

*Egdūnas Račius**

*Institute of International Relations and Political Science, University of Vilnius
Military Academy of Lithuania*

The Devaluation of Democracy: The Cases of Afghanistan and Iraq

Efforts at democratization in the Middle East resemble a wavy sea, where a short-term wave of reforms leading toward democratization is immediately followed by a period of reform-crippling or even destructive “low tide”. Seeking to revive, enhance and speed up the stumbling democratization in the region the Bush lead U.S. Administration practically unilaterally undertook an unprecedented wide range of direct activities in the region. Revulsion at nation-building expressed by G. W. Bush during the election campaign in 2000 later during the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq put the U.S. into a precarious situation – the state whose leader publicly denounced nation-building by will of the very same leader is now forced to lead two grandiose nation-building operations. In both cases the USA chose the perceived quicker path – through the creation of central structures of governance needed for institutional democracy. The biggest paradox of the democratization in the Middle East is that since the USA started actively implementing democracy in the region (through democratization from the outside, sometimes called “democratization by force”) the demand for democracy (and perspectives for democratization from inside) has shrunk, while artificially created institutional democracy by Americans in the pilot projects of Afghanistan and Iraq has been used to their advantage by not necessarily democratically inclined forces.

1. Inside Efforts at Democratization in the Middle East

Though there is no definite and all-encompassing agreement on what countries should be included into the scope of the Middle East, most academics around the world are inclined to consider that the region of the Middle East in the broadest sense is composed of 19 member states of the “League of the Arab States” from Morocco in the North-Western corner of Africa to Oman in the South-Eastern end of the Arabian Peninsula (thus excluding the remaining three member states of the organization, namely the Comoros, Somalia and

* *Dr. Egdūnas Račius*, is an Associate Professor at the Institute of International Relations and Political Science of Vilnius University, and the Political Science Department of the Military Academy of Lithuania. Address: Vokiečių str. 10, 01130 Vilnius, tel. 8-5-2514130, e-mail - egdunas.racius@cr.vu.lt.

Mauritania), non-Arabic, yet Muslim, Turkey and Iran and a non-Arabic and non-Muslim Israel.¹ The region can tentatively be divided into the subregions of Maghrib (the Arabic North Africa), Egypt and Northern Sudan, Near East (South-Western corner of Asia, including Turkey), and the Arabian Peninsula and Northern Persian Gulf. The current U.S. Administration sees Afghanistan as a part of the widened scope of the region, called by it the Broader Middle East. And though technically (geographically, historically, culturally) Afghanistan is not to be included into the Middle East, in the frame of this article it will be treated as a part of this wider region.

Some 300 million people live in the Arabic countries of the region (the most populous country is Egypt with over 75 million), Turkey and Iran each boasts around 75 million, Israel has a population of 6 million (of whom Arabs make roughly a quarter). Afghanistan's population is estimated at 29 million, while that of Iraq at 24 million. And though it is predicted that the number of inhabitants of the region in the near future will not increase as rapidly as it has been until recently, it is estimated that by the year 2050 it will double and in some countries (for example, Saudi Arabia and Yemen) it will increase even three-fold. The populations of Egypt and Iran are expected by then to surpass 100 million in each.²

Efforts at democratization in the Middle East resemble a wavy sea, where a short-term wave of reforms leading toward democratization is immediately followed by a period of reform-crippling or even destructive "low tide". Practically all (with the conditional exception of Israel and Turkey) regimes of the Middle Eastern states were until the 1990's un-representative and non-democratic. With the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the USSR and with it the binary system of the world, because of the outside (first of all from the side of the USA and Europe) but also inside pressure, leaders of the states of the region were compelled or found strength in themselves to undertake certain political and social reforms.

Thus, for example, in the monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula, constitutions until then not heard of, were adopted, parliamentary work (Kuwait, Bahrain) renewed or new consultative councils (Saudi Arabia, Oman) established. In some other Arab countries (Yemen, Algeria, Tunisia, and later Jordan) multi-party systems were introduced. In addition to these most well known steps toward democratization reforms in the legal and educational systems, as well as social care aimed at improving the situation of human rights, were announced. In several countries of the Middle East the economy was significantly liberalized.

Unfortunately, by the mid-1990's, the reform movement not only failed to produce any lasting changes but even began waning. The old ruling regimes in almost all Arab countries of the region reversed their policies and resumed

¹ On the historical evolution of the scope of the Middle East, see Davison R. H., "Where is the Middle East?", *Foreign Affairs* 38, 1960, p. 665-675.

² Population Resource Center, *Executive Summary: The Middle East*, <http://www.prdoc.org/summaries/middleeast/middleeast.html>, 21 09 2007.

their oppressive and undemocratic practices thus stifling the democratization initiatives rising both from the government and civil society sectors. Even worse, Saudi, Tunisian, Egyptian, and Iranian reformists either found themselves behind the bars or were forced to leave their countries. The remaining reformists-turned-extremists declared as their immediate goal forceful removal of the ruling regimes (especially in Egypt and Saudi Arabia), which, it was argued by them, would open the way for unobstructed reforms, however, now seen through the prism of reislamization.

