America in Arab Eyes

Shibley Telhami

It is no secret that the vast majority of Arabs and Muslims outside Iraq strongly opposed the US-led invasion of that country. Most Arab governments shared the view of their public that the war was ill advised, but many felt they could not say 'no' to Washington. There was profound mistrust of American motives and fear that the regional consequences would be devastating. The ultimate judgement on the war would be less over the issue of weapons of mass destruction and more over the consequences of the war for Iraq and the region. Perhaps, some hoped, America could surprise them.

US policymakers knew, too, that the American public would judge the George W. Bush administration's decision to go to war on the war's outcome. Had things gone well, much would have been forgiven. But aside from the removal of Saddam Hussein's ruthless regime, it is hard to claim success, even by the most modest of changing measures.

The war has significantly altered the distribution of power and the calculations of governments in the region, and has widened the gap between governments and publics. In Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, central authority has been significantly weakened since the war and non-state militant actors have correspondingly been strengthened. Washington had hoped that a stable, pro-American Iraq, aided by the presence of significant American forces on its soil, would enhance America's projection of power in the region. While America retains much power in the Middle East, certainly more than any other state, there is a regional perception that the United States has been weakened. This is evident in public-opinion polls showing that Arabs believe America is now

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weaker than it was before the Iraq War. The sense that American forces are over-stretched in Iraq has diminished America's ability to project power elsewhere.

While Arab governments were initially nervous about the prospect of being targeted after Iraq, many, especially Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan, found themselves indispensable for America's strategy to prevent further disaster in Iraq, to pursue the war on al-Qaeda and its allies, and to manage the Arab–Israeli arena. Even in the early phases of the Iraq War, Arab leaders assumed that the Bush administration's rhetoric about spreading democracy in the Arab world was primarily intended as a way of pressuring them to cooperate more in the 'war on terror', on Iraq and on the Arab–Israeli issue. Nonetheless, they understood that the president had stressed the issue of democracy to the American people and thus made it a political issue in the United States. In the early days after the fall of Baghdad, the Bush administration was looking to claim successes on the issue of democracy, in part to shift the domestic debate away from the absence of weapons of mass destruction. For Arab governments, the answer was simple: give the United States just enough evidence of political change to be claimed as successes in the American political debate. Once a country is added to the success side of the American ledger, they reasoned, it is hard for the administration politically to move them back into the failure column.

The success of Islamist parties in Iraq, Lebanon, the Palestinian Authority and Egypt has, predictably, applied the brakes on the US push for rapid electoral change in the region, and there has been a revival in the strong working relationship between the United States and its traditional friends in the Arab world. But this revival has camouflaged a serious shift in the balance of power, the ramifications of which are still unclear. Iraq is no longer a major regional power and, regardless of the outcome internally, will not be for the foreseeable future. Historically, Iraq has not only balanced Iran in the Gulf, but has been one of the poles in Arab politics, often competing with Egypt for Arab leadership. The demise of Iraq as a powerful state has inevitably increased the power of Iran, irrespective of Iran's nuclear programme. This Iranian power is mitigated primarily by the presence of American forces in the Gulf. Even if the United States withdraws from Iraq, it will likely maintain its significant presence in the Gulf, and continue to project American power in the region. Despite their frustration with the outcome of the Iraq War, Gulf Arab governments remain heavily dependent on the United States, especially in the face of rising Iranian power.

An Arab decline
But the Iraq War and subsequent events in the region, including the war in Lebanon and the continuing Israeli–Palestinian conflict, have highlighted the

relative weakness of the Arab world more broadly. Non-Arab states in the region, especially Iran and Israel, have benefited from the relative decline of Arab power, and non-Arab Turkey, whose reputation in the Arab world has been enhanced by its opposition to the Iraq War, now has a greater interest in being a central player in regional politics, especially in Iraq.

Nowhere was this sense of Arab weakness greater than in Lebanon in summer 2006, and nowhere was it more evident than in Egypt, a nation that for decades had seen itself as the leader of the Arab world and whose calculations in shifting alliances toward the United States in the 1970s were in part intended to reverse the decline in relative power in the Arab world in favour of the rising power of the oil-producing states in the Gulf. In fact, a decade after the Camp David Accords with Israel, aided by reduced military expenditures, support from the United States, a revived economy and stagnating oil prices, Egypt's gross national product outstripped the other Arab economies, after falling below those of several oil-producing states in the 1970s.

