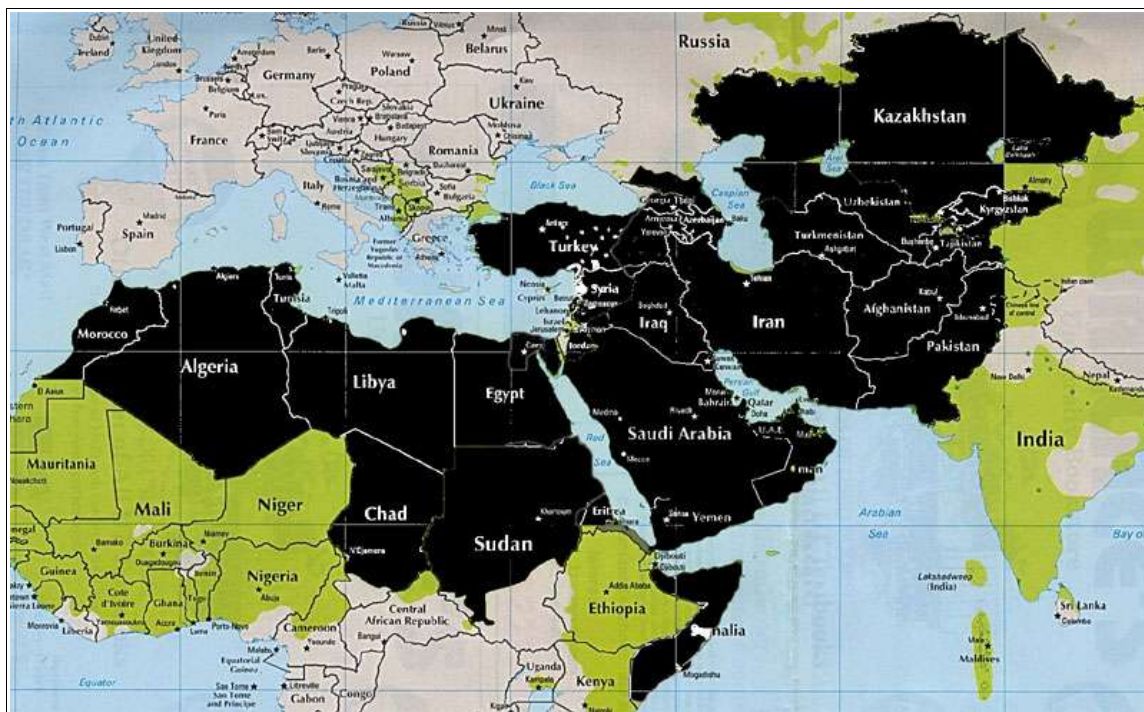


# American-Made: Al Qaeda's New Caliphate



■ -- Concentrations of Muslim populations, 1995 (Source: CIA)  
■ -- Probable scope of al Qaeda's Caliphate five to 10 years after U.S. withdrawal from Iraq (Projected by author)

***After a destabilizing invasion and occupation, Islamic extremists are poised to seize political power across the Middle East in the wake of a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq. The resulting transnational fundamentalist Caliphate would represent the successful completion of al Qaeda's major explicit political goal.***

<p><b>By J.M. Berger</b></p> <p><a href="http://www.jmberger.com">http://www.jmberger.com</a></p> <p>J.M. Berger is a freelance writer and consultant covering transnationalism, business, technology, terrorism and complexity issues. Berger is available for media appearances to discuss this analysis.</p> <p><b>Contact the Author:</b> JMB at intelwire.com</p>	<p><b>Related national news coverage by J.M. Berger:</b></p> <p><i>As freelance producer for WBUR-FM (NPR) Boston:</i></p> <p><a href="#">Fatwa Against Terrorism</a> (Here and Now)</p> <p><a href="#">The Trial of Saddam Hussein</a> (The Connection)</p> <p><a href="#">Secrets of Terrorist Web Sites</a> (The Connection)</p> <p><a href="#">Controversial Iraq War Drama</a> (On Point)</p> <p><a href="#">Will Iraq Be The Last Nation-State?</a> (Here and Now)</p>
------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

## ***Framing the Conflict***

**N**o one knows the stakes of the deadly game in Iraq better than the two men charged with winning it. On one side stands Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. His opposite number is Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, al Qaeda's bloodthirsty lieutenant and the most central actor in the Iraq insurgency.