In part as a consequence of the EU initiated Barcelona process, but mainly due to renewed pressure by the White House under G. W. Bush, some of the Arab governments lately renewed their declarations of willingness to implement political and social reforms. The first ever elections (albeit only partial and tightly controlled) in Saudi Arabia took place in 2005; in 2006 the first truly democratic elections to the Palestinian Parliament also took place; the same year Lebanon, despite ethno-confessional tensions, held successful democratic elections to its Parliament; even the Egyptian regime allowed individual members of the outlawed Islamist political organization the "Muslim Brotherhood" to stand in the parliamentary elections. This way, ruling regimes reintroduced democratic vocabulary into usage.

However, though the usage of democracy related vocabulary in the Arab countries today in the public discourse is getting more widespread than ever, experiences of Afghanistan, Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries in introducing democracy into their political systems are symptomatic: not seldom governments speak of Arab (or Middle Eastern) democracy which supposedly differs from the Western democracy. Moreover, Westerners in their turn arguably have no understanding of this and through their interference (by means of various initiatives and military intervention) only obstruct the already ongoing process of reforms. But according to local regimes even introduction of "Arabic" democracy today is made difficult because the global challenge of terrorism consumes much of government attention and steals it from the reforms. One has to concede that the spread of terrorism in the region is indeed a big challenge to democratization there, and a parallel growing wave of social reislamization with all its consequences is even a greater challenge to the outcome of democratization.

Seeking to revive, enhance and speed up the stumbling democratization in the Middle East, the Bush lead U.S. Administration practically unilaterally undertook an unprecedented wide range of direct activities in the region.

2. The Role of the USA in the Middle East

The dynamics of relations between the countries of the Middle East and the USA throughout the entire post World War Two period was very stormy – relations between the USA and individual states of the region would perma-

nently swindle from all-embracing support and collaboration to open hostility and even hatred and back. For instance, the American – Iranian relations went from active support and mutual commitments and obligations after the CIA inspired coup in the mid-1950's through a phase of close collaboration until 1979 when in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution they entered a period of mutual distrust and confrontation which not only continues to this day but is getting even deeper.

Though the quality of relations between states frequently depends on the tone imposed by the stronger side (in this case the USA), the position of the American administrations vis-a-vis one or another regime in the Middle East can and in fact has been influenced by the ability of those regimes to sell themselves as American partners and allies. For instance, the long-serving autocratic leader of Egypt Husni Mubarak publicly insists that he is committed to friendship and cooperation with the U.S. and in principle supports American policies in the region. But in real terms, there is very little democracy in Egypt – freedom of speech is severely restricted, not only illegal but even legal opposition is persecuted and harassed by special services, citizens are intimidated and even physically prevented from taking part in elections, election results are constantly rigged. Despite all that, this unrepresentative and undemocratic Egyptian government is annually provided with colossal financial and other aid and awarded lucrative military contracts by the USA.

The late Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein reveled in his status as an American ally for almost a decade in the 1980's in his own initiated aggression against Iran with the very same Donald Rumsfeld, who two decades later so vehemently sought Hussein's death, visiting him in Baghdad and warmly shaking hands. Back then the American government shunned talking of threats stemming from Iraq though already then Hussein had been pursuing biological, chemical and even nuclear weapons programs, the first two of which he tried in practice on Iranians and Iraqi Kurds. Hussein's regime at that time was handy for the USA, which saw in it only its enemy's (Iran's) enemy and through this – its ally.

In the case of Afghanistan, the USA willingly provided aid to the pre-Communist Afghan governments, then lavishly supported rebels throughout the 1980's in their fight against the Communist Kabul regime and its master the USSR but later turned away from the victorious mujahidin who came to power in that war ravaged country. The successor regime in Kabul, the Taliban, became mortal enemies of the USA. The fortunes once again changed with the forceful removal by the Americans of the Taliban and installing in power the current Karzai regime, which is publicly called "friendly". Similar stories (different only in details, dates, names and scope) abound in other parts of the Middle East, among them the cases of Iran, Libya, Somalia, the Sudan, Lebanon to mention just several.

Though the Clinton lead U.S. Administration throughout the 1990's emphasized necessity to democratize the region, in reality (physically) it did not take part in the democratization of the Middle East. With the indirect American involvement in the cancellation of the democratic experiment in Algeria

in 1991-1992, which led to a brutal civil war, and after suffering a painful blow to its efforts to stabilize Somalia in 1993, the Clinton Administrations chose an ambivalent and at times even indifferent position vis-à-vis the Middle East. Thus, the USA, by not reacting actively to paralysis of political and social reforms in the region, left the development of democratization entirely to the discretion of local non-democratic regimes. The perceived or real legacy of Clinton was the impression that the USA is not only uninterested in an active pursuit of democratization in the world (and particularly the Middle East) but is incapable of leadership. But the year 2001 changed it all.

