After Afghanistan: The next challenges

Nancy E. Soderber

**Nancy E. Soderber** is vice president of the International Crisis Group and director of the New York office. With nearly 20 years of experience in the formation of U.S. foreign policy, she achieved international recognition for her efforts to promote peace in Northern Ireland; participated in a United Nations’ mission to Indonesia and East Timor; negotiated key UN resolutions regarding the Middle East and Africa; and conducted shuttle diplomacy in Latin America. From 1997 to 2001 she served as alternative representative to the UN as a Presidential appointee with the rank of ambassador, representing the U.S. at the UN Security Council on national security issues, including conflict resolution and the promotion of democracy abroad. From 1993 to 1997 she was the third ranking official of the National Security Council at the White House.

The cost of fighting terrorism at home and abroad is staggering - an additional $67 billion tacked onto the 2003 budget. "And that's most likely just a down payment," said Nancy Soderberg, speaking before the Global Executive Forum. But the cost of doing nothing is even more open-ended. The political unrest in Afghanistan and the escalating conflict in the Middle East "risk fueling instability, raising the price of oil, and undercutting the U.S. economy."

Although the Taliban have fallen, peace has not yet come to a country where warring factions have historically taken up arms against one another as a way of solving grievances. Currently, Afghanistan's rival warlords appear to be in a negotiating mode, but "the resumption of conflict remains a distinct risk," said Soderberg, pointing out that fighting has already broken out in some areas.

"The fact is that (interim leader) Hamid Karzai, although he is off to a good start, has neither the mujahedeen credentials nor the military forces to enforce a peace among the various factions," said Soderberg.

The shaky conditions in Afghanistan and the surrounding region point to the need for keeping the war going on multiple fronts. To do this, "the U.S. has to stay involved in Afghanistan and lead a worldwide coalition to address the root causes of terrorism," said Soderberg. (See sidebar this page.) She outlined four challenges that are facing the world in this struggle.

### Security gap in Afghanistan

Since Afghanistan is years away from having a strong national army in support of the national government, the continued presence of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) is necessary to keep the peace. But the ISAF operates only in Kabul, which leaves most of the country at the mercy of the various warlords. There is concern that humanitarian transport routes through Kandahar and Mazar-e-Sharif can be shut down at any time should fighting flare up in those cities.

ISAF needs to be expanded beyond Kabul and U.S. troops ought to participate. "Yet today the Bush Administration continues to oppose any expansion of the force and to insist that U.S. forces will not participate in ISAF, even once the campaign against al-Qaeda is completed," said Soderberg. There needs to be a shift in that policy or the U.S. is at risk of losing the peace, she added.

"Being a full participant rather than an observer will give us a strong voice in any future decisions regarding the security situation on the ground. We will also be in a measurably better place to secure cooperation by the multinational force, by Afghanistan's various factions, and by neighboring states.
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Extremism in the Arab world

For many young people in the Arab world, the door marked Prosperity is closed tight. In Egypt, unemployment is rising, economic reform is failing, and one-third of the work force earns only $70 a month. In Saudi Arabia, 5000 princes consume the wealth and the opportunity, and an estimated 50,000 Saudis graduate from school each year with no prospect of a job and no hope for the future.

"The young are increasingly hungry for change," said Soderberg. "If they can't get visas to escape, many turn to the mosques as an outlet for their anger," which then gets redirected toward the U.S. and its perceived support of corrupt regimes in the country of their birth. Terrorists are spawned in this climate. The Arab world needs to take steps to stop feeding into the anger, and this includes: putting an end to government-sanctioned anti-American statements in the media; changing the curriculum at religious schools to reflect a more moderate approach than the extreme form of Islam and anti-American sentiment now being propagated and exported; putting a stop to the Saudi practice of buying off extremists or sending them abroad; and using the influence of the richest and largest Arab states - Saudi Arabia and Egypt - to press the state sponsors of terror, especially Iraq, Syria and Iran, to end such support. Also, Arab officials must end their support of suicide bombers in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"A change in this culture of extremism is certainly going to take a generation or so, but the time to start is now," said Soderberg. "And the U.S. needs to increase its own information campaign in the Arab world through Voice of America and the Internet."

