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Kuwait at 50

*Half a century
after independence,
Kuwait's bitter
experience with pan-
Arabism and ongoing
regional power plays
have affected
its growth*



War and Peace

Relations between the US and the Levant country have been as influential for the Middle East's stability as they have been problematical

The Human Condition

Once producing up to 70 percent of the country's water needs, Saudi Arabia's original model of addressing its water poverty is no longer sustainable

Candid Conversations

Sometimes controversy starts when one of Turki Al-Hamad's books or novels is banned, but it doesn't fade when a fatwa declares him an apostate



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Cover image © Getty Images



Editorial

On the occasion of Kuwait's 50th year of independence, Alex Vatanka, senior fellow at the Middle East Institute, brings to you a thorough analysis of internal Kuwaiti politics. He argues that despite fierce political disputes over the need for reform and the future direction of the country, Kuwait has experienced an unprecedented boom due to robust oil revenues and, more importantly, the downfall of Saddam Hussein. The question now is whether Kuwait is ready to move beyond its borders.

Just next door, in Saudi Arabia, Caryle Murphy explores the crisis of water in the kingdom. Ms. Murphy highlights the ever increasing need for water and looks at the government's revised water policies to meet these demands.

In "Hesitant They Stand," writer Christopher Phillips comments on the disappointing relationship between Syria and the US. After what seemed like a promising start with President Barack Obama, skepticism has returned to Syria, amidst increasing tension in the region.

We invite you to read these articles and many more on our website at Majalla.com/en. As always, we welcome and value our readers' feedback, and we invite you to leave your comments or contact us if you are interested in writing for our publication.

*Adel Al Toraiifi,
Editor-in-Chief*

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Brian Cloughley

Brian Cloughley served in the British and Australian armies and saw much of the Middle East and Asia in his 36 years in uniform. His tours of duty included appointments as deputy head of the UN Mission in Kashmir and Australian defence attaché in Pakistan. His first book, *A History of*

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Christopher Phillips

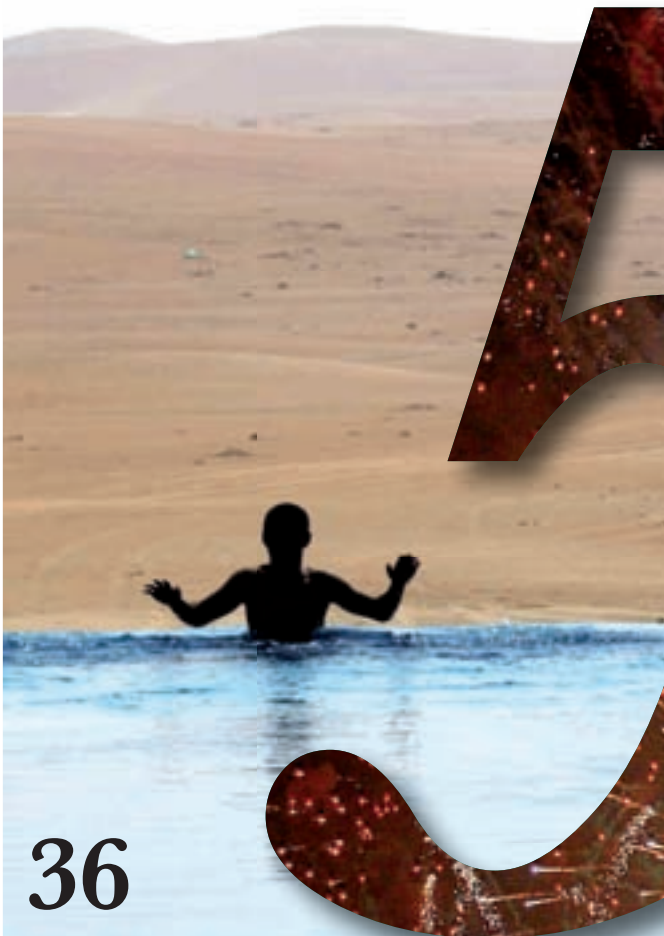
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The advertisement features a large, detailed image of a Cerruti 1881 watch with a black dial and a metal link bracelet. The watch is set against a dark background with a subtle reflection below it. The brand name 'CERRUTI 1881' is prominently displayed at the top in a white, serif font. At the bottom, there is a line of Arabic text and the brand's logo, which includes a stylized 'R' and the name 'alhomaidh'.





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Thanks to robust oil revenues, Kuwait has witnessed an unprecedented boom, albeit amidst raging internal disputes over the need for reform

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Quotes of the Month

Images © Getty Images

"If you [implement reform] just because of what happened in Tunisia and Egypt, then it is going to be a reaction, not an action and... you are going to fail."



Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, speaking to The Wall Street Journal about recent civil unrest in the Middle East

"We thank the Emir of Qatar for giving Al-Jazeera the green light to start this campaign, because it can't be the responsibility of [Al-Jazeera director general] Wadah Khanfar alone"

PLO executive committee member Yasser Abed Rabbo, reacting sarcastically to the release of leaked documents which suggest that, during failed negotiations, huge concessions were made to Israel.

"Our real fear is of a situation that could develop ... which has already developed in several countries including Iran itself—repressive regimes of radical Islam."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, voicing Israel's fears as its neighbor Egypt copes with mass protests.

"The awakening of the Islamic Egyptian people is an Islamic liberation movement and I, in the name of the Iranian government, salute the Egyptian people and the Tunisian people."



Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, with his take on recent events in the region.

"I am fed up. After 62 years in public service, I have had enough. I want to go. If I resign today, there will be chaos."



Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, facing down calls for him to resign.

"My aim is to form a government capable of bringing the Lebanese together. I am working to form a government acceptable to the Lebanese."



Lebanese Prime Minister-designate Najib Mikati is optimistic for the future.

"The goal is a national partnership in which all parties will participate. We respect everyone's right to representation."

Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrullah is equally careful not to stoke partisan feelings.

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THE MAJALLA

The Leading Arab Magazine



Hesitant They Stand

The Obama administration's ambivalent relationship with Syria

Established when Syria was still part of the Ottoman Empire, relations between the US and the Levant country have been as influential for the Middle East's stability as they have been problematical. After a historic low-point, which led the Bush administration to withdraw its ambassador from Damascus, hopes to reset the past and start over arose with the Obama administration. Yet, nearly two years on skepticism has returned to Syria, amidst increasing tension in the region.

Christopher Phillips

Like so many others, Syria welcomed Barack Obama's accession to the presidency in January 2009 as a chance to reset its relationship with the United States. The previous Bush administration had seen bilateral ties between the two states plunge to new depths, with Washington imposing sanctions, withdrawing its ambassador and American forces even raiding Syrian territory from Iraq. Obama's more positive approach was therefore greeted optimistically by President Bashar Al-Assad. Within a month of his inauguration, the 44th President appointed a new ambassador for Damascus and by June Middle East special envoy George Mitchell visited the Syrian capital, the highest-ranking US official for a decade. Against the backdrop of Obama's address in Cairo in the Summer of 2009, and his renewed drive for peace between Israelis and Palestinians, hopes were high for a genuine thaw between Washington and Damascus.

Yet nearly two years on skepticism has returned to Syria. The promised new era of US engagement increasingly looks like a false dawn. Regionally, a failure to make any real progress on Israeli-Palestinian negotiations has already lost the administration much credibility. Whilst Damascus welcomed Washington's tough stance on Israeli settlements, Obama's subsequent climb-down on the issue under pressure from pro-Israeli elements in Congress has raised questions over his ability to be an impartial mediator. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's recent refusal of a substantial arms package in exchange for a mere 90 day settlement freeze in an attempt to revive the peace talks has only served to humiliate the American President in Arab eyes.

In Syria Obama's declining credibility has been further undermined by his ambivalent relationship with Damascus. On the one hand, high level diplomats such as Mitchell, Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs Jeffery Feltman and Senator John Kerry have made regular visits to the Syrian capital, a significant departure from the diplomatic boycott initiated by George W. Bush. On the other hand, key figures in the administration including Feltman and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have been vocal at times in their criticism of Syria, most notably in accusing Damascus of arming Hezbollah.

Obama's domestic political concerns have complicated matters further. Pro-Israel politicians on Capitol Hill success-

Should Israel lose patience with international mediation efforts and attack Iran's nuclear facilities itself, another war between Tel Aviv and Iran's Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah, is a real possibility



Image © Getty Images

fully pressured the President to renew economic sanctions on the Ba'ath regime in May 2010. The same group also delayed the confirmation of Obama's new ambassador to Damascus, Robert Ford, following Tel Aviv's unsubstantiated claims that Syria had supplied Hezbollah with SCUD missiles. This deadlock was only broken in the Christmas 2010 recess, when the White House used a legal loophole to appoint Ford in a temporary position, a decision that could be overturned by the incoming Republican Congress within the year.

Yet as Washington's ambivalence to Syria has faltered along, Damascus has strengthened its bilateral ties elsewhere. Partly as a product of the near decade of Bush-led isolation, and partly due to President Assad finally finding his diplomatic touch, Syria is now in a strong international position despite American indecision. Assad has patched up his relations with the major Arab states, most notably Saudi Arabia, after they had fallen out over Lebanon in 2005. He has similarly forged an alliance with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, which has led to significant economic, political and military cooperation. The EU has ignored Washington's caution and, led by France, offered Syria a long-awaited European Neighborhood Policy Association Agreement. On top of this, after a decade of stagnation, the economic reforms of Assad's deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Dardari are finally taking effect and the Syrian economy has shown consistent growth of over 4 percent in the last 3



years. Syria has thus maneuvered itself into a position where poor relations with America no longer have the crippling effect they once did. Sanctions and diplomatic scorn continue to be a nuisance they would prefer to avoid, but Washington's leverage has been considerably undermined by its regional impotence on Israel-Palestine and Damascus' diplomatic and economic success elsewhere.

2011 thus begins with US-Syrian relations a little better than they had been under Bush, but certainly nowhere near the full reset that Damascus and some in the Obama administration had hoped for. Moreover, there is little to suggest that relations will improve markedly in the coming year. Tensions over Lebanon look likely to increase with the results of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL)—investigating the 2005 assassination of Rafik Hariri—pending. Whilst Syria is now expected to avoid being implicated, most anticipate the indictment of its close ally Hezbollah, prompting a political crisis in Beirut. With much of Damascus' recent rehabilitation within the international community resting on its perceived influence in stabilizing Lebanon, were its western neighbor to erupt into sectarian violence it is unlikely that Syria would stand by. This could once again provoke the wrath of Washington which has long protested Syria's meddling in Lebanon.

Similarly, the future of Iran's nuclear program and Israel's reaction to it could prove an area of potential US-Syria difference. Should Israel lose patience with international mediation efforts and attack Iran's nuclear facilities itself, another war between Tel Aviv and Iran's Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah, is a real possibility. Alternatively, the IDF may strike South Lebanon preemptively. Whilst a recent WikiLeaks document suggested that Damascus is reluctant to join any war with Iran against Israel, an Israeli strike on Hezbollah may draw in Syria against its will. Indeed, other cables released by WikiLeaks suggested that the IDF already had plans to bomb a Syrian arms depot in the event of war with Hezbollah, as a warning against future arms supplied by Damascus to the Shia militia.

Syrian-US relations in the coming year may therefore be determined by Washington's ability to influence its allies in Tel Aviv. Pro-Israel elements on Capitol Hill seem reluctant to allow Obama any Syria policy that is not tied to Israel and with the new Republican Congress determined to spoil White House policy, this trend looks set to continue. Much will thus rest on Obama's determination to reign in any Israeli designs on a renewed conflict with Hezbollah, or to make a new drive for peace on the Palestinian or even Syrian track. Whilst Syria has maneuvered itself into a position where it can cope without strong relations with the US, that won't prevent it from being reluctantly embroiled in a new conflict with Israel should one erupt. Once again, the emphasis is on President Obama to move things forward before they slide back into the abyss.

Christopher Phillips – London-based writer and analyst of Middle Eastern Affairs, with particular focus on Syria, Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Egypt. He has a PhD in international relations from the London School of Economics.

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Beyond Iran

North Korea's proliferation network in the Middle East

North Korea has become an important player in Middle Eastern security. The Asian country has created a proliferation network of nuclear materials and weapons of mass destruction extending beyond its well-known relationship with Iran. The impact of this network is a growing concern not only to various Middle Eastern countries, but also to American diplomats and troops in the region.

Ramon Pacheco Pardo



Following North Korea's recent attack on South Korea, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman asked how the world would be able to stop Iran if it cannot deal with the Asian country. This is not the first time that Lieberman has spoken out against North Korea. Last year he accused Kim Jong-il's regime of smuggling weapons to Hamas and Hezbollah. While the comparison between North Korea and Iran might be far-fetched, Lieberman is right when he says that proliferation from Pyongyang to the Middle East exists. In fact, North Korea has a well-honed nuclear technology and ballistic missiles proliferation network in the region. And even though Iran is its most well-known client, it is by no means the only one.



Syria is North Korea's second most important client in the Middle East after Iran. Israel's bombing in 2007 of the North Korean-designed Al-Kibar plutonium nuclear reactor in Northern Syria brought to light the close relationship between Pyongyang and Damascus. But far from halting cooperation between both, the bombing seems to have strengthened bilateral links. A report commissioned by the UN published last November accused North Korea of providing assistance in "the design and construction of a thermal reactor in Deir Al-Zour." The report also noted that a Syria-bound North Korean shipment of containers filled with working protective garments that could be used for chemical protection was seized by the South Korean authorities in October 2009. There can be little doubt that the Kim Jong-il regime is helping Bashar Al-Assad's government develop its nuclear programme, of which relatively little is known.

Aware of the strength of North Korea's proliferation network in the Middle East, some governments around the region are now more deeply involved in international efforts to disrupt Pyongyang's exports

Egypt is another big Middle Eastern client for North Korea. A recent report from the Congressional Research Service in the United States noted that Pyongyang has been providing Cairo with missile production technology for some years now. The relationship between both countries dates back to the late 1970s, when Egypt supplied North Korea with Scud B missiles in return for Pyongyang's support during the Yom Kippur war. Today it is North Korea transferring missiles to Egypt, which shows the sophistication of its weapons of mass destruction programmes. The American government has been wary of publicly criticizing the military links between a friendly regime in the Middle East and North Korea. Procurement of missiles is one of the few ways for Egypt to try to balance Iran's nuclear programme, thus serving American interests in the region.

Hezbollah is an important North Korean client in the Middle East as well—relations between the Lebanon-based organization and the Asian country date back to the 1980s. Today, Hezbollah receives arms and training in guerrilla warfare from North Korea. In December 2009, Thailand seized a North Korean plane carrying arms destined for the group. This only confirmed suspicions of the supply network going from Pyongyang to Lebanon. Equally relevant, Israel blamed its inability to defeat Hezbollah in their 2006 war on the guerrilla warfare training that the group's fighters received in North Korea, as well as on the tunnels constructed following the Asian country's specifications. This shows how close the relationship between the Kim Jong Il regime and non-state groups in the Middle East can be.

Aware of the strength of North Korea's proliferation network in the Middle East, some governments around the region are now more deeply involved in international efforts to disrupt Pyongyang's exports. In July 2009 the United Arab Emirates seized a military shipment destined for Iran. Countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have reportedly asked the United States to ensure that nuclear technology and weapons transfers from North Korea to the Middle East are kept to a minimum, since completely halting them

The Pyongyang Connection

In September 2007, in an affair shrouded in secrecy and cloaked by an almost impenetrable policy of silence emanating from all parties, Israel effected an audacious and potentially calamitous covert attack on a mysterious facility in the Syrian desert. Rumors still abound as to what exactly happened on the night of 6 September that year, but since then a reliable—if somewhat fantastic story—has emerged which points to North Korean assistance in a joint Iranian-Syrian nuclear weapons program, which was swiftly and unilaterally brought to a halt by an Israeli military act that was as clinical as it was controversial. According to investigative research undertaken by Der Spiegel, the Mossad (Israel's foreign intelligence agency) first became aware of potential North Korean support for Syrian weapons enhancement just as Bashar Al-Assad took the presidency in 2001. At that time intelligence suggesting that discussion of nuclear weapons was on the table was treated with incredulity. However, over the next few years a compelling dossier of information was compiled. American intelligence noted an unaccountable upturn in telephone communication between the provincial town of Al-Kibar, in the Syrian desert, and Pyongyang. A high-ranking Syrian government official was the victim of Hollywood-style espionage, as Mossad agents hacked his carelessly unattended laptop in a London hotel room—the computer yielded astonishing documents and images detailing the construction of a complex at Al-Kibar, with one image showing a leading North Korean nuclear expert

posing in the foreground. The defection from Iran of the former deputy defense minister subsequently furnished the CIA with a treasure trove of information, including the vague claim that Iran was funding a top-secret nuclear project in Syria with help from North Korea. This tale of cloak and dagger espionage culminates in a mind-boggling night mission in which Israeli helicopters flying at a low altitude crossed into Syria and snatched soil samples from the vicinity of Al-Kibar. The soil test results were not definitive, but Ehud Olmert, the then prime minister of Israel, had been keeping track of events and was of a mind to strike at the root of the problem. The absence of any conclusive proof of a potential nuclear threat on Israel's doorstep was outweighed by the growing circumstantial evidence, which now included reports of uranium materials being shipped from Pyongyang to the Syrian port town of Tartous.

In the very early morning of 6 September, seven F-15s fighter jets invaded Syrian airspace and swiftly destroyed the complex at Al-Kibar. What followed is remarkably revealing for how little has been said. Even now, Syria and Israel both remain uncharacteristically coy in their official versions of what happened that night. For Syria, it is a face-saving tactic, and Israel doubtless does not wish to be held accountable for what was essentially an unlawful invasion. In this case it is in everyone's best interests to keep quiet and pretend that nothing ever happened, but the incident gives a chilling insight into what may happen if another nuclear threat becomes a reality in the Middle East, when a similar act of war might be met with fierce reprisals, rather than meek denials.

is considered unfeasible. North Korea's nuclear programme is today as much a concern among American friends in the Middle East as it is among its allies in East Asia.

There are two major obstacles for those who seek to weaken North Korea's proliferation network in the Middle East. The first and most important one is money. Cash-strapped North Korea, suffering from dwindling trade with its two major trading partners China and South Korea, is seeking to diversify its economy. Nuclear technology and weapons of mass destruction are the two only products in which it can compete on a global scale. The Middle East, home to cash-rich countries engaged in a decades-long arms race, is the perfect market for Pyongyang. American pressure on its allies for them not to sell weapons or nuclear materials to certain countries in the region means that the list of possible suppliers is short. Pyongyang is at the top of it, given the advanced stage of its nuclear weapons programme and its proven willingness to transfer production technologies and finished products. As proliferation continues the network strengthens, thus making North Korea an even more attractive supplier.

In addition, the Kim Jong-il government knows that proliferation of nuclear technology and weapons of mass destruction is one of the few remaining cards it can play, when it comes to relations with the United States. Despite recent tensions in the Korean Peninsula, most analysts agree that North Korea is unlikely

to start a full-scale war that would ultimately result in its defeat. Therefore, relations between Pyongyang and Washington under the Barack Obama administration now follow a familiar pattern whereby any North Korean action perceived as a provocation leads to American condemnation but little else. Proliferation to the Middle East could serve as a way to break this pattern and make Washington join Pyongyang in the negotiation table, which the Kim Jong-il regime seeks to achieve. As former US National Security Council director of Asian affairs Victor D. Cha puts it, "every North Korean provocation has been followed, sooner or later, by talks." Proliferation is one such provocation. The United States would probably be ready to offer some carrots to North Korea in exchange for halting nuclear and missile transfers to Iran, Syria and Hezbollah. The right economic and diplomatic incentives would possibly make North Korea accept and end its proliferation network in the Middle East. Dialogue rather than sanctions are the best means to halt North Korean proliferation.

Ramon Pacheco Pardo – An expert on counterproliferation, Mr. Pardo is a lecturer at King's College, London. His forthcoming book on North Korea's foreign policy is enticingly titled, "From the Axis of Evil" to "Dear Mr. Chairman": How North Korea Bargains with the United States.

This article was published in The Majalla 10 January 2011

What's a Little Friendly Competition?

The state of Sino-American military relations

After a tense year of Sino-American relations, two meetings in January have set the stage for further cooperation between the rival powers. Whether military-to-military cooperation will be fruitful, however, remains to be seen as an arms race between the two countries grows increasingly likely.

Iason Athanasiadis

2010 was not a good year for Sino-American relations. The two countries experienced significant setbacks after the United States sanctioned arms sales to Taiwan, and China responded by breaking military-to-military relations. President Obama's meeting with the Dalai Lama did little to quell Chinese resentment.

But China was not the only one with grievances. China's relationships with neighbors in the Pacific have threatened American interests significantly, most notably with their recent reluctance to condemn North Korea's sinking of a South Korean corvette, and the shelling of one of their islands.

After a year of increasingly deteriorating relations, two important state visits marked the beginning of 2011. First came Defense Secretary Robert Gates' trip to China, then later, Hu Jintao visited the United States. As predicted by analysts, great diplomatic strides were not made during these visits, but they were at least an opportunity to start 2011 on the right track for cooperation between the two rivals.

