

# Reconstructing the Middle East?

---

RACHEL BRONSON

Director of Middle East Studies

Council on Foreign Relations

---

THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION HAS EMBARKED on one of the most ambitious political agendas of any modern Presidency. President Bush, who came to power arguing against nation-building, ironically, if predictably, finds himself enmeshed in a breathtakingly bold nation-building campaign. Over the past year the administration has argued for the establishment of a transparent democratic political system in Palestine, built roads and set up schools in Afghanistan, and advocated a postwar occupation of Iraq. At the UN, the President stated that, “the people of Iraq can shake off their captivity. They can one day join a democratic Afghanistan and a democratic Palestine, inspiring reform throughout the Middle East.”<sup>1</sup>

Even before the administration took office, the domestic problems of other countries had become an integral part of American foreign policy calculations. The Clinton administration realized that collapsed and collapsing states pose a threat to American national security as they often endanger key U.S. partners, become havens for terrorists, and suck whole regions into their vortex. The Clinton administration became consumed with problems in the Balkans, East Timor, Haiti, and elsewhere because such problems demanded international leadership.

The need for nation-building projects was predictable, although the area where the current administration is focusing its attention was not. Whereas the Clinton administration focused on weak states on the fringes of political systems, the seams of civilization, the Bush administration has ventured right into the heart of the matter. The Arab Middle East—an area of strong resilient states with frustrated societies, the center of religious identity and strategic resources—is hardly a natural candidate for such efforts. Yet the administration finds itself outlining nation-building plans for Palestine and Iraq and considering whether or not its political blue-print can be extended to Saudi Arabia, Iran, and others. Upon assuming office, few administrations were less prepared than the current one to tackle this ambitious agenda.

---

RACHEL BRONSON is a Senior Fellow and the Director of Middle East Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations.

---

Copyright © 2003 by the *Brown Journal of World Affairs*

The lack of preparation and the ambivalence over how involved America should be in such issues is evident. The administration has missed opportunities in Afghanistan and complicated matters in Palestine. In Iraq, the most daunting area where the administration is now focusing its attention, their track record provides a haunting specter. Given the Bush team's reluctance to fully commit in Afghanistan, and its predisposition against using the U.S. military to police and pacify, this current shift to create a military authority in Iraq is an about face, to say the least.

#### GETTING TO NATION-BUILDING

During the 2000 presidential campaign, the Republicans bludgeoned the Clinton administration over its perceived wasted efforts to nation-build. They argued that the world's sole remaining superpower should not squander scarce resources on ethnic conflict, humanitarian interventions, and the reconstruction that inevitably follows. The United States had to be concerned with major powers such as a resurgent Russia and a threatening China. In a piece in *Foreign Affairs* written during the campaign, Condoleezza Rice, then advisor to candidate Bush, argued that American foreign policy should focus its energies, "on comprehensive relationships with the big powers, particularly Russia and China that can and will mold the character of the international political system."<sup>2</sup> Other powers like the Europeans or Australians, with a more direct self-interest in regional stability should be expected to assume responsibility and put out local brush fires. During the presidential debates between candidates Al Gore and George Bush, Bush argued for removing U.S. troops from the Balkans in order that they could focus on fighting and winning war and stated that, "I don't think our troops ought to be used for what's called nation-building."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, just weeks after Bush took office he removed 750 U.S. troops from the Balkans.<sup>4</sup>

The Middle East was deemed an especially inauspicious place for expending American efforts and resources. The conflict between the Palestinians and Israelis was viewed as a regional problem, not worthy of the high-level involvement undertaken by the Clinton administration. The President absented his administration from the ongoing conflict for a full ten months, only appointing General Anthony Zinni as his special representative after the conflict continued to escalate, drawing in important American partners. Moreover, Iraq was not a candidate for nation-building. What is notable about the administration's earlier discussions of Iraq is the scant attention they gave to the questions of what would come after the military assault. Very little thinking, if any, had been devoted to the rebuilding of Iraq, even though it was the logical conclusion of then-candidate Bush's stated political goals. Real discussion about nation-building in Iraq "the day after," and what it would mean in practice, surfaced only

after Congress left for its 2002 summer recess.

