

The Iraq War ten years on: assessing the fallout

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The tenth anniversary of the Iraq War (March–April 2003) provides little cause for celebration. It is true that the war quickly achieved its primary objective of removing the regime of Saddam Hussein and with him the spectre of a nuclear-armed Iraq, but its justification was highly questionable. Iraq was found to have no weapons of mass destruction; nor did it have links to the extremist group Al-Qaeda. The war's consequences have been far-reaching. A short campaign was followed by a protracted occupation with the final withdrawal of US forces achieved only after nearly nine years. Many thousands of lives were lost, the vast majority—tens, if not hundreds, of thousands—those of Iraqi citizens.¹ The cost to the United States has been estimated in billions or even trillions of dollars when the continuing costs of reconstruction are included.² Taking into account the spill-over effects of the more recent Arab uprisings and renewed sectarian violence, the political future of Iraq and the regional balance of power remain highly unstable. Overall, the war did not prove favourable to western interests. In 2007 Barack Obama, then senator and candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination, described it as a war which 'never should have been authorized and never should have been waged'.³ Whatever the perspective from which it is viewed, it cannot be described as a success. In his 'top ten lessons of the Iraq War', produced on the occasion of its ninth anniversary, Stephen Walt claims simply that 'the US lost'.⁴

Against this sombre background, this tenth anniversary does, however, offer an opportunity for some much-needed reflection about winners and losers and the consequences of the war for domestic, regional and international order. These consequences, which this article aims to explore, have already been subject to much critical analysis;⁵ but the passage of time, and in particular the 'Arab Spring' uprisings which commenced at the end of 2010, have added multiple new dimensions

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¹ Figures are widely contested. *The Lancet's* estimate of 670,000 (which includes civilians and combatants) has been widely challenged. Iraq Body Count's 2012 estimate is nearer to 120,000 (see <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/>, accessed 9 Feb. 2013); others claim a still higher death toll of up to 1 million.

² Joseph Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes, 'The true cost of the Iraq War: \$3 trillion and beyond', *Washington Post*, 5 Sept. 2010.

³ Barack Obama, 'Renewing American leadership', *Foreign Affairs* 86: 4, July–Aug. 2007, pp. 2–16.

⁴ Stephen Walt, 'Top 10 lessons of the Iraq War', *Foreign Policy*, 20 March 2012.

⁵ See e.g. Ali Allawi, *The occupation of Iraq: winning the war, losing the peace* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007); Amitav Acharya and Hiro Katsumata, eds, *Beyond Iraq: the future of world order* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2011).

and perspectives, setting the region on a path somewhat different from that predicted in early assessments. Hence there is a need to review both the legacy of the war—a landmark event in itself—and its longer-term implications in the light of current events. Hitherto this exercise has been little attempted, partly because of the continuing and as yet unresolved controversies over the legitimacy of the war, partly because of the fast-moving events in the region, but also because of the tendency—prevalent in the conflict-prone Middle East—of the latest crisis to overshadow those of the past, meaning that some of the important lessons of Iraq have been forgotten. These lessons have become particularly important, not only because of the continuing conflict and bloodshed in Iraq, which show no signs of abating, but also in the light of regime change in Libya, which was facilitated by western intervention (though under different auspices), and the possible collapse, again with western acquiescence and at least logistical support, of another ‘pivotal’ regional regime: that of Syria’s Bashar al-Assad.

Some preliminary connections between the Iraq War and subsequent events may be illustrated by a few examples, to be taken up later in the article. First, the prevalence of authoritarianism in the region, which—regime change in Iraq notwithstanding—the war failed to dislodge in the short term, has been emphatically challenged, but by internal dynamics rather than external intervention. The Arab uprisings were bottom-up movements, but it is hard to imagine that there was no link between the downfall of the Iraqi dictator in 2003—and the subsequent dissent it unleashed—and the fall of a further three Arab dictators in 2011–12 following the start of the Arab Spring protests.

Second, shifts in the regional balance of power resulting from the Iraq War, which transformed Iraq from a strong to a weak state, have been further sharpened and consolidated following the Arab Spring turmoil, giving rise to realignments in which Turkey, a state already predisposed to regional leadership, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states of the Arab Gulf, whose wealth, regime type and population size have largely shielded them from the uprisings (Bahrain is the important exception here, though Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have both experienced unrest), have emerged more clearly as sources of regional leadership. Widespread speculation about an opposing Syria–Iran axis, which the Iraq War fostered, has been weakened, perhaps fatally, by the onset of civil war in Syria. The wider ‘Iran threat’, as perceived by the US, which the war threw into sharper relief, has not been removed, however: Iran now has allies in Iraq, whose current Prime Minister is a Shi’a, as well as Lebanon and Palestine. Its links to radical Islamic groups remain, as do its aspirations to develop its nuclear programme.

Third, the controversial nature and outcome of the war, which weakened, discredited and divided the West, has had a significant impact on international relations and foreign policy-making—an impact compounded by the effects and further controversy surrounding external intervention in the Arab uprisings, revealing divisions among the permanent five members of the Security Council and exposing the extent of an emerging multipolarity in the international system to which, some would argue, the Iraq War directly contributed.

This article sets out to disentangle the different strands of change and to suggest, with the benefit of ten years of hindsight, what impact the Iraq War has had on domestic, regional and international order. The argument, uncontroversially, is that the Iraq War has given rise, or is still giving rise, to significant changes at all three levels. Some of these changes were intended; many were not. Indeed, one of the remarkable features of the Iraq War is its failure to achieve its desired outcomes. Notably, it did not promote democratic governance on the western model, economic prosperity, peaceful change or regional order.⁶ However, the passage of time reveals a landscape rather different from and even more unpredictable than that of the early postwar years. Indeed, the challenge that arises in 2013 is how to integrate the outcomes of the Iraq War with those of the still unfolding events surrounding the uprisings in the Arab world, which have both built upon and also superseded the post-Iraq framework. Consequently, it is necessary both to examine events and developments since the Iraq War on their own terms and also to consider how these have interacted with or even helped to lay the bases for subsequent developments.

