POLITICAL ISLAM: CHALLENGES FOR U.S. POLICY

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The fifth annual conference on political Islam was held in Istanbul, Turkey, May 30-June 4, 2006. The meeting focused on recent political developments in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran, as well as the prospects for democratic governance in the Arab world. Participants were also briefed on the state of U.S.-Turkish relations and developments in the Turkish political and economic arenas.

The first day’s discussion, led by Samina Ahmed of the International Crisis Group, focused on Pakistan and the challenge posed by Islamists and the prospects for a return to democracy. However the discussion invariably covered the deteriorating situation in neighboring Afghanistan. The basic reality is that if one is to deal with the problem in Afghanistan, Pakistan’s cooperation is essential. In Pakistan the central problem is that while President Musharraf promises much and talks about a return to democracy, the radical Islamists operate quite freely there. How to deal with the radicals while nurturing a transition to democracy is the key to Pakistan’s future. Next year’s election in Pakistan will have far-reaching implications for the region. This is an unstable country of 160 million people with a nuclear weapons capability.

It is important to recognize that although Pakistan has a history of authoritarian regimes, some of its key institutions, including the press and the judiciary, are relatively independent. The majority of the country is inherently moderate and favors democratic governance. Herein lies the dilemma: Musharraf has no popular support among the people and therefore by default looks for alliances with the Islamists. If free and fair elections were held in Pakistan, Musharraf would undoubtedly lose. He is especially vulnerable in Balochistan, where the Taliban are hated and Musharraf and his entourage are seen to be in a covert alliance with the extremists.

In the discussion it was argued that, since 9/11, Musharraf has been an important ally in the war against terrorism. However, while this has been partly true, any Pakistani government would have supported the United States following 9/11, since the viability and the future of the state would have been at stake had its leaders not cooperated. Some participants questioned whether strong criticism of Musharraf is warranted. Surely he has brought competence to the government following the corruption of the Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif administrations. So if Pakistan returns to democratic rule, how can one be sure that the bad old days do not return? The counter to this argument is that the Musharraf regime has not been free of corruption and that there is no transparency or accountability from the current government which has a cabinet of over 60 members.

There was considerable discussion of the dangerous activities of A.Q. Khan and his illegal nuclear network and why, since Khan has become a national hero, the Musharraf govern-
ment has refused to allow the United States to interrogate him. There was agreement that Musharraf would not permit this to happen unless the United States, including Congress, puts much more pressure on him. It is clear that Musharraf and the military knew all about Khan’s activities.

The U.S. must make sure that Musharraf understands how important it is to hold free and fair elections in 2007. There are other “red lines” Musharraf must be made more aware of, especially proliferation dangers. The Pakistani military takes Washington seriously and therefore it has to respect and respond to greater U.S. pressure. Some queried that if Musharraf has been cooperating with Islamic extremists, why have there been several attempts on his life? One reason is that he has chased down Al Qaeda but not domestic terrorists. Clamping down on madrassas is a difficult task for the Musharraf government, given the bad state of public education in Pakistan and the fact that madrassas do provide an elementary education for those who could not receive it otherwise.

In the discussion of policy implications for the United States, some felt that it would be unwise to push Pakistan too hard on the issue of reform. The U.S. does not want a repeat of what happened to the Shah of Iran, who was criticized for his domestic politics only to be replaced with the Ayatollah Khomeini. Others argued that the U.S. should be clear about what is means by democratic reform and must learn to work with governments that fight extremists but are flawed. Some suggested that U.S. aid to Pakistan must be conditioned on extracting more cooperation on the A.Q. Khan issue. One problem is that the United States has been so preoccupied with Iraq that there is neither the time nor the resources to do what is necessary to achieve success in Afghanistan and reform in Pakistan.

The second day’s discussion on the Arab experience with Islamic parties and democracy was opened by Mona Yacoubian, Special Adviser, Muslim World Initiative at the U.S. Institute of Peace. The context of the discussion was the post-9/11 environment in the Arab world and the initial U.S. policy of elevating the issue of democratization to a strategic goal. The presumption of U.S. policy has been that there is a linkage between the behavior of autocratic Arab regimes and the radical extremism personified by Al Qaeda and its supporters. However, the reality is that while democratization remains a noble goal, Islamists and Islamic parties will be a key force in the Arab world for the foreseeable future as recent elections in Palestine, Egypt, and Morocco demonstrate. Islamist parties in the Arab world vary a great deal, but typically they undergo change over time; and some parties are beginning to show signs of political competence rather than religious extremism. There is no guarantee what they will do when they come to power. However, four factors can assuage their propensity for unilateralism: strong transparent institutions following the rule of law; the establishment of clear “red lines” about political behavior; the establishment of secular-Islamic alliances for reform; and an open political arena for genuine party competition.

Presently the political playing fields are not even in the Arab world, and the Islamists with their close ties to mosques and charities have natural advantages over secular reformist parties. This has several implications for American policy. The U.S. will have to engage directly with the moderate Islamists, reform must be inclusive of all political parties, and independent institutions must be nurtured and efforts made to bridge the gap between short-term interests that favor current autocratic regimes and long-term interests that require long-term reform.

The question of why Hamas succeeded in the Palestinian elections was raised. Hamas, though surprised by its victory, is a very sophisticated organization that made great use of modern communications, including the internet, as well as traditional access to mosques and charities. This raised the proposition as to whether the priority should be to build up free independent
institutions, such as the press and judiciary, before holding elections or accept the reality that canceling or postponing elections can be dangerous. The problem facing the moderate parties in the Arab world is that they do not have as disciplined a social base as the radicals. Furthermore, while arguments about independent institutions resonate with the intelligentsia both in the Middle East and the rest of the world, they resonate less with ordinary people in the Arab world who have more immediate social concerns.

The role of Sharia law and how it affects women was raised by a number of participants. The point was made that Islamic democracy does exist in a number of non-Arab Muslim countries, and issues such as the equality of women are universal human rights that transcend questions of faith. In the Arab world the relative conservatism of Islamists tends to increase the further east one goes, with the Gulf States being more resistant to freedoms than either Morocco or Algeria. Part of the problem is convincing Islamists that secular democracy does not equate with atheism. There is a rise in religious interest in a number of democracies including the United States and India (but not Western Europe). The reality is that Western secularism is equated with tolerance, not atheism.

In the discussion of the implications for U.S. policy, some argued that the United States has been too assertive in its push for democracy in the Arab world, when in reality there is no “starter kit” for democracy. For instance, the U.S. tends to see all madrassas as evil when they are mainly about education. The case for having elections in non-democratic countries does not address the concerns of the ordinary people who care about putting food on the table. In this regard, institution-building should be the priority. Others pointed out that, in those countries where theocracy has become the basis of government, the political process becomes corrosive and perverse. The example of the role of the church in Catholic Europe was cited. These countries now have some of the lowest religious beliefs in the world. Some argued that

the best way for the United States to influence autocratic regimes in the Middle East is by example—how the America manages its own affairs. This is preferable to going to the region to try to change its political environment to our liking. Nevertheless, the U.S. should not accept the view that “business as usual” is a preferred course to follow with the Arab regimes. Nurturing democracy is a long process that involves institution-building and checks and balances. There can be no overnight miracles.

The third day of discussion, introduced by James Dobbins, Director of the International Security and Defense Center at RAND, focused on the situation in Iraq. Dobbins stressed there are no good choices in Iraq even though some of the earlier mistakes in U.S. strategy have been partially corrected. The United States does not have enough troops on the ground to replicate the “seize, hold, and build tactics” that we used with some success in Vietnam and with greater success in Bosnia. Our economic and political leverage over the Iraqi government is diminished since the funds for reconstruction have been expended and the Iraqis now have their own freely-elected government. The Iraqi political class has become more sensitive to American interference and many of the players are more sectarian.

Since U.S. leverage is in the regional and diplomatic arenas, it is essential to work to achieve greater cooperation from Iraq’s powerful neighbors. And here the contrast with Afghanistan is noteworthy. Before invading Afghanistan in October 2001, the United States received cooperation from Russia, Uzbekistan, Iran, and India, as well as Pakistan, all of which had little choice but to lend support. Following the war, the neighbors collaborated with the U.S. at the Bonn Conference in December 2001 and worked out a mutual agreement for an interim Afghani government under Hamid Karzai. Iran was a key player in this cooperative venture. In the case of the war in Iraq, the United States paid much less attention to the wishes and views of the neighbors, adopting a
unilateralist perspective that implicitly threatened Iran and Syria, with an emphasis on building a secular democracy that also posed risks for the Arab monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia. It should therefore not be surprising that the neighbors were reluctant to accept such a vision for Iraq. Hence, if the U.S. wants to achieve a “buy in” with the neighbors, it needs to focus less on democracy and more on the themes of stability and power-sharing.

The discussion covered issues that are familiar territory to all participants since the debate over Iraq has now been underway for over three years. Most expressed concern about the dangers of a precipitous withdrawal from Iraq. Not even Iran wants the Americans to leave while Iraq remains unstable. But should there not be benchmarks for progress, especially by the Iraqi government? And if Iraq descends into full-scale civil war, should the U.S. then leave or back one of the parties and help them to victory? One problem in accepting a break-up of Iraq is the fact that Baghdad is home to Kurds, Shiites, and Sunnis, and contains 25% of Iraq’s population. Some neighbors, especially Turkey, have suspicions that the United States has already decided to build permanent military bases in Kurdistan. This fear is reinforced when one examines public opinion polls in Kurdistan that suggest 90% of the population do not want to be part of Iraq. Some believe that the Arab-Kurdish rift is not reconcilable and it will be difficult, if not impossible, to disarm the Kurdish militia, the Peshmerga. Some worried about the pressures to find deadlines and benchmarks while not paying enough attention to the need to “stay the course” and not rush the process. Others argued that the patience of the American people is the critical variable, and that continued American casualties will eventually be unacceptable to the country.

The question of U.S. casualties was further considered in the discussion on policy implications for the United States. For critics of the war the first important task is to identify blunders made and find a way to manage them. How can this be done without the notion that the U.S. is now engaged in salvaging a policy rather than Iraq itself? The counterargument was that the morale among U.S. forces remains high, but troops are unhappy when they hear constant criticisms of the war coming from home. The irony of the Vietnam War was that the very moment the U.S. started to win on the ground, it lost the resolve of the American people and then lost the war. Part of the problem facing the administration is that it has lost a great deal of public support for the war because of the belief that there has never been an honest admission that things have gone wrong. The administration is changing its policy but will not admit to mistakes. Another question concerns the huge sums of money expended on the war (it may reach a trillion dollars) and the opportunity costs of denying Afghanistan the support it needs at this critical time in its political evolution. Furthermore, the wisdom of the American people should not be dismissed. There would have never been a vote for the war in the Congress had the intelligence on the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) been correct.