In recent years the trend has again reversed, especially with the significant increases in oil prices that have helped raise the United Arab Emirates' gross national product past Egypt's, and pushed Saudi Arabia's more than three times higher (see Figure 1). The gap between Egypt and the oil-producing countries in per-captia gross national product is even wider (see Figure 2).
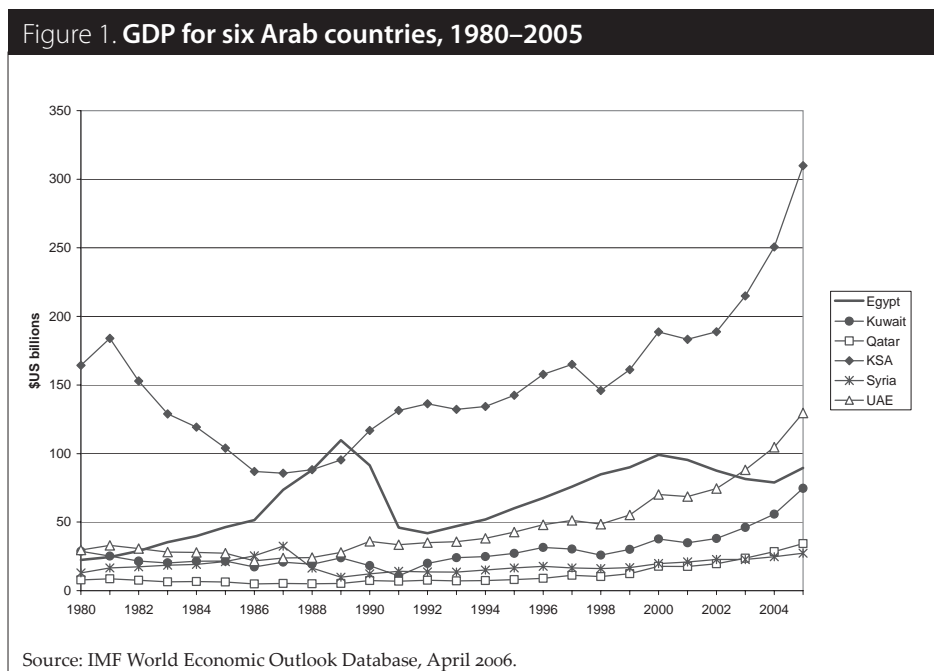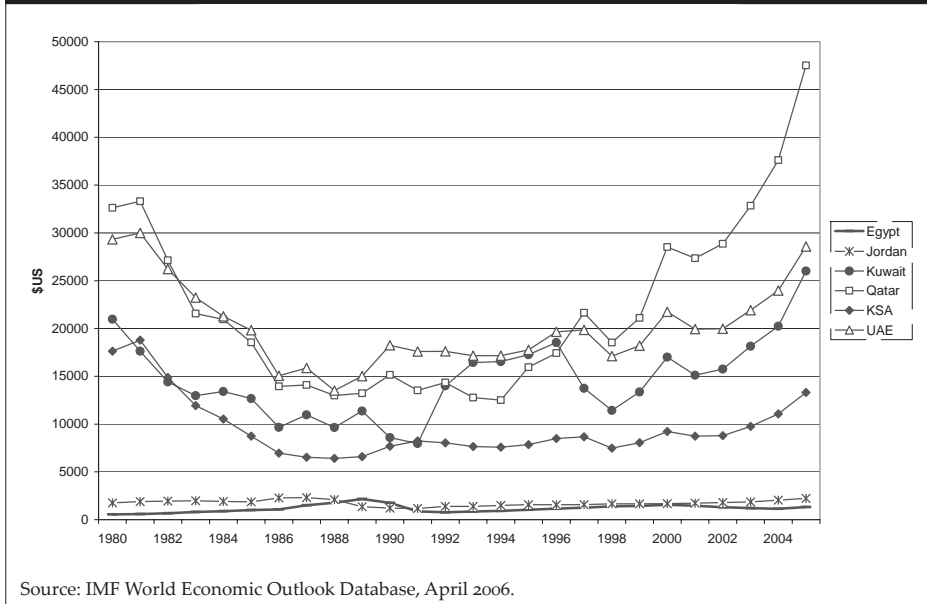

Figure 1. **GDP for six Arab countries, 1980–2005**

Source: IMF World Economic Outlook Database, April 2006.

Figure 2. GDP per capita for six Arab countries, 1980–2005

Source: IMF World Economic Outlook Database, April 2006.

These trends, of course, do not stem from the Iraq War, but were highlighted by subsequent events. Egypt's leadership in Arab politics has historically been supported by its economic and military advantages. Prior to the 1979 peace treaty, Egypt was the only state with a powerful enough military to successfully fight Israel, a central pillar of its leadership role. After a period of estrangement from central Arab politics in the 1980s, Egypt played a key role in the 1990s, in part because of its revived economy but mostly because it could argue that its influence with the United States and Israel could help Arabs, especially Palestinians, by delivering Arab–Israeli peace. So long as progress seemed possible, Egypt was seen to be important.

Since the collapse of the Israeli–Palestinian negotiations in 2000, however, it has been clear that Arab leverage broadly, and Egyptian leverage in particular, has not been able to deliver. The bloodshed in Gaza and the war in Lebanon in summer 2006 highlighted the frustration of the public, as well as elites, with the limited clout Arabs could bring to bear. Many in the Arab press argued that Arabs were neither able to stop the bloodshed nor exploit Israeli difficulties in waging the war in Lebanon.

