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Middle East security after Iraq

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We live in a society that has not yet taken form. It is still fluid and agitated and has not yet settled down or taken a stabilised shape.
Gamal Abdel Nasser, 1955

Introduction

The US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 ended thirty-five years of brutal Ba'ath Party despotism in that country. But pre-war errors in intelligence and inadequate planning for post-war reconstruction have left Iraq's democratically elected Shiite-led government struggling to bring order and reform to a country now immersed in several cruel and bloody civil conflicts. There is no shortage of analysts who have declared that security in Iraq is unachievable, that the country's doom is sealed, and that only failure lies ahead. It is time, they say, to withdraw US and Coalition forces.

However, as President Bush has now made clear in his response to General Petraeus' September Iraq update to the US Congress, a full withdrawal of US troops from Iraq will be left for a future president. A large-scale US withdrawal at this stage is certainly the last thing that senior Iraqi Government officials want, the President and Prime Minister among them. They believe it would spell disaster for their country, leading to an all-out civil war and military intervention by neighbouring states.

Interestingly, the views of neither supporters nor opponents of the immediate commencement of a full withdrawal seem to have been wholly embraced by Iraqis, according to opinion polls. On the one hand, the polls show that most Iraqis believe that the US-led military presence is provoking more conflict than it is preventing and that they want the US to commit to a withdrawal over a twelve-month period. They also believe that this will strengthen the Iraqi Government.

Yet the same polls highlight that in the face of the internecine violence that has been unleashed in Iraq over the last four years, most Iraqis have maintained a cautious optimism about the future and remain defiant of the jihadi bombers and death squads who prey on their families and neighbours. A majority of Iraqis still believe that 'ousting Saddam Hussein was worth the hardships they have suffered';[1] that they want Iraq to remain a unitary state and to have a strong central government; and that they identify themselves as Muslims and not as Sunnis or Shiites.[2] Except among the Kurds in the north, there is little popular demand for any form of partition or federalism.

Beyond the borders of Iraq the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime continues to impact on regional security. The emergence of the Shiite majority from centuries of 'defeat and subservience' has made Iraq 'an oddity in the Arab landscape'.[3] So too has its democratically elected government, whose members do not belong exclusively to any one family, ethnic or religious group. This new political order within Iraq has caused unease in Arab capitals. The autocratic leaders of the Arab Middle East are vulnerable to the winds of reform and also to the forces of radicalism, both of which have been unleashed by regime change in Iraq.

These same Arab rulers fear the repercussions of the overthrow of the Ba'athist regime which, weakened since its defeat in the 1990–1 Gulf War, had been a key structural component of America's long-held strategic policy for Gulf security, namely, the 'dual containment' of Iraq and Iran. The collapse of centralised power in Iraq has now dealt Tehran a freer hand to export its Shiite revolution and be recognised as the dominant local power in the region. The rise to power of Shiite groups in Iraq—some of whom are aligned to Iran—has left Sunni Arab states warning of the rise of a 'Shiite Crescent' stretching from Iran across to Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, and threatening to destabilise countries where Shiite minorities are to be found.

Adding to growing instability in the region is Iran's now very public pursuit of a nuclear program which, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the UN Security Council, is in breach of Iran's obligations under the 1974 Safeguards Agreement to which it is a party. Its president's public statements denying the Holocaust and calling for or predicting Israel's eradication have led to speculation about a looming showdown between these two regional powers. Iran's empowerment has flowed through to its proxies, in particular Hizballah in Lebanon, a Shiite organisation which has energetically pursued the destabilisation of Lebanon's pro-Western government and in June 2006 triggered a war with Israel, the outcome of which was inconclusive and may well lead to further rounds of fighting.

The unchecked violence in Iraq has also provided a training ground for jihadi terrorists from around the region who, upon returning home, form a nucleus of violent opposition to their respective governments. It has further resulted in some two million Iraqis becoming refugees in the neighbouring countries of Iran, Jordan and Syria, placing tremendous strain on the resources and infrastructure of these countries. Close by, Turkey remains exercised by the empowered Kurdish population on its Iraqi border and the fear that this might lead to open conflict with its own Kurdish population.

A resurgent Russia has also been able to take advantage of the US preoccupation with Iraq to re-establish a small but significant measure of the influence in the region once enjoyed by the former Soviet Union. As viewed from Washington and a number of European capitals, the revival of Russian influence comes at the expense of US and European Union foreign policy objectives, thus providing a level of 'external power' tension in the region.

This snap shot of current security concerns prompts the question: whither Middle East *in*security after Iraq? In answering it, this *Special Report* will first provide a general framework for analysing the region's security environment before considering the present political and security situation in Iraq that

has arisen in the wake of the 2003 invasion. Together, this analysis will provide the context for identifying the impact of the war on wider regional security and considering the key currents and players likely to influence Middle East security over the next five to ten years. It will conclude with some reflections on the implications for Australian policy.

The Middle East's security environment

The term 'Middle East' is used here to refer to the region bounded on the northwest by Syria, on the northeast by Iran, on the southeast by Oman, and on the southwest by Egypt. Its two sub-regions consist of the littoral states of the Arabian/Persian Gulf (the 'Gulf') on the one side (including Yemen) and the states located on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, together with Jordan, on the other.

The region has played an important role throughout history due to its geo-strategic position at the crossroads of the continents of Asia, Africa and Europe and as the place where the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam originated. Since the discovery of vast quantities of oil in the Gulf region in the early twentieth century, the whole area has been a particular focus of interest of the major powers and the international community. As a relatively cheap source of energy, oil has been a key driver of growth in both developed and developing economies. In more recent times, the Middle East has taken on further significance as the birthplace of jihadi-salafism, the violent offspring of salafi Islam.[4] Jihadi-salafists view violence directed against civilians as a legitimate tool to create fear to facilitate the achievement of salafists' religio-political objectives.

