

Summary:
A Symposium on Iraq's Impact on the Future of
U.S. Foreign and Defense Policy
October 6, 2006

The war in Iraq is "a supremely serious American initiative whose outcome will have equally serious implications for the ability of the United States to act in the world and influence events in the world in the coming years," said **Steven Simon**, Council on Foreign Relations Hasib J. Sabbagh senior fellow for Middle Eastern studies, at a recent Council symposium, *Iraq's Impact on the Future of U.S. Foreign and Defense Policy*.

Though the symposium's four sessions focused on different facets of U.S. policy affected by the war, speakers continually considered current options for the United States in Iraq. Most participants identified three main choices: immediate U.S. withdrawal, gradual U.S. withdrawal, or the partition of Iraq into three autonomous regions that would then lead to a U.S. exit. But **Michael Gordon**, the *New York Times'* chief military correspondent, asked, "Why do you assume we get out?" He pointed to construction of permanent bases in Iraq as evidence that the United States will have a substantial military presence in the country for years to come.

Few participants found this suggestion palatable. **F. Gregory Gause III**, an associate professor of political science at the University of Vermont and moderator of the first session, characterized one popular analysis: "If the United States leaves Iraq, there's going to be a civil war, and if the United States stays in Iraq, there's going to be a civil war." **Toby Dodge**, director of the Gulf States Program at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), suggested the current level of U.S. involvement could ensure a "comparatively low level of disorder," allowing the Iraqi state to strengthen such that a U.S. withdrawal could take place. Most everyone seemed to agree with Dodge's comment that an immediate U.S. pullout is "the most obvious way to drive Iraq over the brink." But few seemed to agree with his suggestion that the current Iraqi government could offer any real stability. **Ronald Steel**, professor of international relations and history at the University of Southern California, suggested abandoning the U.S. commitment to democracy in Iraq and instead promoting an authoritarian government that would produce a stable state.

Many speakers felt partitioning Iraq is not a viable option. **Shibley Telhami**, the Anwar Sadat chair for peace and development at the University of Maryland,

explained that such a move would potentially anger Iraq's neighbors, not to mention most Iraqis. Even many of Iraq's Kurds—who stand to gain the most from partition—recognize it is not realistic, Telhami said. "Partition doesn't provide solutions," Steel said, citing as evidence the poor historical record of partition in places like South Asia and Palestine.

Simon suggested the United States might be able to gain some traction, and possibly facilitate its eventual withdrawal, by implementing an "ink spot" strategy. This approach calls for additional U.S. troops to help secure Baghdad, creating a security bubble in which the Iraqi government can begin to have a positive impact on people's lives, eventually winning their loyalty while marginalizing the sectarian militants responsible for much of the violence. Once Baghdad is secured in this way, the army could move on to the next city, thus slowly spreading the government's influence while pushing out forces of division. Dodge suggested the deployment of 12,000 additional troops to Baghdad in June was a sign that the United States is attempting this approach.

Other findings from the symposium included:

- **The Iraq war strengthens the jihad against the United States.** "Movements like the jihad thrive on powerful imagery of Muslims as victims and winners," Simon said. "Iraq has provided a plethora of these images," he said. Steel explained the Iraq war has highlighted how U.S. policies can incite terrorism, and predicted increasing calls for the United States to avoid entanglement in places where terrorist activities are provoked.
- **"Rogue states" have learned dangerous lessons from the U.S. invasion of Iraq.** One of these, according to **Steven E. Miller**, director of the International Security Program at Harvard's Belfer Center, is that American power can be combated in such a way as to neutralize many of the U.S. military's advantages. According to Steel, another, perhaps more dangerous, lesson is, "If you want to protect yourself from the United States, you'd better have nuclear weapons."
- **The Iraq war has strengthened Iran.** The greatest threats to Iran before the start of the "war on terror" were Saddam Hussein and the Afghan Taliban, Miller explained. Common enemies coupled with mutual interests in regional stability and the oil market could have presented an opportunity to improve relations with Tehran before the invasion of Iraq.

