Crescent of crisis

by Robert_J_Caldwell

Those who imagine that an American bug out in Iraq would calm a roiling region suffer from an acute case of tunnel vision. Or is it myopia?

Read a newspaper. Look at a map. A crescent of crisis is building from the Iran-Afghanistan border to the shores of the Mediterranean. Radical Islam is on the march and vital American interests are threatened across a 2,000-mile front.

Giving up in Iraq wouldn't solve this problem. Rather, it would make things worse, much worse. An American defeat in Iraq would embolden the forces of radical Islam, even as America's difficulties in Iraq have already produced a region distinctly more hostile to U.S. interests and allies.

Consider the many signs of a deteriorating Middle East.

From 2001 to 2003 while U.S. forces and their allies were sweeping the Taliban and al-Qaeda out of power in Afghanistan and removing Saddam Hussein's vile dictatorship in Iraq, Iran and Syria were passive, intimidated onlookers. In fact, both provided limited intelligence cooperation with the United States against the al-Qaeda terrorist network that they, too, then opposed.

Today, Iran and Syria are back in the role of anti-American spoilers.

Iran is actively aiding, arming and training Iraqi insurgents who are killing American soldiers in Iraq. In recent months, there is evidence that Iran has begun arming resurgent Taliban guerrillas in Afghanistan. Most ominous of all, Iran is defying the West and the United Nations by pushing aggressively ahead with its drive to acquire nuclear weapons, the ultimate Middle East destabilizer.

Simply put, Iran has joined the jihadist coalition bent on driving U.S. forces out of the Middle East.

The Assad dictatorship in Syria, long allied with Iran, is resuming its role as co-conspirator with the ruling mullahs in Tehran. The Syrians are looking the other way as foreign jihadists enter Iraq across the Syrian border to fight the Americans in Iraq. Syria is also aiding Iran's efforts to rearm the Hezbollah radicals in southern Lebanon, in defiance of U.N. Security Council resolutions and the so-far ineffective U.N. peacekeeping forces in Lebanon.

Moreover, Syria is resuming its efforts to destabilize Lebanon's U.S.-backed democratic government. Five anti-Syrian Lebanese politicians have been assassinated in the last two years, almost certainly with the active collaboration of Syria's sinister intelligence service. Syria supported Hezbollah's violent demonstrations in Beirut earlier this year meant to overthrow Lebanon's elected government.

On the Israeli-Palestinian front, the news is equally grim. Hamas gunmen have seized the Gaza Strip, overthrowing Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas' moderate Fatah forces. The Palestinians' Fatah-Hamas unity government, brokered by the Saudis only last February, has collapsed. Turning Gaza into Hamasstan is a loaded Kalashnikov aimed straight at the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Gallows humor now describes a new two-state formula for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict - Hamasstan in Gaza vs. Fatahland in the West Bank. Prospects for reviving the peace process are dismal, if not dead.

On Israel's northern front, as noted, Hezbollah is rearming with the help of Iran and Syria for a possible second round against the Israelis following their inconclusive war last summer. In northern Lebanon, the Lebanese army is fighting an armed extremist group of Islamic radicals based in Palestinian refugee camps.

In short, from one end of the Middle East to the other, moderation is being rudely shoved aside by Islamic radicals who share an anti-American, anti-Western agenda. America's Arab allies in Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states and Egypt are deeply alarmed, and not without reason, at the prospect of an American retreat from Iraq.

Across the Middle East, the common denominator is what the Soviets would have called a changing correlation of forces. Where the Americans once looked confident and victorious, they now seem hesitant and war-weary. Middle East militants see as plainly as anyone that the new Democrat-controlled U.S. Congress is pushing ever more insistently to withdraw American troops from Iraq, regardless of the consequences.

When the Senate's majority leader, the befuddled Harry Reid, declares the Iraq war "lost," the jihadists cheer. When Reid and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi pronounce the Bush administration's troop surge a failure even before all the reinforcements are in place, Islamist radicals rejoice. When every Democratic presidential candidate pledges to "end the war" by getting U.S. forces out of Iraq, every Middle East extremist can believe that the jihad coalition is winning.

It is, of course, folly to imagine that an American pullout from Iraq - read, an American defeat in Iraq - would contribute in any way to stabilizing an increasingly chaotic and imperiled Middle East. Would Hamas, Hezbollah, al-Qaeda, Syria's Assad, Iraq's terrorists and insurgents, and Iran's Ahmadinejad then all stand down? Hardly. They would pocket an American defeat bigger than 9/11, and press their advantage.

An American defeat in Iraq would make an already deadly Middle East deadlier still.

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