There are a number of possible ways to evaluate the impact of the Iraq War on subsequent regional and international developments. In contemplating change, this article considers three broad levels of analysis, looking in turn at the state, regional and international levels. Rather than employing 'levels of analysis' as a reductionist problem-solving device—a method favoured by scholars of international relations in determining the relative weight of different explanations for international events⁷—the approach is used here as a simple analytical and ordering tool to separate off, scrutinize and evaluate the different domains of change. This allows us to focus first on the short- to medium-term effects of the Iraq War at the different levels, and then to draw the Arab uprisings into the analysis to reveal how patterns set by events in Iraq may have triggered or at least influenced the Arab Spring and its outcomes. For example, the region-wide jihadist or resistance movements that developed in response to the Iraq War and occupation have been redeployed in Syria and elsewhere. Their influence, in turn, relates to the new regional balance of power post-Iraq which has pitted the interests of the Sunni Gulf monarchies against those of Shi'i Iran and its allies. While it is hard to demonstrate with precision the relationship between these two path-breaking series of events, and the constraints of space allow for discussion of only selected aspects of change at the different levels, certain inferences and linkages can be made and attention drawn to some key and novel features of domestic, regional and international order, ten years on.

⁶ See further Louise Fawcett, 'Regional order in the Middle East', in Acharya and Katsumata, eds, *Beyond Iraq*, p. 40.

⁷ On levels of analysis and their uses, see J. D. Singer, 'The level of analysis problem in International Relations', *World Politics* 14: 1, 1961, pp. 77–92.

The state level

To understand the state- or domestic-level changes arising from the Iraq War, it is necessary first to understand the order prevailing at the time of the conflict and explore the intended and unintended consequences of the war. Assumptions before the war about regional politics almost invariably started from the default view, popular in western circles, of the Middle East region,⁸ with a couple of outlier states, as illiberal and non-democratic. From the works of regional scholars like Elie Kedourie in the 1970s through to the most recent political analyses of the region prior to the Arab Spring, the region's illiberalism and persistence of authoritarian rule had been widely debated by scholars.⁹ Recently, Roger Owen, whose study of the resilience of Arab presidents was published in 2012, comments in the preface that he was obliged to review his final findings as the book went to press to take account of the unpredicted effects of the Arab uprisings.¹⁰

These widespread assumptions about the state of regional politics were not, of course, wholly misplaced. Though the history of the region demonstrates numerous—often ignored—encounters with liberalism,¹¹ a quick survey of regional politics before the war indicated a poor takeup of democratization. Samuel Huntington, the author of a study on democratization's 'third wave', thought it conceivable but unlikely that a 'new Jeffersonian Nasser could spread a democratic version of Pan-Arabism in the Middle East'.¹² Not only had authoritarian regimes survived a number of challenges, but the turn of the twentieth century into the twenty-first had seen a series of rather smooth father-to-son successions, following the demise of an older generation of Arab leaders in Syria, Jordan, Bahrain and Morocco. Writing in 2002, Laurence Whitehead commented that democratization in the Middle East, in comparison to other areas, 'may be harder to imagine'.¹³

Though western powers had long tolerated and even condoned authoritarian rule as a source of stability in many states of the region, this view shifted after the events of 11 September 2001 when an authoritarian state like Iraq became associated with acts of Islamic extremism, terrorism, and weapons of mass destruction, and as such was viewed as a legitimate object of intervention and regime change. Iraq was not the only state identified as having possible links to Al-Qaeda and other extremist groups, but was an obvious target given its continuing 'rogue state' status and (ultimately unfounded) suspicions about its nuclear programme; further, this was an opportunity to deal with the unfinished business of the 1991

⁸ Understood as comprising the members of the League of Arab States, and the non-Arab states of Israel, Iran and Turkey.

⁹ Elie Kedourie, *Arab political memoirs* (London: Frank Cass, 1974); Oliver Schlumberger, ed., *Debating Arab authoritarianism. dynamics and durability in non-democratic regimes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 1–6.

¹⁰ Roger Owen, *The rise and fall of Arab presidents for life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

¹¹ Albert Hourani, *Arabic thought in the liberal age 1798–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962); Saad Eddin Ibrahim, 'An open door: the Arab world's liberal tradition', *Wilson Quarterly* 28: 2, Spring 2004, pp. 36–46.

¹² Samuel Huntington, *The third wave: democratization in the late twentieth century* (Norman, OK: Oklahoma University Press, 1991), p. 290.

¹³ Laurence Whitehead, *Democratization: theory and experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 190.

Gulf War, which had stopped short of regime change. In 2003 the US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, reflected that the United States should have pushed harder for political reform in the region.¹⁴ One frequently stated aim of the Iraq War (like the war in Afghanistan after 9/11) was to promote a new political order to weaken the appeal of extremist groups. The logic was that if Iraq became more liberal and democratic this would have contagion effects elsewhere; and if the region as a whole became more liberal, it would be more peaceful and provide a more conducive environment for the pursuit of western interests; and so on.

The notion that regime change in Iraq would produce any new turn towards democracy was soon proved mistaken, at least in the short term. Indeed, it flew in the face of sound advice from the findings of International Relations scholars about the links between democratization processes and war.¹⁵ As Iraq descended into a prolonged and highly destructive civil war, a war whose consequences are still unfolding,¹⁶ any idea of democratic consolidation was hard to imagine. Elsewhere in the region, rather than liberalization, both during and after the war there was an initial trend towards 'deliberalization' as regimes struggled to contain the contradictory pressures of mass public disapproval of the war, jihadist movements in support of Iraq's Sunnis, and wider sectarian threats. Fearful for their own survival in the fallout from Iraq, particularly given the rise of radical Islamic movements, authoritarian states—as in the past—sought retrenchment and consolidation as an antidote to change. Reflecting on this some years after the start of the war, John Grey commented starkly: 'Liberal democracy cannot be established in most of the countries of the modern Middle East ... [T]here is a choice between secular despotism and Islamic rule.'¹⁷

This view, however, was also misplaced. If one short-term consequence of the Iraq War was a strengthening of authoritarianism, the medium term saw a growing mood of popular resistance towards incumbent regimes. This mood peaked at the end of 2010 when events triggered by the suicide of a Tunisian fruit-seller, which took place only a year or so after the suppression of the reformist 'Green Movement' in Iran, revealed the extent of Arab (and Iranian) popular disaffection with the authoritarian state and its repertoire of cooption and coercion, and the increasing feelings of empowerment to challenge it. But in rejecting secular despotism, the protesters did not seek Islamic rule, at least not in the sense implied by Grey. Even if Islamic parties were now well placed to win elections, the Arab uprisings did not vindicate the Iranian government's claim of a sympathetic wave of Islamic revolutions.

