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Fighting an urge to despair in the Middle East

By Edward Gnehm

Newspaper headlines bannered the deaths of two policemen during a shootout with alleged "criminals." The pictures were gory, the public outcry emotional. Demands that the government take immediate and decisive action dominated private conversations as well as public statements. Days later news bulletins described yet another shootout. This time reports said that security forces had killed two terrorists and were pursuing two others.

The location of these incidents was neither Iraq nor Gaza, but Kuwait, and these events took place within the past weeks. I was there for the second. I was struck by the intense anger of Kuwaitis, including Islamist parties, toward "terrorists," as they were being called. I was also struck by the intensity of support Kuwaitis displayed for the government to forcefully move against these groups. Neither incident involved the United States. These were incidents that involved Arabs on both sides - terrorists and police.

These incidents underscored a fact little appreciated in the U.S. The Arab world, its people, and its leaders are a target of terrorism, fundamentalist Islamic terrorism, as Americans are. They are as angry as Americans. They do not want to see their way of life or the security destroyed by terrorists any more than Americans do.

Don't we have a common cause with these Arabs? I assert that we do. And yet one of the sad consequences of U.S. reaction to terrorism since Sept. 11, 2001, is to cluster all Arabs in the same profile. This is but one example of the misunderstandings driving Americans and the people of the Middle East apart - exactly as Osama bin Laden desires.

Many Arabs are worried about Iraq, but far more concerned about Iran - not about what Iran will do but what the U.S. will do to Iran. Their presumption is that Iran will not be deterred from its nuclear program and the U.S. will ultimately take some sort of action that will embroil Arabs in U.S.-Iranian hostilities. This, however, is not their nightmare: In Jordan or Kuwait, that scenario is an Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear facilities similar to the attack on the Iraq in 1982. All my interlocutors are concerned about Arab public reaction to an Israeli military attack given public perception in the region that the U.S. is always behind such Israeli actions.

I share the concerns of many observers that the U.S. in fact does not have an Iranian policy - at least not a long-term policy. Ellen Laipson, the president of the Stimson Center in Washington, recently wrote an insightful article on the matter. She observed: "[The U.S. has] lost an ability to think about Iran as a three-dimensional country of great size, natural richness and potential power, and to develop an appropriate complex and multifaceted policy toward that country... The United States lacks an appropriate declaratory policy that addresses the full range of national interests at stake in Iran, a policy that would communicate to Americans and to Iran what the U.S. seeks to achieve and how to move forward in this long-stalled relationship.

I also agree with her that the U.S. "revisit, with a fresh look, all aspects of Iranian behavior to determine where threats and opportunities lie, and consider a range of policy approaches."

In Iraq, elections took place for a constituent assembly that will oversee the drafting and adoption of a permanent Constitution leading to parliamentary elections next December. The text of the Constitution and the willingness of Iraqis to participate in the end-of-year elections are far more the test of success than the latest round of voting.

Iraqis are desirous and capable of reaching the political compromises necessary to keep a political process in motion. Even in the absence of significant Sunni representation in the new assembly, Iraqi leaders will want a Constitution that appeals to the Sunni minority so that it will participate in parliamentary elections. Elected "drafters" will work with Sunni "outsiders" to craft a document that will be more broadly acceptable than many might predict. Specifically, the Constitution will contain guarantees protecting minority rights. And it is worth noting that, so far, we see no major arguing for a division of Iraq into sub-states and I don't think we will.

Having said that, the situation on the ground continues to deteriorate - no matter what the spin. However, I continue to believe that Iraqi Shiites will be their own masters in the end. They will not take orders from Iran any more than other Iraqis will. Iraq's own national interests will prevail. In addition, the Iraqi Shiite religious establishment will endorse the involvement of the clergy in government, as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini did in Iran.

On balance, the U.S. has no choice but to continue supporting the political process it has championed and hope that those Iraqis elected in that process can make the political deals with insurgent groups that will ultimately bring stability to the system. And then Americans need to get out of Iraq.

On the Middle East peace process, I am cautiously optimistic while, admittedly, fighting an urge to despair. The present moment is a real opportunity to advance the cause of Arab-Israeli peace. I was pleased to see U.S. President George Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice use the same word "opportunity." Arab-Israeli peace is the most crucial all the issues we must deal with in the region.

The election of Mahmoud Abbas as president of the Palestinian Authority is significant. It was impressive to see Palestinians going to the polls even under the circumstances they now face. We tend to forget that Palestinians have a history of selecting mayors and other local officials. The Bush administration should support the elections for the Palestinian Parliament scheduled for June as well as continued Palestinian reform.

Abbas' opposition to violence and terror is unquestioned. We have seen his willingness to argue with those who continue to espouse violence to give him the chance to work with the Israelis. The Israelis seem desirous of doing so. We are fortunate to have an Arab initiative adopted at the Beirut Arab Summit of 2002 that supports a peaceful resolution of the Palestinian question along with Arab acceptance of full relations with Israel in the context of a comprehensive settlement. While there are always hurdles, we have significant building blocks at our disposal.

The big question is Washington's intentions. The U.S. needs to re-engage effectively in assisting the two parties. There are good signs: Bush has indicated his hope to see Abbas in Washington, and has reiterated his vision of a Palestinian state living side by side with Israel in peace and security.

And what about that urge to despair? I remember years ago when Secretary of State George Shultz called me in Amman to ask what I thought the odds of success were in a Middle Eastern initiative we had under way. Was it 50, 60 or 70 percent? I said it was more in the 15-20 percent range, but in the Middle East if it was that high you went for it. The difference now is that I was certain then that Shultz was committed to our initiative. I sincerely hope and pray that the Bush administration will seize the opportunity before us.

Edward Gnehm was U.S. ambassador to Kuwait and Jordan, and is currently teaching at George Washington University in Washington. This commentary is an edited and abridged version of remarks he made on Jan. 25