

Middle East International

Vol. II, Issue 1: 6 November 2009

Heading nowhere: political paralysis in...



Turkey's new Middle
East diplomacy ... 9

The rise and rise of
Gamal Mubarak...13

Israel conjures up
Arab monsters...22

Founded 1971

© Middle East International
ISSN 0047-7249

Editor Gerald Butt
Deputy Editor Najm Jarrah
Editorial Assistant Fadia Shawwa

Consultant Editors
Rashid Khalidi
Jim Muir
Zaki Nusseibeh
Patrick Seale

Publisher Nora Shawwa
Subscriptions & Advertising Emilia Panayi
PR Coordinator Hania Dajani
Administration Christina Kashouli

MEI Publications Ltd
P O Box 14208
Nicosia 2155 - Cyprus
Tel + 357 22 68 07 66
Fax + 357 22 31 59 91
UK Tel + 44 20 8987 0184
subscriptions@meionline.com
info@meionline.com

CONTENTS

Viewpoint by David Gardner
Despotism: the Arab exception3

News Analysis

Yemen
Trading charges4
War by proxy4
Fear of failure.....6
Heading for economic collapse.....7
Iraq
Kirkuk imperils elections.....8
Turkey
Out of the straitjacket.....9
Iran
The nuclear deal that wasn't.....11
Political paralysis persists.....11
Egypt
The rise and rise of Gamal Mubarak.....13

Feuding brothers.....13

Tunisia

An election, but no real politics15
Yearning for dialogue16

Palestine

Palestinian hopes evaporate.....17
Abbas opts for elections.....18

Bahrain

No to normalisation 20

Israel

Jerusalem Palestinians face new threat..... 21
Bashing Goldstone, mourning Bush..... 22

United Nations

Goldstone weaves a sticky web 23

Lebanon

Still waiting...24
Preparing for another war?.....25

Features

Israel

Conjuring up monsters: David Hirst examines Israel's claims of "righteous violence"27

US in the Middle East

Graham Usher finds that Obama's Middle East promise is fading.....29

Iraq

Jim Muir assesses Iraq's political prospects up to and beyond the January elections32

Libya

George Joffé profiles Libya's Saif-al-Islam and predicts that the reformer will face challenges from his critics.....34

Book Reviews36

Letter From...

Gaza, by Michael Jansen.....40

MEI Annual Subscription Rates for 2009/2010	Individuals	Institutions
MEI Hardcopy Delivered via airmail including online access to current issue.	€140.00	€190.00
MEI Online Access MEI online including archives.	€110.00	€150.00*
MEI Print + Online Receive both hardcopy and online access including archives.	€175.00	€270.00*
* Multi-user subscription rates available. • Academic/student discounts available. • 5% VAT is applicable to all subscribers from EU member countries, unless a VAT number is provided.		Middle East International Subscriptions Department Tel.: +(357) 22 680766 Fax: +(357) 22 315991 subscriptions@meionline.com visit us: www.meionline.com

Despotism: the “Arab Exception”

by David Gardner

For all that the intractable problems of the Middle East remain with us – Israel-Palestine, Iran and Iraq, to go no further – let us, just for a moment, willingly suspend our disbelief and imagine that serial miracles of statesmanship had resolved them. There would still be one overarching problem.

The Arab world is mired in despotism. The US and the West continue to prop up a network of regional strongmen in the interest of short-term stability. This is a deadly combination. It needs to change.

After the shock of 9/11, the Bush administration began to grasp that Arab tyranny was an essential alloy in the alchemy of Islamist terror. Western collusion in local autocracy helped create an “Arab Exception” – leaving the Arabs marooned as waves of democracy broke over east and central Europe and Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and southeast Asia. In no other part of the world has the West operated with so little regard for the human and political rights of local citizens.

The West’s morbid fear of political Islam has served to deny Arabs democracy in case they support Islamists, just as during the Cold War many Latin Americans, Asians and Africans had to endure Western-endorsed dictators lest they supported communists. Condoleezza Rice, in a speech in Cairo in June 2005, acknowledged the US had pursued stability at the expense of democracy in the Middle East and had ended up with neither. America, she averred, had learnt its lesson.

Aside from taking a sledgehammer to Iraq, the weakest link in the Arab power chain, not much happened. The Bush team were recovering cold warriors, reading over the transformation of the Soviet buffer into the wholly different Arab environment in which the West has been backing, as it were, the local variant of Stalinism. For their part, the facile neo-cons who provided the philosophical justification for invading Iraq were exposed as paladins of the geo-politics of breaking and entering.

Yet, what really brought the “freedom agenda” to a juddering halt was the electoral success of Islamism in 2005-06: in Egypt, Iraq, the Palestinian territories and Lebanon. We guaranteed that outcome after a century of collusion with local despots who suppressed all challenge, leaving their citizens nowhere to regroup but the mosque and the madrasa. Now we must learn to manage the consequences – learn how to live with Islamists.

There is no intrinsic conflict between Christians and Muslims – leaving aside the “they-hate-us-for-our-freedoms” industry that blossomed after 9/11. The root of the problem is that a majority of Muslims is convinced that the West, interested only in a stability based on regional strongmen, the security of Israel and cheap oil, is engaged in a war against Islam and bent on denying them the freedoms it claims for itself. That is why it is so self-defeating to temporise with tyranny as the ostensibly lesser evil to political Islam.

The challenge now is to ensure that these Muslims are not driven into the arms of the jihadis who, aided by the backlash against Western policies in Iraq, Palestine, Afghanistan and elsewhere, are poised to enter the Muslim mainstream.

Democracy, in this unpromising context, could open a long period of illiberal politics that may be inimical to stability. Yet the West’s only realistic choice is to cease obstructing the right of Arabs to decide their own future. A sane policy would seek to prevent the evolution of a lethal form of radical Islam, partly by finding space for a thoughtful Islamism to emerge.

That is no longer easy. The Bush “freedom agenda” has been discredited. Yet the insight brought to the West so violently by al-Qa’ida – that tyranny, connived in by the West, breeds terrorism, instability, and societal stagnation – is no less valid. President Obama needs to rescue that insight before it is swept away in a backlash of shallow realism. His Cairo speech this June hinted that he understood this as he started a new conversation with and about the region.

Unless the Arab countries and the broader Middle East can find a way out of the pit of autocracy, their young populations will be condemned to lives of despair, humiliation and rage for generations, adding fuel to a roaring fire in what is already the most combustible region in the world. Support for autocracy and indulgence of corruption in this region, far from securing stability, breeds extremism and, in extremis, failed states.

It will, of course, be primarily up to the citizens of these countries to claw their way out of that pit. But the least they can expect from the West is not to keep stamping on their fingers.

David Gardner, chief leader writer at The Financial Times, is author of Last Chance: the Middle East in the Balance.

YEMEN

Trading charges

By Ginny Hill, London

As Yemen's intermittent five-year civil war rumbles on in the northern mountains of Saada close to the Saudi border, the government and rebel sides have been exchanging increasingly vocal accusations of foreign involvement.

Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh joined the fray in person late last month when he claimed that captured rebels had confessed to receiving Iranian funding. The authorities in Sana'a had earlier accused Iranian religious institutions of backing the insurgency, and on 26 October announced they had detained five Iranians on a vessel in the Red Sea supposedly shipping anti-tank missiles to Saada. Tehran promptly dismissed the charge as a fabrication, and offered to mediate in the conflict. The weapons seizure followed an announcement that Fares Mana'a, head of a government-appointed mediation committee and brother of the Governor of Saada, had been blacklisted for arms trade violations.

The rebels have meanwhile been amplifying their charges of Saudi backing for the government war effort, and last week declared that Yemeni officials had cut a deal with al-Qa'ida mercenaries to help crush the rebellion. A statement issued by their commander, Abdelmalek Badreddin al-Houthi, on 2 November claimed government forces were using a rear base inside Saudi Arabia to launch attacks into Saada, and hinted that his fighters might have to engage in cross-border retaliation. The charge was swiftly denied by Saudi officials, as were earlier claims that the Saudi air force had conducted raids on rebel-controlled villages.

The latest bout of fighting between

different components of Yemen's security forces and supporters of the charismatic Houthi family began with an anti-rebel offensive launched in mid-August. In an early burst of bellicose rhetoric, Saleh stated that "Operation Scorched Earth" would continue for five or six years. By mid-October he was claiming the army would declare victory within days. An army statement issued in the first week of November spoke of the rebels sustaining "massive casualties" and losing territory in the ongoing drive against them.

The mixed messages emanating from Sana'a suggest that neither the government nor the security services have been operating as a coherent entity inside the combat zone. But with the area off-limits to independent reporters, claims about the progress of the fighting on the ground are hard to verify.

The government has, meanwhile, taken the battle to the courts. In late October proceedings were begun in absentia against Yahya al-Houthi, exiled brother of the insurgency's commander. The rebels' German-based spokesman was charged with spying for an undisclosed foreign power and, for good measure, plotting to assassinate the American ambassador in Sana'a. Other, separate, trials saw 12 men sentenced to death and another 18 jailed for their part in the rebellion.

It is not only against Houthists that legal cudgels have been wielded. On 30 October a special press court convicted the editor-in-chief of *al-Masdar* newspaper and a US-based Yemeni correspondent of slandering the president following critical coverage of the Saada conflict and accusations of corruption. Yemen, not long ago famed for its relatively free press by regional standards, was ranked among the bottom ten countries in Reporters Without Borders' Press

Freedom Index for 2009, reflecting the authorities' increasingly persecutory stance against independent journalism in recent months.

International concern about the Saada war and its fallout is growing palpably. After the UNHCR confirmed that shelling at a UN camp for people displaced by the fighting had killed an unknown number of men, women and children, the US State Department called for a ceasefire, while the Council of the European Union decried the "deteriorating security, political and economic situation across the country." The US has pledged \$8.7 million in emergency relief and Britain £2 million in humanitarian aid to assist the estimated 150,000 people made homeless. The UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs is still seeking top-up funds to match a \$23.5 million appeal it launched in September.

THE REGIONAL DIMENSION

War by proxy?

By Omayma Abdel-Latif, Beirut

The Houthist rebellion is increasingly being portrayed in the Arab world as a reflection of the simmering regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In official statements, clerical pronouncements and, above all, in state-guided media coverage and commentary, this notion has become the dominant theme in public discourse in the region about events in Yemen.

It is a misleading and simplistic outlook which ignores the complex dynamics and realities of domestic Yemeni politics.

But it has its uses.

For the Yemeni authorities, dismissing the Houthists as Iranian

stooges has been a convenient way of discrediting them and deflecting their mundane demands for political inclusion, more equitable distribution of state services and respect for their cultural identity.

But while the external factor may indeed play a role in exacerbating the conflict, it is neither its major driver nor the key to resolving it. And Saudi Arabia and Iran's apparent rivalry and mutual animosity over Yemen can be seen as having more to do with the domestic politics of each country.

Saudi fears

For Saudi Arabia, the priority is to keep Yemen's internal conflicts – whether with Houthist rebels, southern separatists or al-Qa'ida offshoots – within Yemen.

With a shared border extending over 1,000 kilometres, "the Saudis are very concerned about developments in their turbulent neighbour," says London-based Saudi scholar Fuad Ibrahim. "It's a matter of dangers erupting that could spill over into the kingdom. So they use all their influence to push back the fire emanating from the Yemeni nest."

Such tools of influence have long included financial and military support for the Yemeni government and tribal leaders.

Another is what one informed Saudi observer terms the "high risk strategy" of playing on the Sunni-Shi'a divide in the region. This includes encouraging salafi sheikhs to propagate the Wahhabi doctrine amongst Yemen's Zaydis, who are Shi'a, and persuading Yemeni salafis to get involved in the military operations against the Houthis. An Aden-based Houthi sympathiser charged that salafi

clerics in both Yemen and Saudi Arabia were actively involved in fuelling the conflict by means of fatwas condemning the Houthis and urging their followers to join the war against them.

This might help explain the sectarian bile regularly spewed against the Houthis by Sunni



Southerners demand secession: more pressure on the Yemeni government (pic: STR New/Reuters)

clerics close to Saudi Arabia in a variety of Arab countries. Saudi and Saudi-controlled Arab media also consistently paint the conflict in predominantly sectarian colours: as one pitting the Iran-sponsored "Shi'a" rebels against the "Sunni" state backed by Saudi Arabia.

Iranian aid

In similar vein, the fighting in Yemen has been used in the political rivalry between Iran's reformist and conservative camps.

Among the accusations levelled against President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad by reformist critics was his "failure to protect the Shi'a" in Yemen. Although ostensibly of a sectarian nature, such

charges essentially have a domestic political purpose: to undermine the controversially re-elected president's standing in the eyes of the Iranian public. "Had the reformists been in power, they would not have cared less about reaching out to the Houthis," remarked Beirut-based Iranian academic Masoud Asadollahi.

While upholding Tehran's official denials of providing military assistance to the Houthis, Asadollahi concedes that some Iranian and other Shi'i religious leaders have sent them donations, ostensibly as charitable aid. "There are clerics who believe it is their religious duty to assist the poor and marginalised everywhere. Some send funding from Qom," he said.

According to Asadollahi they raise the money autonomously from their followers, acting independently from the state and outside its control. He said the Iranian government had held informal talks with some clerics aimed at dissuading them from providing such funding since it hurt the country's image, but to no avail.

Yet Tehran undoubtedly sees advantages in this. Even the perception of wielding regional influence provides it with leverage which strengthens its hand in its tortuous dealings with Western detractors.

Verbal warfare

But it is the long-troubled relationship between the Islamic Republic and the Saudi Kingdom that remains at the centre of the issue. Tensions between the two surface from time to time in the form of verbal warfare, mostly fought out in print and over the airwaves via Saudi and Iranian-financed media.

In attempting to counter Iran's ascendancy as a key regional power, Saudi Arabia has traditionally opted for a calculated non-confrontational approach in politics. For example, it remained officially silent when Iranian students demonstrated at the Saudi embassy in Tehran to protest against alleged Saudi intervention against Houthis.

Coupled with this has been a highly aggressive – but indirect – rhetorical campaign. In Saudi-financed media, Iran is relentlessly painted as the trouble-maker of the Middle East, a major threat to regional stability and an agent of chaos in many an Arab country: whether Iraq, Lebanon or now in Yemen. In the London-based *Asharq al-Awsat* newspaper, for example, one Saudi commentator accused Iran of supporting “every terrorist organisation in the Middle East” including al-Qa’ida and the Houthis, another spoke of a 50-year scheme devised by Ayatollah Khomeini to achieve Iranian dominance of the Middle East, while a third warned against the emerging Iranian-Turkish alliance and called for Iran to be isolated via the deconstruction of its partnership with Syria.

Mutual name-calling recently looked set to overshadow the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, in a throwback to the 1980s when ugly confrontations between Iranian pilgrims and Saudi security forces were a regular occurrence. It began with remarks by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, later amplified by Ahmadinejad, about the alleged mistreatment of Iranian pilgrims by the Saudi authorities.

Incensed, the Saudis responded with a double message: urging Iran not to politicise the hajj, and at the same time warning that any bid to disrupt the holy ritual would be confronted. This seemed to have the desired effect. As *MEI* went

to press, Iranian Foreign Minister Manushehr Mottaki was due in Riyadh on a mission to clear up the misunderstanding caused by Ahmadinejad's remarks.

BACKGROUND BRIEFING

Fear of failure

By Ginny Hill

If nationhood is a precursor for statehood, Yemen has enjoyed a 1,000-year head start over most of its neighbours. As a geographical concept Yemen predates the birth of Islam. A saying of the Prophet Muhammad praises the Yemenis as a pious and admirable people.

But 21st century Yemen is increasingly viewed as an incomplete, collapsing state. In the last six months, fear of state failure in this strategically-located country has become an international concern – along with the attendant threats to the internal security of neighbouring Saudi Arabia, and the potential for further disruption to piracy-threatened shipping lanes in the Gulf of Aden.

The underlying challenge to the Yemeni state is economic. The country is oil dependent but production is declining: oil output peaked in 2002 at 460,000 barrels per day and is forecast at less than 270,000 b/d in 2010. Multiple internal security problems, a growing consensus that the country is on a downward trajectory, widespread corruption and unpromising geology deter extensive exploration for new finds. Liquefied natural gas production, which began in October, will not make up the shortfall from crude export revenues. Economically, the bottom is dropping out of the country.

Yemenis were the first citizens on the Arabian Peninsula to

have universal suffrage, but the worsening macro-economic crisis exposes the flimsy nature of Yemeni democracy. State revenues fell 75% in the first quarter of this year, impacting both the state budget and the parallel patronage networks that bind disparate interest groups to the centre.

This coincided with a decision to delay parliamentary elections scheduled for April. Officially, the postponement was due to a dispute between the ruling General People's Congress and opposition parties over constitutional reform. The vote is formally on hold until 2011, ostensibly to allow time to resolve opposition grievances. But political tensions are likely to increase as the macro-economic strain intensifies and a question mark hangs over the future of the democratic process.

Yemen is the poorest country in the Middle East, with human development indicators that consistently trail the regional average by a wide margin. Yemen's 3.6% annual population growth rate is among the highest in the world, and more than half of Yemeni children under five suffer from moderate or severe stunting. Food security is “alarming” and Yemen has one of the lowest water per capita availability rates anywhere, forcing widespread reliance on cheap, subsidised diesel to power pumps that extract groundwater from deep aquifers. Fuel subsidies and a bloated civil service wage bill place intolerable strain on the dwindling national budget. But any adjustments will create shockwaves in this breadline economy, threatening widespread social unrest. Bailouts from Yemen's neighbours may buy time, but they will also further erode perceptions of the government's competence.

