

“Iraq 2012: The Regional Context”

F. Gregory Gause, III
University of Vermont

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Iraq in 2012: An Optimistic Scenario

The most optimistic scenario for Iraq in 2012 is that: a) the country remains loosely united, with the Kurdish Region still officially part of Iraq, though clearly it will be enjoying a large amount of autonomy from Baghdad, and no other quasi-independent regional governments; b) the Arab Sunni Awakenings/Sons of Iraq movements are integrated into the state structure through regional elections, national elections and integration of a substantial portion of their militias into the national security services; c) parliamentary and electoral alliances cross the sectarian divide, providing for some stability at the center; d) the central government controls the bulk of Iraq’s oil revenues, allowing it to slowly and carefully build its reach throughout the Arab parts of the country; and e) this point is reached without a sustained, bloody sectarian civil war.

While this is a plausible scenario, it is not a likely one. It seems almost inevitable that the various Arab parties will test their political-military strength against one another. This is already happening among Sunni Arabs, with the happy result that al-Qaeda in Iraq and its local fellow-travelers have seen their influence reduced. This is happening among Shi’a Arabs, with a number of major incidents between government forces/Badr Organization militia and Muqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army, most recently just this week. There is no guarantee that the brutal Sunni-Shi’a conflict of 2006-early 2007 will not be repeated. The risks of large-scale violence between Kurds and Arabs, not particularly high since the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime, will rise if the Kurdish leadership pursues efforts to include Kirkuk in the KRG. However, while violent conflict is likely, it is not inevitable. We have seen the Kurdish leadership be willing to defer a decision on Kirkuk. While the Mahdi Army and the government forces/Badr Organization have clashed, political agreements have limited the extent and duration of their confrontations. The Awakening Movements seem anxious to enter the political process. Violence is likely over the next four years, but there is also hope that it can be mitigated by agreements among the Iraqis themselves.

Regional Powers and Iraq

The course of Iraqi politics, for good or for ill, is largely in the hands of Iraqis themselves and in our hands. However, regional parties can contribute either to the stabilization of Iraq or to its fragmentation. The most important regional players in the Iraq game are Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. While Ankara views Iraqi developments almost exclusively through the lens of Kurdish issues, for Riyadh and Teheran Iraq is one part of a larger contest for regional influence. That contest extends from the Persian Gulf states through Iraq to Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. That contest is the reason for the boycott by many Arab heads of state of the Arab summit meeting in Syria, Iran's major Arab ally, this past weekend. That contest is the reason that Lebanon has been without a president for the past months and will likely remain without a president for some time. That contest is the reason that most Arab countries want Fatah and Hamas to find some workable arrangement in the Palestinian territories, for fear that continued confrontation will push Hamas closer to Iran.

The Saudi-Iranian contest for influence is not a direct confrontation. Iran does not pose a military threat to Saudi Arabia, and the Saudis do not see Iran as such. While Riyadh worries about the Iranian nuclear program, that is an issue for the future, not the immediate present. President Ahmadinejad visited Saudi Arabia in 2007 and the two countries have kept lines of communication open. The Iranians are not trying to destabilize the Saudi regime in its own domestic politics, as they tried to do in the 1980's. The Saudis do not want to see an American-Iranian military confrontation, because they fear that the Arab side of the Gulf will be targeted for Iranian retaliation. For their part, the Iranians do not seek out a direct confrontation with Saudi Arabia, hoping to avoid a sectarian Sunni-Shi'a polarization that might benefit them in Iraq but could hobble their influence elsewhere in the Muslim world. Their contest for influence is more subtle, played out in the domestic politics of Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, and in Arab public opinion. But it is very real.

The Saudi leadership realizes that Iran has more cards to play in Iraq than it does. It does not seek to reverse the reality of post-Saddam Iraq: that the Shi'a Arab majority is going to have a central role in the future of Iraqi politics. What Riyadh seeks is to prevent Iraq from becoming an Iranian client state. It sees the current Iraqi government of Nouri al-Maliki as, in effect, an Iranian client regime. King Abdallah refuses to meet with al-Maliki and Riyadh has backed the failed efforts, led by former prime minister Iyad Allawi, to put together an alternative parliamentary majority to unseat the Maliki government. It also opposes the proposal by the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) to create a 9-province regional government in the center and south of Iraq - a "Shi'astan" on the model of the KRG. Riyadh views that prospect as the end of Iraq as a state, with the Shi'a-dominated regional government as a permanent client of Iran.