It's not surprising that Myers and Zarqawi see the same stakes in Iraq. What's disturbing is the fact that so few Americans understand what these men are fighting for.

In March 2003, the United States launched a proactive campaign to oust Saddam Hussein and install democracy in Iraq. All controversies aside, the invasion was clearly and explicitly predicated on an old military maxim -- the best defense is a good offense.

But in September 2005, America's best offense has become a desperate defense of virtually any position in Iraq. In a little-noticed Pentagon news briefing in August, Myers laid out the likely consequences if the U.S. is perceived as retreating under fire.

"The stakes are huge," said Myers. "If the Zarqawis of the world, if (al Qaeda) were allowed to be successful in Iraq, in their view, that would be the start of the caliphate that they envision. The stakes would be huge for the region. You talk about instability. It would be instant instability in that region, in Saudi Arabia on down the Gulf states, perhaps Iran, Syria, Turkey."

With those words, Myers unambiguously identified America's strategic imperative for the post-invasion conflict in Iraq -- preventing the birth of a fundamentalist Islamic empire spanning the entire Middle East -- al Qaeda's Caliphate.

Understandably, perhaps, Myers significantly understated the probable scale of post-withdrawal instability if the U.S. leaves Iraq at a perceived disadvantage. The politically uncomfortable reality is that key U.S. allies would be put at risk -- nations like Pakistan, Egypt and Afghanistan, even parts of Russia.

A dozen more nations in the region are already near the tipping point, with substantial domestic

Islamist movements that could easily be incited to pursue regime changes at home -- through peaceful means or otherwise.

With so much of the groundwork already in place, an al Qaeda "win" in Iraq could radically transform the Middle East -- within a span of months.

The result of that upheaval? A fundamentalist Islamic bloc roughly equivalent to the continental United States in both size and economic muscle -- al Qaeda's Caliphate, equipped with an arsenal of nuclear weapons and the capacity to build more.

### ***The Failure to Acknowledge al Qaeda's Policy Goals***

Nine days after the September 11 attack, President Bush famously outlined his view of al Qaeda's motivation. It was, perhaps, the single most successful message of his presidency. The words took hold with a roar in the popular imagination and drowned out most efforts to probe the matter any deeper.

"Americans are asking, why do they hate us? They hate what we see right here in this chamber -- a democratically elected government," Bush said during a special address before Congress. "Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms -- our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other."

This capsule summary wasn't just a talking point for propaganda purposes. It appears to have formed the central assumption of the Bush administration's Middle East strategy, which evolved along similarly simplistic lines. By sowing a successful democracy in Iraq, the administration reasoned, other democracies would soon bloom across the region -- the domino effect.

Those dominoes are still poised to tumble, but not in the direction of the West. Iraq has become the flashpoint of the caliphate movement, a fundamentalist campaign intended to restore the historical hegemony of Islam in the Middle East and beyond.

The word "caliphate" is rarely spoken or adequately explained in the Western media. Yet the concept is the most important element of the War on Terror -- because it is the clearest ideal motivating America's enemies. The Caliphate's most famous advocate is Osama bin Laden, and its most activist support comes from the al Qaeda movement.

The U.S. government acknowledges that the Caliphate is the driving ambition of al Qaeda's ideology, but until the summer of 2005, both the word and the concept have been markedly absent from most public discourse about the War on Terror. When last comes to last, the renewal of the caliphate emerges as al Qaeda's ultimate strategic objective. "Hating freedom" is not a goal, and the destruction wrought along the way is only the means to an end.

## ***The Context of the Caliphate***

When Mohammed died in 633 C.E., he left behind a political empire nearly equal to his spiritual legacy. His followers created a structure to maintain this earthly power and simultaneously nourish Islam itself. The structure was embodied in the Caliph -- a leader responsible for preserving Islam's religious and temporal domains.

