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Lebanon, August 2006, Photo: Rita Leistner/Redux, Middle East Report 241, Winter 2006

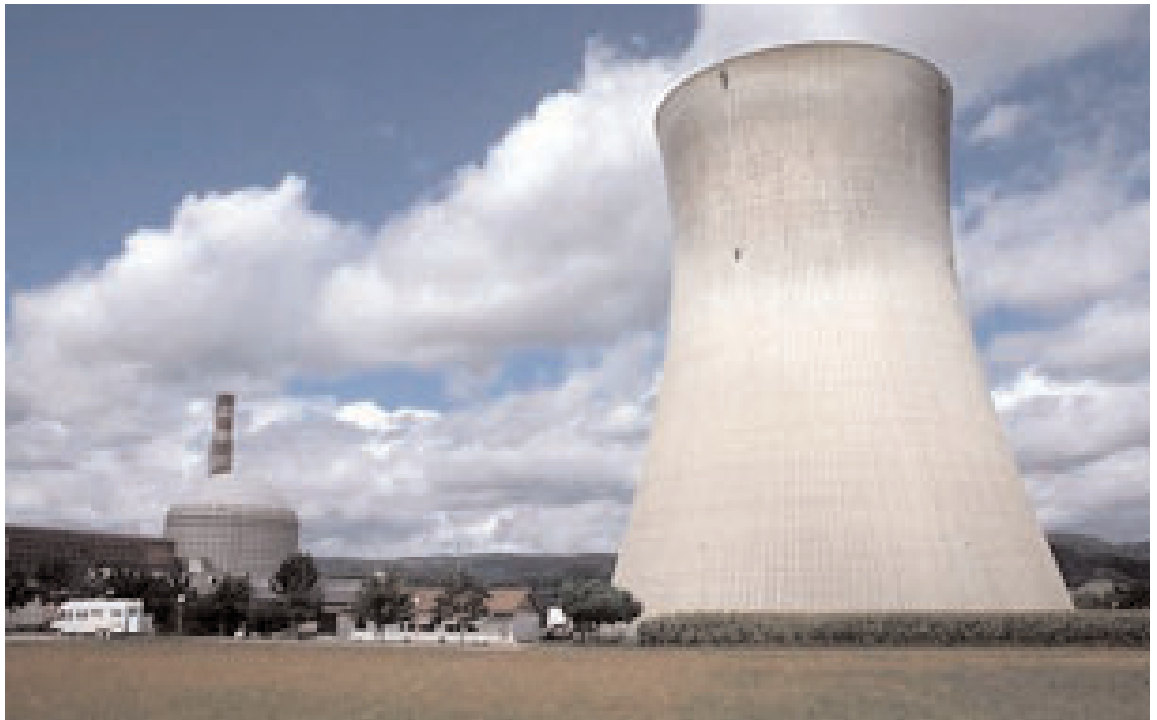
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Egypt *Nuclear* vassal or regional great power?

Ilias Tassopoulos



Egypt wishes to obtain nuclear technology in order to increase its diminished status, as well as to face the threat emanating from other states with nuclear weapons or “nuclear ambitions”

One of the main reasons that led to the American-Israeli attempt to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear capability was its presumed effect on the other states of the region. In particular, the insecurity that will spread among the states of the region may drive some of them to follow suit.

In 1986, Egypt declared the suspension of its nuclear program, after the Chernobyl accident. In the latest years, Egypt has strived to increase its conventional weapons, as well as develop chemical and biological weapons. Now, Egypt has made a U-turn. By deciding to restore its nuclear program, the regime seems to have concluded that the necessity to balance Israeli and Iranian potential nuclear capability overcomes its pursuit of a nuclear-free Middle East. Nevertheless, according to the Nuclear Threat Initiative, “Egypt’s nuclear program is a delicate balance of championing nuclear nonproliferation in the Middle East, developing civilian nuclear industry to address its economic and electricity needs”.



Officially, the nuclear program was restored because of Egypt's rising energy needs. Although it has been argued that the discovery of vast natural gas deposits mitigated Egypt's energy needs, the current pattern of energy consumption is not sustainable. Egypt spends approximately 7 billion dollars per annum on energy (the state subsidizes energy prices so that they can be affordable).

In any case, Egypt's nuclear plan faces a lot of difficulties. The main problem is the lack of know-how. Egyptian experts maintain that there is almost no scientist in Egypt acquainted with the latest developments in nuclear technology. The suspension of the nuclear program twenty years ago led the majority of the nuclear scientists to turn to other Arab countries or to the West.

The funding of the nuclear program constitutes another important aspect, as the initial cost for a nuclear power station of 1000 MW in al-Dabaa, 150 km West of Alexandria is 1,5 billion dollars. Egypt hopes to attract foreign investment to cover these costs. The financial, as well as, the political and technical external support is crucial for Egypt. Therefore, Egypt has proposed that the enrichment process be done abroad. In addition, Egypt approached Russia and China, signing a cooperation agreement with the latter, for the peaceful use of nuclear energy. The Chinese-Egyptian cooperation is broader, as, since 2003, there have been reports that China cooperates with Egypt on mining uranium in the Sinai desert.

Initially, the American response was positive, though, as Egyptian diplomats remarked "...the US will agree to this only to impose conditions later". According to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), of which Egypt remains a signatory, states are entitled to build nuclear power stations under international supervision. However, if Egypt signs the NPT additional protocol, there will be very little space for maneuver left. Under the protocol, inspectors are entitled to a series of privileges, as they are entitled to conduct inspections on any industrial or educational facility without prior notice. The si-

gnature of the additional protocol and the consequent surveillance of its nuclear activities from the International Atomic Energy Agency will probably diminish Egypt's regional status.

Under the current circumstances, Egypt sides up with the US so as to balance Iran, as the Iranians attempt to expand their influence in every Middle Eastern front. The prospect of Iran becoming a regional hegemon has worried Egypt, as Egypt is heavily dependent on the energy resources of the Gulf. The regime seems equally worried about the potential turmoil in the energy market that the prospect of Iraq's tripartition could have.

However, some Egyptian analysts argue that Egypt's nuclear plan is not serious. Were it serious, it wouldn't receive so much publicity from the regime. Although it is based in pragmatic energy needs, the announcement of Egypt's nuclear plans from Gamal Mubarak was made in such a way so as to boost his profile. The son of Hosni Mubarak seems to be interested in becoming the next president of Egypt. It is believed that if he achieves to be seen as a leader who could carry through an "ambitious national plan", he could muster a lot of support inside Egypt.



Regional Security Issues in the Persian Gulf: A Saudi Perspective

Marianna Athanasopoulou

With the Iraqi quagmire as well as Iran's nuclear ambitions and increasingly assertive role in Middle Eastern affairs looming large over the Persian Gulf, Riyadh has recently adopted a tougher stance vis a vis regional security issues, particularly those threatening to tip the delicate balance of power in Tehran's favor. Although the al-Qaeda menace remains a key consideration for the regime's domestic stability and regional standing, at this stage the focus is irrefutably on the Iraqi front and on the royal family's deteriorating relations with Iran.



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“Our Arab region is besieged by a number of dangers, as if it was a powder keg waiting for a spark to explode”. With this opening remark King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia set the tone for the 27th Supreme Council of the Gulf Cooperation Council, (GCC) meeting on December 9-11, 2006 in Riyadh. At the same time, in his December 9 address to the 3rd Regional Security Summit (Manama Dialogue) held in Manama, Bahrain, the Saudi Chief of General Intelligence, Prince Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, elaborated on the nuclear buildup in the region, pointing to Israel as the primary culprit.

Dealing with Iraq's intensifying sectarian strife, Iran's underground meddling which contributes to the current chaos and the Islamic Republic's standoff with the West over the nuclear issue, figure high in Saudi Arabia's regional agenda. In the light of the Democrats' takeover of Congress and the subsequent growing pressure on President Bush to review his policies on Iraq and set a deadline for US troops to withdraw, the Saudis have abandoned quiet diplomacy and taken a number of steps to contain Iranian influence over Iraq's domestic situation. Indeed, after a series of bomb blasts hit the Shiite district of Sadr city in November, killing over 200 and wounding 250, King Abdullah asked for an urgent meeting with US vice President, Dick Cheney, to assess the escalating crisis. In Saudi Arabia's view, a premature US withdrawal from Iraq would be catastrophic, as the vacuum would be readily filled by extremist factions, leading to a full-scale civil war and, eventually, partition. In an article for the Washington Post, Saudi government adviser, Nawaf Obaid, warned that, in the case of an early US pullout, Saudi Arabia would respond with a “massive intervention” to prevent Iranian backed militias from performing a campaign of ethnic cleansing against Iraqi Sunnis. According to the same article, one of Saudi Arabia's options would



be to “provide Sunni military leaders with the same type of assistance that Iran has been giving to Shiite armed groups for years”.

Aside from their conflicting interests vis a vis Iraq, the growing Saudi-Iranian antagonism is equally focused on the nuclear issue. Despite the normalization of relations between the two during Khatami's presidency, the ultra-conservative and virulently anti-Shia Wahabi Saudi clergy has traditionally viewed Iran with suspicion, if not outright hostility. Not surprisingly, Iran's defiance of the international community in its pursuit of nuclear capabilities is seen as a direct threat to Saudi domination of the Gulf region. Consequently, Saudi Arabia has repeatedly expressed its concern about the prospect of Iranian nuclear power plants being developed in the Gulf coast and called on Iran to comply with international norms and cooperate with the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency). The nuclear issue monopolized both the GCC summit and the Manama dialogue of December 2006. In a joint communique on December 10, the GCC heads of State announced plans to develop a shared nuclear program for peaceful purposes. In response to his Arab counterparts' pointed critique about his country's nuclear program and its role in Iraq, Tehran's envoy to the Manama summit, Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki, repeated that Iran's nuclear program is meant solely for peaceful use, while he pointed out that the deteriorating situation in Iraq is rooted exclusively in US policies. With regard to regional security, Iran's Foreign Minister formally proposed the establishment of a collective Persian Gulf Security System as a means of diminishing the presence of foreign troops in the region which, according to Iran, contributes to tension and instability. Up to this date, there has been no official Saudi or GCC response to the Iranian proposition...

