

IS THE WAR IN IRAQ THE MOST SIGNIFICANT EVENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST SINCE THE CREATION OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL?

The daily horrors of the war in Iraq and the desperate efforts of the U.S. Administration to find an exit from the nightmare which it has created quite rightly keep events in Iraq on the front pages of our newspapers. Momentous events are occurring elsewhere in the Middle East – continuing conflict between Palestine and Israel, an international crisis over Iran’s nuclear ambitions, and the huge influx of wealth into the oil-producing states of the Gulf – but it is events in Iraq which have dominated news coverage of the Middle East since the US and British intervention nearly four years ago.

It is hard to underestimate the significance not just for Iraq, but also for the Middle East as a whole, of the events which are unfolding. For Iraq, the tragedy is immediate: Iraqis cannot go about their daily lives without fear of being robbed, kidnapped or worse. Medical facilities, schools, and social services can barely function. Indeed, the Iraqi government’s limited ability to exercise its writ throughout much of the territory which it officially controls raises the question of whether the country of Iraq will continue to exist in the way it has done since its creation after the First World War.

If the tragedy for Iraq is immense, the repercussions of what is happening for the region as a whole are hardly less significant. Iraq has been a major player in recent Middle Eastern history – it was a key player in the creation of the Baghdad Pact in the early 1950s; its eight year war with Iran in the 1980s dented the ability of the new government in Tehran to export its revolution to neighboring countries; and the invasion of Kuwait in 1990 led to the United States’ most significant military intervention in the Middle East since the Second World War.

For most of the twentieth century, Iraq also played a major role in the cultural and intellectual life of the region, boasting a highly educated population keen to play a role in the wider Middle East.

But today, Iraq is disintegrating before our eyes. Kurdistan has operated as a semi-autonomous region for fifteen years and the differences between it and the rest of Iraq increase by the day. The Arab provinces of Iraq seem to be dividing into enclaves which offer allegiance only to local leaders or confessional groupings.

The international isolation imposed on Iraq after its invasion of Kuwait in 1990 curtailed much of Iraq’s regional interaction. A generation of Iraqis was unable to follow in their fathers’ footsteps to universities in Europe and the United States – when this author studied Arabic in the early 1980s, the Iraqi students’ society was one of the largest groupings on campus. In the 1960s, the Iraqi students’ society of the US numbered its members in thousands.

And of course the significance of the situation in Iraq does not end there. The ability and willingness of the world’s only superpower to exercise its military might in the Middle East has been dramatically curtailed. And American ability to exercise moral suasion is compromised by the hostility which its every action in the region now arouses – a hostility which the region’s fragile dictatorships are unable to ignore.

A resurgent Shi'ite community in Iraq – suppressed for so long by Saddam and his predecessors -- is combining with a resurgent Lebanese Shi'ism to re-light the torch of anti-secular, anti-western militancy previously held by militant Sunni groups now defeated or contained in other countries such as Algeria and Egypt.

A recognition of the long-term impact which the 2003 intervention in Iraq will have on the Middle East as a whole leads us to ponder what other events in recent times have changed the face of the region. The creation of the State of Israel in 1948 is perhaps the most obvious. The 1967 Arab-Israeli war was another event of long-term regional significance, as was the 1979 revolution in Iran.

Of course, we need not limit ourselves to recent history. The Treaty of Sevres in 1920 carved up the territories of the defeated Ottoman Empire and created a group of nation states whose boundaries, with few exceptions, still stand today. Orientalist historians would cite Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 as the moment which defines the beginning of the modern Middle East. For Algerians, 1830, the beginning of the French occupation of their country would be a seminal date. Saudis might cite the 1745 alliance between Mohammed Ibn Saud and Mohammed Ibn Abd el-Wahhab which created the first Saudi dynasty and paved the way for the modern Saudi state.

But let us restrain our historical enthusiasm, and remain focused on more recent times. Since the ending of the Second World War in 1945, which events, occurring in the Middle East, have had lasting regional significance?

The table below is a provocative attempt to list the 30 most important events in the Middle East since 1945 and then to rank those 30 in order of importance on a scale of one to five, with the most important events receiving a "five". The criterion for an event to be included on the list is that if that event had happened differently, or not happened at all, the Middle East would have been a very different place.

Clearly the creation of the State of Israel must rank among the most significant and receives a "five". That event has sparked four regional wars (1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973), continuing bilateral conflicts (such as this year's war between Hezbollah and Israel), and informal resistance through international terrorism and local uprisings. The Arab relationship with Israel dominates the regional agenda and will do so for decades to come.