Against this backdrop, the government confronts three distinct

security challenges: the erratic five-year civil war in the northern province of Saada, southern separatism and al-Qaida-inspired terrorism. Each conflict is rooted in different historical circumstances, geographical areas and senses of identity but all three movements mounting these challenges essentially share a single common feature. They all propagate an anti-corruption message and reject President Ali Abdallah Saleh's claim to legitimacy. Saleh, who was re-elected in 2006, has now spent over 30 years in power. His most recent election campaign promises to tackle corruption marked the high-point of Western donor hopes that the government would implement an ambitious reform agenda, accompanied and encouraged by billion-dollar aid pledges. In the past three years, progress has stalled and the atmosphere among Yemen's political elite has become increasingly apocalyptic.

As Yemenis lose faith in Saleh's government, many are turning back in time to nostalgic alternatives, with notional borders that bear no relation to the modern state. The rebels in Saada are fighting in the shadow of the former Zaydi Shi'i Imamate that dominated the northern highlands; the southern separatists draw on the memory of the Marxist government in Aden that predated Yemeni unification in 1990; and al-Qaida is calling for a return to an era of Islamic rule. The imaginative imprint of these three historical states, that have long ceased to exist, gives Yemenis a starting point as they frame their opposition to Sana'a. Combined with contemporary bread-and-butter local issues, it raises the future risk of fragmentation.

The current government's capacity to manage each of these

challenges diminishes as the economic strain increases, because there are fewer and fewer resources – and therefore less political capital – available to pursue the president's well-worn formula of divide and rule. At the same time, Yemenis' expectations of the resources available from their patronage networks have a long way to fall.

Yemen now presents itself as a test-case for successful international intervention in a collapsing state. Western policy makers mull over prescriptions similar to those offered in Afghanistan and Iraq – the holy trinity of development, state-building and counter-terrorism. But the country's location demands a different stance. Western governments would in any case be wary of deploying "infidel" boots just a few hundred miles south of Mecca, should circumstances unravel further.

Yemen's porous, unpatrolled borders and illicit transnational trading networks – shifting weapons, drugs, diesel and people from Africa through Arabia – require a co-ordinated regional response. The road to Yemen's future stability runs through Riyadh, and the Saudis must surely seek alignment with the other states of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Somalia is an additional piece in the regional jigsaw, as a source of increasing numbers of refugees and a market for Yemeni arms and smuggled diesel.

Saleh warns that Yemen runs the risk of turning into another Somalia, often dubbed the world's number one failed state. "Failed state" is an absolute term and, in Yemen's case, it is not yet appropriate. But linguistic quibbles should not detract from the seriousness of Yemen's underlying challenges.

THE VIEW FROM THE GROUND

Heading for economic collapse

Abigail Fielding-Smith reports from Mahweet, 100 kilometres northwest of Sana'a, on the economic difficulties that Yemenis face in daily life.

Nineteen-year-old Muhammad Sa'a slouches idly in the driver's seat of his grandfather's jeep, which has been battered, bleached and time-worn almost to a skeleton. "The economic situation is getting worse," he explains with a wry grin. The dilapidated vehicle is his livelihood, enabling him to transfer building materials to construction sites. He usually earns around 23,000 riyals (\$10-\$15) a day, with which he has to support his wife, their child, and the new baby she is expecting. By lunchtime, however, he has still not found work. Sa'a sees no way of improving his economic prospects. "I have to worry," he says. "I am married with children." Asked whether he feels the government could be doing more to help, he laughs: "We don't have any government."

Mahweet is not one of the poorest governorates in Yemen. Although it is now experiencing water supply problems, it has relatively high rainfall levels, and has traditionally been a strong agricultural producer. The capital, Mahweet City, boasts a higher education college, an elaborately-façaded post office and a large government building – the main sources of employment in the area. Nonetheless, Mahweet reflects many of the critical economic problems which some analysts fear have brought Yemen to the brink of chaos.

The higher education college

can no longer afford to buy books, following a decision at the end of 2008 to slash government expenditure to cover the gaping deficit created by the decline in oil prices. "We can only offer the essentials," says Muhammad al-Nahhari, the Dean. Another drain on resources has been the military conflict further north in Saada, where the government has been involved in a five-year campaign against the Houthi movement. The Saada conflict, Nahhari says, has had a negative impact on Mahweet: "No electricity, no water, no medicine, no healthcare." Like everywhere in Yemen, services exist here, but in a chronically limited form.

With its dramatic mountain scenery, Mahweet was formerly a popular destination for tourists. "I used to sell two or three of these a week," says Muhammad Ali Ariji, displaying a *jambiyah* – the curved dagger which forms the ornamental centrepiece of Yemeni traditional dress. "Now sometimes in a month I don't sell one. After al-Houthi, we have no more tourists."

Search for work

Unemployment, meanwhile, which is estimated at 35% nationally, is the major preoccupation of the town's young people. "I want to leave Yemen and go to Saudi Arabia," says Kamal Muhammad Ali, an 18-year old in his final year at school. Several boys from his neighbourhood have already been smuggled into the kingdom. In Mahweet, boys much younger than Kamal are sometimes given to human traffickers by their parents, but he says the ones he knew went of their own volition. "Here it is difficult unless you are well qualified," he says. "Even some people who finish college end up selling qat."

Mahweet does not seem like a governorate on the edge; several

people interviewed said that they had enough work. But it does seem to be a region in which living, like Muhammad Sa'a's jeep, has been worn down to the bare essentials. "People can wait two-to-three years," says Abdo Saif, a development advisor for the UNDP in Yemen. "But if [the economic crisis] is prolonged, they are going to fight for their livelihood."

Several long-term trends paint a worrying picture. The supply of water, always a problem in Yemen, is reaching critical proportions: Sana'a is predicted to run out of it completely by 2025. Oil, the mainstay of the government's revenue, could be exhausted as early as 2017, according to the World Bank.

Furthermore, government control over certain tribal areas in the north is already negligible, there is a conflict against a metastasising insurgency, and political unrest centred on Aden is showing signs of spreading to other areas. The fear is that further deterioration of the economic situation could result in a complete breakdown of law and central authority. "The government needs to act very fast on economic growth to take the country out of political conflict," says Abdo Saif.

Recovery plan

The government is aware of the urgency of the problem, and a taskforce is drafting an action plan to "catalyse the turnaround of Yemen's economy within 24 months" with, it is hoped, the help of international donors and consultancy firms. "As long as there is a will to work on this plan, it is our way out," says Hisham Sharaf, deputy minister for planning and international cooperation.

The plan's priorities include a solution to the water problem, a development programme for Aden

and economic reform, principally the removal of fuel subsidies, which consume one-third of the budget. There are concerns, however, about whether a government bureaucracy hampered by institutional corruption and grappling with immediate political and security challenges can implement it quickly enough.

Unofficially, hopes are increasingly being pinned on Saudi Arabia to save the day, either with an injection of cash or by opening up its labour market. The assumption is that Saudi Arabia cannot afford to let its southern neighbour collapse.

In Mahweet, meanwhile, hope is channelled in a different direction. "We have confidence in God," says Muhammad al-Akhram, when asked about how he would continue to run his garage as the price of imported parts rose. Further up the road in the higher education college, Dean Nahhari, offers his students different advice: "I tell them," he says, "to rely on themselves."

IRAQ

Kirkuk imperils elections

By Jim Muir, Baghdad

The fate of Iraq's vital general elections, scheduled for 16 January, was hanging in the balance at MEI press-time, with parliamentary factions still at loggerheads over a revised election law to govern the poll, despite heavy pressure from the US and the UN to push it through.

At the centre of the deadlock was the vexed issue of Kirkuk, a perennial thorn in the Iraqi flesh which presents particular problems in terms of electoral arrangements.

One of the biggest issues has been a dispute over which electoral

rolls should be used for the event. Arabs and Turcomans in the region, accusing the Kurds of swamping the oil-rich province with Kurdish voters after 2003, wanted the previous registers to be adopted. The Kurds, meanwhile, are insisting on an updated version to reflect changed demographics that they believe to be a partial and justified rectification of Saddam Hussein's Arabisation policies.

With both sides fearing that any compromises over election issues would imply concessions in a final solution for the province, mediators were struggling to find a way of detaching the election process from the broader issue of Kirkuk's ultimate fate and status.

The Iraqi Higher Election Commission, in charge of running the polls, gave the fractious recalcitrant legislators just another few days to resolve the standoff. Beyond that point, it really would be impossible to get the logistics in place – a process that would normally take a minimum of three months.

The betting was more or less even over whether agreement would be reached or a postponement announced. In the latter case, there would be a risk of a constitutional vacuum, although some politicians believed an extension into February would be permissible. Beyond that, the legitimacy of the incumbent chamber, and hence the entire political structure, would no longer be constitutionally valid.

Friction with US

A postponement would open other dangers too. American commanders, committed to having all their combat troops out of the country by the end of August, have been delaying further major force reductions pending the successful holding of the general elections, regarded as a milestone of Iraqi stability.

But once the polling is out of the way and the results announced, the pullout is expected to gather momentum swiftly. Eager to shift both men and assets across to Afghanistan, Washington will be less than amused if the wheels in Iraq grind to a halt. Hence the signs of mounting impatience in US dealings with Baghdad – and a perceptible backlash from Iraqi politicians, some of whom have warned the Americans that if the elections here are not credible, they will face a situation worse than Afghanistan.

As the withdrawal and its attendant stresses loom closer, there's a growing tendency for the Americans to tell Iraqis, in one way or another, "Solve your own problems", with the Iraqis retorting, "You got us into this mess, you have to do more to get us out of it."

Both Iraqi and US commanders have also warned against the potential of further violence with the approach of the elections – a prediction that was reinforced by the two big explosions in central Baghdad on 25 October in which more than 150 people were killed and 500 wounded.

Once again – as with the 19 August blasts which hit the foreign and finance ministries – the bombs were aimed at government targets, in this instance, the ministries of justice and public works, and the provincial governorate building.

Although a group linked to al-Qa'ida said it carried out the latest attacks, it was not clear whether they were aimed in a general way at disrupting security ahead of the elections, or specifically at undermining the position of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, whose electoral appeal is in large measure based on his campaign to impose law and order and promote stability. Whether or not that was the intention, it would be the likely effect.

In contrast to the August attacks, the October blasts did not provoke a repeat of the extraordinary diatribe unleashed by Maliki against neighbouring Syria, which he accused of harbouring Baath Party diehards who were making common cause with al-Qa'ida-type militants to disrupt Iraqi stability.

The October ministry bombs brought the casualty figures from violence in that month to double those of September. But roughly half of those casualties came from the one double bombing, and without it, the overall trend would have continued to be downward.

(See Jim Muir's "Iraq awaits post-US troops era test" on page 32.)

TURKEY

Out of the straitjacket

By Nicole Pope, Istanbul

Since he took the helm of Turkey's diplomacy earlier this year, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu has been actively promoting his "zero problem" policy with neighbouring countries. Rarely a day goes by without a foreign trip or a major strategic development.

A recent visit to Iraq included a groundbreaking stop in Erbil, which signalled an end to the feud that in recent years has pitted Ankara against Iraqi Kurds over the presence in northern Iraq of Kurdish PKK militants. During an earlier trip to Baghdad in October, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, accompanied by nine ministers, signed 48 cooperation agreements, ranging from water to energy and security.

A similarly high-level Turkish delegation had visited Syria in mid-October. The two neighbours,



Rahab Homaravandi/Reuters

Erdogan and Ahmedinejad: a blossoming friendship

who nearly went to war over the PKK just over a decade ago, lifted visa requirements and announced plans to develop cooperation in several areas. Until recently, Turkey was viewed with suspicion by its neighbours, due in part to the Ottoman legacy but also to the perception that modern Turkey had rejected its Muslim roots.

Since the arrival in power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002, the country's image has evolved. Turkey's refusal to allow US troops to use its territory to invade Iraq in 2003 was welcomed by Arab states, intrigued by the changing face of the country's leadership. The Arab public, meanwhile, has rediscovered Turkish culture through popular television sitcoms.

Turkey's new outreach efforts mark a change of style and strategy, and are not limited to the Middle East. Ankara recently signed key protocols with long-time foe Armenia, pledging to normalise ties and to re-open their common border, closed since 1993. In the Balkans, too, Ankara is seeking greater integration, while its ties with Moscow were boosted by recent energy deals.

Long constrained by rigid policy lines drawn by the army and the secular establishment, Turkey is now bursting out of its straight-jacket and developing its potential.

Central to the credibility of its "soft power" approach in the Middle East are the government's brave attempts to sort out its own internal problems. Prime Minister Erdogan has launched a "democratic opening" aimed at solving Turkey's Kurdish question. Although details of the plans have yet to be released, the more tolerant atmosphere has already allowed 34 PKK militants to return from northern Iraq and more are expected in the coming weeks, despite strong reactions from nationalists in Turkey.

The government's decision to prosecute retired officers and other secular figures accused of plotting its overthrow appear to have put the army on the defensive. This shift in the internal balance of power has given the AKP more leeway to promote an independent agenda.

Exploring all options

Some analysts are wondering if these new developments mark a reorientation away from the West

and its allies. Eyebrows were raised when Ankara abruptly cancelled joint military exercises with Israel in October. Erdogan, known for his abrasive style, has been openly critical of Israel's human rights abuses, although he stresses that he intends to maintain ties with Tel Aviv.

His statements may have jeopardised Ankara's chance to continue playing the role of mediator between Israel and the Palestinians. But Turkey, now more confident, appears to believe that the Israelis need its support more than it needs theirs.

Alarm bells also rang in some Western quarters when the Turkish prime minister referred to the Iranian leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as a "friend" and criticised the West's "hypocrisy" over the nuclear issue. Turkey has always expressed its aversion to nuclear proliferation in the region and advocated dialogue with Tehran to resolve the crisis with the West.

Aside from the desire to promote stability in its backyard and bolster its own strategic position, Turkey's efforts to reach out to new partners carry important economic stakes. Most of its exports were traditionally directed to European countries in the past, but the economic downturn has forced it to look for new markets, less saturated and more dynamic. With Iran alone, the volume of annual trade is expected to treble from \$7 billion to more than \$20 billion in the next few years.

Increased cooperation with oil and gas-rich nations also helps Turkey position itself as a main energy hub linking producers to Western markets, via pipeline projects such as Nabucco, backed by the EU, and Russia's South Stream project.

While the AKP is undoubtedly more at ease with its Muslim

neighbours than its predecessors, Turkey insists it is merely adding a regional dimension to its traditional foreign policy, symbolised by membership of NATO and its candidacy for EU accession. Ankara hopes that its raised profile will make it a more attractive potential member of the EU. But, tired of waiting for EU member states to grasp its strategic value, Turkey is now exploring all its options and signalling that it will no longer do all the running.

IRAN

The nuclear deal that wasn't

By Ian Williams, United Nations

Iran often seems to confuse causing exasperation with diplomacy. It certainly manages to irritate those who try to arrange a graceful climb-down, whether it is the EU states which tried to head off what looked like George W Bush's rush to war or, now, the IAEA.

The IAEA's recent compromise proposal in the ongoing dispute about Iran's nuclear programme suggests that Iran transfer some three-quarters of its declared 1.5 tons of low-enriched uranium to Russia for further enrichment by the end of this year. The uranium would then go to France for conversion into fuel plates for a Tehran reactor that produces medical radio-isotopes for cancer treatment. Just as the negotiators thought they were on the verge of a deal, the Iranians have seemingly asked for incoming shipments of uranium to match those they would send out.

This might seem bloody-minded, but the Iranians have a point. For decades other states, including Russia and China, have

taken Iranian money and refused to deliver nuclear technology and materials. On the other hand, it is understandable that few if any other countries really applaud even the possibility of an Iranian nuclear weapons capability.

The Iranians also have a point that their case should not be before the Security Council. But that point has been somewhat obscured by their inept diplomacy and occasional tendency to be economical with the truth. What they are doing in the way of refinement of nuclear fuel does not breach their obligations under the non-proliferation treaty. They are allowing inspections by the IAEA, and they have not processed the fuel to weapons standard. Their processing can, of course, be a step in the development of bomb-grade material, but that is true of all countries.

Getting Iran onto the agenda of the Security Council needed a referral by the IAEA for which nuclear-armed Israel, a non-signatory of the NPT, agitated. The arm-twisting and cajoling that brought about that result was actively supported by India, also a non-signatory and a possessor of nuclear weapons, in expectation of a deal with the US that would in effect legitimise its driving a juggernaut through the treaty. Iran refuses to accept the legality of the Security Council referral. Its resentments are certainly fuelled by memories of the Iraq-Iran war when the Council refused to act over what the UN later determined was an act of aggression by Iraq, not to mention Saddam's use of missiles and poison gas. By getting Iran on the agenda, the US and its allies pre-empted Iran's ace – which would have been to follow North Korea in leaving the NPT.

There is an element of irrationality in the behaviour of many parties to this controversy. For example, in

Israel the issue is what pretext can be used to hit Iran – but even then one suspects that this is more to fan the siege mentality than because of any real perception of threat.

It is ironic that the Iran's diversion of efforts and resources into promoting its nuclear-based energy independence undermines the development of the oil-refining capacity it desperately lacks, in turn making it more vulnerable to proposed sanctions against imports of gasoline and other refined petroleum products. But seemingly opposition and government alike have now taken up the nuclear cause as a symbol of national pride.

The Security Council is a diplomatic and political body, not a tribunal of law or equity. But under the UN Charter, as the International Court of Justice ruled in the case of Libya over Lockerbie, its decisions are binding in international law. In the past, Iran had the excuse that North Korea had shown that a whiff of uranium could get the US taking notice and talking. The Obama administration is prepared to talk and there are interlocutors, like IAEA head Muhammad ElBaradei prepared to mediate. Iran needs to examine ways to secure the refined fuel supplies it needs – for its pride as much as anything else. It could compromise over uranium enrichment – maybe with an escrow account in third hands in case any of the suppliers default. As Iran has already shown, it can always make more uranium.

Political paralysis persists

By Paul Sampson, London

Iran's failure to approve the nuclear deal proposed by the IAEA has exposed the political divisions

among the ruling elite that have widened in the aftermath of the contested June presidential elections and left the country in a state of political near-paralysis.

