

The new Middle East

RICHARD N HAASS

IT is early 2008. The new US strategy for Iraq, outlined by President George W Bush in January 2007, in the wake of the Iraq Study Group report, has come and gone with no discernible effect.

With 100,000 soldiers still on the ground, despite congressional calls for major withdrawals, "force protection" is the new catchphrase, given domestic intolerance of American casualties.

No one debates any longer whether Iraq is experiencing a civil war; it's in fact part failed state, part civil war and part regional war. Insurgents, militias and terrorists are more active than ever; Iraqi casualties and deaths are higher than ever.

Output of oil and electricity remains stuck at or below prewar levels. Making matters worse are the "volunteers" crossing into Iraq from Iran (to assist the Shia majority) and Syria (where Saudis and others are flocking to help the embattled Sunni minority).

Turkish troops are on alert and



carrying out forays into northern Iraq. Republicans fear that public discontent will lead to further losses in Congress and the Democratic capture of the White House in November.

Iraq is not the only "hybrid" conflict in the region. Lebanon's elected government has collapsed after months of assault from Iranian

-- and Syrian-backed Hizbullah. If Palestine existed, it would be a failed state, with Hamas and Fatah engaged in daily internecine war.

Egypt's aging President Hosni Mubarak clings to power, harboring hopes for a succession by his son Gamal, while the radical Muslim Brotherhood claims the loyalty of many and possibly most Egyptians.

Jordan's King Abdullah looks increasingly vulnerable as a massive influx of Iraqi refugees exacerbates longstanding social divisions. Afghanistan more and more resembles Iraq as a weak central government battles the Taliban and others schooled in the streets of Baghdad.

Iran, snubbing the UN Security Council, presses ahead with its nuclear program. Israel is reported to be readying a preventive attack. Rumors abound that the US president and his senior national-security team are divided, with some pushing to join the Israelis (using stealth aircraft and cruise missiles to attack Iranian nuclear sites) and others opposed, arguing that Iran would retaliate, that sev-

things turning out even worse. Either way, one thing is certain: the American era in the Middle East is over. More than anything else, it was the Iraq war -- the enormous military, economic and diplomatic costs, the shifting internal balances in the region -- that brought it to an end.

Other factors contributed: the demise of the "peace process," the rise of Hamas and Hizbullah, the Israeli embrace of unilateralism and the disinclination of George W. Bush and his administration to undertake active diplomacy.

The failure of traditional Arab regimes to combat the appeal of radical Islam also figures here, as does globalization. It has never been easier for individuals and groups to find money and weapons, or to spread their ideas--including violent anti-Americanism.

But let's be clear: the wounds America has suffered in the region are chiefly self-inflicted.

This is not the first such tectonic geopolitical shift in the region. The modern period dates back some 200 years, beginning in 1798 with a century of weak Ottoman rule.

Then came the post-World War I colonial era, dominated by Britain and France, to be followed in turn by the cold-war era, marked by the decline of war-drained Europe, the rise of Arab nationalism and the emergence of two superpowers. The demise of the Soviet Union brought about the American era.

Its dominant features were the US-led liberation of Kuwait, the Madrid peace conference and the Clinton administration's intense but unsuccessful peacemaking effort at Camp David.

As for Iraq, it will remain weak, divided and violent for years. Kurds, Sunnis and Shia will live separate lives, the result of ethnic cleansing as much as preference or history.

US, policy will evolve from achieving success to limiting costs, both in Iraq and in the wider region. This will lead to a reduction in US forces, a reorientation of their role and greater emphasis on working to prevent what is now a civil war from metastasizing into a regional one.

America's options are limited in such a context. Its thirst for the region's oil, vulnerability to terror and commitment to Israel and a moderate Arab future require it to stay engaged. But how?

The US experience in Iraq should serve as a caution about using military force. It has not proved effective against loosely organized militias or terrorists who are well armed, accepted by the local population and prepared to die for their cause.

And despite calls from some quarters to use force to keep Iran from getting the bomb, the case

port of Israel. China will focus on negotiating energy deals that guarantee it the oil it needs to continue to grow, irrespective of other geopolitical considerations.

More and more, Iran will emerge as a player, a classic imperial power with ambitions to remake the region in its image and with the capabilities to potentially translate its objectives into reality.

Both Egypt and Saudi Arabia are almost certain to initiate nuclear programs of their own, if in fact Iran succeeds, as North Korea has proved able to. Israel, too, looks increasingly vulnerable, burdened with the costs of occupation and multidimensional challenges to its security.

There is unlikely to be any recognizable peace process for the foreseeable future in the absence of a Palestinian partner both able and willing to make compromises.

Tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims will grow throughout the region and be felt acutely in divided societies such as Lebanon, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. "Militiaization" will continue apace, with growing and increasingly powerful private armies in Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories.