How much this highly infectious popular challenge to authoritarian rule was directly related to Iraq remains an open question. Such challenges were not new. Long before the Iraq War, demands for change had resonated across the region,

¹⁴ A. Richard Norton, 'The puzzle of political reform in the Middle East', in Louise Fawcett, ed., *International relations of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 134.

¹⁵ Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder, 'Democratization and the danger of war', *International Security* 20: 1, 1995, p. 36.

¹⁶ See Charles Tripp, 'Three costly lessons from the invasion', *World Today* 69: 1, Feb. 2013, <http://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/twt/archive/view/189205>, accessed 15 Feb. 2013.

¹⁷ John Gray, *Black mass: apocalyptic religion and the death of utopia* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 146.

as detailed by scholars such as Nazih Ayubi; some limited political openings had resulted.¹⁸ After the war there were further episodes of unrest, including the ‘Cedar Revolution’ in Lebanon following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in March 2005 and the *kifayah*-led protests in Egypt which peaked in the run-up to presidential elections held in September 2005. What was new about the Arab uprisings of 2010–2011 were the dimensions and depth of protest, revealing the combustibility and contagion effects of political unrest, and here education, information and communications played a significant role. Other factors driving the uprisings were important, among them the impact of the global financial crisis that began in 2008, the economic privations it brought about and the corrupt leadership practices it revealed. However, notwithstanding the longer cumulative and increasingly public history of opposition to authoritarian rule, there is little doubt that the events surrounding the war and its aftermath may be seen as a critical turning point in a longer story of resistance that is often overlooked. They breathed new life into diverse opposition movements and encouraged social mobilization—activities that were, crucially, facilitated by the explosion of new media and communications networks which have in turn contributed to an opening up of civil society, transformation of political spaces and a ‘redefining of Muslim publics’.¹⁹

If the Iraq War provided an opportunity for popular movements to flex their muscles and practise new communication skills, it also may have served a different purpose in shaking the fabric of authoritarianism, by showing both the ugliness, but also the vulnerability, of dictatorship under threat.²⁰ Consider the manner in which Saddam Hussein (and later Gaddafi) was finally uncovered. Even if Middle Eastern peoples were widely opposed to foreign intervention in the region (and some still regarded Saddam Hussein as hero and martyr) the removal and humiliation of the Iraqi leader—a notorious and unpopular regional strongman—was to be inspirational and empowering for many. The myth of the Arab predilection for ‘strong, all-powerful leadership’, long popular in the West, was further and still more powerfully debunked by the removal, following widespread popular protests, first of Tunisia’s President Ben Ali and then of Egypt’s President Mubarak, both of which emphatically showed that dictators were no longer invincible.²¹

Thus it can be seen that although the intended consequences of the Iraq War failed to materialize, it did open up pathways for political change. The Arab spirit of protest—a rejuvenated Arab nationalism—galvanized by those who resisted the war and occupation, was reproduced *en masse* in the Arab Spring.²² However,

¹⁸ Nazih Ayubi, *Overstating the Arab state: politics and society in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1995), pp. 396–7, 428–9.

¹⁹ Marc Lynch, *Voices of the new Arab public: Iraq, al-Jazeera and Middle East politics today* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2005); Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, ‘Redefining Muslim publics’, in Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, eds, *New media in the Muslim world: the emerging public sphere*, 2nd edn (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), pp. 1–18.

²⁰ Allawi, *Occupation of Iraq*, p. 2.

²¹ F. Gregory Gause III, ‘Why Middle East studies missed the Arab Spring: the myth of authoritarian stability’, *Foreign Affairs* 90: 4, July–Aug. 2011, pp. 81–90.

²² Christopher Phillips, *Everyday Arab identity* (London: Routledge, 2013).

this popular development contrasts starkly with attempts to bring democracy to Iraq in the name of western interests. This project was flawed in its conception and ultimately failed because it made certain assumptions about the region (as illiberal) and about democracy (as a western project) and its export (as possible—regardless of local conditions). It also ignored the alternative possibilities of democratization from within. What Arab states (including Iraq itself) have witnessed since 2010 is the rise of an indigenous democratizing movement of a different quality and nature from the western liberal project—one whose progress, like all democratization processes, is likely to be protracted and confused. It has already given rise to a number of tendencies which do not map neatly onto conservative western notions of how democracy may develop. For example, one such tendency, reflecting demands from the Arab left in countries like Egypt or Tunisia, calls for the undermining of the prevalent neo-liberal economic order. Another invites innovation in Islam and entertains its coexistence with democratic practices.²³ This builds upon earlier trends towards what Asef Bayat has called a ‘post-Islamist turn’ in regional politics in which ‘religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty’ are fused.²⁴

Hence one major domestic impact of the Iraq War was to issue a renewed challenge to the authoritarian state, which in the short term yielded a brief period of retrenchment by incumbent regimes but ultimately gave way to a fresh series of demands which would no longer be satisfied by ‘authoritarian upgrading’.²⁵ In doing so it also provided an effective platform for mass social mobilization—an experience which would be built upon and repeated with higher levels of sophistication and efficacy in the Arab Spring. It is no coincidence that Egypt’s Tahrir Square, for example, was the scene of major protests against the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, protests which rapidly came to be directed against the regime of President Mubarak—an important prelude to future events.²⁶ Following the example of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, Baghdad’s own Tahrir Square also became the site of a series of popular protests against the government led by Nuri al-Maliki.²⁷

The regional level

The domestic or state-level fallout from the Iraq War was carried over into the regional domain with no less profound and continuing consequences for regional order. Contrary to expectations that the regime change in Iraq would have a positive impact on regional order through improving regional governance by example and

²³ See Tariq Ramadan, *The Arab awakening: Islam and the new Middle East* (London: Allen Lane, 2012); Mehran Kamrava, *Innovation in Islam: traditions and contributions* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

²⁴ Asef Bayat, *Making Islam democratic: social movements and the post-Islamist turn* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

²⁵ Raymond Hinnebusch, ‘Syria: from authoritarian upgrading to revolution’, *International Affairs* 88: 1, 2012, pp. 112–13.

²⁶ Paul Schemm, ‘Activist dissent and anti-war protest in Egypt’, in Jeannie Sowers and Chris Toensing, eds, *The journey to Tahrir: revolution, protest and social change in Egypt* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 85.

