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## THE rising ARAB regional ORDER

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## The Arab regional order at stake? The Saudi initiative and its effects

Ilias Tassopoulos

*The Riyadh summit comes at a time when violent radical organizations seem to question the Arab regimes' legitimacy in their own societies. At the same time, Saudi Arabia's activist foreign policy under King Abdullah highlights a turning point in the Arab regional order.*

The resumption of the Arab Peace Plan is of great importance, coming from a country which is widely perceived as the least likely to establish diplomatic relations with Israel because of her spiritual role in the Arab regional order and her conservatism. The Saudi initiative offers a diplomatic way out of the swamp of the "Arab-Israeli dialogue", while it puts Israel in a difficult position by challenging its claim that there are no moderate states or partners for peace in the region.

In the beginning of the 1980's, Saudi Arabia had proposed a plan which addressed central issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that the 1979 Camp David accords failed to resolve or issues that were only superficially addressed. Contrary to the 1981-2 Fahd Plan, the Saudi 2002 initiative offers an explicit recognition of Israel, ending the policy of "no peace, no direct negotiations, no recognition". Furthermore, the plan's formulation is much more moderate than the previous one: with regards to the issue of the Palestinian refugees' right of return to Israel, the plan calls for "...a just solution to the Palestinian Refugee problem". It has been argued that the Arab regimes could cover a large part of the finan-



cial burden, should a deal be struck involving Palestinian renunciation of the right of return in exchange for financial compensation by the state of Israel (regardless of the fact that the royal court of Jordan denied last month as "utterly baseless" the remarks attributed by the Israeli newspaper Haaretz to King Abdullah II that the Palestinian refugee problem could take the form of a mere "compensation" to the Palestinians who deserted their homes in 1948). The Arab states might also be willing to provide limited citizenship rights to the Palestinian refugees. However, in the course of the Riyadh Summit, some Arab states - mainly Syria - objected to this line of thinking by insisting that the bedrock of any settlement with Israel ought to be the return of the Palestinian refugees. In any case, the reference to UN General Assembly Resolution 194 that grants a right of return to 1948 Palestinian refugees was not removed from the proposal, contrary to Israel's wishes.

Following the Mecca Accord - where Saudi Arabia persuaded the Palestinian factions to form a National Unity Government in the Palestinian territories - the Arab States called the Riyadh summit, where there was widespread concern for the rise of Iranian influence throughout the Middle East. Apart from the Iranian issue, the Riyadh summit marked Saudi Arabia's attempt to restore the Arab states' role in the region. The most important aspect of the Saudi Initiative and the Mecca Agreement is the Arab regimes' - primarily Saudi Arabia's - effort to reassert their pre-eminence in the Arab world, even more so since, in the past few years, armed parties and groups have disturbed the state-centric Arab regional order. As the citizens of the Arab states identified their regimes as collaborators with the United States and objected to their leaders' practice of not giving priority to the Palestinian issue, non-state actors seem to have taken the lead on the Palestinian issue for the 'Arab street'. However, Saudi Arabia purports to reverse the rise of radical and extremist groups through the Arab Peace Plan - Saudi Arabia's response to the events of 9/11, as was argued.

Apart from the emergence of King Abdullah as a leader of the Arab world, different from previous kings, pursuing an activist foreign policy, the Saudi strategy is aimed at stabilizing the region as a whole so as to prevent the spread of sectarian violence. Additionally, Riyadh wishes to limit the interference of extra-regional powers in the region, while assuring that Iran will not embark on a drive for regional preponderance in the wake of an American withdrawal from Iraq. Among others, Saudi Arabia, according to Saudi Foreign Minister Al-Faissal, is trying to convince Tehran to meet the US halfway on a settlement vis a vis the nuclear standoff.

The Saudi mediation in the Mecca agreement between the Palestinian factions can also be also interpreted as an attempt to prevent Iran from acquiring an ability to influence the developments at the Palestinian front - Iran's involvement in the Palestinian issue had already caused the Arab states' resentment of the US-imposed embargo. Saudi Arabia stepped in to help unite the Palestinian factions, using her spiritual and economic clout and taking advantage of the circumstances - mainly Hamas' international isolation. The Palestinian National Unity Government (PNUG) has the potential a) to be a negotiator with Israel and the International Community (the EU has declared that it will cooperate with non-Hamas ministers of the PNUG) and b) to act as a vehicle for the adherence of the Palestinian-based Hamas leadership to international norms.

As far as Iraq is concerned, Saudi Arabia faces a strategic dilemma: Riyadh wishes to counterbalance the rise of Iran's influence, protect the Sunni minority - the Sunni insurgents included -, and avoid an indirect confrontation with the US. Evoking the opinion of Saudi officials, F. Gregory Gause III argues that any Saudi effort to establish direct patron-client relations with Arab Sunni groups or factions in Iraq carries the danger of granting support to "people who are killing Americans". This development could result in a further deterioration of American- Saudi relations.

The possible destabilizing effect of the Lebanese issue on the whole of the region and the expansion of Iran's influence seem to be the incentives behind Saudi Arabia's attempt to mediate in Lebanon. The rupture between the Sunni-dominated minority government and the Shia majority opposition along with the weakening of Lebanon's state institutions in the aftermath of Israel's intervention last summer demonstrated the possible domino effect of the Lebanese crisis. The Arab world was divided once



again. Taking the Syrian role in Lebanon into account (links with intelligence services, Hezbollah etc), one could expect Riyadh to approach Damascus. Saudi Arabia would wish to cooperate with Syria on another urgent issue: Saudis wishing to join the Iraqi insurgency fly to Syria so as to enter Iraq more easily. When they return to Saudi Arabia after having been trained in battle conditions they present a clear danger to the regime's stability.

However, Saudi Arabia followed a different route as she has no intention of enhancing Syrian influence in Lebanon, which Riyadh considers destabilizing. To Syria's surprise, Saudi Arabia approached Iran. Iran's leadership, wishing to avoid alienating Saudi Arabia and perhaps even taking advantage of any rift in the Saudi-US relations, decided to talk with the Saudi regime.

Although the meeting between Ahmadinejad and King Abdullah had no tangible outcome, it seems that it has alarmed Syria. Assad's recent compromising position vis a vis Saudi Arabia could be partly attributed to the fear that a cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Iran could deprive Syria from her main ally. According to Egyptian sources, at the end of their meeting in the Arab summit, Bashar promised King Abdullah that he would use his influence over the pro-Syrian camp in Lebanon to show flexibility on the issue of power sharing.

If Saudi Arabia achieves to lure Syria into the Arab regional order that it wishes to promote, using her economic power and threatening to isolate Damascus (which any deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran might involve), Riyadh could achieve something that now seems improbable. Persuading Syria to follow her lead, Saudi Arabia could provide the missing link for a cooperation between Syria and the US by supplying the returns and assurances that the US refuses to offer Damascus. Then, Saudi Arabia, having broken the Syria-Iran-Hezbollah link (or even induced Syria to cooperate in Iraq) and having united the Palestinian factions, could persuade the United States to pressure Israel to accept an agreement with the Arab states. The above could just be wishful thinking. Critics contend that the Riyadh summit was just a demonstration of public diplomacy whereas actually the US was attempting to coordinate the pro-American Sunni Arab regimes and Israel, in preparation for an attack against Iran. Before the Riyadh Summit, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had convened a meeting of the intelligence chiefs of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan in Cairo (the states that composed the Arab Quartet), as an attempt to initiate an Arab-Israeli dialogue under the auspices of the international community.