In the years that followed, various caliphates formed and dissolved amid competing claims to legitimacy, intimately tied to the schisms that divided Islam into Sunni and Shi'a factions (as well as countless other variants). Throughout all these empires -- starting in the seventh century and reiterating through the early 20th century -- no consistent political blueprint emerged.

While the details might vary, the minimalist definition of a 21st-century caliphate would entail a structure in which a single leader (caliph) holds some degree of spiritual and temporal authority over a cohesive bloc of countries governed by Islamic principles and Shari'ah law.

Such a caliphate might function as a single nation, but a more pragmatic model would feature a coalition of states united by a single charismatic spiritual leader. The modern caliph's temporal authority would likely extend over matters of Shari'ah law and the general direction of the Muslim *ummah* (community of believers), while leaving specific governance and administrative functions in the hands of local rulers.

In addition to issuing *fatwas* on specific matters believed to fall under Islamic law, a caliph would be able to direct and incite *jihad* far more effectively than al Qaeda's current theologians. Under a coalition model, the caliph would be able to rally millions of individuals to jihad, even if he did not directly command the combined military forces of the caliphate's member nations.

In addition to its pragmatism, such a coalition model would be roughly consistent with the earliest days of Islamic hegemony in the 7th and 8th centuries, the historical period from which al Qaeda and other Islamic fundamentalists draw their inspiration.

## ***An Explicit Caliphate Strategy***

Jordanian journalist Fouad Hussein recently interviewed several of al Qaeda's current leaders -- including Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, al Qaeda's top operative in Iraq and *ad hoc* leader of the diverse insurgent factions battling the U.S. occupation, and Saif al-Adel, reportedly a close Zarqawi associate and al Qaeda's top military commander.

Hussein's 2005 book, *al-Zarqawi: al-Qaida's Second Generation*, is currently available in Arabic only, but *Der Spiegel* reported on its contents in August 2005.

Hussein claims al Qaeda is methodically executing a multifaceted plan with a single-minded goal -- instituting a renewed caliphate across the Muslim nations of the Middle East. The Caliphate begins in the Middle East, with Iraq as a base for expanded jihad operations such as the final obliteration of Israel. The newborn empire would then leverage its regional economic and military might to launch an apocalyptic war against all non-believers, which al Qaeda's strategists project will end in victory around 2020, according to Hussein.

The strategy of the current moment, as related by Hussein, meshes closely with al Qaeda's well-established pattern of activity. al Qaeda has always aimed to win the hearts and minds of Muslims through spectacular attacks, unlikely victories and aggressive propaganda. The theory is that Muslim populations will be swayed to al Qaeda's ideology by tangible proof that *jihad* is an effective tool against the United States and the corrupt dictatorships it supports in Islamic lands.

*Der Spiegel* described the strategy as "frightening and absurd," but history suggests that this approach can work.

The Middle East was turned upside down by the Iranian Revolution in 1979 -- which ejected a U.S.-supported autocrat and replaced him with a charismatic Islamic fundamentalist cleric.

In the wake of that victory, a rising tide of enthusiasm encompassed political Islamists -- Sunnis and Shi'a alike -- reaching its clearest articulation in the *jihad* against the Soviet Union, after the Communist power invaded Afghanistan in the closing days of 1979.

It took 10 years, but a volunteer army of *mujahideen* and Afghan tribes finally won the field, igniting a fresh groundswell of enthusiasm for militant Islam. Despite the critical role played by Afghan warlords and infidel Americans, the extraordinary victory in Afghanistan elevated Osama bin Laden to iconic status and led directly to the formation of al Qaeda.

If today's al Qaeda can credibly claim any kind of victory in Iraq, the ramifications will be even more dramatic -- partly because of what went before, but also because of simple geography. Iraq is a far more valuable geopolitical prize than Afghanistan ever could be.

Aside from its rich oil fields, Iraq sits in the center of the Middle East, bordered on every side by troubled Arab regimes with predominantly Muslim populations.

