DEALING WITH FAILED STATES I:
Reordering the Islamist Heartland

By

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The request by the coalition authority in Iraq for Indian (and Pakistani) troops to help police Iraq, shows that the American imperium is at last coming to terms with the task of administering its empire. In this task the coalition occupation authorities have been caught flat-footed. This is in part because unlike the British who had trained a large number of Britons to run and administer an empire, the US has no such institutional infrastructure. It will have to acquire one rapidly. Its military capabilities now outrun its civilian one to reconstruct the failed states which it will increasingly have to rule directly or indirectly. In this context it is eminently sensible to ask for Indian help in this task of Iraqi reconstruction, beginning with establishing security- the first prerequisite of maintaining order. The next stages in reordering the Middle East seem fairly clear- a settlement of the Palestinian question (to be discussed in my next column), the replacement of the Baathist regime in Syria, and cheering on the implosion of the mullahercy in Iran. But, there may need to be further changes in the Islamist heartland before the ‘war on terror’ can be won. In this task as I argued in my last column Indian and US interests are congruent.

So it was puzzling that the US also requested Pakistan to provide policing services for Iraq. For, though a US ally in the fight against Al Qaida and the Taliban, Pakistan is on the verge of becoming a failed state. As General Musharaff said recently in London, he will have great difficulty with his domestic Islamist constituency in acceding to this request, as they see the US presence in the Middle East being aimed at Muslims. The really interesting question for the uncertain future is: what will the US and India do if a nuclear Pakistan is taken over by the Islamists in a coup? Similarly, though after the recent bombings in Riyadh, the Saudis- another long standing US ally- seem to have launched an attack against their own Islamists, how far are they likely to succeed? There is a link between these two currently fragile polities and the challenge they pose not only to the US, but indirectly to India.

For, as is well known (see Bernard Schwartz: *The Two faces of Islam*), the Saudi monarchy is the result of the fusion of a tribal polity with the most extreme version of Islam- Wahabism. After the Iranian revolution, the Saudi monarchy decided to spend a large part of its oil wealth to propagate this faith around the world, not least in Pakistan. The Taliban was the creature of this Wahabism and the Pakistan ISI. To what extent the Pakistani army has been infiltrated by Wahabisim is an open question. But the role of Wahabism, spreading through Saudi financial support to the madrassas and mosques, in poisoning young Muslim minds around the world has now become intolerable. They preach hatred against the infidels- the Jews, Christians and above all Hindus- to youngsters, who learn little if anything about the modern world. To see how pernicious it is, imagine what we would think if German schools just had lessons preaching hatred against the Jews or those in America were just teaching the young to hate blacks. But this is what the large number of madrassas funded by the Saudis in Pakistan and many other
countries around the world are teaching. The same message of hatred is being preached by the large number of mosques around the world which have been taken over by Wahabbi preachers with Saudi financial support, perhaps innocently provided through the charitable donations all believers are required to make. Though proclaiming their desire to prevent this misuse, for the Saudis to truly eschew or put a stop to this funding would most likely create a Wahabi backlash in Saudi Arabia and end the dynasty.

If, then in the future both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia—current US allies—are in effect taken over by Islamists, what is likely to be the US response and what should India do? I find it inconceivable that any US administration would allow the nuclear weapons in Pakistan and the oil reserves in Saudi Arabia to fall into Islamist hands. I just hope the US and Indians have contingency plans to take out the Pakistani nuclear weapons before they can be used if this horrible but fairly likely scenario unfolds. An Islamist Saudi Arabia would not, I would judge, be allowed to keep its oil fields. Unlike Iraq where the oil fields are near populated areas, those in Saudi Arabia are virtually in the barren desert. They would be much easier to hold by military force without any grave danger of sabotage. (The deployment of the oil revenues will be discussed in my next column) While this would defuse the immediate threat posed by an Islamist takeover of the two countries, the continuation of such Islamist regimes would continue to pose a terrorist threat—perhaps even magnify it—against the West and India. It is unlikely that they would be allowed to exist.

In Saudi Arabia, the Americans could not maintain an occupation without inflaming Muslim opinion around the world—because of the holy shrines in the Hejaz. But, there may be an answer by going back to the future. As David Fromkin in his enthralling history of the fall of the Ottoman empire and the creation of the modern Middle East (A Peace to end all Peace) has shown, the post war settlement was based on Lord Kitchener’s desire to create a Middle Eastern British empire. Part of this plan was to replace the religious leadership of Islam in the form of the Caliphate from the Turks by an Arab. His chosen instrument was the Hashemite Sheriff of Mecca—a direct descendant of the prophet. What he hadn’t realised was that, unlike Christianity, for Muslims spiritual and temporal authority could not be split. The offer was immediately seen as the Sheriff being offered the kingdom of the Arabs. This inflamed the rival tribal leader, Ibn Saud of the Wahabi’s, who invaded and conquered the Hejaz. The British then created the artificial kingdoms of Iraq and Transjordan from their post 1st war conquests, for two of the Hashemite descendants of the Sheriff of Mecca, as a consolation prize, and no more was heard of the Caliphate. As one of the Hashemite descendants is now once again being considered as a future king of a new Iraqi confederation of Kurdish, Sunni and Shia states, is it too fanciful to imagine that another Hashemite descendant could be restored to Mecca as its Sheriff if the Saud dynasty falls?

What of a nuclear defanged but Islamist Pakistan? Again it is unthinkable that the US would allow this to remain. There is enough of a civil society and educated middle class in Pakistan, as in Iraq, which could in time create a modern state. But in both, the tendency for Muslim polities to veer towards traditional military forms of government, however clothed in various civilian hues, will need to be overcome. The occupying coalition is finding this out painfully in Iraq. If Pakistan becomes a failed state and has to be taken over by the American imperium, this problem of reconstruction will be even more acute.

It is in this context that the US request for Indian help in Iraqi reconstruction makes
eminently good sense from the US viewpoint. After all, the reason why India was the jewel in Britain’s imperial crown was not because of its historically fabled riches, but because it provided the manpower- military and civil- to project British power from Suez to the South China seas. But, would it be in Indian interests to become in effect a strategic partner in the American imperium? As I argued in my least column, there is no danger whatsoever of the US seeking to colonise India. Nor is there any danger that it will seek to prevent India from acquiring the military sinews that it desires, as it rightly sees not India but China as its long run strategic competitor. In this long term perspective, a militarily and economically powerful, as well as democratic India, provides the best bulwark against a resurgent China. It is in this emerging geopolitical perspective that it makes eminent sense for India to become a strategic partner of the US in reordering the Middle East. For, if the US fails in this task, India will be a major loser, as militant Islam poses as much a threat to it as the US.