It is still possible that Ayatollah Ali Khamenei – Iran’s ultimate decision-maker – will put his foot down and order the government and Majlis to fall into line and give the Geneva agreement their blessing. But there is so much opposition to the deal from within the Supreme Leader’s own ranks that he will probably spurn the opportunity for engagement with the West and, as a result, invite a toughening of economic sanctions. Still battered and bruised by the post-election turmoil, Khamenei will not want to risk a further backlash by going against some of his key supporters.

For a brief moment in early October, a serious rapprochement between the West and Iran appeared to be on the cards. Iran’s newly-reinstated president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad expressed his enthusiasm for the Geneva deal, fuelling hope that Tehran would soon give the green light. But dissenting voices of people close to Khamenei began to be heard, including that of Majlis speaker Ali Larijani, who accused the Western powers of trying to “trick” Iran into making concessions on enrichment. And, in a sign of how muddled the political landscape has become in Tehran, opposition leader Mir Hossein Mousavi, whose supporters continue to claim he was robbed of victory in the June elections, voiced his opposition to the deal, partly because it would put thousands of Iranian scientists out of work.

So why did Khamenei agree to stretch out a hand to the West, only to withdraw it? There is a school of thought in Tehran that the Supreme Leader was never committed to a

deal on enrichment but saw it as a way of diverting attention away from the post-election debacle. Since that pivotal moment in mid-June when he used his sermon at Friday prayers to threaten force against opposition protestors – a threat he made good on – Khamenei has tried to distance himself from the political fray and make people forget about the tumultuous events of the second half of June.

But he has not succeeded, as respected opposition leaders such as Moussavi and Mehdi Karroubi refuse to be silenced and, in the case of Karroubi, continue to make allegations of rape in Iran’s prisons and detention centres. Television pictures of prominent reformists, including former vice-president Mohammad Ali Abtahi, attending a court hearing dressed in prison garb, have only heightened people’s perception that they are living in a totalitarian police state.

It serves Khamenei’s purpose to put the spotlight on Ahmadinejad, who often appears to be much more powerful than he actually is. The fact remains that Ahmadinejad is dependent on the support of the Supreme Leader, who controls all the levers of power and can increase or diminish the president’s authority with relative ease. A good example of this came in September, when he leaned on the Majlis to approve most of Ahmadinejad’s nominations for ministers in his new cabinet, most of whom – including the ministers of oil and defence – have backgrounds in the powerful Revolutionary Guard. Senior deputies admitted afterwards that without Khamenei’s intervention, several of the nominees would have been rejected on grounds of incompetence. For instance, the new oil minister, Massoud Mirkazemi, narrowly escaped

being impeached by the legislature during his previous job as commerce minister.

Tackling the economy

Now that he has his new government in place, Ahmadinejad has the opportunity to tackle his biggest problem: what to do with a bloated economy which remains heavily dependent on oil export revenues and is still partly controlled by religious foundations that have little or no accountability. A recent decision by the government to phase out crippling energy and food subsidies was a bold move, but faces strong domestic opposition and may be watered down.

At the same time, the system of patronage that has flourished throughout Iran’s history is unlikely to change any time soon, especially after a majority stake in the state telecoms firm was recently sold to a consortium linked to the Revolutionary Guards. There is every chance that the Guards, with the support that they enjoy in government, will become the dominant players in Iran’s business sector and assume the role that was occupied throughout the 1990s by groups supported by former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

If there is one political figure in Iran who has the ability to conjure up political change in Iran it is Rafsanjani. As head of the mediating body, the Expediency Council, and the Assembly of Experts, a group of some 80 clerics that has the authority to appoint a new Supreme Leader, Rafsanjani remains a heavyweight who could still shape Iran’s future. He has also used his vast personal fortune to build up powerful networks both in and outside of Iran. But Rafsanjani is a divisive figure: he is loathed by Ahmadinejad and his acolytes, some of whom would

like to see him behind bars. And he is also tainted by allegations of corruption involving his three sons. But for Iranians who have grown despondent at Iran's drift towards all-out dictatorship, Rafsanjani may look like the only hope

EGYPT

The rise and rise of Gamal Mubarak

By Issandr El Amrani in Cairo

The saga of Gamal Mubarak's bid — if bid there is — to succeed his father continues unabated. Since 2002, when he first entered politics as an official in Egypt's ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), Gamal has climbed its ranks, overhauling its institutions, ridding it of old bosses and imposing his own faithful. His control of the party now secure, the younger Mubarak looms large over political life.

His influence on Egyptian affairs goes far beyond the façade of his position as the NDP's assistant secretary-general and head of its Policies Committee, an internal think-tank that has shaped many recent government policies. Gamal associates fill not only most key positions in the party, but are also writing legislation or holding cabinet positions. More recently, the 46-year-old former investment banker has become ubiquitous on television, in newspapers and online as the face of the *fikr gedid* (new thinking) he introduced to the NDP in 2003.

At the end of October the NDP held its sixth annual conference, an occasion to launch new policies and announce internal changes. Last year, the conference saw Gamal and acolytes rise in ranks and a new mechanism adopted

for the selection of candidates in presidential elections. This year, a more muted conference held under the slogan "Only for You" drove home a message of social justice and care for the concerns of the average Egyptian in these difficult economic times.

It was also a parade for the party's accomplishments under Gamal. When Ahmad Ezz, the steel billionaire and MP who, as chief whip and organisation secretary, is the key enforcer of the new NDP, took to the stage to praise Gamal's role in fostering a "revolution" in the party, it was more than just the usual sycophancy. Gamal can credibly take credit for rejuvenating the NDP, recruiting new talent and clarifying what it stands for beyond being the inheritor of Gamal Abdel-Nasser's Arab Socialist Union, abolished by Anwar Sadat in 1978 when multi-partyism was introduced. Gamal's NDP — officially at least — balances liberal economic policy with a concern for social justice. It also advocates gradual political reform based on the concept of citizenship and equal rights under the law.

Opposition cynicism

As much as this message has been hammered in at this and past NDP conferences, it is not getting through to much of the independent and opposition press. The NDP is widely perceived as a "party of businessmen" whose sole purpose, aside from the personal enrichment of its members, is to advance the "Gamal Mubarak project" of inheritance of power. Some columnists wonder cynically if NDP leaders are sadists bent on making the life of Egyptians miserable.

No matter what the focus of the NDP conference, the looming question remains who will be the party's presidential candidate

in 2011, when President Hosni Mubarak's fifth term comes to an end. It is too early to answer that question, says NDP Secretary-General Safwat al-Sharif (one of the rare "old guard" figures left in a leadership position, alongside Zakaria Azmi, the president's powerful chief of staff who like Gamal is assistant secretary-general). The NDP will select its candidate at a "special conference" at some point in the future.

In the meantime, Gamal Mubarak appears to have already begun his campaign. He was not only the centre of attention at the party conference, but during the preceding week took part in the second online meeting with Egyptian youth in three months. The event is called *Sharek* — Arabic for "participate." Through a dedicated website Gamal took questions on the economy, problems facing young Egyptians in opening businesses, dealing with corruption, and other topics. The *Sharek* events, like televised debates aired earlier this year, have shown the public a different side of Gamal. He is building a public persona as a dynamic politician who is passionate about his country's future and eager to recruit young Egyptians to his cause.

This outreach is not without its ironic moments, such as when a young man with frustrated ambitions asks about the need for *wasta* (connections) to get a job. Not missing a beat, Gamal — whose political career is entirely based on who his father is — answered that "*wasta* is a fact of life in Egypt" but the phenomenon should be fought. More generally, commentators have accused Gamal of trying to imitate President Barack Obama by using the web and resorting to a message of hope for Egypt's future at a time when deep anxiety prevails. Salama

Ahmad Salama, one of Egypt's most prominent columnists, wrote critically in *al-Ahram*: "These 'choreographed' dialogues are the ruling party's way of corralling public opinion and duping us into thinking that there is only one choice for political life in Egypt in the coming few years."

The Mubaraks, father and son, deny that Gamal is being groomed to run as the NDP's candidate in 2011. Some Egyptians believe the president is in two minds, and that the first lady, Suzanne Mubarak, is the one pushing for her son.

Hats in the ring

The search for potential candidates is well underway with favourites including Director of General Intelligence Omar Suleiman, International Atomic Energy Agency chief Muhammad ElBaradei, Nobel prize-winning chemist Ahmad Zewail and Arab League Secretary-General Amr Mousa, who said last week he did not rule out presenting himself. The celebrated writer Muhammad Hassanein Heikal, who has emerged as a leading critic of the Mubaraks, suggested recently on his al-Jazeera show that these well-known figures

should form a transitional constitutional committee to overhaul Egypt's political system.

It is noteworthy that these potential candidates are taken more seriously than opposition politicians. Ayman Nour, released earlier this year after more than four years in prison, is touring the country to publicise his Ghad party and claims to want to run for president again in 2011 (although his criminal record would disqualify him). Nour's events and new initiatives he is participating in, such as an "Egyptian Campaign against

Feuding brothers

Essam al-Erian is an affable man in his mid-50s with a mobile phone that rarely stops ringing and an easy sense of humour. One of Egypt's best-known Islamist politicians, he is seen as a progressive, keen to distance the group from ultra-conservative views on women, political pluralism and non-Muslims' role in Egyptian society.

Erian spent five years in jail in the 1990s after one of the Mubarak regime's periodic crackdowns on the emerging Islamist leadership but went on to become one of the architects of the Muslim Brothers' 2005 electoral success, when they grabbed an unprecedented 20% of seats in the People's Assembly (the lower house of parliament). He is liked by many younger Islamists and respected by his political opponents. Some of the Muslim Brotherhood's leadership, however, do not like him very much.

For several years, Erian has been considered overdue for promotion to the Brotherhood's most powerful body, the Guidance Bureau. But the conservatives who control this highly hierarchical organisation have blocked him. In mid-October, Mahdi Akef, the Brotherhood's General Guide, threatened to resign if his colleagues did not accept Erian into the Guidance Bureau. As news of his ultimatum spread, he quickly backtracked, and the movement assured its supporters that the whole affair had been blown out of proportion and that the leadership was united. But he also confirmed that he would be stepping down from his position in January 2010, with day-to-day running of the Brotherhood put in the hands of his deputy (and likely successor), Muhammad Habib.

Most outside observers saw the clash over Erian's appointment as a rare public airing of a long-running internal feud. Khalil al-Anani, political analyst and author of a critical book on what he describes as the group's "sclerotic leadership", believes the current crisis is "the worst since the founding of the Brotherhood in 1928." Anani argues that the core of the problem is not so much Erian as the issue of who will succeed Akef. Earlier this year, the General Guide said he would step down to allow others to take the post, although previous guides have served for life. The move was intended to send a message to the Mubarak regime about term limits, a demand much of the Egyptian opposition has made of the Egyptian presidency. But it was also an attempt to democratise the Brotherhood.

Akef, who assumed his title in 2004, is the latest in a series of septuagenarian and octogenarian Brotherhood leaders. During his tenure he has promoted reforms as well as a project to launch a political party. Erian and other reformist Brothers welcomed these moves, but they are resisted by conservatives who feel that the group's priority should be *daawa* (proselytisation), and that increased political activity has led to few benefits and much greater security risks. Over the last few years, thousands of Muslim Brothers and their supporters have been arrested, and key leaders jailed.

To resolve the crisis quickly, the Brotherhood will be voting within a few weeks on new appointments to the Guidance Council. Whether Erian or other reformists are elected, or more traditionalist figures chosen, could have major repercussions on the course the group takes in 2010 and beyond.

Issandr El Amrani

Presidential Succession" that aims to pick up where the Kifaya movement left off in 2005, have been attacked twice in the last months by NDP supporters and security officers, he says. The beleaguered Muslim Brotherhood, still reeling from a relentless security crackdown in the past two years, announced that it would not be fielding a candidate — in any event, prohibitive requirements for independent candidates would have left it out of the running.

Indeed, only legally recognised parties are likely to be able to field candidates in 2011. Since a reinvigorated NDP dominates political life, it stands to reason that its candidate will win. And unless Hosni Mubarak decides, at the age of 83 and after 30 years in power, to run for a sixth term, that candidate will be his son.

TUNISIA

An election, but no real politics

By Eileen Byrne, Tunis

At the polling station in Hay Taddamun, a lower-income neighbourhood on the outskirts of Tunis, there is a steady trickle of voters. Sitting on chairs by the entrance are a couple of plainclothes policemen, smiling in the sunshine behind their dark glasses.

An elderly man, bent over his stick and wearing a traditional turban, makes his way towards the polling station alone: an impressive example of civic spirit. For some of his generation, the act of voting is a proud assertion of national sovereignty. Another man, in the town of El Fahs the previous day, when asked why there was a need for an election if the result was known in advance, drew himself up tall and said: "It's the law!" And anyway, he pointed out,

the victor never quite secures 100%.

In the 25 October election, incumbent President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali was returned for a fifth term with more than 89% of the vote, according to official figures. It was the first time since he took power in 1987 that his official tally had slipped below 90%. A new Chamber of Deputies was elected, with official literature suggesting that a fresh voting system would allow opposition parties greater representation in the country's quiescent parliament.

Just one of the three candidates standing against Ben Ali, Ahmed Brahim of the leftist Tajdeed (Renewal, rebranded from the Tunisian Communist Party), was a real opposition candidate. He was recorded the lowest score, just 1.57%. The 68-year-old academic told reporters that the election was an exercise in renewing allegiance to Ben Ali rather than any exercise of democratic choice.

At a rally in a Tunis theatre, Brahim addressed an enthusiastic audience of several hundred trade unionists and middle-aged leftists, with a sprinkling of young people and the odd Che Guevara T-shirt and red rose. His campaign manifesto had at first been blocked at the printers, he said, and he had not been given equal access to television. "We are open to dialogue," he continued, but there was no opening on the other side. "You can't have democracy by telephone," he told his audience.

The view from outside

In the EU, only the French government pays sustained attention to Tunisia, a country whose population of 10.5 million is about the same as Belgium's. Trade and investment ties are strong, and Paris is glad to see stability there.

Routinely, columnists in the pro-

government press accuse local independent journalists and human rights activists of being inspired from abroad, or specifically France, but the florid anti-French rhetoric of election time is not to be taken too seriously. Following the poll, President Nicolas Sarkozy's foreign ministry confined itself to reasserting that Tunisia can rely on French support as it undertakes "social, economic and political reform".

A book published in September, *La Régente de Carthage*, by two French journalists caused irritation to the Ben Ali family by detailing its business interests, particularly those of the president's wife Leila Trabelsi. It is not, of course, on sale in Tunis, although clandestine copies circulate.

Some Tunisian opposition figures say they detect signs that the Obama Administration may exert pressure to encourage a real democratic opening, in a country with a well-educated and relatively prosperous population. Ben Ali, and the technocrats who provide his government's acceptable face to the world, vaunt the supposed economic miracle that has made "the Tunisian model of development the most dynamic and successful in the Arab world," as a government-aligned newspaper puts it.

Might it not, then, be time for Ben Ali to allow more space for real politics? The US State Department expressed "concern" after the election that the Tunisian government had not allowed "any credible independent observers" to monitor the polls. The US is committed to "partnership" with Tunisia and will "continue to press for political reform and respect for human rights," the statement said.

Price of speaking out

Ben Ali's picture was everywhere at election time, but, paradoxically, it soon becomes second nature for visitors not to mention



Ho New/Reuters

Tunisian President Ben-Ali (right) and wife Leila: Election success guaranteed

the president's name in public. The plain-clothes police do not exist, according to the official world-view.

Nor are there political prisoners in Tunisia, the justice ministry says. But ordinary Tunisians know it is

not a good idea to be overheard being unappreciative of all Ben Ali has done for the nation.

The uniformed police have much improved since the early 1990s, explains one taxi driver in the privacy of his cab, but you must still be careful of what you say in the cafés, even among friends, at the risk of losing your job.

Those Tunisians who choose to be more outspoken – to be a student union activist, for example, or an internet radio reporter, or a lawyer defending judicial independence – face the lurking threat of physical violence, wrongful imprisonment, having a passport withheld, or finding themselves suddenly unemployed or with a landlord who no longer wants you as a tenant. It is low-risk, however, to mention in passing that a little more “freedom of expression” might be a good idea: the phrase crops up often on the wish-list of Tunisians.

In the 1960s and 70s, under

Yearning for dialogue

Ziad Doulatli has suggested the lobby of the luxurious Hotel Africa, the largest on Tunis' main boulevard, as the place for our meeting. A balding, soft-spoken man in his forties, he looks older. Fourteen years in prison, from 1990 to 2004, much of it in solitary confinement, have taken their toll. On his forehead, a grey mark is a sign of prayers said regularly. The son of a regional governor and grandson of a land-owner in the Tunis region, he has a doctorate in pharmacology. He was campaign director for the Nahda party (formerly the Islamic Tendency Movement) in the 1989 legislative elections. In that poll, the party, led by Rached Ghannouchi, emerged as a significant opposition force, the first such breakthrough against the dominance of the ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD). However after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait some Islamist groupings resorted to violence and Ben Ali began a heavy crackdown. Ghannouchi today is a political exile in London.

Dr Doulatli says he still looks to the “dialogue” with the government that was talked of even before the

1989 election. He is hoping that Nahda, a movement that he says has never advocated violence and has always favoured multi-party democracy, might yet be re-legalised. He believes the West in general – if not France – now understands that giving space to moderate Islamism is the best protection against extremism. Nahda is represented on the Committee of 18 October (named after the date of a hunger-strike), an opposition grouping which brings together leftists, independents and Islamists to hammer out agreement on basic issues. The committee has 24 members, three of them women. As some of the parties are officially recognised, the authorities cannot prohibit the committee completely, but it holds its meeting discreetly.

