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Seven years after the start of conflict in Afghanistan and nearly six years since the beginning of the war in Iraq challenges facing the world in a volatile region stretching from Iraq to Pakistan remain as daunting as ever. In fact, at least in one respect namely the situation in Pakistan the present conditions are worse than they were at the beginning of the military operations in Afghanistan.

There are a few bright spots most notably the relative calming of the situation in Iraq following the weakening of the Sunni insurgency and the reining in of the Shi'a militias, including the Mahdi Army of Muqtada Al Sadr. However, even in Iraq the recent gains are still fragile and critical issues remain unresolved.

Problems in this region and most especially in the three countries of Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan have roots both in recent developments, actions of the governments of the countries and key international players and events, and policies going back to decades earlier. In addition, some of the problems facing these countries derive from such fundamental issues as the fragility of national identity as compared to tribal, ethnic and sectarian identities; the question of political legitimacy; the fragility or more seriously the lack of strong political and social institutions; high levels of corruption and; severe economic problems and glaring economic disparities.

A further complicating factor is regional and international rivalries to gain influence in these countries at times ignoring the realities on the ground.

A full treatment of these issues is impossible in this short discussion essay. Therefore, I will simply mention some of the most important challenges, their root causes—both recent and deeper—and will offer some suggestion as to the best ways of trying to resolve or at least mitigate the negative consequences of these challenges.

Iraq

The following are the most fundamental challenges facing Iraq:

First, disagreement over Iraq's national character. To note, Iraq's Arab majority (both Sunni and Shi'a) insists on maintaining Iraq's so-called "Arab Character". Yet, at least, a quarter and perhaps more of Iraq's population are Kurds, Turkmen and Assyrians who would like to see a new Iraq reflect their part in the Iraqi national identity as a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural entity.

In terms of national identity, the sectarian fault line is equally important. In the past, although Shias constitute a majority the official identity of the country was Sunni. Indeed, part of Iraq's post –invasion problems of insurgency were due to the fact that the Iraqi Sunni Arabs were not prepared to see an Iraq which reflected its ethnic and sectarian diversity;

Second, disagreements over Iraq's political structure. The main issue in this regard notwithstanding constitutional arrangements continues to remain disagreement over the character of the Iraqi state's governmental structure. The most significant problem in this regard is the latent desire of Iraq's Kurds to have an independent state which in time would be joined by the Kurdish areas of Iran, Turkey and Syria.

Third, the question of the relative distribution of political power among Iraq's diverse ethnic and religious groups. For too long in Iraq a Sunni Arab minority ruled over the rest of the population. It is psychologically extremely difficult for the Sunni Arabs, most especially the Ba'athist and other Arab Nationalists to accept a division of power in which they are not dominant. This is the main reason why the Sunni Arabs boycotted the first parliamentary elections and were mostly responsible for unrest in Iraq. Indeed, most of the victims of violence in Iraq have been the Shi'as.

Fourth, division of economic resources. The largest of Iraq's oil reserves are in the mostly Shi'a inhabited regions of the South and the Kurdish /Turkmen inhabited regions notably Kirkuk. The issue of Kirkuk goes beyond simply economic resources and is directly linked to Kurdish aspirations for an independent Kurdistan. With Kirkuk part of the Kurdish enclave a future independent Kurdistan would be economically more viable.

Fifth, regional rivalries. Iraq's problems have been exacerbated by regional rivalries.

In this context, international attention has been mostly focused on Iran's activities and ambitions in Iraq. However, in some respects the attitude of some of Iraq's other neighbors, notably Saudi Arabia, other Gulf Arabs and Turkey have not been particularly constructive. Saudi Arabia has supported Sunni insurgents and is unwilling to countenance an Iraqi government in which the Shi'as have more than a nominal role.

Turkey in the meanwhile is taking a hard line position on Kirkuk and is using the Turkmen card. Turkish fears about its own Kurds and frequent Turkish attacks on bases within Iraqi Kurdistan are not helping matters.

More immediate Challenges

The above are some fundamental challenges that are unlikely to go away any time soon. Yet they should be taken into account if long-term stability is to be established in Iraq. In addition to the above, there are some immediate challenges namely: the shape and duration of foreign, mainly American military and political presence in Iraq; the problem of Kirkuk; and the succession issues especially if Jalal Talebani's health deteriorates.

