

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

JANUARY / FEBRUARY 2003



Iraq and the Arabs' Future

Fouad Ajami

Volume 82 • Number 1

Iraq and the Arabs' Future

Fouad Ajami

THE ROAD TO MODERNITY

THERE SHOULD BE no illusions about the sort of Arab landscape that America is destined to find if, or when, it embarks on a war against the Iraqi regime. There would be no “hearts and minds” to be won in the Arab world, no public diplomacy that would convince the overwhelming majority of Arabs that this war would be a just war. An American expedition in the wake of thwarted UN inspections would be seen by the vast majority of Arabs as an imperial reach into their world, a favor to Israel, or a way for the United States to secure control over Iraq’s oil. No hearing would be given to the great foreign power.

America ought to be able to live with this distrust and discount a good deal of this anti-Americanism as the “road rage” of a thwarted Arab world—the congenital condition of a culture yet to take full responsibility for its self-inflicted wounds. There is no need to pay excessive deference to the political pieties and givens of the region. Indeed, this is one of those settings where a reforming foreign power’s simpler guidelines offer a better way than the region’s age-old prohibitions and defects.

Above and beyond toppling the regime of Saddam Hussein and dismantling its deadly weapons, the driving motivation of a new American endeavor in Iraq and in neighboring Arab lands should be modernizing the Arab world. The great indulgence granted to the ways and phobias of Arabs has reaped a terrible harvest—for the Arabs themselves, and for an America implicated in their affairs. It is cruel

FOUAD AJAMI is Majid Khadduri Professor of Middle Eastern Studies at the School for Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University.

and unfair but true: the fight between Arab rulers and insurgents is for now an American concern.

In the 1970s and the 1980s, the political and economic edifice of the Arab world began to give way. Explosive demographic trends overwhelmed what had been built in the postindependence era, and then a furious Islamism blew in like a deadly wind. It offered solace, seduced the young, and provided the means and the language of resentment and refusal. For a while, the failures of that world were confined to its own terrain, but migration and transnational terror altered all that. The fire that began in the Arab world spread to other shores, with the United States itself the principal target of an aggrieved people who no longer believed that justice could be secured in one's own land, from one's own rulers. It was September 11 and its shattering surprise, in turn, that tipped the balance on Iraq away from containment and toward regime change and "rollback."

A reforming zeal must thus be loaded up with the baggage and the gear. No great apologies ought to be made for America's "unilateralism." The region can live with and use that unilateralism. The considerable power now at America's disposal can be used by one and all as a justification for going along with American goals. The drapery of a unanimous Security Council resolution authorizing Iraq's disarmament—signed by the Syrian regime, no less—will grant the Arab rulers the room they need to claim that they had simply bowed to the inevitable, and that Saddam had gotten the war he had called up.

In the end, the battle for a secular, modernist order in the Arab world is an endeavor for the Arabs themselves. But power matters, and a great power's will and prestige can help tip the scales in favor of modernity and change. "The Americans are coming," the Islamists proclaimed after the swift defeat of the Taliban. They scrambled for cover as their "charities," their incitement, and their networks of finance and recruitment came under new scrutiny.

The Islamists' apparent resurgence in recent months was born of their hope that the United States may have lost the sense of righteous violation that drove it after September 11, and that the American push in the region may have lost its steam. These Islamists are supremely political and calculating people; they probe the resolve of their enemies. The "axis of evil" speech of President George W. Bush last January

had caused among the Islamists genuine panic. A measure of relief came in the months that followed. They drew new courage from the bureaucratic struggles in Washington and from the attention that the fight between Israel and the Yasir Arafat regime attracted some months later.

A successful war in Iraq would be true to this pattern. It would embolden those who wish for the Arab world deliverance from retrogression and political decay. Thus far, the United States has been simultaneously an agent of political reaction and a promoter of social revolution in the Arab-Muslim world. Its example has been nothing

**It was September 11
that tipped the balance
on Iraq away from
containment and
toward regime change.**

short of revolutionary, but from one end of the Arab world to the other, its power has invariably been on the side of political reaction and a stagnant status quo. A new war should come with the promise that the United States is now on the side of reform.