But if the United States pulls out of Iraq, American credibility as a world power would be seriously doubted. Thus Iraq cannot be viewed on its own; it must be seen in the broader regional perspectives and vital U.S. interests that transcend the immediate security issues there. Others felt U.S. credibility is so low in the world already that withdrawing from Iraq could hardly make it worse. There was no consensus on several of these issues, even though the participants all praised the capabilities and resolve of the American forces.

Soli Ozel of Bilgi University in Istanbul provided an update of U.S.-Turkish relations. He noted that the most popular movie in Turkey this year is a nationalistic thriller called “The Valley of the Wolves.” It begins with the reenactment of a true event that happened soon after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003. A group of Turkish Special Forces operating in northern Iraq were apprehended by the U.S. military for reasons that are still murky. The
men were shackled and hooded and, though they were eventually released, there were widespread videos taken of their plight and the event had a profound impact on Turkish public opinion. The movie seeks redemption for Turkish honor and in the process the U.S. personnel are shown behaving in the most barbaric ways in Iraq, including actively harvesting body parts of dead Iraqis for transporting to clinics in the United States, Europe and Israel. The movie is profoundly anti-American and has been playing to sell-out audiences in Turkey. Last year, a bestselling novel “The Metal Storm” also depicted the United States as the enemy of the Turkish people. On this occasion, the plot was built around a U.S. invasion of Turkey to capture precious metals.

There are a number of explanations for this dramatic change in Turkish attitudes towards its key Cold War ally and friend. The war in Iraq is a major factor, but there are other deeper issues that reflect what some have called “an identity rift” in Turkey. Turkey’s historic support for the West and “westernism” is questioned by a growing number of Turks including some who support the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) of Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan. “Westernism” will become a political issue in the coming year as Turkey prepares for presidential elections in 2007. The president is elected by the Parliament, and there is a possibility that an ally of Erdogan could assume this important post. The presidency of Turkey has historically been the symbol of Turkish secularism and the rigid separation of religion from politics. If there were any erosion in this separation, the rift in Turkey could grow even wider; and there is a possibility that the army, the guardian of Atatürk’s secular state, could once again intervene in politics.

The second issue that is effecting relations with the United States is the rise of a more militant form of Turkish nationalism. In part, this results from renewed terrorism activity on the part of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the fear that Kurdish nationalism is on the rise. This has been reinforced by conspiracy theories that argue that the United States is nurturing an independent Kurdish state in Iraq, and that it will eventually become a key U.S. strategic ally in the region just like Israel. There is also a pervasive belief that the United States is hostile to most Islamic countries and that its war on terrorism is really a war against Islam. Talk of a possible U.S. confrontation with Iran merely reinforces these perceptions.

However, despite this highly emotional rhetoric, official U.S.-Turkish relations have improved in recent months. Condoleezza Rice’s visit to Turkey in late April went a long way to smooth over bad feelings following the meeting between the Turkish government and representatives of Hamas, a meeting strongly disapproved of by the United States. Furthermore, Turkey and the United States are cooperating on energy supplies. The Baku-Tbliși-Ceyhan pipeline has just opened, and by and large the Turkish government agrees with the United States that Turkey should become an energy access route for Central Asia that bypasses Russia. Turkey does not want to see a major confrontation with Iran but it shares U.S. concerns about an Iranian nuclear program and is playing a cooperative role as a go-between, urging the Iranian government to seek compromise. Meanwhile, the U.S. supports Turkey’s application for European Union membership and, although it may eventually fail, at this point in time the U.S. help is sought after and appreciated. What happens in Iraq will undoubtedly have the most lasting effect on U.S.-Turkish relations. If there is a complete breakdown in Iraq, and steps toward a more independent Kurdish region in the north emerge, the United States will have to work very closely with Turkey to make sure that it is not seen by the Turks as an unacceptable threat.

The last day’s discussion, led by Farhad Kazemi, Professor of Politics and Middle East Studies at New York University, focused on Iran. He stressed that Iran is a country of paradoxes that has evolved around four traditions: monarchy, democracy, Shiite religion, and sec-
ular leftism. Traditions also embrace a strong emphasis on leadership, with Mossadeq and Khomeini being prime examples. Close family ties and the tradition of patrimony, as well as the importance of local politics, also contribute to the character of the nation. One reason Iran is so difficult to understand is because of the fusion of pre-Islamic nationalism with modern Shia ideology. Since the revolution, a duality of public and private life and strict family codes have contributed to serious drug problems and prostitution, in part because the younger people in the country feel they are in a straight jacket. Concerning the economy, although the current regime has tried to move away from overwhelming dependency on oil revenues, the reality is that this dependency has been growing. Another complicating factor is the existence of two separate military establishments: the regular Iranian army and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). The latter serves as a praetorian guard for the Islamic Republic.

In terms of the contemporary political scene, the regime is certainly authoritarian but there are several different circles of power. Although elections are nominally democratic, the Guardian Council places major restrictions on candidates and therefore severely limits the choice open to the voters. The president of Iran has limited power. The Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khameni is the most powerful figure in the government. The current poor state of U.S.-Iranian relations has created significant tension among the Iranian elite with some arguing for a pragmatic accommodation with Washington while others, including the new president, have a more radical posture and do not favor compromise.

In the discussion the most immediate questions concerned the recent attempts by Iran’s president and the Bush Administration to engage in some sort of dialogue. President Ahmadinejad wrote a long, rambling letter to Bush. Some felt that, although it was incoherent in parts, it was a positive gesture and that the United States should respond. Others praised the decision of the Bush Administration to change its policy on non-engagement and join the Europeans in offering the Iranians a comprehensive proposal to settle the nuclear dispute. This could include many carrots if the Iranians agree to end their uranium enrichment program and allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) full access to their facilities and a full record of their past history on the nuclear front. On the question of considering the use of force against Iran if the nuclear agreement does not happen, one problem is the paucity of good intelligence on Iran’s nuclear activities and the location of its nuclear and missile facilities. Given the intelligence failures with respect to Iraq’s WMD programs, there will be great skepticism about U.S. claims concerning Iran’s nuclear program which will, in turn, make it more difficult to attract support for a robust policy including the use of force.

For a number of reasons some felt that the United States and Iran were on a collision course. Yet it must be remembered that the Iranians, while united that they have a right to nuclear technology, are more divided on the issue of nuclear weapons. The real priority of the Iranian government is to improve the economy to the benefit of ordinary citizens. After all, President Ahmadinejad won election in June 2005 on “bread issues,” not the bomb. Furthermore, most Iranians not directly associated with the regime remain pro-American, and there is far less anti-Semitism and anti-Israel sentiment amongst the ordinary people. The regime has made the question of Israel and the right to nuclear technology its key ideological issues, but there is less passion on these issues within the population.

The discussion on policy implications for the United States covered much ground. While some praised the new overtures of the Secretary of State, suggesting engagement with the Iranian government, others reminded about the strong support for Israel and the fact that America’s credibility as a world power depends on its ability to keep commitments to friends and allies. The U.S. must treat the Iranian nuclear issue as
one of extreme urgency. Waiting will only make matters worse. Yet if an aggressive policy that considers preemptive action against Iran is pursued, the United States will be acting unilaterally. Further, if the U.S. proceeds with plans to develop nuclear bunker-busting bombs, it will further undermine the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Some cautioned that a military strike against Iran would mean a full-scale war against Iran, and the American public has no stomach for such a confrontation in the wake of the Iraq crisis. Nevertheless, one participant noted that “you can achieve more with a gun and a smile than a smile alone.” Despite strong differences of opinion on how to deal with the Iranian nuclear threat, most participants agreed that the discussion had been open and enlightening and had made them more appreciative of the complexities of dealing with Iran and its Islamic government.
Pakistan’s military ruler, President Pervez Musharraf, has repeatedly pledged his intention to eliminate Islamic radicalism and transform Pakistan into a moderate polity. Radical Islamists, however, continue to thrive in a climate of virtual impunity. Extremists from radical Sunni Deobandi organizations, some with long-standing links to al Qaeda and its Taliban allies, have attacked Western installations and officials and are also waging a violent jihad against their sectarian rivals—Shia as well as Sunni. The military government did ban a number of radical Islamic groups in 2002 and once again in 2003, but most have simply reemerged under changed names and continue to operate freely. This contradiction in Musharraf’s rhetoric of “enlightened moderation” and his actions is rooted in the country’s crisis of governance.

Although the military has ruled the state, directly or indirectly, for most of its existence, there is popular support for and acceptance of parliamentary democracy. Lacking domestic legitimacy, like his military predecessors, Musharraf has been forced to fall back on a long-standing alliance between the military and the religious parties to counter his civilian opponents, the country’s mainstream moderate parties. The military-mullah alliance has empowered the politico-religious parties, and, in turn, their militant radical Islamist allies. The jihadis also serve another purpose—to fight the military’s proxy war against India, and to promote the military’s perceived interests in Afghanistan.

Now in his seventh year of office, despite political and constitutional manipulations and given popular support for democratic governance, the goals of regime legitimacy, and hence regime stability and consolidation, continue to elude President Musharraf. Lacking any other civilian constituency, he will likely become even more dependent on the Islamist parties to counter his democratic opposition. And the Islamist radicals will continue to benefit from state patronage, with their moderate rivals marginalized by the military. If democratic governance is restored, however, Pakistan will indeed revert to its moderate Muslim roots, with the mullahs cut to size in any free and fair election, and democratic moderate parties once again coming into their own.

**Backdrop**

Since Pakistan’s independence from colonial rule till now, democratic governance has eluded the state. Created overnight by a colonial master anxious to shed its troublesome Indian empire, Pakistan’s Muslim League leadership knew little about the people they now governed. Lacking a popular base, but reluctant to give up their newly acquired political power, they chose to put off the creation of constitutional, representative and participatory institutions, choosing instead to rely on an inherited civil-military bureaucracy. Contemptuous of the weak political leadership, the civil-military
bureaucracy soon grabbed power, ruling from behind the scenes until 1958, when the military substituted indirect control for direct rule.