Moreover, the 2002 proposal of the then Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah was never seriously considered in Washington because Tel Aviv had made it clear that it was not interested. Saudi Arabia's influence in the US is rather limited, considering that Israel, using its lobby power, has just stalled an American plan to supply Riyadh with advanced weaponry - including satellite-guided arms -, with an estimated worth of \$5-10 bn. The Israelis were concerned that the precision-guided air-based weapons could erode Israel's military superiority in the region.

Nonetheless, today, the Saudi Initiative could provide the impetus for a new round of negotiations as several factors are working in favor of this proposal. In any case, the US is in need of Arab support to solve the Iraqi issue, as Mrs Rice's recent visit to Arab capitals showed. Additionally, in support of the Saudi role, Washington has softened its criticism on Saudi Arabia's human rights and women's rights record. In any case, a US plan for successful cooperation between moderate Arab states and Israel - the US is also in need of Arab support in the political confrontation with Iran - will have to involve a settlement that is not imposed by the outside.



# The Mecca Accords in the emerging Arab system

Alexandra Karaiskou, Chryssoula Toufexis

*Confronted with the intra-Palestinian conflict, the Sunni-Shiia divide in Lebanon and Iraq and the growing instability in the region as a whole, Saudi Arabia sought to take the initiative by mediating in the Mecca Accords. Assuming the reins of the moderate Sunni camp, Riyadh opts for a strategy of containment and serves as a counterweight against the rise of Shiite Iran's influence.*

In the light of the recent eruption of hostilities and the consequent threat of a civil war in the Palestinian territories, the Mecca Accord - signed between PA President Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas leader Khaled Meshal on February 8, 2007 under Saudi auspices and promises for financial aid - came to seal the Hamas-Fatah cooperation with the formation of a National Unity Government. According to the agreement, the PLO will undergo a transformation process in order to include Hamas in its ranks. The group has made a commitment to "respect Arab and international resolutions and agreements signed by the PLO", as quoted in Abbas' letter to Hamas leader Haniyeh. But the letter lacks precision and can therefore be interpreted by Hamas in various ways that fail the Quartet's preconditions of granting recognition to Israel. In addition, the acceptance of older agreements between Israel and the PLO is left to the organization's free will.

Moreover, reiterating the Saudi peace initiative presented during the Arab League summit in Beirut 2002, the Mecca Accords set the starting point for the resumption of negotiations with Israel for the establishment of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders and a solution to the issue of Palestinian refugees. Although a full Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories is not accepted by the Israeli government, it is a good starting point for negotiations which in turn leads to the question of whether a revival of the Saudi Peace Plan in the light of the Iraq war, the rising Iranian threat and the consecutive changes in the Middle Eastern geopolitical scene, could produce a future "alliance out of necessity" between Sunni Arabs and Israel. Furthermore, the Arab League Summit on March 28, 2007 supported the Saudi Initiative as a basis for a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, which could entail the normalization of Israel's relation with the Arab states.

On its part, Saudi Arabia was prompted to broker an agreement between the Palestinian factions by its desire to reduce tensions in the region so as to contain Iran's growing influence in domestic Palestinian affairs. In fact, until recently, Iran was supporting and arming Hamas. This comes as no surprise, taking into account the radical nature of the organization that provoked the United States to follow a policy of isolating Hamas. Currently, the Bush administration does not recognize the democratically elected government of the Palestinian territories, because of Hamas' participation in acts of violence and its denial to recognize the state of Israel. Supplementing its policy, the United States has imposed economic sanctions on the Palestinians. Consequently, the pro-Western Arab states were reluctant to confront US



policy towards Hamas, denouncing any relationship with the group. Thus, due to the international and regional isolation and the Western economic boycott, Iran constituted Hamas' alternative source for arms and money.

By supporting Hamas, Tehran has gained legitimacy in the eyes of the Arab public as an advocate of the Palestinian cause. The Mecca agreement has served the purpose of approaching Sunni Hamas, offering economic and political support, and distancing the group from the Iranian sphere of influence. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia paid the price of granting legitimacy to a radical organization, a development that contradicts its declared foreign policy towards both Lebanon and the Palestinian territories which consists in supporting moderate forces. The United States and the rest of the Quartet have explicitly welcomed King Abdullah's mediation effort.

The Mecca Accord is part of a broader Saudi foreign strategy to contain Iran in order to avoid Shiite expansion in the war-ravaged regions of Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. The burgeoning Sunni-Shiite confrontation taking place both in Iraq and Lebanon threatens a spill-over in the greater Muslim world. Taking into consideration the multiple ongoing crises in the Middle East, combined with the decline of Sunni Arab influence in the region, Iran took advantage of the power vacuum created, in order to gain increasing leverage in Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories and reinforce the Shiite camp. The warning came from Saudi Arabia, through King Abdullah's statement in the Kuwaiti newspaper *al-Syasa* that he would not accept any non-Arab interference in purely Arab issues. Under these circumstances, it was vital for Saudi Arabia to restrain Iran's expansion. Within this scope, the moderate Sunni Arab states of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan formed an anti-Iranian axis.

In fact, the Jordanian reaction which is best illustrated in King Abdullah's reference to a "Shiite Crescent" and a "Shiite Storm" is indicative of the concern generated by the rise of Shiite power. Indeed, after the collapse of the Baathist regime in Iraq, the Iraqi government was handed over to Shiites. Moreover, a possible US withdrawal from Iraq, leaving the country in a state of weakness, further raises Saudi concerns over the strengthening of Iranian influence. The issue of Iran's nuclear program only exacerbates the sentiment of worry.

Lebanon is another front of the Sunni-Shiite divide. Shiite Hezbollah, backed by Iran and Syria, constitutes the main opposition to the pro-Western Siniora government, which receives the support of moderate Arab states who regard Iranian proxies as their foes. Hezbollah is accused by the Arab world of triggering the war in Lebanon and destabilizing the country.

Due to its involvement in the July war by offering assistance to Hezbollah and its alliance with Iran, Syria found itself isolated from the Arab states. Following Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon, its regional status has been undermined. The Mecca Accords along with the Saudi-Iranian meeting to discuss the Lebanese standoff, have reinforced Syria's concern that it will possibly be excluded from regional power sharing, which will result in a further deviation from its goal of assuming a greater regional role in order to promote its interests on an equal basis among the Middle Eastern players. Nevertheless, Damascus participation is vital for the achievement of Arab-Israeli peace. No peace is viable without the inclusion of Syria in the negotiations with Israel, because Israel will always feel insecure in its northern border, as Professor Alon Ben-Meir asserts.

The Mecca Accord not only strengthens the anti-Iranian axis, but it also upgrades Riyadh's position vis-a-vis the other Arab states and especially Egypt, further revealing an inter-Arab rivalry between new and old powers. The conclusion of the Mecca Accords, after previous Syrian and Egyptian efforts to achieve reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, revealed the weakness of formerly key regional players and paved the way for Saudi Arabia to adopt a more assertive foreign policy, thus acquiring a leading role among moderate Arab



states in confronting the Iranian threat. Egypt in particular, absorbed by its internal problems, namely the constitutional reform and presidential elections, is second in rank after Saudi Arabia in the Middle East mediation process. The loss of its ability to serve as a communication channel between the Palestinian factions is further confirmed by its failure to prevent intra-Palestinian hostilities. Its role seems to be downgraded by the fact that it failed to put pressure on Hamas to release the Israeli hostage Cpl. Gilad Shalit. But Egypt proved also incompetent to use its relations with Israel to its advantage, in order to offer a viable solution to the Palestinian issue and to upgrade its role in the region. As a result, by failing the Palestinians,



Egypt loses access to Lebanon.