Even the events of 11 September did not immediately alter the administration's outlook. In a December 2001 speech, a full three months after the attacks, the President was still shying away from anything that sounded like nation-building, political engineering, or institutional reform. In a speech at the Citadel he argued that after the Cold War, "some thought our military would be used overseas—not to win wars, but mainly to police and pacify, to control crowds and contain ethnic conflict. They were wrong."<sup>5</sup> He spoke of the Predator, precision guided munitions, and military transformation, but spent little time on how the United States would deploy its political, economic and military might to address the conditions that nurture terrorism.

By the summer, however, this outlook was beginning to change. The domestic structures of other states were becoming a more immediate concern. The problem has been that while the President is articulating grand notions of change, the administration is notably lacking any practical steps and incentives to turn vision into reality. For example, in his 24 June 2002 speech in the Rose Garden of the White House, the President outlined a remarkable nation-building project for the Palestinians. Not only would final status issues need to be resolved to get American support, but a new layer of demands was added. The Palestinian people must force their leadership to embrace democracy, denounce terror, and forego corruption—something that the Palestinian people have been calling on for years, to no avail. Only after these domestic changes were undertaken, would Washington pressure the Israelis to withdraw troops to positions assumed before the fighting began in 2000—still short of full withdrawal. Nevertheless there was still a notable lack of reference in the speech to what the United States would contribute to making this happen. No strategy was offered for how the administration would work to support moderates. Nothing was said about how a democratic process would occur under military occupation. The speech made clear that while the President was supportive of any Palestinian effort to build their nation, he was willing to neither commit American resources nor expend American political capital to make it happen. The President showed even less commitment to the Israeli-Palestinian crisis in his more recent speech at the American Enterprise Institute where he loosely linked an independent, democratic Palestine to regime change in Iraq by stating that, "success in Iraq could also lead to a new stage for Middle Eastern peace and set in motion progress towards a truly democratic Palestinian state...As progress is made towards peace, settlement activity must end."<sup>6</sup> Few believe that Iraq's support for Palestinian terrorism is central to Palestinian violence. Nonetheless, somehow regime change in Iraq is supposed to change Palestinian action, putting into effect a series of events that will re-start a momentum toward peace.

In Afghanistan, the administration only slowly woke up to the fact that the

country would require a longer-term commitment and considerably more resources than the administration originally anticipated. In an April 2002 speech at the Virginia Military Institute, the President invoked the Marshall plan to illustrate what was necessary in Afghanistan. The President also began referring to nation-building efforts in Germany and Japan after WWII, a theme that would re-occur in later speeches about Iraq.<sup>7</sup> Over the summer, the administration acknowledged the need to increase a security

**The President also began referring to nation-building efforts in Germany and Japan after WWII, a theme that would re-occur in later speeches about Iraq.**

buffer to areas outside of Kabul. General Tommy Franks stated at the end of August that, “there are in fact views and a number of places that would indicate the desirability of expanding the International Security Assistance Force.” In early August, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld as-

serted that he had no objection to enlarging the peacekeeping force if other nations were willing to contribute troops.<sup>8</sup> But without seriously committing to the provision of basic security, the Afghan victory will be a hollow one. Warlords will eventually resume the same practices that eventually allowed the Taliban and al-Qa’eda to take over the country.

274

The most notable shift, however, is vis-à-vis Iraq. After a summer of deliberation the administration now appears reconciled to the fact that a serious commitment must be made to a post-conflict Iraq. The President’s advisor on the region, Zalmay Khalilzad, has stated that, “the coalition will assume—and the preferred option—responsibility for the territorial defense and security of Iraq after liberation.”<sup>9</sup> The Pentagon is reported to be planning to assume full control over Iraq for a period of at least a year, if not longer.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, the Department of Defense has created the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance for Iraq. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice has made clear that the United States is committed to, “the democratization or the march of freedom in the Muslim world.”<sup>11</sup> President Bush has stated that, “a new regime in Iraq would serve as a dramatic and inspiring example of freedom to other nations in the region.”<sup>12</sup> These are rhetorically powerful words and a mighty vision.