Myers predicted that an early U.S. withdrawal from Iraq could imperil Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and Syria. In fact, it could do much more. In addition to bordering the countries Myers named, Iraq isolates those countries from each other. The cumulative effect of dominoes falling in the Middle East is exponential.

Almost any scenario for a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq -- early or late -- ends with some form of Islamic theocracy holding power there. Whether constitutional or revolutionary, an Islamist government in Iraq would instantly create a contiguous bloc of countries whose politics are overtly dominated by or in collusion with Islamic fundamentalists. (Sunni-Shi'a divisions will be addressed in more detail below.)



**Map:** Contiguous Islamic theocracies in the immediate wake of a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq.

The countries in question -- Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Qatar -- are the most powerful Gulf oil states, and they hold a commanding position over the entire Persian Gulf. By themselves, these four nations working with loose coordination could exercise nearly overwhelming economic power over the rest of the world.

### ***The Tipping Point***

But there are still more dominoes to consider -- more than a dozen "tipping point" countries, all in close proximity to Iraq, and most of which have been specifically targeted by al Qaeda with propaganda, proselytization and/or *jihād* operations.

In some of these countries, Islamists wouldn't have to seize perfect control in order to make an impact. In Syria and Turkey, as Myers suggested during the August press briefing, significant jihadist activity could simply shut down the national economies and render the countries unsafe for passage by international commercial interests.

In some locales, such as Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, al Qaeda and related groups maintain a substantial paramilitary presence. In other Middle Eastern countries, popular sentiment is so strongly skewed toward Islamic political causes that any major development could suddenly shift domestic politics sharply in the direction of a fundamentalist regime.

For instance, Jordan has been a reliable ally of the U.S. in the War on Terror and is commonly viewed as a secularized, relatively stable Middle Eastern society. Yet almost 90 percent of Jordanians polled by the Pew Global Attitudes Project, for a study released in July 2005, said suicide bombings are sometimes an acceptable tactic, and 57 percent said violence against civilians is often or sometimes justified.

When asked in 2005 if they had confidence in Osama bin Laden, 60 percent responded they "a lot" of confidence -- up 5 percent since 2003. Only 18 percent reported "no confidence." On the question of transnational Muslim identity -- an integral part of any caliphate movement -- 63 percent of Jordanians said they see themselves as Muslims first and citizens second, and a whopping 99 percent said Islam should have an important or somewhat important role in world politics.

In Egypt, perhaps the most powerful secular government in the Middle East, the extremist Muslim Brotherhood has been engaged in a decades-long campaign to win mainstream political recognition, while seeding its members into the leadership of virtually every major Islamic terrorist organization in the world. Meanwhile, Egypt's violent and entrenched Islamist underground with deep al Qaeda links continues to thrive and carry out high-casualty attacks.

In the Islamic Republic of Pakistan -- a nuclear state -- President Pervez Musharraf is already hanging onto power by a thread, in part because of his decision to ally with the United States in the War on Terror. Musharraf has been the object of two al Qaeda-sponsored assassination attempts.

Some of Pakistan's extensive tribal areas already operate as semi-independent nations, known to harbor top al Qaeda leaders, terrorist training camps and armies of *mujahideen*. The central government's intelligence service is riddled with al Qaeda sympathizers. Pakistan is a disaster waiting to happen -- even without any destabilizing external influences. The severe October 2005 earthquake may create conditions for regime change in Pakistan even before a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, setting the stage for a dangerous and immediate nuclear conflict. Discontent with the Musharraf regime has already soared to previously unseen levels in the wake of the disaster.

In dozens of countries from North Africa to Central Asia, al Qaeda and its allies have already laid down a substantial infrastructure and large-scale instability could erupt literally overnight. In many of these nations, organized factions are already pursuing regime change -- efforts that could be accelerated given the right impetus. If Iraq falls to al Qaeda, the maps of the Middle East could be redrawn with astounding speed.

### ***Islamists Don't Need a Decisive Victory***

In 2004, the CIA's National Intelligence Council published a "fictional scenario" projecting world

politics to the year 2020 that observed "a caliphate would not have to be entirely successful for it to present a serious challenge to the international order."