²⁷ Jack Healy and Michael Schmidt, ‘Demonstrations turn violent in Iraq’, *New York Times*, 25 Feb. 2011.

securing the resolution of regional conflicts, the short-term result was increased instability arising from the growth of religious sectarianism and the activities of radical transnational movements, the large-scale displacement of Iraqis (at least 2 million were internally displaced at the height of the conflict) and, above all, disturbances to the balance of power which fundamentally shifted regional security dynamics. Rather than reducing conflict, this instability increased the likelihood of new conflicts emerging while freezing or exacerbating old ones. This was hardly a conducive environment for reviving the Arab–Israel peace process, which only a decade earlier was showing some promise, giving rise to talk of a ‘New Middle East’.²⁸ Rather, it stalled peace initiatives under way, such as a Saudi-sponsored plan unveiled in 2002, and arguably contributed to Israeli intransigence. Certainly, Israel was not made more secure by the absence of its former rival Saddam Hussein, since his demise gave rise to a new coalition of hostile state and non-state forces headed by Syria and Iran. The Israeli interventions in Lebanon in 2006 and Gaza in 2008–2009, to curb the influence of Hezbollah and Hamas respectively, though not directly the result of the Iraq War, were driven by Israel’s increased sense of insecurity and attempts to strengthen its position amid the prevailing regional instability and the perception that radical groups and their state allies had become stronger.

The war also empowered Iran, whose power had been traditionally balanced by Iraq, making some kind of pre-emptive intervention by the United States or Israel a real possibility. Prior to the Iraq War, Iran had been named by President George W. Bush as part of an ‘axis of evil’ including Iraq and North Korea. After the war, Syria and Iran were listed by the US State Department as ‘states sponsoring terrorism’. Now these two states were united in their opposition to western intervention and in their support of Iraqi resistance movements, thereby helping to exacerbate and prolong the occupation.

From a simple balance of power perspective, the fact that a once strong, even dominant regional power had almost overnight become a weak state would have obvious implications for regional order at all levels. Civil wars and weak states are rightly viewed as chronic sources of instability with spillover effects for regional and international order.²⁹ And as International Relations theories would predict, new pretenders sought to fill the vacuum of power following the defeat of Iraq and to exploit further the weakness of the once dominant Sunni axis. As conservative Arab states like Saudi Arabia and Egypt found their positions weakened by the effects of 9/11 and the fallout from the war, it was Syria and Iran and their regional allies Hezbollah and Hamas that emerged as major competitors to the crumbling Arab order. Indeed, it was the so-called HISH (Hamas, Iran, Syria, Hezbollah) alliance that emerged as the short-term beneficiary of the war—the worst possible result from the perspective of the intervening powers.³⁰

Even if the potential of this alliance may have been overstated by conservative Arabs and western powers alike—observers of Iran–Syria relations have long

²⁸ Shimon Peres with Arye Naor, *The new Middle East* (New York: Holt, 1993).

²⁹ Robert I. Rotberg, ‘Failed states, collapsed states, weak states: causes and indicators’, in Robert Rotberg, ed., *State failure and state weakness in a time of terror* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), pp. 1–24.

³⁰ Fawcett, ‘Regional order in the Middle East’, pp. 41–3.

noted multiple elements of competition as well as cooperation³¹—the realignments following the Iraq War clearly brought about a major disturbance to regional order with knock-on consequences for international alignments (discussed below). Perhaps most striking, as states struggled to deal with the consequences of the war, was the absence of leadership shown by major regional powers, which were pulled in different directions by the external and internal demands it generated.

Regional leadership in the Middle East had often been in short supply, hindered by long-standing rivalry and suspicion, together with external meddling, dating back to the very creation of the modern state system; even so, the effects of the war were to reduce the capabilities of major states significantly.³² Reflecting this, in the years immediately following the war regional institutions, notably the League of Arab States, were quiescent, playing no major roles in addressing the fallout from the conflict, leaving observers to conclude that earlier impulses to cooperation had eroded and that the Middle East, in marked contrast to many other areas, remained a backwater of regionalism.³³ Again, any intended consequences of the Iraq War towards strengthening regional governance and institutions and thereby promoting stability failed to materialize.

Although the short-term picture of the war's aftermath as painted above was demonstrably bleak and confused, with an absence of leadership and a jostling for position among rival regional actors together with tentative moves towards adjustments in the regional power balance, some emerging trends became discernible.³⁴ Some of these post-Iraq realignments pointed the way forward to adjustments in the 'regional security complex'³⁵ that merged with the new order taking shape in the wake of the Arab uprisings. A clearer pattern of regional alliances and rivalries started to emerge, with the GCC monarchies, headed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, as front runners on the regional stage, drawing on economic stability and western connections as well as claims to religious legitimacy. Saudi-US tensions—the result of the association of Saudi-born militants with the 9/11 attacks and Saudi opposition to the Iraq intervention—were largely overcome. The small state of Qatar, with its modernizing royal family, immense wealth and control of important media networks, embarked on an increasingly activist foreign policy, exercising significant influence on the regional stage. The bloc of Gulf monarchies now faced a Syria-Iran axis, albeit one weakened by Syria's civil war. If the wider threat posed by Iran—including its links to the region's Shi'i groups

³¹ Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: middle powers in a penetrated regional system* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 87.

³² Ian Lustick, 'The absence of Middle Eastern great powers: political "backwardness" in historical perspective', *International Organization* 51: 4, 1997, pp. 653–83; Louise Fawcett, 'Regional leadership? Understanding power and transformation in the Middle East', in Nadine Godehardt and Dirk Nabers, eds, *Regional powers and regional orders* (London: Routledge, 2011).

³³ Bahgat Korany, 'Looking at the Middle East differently: an alternative conceptual lens', in Bahgat Korany, ed., *The changing Middle East: a new look at regional dynamics* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2010), p. 19; Cilja Harders and Matteo Legrenzi, 'Introduction', in Cilja Harders and Matteo Legrenzi, eds, *Beyond regionalism? Regional cooperation, regionalism and regionalization in the Middle East* (London: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 1–2.

³⁴ See Philip Robins, 'The war for regime change in Iraq', in Fawcett, ed., *International relations of the Middle East*, pp. 304–20.