The 1967 war must have its own place among the events which shaped the region. Not only did the Arab's defeat dispel for ever the notion that they could destroy Israel through military might, but it also discredited the politics of Arab Nationalism, opening the way both for the rise of Islamic-based politics and also more market-orientated economic policies. It also changed the nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict, since Israel now found itself occupying land whose populations remained overwhelmingly Arab. Despite the continued seriousness of Israel's conflict with Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the pivotal position which the Arab-Israeli conflict continues to hold throughout the region, in military terms, the conflict has now become largely an internal matter between occupied Palestinians and the Israeli authorities. The 1967 war receives a "five".

Significance Ranking	Event	Date
5	Creation of the State of Israel	1948
5	Six Day War	1967
5	Iranian Revolution	1979
5	US and Allied intervention in Iraq and overthrow of Saddam Husain	2003
4	Overthrow of King Farouk. Gamal Abd al-Nasir and Free Officers take power in Egypt	1952
4	Egypt recaptures Suez Canal enabling it to negotiate separate peace agreement with Israel	1973
4	First big increase in oil prices transforms oil producing economies	1973-74
4	Camp David Agreements remove Egypt from military equation in negotiations with Israel	1978-9
3	“Suez Crisis”: Failure of UK and France to prevent nationalization of the Canal emboldens Nasser and marks end of British and French-led colonial intervention in the Middle East	1956
3	Overthrow of British-backed Iraqi monarchy marks high-point of Arab Nationalism. British and U.S. troops land in Jordan and Lebanon to protect existing regimes	1958
3	Saddam Husain takes explicit control of Iraqi political scene	1979
3	Iranian students hold US citizens hostage in Iran.	1979-80
3	Start of First Palestinian Intifadah	1987
3	Iraq occupies Kuwait and is removed by a US-led coalition	1990-91
2	Overthrow of Mossadeq’s anti-colonialist government in Iran	1953
2	Algerian Civil War	1954-62
2	Arafat’s “Gun and Olive Branch” speech to the U.N. signals change in mainstream PLO strategy	1974
2	Lebanese civil war	1975-90
2	Second big increase in oil prices bring continued transformation of Gulf economies	1980-82
2	Iran-Iraq War	1980-88
2	Start of second Palestinian Intifadah	1990
2	Start of period of sustained high oil prices increases the economic gap between the Gulf states and the rest of the Middle East	2004
2	Assassination of Rafik Harriri and partial Syrian disengagement from Lebanon	2005
2	Election of Ahmedi-Nejad as President of Iran	2005
1	Start of Egyptian-Saudi war in Yemen	1961
1	British military withdrawal from Gulf leads to emergence of new leaders and political structures	Early 1970s
1	Israeli invasion and partial occupation of Lebanon	1982
1	Collapse of Souq al-Manakh stock market in Kuwait – Kuwaiti economy turns in on itself after having been a leader in Arab financial markets	1982
1	Start of tentative liberalization of many Arab economies. Progress slow but irreversible	1990s
1	Election of Khatami as President of Iran	1997

The four-fold increase in oil prices following the 1973 Arab-Israeli war accelerated a shift in power and influence away from the post-colonial states such as Egypt, Algeria, Lebanon and Syria and towards the Gulf monarchies. Arab Nationalism had been discredited, and the economies where it had held sway were heading into bankruptcy. In contrast, the Gulf States began to emerge as major economic powers in the region, and their more conservative social and religious outlook both reflected and influenced the gradual awakening of Islamic sentiment throughout the region. I award the first oil price hike a score of “four”.

The second oil price hike which followed the Iranian revolution was more significant for the oil exporters – in terms of revenues received -- than the 1974

quadrupling of prices, but it merely accentuated an existing trend, and so while it is included on the list of 30 most important events, it scores only “two”. The current era of high oil prices is further transforming the economies and societies of the Gulf. Indeed, probably the most significant medium term trend in the region today is the increasing gap between the Gulf States, whose economies are developing rapidly, and most other countries in the region which are still struggling with the legacies of socialist-inspired economic planning.

The Lebanese civil war is more difficult to judge. Its significance extended beyond Lebanon to Syria, and it provided an opportunity for the revolutionary government in Iran to establish a foothold beyond its own borders. The demise of Beirut also facilitated the establishment of Bahrain and Dubai as business centers in the Gulf and the regionalization of Arab finance. But for all the suffering which it caused to the Lebanese, it receives only a “two” in our list of events of region-wide significance. The Algerian civil war was an event of huge significance to Algeria, and the violence by which it was characterized fed indirectly into the savagery of the civil war which engulfed Algeria in the 1990s. Yet it is hard to argue that the Middle East as a whole would have been a hugely different place if this civil war had taken a different turn. The Algerian civil war also scores “two”.

