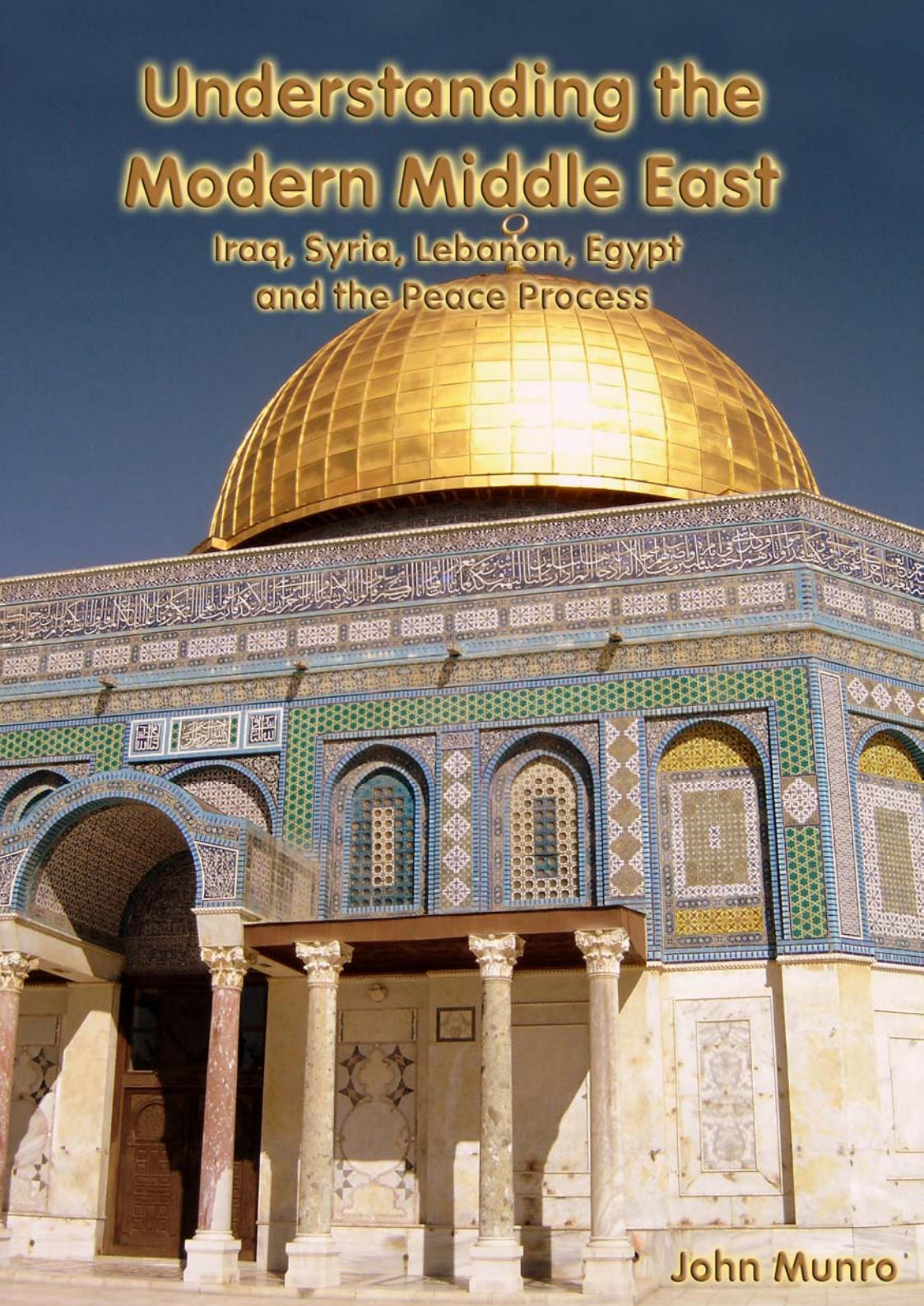
Understanding the Modern Middle East

Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and the Peace Process



John Munro

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Preface

The Middle East is always in the news and most of the time it is for the people of the region doing unpleasant things to either one another or to outsiders. Why do they do it? Why can't the Arabs and the West get along? The answers to these questions are not simple. Partly they are embedded in history; partly they are a consequence of what goes on today. Either way, what happens in the Middle East affects us all and we should try to understand.

