

## **US Nation-building Policy in the Greater Middle East**

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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 decolonised 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.<sup>1</sup>

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, some of which do not share the vision of a united, multi-ethnic, and democratic Bosnia.

In this article, 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 article 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 11 September 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 US 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 are still in power, 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 a commensurate commitment of

financial resources and personnel. As practised, 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.* 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 turn it into its operational base. This history, US officials declared, would not be allowed to repeat itself.

Two years after the overthrow of the Taliban, the pattern of US and, more generally, international engagement in 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/December 2001 that drew up a plan for the political reconstruction of Afghanistan is on track. 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 in June 2002 of an emergency *loya jirga*, an assembly of important personalities and representatives of regions, tribes and ethnic groups, 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. While the timetable for the next steps may slip a little – the constitutional *loya jirga* to review and adopt the constitutional draft, scheduled for October 2003, has not taken place yet and general elections are more likely to be held later in the summer 2004 than at the very beginning – the process has unfolded surprisingly smoothly.

Behind this orderly formal process there is a chaotic, uncertain reality and the commitment of the international community is inadequate to modify it. 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 and around 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 in the south and east, where the warlords of the Northern Alliance have no control, remnants of the Taliban still hide out and find supporters, *al Qaeda* groups operate, and US 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 (out of a total of \$550) and of \$596 million in the development budget (out of a total of \$1.7 billion) between money received from donor sources and the amount pledged thus far.<sup>3</sup>

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 as 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 unfavourably with the \$446 million in grants disbursed through international NGOs.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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 in 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 channelled 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. This explanation is inadequate. Undoubtedly, the war in Iraq has absorbed a lot of attention and is a costly endeavour 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.

*Iraq.* 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 truly internationalised but remains strictly in the hands of the United States. The Bush administration has tried very hard to attract more military support for the occupation and greater financial contributions for the reconstruction, but with limited results. Few countries, besides Britain, are contributing significant number of troops to the occupation. Indeed, even some of the small troop contributions, by several Eastern European countries, for example, have only materialised because the United States is willing to defray the cost and provide logistical support. Countries that could commit significant numbers of troops, India for example, have argued that they could not do so until a new Security Council resolution explicitly legitimised such troop deployment. However, the passage in October 2003 of Security Council Resolution 1511, which goes further than any previous one in legitimising the occupation of Iraq, has not resulted in an additional commitment of troops by any country. Turkey is the major exception. Under much pressure by the United States, the Turkish parliament approved the deployment of about 10,000 troops in Iraq. Paradoxically, deploying Turkish troops is a dangerous step, because Iraqis from virtually all political factions oppose a Turkish presence.

The United States has been somewhat more successful in internationalising the reconstruction, yet it still carries most of the burden. The Madrid conference of October 23-24 raised about \$33 billion in pledges for the reconstruction of Iraq. But \$20 billion were pledged by the United States, and another \$6 to \$9 billion by the international financial institutions. Japan pledged \$ 5 billion, over two-thirds in loans, and Saudi Arabia 1 billion, half of it in export credit. No other country reached the \$1 billion mark. Most contributions were in fact quite modest and France and Germany refused to provide any direct funding.

The second trend is the centralisation of the Iraqi occupation in the hands of a few high officials in the Department of Defense, who refuse to share information even with other departments and with the US Congress. Centralised control may increase efficiency, but it reduces available financial and human resources. Such centralised control has created resentment within the US government, above all in the State Department. Most

importantly, it has contributed greatly to the early backlash by Iraqis against the United States occupation. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and other officials in the department have refused for months to give any indication about their plans to end the occupation. To this day, there is no clear program for a transition to Iraqi governance comparable to what the Bonn conference provided for Afghanistan. Instead, Iraqis have been asked to trust the US to rebuild their country physically, economically, and politically without being told what that the US intends to do.

The third notable feature of US nation-building in Iraq is that the US vision for the country appears to be in conflict with the demands and vested interests of the majority of the major political 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 organised political groups in Iraq 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. US 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 the United States cannot tolerate.

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 characterised the occupation so far. To maximise 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 minimise 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 US 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'ath 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.

*US Initiatives in the Greater Middle East: MEPI and the Muslim world project*

US 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 an 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 4 December 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 have a significant impact.<sup>6</sup>

MEPI was initially funded by a paltry \$20 million in the FY 2002 supplemental appropriations to jump-start its first initiatives. The administration asked for 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.<sup>7</sup> While not insignificant when compared to other US 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 presently implementing 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. Concerning education, for example, MEPI 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 for that purpose. To promote economic reform and private sector development, MEPI has provided technical assistance to Arab members of the World Trade Organisation (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. As for civil society and the promotion of women's 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 observe elections in Yemen, 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 induce 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 organisations 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 organisations, are antithetical to the US 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 liberalisation taken by some leaders of the smaller Gulf countries. Whether compatible with US 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 organisations. The domestic forces with which the international community has to compete in rebuilding Afghanistan and Iraq have already been discussed. 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 modernisation and democratisation 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, Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, the Ba'ath parties of Iraq and Syria, and the FLN in Algeria tried to transform their countries along secular and statist lines, and to a large extent succeeded. The Shah of Iran undertook his "white revolution" to modernise 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 modernisation 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 repeatedly attempted to reshape Libya 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 modernise the economy and introduce at least a degree of modern technical education. Other Gulf monarchies are experimenting with limited degrees of political and social modernisation. 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 organisations*, both Shi'a and Sunni. From the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928 to today, Islamist

organisations have had an explicit project to reform society and the polity. The impact of Islamist organisations 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 secularised.

*Domestic democratic organisations* 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 colonisation, many countries developed a social stratum of modernisers, 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 its influence dissipated.

One of the goals of MEPI, and indeed of earlier democracy promotion activities by USAID and a number of American NGOs, is to strengthen the democratic elements in Arab societies and enhance their influence. MEPI funding will undoubtedly help specific organisations 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 organisations operate at present and turn them into a force capable of counterbalancing the influence of incumbent governments and Islamist organisations.

## **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 realised in the foreseeable future. First, there is a chasm separating the US rhetorical commitment to nation-building in the two countries where it has intervened militarily from 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 organisations of all types in dialogue over reform.

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

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<sup>1</sup> On international interventions and imperialism see M. Ottaway and B. Lacina, "International Interventions and Imperialism: Lessons from the 1990s," *S AIS Review*, vol. 23, no. 2, Summer/Fall 2003.

<sup>2</sup> *United Nations Integrated Regional Information Networks News*, 6 June 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Transitional Government of Afghanistan, "Analysis of Aid Flows to Afghanistan," 30 March 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Transitional Government of Afghanistan, "Analysis of Aid Flows to Afghanistan," 30 March 2003.

<sup>5</sup> *New York Times Magazine*, 1 June 2003.

<sup>6</sup> For more information visit the MEPI web site <<http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rt/mepi>>

<sup>7</sup> Statement by Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs William J. Burns to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 26 March 2003. The US fiscal year begins on 1 October. The current fiscal year, FY 2003, runs from 1 October 2002 to 30 September 2003.