³⁵ See Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and powers: the structure of international security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

(and the current Iraqi regime)—remains, talk of a new regional cold war, focused now on the ‘struggle for Syria’ and recalling the rivalries of the Arab Cold War described by Malcolm Kerr in the 1960s, seems somewhat hyperbolic.³⁶ First of all, one of the players, Iran, is not Arab, and is therefore not a pole of attraction for most Arab states. In contrast, Turkey—often described as a bridge state between the Middle East and the West—has sought to raise its profile as a potential regional leader and conflict mediator. Despite opposition to the Iraq War, its connections with the West, notably through NATO membership and economic links, remain secure. It has moved to support the Syrian opposition despite its real fears of the spillover effects of the ongoing conflict. Meanwhile, its potential mediating role in regional rivalries is enhanced by a domestic model which appears to offer a plausible middle way between secularity and Islamism: a social contract which emphasizes the possibility of coexistence between democracy and Islamic culture.

In this new regional environment, the absence of leadership that had been a feature of regional order since Nasser’s demise and had seemed to be exacerbated by the Iraq War, now seems to be giving way to a new hegemonic axis of Arab monarchies supported by the West. This order, in turn, appears to be further reinforced by evidence of a ‘new regionalism’ reflected in the renewed activism of the League of Arab States and the GCC, both of which took on novel, indeed unprecedented, roles in the light of the Arab uprisings—including support of international intervention in Libya to protect civilians, and attempts at mediation in Yemen and Syria. As the uprisings continued, the Arab League took an increasingly firm stand, for example in suspending Syrian membership. Thus, an organization often dismissed as weak and ineffective started to take on new roles.³⁷ The GCC, in turn, showed activism in its own right while supporting and even directing Arab League initiatives. As a club of conservative monarchies, it could not entertain the possibility of regime change in Sunni-led Bahrain and used its regional force, the Peninsular Shield, to suppress protests there by force. The GCC also sought to strengthen its regional position further by floating the possibility of expansion—to include the monarchies of Morocco and Jordan, and deepening—through talk of moving towards a closer ‘union’. Many observers, however, have pointed to the inherent fragility of this new balance of power. First, the strength of the Gulf monarchies rests, to some extent, on the weakness of those Arab states whose political future remains uncertain. Second, these monarchies themselves have faced differing degrees of popular unrest and threats to their own stability—unrest that draws upon a broader region-wide spirit of resistance to autocratic rule, whether republican or monarchical.³⁸ If the effects of the Arab Spring have already touched a number of Gulf countries, they are not immune either to the increased activity of terrorist militias, including Al-Qaeda.

³⁶ Curtis Ryan, ‘The new Arab cold war and the struggle for Syria’, *Middle East Report* 262: 42, Spring 2012, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer262/new-arab-cold-war-struggle-syria>, accessed 15 Feb. 2013; Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab cold war: Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir and his rivals 1958–1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

³⁷ See further Louise Fawcett, ‘Alliances and regionalism in the Middle East’, in Fawcett, ed., *International relations of the Middle East*, pp. 201–204.

³⁸ Christopher Davidson, *After the sheikhs: the coming collapse of the Gulf monarchies* (London: Hurst, 2012).

The Iraq War thus generated a revised set of security dynamics and a reconfiguration of regional order which, in turn, facilitated the consolidation of longer-term trends. Some of these have been disrupted by the uprisings, others remain. The more robust stance of the GCC states in particular, a product of economic and regime security as well as western alignment, has been noted, as has the emergence of Turkey as a trusted mediator to which the US is looking for partnership and regional leadership.³⁹ Despite continuing political uncertainty, Egypt could return at some point to its position as a pivotal state. Its historic leadership qualities have already reappeared in President Morsi's initiative in brokering a ceasefire following renewed fighting between Israel and Hamas late in 2012. Indeed, one possible outcome of the Arab uprisings is that Israel's hard-line position in relation to Palestinian statehood will come under increasing pressure from regional states. Worryingly for some, Morsi also received a visit from Iran's President Ahmadinejad in early February 2013—the first visit to Egypt from an Iranian head of state in over 30 years. However, Egypt's close links with the US and Saudi Arabia also imply that strong elements of continuity are likely to characterize its foreign policy.

A cautious preliminary analysis of Arab Spring events to date demonstrates further shifts away from an older Arab republican order and the ideals it embodied: shifts reaffirmed by the collapse of two admittedly disparate regimes in Egypt and Libya and the possible demise of a third in Syria. One should be careful not to over-attribute agency to this old Arab core, for in many respects it had weakened and fractured long before Iraq and the Arab Spring—Egypt's defection with the signing of the Camp David Accords in 1979 is a case in point. It is also important to remember that even before the Iraq War, the Gulf monarchies, boosted by their oil wealth, were on a rising trajectory, a trend encouraged by regime change in Iraq and the Arab uprisings.

The international impact

Since the Iraq War was initiated by outside powers in a region of enormous historical and contemporary geostrategic importance, and was highly controversial and widely unpopular, it is unsurprising that considerable speculation has been attached to its fallout at the international level. It is important to remember that it took place at a critical juncture in international politics—not much more than a decade or so after the ending of the Cold War and subsequent breakup of the USSR—coinciding with ongoing readjustments to the post-Cold War international order including the continuing assertion of US unipolarity, multiple challenges to global institutions (notably the United Nations) and a new, more competitive environment of emerging powers. Here again we find that early expectations about the impact of the war, whether on the United States, its allies or its rivals, have dissipated and given way to some pragmatic recalculations.

³⁹ Council on Foreign Relations, *US–Turkey relations: a new partnership*, Independent Task Force Report no. 69 (Washington DC, 2012).

What did these different international actors hope for? In this stocktaking exercise it is worth recalling that the US sought to retain global predominance and continuing leadership through its neo-conservative, some would say 'imperial', project. The European Union, though its members were divided over the uses of hard power, also sought to assert its own brand of leadership by exercising 'normative' power on the global stage. For some, this meant demonstrating greater independence from the US, providing a model of how power could be used judiciously; for others, it was a means of remaining relevant as a regional actor in a region of enormous historical and continuing importance for many European states. Finally, an array of other powers, including China and Russia, whether for economic, security or status reasons, also sought to exercise their influence in a region of high geostrategic significance. None of these goals, as we shall see, were fulfilled in their entirety.

Had the war been more successful, history might have judged it differently. As its short-term military achievements gave way to widely advertised long-term failures, this led to intense speculation about the possible demise of US power and reputation in an emerging multipolar system. There was undoubtedly reputational and soft power damage—'a sharp drop in the attractiveness of the United States around the world';⁴⁰ it was also true that the war's immediate effect was to galvanize local and international opinion against the western 'coalition of the willing' and the policies it embodied. This, in turn, presented new opportunities for other aspiring powers, like Russia or China, to raise their international profile in a still evolving post-Cold War era. Retrospectively this was a kind of 'Vietnam moment' for the United States in which both its allies and its rivals became more critical and assertive.