In addition to the nuclear threat, al-Qaeda inspired international terrorism is another constant security headache for the Gulf states. Al-Jazeera's broadcast of an al-Zawahiri videotape in which he reiterated bin Laden's earlier call for attacks on Gulf oil installations led to a heightened level of alert in the region and to the deployment of additional international forces (alongside Task Force 152, the Italian-led international coalition patrolling the Gulf) in support of Bahraini and Saudi forces. Moreover, in an International Conference for cooperation between NATO and the Gulf states held on December 12 in Kuwait, the parties agreed to step up the level of cooperation in the areas of border security, counter-terrorism, crisis management and military training.

At this stage, the most pressing issue for Saudi Arabia appears to be the dire situation in Iraq. The continuation of sectarian violence there will almost certainly influence the states of the region adversely, even more so since they are already faced with tense socio-political conditions at home. The US debate regarding the way forward in Iraq could lead to a reshuffling of US alliances in the country. Clearly, Saudi Arabia wishes to bring the US closer to moderate Sunni leaders in order to avert the possibility of Shiite domination of Iraqi political life, an eventuality which would virtually mean handing Iraq over to Iran on a silver platter, thus further complicating the balance of power in the region.



Iran's Policy in the Middle East: Between Pragmatism & Ideology

Anna Apostolidou

Iran's role in the Middle East has been upgraded. Its stance regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict, Afghanistan, Iraq and -of course- its nuclear program reveals a policy both realistic and ideological. So far, this policy has proven to be successful and Iran's regional ambitions have been growing as a result.



“Islamic Revolutionary”, “Champion of Shia Islam”, “Centre of the Axis of evil”: no matter how one might call Iran, they cannot overlook its extensive presence in this beleaguered region. The drive for great-power status already existed in the Iranian foreign policy agenda during the Pahlavi regime. However, after the Islamic Revolution (1979) and despite the declared goal of

spreading the Revolution across the borders, the new regime turned out to adopt a more realistic strategy. Iran's political discourse combines an extremist ideological language with pragmatic diplomatic practices, based on a realist consideration of the balance of power and its national interests. Its attitude towards the regional developments after 9/11 is a case in point. Nevertheless, with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's rise to power (2005), the ideological fixation emerged again. According to the President himself, “the Revolution's main mission is to pave the way for the reappearance of the 12th Imam. We should define”, he maintained, “our economic, cultural and political policies on the policy of the Imam Mahdi's return”.

Ahmadinejad's ideological rhetoric also includes an invocation of Ayatollah Khomeini's call for Israel to be wiped off the map. Still, it's worth mentioning that Iran has never entered into a direct military confrontation with Israel. Their relations have alternated from close political alliance during the era of the Pahlavi dynasty to hostility after the Islamic Revolution. However, during the Khatami administration there were some signs of improvement in bilateral relations (e.g. the Iranian proposal to make peace with Israel in 2003). As a result, Israel classified Iran as a threat and no longer as an enemy. After the Iranian nuclear issue emerged, Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz stated that “under no circumstances would Israel be able to tolerate nuclear weapons in Iranian possession”, while Prime Minister Ehud Olmert called for harsher international measures against Iran and declined to rule out a military attack against Tehran.

By and large, Iranian leaders have always inveighed against Israel and defended the Palestinian cause, thus managing to gain acceptance in the Sunni-dominated Arab world. However, their assistance was only verbal and their true policy was to “avoid getting entangled in the Palestinian cause”, as Mahmoud Vaezi, former Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister, admits. It wasn't until Hamas came to power that Iran undertook a more active role. Apart from the speculated arm supplies, Tehran donated about 120 million dollars to the new government, filling the vacuum created in the wake of shrinking financi-



al support from both Arab and Western states; it undertook the training of the Hamas-controlled new Palestinian police forces; and it tried to establish a Shiite organization in Palestine under the banner “Supreme Islamic Shiite Council in Palestine”, despite the fact there is hardly any Shiite community in either Gaza or the West Bank..

Furthermore, Iran has achieved to engage itself politically and morally across the Middle East on account of its interference in the regional crisis in Afghanistan and Iraq, which constitutes an example of Iran's pragmatic foreign policy. Despite its anti-American feelings, Tehran did not react towards the US invasion in both countries, more so since the American expeditions toppled the anti-Shia regimes of the Salafi Taliban and Saddam Hussein. In the first occasion, Iran gained a foothold among the Persian-speaking Shia Afghans. Just after the war, Tehran named a “special envoy” participate Afghanistan's reconstruction and in June, 2002, Mohammad Khatami was the first Iranian President to visit the country since the Islamic Revolution. Tehran has provided assistance in a number of development projects, including the financing of the electricity facilities in the courtesy of Heart, the construction of roads and railways in western Afghanistan, a hospital at Zarandji in the southwest, 10 schools in the west and the supply of educational material. Tehran and Kabul have also established the Hirmand Investment Company, which is active in foodstuff, detergents, health products, pharmaceuticals, medical equipment, transportation and technical and engineering services sectors. Their cooperation expands also in the fields of refugees (Iran hosts over 2 million Afghan refugees), terrorism and drug trafficking control (more than 200 tons of Afghan and Pakistani narcotics are seized annually in Iran). As a result of Iran's influential role in the region, France went on to propose that Iran be invited to join a “contact group” of countries and multilateral institutions to coordinate NATO's peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan (November 2006).

As far as Iraq is concerned, Iran benefited from the power vacuum that followed Saddam Hussein's fall and the rise of Shia community to power. Tehran didn't hesitate to coalesce with US backed Iraqi governments in order to protect its interests in the region. However, when the nuclear issue appeared, their relations aggravated and negotiations were interrupted. Nevertheless, the Iraq Study Group (Baker-Hamilton commission) recommends Washington's engagement with Iran and Syria in order to thwart the ongoing violence in Iraq. The fact that Iran has close ties to the main Shiite groups (Mahdi Army, Fashila Party, Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq) makes Tehran a major player. It's doubtful though whether Tehran is able or willing to defuse the crisis. First, although it can induce the major Shiite militias to stop sectarian killings, it would find it difficult to force them to disband and to accept a national reconciliation agreement. Second, Iran will not offer its help without concessions in return, for instance the lifting of the US sanctions, assurances by the US and its allies not to attack Iran or even the recognition of Iran's right to develop nuclear technology, a concession that the US won't be willing to make. The Bush Administration seems to rule out direct talks with Iran unless it verifiably freezes its nuclear program. As a result, Iranian National Security Council Adviser Ali Larijani calls for the US to set a timetable for “an exit or evacuation of American troops from the region”.

Iran's nuclear file appears to be the primary obstacle in Iran's relations with the US and its allies. Iran's aspiration of becoming a nuclear power is not a new gambit; the Shah was the first to launch the project, which was then abandoned as Ayatollah Khomeini believed that nuclear weapons “work of Satan”. Nonetheless, after the Iraq-Iran War, Iranians turned their attention to nuclear and missile technology once again. In September, 2006, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), after discovering secret nuclear facilities, found Iran to be in non-compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty safety agreements and reported the case to the UN Security Council. On December, 2003, the Security Council voted to impose sanctions on Iran for refusing to suspend uranium enrichment. The resolution orders all countries to stop supplying Iran with materials and technology that could assist the development of its nuclear and missile programs and freezes Iranian assets of 10 key companies and 12 individuals related to those programs. The Security Council warned that it would adopt further nonmilitary sanctions, if Tehran refuses to comply.



The US, the EU and Israel as well as the Gulf states fear that Tehran may exploit its nuclear capacity as a psychological tool, adding nuclear military technology to its “deterrence enhancers”. Moreover, Iran can subsume its future nuclear arsenal into a regional security system becoming thus the key guarantor of defence in the Gulf. Another advantage is that Iran can play the nuclear card to renegotiate a more lucrative relationship with the international and regional powers.

Invoking Israel's nuclear arsenal, Ahmadinejad points out that a “nuclear apartheid” dominates international relations. Whereas he has gained the support of the Non-Aligned states, he has difficulty in persuading the Arab countries, in particular the conservative Sunni Gulf monarchies. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait expressed their concern about the prospect of nuclear power plants along the Gulf coastline and Bahrain participated in a US-led Proliferation Security Initiative exercise. A few days later, Iran responded with maneuvers (named “Great Prophet”) in the same area (November 2006).

Tehran considers any expression of concern about its nuclear program as a hostile position, to which it responds with warnings and assaults, as in the case of the UAE that suddenly turned from a major economic partner into a channel for American conspiracy. At the same time, Iran assured that its “progress in the field of military weapons should never be threatening to the neighbouring countries. On the contrary”, they maintained, “such progress would help prevention of aggression and would supply real security and stability in the Persian Gulf area”. Tehran also proposed the establishment of a regional cooperation mechanism, but the Gulf countries are suspicious of Iran's intentions. We should not forget there remain unresolved bilateral disputes. Iran has a territorial dispute with UAE over three tiny islands and a latent competition with Saudi Arabia for leadership in the region.

Ahmadinejad doesn't share Khatami's diplomatic efforts to smooth relations with other Arab states, e.g. Egypt. As a consequence, Iranian policies are received with distrust by Arab regimes, with the exception of Syria, a traditional Iranian ally. However, after Bashar al Assad came to power, Iranian-Syrian relations were transformed into a hegemonic alliance, where Iran is the patron and Syria the client. Nonetheless, this alliance is actually far less rosy than it seems: according to Jane's Intelligence Digest, in 2005 Iranian intelligence was planning to unseat Bashar al Assad if he continued following pro-Western policies. Iran also sidelined Syrian influence in southern Lebanon by sponsoring Shiite Hizbollah, while Damascus was forced to withdraw its troops. The support for Hizbollah and other militant groups (Hamas, Islamic Jihad) has helped Tehran legitimize its policy in Arab societies.