Terrorism will escalate. Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Egypt will be targeted in terrorist campaigns to weaken and discredit their governments. Faced with such challenges and the impression that democracy feeds disorder, Arab regimes, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia, are likely to resist reform.

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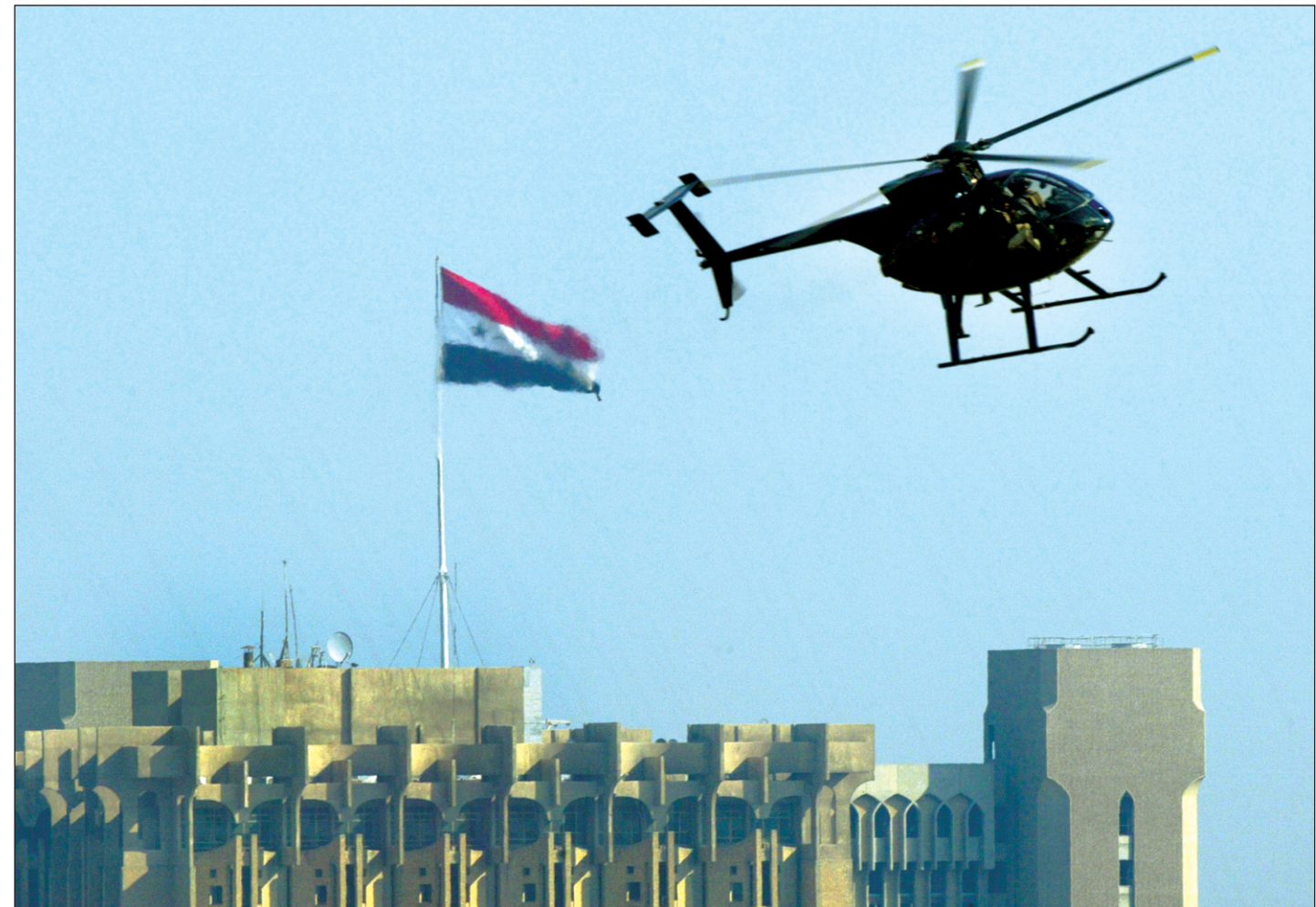
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for not doing so has grown more, rather than less, compelling over time, for reasons ranging from the dangers of retaliation to the likely oil shock to the global economy.

The United States should also rethink democracy as the centerpiece of foreign policy. Yes, mature democracies tend not to make war on one another. But how many decades would it take to create a genuine democracy anywhere in the region, under even the most ideal circumstances?

Meanwhile, it is necessary to work with many of these same non-democratic governments against other mutual challenges. Nor is democracy an answer, in itself, to the problem of terrorism.

Societies that can offer political and economic opportunities for their young people are less prone to radicalism, to be sure. Yet Britain has hardly proved immune. That both Hamas and Hizbullah fared well in elections only to carry out violent attacks afterwards reinforces the point.