And indeed, the odds are steeply against the emergence of a monolithic, authoritarian Caliphate with one border, one government and one mind -- any time soon. But al Qaeda doesn't want or particularly need to create a "United States of Islam."

But the fall of Iraq to Islamic extremists would put nearly two dozen countries at risk in the near to mid-term future -- for revolution, civil war, nonviolent regime change, or anarchic collapse.

Not all Muslim nations will strongly align with any Caliphate that emerges, nor will all nations in the region swear allegiance to any given caliph. But some nations will throw in their lot with the new order, and many more will opt to sit on the sidelines, refusing to actively oppose the Caliphate's policies and politics for fear of becoming the next target of jihadist wrath.

For countries that do resist, the resulting "instability" could easily cripple economies and leave a political vacuum in its wake, as Myers pointed out during the August press briefing. Instability also helps al Qaeda by creating lawless territories where terrorists can congregate, plan and train.

"The proclamation of a Caliphate would not lessen the likelihood of terrorism and, in fomenting more conflict, could fuel a new generation of terrorists intent on attacking those opposed to the Caliphate, whether inside or outside the Muslim world," the 2004 CIA report stated.

Even with the rise of mainstream political structures, terrorists will likely remain the Caliphate's soldiers of choice -- bands of nomadic fighters with primary allegiance to al Qaeda's ideological leaders, rather than the political authorities of any specific nation. Overseas, terrorist operatives and infiltrators would continue to strike against Western interests, but some *mujahideen* would become internal enforcers, keeping the Caliphate's weak links under control.



## ***An Overnight Superpower***

Adding up the countries most at risk, along with those nations strongly motivated to align (passively or actively), creates a map of al Qaeda's Caliphate that is shocking in its scope.

If today's War on Terror sounds amorphous to you, imagine instead al Qaeda's ideology as the basis for a transnational empire, governed under strict Taliban-style jurisprudence and in effective control of half the world's crude oil and natural gas reserves, a third of its oil production capacity, and three of the five most heavily trafficked oil shipping lanes in the world.

Imagine a fundamentalist Caliphate stretching from the north coast of Africa to deep within the former Soviet Union, its politics inspired and perhaps even commanded by the likes of Osama bin Laden and Ayman Al-Zawahiri; an empire armed with ballistic nuclear weapons and unified ground forces easily numbering in the millions, an infantry trained in the arts of war by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

Now imagine all of that happening within a span of five years or less.

Thus far, frontal attacks on al Qaeda have had the same effect as blowing on a dandelion gone to seed -- the distinctive shape of the dandelion "clock" is disrupted, but its spores are scattered on the wind. Although some seeds fall on barren ground, many more take root, producing new dandelions in the image of the original. The Middle East has become a field where al Qaeda's spores have already taken root. There are compelling reasons to expect those seeds will grow.

Each new outcropping of al Qaeda has two components -- an operational terrorist movement with a relatively exclusive membership and a global vision, as well as a more inclusive ideological movement that gains support by attaching itself to concrete issues on the global and local political scenes.

Although the U.S. has disrupted the "corporate" al Qaeda structure temporarily, the number of terrorist attacks fueled by al Qaeda's ideology has climbed to record highs, thanks in large part to the Iraqi jihadist campaign. Even more troubling, Iraq has provided a new focal point for al Qaeda to regenerate the core social infrastructure and terrorist training grounds it lost in Afghanistan. That regeneration will accelerate considerably after U.S. forces depart.

In addition to its arguably ill-founded justification, the U.S. invasion of Iraq (or more specifically, the complete absence of a post-war occupation strategy) represents a strategic error of staggering proportions.

## ***New Strategies Are Needed***

Traditional Western military strategies are not likely to succeed against the al Qaeda template. In lieu of some imaginable prospect for real victory, the important question now is how to minimize the negative consequences of the Iraq conflict. Even stipulating such a limited agenda, however, there is no immediately apparent strategy for success.