Yet the administration’s ability to turn their vision into reality is highly suspect. The same people who have been arguing that a stable democratic Iraq will transform the entire Middle East, have been traditionally reluctant to get into the dirty details of how to create the stability necessary to democracy. Pacifying and policing will be necessary to an occupation of Iraq: something the President’s senior advisors have called for, but an idea he foreswore in the December speech referenced above. Germany and Japan are being invoked as models, but the United States does not maintain constabu-

lary forces (units that straddle the soldier/police divide), which were central to the political success of those countries. The Iraqi army and police may provide some assistance, but they will need to be depoliticized and retrained before the United States will be able to walk away from Iraq. The administration is calling for democratization in the Arab world but has not provided a coherent set of policies, let alone a plan, for how to encourage such democratization.

The administration seems to be engaged in drive-by nation-building. To date, its efforts have been haphazard and uncoordinated. It has realized much later than most that the United States does not have the luxury of engaging only major powers on issues of conventional military balances and ignoring domestic political structures. John Hamre and Gordon Sullivan eloquently made this point in a recent *Washington Quarterly* article in which they stated:

As much as some in the United States would like to avoid involvement in nation-building, failed states are a reality that cannot be wished away. Indeed, some of the possible candidates for failure in coming years are those countries in which the United States already has a defined national security interest—from Iraq and the Occupied Territories in the Middle East to North Korea and Cuba.<sup>13</sup>

## **POLICING THE PEACE**

275

Lessons learned from previous conflicts suggest that in order for the United States to promote stability and successfully exit a postwar environment in a place like Iraq, it will have to undertake a number of important tasks, most importantly establishing basic conditions for law and order. In a recent *Foreign Policy* article, Marina Ottaway correctly argued that, “military might is a necessary component of state building... [an intervening power] has to establish control through a military presence willing to use deadly force...It is not enough just to participate in the initial effort, because what counts is what happens on the ground afterward.”<sup>14</sup>

Experience in the Balkans and elsewhere shows that a serious up-front commitment to law and order is necessary to building a functioning economy, a free and fair political system and a healthy civil society—goals that many inside the administration espouse for Iraq. In the Balkans, democracy and economic initiatives were prioritized over the establishment of law and order. The result was black markets, corruption, drug-lords, and the return to power of the scions of the old system. Such outcomes would be disastrous to U.S. interests in the strategic heartland of the Middle East.

Stability requires military police, constabulary forces, civil police and judicial teams of lawyers, judges, and correction officers.<sup>15</sup> These institutions, which help to provide security within a state, were not immediately established in Kosovo or Bosnia,

making it virtually impossible to establish the conditions for long-term stability. A recent International Crisis Group report on Bosnia concluded that the, “improved security situation,” is far from being sound, while the rule of law, or, “the condition according to which all persons, both individual and government itself, are subject equally to its provisions...cannot be said to rule in Bosnia.”<sup>16</sup>

Since the conflict ended, law and order remains fragile in Bosnia. The initial rush to set up elections compromised the ability of the international community to combat organized crime, ethnic rivalries, and extremists who rejected the notion of a new demo-

**The Balkans experience suggests that the United States desperately needs international assistance to promote stability abroad.**

cratic society. Premature U.S. withdrawal deadlines encouraged extremists, gangsters, and corrupt politicians to hunker down and wait for the international community to leave.<sup>17</sup> The powerful alliances between ethnic nationalist politicians and organized criminal groups that were not aggressively pursued significantly undermined collective

and personal security.<sup>18</sup> Seven years later, crime is still high and has prevented significant economic growth. Courts and prisons do not function properly, and institutionalized corruption is rearing its ugly head.