This sense of reduced leverage and internal vulnerability has brought Arab states friendly to the United States together. Central to this coalition is Saudi–Egyptian coordination, with support from Jordan. These states' concern for religious militancy within their borders, their continued reliance

on the relationship with Washington, and a common need to contain the Iraq crisis and the Arab–Israeli conflict have led to bold moves, most visibly in going against domestic public opinion to criticise the increasingly popular Hizbullah. They have also attempted to revive the 'Saudi plan' for a comprehensive peace in the Middle East, adopted by the Arab League. A public sense that these political manoeuvres are not likely to bear fruit as they are not backed by significant leverage is visible in the Arab media and public opinion polls.

Sunnis and Shi'ites

Some see the seemingly bold stance that Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan have taken against Hizbullah as related to the Iraq War. One of the consequences of the war, the subsequent rise of Iranian power and the emergence of sectarianism in Iraq has been increased attention to the so-called 'Shia crescent', extending from Iran through Iraq and into Lebanon, and affecting Gulf states such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, which have significant Shia communities.

The Sunni–Shia divide does not fully explain emerging coalitions

Although Arab countries are concerned about Tehran's ability to use the Sunni–Shia divide to its own advantage, the divide does not fully explain the emerging coalitions in the region. Egypt and Saudi Arabia criticised Hamas, a Sunni organisation, prior to the 2006 conflict in Lebanon. Well-connected Saudi columnist Abdul-Rahman al-Rashid wrote a column accusing Hamas of bringing criticism upon itself, saying they should not expect help from Arab governments. The Arab governments felt that militant Islamist groups were dragging them down a path that they did not want to follow, and their position was a collective decision that involved Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan – states with strong relationships with the United States.

The Sunni–Shia divide must be viewed from the perspective of grassroots politics. It is difficult to argue that Jordan's King Abdullah is more Sunni than the Muslim Brotherhood in his country, or that President Hosni Mubarak is more Sunni than the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Like most of the public, the Muslim Brotherhood supported Hizbullah in the crisis, and Hassan Nasrallah, Hizbullah's leader, became the single most popular man in Egypt. The position of the various governments do not reflect a grassroots religious momentum based on the Sunni–Shia divide.

The Saudis, in particular, had a sense of 'ownership' of the Lebanese government, in which they had invested heavily. They had a close relationship with the

late prime minister Rafik Hariri, and following his death tried to bring Lebanon back into line with the 1989 Taif Accords they had helped broker, and with their vision of the Middle East. Hizbullah was undermining and threatening that agenda in the short term.

Nor was Syria viewed by these states primarily in terms of its dominant Shia Alawite minority. Egypt, in particular, lobbied Washington to revive relations with Syria and argued that Damascus could be lured away from its alliance with Tehran, reminding American officials that Syria had been persuaded to join the American-led coalition against Iraq in 1991.

The prospect of Syrian–American engagement, and the degree to which Syria might cooperate with the United States on Iraq and Lebanon, is primarily a function of the prospect of a negotiated settlement with Israel and the degree to which Israel is prepared to engage. The Iraq War had much less of an impact on the Arab–Israeli conflict than might have been expected. If the United States had hoped that the demise of Saddam's Iraq would reduce Arab leverage and push the Palestinians, Lebanese and Syrians to be less demanding, that hope has been disappointed. The election of Hamas and the empowerment of Hizbullah were certainly not the sort of results anticipated. But these events were not in the end a function of the Iraq War, but of local circumstances – the death of Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat, the disabling illness of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, the unilateral Israeli policy that preceded the Iraq War. Perhaps the most important consequence of the war for the Arab–Israeli conflict was the wasted opportunity: had the United States chosen to put the kind of economic and political resources it employed in Iraq toward resolving the Arab–Israeli conflict, the outcome might have been different.

States and non-states

Before 2005, the Syrians saw their presence in Lebanon not only as a means of overwhelming influence, but also as strategically important for defending Damascus in case of war with Israel. Although Damascus was concerned about American foreign-policy aims and whether it might be Washington's next target after Iraq, they could also see that the United States was too entangled in Iraq to do much else, at least in the short term. Thus, although American pressure was a factor, it is doubtful that this alone was what yielded the withdrawal of Syrian troops in April 2005, after a 29-year stay. The assassination of Hariri and suspicions that Syria was implicated generated a strong public response in Lebanon, sympathy in parts of the Arab world and, most importantly, US–European (especially US–French) cooperation at the United Nations. Syria might have withstood American pressure, if Europe and key Arab states had not backed Washington.

The rapid Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon created a power vacuum. Although the Lebanese elections following the withdrawal resulted in a coalition government, the Lebanese army was not in a position to assert full control of its territory. Hizbullah, which has the strongest militia in the Middle East, emerged more powerful than ever.