While geography, resources and religion impact significantly on the strategic environment of the Middle East, central to the region's security for the foreseeable future is the fact that its states are relative 'new-comers' to the international state system. Most of them gained independence only after World War II and, in the case of some of the smaller Gulf states, not until the termination of formal British protection in 1971. Although they are at varying levels of development, the countries of the Middle East are still in a process of state-formation which reflects many of the characteristics of state-making evident in other regions of the developing world, albeit with their own particular history and experience of decolonisation. One of these characteristics is the persistence of a dynamic relationship between domestic insecurity and inter-state rivalries and conflict, the reasons for which are summarised below.

Internal state dynamics

The state borders of the Middle East were drawn at the end of World War I from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, largely to suit the colonial interests of Britain and France. This was done with scant regard for the region's people, geography or history and resulted in the creation of many new states constituted by different religious and national groups with little if any internal cohesion.

Decades later, the populations in a majority of states in the region still lack a coherent national identity and remain susceptible to the challenge of transnational ideologies of pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism which provide a meta-narrative of collective identity. Rejecting the legitimacy of sovereign borders—and in the case of Israel, its very existence—these ideologies conflict with basic norms of international law

affirming the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of states, and provide powerful and emotive alternative models to the current fragmented political geography of the region.

Arguments made by the proponents of supra-state ideologies are all the more potent in view of the fact that, with the exception of Israel, the states of the Middle East have made little progress towards the development of good governance and strong institutions, a vibrant civil society, the rule of law, a market economy, a healthy private sector and an established middle class. GDP in Arab economies will need to grow at an annual rate of at least 5–6% in order to absorb those currently unemployed and provide jobs for new labour-market entrants, an important factor in the light of the region's high birth rates. However, their current average annual rate of growth in GDP is 3.5%–4% and as low as 1.5% in some states, according to the 2002 UN Arab Human Development Report. Middle Eastern states also share a poor record on political freedom and human rights, and are ruled by governments that lack legitimacy in the eyes of many of their people because they invariably represent narrow sectarian or family interests rather than a broad societal consensus.

These fundamental conditions of weak statehood and poor governance, coupled with the absence of a coherent national identity and severely limited economic and employment opportunities, have been a potent combination in breeding disaffection and a propensity for violence, fuelling internal threats to state structures. Open debate about political, social and economic issues and free elections are not tolerated by the ruling elites, for whom regime security is indistinguishable from state security, for fear of losing their monopoly of power.

But unlike other developing regions where both the states and their respective regimes are weak (as is the case in sub-Saharan Africa), regimes in the Middle East have succeeded in developing a near monopoly over the use of violence by way of large military budgets and oppressive state police forces. Their internal security forces—the *mukhabarat*, to use the Arabic word—are considered among the most effective, if not brutal, in the world, regularly torturing and murdering their own citizens, as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and other NGOs have reported over many years. Hence while the regimes have developed—one might say 'over-developed'—their coercive capacity to the extent that they are 'unusually stable' in relation to other parts of the developing world, they are likewise 'unusually undemocratic'.

The weak state/strong regime model that has taken root in the Middle East has resulted in the emergence of a ubiquitous domestic 'insecurity dilemma', both for citizens and ruling elites. Fearful of losing its hold on power, the regime monopolises the state's coercive capacities to repress opposition. But the more the regime exercises this coercive power in an attempt to protect its rule, the more its institutional weakness and lack of legitimacy is reinforced. This in turn provokes the threat of violent resistance, and in some cases, violent action. The more violent the dissent, the more brutal is the state's response. The more brutal the state's response, the more violent the dissent.

Islamist opposition groups that promote extremism and violence are a case in point. In his book, *Why Muslims Rebel: Repression and Resistance in the Islamic World*, Mohammed Hafez concluded from his examination of a number of Arab societies that there is a strong correlation between

political and institutional exclusion on the one hand, and reactive and indiscriminate repression on the other. Islamist rebellions, he explains, are 'often defensive reactions to overly repressive regimes that misapply their repression in ways that radicalise, rather than deter, movement activists and supporters.'[5] The same dynamic is evident in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in which sections of the Palestinian opposition to Israel and its occupation since 1967 of Gaza (prior to the Israeli withdrawal in 2005) and the West Bank have become more radicalised over the years, culminating in the wave of terrorist attacks witnessed during the second Palestinian *intifada* (uprising) which began in October 2000. In the case of Arab countries in which jihadi-salafists confront hostility and oppression from the central political authorities, they retreat underground or go abroad to establish bases for terrorist acts and recruitment.

Internal/external state dynamics

In his work on 'Third World' regional security, in which he includes the Middle East, Mohammed Ayoob explains that in regions formed by developing states, there is a symbiotic relationship between internal and external threats to regime security in the sense that external threats quite often are exacerbated by, and in turn exacerbate, the problems of insecurity that exist within state borders. In many cases, he argues, no credible external threat would arise if internal threats and domestic fissures did not already exist within a particular society.