Undoubtedly, Iran has achieved to become a significant player in the Middle East. Combining an idiosyncratic Realpolitik with a religious-ideological cause, Iran offers an alternative model of conduct in the region. It is a revolutionary regime, but not an impulsive one. And it follows pragmatist policies vested in an ideological justification. Will Iran, a provocative, anti-Western, Shiite Persian country, prevail in a conservative, Sunni-dominated, Arab Middle East? No one can tell whether Iran's march on an apocalyptic path will result in destruction or triumph. However, one thing is certain: it will not retreat without substantial hegemonic gains.



Afghanistan: A “success story” that somehow went **wrong**

Marina Eleftheriadou

The “conventional phase” of the war in Afghanistan ended earlier than generally expected, whereas the post-conflict operations and reconstruction efforts dragged on for 4 years. There hasn't been any remarkable progress as the specific parameters on the ground that had to be taken into account for a better policy formulation were not properly assessed.

Of late it has been common talk that the US foreign policy, while initially vested with insuperable power-projection capability and triumphant rhetoric, turned out to be disastrous in the end. Afghanistan constitutes the most indicative example, since in this case there was enough time to consolidate the view of a “success story” as the Taliban's forceful return came only in early 2006. It was probably because of the very fact that this comeback took long to become manifest that the foreign forces did not feel that pressed to build up a strong domestic alternative to the Taliban capable of keeping the insurgency under control, while at the same time the war in Iraq diverted the bulk of the US attention away from the Afghan front. Although the fallacies of the reconstruction program per se represent a major cause for the creation, as someone said, of a “Kabulstan” instead of the new stable Afghanistan that the US administration had wished for. Still it seems that an equally decisive factor was the West's distorted image of how politics work in Afghanistan and, consequently, of what would be the best approach to deal with them, either by modifying the existing - internal and regional - environment or by adjusting to it.

The bad-tailored policies have resulted in the present situation of increasing insecurity that makes the future of the country and its population appear far by promising. It is quite interesting that of the total amount spent by the “international community” in the last 5 years, \$82.5 billion was spent on military operations and only \$7.3 billion was spent on reconstruction, the majority of which went to salaries for the Afghan national forces and counter-narcotics efforts. According to Reuters, despite the significant amount of money dedicated to security related expenses, some 4,000 persons - a quarter of them civilians - have been killed since the beginning of 2006. During the July-September period only, more than 1,740 lives were lost.

The lack of security has, as some reports indicate, reversed the recent years' trend of immigration flows and refugees have once again begun entering Pakistan rather than heading back to Afghanistan. Given that the Afghans are generally accustomed to a life of insecurity, economic and humanitarian considerations are probably the main cause for this phenomenon. After 5 years of reconstruction programs, only 6% of Afghans have access to electricity, while more than half of the population remains impoverished and 63% is illiterate. Moreover, the



UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) recently warned that it cannot cover, during this winter, the needs of millions of Afghans dependent on the organisation. The country is able to fund only 18 percent of its government expenses from its own revenues (estimated by the UN as the lowest percentage in the world). This is indicative of the government's total inability to perform basic tasks without the long-term contribution of international donors.

One of the most crucial shortcomings was probably the heavy reliance on foreign contractors to rebuild Afghanistan, many Afghan workers remaining untrained and unemployed as a result. High unemployment rates and low investment in agriculture, on which 70% of the population depends, have led to a massive return to poppy production. Drug economy is believed to represent 50-75% of the country's GDP. This year's production reached approximately 6,100 tonnes, marking a 49% increase compared to last year. This production actually represents 92% of world production and surpasses world consumption by 30%.

State authorities fail to guarantee law enforcement and security and the vacuum is filled either by local tribal leaders or the Taliban, particularly in their traditional strongholds in the south and southeast of the country. In return for protecting their poppies, the Taliban raise taxes and levy fighters. Taliban leader Mullah Dadullah claims to have 12,000 men under his command in the southern provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul, and Uruzgan. NATO commanders, however, dispute this number. US-led coalition forces were never deployed in southern Afghanistan in sufficient numbers, even though this area constituted the Taliban heartland. Apart from a US base for 3,000 troops in Kandahar, for four years there was virtually no military presence in three out of four provinces and, as a consequence, the opportunity to secure the area was missed. On the contrary, the establishment of a central authority was seen as a panacea. However, Afghanistan has never had a strong central government, while the state structure itself collapsed shortly after the communist government fell. By putting in force a new constitution that concentrates power in the hands of a directly-elected President and by giving that post to Karzai, more of a consensus builder than an authority figure, the authority of the President himself and of his government was virtually restricted to the area of Kabul, due to the sheer fact that, in Afghanistan, authority is traditionally determined by personal and local loyalties.

On the one hand, the coalition forces and now NATO, as in late September the Alliance extended its security mission to all of Afghanistan, haven't been willing at any point to engage a sufficient number of troops in order to control the whole territory. A 31,000-strong NATO force is insufficient (more so since only a portion of the available troops is engaged in combat operations), especially when compared to its



commitment to Bosnia, which is the size of only one Afghan province. There, NATO had deployed almost 60,000 troops. The NATO summit convened in Riga few days ago, failed to reach an agreement on the necessary troop numbers in Afghanistan and also failed to achieve an explicit consent from the countries involved only in reconstruction activities, to relax rules of engagement of their troops.

On the other hand, Western policy-makers and military commanders refrained from relying on the existing tribal structures to counter the insurgency by insisting on the disarmament of the militias, even after it became clear that the training of the army and the police forces was behind schedule and their effectiveness was doubtful. In the case of the army (ANA) there are only 36,000 trained and equipped soldiers, while the ultimate goal is now 50,000, a number actually lower of the one that was planned in the first place (70,000). In addition to those low numbers, there are also reports that indicate a 50% drop-out rate among ANA recruits in the south as a result of the increasing effectiveness of militant operations, the bounties offered by the Taliban to kill soldiers and the low salaries that do not counterbalance the risks. Beyond the issue of insufficient numbers, the police force (ANP) also faces high levels of corruption.

Karzai at some point realized that, as the Taliban advanced in the south, it would be preferable to recruit militia fighters to man the police force at least temporarily, thus giving a note of formality to the reality of militias and warlords operating in the country despite all the efforts to demobilize them. At the moment, agreements between the government and local militias have been made in Helmand and Kunar. These militias operate along the Afghan-Pakistani border so as to prevent insurgents from crossing the 1,400 mile border. Relations between the two countries remain tense as Kabul accuses Islamabad of not doing enough - or "doing too much" to the opposite direction - to destroy the sanctuaries provided to the insurgents in the north Pashtun-populated areas of Waziristan and Balochistan, thus rendering the border to an equivalent of the Ho Chi Minh trail during the Vietnam War. The accusations grew harsher after a peace deal was struck in September between the Pakistan Army and pro-Taliban tribesmen in North Waziristan in order to end the fighting that had been going on ever since the US-led coalition invaded Afghanistan.

Although this initiative raised a lot of criticism on the other side of the border, this kind of approach seems to slowly gain some support, as there are signs of growing cooperation between al-Qaeda foreign fighters, the Taliban and the Hezb-i-Islami of the former prime minister (1993-1994) Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. According to some reports, this tactical alliance was established in May in the border village of Barawal Bandey. It is characteristic that while in 2004 there were only 6 suicide attacks in the country, in early December there were 6 in a week only in Kandahar. Many acknowledge that the war against the Taliban can never be won militarily and advocate the need for a different approach to "part-time fighters" on the one hand, such

as the Taliban and Hezb-i-Islami insurgents, and to "professional fighters" (foreign jihadists) on the other, by somehow including the former in the political process not in the form of the half-hearted reconciliation programme of the government but through a formal peace settlement. As Lakhdar Brahimi (former Head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan) admitted they "were wrong not to bring the Taliban into the political process as early as 2002".



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The Arab-Israeli peace process: *A Phoenix to rise from its ashes?*

Marina Eleftheriadou



The Baker Commission (Iraq Study Group, ISG) proposed convening a fresh new conference for the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict with the participation of the major regional and international actors as a means of alleviating the US problems in Iraq. However, this initiative seems less promising than – or at least having analogous prospects to – a similar process (Madrid Conference) which took place a few years ago.

Exactly 15 years ago, the world was talking of a breakthrough in the Arab-Israeli conflict as the Madrid Conference convened. As 2006 comes to a close, the man behind this initiative, James Baker, proposed (as part of the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group) a similar course of action, a Madrid II. Though history never repeats itself, as the dynamics that form the environment in which it unfolds are too complex, still it is possible to draw some parallels, at least so as to determine the preferences and the probable choices of the main actors involved. And it is also true that whenever a difficult or controversial issue arises, the immediate question that follows is “who has the power to decide?”. In the international sphere the question needs to be rephrased into who has the interest and the power to exert pressure on the others to follow his path.

Both in 1991 and in today's ISG recommendation, the Iraq war is the driving force behind the initiatives. There is though a striking difference: the current US adventure in Iraq proved to be a mess, not even remotely as rapid and successful as the first one in the early 1990's. Hence, the effort to rejuvenate the peace process is not a matter of putting the “final touches” to a successful operation by changing the dynamics of the region. On the contrary, it appears to be the indispensable first step for the US to achieve even a minor improvement of the situation in the region that would safeguard an exit strategy from Iraq and a way to bolster internally the pro-western Arab countries that face increasing domestic challenges.

Without entering into the examination of the actual interrelation between the Iraq War, terrorism and the Arab-Israeli conflict, one remark could be readily drawn: despite the fact that, according to the report, in the core rests America's national interest, President Bush doesn't seem persuaded as he refrained from fully embracing the suggestions of the report, saying that it's just one of the many yet to come. On the other hand, the Democrats' control of the Congress will not necessarily entail a U-turn in US foreign policy. The disavowal with which the new book of Jimmy Carter “Palestine, Peace Not Apartheid” was met by the Democratic Party, indicates that it



is uncertain that the - Democratic - Congress feels ready to lead a “campaign of criticism and pressure” towards Israel in order to push for a renewal of peace talks. In other words, with a clearly articulated interest missing, the prospects of taking the initiative and exerting sufficient pressure are dim.

