Conferences and Lecture Series

Second METU Conference on International Relations, June 23-25, 2003, Ankara, Turkey

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On June 23-25, 2003, the Department of International Relations organized the Second Conference on International Relations at Middle East Technical University (METU). Similar to last year's event, this year's meeting was one of the largest scholarly gatherings in Ankara, which brought together over one hundred scholars from more than two dozen countries. The scope of the conference was interdisciplinary, with a geographical focus on the Balkans, Central Eurasia and the Middle East. Political transitions, democratization, ethnic-communal conflicts, state building, regional rivalries, external interventions, international security and a host of other intra- and inter-state issues were discussed in the forty-six panels held during the three-day event.

The Caucasian region and the surrounding international environment was one of the three primary geographical foci of the conference. Consequently, a large number of participants presented papers dealing with diverse issues in and around the region. Five primary issue areas dominated: state building, economic and political transitions, ethnic conflicts, Caspian oil politics, and regional rivalries. This report will focus on the keynote addresses given by Nazif Shahrani, Brenda Shaffer, Robert Olson, and Moshe Gammer, and then will offer a few other highlights of the conference of interest to Central Eurasianists.

Nazif Shahrani (Professor, Departments of Anthropology and Central Eurasian Studies, Indiana University) made a presentation entitled, "Military Victories and Political Failures? Governance in Post-Taliban Afghanistan and Iraq." Professor Shahrani discussed US policy in post-Taliban Afghanistan with special emphasis on the complexity of state formation in an international system destabilized by the so-called "war on terror." He emphasized the inability of the Washington-backed government in Kabul to address the historical roots of the problems in the country and to remedy them with appropriate policy options. The war on terror, Dr. Shahrani argued, has largely run in opposition to the natural course of post-Taliban state building. Accordingly, more than two hundred years of centralized state building projects in Afghanistan have failed to achieve a viable compromise solution for the diverse ethnic and tribal communities in the country. Successive attempts at centralized state building in Afghanistan have achieved little but victimization of minorities, destruction of interpersonal trust and the instigation of intercommunal conflicts by central governments. Yet the Bush administration's dual policy of "fighting against terrorism" and "nation-building" tries to reenact a scenario played out in the past and proven to be at odds with the soil. The Bush administration has tried to install a strong centralized regime solely for security reasons, but this approach has strong potential to deepen existing fault lines in the country. According to Shahrani, instead of repeating the mistakes of the previous Afghan governments, the new state building project should focus on "community-based local governance," the de facto situation in most parts of the country, and build a small but effective central government with extractive and distributive functions.

Brenda Shaffer (Caspian Studies Program, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University) presented a paper on the foreign policies of the Caspian littoral states entitled, "Is There an Islamic Foreign Policy? Islam, Foreign Policy and the Caspian Region." In her presentation, Dr. Shaffer attacked the recent revival of cultural studies literature in foreign policy studies. Her own research gives little credence to the role of cultural variables, mainly religion, on the foreign policies of the Caspian states. Presenting different examples, she

argued that even though culture has a prominent place in Caspian states' rhetoric, foreign policy practices are not shaped by these factors. Rather, state interests transcending cultural factors play a more prominent role. Muslim states, including Iran, often use culture to pursue material state interests as a way of contending with neighboring regimes or of forcing changes in their policies.

Another keynote speech, "The 'Azerbaijan Question' and Turkey-Iran Relations: 2000-2002," was presented by Robert Olson (Professor of History, University of Kentucky). Dr. Olson discussed the revival of "Azeri nationalism as a significant player in the wider arena of Middle East politics," and emphasized the context of relations between Turkey and Iran during the last three years. According to Dr. Olson, the re-emergence of the Azerbaijan question and of Azeri nationalism is explained by "a complex of local, regional, national, and international forces," which include "grievances of Azeri intellectuals and nationalists, especially in Azerbaijan-Iran," due to their exclusion from the Islamic Republic's government; restriction of cultural-communal rights; "the poor performance of the [Iranian] economy"; and regional tensions between Tabriz and Tehran. Also, the independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the nationalist uprisings as a result of Azerbaijan's war with Armenia have contributed to the revival of Azerbaijani identity and unity in Iran. Other factors, he emphasized, include "alienation" of Azeris as a result of Tehran's support for Armenia, the Azerbaijani government's cultivation of Azeri nationalism in Iran, and Turkish support for Azerbaijani nationalism. As a net effect, Olson argued, Azeri nationalism has become an important regional issue gaining momentum in Turkish-Iranian relations.