Using the example of the first Gulf War (1980–1988) Ayoob argues that Iraq's invasion of Iran in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 was 'among other things, an attempt to pre-empt an anticipated popular movement against it from within.' This 'threat' to Iraq from 'a movement that would have owed much to the demonstration effect of the success of the Iranian Revolution [in seizing power] ... would not have reached the proportions it did in the Iraqi regime's perception had the government in Baghdad been more representative of the majority of its population and had not been as narrowly based as it [then was].'[6]

As already noted, the appeal to transnational identities is an important power resource in the Middle East so that threats to state security emerge not only from other states, but from within the state, or from transnational groups that cut across state boundaries. The work of Gregory Gause on regime threat perceptions and alliance choices in the Middle East has shown that 'states overwhelmingly [identify] ideological and political threats emanating from abroad to the domestic stability of their ruling regimes as more salient than threats based upon aggregate power, geographic proximity and offensive capabilities.' In the calculation of foreign policy decisions made by the leaders of Jordan, Syria and Saudi Arabia during the period from 1971 to 1991 and again in 2003, he found that 'aggressive intentions' were prioritised over 'aggregate power' and that 'words – if it is feared that they will find resonance among a state's citizens – were seen as more immediately threatening than guns. ... Overwhelmingly, [these leaders] balanced against states that were militarily weaker but hostile to the ruling regimes.'[7] As Gause notes, this is of particular significance given the frequency of inter-state war in the region.

The Middle East has indeed been one of the most war-prone regions of the post-World War II period. The rejection by the Arabs of the creation of Israel as a Jewish state in the region, and the occurrence of *al-Nakba*, the

'catastrophe' of Palestinian statelessness, have been perennial sources of conflict resulting, thus far, in seven Arab–Israeli wars and a long-running asymmetrical conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

Wars in the Middle East have also arisen in the context of the quest for status or hegemony played out through the struggle for political and/or territorial control and measured by respective war-making capabilities. This was evident during the so-called 'Arab Cold War' of the 1950s and 1960s—featuring rivalry between Arab states and at times involving Israel—and in the 1980–1988 and 1990–1 Gulf wars. Conflict and wars throughout the region drew in external powers that sought to leverage their influence over client states by providing arms and diplomatic support. During the Cold War, the Middle East was an important arena for US–Soviet rivalry, and became—and remains today—one of the most highly militarised regions in the world. In the post-Cold War period, the US attained unrivalled power in the region, although this is again increasingly being challenged by Russia and to a lesser extent by China.

The decline of Arab power over the last two decades has enhanced the quest for regional hegemony by non-Arab states, notably Iran and Israel, the former hindered and the latter helped by America's position as the region's external power broker. The projection of US power in the Middle East has fuelled immense anger among the people of the region, provoked further by America's support for Israel and its policies in regard to the Palestinians. Popular discourse in Iran and across the Arab world characterises Israel as 'an agent of US imperialism', and the Palestinians as an exemplar of the subjection of the Arab world as a whole to US and Western interests. Arab regimes allied to the US are thus vulnerable to political attacks by both domestic opposition groups and regional rivals for being puppets of the American–Zionist enterprise. This threat has heightened following the 2003 US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq which provided a further focus of anti-American sentiment in the region.

Unquestionably events in Iraq have acted as a catalyst for many of the security challenges noted at the outset. But it would be wrong to see all events taking place on both sides of the region today as intimately linked to Iraq. While security from the threat of inter-state conflict remains a central preoccupation for the states of the region, for most, the threat from external forces is subsumed under the broader umbrella of vulnerabilities that threaten state institutions and, ultimately, regime survival.

It is from within that framework that the central dynamics of the war in Iraq, as they have evolved since March 2003, need to be understood, and their continuing impact on the security environment of the Middle East needs to be gauged.

The war in Iraq

Four and a half years after the destruction of the Saddam Hussein regime, the struggle to reshape Iraq as a modern state threatens to divide the country into sectarian and ethnic enclaves and to extend what is now a 'complex mix of civil conflicts' into a full-scale civil war. The Ba'athist and foreign jihadi-salafist insurgencies that started in the wake of the US-led invasion eventually triggered a mix of sectarian conflicts that, combined, threaten not only the future unity of Iraq, but also the security of neighbouring Gulf states and the wider region.

Sectarian and ethnic 'cleansing' are dividing the country at every level, creating major

refugee problems and leading to forced relocation of large numbers of Iraqis within and outside of Iraq. Restoring a level of security that will support political progress towards national reconciliation is therefore a top priority for the US-led Multi-National Force in Iraq (MNF-I) and Iraqi security forces. Although the recent counter-insurgency strategy—the so-called 'surge'—has shown signs of early success, there is no definitive answer as to how sustainable security might be achieved. The current strategy has a 50% chance of success at best. But in spite of all the risks and uncertainties, the situation is anything but hopeless, even though the window of opportunity to create lasting security in Iraq is of limited duration.

The 'war after the war'

Since independence in 1932, Iraqis have manifested a mix of ethnic and sectarian loyalties. Saddam Hussein artificially kept the lid on tensions arising from the country's fissiparous society by means of an appallingly brutal dictatorship. By removing the dictator in March 2003 the lid was thereby lifted. The failure of the US to plan adequately for post-invasion stability operations and nation building is in large part to blame for the present chaos which has resulted in some two million refugees fleeing to neighbouring countries, a similar number of internally displaced Iraqis, tens of thousands of killed and wounded, and ongoing fighting and ethnic/sectarian cleansing in much of the country.

While the initial post-invasion insurgency was conducted by former regime loyalists, in time the fighting evolved into a much more diffuse range of conflicts, a 'war after the war'. These conflicts have involved Sunni groups and Shiite militias, who continue to engage in ethnic/sectarian cleansing in Baghdad and surrounding provinces; Iraqi Kurds, Arabs and Turkomans in the north of the country, who seek control of Iraq's northern oil resources; and factions among the Shiites who contend for power in the south, including the pro-Iranian Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI, formally the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq) and the Office of the Martyr Sadr. When these factions built up their militias (notably the ISCI's Badr Brigades and Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army), they simultaneously infiltrated and 'sectarianised' the new Iraqi security forces, in particular, the police force. Other key players include jihadi-salafists, of which 'al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia' (AQM)[8] is the most visible, whose religious and ideological goals extend far beyond Iraq. In recent months, a fifth level of conflict has emerged between this latter group and Sunni tribal groups.