The situation started changing with the accession to the White House in the beginning of 2001 of the G. W. Bush lead Administration of the neo-cons, who were in favor of cardinal reforms in the Middle East. Beginning from the autumn of that year and especially with Bush's State of the Union speech in the beginning of 2002, the new American administration concentrated its attention exclusively on the Middle East (admittedly, perceived by it in a somewhat broader geographical perspective than traditionally, and labeled by it the Broader (Wider) Middle East). In November of 2003 Bush unequivocally declared that:

Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe (...). As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export. And with the spread of weapons that can bring catastrophic harm to our country and to our friends, it would be reckless to accept the status quo.³

Gradually the Bush doctrine was formulated where one of its declared fundamental pillars was democratization of this vast region encompassing more than two dozens of states.⁴ Since then the American president has many times reiterated⁵ that his ultimate goal is the implementation of democratization in the Middle East, the goal he has been seeking to achieve in part through the U.S. pursued global antiterrorist campaign called by Bush the "war on terror". Democracy and terrorism in the rhetoric of the American president and other officials in his administration were in an inverse relationship – the more there is of the one, the less there is of the other. It would follow that in order to counter the seemingly unchecked terrorist threat one has to wholeheartedly support the spread of democracy in the otherwise terrorism-permeated lands of the Middle East.

³ United States Chamber of Commerce, "President Bush Discusses Freedom in Iraq and Middle East", Remarks by the President at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy, Washington, D.C., 2003-11-06, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-2.html>, 21 09 2007.

⁴ Sharp J. M., "The Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative: An Overview", CRS Report for Congress, Order Code RS22053, 2005-02-15, <http://italy.usembassy.gov/pdf/other/RS22053.pdf>, 21 09 2007.

⁵ United States Chamber of Commerce, "President Bush Discusses Freedom in Iraq and Middle East", Remarks by the President at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy, Washington, D.C., 2003-11-06, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-2.html>, 21 09 2007.

Iraq, after relatively short and hasty preparations by the USA, became the pioneer state of this ambitious program of the American lead perestroika of the world. During their preparations to invade Iraq, and in the beginning of the occupation, the American leadership had been constantly persuading the world that with the commencement of decisive (understood as forceful) implementation of democracy in one of the countries in the Middle East the others, because of the double pressure from within and outside, will be forced to reform themselves. This way democracy would gradually spread throughout the region and with the help of the USA would become an irreversible process.

3. Pilot Projects of Democratization from Outside – Afghanistan and Iraq

3.1. Democratization without Nation-Building – Creation of Shell States

Revulsion at nation-building expressed by G. W. Bush during his election campaign in 2000⁶ later during the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq put the U.S. into a precarious situation – the state whose leader publicly denounced nation-building by will of the very same leader is now forced to lead two grandiose nation-building operations. In both cases the USA chose the perceived quicker path – through creation of central structures of governance needed for institutional democracy. But already back then keen observers accused the USA and its allies of too a narrow concentration on the state-centered approach, which dominated the process of nation-building and ignoring its community level.⁷ Basing on Hippel's argument that "democratization efforts are part of the larger and more comprehensive nation-building campaign,"⁸ one might argue that the USA has among all constituting components of nation-building focused exceptionally on a single one, e.g. democratization.

Forced promulgation of new constitutions and national, municipal, and, in the case of Afghanistan, presidential elections became the axis of this bastardized speedy "nation-building". In both countries elections took place in 2004-2005 and were relatively successful in terms of security and participation – citizens in fairly

⁶ For example, during an election debate with the then vice-president of the United States and presidential candidate Al Gore on October 11, 2000 Bush unequivocally declared: "I don't think our troops ought to be used for what's called nation-building." Washington, W., "Once against nation-building, Bush now involved", *Boston Globe*, March 2, 2004, http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2004/03/02/once_against_nation_building_bush_now_involved/, 21 09 2007.

⁷ Sedra M., "Afghanistan: It is Time for a Change in the Nation-Building Strategy", *Foreign Policy in Focus*, November 15, 2002, p. 2.

⁸ Hippel K. von, "Democracy by Force: A Renewed Commitment to Nation Building", *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2000, p. 96.

free and democratic elections chose political forces and individuals they wanted to see at the helm of their recreated states. Moreover, the new governments are seen as legitimate by majority of population and indeed are fairly representative. This gave an excuse for the American administration to declare the fact of the constitutional referenda and the elections as the victory of democracy. In the mind of the American government institutional (formal) democracy was equated to “nation-building” without investing more human and financial resources into a “more comprehensive nation-building campaign”.

This is especially valid in the case of Afghanistan, in which the USA since the very beginning of the occupation pursued the “light footprint” (coined by the then UN envoy to Afghanistan Lakhdar Brahimi⁹) approach – to use as few foreign troops and civilians as possible and to leave the task of “nation-building” to Afghans themselves. In the words of Barnett Rubin, who has been analyzing Afghanistan for the past two decades, the USA chose the “NO to peace support, NO to nation-building” path¹⁰, and instead focused on hunting the al-Qaida and Taliban rank and file on the run. Already in the second half of 2002 during the American run-up to the invasion of Iraq, even that minimal attention shrunk further. In the opinion of some observers, this was the time when the “nation-building” in Afghanistan was inexcusably abandoned because the American “failure to invest adequately in either security or reconstruction and the diversion of US political, intelligence, military, and financial resources to Iraq left the Afghan government unable to satisfy popular expectations for security and development”¹¹ and “it became understood in Pakistan and Afghanistan that the US was not committed to nation-building and that their importance on the US agenda was marginal compared to Iraq.”¹²

As post-elections processes showed, after formally passing on governing of the states to the democratically elected governments, the USA soon lost control of the situation on the ground – the local governments would not always obey the American will and themselves, and because of various insurmountable obstacles were not capable of reigning in the situation. In Iraq, after the last elections in the end of 2005, the entire government changed once and several ministers of the current government have already resigned too. With the elected governments losing trust by citizens and the ever-increasing discontent with economic, social and political processes in both countries, in inverse proportionality criminal and anti-governmental (as well as anti-occupational)

⁹ Vienna International Centre, United Nations Information Service, *Secretary General, Special Representative Brahimi tell Security Council rapid disbursement of funds pledged essential for Afghan recovery*, 2002-02-07, <http://www.unis.unvienna.org/unis/pressrels/2002/sc7295.html?print>, 21 09 2007.