What follows is a series of essays about the Middle East, originally delivered in the form of talks for an audience of members of U3A. Hopefully, they will help to make the situation a little clearer. We begin by trying to answer the big question: why don't the Arabs like us? After that we look more closely at individual countries in the region - Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt - and conclude with a review of the peace process. Finally, a short bibliography has been added to help those who may wish to learn more.

To unravel the manifold complexities of the Middle East satisfactorily would require a far more ambitious work than this and a far more knowledgeable observer. But hopefully this series of essays will provide a useful introduction to a subject that has an important bearing on all our lives.

John Munro
November 22, 2008

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Introduction

In speaking of tensions between East and West we should remember it is an age-old phenomenon that long pre-dates the Crusades. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus described it as a conflict between Greeks and Persians, which took place on and off between 490 B.C. and 479 B.C. And he couldn't make up his mind whether it was a cultural conflict exacerbated by political issues, or a political conflict exacerbated by cultural issues. This mirrors the debate over East and West today. People like Samuel Huntington, who has written about a "clash of civilizations," would bet on the former. The administration of George W. Bush and indeed most of its predecessors would argue it is primarily a political problem, which, if the right formula can be found, is capable of being fixed. Let us look at both points of view. The politics:

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Britain began to pay serious attention to the Middle East. It was the gateway to the jewel in Britain's imperial crown, India. Also, oil had been discovered in Iran in 1908 and it was known that significant reserves existed in Iraq, although it was not until the early 1920's that these were seriously exploited. Clearly, Britain had strategic interests in the Middle East and its policy during World War I was dictated by the need to protect them.

World War I pitted Britain, France and Russia against the Central Powers of Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, Germany and the Turkish Ottoman Empire. In a bid to undermine Ottoman control over the Arabs, the British High Commissioner in Cairo, Sir Henry McMahon, entered into correspondence with Hussein Ibn Ali, the Governor of the Hijaz (the heart of modern Saudi Arabia) promising the Arabs independence from the Ottomans if they joined forces with the Allies to defeat them. (This was the political context in which T.E. Lawrence was dispatched to Arabia in 1917 with orders to bring the tribes on board).

At the same time, Britain and France, united in duplicity, were also negotiating a deal that contravened this arrangement. In the event of victory, France and Britain decided that the Arab World should be divided between them, with Russia getting Constantinople (now Istanbul), strips of land on each side of the Bosphorus and some Ottoman provinces on Russia's border. France was to have hegemony over Greater Syria (i.e. Syria plus Lebanon and a sliver of Palestine) plus Lesser Armenia, that is to say eastern Turkey. Britain would gain hegemony over the Ottoman provinces of Basra and Baghdad in Mesopotamia. The remainder would become a federated Arab state divided under British and French spheres of influence. This was known as the Sykes-Picot agreement, named after the two men who formulated it.

This, clearly, was a betrayal of the Arabs by the West. But there was worse to come. This was the so called Balfour Declaration of 1917, in which the British Foreign Secretary promised Lord Rothschild, head of the Zionist Federation, "the establishment in Palestine of a National Home for the Jewish people." True, Balfour also said it should be "clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine," but clearly, in his mind, the Zionists had priority. Eventually, with the creation of the State of Israel on Arab land in 1948 and Israel's subsequent occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, the latter part of Balfour's arrangement was ignored. Since 1948, the UN has passed a number of resolutions condemning Israel for a whole range of abuses relating to Jerusalem and Palestine, which Israel with American backing has largely ignored.

