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NATION-BUILDING IN THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST: THE VIEW FROM WASHINGTON

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Nation-building is a nebulous and often misused concept, surrounded by a great deal of controversy. Literally, the term refers to attempts to develop a sense of common identity or nationhood among the citizens of a country. For example, nation-building was a great concern for newly decolonized countries in the 1960s. Today, the term is most often applied to efforts by outside intervenors to put in place new political and administrative systems and shape a new civil society in post-conflict countries. In the latter interpretation, nation-building is a controversial idea on both sides of the aisle. Intervenors are reluctant to commit financial and human resources to a task that appears endless, but at the same time fear that without nation-building post-conflict countries will sink into chaos. The countries that are targets of nation-building want help in reconstructing, but question whether interventions by the UN or by individual states amount to a new form of imperialism.[1]

Often forgotten in the current controversy over nation-building by outsiders is that most efforts to shape political and administrative systems and society itself are carried out by domestic political actors. For example, the international community has a nation-building strategy in Bosnia, and it has devoted to it an unusually high level of resources for an unusually long period of time. But in implementing its strategy the international community has to contend with the conflicting agendas and vested interests of Bosnian groups that do not necessarily share the vision of a united, multi-ethnic, and democratic Bosnia.

In this paper, the concept of nation-building will be used very broadly to address attempts by both outside intervenors, primarily the United States, and by domestic political actors to reshape the countries of the Greater Middle East. Specifically, the paper will discuss the competing nation-building agendas that are evident in Afghanistan and Iraq, and also the more modest reform attempts in other countries of the Greater Middle East.

The United States and Nation-building in the Greater Middle East

The idea of nation-building was originally rejected by the Bush administration as a political quagmire into which the United States should not venture. During his presidential campaign, George W. Bush made frequent disparaging remarks about nation-building. When the attack of September 11 revealed the costly consequences of Afghanistan's neglect after the Soviet withdrawal, President Bush was forced to accept that nation-building could not be avoided. In a sharp departure from its original position, the administration pledged that it would rebuild Afghanistan and later Iraq into democratic countries after removing their offending regimes. Eventually, Bush's ambition to reshape the Middle East extended beyond these two countries targeted for military intervention. The stated goal of the administration became the promotion of democratic change in the entire region. As envisaged by U.S. officials, this democratic change would be the outcome of a broad process of socio-economic transformation encouraged by the United States. In

December 2002, both Secretary of State Colin Powell and Policy Planning Bureau Director Richard Haass outlined a vision of democratic transformation in the Middle East that started not with political reform, but with a free market economy, educational systems reform, and a more active civil society, including women's empowerment.

At least in theory, the United States is thus currently committed to two forms of nation-building in the Greater Middle East: the comprehensive rebuilding of Afghanistan and Iraq, where it has brought about regime change by force, and the reforming of countries where the old regimes have not been eliminated, but where the United States nevertheless intends to bring about political change through economic and social reform programs, as well as through direct political pressure. Only the most inflexible and intractable countries of the Middle East—countries like Libya and Syria—appear excluded from this broader nation-building effort. Even in Iran, the Bush administration still hopes that regime change may be brought about by a domestic popular uprising.

The expansive and sanguine view of nation-building in the Middle East the Bush administration is espousing in theory is not matched by de facto commitment of financial resources and personnel. As practiced, nation-building is a far more modest affair than the rhetoric suggests. It is faltering in Afghanistan, is off to a bad start in Iraq, and seems to consist of a scattershot of separate projects that do not add up to a strategy in the rest of the Middle East.

Nation-building After Regime Change: Afghanistan and Iraq

From the beginning of the war in Afghanistan, the Bush administration committed itself to rebuilding. acknowledging that the country's neglect after the Soviet withdrawal had contributed to the rise to power of the Taliban and to Al-Qaeda's ability to make into its operational base. This history, U.S. officials declared, would not be allowed to repeat itself.

Two years after the overthrow of the Taliban, the pattern of U.S. and, more generally, international commitment to Afghanistan amounts to far less than rhetorical statements would lead an observer to expect. The formal political reform process set in motion by the Bonn conference of November 2001 is on track and the United States and other members of the international community are determined to keep it that way. Thus, the formal process is moving in an orderly fashion through the planned steps: the formation of the initial interim administration headed by Hamid Karzai at the Bonn conference; the convening of an emergency *loya jirga* in June 2002, which confirmed Karzai in power as president in the transitional government; the setting up of a constitutional drafting commission in October 2002 and of a constitutional review commission to promote discussion of the constitutional draft throughout the country in April 2003; and the beginning of the training of the new Afghan army. There is no reason to believe that the next steps will not take place on schedule: the constitutional *loya jirga* to review and adopt the constitutional draft is scheduled for October 2003, and general elections for mid-2004.