¹⁰ Rubin B. R., “Salvaging Afghanistan”, Testimony before the United States Senate Armed Services Committee, March 1, 2007.

¹¹ Rubin B. R., “Salvaging Afghanistan”, Testimony before the United States Senate Armed Services Committee, March 1, 2007. See also Dobbins J., “Ending Afghanistan’s Civil War”, Testimony before the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, March 8, 2007, p. 1, 3.

¹² Rashid, A., *Security, Nation Building and Democracy: Pakistan, Afghanistan*, Center for Peace and Human Security, April 27, 2006, p. 3.

players and marginal political and militant groups gained in strength while the societies more and more perceive the presence of foreign troops in their countries as occupation.¹³ The annual UN compiled maps¹⁴ of unsafe (and uncontrolled) regions of Afghanistan evidently show that the insecure zones in the country are constantly expanding thus making the entire country ever less stable. The situation until very recently has been very similar in Iraq: even the capital city of Baghdad was beyond the government control, the level of civil war in which has been quelled only with the help of pulling significant numbers (the so-called “surge”) of American troops to the city. But in the end it might turn out to have been only a temporary remedy – once Americans pull out or significantly reduce their military presence the city is likely to plunge into violence and anarchy again.

In Afghanistan, the Karzai government does not face such obstacles as the Iraqi government does. But the Afghani government, due to its weakness (it does not wield the power monopoly because neither army nor police are trustworthy), indecisiveness and financial constrains (unlike Iraq, Afghanistan does not boast natural resources which in the world market can be easily exchanged for hard currency) and also the ever-expanding insurgency, does not control huge sways of the country’s territory. In the words of Dobbins, the argument that little effort from the side of the international community (in this case the USA) bears little fruit proved true: “If one applies low levels of military manpower and economic assistance to post conflict reconstruction, one can expect to see low levels of public security and economic growth.”¹⁵

The lack of conditions for nation-building in both countries is attested to by the damaging stumbling of reforms in security and legal sectors. It is widely acknowledged that security structures (army and police) in Afghanistan and Iraq have not yet attained the level of training and readiness so that they could perform their functions on their own and without outside assistance; moreover, they are not paid for enough and therefore are themselves (especially police) corrupt. For instance, the Afghanistan national police in the volatile south of the country are neither adequately trained nor equipped; moreover, in the face of attacks by insurgence it cannot always count on assistance from the occupational forces. Loyalty of the army and police file and rank to the government is often questionable for there have been a number of instances when entire army and police regiments not only refused to fight insurgents but even went over to them with all their weapons and ammunition. Judicial reforms in Afghanistan have come to a standstill (therefore corruption in the courts system of the country is staggering) and in Iraq the parliament composed of members representing

¹³ Rubin B. R., “Saving Afghanistan”, *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2007.

¹⁴ For instance, comparing “Afghanistan: Security incidents and high risk areas”, July 2003, <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900LargeMaps/SKAR-64GF26?OpenDocument> and “Afghanistan UN Security Accessibility Map” (as of June 20, 2006), [http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/fullMaps_Sa.nsf/luFullMap/5DFAD86624D16A10852571F10074210A/\\$File/aims_ACC_afg200606.pdf?OpenElement](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/fullMaps_Sa.nsf/luFullMap/5DFAD86624D16A10852571F10074210A/$File/aims_ACC_afg200606.pdf?OpenElement), 21 09 2007.

¹⁵ Dobbins J., “Ending Afghanistan’s Civil War”, Testimony before the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/2007/RAND_CT276.pdf, March 8, 2007, p. 3.

different ethno-confessional communities have so far failed to reach common ground on essential legal issues (such as the nature of the state, federalism, the status of autonomies, the role of religion).

3.2. The Fate of the "Social Contract"

Besides the implementation of institutional democracy, nation-building is supposed to include renewing or drawing anew of the "social contract" (or "the nation"). This social contract, in its turn, is to be built on the basis of official recognition of sound expectations of all social, economic, religious and political groups of the country and elimination of factors obstructing its implementation. In Afghanistan, one such factor is warlords and drug barons.

After deposing the Taliban regime, warlords of the years of the civil war in the early 1990's along with the drug-lords, due to shortsighted U.S. policy of "NO to nation-building", reemerged as almost uncontested leaders on local and sometimes even regional levels and became a formidable, albeit not united, political power in the new Afghanistan. Much like back in the first half of the 1990's and without any meaningful presence or intervention from the side of the Karzai government on the provincial level, they renewed scramble for expansion of their fiefdoms at the expense of their rivals. When given a chance (especially before the national elections), seeking to secure security of their person, amassed wealth and clientelist structures and hoping to directly influence the governance of the country, they *en masse* became politicians. Indeed, it is these new-old "feodals" who triumphed in the 2005 elections to the Lower House (Wolesi Jirga) of the Parliament of Afghanistan – through both legal and illegal means they managed to secure majority of votes of people in districts they ran (which more or less overlapped with the territories under their control and where people were in clientelist and therefore dependent relationship to them). Likewise, in the case of the Upper House (Meshrano Jirga) – a score of "feodals" were appointed to it by either the president himself or the Provincial Councils heavily dependent on those same feodals. The most significant of the warlords, like Ismail Khan, Abd ar-Rashid Dustum and several others were co-opted into the Karzai lead government itself.