Facing demands for democratic governance, and popular resistance in the multi-ethnic, multi-regional state against centralized authoritarian rule, military rulers such General Ayub Khan and General Yahya Khan relied on cooperation and coercion to offset domestic dissent. That dissent assumed the shape of a mass movement in the 1960s. When the military refused to recognize the result of Pakistan’s first general elections (1970) and resorted to indiscriminate force, an all-out civil war led to the secession of Pakistan’s eastern wing. It was during this tumultuous period that the military’s alliance with the mullahs first appeared, when Islamist vigilante groups were unleashed on Bengali civilians, agitating for self-rule.

In truncated Pakistan, religious radicals were soon sidelined and internal tensions subsided as elected political leaders joined hands to help reconstruct a new, constitutional and democratic, parliamentary, federal framework of governance through the 1973 constitution. With democratic avenues for bargaining and competition, ethnic tensions also subsided but rose again when Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto (1971-1977) chose to overlook democratic norms and to neglect democratic governance. As domestic dissent increased, Bhutto also unwisely chose to depend on the army to enforce order, giving an ambitious military high command an opportunity to once again seize power.

It was under Pakistan’s third military rule, General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988) that the military openly acknowledged the Islamists as their chosen civilian partners. Facing domestic opposition for the restoration of democracy, Zia attempted to justify military rule on the grounds of religion, with his Islamisation agenda including the creation of a parallel system of legislation and judiciary, empowering Islamist radicals who had failed thus far to make any inroads against their secular rivals. Preferring the Sunni Deobandi parties to their moderate sectarian rivals, Zia made them his partner of choice in the Afghan jihad. With Sunni extremists acquiring access to fiscal resources and weapons, the end result was the violent sectarian violence that plagues Pakistan today.

Zia’s sudden demise and the military’s subsequent decision to hand over power to civilian hands, giving in to demands for democratic rule, did not translate into real change since the high command continued to intervene in domestic politics. Two elected governments, led first by Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, heading a centre-left party, the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), and then by Nawaz Sharif, heading a centre-right party, the Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML-N) were dismissed before they had completed their full terms of office.

In their second terms of elected office, both leaders decided to accept the military’s external preferences without question, including its backing for Sunni Afghan Pashtun extremists, which culminated in support for the Taliban, who had emerged out of Deobandi madrasas in Pakistan’s Balochistan and Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP). The military’s support for the Afghan Islamic extremists also extended to their Pakistani counterparts as it launched another proxy war, this time against India in Kashmir. Because many of the military’s jihadists were recruited from Pakistani Deobandi madrasas, these religious seminaries flourished. And as the Deobandi extremists thrived with state patronage, they also looked inwards, engaging in a violent domestic jihad against their Shia foes. When civilian governments, aware of the dangers posed to the polity by radical Islam, tried to take action, with Bhutto’s second government trying to rein in the jihadi madrasas and Sharif’s second government attempting to bring Sunni terrorists to book, they were thwarted by the military, which protected its anti-Indian jihadi cadre.

Yet even these weak and hamstrung elected governments succeeded in slowing down the jihadi advance. As their constituencies expanded, those of the Islamists contracted. Motivated also by the need to meet their constituents’
needs for public service and a stable economy, civilian governments, centre right and left alike, also attempted to mend their fences with India only to face an obstructionist military. The path of rapprochement was supported by the Pakistani public and political opinion but came undone when the military, headed by Army Chief Pervez Musharraf, spiked Sharif’s attempts at rapprochement by launching a military operation, backed by jihadis, across the Line of Control. The ensuing conflict almost provoked an all out war between the two nuclear-armed neighbors, prevented by external, particularly U.S. intervention, but it did lead to Nawaz’s dismissal by General Musharraf who imposed military rule in October 1999.

As in the past, the military justified the ouster of an elected government on the grounds of civilian incompetence, misgovernance and corruption. Musharraf also denied that the military had political ambitions, emphasizing that he had only one intention: to restore democracy. As in the past too, these justifications failed to legitimize military rule. Lacking domestic legitimacy, and also ostracized and isolated by the international community, General Musharraf would have been forced to transfer power to civilian hands had September 11th not changed his fortunes.

Islamists Under Musharraf

Because Pakistan joined the U.S.-led war against international terrorism, abandoning its Taliban allies and cooperating in the battle against al Qaeda, General Musharraf was transformed from an international pariah into one of the closest and most desirable of allies for the United States and much of the Western industrialized world. External support for democracy too was put on hold. Sanctions, such as those imposed by the U.S. after the military coup, were waived and international pressure on the military to restore democracy was eased. On the contrary, the United States and others have poured in billions of dollars in grants and loans, helping the military to entrench its hold over the state.

To retain international support, Musharraf appears to have successfully convinced important external players that he, and his military, is the sole bulwark against a radical Islamist takeover of the nuclear-armed state. Preaching “enlightened moderation,” the General has committed himself to containing religious radicalism and dismantling jihadi networks and thereby transforming Pakistan into a moderate Muslim state. While the U.S. and other Western actors continue to praise Musharraf as a key ally in the war against terrorism, he is playing a dangerous game: retaining international support by targeting foreign terrorists but failing to take action against their equally dangerous Pakistani partners. His institution’s preferences and interests determine his policy choices, like those of his military predecessors.

The beneficiary of external largesse and benefiting also from more than half a decade of absolute power, the military, led by Musharraf, is also least inclined to restore democracy. Since the only threat to continued military rule comes from the two national level moderate parties, led by Bhutto and Sharif, both leaders have been forced into exile, the former facing charges of corruption and threatened with arrest, the latter exiled after his conviction on charges of attempting to subvert the military. While Musharraf has systematically weakened and even attempted to break the two mainstream national pro-democracy parties, as well as moderate regional parties, just like General Zia, his chosen civilian partners are jihadi and pro-Taliban parties.

Because the mainstream pro-democracy parties, particularly the PPP and the PML-N and their allies in the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy are perceived, and rightly so, as the main threat to regime stability and consolidation, General Musharraf has revitalized the long standing alliance between the military and the mullahs, represented by the six party religious alliance, the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA). This alliance relationship has paid dividends to both parties.

It was with the military’s support that the MMA
swept to power in the NWFP in the 2002 national elections and formed a government in alliance with Musharraf’s Muslim League (PML-Q) in Balochistan. The MMA supported Musharraf’s controversial constitutional amendment, the 17th amendment, which transferred power from the prime minister and parliament in a parliamentary democracy to the president, the symbolic head of the federation. It was with the MMA’s support that Musharraf obtained parliamentary sanction for his retention of the dual roles of president and army chief. In return, the Islamist parties remain the beneficiaries of state support and the rewards continue to this day as Musharraf backtracks on every pledge made to his Western partners in the war on terror.

**Curbing Extremism**

After September 11th, Musharraf banned eight jihadi and sectarian organizations, freezing their funds and arresting thousands of activists. The attacks on the Indian parliament in December 2001 and in London in 2005 led to similar drives. But after each round, most detainees were released. And most jihadi organizations have been allowed to reemerge under changed names, with the same leaders, their infrastructure and organizational capacity intact and their sources of funding unmonitored. Sporadic crackdowns on jihadi publications are also soon reversed. Al Rasheed Trust continues to print and sell its jihadi publications. Jihadi messages are also easily available on audio and videotapes.

With the military’s support, jihadi groups, banned by the government and on the UN Security Council’s sanctioned list, are operating, under changed names or through front organizations, in earthquake relief efforts. These include Jaish-e-Mohammad’s front organization Al-Rehmat Trust, Jamaat-ud-Dawa, the renamed Lashkar-e-Tayyaba, and Al Rasheed Trust. This proves that Musharraf has done little to dismantle their infrastructure and to freeze their sources of funding; and that the military still believes that the jihadists are useful for its Afghan and Kashmir policies.

Fazlur Rehman’s Jamaat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F) and the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI), the two dominant parties in the MMA, are in partnership with Musharraf’s ruling Muslim League in Balochistan and are the general’s supporters in parliament. While the JUI is staunchly pro-Taliban, a number of senior al Qaeda leaders, including Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, have been arrested from the homes of JI activists.

To appease his MMA allies, particularly the JUI, with its vast chain of madrasas in the NWFP and Balochistan’s Pashtun belt, Musharraf has put madrasa reform on the backburner. All that has been done so far is to allow madrasas to register and hence to gain legal status and access to state and donor funding by removing curbs imposed by the Benazir Bhutto government on madrasa registration under a 19th century law, the Societies Registration Act. Slightly modified, the act does not reform the sectarian and jihadi content of madrasa curriculum or monitor their finances. Only a small number of madrasas have direct links to terrorist or sectarian extremists. But unless their curriculum is reformed, based as they are on sectarian identities, most madrasas will continue to promote religious intolerance and hatred. Most significantly, jihadi madrasas, such as the Lashkar’s Muresk complex, linked to the London bombers, continue to operate freely, providing recruits for domestic and regional jihads.

Since Pakistani sectarian organizations, many with close links to al Qaeda, continue to flourish, religious sectarianism has become the principle source of terrorist activity in the country. In 2004, 44 Shias were killed in one incident in Balochistan; in 2005, 46 were killed in a sectarian attack in the Punjab; and in April 2006, 49 Bareli Sunnis were killed in an attack, most likely conducted by their Deobandi sectarian rivals, in Karachi, Sindh’s capital.

**Warning Signals**

By supporting the religious parties and through a systematic onslaught on the mainstream national-level parties, the military is fol-
lowing a dangerous course. Ethnic conflict has also escalated because of the military’s political engineering that excludes political actors who are considered undesirable and others rewarded for services rendered. The military’s continued political dominance and thus preferential access to the state’s resources, as well as its propensity to use force to crush democratic demands, has fueled ethnic conflict and alienation. In Balochistan, for instance, where the military is attempting to crush the anti-Taliban and moderate Baloch parties, a low level insurgency has the potential of escalating province wide. Using divide and rule strategies to curb Baloch dissent, the military is likely to increase its reliance on the pro-Taliban, predominantly Pashtun JUI against the anti-Taliban Baloch, further empowering the Islamist radicals and threatening Afghan security.