While Hu Jintao's visit to the United States went relatively smoothly, little progress was made over the polemic question of what to do about North Korea. More controversial, however, were the circumstances that surrounded Robert Gates' visit earlier in the month, particularly for the implications they had on the prospects of military-to-military cooperation and for the possibility of a future arms race between China and the US.

Gates has hoped that a system of regular contact between the US and Chinese military officials will "increase transparency, reduce suspicion, and ease the pressure that would otherwise push for greater military preparation on both sides," reported *Foreign Policy* magazine. While Gates' trip to China may have been put in place to further cement a bilateral military relationship, the Chinese military's decision to test a stealth fighter jet prior to Gates' arrival suggests that China saw instead an opportunity to flex their military muscle.

The stealth fighter is by no means the only avenue they have been pursuing to balance out US military presence in the Pacific. In addition to the J-20 stealth jet, China is also refitting a Ukrainian aircraft carrier, which according to the *Associated Press* is the country's first power-projecting ship of this magnitude. Likewise, in a 2009 report, the Pentagon claimed China could launch several carriers by 2020, construction for which is reportedly already underway. In addition to these carriers,

China's nuclear deterrent was redeployed in 2008 onto mobile launchers and submarines, and their 60-boat submarine fleet is being refurbished with "super super-quiet nuclear-powered vessels and a second generation of ballistic-missile-equipped subs" added the *Associated Press's* coverage of Gate's trip to China. Moreover, the anti-ship ballistic missiles, or "carrier-killer," able to strike the carriers that cement American presence in the region are approaching deployment.

In addition to the J-20 stealth jet, China is also refitting a Ukrainian aircraft carrier, which according to the Associated Press is the country's first power-projecting ship of this magnitude

Chinese military stock-piling has not gone unnoticed by the United States, but has on the contrary been met with a combination of concern and dismissal. On the one hand, American military officials have been quick to point out the decades that stand between American military technology and that of China's, not to mention the distinctions between developing military technology and having the battle tested capability to use that technology efficiently. On the other hand, these same officials no longer assume that China is willing to be outdone militarily in its sphere of influence, but rather they expect China to aim for the capacity to counter American presence there.

The United States has become increasingly used to the idea that other rival powers will seek to protect their interests through military developments. Nevertheless, the infamous security dilemma so often associated to arms accumulation is lingering, and questions regarding China's intended use of these resources are under the surface. Taiwan is no doubt a major motive for China's intention to develop offensive weapons. Yet American commitment to protecting Taiwan, and containing North Korea, has necessitated a response to China's military build up.

A Nascent Arms Race in South-East Asia

Data released last year by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) suggests that international arms transfers throw light on growing areas of tension around the world. Of particular concern is the increase in trade of conventional major weapons in South-East Asia and the Pacific region, suggesting a bona-fide arms race is on the cards.

- In the past five years, 41 percent of global imports of major conventional weapons went to Asia and Oceania, an increase in volume of 11 percent from the previous four years.
- Of the 10 largest importers, five are from Asian states: China, India and South Korea occupy the top three spots, with new entries Singapore and Pakistan at seventh and tenth respectively.
- Deliveries to South-East Asia practically doubled between 2004 and 2009, with Malaysian imports going up 722 percent.
- Almost 40 percent of all weapons exports from the leading exporter, the US, went to Asia and Oceania.

(Source: SIPRI)

I've watched this sort of cyclical view of American decline come around two or three times, perhaps most dramatically in the latter half of the 1970s...

Defense Secretary Robert Gates explained that the Pentagon is stepping up investments in a range of weapons, jet fighters and technology in response to the Chinese military buildup in the Pacific, even in spite of billions of dollars in proposed Pentagon budget cuts that had been recently announced by Gates himself earlier that week. *The New York Times* reported that these investments included “a new long-range nuclear-capable bomber aircraft, which the Pentagon had stopped developing in 2009, as well as a new generation of electronic jammers for the Navy that are designed to thwart a missile from finding and hitting a target,” as well as continued investment in the Joint Strike Fighter, “the Pentagon’s newest radar-evading fighter jet.”

Despite these military countermeasures, Gates’ trip to China did not end on an entirely antagonistic note. Rather his intention to continue to build on military-to-military cooperation, partly to avoid an arms race from manifesting, led to promises of more talks between the countries’ defense officials.



However, another setback in this relationship was brought to light by the test flight of the stealth jet, which is creating concern around the Chinese government’s lack of influence over their military. Indeed, the Chinese President’s authority over various issues has been questioned in the past, including his influence on the exchange rate policy, its trade barriers and its influence over North Korea, explained *Foreign Policy*’s Robert Haddick. More alarmingly perhaps for the United States, is evidence that Hu Jintao—who heads the Central Military Commission, and is one of two civilians in China’s military bureaucracy—is not consulted on the daily activities of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).

In fact, the *New York Times* cited officials who speculated that the test flight of the stealth jet was meant “as an act of defiance against Mr. Hu, who has ordered the Chinese military to try to smooth over years of rocky relations with



Image © Getty Images

the Pentagon.” These are not the first allegations that Chinese generals take a maverick approach to diplomacy with the United States. In 1995 and 2005, they made threats of nuclear attacks against the US, and in 2001 when a US patrol plane made an emergency landing after colliding with a Chinese fighter, the military did not cooperate with civilian control.

While this may be a result of the Chinese military’s bureaucratic independence, it may create significant problems in calculating how to deal with China, particularly if the government seems willing to cooperate diplomatically but its military refuses to follow through on these promises.

Disconcerting as this prospect may be for the US, having the military function as a wild card may be in China’s advantage since the ends they are looking to meet correspond to those of the civilian leadership, or so argues China scholar Andrew Scobell. “China’s leaders may hope that their calcu-

lated ambiguity will deter a US response during a crisis. But if this gambit fails, such a crisis might end up messier than it would need to be,” adds FP’s Haddick.

Calculations of this sort, for better or worse, drive military decisions. American leaders however have sent a clear message to China, who they believe are making hasty assumptions about an American decline.

To them Defense Secretary Gates has been pithy in summing up what he believes comes from these miscalculations: “I’ve watched this sort of cyclical view of American decline come around two or three times, perhaps most dramatically in the latter half of the 1970s...And my general line for those both at home and around the world who think the US is in decline is that history’s dustbins are filled with countries that underestimated the resilience of the United States.”

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More Sweet Than Sour

Washington and New Delhi are inching closer to better ties

America and India will continue to have diplomatic ups and downs, but both countries consider that accommodation is better than confrontation. While Pakistan and Afghanistan are important regionally and internationally, neither Washington nor New Delhi wishes disruption of US-Indian ties because of Islamabad or Kabul. The Obama administration will continue to defer to India's imperatives.

Brian Cloughley

After President Jimmy Carter visited India in 1978, the village of Daulatpur, in the State of Haryana, was renamed Carterpuri. His mother had been based there as a Peace Corps volunteer, and his visit – and gift consisting of a television set – were appreciated. What was not welcomed by the Indian government was Carter's open-microphone slip, perhaps intentionally, that India should be handed "a cold and blunt message" about its nuclear weapons' program.

Today, America's presidents cannot visit foreign villages for security reasons. During his November visit, President Barak Obama's contacts with the residents of Kanpura, Rajasthan, were confined to a six-minute video conference, after which there was little chance of the place being renamed Obamapuri.

In 1951, the US voted in favor of UNSC Resolution 91, which stated that the "final disposition of the State of Jammu and Kashmir will be made in accordance with the will of the people, expressed through the democratic method of a free and impartial plebiscite"

It was also unlikely that Obama would either deliver a critical message about India's nuclear weapons or make observations that might disturb bilateral relations—Kashmir and India's involvement in Afghanistan were two topics left off the agenda during talks between the American president and India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

Image © Getty Images





How Subrahmanyam and India have changed

By Constantino Xavier

K. Subrahmanyam, India's most respected strategic thinker, died on 2 February at the age of 82. He personified the dramatic changes India underwent in the last decades, from a non-aligned country on the periphery of Soviet influence, to a liberal and emerging market economy that now is a strategic partner of the United States.

During the Cold War, he derided international critics of India's nuclear program (which he advocated fiercely for) as "disarmament ayatollahs," and many in Washington saw him as Delhi's quintessential anti-American.

However, after 1991, Subrahmanyam adapted swiftly to the new realities of a unipolar world and a rising China. Unlike many of his younger colleagues, he extended his support the US-India civil nuclear cooperation deal and an overall rapprochement.

Some explain this realignment with a quasi-biological narrative in which India supposedly "grew up" by gradually shedding its dreamy Third World ideals and becoming a "pragmatic" and "mature" great power. This is not only ethnocentrically preposterous, but also ignorant of India's long Realpolitik tradition.

K. Subrahmanyam, who some called India's Kissinger, is perhaps himself the best embodiment of this astute Indian capacity to survive and adapt to sudden changes in the strategic environment.

From a subcontinental perspective, the cozy relations India now enjoys with the United States are therefore the natural culmination of a strategic reorientation fuelled by three main drivers.

First, the realization that China, more than an immediate security threat, represents a formidable competitor in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, thus forcing Delhi to seek Washington's support to balance Beijing and preserve the current Asian security order.

Second, there is the unprecedented intensification of economic relations, with total trade increasing by 30 percent in 2010 and now close to crossing the \$50 billion mark. Foreign investment, outsourcing and nuclear reactors—that's the new agenda.

Finally, more than just a shared commitment to democracy and pluralism, bilateral relations are now marked by the impressive Indian diaspora lobby in Washington, and Indians as the largest number of foreign students in the US. On the other hand, an unprecedented number of Americans now visit India for tourism, medical treatment or cultural exchanges.

During his election campaign in 2008, Obama told *Time* magazine that the situation in Kashmir was “a potential tar pit diplomatically,” and that his administration would be “working with Pakistan and India to try to resolve [the Kashmir] crisis in a serious way.” Predictably, his pronouncement was met with strong—yet unofficial—objections in India.

But on the eve of his India visit, Obama had not taken any action to solve the Kashmir problem, as promised. Instead, Under Secretary of State William Burns said that America views Kashmir as an internal Indian issue, a statement that was well received in New Delhi, but not in Islamabad.

America’s stance on Kashmir reflects its approach to India. Spurred by lucrative commercial ties, and engaging powers that are distrustful of China, Washington has avoided offending New Delhi.

The US stance on Kashmir, however, has not always been so detached. In 1951, the US voted in favor of UNSC Resolution 91, which stated that the “final disposition of the State of Jammu and Kashmir will be made in accordance with the will of the people, expressed through the democratic method of a free and impartial plebiscite,” conducted under the auspices of the UN.

In 1993, Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs Robin Raphael said that his country did not “recognize the legal validity of Kashmir’s accession as meaning that Kashmir is forever an integral part of India”

In 1993, Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs Robin Raphael said that his country did not “recognize the legal validity of Kashmir’s accession as meaning that Kashmir is forever an integral part of India”. He argued that the “people of Kashmir have got to be consulted in any kind of final settlement of the Kashmir dispute.” Raphael’s comments provoked criticism in India.

In December, leaked US diplomatic cables showed US Ambassador to Pakistan Anne Patterson arguing, in February 2009, that the resolution of the Kashmir problem would “dramatically improve the situation” in the subcontinent. Her advice was not heeded. Obama made it clear that, in spite of the fact that Kashmir remains on the Security Council’s agenda, there would be no attempt to help solve the problem.

Part of Washington’s reluctance to uncork the Kashmir bottle is tied to a belief that Pakistan supports terrorism across its eastern border. Those responsible for the killing spree in Mumbai in 2008 came from Pakistan. Allegations that they were officially sponsored by Pakistan, a firm belief in India, have yet to be substantiated.

Terrorism was high on Obama’s agenda while in India. His decision to stay in the Taj Mahal Hotel, badly damaged in the 2008 assault, conveyed a message of sorts. In Parliament, Obama received applause during his address when he said

that America “will continue to insist to Pakistan’s leaders that terrorist safe havens within their borders are unacceptable,” and that “terrorists behind the Mumbai attacks must be brought to justice.”

Singling out Pakistan caused dismay in Islamabad. This was followed by a Singh statement – on November 21—that India was “willing to discuss all outstanding issues, provided the terror machine [in Pakistan] is brought under control.”

On Afghanistan, Singh said that he was “not sure whether the US and Pakistan have the same objectives. Pakistan would like Afghanistan to be under its control. And they would like the United States to get out soon.” Singh added: “We would like to do more for the construction and development of Afghanistan, and [we] believe we can do it more effectively than any other aid donors.” Singh was echoing the sentiment of General David Petraeus, the top US commander in Afghanistan, who said in July that India, “without question,” has legitimate interests in Afghanistan.

Pakistan, for its part, has major reservations about India’s influence in Afghanistan. Although the official Islamabad line on the US-India cooperation has been that “Pakistan hopes the US will take a moral view, and not base itself on any temporary expediency or exigencies of power politics,” there is evident souring of Washington-Islamabad relations caused by the Afghan conflict, and especially by what Pakistan views as US-endorsed Indian meddling.

Meanwhile, the US regards Pakistan’s stance on Afghanistan as realistic, given its geographic proximity. Yet America does not want to appear to be working contrary to India’s strategic policies, which include an uncompromising rejection of international involvement in regional affairs such as Kashmir.

In September, Minister of External Affairs SM Krishna said that India “consistently rejected the whole idea” of assistance from third parties to help resolve the Kashmir dispute. But, as observed by Finland’s Foreign Minister, in May, “if a bilateral solution has not been found in 60 years, then perhaps other avenues for a solution should be found.”

It appears that the Obama administration will continue molding its approach to India according to New Delhi’s priorities. Immediate bilateral economic imperatives are likely to trump long-term “avenues for a solution” in Kashmir. And although Washington will try to accommodate Pakistan’s interests in Afghanistan, if only because it would be most unwise to do otherwise, the US will not discourage Indian influence there. New Delhi’s involvement in Afghanistan will continue growing, to the frustration of Islamabad.

America and India will continue to have diplomatic ups and downs, but both countries consider that accommodation is better than confrontation. While Pakistan and Afghanistan are important regionally and internationally, neither Washington nor New Delhi wishes disruption of US-Indian ties because of Islamabad or Kabul. The Obama administration will continue to defer to India’s imperatives.

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Remnant of the Cold War

Why the US embargo against Cuba should belong to history, and why it doesn't

Two decades after the end of the Cold War, the US trade embargo against Cuba still stands, and it is unlikely to be lifted anytime soon, especially since the results of the recent mid-term elections. Meanwhile, in an apparent embrace of the Chinese model, important developments on the economic front are taking place in Cuba. As US strategic interests clash with domestic politics, other countries are already stepping in to seize the opportunity.

Manuel Almeida

Before imposing the US trade embargo against Cuba, President J.F. Kennedy reportedly had an aide round up a supply of his favorite Cuban cigars. Five decades later, and 20 years after the end of the Cold War, the blockade—“el Bloqueo”—still stands, and the famous cigars are one of the very few sources of revenue for a regime that has already recognized the failure of its economic model.

Long gone are the days when the Cubans invested their hopes in the revolution. One of the most important events of the 1959 revolt was the assault of the Presidential Palace in Havana, a violent episode of which the bullet holes are still visible in the atrium. In one of the rooms of what has become the Museum of the Revolution, the final lines of a Directorio Revolucionario engraved in an old bronze plaque read as follows: “So that in Cuba injustice and oppression never rule again.” Today, injustice and oppression, the very issues that the revolution claimed to fight against, are every-day realities for the majority of Cubans.

From a hard place to a rock

While the current plight of the Cubans is a familiar picture, the older but no more pleasant story of life in Cuba before the revolution has faded over time. Violence and endemic corruption, abetted by the island nation’s dictator Fulgencio Batista, characterized the years from independence to the revolution. A Cuban military man, Batista held power through a series of puppet presidents until holding the presidency himself in 1940. He retired four years later, only to return to power through a military coup in 1952.

During this time Cuba was a paradise for the American mafia, and the capital Havana was known as the Las Vegas of Central America. Violence, easy money, casinos and prostitution were as commonplace then as poverty and inequity are in Cuba today. Cuban officials made fortunes by turning bribery and racketeering into prosperous businesses. Consequentially, while Cuba had a very high income per capita by Latin American standards, a 1950 World Bank report declared as many as 60 percent of Cubans undernourished.

Not surprisingly, the Cuban revolution was widely embraced and Fidel Castro celebrated when his rebel forces captured Havana in 1959. He would wield absolute power without interruption until 2006, when his health started to deteriorate.

During these five decades, the regime largely failed to provide for the Cubans, who saw a corrupt, violent oligarchy being replaced by a decadent, repressive communist regime.

Due to his health problems, Fidel eventually relinquished power to his brother Raul, a career military officer. Hopes that Raul’s accession would be followed by economic reform and a more open political culture were briefly upheld by Raul’s decision to privatize some land and to allow Cubans to use mobile phones.

While Cuba had a very high income per capita by Latin American standards, a 1950 World Bank report declared as many as 60 percent of Cubans undernourished

These hopes have gradually eroded and most Cubans concede that not much has changed. As a student at Havana University puts it, “things with Raul actually got worse, because he has a stronger military mentality, so control got tighter. We now say that we Cubans are 10 million people, 5 million normal citizens, whereas the other 5 million are policemen.” A taxi driver laments the exodus of the country’s white collar professionals and anyone else with the resources to leave: “Everyone I know would leave if given the opportunity,” he says. “We have good doctors for free, and we live in a very safe place, but that is about it.” Yet even the security that the taxi driver alludes to exists only for those who dare not speak their minds.

A China-style opening and the US embargo

In a recent interview with Fidel, Jeffrey Goldberg, the correspondent of the American current affairs magazine *The Atlantic*, asked the former president if he thought the Cuban model was something worth exporting, to which Fidel replied: “The Cuban model doesn't even work for us anymore.” Indeed, the most powerful reason to be hopeful about Cuba’s future is the regime’s frank assessment of the failure of its own economic model.

Late last year, Raul announced the government would reduce the country’s bloated public payrolls by 15 percent. In order to allow the private sector to come in and occupy, to some

Medical Diplomacy

For some, the term “doctors for oil” conjures images of a corrupt Cuban government taking advantage of its population, by exporting much needed medical services to oil-rich countries in exchange for commodities, which are often then sold on for a profit. For others, the term has connotations that are far from exploitative, but denotes a vaunted diplomatic policy which raises the stature of Cuba across the globe.

Since 2003, with the establishment of the Barrio Adentro program in Venezuela, Cuba has sent thousands of doctors to the South American country as part of trade agreements that see Venezuelan oil going in the opposite direction. The Cuban doctors administer to deprived communities in Venezuela at a cut-price rate, they go to areas that local medics would not dare and care for people with no other recourse to medical services. In this way, Cuba helps to address important Venezuelan social problems, but the flipside is that those very problems are then drawn into the spotlight. For Cuba, the chief gain comes with the economic benefits that effectively keep the Cuban economy above water—in 2006 it is estimated that Cuba earned over \$200 million by supplying medical services abroad, mainly to Venezuela. Of course the inevitable concern is that if the doctors are being sent abroad, then who is seeing to the needs of Cubans? There is an increased dissatisfaction at a shortage of medical personnel available to Cuban communities, despite the fact that Cuba has an astonishing ratio of more than one doctor for every hundred citizens.

This so-called medical diplomacy is nothing new for Cuba. Immediately after the revolution, half a

century ago, the government began sending medical aid abroad. This was due to obvious humanitarian motives, but also to try and win international favor in a hostile arena. Thanks mainly to pouring resources into the medical field, Cuba was able to offset the number of doctors that fled the country as a result of the revolution, and ultimately build a health system admired the world over. Placing huge emphasis on the health of the nation, the revolutionary government takes pride in its achievements also seeks to pay a debt to nations which supported the revolution. The fact that Cuba is today able to send so many thousands of doctors abroad—to Venezuela, as well as every significant disaster relief effort around the world—is testament to the quality of Cuba’s healthcare, and does much to curry international support. Indeed, an offer to send a specialist team to help with the relief efforts after Hurricane Katrina was politely declined by the US government, but it speaks volumes that the smaller nation was in a position to offer help to its neighbor—bearing in mind the prevailing economic blockade.

It is right to question how long such a policy will last. In the case of doctors for oil, the escalating international price of oil may see Venezuela adjust its terms when current agreements are re-negotiated. Continued aid to foreign communities may draw too much attention to the host country’s social problems, as well as placing an extra burden on Cuban society. Finally, defection plays a part in this story: While Cuban doctors earn more abroad than they do at home, the rate is far below what they could hope to earn in, for example, America.

extent, the role of the state as job provider, Raul also encouraged foreigners to invest in the country’s property markets and buy small businesses. Political reform, however, is apparently not on the table. Indeed, coupled with this cautious, progressive economic liberalization is an implacable effort by the regime to prevent the rise of any political freedoms, in what appears to be an embrace of the Chinese model. The question is how the regime will manage the transition, while avoiding the fate of its former patron, the Soviet Union.

Persuading Washington to lift its economic embargo is a critical step. As a Cuban working in the tourism industry and earning 20 dollars per month puts it, “the end of the US embargo would change everything for us, but I think this will only happen in my daughter’s generation. This is an old, irrational, visceral hate, from both sides, and those who suffer the consequences are the Cuban people.” He went on to say that “what we learn in school that the US is evil and all that, most of us don’t buy it, we know it is simply regime propaganda.”