This unfolding of the political process in Afghanistan in part pacified the "feodals." - brought to Kabul and formally (through the ID of an MP or member of the government) related to the government, they were rather successfully co-opted by the president's administration and thus neutralized (though critics rightfully remind that at the same time this allowed for self legitimization of various individuals suspected of war and other heavy crimes). Unfortunately, the lack of traditions of parliamentarism (especially of parliamentary fractions based on political parties) presupposed amorphous work of the Afghani Parliament. In addition, a part of the MPs are, if not altogether anti-systemic, than openly anti-Karzai and anti-American. Ultimately, their cooptation through elections and other means is only a temporary solution. And if the Parliament is not delegated greater law-giving powers (today Afghanistan is in effect a presidential

republic) a score of PMs might soon start sabotaging the fledgling nation-building process in the country. After adding the ineffectiveness of Provincial Councils, infested with war-lords and drug-lords of lower rank and their representatives, the perspective for the renewal (or redrawing) of the “social contract”, in the face of the apparently ever expanding insurgency, becomes obscure on all levels.

In Iraq, the perspectives for the “social contract” look even bleaker: the entrenched hostility between the Sunni and Shii branches of the Arab component of the Iraqi society is now supplemented by intra-confessional rivalries. Thus, for instance, among Arab Sunnis in the al-Anbar province, groups supportive of insurgents and those cooperating with the occupational forces actively fight each other. In the south of the country dominated by Shiis, groups professing different (and clashing) ideologies (as a rule, Islamist) also fight among themselves. The work of the Iraqi Parliament has also been paralyzed because the MPs representing parliamentary factions formed along ethno-confessional lines by following their narrow ethno-confessional interests effectively block adoption of vital laws. Thus, for instance, adoption of the law on division of the income from the oil exports essential to the “social contract” has been unforgivably stalled.

The Afghani middle class and intellectual elite were almost entirely destroyed during the two decades of conflicts. Consequently, the creation of a civil society (recreation of open educational system, emergence of free media, and development of non-governmental sector) in Afghanistan requires colossal human and financial resources and is a long-term process. In Iraq, the on-going (some would argue assisted) shrinking of the indigenous middle class and intellectual elite began immediately after overthrowing of the Hussein regime. According to the UN and other estimates, since the beginning of the occupation no less than a million and a half Iraqis have left their country and around the same number became internally displaced. A big part of these people are from the middle class including the country’s intellectual elite. Civil society is the guardian of the “social contract” and with its extinguishing, an imminent threat to the survival of the nation itself arises. Unfortunately, in both states civil society either has not reached critical numbers yet (Afghanistan) or has lost them (Iraq) and therefore cannot meaningfully influence the fate of the “social contract”.

Summarizing the achievements so far attained by the occupational coalitions in both Iraq and Afghanistan one may draw a conclusion that only sham democracy has been created where creation of formal institutions due to weakness of local governments ripped apart by inner tensions and lacking resources has not yet lead to either consolidation of democracy or creation of “social contract” essential to the nation-building. One even observes an opposite trend – since 2006 Iraq has plunged into a civil war and in Afghanistan’s South and East activities of the rejuvenated Taliban insurgency are on the rise. Next to this, since 2004 Afghanistan is the single biggest producer of opium in the world.¹⁶

¹⁶ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2007*, p. 4, http://www.unodc.org/pdf/research/AFG07_ExSum_web.pdf, 21 09 2007

3.3. The Cultural Awareness Factor

In trying to answer the question of why it happened so that the spread of democracy in the Middle East (and first of all in the cases of the pilot projects of Afghanistan and Iraq) “devalued”, it is worth paying attention to an often ignored conceptual factor in the process of nation-building – “cultural awareness”. Though failures of nation-building in Afghanistan and Iraq were caused by the multiplicity of domestic and outside causes, the lack of “cultural awareness” by Americans and their allies in too many cases contributed to the deterioration of situation in both countries as well as to the negative image of the forced democratization from outside and its chief executioner, the USA.

“Cultural awareness” here means at least the elementary acquaintance with history and life-styles of societies one is engaged with. The concept of “cultural awareness” was first introduced into the American and British military terminology when a need for specific training (usually called “cultural awareness training” or simply “cultural training”) and printed materials for military personnel posted overseas (especially in Muslim countries) was realized. As such advocates of “cultural awareness” like I. Skelton and J. Cooper, both members of the House Armed Services Committee, argue, “a combat brigade would not be deployed into hostile territory without maps. The beliefs of a culture are as critical as terrain features. The unit should have those coordinates as well.”¹⁷ Moreover, according to them, “it is cultural awareness that helps determine whether a host population supports long-term American military presence – and may determine the outcome of the mission.”¹⁸

One might even argue that “cultural awareness” is an essential condition in any trans-ethnic situations, both in military and peace-time encounters – it would enhance mutual understanding and assist in sparing human and material resources. Deeper “cultural training”, for instance, courses in history, languages, religion and studies of relevant societies would allow for a more profound understanding of intellectual currents and undercurrents, social stratification, informal authorities, folk religious practices, all this to be strengthened by learning of a local language.¹⁹ And though one cannot expect every individual clerk or soldier serving overseas to be thoroughly versed in intricacies of the country he or she is serving in, it is desirable that persons charged with decision-making and on whose decisions local societies depend either themselves possess

¹⁷ Skelton I. & Cooper J., “You’re Not from Around Here, Are You?”, *Joint Force Quarterly*, XXXVI, 2004, p. 14.