In the meantime, Dr Doulatli has no passport, cannot leave the Tunis region, and experiences periods of close surveillance when anyone he talks to in the street is approached afterwards by the plainclothes police. He is not allowed to work. “In my case,” he says, “I’m fortunate that my family has money.” So Dr Doulatli escapes the hardship that other ex-prisoners experience.

Eileen Byrne

then-president Habib Bourguiba, leftist movements were in vogue among urban intellectuals and were severely repressed for their pains. This current of opposition continues to hold out, with such figures as Brahim and another long-time campaigner, Hamma Hammami. Together with his wife, the lawyer Radia Nasraoui, Hammami attracts particularly vindictive retaliation from the security services if he speaks out too boldly. This long-running vendetta shows the Ben Ali regime at its most mafia-like, local observers say.

It is Islamists of the Nahda (Renaissance) movement, and other alleged Islamist sympathisers caught up in the widely thrown drag-net of recent years, who make up the bulk of the political detainees held in Tunisian prisons.

Amnesty International believes at least 1,200 people have been sentenced since June 2006, under an anti-terrorism law passed three years earlier. Nahda representatives freed from prison have joined an initiative drawing together various currents favouring political liberalisation and progress on human rights (see box, left), but whether this will prove an effective force for change remains to be seen.

Many ordinary Tunisians are glad only that their country experienced economic growth in recent years and avoided spill-over from the violence in neighbouring Algeria in the 1990s. But youth and graduate unemployment, and underdevelopment in western regions evidently remain a worry for the government.

Although the country's economy will not be one of those worst hit by the global economic crisis, and Tunisia is still competitively priced as a tourist destination, a minister has admitted that 26 textile firms have closed since autumn 2008, hit

by weaker demand in Europe. The official projection sees GDP growth in 2009 holding up at above 3%; the Economist Intelligence Unit in London reckons it could slow to 0.2% this year, sharply down from the impressive rates of recent years.

PALESTINE

Palestinian hopes evaporate

By Graham Usher, New York

On 31 October Hillary Clinton made her first foray to the Middle East as US Secretary of State. In the course of talks with Palestinian and Israeli leaders she made it unequivocally clear that the Obama administration had abandoned its earlier insistence on a complete freeze on West Bank settlement activity as a pre-condition for peace talks.

In so doing, she sent a message to the Palestinians that the hope they had invested in a new American president who seemed committed to establishing a firm foundation for peace talks was misplaced.

Clinton's first Middle East visit took in the UAE, Israel/Palestine, Morocco and Egypt. She was accompanied by special envoy George Mitchell, making it his 13th trip.

From the Palestinians' perspective, none of the signals emanating from Washington augured well. In a videotaped message to the Israeli people to commemorate the 14th anniversary of Yitzak Rabin's assassination, President Barack Obama said the alliance between the US and Israel was "unbreakable" and US support for Israel's security "will never be undermined".

Swearing undying fealty to the US-Israel special relationship is one constant of US foreign policy; dispatching emissaries to the region

on a fruitless search for peace is another.

It was in Abu Dhabi that Clinton explained in detail Washington's new thinking on settlements. She urged Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to return to peace negotiations on the bases of "understandings" reached between Mitchell and Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. These include a pledge to build "only" 3,000 settlement units in the occupied West Bank in the next nine months, excluding construction for "natural growth" and in occupied East Jerusalem.

The Palestinian leader declined, insisting any return to negotiations must be accompanied by a complete freeze on settlement construction, including in Jerusalem.

In West Jerusalem Clinton praised Netanyahu's offer of "restraint on the policy of settlements... no new starts, for example, is unprecedented." She also agreed with him that halting settlement construction "has never been a precondition" for negotiations. "It has always been an issue within negotiations."

But it had once been a precondition for her government. Obama wanted to see "a stop to settlements: not some settlements, not outposts, not 'natural growth' exceptions," Clinton had said in May.

Arab disbelief

In Marrakesh she tried to calm rattled Arab foreign ministers with whom she had arranged a meeting. "The US does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements," she said. But Israel "has responded to the call of the US, the Palestinians and the Arab world to stop settlement by expressing a willingness to restrain settlement activity." The Arabs were aghast.

"I'm really afraid we are about to see failure in US attempts to



Ho New / Reuters

Clinton and Abbas: nothing to smile about now

revive the peace process," said Amr Mousa, Arab League Secretary-General. "Failure is in the atmosphere all over."

Fear is the result. After the long night of George W Bush, there were genuine hopes about Obama among Arab leaders. They welcomed his "outreach" to the Muslim world, his choice of negotiations with Iran and commitment to a peace process grounded on a halt to building settlements, long seen as the gravest threat to a Palestinian state in the Occupied Territories.

Faced with inevitable Israeli rebuttal, the speed with which Obama has ditched this relatively principled position in favour of useless facilitation has surprised many and alarmed all.

Abbas is threatening resignation; sources say he is serious. And Arab leaders are scared they will be compelled to make threats all know are empty.

There is no longer even the pretence that a settlement freeze is part of Obama's armoury. Consumed by health care struggles at home and Afghanistan abroad,

the Administration's current posture toward the Israeli-Arab conflict is "treading water", said a former US negotiator.

The White House is rethinking strategy: three elements are already clear, say sources. There will be no hint of pressure, either in the cutting off of US aid to Israel or a lifting of protection in forums like the United Nations. Nor is there any expectation of movement towards peace as long as Netanyahu remains premier. And Obama's current low rating in Israeli opinion hinders efforts to bring about Netanyahu's demise.

The Americans seem to be acting on precedent. In the late 1990s a popular Bill Clinton dragged Netanyahu kicking and screaming into agreements with the Palestinians that brought down his government. It was replaced by Ehud Barak's, one Israeli coalition that held apparently serious, if ultimately unsuccessful, negotiations with Syria and the PLO.

Sources say Obama's initial stance of seeking a settlement freeze combined with accelerated final

status negotiations was formulated with a centrist, Kadima-led Israeli government in mind. The new strategy seems basically to beat a path for its return to power.

But historical analogies are never exact. In the 1990s Netanyahu led a minority government in a Knesset that was broadly pro-Oslo and very pro-American. Today he heads an ultranationalist coalition in a parliament that is hostile to Obama and his policies towards the Palestinians, the settlements, the UN and Iran.

Israel's behaviour may have brought it closer to war crimes charges in The Hague and alienated long-time allies like Turkey. But standing up to a young, charismatic, liberal US president does Netanyahu no harm.

Polls indicate two-thirds of Israelis are pleased with his handling of foreign policy. And if elections were held today Likud would win 33 seats, six more than its current share.

Abbas opts for elections

By Wafa Amr, Ramallah, and Adnan Salem, Gaza

When Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas decreed that presidential and legislative elections would be held in the Occupied Territories on 24 January 2010, he effectively drew a line under the long-running Egyptian-mediated reconciliation process between Fatah and Hamas, as well as the Obama Administration's efforts to revive peace talks between the Palestinians and Israel.

Abbas' 23 October announcement signals a shift in strategy on both fronts, and makes the prospect of progress on either seem remote

– at least in the near future. It is far from clear at this stage whether any voting will actually take place on that date if Hamas continues to reject Egyptian proposals for a power-sharing deal between the rival Palestinian factions and their respective administrations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip that would have postponed elections until 28 June.

Technically, the electoral mandates claimed by both sides expire in January, and Abbas duly portrayed his decree as an attempt to meet a legal requirement to renew them.

But the principal purpose of his announcement, which was coordinated in advance with various Arab states, was to put pressure on Hamas to sign the unity deal or face political isolation. The Islamist movement was bound to oppose the decree, the thinking went, and by so doing would reveal that it was more interested in consolidating its hold on Gaza – and serving the agendas of its Iranian and Syrian backers – than in restoring even a semblance of Palestinian national unity.

Hamas' predicament

Hamas quickly came out against Abu-Mazen's move, accused him of deepening the intra-Palestinian rift, and served notice that it would not allow elections to be held in Gaza in the absence of a comprehensive political agreement with Fatah. One Hamas official suggested that if voting went ahead in the West Bank regardless, his group would hold separate presidential polls in the Gaza Strip.

But Hamas is in a tight spot. It was put under tremendous pressure to sign the reconciliation paper drafted by the Egyptians, who after months of fruitless mediation ultimately presented the Islamists with a "take-it-or-leave-it" choice, despite their reservations about many of the provisions. Cairo's pressure on Hamas took several forms; including refusal to meet its representatives until they signed, but most notably by restricting use of the cross-border tunnels from Egypt that nowadays serve as the besieged Gaza Strip's economic lifeline.

The Islamist movement objected

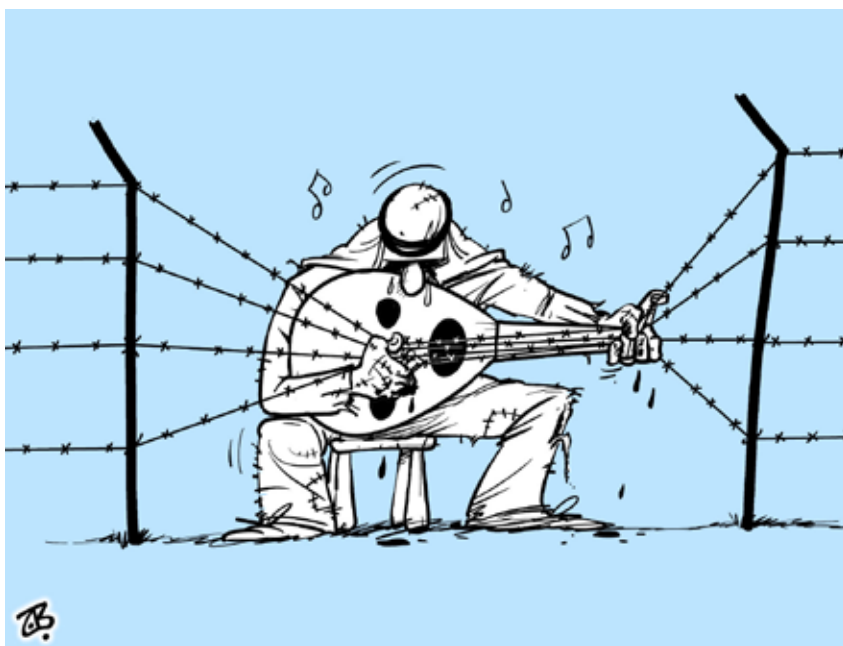
to several clauses in the Egyptian document, including those pertaining to the release of political prisoners detained by the rival Palestinian factions, the return of confiscated Hamas money and property in the West Bank, compensation for individuals who suffered as a consequence of the Fatah-Hamas split, and election mechanisms.

Omar Abdel-Razeq, an elected Hamas lawmaker and former finance minister in the short-lived Hamas-led PA government, maintained that the Egyptians initially agreed to a key demand for the formation of a committee to review the cases of Hamas activists held in PA jails within two months of the signing of an agreement, but then erased the time-frame from the final paper. Also, stipulations that employees fired from government jobs would be reinstated and confiscated assets restored were made contingent on "financial considerations and their impact on the public budget, institutional administrative structures and agreed employment policies."

"Around 1,000 people were fired from their jobs," said Abdel-Razeq. "What if the government of Salam Fayyad [Abbas's prime minister] says there is no budget for their reinstatement or has filled their vacancies? This clause was not agreed upon. These are hindrances to implementation."

Abdel-Razeq insisted that Hamas was not afraid of elections as such, but merely concerned to ensure they were conducted properly. "We agreed to hold elections on 28 June 2010 provided that conditions are suitable for a free, transparent and fair vote," he said.

According to sources close to Hamas, the movement's leaders are divided between those who favour signing the document after seeking a letter of assurances from Egypt



that their demands would later be considered, and those who refuse to cave in and opt for alternatives.

Abbas' options

Fatah had its objections, too, but rushed into endorsing the Egyptian document regardless, despite US pressure on Abbas not to. His aides say Hamas forced his hand by doing its utmost to delegitimise him and avoid signing the unity deal which would ultimately lead to elections as the only way to end the split.

Abbas was particularly incensed by the way Hamas exploited and fuelled public opposition to his stance on the Goldstone report. Opinion polls showed that Abbas' standing nosedived after he bowed to US pressure to let Israel off the hook over its army's behaviour during its assault on the Gaza Strip. He obviously did not anticipate the impact of the move, which subjected him to unprecedented across-the-board criticism. He was eventually compelled to accept responsibility for the decision, and duly reversed it.

Hamas and Fatah remain locked in a battle for Palestinian and Arab public opinion. Both sides have vied to seize the nationalist high ground over sensitive issues including Israeli settlement expansion, political prisoners, and the recent clashes between Israel's army and Muslim worshippers at the al-Aqsa mosque.

Looking ahead, senior aides say Abbas and the Palestinian leadership are considering four options: The first is to keep up the pressure on Hamas, with Egyptian and Arab assistance, in the hope of persuading it to sign up to the unity deal. In that event Abbas would issue a new decree delaying the elections until the 28 June date. Recent polls suggest that Hamas would not fare as well as it did in the 2006 elections. Fatah hopes voters would punish it for causing the split between the

West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Should that fail, option two would be to go ahead with elections in January as threatened. Fatah would not have to worry about Hamas' electoral challenge as it would boycott the poll, but a vote held in such circumstances would scarcely bestow legitimacy on the victor. If Hamas were to hold parallel elections, the political separation between the West Bank and Gaza Strip would become formal and permanent, to the detriment of all. That would also play into Israel's hands, enabling it to cite the absence of a Palestinian partner to stall indefinitely on peace talks. Accordingly, diplomats deem it unlikely that Abbas would choose such a course.

A third option would be to shelve the idea of elections and prepare for a unilateral declaration of statehood. Officials say the Palestinian leadership is considering an idea floated by one of the minor PLO factions to form a new body for the purpose that would be called the Palestinian State Constituent Assembly, composed of members of the PLO Central Council and the PA Legislative Assembly.

Finally, Abbas could choose to step down and not run for re-election as PA president. Fatah officials say he threatened to resign at a meeting of Fatah leaders last month, prompting Obama and other US officials to urge him to stay on. Such a course of action would be the ultimate expression of Abbas' frustration with Washington for abandoning its demand for an Israeli settlement freeze.

Abbas seems intent on resisting US pressure to return to peace talks without such a freeze. The Palestinian leadership does not want to appear publicly at odds with Obama and insists its dispute is with Netanyahu. But resuming negotiations without clear terms of

reference and a halt to settlement-building would amount to political suicide for the already weak Palestinian leader, especially after the battering he took over the Goldstone report. It would also be deeply damaging for Fatah as it tries to improve its public standing ahead of the elections. Hamas, accordingly, is betting on him to yield.

"There are no clear terms of reference and no clear end game for the negotiations. There is a retraction even from positions taken by the previous US administrations. There is no way I can return to talks under these conditions," Abbas told *MEI* shortly before his election declaration.

Abbas believes that Netanyahu's game-plan is to push for the creation of a Palestinian state with provisional borders. In other words, the Palestinians would have nominal jurisdiction over the populated areas already under PA control, while Israel would keep its hold on the majority of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem and the settlement blocs.

The idea of a state with provisional borders was touted when the Bush administration devised its Roadmap for peace. It was and continues to be rejected by Abbas for fear that it would in reality become the permanent solution. "We're stuck at this point," Abbas said.

BAHRAIN

No to normalisation

By Deena Jawhar, Manama

US pressure on allied Arab states to make "gestures" to Israel has produced something of a backlash in Bahrain and presented the government with an unexpected and unwelcome challenge to its authority and style of political management.

On 27 October the elected lower

chamber of parliament unanimously approved a bill banning all contacts between Bahraini citizens and Israel and penalising violators with a \$25,000 fine or up to five years' imprisonment.

The unity displayed by the various political blocs represented in the house was an unusual occurrence in itself, reflecting the strength of popular feeling about the Palestinian cause among the country's Shi'a and Sunnis alike. But the move has also set the MPs at loggerheads with the government, and most likely with the unelected upper chamber appointed by King Hamad, whose hand-picked members will have to approve the bill for it to become law.

The bill was ostensibly tabled in response to the recent incursion by Israeli forces into the al-Aqsa mosque compound in Jerusalem. But it also reflected underlying opposition to a whole series of measures and stances adopted by the government in recent years: the closure of an Israel boycott office in 2005; a proposal by the foreign minister last year to establish a regional forum including Israel; a call for dialogue with Israelis made by Crown Prince Sheikh Salman bin-Hamad in a *Washington Post* article published in July; and King Hamad's regular meetings with pro-Israel groups during trips abroad.

Although the government insists that it has no relations with Israel, it sees the bill as an infringement of its authority and control over foreign policy and of its commitments under international treaties such as the Free Trade Agreement with the US. It also claimed it was at odds with the Saudi-authored Arab Peace Initiative which offered Israel normalisation in exchange for its withdrawal from occupied Arab lands.

But it has proven very difficult for

the government to sell this argument to MPs and the general public, who suspect it of pursuing normalisation with Israel by the back door. "What is the benefit of normalisation with the Zionist enemy," wondered legislator Muhammad Khaled, "particularly as we are not a neighbouring country or an ally?"

The crown prince's answer, that normalisation and peace would bring economic benefits and trade, washes with few Bahrainis.

There could be significant political repercussions if the bill is blocked by the upper house. The government's domestic standing can only suffer if it is seen to override the popular will at a critical juncture for the Palestinian cause. Such a move would also refocus attention on the limitations that were built into the parliamentary system when it was restored in 2002 after a 27-year suspension. The introduction of the upper house was an extremely contentious move at the time and was widely seen as a mechanism to disempower the elected chamber. Many members of the upper house would also be placed in an awkward bind.

Given the tortuous nature of the

legislative process in Bahrain, time is on the government's side. It will probably let the saga play out until after next year's parliamentary elections in the small hope that either the issue will die down, more compliant MPs will be elected, or the Middle East peace process takes off.