While General Musharraf has stressed, time and again, the need to eradicate terrorism by addressing its root causes, including poverty and political alienation, internal and external threats are used to justify an ever-increasing defense burden. This disproportionate expenditure on defense and neglect of human development has widened the gap between the rich and the poor, contributing to widespread poverty. Rising unemployment is adding to the sea of alienated and unemployed youth, potential recruits for the jihadists. Elected governments might not have performed much better, but they were limited in their ability to transform the state’s economic priorities by an overbearing military establishment. If democratic institutions do take root, elected politicians are far more likely to shape their policies in accordance with constituent demands, conscious that they will have to face the ballot box.

Choosing Democracy

The longer the democratic transition is delayed, the more likely that the military’s domestic and external priorities will further weaken a fragile state. The United States has urged Musharraf to restore democracy but the democratic transition still appears less important than Musharraf’s cooperation in the war against al Qaeda. Some believe, in the U.S. and elsewhere in the West, that there is no viable alternative to Musharraf and his military. If power were transferred to a weak and corrupt civilian government, they fear, it would fail to deliver good governance or tackle the scourge of Islamic radicalism.

The reality is far different. Musharraf’s military government has not made good on its pledges to contain radical Islam. On the contrary, it supports religious parties that have links to the Taliban who operate with impunity from Pakistani territory, targeting U.S. and NATO troops. It has certainly not reined in the Pakistani jihadi networks, many of which have links to al Qaeda. As post-earthquake developments reveal, their infrastructure remains intact, and there are no curbs on their source of funding or recruitment.

U.S. and European policymakers should press the military to withdraw from power. The only viable alternative to military rule is a democratic political order that is perceived as legitimate by the Pakistani people. Corruption, military or civil, can only be curbed if there is rule of law, which would buttress good governance, but that is only possible under a democratic order. Ethnic tensions would also subside, once there are democratic avenues for expressing dissent; and political stability would promote stable economic growth. Above all, Islamic radicals would find themselves marginalized in the event of free and fair elections, which are always the first step towards a democratic transition. In a free and fair contest, the victors would be the moderate, national-level and regional parties who are sympathetic to U.S. regional and global goals and who have their own reasons to curb the power and influence of extremist groups. Lacking robust international support, moderate opposition parties are struggling to survive. They alone are the most effective safeguard against the religious lobby’s manifestly anti-Western agenda but only if allowed to function freely in a democratic environment.

General elections are due in 2007. If the con-
test is truly free and fair, either the moderate and pro-Western PPP or Muslim League (Nawaz) will form the next government. The mullahs, represented by the MMA, will be cut down to size, with their electoral strength reflecting their past performance. But Musharraf has no intention of handing over power to his main civilian adversaries. With his presidential term also coming to an end in 2007, he is far more likely, absent international pressure, to rig the fourth election on his watch.5

The U.S. must insist that the 2007 elections meet international standards. This means an independent election commission, appointed with the consensus of opposition parties; allowing all political leaders, including those in exile, to run for office; an end to gerrymandering and pre-poll restrictions on candidates; and an end to intimidation by state security agencies. Musharraf must meet his promise of stepping down as army chief. The international community, including the United States, must also aggressively monitor before, during and after the polls, and make military and non-humanitarian assistance conditional on President Musharraf’s meeting clearly defined benchmarks for the elections.

1 By official estimates, 96 per cent of Pakistan’s population is Muslim, with a 20 per cent Shia minority. Sunnis are, in turn, divided mainly into two main sects, the Barelvis, who follow Sufi orders, and the more orthodox Deobandis.

2 By some accounts, the military killed almost a million Bengali civilians.

3 Sixty-five per cent of all madrasas are run by two JUI factions.

4 Bordering on Afghanistan and Iran, with a 780-kilometre coastline, Balochistan covers 43 per cent of Pakistan’s territory and has around 5% of its population. While it provides the country with almost 40% of its energy needs, it remains the poorest of the four federating units. Baloch parties are agitating for political, social, and economic rights within a democratic framework.

5 Every poll held under Musharraf was deeply flawed, including the presidential referendum and national elections in 2002, and local polls held in 2001-2002 and 2005.
In the immediate aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks, international pressure mounted for political reform in the Middle East, particularly the Arab world. For its part, the Bush administration elevated democracy promotion in the Middle East to a key strategic priority. The administration’s policy sprung from the belief that strong linkages exist between the Middle East’s long history of autocratic rule and the emergence of a transnational terrorist movement with its roots in many of those same countries. Numerous independent analyses likewise have suggested that the Middle East’s dysfunctional, autocratic political systems are helping to breed Islamist extremism.

An Islamist “Tsunami”

Yet, despite the critical importance assigned to political opening in the Middle East, a number of factors, including ongoing turmoil in Iraq and competing priorities of the Global War on Terror (GWOT), have intervened to complicate U.S. democracy promotion efforts. In particular, various Islamist parties’ strong showings in recent elections have added a new layer of complexity to U.S. democracy promotion efforts in the Arab world. Indeed, across the region, Islamist parties and organizations boast strong grassroots support. These groups represent a broad spectrum of views, ranging from moderate parties that have renounced violence to well-established terrorist organizations.

Hamas’ resounding victory in the January 25, 2006 Palestinian elections, winning 74 out of 132 seats, is perhaps the most dramatic example of the power Islamists wield at the ballot box. Deemed a terrorist organization by the United States and Europe, the party’s rise to power has significantly complicated U.S. policy toward the Palestinian Authority as well as efforts to help resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Similar concerns characterize Hizballah’s role in Lebanon. The terrorist organization won 14 of 128 seats in the Lebanese parliament in the June 2005 elections, the first independent vote in thirty years following the withdrawal of Syrian troops. While Hizballah’s parliamentary presence is far outstripped by an anti-Syrian opposition bloc, the organization still holds significant sway over Lebanese politics and is the only political party to maintain an armed militia.

In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) won 88 of 454 seats during the 2005 parliamentary elections, winning 61 percent of the seats it contested. The MB now holds the largest opposition bloc in parliament, with 20 percent of the seats. (Secular opposition parties won only 3.5 percent of the seats, while independents fared only slightly better with 6.5 percent.) Similarly, the Jordanian Islamic Action Front (IAF), a Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, has the largest presence of any political party in the Jordanian parliament, with 17 out of 110 seats. The IAF is anticipated to gain even more power via this year’s municipal elections and in the 2007 parliamentary elections.
In North Africa, the Party for Justice and Development (PJD) stands as the most powerful grassroots opposition force in Morocco. It currently holds 42 of 325 seats in parliament, the third largest bloc. Assuming the PJD is allowed to compete freely in the upcoming 2007 parliamentary elections, the party is expected to win even more seats, if not an outright majority.

Finally, in the Gulf, Islamist parties have also made important inroads in parliamentary politics. In Iraq, Islamist parties hold a majority (by some estimates, 65 percent) of seats following the December elections, while Islamist parties and organizations maintain appreciable influence in the Kuwaiti, Bahraini, and Yemeni parliaments.

Not surprisingly, therefore, U.S. policy makers are increasingly forced to address the key question of whether to engage Islamist parties and what role they envision for these parties in America’s democracy promotion strategy. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive of a successful policy of democracy promotion in the Arab world that does not address specifically the role of Islamist parties. To date, however, U.S. policy largely has steered clear of addressing directly the role of Islamist parties. The Islamist “tsunami” has even led some to question whether the U.S. should engage in any sort of democracy promotion in the region.

Engaging Islamists

Once a taboo topic, relegated to closed door meetings and “eyes only” policy memos, the role of Islamist parties is now openly debated in foreign policy circles, where some believe the integration of moderate Islamists holds the key to successful democratic opening. A task force sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations addressed the issue as part of a longer report on Arab democracy. The Task Force recommended that Washington support the political participation of moderate Islamists who are “committed to abide by the rules and norms of the democratic process.”

Before debating the merits and drawbacks of engaging Islamists in the Arab world, it is useful to consider an earlier case: the aborted Algerian elections of December 1991. At that time, Algeria’s political opening was unparalleled in the Arab world. A legal Islamist party, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) stood on the verge of gaining a commanding majority of the national parliament through free and fair elections. Instead, the army intervened, canceling the elections and banning the FIS. Moderates in the movement were discredited and quickly eclipsed by radicals who took up arms in a brutal insurgency that was to last more than a decade and cost more than 100,000 lives. No one knows what would have happened if the election results had been upheld, but in many ways the tensions in Algeria’s drama at that time encapsulate the very questions we are considering today.

In the most simplified terms, these tensions reduce to the question of whether Islamists who renounce violence and profess a willingness to play by the rules are genuine or whether allowing them to compete freely in the political arena will empower illiberal, antidemocratic forces. Does the adage, “One man, one vote, one time”—a phrase first made popular at the outset of the Algerian elections—apply?

Moderate Islamists throughout the region increasingly say the right things with respect to the need for democratic reforms and what those reforms should look like. For example, among its many demands, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s March 2004 Platform for Reform calls for universal suffrage, presidential term limits, and the right for both women and men to serve in parliament. The Brotherhood also calls for the restoration of basic freedoms and underscores its future vision of Egypt as a “democratic and constitutional parliamentary republic within the realm of Islamic principles.” It also has demanded the abolition of Egypt’s repressive Emergency Laws, the lifting of restrictions on political parties and associations, the strengthening of parliament and the creation of an independent judiciary.
Nonetheless, key questions arise as to whether the Muslim Brotherhood is genuine in its professed commitment to democratic ideals. Can they be trusted, or are these pronouncements merely tactical appeasements designed to pave their path to power? Are the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and other Islamist parties like it, capable of a genuine evolution in their thinking? Ultimately, an assessment of whether such parties can evolve into democratic entities, and if so, whether their evolution can be facilitated by others, will be central to the broader question of what role moderate Islamist parties can play in democratic politics.

When trying to assess the potential for evolution within Islamist parties, it is essential to bear in mind that Islamist parties, like other political actors, are not static entities, but dynamic forces capable of change. Some Western analyses of these groups assume that Islamist groups are rigid, averse to pragmatism, and unwilling to moderate their positions on questions such as the imposition of shari’a law. However two key characteristics of Islamist parties must be considered. First, Islamist parties are not monolithic, but diverse and heterogeneous, covering a broad spectrum from moderate to violent. These groups’ positions on the application of shari’a, both in terms of the scope and timing of its role in defining societal norms, vary significantly. Second, these parties appear capable of change from within. They are first and foremost, political actors. Numerous examples attest to the ability of these groups to change and adapt to their circumstances. Indeed, their potential for evolution has been compared by some to that of the European Christian Democrats.

