

Analysis: Saudis Undecided

Author: [Jamal Ahmad](#)

Given the huge risks, Riyadh will defer its decision on supporting a US-led war until the final moment.

In the unfolding Iraq crisis, no two countries have more similar geopolitical considerations than Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Their location, as Iraq's largest neighbours to the south and north, is alone sufficient to explain their opposition to war. Neither has hidden their strong desire to be rid of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, although this in no way conflicts with their rejection of war.

The war President George Bush is itching for will be fought on our borders - not those of Texas. If Saddam has missiles with a longer-than-permitted range, it is Riyadh or Ankara they could target - not Washington. Even if there is only a 5 per cent chance that Baghdad retains doomsday weapons, this is worrying to Saudi officials.

But while seeking to safeguard their country, they have done their utmost not to cause public alarm. They have taken defensive measures, but secretly and without any media coverage that might upset the calm that has so far prevailed on the Saudi street.

Apart from the risk of unleashing the weapons of mass destruction that the Americans insist Iraq has, war threatens to have many other harmful effects on the region.

One is economic recession. The issue is raised at virtually every meeting between Saudis. Like Turkey, Saudi Arabia has a growing unemployment problem and is trying to get out of a slump. Conflict would be certain to compound its economic suffering.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia doesn't want an influx of refugees, nor an unstable Iraq wracked by internecine strife. That might trigger ugly acts of retribution targeting the Sunni community, wrongly portrayed as the power base of Saddam's regime.

The Saudis can also envisage a scenario in which an impatient and trigger-happy Bush administration causes so much "collateral damage", and behaves so high-handedly, that it turns potential allies in Iraq into angry, vengeful and suspicious adversaries.

Worse still, the Saudis can imagine a situation whereby the Americans' entire enterprise is abandoned in failure: having devastated Iraq, they declare that it no longer poses any threat to them or their allies and proceed to withdraw, leaving Iraq's neighbours to pick up the pieces.

This would whet the appetites that various groups in Iraq have for autonomy, threatening to permanently divide the country and turn it into a new Yugoslavia. Saudi Arabia has invested much in developing and improving relations with Iran. The emergence of a Shi'ite mini-Iraq on its borders could create tensions across the Gulf.

Washington's signals about its broader regional intentions are not reassuring. Given the neo-conservatives' hold over the Bush administration, which is ideologically aligned with Israel and doesn't think much of the Arabs in general, it is legitimate to mistrust America's intentions. Having the Americans running the country would be a liability to US allies in the region.

The kingdom's reluctance to hop to America's war drums should not be seen as a sign that it is relinquishing its old alliance with the superpower, which has been tried and tested in adversity. It is most likely that Saudi Arabia will allow its American allies to use its military bases to provide logistical support to the US Central Command. Saudi Arabia doesn't want to commit itself to anything while Washington could still back off from the decision to go to war. Saddam might even do the unexpected and resign.

Until such time, Saudi Arabia - not unlike Turkey - will maintain its hesitant and ambiguous stand toward the war option. Turkey has demanded monetary compensation and various other concessions in return for its participation in the war. Saudi Arabia has a right to demand something from the Americans too - namely, better treatment than it has been receiving since September 11.

Some observers have attributed the Saudi government's lack of enthusiasm for war to pressure from the religious establishment or extremist trends. But their role tends to be exaggerated.

The truth is that the government has the upper hand by far. There is no power that can challenge it if it decides that the kingdom's interests are best served by maintaining its special relationship with Washington. Should Riyadh reach that conclusion, it will do what it deems fit and will find a thousand justifications for the campaign - one of which could be the assertion that it is to "free" Iraq.

Jamal Ahmad Khashoggi is deputy editor-in-chief of Saudi Arabia's English-language Arab News. A longer version of this commentary first appeared in Lebanon's Daily Star newspaper.

Location: [Israel](#)
[Turkey](#)
[Iraqi Kurdistan](#)
[Iraq](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/analysis-saudis-undecided>