



**For Better or Worse?
Is the U.S. better off with the Middle East as it is now
than as it was before 2001?**

[Victor Davis Hanson](#)

Colaboraciones n° 951

May 23, 2006

After September 11, there were only seven sovereign countries in the Middle East that posed a real danger to the policies and, in some cases, the security of the United States – Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. Ignoring the hysteria about the Sunni Triangle in Iraq, if we look at these states empirically, have they become more or less a threat in the last five years?

The Taliban in Afghanistan was actively harboring bin Laden and al Qaeda. Without their support, the mass murder on September 11 would have been difficult to pull off.

Iran was the chief sponsor of Hezbollah, which had killed more Americans than any other Islamist

terror organization and was rumored to be at work on obtaining nuclear weapons.

In Iraq, Saddam Hussein's agents were involved in the first World Trade Center bombing. They were also meeting with al Qaeda operatives throughout the 1990s and offering sanctuary both to al Qaeda offshoots in Kurdistan and, later, to veterans from Afghanistan. As the U.S. Senate observed in 2002, this was in addition to the general problems of no-fly zones, oil-for-food, violations of U.N. and 1991-armistice accords, and periodic retaliatory American bombing.

Libya was a de facto belligerent of the United States, provoking past U.S. air strikes on Tripolis. Among other things, it was involved in the

Pan Am Lockerbie bombing and had a clandestine WMD program.

Pakistan had violated both U.N. and U.S. non-proliferation protocols. Its intelligence services were infiltrated by radical Islamists who were responsible for killing American diplomatic personnel and supplying the Taliban with support, as well as directly aiding al Qaeda operatives along the border.

Saudi Arabia, whose 15 subjects comprised the majority of the killers on 9/11, was stealthily giving blackmail money to Islamic terrorists to deflect their anti-Royal Family anger toward the United States. The kingdom's vast financial clout subsidized radical "charities" and madrassas that offered at a global level the religious and ideological underpinnings for radical and violent Islamic extremism.

Syria had long swallowed most of Lebanon, and was a haven for anti-Western terrorists from Hamas to Hezbollah.

Four-and-a-half years after September 11, how has the United States fared in neutralizing these seven threats?

The Taliban is gone. In its place is the unthinkable – a parliamentary democracy that welcomes an open economy and foreign investment. Afghanistan is plagued still by drug-lords and resurgent terrorists, but after a successful war that removed the Taliban, the country hardly resembles the nightmare that existed before September 11.

Iran is closer to the bomb than ever, but there is at least worldwide scrutiny of its machinations, in a manner lacking in the past. Tehran is in a death struggle with the new Iraqi government, trying to undermine the democracy by transplanting its radical Shiite ganglia before a constitutional, diverse Iraqi culture energizes its own restive population that supposedly tires of the theocracy.

The thousands who died yearly under Saddam's killing apparatus in Iraq have been followed by thousands killed in sectarian strife. Yet Saddam and his Baathist nightmare are gone from Iraq, offering hope where there was none. After three elections, a democratic government has emerged. Despite a terrible cost in American lives and wealth, so far elections have not been derailed, open civil war has not followed from the daily terror, and Americans are looking to reduce, not enlarge, their presence.

Libya is perhaps the strangest development of all. The United States is slowly exploring reestablishing diplomatic relations. Moammar Khadafy is giving up his WMD arsenal. And the country is suddenly open to cell phones, the Internet, satellite television, and is no longer a global financial conduit for international terrorism.

Pakistan is still run by a military dictator. But as a result of American bullying and financial enticement, it is slowly weeding out al Qaeda sympathizers from its government, which on rare occasions attacks

terrorists residing in its borderlands. Indeed, al Qaeda seems to hate the present Pakistani government as much as it does the United States.

Saudi Arabia has gained enormous leverage as oil skyrocketed from \$30 to over \$70 a barrel. Yet under American pressure it has cracked down on al Qaeda terrorists and has cleaned up (somewhat) its overseas financial offices — perhaps evidenced by a wave of reactive terrorist attacks against the Riyadh government. American efforts to urge liberalization have met a tepid response — given Saudi reliance on the oil card, and its sophistic argument that for the present an autocratic monarchy is the only alternative to a terrorist-supporting theocracy.

