

STATE BREAKING, NATION BUILDING

Enduring Legacies of the Persian Gulf War

ROUNDTABLE

THE PANELISTS

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This roundtable is based on a discussion held in Ottawa on 15 April. The moderator was Michael Bryans, Editor of Peace & Security magazine.

Michael Bryans: First question: once we are out from under the noise of the past six months, what will look special ten years from now? What will be unique about what has happened since August?

Shireen Hunter: There are bound to be some significant internal changes, and that would apply to all of the countries in the Persian Gulf region. One of the things that determines how this whole situation is going to look in ten years is the uncertainties that exist in regard to the Soviet Union. Some countries, I am thinking mostly of Iran and Turkey, are going to be extremely vulnerable to changes in the Soviet Union. I don't believe that the Union is going to last in the way it is currently structured.

If the disintegration of Soviet empire happens rapidly and in a less orderly fashion, I frankly do not exclude territorial and linguistic, or ethnic realignments in that region. It is not a foregone conclusion that there is never going to be Kurdish state. What is going to happen with the Soviet Azerbaijan, for example? Is it going to go to Turkey, Iran? Are they going to have irredentist claims towards Iran?

Bryans: So you are talking about new borders?

Hunter: Drawing new borders may cause tremendous disruption, but there are certainly going to be different economic, political, linguistic realignments. Ideally, the region should go the road of federalism, and then gradually towards regionalism, otherwise we are going to have wars from the Caucasus all the way to South Asia.

Mark Heller: There is a story about a visit of a French delegation to the Chinese Academy of Sciences. They were taken around to meet their counterparts and they asked who in the Academy was responsible for researching the

French Revolution and were told that there was nobody who did it. The French were astonished and said well why is this, this is a major historical event. And the Chinese said, well, not enough perspective yet.

If we think back to 1981, which wasn't such a long time ago, the Gulf area and the Middle East as a whole did not look all that different than they do now in terms of basic forces at work. If we want to get a sense of where things are tending, we have to think in longer terms, and about the socio-economic trends, that eventually may express themselves in political terms.

The regimes on the Arab side of the Gulf, in particular, are increasingly out of joint with the nature of social and economic change. The kinds of societies that exist there are no longer accurately reflected in these regimes. But at what point the disjuncture becomes intolerable is very difficult to predict.

If I try to think of the consequences of developments in the last ten or fifteen years, the crudest way to sum it up is that was a tremendous waste of opportunity for fundamental processes of state building and nation building, and economic and social modernization. Partly because of the distractions of politics, and especially wars – the Iran/Iraq war and the Gulf War – there was a tremendous waste of resources caused particularly by an over-reaching in the realm of Arab nationalism, which resulted, in the case of Iraq, in its virtual destruction.

I would expect that in the next ten years we will have seen a relative strengthening of the non-Arab forces on the periphery of the Gulf, the resurgence of Iran, possibly the emergence of Kurdistan, and quite probably the re-emergence of Turkey as a major actor in the Middle East, at the expense of the Saudis and the Iraqis.

Bahgat Korany: Let me look at some trends that I think we have to watch closely. One is the