Democracy is of little use when dealing with highly mobilized ideological or religious extremists. A more relevant focus might be reforms that promote education, economic liberalism and open markets and encourage Arab and

Muslim authorities to speak out in ways that delegitimize terror and shame its supporters.

The United States must realize that it cannot impose a solution on Iraq. Washington should establish a regional forum akin to what existed to help manage events in Afghanistan. This would necessarily require bringing in both Iran and Syria. Syria is in a position to affect the movement of fighters into Iraq and arms into Lebanon. It also exercises considerable influence over Hamas.

There is a strong case for working to get Syria to close its borders in exchange for economic benefits (provided by Arab governments, Europe and the United States) and a commitment to restart talks aimed at resolving the status of the Golan Heights. History shows that Syria, a state that joined the US-led coalition in the first Iraq war and attended the Madrid peace conference in its wake, might be open to such a deal.

Iran is a more difficult case. But given that regime change is not a near-term prospect and that military strikes would be dangerous, diplomacy is the best option. Any talks must be unconditional and comprehensive -- that is, they must address Iran's nuclear program and its support of terrorism and

militias.

Iran would be offered an array of economic, political, security and energy-related incentives backed by broad international support, a prerequisite if the United States were to press for stiffer UN sanctions should diplomacy ultimately fail. The terms should be public. Ordinary Iranians must know the price they pay for their regime's radical foreign policy.

The weak showing of Iran's president in recent elections suggests he may be vulnerable to such pressures from within.

The Israeli-Palestinian peace process must be revived. It is still the issue that most shapes (and radicalizes) public opinion across the Middle East. The United States should articulate what it believes ought to constitute a final settlement, stipulating that the state of Palestine would be based on 1967 borders and that Palestinians would be compensated for those territorial adjustments made to safeguard Israel's security or to reflect demographic changes.

The more detailed and generous the vision, the harder it becomes for Hamas to justify choosing confrontation. If America is to ever recover its role as an "honest broker" in the region, it must be less passive than it has

been in recent years.

None of this guarantees success, defined however modestly as a halt to the erosion of America's power and standing in the Middle East. Nor, strictly speaking, is there any one "solution" for the Middle East.

Whatever the United States does, or does not do, the region will remain troubled for decades. But this is not a prescription for fatalism. In history, what often matters most is degree.

There's a fundamental difference between a Middle East that lacks formal peace agreements and one defined by terror and war; between a region that houses a powerful Iran and one dominated by Iran; between a part of the world that has an uneasy relationship with the United States and one filled with hatred.

History shows that eras in the Middle East can last as long as a century and as briefly as fifteen years. It is clearly in America's (and the world's) interest that the current era be as brief as possible.

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US losing the infowar



SCOTT JOHNSON

INSURGENTS using simple cell-phone cameras, laptop editing programs and the Web are beating the United States in the fierce battle for Iraqi public opinion.

For nearly four years, US military officials have briefed the Baghdad press corps from behind an imposing wooden podium. No longer.

Last week US military spokesman Maj. Gen. William Caldwell relaxed with reporters around a "media roundtable." He replaced the cumbersome headset once used for Arabic translations with a discreet earpiece. He cut short his opening statement, allowing for more back-and-forth banter.

Yet even as Iraq emerged from the deadliest month in 2006 for American

soldiers, Caldwell maintained the relentlessly upbeat patter that has come to characterize the briefings. "The key difference you're going to see in 2007," he said proudly, "is this is truly the year of transition and adaptation."

Another year, another message. In the United States this week, President George W. Bush's speech laying out his new strategy for Iraq will be scrutinized for its specifics -- the numbers of an anticipated troop surge, the money for reconstruction and jobs programs.

But at least as critical to success may be whether Bush is convincing. A draft report recently produced by the Baghdad embassy's director of strategic communications Ginger Cruz and obtained by Newsweek makes the stakes clear: "Without popular support from US population,

there is the risk that troops will be pulled back... Thus there is a vital need to save popular support via message."

Under the heading domestic messages, Cruz goes on to recommend 16 themes to reinforce with the American public, several of which Bush is likely to hit: "vitally important we succeed," actively working on new approaches; "there are no quick or easy answers."

What's even more telling is that the Iraqi messages -- the very next section -- are still "TBD," to be determined. Indeed, the document so much as admits that despite spending hundreds of millions of dollars, the United States has lost the battle for Iraqi public opinion: "Insurgents, sectarian elements, and others are taking control of the message at the

public level."

Videos of US soldiers being shot and blown up, and of the bloody work of sectarian death squads, are now pervasive. The images inspire new recruits and intimidate those who might stand against them. "Inadequate message control in Iraq," the draft warns, "is feeding the escalating cycle of violence." (A US Embassy spokesperson claims the document reflects Cruz's personal views, not official policy.)