ISRAEL

Jerusalem Palestinians face new threat

By Peretz Kidron, West Jerusalem

At first sight, a minor bureaucratic reform, of interest to few beyond the Israeli construction industry; on closer study, a looming threat to Jerusalem's Palestinian population, that also raises doubts about the strategy long pursued by its leadership.

Following on campaign pledges to make housing more affordable, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu proposes to cut construction costs by streamlining official planning procedures. The measure will abolish the second tier review by professional planners, leaving exclusive powers



Reuters/Cll Cohen Magen

Obama's "freeze" on settlements has turned to slush

to a single committee appointed by the local authority.

Ostensibly a technicality, in the case of Jerusalem this move would surrender control of all construction to political nominees reflecting the composition of the city council, which is heavily dominated by hardline nationalists and clericalists – to the detriment of the city’s Arab residents.

The reform will not mark an abrupt change of course. The Israeli-appointed planning commission has long pursued a two-pronged drive against Jerusalem’s Palestinians. One prong has systematically denied Arab applicants building permits, which are urgently needed to accommodate a growing population. Unable to acquire permits, Palestinian families tackle cramped conditions by resorting to “unlicensed” construction, which then falls prey to municipal bulldozers. Conversely, Jewish families backed by purportedly “private” associations of

religious nationalists are encouraged to take over housing in Palestinian neighbourhoods, or construct new buildings on land they manage to acquire there, often employing means of dubious legality.

This drive to “Judaize” East Jerusalem has been pursued with ruthless single-mindedness, riding roughshod over protests from Palestinians backed by Israeli human rights activists of the Israel Committee Against House Demolitions. ICAHD’s legal challenges to the demolition orders regularly fail in Israeli courts. The aim is clear: to confine and restrict the Palestinian presence in Jerusalem. Some Israelis, perhaps, hope the harassment will induce Palestinians to give up and leave the city.

Hitherto, the blatant anti-Arab bias of the city’s planning committee has been somewhat moderated by the planners of the regional commission, whose professionalism has occasionally cooled

the nationalist zeal of the political appointees. But with the abolition of that second tier Jerusalem’s Palestinians will be entirely at the mercy of the “Judaisers”.

Palestinian boycott

The domination of Jerusalem’s municipal organs by Israeli right-wingers is not an inevitable imposition; rather, it reflects a conscious choice by Palestinian leaders. When Israel annexed the Arab neighbourhoods in 1967, it refrained from extending citizenship rights to their residents, but sweetened the pill with “residence” status, including the right to vote in municipal elections. But Palestinian leaders argued that taking up that privilege would offer implicit recognition of the annexation and proclaimed an election boycott that has been maintained to this day.

It was a momentous choice. The Palestinian refusal to take part in elections has left the field clear for the nationalist and clericalist parties

Bashing Goldstone, mourning Bush

Haim Baram, West Jerusalem

The Goldstone report, arguably a very restrained account of the war in Gaza earlier this year, is still a potent time-bomb as far as most Israelis are concerned. Public opinion is largely united in its well-orchestrated outrage and characteristic self-righteous sense of indignation. Most pundits went out of their way to castigate Richard Goldstone, a Jew with strong familial links to Israel and even some Zionist persuasions, as an anti-Semite and Israel-basher; but to no avail.

Even hawks and right-wingers, the bulk of the Israeli public these days, felt that the accusations against the respectable judge were hollow and devoid of genuine merit. It is quite clear that the very kosher identity of Goldstone has rendered his findings even less palatable for the Israeli establishment.

One of the least-endearing tasks for foreign commentators is to witness the Israelis’ yearning for international sympathy and understanding, despite their savageness in Gaza. This phenomenon,

essential to the correct analysis of Israeli behaviour in the regional and international arenas, has broken all known records for pious hypocrisy. The shift of the Israeli elite from ostentatious liberalism to diehard conservatism (in the American sense of the term) has been completed in recent years, and many so-called enlightened commentators, who are still taken seriously by *The New York Times*, *The Observer* and *The Guardian*, have sold their souls to militarist and cruel Zionism.

The general revulsion in the West and the increasing hatred of Israel in the Islamic world have intensified the paranoia here. The tendency in Israel to view criticism by foreign observers as a manifestation of an anti-Semitic plot to destroy the state of Israel and annihilate the Jewish presence in the region has gathered momentum since the 2006 Lebanese war. Goldstone has finally galvanised the general sense of isolation and fear. The irony is glaring: the stronger the

who enjoy strong support in Jerusalem's Israeli electorate. Hence the virulently right-wing bias of the council and its subsidiaries, such as the planning commission.

This state of affairs raises doubts about the Palestinian boycott. As a strategy it can point to few successes. As a protest, it has long faded from public awareness. Media reports of elections make no more than passing mention of the Arab stay-away. And with regard to the legal consequences, only unreformed believers in the supremacy of law over politics can hold that the city's future will be shaped by such legal niceties. After all, if precedent is all-important, Israel would argue that Jerusalem Palestinians offer de facto recognition of the status quo by their daily behaviour, as they pay municipal taxes, obey municipal laws and regulations and defer to municipal officials.

The downside is plain to see. In the absence of Arab representation on the municipal council, Palestinian

quarters suffer blatant neglect. Even defying orders handed down by Israeli courts, the city fails to provide classrooms for Arab schools, leaving thousands of children without their entitled schooling. In every municipal service, from rubbish collection to street maintenance, Palestinians get a raw deal.

Strategy reconsidered

Matters could change if Arabs turned out to vote. Making up 30% of the electorate, their representatives would occupy one third of municipal council seats. Unlike the Knesset where a handful of Palestinian members are easily marginalised, this massive Arab presence would offer intriguing opportunities. Given the sharp divisions among the Jewish parties, no stable administration could avoid offering some share of influence to the Arab representatives, with a profound impact on the conditions of the Palestinian population.

Some observers believe that active Arab participation in municipal affairs would have a far-reaching political impact. In their interpretation of Zionist ideology, Israeli nationalists refuse to consider any erosion of an absolute Jewish hegemony in any domain. Should they wake up to a new and unfamiliar reality whereby their capital was shared with a sizeable and self-assertive Palestinian minority, it might not be overfanciful to imagine the hardliners deciding that they would be better off excluding the Palestinian neighbourhoods from the city's domains, and dropping the slogan of "united Jerusalem under Israeli rule".

In weighing up the boycott, Palestinians could consider how it is regarded by the Israeli leadership. The Arab abstention has never caused unease to Israeli leaders, who obviously relish the luxury of running the city without effective political opposition from its Palestinian citizens.

Israelis are militarily, the weaker they feel mentally.

Unfortunately for our leaders, Abba Eban is no longer with us. The skilful diplomatist served the Zionist movement, and then Israel as an ambassador to the UN (1950-59) and foreign minister (1966-74). His smooth style and sublime English were harnessed to the most sophisticated propaganda machine in modern history. When Eban shed crocodile tears over the plight of Palestinian victims, the world in general and the Americans in particular wept with him. The current Israeli leaders do not enjoy Eban's privileges. Both Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman behave like thugs and the world treats them as such.

Goldstone is the direct result of the transformation in the image of the Israelis. Gaza is the epitome of this development; the escalation in wanton atrocities has been accompanied by a deterioration of Israel's international reputation.

Avid readers of letters to the editors of our national and local newspapers and "talkbacks" on the Internet would easily conclude that the verdict of the Goldstone commission is associated here with

the new regime in Washington. The Israelis mourn the departure of George W Bush more than the white population of Alabama. This is not entirely new: when Richard Nixon visited Israel shortly before his impeachment he was greeted like a national hero. The shadow of Watergate had failed to reach the shores of Israel, and one could have fathomed a similar reception had Bush decided to pay us a visit. The lesson has been internalised by the international community: Israel has shifted completely to the right since 1974.

The Goldstone report is not only a milestone but an integral part of a profound ongoing process, denoting the decline of Israel as a liberal society. One can dismiss international opinion at will, but the implications are inescapable. Judge Goldstone, the embodiment of enlightenment and lover of Israel, has turned his back on the Jewish state and discarded his responsibility as a Jew for its war against civilians in Gaza.

Israelis are reluctant to admit it, but the righteous self-image of their state has been fatally dented. In the end, some good may emerge from the report, even if it takes them several years to recognise it.

Conversely, the only time the Israeli government displayed active concern was in the 1980s, when some prominent Palestinian Jerusalemites proposed to field a slate of candidates in upcoming elections. The prospect of active Arab participation in the municipal government sparked near-panic in official Israeli circles. But when a combination of Israeli harassment and intimidation by Palestinian radicals put paid to the electoral initiative, the almost audible sigh of relief from Israeli officials should have sent a clear message about the wisdom of the boycott strategy.

UNITED NATIONS

Goldstone weaves a sticky web

By Ian Williams, *New York*

Amid the hysteria generated among Israelis in the wake of the UN report on last December/January's assault on the Gaza Strip, it is easy to forget that the commission headed by the South African judge Richard Goldstone simply concluded that Israel – and indeed Hamas – had a case to answer about possible war crimes, and asked both to mount credible investigations.

Anyone who parses the statements coming from Israel's Western protectors will realise that Israel has already lost. The US, the UK and France have all urged it to mount such an investigation, while making sure to accompany their requests with the now mandatory stroking of Israeli sensibilities.

The US regretted the "bias" of the report's mandate – ignoring the fact that Goldstone had successfully insisted on rewriting it to include

investigation of crimes committed by either side as a condition of accepting the position. The British envoy to the Human Rights Council (HRC) tied himself into a complete Möbius strip by declaring: "Because Israel did not cooperate with the Mission, which we regret, the report lacks an authoritative Israeli perspective on the events in question, so crucial to determining the legality of actions." They would not be so indulgent about Radovan Karadzic's refusal to appear at his hearing in The Hague.

But that is where the legal expertise of Goldstone and his colleagues is so damaging. The International Criminal Court's jurisdiction only extends to cases that the country concerned has failed to investigate or try itself. So why does Israel not respond with a Kahan-style grey-wash job as it did after Sabra and Shatila?

One reason is political. As Binyamin Netanyahu obliquely reminded his coalition partners and Washington after the HRC vote: "We will not allow Ehud Olmert, Tzipi Livni and Ehud Barak, who sent our sons to war, to arrive at the international court in The Hague." It was, of course, Barack Obama's preferred peace partners in the previous Israeli government who started Operation Cast Lead.

However, the main reason is that Goldstone's expertise has boxed in Israel and its putative friends with a comprehensive and wide-ranging array of references. The report, which the HRC endorsed, recommends that the UN Secretary-General refer the issue to the Security Council, asking not only that it require Israel to mount an investigation, but that the Council itself should set up a panel of legal experts to monitor and report back on the thoroughness of any Israeli process. The ultimate sanction is

that the Council can, as it did with Sudan over Darfur, empower the ICC to take proceedings against individuals from non-member states if Israel does not comply.

Well aware of the possibility of a Security Council veto, the report is also referred to the prosecutor of the ICC to consider in the context of the Palestinian Authority's acceptance of the Court's jurisdiction. The UN General Assembly has in the past accepted Palestine as a state in almost everything except voting rights. If Palestine's signature is accepted then the Court has jurisdiction on crimes committed in its territory, whether or not Israel has signed.

The report also suggests that countries consider prosecutions under the growing doctrine of universal jurisdiction of national courts against war crimes. The Israeli defence minister has already cancelled a trip to Britain for fear of just such a prosecution and other officials have already had similar problems with travel abroad.

Assuming that the UN General Assembly endorses the report's conclusions, Switzerland will be asked to reconvene a meeting of the parties to the Geneva Conventions to consider conditions in the Occupied Territories. (It is worth remembering that the report, as well as considering the imprisonment of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit at some length, also considers and condemns Israeli behaviour towards Palestinian prisoners). It also asks the Assembly to consider the legality of use of white phosphorous, flechettes and tungsten in armaments and calls on Israel to put a moratorium on their deployment.

The Arab Group's General Assembly resolution was restrained in its tone. It asked the secretary-general to refer the report to the

Security Council and called on both Israelis and Palestinians to conduct the investigations demanded, with the secretary-general reporting back to the Assembly on progress. Needless to say, such a reasonably phrased resolution was likely to be unacceptable to the Europeans, desperate to avoid offending Obama or Israel.

The issue puts Obama in an invidious position. US opposition to any call for Israel to investigate would undo all the president's bridge-building in the Arab world. Alternatively Obama could try to trade US backing for Israel over Goldstone for concessions elsewhere: such as settlements or the Gaza blockade. Washington will almost certainly try to procrastinate, even if the sticky web that Goldstone and his team have woven limits its options.

LEBANON

Preparing for another war?

By Nicholas Blanford, Beirut

A mainly cold war pitting Israel's intelligence services against Lebanon's Hizbullah is showing indications of heating up, threatening the calm that has prevailed along the Lebanon-Israel border for the past three years.

Recent weeks have witnessed mysterious rocket attacks into Israel, the busting of Israeli spy rings in Lebanon, explosions at suspected Hizbullah weapons storage facilities and the discovery of a tapping device hooked into the party's communications network.

Since the end of Israel's month-long assault in 2006, the border has

experienced its longest period of calm in four decades. Nevertheless, many analysts believe that another war between Hizbullah and Israel is inevitable, and could prove even more destructive than the last. Although neither side appears to be seeking a clash at present, both are undertaking feverish preparations just in case.

Israel appears to have stepped up its espionage and surveillance activities in Lebanon significantly to compensate for its intelligence failure prior to the 2006 war, when it badly under-estimated Hizbullah's military capabilities.

"Israel has the right to collect investigatory information from inside Lebanon [by] all means possible," Moshe Yaalon, Israel's deputy prime minister maintained on 31 October. "As long as Israel lives in a state of conflict with its enemy, it

Still waiting...

Five months after the Saudi-backed March 14 coalition secured a narrow victory over the Hizbullah-led opposition in the parliamentary elections, Lebanon's bickering politicians appear no closer to forming a new government.

The two sides accuse each other of intransigence over the distribution of cabinet portfolios in what both agree should be an all-embracing national unity government, but the hold-up also reflects lingering tensions between the regional players backing rival factions in Lebanon.

The most publicly talked-about facet of the dispute relates to the identity of the next telecommunications minister. Michel Aoun, the once anti-Syrian former army commander whose Free Patriotic Movement is the principal Christian component of the opposition, wants Gibran Baseel, the present holder of the portfolio (and Aoun's son-in-law) to retain it. Saad Hariri, the prime minister-designate who inherited the leadership of the majority bloc from his assassinated father, has offered the ministry to a person of Aoun's choosing – so long as it is not Baseel. The two sides have negotiated back and forth over the issue, so far without reaching a compromise.

Antoine Zahra, an MP with the Lebanese Forces, a Christian party and part of the March 14 coalition, said that Hariri was no longer willing to make further concessions to the opposition. "The opposition wants Hariri to give up his powers as prime minister," he told Future News television on 2 November.

The political tensions that have roiled Lebanon for the past three years in part are a symptom of the strained ties between Saudi Arabia and Syria. A fence-mending summit between the two countries' leaders in Damascus last month raised hopes of a breakthrough in the impasse between their respective Lebanese protégés. But the rapprochement between Damascus and Riyadh appears to be proceeding slower than anticipated, dampening expectations that the Lebanese may soon have a government.

In an interview with *as-Safir* newspaper on 2 November, Syrian President Bashar al-Asad insisted that the formation of a new government in Beirut was up to the Lebanese themselves. "Syria, Saudi Arabia and the summit that brought both the countries' leaders together cannot be held liable to form a Lebanese national unity cabinet," he said.

Nicholas Blanford

will carry on with collecting investigatory information about it.”

On 27 October, a single 107mm Katyusha rocket was fired from the southern Lebanese village of Houla into northern Israel, the second such incident in six weeks. Israeli artillery gunners fired a few shells back into Lebanon, but no casualties were reported on either side. The Lebanese army subsequently discovered four more rockets, three of them primed for launch, beside a half-constructed house in Houla.

There have been several anonymous rocket attacks into Israel since 2006 war. Rogue Palestinians or groups associated with al-Qa’ida are generally blamed.

The latest launching occurred close to where suspected Israeli monitoring devices were discovered 10 days earlier. The devices were buried two feet underground in a valley south of Houla and were attached to a fibre-optic cable, part of Hizbullah’s internal communications network. One of the devices was blown up by remote control, apparently after the Israelis learned that it had been discovered.

According to an officer serving with the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), the 13,300-strong peacekeeping contingent deployed in south Lebanon, the second device consisted of a receiver hooked into the cable and a transmitter which wirelessly relayed intercepted data. The device was powered by 360 individual batteries and was booby-trapped with explosives. The Lebanese army destroyed the second device in a controlled explosion. It was the first known time that Hizbullah’s internal land line system had been tapped by the Israelis. This network has been extended since 2006 to link areas under Hizbullah’s control in southern Lebanon, the Beqaa Valley and the southern suburbs of Beirut.

UNIFIL is still investigating the origins of a small explosion in a house in the village of Tair Filsay on 12 October which provoked claims and counter-claims from Israel and Hizbullah. The Israeli military released video footage shot from a reconnaissance drone which it claimed showed Hizbullah men removing rockets from the house. Israel accused Hizbullah of violating UN Security Council Resolution 1701 which forbids the storage of armaments in the UNIFIL-patrolled zone.

Hizbullah denied it was transporting arms. In the absence of firm evidence either way, the facts remain inconclusive. But a UNIFIL officer said that the scene of the explosion in Tair Filsay had been scrubbed clean by Hizbullah, leaving little forensic evidence for the investigators. “They used gasoline to clean the floors, walls and ceilings. There was not a grain of dust for us to look at,” the officer said.

In July, a house in Khirbet Slim village was destroyed when stock-piled artillery shells and short-range rockets blew up. The UN concluded that the house was an “actively maintained arms depot” for Hizbullah, which claimed that the munitions were unexploded ordnance left over from the 2006 war.