America's open backers will be Kuwait and Qatar—the first because of the trauma and violation it endured in 1990–91 at the hands of Iraq, the second because it has taken a generally assertive and novel approach in diplomacy as well as a willingness to associate openly with American power. In the main, however, the ruling order in the Arab world will duck for cover and hope to be spared. Rather than Desert Storm, the Arab rulers will want the perfect storm: a swift war, few casualties, as little exposure by themselves as possible, and the opportunity to be rid of Saddam without riding in broad daylight with the Americans or being brought to account by their people.

The political world rarely grants this kind of good fortune, but such is the dilemma of hugely unpopular rulers who have never taken their populations into their confidence, who have lived with American patronage while winking at the most malignant strands of anti-Americanism. Those rulers know that a war against Iraq would be the first war in their midst waged in the era of the satellite channels, at a time when everyone is “wired” and choices are difficult to conceal.

A new campaign against Iraq would find a deeply divided verdict in the region on the Iraqi menace. There are those who, if only out of feelings of historical inadequacy about the Arabs' technical skills, will

doubt that the ruler in Baghdad and his military apparatus have at their disposal weapons of mass destruction. Others will see Iraq's weapons as proof that Arabs have come of age in the modern world, and that the powers beyond are bent on subjugating them, stripping them of the same weapons that represent modernity and scientific and military advance in a Hobbesian world of hierarchy and inequality.

Given the belligerence and self-pity in Arab life, its retreat from modernist culture, and its embrace of conspiracy theories, there are justifiable grounds for believing there are no native liberal or secular traditions to embrace the United States and use its victory to build an alternative to despotic rule. Few Arabs would believe this effort to be a Wilsonian campaign to spread the reign of liberty in the Arab world. They are to be forgiven their doubts, for American power, either by design or by default, has been built on relationships with military rulers and monarchs without popular mandates. America has not known or trusted the middle classes and the professionals in these lands. Rather, it has settled for relationships of convenience with the autocracies in the saddle, tolerating the cultural and political malignancies of the Arab world. A new American role in the region will have to break with this history.

LONELY AT THE TOP

THE SOLITUDE of the United States is more acute than it was during the Persian Gulf War in 1990–91. In that expedition, there was local cover for what was in truth an imperial campaign against an Iraqi state that threatened to shred the balance of power in the gulf. There were even Muslim jurists in Saudi Arabia and Egypt who issued *fatwas* that sanctioned the expedition of the foreign power.

The three powers of consequence—Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia—were arrayed against Saddam Hussein. The last was directly menaced, while Egypt and Syria were given substantial economic rewards for covering the flanks of the gulf states, denying the Iraqi ruler the chance to depict the struggle as a standoff between the haves and the have-nots in the Arab world. Saddam had been particularly obtuse: he had broken the code of the ruling Arab order for which he had posed as a trusted warrior against the Iranian revolutionary state. But

for the vast majority of Arabs, Operation Desert Storm was an Anglo-American campaign of hegemony. A predator had risen in the region and a great foreign power, the inheritor of Pax Britannica in the Persian Gulf, had checked his bid for hegemony.

Saddam had sacked a country, but there was an odd popular identification with him, and crowds saw him as the bearer of a lofty Arab endeavor. The gullible saw him as a Robin Hood, an avenging Saladin fighting “the Franks” and their local collaborators, erasing the colonial boundaries imposed after World War I. It may be heretical to suggest it, but the Iraqi ruler would have won a “free” election among Arabs in 1990–91. The dynasties he was warring against were unloved in their world. From Amman to Nablus to Casablanca, the crowds gave their approval to the night of terror that he unleashed on the region. He was a revisionist at odds with the order around him, and in a thwarted world the bandit acts out the yearnings of subdued but resentful crowds.

No great Arab hopes are pinned on the Iraqi ruler this time around. This is the other side of the ledger, for the fickle crowd makes and breaks these kinds of attachments with brigands and false redeemers with great frequency. Saddam had lost his bid; he had treated a world steeped in defeats to yet another calamity. The crowd that had fallen for Osama bin Laden was the same floating crowd that had once trusted its scores with the world would be settled by the Iraqi ruler. The struggle against him is a different matter now. The crowd may shout itself hoarse against the Americans, but its bonds with the Iraqi ruler have been weakened.