Factors for Success

Certainly, there are no guarantees in politics, and it is difficult to make a definitive judgment on the role of Islamist parties during political openings. Nonetheless, the presence of four key factors can help to assuage concerns that Islamist parties will exploit political openings to overturn nascent democracies.

- **Institution-building.** A well-established system of checks and balances undergirded by strong, transparent institutions that are accountable to the public and founded on the rule of law stands as the most important guarantee against Islamist forces coming to power and implementing anti-democratic rule. In this regard, one of the key lessons learned from the Algerian experience is that elections should be among the final steps of political opening, not the first. Building strong institutions fortified by constitutional amendments that distribute power equitably and insure checks on executive power will be crucial to any effort at political reform.

- **Establishing clear “red lines.”** Vali Nasr, from the Naval Postgraduate School, who addressed this conference last year, has underscored the importance of clearly established “red lines” that serve as democratic restraints (on both Islamists as well as ruling regimes) on how far various political actors can push their agendas. In this context, “red lines” should not be confused with the implementation of measures that are inherently anti-democratic, but rather clearly defined restraints on power applied equally to regimes and opposition movements. Nasr emphasized that reversals in reform have taken place in countries where no clear “red lines” have been established. Such “red lines” can be explicit, laid down in constitutions or national pacts, or they can be implicit. In an example of the latter, Morocco’s Justice and Development Party (PJD) opted to limit voluntarily the number of seats it contested in the 2003 elections. Its actions suggest the party’s respect for an implicit “red line” drawn by the monarchy in the wake of the May 2003 suicide bombings in Casablanca.

- **Formation of secular-Islamist reform alliances.** Alliance building between secular and Islamist opposition groups has begun to take root in some Arab countries,
including Yemen, Jordan, Morocco, Lebanon, and Egypt. In Yemen, for example, the “Joint Meeting of Opposition Parties” functions as an important forum for ongoing collaboration between the Islamist Islah Party and the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), an ardently secular party. Cooperation and dialogue between these two parties has yielded important gains in process-related areas, such as improving electoral laws. More broadly, two key non-government Arab reform initiatives, the March 2004 Beirut Summit and the June 2004 Doha Declaration, featured close cooperation by Islamist and secular reform advocates. While it is still too early to determine the impact of these alliances, coalition-building necessarily requires real compromise which could in turn lead to a genuine evolution in thinking. At a minimum, secular and opposition groups joining forces to pressure for greater political opening may accelerate the momentum for change and provide an effective counter-weight to ruling regimes.

- **Opening political space to allow for genuine multi-party competition.** An open political arena, characterized by fierce competition for votes among parties, will further contribute to greater pragmatism on the part of moderate Islamist parties as they seek to win votes, gain influence, and garner popular appeal. The imperatives of political participation amidst real competition from viable secular parties with genuine popular appeal can be an important force for moderation among Islamist parties. Of course, it is essential that independent, secular parties be strengthened as an effective counterbalance.

### Implications for U.S. Policy

Finally, it is important to consider a number of key implications for U.S. policy:

- **Engage directly with moderate Islamists.** Given the Islamists’ strong popular appeal, the U.S. can no longer afford to call for democratic change in the region while ignoring one of its most potent political forces. Indeed, to be sustained and successful, reform efforts in the region must be inclusive, reaching out to all elements of society willing to “play by the rules.” The national political party institutes (the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI)) have worked consistently and quietly, behind the scenes to engage moderate Islamists across the Arab world. Their efforts have laid important groundwork by cementing relationships with key Islamist parties. The U.S. must continue and deepen its efforts to reach out to moderate Islamist politicians and activists, both in the region as well as on exchanges to the United States. In particular, exchanges should target both Islamist politicians, as well as representatives from the religious establishments of various Arab countries.

- **Enhanced political party training for both secular and moderate Islamist parties.** While NDI and IRI already have political party strengthening programs in place, intensified efforts must be made to train and bolster secular opposition parties as an effective counterbalance to powerful Islamist opposition parties. To date, secular opposition parties have had little success in attracting substantial grassroots support. These parties often are riven by internal divisions, and suffer from the same aging leadership, stagnation and lack of transparency that characterize ruling governments in the region. At the same time, moderate Islamist parties should not be excluded from such training opportunities. As mentioned above, it is critical that these actors be included in reform efforts and vested with a stake in democratic reform.

- **Support Islamist-secularist dialogues on reform.** In addition to accelerating and deepening political party training, greater funding should be allocated to support dia-
logue and other means of “bridging” reformers from Islamist and secular spheres. Fostering alliances for reform that bring secular and Islamist reformers together stands as a logical follow-on to working separately with Islamist and secular opposition parties. As well, moderate Islamists should also be included in multilateral fora such as the Democracy Assistance Dialogue which is part of the G-8’s Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative.

- **Greater emphasis on projects and programs that strengthen institutions and support the rule of law.** The push for free elections must be accompanied by commensurate support for institution building, particularly programs that aim to establish independent judiciaries, strengthen parliaments, and promote the rule of the law. Alongside institution building, it is essential for the United States to pressure Arab governments that maintain Emergency Laws (e.g., Egypt, Algeria, Syria) to lift these restrictions. Such restrictions, at times in place for decades, substantially undercut the rule of law and allow ruling regimes to operate with impunity. The lifting of Emergency Laws is particularly important in countries that are planning to hold elections, in order to ensure sufficient freedoms to competing political parties, the press, and key elements of civil society.

- **De-conflict contradictions between democracy promotion policies and the Global War on Terror.** U.S. policy toward political Islam is often caught between the conflicting demands of democracy promotion and the global war on terror. Regional regimes are often sent mixed messages. Security and intelligence cooperation from Arab governments is encouraged as part of the GWOT. Yet, crackdowns on suspected terrorists often result in human rights violations and an increase in repression. U.S. strategy must balance the needs of nurturing civil society and greater political opening while guarding against extremism.

To conclude, engaging moderate Islamists and supporting their inclusion in the political arena is critical to the region’s long-term stability. Islamist parties willing to “play by the rules,” renounce violence and assert support for democratic principles should be allowed to participate in politics. They must be given a stake and feel vested in the system. Such participation, in concert with strong institutions, clearly-identified “red lines,” healthy political competition and incentives for alliance building, could well be the beginning of a virtuous circle, where participation breeds greater moderation. The alternative—repression of moderate Islamist forces or their isolation—could well provoke the opposite, a vicious cycle of radicalization and violence.

1 The views expressed here are not those of USIP, which does not advocate specific policy positions.

2 A recent poll conducted by the International Republican Institute showed that the PJD could win 47 percent of the vote.

What to Do About Iraq?

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The United States has few good options in Iraq. The presence there of American troops incites resistance. Their absence could open the way for a broader civil war. In these circumstances, American policy makers continue to be left with the unhappy choice of either making things slowly worse by staying, or quickly worse by going.

President Bush has chosen the middle course, promising, on the one hand, to stay long enough to establish a representative Iraqi government capable of holding its own against the centrifugal forces threatening to break up the country, but also promising to draw down U.S. forces as quickly as Iraqi police and military units can be stood up. This policy has encountered criticism from both sides, some urging a more rapid, less conditioned withdrawal, others arguing for a more robust longer-term commitment.

Divergent Critiques

Those advocating accelerated withdrawal suggest that the early departure of American troops would encourage Iraq’s political leaders to apply themselves more seriously to the process of reconciling contending factions, suppressing the insurgency and governing the country. Perhaps. But experience suggests otherwise. If history is any guide, a state as badly divided and weakly governed as Iraq will, if left to its own devices, probably descend further into open civil war. And it will likely remain there for some time, the level of violence waxing and waning from one year to the next, until some outside power or group of powers intervenes to restore order. This has been the experience over the past couple of decades of Lebanon, Yugoslavia, the Congo, Cambodia, Mozambique, Angola, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Sudan and Somalia, to name a few of the most prominent examples of state failure.

If this analysis is correct, the options confronting American policy makers may be either 1) stay and stabilize Iraq now, 2) leave and come back later, possibly after millions of Iraqis have been killed or driven from their homes, or 3) leave, stay out, and cede the task of securing Iraq to others, most notably Iran and Turkey, both of whom would find it hard to avoid being drawn into the vacuum created by a collapse of the Iraqi state.

Those who advocate a more robust longer-term commitment in Iraq argue for shifts in American military strategy. One school urges adoption of lessons derived from the American pacification program in Vietnam. Another argues that the war in Iraq resembles more the ethnically based conflicts of the Balkans than the ideologically based insurgency in Indochina. The Vietnam school argues for a “hearts and minds” campaign focused on protecting the local populations, affording them better government and ultimately winning their cooperation in marginalizing violent extremists. The Balkans school rejects the “hearts and minds” objective, arguing that Iraqis are not fighting for good gov-
ernment, but for government dominated by their sectarian group. Both critiques tend to see the Kurdish and Shia militias as greater long-term threats to Iraqi unity than the less numerous Sunni insurgents and both therefore urge that the United States shift the weight of its operations from hunting down insurgents in the Sunni heartland toward establishing secure areas, initially in Baghdad and the Shia south.

There is much to be said for both these views. American troops are slowly relearning counterinsurgency techniques honed in Vietnam in the 1970s. Ethnic tensions in Iraq are reminiscent of those that led to the break up of Yugoslavia, and could have a similar result. Shia and Kurdish militias do present a growing threat, if not to U.S. forces, then certainly to the unity of Iraq. Some repositioning of U.S. and Iraqi forces to ensure greater control over the country’s center of gravity, Baghdad, where twenty percent of the population lives, and where the Shia, Kurd and Sunni communities are thoroughly intermixed, may well be desirable.

American concerns have naturally focused upon the Sunni extremists and their foreign allies because these are the only groups regularly targeting American forces. But Kurdish militia are engaged in ethnic cleansing designed to reestablish their dominance over the city of Kirkuk and the northern oil fields. Shia militia are organizing death squads and intimidating the Sunni population in mixed areas like Baghdad. All of the sectarian groups in Iraq have thus been resorting to terrorism to achieve their political purposes. This is not a war with the terrorists on one side and the Americans on the other. It is a three-cornered civil conflict with terrorists in all three corners, and the United States increasingly in the middle, doing its best to channel violent sectarian competition into more peaceful forms of political activity.