Iraq's neighbours, notably Iran and Syria, also contribute to the instability and conflict in the country by providing military, financial, and operational support and training to both Shiite and Sunni groups. Iran's intelligence operatives are deeply embedded throughout Iraq's security forces and within the Shiite militias operating in the south of the country, especially in the city of Basra. Indeed, Iran has made no secret of its intention to destabilise Iraq and to fill the vacuum there once the Americans depart. Syria, too, has turned a blind eye to the infiltration across its border with Iraq of al-Qaeda terrorists transiting from the Gulf—at its height numbering an estimated 60–90 foreign fighters a month—and former Iraqi Ba'athists and other Iraqi Sunni elements. It has also acted as a primary line of supply of weaponry to support the Iraqi insurgency against the MNF-I.

In January 2007, President Bush announced a new counterinsurgency strategy for Iraq

which has included sending five additional combat brigades to increase US troop levels to 160,000. The aim of the 'surge', as set out in the 'Joint Campaign Plan', is to achieve 'localised security' (in Baghdad and other critical parts of Iraq) by mid-2008 and for 'sustainable security' to be established across the country by mid-2009.

In their much anticipated reports to Congress on 11 September, the Commander of the MNF-I, General David Petraeus, and US Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker, pointed to a number of factors indicating that the 'surge' has achieved several of its security objectives. In Baghdad and across the country in general, the number of sectarian murders has decreased by perhaps one third since the height of the violence in December 2006. In late August, Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr called for his Mahdi Army to halt operations for six months. Further, new alliances have been established between US forces and Iraqi Sunni groups, including tribal elements in the Anbar and Diyala provinces, who have taken up fighting against AQM and other terrorist groups in response to intolerable levels of AQM violence and the latter's attempt to arrange forced marriages with local women. It is important to note, though, that the Sunni 'tribal revolt' against AQM has thus far occurred without any clear alignment with the government in Baghdad.

In the general scheme of things, the security situation in Iraq remains grave, a long way from a sustainable level of security that would survive a significant drawing down of US and Coalition forces. For this reason, Petraeus recommended in his report to the US Congress that the US remain committed to building sustainable security in Iraq; that the additional troops introduced during the 'surge' be withdrawn between December 2007 and mid-2008; and that US troop numbers otherwise be maintained at pre-surge levels for the foreseeable future. These recommendations were endorsed by Bush in his 'Address to the Nation' two days after Petraeus delivered his report.

But while there appears to be modest success at the security level, political progress has been stalled as sectarian groups are deeply divided over the sharing of power and resources, and the central government remains corrupt and ineffective. Since taking office in May 2006, Nuri al-Maliki's government has been dominated by the Shiite's United Iraqi Alliance, sections of which have used their positions to pursue a sectarian agenda and exacerbate communal tensions. This has involved denying resources and government services to Sunni areas. In addition, the National Police and Ministry of Interior are known to be corrupt, highly politicised and to be involved in acts of sectarian violence.

In recent months, divisions among Shiite factions and mounting criticism by Sunni and Kurdish parties of al-Malaki's government have led to some parties leaving the government. This does not bode well for the much needed progress on the national reconciliation program comprising a number of legislative and political reforms intended to address the concerns of Iraq's Sunnis (representing about 20% of the population) who have felt alienated (in part due to their own actions) from the changes brought about by the end of the Saddam Hussein regime. These include important revisions to Iraq's constitution to accommodate Sunni demands for a more centralised state; the enactment of legislation on de-Ba'athification to facilitate significant and sustained Sunni participation in the political process; the equitable distribution of Iraq's energy revenues; and the holding

of new provincial elections that will provide for Sunni representation in Sunni-majority provinces. (Sunnis boycotted the January 2005 provincial and parliamentary elections).

As a part of the Coalition's two-year counter-insurgency plan launched in January this year, political accommodation at the local level is being encouraged. Efforts have been made to reach out to former insurgents and tribal leaders to encourage them to move away from violence as a way of expressing their opposition to the political status quo. The hope is that sufficient progress might be made at the local level to encourage accommodation at the national level, and vice versa. By bringing 'stability and security to the Iraqi people' it is intended that Iraq's political leaders will have 'the time and space needed to come to grips with the tough issues they face and enable reconciliation to take place.'[9] But this course faces its own challenge: by encouraging 'bottom-up' reconciliation, the Coalition risks creating stronger regions and an even weaker centre.

All the while, tensions across the Middle East are running high. Much of the instability in the region has been triggered if not caused by the chaos in Iraq, such as heightened sectarianism and the increase in transnational terrorism. But other factors, exacerbated by the impact of events in Iraq, have their origins prior to March 2003, the most critical being the threat of nuclear proliferation.

Undoubtedly the Middle East has reached a particularly 'unstable' moment. Important questions thus arise as to how present threats to regional security will play out over the short to medium term? What will be the key currents affecting Middle East security in the foreseeable future and who might the main players be?

Whither Middle East security after Iraq?

Key currents

The spill-over of jihadi-salafist terrorism from Iraq to neighbouring countries and beyond has to date been the deadliest effect of the Iraq war. Like Afghanistan before it, Iraq has provided an ideal training ground for jihadi terrorists from around the region who bring home with them newly honed skills in bomb-making and other aspects of insurgent warfare. They threaten to empower local cells or establish new ones of their own in the states to which they return and thus to undermine the internal security of those states. In response, Arab security agencies have been vigilant about who is entering and leaving their countries, arresting anyone who raises suspicions. In 2006, fearing the infiltration of battle-trained militants who might join with al-Qaeda elements already active in their country, the Saudis began constructing a security fence along its 900km border with Iraq.