One particular but pivotal Arab realm is calmer this time around. In 1990–91, all the currents of political revisionism, the envy of the poorer Arab lands toward the oil states, the bitter sense that history has dealt the Arabs a terrible hand, seemed to converge on Jordan. It was in that country, more than in any other in the Arab world, that the Iraqi dictator was both an avenger and would-be redeemer. He had *rujula* (manhood), he had money to throw around, and he held out the promise that the oil dynasties would be brought down. It was that radicalism that had forced King Hussein to stay a step ahead of the crowd, breaking with the Persian Gulf powers and the United States to side with Iraq. A group of religious scholars, the Conference



Photo Not Available

CORBIS-BETTMANN

Saddam Hussein and the Chamber of Secrets: presidential palace, Baghdad

of the Ulama of the Sharia (an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood), has issued a *fatwa* banning any assistance to the Americans, such as “opening airports and harbors to them, providing their planes and vehicles with fuel, offering them intelligence for their war against Muslims.” It is impermissible, the *fatwa* added, “to sell the American aggressor a piece of bread or to offer him a drink of water.” This time, however, the monarchy has drawn a line, and wise Jordanians have put the word out that a short war and a reconstructed Iraq would work to the advantage of their poorer and smaller domain.

For American power, there are two ways in the Arab world. One is restraint, pessimistic about the possibility of changing that stubborn world, reticent about the uses of American power. In this vision of things, the United States would either spare the Iraqi dictator or wage a war with limited political goals for Iraq and for the region as a whole. The other choice, more ambitious, would envisage a more profound American role in Arab political life: the spearheading of a reformist project that seeks to modernize and transform the Arab landscape. Iraq would be the starting point, and beyond Iraq lies an Arab political and economic tradition and a culture whose agonies and failures have been on cruel display.

The first option would hark back to Desert Storm. After a campaign imbued with high moral purpose came reticence. There was no incentive to push deeper into Iraq or into Arab politics. The balance of power had been restored, and the internal order of the Arab states did not concern George H.W. Bush. Indeed, Bush appeared to have a kind of benign affection for the Arab monarchies. His attitude toward the gulf states resembled what the British took to distant realms of their empire before “reform” caught up: love of pageantry, a fascination with exotic style, and a tolerance for time-honored traditions of rule.

For Iraq, there was to be no Wilsonian redemption after the Persian Gulf War.

The authority that the United States gained in the aftermath of Desert Storm was used to bring together Arabs and Israelis at Madrid in 1991. George H.W. Bush had resisted “linkage” between the Persian Gulf and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but he

was to make it the cornerstone of U.S. strategy after the guns had fallen silent. The internal order of the House of Saud and the governance of Kuwait were left to the rulers of those lands. True, some liberal secularists there had thought that the United States would press for internal reforms—in Kuwait in particular. But democracy is not a foreigner’s gift, nor was its export a prospect that Bush ever entertained.

For Iraq itself, there was to be no Wilsonian redemption. Bush had called upon the Iraqis to “take matters into their own hands.” His call had been answered in the hills of Kurdistan and in the southern part of the country, where rebellion erupted in Basra, then spreading into the Shi`ite holy cities of Najaf and Karbala. For a brief moment, the mastery of the regime cracked as prisons were emptied, and the insurgents were joined by soldiers straggling in from the front. But with the help of the regime’s helicopter gunships, the rebellions were crushed with unspeakable cruelty.

Some key players within the Bush administration were eager for a “clean break” from the war. This was particularly true of the then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell. “Neither revolt had a chance,” Powell would later write of the Kurdish and Shi`a rebellions. “Nor, frankly, was their success a goal of our policy.” It was a cruel ending for a campaign billed as the opening act of a new international order. The reordering of Iraq had not been a goal of the war.

In the intervening years, however, the ground has shifted in the Arab world, and the stakes for the United States have risen. The Iraqi dictator has hung on, outlasting and mocking his countless obituaries. And the familiar balance of power in the region sent America's way the terror of September 11. The United States has been caught in the crossfire between the regimes in the saddle and the Islamic insurgents. These insurgents could not win in Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, or Syria, or on the Arabian Peninsula. So they took to the road and targeted the United States, and they were brutally candid about their motives. They did not strike at America because it was a patron of Israel; rather, they drew a distinction between the "near enemy" (their own rulers) and the "far enemy," the United States.

Those entrenched regimes could not be beaten at home. Their power, as well as their people's resigned acceptance that their rulers' sins would be dwarfed by the terrors that Islamists would unleash were they to prevail, had settled the fight in favor of the rulers. The targeting of America came out of this terrible political culture of Arab lands. If the leader of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, the physician Ayman al-Zawahiri, could not avenge himself against the military regime of Hosni Mubarak for the torture he endured at the hands of his country's security services, why not target Mubarak's U.S. patrons?