Sunni insurgents in particular have become expert at using technology to underscore -- some would say exaggerate -- their effectiveness. "The sophistication of the way the enemy is using the news media is huge," Lt. Gen. Peter Chiarelli, the former commander of US forces in Iraq, told Newsweek just before he returned to

the United States.

Most large-scale attacks on US forces are now filmed, often from multiple camera angles, and with high-resolution cameras. The footage is slickly edited into dramatic narratives: quick-cut images of Humvees exploding or US soldiers being felled by snipers are set to inspiring religious soundtracks or chanting, which lends them a triumphal feel.

In some cases, US officials believe, insurgents attack American forces primarily to generate fresh footage.

Guerrillas have always sought alternative technologies to undermine their better-equipped enemies. What's different now is the power and accessibility of such tools. Production work that once required a studio can now be done on a laptop.

Compilation videos of attacks on US forces sell in Baghdad markets for as little as 50 cents on video CDs. Advancements in cell-phone technology have made such devices particularly useful. Their small video files -- the filming of Saddam Hussein's hanging took up just over one megabyte -- are especially easy to download and disseminate.

"Literally, it's only hours after an attack (and the videos) are available," says Andrew Garfield, a British counter-intelligence expert who has advised US forces in Baghdad. "You can really say it's only a cell-phone call away."

What the insurgents understand better than the Americans is how Iraqis consume information. Tapes of beheadings are stored on cell phones along with baby pictures and wedding videos. Popular Arab satellite channels like al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya air far more graphic images than are typically seen on US TV -- leaving the impression, say US military officials that America is on the run.

At the extreme is the Zawra channel, run by former Sunni parliamentarian Mishan Jibouri, who fled to Syria last year after being accused of corruption. (Jibouri says he's being persecuted for political reasons, and can return to Iraq whenever he wants.) Since November the channel has been spewing out an unending series of videos showing American soldiers being killed in sniper and IED attacks.

The clips are accompanied by commentary, often in English, admonishing Iraqis to "focus your utmost rage against the occupation." Among Sunnis and even some Shiites, Zawra has become one of the most popular stations in Iraq. "I get e-mails from girls in their 20s from Arab countries; some of them are very wealthy," Jibouri boasts. "Some offer to work for free, some offer money."

The US military's response, on the other hand, usually sticks to traditional channels like press releases. These can take hours to prepare and are often outdated by the time they're issued.

Lt. Col. Barry Johnson, director of the military's press operations in Baghdad until this past September, complains that all military-related information has to be processed upward through a laborious and bureaucratic chain of command. "The military wants to control the environment around it, but as we try to (do so), it only slows us down further," he says.

"All too often, the easiest decision we made was just not to talk about (the story) at all, and then you absolutely lose your ability to frame what's going on."

An even bigger problem, say other US officials, may be the message itself. The videos on Zawra are powerful precisely because they confirm the preconceptions many Iraqis have about the occupation.

Col. William Darley, editor of the influential Military Review at the Combined Arms Center in Fort Leavenworth, Kans., argues that merely changing podiums in the briefing room misses the point. "You can cook up a kind of shrewd, New York City-style advertising campaign for a candy bar, and if the candy bar tastes lousy, you can't sell it," says Darley. "If Iraq has no electricity, spotty medical care, no security, then (we) cannot succeed."

The consequences of losing the propaganda battle are real. "One of these videos is worth a division of



tanks to those people," says Robert Steele, a former US Marine Corps intelligence officer. Not only do the insurgent videos draw recruits and donations, they don't give ordinary Iraqis much incentive to cooperate with the Americans.

Videos put out by sectarian death squads, like the one shown to Newsweek by the watchdog SITE institute in which a Sunni militiaman saws the head off a Shiite prisoner with a five-inch knife, enrage the targeted community.

The release of the ghoulish video of Saddam's hanging prompted thousands of Sunnis to protest in Anbar province. Residents of Fallujah -- the target of a multimillion-dollar hearts-and-minds campaign -- renamed the city's main thoroughfare the Street of the Martyr Saddam Hussein.

The damage goes beyond Iraq. Al-Qaeda's media arm, As-Sahab ("The Cloud"), has similarly improved the quality and frequency of its videos; the group, says former State Department adviser Philip Zelikow, uses "the Internet to provide a sense of virtual identity" now that its Afghan training camps have largely been destroyed.

The question is how to fight back, when today's most powerful technologies -- the Web, cell phones -- are better suited to small, nimble organizations. Back in the 1930s national leaders could almost wholly control the framing of their messages, says Donald Shaw, a professor of media theory at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who has written about reforms for military public-affairs officers. But now, "the podium has lost its influence." For those who once stood behind it, that message at least is very clear.

With Michael Hastings in Baghdad and Benjamin Sutherland in Treviso

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