The idea that the US embargo still stands because the Cuban regime is an enemy of human rights simply does not hold any credibility, particularly when considering the realpolitik way in which Washington engages with repressive regimes like Egypt, Yemen, or China, to name just a few. Like most economic embargos, US sanctions are borne largely by the Cuban working

class, which holds no animosity towards the US, while a handful of Cuban ministers and generals drive around Havana in modern cars and live in fancy mansions.

What is the national interest?

There are numerous reasons for the US to lift the embargo and engage with Cuba. Throughout Latin America and much of Asia, economic liberalization has brought with it the seeds of political liberalization, even if at a very slow pace. What is more, if US companies don’t answer the regime’s call for private investors, other powers will be delighted to seize the opportunity. When asked if China could be that power, a Cuban immigrant to the US replies “I do not know. Cuban external debts with China are very high ... I see that Venezuela is conquering Cuban economic space, just like the Soviet Union before.”

Another powerful reason for the US to change its policy towards Cuba lies in Cuba’s potentially huge energy reserves in the Gulf of Mexico. Described by *The Economist* as “the other way out,” in 2011 Cuba expects to see several exploratory drillings going ahead, all by non-US companies—Spain’s Repsol; Norway’s Statoil; India’s Oil and Natural Gas Corporation; Russia’s Gazprom; Venezuela’s PDVSA. And the list is likely to increase, with countries such as China, Vietnam and Angola already in negotiations.



Image © Getty Images

The embargo also constitutes a powerful tool for the Castro regime to blame its disastrous economic policies on US sanctions. Lifting it would leave one less excuse for the regime.

This is where US economic, strategic, and foreign policy interests collide with domestic politics. Of all the ethnic lobbies that influence the formulation of US foreign policy, the Cuban lobby, particularly the Cuban American National Foundation, is considered as the second most powerful after the Israeli lobby. Concentrated largely in Florida and New Jersey, it strongly opposes the Castro regime and has worked assiduously with the US Congress, especially lawmakers from the conservative Republican Party, to preserve the embargo.

Yet, this lobby is not as homogenous as one might expect. There seems to be a generational divide between the older Cuban exiles who wish to return to Cuba and strongly support the efforts to isolate the Castro's regime, and the younger Cuban-Americans, born in the US, who see the older generation's position as too radical.

It is becoming increasingly hard to make sense of the US trade embargo. But with an economic crisis and two wars to wage, the last thing the Obama Administration wants is a confrontation with Congress over Cuba, particularly after the Republicans' strong performance in November's mid-term elections.

There seems to be a generational divide between the older Cuban exiles who wish to return to Cuba and strongly support the efforts to isolate the Castro's regime, and the younger Cuban-Americans, born in the US, who see the older generation's position as too radical

“The nation which indulges toward another an habitual hatred or an habitual fondness is in some degree a slave. It is a slave to its animosity or to its affection, either of which is sufficient to lead it astray from its duty and its interest.” These were the words of George Washington in his September 1796 farewell address, which shed light on the contradiction that is el Bloqueo.

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A Bloody Plan

Clashes between Rabat and Sahrawis redefined talks

Morocco's November assault on the Saharan refugee camp known as Gadaym Izik marked a new phase in the US and EU policies toward Morocco. As the conflict in the Western Sahara moves to the forefront of Morocco's priorities, international opinion has become more critical of Rabat than ever. As a result, a different set of factors has become the foundation upon which new rules of political and diplomatic engagement are being initiated.

Daniel F. Rivera



Image © Getty Images

Until clashes at the Saharan refugee camp near Al-Ayoun in November, Morocco's conflict with residents of the Western Sahara, known as Sahrawis and represented by the Polisario Front, had been a mostly domestic affair. By maintaining an upper hand over the inhabitants of the area, Rabat had generally managed to contain the spread of news from the area that could potentially damage Morocco's image. The Moroccan government fully controls access to the Sahara—disputed territory since Spain withdrew in 1975—often preventing journalists and representatives of international organizations from entering the area.

The clashes, which had started at the Gadaym Izik refugee camp, proved to be a turning point in the history of the conflict between Morocco and the Sahrawis. What was a peaceful demonstration against the high rate of unemployment and lack of social services escalated into full-scale clashes between Moroccan security forces and camp residents that lasted several days, resulting in the death of 10 Moroccan policemen and two Sahrawis, in addition to the arrest of 163 people.

Although Morocco promised to conduct an investigation into the incident, both the Polisario Front and the EU—in a significant policy shift—recommended an independent investigation. Meanwhile, the Moroccan government assured the international community that it had presumably taken every precaution to minimize casualties during the raid, and that they did not use live rounds. Instead, the authorities blamed Sahrawi paramilitary elements allegedly linked to the Polisario Front and the Algerian government of “hijacking” the demonstration and turning it into a political rally.

Despite the many troubles the Sahrawis face, they do enjoy support among key players in the region, including Spain and Algeria. For years now, Algeria has shown unwavering support for the Polisario Front and the Sahwari right to self-determination. Currently, more than 160 thousand Sahrawis live in the Tindouf refugee camp, located at the Algerian-Saharan border, and considered by many to be the heart of a future Saharan state. As a leading world producer of natural gas and oil, Algeria needs to build a pipeline from the Western Sahara coast

directly to Spain in order to sell oil and gas to Europe and the US without Moroccan interference (an Algerian-owned pipeline crossing Morocco into Spain is in use at the moment, but the Algerian government has complained that Morocco is stealing from them).

The Sahrawis, for their part, have had a trying relationship with the US and the EU, particularly since 9/11, because several governments were able to use “the war on terror” as an excuse to win political and financial support from the West at the expense of Western Sahara.

Since its launch, the war on terror has superseded human rights issues in importance. And this, in turn, enabled Morocco to voice concerns over a presumably growing Islamist threat in the Sahara desert. Rabat also presented itself as an essential partner in the war on terror in the region, thus further strengthening Moroccan-US-EU relations. The West, therefore, lent its full support to Morocco’s Autonomy Plan for the Western Sahara, while accepting Rabat’s tight control over the territory.

Prior to the clashes at Gadaym Izik, Morocco’s plan continued to enjoy support among several countries, including permanent members of the UN Security Council such as the US and France, as well as other Arab and Latin American countries. However, after November, leading voices in these countries condemned the event and alluded to repercussions in their ties with Rabat at the political and economic levels.

Joining these voices were members of the political and business communities, who, due to Morocco’s poor human rights record, in addition to rampant corruption, are finding it increasingly difficult to engage with the country. In a recent WikiLeaks cable, one businessman commented: “While corrupt practices existed during the reign of King Hassan II... they have become much more institutionalized with King Mohammed VI.”

Soon after the incidents at Gadaym Izik and the street battle at Al-Ayoun, the EU commissioner for Fisheries, Maria Damanaki, demanded proof from the Moroccan Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries Aziz Akhannouch that the Sahrawis were benefiting from the EU fishing concessions granted to Morocco—an agreement due to expire in three months. Because Akhannouch has yet to provide such proof, the commissioner is currently exploring other options, such as restricting EU sailing in Moroccan waters and demarcation to give the Sahrawis access.

As for the Sahrawis, though the clashes at Gadaym Izik have boosted global support for their self-determination, they have also cast a shadow over future negotiations with their Moroccan counterparts. The most recent negotiations at the UN in New York, where they were to discuss the autonomy plan, ended without progress. Today, both parties are preparing for what might prove to be a tough round of negotiations in March 2011.

Even though Morocco has so far prevented international investigation into the incident at Gadaym Izik, the kingdom’s prestige, image and credibility are on the line. Morocco needs to make a move and show progress in negotiations, otherwise Rabat might lose more than economic agreements, licenses and concessions.

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Caught in the Middle

The Sahrawis, inhabitants of the disputed territory of the Western Sahara, are the pawns in a 17-year-long power struggle between North African neighbors Morocco and Algeria. A source of much hostility between the two countries was an attack on a hotel in Marrakech, which the Moroccan government believed Algeria to have been involved in. As a security measure, the Moroccan king introduced visas for Algerians, and immediately expelled thousands of Algerian tourists and residents. In 1994, Algeria responded with the closing of its border with Morocco. Still closed today, the progressing rivalry between the two countries has only made matters worse for the Sahrawis.

The Sahrawi Polisario Front, formed in 1973 to fight for independence from Spain, took up arms against a new enemy—Morocco—when Spain released the territory to Morocco and Mauritania in 1976 under severe pressure from the former. Despite recognition of Sahrawi self-determination by the International Court of Justice in 1975, the Polisario Front has made little progress in negotiations with the Moroccan government. In fact, the situation has only worsened.

Determined to claim the disputed territory for its large phosphate reserves and lucrative fishing industry, the Moroccan government has settled the western half of the area with its own population, injected resources into the economy there, and built a 1,500 mile wall to seal it all off. Compounding the dispute is the fact that the Polisario Front is entirely dependent upon Algeria for political and financial support. If the Sahrawis are ever granted independence, the likelihood that they would end up a satellite state of their benefactor is high, hence the reason behind Morocco’s autonomy plan for the Sahrawis rather than one for full independence.

(Source: “The Economist” and BBC)

Independence and Conflict



Since its independence from Britain in 1961, Kuwait's evolution as an oil-rich nation-state—in one of the world's most troubled regions—has been marked by rapid development, which has largely been interrupted only by the actions of its neighbors, such as the August 1990 Iraqi invasion, and the subsequent seven-month occupation.

In the decades leading up to the invasion, Kuwait was experiencing a boom in oil-money revenue, which caused a bonanza in infrastructure growth. This attracted highly skilled laborers and businesspeople from all over the region, including a young Palestinian engineer called Mohammed Qudwa, otherwise known as Yasser Arafat. After having made a name for himself and his small organization, Fateh, Arafat emerged as the undisputed leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) starting in the late 1960s until his death in 2004.

Using their connections in Kuwait, Arafat and his associates—many of whom had also lived in Kuwait City—collected donations for the PLO. Compared to other Gulf countries, Kuwait and Kuwaitis were especially generous in supporting Arafat financially. Kuwait was also politically supportive of Arafat and the PLO cause. Despite its small size, Kuwait was able to use its financial weight to leverage its political position, which the government lent to the Palestinian leader until the first Gulf war when Arafat stood next to Iraq's Saddam Hussein while the latter paraded units of his army that had invaded Kuwait in August 1990. Naturally, the Kuwaitis felt betrayed by Arafat, and after their country was liberated, the Kuwaiti government promptly expelled most Palestinian residents and expressed bitterness toward pan-Arabism, which it had championed until it was invaded by another Arab country.

Coupled with Kuwait's regional location among the Middle East's three giants of Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, anxieties about regional power plays are never far from the mind in Kuwait City. But as we near the 20th anniversary of the Iraqi invasion, much of what preoccupies the Kuwaiti elite and population today seems to be rooted in internal disputes.

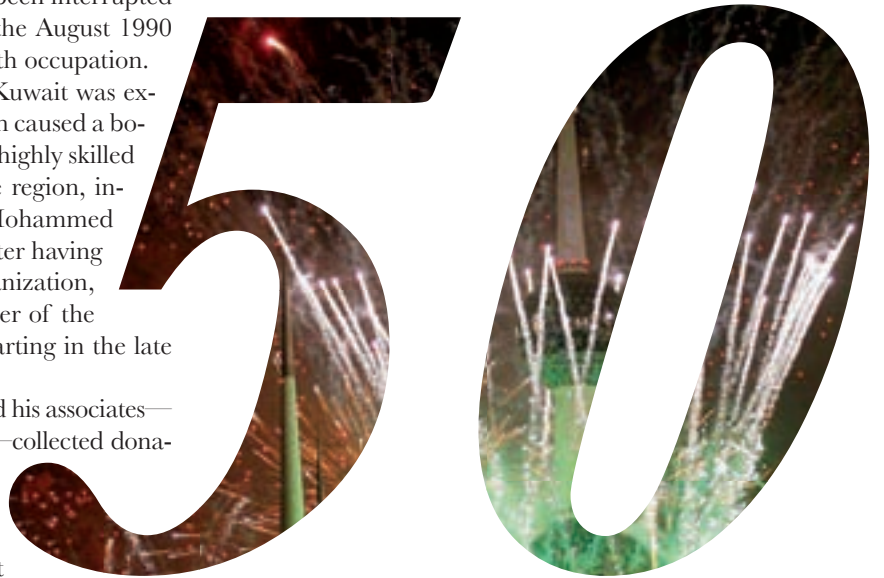
All politics are local politics

Political rift that often pits the elected parliament against the government, as well as sectarian and social fault lines, are indeed real challenges that Kuwait regularly struggles with. These divisions, however, should not be exaggerated. In the meantime, thanks to buoyant oil prices for much of the last decade, the Kuwaiti economy has never been short of cash, despite the unrelenting—and sometimes harmful—tangle that the royal family and the parliament and government find themselves in. Several observers believe that Kuwait's political stalemates continue to hinder key reforms and oil sector development.

In 1963, two years after independence, Kuwait held its first national elections. In comparison to her immediate Arab neighbors, this was a pioneering development, even though the elections were only open to those men of impeccable Kuwaiti pedigree. Even today, as all other fellow Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries experiment with various political reforms, Kuwait is arguably still at the forefront in paving the way.

For example, at a time of heightened anxiety in Sunni-majority states about the rise of the Shi'a as a political force, the May 2009 elections in Kuwait saw the nation's minority Shi'a

Kuwait at



Embittered by regional politics, Kuwait looks inward

Half a century after independence and two decades since the liberation from Iraqi occupation, Kuwait's bitter experience with pan-Arabism and ongoing regional power plays have affected its growth. However, since the downfall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, and thanks to robust oil revenues, Kuwait has witnessed an unprecedented boom, albeit amidst raging internal disputes over the need for reform and the future direction of the country.

Alex Vatanka

community almost doubling its representation in parliament to nine seats. Also in 2009, and for the first time in Kuwait's history, four women were elected to office.

Another example would be the degree of pressure the emir of Kuwait is willing to allow the parliament to bring down on the government, whose backbone is formed mainly of senior royals. In December 2009, for the first time in history anywhere in the GCC, the prime minister was exposed to questioning by members of the parliament, although Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammed Al-Sabah democratically survived the no-confidence vote.

While the emir, Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah who came to power as the 15th emir in 2006, has the authority to override the wishes of parliament in favor of his nephew the prime minister—which he has so far chosen not to do—the fact remains that only a few other states in the region have legislative bodies with such leverage to scrutinize.

The most recent no-confidence vote in Sheikh Nasser took place on 5 January 2011. Again, the prime minister survived the no-confidence test. Parliamentarians had brought about

the censure after police had physically assaulted a number of opposition lawmakers at a public gathering on 8 December. Opposition MPs also argued that Sheikh Nasser had used the police and security forces to intimidate his opponents.

The repeated standoffs between the royals and lawmakers have resulted in the emir disbanding of parliament on five occasions since its reinstatement in 1992. In 1999, 2003, 2006, 2008 and 2009, the emir called for early elections, arguing that parliamentarians had been endangering the country's national security.

As the Al-Sabah family remains in solid control of government, the opposition it faces in the parliament comes from both the conservative/Islamist and independent/liberal deputies. However, it remains safe to characterize the Kuwaiti political scene as dominated by personalities rather than policy issues, with ties of clan, family and religion proving more central in parliamentary activities than in competing policy blueprints. Meanwhile, as the House of Al-Sabah strives to juggle between the rivaling interests of Islamists, tribes and the liberals, the Sabahs have found the tussle between the government and the legislative branch to become increasingly debilitating.

Since the emergence of Sheikh Sabah as emir in 2006, five governments have resigned. Dissolving the parliament and holding new elections, however, has not brought about more harmony between the government and parliament over the past four years. As "politics as usual" continue, dominated by a government that has had to constantly fend off parliamentarians' attempts at more policy influence while deputies themselves act on the basis of short-term interests, domestic stability was never endangered or compromised. Yet the provisional approach to policy-making, which is so prevalent in Kuwait, has—by most accounts—come at the expense of long-term economic planning and development.

The executive-legislative impasse today threatens economic reforms seen as vital to the long-term prospects of Kuwait. On the one hand, the government seeks to implement market-oriented measures that will generate foreign investment and lead to both economic diversification and less reliance on oil export revenues, while also creating more private-sector jobs.

The 50 elected parliamentarians, on the other hand, appear to be anything but skeptical about large-scale reforms, and are evidently only keen to maintain, as much as possible, the generous welfare state that Kuwaitis have come to know over the last two generations. While many of the MPs remain steadfast in obstructing reform, fearing their constituents' wrath in the event of the need to tighten belts, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is on the side of the government.

It's the economy

According to the IMF, Kuwait needs to lessen its dependence on oil export revenues, diversify its economy and decrease the amount budgeted for subsidies while increasing income tax. Economic logic aside, there seems to be little doubt that it is the careers of the elected parliamentarians that are on the line should major reforms start to hurt the average Kuwaiti citizen.

As a result of this political-economic discrepancy, it took some 10 years of deliberations before a major economic initiative was launched in February 2010. According to Arabian Business, the four-year plan will direct some \$104 billion toward the development of infrastructure, much of it aimed at

The Bidoon

One of the greatest social challenges within Kuwait, which has caused concern since the country's independence 60 years ago, is the plight of the Bidoon. Short for *bidoon jinsiya* (without nationality), and not to be confused with the traditionally nomadic Bedouin, the Bidoon are a large group of disenfranchised people unrecognized by the government, thought to make up more than ten percent of the population. It is difficult to place an exact figure on the number of Bidoon resident in Kuwait, but the Kuwaiti ministry of planning estimates that there were at least 100 thousand in the country at the end of 2006—unofficial estimates put the figure far in advance of that, at up to 300 thousand.

Due to the Bidoon's status of no citizenship, it is very difficult for them to live within the state bureaucratic system and obtain essential documents, such as work permits, birth certificates, driver's licenses and permission to travel. Human Rights Watch, the international NGO, maintains that the Bidoon are the victims of institutionalized government discrimination.

However, as so often with the vagaries of Middle East society, the root cause of the problem lies within the circumstances of how and where national borders were drawn up in the region. Prior to the nineteen twenties, when border control was non-existent between modern-day Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the unrestricted movement of nomadic tribes meant that when states were formed and lines were drawn—almost arbitrarily—on maps, it was nigh on impossible to effectively register citizens. Partly due to illiteracy, or simply ignorance of new a bureaucratic reality, tens of thousands of people did not fill in the proper paperwork—an oversight that would have lasting ramifications.

In the early years of Kuwait's formation, it became necessary to promote a policy of nationalization, simply to boost the citizenship numbers in a country undergoing a state-building project. During the nineteen sixties, many Bidoon took Kuwaiti nationality and joined the army and security forces. The subsequent generation of these nationalized Bidoon firmly established themselves as lawmakers and parliamentarians in the nineteen nineties. It is these members of the Kuwaiti establishment who push for the reform of current citizenship laws, but they face opposition from those that consider themselves original Kuwaitis and therefore feel under threat from the Bidoon.

The situation is a divisive problem for Kuwait, especially since the mid-Eighties. After the first Gulf war for example, many problems arose concerning the return of families who fled from the violence, and many Bidoon were accused of collaboration with the Iraqi forces. Today, reforms are frequently discussed and put to parliament but with only minor successes so far—such as slowly increasing the number of Bidoon that can be registered per year. The issue is a long way from being resolved; at the heart of the matter is a story common to nations around the world, of coping with immigration and integrating society.

the oil and natural gas industries. There are said to be some 1,100 projects to be launched as part of the scheme, making the 2010 scheme the first major plan in the country since 1986.

Edmund O’Sullivan, the publisher of *Middle East Economic Digest*, wrote in December 2010 that Kuwait’s “total capital investment in the next five years could be close to \$200 billion—more than Kuwait’s forecast 2010 GDP.” But O’Sullivan also acknowledged that the insolent parliament could still put up barriers before the implementation of projects, particularly in the realm of the contentious Public-Private Partnership (PPP) programs.

The fact that major initiatives, such as the Kuwait Project that is aimed to open the country’s energy sector to foreign firms, remain dormant have also raised question marks about Kuwait’s overall commitment to foreign investment. In the entire Middle East and North Africa region, Kuwait comes second to last—only to the Palestinian Authority—in securing foreign capital. In order to raise its rank on this table, in the summer of 2010, the Kuwaiti Finance Ministry reduced the tax rate for international firms from a maximum of 55 percent to a flat 15 percent.

Some other key economic issues under continuous debate in Kuwait relate to the bloated and ineffective public sector, creating jobs and countering corruption. The latter issue is not just embarrassing, but is a driver behind much of the acrimony that divides the government and parliament. According to Transparency International, Kuwait’s corruption ranking has fallen from 35 in 2003 to 54 in 2010, although its lowest ranking was in 2009, when it came at 66 on the list assessing the scale of corruption in 180 states.

The charge of corruption is often politically debilitating. The December 2009 no-confidence vote on the prime minister was on the back of charges of financial mismanagement in the Ministry of Interior, a vote that Sheikh Nasser won by 35 against 13 votes. Anti-corruption crusades, however, remain a key populist move by parliamentarians.