The roots and the specific aspects of this reluctance today contrary to 1991 emerge if we examine the current regional landscape. The report makes it explicit that Iran and Syria should be included in the process. However, today's Iran does not resemble the rather weak player of 1991 after a devastating 8-year war with Iraq. For Syria, the peace process is not just a matter of the Golan anymore - as was the case during Hafiz al-Assad's rule; it is rather about her role as a key player in the region. However, the US continues to demand that Iran halts its nuclear program and that Syria avoids interference in Lebanon's domestic affairs, cooperates in the investigation of the murder of Hariri and ceases all assistance to Hezbollah. Obviously, the Bush Administration doesn't want to pay the price. On the other hand, it is unrealistic to expect Teheran and Damascus to come along without being offered any incentives at all. Apart from Iran and Syria, the only other open front in the region - except the Palestinian one - is Lebanon. However, due to the recent war and the ensuing internal strife, it seems highly unproductive at this point to pursue an Israeli-Lebanese peace settlement. Prime Minister Siniora's statement that Lebanon will be the last Arab country to make peace with Israel is quite illustrative of the contemporary regional framework.

As the scope of the process is de facto narrowed down, the Israeli-Palestinian dimension of the conflict is practically all that is left, and in this case past experience can be very useful. The Madrid Conference was completely undermined when Israel set off direct negotiations with the Palestinians, culminating in the Oslo agreements. In fact, as soon as the report came out, Prime Minister Olmert said that “conditions are not ripe to reopen talks with Damascus” while adding that “Israel is deeply interested in restarting new talks with the Palestinians”. The Israeli ambassador to the US, Sallai Meridor, expressed the same point of view saying that “the path to peace is in direct, bilateral negotiations”, thus precluding any efforts to address the conflict on a regional scale, as mentioned in the report. In other words, with one of the main actors unwilling and the traditional peace-broker not really interested, the ball is on the court of the one most-directly involved and most powerful: Israel.

As past experience has shown, Tel Aviv advocates bilateral agreements so as to be able to manoeuvre them more freely (or to derail them whenever it is deemed profitable) taking advantage of its relative superiority. This traditional approach is gaining more ground after the shock of the recent war that eroded Israel's image of military mightiness and power of deterrence. The summer war brought up one more problem for Israel. It exposed the dangers inherent in withdrawing from occupied territories without a prior agreement and Olmert, having to face the threats emanating from two areas which Israel has unilaterally evacuated (Gaza and Lebanon) had to admit that a withdrawal from West Bank is now out of the question, more so since the failures of unilateral disengagement have reinforced the settler community's leverage. In September, the government authorised the construction of new housing units while leaked plans to legalise outposts banned by the Roadmap have come to light.

As the option of unilateralism gradually loses its initial charm, the Olmert government is now in need of a new agenda to deal with the Palestinian question, not so for the sake of stabilizing its domestic standing (in Israel governments don't collapse for not doing enough but rather for “doing too much”) but in order to prepare for the worst case scenario: if Olmert loses control, there are already dauphins ready to take charge, such as the Israeli-Russian billionaire Arcadi Gaydamak. Recent polls indicate that if he decides to enter politics, his party would have the potential to gain a third of the seats (29% of votes).



After Hamas' electoral victory, both Washington and Jerusalem were convinced that an international financial and diplomatic boycott coupled with Israeli military pressure would force Hamas to bend over. Months of boycott showed that this policy is not working. A November opinion poll released by the Palestinian Centre for Public Opinion demonstrated that only a small portion of the Palestinians actually blame Hamas for the financial-humanitarian crisis in the Occupied Territories (24,6%). The effort to strengthen Abbas didn't bear fruit either. And the most disturbing thing for Olmert is that the Israeli soldier captured in June has yet to be released. As Abbas seems unable to prevail over Hamas, his unfulfilled threats to oust the government (the consequences from the recent Abbas' call for elections are yet to be seen, but the tension has already been escalating) damage his credibility not only vis-a-vis Hamas but also inside Fatah, and the talks for the formation of a government of national unity have once again reached a dead-end, it becomes clear that Hamas cannot be thrust aside. It's not clear yet if the recently prepared list of Palestinians kept in Israeli prisons to be exchanged with the Israeli soldier includes the very popular Fatah-Tanzim leader Marwan Barghouti (among the many to advocate such a move is the Cabinet minister and former senior Shin Bet official, Gideon Ezra) who could indeed boost Fatah, but still the fact remains that any kind of agreement needs the consent of Hamas.

Comprehensive negotiations and a final status agreement are, for the time being, as unattainable as ever, since neither Hamas nor Israel feel ready to pass through the "minefield" of interim agreements, let alone the issues of Jerusalem and the refugees. Instead, a more viable formula would focus on the Quartet's third condition which calls on Hamas to denounce the use of violence. Certainly, there isn't a single actor that "controls the trigger" (as for example Hezbollah in Lebanon), but still Hamas enjoys a comparative advantage and was smart enough to prove it by acceding to the recent cease-fire while at the same time "letting" Islamic Jihad and the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades threaten a resumption of rocket fire so as to show that only they can guarantee relative calm. And Israel was quick to accept it and did so with the full support of the cabinet. Even the much feared Avigdor Lieberman did not oppose it.

Still, some would argue, there is something missing from the picture. In contrast with the early '90s, Israel now experiences one of its most terrorism-free periods. However, in case of inter-Palestinian fighting or the collapse of PA, a new Intifada cannot be ruled out as both Hamas and Fatah realise that they can retain their support bases only through fighting Israel. Recently, the exiled Hamas leader Khaled Meshal said "his movement was ready to give peace negotiations six months to reach an agreement", but threatened "a new uprising if talks fail". The murder of the three children of the Fatah-affiliated Baha Balousheh a few days ago and the consequent "response attacks" and exchange of charges from both of sides -that peaked with the attack on PM Hanieyh's convoy as he was crossing the Gaza-Egypt border after being held for hours following a dispute with Israel over donation money he was carrying-, show that this can happen even earlier. This third Intifada could get easily out of hand as it will probably be characterised by Al-Qaeda-like violence and some kind of participation from armed gangs (according to the Palestinian Independent Commission for Citizens' Rights, crime in Gaza and West Bank has increased by 50% compared to last year). But then again history doesn't repeat itself. Or is it perhaps possible that it does?



Beyond Lebanon: *Syria's regional standing*

Ilias Tassopoulos

The Iraq Study Group (ISG) report that was released in December, recommended to the US administration to engage Syria so as to solve a more crucial issue: the stabilization of Iraq. Engaging Syria is not going to be easy, though.

According to the report, the engagement of Syria should be accompanied by a New Diplomatic Offensive for the settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The authors probably had in mind that the Syrian regime would find it very difficult to conclude an agreement with Israel, unless progress in the Israeli-Palestinian track is achieved. A compromise on the Golan Heights does not seem to be enough.

Commentators believe that the Bush administration is not capable of performing the task of cooperating with Syria. Aside from the fact that President Bush seems unwilling to adopt the ISG recommendations, his administration has never indicated that it wishes to adopt such a policy. Before the rise of the Republican Party's neoconservative wing, the US-Syrian relations were showing signs of improvement. Syria had participated in the 1991 Gulf war on the side of the US-led coalition under the administration of George H. W. Bush. Bilateral relations under the Clinton administration indicated that Syria and the US could find a common ground for cooperation. However, the collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in 2000 resulted in a more aggressive policy towards Syria. Consequently, the Bush administration adopted a much harder stance toward Syria. The US hoped that Syria would agree to their demands, without offering any quid pro quos. The US administration thinks that talking with Syria would not advance the national interest.

The fact that the US policy involves only sticks and no carrots has severe repercussions for US-Syrian relations. Due to Syria's internal power structure, Damascus faces great difficulties when it yields under external pressures. The regime's survival has always been at stake. The Syrian regime consists of members of the Alawi minority who dominate the Ba'ath party and, in addition, hold crucial positions in the Army since the end of the French Mandate. These two factors combined ensure that the Alawi minority prevails over the Sunni majority.

As a result, the regime's legitimacy stems not only from the preservation of the domestic status quo and but also from projecting the image of a strong Syria throughout the Arab world. It has been argued that the pursuit of a dominant role in regional affairs helps the regime counterbalance the fact that an Alawi minority controls the state. Yielding to Western demands would demonstrate that the regime is not capable of performing all the above tasks, that is maintaining domestic order and a dominant position in the Arab world.

At present, the Syrian regime seems determined to resist US and European pressures, since the current balance of power, with the deteriorating situation for the US forces in Iraq, is deemed to be working in Damascus' favor. If Iraq disintegrated, chaos would reign in the region, endangering the smooth energy supply. The Syrian regime thinks that the situation in Iraq, Israel's unilateral policy and the threat of Islamic fundamentalism will impel the US to reassess its policy vis a vis Syria. Syrian offi-



cers appear to be certain that the will of the US to pressure Syria will diminish sooner or later. In such an eventuality, the regime will have increased space for maneuvering in its dealing with the problems of the region.

In addition, Assad seems to think that the time has come to reap the fruits of his successful policy choices (supporting Hizbollah and aligning with Iran) so as to start negotiations with Israel from a position of strength. Moreover, according to the Jaffee Center of Tel Aviv University, if negotiations fail, Syria has the option of resorting to a limited form of violence in order to regain the Golan Heights. Israeli analysts contend that the summer war has created the impression that Israel cannot fight against a guerrilla army. Launching such a “popular struggle” would gain the support not only of Arab and Muslim societies, but also in the international arena, where the Golan Heights are considered an occupied territory. Assad seems to believe that his army is ready for a military showdown. But even if the war ends in failure, the Syrian regime won't collapse, as these moves will have enhanced its internal legitimacy.

In any case, Syria wants to exploit the situation by stressing that it can perform a stabilizing role in the region, in contrast with other states. Maintaining good relations with the US could prove useful to Syria so as to pressure Israel to make concessions. Despite the fact that Syria and the US have conflicting interests vis a vis several issues, the threat of militant Sunni Islamism is an issue that worries both. This might turn out to be the golden section for a convergence of their policies in the future.

However, the Lebanon issue sets Syria and the West apart, as the former's interference in Lebanese politics contravenes US and European interests. For its part, Damascus wants to ensure that Israel will not gain influence over Lebanon's political system. Besides, Syria's strategic interests dictate that Israel should never be allowed to use Lebanon as a base for an attack.