**Prospects for Iraqization**

After some false starts, the American efforts to recruit, train and equip Iraqi forces are bearing fruit. Iraqi army and, to a lesser degree, police units are taking functions over from American soldiers, and performing increasingly well. Iraqi soldiers and police have some advantages over Americans in waging a counterinsurgency campaign, specifically their greater access to the language and culture of the local population. These advantages may compensate for their comparative lack of firepower, defensive equipment, mobility and sustainability. On the other hand, to the extent that Iraqi police and army units themselves assume a sectarian guise, they may have an even greater difficulty than the Americans in winning the confidence of the population in mixed and Sunni areas of the country.

National Guard and police are recruited in the localities in which they serve, and thus reflect in their makeup the locally dominant sect, whether Kurd, Shia or Sunni. Only the regular army is recruited on a national basis and organized into fully multiethnic units. This means that only about one third of Iraqi national security forces are ethnically mixed and fully national in makeup. The most recent Iraqi elections reinforced the coincidence between the country’s political and militia leaderships. This might be interpreted as a good sign; it is arguably better to have militia leaders, even highly irresponsible ones such as Moqtader Sadr, inside the political process than outside it. Yet the presence of militia leaders in the political game greatly raises its stakes, allowing all sides to believe that they have other options if unable to achieve their objectives peacefully.

If, in the end, Iraqi national police and army units prove unable to secure their country, it will not be because they are inadequately trained or equipped, but because they are not working for a government capable of inspiring them, paying them regularly, and using them wisely. At this point, therefore, the critical variable of success in Iraq is no longer the pace at which the U.S. can train and deploy new Iraqi security forces, but the quality of Iraq’s next government. The last Iraqi government was widely perceived as incompetent, divided, corrupt, and abusive. If the next government does
not represent a marked improvement, even the best-equipped and trained Iraqi army will not suffice to hold the country together.

Obstacles to Multilateralization

Critics of the Administration have regularly called for greater internationalization of American nation building efforts in Iraq, urging increased involvement of the UN, NATO, the European Union and neighboring governments. This is, of course, easier said than done. The optimal time to have multilateralized Iraq’s reconstruction was in the immediate aftermath of the invasion. At that moment American prestige was high, no significant resistance had emerged, and the world still assumed that weapons of mass destruction (WMD) would be found. In those early months, however, Americans tended to see Iraq more as a prize won than a burden acquired. Steps were taken to ban French, German and Russian companies from reconstruction contracts. President Bush rebuffed Prime Minister Blair’s efforts to craft a central role for the UN. The United States chose to formally designate itself as an occupying power, and to establish as the legal basis for its presence in Iraq the laws of armed conflict, rather than the United Nations charter. Perhaps most importantly, the United States made no effort during those early months to create, as it had earlier with Bosnia and Afghanistan, a regional framework designed to involve Iraq’s neighbors in decisions regarding its future.

Holding together ethnically divided societies is hardly a new or unfamiliar task. Similar efforts were required to end the war in Bosnia in the mid 1990s, and to install a successor to the Taleban regime in Afghanistan in late 2001. Iraq was not a more divided society than Bosnia and Afghanistan. Both of those states were in the midst of open, long-running civil wars when the United States stepped in. What makes Iraq different and particularly difficult is that in this case, for the first time, the United States has tried to pull a society back together without securing the cooperation, however grudging, of its neighbors.

In the mid 1990s NATO nations discovered that they could not put Bosnia back together without the active cooperation of Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic and Croatian President Franjo Tudjman, the two men personally responsible for the genocide NATO was trying to stop. In late 2001, the United States recognized that it could not install a broadly-based successor regime to the Taleban without the active support of those nations that had been tearing Afghanistan apart for several decades.

In the Balkans, the United States and its allies created the “Peace Implementation Council,” which accorded all of Bosnia’s neighbors a role in overseeing its transformation. With Afghanistan, the United Nations established the “six plus two” forum, bringing together all of that country’s neighbors, along with the United States and Russia. It was this group that formally launched the process of forming a successor regime to the Taleban. Its principal members’ governments all participated actively in helping choose and install that government.

Democratization vs. Stabilization

In contrast to its earlier approach to nation building in Afghanistan, the Administration’s characterization of its objectives in Iraq has precluded any meaningful regional cooperation. The United States did not invade Afghanistan in order to remake that country into a model for Central Asia, nor did Washington state its intention to subsequently promote the democratization of all neighboring regimes. Had Washington announced such an intention, it would never have secured the support of Russia, Iran, Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan for the war, nor would it have had their help in shaping the subsequent peace. The stated American goal was to ensure that Afghanistan never again became a launch pad for global terrorism. This was an objective all its neighbors could and did buy into.

In contrast, the United States did invade Iraq with the stated intention of making that state into a model for the Middle East, and with
the promise that once this was achieved, the United States would then proceed to promote similar transformations in the political systems of all Iraq’s neighbors. This was not a vision any of those regimes was likely to embrace. Nor have they.

In weak, divided societies local claimants to power always seek external sponsors. Faced with a failing state, neighboring governments always seek to develop local clientele, and provide backing to one or another claimant to power. Much as one may regret and deplore such activity, neighbors can neither be safely ignored, nor effectively barred from exercising their considerable influence. It has always proved wise, therefore, to find ways to engage them constructively.

None of Iraq’s neighbors can match American influence in Baghdad, but several have the capacity to undermine American efforts to forge enduring power-sharing arrangements among the Shia, Sunni and Kurdish communities. As long as the governments in Teheran, Damascus, Riyadh, Amman, Ankara and Washington are pulling Iraqi politicians in divergent directions, no government of national unity is likely to stay unified for long.

As has been repeatedly demonstrated in the Balkans, democracy can mobilize a divided nation, but democracy alone cannot unite it. Quite the contrary! Elections are polarizing events, particularly in societies riven by sectarian conflict. In such circumstances, peace can only be secured through power-sharing arrangements that accord minorities a greater share in governance than their performance at the ballot box would normally justify.

By making Iraq the centerpiece of a larger effort to transform the Middle East, Washington has complicated its efforts to secure such an outcome. Democratization of Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, not to speak of Lebanon and the Palestinian territories are all worthy goals, but not ones around which a regional consensus in favor of stabilizing Iraq can be formed. If stabilizing Iraq is America’s most immediate priority, and if the support of neighboring govern-
ments is necessary, as experience elsewhere suggests it is, then these broader efforts at democratization need to be subordinated to the more immediate goal. That does not mean abandoning attempts to promote democracy throughout the Middle East. It does mean diminishing the prominence of the democratization campaign, while focusing American rhetoric and diplomatic activity upon the themes of power sharing, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and regional stability around which all the governments of that region can unite.

**Establishing a Regional Security Dialogue**

Stabilizing Iraq is not America’s only interest in the Middle East. Washington must also be concerned with Syrian behavior in Lebanon, and Iranian behavior toward Israel, not to speak of Teheran’s nuclear aspirations. Conversations with those governments over Iraq should not, therefore, be conducted in isolation, but should be designed to lead into a broader regional dialogue ultimately addressing all these other issues.

The Persian Gulf is the only large area of the world that does not possess some framework for regular consultations on regional security issues. In the Western Hemisphere there is the Organization of American States. In Europe, there is NATO. In Africa, there is the African Union. In Southeast Asia, there is ASEAN. Even in the midst of the Cold War all the nations of NATO and the Warsaw Pact met regularly, in the context of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe to debate their differences and address their mutual concerns. The absence of any such forum for dialogue in and around the Persian Gulf makes what is already the world’s most tense and dangerous region even more volatile than it need be.

Just as the United States has leveraged regional concern about North Korea’s nuclear ambitions to forge a regional forum for security consultations among all the nations of
Northeast Asia, so it now has an opportunity to leverage anxieties over Iraq’s future to launch broader regional dialogue over security in and around the Persian Gulf.

Conclusion

Neither the American nor the Iraqi people want to see a larger or more extended American presence in Iraq. On the other hand, majorities in both countries also understand that a precipitate withdrawal could make a bad situation even worse. Proposals for future policy toward Iraq need to take account of the real constraints imposed by American and Iraqi opinion.

The policy of Iraqization represents the least bad option among a range of unhappy choices available to the United States. Staying in Iraq long enough to empower a broadly representative Iraqi government, and seeking to provide that regime the wherewithal to secure the country is the only responsible American course at this stage, given all that has gone before. On the other hand, leaving as quickly as Iraqi forces can take over from American is the appropriate response to the Iraqi public’s antipathy to the U.S. presence, and the American public’s waning support for the commitment.

American counterinsurgency campaigns in Vietnam and stabilization efforts in the Balkans both provide enlightening analogies to the challenges faced today in Iraq. But commitments on those scales are not realistic options. The United States put 500,000 troops into Vietnam, a country less than half the size of Iraq. NATO put over 100,000 troops into Bosnia and Kosovo, societies that in combination are less than 1/5 the size of Iraq. If the American commitment to Iraq is to be sustained, the American role in the counterinsurgency campaigns of Central America in the 1980s may provide a better model, one in which the residual American role is largely confined to advice and material support.

Sectarian militias are, as U.S. Ambassador Khalilzad has suggested, “the building blocks of civil war.” In this respect the Shia and Kurdish militias may be even more of a threat to Iraqi unity than the Sunni insurgents. It is not realistic to think, however, that the United States, at this late stage, is going to shoulder the principal burden of disarming and demobilizing these forces. That is a challenge that will have to be met primarily by the Iraqis, and primarily through political means. Nevertheless, the United States must continue to seek to defuse sectarian violence, and support those within the Iraqi regime seeking to promote national reconciliation and the rule of law.

American efforts to build Iraqi security forces are beginning to show measurable results. If Iraqization ultimately fails, it will not be because Iraqi forces are inadequately equipped or trained, but because the government they work for cannot win their trust and use them wisely. Building a government that can perform those functions should, therefore, be the top American priority.

Experience with other badly divided nations suggests that the task of uniting such societies is beyond the capacity of any one foreign power, even one as powerful as the United States. On the other hand, full-scale internationalization of the nation-building effort in Iraq is no longer feasible, if it ever was. Some greater effort nevertheless needs to be made to engage Iraq’s neighbors in the process of stabilizing that country.