There is no reason to think a strategic approach that abandoned core Western ideological tents -- such as civil rights, national sovereignty and a principled opposition to the tactical use of nuclear weapons -- would be any more successful than the current tack. Many Middle Eastern regimes (such as Egypt and Pakistan) are not "hampered" by such considerations, but these regimes can not boast of any greater effectiveness against al Qaeda and its affiliates. Islamic regimes such as Saudi Arabia have attempted to engage al Qaeda on an ideological level, with little success.

At the heart of this impotence lies the fact that the West lacks any coherent "viral" movement capable of opposing al Qaeda on its own ground -- as a grassroots social hybrid combining transnational political and cultural messages with a clear ideological stance. The prized diversity of the Western cultural landscape makes it difficult to mobilize broad segments of its population around any single principle except the desire for security -- an inherently defensive posture.

There is no easy or immediate solution to this conundrum, but there may be time to develop a more effective mode of offense.

## ***Zarqawi: One of the Few Vulnerabilities in al Qaeda's Strategy***

The biggest obstacle to the completion of al Qaeda's plan comes from within its own ranks -- the bloody persecution of Shi'ites by the terror network's most vicious and effective Sunni general -- Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

Extreme even in the relative context of his terrorist cohort, Zarqawi has long considered Shi'ite Muslims as "apostates," a belief widely held within al Qaeda's Sunni fundamentalist core constituency. In recent months, Zarqawi has targeted Iraqi Shi'ites in a bloody spree of terrorist attacks that threatens to overshadow his organization's attacks on Americans.

Prior to September 11, Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda was a relatively ecumenical network. bin Laden's public statements were geared toward "all Muslims" united against the "crusaders." al Qaeda was known to collaborate with Shi'ite regimes like Iran and Shi'ite terrorist groups like Hezbollah. Although Ayman al-Zawahiri and others prominent al Qaeda leaders belong to an extremist sect known for its violence against Shi'ites (whom they consider apostates), the

sectarian violence never threatened to overshadow the struggle against common enemies.

Zarqawi has shifted that equation, issuing a series of increasingly virulent pronouncements against Iraqi Shi'ites over the course of several months. The messages initially targeted Shi'ites primarily for their perceived role as collaborators with the U.S. occupation, but Zarqawi's communiqués issued in 2005 have been broader and much more religiously charged, provoking the ire of some Sunni hardliners.

The ultimate effect of Zarqawi's rhetoric is difficult to estimate. With its geographic situation and advanced nuclear program, Iran will be a major force in any regional caliphate that emerges in the wake of the Iraq war. As Myers pointed out, Iran could be severely destabilized by the chaos likely to ensue after the U.S. withdrawal.

Alternatively, Iran could opt to throw in its lot with the caliphate. Despite al Qaeda's decision to add substantial propaganda emphasis to Zarqawi's campaign, some top al Qaeda leaders are still tolerated and believed to be operating freely in Iran. Osama bin Laden's son is reportedly hiding in the country, and some sources even say bin Laden himself is there.

al Qaeda's presence (reportedly along Iran's borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan) is not openly endorsed by Iranian leaders, but neither does it appear to be actively opposed. Iran is reported to have arrested some al Qaeda figures, but it has not deported them into Western custody. The details of these arrests are not known and not confirmed.

If Iran decides to stand against any emerging caliphate movement, it could slow al Qaeda's political progress substantially and lead to a period of regional conflict among differing interpretations of Islam. But the strength of Iran's position in al Qaeda's Middle East -- potentially hemmed in by entrenched Sunni fundamentalist positions in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Saudi Arabia -- is questionable. Rapprochement would be the path of least resistance, and Iran's recent declaration that it would be willing to share its nuclear weapons knowhow with other Muslim nations indicates a degree of flexibility.

Despite what would seem like common sense, militant Shi'ites have been willing to overlook Zarqawi's invective even within Iraq itself, where Shi'ite casualties of terrorism now surpass American casualties.

A recent report by the Middle East Media Research Institute cited several examples of collaboration in message and intent among Sunni insurgents and Muqtada al-Sadr, the leading light of Iraq's Shi'ite resistance, the Mahdi Army. al-Sadr is suspected of receiving support from Iran, although the regime there has overtly thrown its support behind Iranian-born Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani.