The development reinforced Washington's belief that the challenges America and the world faced, including global terrorism, were a function of rogue states, especially the 'axis of evil' that Bush identified in the months following the 11 September 2001 attacks. The weakening, if not removal, of governments whose policies were deemed dangerous became an American foreign-policy objective; the spread-of-democracy argument derived in part from the same notion. But the results were in many ways the opposite of what was expected: the three most successful cases of democratic elections – Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon – turned rapidly into the most troubling arenas for the region and for American foreign policy.

In part, the problem was the election winners, particularly Hamas. But a bigger problem was the weakening of central authority in each of these states, with unintended consequences: the empowerment of militant non-state actors and, in Iraq, the ability of al-Qaeda to exploit the resulting anarchy to establish a base in the heart of the Middle East. The inability of conventional power to deter and defeat non-state actors, and the continued need for strong states to establish international security, became one of the legacies of the Iraq War.

The focus on the many tactical and strategic failures of the US-led war – and there are far too many – has diverted attention from the central problem. Consider the stunning magnitude of the failure: Iraq has been the top priority for the world's only superpower for the past three years, and a central one for many regional and international powers. The United States, intent on keeping Iraq together, has spent more (in absolute terms) on that country than any state ever has spent on another in history.

Division and disintegration

Iraq's neighbours, for their own reasons, all seek to avoid a divided Iraq. All of the major factions in Iraq have an interest in preventing civil war – the Shi'ites, preferring to have the majority voice in a unified Iraq; the Sunnis, fearing being left with a resource-poor region; and the Kurds, who do not want to risk Turkish intervention. Arab states fear the break-up of Iraq, and division is the biggest concern for Arab public opinion.[1] All major international organisations, from the United Nations to the Arab League, seek the preservation of a unified Iraq. Yet the prospect of civil war and a divided Iraq is now greater than ever. This

paradox is now the stuff of conspiracy theories among Sunnis and Shi'ites, Arabs and Iranians, that the United States sought division from the outset.

In the United States, a majority of both politicians and analysts accepted the initial decision to wage war. Many critics of the Bush administration blame poor implementation for US failures. While it is true that the implementation was weak – on a bewildering scale – no large-scale operation will ever take place without significant flaws and surprises, even if these can be limited by better planning. Even if the Iraqi army had not been dismantled, for example, it is not clear how effective it would have been after its devastating defeat in the invasion or how the Shi'ites would have related to it. Nor is it yet clear whether the insurgency was planned by elements of the army all along. Even with the best US preparation, the odds against keeping Iraq together would have been great. The problem is more fundamental: once the institutions of sovereignty are destroyed in any state, especially one with a heterogeneous society, the odds are against any effort to build a stable alternative in the same generation. In the absence of effective central authority, all it takes is a small, determined minority to prevent unity.

In the Middle East, nearly all of the projects of change in the twentieth century, including bloody military coups, maintained the institutions of government, especially the army, and thus preserved the state. In the one major civil war – Lebanon from 1975 to 1990 – that led to the collapse of state institutions, the state remains so weak and fragile 16 years later that it is unable to defend itself or to disarm militias on its territory. The withdrawal of Syrian forces, which had in effect served as enforcers of internal security, before the empowerment of a strong Lebanese army to fill the resulting vacuum, highlighted the problem, which was made especially stark in the Hizbullah–Israeli conflict in summer 2006. The American failure to quell the insurgency in Iraq, together with Israel's inability to defeat or deter the Hizbullah militias, brought home the challenge posed by such weakened structures.

Dismantling states is one of the greatest dangers

In the Palestinian territories, both Israel and the United States have sought to isolate the PLO-led Palestinian Authority and weaken its institutions – even aside from the self-inflicted Palestinian wounds. By the time the Palestinian parliamentary elections were held, Hamas's military power had risen significantly in relation to that of the Palestinian Authority. The result was a loss of control and a failure of deterrence for both Israel and the United States, reduced influence of Arab states in Palestinian affairs, and more devastation for the Palestinians.