In contrast, the Mecca Accords, among a series of initiatives, demonstrated the emergence of Saudi Arabia as a leading power in the Sunni axis. A combination of various actors both in the internal and the external sphere enable the Saudi regime to pursue a more activist foreign policy and establish a great-power status in the emerging regional system. Indeed, domestically King Abdullah enjoys widespread popularity and the Saudi economy has been boosted in the recent years. Riyadh's moderate stance in combination with the support of the US and the Quartet, its legitimacy in the Islamic world and its ability to communicate with both parties of the conflict (i.e. Fatah and Hamas), have rendered it the only reliable mediator in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The ultimate question now is how Hamas is going to exploit the initiative. The recent rivalry between the Hamas "rejectionists", led by Interior Minister Said Siam and Foreign Affairs Minister Mahmoud a-Zahar, and the relatively "moderate" Ismail Haniyeh and Khaled Mashaal over the Mecca Accords and the formation of a coalition with Fatah is a worrisome development. Hamas' military wing, the Executive Force and Izzadin al-Kassam have also criticized the organization for "falling into the Abbas trap".



# The *Baghdad* Conference

## Can **Iraq** be the starting point for a new regional order?

Marina Eleftheriadou

*Iraq has always played a prominent role in every attempt to create a regional order either in an inclusive (by being the linchpin of this order) or an exclusive (by being the target of security arrangements) way. This was much more so with the US invasion of Iraq which was believed to send "shockwaves" of democratization throughout the region and to start a domino effect that would eventually lead to a new security system. Four years later, the Baghdad international conference aspires to help Iraq recover from its ashes. Now that Iraq is far from being an inspiration, regional help and cooperation are regarded as indispensable, though the prospects for this are dim.*

The idea of engaging the regional actors to resolve the Iraqi crisis was introduced by the Iraq Study Group's report which called for an establishment of an International Support Group comprising all bordering countries as well as key regional and international states. A similar course of action was proposed even earlier by Senators Chuck Hagel (Republican) and John Kerry (Democrat). However, until the March 10 conference, the Iraqi government as well as the Americans and Arabs, each for their own reasons, were reluctant to undertake such an initiative. The Iraqi Shia and Kurds who control the government feared that a conference would translate into increased pressure from their Sunni Arab neighbors to the advantage of Iraqi Sunnis. Indicative of this fear was Bayan Jabr's (then interior minister) remarks in October 2005, referring to statements made by Prince Saud al-Faisal in a visit to the United States, that "Iraq would not be lectured by some Bedouin riding a camel". Even during the Baghdad conference, PM Maliki in his inaugural speech said that his government will not succumb to attempts to force changes on its political agenda, in clear reference to a policy statement adopted by Arab foreign ministers, a few days earlier, that prompted the government to redraft Iraq's constitution and withdraw laws that give preferential treatment to Shiites and Kurds. The Americans on their part didn't want to offer a helping hand to the isolated Iran and Syria. The Arabs, finally, unable to adopt a common position on the eve (Arab meetings in Cairo on February and March 2003) and after the invasion (Riyadh meeting of the states neighboring Iraq in April 2003) and lacking a "hegemonic power" (as was Egypt, Syria and Iraq in the past) that would inspire or impose unity, preferred to stay in the backstage and leave the outside forces to do all the work. As, characteristically, Patrick Seale wrote in the Daily Star on October 6, 2003: "The Arab system has often been pronounced dead and this time it may be indeed true". What is more, they were reluctant to be seen as backing the



Shia government and didn't want to legitimize the rising Iranian regional role.

So, what has changed since then? The Iraqi government's change of attitude, on the one hand, is probably the product of American pressure and, on the other hand, indicates a desire to assert its power. The Bush administration is faced with the issue of casualties (now over 3000) and with increasing pressure from Democrats to set a pullout timetable as part of the war spending bill discussed in Congress, and is therefore in a desperate need to ease the internal criticism by somehow adopting the Baker-Hamilton report's propositions. By doing so, they can more easily place the onus on Iran's and Syria's lack of cooperation and if eventually the military attack materializes, then the Administration can claim that it has tried all the other -political- means to engage Iran peacefully. Moreover, as regards the situation in Iraq, it wishes to engage the Arabs in a more constructive way so as to make use of the influence they can have on the Sunnis. And the Arabs realized that Iraq is either falling apart or falling in the Iranian orbit. From Jordanian King Abdullah's remarks about the emergence of a Shi'ite crescent to Saudi Nawaf Obaid's threat that Riyadh might decide to help Sunnis in their fight with Shia in Iraq, it became a common belief that to abandon Iraq is equivalent to give it away to Iran. The new strategy appears to be to bring Iraq back into the Arab fold.

The proclaimed intensions were good and the Americans signaled that they were open to bilateral talks with Iran and Syria. As David Satterfield, the State Department's Iraq coordinator, pointed out: "If we are approached over orange juice by the Syrians or the Iranians to discuss an Iraq-related issue that is germane to this topic - stable, secure, peaceful, democratic Iraq- we are not going to turn and walk away". Nevertheless, during the conference, where, as Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari said: "There [was] lunch and there [was] some orange juice and soft drinks going around", nothing more than a vague final statement was presented, expressing support to Iraq and an agreement to form working groups, made up of technical experts from Iraq's six neighbors, to cope with border security, fuel imports and refugees. No agreement was reached regarding dates or the members of the committees.

It was obvious that the United States support and participation in the meeting didn't constitute a u-turn -a strategic shift- in American policy. The former Ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, said: "The meeting today was in a multilateral setting, and it was focused on Iraq at the invitation of the Iraqi government. So, this is, in my view, not a change in policy, but something that we have said we would do, and we have stated that repeatedly for some time". Neither the US nor Iran can make the necessary concessions in order to achieve the minimum common denominator that would form the basis for a future understanding. First, they have a different perception of what constitutes a "desirable Iraq". Second and more important, even if there could be some kind of convergence in the face of the possible consequences of the spill-over effect of the civil war, any serious cooperation in Iraq, let alone the region, would stumble at the prerequisite to deal with the issues pertaining to their multi-faceted and region-wide confrontation. Otherwise Iran lacks a motive. As Iranian analyst, Saeid Leylaz, put it: "How can you expect us to talk to them about Iraq's security without



Iran's security being part of the talks?". On the other hand, in the eyes of this Administration the actual help that Iran can provide to stabilize Iraq -contrary to destabilize- doesn't compensate for the concessions that need to be made. As a US official put it: "Why should we pay this price when there is little Syria or Iran can do to help us in Iraq. The violence today pits Iraqi against Iraqi. It is not an external war. It is an internal one". Probably he was not wrong, given the everyday picture of Iraq.



Hence, the only significant element seems to be Arabs' forceful comeback. The return of the Arabs gained momentum with the Saudi bid to take a leading role in the Arab camp. The Saudis, who had previously been content to provide discreet moral and financial support and leave others to worry about the stability of the region, realized that this stability was challenged on the Palestinian, Lebanese and Iraqi front. Saudi Arabia's return to the foreground was openly pro-

nounced during King Abdullah's unifying speech in the recent Arab League summit in Riyadh, where he was quoted as saying: "The Arab League was established over 60 years ago to become the core for true Arab unity... The question that needs to be addressed is: What has been achieved from all of this? The answer is illustrated in our reality, which reveals that that we are far away from unity".