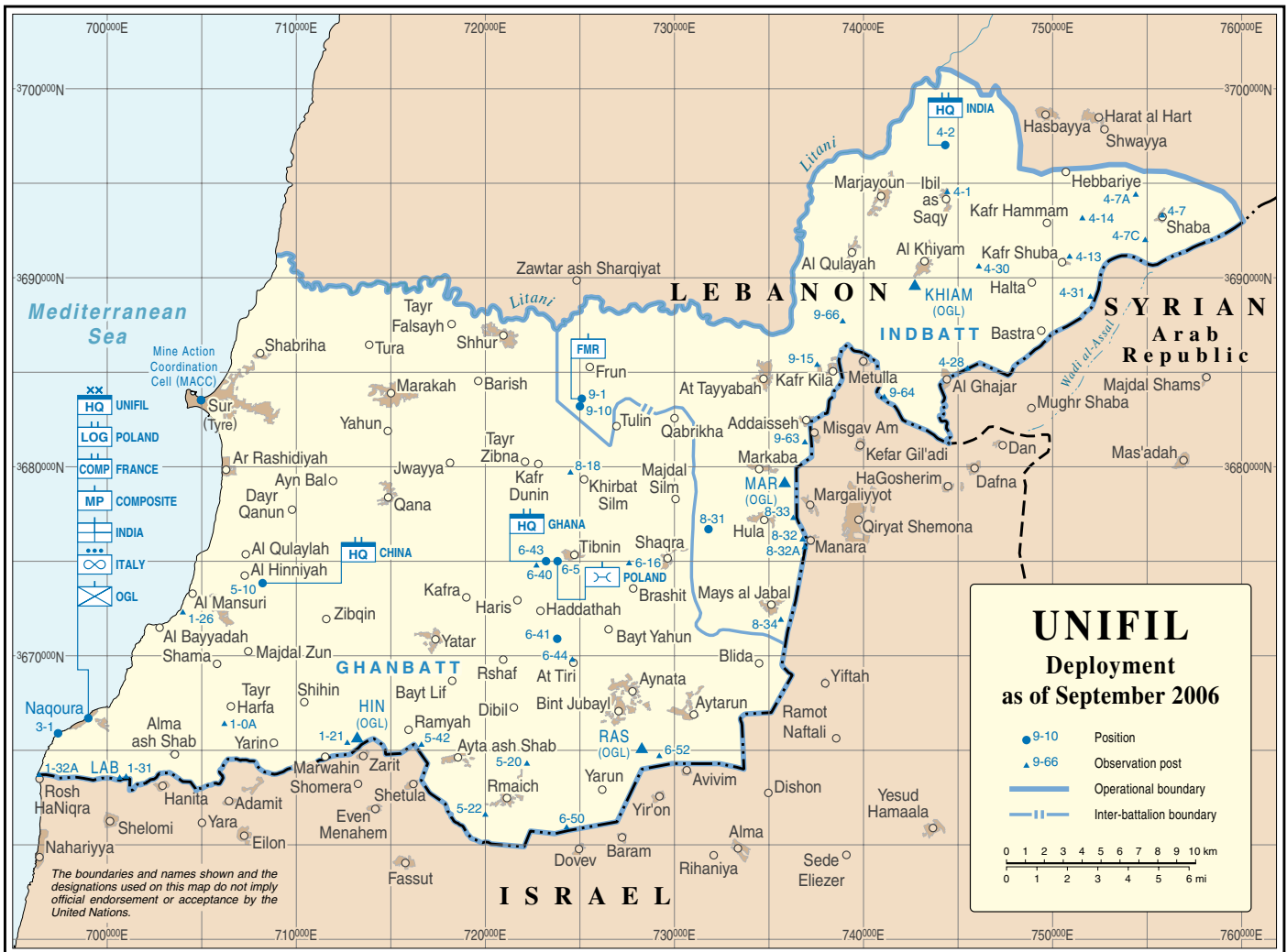
Syria- as well as Iran - supports Hizbollah so as to counterbalance the US and at the same time avoid a direct clash with Israel. It has also used Hizbollah's attacks against Israeli targets as leverage against Israel. Researchers maintain that weak states back terrorist organizations so as to balance the superior force of other states. Nevertheless, there is another

aspect in Syria's alliance with Hizbollah. Hizbollah has provided a means for Syria to retain a dominant position in Lebanon.

Damascus has opted to tighten its links with Hizbollah, after the latter came out of the summer war with Israel as a “winner”. In Lebanon, Hizbollah has been attempting to change Lebanon's political system by filling the power vacuum in Lebanese politics. Shooting down an Israeli warplane is Hizbollah's primary military target in order to present itself as the only party capable of standing up against Israel.

Controlling the government is another crucial aspect of its strategy. Hizbollah can no longer use its principal base in southern Lebanon to attack Israel. By having a veto power, Hizbollah would be





Map No. 4144 Rev. 16E UNITED NATIONS
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Department of Peacekeeping Operations
Cartographic Section

able to obstruct the deployment of UN forces in South Lebanon, in order to restore its activity in the South. Meanwhile, Hizbollah has already coalesced with General Michel Aoun in order to bring down the government. However, Hizbollah stresses the national character of the movement, so as to legitimize the veto power that it hopes to ensure in the new government.

On the other hand, internal factors also influence Syria's policy towards Lebanon. The view brought up by American analysts that Assad's argument about internal pressure is merely an excuse, is not depicting the whole picture. For its part, the "old guard" will threaten the regime's survival, if it endangers the profitable mostly black market enterprises in which Syria's businessmen and officers participate in Lebanon.

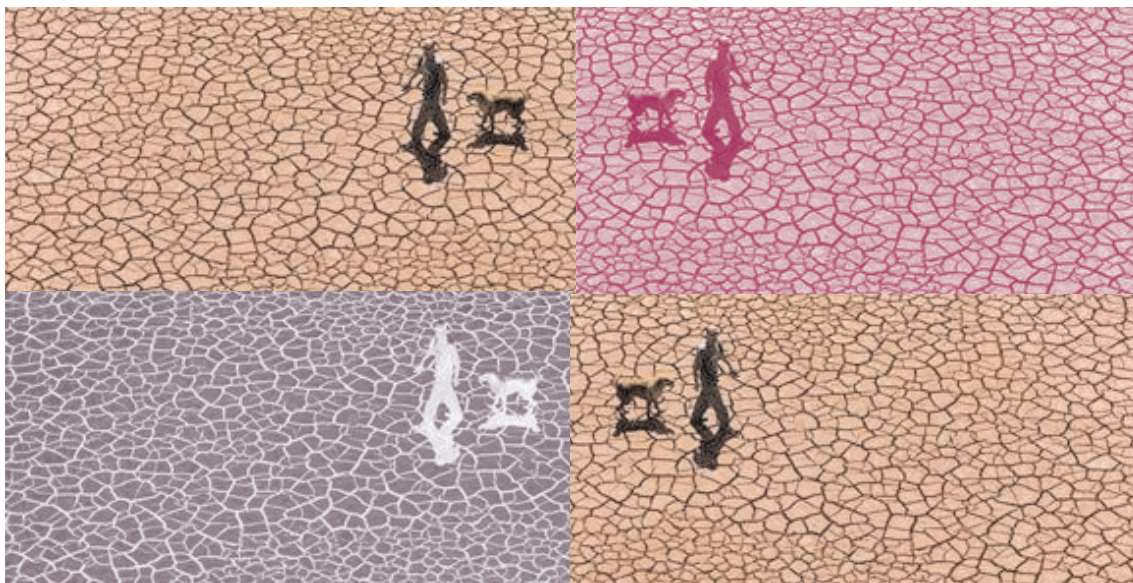
At the same time, a lot of Syrians earn their living in Lebanon, where the wages are much higher than in Syria. By encouraging the redundant labor force to work in Lebanon, the Syrian regime lets off steam. As unemployment rises and the standard of living falls in Syria, the pressure for the regime is getting higher.

Well-known Israeli analysts suggest that Syria uses any peace proposals to raise the cost of a potential American or Israeli aggression. At present, Damascus is pressured to cooperate with the US in Lebanon and in Iraq. Nevertheless, it doesn't seem willing to cooperate. Moreover, as far as Lebanon is concerned, all the signs show that Syria's influence hasn't faded away, despite last year's withdrawal of the Syrian troops. Lebanon's former President, Amin Gemayel, long before the assassination of his son, had pointed out that during the occupation Syria managed to infiltrate all of Lebanon's national institutions and it would take time to erase its presence.



Mahgreb Countries: New *Prospects* and *Challenges* for Arab North Africa

Ioannis V. Mantzikos



Despite the fact that Mahgreb countries belong (geographically) to Africa, geo-political analysis arguably considers them as part of Middle East. This view has drawn much attention on that region that is far different from that drawn on sub-Saharan Africa. Looking at 2007, Mahgreb countries face important challenges such as: the future of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism, the debate over Arab civil society, and their integration in the global economy.

The long projected Arab Mahgreb Union has been advanced in early 1989, with the formation of a joint Parliament consisting five member states (Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia). Despite the agreement for intra co-ordination and strengthening of relations with regional groups (especially with the European Union), Mahgreb countries appeared lukewarm to resolve major problems (including Morocco's policy in Western Sahara, Qaddafi's foreign policy and disputes between Senegal and Mauritania).

By late 2006, the EMP, instead of creating an integrated region around Mediterranean, has emerged as a hub and spokes arrangement, with the EU as the hub connected to each partner state by separate bilateral trade links or spokes. Mahgreb countries have voiced complaints about their disadvantages, especially in the agricultural sector. For their part, they emphasize that southern European members have lobbied effectively in Brussels in order to protect their farmers from competition aroused by North African producers. Europeans, on the other hand, are disappointed by the weakness that Arab African states have shown in corruption combat, as well as in accountability and transparency promotion.