But as the horrific November 2005 terrorist attack in Jordan's capital Amman has shown, the scourge of transnational terrorism poses a particular challenge to the domestic security of Iraq's neighbours. In the latter case, unknown Iraqi jihadists were dispatched from Iraq by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to carry out a triple bomb attack because of their ability to move unnoticed inside the target country and avoid detection by the omnipresent security services. They could therefore succeed where local Jordanian jihadists have failed. Thus as long as the insurgency in Iraq continues, it will provide increasingly sophisticated transnational cells able to move undetected across borders throughout the region.

Efforts made by regimes to crack down on terrorist elements within their societies have come at the cost of much needed political reform. The 2004 UN Arab Human Development Report (AHDR), for example, recorded that although some Arab states had taken 'embryonic and fragmentary' steps to deal with deficits in freedom, the overall picture was not a positive one. On the contrary, there were indications of a regression in popular participation, and human rights violations. The 2005 AHDR noted that of the reforms that had taken place over the previous year, most had been cosmetic and were intended to hide the continuing repression of freedom through the uninterrupted violation of human rights. And in its 2006 global survey on political rights and civil liberties, Freedom House listed two Arab states, Saudi Arabia and Syria, as among the 'worst of the worst of most repressive societies'.[10]

As Marina Ottaway has argued, the 'failure of U.S. policy in Iraq has provided autocratic regimes in the Middle East a reprieve from the pressure to democratize ... Saudi Arabia and Egypt have been the biggest beneficiaries of the U.S. loss of interest in draining the swamp of autocracy while it was confronted by large alligators such as Iran and its allies. Once again, autocracy is thriving – and so are the alligators.'[11] With this in mind, the authors of the 2004 AHDR make the following prediction: if the current repressive situation in Arab countries continues, 'intensified social conflict ... [and] violent protest, with the risk of internal disorder' is likely to follow.[12] To the extent that the 'violent protest' cannot find expression in 'internal disorder' it will almost certainly continue to be exported for years if not decades to come.

While the influx of insurgents across Iraq's porous borders has facilitated the destabilising effects of the insurgency in that country, the out-flow of refugees from Iraq has in turn destabilised the societies and economies of neighbouring host countries, in particular Jordan and Syria. In Syria, the flow of Iraqi refugees—currently estimated to be more than one million—has put tremendous pressure on Syria's state-subsidised economy, triggering widespread inflation and severely straining Syria's already insufficient public services and worn infrastructure.

To add to these economic and social challenges, the Ba'athist regime in Damascus has been confronted with a restive Kurdish minority (estimated at 1.7 million), emboldened by the success of Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq. During 2004 and 2005, Syria's Kurds openly defied the al-Asad regime by engaging in several violent protests—dubbed the 'Kurdish *Intifada*'—prompting a harsh crackdown by Syrian authorities. Such challenges to the status quo in Syria will continue to arise whenever opposition parties view an opportune moment. However, the al-Asad regime is one of the most brutal in the world; it is unlikely to lose its hold on power for the foreseeable future.

Jordan, too, is presently struggling under the strain of over one million Iraqi refugees and in recent months has virtually closed its borders. (Iraqis or their professional sponsors must now pay a US$5,000 deposit guaranteeing their departure). While the inflow of vast amounts of money brought to Jordan by the wealthy among the refugees has stimulated the economy, this has also resulted in a jump in the general cost of living and has priced Amman real estate out of the reach of the average Jordanian. Ongoing instability and violence across the Iraqi border will only increase political, economic, and social instability in Jordan, a society already challenged by the legacy of

the first major refugee crisis in the region, that of the Palestinians who today constitute the majority of Jordan's population. Without significant aid from the US and others, it will be impossible for the desert kingdom to accommodate the present number of Iraqi refugees for any length of time.

But Iraq is not the only front on which Jordan's strategic horizon has deteriorated. Although unrelated to the US invasion, developments in Palestinian politics since the election of Hamas to the Palestinian Legislative Council, the subsequent failure of the power-sharing arrangement between Hamas and Fatah, and the more recent division of the Palestinian territories between Hamas-controlled Gaza and the Fatah-controlled West Bank has led to further hardships for the Palestinians and dealt a blow to their national aspirations. There is now renewed dialogue between Israeli and Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) officials, spearheaded by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, with the intention of re-starting the stalled Israeli–Palestinian peace process, which fell off the rails more than a decade ago. It is hoped that from the most recent round of talks between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and PLO Chairman and Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas a joint declaration of principles on the 'core issues' of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict might be formulated in preparation for the international Arab–Israeli peace summit planned for Washington in November.

The establishment of a Palestinian state in Gaza and the West Bank and internationally recognised borders between that state and Israel is probably still a long way off, although predictions about the conflict are notoriously fallible. Until a permanent settlement is reached involving an 'end of claims and end of conflict', that enjoys widespread acceptance by both peoples, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict will continue to bring bloodshed to both peoples and provide a ready focus for the sense of powerlessness, anger and frustration that pervade the entire region.