Perhaps in the long-term the precedent set by the conference could yield a different framework: by co-opting the weak link, Syria, both Arab unity and Iran's weakening (unless Damascus is granted the role of an intermediary between Iran and the rest of the world) will be enhanced. Press and officials from Syria as well as other Arab countries have lately adopted a conciliatory tone. That's why, more and more, there appear article titles such as "The Tehran-Damascus Axis: Tactical Disagreements or the Beginning of a Split?" (Al-Sharq Al-Awsat) or "Damascus must soon choose" (Al-Ahram), as well as statements like the one of the Syrian Vice President Al-Shara made in Cairo in early March, where he said that Assad, in his August 2006 speech, had "not been referring to any Arab leaders" but what Assad meant by saying "half-men" was "some of the small leaders in some of the Arab countries." The frequent visits by American and European officials and legislators (the most infamous of these -and the most criticized- was made, on April 3 by the House Speaker Nancy Pelosi), come against this background. However, even in this case, there is mutual suspicion. The results of the second meeting convened in Egypt in early May, this time at ministerial level, will show whether this suspicion, either around both Syria and Iran or only Syria, can be surpassed, proving the pessimists wrong.



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# Vultures over the Land of the Cedars:

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## The Lebanese Predicament & the New Regional Order

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**Marianna Athanasopoulou**

*Lebanon's protracted political crisis, sparked when opposition ministers resigned last November declaring Siniora's coalition illegitimate and demanding a one third guarantee of cabinet ministers in a new government, far from being a domestic issue is once again the product of regional power politics. As Hezbollah, Iran and Syria on the one hand and Saudi Arabia with international backing on the other vie for ascendancy, the prospects for a new Taif agreement to accommodate the crisis intertwine with the future of Iraq, Tehran's nuclear ambitions and the survival of Syria's Alawite regime.*

"The Middle East that will emerge from the crucible of the Iraq war may not be more democratic but it will definitely be more Shiite". Foreign Affairs editor Vali Nasr has a point: the demise of Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime, its replacement by a Shiite-dominated government and the seemingly endless ensuing sectarian strife lie at the heart of the region's shifting geopolitical dynamics. Iraq, a traditional centre of Sunni Arab power, is guaranteed to remain weak and divided for the foreseeable future, freeing Iran and its intricate network of regional allies from one of their chief adversaries and touching off a region-wide Sunni-Shiite divide. Shiite Iran and Hezbollah have transformed into the champions of anti-Western defiance and anti-Israeli resistance respectively and Saudi Arabia is charged with the heavy task of reversing the Sunni world's downward course by assuming a leading role among pro-Western Arab states to check Tehran's expanding sphere of influence.

The centrality of Lebanon in the above equation is apparent: in the aftermath of the July war, Hezbollah emerged with huge capital and by stirring a renewed cycle of political upheaval it has reaffirmed Tehran's ability to wage war by proxy in order to divert international attention from its ongoing uranium enrichment program. Next in line is the Lebanese group's Syrian patron that uses Hezbollah's postwar triumphant momentum to halt the establishment of an international tribunal to try suspects in the Hariri assassination. The Arab world, spearheaded by Saudi Arabia, has openly sided with the Siniora-led March 14 forces - the anti-Syrian alliance that formed after the 2005 Hariri assassination -, implicitly blaming Hezbollah and its Syrian and Iranian sponsors for the outbreak of the summer war. In the political crisis that followed, Saudi Arabia (along with Egypt and Jordan) has systematically rejected the opposition's call for a 19-11 formula (the number of cabinet ministers from each camp) in a new national unity government. If implemented, the formula will grant the opposition forces veto power over governmental decisions - a tool that Hezbollah would be more than willing to use in order to block the formation of the tribunal one of the principal causes of the current crisis.

Saudi Arabia's active involvement as a mediator between Lebanon's Western-backed



forces and Hezbollah is hardly surprising. The Kingdom has played a decisive role in Lebanese politics ever since the Taif agreement of 1989 which ended the 15-year civil war and granted Syria quasi-total control over Lebanon, on the condition that Damascus' domination would not endanger Riyadh's interests in the country. Lebanon's assassinated former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was a well-known Saudi protege and his cordial relations with the royal family had ensured massive Saudi investment in his ambitious national reconstruction project. Hariri's assassination and the subsequent civil unrest and prompt international response which led to the withdrawal of Syrian troops disturbed the delicate balance achieved through Taif and left the country exposed to an escalating intra-faction rivalry to fill the vacuum. To make matters worse, the summer war wrecked everything that the Saudis had helped build during the past 15 years, paralyzing the country and bringing about further polarization. Aside from being perceived as a means of preserving and safeguarding Saudi Arabia's privileged status in Lebanon, the reactivation of Saudi diplomacy to deal with the Lebanese crisis forms part of its greater policy to challenge Iran's predominance and avert the creation of a powerful Shiite crescent in the region. The widespread Arab mistrust of US policies, generated by the Bush administration's inability to control the chaotic situation in Iraq or to rein in Iran's hegemonic ascension and nuclear pursuit, is at the core of Riyadh's new activism vis a vis virtually every sensitive issue in the Middle East (featuring the Mecca agreement and the Saudi-sponsored Arab League proposal for a Palestinian-Israeli peace settlement).

Riyadh followed a hands-on policy early on: Prime Minister Siniora's seven-point plan to end the war with Israel was issued last August after successive meetings with the Saudi Ambassador in Beirut and has enjoyed full Saudi support ever since. Moreover, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal traveled both to Tehran and Damascus to press for Iranian and Syrian cooperation in the implementation of Security Council Resolution 1701. Nonetheless, as much as the Arabs resent Iran's and Syria's ability to use Hezbollah as a foreign policy tool and are convinced of Damascus' culpability in the Hariri killing, the current regional circumstances call for a non-confrontational stance. Accordingly, after two years of Syrian isolation from the Arab fold, President Bashar al-Assad met with Saudi King Abdullah on the sidelines of the March 2007 Arab League summit in Riyadh to discuss the situation in Lebanon. The Saudi King tried to reassure Damascus that despite the findings of the Mehlis report, according to which high-ranking Syrian and Lebanese government officials were involved in the Hariri assassination, the international tribunal will have no political repercussions for the Syrian regime. It appears that, after having characterized the Arab leaders as "half men" for blaming the summer war on Hezbollah, the Syrian President is back on the negotiating table not out of good will, but rather out of political expediency: prior to the above meeting, a Saudi-Iranian summit, initiated by Tehran, had been staged in Riyadh to settle the political crisis in Lebanon. Regardless of whether that summit was a public relations trick meant to project a less intransigent Iranian image to an Arab world that is growing increasingly impatient with Tehran's practices or an earnest effort to settle the crisis, Syria was alarmed at the prospect of a Saudi-Iranian rapprochement at its expense. As a result, Ahmadinejad's commitment to help ease the tensions between Hezbollah and the March-14 coalition were matched by a Syrian pledge to work towards an agreement on the framework for talks between Lebanon's rival camps. The situation on the ground, however, tells a differ-



ent story. Notwithstanding the much publicized and seemingly promising Saudi-Iranian effort, Hezbollah's leader, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, - possibly conveying a covert message from Damascus - stated that "an agreement between two countries or two governments does not bind the Lebanese, because the Lebanese must seek their own interests and not the interests of Saudi Arabia and Iran".



Despite the de facto Syrian-Iranian cooperation on a number of issues, there might be a conflict of interest between the two as far as the current situation in Lebanon is concerned. Tehran may be ready to make some concessions in order to extract gains on more pressing issues, such as the nuclear standoff and the resultant increasing regional and international isolation of Iran, while Damascus is bent on blocking the formation of the Hariri tribunal at all costs. The question is who is more likely to prevail upon Hezbollah.