A similar motivation propelled the Saudi members of al Qaeda. These men could not sack the House of Saud. The dynasty's wealth, its political primacy, and the conservative religious establishment gave the rulers a decided edge in their struggle with the Islamists; the war against America was the next best thing. The great power was an easier target: it was more open, more trusting, and its liberties more easily subverted by a band of jihadists. The jihadists and their leader, bin Laden, aimed at the dynasty's carefully nurtured self-image. The children of Arabia who had boarded those planes on September 11 and the countless young men held at the Guantanamo Bay military base could not be disowned. Bin Laden got the crisis in Saudi-American relations he aimed for. Those 15 young Saudis were put on those planes to challenge the old notions about the stability of the monarchy. Grant the devil his due: bin Laden knew the premium the dynasty placed on its privileged relationship with the United States. He had an exquisite feel for the regime's cultural style, its dread of open

disagreements and of scrutiny. He treated the House of Saud to its worst nightmare, puncturing the official narrative of a realm at peace.

That veneer of Saudi-American harmony was destined to crack. The Saudi population had changed; it was younger, poorer, and more disgruntled. Its airwaves crackled with bitter anti-Americanism, and a younger breed of radicalized preachers had challenged the standard Wahhabi doctrine of obedience to the rulers. As the winds of anti-Americanism and antimodernism blew at will, the rulers stepped aside. The royal family was cautious: it rode with America but let the anti-Americanism have its play.

CASUS BELLI

THE CASE FOR WAR must rest in part on the kind of vision the United States has for Iraq. The dread of “nation-building” must be cast aside. It is too late in the annals of nations for outright foreign rule. But there will have to be a sustained American presence if the new order is to hold and take root. Iraq is a society with substantial social capital and the region’s second-largest reserves of oil. It has traditions of literacy, learning, and technical competence. It can draw on the skills of a vast diaspora of means and sophistication, waves of people who fled the country’s turbulent politics and the heavy hand of its rulers. If Iraq’s pain has been great in the modern era, so too, has been its betrayed promise. There were skills and hope that the polity could be made right, that the abundance of oil and water and the relative freedom from an overbearing religious tradition would pave the way toward modernity and development.

For Pax Americana, Iraq may be worth the effort and the risks. America has been on the ground in Saudi Arabia for nearly six decades now, in Egypt for three. In both realms, there is wrath and estrangement toward America. What has been built in Arabia appears in serious jeopardy. The aid and help granted to Egypt has begotten nothing other than ingratitude and a deep suspicion among frustrated middle-class Egyptians that the United States wishes for them subjugation and dependence. There is an unfathomable anti-Americanism in Egypt—even among those professionals who have done well by the American connection.

There appears to be no liberal option for Egypt, no economic salvation. This country of outward tranquility and seething internal radicalism is in the grip of deep frustration. Egyptian history has stalled; the military ruler is supreme, but he offers no way out for his country. As the political life of the land has atrophied, anti-Americanism has taken hold, offering absolution and a way of airing the rage of a proud population that has fallen short of its own idea of itself and its place among the nations. Iraq may offer a contrast, a base in the Arab world free of the poison of anti-Americanism. The country is not hemmed in by the kind of religious prohibitions that stalk the U.S. presence in the Saudi realm. It may have a greater readiness for democracy than Egypt, if only because it is wealthier and is free of the weight of Egypt's demographic pressures and the steady menace of an Islamist movement.

Iraq should not be burdened, however, with the weight of great expectations. This is the Arab world, after all, and Americans do not know it with such intimacy. Iraq could disappoint its American liberators. There has been heartbreak in Iraq, and vengeance and retribution could sour Americans on this latest sphere of influence in the Muslim world.

But America could still be more daring in Iraq than it was after Desert Storm. To begin with, the bogeyman of a Shi'ite state emerging in Iraq as a satrapy of the Iranian clerical regime—the fear that paralyzed American power back in 1991—should be laid to rest. The Iranian Revolution's promise has clearly faded. The clerics there are in no position to export their “revolutionary happiness,” for they would find no takers anywhere. Then, too, the Shi'a of Iraq must be seen for what they are: Arabs and Iraqis through and through.