In the medium term, the Iraq War has certainly contributed to a shift in the policy priorities and choices of the US, UK and other European governments, those most intimately involved in the conflict, for whom the war became a serious political liability. However, viewed from a longer-term Arab Spring perspective, which has seen western powers acting—more often in concert than not—to influence the political future of the region, it can hardly be said that the US and European priorities, or their propensity to intervene where core interests appear threatened, have suffered an irreversible setback, even if the modality of intervention has, for the moment, changed.

What was the effect of the Iraq War on US standing? There was widespread domestic and international criticism of the invasion, and of the prolonged occupation of Iraq that followed. This was part of a wider critique about the nature and direction of post-Cold War US foreign policy in which terms like unilateralism and neo-imperialism predominated. There was scoffing at the naivety and hubris demonstrated by President George W. Bush, as he outlined after the fall of Baghdad his 'forward strategy of freedom'.⁴¹ Certainly, the Iraq War was a factor

⁴⁰ Joseph Nye, *Soft power: the means to success in world politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), p. xii.

⁴¹ 'Remarks by President George W. Bush at the twentieth anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy', 6 Nov. 2003, <http://www.ned.org/node/658>, accessed 9 Feb. 2013.

in the Republican defeat in the 2008 presidential election and in the reshaping of foreign policy-making under a new Democratic administration led by Barack Obama with initially a very different feel. Similarly, in Britain the Iraq War became a liability for the Labour administrations of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, and a factor also in the latter's replacement by the current coalition government in 2010. The results of the Iraq (Chilcot) Inquiry, launched in 2009, tasked with considering the different aspects of the UK's involvement, are still awaited.⁴²

Barack Obama's campaign and first presidency, however, did not signal a withdrawal from internationalism, or a new isolationist turn; rather, it emphasized a commitment to 'renewing American leadership' and 'moving beyond Iraq' as part of this renewal.⁴³ His new vision of foreign policy had the Middle East as its centrepiece with the announced closure of the Guantánamo Bay facility, dialogue with Iran, revival of the Middle East peace process and withdrawal of US forces from Iraq and Afghanistan.⁴⁴ A much publicized speech at Cairo University in June 2009 spoke of a 'new beginning for US-Muslim relations'.

At the end of 2012, some, but by no means all, of these objectives had been achieved. It is clear that the Iraq War had had an appreciable impact on US politics and decision-making, contributing to a foreign policy change in which some of the principles of the Bush era were adjusted. The Iraq experience, like that of Vietnam, with its high economic and political costs, altered US perceptions of the wisdom of unilateralism, the utility of force and willingness to act. It was European powers, headed by France and the UK, rather than the United States, that took the lead in urging multilateral intervention in Libya, though US endorsement of such action was crucial. But despite the United States' concern to maintain a prudent distance from any renewed use of hard power, it remains valid to ask how much has really changed, and what is new from a wider perspective.⁴⁵ US policy towards Israel (as shown, for example, by its support for Israel's intervention in Gaza in 2012) and Iran has not undergone substantial changes; nor has its reputation or profile as regional peacemaker or democracy promoter been significantly enhanced. As Barack Obama commences his second presidential term, it remains to be seen whether renewed commitments to the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, endorsed by his new Secretary of State John Kerry, will yield results. Though the Iraq War has clearly affected US policy options in respect of the Arab Spring uprisings, it has not given way to any coherent new strategy, as a Chatham House document on Obama's second term reveals.⁴⁶ A tendency towards lower-profile regional engagement, coupled with a reluctance to use direct force and a preference for multilateral action, could yet give way to pressure for further acts of intervention if core interests appear threatened—in Syria or elsewhere. The

⁴² See <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/>, accessed 9 Feb. 2013.

⁴³ Obama, 'Renewing American leadership'.

⁴⁴ Martin Indyk, Kenneth Lieberthal and Michael O'Hanlon, 'Scoring Obama's foreign policy', *Foreign Affairs* 91: 3, May–June 2012, pp. 29–43.

⁴⁵ Katerina Dalacoura, 'The 2011 uprisings in the Arab Middle East: political change and geopolitical implications', *International Affairs* 88: 1, Jan. 2012, pp. 63–79.

⁴⁶ Steve Clemons, 'The Middle East and North Africa', in Xenia Dormandy, ed., *The next chapter: President Obama's second term foreign policy* (London: Chatham House, 2013), pp. 42–6.

question of intervention in Iran remains the subject of lively ongoing debate in important US policy-influencing journals such as *Foreign Affairs*.

Turning from the United States to the wider western alliance, there was widespread speculation that the events surrounding the Iraq War had caused serious, possibly irreparable damage to transatlantic relations. The growing gulf between the United States and its traditional allies, exacerbated by the Iraq War, was captured in an article by Michael Cox with the suggestive subtitle, 'Terrors in Transatlantia', in which he warned that not only the western alliance but the very unitary concept of the West itself was at stake.⁴⁷ The passage of time, however, does not endorse this conclusion, or not fully. There are long-standing divisions within the western camp, for reasons that derive from Europe's distinctive past and present power asymmetry, as colourfully described by Robert Kagan.⁴⁸ However, despite the short-term damage, the transatlantic relationship has not visibly crumbled as a result of fallout from the Iraq War. The West still finds many terrors to unite it, from nuclear threats from 'rogue states' like North Korea and Iran to its fear of Islamic militancy, even Islamic parties in government. Thus one should be cautious in attributing too much disunity to transatlantic relations, which have ebbed and flowed over the years—as illustrated particularly well by attitudes towards and relations with the Middle East.⁴⁹

Though far from united—and an expanding and culturally diverse European Union has made policy fragmentation more likely—western powers share a similar set of concerns and prescriptions for regional order. This was revealed after the Iraq War when, in 2004, both the US and the EU embraced similar policies in the Greater Middle East Initiative and European Partnership Programme respectively. Such cooperative initiatives, emphasizing good governance, democracy promotion and economic stability, were announced with much fanfare, but were received coolly in the region and failed to achieve the desired results. They, together with President Sarkozy's subsequent plans for a Union for the Mediterranean, were interrupted by the start of the Arab Spring uprisings and the eurozone crisis. Tellingly, however, none of these initiatives anticipated, or significantly contributed to, the Arab Spring. As Rosemary Hollis commented in an article for *International Affairs* at the start of 2012, notwithstanding the lessons learned from 9/11 and the Iraq War, the EU proved to be 'no friend of democratization', and if its policies did contribute to the Arab uprisings it was more 'by default than design'.⁵⁰

The Arab uprisings themselves took western powers, and most of the rest of the world, by surprise, showing that they could hardly be interpreted as the result of western efforts to orchestrate change. European responses were slow and clumsy:

⁴⁷ Michael Cox, 'Beyond the West: terrors in Transatlantia', *European Journal of International Relations* 11: 2, 2005, pp. 203–33.