¹⁸ Skelton I. & Cooper J., “You’re Not from Around Here, Are You?”, *Joint Force Quarterly*, XXXVI, 2004, p. 12. See also Duffey T., “Cultural Issues in Contemporary Peacekeeping”, *International Peacekeeping*, VII: 1, Spring 2000, 151, where she forcefully argues that “maintaining good relations with the local community, a prerequisite for successful operations, relies on peacekeepers’ understandings of the local population’s culture and respect for their cultural traditions.”

¹⁹ Duffey, when speaking about “cultural training”, distinguishes between ‘culture-general’ and ‘culture-specific’ components. Duffey T., “Cultural Issues in Contemporary Peacekeeping”, *International Peacekeeping*, VII: 1, Spring 2000, p. 164.

enough “cultural literacy” or have informed advisors, because only decisions stemming from “cultural awareness” (or even better, “cultural literacy”) have propensity to be welcome by people affected by them.

E. Said, analyzing the 19th century trans-cultural colonialist encounters, has passionately argued in his *Orientalism*²⁰, that too often imperial European (and recently American) decision-makers and policy-makers assumed to have grasped the essence of respective non-European societies (their cultures) and acted upon that perception, while in fact they were acting upon wrong assumptions and misjudgments. Said would argue that both contemporary Europeans and Americans are captives of their own invented and cultivated stereotypes about the “Orient” who have not managed to free themselves from applying phantasmagoric images of the “Orient” and “Orientals” to “non-Westerners” in their decisions with practical consequences. Persistence of such orientalizing images of the “Other” without doubt prevents one from acquiring new and objective view of remote (especially Asian) societies. Indeed, failure to acknowledge, perceive and appreciate cultural differences is one of the features of the continuous pervasive, often latent, Orientalism among the Western societies of today.

One of the biggest dangers and mistakes that has been seeping into the trans-cultural cooperation (part of which is nation-building) until now is biased and arrogant behavior by Western politicians and military which antagonizes and marginalizes target groups (in this case, Afghani and Iraqi societies or parts of them) and thus unwillingly facilitates their negative and often violent reaction. Ultimately, due to “cultural ignorance” (on both sides, one has to admit) the “nation-building” efforts tend to slide into cultural conflict, sometimes called “clash of civilizations”.

3.4. Consequences of Cultural Ignorance

In Afghanistan, the resolve of Americans and their allies to create conditions for the development of democracy may be evaluated through the prism of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT). The main tasks of the more than two dozen PRTs are set as strengthening of the influence of the Afghanistan’s central government in provinces and creation of conditions suitable for reconstruction of provinces (and ultimately the entire country). But observers point out that the activities of different PRTs are developed very unevenly. Next to the security situation, surviving infrastructure, and also topographic and demographic features of individual provinces, the scope of activities of individual PRTs are heavily circumscribed by the measure of willingness of the PRT lead-nation to contribute to a full-fledged nation-building. In any case, most of the PRTs permanently lack specialists versed in socio-political history of Afghanistan with a firm grasp of its today’s social realities who would in

²⁰ Said E., *Orientalism*, London: Penguin Books, 2003 (1978).

addition be able to communicate in either Dari or Pashto. Under conditions of lack of “cultural literacy” even the best intentions and finances spent on their implementation often do not bring desired results.

Culturally ignorant (and thus effectively impotent to adequately perceive the situation) the USA in the beginning of the occupation of Afghanistan relied heavily on the earlier mentioned anti-Taliban inclined warlords from the previous civil wars, who were given free reign to run their fiefdoms. Unfortunately, these “allies” soon turned out to be lukewarm if not altogether hostile toward democratization and any wider nation-building and rather used the Americans (and the coalition) to enhance their personal fortunes. Their legitimization through election to the Parliament and appointments to important governmental positions further jeopardized the entire nation-building process.

A good example of the incapacity of the Americans (caused by apparent persistent cultural ignorance) to identify reliable partners in Iraq, is Ahmed Chalabi’s career. In the run-up to the invasion and even the entire first year of the occupation a secular Shii Chalabi, who had been living outside of Iraq for several decades, was one of a few pillars and a major mouthpiece of the American administration. Unfortunately for him, in the wake of the invasion tipped as a possible leader of the post-Hussein Iraq, within a year of the occupation Chalabi not only lost trust and support of the USA, quarreled with the Provisional Coalition Authority then governing Iraq but even was accused of graft and passing on of classified information onto unidentified enemy side; his office and home were raided by security services. Meanwhile the USA discontinued the monthly support of the three-hundred thousand US dollars for Chalabi’s organization that it had been financing since 1998.