Shi'ism was a phenomenon of Iraq centuries before it crossed to Iran, brought to that land by the Safavid rulers as a state religion in the opening years of the sixteenth century. But even long before that, it had been an Arab religious-political dispute. Moreover, the sacred geography of Shi'ism had brought Shi'a religious scholars and seminarians from India, Lebanon, and Persia to Iraq. Thanks to geographic proximity, the Persian component had been particularly strong: it had used the shrine cities of Iraq as sanctuary, checking the power of their own country's leaders in the ceaseless tug-of-war between rulers and religious scholars. But in their overwhelming

numbers, the adherents of Shi`ism were drawn from Arab tribesmen. Arab nationalism, which came to Iraq with the Hashemite rulers and the officers and ideologues who rode their coattails, covered up Sunni dominion with a secular garb. As Iran was nearby, larger and more powerful, it became convenient for the ruling stratum of Iraq to disenfranchise its own Shi`a majority, claiming that they were a Persian fifth column of Iran.

This invented history took on a life of its own under Saddam Hussein. But before the Tikriti rulers terrorized the Shi`ite religious establishment and shattered its autonomy, a healthy measure of competition was always the norm between the Shi`ite seminaries of Iraq and those of Iran. Few Iraqi Shi`ites are eager to cede their own world to Iran's rulers. As the majority population of Iraq, they have a vested interest in its independence and statehood. Over the last three decades, they have endured the regime's brutality yet fought its war against Iran in 1980–88. Precious few among them dream of a Shi`a state. The majority of them are secularists who understand that the brutalized country will have to be shared among its principal communities if it is to find a way out of fear and terror.

There is a religiously based Shi`a movement, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), based in Iran, led by Ayatollah Mohamed Baqir al-Hakim. The choice of Iran as sanctuary by the al-Hakim family was dictated by the brutality of the Iraqi regime and by the lack of an Arab sanctuary where the Shi`a opposition could survive and function. Iran gave the clerics and laymen of SCIRI the resources and proximity for their war against the regime. What such men could bring to a new order is difficult to forecast with any confidence, but it is hard to see them building the necessary bridges to the Kurds and the Sunni remnants willing and able to break with the Tikriti legacy.

A more likely outcome would be the rise to power of a different kind of Shi`ism: more at home in the secular world, granting the clerics a political and cultural role of their own while subordinating them to secular authorities, as is the case in Lebanon. In the scheme of historical development of the Shi`a tradition, the triumph of clerics has been a relatively recent phenomenon—more a feature of Iran since 1979 than of the Arab world.

FAREWELL TO PAN-ARABISM?

A NEW REGIME in Iraq might be willing to bid farewell to virulent pan-Arabism. The passion for a Palestinian vocation in a new Iraq may subside, if only because the Palestinians have been such faithful supporters of Saddam Hussein. The norm has been for Iraq, the frontier Arab land far away from the Mediterranean, to stoke the fires of anti-Zionism knowing that others closer to the fire—Jordanians, Palestinians, Egyptians, Syrians, and Lebanese—would be the ones consumed. A new Iraqi political order might find within itself the ability to recognize that Palestine and the Palestinians are not an Iraqi concern. A new ruling elite that picks up the pieces in Iraq might conclude that offering a bounty to the families of Palestinian suicide “martyrs” is something that a burdened country can do without.

A new Iraqi political arrangement would also empower the Shi'a and the Kurds, and neither population owes fidelity to the pieties of Arabism. The Iraqi Kurds owe the Arab world little. The Iraqi opposition's solitude in the wider politics of the Arab world has been deep and searing. Saddam's opponents have had no Egyptian or Saudi sponsorship, nor have the Arab nationalists and “the street” embraced them. They have worked alone from London and Iran, and more recently, with American patronage. They are free to fashion a world with relative indifference to Arab claims.

A respected Kuwaiti thinker, Muhammad al-Rumaihi, has recently observed that the talk of Iraq as a model for other Arabs is overdone, that Iraq has never enjoyed such primacy in modern Arab life, either under the monarchy or under the radical regimes that have held sway since the revolution of 1958. There may be truth in what he says, for the country is idiosyncratic and lacks the cultural accessibility to other Arabs, such as those in Cairo, Damascus, or Beirut. But herein lies the prospect of Iraq's deliverance: freedom from the deadly legends of Arabism, from the lure of political roles that have wrecked Arab regimes that succumbed to them. Think of Cairo under the weight of its Arab calling and the undoing of the bright hopes of its Nasserist era. No country should wish for itself this sort of captivity.