Syria is out of Lebanon by popular pressure. It still supports terrorists against Israel — and now Iraq too — but judging from its rhetoric it must be feeling squeezed by a democratic Turkey, Iraq, and Israel on its borders, and a new tough stance from the United States.

So where does all this leave us? In every case, I think, far messier — but far better — than before September 11. Few argue that Afghanistan or Iraq is worse off than when under the Taliban or Saddam. Nor is Syria in a stronger position. Despite their respective nuclear and petroleum deterrence, both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are ever more sensitive to the dangers of Islamic radicalism. Libya no longer poses the threat of using WMD against its neighbors and is less likely to fund

international terror. Iran is the wild card — closer to success in obtaining the bomb, but closer as well to becoming isolated by international pressure and the events that it cannot quite control across the border in Iraq.

Where do we go from here? The United States has its own paradoxes. These positive developments — themselves the result of a radical departure from the old appeasement that either used the cruise missile as an impotent gesture of retaliation or accepted realpolitik as a means of playing odious dictators against each other — have proved as controversial as they are costly.

A new strain of what we might call punitive isolationism is back (“more rubble, less trouble”), in which we should simply unleash bombers when evidence is produced of complicity in attacks against Americans, but under no circumstance put a single soldier on the ground to “help” such people who are “incapable” of liberal civilized society.

The hard Right is candid in its pessimistic dismissal of American idealism and worries that a new muscular Wilsonianism will lose the ascendant Republican majority and betray conservative values.

The Left buys into the neo-isolationism since it means less of an “imperial” footprint abroad and more funds released for entitlements at home — as well as a way of tarring George Bush and regaining Congress.

What is lacking has been a consistently spirited defense, both unapologetic and humble at the same time, of our efforts since September 11.

First, the United States was not cynical in its efforts: no oil was stolen; no hegemony was established; and democrats, not dictators, were promoted. We were appealing directly to the people of the Middle East, not negotiating with Mullah Omar or Saddam Hussein about their futures. No other oil-importing country in the world would have tried to pressure the Saudis to reform at a time of global petroleum shortages — not France, not China, not India.

Second, there were never good choices after September 11. The old appeasement had only emboldened the terrorists, from 1993 in Manhattan to the bombing in Yemen of the *U.S.S. Cole*. Saddam's Iraq was unstable. It was only a matter of time before Saddam, energized with fresh petroleum profits, would renew his ambitions, once 12 years of no-fly-zones and controversial, but leaky, embargoes wore the West out. Given the premise that dictators promoted terrorists in an unholy alliance of convenience, and themselves often had oil and access to weapons, there were no good choices, whether we let them be or removed the worst.

Three, by the standard of Grenada, Panama, and the Balkans, our losses were costly. But the Middle East is a struggle of a different sort; it is an existential one in which defeat

means more attacks on the United States homeland, while victory in changing the landscape of the region presages an end to the nexus of Islamic terror. In that regard, so far we have been fortunate, four-and-a-half years later, in avoiding the level of costs incurred on the first day of the war that took 3,000 American lives and resulted in a trillion dollars in economic damage.

Four, the strategy was not wholly military or political, much less characterized by preemption or unilateralism. Iraq was not the blueprint for endless military action to come, but the high-stakes gambit that offered real hope of bringing about associated change from Pakistan to Tripolis once Saddam was gone and a constitutional government established in its place.

Five, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. As we approach year five, there has been no subsequent attack on the United States. An entire intellectual industry has emerged to educate the West about radical Islamic fascism, something mostly lacking prior to September 11. Our enemies in al Qaeda are either dead, arrested, in hiding, or losing in Iraq, and the embrace of radical Islam through the Middle East at least now carries the consequence of fear of an unpredictable reaction on the part of the United States.

We are still in a race of sorts, hoping that Afghanistan and Iraq will enter a period of democratic stability and the violence halts before the American public tires of the daily visuals

to the point of demanding a premature end to our efforts at birthing democracy. And while we do the unpopular work of trying to restore hope to the Middle East, the aloof Europeans pose as the moderate

alternative, the Chinese make ever more trade, the Russians ever more trouble, and the Arab sheikdoms ever more money.

©2006 Victor Davis Hanson