Huge infrastructure projects, exactly the kind that Kuwait has sanctioned with the February 2010 bill and which are hoped to be the engine out of the 2008-09 economic lull years, are also most likely to draw the anti-corruption prying of parliamentarians. Only time will show if the latest economic development designs will slow, or altogether falter, in the contest to battle corruption.

The problem of paralysis at the policy-making level aside, as OPEC’s fourth largest oil exporter at some 2.5 million barrels a day, Kuwait is not short of cash. In fact, the country has enjoyed significant current-account surpluses since 1993. However, there is the problem of having to deal with the problem of oil price fluctuations, which is somewhat offset by income received from the considerable international investments the successive Kuwaiti governments have made since the 1970s. According to data from international financial organizations, the revenue the Kuwaiti government generates from its foreign investments amounts to about 20 percent of its oil export income.

Overcoming the impact of oil price fluctuations, however, pales in comparison to the more important external challenges that Kuwait faces, particularly in the shape of two of its immediate neighbors: Iran and Iraq. In the case of Iran, the Kuwaiti elite remain highly anxious about the policies and ambitions of the Islamic Republic. Despite attempts to maintain cordial ties,



The Royal Saudi Hawks, the aerobatic team of the Saudi Air Force, perform during a military show in Kuwait City on February 28, 2011 as the Gulf state marks its 50th Independence Day and 20th anniversary of the end of the Gulf war with the liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation

the underlying tension in bilateral ties is undeniable. One of the most recent examples of Kuwaiti fears about Tehran’s long regional arm was the May 2010 arrests of an alleged seven-person Iranian spy cell that included a Kuwaiti soldier and that was said to provide intelligence to Iran’s Islamic Revolution Guards Corps.

Where you stand is where you sit

The ongoing Iranian nuclear program and the launch of the Bushehr nuclear plant in 2010 continue to alarm Kuwaitis, in particular against a background of a potential US-Iran military conflict. In the specific case of the Bushehr plant, Kuwaiti fears are far more tangible. A 6 October headline in the *Al-Watan* newspaper stated that “Kuwait faces a catastrophic situation if an earthquake hits Bushehr,” suggesting that radiation from the Russian-built plant could devastate life in Kuwait.

In terms of relations with Iraq, the strain was again most recently evident on 10 January 2011 when a Kuwaiti naval officer was killed in a confrontation with a group of Iraqi fishermen in waters along the two states’ maritime borders. The issue of border demarcation was also highlighted in July 2010 when Iraq’s Permanent Representative to the Arab League, Qais Al-Azzawi, suggested that Baghdad does not recognize the demarcation of the common borders, although both capitals later dismissed the significance of the dispute.

However, the current Iraqi-Kuwaiti divide both runs beyond questions over the location of the border and can have far reaching consequences for stability in Kuwait. While Kuwaitis were certainly thrilled to see the regime of Saddam Hussein fall in March 2003, the hard reality is that the arrival of an Iranian-backed Shi’a elite in Baghdad continues to be difficult to accept in Kuwait City, especially since the government of Nouri Al-Maliki is often seen to represent Iran’s interests. As with concerns relating to Iran, there are also some tangible fears about developments in Iraq, and none are more consequential for Kuwait than the notion of sectarian spillover from Iraq.

Kuwait’s minority Shi’a population is not a repressed community. It participates in all aspects of life from politics to running leading business entities in the country. However, there is no doubt that the emergence of Shi’a political power in Iraq,

as long as some of the Sunni-Shi'a tensions remain there, has impacted the position of Kuwaiti Shi'a.

When Mohammed Baqer Al-Mutri, the head of the Shi'a Clerics Congregation in Kuwait, warned in June 2005 about Shi'a disfranchisement after no Shi'a candidates were elected to office in that month's elections, the government quickly appointed a Shi'a to the cabinet. As Al-Mutri had warned, and the Al-Sabah royal family evidently accepted, it was a simple question of national unity at a time when Shi'a-Sunni divisions in Iraq, and elsewhere in the region such as in Lebanon, were reverberating across the Middle East.

Still the bigger Kuwaiti divide does not run along Shi'a-Sunni lines but more along differences in worldviews between Islamists and secularists. As recently as September 2009, Islamist MPs promised to censure the prime minister unless he acted against the rise in the number of entertainment establishments, bars and nightclubs.

Another example of this cultural rift has been evident in the debate about the country's future plans for education. As the government has sought to reform the various curriculums with the aim of lessening material that can generate fanaticism among the youth, Islamist MPs have balked and warned of the dilution of "traditional Kuwaiti values." Given these fault lines, the issue of maximizing internal harmony, as reforms both in the political and economic areas are enacted, becomes of paramount importance to Kuwait.

Looking forward

Despite the slowdown in 2008-2009, the macro-economic situation in Kuwait remains on solid grounds. When there has been a need, the government has been able to easily interject cash into the economy to lessen anxieties. When the global financial crisis of September 2008 arrived in Kuwait, the government unveiled a \$5.2 billion financial stimulus package in April 2009. That, however, was when the Kuwaiti government and parliament saw eye-to-eye about the urgent need to pass legislation.

Today, most observers of the Kuwaiti economy appear to see much of the country's challenges to be rooted in a lack of coherent and agreeable vision among the country's various interested parties about where to go from here. Relative to its size, the country certainly has no lack of financial muscle thanks to the flowing oil income that is projected to last for at least another century.

And while Kuwaiti concerns about developments in both Iran and Iraq should not be dismissed, the reality remains that the physical security of the country is more or less guaranteed by some regional and international powers. The value of Kuwait as a strategic partner to the US has, if anything, increased since the 2003 Saudi decision to request that American troops leave the kingdom. The US decision to give Kuwait the status of a Major non-NATO ally in 2004 is a reflection of the American commitment to Kuwait and mutual benefits from a strategic understanding. Time will show if the Kuwaitis will be able to better utilize the reassuring advantage of this important security umbrella as they set about choosing the course for the future of the nation.

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Moving Forward

Kuwait can be proud of its reputation as a Gulf state not shy of political reform. Relative praise can be lauded upon the parliamentary system, which, while still subject to the authority of the Emir, allows room for an authentic scrutiny of the government. The country's Shi'a minority is represented in parliament, and since May 2005, Kuwaiti women have been able to vote—parliament voted in women's suffrage by 35 to 23. In the same year, the first female cabinet minister was appointed and women's rights took another step forward in 2009, when four women out of 16 female candidates won election to the 50 seat assembly.

However, concerns still persist about the how the parliament is comprised. Until 2005 just 15 percent of the population was eligible to vote, today that figure has been raised to roughly one third—which of course leaves a huge proportion of the population disenfranchised. A significant number of these marginalized Kuwaitis are commonly known as Bidoon jinsiya (without nationality). The Bidoon are essentially second-class citizens who, according to Human Rights Watch, are the victims of institutionalized discrimination. Frequently prevented from working or unable to secure basic bureaucratic documents such as a driver's license or travel permit, the plight of the Bidoon stems from a mishandled regulation of citizenship in the wake of independence from Britain in 1961. Until the mid-Eighties the Bidoon, who were passed over for citizenship, were eligible for temporary passports, government employment and access to state services—like education, health-care and welfare. Since that time—and especially after the first Gulf war—the government has come under mounting criticism for denying the Bidoon these essential rights.

In terms of religious freedoms, the Kuwaiti constitution allows for "absolute freedom" of religious practice, provided it does not go against accepted moral norms. In effect though, this can be interpreted loosely and the country has had to cope with its fair share of sectarian Shi'a-Sunni tensions. As recently as September 2010, controversy flared up when a Shi'a cleric—living in self-imposed exile in London—carried remarks on his website that were deemed insulting to Sunnis. In the ensuing farrago of competing insults, death threats and reconciliations, the government banned large public gatherings, and government officials issued calming warnings to the public. Wary of potential unrest, the government is wise to mollify the Shi'a community—which makes up about one third of the total population of 1.1 million people—particularly due to the increasing influence of Iran in the region after Iraq's recent turmoil. There are nine Shi'a members in the 50-seat parliament and two members in the emirate's 16-member cabinet, a statistic which, when taken into consideration with female representation, demonstrates that 50 years on from independence Kuwait is keen to take a broad view of society.

Boom and Gloom

Trade relations between Iran and Iraq in 2011 and beyond

Iran and Iraq have been intrinsically linked for centuries, and recent months have seen trade ties only strengthen between the two neighbors. While more unrestrained trade may bring mutual benefit to each economy, serious concerns linger.

Jon Weinberg

Image © Getty Images



To say that Iran and Iraq have a complicated relationship, both political and economic, is beyond an understatement. In the 1980s, Iran and Iraq fought a bitter, eight-year war that devastated both countries and produced no decisive victor. More than just an ideological struggle between hyper-nationalist, Ba'athist Iraq and ultra-ideological, theocratic Iran, the war changed the fate of both countries, in much the same way that World War I changed the fate of early twentieth century Europe.

The war's greatest toll was the million and half million casualties Iran and Iraq suffered respectively. Not surprisingly, economic losses on both sides were similarly severe. In the 1960s and early 1970s, Iran and Iraq rapidly developed from modest, largely agrarian and pastoral economies to increasingly industrialized, middle-income countries achieving double-growth and the infrastructural advancements that come with it. By 1988, each country had spent hundreds of billions of dollars on the war effort (1980s dollars, that is), which produced an economic collapse from which neither Iran nor Iraq has fully recovered. Both suffered crippling decreases in oil production, their life source. Iraq, which had borrowed liberally from other Arab countries to fund its war efforts, became the most indebted economy in the world.

Time may not heal all wounds, but temporal distance has certainly had a profound impact on the economic relationship

between these once bitter enemies. Trade relations resumed immediately after the deposition of Saddam Hussein—who had ruled Iraq since 1979—by the American-led invasion in 2003. Since then, annual trade between Iran and Iraq has increased exponentially, reaching an estimated \$8 billion in 2010 compared to \$1.5 billion in 2009.

Iran has, in fact, become Iraq's most significant trading partner. Iranian goods are typically cheaper than their Chinese counterparts due to the low cost of overland shipping from Iran. Business has been so good in recent years that in March 2010, Iraq announced its intention to create a bilateral free trade zone near Basra, Iraq's second largest city and largest seaport. There have been also talks of founding joint industrial townships on the inland border between the two countries.

That Iran and Iraq have more than borders in common is well known, but the extent of this connection is often overlooked. The Semitic-speaking peoples of what is now mostly Iraq and the Persian-speaking peoples of what is now mostly Iran, have continuously conquered and ruled each other for over four millennia. As a result, their respective languages, cultures, and genes have co-mingled to the point that in many cases it is nearly impossible to trace where one influence begins and another ends. Baghdad, for instance, is thought to be an ancient Persian name that loosely translates to “God's gift.” Perhaps the most important cultural influence of all was the Arab-Islamic conquest of Sassanid Persia—which extended to modern day Iraq—in the seventh century, which has historically and continues to influence Iran's language and religion.

Islam also continues to influence the economic relationship between Iran and Iraq. Other than tiny neighboring Bahrain, Iran and Iraq are the only two majority-Shi'a-Muslim countries on the planet. Every month, tens of thousands of Iranian religious pilgrims flock to the Iraqi cities of Najaf and Karbala—the holiest places in Shi'a Islam after Mecca and Medina—spending millions on accommodation, food, and transportation.

Despite the boost that this provides the local and national economies, many Iraqis feel that religious pilgrimage represents the only significant source of well-intended Iranian contributions to the Iraqi economy. Iranian politicians and businesspeople, they argue, have used the past seven years to take advantage of Iraq's political and economic instability in order to exploit Iraq's fledgling government and economy for their own gain. Some, like former Iraqi MP Ayad Jamal Al-Din, have gone so far as to call Iranian economic influence a type of occupation and colonization.

Upheaval Averted

Following the spectacular scenes in Tunisia, where a popular uprising at one stage seemed likely to completely overthrow a repressive regime, the eyes of the world are once again looking elsewhere around the Middle East and North Africa Region for signs of turmoil and potential civil unrest. Iran, with its practically unique history in the region of a successful popular revolution, stands out as a possible arena for civil disquiet—especially given the events of 2009, when disputed election results saw mass protests, and the current economic climate which contributed so heavily to the Tunisian uproar.

The Middle East—rightly or wrongly—has a notorious reputation for instability, but by and large major change comes about through high-level politicking or a sensational coup d'état. However, the Iranian regime has been on its toes in the past few weeks, due to the implementation of widespread subsidy cuts which will have an economic impact of about \$4,000 per year for the everyday Iranian family. As well as a tendency towards civil unrest, Iran—like Tunisia—has a generally well-educated population which is liable to react strongly against economic hardship, when combined with curtailed civil liberties. The recent turmoil in Tunisia came amid an unemployment rate of around 14 percent. Compare that to the staggering rate of roughly 20 percent in Iran and it is clear why some fear more social upheaval in Tehran.

There was a strong police presence in Tehran recently when petrol prices were effectively quadrupled: Subsidized costs are now around 40 cents per liter, when it was previously just 10 cents per liter. But there was no repeat of 2007 protests, when petrol stations were burned due to price hikes. Social unrest has since been avoided, despite a de-facto rise in the price of bread and the supply of water due to decreased subsidies. President Mahmoud

Ahmadinejad has said that bread subsidies alone cost the country as much as \$4 billion dollars per year.

Iran has literally been forced into these austerity measures. US Undersecretary of State, William Burns, claimed in December that American sanctions were costing Iran \$60 billion in lost oil investments alone. Innumerable reasons can be put forward as to why no popular reaction has been forthcoming, but most experts consider that it is a sign of Ahmadinejad's political savvy—he has managed to endure a period of sustained criticism, and ultimately appease his detractors to some extent, largely by pilfering ideas from the opposition. Recent claims from government officials put the annual cost of subsidies at approximately \$100 billion per year, a figure which simply cannot be sustained.

Indeed, the signs are that Iranians are more ready to accept a pragmatic economic policy, largely thanks to a rigorous advertising campaign, and a nominal (but well received) state grant of around \$40 per month, to alleviate the effect of the cuts. Everyone seems ready to believe that energy and cost saving measures are necessary, which given the astonishing energy waste attributed to Iranian households is hardly a surprise—an estimated \$30 billion per year is lost through poor insulation and energy management.

The real lesson for observers of the region hoping to discern a broad pattern, is that the factors which contribute to social upheaval are so many and varied—and often so inextricably linked to unique dynamics of a particular country or city—that more often than not the flashpoint, when it comes, will be a complete surprise. The educated and unemployed people of Tunisia have much in common with the frustrated men and women in Iran—including a roughly equivalent GDP per capita of around \$10,000—but that is not to say that they will choose the same path.

The source of such claims is somewhat understandable. Trade between the two countries is extraordinarily one-sided. Among Iraq's chief exports to Iran are dates, sulfur, and leather. Iranian companies, on the other hand, export cars, fuel, medical supplies, and construction materials to Iraq, where they have also built factories, hotels, schools, housing, and hospitals. An Iranian company, Saner, has even built a power plant near Baghdad's Sadr City neighborhood, reminding some Iraqis of Iranian influence every time they flip a switch in their country's capital.

Others are convinced that while Iran may influence Iraq through political contributions, charitable donations, and an unquestioned position of leadership in the Shi'a world, Iran's upper hand as a trading partner may be circumstantial and fleeting. As a consequence of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's decision to abruptly cut his government's generous fuel subsidies in December—quadrupling petrol and diesel prices overnight—there has been a sharp decline in the volume of goods crossing over to Iraq. Unlike foreign sanctions, which both countries have or are currently experiencing, fuel prices also have a dramatic impact on Iraq and Iran's vibrant unregulated grey and black markets as well.

Aside from fuel costs, Iraq may have other reasons to reconsider its options. India, Iran's biggest trading partner, has recently joined the American and EU-led effort to stifle the economy of Iran, who they suspect of nuclear ambitions beyond the production of electricity. By banning Indian firms from transactions involving clearing houses that obscure both participants on either end of a deal, India is undercutting Iranian companies' chief outlets for sidestepping American and European financial blockades. A more stable, more confident and increasingly opportunistic Iraq, ever eager to rid itself of the shackles of foreign influence, may decide to slowly distance itself from strong association with its neighbor to the East.

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Injecting an extra \$600 billion into the US economy may bolster America's domestic interests, but it also poses potentially serious threats to Chinese policymakers. It's time for the Fed to realize that, in today's global market, what's best for America isn't always best for the world.

Zhenbo Hou

The Federal Reserve has introduced its second quantitative easing package (QE2), injecting another \$600 billion into the still limping US economy. In doing so, however, the Fed runs the risk of adversely affecting the world economy—and China's in particular. A failure to understand the negative effects of US monetary policies could severely weaken the US's authority as the issuer of the world's reserve currency.

The QE2 will help the US economy in a few ways. For one, it will reduce borrowing and lending costs, as a lower interest rate stimulates investment in the economy. It will also inflate asset prices, since lower bond interest rates will entice investors to switch from bonds to equities, pushing stock prices up.

Nevertheless, the QE2 is likely to hurt the Chinese economy in several, potentially serious ways. For one, a devalued dollar relative to the Renminbi (RMB) means losses of billions of dollar-denominated foreign reserves. Most importantly, China's inflation would rise, thereby exacerbating asset bubbles since some of this "hot money" would likely seek fickle investment opportunities. Due to its fixed exchange rate scheme, China's central bank will have to print more RMB for any additional dollar that is invested in China.

In order to curb rising domestic inflation, China may even find itself compelled to appreciate the RMB significantly. If investors are led to believe that an appreciation of the RMB is inevitable, an upward spiral in the value of the RMB could quickly ensue.

A rapid rise of the value of the RMB is the last scenario the Chinese government wants to see. A higher RMB would not only make Chinese exports more expensive, (resulting, most likely, in massive unemployment); it would also stoke potential economic uncertainties surrounding volatile currency adjustment. The most famous example of this phenomenon can be found in Japan. After the country's property bubble burst in the late 1980s, Japan entered its "lost decades" of slow economic growth.

It is true that China needs to move away from its export-led growth and fulfill its responsibility to reduce the global imbalances that contributed to the global economic crisis. But in the same way that the US prioritizes its domestic economy over the global economy, China also needs to manage the transition of its economy in a timely manner. At the same time, it must minimize any associated social costs, such as lower growth rates and rising unemployment. To manage such a transition is especially difficult if Beijing's monetary policy is largely dependent on Washington. In that light, China's criticism over the Fed's QE2 is justified.

In recent years, the United States has become more like the first among equals rather than the world's sole superpower, due to the growing economic weight of emerging markets. Last November's G20 underscored this evolution. There, President Obama found himself in an uncomfortable and isolated situ-



Most importantly, China's inflation would rise, thereby exacerbating asset bubbles since some of this "hot money" would likely seek fickle investment opportunities. Due to its fixed exchange rate scheme, China's central bank will have to print more RMB for any additional dollar that is invested in China

ation when a significant number of countries disagreed with American expansionary monetary policy.

In the 1970s, West Germany and Japan were willing to pay an economic price for US military protection. Today, however, there are no overriding security concerns to act as a heat sink



What Quantitative Easing Means for China

The Federal Reserve's policy poses new challenges to China

Image © Getty Images

for tensions over monetary policy between the United States and China. In a multi-polar world, US economic policymakers must be wary of the increased potential for retaliatory economic protectionism, especially from its closest trade partners. This is why China's president Hun Jintao questioned the role of US dollar in the global monetary system ahead of his state visit to Washington, saying "the current international currency system is a product of the past."

On the contrary, the global economic crisis fortified divergent interests among the surplus and deficit countries. A monetary solution that is welcomed by the countries facing deficits could induce adverse effects on those carrying surpluses. It is important for Washington to recognize that in today's global political economy, what is best for the US is not always best for the world. Greater weight must therefore be placed on reciprocity.

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The Word on the Yuan

China, which has let its currency rise against the dollar since June, says inflation is only one factor influencing its exchange-rate policy.



News Behind the Graph

China's GDP grew at a robust rate throughout much of the first part of the decade, but its growth rate gradually tailed off beginning in 2007 (see Graph 1). Since that time, China's GDP has fallen from a rate of 13%, to a low of 6.2% in 2009. It should be noted, however, that even this relatively low pace was high, compared to many western economies that mired through the financial crisis. Since then, the Chinese economy has rebounded, growing, at one point, at a rate of 11.9% clip during 2010. On 20 January, the National Bureau of Statistics announced that the economy grew at an overall rate of 10.3% during 2010—substantially higher than what many analysts had expected.

With China's accelerated growth has come an escalation in inflation as well. Thanks to massive state investment projects, and a relatively liberal borrowing climate, China's inflation rate has been gradually increasing since the beginning of 2010 (see Graph 2). In 2009, at the height of the financial crisis, the country actually experienced negative inflation, but as the economy has heated up again, prices have risen. The consumer price index (CPI) rose by 3.3% overall in 2010—slightly higher than the government's target rate of 3%. And, though Chinese inflation has yet to reach levels experienced in mid-2008, when the country saw nearly 9% annual increases, the recent acceleration has given Chinese policymakers cause for concern.