Today, the Palestinians - and by extension, other Arabs and many Moslems elsewhere - regard western attitudes to Israel as the main issue that divides them.

More generally, the West has been inconsistent vis-à-vis the Arabs with regard to democracy and human rights. Ironically, during the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century, while Europe's governing bodies were gradually ceding power to their peoples, there was

no corresponding effort to promote democracy abroad. On the contrary, firmly convinced they were dealing with people whom the British poet of empire, Rudyard Kipling, described as "lesser breeds before the law," France and Britain firmly suppressed any sign of popular revolt. This happened at Danshawi in Egypt in 1906, when the accidental death of an Egyptian woman provoked local outrage and a disproportionately brutal response by the British authorities. It happened in the 1920's when France put down a Druse rebellion in Syria. It happened in Iraq shortly afterwards, when the British bombed Iraqis seeking self-determination, killing several hundred people.

The colonial powers also ran roughshod over existing ethnic realities, pursuing a policy of divide and rule, whose repercussions still haunt us today: as in Sudan. There the authority of the Christian/animist south was boosted to provide a counterbalance to the Moslem north. Another tactic favoured by Britain in the Middle East was to give power and protection to minorities at the expense of the majority Moslem population: for example the Christian Copts in British mandated Egypt; the Christian Maronites in French mandated Lebanon; Alawi Moslems in French mandated Syria. This practice also built up resentment.

The colonial powers also had a habit of concentrating authority in self-serving elites whom they were able to manipulate (which happened just about everywhere). By actively supporting puppet regimes throughout the region, Britain and France not only inhibited the development of a genuine civil society in their mandated territories but also helped foster a culture of political entitlement among the chosen few, paving the way for the largely illegitimate regimes who now govern in their place.

It should also be noted that when Arab countries did gain their independence, it was in most cases given reluctantly (as for example Britain's partial handover of power in Egypt which left British troops there as well as joint control of the Suez Canal with France). Sometimes, independence was granted so reluctantly that it came only after a series of coups and other forms of blood-letting (as in Egypt and Iraq). And in most

instances, when after World War II, when Arab independence was eventually granted, any sense of responsible Arab nationalism was severely inhibited by Cold War rivalries. Instead of being able to consolidate their newly won freedoms, the Arabs had to contend with the Western Allies and the Soviet Union vying with one another to bring them to their respective sides. Thus, the United States initially backed the World Bank's offer of funds to build the Aswan High Dam but later took away its support when Nasser demonstrated his determination to nationalize the Suez Canal and throw in his lot with the Soviet dominated Non-Aligned Movement. The dam was later built with low interest Soviet loans.

In short, the Arabs have reason to complain about the way they were treated during and immediately after colonial rule and these memories persist. Ironically, in light of later events, we should note that the United States was highly regarded during most of this period. In 1919 the King-Crane Commission was set up by the League of Nations to assess the reaction of the people living in the lands which had been divvied up under the terms of the Sykes-Picot agreement. The commission found that the indigenous population would rather have no mandatory power governing them at all but if someone had to, the United States would be preferred. It was only after a period of unwavering support for Israel after 1948 that America's once favoured status in the region was undermined.

In other words, there are many political reasons why the Arab world should resent the West. But, if the sources of tension were purely political, one might assume they might eventually be negotiated away. But, according to Edward Said, author of the hugely influential book *Orientalism*, politics influenced cultural attitudes as well.

Because the West regarded the Arab world through imperialist eyes, it made sweeping, patronizing assumptions about the Arab identity, which had less to do with rational observation as racial prejudice. For some, Arabs were devious, untrustworthy, sly and cowardly; for others, ironically, drawing inspiration from a romanticized view of Bedouin culture prompted by the western concept of Rousseau's "noble savage," they were

immensely hospitable, true to their word, brave and loyal to their kin. Neither view was based on objective analysis. Rather they were perceptions derived from western cultural conditioning. Arabs were regarded as anthropological specimens rather than real people.

