

## **Power's Diminishing Returns**

By Zaki Laidi

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### ***After Saddam Hussein's Capture, Uncertainties Remain***

The Iraq war was waged on the basis of a new strategic concept (preventative war), a politico-military objective (the fight against weapons of mass destruction) and a politico-ideological goal (regime change in Iraq). What assessment can be made some nine months after the Americano-British intervention and the day after Saddam Hussein's capture,?

The idea that Iraq constituted a strategic threat to the United States could not be verified for a simple reason: the links between Saddam Hussein and the terrorist al-Qaeda network were probably never substantial. On the other hand, it is to be feared that Iraq is in the process of becoming a terrorist center of primary importance, even if no one to this day has succeeded in determining whether al-Qaeda is a terrorist "label" issued by a franchise or a true organization.

The justification of the war as a struggle against arms of mass destruction has turned out to be just as unconvincing. Of course, it did take the U.N. inspectors more than four years after the first Gulf War to discover the former nuclear, chemical, and biological programs initiated by Iraqi regime. But the present situation seems different. The American army controls the country and Iraqi scientists are in principle less inhibited about revealing any eventual secret programs. Moreover, the fact that the American administration practically never evokes this argument any more suggests that it has hardly any hope of discovering such secret programs. The Iraqi weapons "mystery" remains complete and those strategic experts who were so voluble during the war appear to have lost their voice (...).

The third prize of regime change remains. With regard to this matter, the issues appear more complex. Among the American sales' points, this objective in fact covered three preoccupations. The first was the "nationalist hawks", whose goal was not so much to bring democracy to Iraq, as to get rid of a regime that was durably opposed to the United States and which had frustrated their political victory in 1991. Moreover, in the post-September 11 context, this goal took on a new meaning. Certainly the United States drove the Taliban very rapidly out of Afghanistan, but in a certain way this victory was too simple and consequently not very useful symbolically. Taking on Saddam Hussein, in a way, had much more style. That's what Paul Wolfowitz understood in the week after the attacks.

The second preoccupation's was that of "internationalist hawks", who not only wanted to assert America's power in the world game, but also to connect this goal to the United States' historic and ideological Messianism: to promote democracy in the world. That's the whole thesis of a benevolent superpower.

The third preoccupation was more regional, even though it grew out of the second. It was not only a question of bringing democracy to Iraq, but of playing on the demonstration effect of this choice to lead the whole Arab world into a democratic cycle. For one part of the American establishment, Baghdad's liberation opened the way to liberation of the entire Arab world and to settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In fact, in the thinking of this establishment, the absence of democracy in the Arab world was always perceived as the primary obstacle to an Israeli-Palestinian settlement. Democratizing the Arab world would democratize the Middle East and depolarize tensions.

So there is this line of reasoning, the idea that the Palestinian problem doesn't constitute a national problem, properly speaking, but is rather a sub-product of a non-democratic Arab political culture. Consequently, the disappearance of a ferocious anti-democratic, anti-Israeli regime would present the advantage not only of strengthening Israel, but also of motivating it to proceed to settlement of the Palestinian problem on an advantageous basis for itself. In this order of ideas, the increased pressure put on Syria and Iran would give even more coherence to American strategy in the region.

Paradoxically, the oil argument that has so often been presented as central is not the most obvious. Certainly the United States would never have concerned itself with Iraq had it not been an oil state of the very first importance. And it's more than probable that the possibility of the United States leaning on Iraq in case of a Saudi defection counted for much in the balance. But oil was not in itself a goal of the war.

Must a person regarding all the different elements we have just reviewed conclude that the war in Iraq was waged for reasons that were other than those given and which still remain obscure today? The answer to this question is, well, yes.

The United States waged the Iraq war to reassert American supremacy after September 11. To this end, they had an imperative need to construct an enemy, which they had desperately sought since the end of the Cold War. In this situation, the search for a motive or a central explanation became secondary.