As a result, the Chinese government has ratcheted up its efforts to control domestic prices by increasing the national interest rate. In 2008, when inflation was at a recent high, the government responded in similar fashion, by raising interest rates to nearly 7.5% (see Graph 3). Once the financial crisis came into full swing, however, those rates quickly dropped down in an effort to spur growth at a time when liquidity was in scarce supply.

Since early 2010, however, China has begun gradually raising rates once again in the hopes of quelling inflation, and preventing the Chinese economy from overheating. On 8 February, Chinese policymakers raised the benchmark one-year deposit rate by a quarter of a percentage point, as many expected, and hiked its one-year lending rate by an identical margin, to 6.06%.

Since early 2010, however, China has begun gradually raising rates once again in the hopes of quelling inflation, and preventing the Chinese economy from overheating. On 8 February, Chinese policymakers raised the benchmark one-year deposit rate by a quarter of a percentage point

The announcement marked the third interest rate hike since October, and, according to analysts, could be the first of many to come during 2011. Thus far, the government has deployed several other approaches to controlling prices, including property tax increases in specific cities, and has provided instructions to certain banks, asking them to curb their lending.

Graph 2



Source: TradingEconomics.com

Graph 1



Source: TradingEconomics.com

Graph 3



Source: TradingEconomics.com



The Kingdom of Desalination

Saudi Arabia addresses its future water needs

Saudi Arabia's original model of addressing its water poverty is no longer sustainable. Once producing up to 70 percent of the country's water needs, a growing demand for water is exhausting this solution at a rate that demands a change in the government's policy and in its citizens' demands for water.

Image © Getty Images

Caryle Murphy

Saudi Arabia may be rich in oil, but it is poor in one of life's basic commodities: water. For decades, the kingdom solved that problem with government-run desalination plants. These supplied 60 to 70 percent of the kingdom's needs, with the rest met by ancient underground aquifers. In the process, Saudi Arabia became the world's desalination king, producing more than any other country.

But that model is no longer sufficient. A rapidly expanding population, growing urbanization and plans for an increasingly diversified industrial base mean an ever greater demand for water—just as the country's underground water supply is nearing depletion.

Clearly, meeting future water needs is one of Saudi Arabia's biggest challenges. And to cope with it, the government

has launched a major overhaul of its national water system, opening up to private sector participation and restructuring state-run entities.

It also committed around \$60 billion to expanding the water supply and distribution network, according to a recent report by National Commercial Bank (NCB), one of the kingdom's largest banks. Those projects include \$14 billion for building 16 more desalination facilities over the next 17 years—about one a year. These new plants will augment the 30 existing ones, some of which will be decommissioned because of age.

The goal is to increase desalination water production, currently around 5.7 million cubic meters a day, to at least 10 million cubic meters and, if necessary, to 13 million cubic meters



a day by 2020. That is the year when, by some estimates, the kingdom's 22 million citizens will have increased to 33 million.

"We need to get a lot done fast," said Paddy Padmanathan, President and CEO of ACWA Power International, a Saudi firm that has become one of the biggest providers of private sector-generated water in the kingdom.

The Saudis are not alone in their water conundrum. A report released 13 December by the Middle East program of the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies concluded that water is a matter of rising concern across the Middle East, home to 10 of the world's 15 most water-poor countries.

Entitled "Clear Gold," the report warns that the region "is moving rapidly towards total depletion of its groundwater resources" and predicts that resulting shortages may have political ramifications as water-deprived citizens lose patience with governments.

"The real wild card for political and social unrest in the Middle East over the next 20 years is not war, terrorism, or revolution," the report said. "It is water."

Saudi Arabia's first major move to deal with its water crisis came in 2002, when the Supreme Economic Council, recognizing that the private sector had a role to play in expanding the national water supply, issued new regulations for its participation in the water (and power) arenas. New desalination plants—at Shuaibah, Shuqaiq, Ras Al-Zour and Jubail—were the first to be built under this new regime. The government also restructured its water departments, creating the National Water Company to work in joint

ventures with both Saudi and international corporations. In part, the NWC was set up to bypass traditionally slow-moving state bureaucracies and create a more investor-friendly environment.

Another big step came in 2008 when the government announced that it would phase out wheat farming by 2016. This addressed the fact that about 88 percent of the water used in the kingdom was for agriculture, even though that sector contributes less than 3 percent to the country's GDP. It would make more sense, experts argued, to import wheat.

Nevertheless, "Clear Gold" found that more remains to be done in this area. Groundwater supplies continue to be used "for large-scale agricultural projects—such as the world's largest dairy farm, where 2,300 gallons of water or more are needed to produce a gallon of milk," the report stated. "Overall, the kingdom now uses as much as 20 billion cubic meters of nonrenewable groundwater every year for agriculture—the equivalent of almost three months worth of water crashing over Niagara Falls."

In another key move, the Saudi government recognized the need to change consumer attitudes. The kingdom has the third highest daily per capita water consumption in the world—about 280 liters—after the United States and Canada. Water has traditionally been supplied free, or practically so, to residential and commercial customers, accounting for these high levels of consumption. Customers are charged about 1 percent of the actual cost of the water they use, while the government pays the rest, which leaves it with an annual water tab of \$4 billion, according to one estimate.



“Clear Gold:” The Middle East’s most precious resource

The Middle East Program of the Center for Strategic and International Studies has recently published the report *Clear Gold: Water as a Strategic Resource in the Middle East*. Co-authored by Jon B. Alterman—the program’s director—and Michael Dziuban, the report looks at the strategic implications of Middle Eastern water scarcity and goes as far as to say that: “The real wild card for political and social unrest in the Middle East over the next 20 years is not war, terrorism, or revolution—it is water. Conventional security threats dominate public debate and government thinking, but water is the true game-changer in Middle Eastern politics.”

The finite supply of unseen groundwater reserves inside countries’ territorial borders serves as the focus of the report. It is the rapid depletion of these resources which threatens to destabilize social contracts, conceivably causing political alienation and migration crises. Alterman and Dziuban offer recommendations for government action to help avoid looming instability.

- Using treated wastewater for agricultural irrigation will stem the depletion of groundwater reserves. Jordan and the United Arab Emirates have already had some success in this field, and though it is an expensive option careful investment in new technologies would put make this a viable technique for both rich and poor countries.
- Alternative methods for fueling desalination and water treatment would alleviate dependency on oil and gas.

The nuclear option in particular allows for greater efficiency in linking energy and water production.

- Current levels of water use cannot remain so high, even with the introduction of efficiency measures. Heavily subsidized or free water supply shall have to become a thing of the past. Tariff systems would reduce water use domestically and agriculturally, as would a system of punitive measures for over-use. This is a logistically difficult task, especially concerning the collection of payments and managing people’s attitudes to consumption. Rewards and incentives would help encourage an ethos of conservation.
- Water-metering and monitoring technology, relayed to a central system would allow countries to get to grips with how much water is being used. Abu Dhabi has already made strides in this area, and soon the entire emirate should be covered by a smart-meter scheme, which will in turn help to judge appropriate tariffs.
- The low prices of agricultural commodities do not reflect the currently massive cost of water used to produce them. Restructuring markets to represent the costs of production would encourage farmers to direct water use to crops specifically in demand, rather than maximizing their profits by producing as much as possible of a given crop.
- Ultimately governments must act quickly to change the way people think about water and its value, and stress the finite nature of this most valuable resource. “If water is treated as a free resource, it will continue to be treated as an inexhaustible one.”

Government officials, preaching the old saying that you don’t appreciate what comes for free, argue that this is about to change. The message is that water tariffs are coming for all consumers. Their phase-in will be gradual, they add, but sooner or later, the government will no longer be picking up the tab.

“In order to cut down water consumption in the Kingdom...it’s about time to restructure the water tariff,” Loay Ahmed Al-Musallam, CEO of the National Water Company, told a public forum on water in October. “And I think this is coming very, very soon.”

The Minister for Water and Electricity, Abdullah Al-Hussayen, suggested at the same forum that the government would not be moved on this issue. He pointed out that Saudis who happily pay an average of \$53 dollars a month for a cell phone ought not to mind paying a monthly water bill.

Conservation is also a new mantra for the government. In addition to public media campaigns, it is installing faucets and flushes that release limited amounts of water in mosques and government offices.

Much more needs to be done, however, to reduce consumption, according to NCB chief economist Jarmo Kotilaine. “In general...the emphasis of the government has been on supply security above all, in order to meet demand,” he said. “Where there’s been much less progress is in demand management... On the whole, relatively little is being done on shaping attitudes and public opinion” about the need to use water responsibly.

Finally, the government’s new approach to water also includes more facilities for treating wastewater so that it can be put to industrial and commercial uses.

There is, as always, a downside for the government’s water policies, especially the expanded construction of desalination facilities. These plants need a lot of power: Currently, they eat up about 65 percent of all the oil that Saudi Arabia uses domestically. More desalination facilities means even more petroleum will be used at home, leaving less for export—which means less revenue in the years ahead.

As a result, the government has decided to move at a faster rate into solar and nuclear-generated power in order to save as much petroleum as possible for export. Last January, it announced a pilot program testing solar power in desalination plants.

Some improvements from the government’s revised water policies are already evident. Residents of Jeddah, the country’s second largest city, have seen a measurable reduction in long-standing water shortages in recent months after a new desalination project at Shuaibah—built by Acwapower International—began operating earlier this year. Padmanathan said he was optimistic that the kingdom will rise to meet its water challenge.

“I’m more confident than I was five years ago,” he said. “All the right policies are being implemented now.”

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Power and Principle

Reforming the United Nations Security Council



Image © Getty Images

Following Barack Obama's proclaimed backing of an Indian Security Council seat, various reform proposals are being contemplated. However, it is questionable how far Security Council reform is really the solution to the UN's problems.

Eva Prag

Barack Obama's recent declaration that he would back India's claim to a permanent seat on the Security Council of the United Nations has, once again, fuelled calls for a reform of the international body, widely seen as failing in its attempts to represent the world "as it is." A significant amount of influential voices including *The Economist*, argue that the only alternative to reforming the UN is accepting its decline. Such bold statements, however, show a disregard for the history of the organization and its place in international politics.

The most recent efforts towards reform started in 2003, after the US invasion of Iraq, when Secretary-General Kofi Annan called for a "radical" overhaul of intergovernmental machinery, beginning with the Security Council (SC). Annan established a High Level Panel (HLP) to undertake a fundamental review of the United Nation's role in the field of peace and security, the primary responsibility of the SC. Recommendations included expanding the SC to 24 members through reforms that included increasing the number of permanent seats, creating a new category of four-year seats and/or expanding the number of two-year seats among others. The panel's criteria for seat holders would be based on the geographic representation of states, as well as their financial, military and diplomatic contribution to the UN.

While these criteria sound logical, it is incredibly difficult to implement. An emphasis on financial contribution would earn Germany and Japan seats, the latter of which would be unacceptable to China. Meanwhile, one of the greatest military contributors is Pakistan, whose membership to the Council would be incompatible with India's. Norway is a strong diplomatic power, but another seat to a European country seems unfeasible, and France and the UK cannot be expected to give up their seats, although a single

seat for the EU would indeed be more representative of the international distribution of power.

What comes to the surface with this quick analysis of a supposedly more representative Security Council is that firstly, representation is very difficult to define, and secondly, the justness of such a council is likely to be undermined by state interest. As Erik Luck, current adviser to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has stated, the sense of urgency in Kofi Annan's call for reform reflected a "puzzling disregard for the history and politics of the UN."

The past six decades have seen dozens of reform efforts. Although broad packages, such as those of the HLP are sometimes proposed, they are never adopted, as member states like to pick and choose reforms that correspond to their political interests.

This should serve as a reminder that the UN is nothing more and nothing less than what states make it—it is not an independent body. Legitimacy is the only tool at the UN's disposal with which it can counter the national interest of states, and must therefore be taken seriously. However, legitimacy is a constant challenge, as the concept changes with the dynamics of international politics and depends on the perspective of particular states.

The evolution of the UN in international politics and the tensions it continually faces were particularly evident towards the end of the Cold War. Although the 90s were just as difficult; there were many appeals for the UN to help countries like Somalia and Haiti, and too few resources to implement Security Council Mandates. While many questioned the future of the UN at the time, and its actions were certainly flawed, states have continuously turned to it in the new millennium.

Exclusionary Reform

Reform of the UN, particularly the Security Council (SC), is a deeply contentious issue. At the center of the debate lies the question as to how representative the organization is as a world body intended to foster international security and development—with an ambitious ultimate objective of world peace. The UN, and the format of the SC, was established after World War II to serve the national interests of the victorious allies. Since then, despite reforms including an expansion of the number of non-permanent members of the SC (from 6 to 10 in 1965), there remains an indisputable status quo in favor of Europe and the US. For years there have been increasing calls for a permanent African seat at the security council—Africa has more UN members than any other continent—as well as a growing concern that the Muslim world is being effectively excluded from the top table. The major powers implicitly fear that should a majority Islamic nation gain SC status, it could wield its power of veto to disrupt UN actions in the Middle East. Reform is always on the agenda at the UN, but reaching consensus is not a straightforward task. The positions of the US, Britain and France—shown below—demonstrate the kind of reform these nations seek. Proposed reform is essentially in keeping with the traditions of the UN, i.e. supporting the major power national interests by backing countries with strong pre-existing trade-ties and an ideological pro-democratic common ground.

8 November, 2010

Remarks by the US President to the Joint Session of the Indian Parliament in New Delhi

As two global leaders, the United States and India can partner for global security—especially as India serves on the Security Council over the next two years. Indeed, the just and sustainable international order that America seeks includes a United Nations that is efficient, effective, credible and legitimate. That is why I can say today, in the years ahead, I look forward to a reformed United Nations Security Council that includes India as a permanent member.

Thursday 27 March, 2008

Joint UK-France Summit Declaration
Reform of the UN Security Council, both its enlargement and the improvement of its working methods, must therefore succeed. We reaffirm the support of our two countries for the candidacies of Germany, Brazil, India and Japan for permanent membership, as well as for permanent representation for Africa on the Council.

We regret that negotiations towards this goal remain in deadlock and are therefore ready to consider an intermediate solution. This could include a new category of seats, with a longer term than those of the current elected members and those terms would be renewable; at the end of an initial phase, it could be decided to turn these new types of seats into permanent ones. We will work with all our partners to define the parameters of such a reform.

UNSC reform requires a political commitment from the member states at the highest level. We will work in this direction in the coming months with a view to achieving effective reform.

The UN has survived because it is highly adaptable and capable of making midcourse corrections, of championing new agendas, and of learning to employ new tools as the needs and values of its member states change. However, these transitions do not imply a smooth process. The UN adopts formal reforms with great reluctance and glacier-like speed. The founders wanted it that way, and so they placed high hurdles to charter amendment.

Hence, what should be learned from six decades of reform proposals is that modest expectations are in order. Rather than an excessive focus on expanding the Security Council, which will have unpredictable and potentially damaging consequences for regional and global relations, greater attention should be paid to ensuring the transparency and accountability of the UN's day-to-day activities. Furthermore, the UN's working methods should be improved, for example through a strengthening of UN field operations, and enhancement of the capacities of the Secretary-General should be implemented. Progress has already been made through the establishment of a Peacebuilding Commission and a smaller, more accountable Human Rights Council.

These modifications are unlikely to fundamentally influence national interest decision-making by states in the Council, but neither would changes in the UN Charter. In

the end, it is its practical achievements that will lend legitimacy to the UN, not which states are on the SC.

The UN proclaims in Article 1 of the Charter that its purpose is achieving international cooperation for “promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all,” and reform should contribute towards fulfilling this goal. There are more promising ways to improve Security Council accountability and effectiveness than overly optimistic notions about amending the Charter. We should thus be cautious in suggesting that the organization can be saved from irrelevance only by radical structural reform, as this is simply not true.

As the Kofi Annan expressed it in his first reform report in 1997, “[r]eform is not an event; it is a process.” The tension between power and principle in the UN has always been present and it should be treated as a creative tension rather than a problem, easily overcome by a simple act of will. Progressive calls for reform should be encouraged, as rhetorical fireworks may contribute to an environment that facilitates pragmatic modifications in working methods and democratic accountability. However, as with all explosives, they should be approached with caution and awareness of their potentially destructive effects.

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هناك أوقات تستحق الاحتفال
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مسقط - مركز مول: ٠٩ ٢٢٦ ٤٧٠١ - القاهرة - مركز فرانس المصري: ٠٢ ٨١٩ ٠٨١٩
الشارقة - مركز كورتلين: ٠٤ ١٢ ٥٢٢ ٩٤٩٩٤٢



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Egypt at the brink

More than a week of mass demonstrations against the government saw Egypt teetering on the brink of chaos. Clashes erupted across the land and many thousands of people occupied Tahrir Square in the heart of Cairo calling for the resignation of the president.

A Liberal Islam

An interview with Turki Al-Hamad, prominent Saudi liberal

Professor Turki Al-Hamad is a prominent Saudi liberal who stirs controversy wherever he goes. Sometimes controversy starts when one of his books or novels is banned, but it doesn't fade when a fatwa declares him an apostate or permits killing him. In his interview with The Majalla, Al-Hamad describes those who have issued fatwas against him to be "the pharaohs of this age," asserting that he is not afraid of these fatwas and doesn't believe in invariables in this life. For him, life is similar to a flowing river, and one cannot bathe in the same river twice.

Abeer Saady

Professor Turki Al-Hamad is good at swimming against the current, for example he considers that there is no contradiction between Islam and application of liberalism. He says that true liberalism can never mean exclusion, as the core of liberalism is freedom of choice and its essence is multiplicity. A true liberal who believes in the values and philosophy of liberalism can but be tolerant.

You've lived in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the US and Saudi Arabia again. How have these places affected your body of work?

It brought me multiplicity and rich experience [to live abroad]. At the end, man is a result of his experiences, along with his gifts, which crystallize all these into a philosophy of life.

I was born in Jordan in the 1950s, when political and social changes were taking place. This country combines traditional tribal order and a political party system. This influenced me in my beginnings, especially the political side where nationalist and leftist ideas were established in my thought. Indeed, I was a six or seven year old child at that time, but these were my years of formation. Even if these early thoughts did not form an apparent awareness, they were deeply rooted in my subconscious, contributing eventually to my personality and philosophy. Thus, I always emphasize on paying attention to young minds, because who forms those minds is forming the whole world in the end.

I spent my teenage years and early youth in Dammam in the 1960s. It was then that primary ideas started to materialize into an awareness and a behavior. There was an openness to the world of knowledge and political and intellectual streams, and engagement in underground organizations and political trends, especially national and leftist, that were overshadowing the regions.

In the 1970s, in Riyadh, after the six-day war, the death of Nasser, and Black September in Jordan, I began a self-revision, and tried to reconsider ideas which were previously undisputed. Nevertheless, one's soul still hangs to such ideas like a mother who still hangs to her child though he has grown up.

In the US, it was a stage, or an attempt, of rationalism and liberation from old ideas, by finding a new criterion based on filtering any and every idea through a balanced mind, and an approach of doubt until certainty is established. Then, it will be a primary certainty as there is no absolute certainty in this life.

In Riyadh in the eighties, nineties, and the beginning of the new millennium, the approach has become clear, and my view has



been largely determined: mind is the only balance, doubt is the sole method, and life has no meaning without diversity, multiplicity and difference.

Does Hisham Al-'Abir, the hero of your trilogy *Atyaf al-Aziqah al-Mahjurah (Phantoms of the Deserted Alleys)*, represent Turki Al-Hamad, or just portray part of your character?

Hisham Al-'Abir is not Turki Al-Hamad, despite carrying many of his features. Similarly, Kamal Abdel-Jawad held many characteristics of Naguib Mahfouz in his famous trilogy. The hero of any novel must have something similar to his creator. This hero has not fallen from heaven, but a portrayal, in some way, of the author,

even if the similarities are simple. I can say that as God has created man in his shape, the author has invented the hero according to his stereotype. I think this clarifies the difference between Turki Al-Hamad and Hisham Al-'Abir.

You have confronted religious and social norms with defiant statements that break taboos. Do you have any regrets?

Should I ever regret something? I don't believe in invariables in this life. Life is similar to a flowing river, and we cannot bathe in the same river twice, even if we think that we can do so, because the water is never the same—though it looks like the same river. Some people may say that denying norms, especially religious ones, is heresy and blasphemy, if not apostasy. Here, I say that everything has a source or reference determining its track. For example, the gravity of the sun determines the track of planets around it, but let us remember that even the sun is following a cosmic orbit too. Thus, I would say that nothing is invariable except for change, despite the apparent contradiction in the sentence.

Three fatwas have been issued calling you an apostate and permitting your assassination. Are you afraid?

Absolutely not. I have deep faith in our creator, despite all the allegations. I believe in destiny. Thus, I say what I believe true regardless of who is satisfied and who is angry. Their fatwas do not intimidate me, because I know that they claim they are speaking on behalf of God, our Lord, Muslims and non-Muslims, he is not theirs only. Their fatwas are a means to impose their influence on thought and society, so one should stand against them. An Arabic proverb says, 'Pharaoh, what has made you tyrant.' He replies, 'I've found no-one stopping me.' Those people have turned out to be the pharaohs of this age, and they should be stopped for the sake of humanity, and even for the sake of religion which they monopolize, steal and twist.

Some time ago, the Egyptian thinker Nasr Hamid Abu-Zayed passed away. Will those who previously called him an apostate regret it?