The Mahgreb region also confronts looming problems that underscore the need to accelerate growth and facilitate changes in their structure of production in the coming years. First, the rapid labor



force growth in the presence of high unemployment has created an urgent need for a sustained increase in the number of jobs. Estimations rate unemployment to 11-14%, with higher rates in urban areas (18%) and among college graduates (above 20%) Second, Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria (dominated mainly by fuel exports estimated at 90% of her total exports) are dependent on few export industries. Morocco and Tunisia are heavily dependent on clothing exports and with the ascent of China and India as major low-cost producers, these countries will have to take measures to transform their industries. Third, the integration of eastern European countries in EU has created an important source of competition for trade and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) for Mahgreb countries. Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland are able to utilize a much larger stock of inwards FDI than Mahgreb (Bulgaria for i.e. has 842 firms certified with ISO 9001 while Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia have 226 totally).

Islamic fundamentalism is one of the most important issues in contemporary Mahgreb region. This has also increased the United States' involvement in Africa. Mahgreb countries have reacted differently to this phenomenon (fundamentalism). Algeria, besides legislation changes in order to help counterterrorism (including amnesty laws and a process for national reconciliation), uses a number of other techniques such as the establishment of counterterrorism governmental groups [such as the Brigade Mobile de Police Judiciaire (BMPJ) and the Groupe d' Intervention Rapide (GIR), who act supportively to the police force and the army]. Morocco has chosen the classical route of trials and legislative measures to fight terrorism. The US administration is assisting Morocco in a number of counter-terrorism initiatives, under State Department's reference. Tunisia, however, has focused on the social dimension of terrorism; a strategy that has been followed since the 1980s.

The US has established the Pan-Sahel Initiative since 2003. This program that initially was applicable to countries such as Chad, Mali, Niger and Mauritania has expanded the last years in Mahgreb. The Sahel/Mahgreb region is of special concern to the US due to the prevalent nomadic life style which inhibits border control and law enforcement. Ed Royce (former Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Africa, US Representative) stated: "North Africa is the place where our fight against terrorism is being fought". An important factor is also Libya's and US restoration of diplomatic relations last May. Qaddafi's regime has set up an alliance with the US in countering al-Qaeda and its offshoots. Furthermore, Libya stands-off over Iran's nuclear ambitions and has the largest oil reserves in North Africa ((29.5 thousand million barrels, out of 42.4 thousand million of total North Africa) and (2.8% share of world total, out of 4.1% of total North Africa)), safely distant from the Persian Gulf, and these aspects are crucial (for the US) in terms of pure Realpolitik. However the US are afraid of China's oil and gas ambitions in North Africa. For example, Mauritania's possession of promising oil and gas fields in Taoudeni Basin has caused the intervention of China National Petroleum Co.

Another issue that influences the Mahgreb is the continuing dispute between Morocco and the Polisario Liberation Front over the Western Sahara region. The Moroccans rule out a referendum that was scheduled since 1992. The United Nations (UN) is still promoting a referendum plan, but the Moroccan government is only willing to consider a kind of regional autonomy. Foreign oil companies operating in Western Sahara have become targets of international protest campaigns, because of the region's unsettled status. As of May 2005, Kerr-McGee (the last Western company) has pulled out.

Arab Mahgreb deals with the debate over civil society and its relevance with the issue of democracy. Arab North Africa countries have structural disadvantages concerning non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) and their relationship with the Arab state and democracy within. Research results have shown that governments maintain a contradictory and opportunistic attitude towards these organizations. They are keen on practicing the relationship in a functional and selective manner. There is also no demarcation line between governmental and civil actions. This situation negates Arab Mahgreb CSOs independence, which is a precondition for the existence of an effectively functioning civil society. In order to encourage civil society in Mahgreb, the Euromed Civil Forum has decided to establish a "Permanent Negotiation Mechanism" with Arab CSOs and a "Non-governmental Euro-Med Platform" as an assisting sector.



NATO & EGYPT:

Partnership dilemmas

Ilias Tassopoulos

The dilemmas facing the NATO-Egypt relationship are typical of the implications that come up when the issue of NATO's involvement in the Middle East arises. NATO's firm position is that the problems of the region are political and economic, rather than military. Simultaneously, the issue of Egypt's cooperation with the West is always in question.

Boutros Boutros- Ghali, the Egyptian former UN Secretary General, observed a few months before the 2003 Iraq war that "...no conference was convoked after the end of the Cold War" so as "...to explore the new situation at the end of the conflict". In essence, NATO was the winning alliance, an alliance that did not dissolve after the end of the war. In contrast, NATO has been transforming itself since then. Some analysts maintain that it has become an organization with totally altered objectives, preserving unaltered only its "brand name".

After the end of the Cold War, NATO did trace a new threat. This time, the threat came from the South, not from the East. The West was threatened by the combination of stagnant economies and growing populations in the less developed countries. The fact that these countries didn't have functioning state mechanisms in order to manage these trends resulted in the danger of instability diffusion. The problems of the less developed South could trouble the developed West as illegal immigration and terrorist activities increased, endangering the energy routes.

Taking the above under consideration, the Western initiatives were intended to prove that its policies didn't contradict the interests of the Arab states. The Oslo Accords, as a sign of the Western intention to help resolve the Palestinian issue, made it possible for NATO to cooperate with the Arab states.

NATO had the ability to cover a host of needs, military above all, having access in an unmatched technology. Exploiting its comparative technological advantage, NATO has now risen as the sole organization with the potential to provide security in the region. Simultaneously a technical and political bond is created with any state that decides to cooperate.

All in all, it has been very difficult for any Egyptian regime to participate in a permanent multilateral alliance with Western countries, especially after the July 1952 Revolution. The main reasons are both Egypt's special role in the Arab world and its anticolonialist past. Nevertheless, Egypt participated in the NATO Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) in 1994, after the positive developments of the previous year. The MD intended to engage the Middle Eastern states, offering them a reduction of the insecurity that abounded a few years after the end of the Cold War.

The multifaceted positive effects of the NATO- Egypt cooperation rest in the large number of available Egyptian soldiers for NATO operations but also in Egypt's status in Arab societies. At present, the contribution of troops to NATO operations is more than desirable, as the major countries are stretched to the limit, participating in operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon. As if these were not enough, the national "caveats" constitute another serious issue.

Bearing these developments in mind, Egyptian troops are more than welcome. Egyptian troops have already participated in NATO peace operations in Bosnia (along with Morocco's and Jordan's) and seem able to carry through successful peace operations in countries with Arab population. Egypt se-



ems willing to contribute troops in peace operations in Sudan, where Egyptian troops already take part in the African Union's force in Darfur (NATO and EU are providing support). However, Egypt has refused to send troops to Iraq, even under a UN umbrella. Nevertheless, the country has trained Iraqi soldiers in Egypt and stands ready to train more, as American Generals contend. Egypt has also refused to send troops to Afghanistan, though the issue may rise again.

Nowadays, NATO's capabilities are enormous, based on the high level of integration - for an international organization - of its forces. The organization can contribute in maintaining borders' security, in facilitating information exchange as well as enhancing cooperation in airspace management, civil emergency planning, and crisis management. The November 2006 Riga Summit recognized that "for the foreseeable future, the principal threats to the Alliance are terrorism and proliferation, as well as failing states, regional crises, misuse of new technologies and disruption of the flow of vital resources." As for the "countries who contribute to or support our operations and missions politically, militarily

and in other ways", the NATO summit has decided, "...to call ad-hoc meetings as events arise... using flexible formats for consultation meetings".

In any case, NATO's ability to implement its principles is very important for a future successful partnership with the Arabic states. Egypt is essential for demonstrating the implementation of the non-discrimination principle, proving to Arab states that there is an opportunity for them to benefit from a partnership with NATO. A successful partnership with Egypt might also be useful for the implementation of the principles of complementarity (participating simultaneously in other regional collaboration schemes, without complications or overlapping) and self-differentiation (adjustment to any partner's needs).

Egypt is willing to cooperate with NATO on issues concerning the Arab-Israeli conflict and the stabilization of the Horn of Africa. Perhaps, that could also be the case for Iraq. Still, the main precondition for ensuring Egypt's cooperation is the regional acceptance of NATO's role in the Middle East. As a result, the continuation of their relationship is contingent on the successful settlement of the Arab world's problems.

Perhaps more important, the Egyptian regime reckons that a close NATO- Egypt cooperation could have a negative impact on her status in the Arab world. Egyptian diplomats argue that the inclusion of Syria, Libya and Lebanon in a NATO partnership would allow Egypt to further expand its cooperation with NATO. Libya, after its rapprochement with the West, has already been included in Western initiatives (e.g. Greater Middle East Initiative). However, "NATO is not yet ready to invite them to join this partnership", as deputy secretary general Minuto Rizzo replied, when asked about the reason that Syria and Libya were excluded from the Mediterranean Partnership States.

It is not just NATO's hesitation. Egypt might avoid expanding its relationship with NATO, as there is another potential implication: ever since the Camp David Accord, Egypt receives a generous annual military help from the US that could be put into reconsideration if Egypt's relationship with NATO becomes closer.



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Darfur: the battle for the soul of political Islam in Sudan

Ioannis V. Mantzikos

The massive campaign of ethnic violence in Darfur has been viewed by several analysts as a pastoral or tribal dispute. Nevertheless, Darfur represents a major challenge to the Khartoum regime. Given the immensity and complexity of the conflict, the signing of Darfur Peace Agreement affects the fragile North-South peace process, causes divisions within the Darfurians and raises the geopolitical stakes on the Horn of Africa.

In 1999, Omar al-Bashir dissolved the parliament in order to prevent Hassan al-Turabi's intentions to manipulate the governing party. Turabi was a vociferous critic of the monopolization of state politics by the two Sufi families the Khatmiya and the Ansar. His ideological influence on Darfurians and the discontent with Khartoum have been associated with the rise of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM).