At present, the Shiite group appears to be closer to the Syrian position, not only because of its long-standing ties with Damascus, but also because no considerable incentives are currently being offered to appease its leadership. Some analysts have suggested that a new version of the 1989 Taif agreement based on an understanding between pro-Western regional powers led by Saudi Arabia and Syria and Iran would be the most effective way out of the impasse. Besides the international tribunal, such an understanding would have to address issues such as who is going to succeed the pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud, how to reshape the confessional system and rewrite the nation's electoral laws taking into account the demographic changes that have taken place since 1989, whether Hezbollah will have to lay down its arms and whether the UN troops will remain in the South indefinitely. The situation in Lebanon can only be resolved by means of engaging Syria and Iran in negotiations over a broad range of regional issues, including Iraq, denuclearization and normalization with Israel (an option that the Bush administration has consistently rejected ever since it came to power in 2000). Saudi Arabia, one of the staunchest US allies in the Arab world, is cautiously moving towards that direction, with American officials for the time being just watching without interfering. It is too early to say whether Riyadh's opening towards Tehran and Damascus will bear fruit. But it is certain that in the future there cannot be a single guarantor of Lebanon's stability, as was the case with Syria during the past 15 years. Lebanon's fate will remain tied to regional developments and its predicament of always being patronized by outside powers will only wane when those powers find the resolve to abandon the dead-end "all or nothing" approach that they currently pursue and make concessions which may not result in an ideal situation, but which will certainly pave the way for a bearable one.



# Syrian Dilemmas in Quest of Middle East Hegemony

Chryssoula Toufexis

*The present article examines the challenges facing Syria given the regional and international isolation imposed to the country after a series of mishandlings that provoked Riyadh's and Washington's discontent, mainly in the Lebanese and Iraqi crises. Syria faces a dilemma with regards to its alliances and its aspiration to achieve an upgrade of its regional status so as to become an interlocutor of equal gravity and enhance its position vis-a-vis the Middle Eastern players in search of hegemony.*

In the current Arab regional system, where Sunni Arab states try to restrain Iran's influence in

Iraq and Lebanon, Syria seems to play an important role. While an Arab state with a majority Sunni population, its relationship with the moderate Arab camp, namely Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan, continues to deteriorate, whereas its alliance with Iran, a non-Arab Shiite state, and Hezbollah, a non-state Shiite actor, remains solid.

Further alienation from Saudi Arabia and Egypt was produced after the outbreak of the Lebanon war in July 2006 and the widespread Arab criticism of the Syrian role in aiding Hezbollah with moral support and weapons. The strong Syrian support to the group, contrary to Riyadh's and Cairo's demands, serves to preserve Damascus' influence inside Lebanon, in a regional environment where its status is constantly undermined. It also helps the Syrian regime gain the support of a public opinion that respects Hezbollah's anti-Israeli resistance. But Syria no longer maintains the ability to exercise control over the group as it used to. Hezbollah has grown stronger after the war and it seems that its relationship with Iran is strengthened.

The Lebanon question thus contributes to the regional and international isolation of Syria from the current formation of Middle Eastern alliances. Syria has been deprived of its strategic advantage ever since its alleged involvement in the Hariri assassination and the consequent withdrawal of the Syrian forces from Lebanon. Previous Syrian interference in internal Lebanese affairs, specifically its role in the amendment of Lebanon's Constitution, had provoked dissatisfaction and a shift in French foreign policy regarding the special relationship between Syria and Lebanon.

In search of an ally that does not contradict Damascus' main policy in Lebanon, Bashar al-Assad's only alternative is to preserve his traditional alliance with Iran. The Syrian-Iranian axis faces a series of common threats and goals. First, they have created a united front against the American occupation of Iraq, which gained them legitimacy in the eyes of the Arab public, while both feel threatened by the Kurdish autonomy in Northern Iraq, as the increased autonomy rights enjoyed by



Iraqi Kurds may raise demands of the Syrian Kurds living northeast of the country.

Moreover by assisting Hezbollah and Hamas in their fight against Israel they indirectly inflict damage to the later without risking direct confrontation and at the same time enhancing their prestige as regional powers fighting Western interests. However, Syria is accused by the US that it uses the Palestinian - Israeli conflict as a means of propaganda and that it purposely disorients the peace process in order to unite the Syrian people under a common enemy and turn the focus away from its internal turmoil. Another challenge to the Syrian regime is the strengthening of Sunni Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia and Egypt, which could turn the Sunni majority against the Alawite regime.

However, this alliance has increased the dilemmas of the Sunni Arab states in the spectrum of a Shiite-Islamist hegemony across Iran, Iraq and Hezbollah's base in South Lebanon. Iran is constantly enhancing its power, while Syria in the face of its weakening position is transforming into an Iranian satellite. Saudi Arabia thus, has to choose whether it will completely isolate Syria and ignore its interests or it will make some concessions to Syrian demands, in order to reunite the Damascus-Cairo-Riyadh front.

Saudi Arabia has taken the lead of the Sunni moderate camp with a series of initiatives vis a vis the Palestinian and Lebanon crises, the Mecca Accord and the Saudi-Iranian meeting over Lebanon. The Mecca Accord is considered a great success for Saudi Arabia in its effort to win Hamas back to the moderate Arab camp and to break the Hezbollah-Iran-Syria-Hamas link and it is considered as a loss for Syria. In addition, the Saudi-Iranian meeting over Lebanon and the Hariri assassination tribunal, although it did not lead to any agreement between the two states, marginalized Syria. The formation of alliances is a very sensitive matter in light of Saudi discontent concerning Syrian aid to Hezbollah and the Saudi attempt to undermine Syrian ambitions in the region, which further pushes Syria to seek an alternative ally in Shiite Iran. At the same time, Syria could be a very helpful partner for Saudi Arabia in its effort to counterbalance the expansion of Shiite-Islamist power emanating from Iran. Saudi skepticism over this matter is illustrated by the recent invitation of Syria to participate in the March 28 Arab League Summit in Riyadh. Discussions over the Lebanon, Iraq and Palestinian crises can only be effective if they take into account Damascus' position and interests. The Saudi initiatives, indeed, evoked Syria's response, as the latter seems to be willing to improve its relations with Riyadh, and according to UN reports is demonstrating a more cooperative face in the Hariri assassination case.

Iraq is also a very delicate matter for Syria. In November 2006, diplomatic relations between the two were finally restored. Syria also participated (together with Iran) in the 2007 Baghdad Conference, where the two states were invited by the United States to discuss the situation in Iraq (as was initially proposed by the Baker-Hamilton Report). The issue that undermines Syrian-Iraqi relations is the infiltration through Syrian borders of Sunni Islamist insurgents that operate against the Shiite-controlled government. When the US invasion in Iraq started, Syria allowed border crossing and weapon smuggling and along with its anti-American rhetoric gained legitimacy in the Syrian and Arab public opinion. However, it was accused by the United States as a rogue state that sponsored terrorism and was further isolated from the moderate Arab camp. The validity of Syria's commitment to support the US-led stabilization efforts in Iraq will therefore depend on its desire and ability to exercise effective control over its borders.

Whether Syria is in a position to handle the challenges stemming from regional crises in the Middle East, where some of its key interests are at stake, remains to be seen. It will depend on further commitment on its part to cooperate with the Arab states to resolve the crises in Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. It will also depend on whether Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United States will accept to engage with Syria and not isolate the country, especially if the Arab-Israeli peace process is to restart. Syria is indeed a key factor that needs to be taken into account in the negotiating process in the Middle East.



# Egypt in the Arab regional **order**: The moderates' struggle for leadership

Ioannis V. Mantzikos

*During the last 25 years of Hosni Mubarak presidency, Egypt failed to gain the moderate Arab leadership. The main reason to this lies in its strive to balance its strategic interests and its peoples' sentiment.*

The Egyptian foreign policy is currently orientated towards two seemingly opposite directions: leadership of the Arab world and alignment with the United States. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak is at a crossroads: on the one hand he denied to take part in the G8 summit for the Middle East last June, stating that regional problems must be resolved through intra Arab cooperation, while on the other the US considers Egypt as one of its most important Arab allies (along with Saudi Arabia) in supporting the opponents of Hizbollah in Lebanon and of Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestine, and in promoting the ascension of a moderate leadership both in Beirut and in the Palestinian territories.

