

Lesson from history: 1955 Baghdad Pact

By Gerald Butt
Middle East analyst

As a starting point for a new alliance of Arab states with a Western outlook, Baghdad may not be an auspicious choice. This is because the Iraqi capital gave its name to a short-lived British-backed alliance in the 1950s. The failure of the Baghdad Pact, as it was known, heralded the end of British influence in the Middle East.

The question today is whether a pact of modernised democratic Arab states that the Bush administration is hoping to form will be more successful than its predecessor of half a century ago.

The Baghdad Pact was created in 1955 by Britain, Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Pakistan with the aim of strengthening regional defence and preventing the infiltration of the Soviet Union into the Middle East.

Britain hoped that Syria and Jordan would complete the arc of countries sweeping across the region.

But Britain's ambitions faced strong popular Arab opposition, encouraged by Egyptian President Gemal Abdel Nasser in fiery rhetoric broadcast from the Voice of the Arabs radio in Cairo.



Nasser stoked popular opposition to British plans in Iraq in the 1950s

Syria refused to join, while the young anglophile King Hussein of Jordan wavered.

Anti-British riots

In the end, he bowed to the will of his people who took to the streets in large numbers to denounce the pact.

The windows of the British bank in Amman where my father worked were smashed, and, as a child I was frightened by the crowds rampaging through the garden of our house.

Whether the Baghdad Pact would have lasted longer under different circumstances is debatable.

But in the event, Britain's disastrous role in the Suez crisis of 1956 undermined its authority and prestige.

Then in 1958, the monarchy installed by Britain in Iraq was overthrown in a violent and bloody coup.



Even the anglophile King Hussein of Jordan could not support Britain in the 1950s

Echoes of the past

The world today, of course, is different.

The West's enemy is no longer communism, but Islamic fundamentalism and international terrorism.

The United States believes that by reshaping the Middle East and installing modern democratic regimes, terrorism will be uprooted.

But while the cause is different, there are remarkable echoes of the pact of the 1950s - not least in the players involved, with America taking over the lead role from Britain.

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Iraqi exile

Pakistan, in the aftermath of the 11 September bombings, has become a dependable American ally, and Turkey will be co-operating closely with Washington in any future war on Iraq.

Of the members of the Baghdad Pact, only Iran is outside the arc envisaged by the US today.

And hawkish members of the Bush administration have hinted that regime change in Tehran may be high on the agenda when the operation in Iraq is over, with Syria only a little further down the list.

Arab opposition

To carry the comparison between the contemporary world and that of the 1950s too far would be wrong.

The US today is the sole superpower in the world and to a large extent can do whatever it likes.

Nevertheless, the Bush administration may need to take into account one factor that has not changed over the past 50 years: overwhelming Arab opposition to what is regarded as unwarranted and unacceptable interference in the affairs of the region.

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American officials could encounter this attitude sooner than they think.

"Getting rid of Saddam Hussein is one thing," said a prominent Iraqi exile who is not associated with any of the opposition groups.

"But you won't find any self-respecting Iraqi prepared to co-operate with an American puppet regime."

Even Ahmed Chalabi, an Iraqi opposition leader with close links with Washington, has denounced the idea of an interim US military government in Baghdad as an affront to the country's sovereignty.

So the Bush administration will face the daunting task of convincing Arabs at large that what looks to them like a new colonialist-style attempt to reshape the region is the best way forward.

If the Americans do not succeed in this, then there must be a significant possibility of the latest Baghdad pact ultimately suffering the same fate as the previous one.