That attitude is still prevalent. The feeling persists that Arabs are not like us; they are alien creatures who think and act differently from the way we do. And all too frequently that "difference" has been attributed to one primary source: Islam.

Islam has generally received a bad press in the West. Partly, this is due to history; memories of the crusades and the colonial period reverberate until today. There also exists the perception that Islam is a simplistic faith, essentially a book of rules, whose appeal is primarily to God-fearing, narrow-minded dogmatists.

Indeed, there is a whole range of western misconceptions about Islam. Actually, Christianity, Judaism and Islam, have much in common. All are Abrahamic religions. That is to say, they all spring from the same root. They share the same common values: moral equality is taken for granted as a basic human characteristic: rank is to be achieved by competition among equals, not awarded at birth to members of an aristocracy. Islam and Christianity also share the fundamental belief that all men are born equal before God and that all human beings, though subject ultimately to God's will, are born free and should strive to gain positions of honour and respect among their fellows and salvation in an afterlife. In addition, Moslems make a sharp distinction between those whom they call "dhimmis," (followers of the book) and those who do not have a sacred text, such as Hindus, for example. This means that genuine Moslems have no trouble respecting the teachings of other faiths which preceded Islam, namely Judaism and Christianity.

True, in Europe today, there are few who pay anything more than lip service to the Christian faith. Therefore, the problem in Europe is not so much between Islam and Christianity as between Islam and secularism,

what the French call "laicisme." This may be loosely defined as a body of Christian values filtered through the European Enlightenment and generally demystified. These values we may summarize as respect for individual freedom and the rule of secular as opposed to religious law. Most people today regard these values as immutable and assume everyone should respect them. In short, most westerners no longer follow God's word per se but the path of reason as articulated by good men. This is something most Moslems find difficult to accept. In Islam the law is God's word, not man's. What is written in the Holy Koran subsumes secular law: hence the problem that arises in the West over such issues as the Koranic injunction for women to be modestly dressed, which in secular societies translates frequently as gender discrimination.

Islam as a faith, emerged in sixth century Saudi Arabia, when the word of God was revealed to the Prophet Mohammed, who is seen as the last of a series of messengers of Allah to humans; these include besides Adam, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. The Islamic message was written down in the Holy Koran and supplemented by the words and deeds of the Prophet, the sunna, which were later codified in the Hadith. These two sources, the Koran and the Hadith, are the basis of Sharia (Islamic law), which covers all aspects of religious, social, economic and political life, including government and the conduct of war.

All Moslems are expected to perform five duties - the so called five pillars of Islam, which are: to say at various times that "there is no God but God and Mohammed is His messenger"; pray five times a day facing Mecca, the Prophet's birthplace; take part in noon prayers every Friday; pay zakat (i.e. a charitable tithe); fast from dawn to dusk during the holy month of Ramadan; and at least once in a lifetime make the hajj, or religious pilgrimage to Mecca.

These precepts all Moslems are expected to observe. However, like other religions, Islam has also had its schisms. The most important is that which separates mainstream (Sunni) orthodoxy from Shiism. Shiism came about after the Prophet's death, when his responsibilities were taken over by the

Caliph Abu Bakr, and then Omar ibn al Khattab and Othman ibn Affan, who was later assassinated. During this period, Islam steadily extended its influence but without the dominating personality of Mohammed, there were persistent quarrels among his followers. Eventually, the rule of Caliph Ali ibn Abu Talib, a cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed was challenged by Muwaiya ibn Abu Sufian, and a civil war ensued. At the battle of Karbala, Ali was slain, which led his followers to split from the religious mainstream, claiming they were the true keepers of the flame, because their leader was directly descended from the Prophet rather than simply an associate. From these bloody beginnings Shiism was born, an offshoot of Islam which today exercises broad influence in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, Pakistan and lesser influence in Saudi Arabia, where in the Eastern Province, incidentally the centre of the Saudi's oil industry, they are a significant minority.