Behind this orderly formal process there is a chaotic, uncertain reality that the commitment of the international community is inadequate to modify. Security in the country has remained precarious all along and is now deteriorating in many areas, hampering relief efforts and making a mockery of the idea of nation-building. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) is only deployed in Kabul and its 5,000 soldiers are barely sufficient to maintain security even there; the 11,500 American and coalition troops still in the country are engaged in hunting down the remains of the Taliban and al-Qaeda in selected areas. While they do some relief and rehabilitation work to win hearts and minds, they are not engaged in a systematic attempt to provide security for ordinary Afghan people. Much of the country is thus left to its own devices. This means that areas controlled by a strong warlord are reasonably secure, and areas where no single figure has a monopoly over means of coercion are not. The worst problems continue to occur in Pashtun areas, where the warlords of the Northern alliance have no control, remnants of the Taliban still hide out and find supporters, al-Qaeda figures operate, and U.S. troops continue to mount operations with the help of local leaders willing to cooperate with the Americans but not strong enough to impose their peace.

The Karzai government remains extraordinarily weak. Only 4,000 men have been trained so far for the envisaged 70,000-strong new national army, while there are about 200,000 men under arms in Afghanistan, most under the control of regional warlords.[2] Karzai is also undermined by the unwillingness of many donors, including the United States, to channel aid through the Afghan government rather than international NGOs and private contractors. The policy was justified by expediency in the initial emergency situation — international NGOs that had operated in Afghanistan under the Taliban were much better prepared to distribute food, provide rudimentary health care, and start rebuilding the villages than a new government that had to reinvent itself from scratch. But by continuing to bypass the Afghan government, the international community is making it difficult for it to increase its capacity, let alone its legitimacy in the eyes of the population.

Furthermore, many donors have not delivered all the aid they originally pledged. The transitional government's budget for Afghan fiscal year 1382, which began in March 2003, indicates a gap of $ 181 million in the ordinary budget and of $ 596 million in the development budget between money required from donor sources and the amount pledged thus far. These are high percentages: the ordinary budget for 1382 is $ 550 million and the development budget is $ 1.7 billion. [3]

Most importantly, the Karzai government is undermined by the reality of the power distribution in the country. Warlords have not been disarmed, forcing the president to make room for them in his cabinet or to accept them provincial governors. Warlords are growing rich by collecting customs revenue on goods coming into the country and exporting drugs, while the government coffers remain empty, dependent on foreign assistance. Donors' contributions to the government's budget total $ 296 million, which compares unfavorably with the $ 446 million in grants disbursed through international NGOs.[4] At the same time, provincial customs houses under the control of warlords maintain control over most of the estimated $ 600 million of customs revenues and other taxes raised internally.[5]

What is troubling about the situation in Afghanistan is not that the processes of nation-building and state-building are still incomplete—given the complexity of the task two years would be grossly insufficient even under a best case scenario. Rather, the problem is that, if present trends continue, nation-building will never be successful. If the warlords continue to consolidate their military and financial base and the international community allows this to happen, and aid continues to bypass state institutions and be channeled through international institutions and NGOs, then the Afghan state will never be reconstructed into the united, multi-ethnic, democratic entity that is the stated goal of the international intervention.

One explanation given for the scant commitment by the United States and other countries to the reconstruction of Afghanistan is the all-consuming preoccupation with Iraq. The explanation is inadequate. Undoubtedly, the war in Iraq has absorbed a lot of attention and is a costly endeavor for the United States, but even in Iraq reconstruction was never adequately planned, and as a result efforts are faltering. This suggests that the real problem is not that Iraq caused Afghanistan to be forgotten, but that there is a lack of commitment to and know-how about nation-building on the part of the United States. The Bush administration has pledged to reconstruct Iraq as a stable and democratic state, making it into an inspiration and model for other countries in the Middle East. What is happening on the ground does not correspond to this vision.