Violence in the Middle East

The International Crisis Group has just issued a report urging the U.S. to end its support of an incremental approach to the crisis as put forth in the George Mitchell and George Tenet peace plans. Under these plans, achieving a cease fire comes first, then building trust, and lastly, addressing the hard political issues.

"This approach is increasingly irrelevant against the backdrop of terror and violence, and it has obviously failed," said Soderberg. A "bold new approach is needed."

The ICG proposes a reversal of the incremental approach on the basis that "a cease fire can be achieved only if the parties see the terms of the political settlement the end game available to them now and to know that there's strong international backing for it. A reversal would seek a final settlement first as the only way to achieve a cease fire and a lasting peace."

In order for the ICG plan to be implemented, said Soderberg, "it has to be put forward and actively sold by the United States and then backed by the regional and international actors."

She stated her belief that Secretary Powell's trip to the region would not be fruitful, due to a lack of preparation. "If the U.S. can get off of the sidelines where it's been for the last year, and lead with a comprehensive approach, I believe the cycle of violence can be broken. It's not to minimize the difficulties, but I think that this ultimately will be the way forward."

Iraq: Weapons of mass destruction

The Iraqi army, at 430,000 men strong and another 1 million in reserve, is a major obstacle to any U.S. plan to overthrow Saddam Hussein, said Soderberg. It's not that it can't be done, but, unlike the war in Afghanistan, which was predominantly fought by air, an Iraqi invasion will require putting somewhere
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around 200,000 U.S. troops on the ground. "There's been a lot of talk about this in Washington, but I do not believe that a decision has been made."

Whether or not such an invasion is being planned, the Administration needs to focus on a more imminent danger, said Soderberg. "According to the CIA, the major threat to the United States from Iraq is Baghdad's effort to develop long-range missiles which could be tipped with chemical or biological warheads. Low-level nuclear weapons research is also continuing."

The U.S. and Britain want Iraq to allow the return of UN inspectors. Russia's support is needed, but Russia is protecting its own interests and is pushing for the lifting of UN sanctions. Russian companies now have billion-dollar oil contracts with Iraq, and if sanctions are lifted they will be rewarded with billions more.

"In this new era of cooperation and the new world coalition on terror, the U.S. needs to make an all out effort to reach agreement with Russia on workable sanctions and the return of inspectors to Iraq."

Soderberg is optimistic that the challenges can be overcome. "There's no such thing as an impossible political problem. It's just a question of how long and how hard you're going to work at solving it. But the U.S. has to be willing to engage and lead, and I think on that point the jury is still out."

About the ICG

The International Crisis Group is a private multinational organization committed to strengthening the capacity of the international community to anticipate, understand and act to prevent and contain conflict. Headquarters are in Brussels, with advocacy offices in Washington DC, New York and Paris. After Sept. 11, the ICG opened field offices in Amman and Islamabad.

ICG's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts, based on the ground in countries at risk of conflict, gather information from a wide range of sources, assess local conditions and produce regular analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers.

ICG raises funds from governments, charitable foundations, companies and individual donors.

-ICG Web site http://www.crisisweb.org

ICG's proposal for a political settlement in the Middle East

Excerpts:

"The most significant step in ending the current deadlock would be for the United States to forge an international coalition of like-minded European and Arab countries that would formulate all the major elements of, and back, a fair and comprehensive end-of-conflict deal. The intended audience should be not only Israeli and Palestinian leaders, but also, and chiefly, their publics, the goal being to thicken domestic and international support for a
peaceful, two-state solution and increase pressure on the two sides' leaderships. There is considerable evidence from the ground that both publics are in fact yearning for a way out, and equal evidence that the two current leaderships are incapable of finding one.

"The proposed solution should build on the progress that has been made from Camp David to Taba, but also on subsequent pronouncements by the United Nations in Security Council Resolution 1397 of 12 March 2002 and by the Arab League Beirut Declaration of 28 March 2002. Far from being a reward for terrorism as some have argued, moving toward a political solution is an essential ingredient in defeating it."

**Terrorism: root causes to be addressed**

- The existence of stateless havens for terrorism, such as Somalia and Yemen.
- The Arab world fomenting hatred of the United States as a way to deflect the spotlight from their own failures.
- The continuing threat of state sponsors of terrorism, such as Sudan, Syria, North Korea, Iran and Iraq.
- The potential of nuclear war between Pakistan and India.