⁴⁸ Robert Kagan, *Of paradise and power: America and Europe in the new world order* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

⁴⁹ Daniel Möckli and Victor Mauer, *European–American relations and the Middle East: from Suez to Iraq* (London: Routledge, 2011).

⁵⁰ Rosemary Hollis, 'No friend of democratization: Europe's role in the genesis of the "Arab Spring"', *International Affairs* 88: 1, Jan. 2012, p. 94.

events in Tunisia interrupted EU negotiations to upgrade relations.⁵¹ Initial celebration of a new 'democratic turn' in the Arab world gave way to caution amid calls for foreign policy changes that might damage core western interests, and fear as Islamic parties, albeit including moderate ones, seemed likely to be the beneficiaries of popular reform movements. And when incumbent regimes failed to respond to popular demands for change and resorted instead to violence against civilians, there were further opportunities for western collaboration. The choice of a multilateral, UN-backed response against Libya's Gaddafi was unsurprising in the light of the Iraq War fallout and the humanitarian imperative, as was the desire to involve relevant regional institutions like the League of Arab States, the Organization of the Islamic Conference and the GCC; but the wider policy implications of western action show continuity in seeking to influence the direction and pace of regional change. Intervention in Libya, under UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which enforced a no-fly zone to protect civilians from regime violence, invoked the doctrine of 'responsibility to protect' (R2P). This doctrine, of Canadian origin, was endorsed by the UN's World Summit Outcome Document in 2005,⁵² but it remains controversial in the eyes of many non-western countries. Resolution 1973 conferred on intervention a legitimacy that had been absent in the Iraq War; furthermore, it was critically facilitated by the support of Arab regional organizations, as noted above. But there are several dangers attached to international interventions leading to regime change, even when supported by UN resolutions. Libya, despite ongoing internal conflict, is a state less central to the regional balance of power, and therefore unlikely to become a new Iraq, but Syria could.⁵³ And any UN resolution on Syria is unlikely to be forthcoming in the light of Russian and Chinese opposition. There is, therefore, the danger of Syria becoming the site for 'just another liberal war'.⁵⁴

There is no doubt that western policy options have been adjusted and trimmed following the Iraq experience, and for the moment an emphasis on multilateralism is in the ascendant; but there is little evidence of any long-term western rift over the Iraq War, as demonstrated by cooperation and common purpose prior to and during the Arab Spring. The ongoing divisions in the UN Security Council over the issue of intervention in Syria, and the hardening position of Russia's President Putin who would like to have seen the proposal for Libyan intervention vetoed, tell a different story. For some US policy-makers, one of the unintended consequences of the Iraq War was precisely that it empowered rival states like China and Russia, offering them an opportunity to assert their status and influence on the global stage at a moment when US hegemony was under challenge.

⁵¹ Joel Peters, ed., *The European Union and the Arab Spring* (New York: Lexington Books, 2012), pp. xiv–xv.

⁵² 'Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS): Responsibility to Protect' (Ottawa: International Development Research Center, Dec. 2001); United Nations, 2005 World Summit outcome document, paras 138–9, <http://www.un.org/summit2005/documents.html>, accessed 9 Feb. 2013.

⁵³ Chris Toensing, 'Libya's lessons', *Middle East Research and Information Project*, 5 March 2012, http://www.merip.org/newspaper_opeds/opedo30512, accessed 15 Feb. 2013; David Lesch, 'Prudence suggests staying out of Syria', *Current History* 111: 748, Nov. 2012, pp. 299–304.

⁵⁴ Nicholas Kitchen and Michael Cox, 'Just another liberal war? Western interventionism and the Iraq War', in Acharya and Katsumata, eds, *Beyond Iraq*, pp. 65–84.

To claim that the Iraq War or the subsequent Arab Spring has somehow unleashed rising powers or helped to generate a new 'Cold War' competition is probably an overstatement. China was already rising; its interests in the region are more economic than political, and the Iraq War provided an opportunity to expand its Middle Eastern footprint, not least by providing access to valuable oil contracts—contracts that extend from Iraq to Saudi Arabia.⁵⁵ China is known to be generally conservative in regard to R2P.⁵⁶ Russia is different: a weak state in many respects, it is not a 'rising power' and its foreign policies have often been conservative and inward-looking.⁵⁷ If events since 9/11 and the Iraq War have permitted some modest advances in its regional status (it was already a member of the Middle East Quartet established in 2002), its influence should not be overstated. In rejecting western efforts to endorse a UN-led intervention in Syria, Russia is demonstrating its veto power. However, it is also supporting a long-standing regional ally with which it has important economic and military ties, and attempting to uphold a fragile regional status quo. Russian and Chinese support for non-intervention in Syria is pragmatic and consistent with previous policy. Neither the Iraq War, nor the unfolding of the Arab Spring, provides the ingredients of a new Cold War conflict; rather, the likely outcome in both cases is a modest reaffirmation of US power. The US fought a damaging and protracted war in Iraq, but still enjoys regional predominance. It is one thing to discern elements of a new regional cold war as the Syrian crisis develops—evident in the power struggles between rival regional states such as Saudi Arabia and Iran—another to talk of it at the international level. To suggest this is a new Cold War, or a continuation of the old, at best confers agency where it is not due and at worst is a kind of scaremongering. It trivializes the past Cold War and paints Chinese or Russian actions in a light that can hardly be justified in terms of their regional policies so far.⁵⁸

In summarizing the international fallout from Iraq, it is important to separate myth from reality and take a long hard look at the impact of events in the region on the wider international system. Despite valid claims of imperial overstretch, some of the consequences of which are playing out in Obama's policies, the episode has not led to any sudden demise of US power and influence in the region; it has not split the western alliance; it has not led to a revitalized 'normative power Europe'; nor has it significantly opened more space for challengers to the United States—challengers that would have emerged anyway, particularly in the light of Asia's growing energy needs and the desire of consumers and producers to diversify markets. There has been, at least in the short term, a discernible shift from US unilateralism to a more multilateralist policy, engaging international institutions like the UN and regional actors, but it is not one that abandons core US interests. It also leaves Europe, riven by internal crisis and economic woes, a

⁵⁵ David Shambaugh, *China goes global: the partial power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁵⁶ Rosemary Foot and Andrew Walter, *China, the United States and global order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 50.