Although an assessment of nation-building in Iraq can only be highly tentative at this point, some trends are well-established and unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, barring a major crisis. The first trend is that the reconstruction project has not been internationalized but remains strictly in the hands of the United States. Of the other members of the so-called international coalition, Britain is playing a supporting, secondary role, while others are at best providing small numbers of troops and personnel to military and civilian operations controlled by the United States. The United Nations, and even the less controversial IMF and World Bank, also appear to have been relegated to the most marginal positions compatible with the wording of Security Council Resolution 1483. While the Bush administration by the late summer 2003 was willing to envisage a more important role for the UN, it still appeared unwilling to give that institution any real military or political control. Even domestically, control over the Iraqi occupation is highly centralized in the hands of a few high officials at the Pentagon, who refused to share even information with other departments and with the US Congress. Centralized control may increase efficiency, but it reduces available financial and human resources. It has also created an early backlash by Iraqis against the United States. Yet, in the absence of a clearly spelled out program for a transition to Iraqi governance comparable to what the Bonn conference provided for Afghanistan. Iraqis are being asked to trust the U.S. to rebuild their country physically, economically, and politically without being told what that the U.S. intends to do.

The second notable feature of U.S. nation-building in Iraq is that the U.S. vision for the country appears to be in conflict with the demands and vested interests of the majority of major politically players identifiable at this point. The United States has outlined a vision of a liberal, reasonably democratic, secular, federal Iraq within its present borders, with the units comprising the federation being defined by geography, not by ethnicity or religion. Theoretically, a state constituted along those lines would be highly desirable. In practice, there is extreme confusion in the ranks of the Bush administration about how such a state might be built. Even more seriously, this vision may not be compatible with Iraq's historical and present political reality.

It is already abundantly clear that the American agenda it is not compatible with what the major organized political groups want. It clashes with the agenda of the Kurds, who essentially want independence, although they are too astute politically to press for it at this time. It clashes with the agendas of both Shi'a and Sunni clerics, who are divided by conflicting visions of an Islamist state but are in agreement on the rejection of a secular one. It probably also clashes with that of many secular Shi'a politicians whose concern with power is greater than their concern for democracy. U.S. differences with this latter group can probably be glossed over — as long as such politicians remain friendly, the United States will probably disregard their scant commitment to democracy, just as it is willing to disregard the scant commitment to democracy of the warlords safely ensconced in the Karzai government and in the provinces of Afghanistan. But the agendas of Kurdish parties and Islamists are an open challenge to the United States that cannot be tolerated.

Other aspects of the American nation-building project for Iraq are still extremely vague. The Bush administration remains torn between two conflicting imperatives: ensuring the success of the reconstruction, and transferring power quickly to an Iraqi government before the tension caused by the occupation gets out of hand. Unfortunately, the two imperatives are irreconcilable, leading to the uncertain policy and abrupt changes of direction that have characterized the occupation so far. To maximize the probability of Iraq turning into a stable and reasonably democratic country, the United States has no option but to embark on a prolonged and forceful occupation. This is the lesson of Germany and Japan; it is also the lesson of Bosnia, where seven years of international occupation have not yet brought the country to the point where stability and democracy would be maintained without a continuing international presence. To minimize the possibility of a popular Iraqi backlash, on the other hand, power needs to be transferred back to the Iraqis quickly. However, that means that, as in Afghanistan, the U.S. capacity to transform Iraq will be reduced greatly and the country will de facto be reconstructed by the political groups that have already asserted themselves as major players: the Kurds in the north, Shi'a clerics in the south, the remnants of the Ba'th party and the Sunni clerics in the middle, and formerly exiled political groups trying to carve out a role for themselves against better established political forces all across the country. The possibility of a stable and democratic outcome does not appear good if these are the groups that will determine how Iraq is to be reconstructed.

U.S. Initiatives in the Greater Middle East: MEPI and the Muslim world project

U.S. attempts to rebuild a less dangerous, more friendly, and more democratic Middle East extend beyond the headline-grabbing war and subsequent reconstruction of Afghanistan and Iraq. More quietly, the United States has also launched an effort to bring about democratic change in the rest of the region. The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) is a central aspect of this effort. MEPI is a nation-building project, because it sees political reform not as an isolated activity, but as integral part, indeed the outcome, of a series of interrelated socio-economic changes. Richard Haass, then director of the Policy Planning Bureau at the State Department, set forth the rationale for such engagement with the Middle East on December 4, 2002 at the Council on Foreign Relations: “Hence, for elections to be a true reflection of the people, they must be embedded in societies where there are strong and mature civil institutions and a diffusion of power. Elections should accompany the development of civil society (...) democracy takes time. It takes time for ideas to sink in and for political processes, institutions, and traditions to develop. Democratization is best measured not in weeks or months, but in years, decades and generations.” Democracy, in other words, requires a comprehensive nation-building effort, which involves the economy, the culture, and the society before it involves a direct tackling of political reform.