The pan-Arabism that has played upon Iraq and infected its political life has been a terrible simplification of that checkered country's

history, a whip in the hands of a minority bent on dominating the polity and dispossessing the other communities of their rightful claims. Iraq had been a country of Kurdish highlanders, Marsh Arabs, Sunnis, Shi'ites, Turkmen, Assyrians, Jews, and Chaldeans. But only the Sunni Arabs came into power—the city people, the privileged community of the (Sunni) Ottoman state.

British rule had worked through the Sunnis, for the British had rightly assumed that a ruling community that included 20 percent of the population would be easily subordinated to foreign tutelage. In a cruel historical irony, the Sunni Arabs emerged with the best of alternatives: they were at once the colonial power's proxies and the bearers of a strident, belligerent ideology of Arab nationalism. The state remained external to the body politic, an alien imposition.

Oil and terror gave that state freedom from the society and the means to destroy all potential challengers. The regime grew more clannish, more relentless, more Sunni, and more Arab by the day. The Assyrians were destroyed in a military campaign in 1933. Then the Jews were dispossessed and expelled. There remained the Shi'ites, the Kurds, and the Turkmen to contend with.

The state also grew in power. The dominance of Saddam Hussein's fellow townspeople, the Tikritis, led to the gradual hardening that separated the regime from the larger society around it. In earlier, more benign days, the Tikritis had lived off the making of rafts of inflated goatskins. The steamships broke that industry. By happenstance, the Tikritis made their way into the military academies and the security services. There, they found a brand-new endeavor: state terror. Their rule had to be given ideological pretense, and pan-Arabism proved to be a perfect instrument of exclusion, a modern cover for tribalism.

The Fertile Crescent has always been a land of rival communities and compact minorities. Arab nationalism, the creed of Iraq's rulers, escaped from all that ambiguity into an unyielding doctrine of Arabism. The radicalism of that history wrecked the Arab world and gave the politics of the Fertile Crescent a particularly rancid and violent temper. Saddam did not descend from the sky; he emerged out of his world's sins of omission and commission. The murderous zeal with which he went about subduing the Kurds and the Shi'a was a reflection of the deep atavisms of Arab life. There, on the eastern flank of the

Iraq and the Arabs' Future

Arab world, Iraq and its “maximum leader” offered the fake promise of a pan-Arab Bismarck who would check the Persians to the east and, in time, head west to take up Israel’s challenge.

AN OPENING FOR DEMOCRACY

AN ARAB WORLD rid of this kind of ruinous temptation might conceivably have a chance to rethink the role of political power and the very nature of the state. It has often seemed in recent years that the Arab political tradition is immune to democratic stirrings. The sacking of a terrible regime with such a pervasive cult of terror may offer Iraqis and Arabs a break with the false gifts of despotism.

If and when it comes, that task of repairing—or detoxifying—Iraq will be a major undertaking. The remarkable rehabilitation of Japan between its surrender in 1945 and the restoration of its sovereignty in 1952 offers a historical precedent. Indeed, the Japanese example has already turned up, in both American and Arab discussions, as a window onto the kind of work that awaits the Americans and the Iraqis once the dictatorship is overthrown. Granted, no analogy is perfect: Iraq, with its heterogeneity, differs from Japan. America, too, is a radically different society than it was in 1945—more diverse, more given to doubt, and lacking the sense of righteous mission that drove it through the war years and into the work in Japan.

Yet for all these differences, the Japanese precedent is an important one. In the space of a decade, imperial Japan gave way to a more egalitarian, modern society. A country poisoned by militarism emerged with a pacifist view of the world. It was the victors’ justice that drove the new monumental undertaking and powered the twin goals of demilitarization and democratization. The victors tinkered with the media, the educational system, and the textbooks. Those are some of the things that will have to be done if a military campaign in Iraq is to redeem itself in the process. The theatrics and megalomania of Douglas MacArthur may belong to a bygone age, but Iraq could do worse than having the interim stewardship of a modern-day high commissioner who would help usher it toward a normal world.

At a minimum, Iraq would be lucky to have the semidemocratic politics of its neighbors. Turkey and Jordan come to mind, and even

Iran is a more merciful land than the large prison that Iraq has become under its terrifying warden. The very brutality that the Iraqis have endured under Saddam may be Iraq's saving grace if redemption comes its way. There may come relief after liberation—and a measure of realism.