As surveys conducted by the Oxford Research International and others have revealed, Chalabi in February of 2004 was favored by just a little bit more than 1 per cent of Iraqis, while almost 18 per cent absolutely mistrusted him. To compare, according to the Oxford Research International²¹, when replying to the question (asked in June of 2004, prior to the formal handing over of governing back to Iraqis) on what leader they trusted most only 1.3 per cent of the respondents identified the then American hand-picked temporary president Ghazi al-Yawar (Saddam Hussein was favored by 1 per cent), while a staunch anti-American Muqtada as-Sadr was favored by 7.4 per cent. The most favored of all was Ibrahim al-Jafaari with 13 per cent, one of the leaders of the Shii Islamist party “Da’wa” (later to become the first Iraqi Prime Minister after the first democratic general elections only to be pushed out by the Americans in a year after assuming the position).

If the results of such surveys are representative to any degree, it would follow that the USA constantly chose as partners whom they showered with financial and human investment people least trusted by Iraqis. And vice versa, the most favored individuals by Iraqis were totally marginalized and

²¹ Oxford Research International, *National Survey of Iraq*, http://news.bbc.co.uk/nol/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/15_03_04_iraqsurvey.pdf, 21 09 2007.

even vilified (as in the case of as-Sadr) by Americans. No wonder then that the American protégés (the temporary president al-Yawar and Prime Minister Alawi) and their blocks failed badly in the democratic elections and the earlier marginalized politicians were spirited by the popular will into the positions of power. One may draw a conclusion that the U.S. Administration before the handing over of the governing of the country to the elected government either ignored the realities (local public sympathies) or it simply lacked “cultural awareness”. In any case, the American political investments into preferred politicians did not pay off. U.S. choice before the elections to support future absolute losers sowed the seeds of tensions between the elected government (which incidentally included not only Iran-backed Shii Islamist parties but also an open anti-American as-Sadr’s political block) and the USA.

In a broader context, apparent American and also their allies’ cultural ignorance is manifest in talks by politicians and assessments by media of democratization in Afghanistan and Iraq. For instance, in summer of 2006 international think tank *Senlis Council* published its report “Afghanistan Five Years Later - The Return of the Taliban”²² that provoked furious reaction from the side of the British government. *Senlis Council* in its two hundred page long report argues that the situation in Afghanistan is critical and getting ever worse; the blame for which it put on the occupying coalition. The executive director of the organization, Emmanuel Reinert, when talking about the report, directly accused the USA, for according to him, U.S. policy in Afghanistan “has recreated the safe haven for terrorism that the 2001 invasion aimed to destroy.”²³ Such blunt critique drew equally blunt negation by both the British government and the NATO.

Clash between *Senlis Council* and the British government and the NATO is symptomatic for it shows that the situation in Afghanistan is perceived (or at least publicly maintained) radically differently by different actors. Some might accuse *Senlis Council* of unwarranted scandalizing without knowing the situation on the ground. However, this organization for the past several years (until its activities in Afghanistan were banned by the Karzai government in 2006) has had field offices in Kandahar, Hilmand and several other provinces of Afghanistan, where it had been continuously conducting in-depth research among the locals. Therefore *Senlis Council* felt the real situation on the ground very well and in its reports spoke with deserved authority.

The world’s media since the very beginning of the occupation of Afghanistan (and a little later of Iraq also) has found itself in the midst of the furious information war. There are several dimensions of this war, one of which is between the PR campaigns of the occupying powers and that of the insurgents. Much less attention so far has been paid to its another dimension –

²² Senlis Council, *Afghanistan Five Years Later - The Return of the Taliban*, http://www.senliscouncil.net/modules/publications/014_publication, 21 09 2007.

²³ Ibidem.

information war “at home” – in Europe and North America, where on the one side are local governments and their PR apparatus, and on the other one finds non-governmental organizations, at the helm of which stand such independent “culturally literate” think tanks as *Oxford Research International Ltd.*, *International Crisis Group* and *Senlis Council*.

4. Forecast: Consequences of the Pilot Projects to the Perspectives of Democratization in the Broader Middle East

The biggest paradox of democratization in the Middle East, however, is that since the USA began actively (through military invasions followed by occupations) pursuing democratization from outside (therefore some call it “forced democratization”) in the region, demand for democratization (and perspectives for democratization from inside) has been proportionally shrinking while the American created artificial institutional democracy in the pilot projects in Afghanistan and Iraq has been used to their advantage by not necessarily democratically inclined forces. Even worse, the bigger part of the societies in these countries not only do not see any real benefits of such democratization, they even suffer from economic deprivation, social turmoil and in certain regions from civil war. Arab satellite television channels make sure that such an unappealing image of consequences (or side effects) of democratization reaches other Middle Eastern societies this way inciting anti-American feelings and feeding Islamist forces. In other words, the American lead democratization from outside in the pilot projects has damaging and maybe even potentially deadly consequences for democratization in the entire Middle East.