The Darfurian insurgency is related with two intersecting conflicts: first, the political and economic marginalization of the area by Khartoum and, second, the Arab-African divide. Both have a direct connection to the 1994 "reform" when the Fur, the largest tribe in the region split up into three internal governorates (North, South and West Darfur), and Khartoum elites promoted the "Arabisation" of

Table 1: Major ethnic groups in Sudan (Northern and Darfur region)

1. Arab ethnic groups	mostly Northern Sudan and parts of Central Sudan	Baggara, Batahin, Hamar, Hawawir, Kawahila, Jaalin, Manasir, Rufaa, Schukria, Selim & Taaischa.
2. Other ethnic groups	mostly Western Sudan	Dago, Fur, Maba, Tama & Zaghawa

Source: Sudan Peace and Reconciliation Commission (SPRC), Strategic Plan Document for Peace and Reconciliation in a Post-Conflict Sudan (SDP-PCS), October 2004.

governmental positions within Darfur. Douglas Johnson (a regional analyst) emphasizes that: "as the war in Chad spilled into Darfur, it sharpened the divide between Arabs and Blacks (Zuruq), with Sudanese Islamist parties now equating Islam with Arabism". The rebellion against Khartoum began in early 2003, when fighting in Darfur between government forces, its militia allies (known as the janjaweed) and the Sudanese Liberation Movement (SLM) joined by the JEM, spread across the region.

Darfur's implication in the North-South peace process is also important. Sudan's People Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the National Congress Party (NCP) have different views about the resolution of the conflict. In Comprehensive Peace Agreement talks, the Darfurian demand for a seat at the Presidency was declined. Although basic principles of the agreement include political pluralism, human rights and fiscal federalism, the negotiating partners thought that Darfurian inclusion would affect the guarantees of a 50% representation for the NCP in the National Assembly.

The Darfurians also face a series of important challenges, initiated by the Abuja peace process (conducted under the reference of Olusegun Obasanjo, President of Nigeria). At the seventh round of the peace talks, there were clear indications of dissent within the rebel groups. The SLA (Sudanese Liberation Army) was split into two major factions, one led by Minni Arkoi Minnawi and another led by Abdel Wahid Nour. On May 2006, the government of Sudan and Minni Arkoi Minnawi faction has completed the signing the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA). Indeed, one of the major weaknesses of the peace process is that it lacked the confidence of key leader Wahid Nour. The further fracturing within Nour faction has elevated Minnawi as major representative of the rebels. However even in Minni Arkoi Minnawi's faction are numerous voices which are calling for rejection of the deal. Finally, the factions who have opposed the agreement have formed the National Redemption Front (NRF), comprised of JEM, Khamis Abdallah Ibrahim (SLA former vice-president) and other non-signatory actors. Khalil Ibrahim (JEM's leader) commented: "this is a call for people of Darfur to join NRF, in order to realize justice and lasting peace for all".

The government of Sudan has recently accepted the deployment of UN troops (based on Kofi Annan's suggestion for the "expansion of the current UN mission based in the South"). The African Union (AU) has established a mission of 7,000 peacekeeping forces in Darfur from September 2005 and was expected to reach 12,500 by the end of 2006. Apart from African nations, no other country has been willing to send troops in Darfur. However, continuing challenges impede AU's mission in Darfur, such as the involvement of institutional structures and financial constraints. In other terms AU's various organs are still evolving and have not matured yet to the level where their effectiveness can be felt. Moreover, the inability of AU to airlift 300 soldiers to Darfur shows that the organization lacks the financial capacity to carry out such a mission. AU inherited a US\$42 million debt from African Unity Organization. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) operates in eastern Chad, where 300,000 refugees from West Darfur have fled. UNHCR expenditures are among the highest per refugee in the world. Some UN observers estimate that 2 million Darfurians have been displaced and 300,000 have been killed. The UN Security Council has adopted a resolution that entails the handover of AMIS (African Union Mission in Sudan) to United Nations; a decision endorsed by the UK and the United States, but not by China, Russia and Qatar. In July 30, the UN Security Council threatened Janjaweed with sanctions if they will not get immediately disarmed.

Moreover, the bloodshed in Darfur has an impact on other regional players such as Chad and Egypt. Last April, the President of Chad, Idriss Deby (a Zaghawa himself, one of the major ethnic groups in Darfur), accused Sudan of assisting rebels camped in Darfur for a coup against him. Sudan on the other hand, accused Deby of enhancing his support for Darfurian rebels. Finally on July, both governments have signed an accord in order not to use the Darfur territory to destabilize the region. However, this "honeymoon" period will continue, if only Minnawi, (who is from the Zaghawa tribe, as Deby) remains in the political game.

Egypt has backed the National Islamic Front (NIF) and its violent policies. The Egyptian President, Hosni Mubarak believes that it is essential for his regional strategy (because of the importance of Nile waters) that Sudan remains unified, with any cost. Thus, any threat on Sudan's peace processes (CPA and DPA) can address conflicts, like the inter-Nuer in the Upper Nile, the Bahr el Ghazal and Liliir in the eastern bank of Nile and, the Dinka and Nuer in western Upper Nile. The United States is worried about the aggressive Ethiopian foreign policy in the Horn of Africa, in Somalia particularly, due to the instability inside Somalia. Therefore, they consider Sudan as an important ally that might be of considerable assistance in the resolving of both cases.



Egypt Jordan:

The “alliance of moderate Arabs”

Panagiotis Bakalis, Alexandra Karaïskou, Vassiliki Christina Katsaouni

Egypt and Jordan, “the forces of moderation”, seem to seek a stabilizing role in a region stumbling from one crisis to another, while the ever-present Palestinian problem still remains unresolved. At the same time, they strive to balance between their greater strategic goals and their people's sentiment.

Egypt and Jordan (as well as Saudi Arabia) are the bastions of the moderate pro-Western camp in the Middle East. They have long strived to develop a strategic relationship with the West in order to counterbalance their vulnerability. Especially after the settlement of their disputes with Israel, they have earned the right to serve as “advisors” to US foreign policy in the region. The United States have actually bestowed upon them the role of buffers between moderation and radicalism. The US is in favour of a coalition between Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, which will minimize the influence of the forces of extremism on the main political issues. Secretary Rice, during her recent tour in the region, has asked the three members of the alliance to support the opponents of Hizbullah in Lebanon, of Hamas and Jihad in Palestine and of the armed resistance in Iraq, and to promote a strong, moderate central authority in these countries.

Egypt was the first country to abandon the anti-Israeli block, after signing the Camp David agreement in 1979, and it was followed, 15 years later, by Jordan, which signed its Peace Treaty with Israel in 1994, transforming the past enmity into a cooperative relationship focused mainly on collaboration and joint economic development. They remain the only Arab states to have formally normalized relations with Israel.

The current situation in Palestine should have been an opportunity for a more direct involvement in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in order to facilitate the re-opening of the peace process. But if they chose to do so, they will probably face dilemmas that will reduce their political manoeuvring capacity. Their prime dilemma is how to equilibrate between the fulfilment of Palestinian aspirations for an independent state and the maintenance of stable relationships with Israel. In Egypt, the government is exposed to frequent attacks by the Muslim Brotherhood, which criticizes Mubarak for his “mild” positions. In this way, the MB tries to take advantage of the gap between the government's policies and the sentiment on the street. As for the Kingdom of Jordan, the Islamic Action Front (IAF) -the sanctioned political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood- whose new leading elite consists of Jordanians of Palestinian origin, has launched a campaign against Abdullah's strategy for the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, in the view of the upcoming elections.

In addition, both Egypt and Jordan have difficulty in influencing the future of the Palestinian Authority. They both agree that the formation of a national unity government in Palestine is crucial for the development of the peace process. They have been working for a compromise between Fatah and Hamas (especially Egypt that has repeatedly hosted talks between the opposing factions). However, a possible rise of Hamas' status could have an impact on their domestic political scene, as it could serve as an example for radicals in the region, and actually, in the tug-of-war over the ad-



ministration of the Palestinian territory, they would prefer the prevalence of the more moderate factions. This becomes evident in the case of Jordan, as during the months following the IAF's leadership elections in March, where Bani-Irshayd, the representative of the Palestinian faction of the MB, was elected secretary general. That, to some analysts, suggests a " Hamasization " of the party that gives great importance to the 2007 elections and challenges the " Jordan First " slogan of King Abdullah. This slogan, briefly, refers to the nationalization of the internal political scene and the removal of any foreign influence. An increase of IAF's parliamentary presence will strengthen the Palestinians' position in the decision making and shift, more or less, Jordan's strategy in the area. For instance, Bani-Irshayd stated, rather exceedingly, that should IAF win the elections (a rather improbable development), they would bring a referendum to overturn the 1994 Peace Agreement with Israel.

The lack of political legitimacy became once again evident during the Lebanon crisis. Egypt and Jordan criticized Hizbullah's behaviour, describing its action as " risky and uncalculated adventurism ", in accordance to western official positions. They called for the deployment of an international force and the immediate implementation of the UN Resolution 1559, for the disarmament of militias (including Hizbullah). Minimizing Hizbullah's influence, in Lebanon in particular and in the Arab world in general, is essential not only for the Egyptian-Jordanian policy but also for the US strategy, as they want to prevent the conversion of Lebanon to a Shia rampart and to counter possible foreign influences within their domestic politics. If the Shiites gain advantage over their opponents (the pro-western Seniora government and the anti-Syrian parties) in their struggle for power, it will lead to an enhancement of Syria and Iran's relative position in the area. The importance of the second argument is evident, considering that after the anger on the streets, the leaders had to amend their position, so that they could blame Israel, but at the same time deprive the Lebanese resistance from any kind of official support.

To this point, we have seen that Egypt and Jordan share their views on the region with the United States. Differences have also been expressed on various issues, including Iraq. Despite the distance both countries kept from the Saddam Hussein regime during the 1990's, and the given alliance with the United States, they did not agree with the Bush's administration's decision to invade Iraq, as they feared that the crisis might spill over to neighbouring countries. Mubarak especially " stressed that he would prefer to see the United States its commitment to resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict than to attack Iraq ". Nonetheless, they both facilitated the American military campaign in many ways, including the installation of Patriot missiles' battery and the presence of troops in the borders of Jordan.