The prime dilemma for Egypt regarding Palestinian-Israeli peacemaking is how equilibrate between the fulfillment of Palestinian aspirations for an independent state and maintaining stable relations with Israel. However, in recent months, the Egyptian policy seems to be facing major obstacles in both fields. Egypt has failed in its mediating role between the opposing Palestinian factions; in addition, there has been a significant rise in anti-Israeli sentiment in Egypt, exacerbated by Israeli excavation work near Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque and allegations that Israeli cabinet minister Bin Eliezer was involved in the murder of Egyptian prisoners of war.

Egyptian analysts believe that the Mecca accord might have a positive outcome for their country: the potential decline of Iranian interference in Palestinian affairs through increased Egyptian (and Saudi) support; and the release of the captured Israeli soldier Gilead Shalit. Egypt has played a central role in the negotiations for the soldier's release, which, if achieved, will be an indication of "good will" not only on Hamas' part but on Israel's as well (one soldier swapped for 1.400 jailed Palestinians). Notably, in the first phase of the proposed deal the soldier will be handled to Egypt which has been mediating the talks.

In addition, there are also several voices in Cairo who support Hamas' call for the release of Marwan Barghouti. They think he is capable of ending the factional struggle and constituting an effective partner for peace talks. Finally, Cairo hopes that both sides will recognize its significant contribution to the resolution of the Shalit case and that its position in the Arab-Israeli conflict will be further upgraded.

Egyptian diplomacy seems to share Secretary Condoleeza Rice's vision, i.e. to create "a political horizon" for discussion in order to both validate Abbas' focus on negotiations instead of violence and to satisfy Israel Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni's belief that such a broad discussion will ensure that Israeli concessions will not be made in a contextual vacuum.

However, Hosni Mubarak's political circle also notices that Secretary Rice must consider whether Riyadh and Cairo are willing to do something that they were not willing to do in the 2000 Camp David summit. Namely, they suggest that in the long-term, they need to provide Abbas the necessary political cover in order to enable him to make key compromises so that the Palestinian refugees can inhabit the Palestinian state through a third country or receive financial compensation but not go back to Israel. Obviously, Egypt wishes to be that third country.



As far as the Lebanon crisis is concerned, the Mubarak regime held Hizbollah responsible for igniting hostilities and denied the Islamist resistance military assistance. In fact, like his other moderate counterparts, Hosni Mubarak has several reasons to dislike Hizbollah: its non-state actor status poses a challenge to state authority; its alliance with Iran and its continuous sabotages frail the prospects for regional peace.

During the war, Egypt called for the deployment of an international force and the immediate implementation of UN resolution 1559 for the disarmament of Lebanese militias. Minimizing Hizbollah's influence in Lebanon in particular and in the Arab world in general is essential for Egypt's goal of preventing the transformation of Lebanon into a Shiite rampart. If the Shiites gain advantage over their opponents in their struggle for power, this will lead to an enhancement of Syria and Iran's position in the region.

On the other hand, Hosni Mubarak stated that: "Israeli's furious response was recruiting millions of new enemies". Yet the Egyptian government's inability to protect the Lebanese people makes it look impotent at a regional level and weak at home. Even so, Egypt "appears willing to be aligned with US foreign policy at every stage" a Jordanian newspaper wrote the week after the war.

Another vital issue regarding Egypt's regional aspirations is Saudi Arabia's Near East diplomacy. The failure of the Egyptian efforts to bridge the differences between the Palestinian factions, a field in which the Saudis seem to have been successful, has revived Saudi claims for leadership of the moderate Arab world.

However, from an Egyptian perspective, the recent Mecca accord last February raises key questions about Saudis true motives. There two groups of analysts, one benign and another less benign. The first (which is the most popular) suggests that Saudi Arabia has realized the threat posed by radicalism and is ready to take the plunge into Arab-Israeli peacemaking. The fear of Iran drives home the risk of rejectionism to Riyadh and they view Arab-Israeli peacemaking as at least one means to defeat it. However, those more skeptical support that the Saudis are being driven by sectarianism and not by the pursuit of Arab-Israeli Peace. In their view, Riyadh has no problem supporting Hamas' program as long as the group can keep Iranian money and influence at bay. Saudi Arabia is therefore not unanimously considered to be a reliable peace partner.



In the case of Iraq, though Egypt expressed its opposition in Iraq's invasion it was the first Arab nation which decided to send a diplomatic mission after the war, (though the mission was recalled, after the murder of the Egyptian ambassador); Egypt was also member of the Iraq Steering Committee and has facilitated the American military campaign in many ways.

In the current situation, Egypt opposes an immediate withdrawal of the American troops from Iraq, since a possible withdrawal can deteriorate the security condition and embroil the country in a full-scale a civil war. Moreover, Egypt is trying to reconcile Iraq's factions in order to maintain ethnic unity and constrain radical insurgents. Cairo is also being led by the fear of a spillover of radicalism within its borders. The prime concern is al-Qaeda and its local branch in the Levant and Egypt, the Abdallah Azzam Brigades; through the Iraqi "pipeline" a slew of well-trained fighters could be sent back as experienced jihadists in order to topple the regime.

The Egyptian stance vis a vis the Iraq war reflects Egypt's current position in Arab regional order: many vows and remarks about Islamism and Arabism, such as last year's comments for Shiite disloyalty in Iraq, but, in practice, total alignment with the US. Egypt's moderation along with its domestic and foreign policy dilemmas seem to be the reasons for its failure to establish itself as a leader of the Arab world.



# Israel in the Middle East regional order: Between *theory* and *reality*

Marina Eleftheriadou

*The current state of Middle Eastern affairs is conducive to a search for a regional order that will ensure region-wide stability and deter the rise of Iran. Regionalism regains momentum posing a core question: which is the best framework for cooperation and, perhaps more importantly, who will be part of it. The purpose of this article is to examine whether Israel, though geographically a part of the region, can be part of the regional order as well. That is to say, do Israel's neighbors consider it a potential partner and, ultimately, does Israel wish to become one?*

The Middle East, too important to be left "unsupervised", was one of the US trophies in the post-Cold War era and as such it had to be shaped according to the remaining superpower's needs. With Iraq off the scene and the dual containment policy keeping Iran in check, the Madrid conference was supposed to perfect the plan by admitting the region's "red rag", Israel, into the regional order. The Madrid Process was not restricted to peace talks. On the contrary, a diverse range of issues was raised such as arms control and economic cooperation. The most articulate expression of the vision for a new regional order was Shimon Peres' concept of a "New Middle East", whereby the establishment of a regional framework that would favor and foster wider cooperation on "soft" regional problems (e.g. water) would help attain peace. The issue of water was part of the so called "green belt". The other three "belts" referred to tourism (blue), transportation and communication networks (grey) and arms control (white). Cooperation on those fields would, according to the plan, halt the spread of Islamic fundamentalism, enhance the sense of national security in each country, raise the standard of living and promote democratization.

However, as the peace process lost momentum, the dialogue initiated by the Working Group on Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) stalled and more emphasis was placed on economic and commercial aspects (e.g. establishment of a regional development bank in 1995), the effort to form a new regional order crumpled under a barrage of criticism, while the notion that Israel was trying to translate its military domination of the region into economic hegemony, previously shared only by few, became widespread. In the eyes of its critics, the "New Middle East", given Israel's economic and military might, was "imperialism by regionalism", a refined way to achieve the creation of "Greater Israel". For example, in an article in the Egyptian economic monthly *Elahras Elaktizadi* the plan was relegated to "an Israeli attempt to guide Arab policy toward changing the map of the Middle East, so that each state would have a specific role that would serve Israel's goals". In this light, it is no surprise that one of the first subjects to be discussed in the Middle East economic research forum created in 1993 was whether Tel Aviv should be accepted as a member. The response was negative and, as a result, the forum was renamed "Economic Research Forum for the Arab States, Turkey and Iran".