Iraqi political leaders will coalesce only if and when they receive convergent signals from their various external sponsors. Washington’s high profile commitment to regional democratization, and its concomitant challenge to the legitimacy of all the neighboring regimes, is working at cross-purposes with its effort to promote the formation of a government of national unity. Regional democratization, therefore, needs to be subordinated, at least for the next several years, to efforts to stabilize Iraq. The United States should leverage widespread anxiety over Iraq’s future to promote the emergence of a forum for consultations among all the states of the region on issues of security in and around the Persian Gulf.
Members of Congress who share the above analysis can best employ their influence by urging the Administration to: 1) adopt a more limited, realistic vision of American objectives and prospects in Iraq, 2) put stabilizing Iraq at the top of our national priorities (if not our most important problem, it is certainly the most urgent, 3) focus America’s regional diplomacy on the themes of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and stability, not democratization and regime change, and 4) engage the neighboring states and global community in efforts to build and sustain a competent, moderate and representative government in Baghdad.

1  A Switch in Time, Kenneth M Pollack, Brookings 2006
2  Seeing Baghdad Thinking Saigon, Stephen Biddle, Foreign Affairs, March/April 2006
Political Traditions: Historical Overview

Political action in Iranian society takes place in a cultural milieu that is rich, varied, and eclectic. It is transmitted through three major political traditions emanating from monar-chism, liberal nationalism, and Shi’ism. There is also a minor tradition associated with the Left. The three major traditions can be best understood through three key individuals who have been their primary proponents in different periods: Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941-79), Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq (1951-53), and the supreme religious leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1979-89). Although the Left has also had important leaders, it is not identified with a single individual.

The three major traditions have co-existed in both high and popular culture in an uneasy relationship. Although it is highly unlikely that the monarchical tradition will reemerge in Iran as a dominant political force, its existence as a major element of past culture and history will continue to have some bearing on popular attitudes. The secular liberal nationalist tradition has a far greater chance than the monarchical one to reappear as the dominant political force despite the fact that secularism has been maligned and disgraced under the Islamic republic. Liberal nationalism is a strong force in Iranian culture and, assuming that it can accommodate moderate religious elements, it may play a significant role in the future. The leftist tradition will continue as a force in Iranian politics but its chances of success are limited.

The three major traditions have interacted with cultural legacies from both pre- and post-Islamic Iran. These legacies include emphasis on the personalistic aspects of politics, dependence on family and group ties, and a continuing tradition of patronialism. They have also depended on a vast array of cultural symbols derived from Iranian Shi’ism. During major political upheavals, these symbols have been used to mobilize the masses and also play a part in the recurrent pattern of liberal-clerical alliance in Iranian politics. The revolution of 1978-79 is the most recent example that underlines the close relationship between politics and culture in Iran.

A significant new issue in Iranian politics in the post-Khatami era (1997-2005) is the demise of the reformers and the emergence in 2005 of the millenialistic hard-line new president, Mahmud Ahmadinejad. Although the demise of the reformers may turn out to be temporary, Ahmadinejad’s presidency has exacerbated two related critical problems. On the domestic side, Ahmadinejad’s intimate ties to the intelligence and security forces (and particularly the Revolutionary Guards, Pasdaran) has ushered in a new ascendency of Islamist military and security forces in Iranian politics. The emergence of the Pasdaran as the ultimate Praetorian Guards of the Islamic Republic is a relatively new and unwelcome development. Its potential implica-
tions for both domestic and foreign relations are problematic. Moreover, Ahmadinejad’s celebration of messianic Shi’ism and expectations for the return of the Hidden Imam (Shi’i Messiah whose return is anxiously awaited by the faithful) have clear reverberations in populist Shi’i politics in Iran as it reaffirms the ascendant place of chiliastic religion in politics.

On the international side, Iran’s tumultuous relations with the United States and its relentless pursuit of nuclear power and weapons have intensified the country’s international problems. They have led to the potential reemergence of Iran as a pariah state—a designation that originally emerged during the American hostage crisis. The failure to resolve these problems diplomatically has increased the threat perception of a key U.S. ally (Israel). This could conceivably end in an armed conflict that would engulf the region in yet another cycle of violence, destruction, and bloodshed. At this point, Iran is stationed at the vortex of a momentous international crisis.

Iran Perceptions of Insecurity

Since the Islamic revolution of 1979, Iranians have been confronted with significant internal and external crises of unprecedented scale. Each crisis has had a profound influence on their security. These include the revolutionary process, Iran-Iraq war, the hostage crisis, Islamization of society and its political system, and the invention of the concept of the supreme jurisprudential leader (velayat-e faqih) with its multi-faceted and authoritarian features. These developments were further complicated by the collapse of the USSR and the arrival of six new Muslim republics in Iran’s neighborhood, its problems with neighbors in the Persian Gulf, and stormy interactions with Afghans and Iraqis, not to mention a score of other problems in Europe, Argentina, and elsewhere. Moreover, and importantly, Iran has become an active and divisive player in the Arab-Israeli conflict for the first time—a development with serious implications for its foreign policy. Iran’s conflictual relationship with the U.S. and the imposition of American trade sanctions have intensified the problem. Finally, Iran has had to deal with serious charges from credible international sources of pursuing terrorism, developing weapons of mass destruction, and interfering in the internal affairs of neighbors. These developments have created a highly-charged and insecure environment in Iran.

How has the Iranian government managed to survive in the face of enormous adversity both at home and abroad? At least partial answers can be found in the increase in the state’s power over society and in a gradual but dynamic process of institutional transformation since the revolution. This transformation has also helped to modify and even moderate some aspects of the regime’s ideological zeal and revolutionary purity. However, the refusal by those in authority to concede some degree of power and autonomy to societal actors may herald serious and possibly crippling problems for the regime in the future. On the international side, Iran’s enrichment of uranium in April 2006 has created an unprecedented evolving crisis.

The process of institutional transformation can be observed in both coercive (military and security) and civilian institutions. In the military and security sphere, two important factors loom large. First, due initially to the surprise Iran-Iraq war and later to the U.S. Dual Containment and trade embargo policies, the issues of national security and regime survival have become critical. The regime’s mandate to the coercive institutions has been readiness in case of a surprise attack or any other form of military and security challenge. The Iranian National Security Council is the highest governmental body entrusted with overseeing this task. Various efforts to rebuild the ground, air, and naval forces as well as developing a defense industrial organization are the direct results of the military’s readiness mandate.

Second, since the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988 a major effort has been launched to bring an end to the anomalous existence of two separate armies. The clerics, who did not trust the regular military because of its close ties to
the Pahlavi regime, decided to transform the zealot revolutionary militias into a military force fully accountable to them. Soon after 1979, the organization of Revolutionary Guards (Pasdaran) was created with many functions that essentially paralleled those of the regular army. Both forces fought in the long war often using different tactics and strategies of warfare. When the war ended, a decision was made to merge the two armies. In 1989 a combined general headquarters was established with the Pasdaran commanders dominating. Although this ended the dualism of Iran’s military forces, it also reaffirmed the preeminence of the Revolutionary Guards in the armed forces. The Guards’ proven commitment to clerical rule, and their ideological posture of revolutionary Islam, reconfirm their leadership role in the military. The consolidation of military forces has probably also eliminated any potential challenge to the regime from the ranks of the regular army. Nevertheless, it has led to the rise of the Revolutionary Guards as a major force in Iranian politics and society.

**Duality of Public and Private Lives and Alienation from the System**

The fissures of the Iranian political system remain large and problematic. In spite of the regime’s attempts to control the forces of civil society and undermine institutions of reform, the final outcome is not necessarily determined. What is clear, however, is that the persecution of reformers and the forced Islamization of society have resulted in a growing cynicism about political life in Iran. This has resulted in dual life styles in the social order. Iran’s civil society exhibits an unusually pronounced duality in the social system that encourages separation of public and private lives. Although the separation of private and public domains are not uncommon in other parts of the world, the Iranian case is noted for its sharp contrasts and dramatic differences—a juxtaposition of forces that is for all practical purposes unique.

In the public sphere, the rigid Islamic arm segregates people by gender in public space, enforces veiling of women, sets strict quotas for university admission and government employment on the basis of ascription and tested loyalty to the system, demands obedience to certain Islamic rules and regulations, and regularly uses sanctions (both formal and vigilante style) to enforce norms and rules. The private arena is very different. This is the world behind walls. It is a highly Western and liberal world where the latest films, musical shows, and videos from the West (especially the U.S.), are regularly shown. Here genders mix, dancing is allowed, all forms of music are enjoyed, and even alcoholic beverages are routinely consumed. Islamic garb and veils are discarded in favor of its Western counterpart. People feel that they possess private freedoms not attainable in the public domain.

The private sphere is dominated by the youth—that large and amorphous group under the age of twenty-five. To them the public sector is identified with a set of highly rigid norms, rules, and regulations that constantly constrain personal choice. They find the system non-responsive to their current needs and future goals. Although not organized institutionally in opposition to the regime, the youth are, nevertheless, the harbingers of change and a critical pro-democracy force that openly questions the imposed religious straitjacket. Their quest for liberalization and reform is strongly supported by most women (both young and older generations) who yearn for changes in gender policies and greater reform of the personal status laws that are detrimental to gender equality. The women and youth of Iran will be the critical catalysts of any future pro-democracy movement.

**U.S.-Iran Relations**

Historically the intensely close friendship between Iran and the U.S. came to a formal end with the Islamic revolution when a close ally became an adversary overnight. Moreover, a country that had ostensibly been one of the most secular societies in the Middle East became a Shi’i-Islamic theocratic state. The relationship
between the U.S. and Iran since the 1979 Islamic revolution can be best characterized as a failure of foreign policy on both sides. Ever since the revolution, the ensuing hostage crisis, and the severance of diplomatic relations, the two protagonists have been on a collision course short of actual warfare. Some observers have dubbed Iran as the “Bermuda Triangle” of successive American presidents beginning with Carter and the hostage crisis, continuing with Reagan and the Iran-Contra Affair, and finally concluding with the current President Bush and his “axis of evil” address. Despite occasional positive developments and several instances of apparent common interests regarding Afghanistan, Iraq, and control of transnational drug traffic, it is clear that conflict and tension have been the modal patterns of the U.S.-Iran relationship for over a quarter of a century.

The sources of tension have generally centered on the charges that the Iranian government has been supporting terrorism abroad and abusing human rights at home, giving assistance to radical fundamentalist groups in the Arab world, undermining the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians, and building up offensive weapons to dominate the Persian Gulf while at the same time seeking weapons of mass destruction. The 1993 U.S. policy of Dual Containment (of Iraq and Iran) and the May 1995 decision to proceed with a full trade embargo of Iran have been among the most notable responses by the U.S. government.