Al-Jabri, Arkoun, Ahmed Al-Baghdadi and others also died. Those who called them apostates will not regret it, but the ones who have not benefited from their existence and thought in their lives will. Those who brand people apostates cannot regret, as regret requires minds, and revision of one's thoughts and beliefs. Those callers of apostasy still brand Averroes, Avicenna, Ibn Arabi, Al-Razi and others apostates, though these names are sources of pride in Arab and Muslim civilization. So what will make them differentiate today between Abu Zayd and Averroes, for example?

You reject the politicization of religion and the interference of religion in politics. Do you want complete isolation between religion and politics?

Yes to isolating religious institutions from politics. There is a difference between religion and a religious institution. Religion is a wide space that can have multiple interpretations and understanding. In essence, it is a relationship between man and God. Thus, we may find two people belonging to the same religion but having two different understandings of it, which is not a problem. As for the religious institution, it embodies unilateral interpretation and understanding; consequently, it is incapable of absorbing the flowing and changing stream of life. Hence, there is a shortcoming

in the relationship of the religious institution and its thought that is essentially dictatorial. Eventually, politicization of religion and interference of religion in politics will inevitably lead to despotism, and history proves it.

Do you think there is contradiction between Islam and application of liberalism?

On the contrary, if we understand religion as a wide space, liberalism will be the air in which religious thought can breathe. Here, I speak about religion, not a unilateral interpretation of religion or a religious institution as a representative of religion. In the latter case, contradiction is inevitable, because liberalism is an enemy of unilateral thinking, which the religious institution represents.

Those people have turned out to be the pharaohs of this age, and they should be stopped for the sake of humanity, and even for the sake of religion which they monopolize, steal and twist

Some people see no difference between liberals and fundamentalists as both exclude and belittle each other. Is there a need for more tolerance between the elite, whether Islamists or liberals?

True liberalism can never mean exclusion, at its core is the freedom of choice, its essence is multiplicity. A true Liberal who believes in the values and philosophy of liberalism can but be tolerant. To be liberal, one has to accept the existence of all views and trends, religious or non-religious, providing that these views and trends accept each other's existence. That is to say tolerance is the environment in which all can coexist.

In your column entitled "They Planted...We Ate" you analyze the reasons that led to the Riyadh bombings and the aftermath of 9/11 attacks. How can we combat terrorism?

We can combat terrorism by uprooting its ideology from the beginning, and implanting a culture of tolerance in the youth. I think this is an educational and instructional issue in the first place.

You speak about a difference between the job of the intellectual and that of the politician. Which one is yours?

Maybe I'm a political analyst, but definitely not a politician. If the job of the intellectual is to "sting" in order to restore awareness then I think this is my role, or rather I'm trying to do so.

In your book Arab Culture in the Age of Globalization, you wrote that history is influenced by competition and survival of the fittest. How can Arabs live under globalization?

They have to globalize and free themselves from their illusions, especially the illusions of uniqueness, superiority and progress in the past.

Understated Controversy

Turki Al-Hamad did not start writing fiction until relatively late in life. Though born in Jordan, the young Al-Hamad moved with his family to Dammam, Saudi Arabia. Once there, he did not cultivate the tortured anxiety of a struggling young author, desperate to unleash his work upon the world. Rather, his career as a respected academic and noted political thinker was set against the background of a youth spent debating the ins and outs of Nasserism and Ba'athism. A student in the Sixties and Seventies, when those movements made up a big part of the underground political landscape in Saudi, Al-Hamad's nascent dissidence led to his arrest during his first year at King Saud (then Riyadh) University. After being detained for nearly two years, he saw out the rest of his education in the US, achieving his master's degree from Colorado and PhD in political theory from the University of Southern California. It was not until the mid-Nineties, when he retired from teaching political science at King Saud University, that he began to make his name as a taboo-busting and provocative novelist—as well as contributing to *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* newspaper.

It was his first output that earned him the reputation as one of Saudi Arabia's—and the Arab world's—most controversial authors. Despite—or perhaps due to—being banned in his native country, his trilogy, *Atyaf Al-Aziqah Al-Mahjurah* (Phantoms of the Deserted Alleys), is his most famous work. The novels deal with the young life of the central character, Hisham, as he navigates sexual adventures, tests religious freedoms and probes underground political ideas in Saudi Arabia in the Seventies. It is plain to see the author's personal inspiration, and why the works provoked such a storm. The depiction—if occasionally rather euphemistically—of

a vibrant sexual subculture in the heart of a notoriously puritanical country was always likely to ruffle feathers. Al-Hamad has said: "Where I live there are three taboos: religion, politics and sex. It is forbidden to speak about these. I wrote this trilogy to get things moving."

And yet for the most part, the trilogy, though notorious, is quite tame in its style. One reviewer (of the English translation) generously attributes a very flat tone to an attempt to evoke the monotony of middle class Saudi Arabia in the Seventies. Importantly, it was not the off-limits descriptions of illicit meetings between boy and girl that put Al-Hamad in the full glare of the spotlight. Even the author concedes such societal revelations to be essentially stating the obvious, but at the turn of the century several fatwas were issued against him after the final book in the trilogy was published. These religious rulings cited philosophical aspects of the novels, especially a moment in which a character ponders the relationship between God and the Devil. In the wake of these fatwas, and a statement from Al-Qaeda declaring him an apostate, Al-Hamad quickly sought and received personal security from the Saudi government.

Al-Hamad continues to write fiction and also contributes to *Al-Watan* newspaper. His most recent novel published in 2005, *Riyh Al-Jannah* (Heaven's Wind), is about the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 and examines the life of four hijackers. Such subject matter will naturally garner attention, and it seems that the author is destined never to escape his notoriety. Indeed, Al-Hamad is now in such a position that the actual merit of his work is in danger of being considered secondary to its content. Nevertheless, he cuts a fascinating figure as one of the most prominent liberal Saudi thinkers.

You retired early as an academic professor to devote yourself to writing. Is it difficult to combine an academic career with writing?

In a contradictory culture snapping itself and claiming to be what it is not, and under educational institutions lacking freedom along with societies missing the spirit of tolerance, I say yes.

What is the difference between a thinker who writes a novel and an author who writes a novel? And what do you say in your novels that you can't say in your articles?

What is important is the quality of the product, as well as its message and truth. Otherwise, there are details that have no effect. A novel can express the warmth of experience and the vigor of life, but an article cannot.

What is your readership, the average man or the elitist intellectual?

My reader is rather someone in-between. The elitist thinks I am below the sought level, and the average man thinks I'm higher than what he wants. I'm in-between them both, I am only keen on conveying the idea in the end.

How do you analyze the level of the Saudi novel? And how do you assess the experience of female novelists in Saudi Arabia?

The Saudi novel is moving forward, but has not reached full maturity, even though it is approaching it. As for the Saudi women's experience in writing novels, I think that, in general, it is a literature of revealing what was socially silenced, more than being a novel.

When it comes to you, are your books banned because of your name or their content?

Probably in the past the reason was the content, but now I doubt that. Today, there are Saudi male and female writers who are more daring than me in the past, yet they are not "disliked."

What is your forthcoming project? Do you intend to write a new trilogy?

There is a time for everything, in its own time.

This article was published in The Majalla 7 January 2011

Awaiting the Eisenhower Moment

An Interview with Palestinian Ambassador, Afif Safieh

Few diplomats can match the credentials of Palestinian Ambassador Afif Safieh who has represented the PLO in different diplomatic missions around the world for almost 30 years. In this interview with The Majalla, Ambassador Safieh reflects on the flaws of the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, which seems to have reached yet another dead end, while the Arab world perpetually waits for a repeat of what he calls the Eisenhower moment from the United States.

Maxim Sansour

Few diplomats can match the credentials of Palestinian Ambassador Afif Safieh. Having spent his youth as a political activist—as chairman of the Palestinian Student Union first in Belgium and then in France—Safieh went on to represent the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) as head of Palestinian diplomatic missions in the Netherlands, Holy Sea, London, Washington and finally Moscow.

Today, the 60-year-old Safieh serves as a Palestinian Roving Ambassador for Special Missions, based in London, with frequent trips to the West Bank after having been elected to the Fateh Revolutionary Council in 2009.

In recent times, Safieh has turned much of his attention to documenting his 30-year-long diplomatic journey and is currently working on his memoirs, entitled, *Anatomy of a mission*. As a prelude to his memoirs, however, Safieh has recently published another book, entitled, *The Peace Process* (Saqi, 2010), comprising a collection of lectures and speeches that he had given at different stages throughout his career. The book covers a wide range of topics, including Israeli and Palestinian domestic politics, Palestinian-Arab relations and Palestinian-American relations. Given the recent reports by Al-Jazeera, in which the station purports to have uncovered documents revealing undisclosed concessions by the Palestinian Authority to Israel, the book is particularly timely in retracing the evolution of Palestinian political thought and the unfolding of the peace process negotiations, which now seem to have reached a dead end.

The Majalla met with Ambassador Safieh in London and had the following interview.

Having recently revisited you're lectures and speeches given in the last 30 years of your career, what would you say were the major flaws of the peace negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians?

I think the major flaw was that the Americans adopted the preferred Israeli negotiating approach, which was in part based on the strategy of “let's make them an offer that they can't refuse.” Up to today, too much has been left to the local belligerent parties to sort out, and as we are dealing with two asymmetrical players, the Israelis have always been tempted to dictate the conditions for negotiations. Any Israeli compromise was, therefore, seen as a halfway compromise between their two domestic poles: Labour/Likud, Shimon/Sharon, Bibi /Barak, Livni/Lieberman etc. With this approach the Israelis always felt entitled to set the ceiling of the permissible and dictate the pace of the process.

The result has been a static process that is made of a succession of spectacular non-events. We see a lot of agitation but no movement to the extent that observers have become bored by now.

As for the Arab world, the official strategy has for too long been to wait for the Eisenhower moment, by which I am referring to events in 1956 after the Suez War when it took US President Eisenhower 24 hours to obtain an Israeli withdrawal out of the Sinai. Unfortunately, though, that Eisenhower moment has not rematerialized.

The book is particularly timely in retracing the evolution of Palestinian political thought and the unfolding of the peace process negotiations, which now seem to have reached a dead end

What approach do you think would have been more conducive to the success of the negotiations?

I would have preferred what I call the “de Gaulle” approach, through which the international community would tell the local belligerent parties what the world expects from them on the basis of international law. The Israelis would then be made to understand that they do not have much of a choice. That it's not through their regular elections that they can decide on how much territory they want to condescendingly withdraw from. Peace is too important to be left to the Israelis to decide on. Today, it is manifested that it is territory rather than terrorism that is the obstacle to peace. Israeli territorial appetite is the guilty party. And with the Arab Peace Initiative now on the table for more than a decade, it's clear that the impasse is not due to Arab rejection of Israeli existence but the Israeli rejection of Arab acceptance—because they do not accept the territorial prerequisite, which is withdrawal.

Why do you think that the Eisenhower moment has not been forthcoming from the American side?

There is a debate within Israel on the wisdom of keeping the hilltops of the West Bank, but what is America's interest in

Israel keeping those hilltops? I believe none. There is an expanding constituency in America among decision makers and academics that increasingly believes that it is Israeli obstinacy and the perceived American collusion that has put America on a collision course with much of the Arab and Muslim world. Israeli obstinacy is today destabilizing and delegitimizing a profoundly pro-American regional system.

The problem we have is the interplay between domestic factors in America and the formulation of American foreign policy. There are many in the USA now for whom it is clear that American foreign policy in the Middle East has been hijacked by the very powerful Israeli lobby. (Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin) Netanyahu knows that, and when speaking to his immediate entourage, boasts that he is stronger than (US President Barack) Obama in Washington, and he behaves on that assumption.

And it appears that he is right, for in the three political battles—the confrontation of wills between Obama and Netanyahu—Obama lost all three.

The result of all of this is that each time we are promised American pressure on Israel it appears that the world's remaining super power has the political weight of Luxemburg or even Liechtenstein.

There have been some significant changes in the political activism of Jewish Americans. What do you make of the rise of some groups such as J Street, for example?

I believe that this is incredibly significant, and if I had one criticism of Obama, for whom I have a very favorable opinion, it is that he was unaware when he came to power of the enormous shift that had taken place within American Jewish public opinion. He therefore, unfortunately, relied too much on the old rather new forces emerging out of that community. This is demonstrated, for example, in the disproportionately important role that he granted to Denis Ross in the peace process, which has been extremely detrimental.

I believe that the majority of Jewish Americans today would welcome an assertive American role, and many increasingly perceive Israel's behavior as a source of embarrassment that they are keen to distance themselves from.

Jews as a minority in many countries were at the forefront of the battles for Human rights and civil rights, in America and elsewhere. But in America during the last 40 years because of their connection to Israel, and their unwillingness to criticize it, they were reduced to defending the indefensible, until today, when they have begun to view Israel as a major source of embarrassment and anti-Jewish sentiment.

How can the Palestinians then capitalize on that development?

I think it is one of the great sources of optimism and one should not see it as static. All those interactions are extremely dynamic and I am in favor of intensifying and deepening Palestinian-Jewish dialogue around the world. In so doing, however, we must choose the right interlocutors. It's not with AIPAC [American Israel Public Affairs Committee] that we will make history but with organizations like J Street, which is an authentic Jewish American movement that has opted for a critical approach.



LONDON - JANUARY 14 2003; Delegates, including U.S. Assistant Secretary of State William Burns (L), General Delegate of the Palestinian Authority Afif Safieh (2nd L), British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw (C) and Javier Solana, EU Foreign Policy Representative (R) meet at No. 10 Downing Street, London, for a conference on the future of the Palestinian Authority.

In recent months we have seen a number of moves by the Palestinian Authority to proactively communicate with Israelis, including a public relations campaign that was launched in Israeli media and a meeting at the PA headquarters in Ramallah in which several Israeli politicians were invited outside of the framework of peace negotiations. What do you make of such moves?

That is the right direction and we have to increase the frequency and pace of these types of initiatives. I am in favor of



Image © Getty Images

intensifying the dynamism of the Palestinian national movement and that includes engaging in dialogue not only with the Israeli political establishment but also with public opinion makers and shakers which is what the recent PA moves have sought to do.

I am not expecting a dramatic shift in getting a majority in Israel in favor of what we would consider minimally acceptable, but we have to help expand the minority of Israelis who are today uncomfortable with the status quo.

Historically, we have neglected two sociological components of Israeli community; one was the Orientals and two were the new arrivals from the former Soviet Union. These two components make up 60 to 65 percent of Israeli society. They were the least permeable to our intellectual input, and we have in my opinion to increase the interactions and target these two constituencies for dialogue and the exploration of new modes of cohabitation within the framework of the two state solution.

You mention in your book, at different stages, that Israel is in crisis. Do you still see that?

Israel is actually in a comfortable strategic situation. Their economy is extremely vibrant and their military capabilities are superior to all their neighbors put together. But Israel has a moral, political and existential crisis.

There is an intense debate within Israeli society on what it is to be Zionist or even to be Jewish. The question that is being asked today is not only how appetizing is Israel for the world but also how appetizing it is for Jewish communities themselves, and I believe that Israeli migration out of Israel/Palestine is important to trace.

Many Israelis are becoming increasingly uncomfortable with their own society. Take West Jerusalem, for example, where many liberal Israelis are moving out because they find the atmosphere there suffocating with religious fanatic regressive schools of thought, dominating not only the discourse but the way of life. Israel is becoming increasingly uncomfortable to those segments of their society that are supposed to be the most creative, inventive and modern.

All Palestinian political parties should become aware of the increasing disenchantment of Palestinian public opinion with all the factions

The Israeli government has not seen the gravity of this problem because it continues to bring in new settlers from countries that are economically disadvantaged, as long as they are not Arabs. This why we hear, every now and then, about the discovery of Chinese and Indian Jews, or even more recently it is said that the Pashtuns of Afghanistan are one of the last Jewish tribes. In effect, Israel wants to continually seek demographic reservoirs elsewhere to compensate for Israeli emigration and a continuous rise in the Palestinian population.

All this is mutilating Palestine because we are going to end up with too much demography on that limited geography.

Throughout your public presentations starting from the 1980s you often mention that the political discourse on Palestine/Israel was improving. Many today repeat the same notion, citing recent shifts in American rhetoric on settlements, for example, to be a source of optimism. To what extent do you think that Palestinians can hedge their fortunes on improving rhetoric or discourse?

I think it is extremely important. I always say that Palestinians were subjected to three denials: We were denied our mere physical existence; our rights and our suffering. This is not the case today, and I believe that the discourse and media coverage of the conflict have indeed improved. It is still not fair or even handed, but it improved nonetheless.

In the past, commentators were content with only having an Israeli opinion on matters of importance, but from the start of the peace process onwards there was a heartfelt need to hear the other side of the coin.

I believe that this will continue to assist us especially with technological breakthroughs, such as the internet, which in the USA, for example, has resulted in a parallel flow of information that is compensating for the uneven coverage by a mainstream media that is controlled by pro-Israeli commentators.

Do you think that this parallel information flow has led to any real shifts in US public opinion?

Yes. During my three years in Washington there were many opinion polls that revealed broad non-endorsement of Israeli behavior in the 2006 war in Lebanon, for example. This did not translate on Capitol Hill, which one can consider as another Israeli occupied territory which needs to one day be liberated, but there was a majority in the public who were condemning Israel's massively disproportionate retaliations on Lebanon. There was also the discovery of the American Lebanese community which was sympathizing with their country of origin.

Many today are disappointed with Obama's presidency that had promised so much to the Palestinians. Given the absence of what you referred to as the Eisenhower moment even under a president who seemed so attuned to Palestinian aspirations, what is the future of Palestinian-American relations?

Chomsky recently wrote about the affinity of America with Israel because Israel is replaying the American itinerary.

I say that there are two Americas. There is the America of the early European settlers that had resulted in the almost total extermination of the indigenous population, the America that had expanded shamelessly at the detriment of Mexico, and the one that had institutionalized slavery. That's the America that Israelis would not like to engage and make an alliance with. When Israel refers to shared values with the USA they probably speak of that common experience of confronting indigenous population and elastically expanding settlements.

But I think that fortunately for us there is another America. This is the America of the Founding Fathers that revolted against the colonial power, the America of Abraham Lincoln which courageously undertook a civil war to rid his country of slavery, the America of Woodrow Wilson who came to the Versailles conference after WWI, upholding the principle of self-determination.

And that's the America that we want to make an alliance and engage with, and I believe that Obama represents that other America.

Now we have a choice for tomorrow. Would we like to have an Obama second mandate however disappointing the first mandate was with its undelivered promises? Or should we expect a Sarah Palin-like candidate?

I will not conceal that I am in favor of Obama having a second mandate, because I believe that he has the intellect and ethics needed.

I joked once that the ideal American president for us in the Middle East would be one that combines the following three prerequisites. He would have the ethics of a Carter, the popularity of a Reagan and the strategic audacity of a Nixon. And I said that God forbid that one day we have an American president who has the ethics of a Nixon, the popularity of a Carter and the intellectual agility of a Reagan.

Try, Try Again, But Will You Succeed?

Contemplating the 30 some years of Palestinian-Israeli negotiations can make the head spin. Failure after failure has resulted in a deepening apathy and hopelessness among Arabs, Palestinians and some Israelis alike. While Palestinians become more desperate and divided, they continue to face what looks like many more years of abuse, from land confiscation to house demolitions to assassinations, at the hands of Israeli governments and extremist Jewish settler groups.

As the Israeli public moves further to the right, its representatives are becoming exceptionally defiant (i.e. the ongoing Gaza blockade, the murder of Turkish peace activists, continued settlement building in East Jerusalem and in the West Bank) in the face of western powers, which until now have been unwilling to exert the political capital needed to affect genuine change to the status quo.

How is it that with so much effort did we get here? Palestinian Ambassador Afif Safieh's new book, *The Peace Process: From Breakthrough to Breakdown*, maps the answers to this question through a chronological reprint of a wide selection of his writings, lectures and speeches that start from 1981, when he was a staff member in President Arafat's office in Beirut, and end with his farewell speech in 2005 at the Chatham House in London at the conclusion of his assignment as the PLO representative in the UK.

One of the more striking aspects of revisiting Safieh's writings and speeches is the consistency of the PLO's messaging to the international community throughout Safieh's career. They reveal that while the Palestinians had often seemed, or were portrayed, to be fractured, their proposed solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has remained the same since the 1970s—two states

coexisting peacefully side by side with Palestine created in the West Bank and Gaza after Israel withdraws from territories it had occupied in 1967.

What has changed over the years is not the PLO's acceptance of Israel and of a need for a compromised peace treaty but Israel and the international community's acceptance of the existence of the Palestinians, their grievances and their rights.

Safieh's writings, however, also reveal why despite this gradual realization of the need to address Palestinian aspirations, we still find ourselves reaching one dead lock in the negotiations after another. He cites six key factors for the continued impasse: The Palestinian dispossession of 1948 was not a frozen moment in history but an ongoing process; the objective of successive Israeli governments always was to acquire the maximum Palestinian geography with minimum Palestinian demography; during the years of supposed peacemaking, Israel did not withdraw from territory but continued instead to expand the occupation through illegal settlement; with ceasefires holding in both the West Bank and Gaza, it became apparent that it is territory and not terrorism that is the obstacle to peace; the Arab states' peace initiative has been on the table since 2002, so the deadlock is due not to an Arab rejection of Israel's existence but to Israeli rejection of Arab acceptance; finally, because of its self-inflicted impotence in dealing with Israel, the USA acts with all the political clout of a Luxembourg or even Lichtenstein.

