vivendi* with Syria and low intensity conflict with the Palestinians. The balance of power between Israel and its Arab neighbors has shifted markedly in Israel's favor. Generally in the last two decades or so the Arabs have weakened considerably, as former Arab regional powers have lost their hegemonic status. Egypt no longer wields the regional clout it once enjoyed. Syria under President Bashar Assad is but a shadow of its former self under his father, Hafez. It has been forced out of Lebanon and is totally isolated by the United States and its local allies. Iraq has been crushed by the American invasion and the Saudis, even with oil prices going through the roof, are not as wealthy as they once were. Moreover, they suffer the insecurity of domestic terrorism, and have had a somewhat less intimate relationship with the United States ever since 9/11.

In the Arab east, where the Syrian and the Iraqi Baath regimes once competed for supremacy, there is now an Arab leadership void; the power vacuum is being filled by an expanding Iran, the likes of which the region has never witnessed in the modern era. Determined to obtain a nuclear capability, Iran is presently also buoyed by an unprecedented sense of Shi'ite ascendancy. Iraq has become the first Shi'ite dominated Arab state, the Shi'ites are on the rise in Lebanon, and Jordan's King Abdullah was therefore pretty much on the mark in his anxious reference in late 2004 to the emergent "Shi'ite crescent" of influence.

In these circumstances, the former Sunni Arab core is becoming a political periphery relative to the new core, which has moved eastwards to Iran. As the

United States sinks deeper into the Iraqi morass, so Iran treats the West with ever increasing defiance and an obvious sense of impunity and self-assurance. Saddam's Iraq had once been the Arab bulwark in the east, but its removal has opened the floodgates for Iranian regional ascendance, for which nothing positive can be said from an Israeli standpoint.

If the weakening of Iraq and just the potential for its disintegration have brought the region thus far, the actual dismemberment of Iraq into three statelets--one Kurdish in the north, one Sunni in the center, and one Shi'ite in the south--could have disastrous consequences for the entire neighborhood, especially for Israel and its regional allies, Turkey and Jordan.

As is well known, the Turks are wary of the potentially destabilizing capacity of such a Kurdish state. A weak Sunni Iraqi state, sandwiched between the Kurds and the Shi'ites and denied Iraq's oil wealth, could become an insufferable burden on the neighbors, especially Jordan to whom many may emigrate. This would bring even greater pressure to bear on Jordan's economy and infrastructure, already straining under the burden of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who have taken refuge in the kingdom. The Shi'ite statelet in the south would be far more dependent on Iran than a more powerful united (albeit federative and Shi'ite dominated) Arab-Kurdish Iraqi state, and thus a far more likely candidate to serve as a subservient and subversive cat's paw of the ayatollahs in Tehran.

The disintegration of Iraq along sectarian lines would be the first of its kind in the Arab state system since its creation in the 1920s. Others could follow, like Lebanon and Syria, leading to sectarian shifts of power to the Shi'ites in Lebanon and, in Syria, to fundamentalist Sunnis bent on unseating the Alawis, who dispossessed them a generation ago. The Iranians and Hizballah, Hamas and their Syrian counterparts in the Muslim Brotherhood would all stand to benefit from the new disorder, in which Israel, Jordan and Turkey would be equally hard-pressed to cope with the negative fallout of Iraq's demise.

Considering the alternatives, none appears more appealing than the restoration of the integrity of an independent, unoccupied, Arab-Kurdish Iraqi state, which would probably be more inclined to restrain Iranian influence than both the occupied and the fragmented versions.

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