276

In both Bosnia and Kosovo, the United States and its allies were compelled to undertake a significant number of unconventional tasks to ensure law and order. Among their assignments were border patrols, around the clock protection of mosques, churches, and other religious sites, checkpoint operations, criminal investigations, judiciary support, monitoring and verification of elections, refugee/internally displaced persons return, escorting children to school, riot control, de-mining, humanitarian aid distribution, policing, and rebuilding infrastructure such as bridges, roads, schools, and hospitals. Other tasks included the arrest and prosecution of war criminals and the establishment of indigenous institutions, such as separate military and police forces and reliable penal systems.<sup>19</sup> There is every reason to believe that these same tasks will need to be fulfilled in the postwar reconstruction of Iraq.

The Balkans experience also suggests that the United States desperately needs international assistance to promote stability abroad. Italy's Carabinieri, France's Gendarmerie, and Spain's Guardia Civil are better suited for the tasks that straddle the blurry security line between war and peace. Such forces were used in Bosnia and often relieved U.S. military forces of duties including escorting refugees, protecting airports, crowd control, and guard duties.<sup>20</sup> United Nations civil police also assisted with refugee return, humanitarian relief, and training local police units.

Even with European cooperation, much of the responsibility for law and order

fell to U.S. forces. The international support required in the Balkans suggests a real need for the administration to overcome the international divisions that now exist as a result of the pre-war Iraq debate. It will serve American interests to build support for reconstruction in general, but law and order responsibilities in particular.

If the Balkans offer guidance on the importance of seriously committing to law and order, then Afghanistan offers lessons on how not to provide it. Learning the lessons of the Balkans, the United States and its partners have committed to providing basic security to Afghanistan's capital city Kabul. Germany is training an Afghan police force that will operate along side the Afghan Army being rebuilt by Washington. In establishing law and order, Washington and its partners have radically improved conditions within the capital city.

The problem is that because the administration was reluctant to commit American troops to Afghanistan, initial efforts were limited to Kabul. An *Amnesty International* report from March 2003 highlights that outside Kabul, Afghan police officers have not been paid in four months and there continues to be a, "complete absence of accountability structures."<sup>21</sup> If not attended to, the security vacuum will be filled by nefarious actors who will twist it to their own advantage and eventually overturn initial military successes. The unwillingness to firmly commit in Afghanistan has undermined the potential for stability and made it more difficult for American troops to exit. Not surprisingly then, U.S. military presence is slowly spreading to other major cities. But the initial reluctance to use the American military to undertake tasks that smacked of nation-building has cost precious time and will make the job of pacifying and eventually leaving Afghanistan all the more difficult. Afghan warlords have used this time to amass resources and regain some of their former strength.

In Iraq these lessons suggest that during and after the fighting it will be crucial for America and its partners to immediately help establish order throughout major Iraqi cities. It is too important a country in too important a region to allow it to experience the problems of the Balkans or Afghanistan. The brutal history of Iraq has caused too much hatred to allow lawlessness to reign. In the face of a power vacuum, Iraqis are likely to take justice into their own hands and engage in a bloodletting that will rival, if not exceed, Rwanda's. If confronted by domestic turmoil, Iraq's neighbors are likely to intervene in order to quell or exploit instability. International soldiers, paramilitaries, and ultimately police officers therefore will be required, in high numbers, for years to come. They will need to be deployed not only to Baghdad, but throughout Iraq.<sup>22</sup> It will require a massive commitment—the kind of commitment against which the administration campaigned.