Despite the prevalence of troubled and troubling governments, states remain the most effective entities for enforcing security. Many states need to
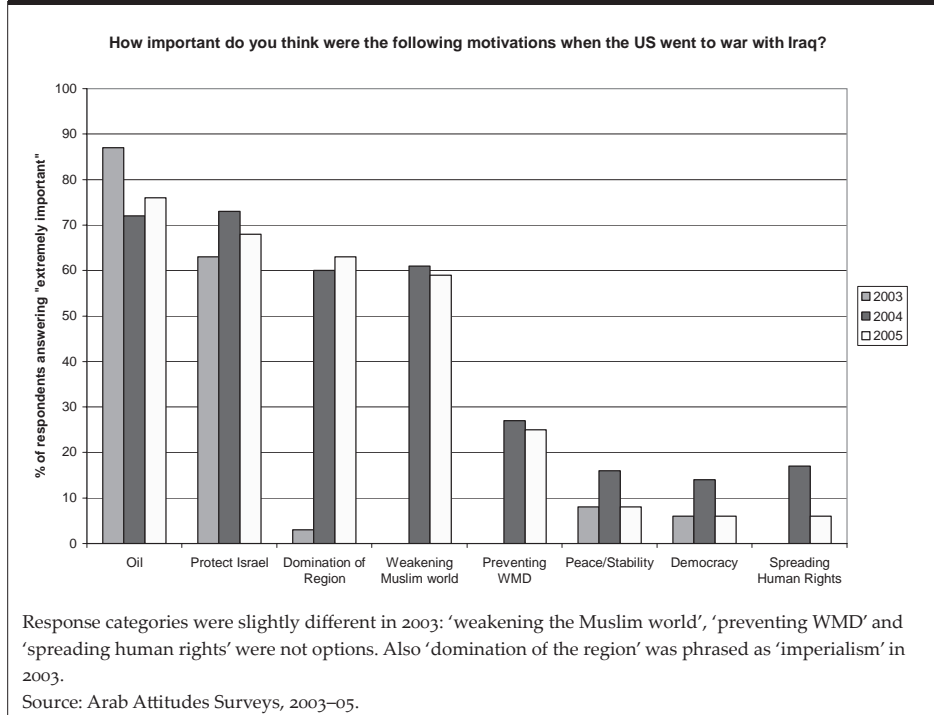
be improved or enhanced; others challenged, sometimes fought. Confronting them is sometimes necessary, but dismantling them is altogether different. Dismantling states or significantly undermining their central authority remains one of the greatest dangers in the international system.

Arab public opinion

The centrality of the state in Middle East politics sometimes overshadows the role of public opinion. Governments ignore public opinion on important issues without obvious penalties. The ability of many Arab states to provide military, intelligence and logistical support for the Iraq War even as their citizens strongly opposed it, and the gap between governments and the public during the fighting in Lebanon in 2006, are recent examples. Yet the disconnect between governments and public in the Arab world, especially during regional crises, has led nervous governments to tighten controls, even as they move toward limited elections, and public frustration with government policy has led to the further empowerment of non-state actors, whose popularity has risen in recent years.

Not surprisingly, much popular anger has been directed toward the United States. American foreign policy has not been popular in the Middle East for

Figure 3. **Arab views of US motivations for Iraq War**

How important do you think were the following motivations when the US went to war with Iraq?

Response categories were slightly different in 2003: 'weakening the Muslim world', 'preventing WMD' and 'spreading human rights' were not options. Also 'domination of the region' was phrased as 'imperialism' in 2003.

Source: Arab Attitudes Surveys, 2003–05.

the past several decades (largely due to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict), but the anger has become more intense since the collapse of the Israeli–Palestinian negotiations in July 2000, with a lack of trust in Washington's stated objectives, and a view that the United States is a central threat to the region.

In public-opinion polls just before and subsequent to the Iraq War, the vast majority of Arabs consistently rejected the view that the United States sought to spread democracy or human rights in the region (Figure 3). Most believed that the United States was driven by its need to control oil, help Israel and dominate the region or weaken the Muslim world. This view remained consistent even with America's putative focus on democracy after the war.

Surprisingly, most Arabs (58%) also believe that the Middle East has become even less democratic since the Iraq War.[2] This may, in part, be because the vast majority of Arabs had opposed the war and were predisposed against seeing good results. But the public was also less than optimistic about the electoral exercises (nearly 80% of Egyptians failed to vote in the presidential elections), and they witnessed the extra security measures employed by governments made even more insecure by public anger.

Mistrust of American intentions is evident in Iraq, where a majority, especially among Shi'ites and Kurds, are pleased with the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's government. Even among these groups there is little faith in what drives American policy. Polls conducted in 2006 show that most Iraqis, including a majority of Shi'ites, support attacks on American forces (61%, including 92% of Sunnis, 62% of Shi'ites and 15% of Kurds), want US troops to fully withdraw (71%), and most (78%) believe that the United States *won't* pull out even if asked by the Iraqi government.[3]

Iraq has become a prism through which a majority of Arabs see the United States and the world. In 2005, asked to name the two states which constituted the greatest threat to them, most Arabs identified the United States (69%) and Israel (72%), while Britain was ranked a distant third with 12%. Even though Tehran obviously benefited from the Iraq war, only 3% of Arabs polled identified Iran as a central threat. French President Jacques Chirac was the most popular world leader, named by 18%, largely because of his opposition to the Iraq War, with Saddam Hussein second at 4%. Sharon and Bush were the most disliked (50% and 32% respectively), followed by British Prime Minister Tony Blair as a distant third at 2%.[4]

The popular fixation on the American 'threat' in Iraq led to significant benefits for Iran on the level of Arab public opinion, even as governments became more concerned about rising Iranian power. Despite the focus on sectarianism in Iraq, with a Shia-dominated government, many of whose leaders have had

good relations with Iran, attitudes about aspects of Iranian power are surprising. In 2005 a plurality (41%) of Arabs said they believed that Iran was trying to develop nuclear weapons, yet a majority (63%) did not support international pressure on Iran to halt its programme.[5] An unscientific survey in May 2006 indicated that 73% did not believe that Iran's nuclear programme constituted a threat to neighbouring countries.[6]

Arab governments, especially in the Persian Gulf region, remain concerned about rising Iranian influence and worried about the intensifying Shia–Sunni divide. If America goes to war with Iran, many are not in a position to say no. But even those governments are more concerned that a war with Iran would create more instability, which would add to Iraq's troubles. The UAE, Qatar and Bahrain, too, are concentrated in cities on the Gulf within easy range of Iran's weapons. They would lose much from a new war.