Possible Solutions

The fundamental issues of national identity and division of power and privilege among Iraq's diverse population will take time and a period of calm and long practice in the art of political compromise and learning of a more sharing and cooperative approach to power than the tradition of method of dominance.

But for this to be achieved a greater measure of calm is required. The main responsibility for this is with the Iraqis themselves. All concerned have to become convinced that they will lose more by infighting than by cooperating and that no group is likely to impose its domination on others. However, most importantly the Sunnis have to be convinced that a return to the old days is not possible.

In this regard, Iraq's neighbors especially Turkey and Sunni Arabs, most notably Saudi Arabia have an important role to play. In particular, the Saudis should not consider the enfranchisement of Iraq's Shi'as as some sort of existential threat to themselves. Also, they should not see an Iraq where Shi'as enjoy rights of citizenship and share in power as somehow increasing Iran's influence. Rather Iran would benefit if the Shi'as came to believe that the Arab governments are against them.

In the same way, Western powers while being vigilant to Iranian ambitions and activities in Iraq, should dissuade Sunni Arabs from fanning the sectarian flames. In fact, in the past, the manipulation of the Shi'a factor to gain Arab support against Iran has negatively impacted Iraq, and its ramifications are also observable in other Gulf Arab countries. Thus the issue of Iran's containment should be separated from the stabilization policies for Iraq.

Turkey, too, is both concerned about an Iraqi government where the majority Shi'a have a greater say and the impact of developments in Iraqi Kurdistan on its Kurdish population. But, here, too, fear should not be the guiding role. Turkey's worst Kurdish crisis was during the time of Saddam Hussein. Turkey must realize that its Kurdish problem has internal dynamics and is not fed mostly by outside forces and developments. Turkey's Western allies should point out these issues to Turkey. Excessive fear that Turkey if pressured might chose the option an alliance with Russia and Iran is baseless. There are too many obstacles to such an alliance, including fundamental divergence of interests as well as regional, ethnic and other rivalries.

Furthermore, regional and western powers should not become nostalgic about the Ba'athist era.

In the long term, the best solution to the problems of the Iraq and its neighbors may lie in the development of decentralized and even federal forms of government and fostering of regionalism, economic, cultural and political. These measures could mitigate both ethnic separatism and regional rivalry.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan faces all of the fundamental identity and other problems noted in Iraq's case compounded by the destruction wrought on the country by the Soviet-Afghan war (1979-1989) and the long Afghan civil war which in a sense has resumed after a lull following the military operations of 2001.

Afghan situation in some respects is worse than that of Iraq also because of the particular brand of Sunni Islam (Wahhabism) which has gained influence in the country more or less replacing its traditional and more moderate Hanafi Islam. This change has occurred through a conscious policy pursued by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia during the Soviet –Afghan war and the Afghan Civil War. The spread of this type of Islam has in turn facilitated the development, or some even would say the invention, of the Taliban by Pakistan and its Arab allies with the US and the Western countries either supporting it or at least tolerating. It is no wonder that in the 1990s only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE recognized the Taliban regime.

Pakistan's Ambitions in Afghanistan

To understand Afghanistan's predicament in the last three decades and its current crisis, it is important to understand Pakistan's view of its interests in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has always wanted to have a determining influence in Afghanistan and over any government that ruled there. However, until the Soviet-afghan war this goal was completely out of Pakistan's reach, although by the 1960s with help from Saudi Arabia Pakistan had began competing for influence in Pakistan.

One reason for this desire was to squash for ever Afghan irredentist claims to Pashtunistan. Secondly, in the context of its competition with India, Pakistan looked at Afghanistan in its strategic depth. This latter factor has lost some of its influence with growing disparity between India and Pakistan. However, Pakistan is keen to prevent an Indian presence in Pakistan and also limit Iran's influence.

Therefore, if Pakistan cannot have control over Afghanistan it would rather have an unstable Afghanistan on its borders rather than a viable Afghan government capable of pursuing its own national and regional interests. Since the start of the military operations, Pakistan has played a double game of masquerading as a staunch ally in the War on terror while destabilizing Afghanistan's government and supporting Muslim extremists. Afghan president Hamid Karzai has repeatedly noted Pakistan's destructive role in Afghanistan.