The challenge of providing law and order are already obvious. Within the first few days of "Operation Iraqi Freedom," looters were marauding through the streets of

Basra causing fear throughout the city. One Basra resident stated that the village did not lack food or medicine, only fresh drinking water, since the supply was cut at the outset of the war. More ominously, he stated that the main concern was the lack of security. “We need police,” he said. “We want police to save this place.” Great Britain’s Major Duncan McSporrán, conceded that within a week he had become a local law enforcer noting that, “I am the sheriff, aren’t I? That’s one of my many functions.” Another British soldier, a member of the famed Desert Rats, acknowledged that “this is getting to be peacekeeping duty, like in Bosnia and Kosovo.”<sup>23</sup>

There are worrying signs that the administration will be reluctant to commit the necessary resources to law and order in Iraq’s post-conflict reconstruction. Despite assurances by Secretary of State Powell that in Iraq, “we will help with the nation

**During his testimony General Shinseki estimated that a force of “several hundred thousand” would be required to remain in Iraq after the war.**

building...there’s no question about that,” the White House has earmarked only \$2.5 billion for relief and reconstruction. This amount is woefully short of the required tens of billions of dollars forecasted by most experts.<sup>24</sup> Just rebuilding Iraq’s electrical power infrastructure could cost \$20 billion to restore its pre-1990 capacity.<sup>25</sup> As a point of comparison, the airline industry received \$3 billion in assistance in the same supplemental. In

278

fact, the requested \$2.5 billion tracks more closely with the view held by senior administration officials other than Powell who continue to state categorically that, “we will not nation-build in Iraq,” than it does with Powell’s assurances.<sup>26</sup>

Even more problematic than the anemic funding request is the response by the administration to the recent congressional testimony of General Eric Shinseki, the Army chief of staff and a former commander of NATO forces in Bosnia (who is retiring in June and is thus not beholden to toe any particular political line). During his testimony General Shinseki estimated that a force of “several hundred thousand” would be required to remain in Iraq after the war. Secretary Rumsfeld quickly discounted the estimate. Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz dismissed Shinseki’s assessment as “wildly off the mark,” although he did not elaborate why he believed them to be so.<sup>27</sup> Whatever the final number, the force must be composed of international forces large enough to provide immediate security to the Iraqi people.


The lessons from places like the Balkans and Afghanistan suggest that there are difficult and practical things that an outside power must provide if it is to stitch broken societies back together. Law and order must be established in order to provide the political space for local political actors to emerge. The outside power must come equipped with packages that include police, judicial, and penal reform. Troops must

be prepared to confront looting, score-settling, riots, and organized violent protests. Not only a political vision, but also a plan, is needed for how to hand over such tasks to civilian indigenous control. These are the tasks that are the foundations of long-term success and unfortunately are not those that the American military or government finds most comfortable. Only by committing publicly to the practical, difficult, unglamorous aspects of reconstruction is there any chance that the administration's longer-term and grander visions may become a reality. It provides the only chance that the mud of the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers may prove fertile to the grandiose plans of the administration.

### **WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS**

In Iraq, the administration has a rare opportunity to make up for its past mistakes and rethink its approach to post-conflict reconstruction. The United States will be remembered not only for how it fights the war, but for how it leaves Iraq, and by implication the greater Middle East. If it allows one tyrant to simply replace another, or on the other extreme, chaos to reign, it will only recreate the conditions that breed human misery and perpetuate regional instability, necessitating future interventions. Tyrant swapping or chaos will animate extremists who already view American intentions in the worst possible light and attract moderates across the globe to their cause.

In their vision of what the Middle East could look like in the future, the administration's rhetoric and resources are out of balance. The rhetoric of administration officials has far outpaced what the administration has so far been willing to commit. It is one thing to call for democracy in Palestine and quite another to create the incentives that would encourage it. Removing a violent regional menace is an attractive course of action in Iraq, but creating a more stable political environment will require using the military to police and pacify. Kabul is secure, but unless the United States and its partners continue to actively commit to security in other major cities, security will not drop roots in Afghanistan.

To date this mismatch between rhetoric and resources has not cost the administration or the American people. There has not been a high price in terms of lives lost, resources expended or expectations dashed. It is not clear though that the United States will be so lucky in Iraq. The costs of getting Iraq wrong are exceedingly high, higher only to the costs of getting it right. Instability there would require future interventions and have pernicious effects throughout the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, and beyond. The lessons of post-conflict reconstruction are there to be learned from our own experience over the course of the last decade. It is up to the administration to learn them. 

