

Great Decisions: Widening Distress in the Middle East Saturday, February 10, 2007

By Fiona MacKinnon

On Saturday Professor Marc Simon of the Political Science Department at Bowling Green State University described the multiple entanglements impinging on the Middle East and Iraq crisis today. This was the third Great Decisions discussion in the series at the Wood County Senior Citizens Center.

From 1500 to 1900 the Islamic World was a thriving civilization and reached from Indonesia, to Europe, and parts of China as well as the Middle East. Three major cultures flourished at the time—Europe, China, and the Islamic World. These were the major centers of trade, science, art, and religion. By 1800 the prosperous Middle East was ruled by the Ottoman Empire and the Turks. Sovereign states and nations had not yet been implanted in the region.

The fragmentation of the Middle East began with World War I and the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The victors, France and England, divided the lands in the region. The continued fragmentation, post World War II, added the state of Israel to the Middle East with a resulting sense of Arab victimization that continues.

The Middle East is important to the United States because of its oil. The US role in the past has been supportive, but generally balanced in support of both the Israeli and Arab states. American policy toward the Middle East has not necessarily been even-handed. The Clinton administration provided more support for Israel than the Arab states. George W. Bush, while impatient for democracy to evolve in the region, naively hoped that force might transform Iraq into a model of democracy for the region. Given the religious divisions and sovereign states in the region there are no simple diplomatic or political answers to the unrest that has been unleashed.

Will stability in the Middle East come about through evolution or through war? The immediate challenges in the region remain unsolved. First of all there seem to be no easy solutions to the Lebanon/Israeli/Hezbollah rift. Second, Iran and the Persian Shiia influence in the area remains unsettling. The United States military is over-extended and cannot pursue stabilization on another front. Third, the Iraq insurgency continues with civil war in the shadows, but President George W. Bush chose not to make the policy change suggested by the Iraq Study Group through political means, but instead will pursue democracy through one more military surge. Not until 2009 with a new administration will there be an opportunity for a major policy change. Finally the fourth challenge remains the influence of the Islamists who would like to gain power through either violent or peaceful means in order to institute a more religious government but have been unable to do so. Generally Islamists have not been able to appeal to the population en masse.

The issues facing the United States in the Middle East remain complex. These issues move quickly to our own citizens in the United States. Newspaper articles bring the news of the Sunni and Shiia in the Detroit area disagreeing violently and physically rather than through non-violent means. Our hopes lie in educating our own citizens and children about Islam and differing world cultures so that tolerance and peaceful dialog will infuse our way of life. Our schools must continue to educate broadly rather than narrowly and expose young people to cultural differences.

The Great Decisions discussions are open to the public on Saturday mornings from 9:30 until 11:00 am at the Wood County Senior Center and are co-hosted by the American Association of University Women and the Bowling Green Women's Club. Lunch is available by reserving at (419) 353-5661 or 800-367-4935. Suggested donation is \$2.00. The remaining sessions in the series will also take place at the Senior Center and focus on children (Feb. 17), and Migration (Feb. 24).