With regards to the current situation in Iraq, both countries express their opposition to an immediate withdrawal of the Americans from Iraq, which could deteriorate the security condition in Iraq and embroil the country to a civil war. President Mubarak stated that " if the Americans left now, it would be a catastrophe because the war will get worse, and the country will become the theatre of an ugly civil war and terror will eat up not only Iraq but the entire region " King Abdullah also noted the danger " of turning a political dispute into a sectarian and religious conflict among the people of one religion and one country ". The fear of a spill over of the crisis in the Middle East is leading the two countries to contribute to the " rehabilitation " of Iraq in an active manner. Egypt, after the shock of Ihab el-Sherif, the Egyptian ambassador in Baghdad, murder on July 8 2005, has reassessed its diplomatic approach towards Iraq. It's trying to reconcile Iraq's many factions in order to maintain ethnic unity and contain the radical insurgents, but it is still uncertain of how deep its involvement must be. On the other hand Jordan has profound historical, economical and political ties with Iraq. This is why Jordan intends to play a significant role to the reconstruction of Iraq. This commitment was recently sealed (14/12/2006) with the agreement for the creation of a joint committee for the enhancement of security between the two neighbours and the exchange of intelligence on terrorism and organized crime.



The Concept of *taqiyya* and the Shiites in Iraq today

By Evangelos Venetis*, University of Leiden

After almost three and a half years after the US-British overthrow of Saddam Hussein's government, the Shiite majority has been at the spearhead of the Iraqi government along with the Kurds under the auspices of the US and British foreign policies. The current situation in Iraq with the lack of security and the Shiite-Sunni rivalry, which has taken proportions of civil war, has sent signals of emergency about the viability of Iraq as a state in the future. The role of the Shiite majority in the US plans for the stability and preservation of Iraq as a single independent entity rely, along with the separatist Kurds in the north, almost entirely on the performance of the Shiite government of Nouri al-Maliki. But what is the attitude of the Shiites in this fragile relation with the US administration? This text suggest that the Shiite concept of *taqiyya* (=dissimulation) is the key to interpret the overall Shiite attitude to the US and British presence in their country.

Undoubtedly, the Shiites are the ones who have been benefited the most after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Actually they passively helped the fall of Saddam by not opposing the US-British military operations in the country in spring 2003. In spite of some exceptions (Muqtada al-Sadr's revolt in 2004 and some skirmishes or even battles with the Mehdi Army and the Badr Brigades), the Shiites have also helped the US and British forces by not attacking them during these years of the western forces in the country. Moreover the Shiites did not oppose the elections and 'democratisation' of Iraq. Hence they participated in the elections and they emerged as the leading political force in the political scene of Iraq by having the majority of parliamentary seats and cabinets in the Iraqi government. The key personality in this attitude of tolerance of the Shiites to the US and British plans is Ayyatullah Ali Sistani who has repeatedly issued calls for abstention from reprisals against the violence of the Sunni militias against the Shiites. Sistani's edicts have been more or less found other top Shiite clergy men in full accord. An interesting question rises from the situation described above: why do the Shiites support the US plans for democratisation and the stability of Iraq?

The answer is twofold. In terms of power struggle it is plausible to think that the Shiites see that the US plans are in accordance with their interests: Saddam was their persecutor and they always lived in the shadow of the Sunni privileged minority. The Shiites know that if there is going to be a united Iraq, the US administration must rely on them. And it is in their (Shiite) best interest to keep the country united because they will be able to rule more provinces with more resources.

However, the second part of the answer lies in the Shiite religious-political world-concept. The religious Shiite functions who are elected and rule Iraq today are not the ones that the US desired for this role before the overthrow of Saddam's rule. It is obvious that secular Shiite forces and personae such as those of Ilyad Allawi and Ahmad Chalabi were chosen by the US to lead the political process amongst the Shiites. But apparently the power of the Shiite clergy proved to be stronger than the western powers had estimated. What is not widely known is that the Shiite world-concept is an Islamic one, i.e. they cannot accept the presence of non-Muslim forces in their lands. It is well known that Islam divides the world into dar al-Islam (Realm of Islam) and dar al-harb (Realm of War/non-Muslims). When non-Muslim forces attack dar al-Islam then the Muslims are obliged to conduct jihad (conventionally translated as 'holy war' but it actually means 'Striving in the Path of God'). This is exactly what happens with the Sunni Iraqi insurgency but this is not the case with the Shiites. Apart from the political gains the Shiites have gained from the US presence in their country, this is not enough to justify the moral-religious support of the clergy to a passive approach of the US-British occupation of Iraq. The answer to this question lies in the term of *taqiyya*.

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A theological analysis of *taqiyya*

This term literally means: "Concealing/disguising one's beliefs, ideas, feelings, and/or strategies at a time of eminent danger, whether now or later in time, to save oneself from physical and/or mental injury." In one word it could be translated as dissimulation. Expectedly enough this term forms the backbone of the behaviour and world-concept of the Shiites. The concept of *taqiyya* is distinctively Shiite and was developed in the early Islamic period, when the Shiites were marginalised by the Sunni Ummayyad Caliphs. The Sunni tradition asserts that *taqiyya* is an act of hypocrisy, serving to conceal the truth and reveal that which is the exact opposite (of the truth). Additionally, according to some Sunnis, *taqiyya* constitutes a lack of faith and trust in God because the person who conceals his beliefs to spare himself from eminent danger is fearful of humans, when, in fact, he should be fearful of God only.

Yet the Shiites have developed a long tradition of theology on the term of *taqiyya* and they have based their theological treatises on the Qur'an. The Shiites justify the practice using the following verse from the Qur'an:

"Any one who, after accepting faith in Allah, utters Unbelief, except under compulsion, his heart remaining firm in Faith, but such as open their breast to Unbelief, on them is Wrath from Allah, and theirs will be a dreadful Penalty." (16:106)

The first historical use of *taqiyya* begins from the time of the Prophet of Islam Muhammad. At that time, the Quraishites began torturing Muslims. Ammar ibn Yasir, one of Muhammad's followers, whose friends were killed by the Quraish for being Muslim, was confronted by a Quraishite. 'Ammar pretended to renounce Islam and saved his life. However it was after the assassination of Imam 'Ali ibn Abu Talib and his son Imam Hussein that the concept of *taqiyya* was established and developed amongst the Shiites. That period coincided with the Umayyad rule in the caliphate who marginalised the Shiite communities. This marginalisation involved persecution by the authorities against the descendants of the Prophet's family. Thus the Shiites decided to hide the identity of the family members and friends of the Prophet so as to escape persecution and assassination. The Shiites and some Sunnis believe that life is a gift from God and should be preserved. This practice was the first step in establishing the concept of *taqiyya* as an essential means of preserving one's life and religious values.

By contrast, it is asserted in the Sunni tradition that the Shi'a doctrine of *taqiyya* is not in accordance with its use to save one's life. The Sunnis claim that the Shiites have been using *taqiyya* as a tool of deception, not to save their own lives, but to cause strife for the Sunni Caliph and to legitimize their own minority faith in the eyes of a majority whom it is constantly surrounded by. In many Sunni writings, classical and contemporary it is stated that although *taqiyya* to save one's life can be considered as legitimate at times, the way that the Shiites have applied *taqiyya* by misrepresenting historical occurrences and sayings is forbidden.

***Taqiyya* in Iraq today**

Regardless of the Sunni viewpoint, the Shiites have developed their own theology and worldconcept and they consider *taqiyya* as legitimate means of preserving their faith when they face a dangerous enemy-oppressor. The Shiites have been practicing *taqiyya* for almost a thousand and a half years and they will continue doing so as long as they feel oppressed by Sunnis or by non-Muslims. Hence today the Shiite clergy in Iraq views the US-British presence in their country as illegal in political terms and immoral in religious terms. For the Shiites of Iraq the US-British rule led to the deposal of their tyrant and persecutor Saddam Hussein and the Shiites are happy with this development. Nevertheless, given that this deposal was dictated by non-Muslim (Christian) powers in dar al Islam, the initial content of the Shiites with this development was counterbalanced by the extended presence of multinational western forces in their lands. This presence is seen by the Shi-



ites as invasion and occupation of dar al-Islam by the involved Christian powers and due to the US-British military supremacy the Shiites have been engaged in conducting *taqiyah* towards the US and British administrations in Iraq.

The forms that *taqiyah* takes in Iraq today are multiple: the most fundamental is that of collaborating with the western forces as long as these forces seek collaboration with the Shiites. This collaboration is attested in political and military terms. In politics the Shiites religious parties have accepted and successfully exploited the western offer of holding elections and having democratic procedures established in the country. In military terms the Shiites have accepted military training by the US-British forces and hence they have formed the backbone of the Iraqi army and police currently. This collaboration has taken place under the auspices of the Shiite clergy in Iraq, especially the Grand Ayyatullah Ali Sistani as well as the rest of the three Grand Ayyatullahs in Iraq. The supremacy of the Shiite clergy in the political process in Iraq is unquestionable. The Shiites political personae and forces who have a religious world concept (Ibrahim al-Ja'afari, Nouri al-Maliki, Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, Moqtada al-Sadr and numerous others) have veified politically the religious initiative for collaboration with the multinational forces in Iraq.

What is interesting with the concept of *taqiyah* as such in general and in Iraq particularly is that practicing *taqiyah* by the faithful must not be obvious to the oppressor. In other words the call for *taqiyah* by the religious establishment to the faithful is indirect, silent if not secret as a whole. Hence, one should not expect any official announcement by an Ayyatullah that the Shiites should practice *taqiyah*. This explained by the fact that if there was such an announcement, then practicing *taqiyah* would be meaningless since the enemy of the Shiites would be aware of the dissimulation process. So the difficult thing for a non-Shiite is to understand when and which cases a Shiite conducts *taqiyah*. Actually this is one of the most important advantages that *taqiyah* ensures for a Shiite.

Thus what in Iraq today seems to be to the western eye an alliance-collaboration of the US-British administration with the Shiite majority in Iraq within a spirit of a democratic process, it is actually a superficial fragile coexistence which will come to an end sooner or later. It is evident from the above brief analysis that the US presence in Iraq cannot be considered as legitimate by the Shiite clergy and population in the country. The Shiites will stop conducting *taqiyah* once they US-British forces leave Iraq and when they see that the general political climate will enable the Shiites to unfold their own political and religious agenda. Such a development will endanger western interests in Iraq and will strengthen the influence of anti-western forces in the region.



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