Terrorism, al-Qaeda, and recent political trends

One result of the Iraq War has been that al-Qaeda – and similarly minded militant globalist Islamist groups – have taken root in a country where they had little influence before the war. Whether or not continued anarchy in Iraq will provide the organisation with the kind of home it found in Afghanistan is subject to debate, but there can be little doubt it has been far more active in the Middle East broadly. Its ability to draw recruits into Iraq has been demonstrated, and a leaked US government report and a report by the British House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee have found that terrorism has increased due to the Iraq War.[7]

It would be a mistake, however, to see in al-Qaeda a movement on the march. Although it remains a threat and terrorism has increased, the organisation has failed to attract support for its Taliban-like agenda, despite the Muslim public's anger with the United States.

Al-Qaeda is not a movement on the march

The group has not given up on its original goal. In an attempt to exploit the popularity of Hizbullah during the 2006 Hizbullah–Israeli conflict, al-Qaeda's Ayman Zawahiri asked Muslims to fight in Lebanon and Gaza until Islam reigned from Spain to Iraq. But he appeared to welcome Shi'ites into the fight, despite the fact that al-Qaeda operatives in Iraq continue to kill Shi'ites.

Al-Qaeda's failure to win many converts to its vision may seem to be paradoxical, given recent trends. Over the past two years, Islamist parties in the Arab world have scored big successes: the electoral victory of the Palestinian
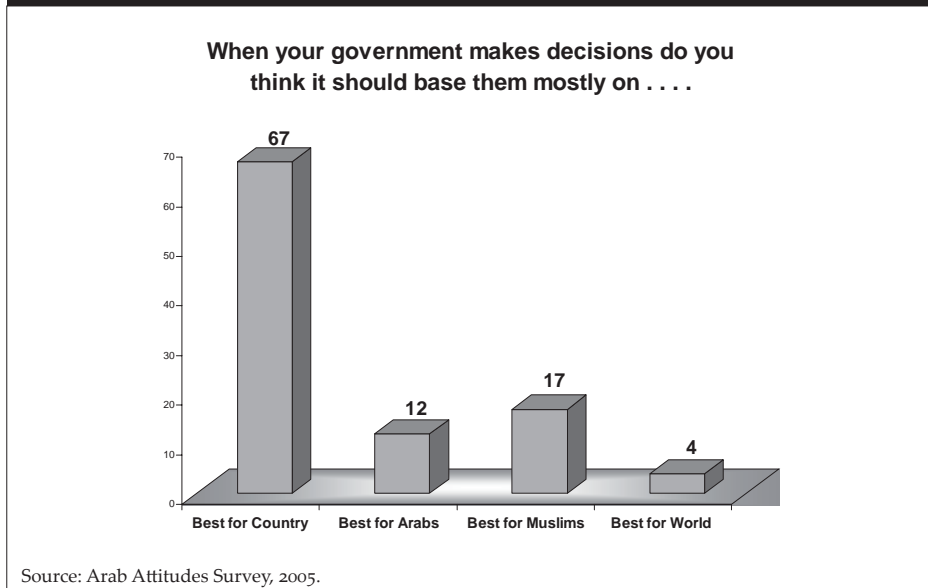
Hamas, the strong showing by the Muslim Brotherhood in the Egyptian elections, the victory of Islamist parties in Iraq, Hizbullah's success in winning seats in the legislature and cabinet in Lebanon, and the recent rise in the power of Islamists in Somalia.

But a closer look at the strained relations between al-Qaeda and those newly empowered Islamist groups and a review of recent polls provide evidence that neither Muslims' anger at the United States nor their support for more religious governments equals approval for a Muslim superstate ready to do battle with the West, or for a puritanical Taliban-like political order. There has been a decline in the number of people who identify themselves as Muslims first and a rise in the number of those identifying with their state. In 2004, a plurality of people identified themselves as Muslims first in four of six countries polled; in 2005, a plurality of people in four of the six countries identified themselves as citizens of their countries first.[8] Many Arabs probably identified themselves after the fall of Baghdad as Muslims first in part because the 'war on terror' and the Iraq War were seen to be aimed at weakening the Muslim world, not because they wanted to join together under one government with other Muslims or because they embraced al-Qaeda.

