

Three Critical Concerns for the Macro-Middle East

Wolfgang Danspeckgruber

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Several weeks of residence in Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia have considerably increased my concern about the future of the macro-region of western South Asia and the Middle East (or from the Nile to the Hindu) for three reasons: i.) the tribulations of state-building, ii.) the perilous potential of self-determination, and iii.) the very real dangers of a U.S. air attack on Iran in the near future. To address these challenges, it is imperative to launch a diplomatic effort for a regional initiative focused on creating a new regional compact. This initiative must focus on security-building and confidence-building measures, including attention to territorial inviolability, nuclear security and socio-cultural dimensions, and energy and the environment. It should include the Gulf region itself – including Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and UAE – but also the macro-region encompassing Turkey, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Such a process should be undertaken with the involvement of the U.S., U.K., France, Russia, and China, the permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany.

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Concerning international state building efforts in Afghanistan, it has become clear that there are serious challenges to be dealt with – from a restarted insurgency to Afghanistan emerging as the world's largest poppy producer to an Afghan economy that some estimates say is more than 60% carried by the drug trade. But additional crucial challenges are the increasing disconnect between Afghans and the international community, and the lack of “*Afghan ownership*,” participation, and involvement in state-building projects. The disconnect between state-building efforts and the Afghan reality as well as the Afghan reluctance to show leadership and to take responsibility for their actions further complicate the all-important preparations for presidential and parliamentary elections in 2009 and 2010.

Afghanistan is at a critical turning point: either the state- and security-building process will work or Afghanistan will slide increasingly toward a weak narco-dominated state. Afghanistan will either find its way to a stable, increasingly secure and prosperous country with successful elections in 2009 and 2010 or it will undergo a “*Columbianization*” wherein an outbreak of a civil Mujahedeen war like in the 1990s is probable, and the influence of the Taliban and infiltration of the political system by members of Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami party may well shape the nation's future. Obviously, any new instability in the region – especially in Pakistan or Iran – would considerably aggravate the negative scenarios.

Moving forward, state- and security-building efforts must be based on *Afghan empowerment* – the extensive involvement of Afghans in planning, development, and execution of projects – and done according to an Afghan timeframe even if this means a much longer and presumably more cumbersome process than the western world would like. An emphasis has to be placed on training, education, capacity building, and positive engagement of the Afghan *diaspora* as Afghan

empowerment is contingent on the ability and desire to shoulder the responsibility of governmental action. Given that most Afghans did not enjoy education for nearly 30 years, it is vital to offer to those in the new generation effective avenues for education *in Afghanistan*. Very basic education is needed but the crux of the problem is that there is a fine line between conveying progress and exaggerating the message which has the potential to cause reactionary attitudes in a very conservative society. Past experience of modernization and westernization in Afghanistan has shown extreme reactions against too forceful efforts.

State-building must focus on specific agricultural, industrial, energy, and infra-structure projects utilizing Afghan expertise and participation in order to yield rapid and palpable results. Enough paper has been used to draw up (many times unrealistic) plans. Concrete projects can comprise special fruit and vegetable farming cooperatives, small energy projects, and local rail and road infrastructure construction. But again to show effective progress, the projects must be specific and clearly defined, and must have full Afghan participation in planning, development, execution, and subsequent maintenance, improvement, and adaptation. The long-term stability and security of the macro-region as a whole is contingent on a stable and secure Afghanistan.

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Self-determination has become a special and dangerous issue for the region. On the one hand, finding one's own destiny, defining one's policies can be seen as self-determination as has been the Swiss example for centuries. It seems that Afghanistan clearly should be able to achieve this after nearly 30 years of occupation, civil-strife, and outside intervention. This would be the positive dimension of an otherwise perilous concept. Self-determination's potential state shattering dimension however can already be observed in the region from the Kurds, Armenians in Nagorno-Karabagh, the Azeris in Iran, and even to the Baluchis within both Iran and Pakistan.

What is perhaps most unsettling and highlights the potential instability to be caused by self-determination claims in the region is the divide between Shia and Sunni. For many the possibility of the Kurds splitting off from Iraq would be a recipe for disaster in the region and possibly trigger a region-wide conflagration. Because most major oil and gas reserves in the region seem to be in Shia lands, at issue is the new regional law in Iraq which may create a larger province in Shia dominated southern Iraq. There are fears among some that other Shia in the region may feel enticed by it which could well lead to unrest in other states where Shia live.