Programs initiated under MEPI so far accurately reflect this idea of nation-building, although the limitations of the funding provided for MEPI and the enormous ambition of its mandate have resulted not in a systematic, well-thought out, and comprehensive nation-building effort, but rather in a scattershot of initiatives. Such initiatives may be linked in an overall comprehensive framework in the minds of those who devised them, but to an outside observer they look more like a series of random activities extremely unlikely to make a significant difference.[6]

MEPI was initially funded at a paltry $ 20 million in the FY 2002 supplemental appropriations to jump-start its first initiatives. The administration asked an additional $ 200 million for MEPI and the broader Muslim Outreach program in the FY 2003 supplemental appropriations in order to strengthen current projects. Additionally, the administration will request $ 145 million for FY 2004.[7] While not insignificant when compared to other U.S. assistance programs, these figures are still very small when compared to the ambitious goal of bringing about significant change in the economy and the educational system, and thus the culture and civil society, particularly that concerning women, of all Middle East countries. (Since this is not a development assistance project, but one of socio-political transformation, there are no eligibility criteria based on per capita income to exclude the rich countries of the region.)

The activities MEPI has implemented or is implementing at present are distinctly modest—some are, in fact, considered to be pilot projects, slated to increase in scope in the future. Significantly, these activities appear to be chosen at random, without an underlying overall vision. In the field of education, for example, MEPI is spreading its efforts broadly: Concerning education, it has committed funds to create links between Arab and US universities, to improve pre-school education, to promote the teaching of English, and to improve techniques of adult teaching and the quality of the reading material used. To promote economic reform and private sector development, MEPI has provided technical assistance to Arab members of the WTO to help them comply with WTO criteria, has launched group training programs for small business entrepreneurs, and is supporting reform of commercial laws in some countries.. In the realm of civil society and promotion of women rights, MEPI has brought Arab women with political ambitions to the United States to learn about political campaigning and to observe elections, it has helped NGOs in Yemen observe elections, and it has provided leadership training to student leaders from the Middle East and North Africa. The list could continue.

MEPI, in other words, has chosen to focus on very traditional, project-based activities rather than on broader programs or policies. Even if such projects increase in number, they will no more force significant change in any country in the future than similar projects have done in the past.

Nation-building from within: the Challenge to the United States

The effectiveness of MEPI in promoting socio-economic and political change in the Middle East looks even more doubtful against the background of past and present domestic nation-building efforts to which the countries of the Middle East have been exposed, from the fall of the Ottoman Empire to this day. Governments, political parties, and religious organizations have long tried to shape the countries of the Middle East to fit their particular view. The Middle East is hardly virgin territory for nation-building.

Some of the contemporary domestic nation-building initiatives, particularly those by radical Islamist organizations, are antithetical to the U.S. vision for the Middle East and inimical to its interests. Others are more in line with American goals, for example the modest steps toward political liberalization taken by some the leaders of the smaller Gulf countries. Whether compatible with U.S. goals or not, there is much nation-building taking place in the Greater Middle East over which the United States has no control.

Indeed, the scope of the United States' cautious and piecemeal efforts to shape a new culture and politics in the Greater Middle East pales in comparison to the attempts carried out by Arab governments and political organizations. I have already discussed the domestic forces with which the international community has to compete in rebuilding Afghanistan and Iraq. Similar powerful forces exist elsewhere. Such forces can be divided schematically into three broad categories, with very strong variations from country to country: Arab governments, Islamist parties, and, far behind, democratic forces.