The deference to the wider Arab phobias about the Shi'a or the Kurds coming into new power in Iraq should be cast aside. A liberal power cannot shore up ethnic imperiums of minority groups. The rule of a Sunni minority, now well below 20 percent of Iraq's population, cannot be made an American goal. The Arabs around Iraq are not owed that kind of indulgence. It is with these sorts of phobias and biases that the Arab world must break. A culture that looks squarely at its own troubles should think aloud about the rage that is summoned on behalf of the Palestinians while the pain of the Kurds, or the Berbers in North Africa, or the Christians in the southern Sudan, is passed over in silence.

This righteous sense of Arab victimhood—which overlooks what Arab rulers do to others while lamenting its own condition—emanates from a political tradition of belligerent self-pity. The push should be for an Arab world that acknowledges its own economic and political retrogression and begins to find a way out of those crippling sectarian atavisms.

From the Kurds, there are now proposals for a federal, decentralized polity that would keep the country intact while granting that minority the measure of autonomy they were promised when they were herded into a Baghdad-based Arab government in the early 1920s. That federalism would look different in an Iraqi setting, but there may lie Iraq's salvation. It would be a departure from the command states dominant in the Arab world and in the centralized oil states in particular. In their modern history, the Kurds have been repeatedly betrayed, and that terrible history has bred in them habits of fratricide and sedition. But the Kurds ought to be given credit for what they have built over the last decade in their ancestral land in northern Iraq, albeit under the protection of Anglo-American air power.

Kurdistan has thrived, and the perennial struggle between its dominant warlords, Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, appears to have subsided. An attempt is being made at parliamentary life. This

achievement is fragile and could crack, but under the gaze of two watchful and hostile powers, Iran and Turkey, the Kurds appear to control the zone they rule, which consists of 10 percent of Iraq's land and 15 percent of its population. Arabs are not given to charitable views of the Kurds, but the Kurds could bring to the debate about a new Iraq the experience and the poise gained during self-rule.

It is not decreed that the Kurds, or the Shi'a for that matter, will want sectarian republics of their own. The convenience that created Iraq in the 1920s may still hold, but it would have to be a different Iraq. A country of genuine pluralism, a culture that has traffic with Iran, Turkey, Syria, and the Arabian Peninsula, and the inheritance of four decades of British tutelage, has treated the Arab world to a cruel idea of Arabism, racial belonging, and merciless clan rule as well. This duality would be tested and played out if Iraq's different communities could arrive at a tolerable public order. The "ownership" of a new Iraq would have to be shared; its vocation would have to be a new social and political contract between state and society and among the principal communities of the land.

But Iraq would also provide, as it did under British tutelage, a mirror for American power as well. A new American primacy in Iraq would play out under watchful eyes. There will be Arabs convinced that their world is being recolonized. There will be pan-Arabists sure that Iraq has been taken out of "Arab hands," given over to the minorities within, and made more vulnerable to Turkey and Iran, the two non-Arab powers nearby. There will be Europeans looking for cracks in the conduct of the distant great power. The judgment that matters will be made at home, in the United States itself, as to the costs and returns of imperial burden. The British Empire's moment in Iraq came when it was exhausted; on the eve of its occupation of Iraq, the United Kingdom's GDP was 8 percent of the world product, when the comparable figure for America today is at least three times as large. America can afford a big role in Iraq, and beyond. Whether the will and the interest are there is an entirely different matter.

The Arab world could whittle down, even devour, an American victory. This is a difficult, perhaps impossible, political landscape. It may reject the message of reform by dwelling on the sins of the American messenger. There are endless escapes available to that Arab

world. It can call up the fury of the Israeli-Palestinian violence and use it as an alibi for yet more self-pity and rage. It can shout down its own would-be reformers, write them off as accomplices of a foreign assault. It can throw up its defenses and wait for the United States to weary of its expedition. It is with sobering caution, then, that a war will have to be waged. But it should be recognized that the Rubicon has been crossed. Any fallout of war is certain to be dwarfed by the terrible consequences of America's walking right up to the edge of war and then stepping back, letting the Iraqi dictator work out the terms of another reprieve. It is the fate of great powers that provide order to do so against the background of a world that takes the protection while it bemoans the heavy hand of the protector. This new expedition to Mesopotamia would be no exception to that rule. 🌐