Moshe Gammer (Senior Lecturer, Department of Middle Eastern and African History, Tel-Aviv University) discussed the reasons for Daghestan's choice not to follow Chechnya in its conflict with Russia in his paper entitled, "The Road Not Taken: Daghestan and the Conflict in Chechnya." Detailing the complex ethnic structure in Daghestan, which has fourteen titular ethnic groups, Dr. Gammer referred to sources of tension and distrust in the republic, such as conflicts between the "Highlanders" (speakers of Caucasian languages) and the "Lowlanders" (Turkic-language speakers), and other ethnic disturbances including the problem of the Aki Chechens, a Chechen group that had been annexed to Dagestan in the 1920s and was subsequently deported from their lands in 1944. Aki Chechen claims to their historical villages met with the resistance of other ethnic groups, such as the Laks who had been resettled in Chechen villages after the deportation, or the Kumyks who were disturbed by the returning Chechens in and around Makhachkala. Similar ethnic tensions and the influx of Wahhabis to the republic after independence have been discouraging factors for the Daghestani government.

A number of papers focused on the Caspian oil basin, regional rivalries, and integration in the Caucasus. Elif Hatun Kılıçbeyli and Mahal Emrahov from Çukurova University, Turkey, discussed disputes on the legal status of the Caspian Sea, border problems in the region and Russia's intervention in regional conflicts in Abkhazia, Azerbaijan, and Ossetia as a part of its larger strategy to dominate the oil-rich region. Niyazi Abbazov from the Azerbaijan State Economic University focused on the desire of the South Caucasian countries to integrate into the world economy, and noted the importance of having a modern transport and communication infrastructure. He argued that the Europe-Caucasus-Asia Transport Corridor (TRACECA) will contribute to the integration of the southern Caucasus into Europe and the world economy.

The Center for the Black Sea and Central Asia (KORA) organized three separate panels that offered "Perspectives from Central Asia and the Caucasus." Among the papers on these panels was "Petro-Politics and the State in the Caspian Region," presented by Recep Boztemur of METU. Boztemur discussed the "impacts of energy resources and their uses on the political organization of the Caspian countries," and suggested that development in the energy sector "might facilitate the democratization of Caspian states, assist political development in individual countries, and promote conflict management in the complex problems of ethnicity between regional powers, as well as support regional security and stability by encouraging cooperation through various political, economic and humanitarian means." Boztemur emphasized the problematic relationship between the democratization processes on the one hand and the discourse on regional security and stability on the other.

Another KORA-sponsored paper was "The Russian Federation's Military Policy in Central Asia in 1991-2001," presented by Isık Kuşçu (KORA).

Kuşçu speculated on Moscow's real intention behind establishing military ties with the Central Asian states, and to what extent Moscow was successful in accomplishing this aim. She argued that the Russian Federation did not perceive direct threats to its national security from the region; rather it used these threats to become the main actor in the region via military means. Kuşçu discussed the shift in the Russian Federation's foreign policy regarding the "Near Abroad." Finally, Hayriye Kahveci (KORA) presented her research on the development of "Civil Society in Kazakhstan." She divided the civil society formation process into two phases: the late Soviet era and the transitional post-Soviet era. Her paper emphasized the post-Soviet environment of a thorough transformation process from an authoritarian system towards a democratic one. Kahveci argued that if the formation of a functioning civil society is an essential precondition for the establishment of a pluralist and democratic society, then contrary to initial expectations a decade of independence reveals signs of an authoritarian state reemerging in which the so-called institutions of civil society could not have much effect.

The Third METU Conference on International Relations will be held in Ankara in June of 2004. Members of the Central Eurasian Studies Society are encouraged to take part in the next conference. Detailed information on this year's conference and the proceedings can be found on the conference website, http://www.ir.metu.edu.tr/conf.