The election in 1996 of Benjamin Netanyahu and the outbreak of the second Intifada four years later delivered the "coup de grace" to the regional order in the making and reversed the few achievements already fulfilled, thus proving that there can be no cooperation as long as



security concerns and historic grievances persist. In fact, the only tangible legacy of this process was the warming up of the Jordanian-Israeli ties following the bilateral peace treaty in 1994, as seen in the recently approved project (dubbed the "economic peace corridor") which includes, among others, the creation of a rail network linking Jordan to the northern Israeli port of Haifa and a 160-kilometre canal between the Red Sea and the Dead Sea.

Since an even-handed American "security umbrella" that would turn Middle Eastern



states into what Kenneth Waltz called (referring to Europe) "security consumers" is not a credible claim and the normalization of Arab-Israeli relations, despite the rejuvenation of the Arab Peace Plan, appears improbable even over a five-year term - as implied by the Israeli PM Ehud Olmert - the only way to promote a new regional order and overcome the above problems is a common threat perception against a new "Soviet Union" or today's "evil" Iran. In fact, today's divi-

sion of the region's map along radical-moderate and Sunni-Shia lines is indicative of the effort to form an anti-Iranian axis which also would provide an opportunity for bringing together the moderate Arab states and Israel. The half-hearted renewal of the peace process and Condoleezza Rice's "peace diplomacy" have taken place against this backdrop.

However, the threat posed by Iran, though presumably a unifying factor, does not seem to have an automatic and self-contained dynamic. As the New York Times revealed in early April, Israel successfully halted Washington's plans for a major arms sale to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf allies aimed at deterring Iran. This incident showed that, despite shared concerns about Tehran's ambitions and Israeli advocacy of a closer (through direct yet secret negotiations) relationship with Saudi Arabia - the only Arab country with the necessary credentials to assume a leading regional role - Tel Aviv is still hesitant, fearing that the US plan for a Sunni Arab-Israeli coalition against Iran might never materialize, thus ending up empowering Saudi Arabia against Israel.

Nevertheless, the fear of a nuclear Iran pulls Israel towards another "security complex", NATO. Until recently the only formal cooperation was within the framework of the "Mediterranean Dialogue". However, in October 2006 Israel and NATO strengthened their bilateral relations with the conclusion of an Individual Cooperation Program (ICP), while at the same time the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tzipi Livni, announced that Israel seeks to be included in NATO's official partnership framework, the Partnership for Peace (PfP). Though Israel's rapprochement with NATO is not a new idea, it had been rebuffed in the past, either by Israel who disliked the constraints posed by a multilateral organization or by some NATO members who were reluctant to see a country still at war join the ranks of NATO. However, in the last months this old idea has regained momentum as many suggest that inasmuch as NATO would, in all likelihood, defend Israel against a nuclear Iran, it would be logical to make this commitment formal by admitting Israel into NATO -or at least that was the conclusive argument of a working paper presented in this year's, par excellence influential and "prophetic" regarding Israeli politics, Herzliya Conference.



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## involvement in the Middle East

Ilias Tassopoulos

*After NATO won the Cold War its members decided to lead the states of Eastern Europe towards the "democracy path". After 9/11, the Organization's new mission was to take place in the Middle East.*

After the end of the Cold War, the key issues on NATO's agenda were its Eastern enlargement and instability in the Balkans. However, the West - primarily the European countries - also felt threatened by the combination of stagnant economies and population boom in the less developed Arab countries. The fact that these countries had not developed functioning state mechanisms in order to manage those trends resulted in fears for a potential spread of instability in Europe. Illegal immigration and terrorist activities increased, endangering the energy routes.

From the end of the Cold War until the 9/11 attacks, the various Western initiatives were intended to prove that the West's policies didn't contradict the interests of the Arab states. The Oslo Accords, a sign of the Western commitment to help resolve the Palestinian issue, made it possible for NATO to cooperate with the Arab states.

The period after the 2001 terrorist attacks marked the climax of US's desire to expand NATO's engagement in the region, by enlisting the Alliance in its Greater Middle East Initiative. The Middle East region became the main concern of the Bush administration. Throughout the Middle East, terrorist organizations abounded, the WMD non-proliferation principle was openly challenged, the state as a security institution was severely undermined...The Partnership for Peace (PfP), a pattern used in the case of Eastern European states after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, was to serve as a guide for NATO relations with the Arab states.

However, the case of Eastern Europe and that of the Arab world differ greatly. The states of the former Eastern block were drawn to NATO because they considered their participation in the organization as a security guarantee against Russia. Their participation in the PfP was seen as a prelude to their accession to NATO (and to Western institutions).

Contrary to the states of Eastern Europe, the Arab states are neither offered a potential NATO membership nor interested in one. (Considering that NATO's role is not regionally accepted, an Arab state's accession to NATO will jeopardize its place in the Arab regional order, not to mention the regime's internal legitimization.) As a result NATO has very few negotiating cards vis-a-vis the Arab states.

NATO and the Arab states frequently have conflicting views on what constitutes a primary security concern. While the Arab states regard regional stability as a top priority, NATO's most powerful member, the US, gives precedence to reform. In addition, the Arab states perceive the West as a serious threat, partly because the latter is still associated with colonialism. America's unilateralism in the region since 9/11 has certainly not extenuated the Arab elites' mistrustful outlook. Consequently, NATO is not seen as a "security provider", as in the case of the Eastern Europe states.

One should not conclude from the above that the Arab states are reluctant to cooperate with NATO. The modernization of their armed forces is a very serious concern, while they are also interested in conducting training exercises with the superior - in technological and



administrative terms - organization. NATO, possessing the ability to cover a host of military needs, is in a position to exploit its comparative technological advantage and engage the Arab states.

And this is exactly what it did. Apart from the NATO Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) which started in 1994, NATO initiated the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) in 2004. The ICI, involving the enhanced cooperation with the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) on a bilateral basis, however illuminates NATO "democracy dilemma".

As the armed forces in the Middle East are not only used to protect the state from external enemies but also to suppress internal opposition, by strengthening the armed forces of the Middle Eastern states, NATO will weaken the opposition forces. The regimes of the Middle East could (and normally do) use their power to suppress their internal adversaries. Thereby, NATO acts contrary to its founding principles (democracy, individual liberty, rule of law) by undermining the prospects of democracy in Middle Eastern states. This dilemma is not only found in NATO's collaboration with the GCC countries (until today Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have formally joined the ICI), but extends to the countries participating in the MD. Since the Mediterranean Arab countries are suspicious of reform attempts that take the form of intervention or imposition of cultural norms, NATO seems to have downplayed the democratic aspects of defence reform, focusing on the effectiveness and the interoperability with NATO forces.