The overthrow of the Shah must also rank among the most significant events in the region since 1945 – clearly a “five”. A staunch western ally was replaced by a regime which was not only hostile to the west but which actively sought to export its anti-western positions throughout the region. Saudi Arabia responded to Iran’s efforts to export its Shi’ite revolution with its own support for Sunni Islamist groups, most noticeably through financing the building of mosques in Middle Eastern countries. The support which both Shi-ite and Sunni groups received as a result of this Iranian-Saudi rivalry contributed in no small way to the increased confidence and resources of Islamist groups and, in consequence, their ability to challenge incumbent secular governments.

Of course, many of the most important factors which have been shaping the Middle East cannot be pinned down to specific dates. The construction of settlements on the West Bank changed the parameters of the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations and could rank alongside the 1967 war in significance because the existence of settlements redefined the bargaining positions of both sides to the conflict. But when was the pivotal moment in the construction of settlements? Perhaps the election of Menachem Begin and his Likud government in 1977. But then if Begin and the Likud had not begun building settlements, surely someone else would have built them.

The way in which the Al-Saud eased out King Saud in the early-1960s, the way in which they coped with the assassination of King Faisal in 1975, and the way in which they managed the incapacity of King Fahd had demonstrated the ability of the Saudi royal family to retain cohesion even in the most difficult times. The stability of the Saudi state has been a factor of enormous importance to the modern Middle East, but cannot be pinned down to one single event or one single date.

And how are we to judge the dominant personalities in the region since 1945? A coup to topple the corrupt and ineffectual Egyptian monarchy was to be expected, but the impact of the 1952 coup on the region would have been far less had it not been led by the charismatic figure of Gamal Abd el-Nasir. A lesser figure may not have nationalized the Suez Canal, leading to a war which marked the last military intervention in the Middle

East led by the old colonial powers. And a lesser figure would not have had the stature to inspire others to embrace Arab Nationalism and establish it as the spirit of the age around which regional events would revolve. Surely Nasser's assumption of power in Egypt must rank among the most significant events of recent times. I score it at "four".

The fact that the head of the Syrian air force became, in 1970, the latest in a series of military rulers in Damascus was not in itself remarkable. But Hafez al-Asad's longevity (he died in 2000) undoubtedly shaped the Middle East by ensuring that one of the front-line states adopted a consistent rejectionist line over a period of thirty years.

And what of Saddam Husain? His significance lies in more than longevity – the invasion of Iran, the invasion of Kuwait, and his unwillingness to appease an increasingly belligerent Republican administration in America have had enormous impact on the Middle East, though it is debatable whether those events imply that Saddam's significance is based on stupidity, miscalculation, or, as his supporters would say, on the courage – which other Arab leaders lacked – to aggressively pursue an independent anti-imperialist foreign policy. Clearly Saddam has to feature somewhere on our list. I recognize 1979 -- when he fully emerged from the shadows, assumed the Presidency, and purged his remaining opponents -- as the most identifiable significant date, and award it "three".

Should we include Mu'ammer Ghaddafi in the list of significant personalities? No. This most colorful of Middle East figures has had little impact beyond his own country. Nor do events in Morocco and Tunisia contribute to the list of significant events.

My criterion for inclusion is that an event must have happened in the Middle East, and as a result one of the most important events affecting our region cannot appear on the list – 9/11. The terrorist attacks on New York and Washington transformed U.S. policy towards the Middle East and led directly to the intervention in of Iraq and a more interventionist approach to foreign policy in the Middle East. 9/11 also inspired many in the region who are hostile to western interests and, some would say, has led to an increase in terrorist activities directed against western targets. The effects of 9/11 will be felt in the region for many years to come.

The collapse of the Soviet Union has also shaped the Middle East in recent years. Now the U.S. reigns as the only superpower in the region, drawing on support from European nations when needed, but never being openly challenged in the way that it was by the Soviet Union and its allies.

So, finally, what is the answer to our opening question? Is the war in Iraq the most significant event in the Middle East since the creation of the State of Israel? Let us not take refuge in the easy answer: that it is, "too early to tell". Let us assert outright that the wide-ranging events unleashed by the 2003 intervention will not soon settle to quiet conclusion. 2003 is creating a new frame of reference within which the region's actors will play out their roles over the coming decades. The answer is, "yes".

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