The Saudis have limited but important assets by which to affect Iraqi politics. For years after the fall of Saddam Hussein, Riyadh was paralyzed regarding the development of Iraqi politics. They had advised Washington against going to war, but cooperated to a limited but important extent in the war plan. They had no desire to support the elected government of Iraq after 2005, because they saw it as an Iranian client. However, they were leery of supporting their sectarian allies in Iraq, the Sunni Arab insurgency, for two reasons: 1) the insurgency was killing Americans, which could place their bilateral relationship with Washington at risk; and 2) part of the Sunni insurgency was in league with al-Qaeda, which by 2003 the Saudi leadership realized was a threat to its own rule in Saudi Arabia. The emergence of the Awakening Movements in late 2006-early 2007 provided the Saudis with ideal clients – anti-al-Qaeda Sunni Arabs cooperating with the United States. Riyadh is supporting those movements, but we should not exaggerate the Saudi influence upon them. They are indigenous, not Saudi-created or controlled. As mentioned above, Saudi Arabia also maintains ties with important Iraqi politicians across the sectarian divide.

The Iranians have a wider array of local allies, particularly armed allies, in Iraq. They created and continue to support ISCI, formerly the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. They have ties to other Shi'a groups, including the Sadrist movement. They have good relations with Kurdish parties, particularly the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan led by Iraqi President Jalal Talabani. They have a thriving trade with Iraq; tens of thousands of Iranian pilgrims visit the holy sites in Iraq every year. While the Shi'a religious establishments in Najaf and Qom have something of a historical rivalry for leadership in Shi'a theology, we should not discount the personal and family ties and corporate identity which link the Shi'a *ulama* across the Iran-Iraq border.

The most important regional question affecting Iraq's stability is whether Saudi Arabia and Iran can find a workable arrangement that satisfies both of their regional ambitions. If they can, then they can encourage their local Iraqi allies to work out an accommodation. If they cannot, we can expect both states to continue to see Iraq as a contest for influence, with the Saudis seeking to prevent the consolidation of Iran's predominant influence in the country.

As mentioned above, the Turkish perspective on Iraq is not regional; it is domestic. Ankara views events in Iraq through the prism of its own Kurdish issue. It has accommodated itself since 1991 to the de facto independence of Iraqi Kurdistan. Turkish businesses are developing substantial interests there. However, it will not long tolerate any actions by the Iraqi Kurdish leadership which it sees as encouraging Turkish Kurds to dream of independence and revolt against the Turkish government. While Turkey's military options are limited, it has demonstrated that it will use force in the border region against the PKK. It will use its diplomatic and economic influence to

support Iraqi Turkomans in Kirkuk against the KRG's desire to annex the area. It will stand foursquare against Iraqi Kurdish independence.

American Diplomacy, Regional Powers and Iraq

Many observers of the Middle East have urged the United States to take a more active role in bringing regional powers together in a diplomatic effort to stabilize Iraq. This was a major recommendation of the Iraq Study Group. It is not a bad idea, but we should not invest it with more importance and efficacy than it merits. It is not so much the actual convening of such a conference as the agreements and understandings which would precede it that could improve the prospects for a good outcome in Iraq. None of the regional parties will pay a price just to sit at that table. Each believes that it has assets regarding Iraq which it will not give up just for the privilege of joining such a meeting.

The kinds of understandings which Turkey would require to play a constructive role in stabilizing Iraq could be achieved comparatively easily by an active American diplomatic effort, because we have influence both in Ankara and with the Iraqi Kurdish leadership. As long as we can assure the Turks that the Iraqi Kurds will not harbor and support the PKK and will not move to separation from Iraq and formal independence, we can reassure Ankara that its vital interests will not be compromised. The Kirkuk issue will be harder for American diplomacy to finesse, as the Kurdish leadership appears intent upon integrating Kirkuk into the KRG. Turkey will oppose this, but it does not pose the same kind of threat to fundamental Turkish interests that the PKK and Kurdish independence do. The Bush Administration has handled the Turkish side of the Iraq issue relatively well, at least since the debacle of Turkish refusal to allow the opening of a northern front during the 2003 war. Working out and sustaining a *modus vivendi* between Turkey and the KRG can be accomplished without a regional conference.

American diplomatic efforts to encourage a Saudi-Iranian understanding would be much more difficult. First, we have no influence on the Iranians. Second, we join the Saudis in seeking to contain their influence in the region. We are not brokers, as we could be between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurdish leadership. We are participants in the regional contest for influence. In fact, the Saudis have a more nuanced view of their contest with Iran, including keeping lines of communication open to Teheran, than we do. The Iranians are certainly not going to pay a price simply to sit at a table with us and other regional powers to discuss Iran's future. By skipping the last scheduled bilateral meeting in Baghdad, the Iranians signaled that they are hardly panting for dialogue with us.

Any constructive engagement with Iran on regional issues, including Iraq, requires an engagement on the bilateral American-Iranian relationship. There is not

much that we can give the Iranians in Iraq. They already have enormous influence with many of the Iraqi players, including the Iraqi government. If there is anything that Iran wants from us, it involves their relationship with us – an end to the threat of attack, some acceptance of its nuclear stance, an acknowledgement of its regional role – not our ability to “give” them something in Iraq.

