

**Geographer Alexander Murphy argues that a simplistic view of Middle East geopolitics feeds extremism -- here and there.**

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## **Clashing Geopolitical Visions of Iraq**

**By Alexander Murphy**

After more than three years and a deluge of information to the contrary, why do 64 percent of Americans still believe Saddam Hussein had strong links with Al Qaeda? Ignorance or gullibility might be part of the answer, but Donald Rumsfeld's recent statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee provides another clue.

If we leave Iraq soon, Rumsfeld argues, "the enemy would tell us to leave Afghanistan and then withdraw from the Middle East. And if we left the Middle East, they'd order us and all those who don't share their militant ideology to leave what they call the occupied Muslim lands from Spain to the Philippines."

Since the early days after 9/11, two vastly different geopolitical visions have dominated thinking about the Middle East. One -- the Rumsfeld (and Bush) vision -- sees the region as a staging ground for attacks against the West by an increasingly broad-based movement aimed at expanding the influence and territory of the "Islamic World." The other sees the region as an unstable and fragmented area with many authoritarian regimes, as well as some dangerous but diffuse terrorist movements.

These different visions are more than interesting abstractions. They explain much about why people disagree about policies, and about facts. Proponents of the "unstable, fragmented" geopolitical view find no link between Hussein and Al Qaeda—noting the competing regional agendas of the two and their lack of overt cooperation.

For the significant majority who believe a link existed, no actual evidence of cooperation is necessary. Viewing the world through the prism of the Bush-Rumsfeld geopolitical vision,

they see Hussein and Al Qaeda as mutually reinforcing examples of a threatening Middle East motivated by anti-Western expansionism.

Despite repeated efforts by the critics of Bush's Iraq policy to highlight the differences between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda, most people's perceptions have not changed. Why? Perhaps because the critics are not speaking to the real reasons people think there is a link.

Confronting those reasons means taking on the Bush-Rumsfeld geopolitical vision. This is no easy task given the shifting arguments coming out of the White House and the limited exposure of most Americans to the history and geography of the Middle East.

The vision on display in Rumsfeld's statement casts the Middle East as a monolithic geopolitical node. Yet watching what is happening now in Iraq shows the naiveté of that image. The issue isn't just Shiites versus Sunnis; there are significant divisions along tribal, village, and class lines.

The perception that most of the region's states command little loyalty is manifestly wrong; in many respects state nationalism is a stronger force than Arab or Islamic nationalism. One would have to look long and hard to find animosity between two neighboring states as violent and deep-rooted as that between Iran and Iraq. Are Iranians and Iraqis really just one undifferentiated chunk of a common enemy?

Ironically, the Bush-Rumsfeld geopolitical model and the future hope of radical Islam are remarkably similar. Radical Islamicists clearly understand the diversity of the Middle East and the opposition they face from many state leaders. Their goal is to overcome that diversity and opposition by fostering a sense of common cause against the West in general, and the United States in particular. Wars are usually won by figuring out your enemy's geopolitical objectives and undermining them. Under the circumstances, should we really be taking our enemy's geopolitical vision as our starting point?

Much has been made of the Iraq-Vietnam comparison -- sometimes too much. But as with Iraq, two different geopolitical visions swirled around Vietnam. One saw it as a key domino in the diffusion of communism; the other saw it as the product of a nationalist movement that happened to be communist. Only when more and more people came to question the first vision did a sufficiently broad-based movement develop to force a change in policy toward Vietnam.

So it is likely to be with Iraq. Arguing that Saddam Hussein had no direct connection with 9/11 will have little impact on continued support for the Bush-Rumsfeld foreign policy unless it is accompanied by an effective challenge to the geopolitical visions that sustain belief in that connection. That means highlighting regional complexities and emphasizing the dangers of playing into extremist geopolitical visions. Sadly, policies motivated by the "Middle East as a staging ground" geopolitical model are like self-fulfilling prophecies. Each day we insist on treating the Middle East as a monolithic bloc, we stoke the fires that make it more so.

*Alexander B. Murphy is a member of the Writers Circle of the American Geographical Society, a professor of geography at the University of Oregon, Vice President of the American Geographical Society, and former President of the Association of American Geographers. He can be reached at [abmurphy@uoregon.edu](mailto:abmurphy@uoregon.edu)*