The house blasts have placed

a spotlight on Hizbullah’s covert arms-building activities. In a report to the UN Security Council on 28 October, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon called on Hizbullah to disarm in accordance with UN resolutions, describing its retention of weapons as a “key challenge to the safety of Lebanese civilians and to the government’s monopoly on the legitimate use of force”.

Hizbullah said the report was biased in favour of Israel and complained that Israeli violations of Resolution 1701, such as near-daily overflights in Lebanese airspace, failed to receive the same level of censure.

The latest incidents have placed Hizbullah on the defensive. But the group’s counter-espionage branch and the Lebanese security services have had some success in the past year in uncovering and arresting dozens of suspected spies for Israel.

The spy cells reportedly were exposed after France provided Lebanon’s Internal Security Forces (ISF) with advanced phone-tapping equipment and data-processing computer programmes. The equipment was supposed to help trace the culprits in the 2005 assassination of former premier Rafiq Hariri, but the ISF used it to disrupt Israeli spy rings. Some 70 suspected spies have been arrested so far.




www.rimalbooks.com


RIMAL PUBLICATIONS

Books on travel, world history and politics, art and culture—related to the Middle East and the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean.

2009 Titles from Rimal Publications include:



Life at the Crossroads
A History of Gaza (New Edition)
Gerald Butt
210x150mm, 264 pp, PB, 2009
978-9963-610-39-6, €17.00



Jerusalemites
A Living Memory
Hazem Zaki Nusseibeh
210x150mm, 456 pp, PB, 2009
978-9963-610-38-9, €21.00

Conjuring up monsters: Israel's claims of "righteous" violence

David Hirst strips the camouflage from Israel's justifications, rooted in Zionism, for using extreme force against its Arab enemies.

Israel's is "the most moral army in the world", says Ehud Barak. How, then, could it have possibly done the things that Richard Goldstone said it did? Rarely has this hoary Zionist mantra been so incessantly invoked as it has since the Gaza war. Yet the self-righteous pretension is as absurd as it has always been typical; so absurd, in fact, that on a recent visit to Britain the defence minister himself was nearly arrested as a suspected "war criminal".

Violence was always the core of Arab-Israeli conflict. Israel could not have come into being without it; for no people voluntarily cedes its homeland to another. The Zionists knew that from the outset. Theodor Herzl, their prophet, believed that, ideally, they should acquire Palestine by armed conquest. His followers put that into practice as soon as they had the means.

The morality of violence has been a perpetual issue too; indeed, a basic yardstick of the protagonists' standing in the eyes of world. The Zionists always presented their violence as righteous and legitimate. This was necessary for their self-image as adherents of a supposedly lofty cause, and – more importantly – because they had to look good in the democratic West, especially Britain and the US, without whose sponsorship the cause would have got nowhere.

So, when serious, armed conflict first erupted in the 1930s, "purity of arms" became their motto. By contrast, Palestinian violence was mere terror, fanaticism, "the barbarism of the desert". Even if their adversaries had a cause of sorts, their methods were an evil which, of itself, nullified any legitimacy it might have had. The Zionists' violence was therefore always "self-defence" or "retaliation" against terror, or – when the

conflict broadened – against Arab "aggression". At its baldest, that became the moral antithesis by which they ever after defined the conflict.

Zionist terrorism

It was a falsification from the outset. Of course, Palestinians have used terrorism. But terrorism – in the correct definition of that much abused word – is precisely what the Zionists themselves first turned to when, before they achieved statehood, it was the readiest form of violence available to them. Denied political, democratic means of challenging the colonisation and threatened takeover of their country, the Palestinians fired the first shots in their Great Rebellion; but the nascent Zionist militias engaged in so-called "reprisals" of a murderous and far more effective kind. At their height, with bombs in market



Marcus Butt

places or mosques and the machine-gunning of trains and buses, they killed more Palestinians (140 in three weeks) than Palestinians killed Jews in a year and a half.

Hasbara, Hebrew for “explanation”, always accompanied the violence. The Zionists were so good at it that – with Hitler’s persecution of the Jews also creating sympathy for their cause – the real nature of their deeds did not count against them. The Manchester Guardian (15 July 1938) greatly admired their “self-restraint” against continual terrorism “organised from outside”. A US secretary of the interior told them that “the enemy against whom you are forced to contend are... [are] the enemies of all human progress.” It set a pattern in which Arabs and Palestinians continually lost their military and propaganda wars.

The Zionists-turned-Israelis’ greatest achievement, in these two fields, was their War of Independence, and the nakba, or catastrophe, it brought on the Palestinians. Their official version was that only when Arab armies, bent on destroying the new-born state, invaded Palestine did Jewish soldiers take up arms and vanquish them in a David-versus-Goliath struggle. It took nearly half a century for “revisionist” Israeli historians to corroborate this for the gigantic myth Arab scholars always said it was. Essentially, the Israelis, not the Arabs, initiated a war whose central purpose was, in the words of Joseph Weitz, godfather of their long-planned ethnic cleansing project, to ensure that “not a single village or tribe” remained in Palestine. With the world’s complaisance in this version, Israel successfully pressed the case that as “aggressors” their enemies had forfeited any right to the return of refugees, or restoration of conquered land.

When the Zionist militias mutated into Israel’s army, violence became the instrument not only of its preservation, but also of its still unfinished business. This involved enlarging an entity that, according to David Ben-Gurion, had been set up in only “a portion of the Land of Israel” into the “whole” of it.

Since the Arabs proclaimed they would “liberate” what they had lost, the Israelis were able, in their hasbara, to speak of Palestinian “terror” and Arab “aggression” as legitimate grounds for disproportionate, often atrocity-laden “retaliatory” raids that led, deliberately, to full-scale wars. In the first of two, Suez 1956, Israel’s own aggression was so blatant that President Eisenhower, the last American president to take so resolute a stand against Israeli violence, decreed its retreat and the disgorging of almost all its gains. In 1967, in what may have looked like “a war of survival”, but was not at all – the Arabs’ strategic folly

and belligerent rhetoric greatly aiding the deception – it attacked Egypt, Jordan and Syria, seizing territory three times its own size. Much of the West rejoiced.

Confronting Fatah, Hizbullah and Hamas

Israel’s troubles really began when, with Arab armies virtually *hors de combat*, they confronted non-state guerrilla movements instead, first Yaser Arafat’s Fatah, then – and more seriously – the Islamists of Hizbullah and Hamas. The new-style warfare, now dubbed “asymmetrical”, posed problems both in the fighting and the “explanation” for it.

In the fifth Arab-Israeli War, Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon, its objective was not merely to expel the PLO – in which it largely succeeded – but also to engineer a grandiose geopolitical transformation along its entire “eastern front” from Beirut to Aqaba – in which it failed utterly. This “chosen war”, as Menachem Begin called it, had no serious *casus belli* whatsoever.

Never did an Israeli scholar, Yehoshua Porath, shed a more discerning light on a key, abiding dynamic of Israeli violence when he wrote that, to justify their habitual use of force for political ends, Begin and his like wanted the PLO “to return to its earlier terrorist exploits, hijack plenty of aeroplanes and kill many Israelis.” Twenty-thousand people, mainly Lebanese civilians, died in the war, which also produced the quasi-genocidal massacre of Sabra and Shatila.

Physically, Israel’s Lebanese allies, the Phalangists, carried it out; but ultimate moral responsibility lay with Gen Ariel Sharon and his commanders, who knew exactly what they were about and encouraged them in it. The killings deeply embarrassed the friends of Israel in the West, who demanded, and got, an official Israeli enquiry. The resulting Kahan commission, largely exonerating the Israelis by scapegoating the Phalangists, was a whitewash. But for important US opinion-makers Israel had redeemed itself as a still worthy member of the civilised world. *The New York Times* hailed the birth of a new, a higher “Jerusalem ethic”.

With Hizbullah, that Israeli antithesis – “self-defence” against “terror” – grew increasingly spurious. This organisation had been terrorist, in some ways. But against Israel it fought clean; for nearly two decades, it confined itself to striking perfectly legitimate targets, Israeli soldiers occupying south Lebanon. In response, the Israelis relied exclusively on their virtually casualty-free, high-tech, long-range firepower, delivered by air or ground artillery. They may have aimed at Hizbullah personnel and their missiles, but, usually missing them, they hit civilians instead. They called this accidental, “collateral” damage, but simultaneously made it clear

that, even if it was, it formed part of a wider, growing policy of “punishing” the Lebanese for harbouring “terror” in their midst. The 2006 war, their latest bid to destroy Hizbullah, was yet another abysmal failure – and out of that grew the methods which, ostensibly developed for the “next round” against it, were first applied instead against Hamas in Gaza.

There “the most moral army in the world” finally became what must be one of the first in the world to adopt the hitting of civilian targets as official policy. It even had a label: the “Dahiya Doctrine”, after Beirut’s southern suburbs, chunks of which it flattened in 2006. First to enunciate it, General Gadi Eisenkot, commander of the northern front, said that, under “an already authorised plan”, the same thing would “happen in every village from which shots are fired at Israel. We will wield disproportionate power against [them] and cause immense damage and destruction.” It was, wrote Michael Sfar, an Israeli international law expert, “as if Eisenkot was standing on a hilltop declaring his intention to commit war crimes.”

Israel’s right to “go crazy”

Words, which, once out, can never be contested, are often more telling than deeds, which so often can be. In his report, Goldstone paid much attention to this and similar pronouncements, such as Foreign Minister Tzvi Lipni’s statement about Israel’s right to “go crazy”. Every Israeli knows what this very Israeli concept means: the resort to wild, irrational behaviour in response to military or political setbacks. Veteran peace activist Uri Avnery wrote that in the context of Gaza it denoted a military “behaving like madmen, going on the rampage, killing or destroying mercilessly” in their belief that “the [success] of the war planners [depends on] the very barbarity of their plan.”

Of course, Goldstone condemned Hamas too. But if Hamas is a terrorist militia, then Israel can now only be described, on his authority, as a fully-fledged, self-confessed terrorist state. Dissident Israelis sometimes call hasbara “lying for Israel”. If so, it reached its apogee over Goldstone. Press and politicians, unable to address his actual charges, came up with every conceivable smear, sophistry and misrepresentation instead: from the allegation of pre-conceived bias – via anti-Semitism, blood libel, even a new version of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion – to the contention that the real criminal was Goldstone himself, and that he should stand trial for undermining the right and ability of Israel – and all “democracies” – to defend themselves against international terror. It was a well-nigh hysterical response, and perhaps the best evidence that another UN official, and

Israeli *bête noire*, was right: at last, said Richard Falk, “the Palestinians have increasingly been winning this second, non-military war.”

But they will not be winning it outright. Israel will almost certainly be spared the worst of what Goldstone could theoretically come to: the hauling of Barak and company before the International Criminal Court. The Americans will see to that. But who would ever have dreamt that, in their hour of vindication, the Palestinians would also help save Israel from its fate? For that, at least, is what their official leadership sought to do, with its abject vote [later abjectly reversed] at the Geneva Human Rights Council in favour of deferring further international action on the report. There were obvious reasons for this, US arm-twisting and Israeli economic blackmail. But the truly scandalous one seems to have been the Palestine Authority’s fear that the Israelis would carry out their threat to expose the “hidden side” of the Gaza war: that is to say, the full extent to which, in its hatred of Hamas, it collaborated with them, and even urged them on, thereby making itself complicit in the “war crimes” which it surely knew better than anyone they intended to commit.

Continuity masquerading as change: Obama’s Middle East promise fades

A year after the new US president was elected, *Graham Usher* points to the gap between expectations and reality.

Barack Obama’s speech to the UN General Assembly on 23 September reminded many in his audience why his election as US president inspired hope. Unlike earlier incumbents, he was humble: “I am well aware of the expectations that accompany my presidency around the world. These expectations are not about me. Rather, they are rooted – I believe – in a discontent with a status quo that has allowed us to be increasingly defined by our differences, and outpaced by our problems.”

Nowhere is that discontent greater than with the US-induced status quo in the Middle East. Obama has promised “change”. At the UN, and in his speech to the

Muslim world in Cairo on 4 June, he said his administration would seek “a just and lasting peace between Israel, Palestine and the Arab world.”

He also promised to work for a world free of nuclear weapons: “The world must stand together to demonstrate that international law is not an empty promise.”

But a year after his election it is Obama’s promise that is starting to look empty. US action and inaction in the Middle East are again alienating Arab and Muslim opinion, weakening Washington’s allies and emboldening adversaries. So far Obama’s Middle East policy has been one of continuity masquerading as change, if not with the imperial hubris of Bush’s first term or the imperial ambitions of his second.

This is not to say that “change” can not come. But it will have to be wrought at home before it can be extended abroad.

Snubbed on settlements

Obama began well. He appointed as his Middle East special envoy the respected former senator George Mitchell. His opening gambit was good: a freeze on all Israeli settlement in the Occupied Territories to resuscitate a comatose peace process.

A freeze would bolster the Palestinians in the West Bank while coaxing “gestures” to Israel from Arab states to entice – or fracture – an Israeli government hostile to the demand, and probably to the entire process. It would also enhance the US’ status as broker, since for Arabs there is no greater threat to the two-state solution than Israel’s West Bank colonisation.

Israeli Premier Binyamin Netanyahu met the “freeze” with a succession of snubs. He unfroze 2,500 building licences in the West Bank and approved 468 new housing starts in occupied East Jerusalem. “Jerusalem is not a settlement,” he told his cabinet.

By August, US officials were saying a freeze was no longer a condition for resuming talks. By September, it had melted away. Obama urged Israel “to restrain settlement activity”. The freeze, said US analyst Phyllis Bennis, became “slush”.

An official involved in the diplomacy expressed bemusement: “Obama was right to focus on settlements. What’s inexplicable is to have no fall-back pressure point when Netanyahu refuses.”

Obama does have “pressure points”. Yet one of his first decisions as president was to reconfirm George W Bush’s August 2008 pledge ensuring Israel \$30 billion in military aid over the next decade. So that leverage, it seems, is gone. Nor, if its craven performance over the Goldstone report is any guide, will his administration cease shielding Israel at bodies like the UN.

How to explain this abdication? Perhaps Obama is committed no less than Bush to a regional status quo predicated on Israel’s military hegemony and an alliance of Arab states enlisted to control the Gulf’s energy supplies on America’s behalf. Or perhaps peace is not such a priority. “For Obama, the peace process is one thing among many, and may have been overtaken by issues like health care at home and Afghanistan abroad,” says historian and analyst Andrew Bacevich.

There is also the Israeli lobby. One reason for Obama’s thunderous silence during the Gaza carnage last January was a House of Representatives resolution, passed by 390-5, that Hamas “alone” was responsible for the high civilian death toll: Israel was exercising its “right to self-defence”. During the skirmishes with Netanyahu AIPAC dispatched a letter – with 329 signatures from the House and 76 from the Senate – advising Obama to “work closely and privately” with Israel. As a result, some prominent Democrats queried their president’s focus on settlements. “If Obama tries to make aid conditional on a settlement freeze, Congress will simply override him,” predicted analyst Stephen Walt.

Dilemmas about Iran

There is more change with Iran. Obama has been true to his election promise to use diplomacy rather than force to deal with Tehran’s nuclear programme. But “there’s been no abandonment of the idea of Iran as a rogue state that must be isolated,” says Bennis.

Obama blows soft and hard, probably reflecting a duel within the administration. In January, he promised a new era in relations if Iran would only “unclench its fist” and give up the right to enrich uranium. In May, he quietly told Netanyahu that Iran had until the end of the year to unclench or face more sanctions.

Obama has sent emissaries to negotiate directly with Iran over the nuclear issue in Geneva and Vienna, and invited Iran’s foreign minister to Washington. The negotiations are serious. Yet both moves were overshadowed by Iran’s disclosure, ostensibly US-forced, of a second unacknowledged Iranian uranium enrichment site near Qom and by reports in the US media that Iran was designing a nuclear warhead. The glove always clothes a clenched American fist.

Obama has dilemmas with Iran. Intelligence is mixed as to whether Iran wants the bomb or simply wants the capacity to “break out” and make a bomb if the need arises. There is consensus that Iran has in the past experimented with some form of weapons process. However there is no recognition in the administration that what may lie behind any Iranian

drive to nuclear weapons is its encirclement by US military bases in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Gulf, or the threat of a “preventive” Israeli attack. Iran’s nuclear weapons temptations may be worrying, but they are not irrational.

“Engagement” also became more complicated after Iran’s rigged presidential elections in June and the political turmoil and repression that ensued. Yet the Iranian national consensus in favour of the nuclear programme seems unaffected by the country’s internal crises and defies facile moderate-versus-hardliner characterisation. Not a single presidential candidate in June proffered unilateral restrictions on the programme. All urged nuclear disarmament in a context of “strategic cooperation”.

Since the attacks of 11 September, Iranian governments, reformist-led or otherwise, have offered the US a “grand bargain”: a Middle East free of nuclear weapons (including Israel’s) and cooperation on regional disputes in Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan, in return for guarantees that the US would renounce policies of regime change. Bush rejected the trade.

But is it a bargain Obama could accept? It would seem to be precisely the kind of “building of new coalitions that bridge old divides” that he says must be the basis of any 21st century foreign policy. It would start to dismantle a lethal and US-created regional architecture that marshals Israel and “moderate” Arab regimes aimed at “containing” any state (such as Iran) or force (such as Hizbullah and Hamas) that resists US hegemony. It would make the Middle East safer.

“A grand bargain is attractive but the domestic political constraints are formidable,” says Bacevich. “It would fly in the face of 30 years of US demonisation. Obama would have to say Iran is not a threat to US security – or only a modest threat – but a rational regime that, like ours, acts according to its perceived national security interests.”