⁵⁷ Marie Mendras, *Russian politics: the paradox of a weak state* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. xx.

⁵⁸ For further discussion, see Mohammed Ayoob, 'The Arab Spring: its geostrategic significance', Institute for Social Policy and Understanding Policy Brief no. 59, Sept. 2012, pp. 5–6.

subsidiary partner as before. The Iraq War therefore contributed significantly to shifts in the region's security complex, as described above, but its impact on the wider global balance of power has so far perhaps been less than predicted. The Arab Spring, though failing to deliver the kind of democratization that western powers hoped for, may, by introducing new regional divisions, have provided new opportunities for manoeuvre, which have helped rather than hindered US ambitions, though the dangers of escalation and further spillover of the conflict in Syria cannot be discounted. However, in continuing efforts to reset their relations with the Arab world, both the West and non-western powers will need to take increasing account of the agency of Middle Eastern peoples themselves. When the dust finally settles on the Arab Spring, it may be the fact of greater regional autonomy and self-reliance, rather than dependence on the West, that becomes the long-term legacy of Iraq. The Arab Spring is neither 1989 nor 1848 but 2010.⁵⁹ This shows, yet again, as Middle Eastern scholars have repeatedly pointed out, that whatever the extent of outside penetration of the region, it demonstrates a degree of autonomy and agency of its own and proves resistant to external pressures for change.⁶⁰

Conclusion

Early in 2013 the international press was reporting on the organization of global protests to mark the passage of ten years since the start of the war. Such protests have become regular, annual events. In London the 'Stop the War' campaign had scheduled a major international conference in February. The numbers attending such events have dwindled since 2003, when millions participated around the world. However, remembering the war in this way is important: for the protests are not only about the war itself—a war that has been described as one of the most controversial events of the post-Cold War period—but about other wars that are being fought at a time of economic austerity, and a reminder that US and British soldiers are still dying in Afghanistan. It also offers an opportunity to reflect on some lessons for possible future wars.

With the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Iraq, and with Arab Spring events taking centre stage and introducing a new set of dynamics to the region, it is understandable that the Iraq War's impact has seemed less immediate. The fall of three Arab regimes (in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya) in the space of a couple of years, a volatile situation in Bahrain and Yemen, and protracted civil war in Syria have drawn attention elsewhere. However, with the UN reporting casualties of around 60,000 by the end of 2012 in Syria's civil war, and western powers contemplating offering more active support to the opponents of President Assad, it is ever more important to recall the lessons of Iraq. Two points in particular stand out. First, Iraq itself in the early months of 2013, amid an increase in sectarian

⁵⁹ Robert Springborg, 'The Arab Spring: 1989 or 1848?', *International Spectator* 46: 3, Sept. 2011, pp. 5–12.

⁶⁰ L. Carl Brown, *International politics of the Middle East: old rules, dangerous game* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 3.

violence, appeared to be an increasingly fragile state, exposing the immense task of nation-building in occupied and divided societies. Second, the remaking of Syria, whatever regime finally emerges, will be a task scarcely less complex, costly and controversial than the remaking of Iraq and will raise multiple challenges, as well as opportunities, for internal and external players alike.

The Iraq War produced new volatility and new fault-lines in an already volatile regional system. This system was already in the process of remaking when the Arab uprisings unfolded. These, in turn, have had further impacts on regional order. Both episodes, however, reveal elements of continuity as well as change. Domestically, a number of regimes have faced increasing challenges, with authoritarians struggling to retain their hold on power. At the regional level, changes to the balance of power had been emerging over some time, marking a shift from the older Arab republican axis to one populated by newer pretenders—whether the GCC monarchies with their strong globalized economies and western links, or a middle-ground state like Turkey. Iran may have gained from the Iraq War with the removal of its rival Saddam Hussein and the empowerment of Iraq's Shi'is, but its regional position remains vulnerable, particularly given the possible loss of its Syrian ally. The Arab Spring has not unleashed a wave of Islamic movements sympathetic to Iran; but it has provided new opportunities for sectarian violence across the region while also unleashing popular demands for change whose direction is still uncertain. The Iraq War may therefore be seen as a critical juncture in a continuing and protracted process of transformation in which popular mobilization, demands for greater liberalization of politics, a new regional balance of power and shifting international alignments all feature. The war itself was not solely responsible for introducing these changes—even after the Arab Spring adjustments, elements of the old order remain—but it did act as a catalyst.

Western hubris insists that everything that happens in the Middle East somehow depends on western agency, but the region's past and present demonstrate this to be untrue. In their partnership programmes and Middle Eastern initiatives that mushroomed before and after the Iraq War, both the US and European powers have been party to attempts to recreate the region in their image. The consequences of conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the wave of Arab uprisings over which outside powers ultimately have little control, for the most part repudiate such efforts. Western powers claim to have been humbled by the lessons of Iraq and the Arab Spring. The hardest lesson to accept is that if and when democracy and stability come to the region, they will arrive in their own way and on their own terms. Even if the US and European powers, in contemplating the fallout from the Iraq War and Arab Spring, may draw some comfort from realignments that still support core western interests, the drift from dependence to greater autonomy—facilitated by domestic changes and a wider menu of international choices—will continue to draw the region into new orbits.

Ten years after the start of the Iraq War, the region shows evidence of huge and continuing changes, some of which the war helped to generate, but there are many features of continuity. For the moment, the US remains the predominant power

in the region and the position of the Gulf monarchies appears secure. The region is becoming more democratic, but democratization, in the Middle East or anywhere else, is a long and punctuated process. Events that seemed to be seminal in 2003 appear less compelling today; rather, they form a marker in which the relative, if slow, decline of western interests and the new dynamism of the Middle East have given rise to a set of challenges and opportunities for regional and international players whose consequences are still unfolding. The lesson of Iraq, as of the Arab Spring, is that it is regional powers themselves who will increasingly set the pace of change.