That's why if you want to understand George Bush's America, it's better to reread the German philosopher Carl Schmitt than to listen to the experts. "A war waged for so-called purely religious, purely moral, purely legal, or purely economic motives would be an absurdity," he writes. "It's not possible to end up at the friend-enemy polarity and consequently at war starting out from specific oppositions in these domains of human activity. A war is not necessarily a good undertaking or morally good or even profitable (...). The only question to be asked then is whether the friend-enemy polarity exists either in reality or in the virtuality of the real, without even wondering about what the human motives powerful enough to make it appear may be." The meaning of these remarks is clear. Politics exist only on the basis of a polarization between friend and enemy. Consequently, constructing itself an enemy is an existential priority for a state.

At a time of amicable discourse about globalization and interdependence, this political primitivism may seem crude and very unfriendly. But it has the immense merit of bringing you back to historic continuities. The whole question is to know if recourse to this polarization is functionally effective. That may be doubted. Al-Qaeda's destruction in Afghanistan led to a dispersion comparable to that of a business network: when the costs become untenable in the center, there is dispersion out to the peripheries.

In addition, European ability to fight terrorism appears operationally superior to that of the U.S. There are thirty al-Qaeda agents in European jails. There's not a single one in United States' prisons. Two questions remain: that of the meaning of American power and its prospects in Iraq. The debate about American power has been obscured by abusive references to hyperpower (...). That's no longer at stake. It's rather a reflexion on what international legitimacy is today. Because what the American political jam in Iraq reveals is power's submission to the law of diminishing returns.

This law has a simple meaning: beyond a certain threshold, power rapidly loses its effectiveness. That's why peremptory interpretations about the end of the U.N., the end of N.A.T.O., or the end of alliances seem excessive. The United States is discovering that its status does not immunize it against the necessity of relying on allies. And now their number is smaller than ever.

Symmetrically, the simplistic idea that the United States, confronted with an unanticipated result, is now on the way to rediscovering their "way to Damascus" would seem very imprudent. The reduction of politics to a purely rational gamble where the discovery of a constraint mechanistically entails the construction of an appropriate response pertains to a cruel naïveté.

If our "Schmittian hypothesis" interpretation of present American policy is correct, a change in direction won't happen tomorrow, in any case, not with this administration. A rush toward other targets from the "Axis of Evil" is not to be totally excluded, even if it seems unlikely.

On the ground, (...) Kurdistan is, so to say, pacified, and Shi'ite territory remains relatively calm up to now. That doesn't mean that there is much American margin for maneuver, but there is some, all the same. Three options seem available:

- The option of a federalism that would resemble Lebanon's more than Germany's and that would leave the United States as the arbiter of an internal political operation that was by definition not very stable. This is probably the scenario Washington favors, as long as there is no durable and continuing commitment of American troops, even if the idea of a withdrawal seems most unlikely. Under certain conditions this scenario could satisfy the Kurds and the Sunni. On the other hand, it would deprive the Shi'ia of the political victory they have been waiting for for a long time. This solution also presents an enormous risk: denominationalizing Iraqi society which today is the least denominationalized of Arab societies.
- The option of a minority and authoritarian Sunni power which would offer the advantage of pacifying a turbulent Iraq, while reconstituting a regime little different from the preceding one, without its ferocity. There is moreover no doubt that the Baathist framework of the regime will be rehabilitated far faster than is believed and that the best way to destroy the present resistance would be to partially restore power to those who previously held it. A Baathist regime without Saddam, which is to say a benevolent dictatorship, would seem, in this context, to be an optimal solution.

A third hypothesis remains: that of a devolution of power to the Shi'ites. This schema would offer an enormous advantage: offering power to a majority that had been largely deprived of it. But it presents the risk of intensifying Sunni resistance without offering the least guarantee of docility vis-à-vis Washington. In effect, it is more than probable that a Shiite regime, which cannot be imagined escaping from the power of the clerics, could only construct itself against the United States.

Also, according to a paradox to which history contains the key, the Shi'ites, whose majority have appeared to support the American intervention, at least implicitly, could not durably legitimize themselves except by opposition to America, while the Sunnis, who had more to lose from an American intervention, would become Washington's best allies, faced with a conquering Shi'ite power.

Not one of these scenarios has a chance of seeing daylight in its raw form. But in a context of extreme political fluidity, they constitute the markers to decipher a complex and chaotic situation.

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*Zaki Laidi is a political scientist at Sciences-Po (Paris)*