There is another constraint. Israel’s current inaction towards Iran is predicated on US action in the future, either sanctions or worse. Tel Aviv is convinced that Iran represents an existential threat. Some say Netanyahu has embarked on an almost eschatological mission to eliminate it. Any deal that left the current Iranian regime intact – let alone put Israel’s own nuclear arsenal on the negotiating table – may be a bridge too far for the present Israeli government. An Israeli military strike may not take out Iran’s nuclear programme. But it would wreck the bargain.

As with a settlement freeze, Obama may forswear change so as not to upset an Israeli-anchored status quo.

Two-pillar policy

Obama’s Middle East policy has two pillars. The first is that the US can serve as an honest broker between Israel and the Arabs, and Iran and the “West”. The second is that the US remains Israel’s closest, “unshakeable”, ally. Overarching both is a faith: that American and Israeli interests align.

They do not. In Cairo, Obama said the two-state solution was “in America’s interest”. That is true. Resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict would lance the greatest source of poison in US-Muslim relations and blunt the greatest grievance against America in the armoury of jihadist Islam.

But peace is not in the interest of the present Israeli government. It would undermine its national-religious ideology and wreck its coalition. Any West Bank withdrawal would unleash an intra-Jewish conflict that would make the August 2005 Gaza disengagement seem trouble-free in comparison.

For Netanyahu the current status quo of a quisling PA in the West Bank and a quarantined Hamas administration in Gaza is probably the best he can get. A sanctioned, contained and crippled Iran would be even better.

Dare Obama air this difference out loud? No US government is likely to abandon Israel’s security. But he could make aid conditional on change; he could lift Israel’s immunity from international law; and he could state that his government’s “parameters for peace” also include withdrawal to the 1967 borders, shared sovereignty in Jerusalem, and an agreed and just solution for the refugees. He could make the Arab Peace Initiative his own. And he could make that and a Middle East free of nuclear weapons part of any grand trade with Iran.

This would trigger schisms in his party and a backlash at home from very powerful forces. But it would not necessarily hurt his base. AIPAC opposed his presidential candidacy – as did other Jewish organisations – but 78% of American Jews voted for him: 64% say they would do so today. There is a cleavage between what many US Jews see as in Israel’s interest and what the Israeli government does. And Obama still has mammoth backing from African-Americans and Latinos.

These are the constituencies that have the most to lose by trillions spent on useless wars and arms races in the Middle East. They are the ones that may also ask why, at a time of recession, their government still spends more per capita on Israel’s citizens than its own.

Obama has the political capital to demand change. The question is: does he have the political will?

Iraq awaits test after an era of US military presence

Jim Muir assesses Iraq's political prospects up to and beyond the scheduled January 2010 elections and concludes that the indicators are mixed.

Is the outside world beginning to forget Iraq? You might be excused for concluding that it is. Events in the country have to fight their way onto international news bulletins and rarely make the front pages of newspapers. Astonishingly, despite the continuing presence of 120,000 US troops, the major American networks – CBS, NBC, ABC – have all reduced their Baghdad bureaux to local operations whose products rarely make the air.

It seems that people do not really want to hear Iraqi news, good or bad. It is yesterday's story. Things have moved on: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran's nuclear ambitions are more pressing preoccupations. But how things end up in Iraq matters hugely, not just for the Iraqis themselves, but for the region, and internationally.

For one thing, Iraq, as Lebanon and others before it, has become a proxy battleground for struggles between such outside powers as the US, Iran, Syria, the Sunni Arab states and others. So how the situation develops will both reflect and affect the balance of power and relationships between the external players, particularly the US and Iran.

The test will not be long in coming. American forces have already started thinning down. By August next year, all combat troops should be out of the country, leaving up to 50,000 trainers and advisers behind. By the end of 2011, even they should all be gone.

The Americans, under President Barack Obama's new management, seem determined to stick to the withdrawal schedule – although they concede it must be "responsible", in other words, carried out in a manner that would not trigger chaos and make a nonsense of the 4,350 or so US soldiers' lives and billions of dollars Washington has spent in Iraq since 2003.

However, the overall goal remains to end an involvement that Obama does not believe should ever have begun, the better to focus minds and resources on the real battle: Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Intensifying struggle

This points to another way in which what happens in Iraq will matter very much. Should the country fall to

pieces, with chunks of it perhaps tumbling into the lap of neighbouring Iran, what would that mean for the contemplated American troop "surge" in Afghanistan, similar to that which apparently turned the tide in Iraq after the sectarian bloodbaths of 2006–07? Conditions in the two countries are of course in many ways different, but the basics are not.

Failure in Iraq would bode ill for the chances of success in a struggle that has already lasted eight years and is intensifying rather than abating.

As has been the case in Iraq since the outset of this chapter in its history, optimists and pessimists can adopt rose-coloured or gloomy optics to assess the prospects, and find plenty on either side to support their case. The fact is that because there is no Iraqi or regional precedent for much of what is happening nobody can predict with confidence the answers to such key questions as whether the country will hold together as a unitarian state, and whether democracy will survive once the Americans have gone.

Certainly the Iraqis have developed a taste for democracy, even an attachment to it, although the process has no real history in the country itself and precious little in the wider region. Millions have turned out to vote in successive elections since 2003 despite overt threats of violence and retribution from insurgents. The provincial elections of January this year were more significant than the first round of polls in 2004–05, because it was the first time the public had a chance to vote people out of office, which in some cases they did.

It was a heady moment – the realisation that you could actually get rid of officials who had not performed or kept their promises; a rare development indeed in the Arab world. And equally impressively, the election passed off with virtually no violence on the day, or in the aftermath, when the results showed that there were some powerful losers, all with access to guns. There was grumbling and some threats, but by and large the outcome was accepted as generally fair.

Turning against sectarianism

The electorate also took that opportunity to deliver clear messages about what it liked and did not like. Confession-based factions associated with the hideous sectarian carnage of 2006–07 generally fared poorly. Sensing which way the wind was blowing, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and his Shi'a-based Daawa Party cunningly changed labels and fielded candidates under a new brand, the State of Law Coalition.

It was a master stroke which played to the Iraqis' apparent longing for those two concepts – state authority, and the rule of law – as opposed to the fragmentation,

sectarianism, militia rule and subservience to outside powers which held sway before Maliki's government (and the Americans) launched the "Imposing the Law" security crackdown in early 2007 that began to turn the tide. Nationalism rather than narrow confessionalism seems to be the concept that hits the gong among a lot of Iraqis, but not of course all. Playing that tune, Maliki's followers came out top (but not with a ruling majority) in nine out of the 10 provinces where the Shi'a predominate.

Optimists can point to the fact that since that crackdown there's been a marked and steady decline in violence of all sorts, and the ensuing casualties. Combining 2006 and 2007, an average of 2,175 Iraqi civilians died violent deaths every month. By 2008, that figure had dropped to 938 per month, and for the seven months until July this year, it averaged 390. These figures, from Iraq Body Count, may be incomplete and disputed by some, but the trends are clear.

So there are visible elements that optimists would regard as encouraging. Viewed through harsher lenses, though, Iraq can look like a hopeless basket case. For one thing, the violence may have simmered down, but it has proven very stubborn to eradicate. Life in Baghdad has improved beyond recognition in terms of people getting out and about, but bombs continue to go off from time to time, and people are shot dead. (The twin suicide bombing in central Baghdad in late October, in which more than 150 people were killed, was the deadliest attack since 2007). Much of the persistent violence has been in the mixed provinces immediately to the north of Baghdad, and in the far north, around Mosul and Kirkuk, reflecting the ongoing tensions between Arabs and Kurds all along the ethnic fault line that runs through disputed areas from Sinjar on the Syrian border in the northwest down to the Iranian border to the southeast. US commanders rate the Arab-Kurdish

stand-off as the most significant "driver of instability" in the country.

Alarming, there has also been something of a resur-



Maliki faces an uncertain future, with the US set to exit Iraq

gence of violence in the mainly Sunni province of Anbar to the west of Baghdad, now that the American troops have largely withdrawn there. Anbar was held up as a glowing example of success in pacifying the insurgency by winning over Sunni tribes to the government/US side.

The Shi'i militias and Sunni groups which were blamed for the earlier sectarian violence may be politically off the streets, but they

(and even rogue official security elements) are held at least partly responsible for an alarming wave of outright criminality: armed raids on banks and jewellery shops, kidnapping for ransom etc.

After the Americans

All of this underlines a possibility that nobody can rule out: that the embers glowing under the ashes might burst once again into flames when the Americans are no longer in the background to stiffen the resolve of the Iraqi security forces and provide any support they need. US troops were still in the wings for the provincial elections last January, as they will be for the upcoming national ones. But by the next round of polls, they will be gone.

Looking at the wider picture, at things that hold nations together and give them a sense of purpose and progress, there is not a lot to feel good about.

In one way it is a tribute to the fact that security has much improved that the first gripe of most Iraqis is now no longer about the risk of being killed or maimed, but the pathetic state of utilities, infrastructure and job prospects, more than six years after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. Corruption is so extensive that Iraq has the distinction of ranking third (behind Somalia and Myanmar) in the stakes for the world's most corrupt country, according to Transparency International.

Three-quarters of the national budget is spent on a vast army of public employees, many of whom do nothing more productive than turning up to collect their salaries; but the government cannot cut back for fear of triggering hardship and unrest.

In addition to all its other problems, the Iraqi government faces a situation where an estimated 2.8 million of its citizens are displaced internally by the conflict, while another two million have fled abroad, including many much-needed professionals.

Because of falling oil prices, the national budget has had to be cut twice this year, from \$79 billion to \$56 billion, and for next year has been set at \$67 billion, some \$15 billion short of estimated requirements. The squeeze is such that concerns have been raised about the government's ability to equip and train its security forces to face the challenges ahead – what one US commander inelegantly described as a “cost-crunch, time-crunch situation”.

Iraq's only real source of income is oil, and with production running consistently at levels lower than when Saddam was in power, revenues have sagged. To boost production and income, a huge injection of investment, expertise and technology is required which can only come from outside. That means drawing in international companies which are understandably nervous not just about security, but also the legal and operational situations, which remain obscure in the absence of a much-delayed hydrocarbons law. A first round of contract bidding in June went disastrously, with only one out of eight being awarded, so unattractive were the terms on offer deemed. A second round is planned for December but even if successful, it will be a long time before the benefits are felt.

Legislation logjam

The oil and gas law is only one of several key pieces of nation-building legislation constantly delayed by factional bickering in parliament. Partly to blame is an intractable north-south deadlock between Kurds and Arabs (or the Kurdistan Regional Government and

the Baghdad administration). Like many other issues, it will have to wait until after the January general elections before anything is attempted beyond trying to sponsor confidence-building measures to avert an explosion in the disputed territories, especially Kirkuk, which exemplifies and crystallises many of the country's problems. The elections themselves have been jeopardised by eleventh-hour haggling over reforms to the election law, in which the Kirkuk dispute is one of several contentious elements.

The political configurations going into the 2010 polls are very different from those that contested the last general election in 2005. The big, sect-based coalitions in both the Shi'i and Sunni camps have split up. Maliki resisted Iranian and other pressures to join a revived Shi'i front, leaving the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), the Sadrist movement and other uneasy bedfellows grouped under a banner whose title has, in a sign of shifting public tastes, been changed from the United Iraqi Coalition to the Iraqi National Coalition.

Trying to break the mould of sectarian politics, Maliki has sought alliances with Sunni tribal and political leaders as well as other minorities, and his rivals have tried their best to follow suit. However well he does, though, he is unlikely to achieve the kind of majority that would allow him to step easily back into the premiership and try to boost his strong-man image. He will have to do a lot of bargaining and compromising to get the job.

Most likely, the post-election period will see a ferment of horse-trading and alliance-forging which would almost certainly mean that the construction of a new government, and the reconfiguring of the entire political structure, including the three-man presidential council, will take many months.

In the meantime, provided things do not come disastrously off the rails, the US withdrawal will be gaining serious momentum – at least 70,000 troops out of the country by August.

That is when the test will really begin.

Saif-al-Islam: frustrations face Libya's reformer

A top political role is being created for Col Qadhafi's second son, but there is no shortage of critics in the wings, says George Joffé.

On 6 October, during a visit to Sebha, where he had celebrated the anniversary of the founding of the Union of Free Officers more than 40 years ago and the much more recent Libyan-sponsored treaty to end the Touareg conflict with the Niger government, Col Muammar al-Qadhafi called on Libyans to create a formal political position for his second son, Saif-al-Islam. Only then, he claimed, could the 37-year-old properly discharge his desire to serve the Libyan

people, whilst he himself could concentrate on the global agenda. He added that any such position should be permanent so that Saif-al-Islam could realise the reform agenda he had set for himself.

The next day it emerged that Saif was to be offered the post of leader of Libya's Socialist Popular Leadership (SPL) – formally, at least, one of the most senior positions in the Libyan Jamahiriya. His appointment as coordinator of the committee which runs the SPL was confirmed 10 days later. Reports claimed that his elevation would make him the second most powerful figure in Libya and confirm him as his father's anointed successor.

A poisoned chalice?

The SPL stands alongside the parliamentary system, the government and the Revolutionary Committee Movement as one of the overt pillars of power and authority in Libya. It was created in 1994 and consists of 32 tribal leaders in committee, under a coordinator, whose task is, in essence, to ensure loyalty to the regime outside the formal institutions of the state. It has the power to demand collective commitment to the Jamahiriya from social groups and to authorise punishment of individuals who fail to observe such collective undertakings.

It is, in short, a powerful vehicle for social and political conformity. Yet at the same time it gives tribal groups potential autonomy within Libya's pervasive political structures. That, indeed, was something that the Warfalla tribe demonstrated after the failed October 1993 Bani Walid coup attempt, when the tribe's leaders refused regime demands to punish those who had been involved.

Saif-al-Islam's appointment, then, raises interesting speculation over what it really signifies. It is certainly not his ideal, for he had wanted a Constitution to be put in place before he took up a permanent political position. Still, it seems that his father has implicitly given him his imprimatur as his putative successor, a position which enthusiastic supporters in the West had long accorded him. Yet it also cements Saif-al-Islam within the formal structure of Libya; hardly the location of choice for the energetic reformer he has long wished to be – although he would now, in theory, have the power base he needs to carry out his planned changes.



Saif-al-Islam: Conservatives want to wipe the smile from his face (pic: Reuters)

There is no doubt that Col Qadhafi will still be the one to call the shots in Libya. After all, it was because of disagreements with his father over the proposed Constitution for Libya that Saif-al-Islam withdrew from political life in late August 2008. At the time, he made it clear that his retirement from politics was permanent, despite a series of demonstrations shortly afterwards, calling for his return. But his hankering for re-engagement has become ever more overt, as made clear by his involvement in the return of the Lockerbie bombing convict Abdelbaset al-Megrahi.

The question, then, is what Saif will feel able to achieve now and whether or not his father's gift is a poisoned chalice that will bind him into perpetual impotence within the Jamahiriya. It is a crucial issue, for he has long headed a movement within the country that seeks genuine modernisation and transparency. Yet his renewed prominence must also be set against the position of his brother, al-Mutasim, who over the past year has gained control of the security and oil sectors.

A tide to turn

Saif-al-Islam's problem has been that, ever since he emerged onto the political scene at the beginning of this decade and began to articulate a reform agenda, he has

faced challenges from the radicals in the Jamahiriya. They see no reason for fundamental change and many of them – particularly in the Revolutionary Committee Movement, which Saif-al-Islam is said to abhor – have a vested interest in the status quo.

The arbiter in the increasingly bitter dispute between the radicals (who in the topsy-turvy world of Libyan politics are really traditionalists) and Saif-al-Islam has been Col Qadhafi himself. Yet he, too, is profoundly attached to his own creation of the Jamahiriya and has repeatedly back-pedalled over the reforms proposed by his son – hence the row over the Constitution last year.

It has been this reluctant uncertainty that has bedevilled reform in Libya throughout this decade and has rendered Saif's agenda so difficult to articulate, let alone implement. It has hindered economic restructuring of the kind proposed by Professor Michael Porter and the Monitor Group, a firm brought into Libya as consultants by Saif-al-Islam. And it has profoundly hampered reforming

politicians such as the former premier and latterly head of the Libyan National Oil Corporation, Shukri Ghanem – a protégé of Saif-al-Islam since the latter’s days as an MBA student in Vienna in the 1990s, when Ghanem worked for OPEC.

Yet there have been successes too. Saif-al-Islam has been able to use his chairmanship of the al-Qadhafi Charitable Foundation to influence Libyan policy, over Lockerbie and the Bulgarian nurses affair, for example. Human rights reform and the belated official recognition accorded to the 1996 massacre at Tripoli’s Abu Sulaim prison were also due to the Libyan leader’s second son. And then there has been Libya’s spectacular success in persuading its imprisoned Islamist extremists to renounce violence and thus gain their recent release, another success, in reality, for Saif-al-Islam.

In the balance

Saif’s new appointment, then, reflects this ambivalent

past. True, it provides him with a power base but it also binds him to his father’s political creation and to the radical traditionalists who will frustrate him at every turn. It is true, too, that the Colonel now sees his future on the world stage and would like to leave domestic politics in other trustworthy hands. But he will not lose control of his domestic support and has, as a result, divided the control of power in Libya between Saif-al-Islam and al-Mutasim.

And there are other brothers and a sister, too, all with their ambitions to satisfy. Yet Saif does have his own constituency in Libya, most recently bolstered by the re-appointment of Ghanem as oil head, a few weeks after his precipitate resignation in fury at traditionalist interference.

The question is, however, whether that constituency, together with his new position, is strong enough to frustrate his opponents and whether his father’s support will continue if the Jamahiriya faces real reform.