## NOTES

\* The author would like to thank Rachel Abramson, Inga-Britt Hunter and Sarah Saghir for their research assistance with this article.

1. White House Briefing, "Remarks by President George W. Bush to the United Nations General Assembly," *Federal News Service*, 12 September 2002.
2. Condoleezza Rice, "Promoting the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2000, p. 46.
3. The 2000 campaign, 2nd Presidential Debate Between Governor. George W. Bush and Vice President Al Gore transcript, *New York Times*, 12 October 2000.
4. Gareth Evans, "Sorry, the boys should darn well stay in Bosnia," *International Herald Tribune*, 25 May 2001.
5. White House Briefing, "Remarks by President George W. Bush at the Citadel re: Future of America's Military," *Federal News Service*, 11 December 2001.
6. President George W. Bush, "In the President's Words: Free People Will Keep the Peace of the World," *New York Times*, 27 February 2003.
7. "Remarks by President George W. Bush to Students of the Virginia Military Institute," *Federal News Service*, 17 April 2002.
8. Michael Gordon, "U.S. Backs Increase in Peacekeepers for Afghanistan," *New York Times*, 29 August 2002.
9. Zalmay Khalilzad, in a speech to the *Washington Institute for Near East Policy* on 5 October 2002. Italics added.
10. David E. Sanger and Eric Schmitt, "Threats and Responses: A Plan for Iraq," *New York Times*, Friday 11 October 2002.
11. James Harding and Richard Wolffe, "Condoleezza Rice Interview," *The Financial Times*, 23 September 2002.
12. President George W. Bush, "In the President's Words: Free People Will Keep the Peace of the World," *New York Times*, 27 February 2003.
13. John J. Hamre and Gordon R. Sullivan, "Toward Postconflict Reconstruction," *Washington Quarterly*, Autumn 2002, p. 85-86.
14. Marina Ottaway, "Nation Building," *Foreign Policy*, September/October 2002, p. 18.
15. Robert M. Perito, "Establishing Post-Conflict Security and the Rule of Law in Iraq," *United States Institute of Peace*, February 2003, p.22.
16. International Crisis Group, *Courting Disaster: The Misrule of Law in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Balkans*, Report No.127, Sarajevo/Brussels, March 25, 2002.
17. Robert M. Perito, "Establishing Post-Conflict Security and the Rule of Law in Iraq," *United States Institute of Peace*, February 2003, p.22.
18. R. Jeffrey Smith, "Criminal Gangs Challenging West in Bosnia," *The Washington Post*, 24 June 2001.
19. Military Support Tasking Matrix, <http://call.army.mil/call/newsltrs>.
20. R. Jeffrey Smith, "Criminal Gangs Challenging West in Bosnia," *The Washington Post*, 24 June 2001.
21. Amnesty International, *Create Human Rights Based Policing in Afghanistan*, 13 March 2003.
22. The required number of American military men and women could be reduced by relying on the Iraqi Army and police. Still, transitioning responsibility back to them will take time, as the army and police must be depoliticized and retrained.
23. Keith Richburg, "Lawlessness Spreads in Villages As Bandits Rove, Allied Forces Are Blamed for Not Enforcing Order," *The Washington Post*, 29 March 2003, p. A1.
24. Colin Powell to Tim Russert on *Meet the Press*, 9 March 2003. For a good breakdown on White

*Reconstructing the Middle East?*

House budgeting for the war see Dana Milbank, "Spending Request Envisions Long War," *The Washington Post*, 25 March 2003, p. A1.

25. See *Guiding Principles for Post-Conflict Policy in Iraq* (Council on Foreign Relations, 2003), p. 12.

26. Off the record conversation with a senior Administration official 12 March 2003.

27. Eric Schmitt, "Pentagon contradicts General on Iraq and Occupation Force's Size," *New York Times*, 28 February 2003.