After leveling its own case against American support of the Shah of Iran (including the CIA-engineered coup in August 1953 that brought the Shah back to power), the Iranian government dismisses American charges. It argues that its activities are defensive in a hostile world and especially in the volatile Middle East. It points to the instability of the region beginning with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of six new republics in its neighborhood, the Iran-Iraq war, the two Gulf wars, and the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Iran further maintains that as a signatory to the non-proliferation treaty it has the right to proceed with the development of nuclear energy for peaceful domestic uses.

The looming paradox in Iran’s relationship with the U.S. is the incontestable fact that Iran’s two worst enemies (Taliban’s Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq) have been subdued by American forces. Although a cynic could charge that the U.S. is Iran’s secret weapon, the reality is more complicated. On the one hand, the empowerment of the Shi’is in Iraq has been a clear benefit to Iran. On the other, the U.S. presence in Iraq and Afghanistan has helped encircle Iran with American military personnel, war materiel, and bases. Moreover, the U.S. presence is not restricted to these two countries but is evident elsewhere in the Persian Gulf region (Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait) and in a number of other countries in the vicinity of the Caspian Sea littoral and beyond.

**Shi’i Empowerment**

Many recent historical events have helped Shi’i empowerment. First, is the experience of the Islamic revolution in Iran. It appeared to many Shi’is that a major regime with a mighty military, enjoying full support of the superpowers, succumbed in a revolutionary struggle to unarmed civilians, many of whom were powered by faith. The establishment of an Islamic republic with an ideology that emphasizes the export of the revolution further raised consciousness among the Shi’is.

The second factor has been the rise of the Lebanese Shi’i power through Amal (a Shi’i political movement/party in Lebanon) and later Hezbollah. Although the rise of Shi’is in Lebanon predates the revolution in Iran, Hezbollah’s emergence as a critical force in Lebanese politics is directly connected to both the Islamic Revolution and its regional politics. The gradual transformation of Hizballah into an influential political entity is bound to further empower the Lebanese Shi’is. The final factor is the U.S. role in the war that brought the Saddam Hussein regime to an end. Whether by design or by default, the U.S. has played a sig-
significant role in the empowerment of the Shi’is. It has destroyed one of the most hated Shi’i enemies, the Taleban, and later toppled Saddam. The first event removed a regime with a clear anti-Shi’i ideology. The second event removed an ostensibly secular regime that suppressed the rights and privileges of most Iraqis, particularly the Shi’i majority.

The American presence in Iraq has indeed been a threshold event in the rise of Shi’i political power. It is inconceivable to think of Shi’is playing anything but a major role in the politics, economics, and social affairs of Iraq. Yet the ultimate direction of these developments is unclear. Will this empowerment also have a beneficial side that would engender progressive theology and reconciliation of Islam and democracy for both Shi’is and Sunnis? Or will it become yet another avenue for the accumulation of wealth, power, and status at the expense of others. The answer, in the current changing process, is not clear.

Conclusion

The paramount problem both for Iranian domestic politics and U.S.-Iran relations is the nuclear issue. Any direct military action on Iranian nuclear sites, even if successful, will have a number of consequences. On the domestic side, it will energize Iranian nationalism and will unite most people behind an unpopular regime. The regime can respond in several staged actions in the region: disruption of the world supply of energy by ending Iranian oil production, attempts to close the Straits of Hormuz, or attacks on neighbors’ oil facilities. Iran could also respond by unleashing its “clients” in Lebanon, Afghanistan, Iraq, and among the Palestinian Islamist radicals to retaliate against Israel and American forces. Clearly the specter of protracted Middle East violence and instability is very real.

If one is to assume that the most recent Iran problem could be resolved diplomatically, then the next stage would be for the U.S. government to engage Iran in a grand bargain. Our policy of isolation and sanctions of Iran has not been successful. The real policy issue for the Bush administration is whether it is possible to have constructive engagement with Iran given the history of mutual distrust and conflict. The options are neither easy nor can they necessarily lead to a trajectory that ends with a resolution of the disputes. A 2004 task force report from the Council on Foreign Relations recommends that the U.S. “offer Iran a direct dialogue on specific issues of regional stabilization” and also deal with issues concerning terrorism, Afghanistan, and Iraq. It further recommends that in coordination with European allies, Iran be pressed to verify its nuclear activities fully and suspend “all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities.” The task force is also quite clear that it is best for the U.S. to expand its political, economic, and cultural linkages with Iran. To most observers of U.S.-Iran relations the policy of sanctions and ever-expanding political conflict has not been fruitful to either side. Assuming a diplomatic resolution of the nuclear issue, it is perhaps time for both sides to see the benefit of constructive mutual engagement. This is a two-way process and, at a minimum, will require transparency on the nuclear issue and an agreement to stop the enrichment process or subject it to vigorous verification. In return, the U.S. must agree to abandon its embargo and trade sanctions on Iran.
Members of Congress

Senator Lamar Alexander
and Honey Alexander
Senator Bob Bennett
Representative Howard Berman
and Janis Berman
Representative Earl Blumenauer
and Jon Blumenauer
Representative Jim Cooper
and Martha Cooper
Representative Lloyd Doggett
and Libby Doggett
Senator Byron Dorgan
and Kimberly Dorgan
Representative Rush Holt
and Margaret Lancefield
Senator Tim Johnson
and Barbara Johnson
Representative Jim Kolbe
and Beth Kolbe
Representative Nita Lowey
and Stephen Lowey
Senator Dick Lugar
and Charlene Lugar
Representative George Miller
and Cynthia Miller
Senator Paul Sarbanes
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Senator Ted Stevens
and Catherine Stevens
Representative Henry Waxman
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Diane Anello
Sara Kuhn
Bill Nell
Pat Walton
Pakistan: Democracy and the Islamists
Samina Ahmed, International Crisis Group, Islamabad

Discussion Questions
On September 12th 2001, Pakistan became one of America’s closest allies in the war against terrorism. Its leader Pervez Musharraf provided critical support to the effort to establish a democratic state in Afghanistan. Yet his authoritarian rule in Pakistan continues, and his ability and willingness to crack down on Islamist extremism at home is openly questioned by many reform minded Pakistanis and members of the U.S. government. The U.S. has provided Pakistan with considerable economic and military aid, including F-16 fighter jets. Pakistan remains a critical country armed with nuclear weapons and facing unresolved problems with its huge neighbor, India. How Pakistan evolves has become one of the more important questions facing American foreign policy makers as they contemplate the emerging power balance in Asia. What can or should the U.S. government do to bring about more democratic political change in Pakistan? Is Musharraf the best one can hope for? Will pushing him too hard have unforeseen and potentially dangerous consequences for U.S. interests as was the case when the Carter administration pushed the Shah of Iran to reform only to see him replaced by the Mullahs?

Democracy and Islamist Parties: The Arab Experience
Mona Yacoubian, U.S. Institute of Peace

Discussion Questions
Promoting democracy in the Arab world is not an easy task. There have been many experiments with political reform in Arab countries yet in each case reform has been stymied either because of military takeovers or because of the persistence of authoritarian rule which invariably depends upon the cooperation of the military. Islamist political parties (parties that invoke the laws of Islam as part of their party platform) have for many years been banned or suppressed in countries such as Syria, Egypt and Algeria. Yet today, with the emergence of major divisions within the Islamic movement, some believe that “moderate” Islamist parties, such as the Egyptian Brotherhood, can be co-opted into supporting democratic rule once they are given a participatory role in the government of the country. This issue has become a contentious debate among Middle East scholars. Some argue that it is hopeless to wait for genuine democratic reformers to emerge politically: their numbers are too small and they are too disorganized. Others argue that giving power to Islamists will be the beginning of the emergence of more Islamic states that will eventually suppress freedoms and rights in which the United States and the West so strongly believe. How the United States handles the question of democracy and Islamist par-
ties is key to the overall American foreign policy of bringing more freedoms to the Middle East, particularly the Arab world. What should American policy toward Islamists parties be? How should the U.S. engage with them? Is the current U.S. policy on the right track?

**Iraq: Where Do We Go From Here?**

James Dobbins, RAND

**Discussion Questions**

Although the original rationale for the Bush administration going to war with Saddam Hussein was the eminent threat posed by his weapons of mass destruction, many also hoped that the overthrow of the Ba’ath regime would bring about a new era of freedom and democracy not only for Iraq but for many other countries in the Middle East. Coming in the wake of the successful defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan there were high expectations that women’s and minority rights in Iraq would be enshrined in a new constitution that would be a beacon for reformers in more conservative Muslim states such as Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately, the failure of the occupying forces to win the Iraq war in a decisive manner and the continued insecurity that bedevils the country have led to growing divisions between the three dominant groups—Sunni, Shi’ia and the Kurds. And while the draft of the Iraqi constitution may pay lip service to the rights of women and minorities, few believe that the constitution alone can achieve this objective unless Iraq is united politically. What are the chances that this can happen, given the fundamental schisms within Iraqi society and the legacy of the war? Will the interpretation of Sharia law in the Iraqi constitution consign women forever to a subservient role in that society? What should United States policy be at this stage of the confrontation?

**The Turkish Example Of Islam**

Remarks by Soli Özel, Bilgi University

**The Islamic Republic of Iran: An Update**

Farhad Kazemi, New York University

**Discussion Questions**

No country has caused the United States more heartburn in recent years than the revolutionary regime which came to power in 1979 after the overthrow of the Shah of Iran and the end of the Pahlavi dynasty. Iran had been a key ally of the United States; the United States maintained a significant presence there before 1979. The subsequent hostage crisis, Iranian terrorism, and now Iran’s determination to get a nuclear weapons capability have placed it on the Bush administration’s “Axis of Evil.” The election of a conservative president, Mahmood Ahmadinejad in June 2005, reinforces the concerns of those who believe that Iran’s autocratic regime is flexing its muscles and, with new oil revenues, is showing great disdain for cooperation with the international community, particularly on the nuclear matter. Yet Iran itself is bedeviled with political contradictions, structural weaknesses of its economy and its failure to attract foreign capital to fully exploit its natural gas and oil reserves. How the United States manages Iran and how Iran behaves in the region will have profound implications for American foreign policy in the years ahead and may be critical to the success or failure of the American policy in Iraq, where Iran has greater influence than at any time in the recent past. What is the current U.S. policy toward Iran? Should the U.S. reassess its policy? Are Iran’s conservatives able to make a deal with the United States?