Ultimately, these factors serve to muddy the waters. In the event of a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, it is virtually impossible to guess which way Iran will jump, assuming its current political

leadership can even retain its hold on power.

### ***Complex Problems Require Complex Understanding***

Regardless of what dubious wisdom, justification or strategic intention originally motivated the invasion of Iraq, the war there has now become virtually unwinnable for the United States in the foreseeable future. An extended U.S. occupation may allow enough time for the political situation to change in favor of Western interests. While even this hope is tenuous, the occupation is -- for the moment -- probably the most attractive option among some very bad alternatives.

In the short- to intermediate-term future, the U.S. could seek to bolster its position by supporting autocratic secular allies in the region with economic and military incentives. However, the allies most susceptible to this sort of persuasion are also the most vulnerable countries in the event that the tide of Islamism continues to rise, raising the all-too-likely prospect that such aid would ultimately end up in the hands of the very enemies the policy was intended to thwart.

By providing this sort of support to corrupt and nondemocratic regimes like Egypt and Pakistan, U.S. leaders would also have to abandon the stated goal of instilling democracy in the region. This, in turn, would compromise their political standing at home and make it even more difficult to maintain any sort of popular support for a continued military presence in Iraq.

In the final analysis, the best America can hope for in Iraq is to maintain its occupation in a state of relative stability for the duration of the Bush administration (an outcome which would require new strategies to stem the momentum of the insurgency).

The current administration lacks the political capital at home and abroad to craft a broad regional solution favorable to Western interests, a fact which is unlikely to change for the better. The major risk of a prolonged occupation is that any significant error or scandal -- such as the Abu Ghraib prison controversy -- further diminishes America's already badly tarnished image in the region.

The Bush administration is only now coming to terms with the consequences of the occupation. In an October press conference on the topic of "staying the course in Iraq," President Bush made a rare direct acknowledgment of the caliphate issue:

"(T)he militants believe that controlling one country will rally the Muslim masses, enabling them to overthrow all moderate governments in the region, and establish a radical Islamic empire that spans from Spain to Indonesia," Bush said. "With greater economic and military and political power, the terrorists would be able to advance their stated agenda: to develop weapons of mass destruction, to destroy Israel, to intimidate Europe, to assault the American people, and to blackmail our government into isolation."

Bush's recognition of the problem comes far too late to make a meaningful difference. The early rhetoric of the War on Terror still dominates his thinking -- he mentioned the word "evil" six times during the speech and the word "caliphate" not even once. Even if Administration officials manage to clearly and consistently articulate the stakes in Iraq going forward, their words would simply vanish into the list of ever-changing rationales previously offered to justify the original invasion.

A new administration might be able to approach such efforts with a clean slate, presuming the next president is not closely linked to the policies of the current White House. However, this outcome is also contingent on the emergence of new and better thinkers in both U.S. political parties.

To date, the most visible leaders in both the Republican and Democratic parties have been notably silent on the caliphate issue in general. Certainly, no one on either side of the aisle has advanced any new thinking on Iraq, nor has any political figure suggested any sort of Iraq strategy that extends much deeper than the polar proposals of "stay" and "leave."

The ultimate failure of American leadership in Iraq boils down to a crippling inability to comprehend the complexity of situation -- a problem that unfortunately transcends the divisions of partisan politics and extends well beyond this particular issue.

For decades, American political dialogue has been devolving into simplistic sound bites and buzz words which are meant to invoke simple talking points, primarily intended as fodder in the two-party conflict of U.S. politics. Even as the American dialogue has simplified, the world has complexified, thanks to a surge of transnational phenomena and accompanying rapid changes in the global economy, technology and mass communications.

Until the American electorate chooses to reject sloganeering as its primary source of information regarding the world and the implementation of articles of faith as its primary response to crises, the United States will face disaster after disaster in the complex systems that lie at the heart of the modern world -- from Iraq to Social Security to hurricanes to health care, and beyond.

Any one of these impending disasters could be fatal to the American way of life. At the moment, America is on track to experience several of them simultaneously. A change in course cannot come too soon, but it may already be too late to salvage the Middle East.