Instead, “Many of the same motives that drove us into Iraq exist in Iran,” and if the United States truly believes Iran to be a threat, it will attack, Miller said. He suggested a surgical strike on specific parts of Iran’s nuclear infrastructure could set the country’s nuclear program back five to ten years, though **Richard K. Betts**, CFR adjunct senior fellow, said such an outcome is not guaranteed. **Lawrence Freedman**, professor of war studies at King’s College, said the problem with a surgical strike is, “Like all surgery, it tends to be bloody, messy, and you end up going back for more.” He suggested the United States should adopt a containment policy toward such “rogue states” as Iran and North Korea, even if this means allowing some uncomfortable situations—like a nuclear-armed North Korea—to persist when a solution is not readily available.

- **The invasion of Iraq disrupted the regional balance of power.** The fall of Baghdad marked an erosion of Arab power and the rise of Iranian power. “There’s a hunger for assertion of [Arab] power,” Telhami said. And with Gulf States unable to stand up to the United States, “people are rallying behind non-state actors as the way to exercise power.” Fostering a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a way that empowers Palestinians could satisfy this hunger and help repair the U.S. image in the region. But security concerns in Iraq and Iran will make it difficult for the United States to focus on other parts of the Middle East.
- **The U.S. military does not have enough ground forces to successfully fight an insurgency in Iraq.** “The military is stretched incredibly thin,” Michael Gordon said. Effective Iraqi forces might help alleviate some stress, but they have yet to materialize. Increasing U.S. force size could also help, though the process could take two or three years. According to Michael Gordon, the shortfall in personnel is partly due to the Bush administration’s initial bias against nation-building and its decision to build light, high-tech units designed for major combat. Some panelists expressed optimism that the Department of Defense is writing a new counterinsurgency doctrine, but Gordon said this document will only codify things already being done.
- **The Iraq war will change the direction of U.S. foreign and defense policies.** Just as the “Vietnam syndrome” caused the United States to shy away from major foreign interventions, Steel predicted an “Iraq syndrome” in which the United States will be reluctant to use force, particularly in support of a moral cause. He suggested U.S. policy should

be more informed by realpolitik, and that unilateralism and democracy promotion will fall out of favor. As **Philip H. Gordon**, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, observed, “One of the ironies of our support for democracy is that the more democracies there are, the more public opinion matters.”

- **Europe is divided over how to deal with the United States.** Though the Iraq war was quite divisive among European nations, much of the European debate over Iraq was really the product of conflicting ideas of how to approach U.S. power, said **Dana H. Allin**, Carol Deane senior fellow at IISS. He suggested the emergence of new leaders in many European nations could help foster better transatlantic ties in the years to come.
- **Europe is united on most contemporary international issues.** Allin said European nations agree “philosophically” on such hot-button topics as climate change, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the roles of the United Nations and International Criminal Court. European nations have also come together—and often taken the lead—in addressing crises in Iran, Afghanistan, and Lebanon. As Philip H. Gordon pointed out, “We should be happy that they're doing what they're doing.”
- **The effect of the Iraq war in Asia has not been as great as in Europe.** **Phillip C. Saunders**, a senior research fellow at the National Defense University’s Institute for National Strategic Studies, explained that while public opinion of the United States is sagging in Asia, the war has not become a political issue for pro-U.S. Asian leaders. As Chinese power waxes, Beijing is content to see the United States preoccupied in the Middle East. Yet Saunders pointed out that much of U.S. naval and air power remains stationed in the Pacific, thus maintaining some balance to Chinese and North Korean ambitions in the region.

The Council on Foreign Relations hosted the symposium with the generous support of Rita Hauser and in collaboration with the International Institute for Strategic Studies. The panelists prepared papers for the symposium, which will be published in the Winter and Spring 2007 issues of *Survival* and posted on CFR.org.