The first ever visit of an Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs to NATO Headquarters, March 2007, [www.nato.int](http://www.nato.int)

Ultimately, NATO wishes to render the armed forces of the Arab states compatible with those of the Alliance, so as to contribute to NATO-led operations, fight against terrorism and control the flow of WMD materiel and illegal arms transfers. However, NATO should be well aware that any progress in the Middle East region will depend on the Organization's ability to comprehend the anxieties of the Middle Eastern states on the Iraq issue, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Western attitude towards Iran and Syria (e.g. the inclusion of Syria, Libya and Lebanon in a NATO partnership would allow

Egypt to further expand its cooperation with NATO). Since the Arab elites are firmly against Western reform initiatives and the structural interests of NATO and the Arab states are not fully compatible, NATO should opt for a different role in the Middle East. The Organization should have a supporting role in the region, consulting with the Arab states, not excluding Israel and tailoring the initiatives planned to the needs of its Middle Eastern partners. A cooperation scheme involving Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia and the GCC should be considered, focusing on combating radical and extremist organizations by blocking illegal arm transfers. However, Syria and Saudi Arabia will not be able to participate in a regional cooperation scheme with Israel, if some kind of progress doesn't take place in the Arab-Israeli issue.



# *Under the auspices of al Qaeda: the GSPC and Terrorism in Algeria*

Ioannis V. Mantzikos



*Algeria is no doubt the African country that has, to date, been hit the hardest by Islamic fundamentalism. The GSPC's formal merger with al-Qaeda last September should not be seen as sudden and unexpected development, but rather as the culmination of the group's original objective of becoming reintegrated with international military networks.*

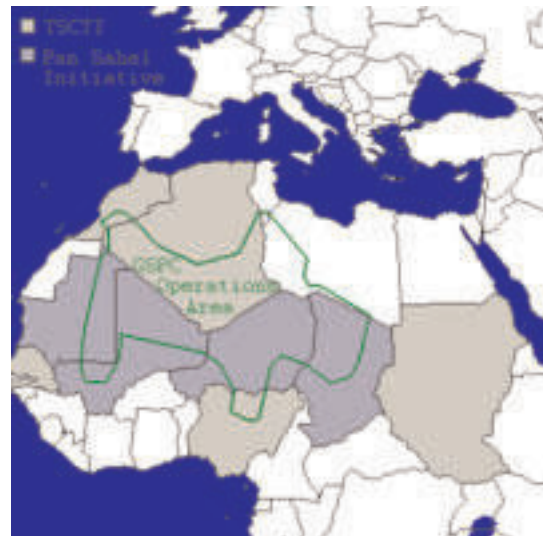
The recent bombings in Algiers may be an indication that the most worrying resurgence of the Algerian hard-core Islamist militants, known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GPSC), has taken place making a return to the chaotic situation of the mid-1990s possible. The group originally operated as an armed Islamic resistance movement against the secular Algerian government. Its resurrection began when Algeria's military government cancelled the second round of parliamentary elections in 1992, after it became clear that the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) might win. The GSPC declared its independence from the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in 1998 and was formed by a group of "Afghan" Algerians. This group disagreed with GIA's brutal tactics that were hurting the Islamic cause in their view.



After the 9/11 attacks, Al-Qaeda has transformed from a top-down to a bottom-up organization, in which the onus for perpetrating attacks lies with local cells. Al-Qaeda's resilience stems from its ability to co-opt and exploit local networks to its ideological and operational advantage. Simultaneously, the GSPC has benefited from its adoption of an al-Qaeda style structure that is difficult for counterterrorism forces to penetrate. In September 2006 al-Qaeda's deputy leader Ayman al-Zawahiri issued a statement announcing the merger of his group with the GSPC. The GSPC's proven combat capabilities, its willingness to send fighters in Afghanistan, Iraq and other Islamic insurgencies, and its status as a potential threat to Western oil and natural gas interests are some of its key characteristics.

Moreover, the merger with the GSPC fits nicely in the primary vision of al-Qaeda's leaders: instigating and inspiring Muslims to fight Islam's "far enemy", the United States. The broad network that includes the Libyan Islamist Fighting Group and the al-Qaeda Mahgreb Commandment in Morocco falls under the regional leadership of the GSPC which in turn is aligned with al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda has clearly taken a renewed interest in reconstructing its Mahgrebi affiliates with the dual intent of supporting the Iraqi jihad and bolstering its operational assets in the region. The forming of the al-Qaeda Organization of Jihad in the Arab Mahgreb countries is a step towards that direction.

The group primary target is to overthrow Algeria's secular government and to ultimately establish an Islamic caliphate. However, the GSPC's armed struggle has lost most of its public support and has attracted the attention of militants outside Algeria. The GSPC is recruiting fighters from Tunisia, Morocco, Mali, and from former strongholds of the Nigerian Taliban. Underlying the recruitment of fighters for the GSPC could be the formation of an extensive training network to provide the means by which al-Qaeda can move fighters from Iraq and Mahgreb. The training network's basis is situated in GSPC's camps in the Sahara desert. Following the completion of this phase, fighters move on to fight along with the GSPC against the Algerian government. The next and final stage includes the transfer of fighters to the Iraqi jihad.



According to the Center for Policing Terrorism (CPT), GSPC militants kidnapped thirty European tourists in the Algerian Sahara in February 2003. The money from the victims' ransom is alleged to have been used for purchasing heavy weaponry. In December 2006 the militants also attacked two buses, wounding several foreign officials.

Within Algeria, the GSPC has effectively split into two groups: the north, which operates under the leadership of Abdelmalek Droukdal and the one based in the Sahara desert that encompasses southern Algeria, northern Mali and Mauritania. The northern grouping is more geographically constrained by Algerian security forces. The northern grouping funds itself primarily through kidnappings for ransom and armed robbery. The southern grouping was until recently led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar who masterminded together with Ammari Saifi the GSPC's exploitation of Sahara as an operational basis. The southern GSPC is involved in cigarette and marijuana trafficking as well as in illegal trading of government subsidized goods. It also engages in Islamic policing of traditional routes, demanding protection money



from smugglers who use the routes and occasionally confiscating and reselling items deemed un-Islamic.

For its part, in order to successfully tackle terrorism the Algerian government created new units that work alongside the army and the police. These groups are the Brigade Mobile de Police Judiciaire (BMPJ), the Groupe d' Intervention Speciale (GIS) and la Garde Communale. In addition the government has established civil anti-terrorism groups to fight against terrorism. These groups have considerably facilitated the work of security forces in rural areas. Algeria also participates in the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCP) a multi-agency program led by the US State Department and aimed at building counterterrorism capacity in nine African countries: Algeria, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and, Tunisia. Furthermore, a Plan of Action on Combating Terrorism in Africa has been adopted in an African Union meeting in Algiers since 2002.

The current political situation within Algeria is focused on the forthcoming election next month. President Abdelaziz Bouteflika will further cement his power. These will be the first elections since the 2006 Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation. The charter allowed militants who surrendered to be fully reintegrated into society and in some cases to benefit from government assistance in finding a job. However, several Islamists, released from prison or having returned from exile will attempt to contest the elections though the charter forbids both the reconstruction of the FIS and the participation in party politics of former FIS activists. There are several voices in Algeria's political scene that advocate the militants' imprisonment, considering those activists as personae non-gratae with possible involvement in the GSPC fighting.



**I.I.R.**

*Institute of International Relations  
Panteion University*

*3-5 Hill Street  
GR-10558, Athens, GREECE*

[www.idis.gr](http://www.idis.gr)

**Consulting Editor**

Sotiris Roussos

**Senior Editors**

Marina Eleftheriadou  
Ilias Tassopoulos

**Coordinator**

Anna Apostolidou

**Contributors**

Anna Apostolidou  
Marianna Athanasopoulou  
Marina Eleftheriadou  
Alexandra Karaiskou  
Ioannis Mantzikos  
Ilias Tassopoulos  
Chryssoula Toufexis

**English Language Editing**

Marianna Athanasopoulou

**Designing**

azúcar K



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Institute of International Relations  
3-5, Hill Street, 105 58 Athens, Greece.

Tel: 0030 210 3312325-7, fax: 0030 210 3313575

**Website: [www.idis.gr](http://www.idis.gr)**