All Arab governments are engaged, more or less explicitly, in nation-building. The fact that these efforts do not take the form of the modernization and democratization project the United States and other industrial democracies would like to see does not mean that Arab governments are not trying to transform their countries. For many of these countries, this is not a new phenomenon. The earliest nation-building attempt in the Greater Middle East was undertaken by Kamal Ataturk in Turkey in the 1920s and 30s. Somewhat more recently, to mention just some of the most obvious cases, both Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt and the Ba'th parties of Iraq and Syria tried to transform their countries along secular and statist lines, as did the FLN in Algeria, and to a large extent they succeeded. The Shah of Iran undertook his "white revolution" to modernize the country, unleashing a reaction that eventually cost him the throne and brought to power shi'a clerics with their own nation-building agenda. King Hassan of Morocco undertook a more cautious modernization of the country, as did King Hussein of Jordan; both managed to retain control and pass the throne—and the problem of nation-building—on to their sons. Muammar Ghaddafi has attempted to reshape Libya repeatedly according to his rather quixotic and ever changing views. Even the Gulf monarchies, admittedly the most conservative and slow acting of all Arab governments, engage in some degree of nation-building. The Saudi royal family has allowed the Wahabi religious establishment to control social life and religious and political thinking in the country, while carrying out a slow attempt to modernize the economy and introduce at least a degree of modern technical education. Other Gulf monarchies are experimenting with limited degrees of political and social modernization. Far from being immutable entities shaped by primordial trends and an archaic interpretation of Islam, Arab countries are the products of remarkable nation-building efforts.

In the last two decades, the countries of the Greater Middle East have also been deeply affected by the nation-building project of Islamist organizations, both Shi'a and Sunni. From the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928 to today, Islamist organizations have had an explicit project to reform society and the polity. The impact of Islamist organizations has been profound everywhere. To be sure, the impact has been greater in countries like Iran and Afghanistan, where Islamists are or have been in power, or in a country such as Saudi Arabia, where the government has allowed them to control social customs and education. But Islamist groups have also become a political force to be reckoned with in all countries of the Greater Middle East, including some of the former

Soviet republics in Central Asia. Most insidiously, they have had a very deep, visible, and extremely complex impact in countries like Egypt or Turkey, which only two decades ago appeared to be quite secularized.

Domestic democratic organizations in the Middle East are by far the weakest nation-builders: they have a project, but they have limited capacity to implement it. Beginning with the impact of colonization, many countries developed a social stratum of modernizers, influenced by western ideas about politics, economics and social relations. In Egypt in particular, this stratum became quite influential in the 1920s and 1930s, seeking to develop a modern entrepreneurial economy, fighting for women's rights, and developing a modern educational system and thus a professional class. This was also the stratum that led the resistance to British control and, in so doing, created a common bond of nationalism with other segments of the population, becoming very influential. However, once the British presence dwindled after World War II, this liberal and democratic intelligentsia lost the capacity to create a broad-based movement and lost its influence.

One of the goals of MEPI, and indeed of earlier democracy promotion activities by USAID and a number of American NGOs, is the strengthening the democratic elements in Arab societies and enhancing their influence. MEPI funding will undoubtedly help specific organizations of civil society or even political parties. It is much more doubtful that even an increased number of projects will be able to reverse the tremendous disadvantage under which such organizations operate at present and make them into a force capable of counterbalancing the influence of incumbent governments and Islamist organizations.

Conclusions

The United States' ambition to rebuild Afghanistan and Iraq into modern, secular, and reasonably democratic countries and to steer the entire Greater Middle East toward democracy is unlikely to be realized in the foreseeable future. First, there is a chasm separating the U.S. rhetorical commitment to nation-building in the two countries where it has intervened militarily and what it is doing in practice. Second, the low key—and low cost—approach of the Middle East Partnership Initiative will not bring about much change. It is an approach based on the implementation of narrowly focused, small projects in many countries, rather than on a politically more demanding and risky, although potentially more rewarding, attempt to engage Arab regimes and political organizations of all types in dialogue over reform.

In the meantime, incumbent governments and Islamist political organizations are pursuing their own nation-building projects, which conflict with each other and with the U.S. approach. Nation-building in the Greater Middle East is a battle the United States is not guaranteed to win.

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[1] On international interventions and imperialism see M. Ottaway and B. Lacina, "International Interventions and Imperialism: Lessons from the 1990s," *SAIS Review*, Summer 2003.

[2] *United Nations Integrated Regional Information Networks News*, June 6, 2003.

[3] Transitional Government of Afghanistan. "Analysis of Aid Flows to Afghanistan," March 30, 2003.

[4] Transitional Government of Afghanistan. "Analysis of Aid Flows to Afghanistan," March 30, 2003.
[5] *New York Times Magazine*, June 1, 2003.
[6] For more information visit the MEPI web site at http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rt/mepi/
[7] Statement by Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs William J. Burns to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, March 26, 2003. The U.S. fiscal year begins on October 1. The current fiscal year, FY 2003, runs from October 1, 2002 to September 30, 2003.