Safieh believes the only answer to the impasse is an elegantly imposed, mutually unacceptable solution, because "the concept of mutual unacceptability carries more potential than the eternal and elusive search for mutual acceptability by two unequal negotiating partners left to themselves to sort it out."

famous historical precedents of a politics based on balance of power have invariably ended with war.

In recent days we saw the publication of the so called Palestine Papers on Aljazeera. Where do you think these papers leave the peace process?

I was unaware that there was a peace process. Anyway, I believe that we can have peace without negotiations because all concerned know what is the desirable, the possible and the acceptable. Negotiations and diplomacy so far have been the best way of delaying the inevitable as long as possible—the inevitable being ending the occupation and the birth of Palestinian statehood. What is lacking is the political will. I have always believed that a territory that was occupied in six days in 1967 can also be evacuated in six days so that the Israelis can rest on the seventh day and we can finally engage in the fascinating journey of state building and economic recovery.

What good, if any, could come out of the release of these papers?

I have been reluctant to get absorbed in the brouhaha of this debate. I do not think that the leak and the spectacle

of poor taste that was shown on TV were motivated by patriotism or altruism.

I am sad to note again that we the Palestinians these days indulge too often in political masochism and show a pronounced politically suicidal propensity. All Palestinian political parties should become aware of the increasing disenchantment of Palestinian public opinion with all the factions.

Undeniably, we should do some soul searching and we need to rebuild a damaged political system through internal dialogue and reconciliation. We should also show more cohesion and accountability in the future. We should aim at a future government of national unity, yet avoid what was previously called in Palestinian circles the "paralytic consensus." Some believe that we are condemned to have either unity but no strategy or a strategy but at the expense of unity. I believe that we can achieve both.

This article was published in The Majalla 24 January 2011

Tunisia: A Changing Picture

Timeline

1883 Treaty of Bardo makes Tunisia a French protectorate, following French invasion from Algeria and despite objections from Italy.

1906 Approximately 34 thousand French colonists have settled in Tunisia, following encouragement from the ruling power.

1942-1943 Tunisia becomes a key arena during World War Two. Allied armies eventually scored a decisive victory over German-Italian forces, ultimately dominating the strategically crucial North Africa.

1945 More than 150 thousand French colonists have by now settled in Tunisia.



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1957 Independence from France is declared, led by Habib Bourguiba, who would subsequently become the first President of Tunisia and implement a process of secular reform.

1965 Bourguiba delivers the Jericho Speech, in which he advocates a just and lasting peace between Israel and Palestine, based on a two-state solution.

1975 Tunisian assembly votes Bourguiba “president for life.”

1985 Israel destroys PLO headquarters near Tunis with an air-strike attack known as Operation Wooden Leg.

1987 Prime Minister Zine El Abidine Ben Ali orchestrates a bloodless coup, in which Bourguiba is impeached on medical grounds and declared unfit to govern. Ben Ali assumes Presidency.

1994 First formally pluralistic legislative elections are held in Tunisia. Few opposition parties are permitted to campaign against the ruling CDR party, which wins 144 of 163 seats in parliament. Ben Ali, as the only presidential candidate is re-elected with 100 percent of the vote.

2009 Ben Ali is re-elected for a fifth term as president, he gains 89 percent of the vote.

2010 Young university graduate Mohammed Bouazizi sets himself on fire in protest at the injustices of the regime, mass unemployment, and endemic corruption. The president visits him in hospital.

2011 Ben Ali is forced to flee the country, following mass demonstrations in the wake of Bouazizi’s death. Interpol issue a warrant for the arrest of the former president and his wife.

Image © Getty Images

Travel journals and tourists alike tend to depict Tunisia as a list of various attractive points of interest. “Things to do” may include a visit to the ancient ruins of Carthage near the country’s capital Tunis, or to the world’s third-largest Amphitheatre at El Djem, or a rare synagogue, a fortress or a picaresque cliff top village. Not to forget the balmy beaches spilling into luscious green forests and the vast stretch of the Sahara desert. Even Star Wars fans would offer Tunisia a nod of approval—as the Hollywood setting for Luke Skywalker’s home planet. Indeed Africa’s northernmost country prides itself on assorted and remarkable vistas, and its population of women is considered to be the most liberated in the Arab region. It was, until recently, a popular spot with sun-sea-sand holidaymakers.

Nonetheless, Tunisia’s assets hint at a troubled history, and these days the region’s picture postcard facade is being recognized as somewhat cosmetic. Until now considered a calm, safe country, Tunisia’s recent turbulence, a result of boiling frustrations over a growing unemployment crisis, reveals the years of simmering problems that bubbled below seemingly cool waters. Many did not associate the region with deprivation. Yet on 17 December 2010, when Tunisia’s political situation was still regarded by the rest of the world as relatively stable, college graduate Mohammed Bouazizi doused himself in petrol and set himself alight in protest after officials confiscated his vegetable cart, leaving him destitute.

Bouazizi’s desperate act ignited a wider flame across the country and the sudden onslaught of an uprising on the ground eventually led to the deposition of its current president, a curtain call on a 23-year-rule during which his party dominated politics in Tunisia. Popular theories concerning how political change may come to Arab countries were challenged by the ensuing events. Although analysts have been aware for the last two decades that Tunisia’s growing youth bulge may turn out to be a political time bomb, Tunisia also debunked the long-held belief that an authoritarian system could not be overthrown by the might of the people alone.

From Troubled Past to Troubled Present

Certainly Tunisia has had a long history of being juggled by successive powers and civilizations and from its position, wedged between present day Algeria and Libya, has seen the arrival of many peoples, who have left behind a diverse cultural imprint—the country’s national symbol, the Jasmine flower, is an Andalusia import. One major population throughout its history has been the Berbers who became particularly known in antiquity for their Mediterranean trading. Relatives and descendants of this group have inhabited North Africa during the last eight thousand years and migration routes show evidence of their travels in prehistoric times.

In 1100 BC, the Phoenicians arrived in Tunisia from the Levant and established their new capital Carthage (New City), which eventually became a master of the Mediterranean’s seagoing trade. When the Roman Empire emerged, 128 years of Punic wars ensued. Carthage’s legendary general, Hannibal, was defeated in the second Punic War during an invasion of Italy in 216 BC. After the third Punic War the Romans annihilated Carthage, selling its population to slavery reinventing it as a Roman city in 44 BC. Tunisia under the Roman Empire flourished, the temple adorned city of Dougga and the elaborate El Djem Amphitheatre still remain in testament to this.

Key Facts



Image © iStockphoto

Capital: Tunis
Independence from
France: 1956
Government:
 Presidential Republic
Acting President: Fouad Mebazaa
Prime Minister: Mohamed Ghannouchi

GEOGRAPHY

Area: 163,610 km²
Bordering countries: Algeria, Libya
Climate: Average 18.4 °C (65 °F)

PEOPLE

Population: 10,432,500
Ethnic Groups: 99% Arab
Religions: Sunni Muslim
Official language: Arabic
Second language: French

ECONOMY

GDP: \$86.086 billion
GDP per capita: \$8,254
Currency: Tunisian Dinar

In the fifth century, the Roman Empire fell and Tunisia succumbed to vandals. The local Berber population rebelled and formed small kingdoms but all were conquered by the Byzantines in 533 BC. In the seventh century Arabs arrived from the East. They established the Islamic city of Kairouan, a renowned center for religious and intellectual pursuits, and remained in Tunisia until the 16th century, when the region became an outpost of the Ottoman Empire—during which time Tunisian mosques were erected in the manner of Constantinople. In 1881, French troops occupied Tunisia with France controlling its economic and foreign affairs and from 1883, Tunisia became a French protectorate. Elements of French culture remain in the region’s language and cuisine, and in some architecture, which has come to be known as Rococo Tunisia. The French established many schools and the language became a symbol of social advancement.

In 1934, Habib Bourguiba founded the Anti-French pro-independent Neo-Dustour party, and by 20 March 1956, Tunisia had become independent as a constitutional monarchy, with the Bey of Tunis, Mohammed VIII Al-Amin, as king and Bourguiba as prime minister. But Bourguiba didn’t wish to share his rule and removed the monarchy not long after. On 5 July 1957 a republic was declared and Bourguiba enjoyed a president-for-life status with far more power than the king had had. He established a strict one-party secular state repressing Islamic fundamentalism and introduced women’s rights under the 1957 Code of Personal Status (CPS), unprecedented in the Arab world. Bourguiba also banned the practice of polygamy and allowed women to divorce. Tunisian national identity grew strong, especially with reference to the country’s independence from France, which is still celebrated during National holidays.

In 1987 Bourguiba was declared senile by Physicians and ousted in a bloodless coup by his prime minister Zine Al-Abidine Ben Ali, who then took to the stand as president.

Ben Ali, with a remarkably preserved slick of black hair and fresh face barely alluding to his 74 years, was born in 1938 into a modest, but respected family when Tunisia was still a French protectorate. As a teenager, Ben Ali participated in the Neo-Destour movement which led to his expulsion from French-administered schools. Ironically after independence, he won a scholarship to military school in France. After studies in France and the US, he moved into army intelligence, and rose through the ranks to become minister for national security in 1985, and then minister of the Interior. In early 1987, Bourguiba appointed him prime minister. Weeks later he assumed the role of Tunisia's second president since independence. Ben Ali promised a move towards democracy and scrapped the status of president-for-life as created by Bourguiba, limiting the number of presidential terms to three. However, as the years passed, Ben Ali would also extend the number of terms he was allowed to serve under the constitution. Ben Ali organized the country's first multi-candidate presidential election in 1999 and won with 99.44 percent of the vote. Although the government allowed few opposing parties which were placed under strict conditions designed to minimize the threat to Ben Ali's supremacy.

In the 1970s, an Islamist movement emerged, culminating in the formation of the Al-Nahdah party in the 1980s. In the early 1990s Ben Ali's party, The Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) emphasized a strong stand against extremism and terrorism, adopting police measures that Ben Ali described as "beyond simple considerations of security." Most Al-Nahdhah leaders were exiled or arrested during this time. Although a hard stance against Islamists drew concern from human rights groups, his tackling the issue of terrorism earned Ben Ali's regime a friendship with Western governments. Additionally Ben Ali established The National Solidarity Fund that aimed to fight terrorism through economic assistance, development and the law, and by providing opportunities to the impoverished—seen as vulnerable to terrorist recruitment. Ben Ali also promoted a moderate foreign policy and peaceful settlement of conflicts and, in support of the Palestinian cause, hosted the first-ever Palestinian American dialogue. Ben Ali's creation of a special fund for the underprivileged and a social security system, while continuing to bolster education and women's rights, earned him the support of Tunisia's growing middle class.

Economic Security

Tunisia's strategic location has long ensured economic stability and its cultivated areas that were once productive to the Roman dynasty still generate a substantial portion of its economy. Ben Ali's RCD party had a manifesto that was ostensibly committed to economic liberalization. During their rule, Tunisia's GDP per capita more than tripled between the years 1986 to 2008, although in 2002 growth slowed to a 15 year low when tourism suffered as a result of various terrorist attacks. The global financial crisis and persistent drought also had negative effects for the economy, but consistent prudent economic and financial planning ensured its recovery. The GDP annual growth for Tunisia averaged nearly 5 percent in 20 years from 1987.

Under Ben Ali, the economy of Tunisia prospered, yet statistics could not reveal a true picture of the region's social situation. Even the World Bank recently praised Tunisia for its handling of the economic crisis. However, while the coastline enjoyed the benefits of an influx of tourism, other areas had been deprived since the reign of Bourguiba. The government invested heavily in education, and 80,000 graduates were produced by the university each year. But the focus on agricultural products, textiles and oil, meant there were few jobs for higher end earners or those with degrees. In unofficial figures 25% of male graduates were unemployed. The government was criticized for failing to design policies that would attract domestic and foreign investment to sectors that would provide jobs for those leaving higher education. The result was a marginalization of graduates in the country as well as regional marginalization.

Astoundingly, in 1989 the French Center for Political and Society Studies bestowed Ben Ali the "Man of the Year" award for his work in promoting human rights in Tunisia, after his handling of the onslaught of drought and locust invasion in the region. Yet Ben Ali's regime was deemed authoritarian and undemocratic by independent international standards of political rights and was accused of interfering with the work of local human rights organizations. These groups slammed the regime that also placed arbitrary restrictions on independent trade and student unions, banned books, tapped phones, used secret police and adopted an intolerant stance towards dissidents, including journalists and bloggers, who were subsequently jailed or exiled. Ben Ali stifled the opposition, kept strong control of the media and armed forces, and small businesses were subjected to suffocating bureaucracy. In all, corruption was rife and those with close or direct links to Ben Ali's family appeared to be better off in the region.

Leila Trabelsi, second wife of Ben Ali, has been described as "Machiavellian" in character and her family likened to a quasi-mafia. Brought up with 10 brothers in the heart of Tunis, she was a hairdresser when she met Ben Ali. When the youth strike movement and demonstrations occurred, "No! No to the Trabelsis who looted the budget," was a popular chant on the streets.

The government moved instantly to try to mobilize its resources but it was already too late.

Ben Ali, and Leila Trabelsi, fled to Saudi Arabia but they and other members of their extended family were the subject of arrest warrants, issued for illegal acquisition of assets and illicit transfers of funds abroad.

A Symbol for Change

Mohammed Bouazizi is now being hailed as a martyr, and as a symbol for change in Arab countries. His life has also become symbolic of an accumulation of years of marginalization and suppression of freedom of expression. When long-awaited change finally comes, it is often startling how relatively swiftly a new picture can be created. Today Tunisians talk of a democratic and pluralistic future. Yet, the country now faces many new challenges.

The whole structure of Tunisian society hangs in the balance and questions remain. Whether Tunisia's strong ties to the West will continue if Islamists prevail in its government, what effect this could have on Tunisia's liberal society, and will Tunisia's economy be successfully maintained? In short, the overriding hope is that Tunisia will not also lose all that it has gained.



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Beyond the Red Carpet

The Dubai International Film Festival

The Dubai International Film Festival, now in its seventh year, continues to distinguish itself from other, more established festivals in the West by selecting films noted for their universal and highly relevant themes, and powerful story lines. By dividing the prizes into Arab and Asian-African categories, Festival Director Masoud Amralla Al-Ali has created a showcase for all cinema from outside the European and Hollywood mainstream. The result is a fascinating glimpse into the imagination of different nations.

Nicholas Blincoe

In the film *The Godfather*, Hollywood producer Jack Woltz wakes to find a severed horse's head inside his bed. In Dubai, the horse's heads are presented to the winners of the film festival competition though they are made of gold and silver rather than flesh-and-blood. I doubt there is any confusion, although when the Egyptian star Bushra heard she had won best female actor, she rose with a scream that electrified the four-thousand-seat auditorium. I was sitting only a few seats away and am almost certain she screamed in delight rather than horror, though there was a split-second when I thought she might fall into my lap, she seemed so unsteady in her crimson taffeta ball-gown.

The Dubai International Film Festival, now in its seventh year, opened with the sweet yet reserved *The King's Speech*, introduced by its star Colin Firth. A whole series of premieres and star appearances kept us entertained, from *Winter's Bone*, a rural thriller from the American independent director Debra Granik, to *The Way Back*, the first film by Peter Weir since *Master and Commander* seven years ago. Colin Farrell, star of *The Way Back*, arrived two days late to give a lively and generous on-stage interview to the festival's programmer Sheila Whitaker, explaining that he had risen from his sickbed to reach Dubai. A life-time achievement award was given to Sean Penn who sent a message apologizing for his absence, explaining that the situation in Haiti required his urgent attention: the kind of excuse that makes the mind boggle and the eyes roll.

The international stars put a very Dubai layer of gloss on what was, at heart, a more complex festival. By dividing the prizes into Arab and Asian-African categories, Festival Director Masoud Amralla Al-Ali has created a showcase for all cinema from outside the European and Hollywood mainstream. The

A whole series of premieres and star appearances kept us entertained, from *Winter's Bone*, a rural thriller from the American independent director Debra Granik, to *The Way Back*, the first film by Peter Weir since *Master and Commander* seven years ago

result is a fascinating glimpse into the imagination of different nations. South Korea, for instance, with its appetite for chilly, even hallucinatory thrillers, was represented by *End of Animal*. Iranian cinema, which wrings tragedies from the most casually observed family stories, was represented by a portmanteau film, *Please do Not Disturb*, and by *Salve*, whose female lead, the veteran actor Kobra Hasanzadeh Esfahani, was a wildly popular winner of the best AsiaAfrica female actor award. A *Screaming Man*, from Chad, won the best AsiaAfrica film, while its star, the tall and elegant Youssouff Djaora, won best actor for his part as a jealous father. Like Bushra, Djaora had to pass my seat to collect his trophy, and though there was never any danger of him falling into my lap, he looked exhausted by the to-ing and fro-ing as his film eventually won three awards to add to the Jury Prize it received at Cannes.

Many of the films competing for the Muhr Arab Feature prize combined social issues with sweeping melodrama, providing an array of roles for strong women. Bushra's portrayal of a woman taking revenge for sexual abuse in *Six, Seven, Eight* faced fierce competition from, among others, Nadine Labaki as a reluctant bride in *Stray Bullet* and Marah Jabri—niece of the much-loved comic actor Naji Jabr—as a Syrian-Jewish girl discovering her roots in *Damascus with Love*. Even the more naturalistic *Transit Cities*, a Jordanian film that won the Special Jury Prize, had its own strong woman: Saba Moubarak, who is being tipped for stardom. Iraq, meanwhile, seems to be expressing its fears for the future via films of disorientated travelers on nightmarish journeys. Where the recently released *Sons of Babylon* focused on a woman's search for her son, *The Singer* tells the story of a crooner lost in Baghdad as he tries and fails to reach a party for a violent and unpredictable dictator; while *Leaving Baghdad* vividly conveys the helplessness of a refugee passed hand-to-hand by people smugglers.

The Dubai International Film Festival is also unique in its commitment to short films and documentaries, which is why I was in the city. My wife, director Leila Sansour, previewed a rough cut of her documentary, *The Road to Bethlehem*, the recipient of Dubai film festival's Enjaz award. Her film tells the story of a city but also charts Leila's relationship with her father. It looks as though father-child relations might be a defining feature of new Palestinian films, reflecting the passing of the generation of the Nakba. The self-explanatory *My Father* from Haifa is a warm and engaging film that picked up the audience award as well as the Jury Prize. *This Is My Picture When I Was Dead* is a chillier affair, unable to develop its story or characters after the decision to focus on a single frozen moment when a son witnesses the assassination of his father.

Jean-Luc Godard gave Alphaville its strange futuristic look by aiming his camera in the opposite direction to every other filmmaker who filmed Paris. Dubai's film festival aims its gaze away from the studio-driven mainstream, providing film lovers with a unique opportunity to spot trends before they gather the weight and pace of truly global phenomena. All this and Bushra in crimson, holding a horse's head – where else but Dubai?

Nicholas Blincoe – Author and screenwriter living between London and the Palestinian city of Bethlehem. He writes regularly for "The Guardian" and "The Telegraph." "The Road to Bethlehem" will go on theatrical release in time for Christmas 2011.

This article was first published in The Majalla 6 January 2011

At the Vanguard of Contemporary Arab Cinema

An interview with writer and director, Amin Matalqa

Amin Matalqa, an Arab-American filmmaker, achieved critical acclaim with his latest film, Captain Abu Raed. Matalqa speaks of the growth in the quality and quantity of films produced in the Middle East, and their increasing originality, openness and creativity. He speaks of his passion for film and for the way the cinema captures the depth and diversity of human behaviour.

Noam Schimmel

Amin Matalqa is an Arab-American filmmaker based in Los Angeles. His last feature film, *Captain Abu Raed*, set in Jordan, was described as a “humanistic triumph” by The Hollywood Reporter and met with tremendous success around the world among audiences and critics alike. It won a range of awards, including Best Director at the 2008 Seattle International Film Festival, Best Feature—World Cinema at the 2008 Maui Film Festival, World Cinema Audience Award at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival, 2008 Heartland Truly Moving Picture Award and Heartland Crystal Heart Grand Prize Award, Outstanding First Feature at the 2009 Palm Springs Film Festival, Best Screenplay at the 2008 Beirut International Film Festival, and the Best First Feature at the 2008 Durban International Film Festival.

Captain Abu Raed tells the story of a custodian at Amman’s international airport, who, with the help of a pilot’s hat, finds his calling: to enchant the children of a disadvantaged neighborhood of Amman with tales of travel, exploration and daring. Initially unwilling to play the role of storyteller and insistent to the children that he is merely a simple custodian, Abu Raed eventually succumbs to their enthusiasm and faith. He transforms a mundane discovery into an opportunity for cultivating relationships that energize and inspire him and liberate the children—and other community members with whom he interacts. In the process he is able to share some of the wisdom he has gained as an elderly father, and to aid the most vulnerable members of his neighborhood.