Another important current affecting Middle East security in the wake of the Iraq war and the political empowerment of the Shiite majority at the expense of Iraq's Sunni community is the aggravation of sectarian tensions in a number of states across the region. Ever fearful of loyalties 'beyond the regime', some Sunni governments have warned of an Iranian backed-Shiite 'fifth column' in their midst threatening domestic stability. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, for example, has claimed that '[t]here are Shiites in all [the] countries [of the region], significant percentages, and Shiites are mostly always loyal to Iran and not the countries where they live.'[13]

However, some analysts who have examined trends among Shiite populations, particularly those of the Gulf states, have argued that their communities pose less of a threat to their ruling regimes than has been claimed. This is due to 'their diversity within the region [and] economic stake in the status quo' which combined has resulted in 'national identity [trumping] sectarian identity'.[14] Where Shiite tensions do exist, as in Bahrain, where Shiites constitute the majority of the population, and in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia, where they remain relatively isolated from neighbouring populations (although in a strategic oil-producing area), their discontent is internally driven and pre-dates the 2003 invasion of Iraq. How these particular Shiite grievances play out will be determined by their governments' responses to institutional discrimination and economic inequality, and by the unlikely prospect of Arab regimes

embracing political reforms for minorities and majorities alike, as has already been noted.

Key players

While Sunni-Shiite sectarian rivalries are perceived in some quarters as a potential threat to domestic security, particularly in the Gulf states, these tensions have been linked by Sunni leaders to the rising influence of Iran. From the perspective of the Arab monarchs of the Gulf, the Iraq war has elevated Iran into a primary threat to regional stability. The fall of the so-called 'Sunni wall'—that of Iraq to its west and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan to its east—has provided the opportunity for the Iranian regime to attempt to realise its long held foreign policy goals of exporting its Islamic revolution and achieving regional hegemony at the expense of its Sunni Arab neighbours not only in the Gulf but across the entire region. This was certainly what Jordan's King Abdullah II had in mind when he warned of the growing influence of Iran in the lead up to the 2005 elections in Iraq, stating that if 'pro-Iran parties or politicians dominate the new Iraqi government a new "crescent" of dominant Shiite movements or governments stretching from Iran into Iraq, Syria and Lebanon could emerge, alter the traditional balance of power between the two main Islamic sects and pose new challenges to U.S. interests and allies.'[15]

Indeed, the attempt by the Hizballah-led opposition in Lebanon to destabilise the present (pro-Western) Sunni-led government of Fouad Seniora is viewed as ominous by some Sunni leaders. If Iranian-backed Hizballah is successful in its aim to 'de-confessionalise' Lebanon's political system and replace it with Shiite majoritarian rule, it could provide a further platform—in addition to Iraq—for Iranian penetration into the Arab world. Hizballah's foreign policy, too, especially its implacable opposition to the existence of Israel, is inherently offensive, propelling Hizballah into recurring confrontation with the Jewish state, especially following its claimed victory in its war with Israel in July last year.

In real terms, the outcome of the July 2006 war was inconclusive, and activity on both sides of the Israel–Lebanon border would suggest that another round of fighting is likely within the short to medium term. Over the last year, with the assistance of Iran and Syria, Hizballah has not just rebuilt but strengthened its long and short-range missile capacity. It is believed that Hizballah now has 20,000 missiles and rockets compared to an estimated 10,000–15,000 before the 2006 war. It has also increased its supply of other weapons including advanced anti-tank missiles and rockets. Hizballah fighters remain active in Shiite villages in southern Lebanon despite the presence of United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and Lebanese Armed Forces which were intended to end Hizballah's armed activities there.

Israel, too, has been hard at work preparing for what is expected to be a second round of fighting with Hizballah. Having internalised the harsh lessons of its failure to meet its military objectives in the 2006 campaign, Israel's tank and infantry forces have been engaged in intensive training, and are expected to play a more central role in any subsequent war. The trigger might be a further foray by Hizballah into Israeli territory or rocket attacks against Israeli civilian population centres. It could also result from a premature withdrawal of US forces from Iraq or a Western strike against Iran's nuclear sites.

Planning in Jerusalem for the next round of warfare against Hizballah also includes the possibility of Syria entering the conflict on Hizballah's side. Although the Damascus regime is weak militarily and exercises only limited influence on Hizballah, it believes that assisting Hizballah to destabilise Lebanon internally and to confront Israel externally strengthens its bargaining position at two levels. It gives the al-Asad regime leverage to try to suppress the UN enquiry into Syria's involvement in the 2005 assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, and to try to extract concessions from Israel in any future negotiations over the Golan Heights. Syria, too, is ever watchful of an opportunity to re-occupy Lebanon from which it was forced to withdraw its military forces in the wake of the Hariri assassination.

Israel's major concern, however, and that of the US, its Arab allies and the international community in general is Iran's rapidly developing nuclear program and its government's barely-disguised regional ambitions. Should Iran acquire nuclear weapons, it already has a well-developed missile delivery system in the form of the 'Shihab 3' with which to threaten other states. It can quite accurately hit targets much further away from Iran than Israel. Many European capitals are already within its range.

Although there is much speculation that Iran would use its nuclear weapons if it acquired them, this is very far from being a given. But it is also beside the point in the short to near term. The government of a weak state with a nuclear weapons capability would find it almost impossible to resist the temptation to engage in chronically belligerent behaviour towards its neighbours, among others, as a diversion from domestic discontent with the state's internal deficiencies. Such behaviour would be all the more difficult to deter because nuclear weapons would give Iran its own deterrent and, as a consequence, enhanced prestige and strategic weight.

And Iran's domestic situation is certainly far from stable. In the last six months its government has undertaken the largest crackdown on civil liberties since the 1980s. The degree of brutality that has accompanied the arrest of women's-rights activists, student leaders, trade unionists and journalists who are deemed too critical of the government reflects the growing sense of domestic insecurity felt by a regime that, amidst the threat of war with the US, has failed to solve Iran's basic problems of ever-increasing poverty and unemployment. The number of executions has almost doubled in the last year. There has been a return to mass public hangings, which are sometimes broadcast on state television.