The highly publicized self-determination development in Kosovo with the acceptance by many in the international community of its new sovereignty has certainly emboldened some in the larger Middle East region, while the media reporting concerning Tibet and its claim for self-determination has added to the international attention. The interest shown by some for an independent Iraqi Kurdistan (notably the work of Peter Galbraith) is seen by many as a most dangerous challenge for internal state security and for the security of the whole the region – not the least, in view of Kurds also inhabiting Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. Some argue that the self-determination fervor prevalent in the region is less a product of homegrown sentiments than a product of the actions and enticement of certain outside interests with the intent of causing instability and unrest in sovereign territories.

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The relationship between the United States and Iran looms large as a concern for the Middle East and western South Asia. There is a strong interconnect between the Gulf States and the macro-region from India to the Mediterranean (see for instance the relationship Riyadh-Islamabad) wherein events and developments are of mutually influential character. Thus any future reduction in regional presence (i.e. Iraq) of the United States and a likely showdown between America and Iran, will cause potentially dire consequences.

Because of this, arguably the highest level of concern is concentrated on the relationship between the U.S. and Iran. The Bush administration continues to highlight Iran's supposed efforts to build nuclear weapons, its support of Hezbollah and other terrorist organizations, and Iran's flexing of its regional muscles and influence especially in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Afghanistan. With increasingly vitriolic language from the Bush administration, the U.S. accuses Iran of involvement in Iraq by supplying war material to forces hostile to U.S. efforts, and meddling in Afghanistan by increasing support of the Taliban. Statements such as an "Iran with nuclear weapons would be worse than a war on Iran" and President Bush's recent speech in Israel in which he stated that allowing Iran to obtain nuclear capability would be an "unforgivable betrayal of future generations" are easily misunderstood. On the other hand of course, Iranian leadership continues to throw verbal aggressions against Israel and relishes in the successful Hezbollah Operation in Lebanon.

Observers are also quick to point out that regardless of the public rationale for any strike against Iran, it seems to be an objective of the Bush administration not to leave office without bombing Iran – whether to settle some of the accounts which would (for some) finalize the 1979 hostage taking at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and to deal a major "blow to the Mullahs," redress Iran's role in the region in view of any future reduced U.S. presence, to punish Iran for its supposed continued interference in Iraq, or halt/slow down Iran's expanding uranium enrichment program, and thereby guarantee Israel's security in the region. Some even argue that a security emergency – if only limited in scope – could bolster the strength of the Republican Party and its presumptive presidential nominee, Senator John McCain, in the upcoming presidential elections while calling into question the security and foreign policy experience of the leading Democratic candidate, Senator Barack Obama.

A recent Israeli intelligence estimate predicted that Iran may have enough HEU within 9 months, down from the previously assumed 16-20 months as of 2007 and, indeed, plans for a U.S. air attack against Iran seem to be moving forward. In March Vice-President Cheney visited Turkey with one objective presumably: to pressure the Turkish government to permit U.S. over-flights in case of a confrontation with Iran. Reports suggest that "hardening sanctions against Iran" were also very much on the agenda in President Bush's visit to the region in May. Some suggest that General David Petraeus' replacement of Admiral William Fallon as Commander of Central Command, could make it easier for the White House to get the backing of the military leadership for an Iran strike. And, there is apparently a build-up of U.S. Naval units in and around the Persian Gulf so that more than 5 carrier groups will be in or in the Gulf's vicinity by Summer 2008.

Most troubling, while in Saudi Arabia I came to the realization that in the Kingdom (and I would assume also elsewhere in Sunni states in the region) there seems to be a consensus that for them the current *status quo* is unacceptable. An implicit dimension of this message may well be that a military operation against Iran to alter that status quo would for some not only be acceptable but desirable, and could be interpreted as de facto agreement with such an action.

Alas, from the combined perspective of these points, it seems highly likely that the U.S. will resort to an air-attack on Iran within the next six months. *Operation Dessert Fox* ordered by the Clinton Administration 1998 to punish Saddam Hussein for not permitting UNSCOM operations may serve as example. Even if the effects of such an operation are difficult to judge concerning Iran proper, depending on the reaction, time and intensity of the strikes and whether a retaliatory tit-for-tat will follow, the potential ramifications for the region, especially for Afghanistan and Iraq may be disastrous – not to speak about economics, and today's international system. History holds ample examples where the eventual consequences of short military operations differ dramatically from the outcome originally envisaged. As a sarcastic final hope: perhaps the only convincing deterrent against such an action, more than any other rational argument concerning regional peace and stability, not to mention spared lives, may be the extremely high price of oil. Imagine then the many detrimental effects of US \$350 price per barrel of petroleum which could be reached as a consequence of such a strike. Inversely, a reduction of the price per barrel may increase the chance of action.