Winning or losing Muslim hearts and minds

A Necessary Engagement: Reinventing America’s Relations with the Muslim World

Emile Nakhleh

Princeton University Press 2009, £18.95

ISBN: 9780691135250

Engaging the Muslim World

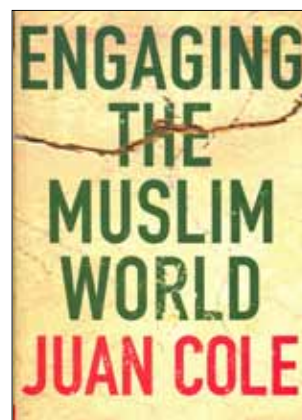
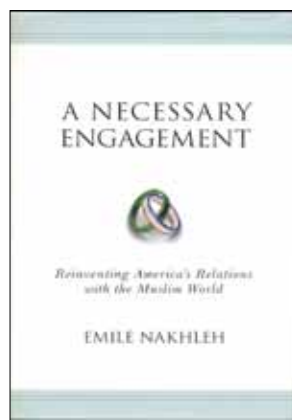
Juan Cole

Palgrave Macmillan 2009, £16.99

ISBN: 9780230607545

One of the most significant and daunting elements of George Bush’s legacy to Barack Obama is America’s threadbare relationship with the Muslim world. The new president’s Cairo speech in June 2009, offering Muslims a fresh start based on mutual respect, was accordingly welcomed as a sign that he regards the issue as a personal priority. He has realised that none of his most cherished policy objectives in the Greater Middle East can be achieved – reviving the Arab-Israeli peace process, withdrawing from Iraq, defeating al-Qa’ida, stabilising Afghanistan and Pakistan, opening a dialogue with Iran and Syria – without also signalling, in a new and more convincing way, that Muslim hearts and minds matter.

These two books are both, in part, primers for the new president. Both argue that America needs to do a



better job of understanding Islam and Islamism, to avoid the obsessions of what Juan Cole calls “Islam Anxiety” and to craft and promote policies to end the virtual Cold War between Islam and the West. But while they have much in common, the two authors come at the task from different backgrounds and with different approaches.

Emile Nakhleh, a Palestinian Christian from Galilee, earned his PhD in Washington DC, and eventually joined the CIA, becoming its resident guru on political Islam, a position he held until retiring in 2006. What distinguishes his little book is that it throws light on the CIA’s efforts to understand the character and dynamics of Islamic movements and to communicate its findings – not always successfully – to Congress and the policy-makers.

Many of the author’s conclusions – that there is an intimate connection between policy and perception;

that Islamist movements are part of the political landscape and the United States should engage with them; that working to resolve the Palestine problem is central to any effort to win hearts and minds; that for a host of reasons the Iraq war was a bad idea – may seem unoriginal to those who study the region. But to those he was briefing they were often novel and sometimes unwelcome.

Indeed, while the book's tone is on the whole discreet, there is no disguising the lingering sense of hurt over the way in which, during the controversy over Iraq, the CIA was made the scapegoat for the failings of others.

Some experts will part company with Nakhleh, however, over his conviction that mainstream Islamic movements – such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and its counterparts elsewhere – have made a definitive transition to democratic politics. There are, to be sure, signs pointing in that direction; but many would argue that within Islamism's extended family the democrats and reformists are still a beleaguered minority.

Juan Cole has had a different personal involvement with the world of Islam. He grew up as a teenager in the Horn of Africa, later spending time in Egypt, Lebanon and South Asia, before becoming a professor of history at the University of Michigan and a well-known commentator and blogger. He, too, argues that the Bush administration failed in its approach to the Muslim world and that central to that failure was the calamitous war in Iraq.

His book is a potpourri of history, analysis, reportage and polemic. It casts a wide net, ranging from energy and climate change to the roots of Sunni Islamism, the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the heated controversies over Iran's nuclear programme and its regional role.

Reading at times more like a collection of briefings than a sustained study of Islam and the West, it is at its best incisive and persuasive. Its least successful chapter, on the 'Wahhabi myth', argues that Saudi Arabia is a loyal ally of the United States rather than, as it is increasingly portrayed, a propagator and paymaster of extremism and intolerance.

These two books, and a number of policy papers from the more sensible Washington think-tanks, have provided the Obama administration with a range of policy recommendations to which it seems broadly sympathetic. Disentangling itself, however, from the lingering effects of the Bush legacy – and turning

promise into performance – are already proving immensely challenging.

Roger Hardy

Arabia Infelix

What's Really Wrong with the Middle East

Brian Whitaker

Saqi, London 2009, £10.99

ISBN: 9780863566240

By choosing the title *What's Really Wrong with the Middle East*, Brian Whitaker may have had in mind Bernard Lewis' *What Went Wrong?* as well as other, less scholarly, diatribes about a "Middle Eastern question" defined by Western commentators in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. At the centre of such enquiries is the question of why so much of the Muslim world is so dysfunctional,

why it produces religious violence, and, perhaps most crucially, whether Islam and the West are destined to clash. Whitaker, formerly *The Guardian's* Middle East editor and the author of a book on homosexuality in the Arab world, does not try to paint with such a broad brush or delve into historical grievances; and he eschews grand civilisational conflicts.

Instead, based on his experience of reporting from the region, and on a wide range of statistical and analytical sources and interviews with young men and women decrying the current state of affairs, Whitaker presents a survey of key social problems common to Arab societies. Indeed,

the book should be called *What's Really Wrong with the Arab World*, since it excludes Iran, Israel and Turkey from consideration, and largely focuses on the "Arab malaise" debated by many inside and outside the region for several decades. "Put simply, the Arab 'freedom deficit' results in a stultifying atmosphere where change, innovation, creativity, critical thinking, questioning, problem-solving, and virtually any kind of non-conformity are discouraged if not necessarily punished," he argues.

Of course, Arabs have been having this discussion for a long time — at least since the 19th century — and have been particularly despondent about their lot in the past decade, as the often-quoted UNDP Arab Human Development Reports (from which Whitaker liberally draws) made clear. The things that are wrong with the Arab world, then, are well known: poverty, illiteracy,



intolerance, corruption, nepotism, authoritarianism, religious obscurantism, etc — as well as, at times, a thin skin when outsiders point out these ills. Although cases differ from country to country (with the most obvious differences being between the populous Arab states and the small, hydrocarbon-rich Gulf monarchies), anyone familiar with countries like Egypt, Syria, Morocco or Algeria will recognise the ailments. The question explored in *What's Really Wrong with the Middle East* is why, even while they decry their predicament, Arabs fail to do much about it.

In seeking answers, Whitaker looks beyond the actions of authoritarian regimes at how Arab societies themselves create these problems. "Governments are the product of the societies they govern and in Arab countries it is often society, as much as the government itself, which stands in the way of progress," he writes. Much of his concern is not so much about the injustices (relating to religion, gender, race or sexuality) that abound in the Arab world, but rather the extent to which they are interiorised and justified by ordinary people.

He makes his case with testimonies from mostly young Arabs sympathetic to his own secular progressive worldview, most notably accounts of the archaism that characterises public education, restrictions on political activity, the growing conservatism of many Arabs and the conformism (and at times intolerance) it encourages. Drawing on the Palestinian-American historian Hisham Sharabi's theory of "neo-patriarchy", Whitaker argues that the paternalism of governments is often a reflection of that found at home, or to quote one of his favourite sources, the Belgium-based Egyptian commentator Khaled Diab, "Egypt has a million Mubaraks." It is not just a question of gender inequality or father-knows-best authoritarianism that is at stake here. The wider point is that positive change in the Arab world cannot come from political change alone: societies and the individuals who compose them have their part to play too.

The author cites current instances where individuals have challenged both government authority and social prejudice. The Egyptian human rights activist Hussam Bahgat, who took on Islamists and conservative theologians by challenging their interpretations of religious texts — an approach so far shunned by Egypt's largely left-wing and secularist human rights community, who have preferred to avoid making arguments on Islamic grounds — is a case in point.

At other times, however, Whitaker is

too ambitious. He is correct to highlight racism in the Arab world and discrimination based on skin colour, as well as a certain obliviousness to the very existence of racism (although Arab scholars such as Moroccan historian Mohammed Ennaji have linked the practice of slavery and its sanction in Islam with authoritarianism). But the author does not make clear what is different about Arab (rather than American or Swedish or Indian) racism. Similarly, while a chapter on globalisation focuses on xenophobia, the anti-globalisation rhetoric cited in it can be found anywhere across the world. The book does not take into account how deeply integrated into (and dependent on) the global economy large parts of the Arab world are. Also absent, aside from a remark at the beginning of the book and a reflection on the "oil curse", are considerations of the region's strategic value and military penetration by outsiders, or indeed the prevalence of war in the recent history of many Arab countries and its dissuasive effect on those who might want to rock the boat.

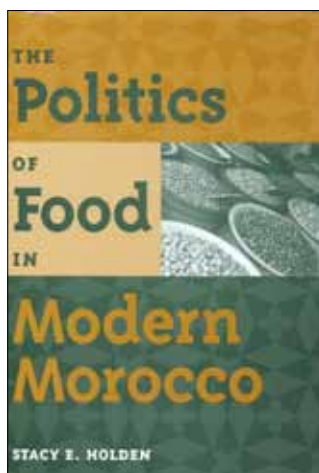
These flaws detract little from what is overall a well-informed book that is sympathetic to its subject without being indulgent towards it. At its heart, *What's Really Wrong with the Middle East* attempts the difficult task of tackling socio-cultural causes of some of the Arab world's problems while skirting the trap of cultural essentialism.

Issandr El Amrani

Long war against hunger

The Politics of Food in Modern Morocco **Stacy E. Holden**

University Press of Florida Press 2009 £57.26



"The rain is our stock-market index," Moroccan Finance Minister Fatahalla Oulalou told reporters in 2004, referring to the preponderant role that food production still plays in the country's economy: the autumn and spring rains continue to be an important determinant of annual GDP and consumer spending power.

Famine and food-shortages, whether induced by drought, locust infestation or archaic production methods, linger on in Moroccan folk memory. It is easy to see why. In the early part of Stacy Holden's

United Nations Development Programme



The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is an advocate for change, connecting countries to knowledge, experience and resources to help people build a better life. UNDP is on the ground in 166 countries, working with them on their own solutions to development challenges.

Are you ready to LEAD?

UNDP is seeking motivated and talented professionals from around the world to join its Leadership Development Programme (LEAD) in late 2010.

LEAD is an entry point for professionals interested in an international career in development. It aims to cultivate high-performing development practitioners with a passion for making a positive difference in the world.

Applicants must have an advanced university degree (Masters or equivalent) in development studies, economics, social sciences, business administration or a related discipline; at least five (5) years of experience relevant to the work of UNDP; and proficiency in English and at least one other UN language (Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian, and Spanish) or Portuguese. Candidates should ideally be under the age of 35 years at the point of application.

Applications close on **30 November 2009**.

For more information on the programme and how to apply, go to www.undp.org/lead

book, hunger stalks the Moroccan landscape. In 1878, a British diplomat reported emaciated corpses by the roadside between Tangiers and Fez, as villagers fleeing drought tried unsuccessfully to reach the towns. Under the French and Spanish protectorates, food supplies were still precarious. In 1927, the Fez local authorities made a special allocation to fund the burials of famine victims, and food scarcities continued into the 1930s.

Holden's book draws on her research into the millers and butchers in the old city of Fez in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, looking at how those two sectors did or did not modernise, the limited impact of technology and capital from abroad, and the hot-button issue of water supply. Accessing the municipal archives in Fez, the Royal Archives in Rabat and French colonial records in Nantes, she has unearthed details of sultans' relations with the city's leading food producers, and the later policies of the French protectorate towards such issues as the price of meat.

Under the French protectorate, the 'notable' class in Fez feared unrest from the lower orders but still regarded meat – unlike bread – as a luxury that did not need to be priced for regular mass consumption. Their views held sway via the local majlis (council), a consultative body created by the French. The butchers, a very different social class, may have been interested in having meat more widely consumed, but were hampered by the tax that the majlis continued to impose on each head of livestock slaughtered.

The French, meanwhile, had a Fabian-like enthusiasm for modern abattoirs. The Protectorate authorities, like the sultans before them, needed to keep the notables on board, but their biggest fear was the unrest that erupted from time to time when the poorer classes found their conditions of life becoming intolerable. During a wheat shortage in 1919, French officials in Fez criticised some notable families for hoarding supplies and failing to declare what they held, as they were now required to do. At times of crisis, the French ensured that subsidised wheat was made available to the lowest-income classes.

Their intervention in the market was nothing new. In the period before the Protectorate, an official, the muhtasib, set the price for flour in each major city, trying to keep both the millers and consumers happy. He also had the authority to force speculators to sell off their stocks of wheat. If the worst came to the worst, the Sultan would release some of his own stocks for sale onto the market, as mentioned in an internal memo from 1897 in the Royal Archives. The word 'makhzen', still used by Moroccans to refer to the nexus of power around their monarchy, does, after all, have a literal meaning of 'storehouse'.

Holden refers briefly to the idea developed by the German-born left-wing historian Karl Wittfogel in 1957 that the challenge of food provisioning in drought-prone areas leads to highly centralised, even repressive, governments – it is another version of the 'oriental despotism' thesis. The title of Holden's book might seem to suggest she is going to wade into this debate, or perhaps find rich pickings looking at her data through anthropological eyes. But she is clearly more at home with the concrete, and some of her most interesting findings do not concern food as such. She shows how the colonial administration under Gen Hubert Lyautey decided it was in its interests to publicise the Sultan's Eid al-Adha sacrificing of a sheep on behalf of his people, for the benefit of a lukewarm public. Enshrined in the re-invented, post-independence version of the monarchy, this event is nowadays broadcast annually on television.

Charity, patronage, and highly personalised economic relations are a theme running through the book, just as they are a strong strand in Moroccan political culture. Holden emphasises how the conservatism of the Fez elites influenced the anti-colonial movement: in 1934 the nationalists celebrated Throne Day by distributing tajine, cakes and tea to workers in Tangiers, and in Fez they distributed loaves to the poor. As to what was going on in far-flung villages of the Rif, the Fez hinterland or the southern Atlas, where a failed harvest could bring very real peril, the written records offer little information.

Eileen Byrne

LETTER FROM...GAZA



My passage through the vast, empty, echoing Israeli Erez terminal was quick. As always, I began by meeting John Ging, Irish chief of the UN agency looking after Palestinian refugees in the Gaza Strip. Less stressed than when we met in January after the ceasefire in Israel's 22-day war, he said Gaza's relentless downward slide could be reversed quickly if Israel ended its siege and blockade. Limited and decreasing quantities of basic humanitarian supplies for 1.5 million Gazans are allowed in through Israel's crossings. "Eighty-five per cent of people here depend on handouts of food to survive," he said. "All aspects of life are a struggle. The whole society is being broken down." Opening the borders to allow in materials for reconstruction, manufacturing and agriculture, and permitting exports, would "unleash the potential" of the workforce and "entrepreneurs who remain committed to Gaza."

At present, the energies of Gaza's workers and entrepreneurs are directed largely towards the underground economy created by Israel's blockade. Over the past year the tunnels beneath the Strip's southern border with Egypt are said to have doubled to between 1,300 and 1,500 and prospered, in spite of Israeli bombing and Egyptian interference. Everything – bar the flour, rice and oil in UN rations – is imported through the tunnels under the watchful eyes of Egyptian police and Israeli drones: meat, fish, soft drinks, fuel, and building supplies for all. Cheap clothing for the poor, glass for the windows of the rich. Tunnels are big business.

Basil Shawwa, manager of Marna House, Gaza's oldest hotel, dating back to 1946, estimated it would cost "\$60,000 to make a good tunnel, \$30,000 for a poor one and \$500,000 for one large enough to bring cars. But there is a limit. Too many cars will attract [Israeli] rockets." Petrol and diesel smuggled from Egypt are cheaper than in Israel. But construction materials brought in this way are too expensive for rebuilding homes and infrastructure damaged or destroyed during the war. On his gleaming wooden desk in his new office were two towel sets, one a ghastly green, the other a pleasant apricot colour. "Which do you like?" I pointed to the latter. "My choice, too." He told his major domo to order 100 sets. After a few minutes the man returned. "The towels," he said, "will come on Saturday" – through the tunnels, of course.

Basil is one of Gaza's unsinkable non-tunnel entrepreneurs. Even though the hotel has few guests, since January he has converted his old office into a third conference room and shifted his headquarters to the back of the original guest house. The two larger rooms, which accommodate 45 people, are reserved for most of the year. Conferences are a booming business. "Once we get cement at good prices," Basil added, "I plan to make a new building in the back and use the whole roof for a big conference centre for 200 to 500 persons."

As we toured the garden restaurant, the first customers of the day were drawing smoke through bubbling water-pipes, sipping coffee, and bending over computers logged on to Basil's wi-fi network. He has extended the heavy plastic roof over the entire garden, paved it and enclosed it with low walls and sliding aluminium windows, fencing beds with trees and floral plants. Roof panels on one side lift at the touch of a button to provide ventilation.

One of the major problems Marna House faces is electricity ("I pay \$2,000 per month," Basil said). Government power goes on and off because of Israel's disruption of the flow of EU-financed fuel and the shortage of spare parts for the overworked plant, forcing Basil to rely on a generator. He has recently "installed electronic switches so I don't have to throw switches all the time."

Hamas, which rules Gaza, provides two guards for every hotel but does not intervene in business. Basil's motto is maximise profits and re-invest, even though the owner of Marna House, Auntie Malika, lives in Beirut and cannot come to Gaza. "When the war finished, I continued my business," Basil told me. "I won't stop for any reason except if I don't have money or I die." But, he admits: "I have no hope." Few Gazans do. I met half a dozen young professionals at the fashionable Mazaj Cafe on Omar al-Mukhtar, Gaza City's main street. Over coffee and Kashmiri masala tea, they said they had no option but to struggle on. Zafer, a training entrepreneur, observed: "We have a cultural, economic, political and social crisis. A crisis in every sense of the word. People [world leaders] do not want to see it so they won't have to solve it." He joked that "in 2022, the Palestinian state will be established at Rafah", the tunnel town, perhaps the only piece of real estate to remain Palestinian by that time.

Michael Jansen