In the same way that we should not exaggerate the results of convening a regional conference, we should not assume that direct engagement with Iran will lead automatically to a more cooperative Iranian attitude. The Iranian leadership will inevitably see such a bilateral initiative as an admission of weakness on our part, at least at the outset. However, such engagement will place the Iranians, who are themselves divided on a number of regional issues, in front of difficult choices. It could constrain the more ambitious elements of the leadership, strengthening those who argue for more modest Iranian regional goals. It will place the Iranian leadership before hard choices that they have been able to kick down the road up to now.

In the context of an Iranian-American bilateral engagement that is moving forward, it might be (I emphasize “might”) possible to achieve a larger regional understanding that major regional parties can live with. Such an understanding would involve acknowledgement of Iran’s influence in Iraq, Iran’s acknowledgement that Arab-Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli peace is a global concern which Iran should not block and an understanding in Lebanon that gives Hizballah a commensurate role in Lebanese politics without a veto over an elected Lebanese government while assuring a stable Israeli-Lebanese border. There is no guarantee that a bilateral American-Iranian understanding can be achieved and can lead to these other positive results, but it is almost certain that we will not be able to reach these goals without some kind of American-Iranian understanding.

With an American-Iranian dialogue commenced, if it demonstrates any promise, the possibility of a successful regional conference on Iraqi issues increases. The U.S. can then use its influence with Saudi Arabia to urge Sunni Arab Iraqi groups to play a constructive role. Moreover, such regional progress could put pressure on the Syrian-Iranian alliance, as Damascus could begin to doubt Teheran’s commitments. Distance in that relationship can only increase the chances of positive movement in Lebanon and opens up the possibility of progress on the Syrian-Israeli track of the Arab-Israeli peace process.

This analysis of regional politics has been made in the spirit of the hearing, calling for imagining a relatively positive outcome for Iraq in 2012 and how we might get there. While the positive effects of American-Iranian bilateral understandings are plausible, they are by no means inevitable – neither American-Iranian agreements nor the positive consequences. However, it is hard to imagine good Iraqi and regional outcomes without some kind of American-Iranian understanding.

American Withdrawal from Iraq and Regional Politics

One of the persistent arguments put forward against American military withdrawal from Iraq is the spill-over effect of Iraqi instability in the region as a whole. The argument has three elements: 1) that domestic violence in Iraq will spill over into bordering countries – Kurdish violence in Turkey, Iraqi refugee flows destabilizing Syria and Jordan, Sunni-Shi'a tensions leading to domestic violence in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain; 2) that all-out civil war in Iraq will draw in the forces of neighboring states, with Turkish intervention in the north, Iranian intervention in the south and Arab state interventions in response, turning Iraq into a full-fledged regional war; and 3) that al-Qaeda would be so emboldened by our withdrawal that it would be able to take its fight against pro-American Arab regimes across Iraq's borders.

One should never bet against the worst possible outcomes in the Middle East. However, it is hardly inevitable that American withdrawal from Iraq would lead to any of these bad results. On the contrary, I will make the case that an announced intention to withdrawal on a realistic timetable might (again, I stress "might") actually push regional powers to take more cooperative stances on Iraq.

The prospects of violent spill-over from Iraq are much more limited than the worst case scenarios about American withdrawal assert. Undoubtedly, withdrawal will be accompanied by violence within Iraq, as various groups test their strength both in intra- and inter-sectarian contests. But it is hard to see in most cases how that violence would spill over the borders. The Kurdish area would not be subject to such violence, as it is relatively well ordered now (with the important exception of violence in the Kirkuk region should the KRG move to formalize its control there). The spill-over prospects into Turkey have more to do with the status of the PKK in Iraqi Kurdistan, which would not be greatly affected by events to the south. Sectarian tensions could rise in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain with increased sectarian violence in Iraq. That was certainly the case during 2006-early 2007. However, increased tensions and violence are two different things. The states in all three countries have adequate police and security forces and are more than willing to use them to maintain order and state power. The most likely areas of spill-over from Iraq are Syria and Jordan, which have taken in the bulk of Iraqi refugees. International efforts would be necessary to support these states and relieve the burden upon them of new refugee inflows. This is a serious issue, but a far cry from the picture of widespread regional destabilization one sometimes hears.