The question is whether with the rising threat of militants in Pakistan itself Pakistan will reconsider this policy.

The Saudi Factor

Saudi Arabia has been an important player since the 1960s as part of its regional competition first with the Shah's regime and then the Islamic government in Iran.

The spread of Wahhabi Islam, with its extreme anti-Shi'a dimensions, has been a key to Saudi policies in Afghanistan. The opportunities to do so became abundant during the Soviet –Afghan and Afghan Civil wars. As noted above, Saudi Arabia recognized the Taliban regime.

The Saudis always disliked the Tajik Mujahedin and of course Afghanistan substantial Shi'a minority. From their perspective, too, a simmering Afghanistan is better than a viable Afghanistan with reasonable relations with Iran and as part of a Persian speaking cultural grouping.

President Karzai in recognition of Saudi influence in September stated that he has several times asked King Abdullah help negotiate peace between the government and the Taliban.

What Is To Be Done

The most immediate action must be the elimination of the military and security threat posed by the Taliban and their sympathizers and the restoration of some sense security to the people. This will require both the more extensive and effective use of military force as well as reaching out to the less hardened members or sympathizers of the Taliban.

The next step has to be the limitation and eventual elimination of regional leaders (often referred to as Warlords). This is a more long-term project. However, steps in that direction must be taken.

In the process of eliminating the Taliban care must be taken not to harm the civilian populations and treat them well. Otherwise, they would be tempted to turn to the Taliban. Already there seems to be some nostalgia for the peace albeit brutal established by the Taliban in the 1990s. Some lessons have been learned, but more needs to be done.

Stability in Afghanistan is not possible without sincere cooperation of Pakistan and efforts by other countries, notably Saudi Arabia, who have influence over the Taliban. Meanwhile, problems with Iran should not be allowed to affect policy toward Afghanistan as it did in the immediate aftermath of the 2001 military operations. Blaming Iran for Taliban actions is neither credible nor useful.

Lastly, actions must be undertaken to ease peoples' problems especially during the winter months.

In the long term the best way to mitigate regional rivalries is to promote regional cooperation rather than encouraging competition or using Afghanistan as an instrument in the strategy of containing Iran as was done in the 1990s. Similarly, projects such as the peace pipeline should be encouraged as they give incentives for all concerned to resolve their problems, instead of opposing it and rewarding India with nuclear deal which is bound to enhance Pakistan's fears.

Pakistan

Pakistan, too, faces many of the fundamental problems noted in the case of Iraq, including a serious sectarian problem. But most of Pakistan's immediate problems are the consequence of misguided policies notably that of Islamization along a stricter Islam which began under Zia ul Haq and unfortunately were not reversed under the succeeding governments. On the contrary, Pakistan's role in the creation of the Taliban began under Benazir Bhutto. She thought as she said that "Pakistan will have a civilizing impact on the Taliban." Ironically it turned out the other way round. Nawaz Sharif was no better and praised the Taliban style justice.

Pakistan is also paying the price of its involvement in the Soviet –Afghan war. For example the ISI was created in the early 1980s and now has emerged into a state within a state. It is also reaping the fruits of its misguided policy toward Afghanistan since the 2001 operations.

But Pakistan's most immediate problem is how to balance the requests of its ally –the US—for tougher action against the Taliban and its own militants and to respond to its peoples demand to focus on what they see as Pakistan's own interest. In particular, president Zardari will need to show his independence from the US at the time when anti-US sentiments are running high in Pakistan.

What is To Be Done?

Pakistan's Western allies should handle her with firmness and care. Pakistan must be made to understand that an unstable Afghanistan is not good for its interests. However, Pakistan's allies should refrain from actions that could embarrass it in the eyes of its population.

In the case of Pakistan, too, the temptation to use it as part of a strategy of pressuring Iran should be resisted. For example one cannot pressure the ISI in terms of dealing with the Taliban if one wants their cooperation in helping Sunni dissidents such as the Jund ul Allah in Southeastern Iran.