

"The Middle East Cauldron - The Next Five Years"

Whoever is President of the United States, the basic political dilemmas of the Middle East will be the same in the coming five years. There are three loci of crucial happenings and probable major shifts in the coming period: Iraq, Iran, and Israel/Palestine.

The issue in Iraq that will have most impact on the future of Iraq, the Middle East, and the world is when and under what circumstances U.S. military forces will quit the country. At this point, the U.S. military presence has come to be a surgical graft that the Iraqi body is rejecting, and rejecting definitively. Sooner or later, U.S. forces will have to leave entirely, including from the prospective permanent bases. There are only three manners in which U.S. withdrawal can take place: as an early autonomous decision of the U.S. government; at the later request of the Iraqi authorities; or ultimately chased by Iraqi insurgents.

The first alternative is undoubtedly the one which would serve U.S., Iraqi, and world interests best. It is also the least likely to occur. The U.S. president will find this impossible politically to do in 2005 or 2006 because it would be interpreted, first of all at home in the United States, as a major political defeat for the United States. And it would be. Antiwar sentiment in the United States is growing, but it is not yet at the point where members of Congress would willingly endorse such a move. Even those in the military who think the entire Iraqi invasion was a grave error would regard withdrawal now as a slap in the face of the U.S. military. And those leaders in other countries who have backed the U.S. fully - Blair, Berlusconi, Howard - would equally be dismayed, because it would have very negative political consequences for them in their countries.

The second alternative - being asked to withdraw by the Iraqi government - is more plausible. Of course, it depends to some extent on political developments within Iraq. The elections of January may well take place, even if participation in many areas will be fitful or even virtually nonexistent. The elections are likely to take place because a number of important actors are at the moment committed to them: the U.S. government; the interim Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi; the Kurdish leaders; and Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, who sees the opportunity for a legislature dominated by religious Shia.

But this does not ensure a legitimate regime after January. For one thing, if the U.S. forces go into Fallujah, as they seem to intend to do, not only will this guarantee Sunni non-participation in the elections but it threatens to ignite new eruptions in Shia areas, now that Moqtada al-Sadr has committed himself to full support of Fallujah resistance. And if, despite such eruptions, the elections take place, it is by no means clear whether Allawi would be able to consolidate his control of the central government or would be displaced by a figure closer to al-Sistani and less dependent on the United States.

But whatever the makeup of the Iraqi government in 2005, its prime and most immediate concern will be to secure popular support and legitimation. What can such a government offer a population that is unhappy with American military presence, massively insecure because of the insurgency and the U.S. response, and in great economic difficulty? Such a government will have only two choices: moving much closer to the U.S. proconsul and his military forces, or distancing itself considerably from them.

Closeness has not paid off thus far, either in deepening legitimacy or in getting significant

material support from the U.S. It follows that, at some point, the likelihood is that the Iraqi government will turn against the U.S. They will certainly be encouraged to do so, for different reasons, by all their neighbors - Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, Iran. Even if they have deep reservations about each of these neighbors and their governments, the pressures coming from them plus the pressures coming from their populations plus the undoubtedly erratic behavior of the United States will probably be enough for the Iraqi government to shift its basic position vis-a-vis the United States.

But if they don't, because they fear an inability to survive without U.S. military support, then it will be the insurgency that will grow stronger and stronger, and become the de facto government of the country. When that happens, Iraq is headed towards a Tet offensive scenario. And the U.S. may have to evacuate its personnel from the Green Zone in helicopters. This will be a far greater defeat than autonomous withdrawal in 2005.

Meanwhile, in Iran, the government will join the nuclear club in this same period. Iran is a major power in the region, heir to a very ancient civilization, a Shia state beside a largely Sunni Arab world, a country surrounded by nuclear powers. It needs nuclear weapons to realize its full weight as a regional power, and it will do what it takes to get them. It has three obstacles in its path. The most public is the opposition of the U.S. and the European Union to this breakdown in observance of the non-proliferation treaty. This is the most public and the least important obstacle, since in fact neither the U.S. nor the EU can do very much to stop Iran.

There are two more serious obstacles. The first derives from Iran's internal politics. The government in power has been losing popular support and legitimacy for more than a decade because of its repressive and fundamentalist politics. It is not that the opposition forces would really be against Iran acquiring nuclear weapons but rather that, should they be able to create turmoil, the government might not have the energy to move forward on the nuclear front. However, at this point, the opposition seems too weak politically to disrupt, and the government's strong stand on nuclear weapons would probably be a popular move at home.

The third and most serious obstacle is the Israeli threat to bomb Iranian nuclear facilities. There is little doubt that the Israeli government would like to do that. There are however three questions about an Israeli attack. Can Israel do it in such a way that the attack would really cripple Iranian capacity? Can the Iranians retaliate in such a way that Israel would really be hurt? And would world (including U.S.) opinion swallow such an attack as they did the Israeli bombing of Iraq in 1981, or would they react by turning Israel into a total pariah state?

I doubt Israel can cripple Iran because I believe that Iran has scattered its facilities already enough to prevent this. I also doubt that the Iranians could retaliate with sufficient strength to hurt Israel seriously. But the weak point for Israel is world opinion. Israel has already lost a lot of legitimacy in the last four years, and this could be the last straw. The world's geopolitics are quite different today than in 1981. The lesson of South Africa is that it is politically extremely difficult to survive as a pariah state.

Finally, there is Israel/Palestine. Israel has tied its fate to that of the United States in the Middle East. A defeat for the United States is a defeat for Israel. At the moment, Sharon is trying the ploy of a unilateral Gaza withdrawal which would enable him effectively to foreclose a meaningful Palestinian state on the West Bank. But it doesn't seem to be working. Hamas is unalterably hostile and unappeased. And the Palestine Authority, which might have

been willing to negotiate such an arrangement, has been excluded from its implementation, and therefore has to be ultra-reserved as well. In any case, Arafat may well die soon, and once that happens, the PLO may splinter into many parts, to the probable benefit of Hamas.

Meanwhile, among the Israelis, the refusal of the right-wing settlers to envisage even this tiny concession has led to a virtual split in the Likud party, and an implicit threat of total implosion of the Jewish state. Gaza withdrawal will never really come about. But in the process of trying to do it, Sharon might reunite the Palestinians and fatefully divide the Israeli body politic in ways that have never occurred up to now. And this division among the Israelis themselves might be the final blow to their political strength within the United States. Israel/Palestine might finally lose its status as an untouchable U.S. political issue and become a matter of public debate within the United States. This would bode ill for Israel's survival.

by Immanuel Wallerstein