In response to the ongoing dispute between Iran and the IAEA concerning Tehran's nuclear program, and to counter Tehran's defiant statements concerning its right to pursue nuclear energy, and President Ahmadinejad's statements calling for the eradication of Israel, Israeli officials have reiterated their country's long-standing security policy: Israel will not tolerate any of its hostile neighbours acquiring nuclear weapons.

The US Administration, too, has ratcheted-up its anti-Iranian rhetoric. Since characterising Iran as a part of the 'axis of evil' in 2002, top US officials have frequently described the Iranian regime in starkly negative terms. In August this year, for example, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice referred to Iran as 'the single most important single-country challenge to … US interests in the Middle East.'[16] In his 13 September speech following the Petraeus Report, President Bush stressed 'the destructive ambitions of Iran' and the

need to counter those ambitions as a major reason for the continued US presence in Iraq.

Recent reports from the US that the Bush Administration is planning a 'massive strike' against Iranian nuclear and military facilities have only served to heighten speculation about a catastrophic showdown between these two states. Any military strike against Iran would almost certainly result in a prolonged cycle of retaliatory and counter-retaliatory action that would potentially be played out not only in Iran but also in Iraq, Lebanon and Israel, and perhaps beyond, including the US and US interests globally.

As a part of its effort to (re)contain Iran in the coming years, the US has moved to shore up Israel and its Arab allies in the region by way of stepped up military support. In August this year the US announced plans to offer US$20 billion in military aid to Arab Gulf states (mostly Saudi Arabia) and a US$30 billion package for Israel. The latter reflects the highly integrated relationship between Israel and the US in regard to defence technology. Israel, for example, has been developing the 'Arrow System Improvement Program' for combating long range ballistic missiles (with interoperability of the US and Israeli systems) and the short range missile defence program known as 'David's Sling'. Both programs receive funding from the US.

Thus Iran will be a key player in the security environment of the Gulf and wider Middle East region for some time to come. So too will the US and any of its allies that take it upon themselves to challenge Iran's quest for regional hegemony.

Meanwhile Russia has entered what appears to be a new round of a Middle East cold war by throwing its sizable weight behind Iran and its allies and proxies. Strengthened as an economic and strategic power by higher oil prices, and emboldened by a staunchly nationalist leader, Russia under Putin appears determined to reclaim some of its former status as a major international player. And Russia, like the Soviet Union before it, sees Syria and to a lesser extent Iran, as highly useful allies of convenience to counter the pre-eminence of the US in Russia's front yard in Eastern Europe, and as proxies for advancing Russia's own historic ambitions in the region. Already in July 2002, as the US was shaping up to invade Iraq, Russia signed a US$10 billion agreement to supply Iran with six nuclear reactors over ten years. In early 2005 Russia agreed to forgive 73% of a $US13.4 billion debt owed to the former Soviet Union by the state led by the region's other conspicuously anti-Western regime, Syria. There are also plans for Russia to re-activate the Tartus and Latakia ports in Syria as permanent bases for the Russian navy. This will heighten tensions between both states and Israel and, by extension, between Russia and the US.

China—now the world's second largest international oil consumer after the US—is also set to enter the Middle East as a key external power. Saudi Arabia and Iran are the source of nearly 50% and nearly 20% respectively of China's total oil imports. China has become Saudi Arabia's leading customer and Iran's second-largest customer after Japan. In an effort to secure long-term oil supplies from the region, Beijing has embarked upon an energy security strategy that has included the signing by Sinopec (China's second largest oil and gas producer) and Saudi's ARAMCO of a natural gas exploration and development agreement in *Ar-Rub' al-Khali*, (the so-called 'Empty Quarter). Under this agreement Sinopec will be entitled to a four-fifths share of the natural gas extracted. Saudi Arabia in turn

has become a major investor in Chinese refineries, such as the joint Sino-Saudi petroleum and chemical project in China's eastern Fujian province. In October 2004, China and Iran signed a US$70 billion oil and gas agreement under which Sinopec will develop the Yadavaran oil field and be entitled to 50% of its oil reserves (estimated at 17 billion barrels) and to buy 250 million tons of liquefied natural gas over thirty years.

As tensions rise between Iran and the Sunni oil producing states of the Gulf over sectarian divisions in Iraq and Iran's nuclear program, China will need to tread carefully, though with the potential to play a positive role in diplomatic efforts to minimise tensions between its major oil trading partners, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Beijing has also indicated interest in participating in the rebuilding process in Iraq, in particular, its oil fields.

Another state that stands to play a key role in the dynamics of Middle East security over the next decade is Turkey, which maintains a watchful if not threatening eye on relations between the virtually autonomous Kurdish regional government in northern Iraq and its own Kurdish nationalists. Turkey remains fearful of an empowered Kurdish population on the other side of its border with Iraq that might constitute a base from which the conflict with its own Kurdish population is reignited, in particular through the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The Turkish Government has on occasion threatened to intervene militarily in Iraq if Iraqi Kurds pursue an independent state. The large known oil reserves in northern Iraq make such a state economically feasible. Tensions are thus set to heighten at the end of 2007 when a municipal referendum is scheduled to determine whether the oil-rich city of Kirkuk should be officially recognised as part of the Kurdish region of Iraq.

Implications for Australian policy

Maintaining the flow of oil from the Middle East is a priority for Australia even though the direct dependence of Australia and other Western countries on the region's oil for their energy needs continues to decline. This is because countries like China and India, which are absorbing an increasing proportion of Australia's exports, are still heavily dependent on Middle Eastern oil as a source of energy, as is our long-standing trading partner, Japan. Any prolonged interruption to oil supplies from the Gulf would thus have a severely negative impact on Australia's exports and economy. It should therefore be of the highest priority for the governments of Australia and our regional partners to pursue the development of alternative sources for most of our energy in order to minimise the exposure of our economies to the perennial insecurities of the Middle East.