The prospect of regional intervention into Iraq, making an Iraqi civil war into a region-wide conflict, is also highly unlikely. First, there is already substantial foreign intervention (besides our own) in Iraq. The Iranians have considerable influence and the Saudis are building theirs, as was discussed above. The Turkish military will intervene in Iraqi Kurdistan when it thinks it is necessary. It is hard to see why these

interventions would escalate with American withdrawal. The Iranians already have what they want in Iraq – substantial influence both with the Baghdad government and with major actors in border regions to the south and the north. The Turks do not want to occupy Iraqi Kurdistan or annex it. The Saudi army is hardly capable of serious cross-border operations. Foreigners will play in Iraqi politics as long as Iraq is weak and Iraqi parties seek foreign support. They are doing it now, with the American military there. They will continue to do it. But they do not appear to have the desire (in some cases, like Turkey and Iran) or the means (Saudi Arabia) to intervene in a direct, sustained military way that could lead to a wider regional war.

Undoubtedly, al-Qaeda will claim victory with an American withdrawal. But making that fact, over which we have no control, the reason to maintain our presence in Iraq gives Usama bin Laden a veto over American policy. That cannot be a good thing. Were we to have withdrawn in 2006, as al-Qaeda in Iraq was enjoying some successes in Sunni Arab areas, this objection to withdrawal would be more compelling. However, thanks to the turn in Sunni Arab politics over the past 18 months and to the surge, AQI has suffered important reverses. It is not eliminated, but it is certainly not on the march in Iraq. As long as Sunni Arab sentiment continues on its current course, it is highly unlikely that a group as small as AQI will be able to achieve any major victories in the area. Bin Laden can claim what he wants; people in the region will see the results on the ground.

The regional risks of American withdrawal are not as great as some contend. There could also be regional benefits to withdrawal. As long as we remain in Iraq with substantial military forces, neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia has to face up to the regional consequences of a chaotic Iraq. The Iranians can rest assured that we will not allow the government which they support to be defeated militarily. The Saudis can assume that we will not allow complete Iranian control over Iraq. Both can build up their allies with little regard to the consequences for longer-term Iraqi politics, as both are protected against their worst-case outcomes. However, the prospect of our withdrawal might (again, I emphasize “might”) lead both Teheran and Riyadh to face up to the prospect that a complete deterioration of security in Iraq could increase the prospects of their worst-case outcomes. It could lead to a more realistic sense of what an acceptable outcome for both states would be and a willingness on Iran’s part to compromise on its more ambitious goals in Iraq.

Such an understanding would involve Iran: a) discouraging its client ISCI from pushing for the 9-province regional government of the center and the south, b) encouraging the Baghdad government to include Sunni Arab leaders who emerge from new provincial and national elections, and c) accepting a prime minister other than Nouri al-Maliki. Such an understanding would require Saudi Arabia to encourage its allies in the Awakening Movements to accept the reality of Shi’a demographic weight in

Iraqi politics and discourage them from thinking that they had the chance to defeat the government and Shi'a militias and claim power on their own.

Conclusions: Iraq 2012

While regional actors will be important players in how Iraqi politics develops, the real decisions will be made by Iraqis themselves. Iran's allies in Iraq have varying degrees of loyalty to Teheran, from relatively strong for ISCI to relatively weak for the Sadrists. The Saudis exercise only influence, not control, over Sunni Arab actors. The Kurds answer only to the United States as an outside power patron, and we certainly do not control them.

While more violence is inevitable over the coming years, the hope for a minimally violent transition to a more effective Iraqi state relies on two political processes. First, the new Sunni Arab leadership which has emerged in the Awakening and Sons of Iraq movements must be integrated into provincial and national political and security structures. This could be accomplished through new elections, at both the provincial and national levels, which would empower this new leadership. Second, the split among the Shi'a components of the Unified Iraqi Alliance, which has been obvious for the past year and was most recently manifested in the fighting of this week, has to work itself out politically. The Sadrists need to compete on their own against ISCI and Da'wa and other Shi'a groups in the provinces and in national elections. Splitting the Shi'a bloc opens up the possibilities for cross-sectarian political alliances which could mitigate sectarian tensions and encourage a more stable central government.

This optimistic scenario relies upon other important developments. The Kurdish leadership must show forbearance regarding Kirkuk. Efforts to incorporate the Kirkuk area into the KRG could spark new violence between Kurds and Arabs. While this might unite Arabs across sectarian lines, it would hardly be a good thing for the development of a more stable Iraq. The central government must control oil revenues, at least in the Arab areas. Only through its ability to use and distribute revenue can the central government begin to build its capacity to govern. ISCI must give up its dream to establish a 9-province "Shi'astan" in the center and the south. It is a divisive proposal among Shi'a (the Sadrists are dead set against it) and absolutely unacceptable to even the most moderate Sunni Arabs.

There is no guarantee that Iraq can be saved from a descent into worse political violence, either if the United States remains in the country or if it leaves. If there were easy solutions to the problems of Iraq, we would have found them by now. However, there is the possibility that domestic and regional forces might be able to mitigate violence and encourage the gradual establishment of state authority in Iraq. On the regional level, that result will require an American-Iranian understanding.