Some of them are already observable. For instance, intensification of anti-American feelings in the region. It first of all manifests itself through escalation of repugnance toward the U.S. policies in Iraq in both local and international Arab media.²⁴ Governments of some Middle Eastern countries (first of all Iran, but also the Sudan, Palestine (Hamas), even Saudi Arabia) renewed or intensified their anti-American rhetoric. Public opinion polls also reveal negative attitudes of many Middle Eastern societies toward the USA, something that was notably on the rise in 2003-2004.²⁵ As Kohut argues, “Muslims are increasingly hostile to Americans as well as America; in the past, as the 1983 Newsweek survey showed, people did not let their distaste for U.S. policies affect their view of the American people.”²⁶

²⁴ Shanahan, J. and Nisbet, E., “The Communication of Anti-Americanism: Media Influence and Anti-American Sentiment”, Executive Summary, Report Presented to the United States Institute for Peace, May 2007.

²⁵ The Pew Research Center, *Pew Global Attitudes Project*, <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?PageID=802>, 21 09 2007.

²⁶ Kohut, A., “Anti-Americanism: Causes and Characteristics”, The Pew Research Center, <http://peoplepress.org/commentary/display.php3?AnalysisID=77>, 21 09 2007.

Growth of anti-American feelings in the region has in part facilitated another phenomenon – since 2005 one clearly sees the rebirth of Islamism and “Islamic democracy” when with more and more Middle Eastern states holding at least partially democratic elections Islamist (who at the same time as a rule are anti-American) forces perform very well (in Egypt, Saudi Arabia) or even triumph (as in Palestine) in them. Admittedly, there hardly is any direct relation between peaceful participation of Islamist parties in the political life of their countries on the one hand and American actions in Afghanistan and Iraq. And though itself the opening of political systems may in part be perceived as giving in to American (and to a much lesser extent European) pressure, electoral success of Islamists is more conditioned by an ever more clearly expressed need for reislamization by the majorities in the Middle Eastern societies. Therefore, in many Middle Eastern countries a union between democratization and reislamization is apparent. A side effect of such a union is a frequent increase in anti-American feelings among citizens of given countries. The best example of this is Hamas victory in Palestine.

If reislamization of the Middle Eastern societies is not necessarily a threat to Western (and world) security, a parallel process to peaceful (democratic) reislamization, the spread of global jihadism definitely is. But the latter also can be seen as a direct consequence of the American policies in Afghanistan and Iraq.

At least several dozen radical Muslim groups, in the two decades preceding invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, had been actively engaged in terror in the Middle East. They would constantly form, splinter and disappear only to be once again recreated. However, in the last decade of the 20th century many of these groups underwent an evolutionary transformation that in the beginning of the 21st century has brought them to a qualitatively new level of terrorism – global jihadism. In its rationale, violence has become an objective in itself for those extremists among Muslims to whom violence is handy and who have absolutized and raised it to the level of religious (sacred) duty. The best example of the global jihadi culture is obviously Usama bin Ladin himself and his lead al-Qaida.

The Al-Qaida since its inception has undergone several evolutionary phases: from a fairly compact group in the sea of radical Muslim groups in the Sudan period (between 1992 and 1996), al-Qaida grew into an umbrella organization during the Afghanistan period (between 1996 and 2001). After the forceful removal of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and annihilation of the network of jihadi training camps al-Qaida, not without unintended assistance by world media, became the symbol and equivalent of the fight by armed radical Muslims. In other words, in the present phase al-Qaida is more of a way of thinking and acting than a physical organization. After the unprecedented attacks of 2001 attributed to bin Ladin and his cohort, the al-Qaida, has become a symbol ideologically uniting the like-minded radical Muslim groups around the globe, who, however, not necessarily coordinate their activities. Some of these groups have proclaimed to belong to al-Qaida or named themselves after

it. This way al-Qaida in a very short span of time from a network that existed in a physical reality became a mental construct providing psychological comfort to thousands of radical Muslims within and without the Middle East.

One of the most famous terrorist groups openly sympathizing with bin Ladin and al-Qaida was an Iraqi "Tawhid wal-Jihad". This group led by a late Jordanian Abu Musab az-Zarqawi was active in Baghdad as well as the so-called Sunni triangle North-West of Baghdad. It is believed that it was composed of some 200 foreign jihadis and undefined number of Iraqis. But az-Zarqawi by far was not the sole product of the al-Qaida inspired jihadi culture; other examples include perpetrators of attacks in Riyadh, Khobar, Casablanca, Bali, Madrid, London and many others. Groups like the one that called itself "al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula" which was especially active in Saudi Arabia in 2005 when it targeted foreign residents in the Kingdom and the "al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib" active in both Algeria and Morocco are other examples.

Today, the merging of democratization from inside and outside (the so-called forceful democratization) in the Middle East bears contradictory results. Looking formally, there is undoubtedly much more institutional democracy in the region that five years ago – in many countries democratic or partially democratic elections take place with political forces representing divergent ideologies taking part in them. On the other hand, the real and potential winners in this democratization process are those political forces who in the West traditionally are suspected of being least democratic – e.g. Islamists. But ultimately, the biggest challenge to democratization comes from the rising tide of global anti-American (and anti-Western) jihadism in big part born by forced democratization from outside. The process of democratization in the Middle East has been locked in a vicious circle – the more inner democracy there is in the countries of the region the more reislamization of Middle Eastern societies one observes; and the more democratization from outside there is the more forceful jihadi reaction rises. No recipes have yet been offered for breaking this circle without stopping the democratization itself. But even if democratization is discontinued it would be naïve to hope that Islamism and Jihadism would abate in the short-term perspective.

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