Although many said they wanted religion to play a larger role in politics and wanted their governments replaced, they appeared to be thinking more locally than globally. The majority in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon

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Figure 4. **Arab views of their governments' motivations**

When your government makes decisions do you think it should base them mostly on . . . .
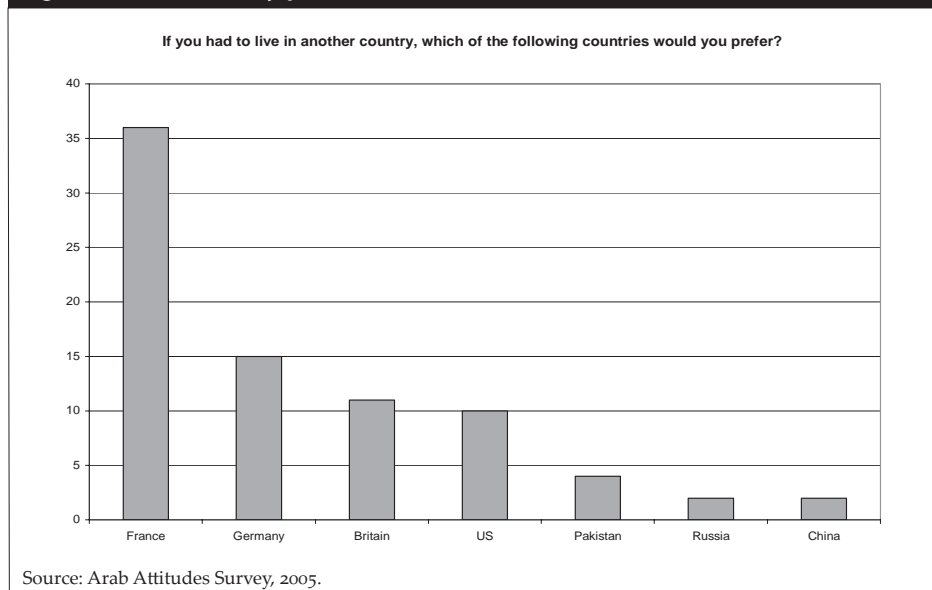

Source: Arab Attitudes Survey, 2005.

and the UAE said they wanted their government to do what's good for its citizens, not what's good for Muslims broadly (Figure 4).

Why this shift occurred is uncertain, but it is likely that people were terrified by both the anarchy that followed the dissolution of the Iraqi state and by the brutal tactics of al-Qaeda in Mesopotaomia under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who has since been killed by US forces. Fellow Muslims may have rooted for al-Zarqawi to defeat the United States, but they probably could not welcome his ruling over their children.

Even al-Qaeda's top leadership may have decided that al-Zarqawi was hurting the public perception of the group. In a letter in summer 2005 (never authenticated), Zawahiri advised al-Zarqawi and his devout Sunni supporters that the public beheadings and large-scale killings of Shi'ites would amount to 'action that the masses do not understand or approve'.[9]

Polls in 2006 also show little support for al-Qaeda's global goals. Only 6% of Arabs identify advocacy of a puritanical Islamic state as the aspect of al-Qaeda with which they most sympathise, while 7% identify the organisation's methods. A plurality identify al-Qaeda's fight with the United States as the aspect with which they most sympathise.[10] In Iraq, 94% of Iraqis (including 79% of Sunnis) reject al-Qaeda.[11] Confidence in Osama bin Laden eroded in Jordan, Indonesia, Morocco, Turkey and Lebanon – but not Pakistan – between 2003 and 2005, in some cases dramatically.[12]

Figure 5. **Arab country preferences**

If you had to live in another country, which of the following countries would you prefer?

Source: Arab Attitudes Survey, 2005.

Moreover, if al-Qaeda's imagined world is Talibanesque and virulently anti-Western, the vision is not shared by most in the Arab world. A majority of Arabs believe that women should have the right to work outside the home, either always (55%) or when economically needed (34%).[13] Although most prefer China and Pakistan as superpowers over the United States and Britain, the vast majority identify Western European countries – including Britain – and the United States, rather than Muslim Pakistan, as places where they want to live or have a family member study (Figure 5).

There is also increasing evidence that the recent political successes of Islamists in the Arab world have been primarily local phenomena, not an embrace of al-Qaeda's agenda. In fact, al-Qaeda has had a chilly reception from several groups. When Somalia's Islamists captured Mogadishu in June 2006, bin Laden issued an audiotape that gave advice, including urging them to resist the deployment of foreign troops there. But the Somalis did not appear to want his counsel. The former leader of the Somali Islamists, Sheikh Sharif Ahmed, said, 'Osama bin Laden is expressing his views like any other international figure. We are not concerned about it.'[14]

The recent political successes have been primarily local phenomena

When Sunni Hamas won the Palestinian legislative elections in January 2006, Arab headlines highlighted criticism by Zawahiri. The powerful al-Qaeda leader accused Hamas of adopting 'secularist' rules by participating in an election that was an indirect offshoot of the Oslo Accords, which al-Qaeda deems illegitimate. Hamas's reaction was fast and strong. Representatives advised al-Qaeda to stay out, adding that Hamas was focused on local issues and that its vision of Islam is different.