But Australia's interests in the Middle East are not just about oil. For the reasons stated earlier, the region's other major export is the ideology underpinning global terrorism, jihadi-salafism, and the terrorists themselves. Herein lies a central dilemma, not just for the region or Australia but for the world. The weak state/strong regime model that predominates in the Arab world has, without exception, made its governments repressive, brutal and corrupt to varying degrees. And the repression has called forth violent radical Islamism, dedicated to the overthrow of the existing order in the Middle East and of global capitalism at large. The maintenance of stability in the Middle East has therefore come at the price of fuelling destabilising movements that are now spreading across the globe.

If part of the solution to the dilemma of domestic insecurity in the Middle East lies

in modernisation and the political and economic freedoms that come with it, then Arab states will not prevail in their struggle against terrorism unless they adopt a multi-dimensional security policy that promotes their integration into the world economy, government accountability, political participation, and the rule of law. This can only occur over a long period as part of the internal evolution of societies in the Middle East. Australia should therefore remain focused on preventing the spread of jihadi-salafism in our own region through close cooperation with neighbouring governments and their law enforcement agencies. Such cooperation should include concerted action to prevent Saudi funds from being used to transmit salafist ideologies through educational, religious and welfare institutions.

Australia also has an interest in supporting US and international efforts to control the proliferation of WMD in the Middle East. If Iran acquires nuclear weapons, Sunni states like Egypt and Saudi Arabia will be under pressure to respond by acquiring their own nuclear deterrent. Some of their leaders have already publicly expressed interest in acquiring nuclear power facilities. The wider the proliferation, the greater is the potential for the outbreak of inter-state nuclear war in the region, by accident or design, and for nuclear material in the form of a 'dirty bomb' to find its way into the hands of Iran's proxies, Hizballah and Hamas. It is therefore imperative that Australia continue to support the diplomatic efforts made by the international community to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Understandably, the present political focus in Australia concerning the Middle East is on the future of Australia's military presence in Iraq. The ALP's policy is 'time-based' in that it supports a withdrawal, commencing from mid-2008, of the 550 troops comprising Australia's Overwatch Battle Group who train the Iraqi Army in the south of the country. About 1,000 Australian Defence Forces (ADF) personnel, two-thirds of the current total, would remain in the Iraq theatre. The Coalition's policy is 'conditions-based' supporting a draw-down of the ADF presence from Iraq when the Iraqi Government is able to assume responsibility for its own security. To do so before hand, the Coalition argues, would be premature and lead to a reversal of the gains thus-far made in relation to the reduction of sectarian violence and a weakening of al-Qaeda's position among the Sunni opposition. If the present counterinsurgency strategy is successful, this might be from as early as mid-2009, but no time-frame has been specified.

The challenge of reaching the point of sustainable security and political reconciliation in Iraq is a formidable one, particularly in the light of the decades of tyranny and division that preceded the 2003 US-led invasion. Regardless of the mistakes in US policy to date, Australia has an obligation as a coalition partner to do all that is possible to ensure that Iraqi society does not collapse and degenerate into all out civil war. As noted above, any level of success that the US might achieve through this latest 'surge' will ultimately prove ephemeral without the Iraqi Government achieving some measure of political unity, administrative competence, and a nationalist ideology with more popular appeal than its extremist, sectarian and ethnic competitors. The Australian Government should thus continue to support its coalition partners in their efforts to provide security for the Iraqi people and to nudge the al-Malaki government to engage in state-building and, more critically, nation-building through national dialogue and reconciliation. As

for how long this commitment will be, the message of American Middle East analyst Anthony Cordesman to his own government also holds true for Australian policy makers: 'Failure can always be quick. Any form of success will take at least half a decade of strategic patience.'[17]

Conclusion

Unquestionably the war in Iraq has had important effects on the security of the states of the Gulf region and also of Iraq's western neighbours, creating in its wake a new wave of instability across the region. But for all the events that have occurred and their effects, the basic framework of the region's security environment has not changed. States remain inherently unstable and regimes continue to use their reflexive arm of repression to silence domestic opposition; transnational ideologies, and the emergence of the jihadi-salafist narrative in particular, threaten loyalty to the state and challenge repressive regimes; non-Arab powers in the region continue to struggle for hegemony with nuclear weapons as the latest measure of military capability; external and regional powers continue to pursue their own interests through local proxies; the US is still considered the most powerful player in region, irrespective of the perceived decline in its power as a result of its thus far failed Iraq campaign; anti-American, anti-Israeli and antisemitic sentiment remain at record highs among the general population; and although there have been a number of significant changes in internal Palestinian politics, the asymmetrical conflict between Israel and the Palestinians continues unabated.

Regardless of how these dynamics play out in the coming years, the key current across the region will continue to be insecurity as the states of the Middle East try to navigate their way through the unstable dynamics of state and nation formation, of societies that are 'agitated and [have] not yet settled down or taken a stabilised shape', and to manage the perennial interference of, and their economic and security dependence on, external powers whose own economic and security interests are in turn so intimately linked to the region. This will remain the situation until a substitute for oil is found to fuel the global economy. Finding such an alternative is therefore a global security imperative.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ADF	Australian Defence Force
AHDR	Arab Human Development Report (UN)
AQM	al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
ISCI	Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq
MNF-I	Multi-National Force in Iraq
PA	Palestinian Authority
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
PKK	Kurdistan Workers Party
UNIFIL	United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon

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