Matalqa grew up in Jordan until the age of 13, when he moved to the US in 1989. He has made over 25 short films and studied at the American Film Institute where he received his master’s degree in Fine Arts.

Currently there appears to be tremendous growth in film production in the Arab world as well as increased frameworks for distribution, such as new film festivals in the Gulf states. Are there any dominant trends, stylistic or thematic that you’re finding in contemporary Arab cinema?

I’m not sure what the trends are but I’m happy to see that there is now a community of Arab filmmakers who have made one or two features and continue to battle to get their films made as part of their daily grind. Five years ago this was almost non-existent. There were only a couple of names that we knew about. Now there’s a group and healthy competition among each other, which will only increase the quality of films emerging. I’ve seen some amazing comedies like the Algerian film *Masquer-*

ade, and the Palestinian film *The Time That Remains*. I also heard that the Lebanese/Swedish film, *Ball*, from Joseph Faris is great and funny. So hopefully the trend keeps some healthy room for comedy, because we need escapist entertainment to fill theaters. But entertainment can have a special meaning behind it. Having said that, I have a really fun comedy I can’t wait to make in Jordan late next year that is completely meaningless, and I love it.

You are not only the film’s director but also its writer. How did you conceive of the story? How did it evolve?

It’s a long story, but in a nutshell it started in 2005 shortly after my grandfather passed away. Organically I built layers upon layers of the story with each rewrite until 30 drafts later I had found the right balance of story, character, drama, comedy and minimal dialogue. The best realizations came as I found myself taking things out. I learned from the process that less is more.

How was the film received in the Arab world? It includes some serious and extensive social critique on issues of class/poverty, gender and social conformity. How did the Arab public and critics respond to this?

For the most part, the reception was great. A lot of support. There are always those few who gripe that you’re portraying something negative about the Arab world, but those are people who failed to see that the story is universal—with problems you can find anywhere around the world—which is also why the

Captain Abu Raed tells the story of a custodian at Amman’s international airport, who, with the help of a pilot’s hat, finds his calling: to enchant the children of a disadvantaged neighborhood of Amman with tales of travel, exploration and daring



film played well to international audiences. I hope that with time it will continue to be discovered by new audiences in the Middle East. It has yet to play on TV. Distribution is still a big weakness in the Arab world.

Tell us about your personal journey to filmmaking and writing.

I'll simplify it by saying that if you follow your heart and work hard; you will find that the universe somehow comes to help you. Everything in *The Alchemist* has been true in my experience. I feel very fortunate. And there is a struggle, but you have to find a balance and enjoy the journey. My love for filmmaking is not because I want to be rich. Making movies is a poor man's journey for independent filmmakers. You have to do it because you truly love creating and capturing behavior. Some people call it telling stories. I prefer to call it capturing behavior. That's the best part of making movies. How people interact.

Images of Arabs and the Arab world in Hollywood are often one-dimensional, stereotypical and pejorative. Captain Abu Raed is totally different in the way in which it so intimately, vividly and respectfully renders Jordan and Amman in their depth, diversity and complexity. Can you describe your relationship with Arab culture generally and Jordanian culture more specifically?

I'm a mutt in that I have Jordanian, Palestinian and Lebanese blood in my mix yet I left Jordan at an early age when I was 13 and have since become very Americanized in my mentality and need for individuality. But at the same time I am constantly hungry for the European experience, either because I'm nostalgic to my childhood where I traveled with my parents to Europe, or because I'm haunted from a previous life where I was in either France or Germany. So at the end of the day, I sincerely see myself as a mixed bag of different parts of the world and I try to stay open to new experiences to widen my horizons. I am Arab-American and my roots started in Jordan, but I grew up in Ohio, yet my home is in Los Angeles—where my dogs live.

Are you involved in Jordan's new film school in Aqaba? If so, how?

Only in that my wife was one of the founding members and continues to work there. I am very proud of the enthusiasm they have in this program. It's quite amazing.

What are your plans for the immediate future in terms of directing/writing? And long term?

A new movie is going into pre-production next week. I can't announce it yet because it's for a studio and it's up to them to publicize it.

What is your greatest pleasure as a filmmaker? And your greatest challenge/frustration?

Creating. Writing. I love writing. I love working with actors and coming up with shots. I love the entire process. The collaboration. It is pure joy when it works. You build a family with each film. The biggest frustration is how long it takes to get the financing together, and of course distribution is a very tricky tough business. I also love when the music marries with the image at the scoring stage.

At the Vanguard of Contemporary Arab Cinema

Until the beginning of this century, Jordan was not a place one would associate with filmmaking. Yet its vast and unpopulated desert landscape, world-renowned historical sites, and mixture of Bedouin and Arab cultures have provided a number of directors with ideal locations for their films. The more well-known examples are *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, shot in Petra in 1988; *Lawrence of Arabia*, filmed in Wadi Rum desert in 1961; and most recently, *The Hurt Locker* (2008), and *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009).

In light of Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Qatar's successful bids to become cultural centers of the Middle East, it is not surprising that Jordan has followed suit. Filmmaking in Jordan began to gain momentum in 2003 when The Royal Film Commission was established with the aim of developing an internationally competitive film industry. Among its offerings are fully equipped film studios and training programs for aspiring filmmakers. Now in its ninth year, the commission has been pivotal in attracting foreign filmmakers, who, in total, account for the production of roughly 30 films since its founding. At the same time, however, the commission has been slow to produce its own films: three in 2007, two in 2009, and three in 2010.

One potential remedy for this is the Red Sea Institute of Cinematic Arts in Aqaba, which is essentially the film-training counterpart of the commission. According to writer Noam Schimmel, who covered this topic in November 2010 for *The Majalla* ("Art for the Next Generation: The Red Sea Institute for Cinematic Arts"), 21 students are currently enrolled at the school, where they learn practice and theory, in programs largely modeled off of the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts. The graduating class of 2010 has already gone on to participate in several well-known American workshops, programs and internships in the hopes of producing short films for the year to come. In a region apparently on the brink of change, these young filmmakers have a historical opportunity to use the popular medium of film to reflect on their own roles and those of their communities, while communicating their feelings and experiences to an international audience.

How would you describe your creative writing process?

Lots of walking with my dogs early in the morning and handwriting for hours and hours everyday. Lots of asking questions and searching for something special. I always ask myself why I care about what I'm writing and why the audience will care. And I also love learning and researching.

This article was first published in The Majalla 20 December 2010

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Obama Paradiso

The Obama Syndrome: Surrender at Home, War Abroad by Tariq Ali

Verso 2010

Tariq Ali's new book, The Obama Syndrome, would be a great trailer for an upcoming film. It tantalizes the mind and titillates the senses, and, like any movie preview, only leaves the reader wanting more. The thesis, at its core, is robust, and its supporting arguments are largely cogent. On more than one occasion, however, the author's pen seems to run too far ahead of the reader, leaving unexplained claims in its wake.

In the preface to his new book, *The Obama Syndrome*, Tariq Ali makes a curious disclaimer about the thematic scope of his most recent work. "This is a preliminary report on the first 1,000 days of the Obama administration," Ali writes. "Nothing more."

The transparently self-effacing description is both accurate and misleading. Ali's work is indeed preliminary, but, by definition, so is any Obama-themed book published between now and the end of the Obama presidency. Written right before the midterm elections in the US, Ali's book has a minimal shelf life, and one that, by now, may have even expired.

Nevertheless, the temporal parameters of the book allow Ali to structure his narrative around a unique moment in recent political history. On the eve of impending political change, the author looks back on the nascent presidency of a man who rode into the White House on a message of change, and a list of promises that, according to Ali, he never meant to fulfill.

True to Ali's disclaimer, *The Obama Syndrome* is loosely structured like a "report." Like any good reporter, the author aggregates facts and quotations, and uses them, in tandem, to construct his own analysis of recent presidential history. But in Ali's skilled hands, facts and citations mingle freely with metaphor and hyperbole, creating a hybrid form of poetic argumentation that's enjoyable to consume, but sometimes difficult to digest. There's plenty of reporting to be sure, but there's also plenty of textual frivolity. And whenever Ali favors the latter over the former, his rationality flirts with sensationalism, and his poetry soon devolves into punditry.

Given the book's abbreviated scope and temporal limitations, it's more appropriate to think of *The Obama Syndrome* not as an investigative report or expository essay, but as an extended trailer for an upcoming film. It titillates and teases with strangely pleasurable relentlessness. It consistently invites the audience to take a look behind the curtain, to meditate on a particular argument or camera angle, before hurriedly cutting to the next scene. Ali's tactics are tantalizing, but far from satisfying.

Then again, *The Obama Syndrome* isn't really intended to "satisfy." Its aim is to enlighten, to excavate, and to intrigue—all of which it does, but to a disappointingly limited extent.

Ali's brief work is divided into three parts. The first chapter attempts to contextualize Obama's election in light of Ameri-

ca's intertwining racial and political histories. The second addresses the president's foreign policy agenda, with particular attention paid to both Afghanistan and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And the third, titled "Surrender at Home," zeroes in on Obama's domestic shortcomings—namely, those related to healthcare and financial reforms.

In each act, Ali adds more factual weight to his claim that Obama is, as he says, nothing more than "the Empire's most inventive apparition of itself." According to Ali, America's 44th president has firmly committed himself to pursuing the same, neo-liberal economic agenda that spawned the financial crisis, and the same, misguided foreign policy agenda that Ronald Reagan planted, and George W. Bush took to terrifying extremes. At home, he's blatantly pandered to corporate interests, while slyly casting himself as an idealist who's just trying to do the "right thing" amidst a cruel sea of political reality.

The thesis, at its core, is robust, and its supporting arguments are largely cogent. On more than one occasion, however, the author's pen seems to run too far ahead of the reader, leaving unexplained claims in its wake.

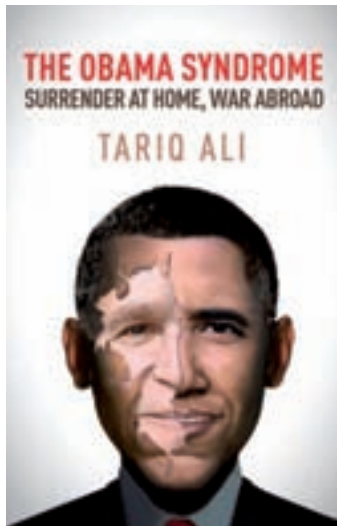
Ali may spend several pages laying the foundation for a single argument, only to glide over seemingly important details and implicitly declare them as absolute givens. This habit is particularly egregious in the second chapter, when the author makes a series of declarative statements on the mechanisms underpinning diplomatic chess in the Middle East, without offering sorely needed support.

Fortunately, Ali's prose is commanding enough to distract the reader from his occasional oversight, and organically rhythmic enough to keep the narrative moving forward. But this powerful prose can also backfire, and bloat intrinsically sobering arguments with superfluous, and sometimes self-contradictory fluff.

Ali repeatedly chastises Obama for delivering remarkably eloquent, and stunningly vacuous speeches. Yet, he could easily apply the very same critique to his own writing. Case in point: "As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan showed few signs of subsiding, the Orwellian mediasphere continued to proclaim 'peace is war' and 'war is peace.'" Pot, meet kettle.

Meanwhile, the author's use of metaphor ranges from the clumsy ("Sadly, no political drug has been developed to cure the cancerous corruptions of US politicians") to the downright absurd ("Proximity to power has an unsurprising ability to mutate a politician's spinal chord into bright yellow jelly."). At other moments, his fiery rhetoric comes across as grouchy, and unnecessarily vindictive. At the end of the first chapter, for instance, he brutally excoriates Michelle Obama's anti-obesity campaign for no real reason, whatsoever.

It's the kind of attention-grabbing, quote-manufacturing language that dilutes an otherwise well-reasoned book. But it's also the perfect lexicon for a compelling movie trailer—one that skims the surface, stimulates the senses, and piques the imagination. And, as with every great movie trailer, *The Obama Syndrome* only leaves the reader wanting more.



This article was first published in The Majalla 27 January 2011

REPORT

Waiting for Change

*The Iran Stalemate and the Need for Strategic Patience
Iran Task Force issue brief*

Atlantic Council, November 2010

*As part of the Iran Task Force series for the Atlantic Council, journalist and Iran expert Barbara Slavin thrashes out the difficulties facing US-Iran relations. In *The Iran Stalemate and the Need for Strategic Patience*, Slavin sifts through the political, economic and cultural aspects of the country, arguing why the US should remain patient as it waits for internal changes in Iran. But this wait might be a lengthy one, and the international community may not have the time as Iran pursues its nuclear ambitions.*

Iran expert Barbara Slavin commences the Atlantic Council's issue brief, *The Iran Stalemate and the Need for Strategic Patience* by outlining the history of US-Iran relations, examining the political environment and detailing the complexities of the economy. Slavin's policy prescriptions recommend the US take a mixed approach, putting certain pressures on Iran while offering other incentives. This, she argues, must be accommodated by a more tolerant attitude towards Iran until US diplomacy effects change or the country witnesses its own internal transformation.

While Slavin's recommendations seem solid, her ideas depart slightly from prevailing perspectives on the issue. Even in the introduction to the installment, written by US Senator Chuck Hagel and Ambassador Stuart Eizenstat, administering further sanctions against the country or resorting to force are mentioned as distinct possibilities for the near future. Beyond this, there is a history of a multilateral crack down on the country, as nations have issued sanctions on Iran over its non-compliance with the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty and uttered public condemnations over the government's harsh techniques and human rights abuses. It's difficult to back peddle and show patience with such a track record.

Hagel also mentions that future Iranian leaders may view the West more benignly, in which case US tolerance and patience may be the perfect prescription to allow Iran to develop a new public image and enhance their relations with the world. This would be a positive development, but it's not a likely one.

To bolster the argument that Iran may be more pro-West in the upcoming years, Slavin argues that the country is better educated now, with an 80 percent literacy rate, and a growing number of university graduates. The report applauds the apparent growth of the Green Movement, in spite of brutal government oppression, particularly after the 2009 election. Since the movement espouses liberal, democratic values, Slavin is hopeful these ideas will infiltrate the government. She also cites conservative party tensions and growing dislike of President Ahmadinejad as further support for her prediction of change. Yet these political and cultural variables may not lead to a transformation.

In an article for *Foreign Policy*, Hooman Majd argues that Green Movement leaders define themselves not as a revolutionary group aimed at regime change, but instead as a civil rights

movement, aimed at legitimately reforming the government. Such reform is a slow process. Majd also notes that some Iranians are leaving the Green Movement, as they want to create a party that aims at revolution. If this is the case, then the Green Movement is actually losing some political clout. Does the US have enough evidence to justify a strategy of restraint—and risk giving Iran more time to enhance its nuclear capabilities?

The focus of the report is refreshingly holistic and does not place Iranian nuclear issues at the crux of its argument. However, a comprehensive background on Iran's nuclear endeavors, which dates back to the 1950s, supplements the report. This portion of the report, authored by Dr. Olli Heinonen, says that uranium stockpiles in Iran are growing, but there has been a marked slowdown in the pace that the country has pursued nuclear projects. Heinonen argues that this dynamic "will give negotiators time—one to two years—to solve the enrichment-related issues."

Twenty-four months is hardly a long time. And how much of this period can be spent waiting? On 6 December, Iran finally walked back to the negotiating table after a 14-month break, and though more negotiations are set for January 2011 in Istanbul, they will likely not yield any results, as reported by Reuters news agency.

The two-pronged approach Slavin recommends for the US is to apply pressure to Iran by continuing sanctions, targeting the oil industry, and condemning human rights atrocities. But she also suggests the US offer incentives via strong outreach efforts to the Iranian public. Such measures might include academic exchanges for younger Iranians and offering western medical treatments.

She also notes the need for inclusion of Iran in multilateral forums as the direction of Afghanistan is solidified. The fact that both the US and Iran share a common interest in the stabilization of Afghanistan is a very useful point on which diplomatic engagement with Iran might continue. Thwarting drug trafficking and quelling the rise of the Taliban are problems that are best tackled collectively. If the US and Iran can compromise using Afghanistan as a starting point, perhaps achieving a bargain on Iran's nuclear program might also be possible.

Slavin only spends five paragraphs discussing sanctions, addressing more their economic ramifications (inflation) rather than their cultural impact, such as how the sanctions have hurt children and lower income families the most. A depressed economy gives Iran a strong rationale to continue its pursuit of cheap nuclear energy. And if Iranian political leaders continue to blame the West for their economic woes, the US also risks this sentiment filtering into future political regimes.

Slavin says the US must practice patience and restraint while avoiding "overreactions that could set back Iran's political development." Calming overreactions is commendable, but the US would have to tread a very fine line in order to not be perceived as silent on—even accepting of—the polarizing issues that saturate Iran's political environment. Hopefully what this report will do is inspire policy makers to utilize creative incentives and capitalize on exploring the bargaining options that relate to Afghanistan.

*You can read the Atlantic Council's report in its entirety at this address:
<http://www.acus.org/publication/iran-stalemate-and-need-strategic-patience>*

*This article was first published in *The Majalla* 4 January 2011*

After Tahrir Square

Adel Al Toraiifi

There can be no doubt that the protestors in Cairo's Tahrir Square have proved their point regarding the departure of President Mubarak. However, those who have followed the situation in Egypt for years realize that the departure of the president may not change the conditions in Egypt; in fact, living conditions could perhaps get worse.

Today, it is difficult to review and assess the regime of President Mubarak in a rational and balanced manner because of the state of popular upheaval that we are witnessing. However, if we can say anything, it is that President Mubarak should have stepped down in a dignified manner a long time ago. His era has witnessed successes, and many significant mistakes, but over the last 10 years in particular, there have been signs of old age and senility at the top levels of Egyptian power. Subsequently, the country sank into a debate surrounding the possibility of hereditary rule, and different wings of the National Democratic Party competed to monopolize money and power, amidst poverty and discontent, with some state institutions—most notably the security agencies—becoming mere instruments of the regime, rife with corruption and authoritarianism.

Despite all this, Mubarak's era being solely held responsible for the deteriorating conditions in Egypt will not help to resolve this crisis. Rather, the problems afflicting Egyptian society will likely get worse before they improve in the long run.

Within a few months, Egyptians will be able to elect a new president, amend the constitution, and achieve an elected parliament; yet solving the problems of the Egyptian state may take decades. Seven-hundred thousand Egyptians enter the job market each year; 417,000 of those are high school or university graduates, whilst only 18 percent of this figure will have graduated from technical or medical departments. These statistics are compounded by the declining overall level of education in Egypt, which is now globally classified as ranking 106 out of 130 countries. Not only this, but the Egyptian state has created one of the most bloated bureaucracies in the world. In other words, the state and the public sector employ more people than is strictly required. The state has also financed projects to support services and basic needs in a manner that is beyond the country's economic capacity in a bid to buy the silence of the poor. This is not to mention Egypt's population explosion, which means that for decades, Egyptian state institutions will be unable to find solutions to housing or health problems, or rectify poverty levels in the country.

The Egyptian government is dependent on six major sources to achieve economic growth: tourism, oil and gas revenue, the Suez Canal, foreign investment, remittance for expatriate employment and foreign aid. Any future government must protect the three sources that have been affected by the current crisis: tourism, foreign investment and foreign aid. In "Hold the Applause," published in *Foreign Policy* in February, David Mack has warned against rushing to applaud the events in Egypt because the challenges of economic and structural reform will perhaps be too much for any one or two generations to overcome,

especially if food prices and unemployment continue to rise, tourism declines, and foreign aid and investment shrink. In this case, Mack writes, "the US media and armchair theoreticians of democracy in the United States will be able to walk away at the end of the day. The Tunisians and Egyptians will not."

Currently, many fear the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, and this fear is justified, yet it is not likely that the Muslim Brotherhood will be able to form the next Egyptian government on its own, either due to their inability to acquire sufficient votes, or for fear of international reaction. As a result, we are likely to witness short-term coalition governments. Today, Egyptian expectations are higher; their criticisms will be greater now that they are aware that they possess the power to force change at any time. If this were to occur, Egypt may cease to function internally, amidst partisan and political conflicts that could last for decades.

Within a few months, Egyptians will be able to elect a new president, amend the constitution, and achieve an elected parliament; yet solving the problems of the Egyptian state may take decades

As you can see, the problems in Egypt cannot be solely blamed upon the president, or corruption during his presidency. This is because, according to international reports, there is a widespread culture of corruption and bribery, inefficiency, and a lack of accountability in all aspects of society. Thus, the coming days may pose greater challenges, because the stability that Egypt lived through for three decades—albeit in a non-democratic manner—ensured tremendous growth in tourism, and foreign investment. Assuming that tourism will continue and develop, foreign investment may not grow to the same extent, because investors will become unsettled by the magnitude of changes that Egypt may undergo in the coming phase with regards to its legislative and economic framework.

In his important book, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Samuel Huntington said, "Judging on past experience, the two most influential factors in the stability and expansion of democracy are economic development and political leadership." Any researcher who knows the political reality in Egypt is aware that there are many social and traditional obstacles preventing this.

The Tahrir Square youth have been able to make their voices heard by the world, but the crucial matter here is not one of objection and protest—for others have tried this in many other countries—but rather in transforming these protests into political and economic gains. That is true success.

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