Al-Qaeda's relations with Hizbullah also have been troubled. Even before the 2006 Hizbullah–Israeli conflict, Hizbullah was popular in the Sunni Arab world, despite being Shia, because of the widely held perception that its attacks drove Israel out of Lebanon several years ago. Despite that background, or maybe partly because of it, al-Zarqawi – who led a bloody war against Iraq's Shi'ites – criticised the organisation and claimed it was shielding Israel from attacks by preventing his organisation from establishing bases in Lebanon. During the Hizbullah–Israeli conflict, some Arab commentators pointedly noted that Hizbullah has been far more effective, with a broader grassroots base, than al-Qaeda.

This does not diminish the grave danger that al-Qaeda continues to pose to the United States and its allies, nor does it suggest that the group will not continue to attract many recruits who embrace its agenda. Although still troubling, Arab attitudes toward al-Qaeda are less an endorsement of its agenda and more a reflection

of rooting against Washington. The Arab public fears al-Qaeda's world, but hopes the group will give America a black eye. This suggests a need for a differentiated policy toward the different militant Islamist groups in the Middle East.

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The Iraq War has significantly altered the balance of power in the Gulf region and within the Arab world. It has also widened the gap between governments and publics in the region, increased the popularity of non-state actors, and resulted in an increase in terrorism and enhancement of al-Qaeda's presence in the Arab world. It has had little impact on the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, and has not made al-Qaeda's agenda more popular. The rise of Islamic militant groups in the region appears to be more an effect of both the Iraq War and local circumstances, not a reflection of a sweeping Islamist globalist ideology.

The result is a political environment that will remain unstable for the foreseeable future, no matter what happens in Iraq. Even the most optimistic scenario leaves Iraq somewhat unstable and certainly too weak to be a major regional power any time soon. The imbalance of power in the Gulf will become more evident if and when American troops withdraw from Iraq, although the presence of US forces elsewhere in the Gulf will remain a major factor. Arab politics are highly dependent at present on two key states: Saudi Arabia and Egypt. For both states, but especially Egypt, the current policies are hard to sustain. There is a pervasive sense that American economic and military aid to Egypt binds Cairo to policies that, on the whole, have not advanced its relative influence in the region. Although substantial change is unlikely while the present rulers remain in power, the post-Mubarak era is likely to see a significant push for foreign-policy change – no matter who succeeds him.

In the end, much depends on what happens not only in Iraq, but also in the Arab–Israeli conflict, which remains a key prism through which Arabs view the world. Moreover, American confrontation with Iran could again re-shuffle the regional deck. But what the United States has learned in Iraq is that it can shuffle the deck, but it canot determine where the cards will fall.

Notes

[1]   Arab Attitudes Survey 2005, conducted jointly by the Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development, University of Maryland, and Zogby International, available online at http://www.bsos.umd.edu/sadat/pub/survey-2005.htm. The Arab Attitudes Survey has been conducted annually since 2002, and polls between 3,200 and 3,900 respondents in total from

Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. In 2005, 31% of respondents reported a divided Iraq as their biggest concern, followed by 28% concerned with continued US dominition even after the official transfer of power.

2   *Ibid*.
3   Program for International Public Attitudes, University of Maryland, *The Iraqi Public on the US Presence and the Future of Iraq – a WorldPublicOpinion. org Poll*, (PIPA, 27 September 2006), http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/ pipa/pdf/sep06/Iraq_Sep06_rpt.pdf.
4   Arab Attitudes Survey 2005.
5   *Ibid.*
6   Online al-Jazeera television poll, May 2006, among 36,000 Arabic speakers.
7   House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *Foreign Policy Aspects of the War Against Terrorism*, HC 573, available at http://www.publications. parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmselect/ cmfaff/573/573.pdf.

8   Arab Attitudes Surveys, 2004 and 2005. In 2004 pluralities of respondents identified primarily as Muslim in Jordan (33%), Morocco (48%), Saudi Arabia (56%) and the UAE (66%), but not Lebanon (3%) or Egypt (17%). In 2005 pluralities identified primarily as a citizen of their country in Egypt (64%), Jordan (40%) and Lebanon (65%), but not Saudi Arabia (23%), Morocco (41%) or the UAE (27%).
9   An English translation of the letter is available at http://www.globalsecurity. org/security/library/report/2005/ zawahiri-zarqawi-letter_9jul2005.htm.
10 Arab Attitudes Survey 2005.
11 PIPA, *The Iraqi Public*.
12 The Pew Global Attitudes Project, *Islamic Extremism: Common Concern for Muslim and Western Publics: 17-Nation Global Attitudes Survey* (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 14 July 2006), http://pewglobal.org/reports/ pdf/248.pdf.
13 Arab Attitudes Survey 2005.
14 Quoted by Reuters, 3 July 2006.