Both Shiites and Sunnis accept the basic tenets of Islam (i.e. the five pillars). Where they differ is mainly in terms of rituals and practices. In general, Shiites tend to be more radical and extreme in their views. The massacre at Karbala still weighs heavily on their sensibilities and each year at their main festival of Ashura, there is much lamenting and self-flagellation as they recall the sacrifices their forebears made to keep what they regard as the true faith.

While there are several other offshoots of Islam-Alawi Islam, for example, practiced by Syria's ruling family, which we shall look at later - the only other one of international significance is Wahabism. This emerged in Saudi Arabia in the late eighteenth century under the leadership of Mohammed ibn Abu Wahab. Generally speaking, he was appalled by the way Islam had drifted away from what he regarded as its pure essence. He was particularly incensed by the way some Moslems were resorting to saints as intermediaries with God; he disliked ostentatious display; banned music, jewellery and fancy clothes and even ordered the destruction of minarets from mosques. Notably, he promoted the idea of armed jihad to purify Islam and directed most of his ire against the

Shiites, whom he thought were mainly responsible for the corruption of the Islamic faith. Such was his antipathy that he ordered his followers to attack and loot the Shiite shrine of Karbala in 1802, which further exacerbated relations between the two sects.

Today, the Wahabis exert a powerful influence throughout the Arab World. This is not necessarily because the majority of Arabs respond to this puritanical branch of Islam. Equally, if not more important is the fact that the Wahabist Saudi royal family and its supporters have won over many Sunni Moslems by dispensing charity on a monumental scale throughout the Moslem world and elsewhere. And, as we know to our cost, in some instances the Wahabis have supported armed jihad against the West, which it regards as irredeemably corrupt. The Wahabis also continue their support for Sunnis in Iraq, where extremist elements have gone so far as to blow up Shia mosques and massacre large numbers of their so called brothers.

This brief, broad-brush account should not be regarded as a complete picture of Islam. For one thing, it does not take into account the fact that today many Moslems wear their religion as lightly as many self-confessed Christians. Specifically, many Moslems today do not regard jihad as "armed struggle" but see it more as a moral obligation to uphold their faith in the face of what they would regard as decadent Western influences.

More importantly, this brief sketch does not take into account the fact that Moslems, often regarded as emotional fanatics, have at times wrestled with the over-arching concern of all who profess to be religious: the relationship between faith and reason.

While all true Moslems take absolute faith in God as basic to their faith, this is not to say they have not from time to time subjected their religion to rational analysis. Originally, this came about with the introduction of Greek philosophy into the Islamic world but common sense suggests that even without such intervention many thoughtful people would have

questioned the absolute authority of the sacred texts anyway. It must have struck many that the Koran, being a finite document, could not provide authoritative guidance for every aspect of human and social behaviour. Therefore, it was argued, intelligent readers ought to be allowed to re-interpret the holy book in order to align it with the dictates of reason. This move was backed by the eighth-century Abassid Caliph, Ma'moun who, perhaps cynically, recognized that his authority would be enhanced if he could control the experts and thereby influence their interpretation to reinforce his political decisions.

This arrangement led to some confusion and a rift developed between those who sought a free interpretation of the sacred texts, the so called rationalists, or Mutazilis, and the traditionalists, who were led by Ibn Hanbal, whose authority eventually triumphed. This did not lead entirely to the defeat of reason, however; what it meant was that henceforth rational explication was limited to examining the legal implications of the sacred texts but it was generally accepted that reason should not be extended to impose limits on God's word. The true believer had to accept God's word as it is. Any seeming absurdities that this might lead to were taken as evidence of the inability of human beings to grasp the infinite potentiality of God's awesome power.

This, incidentally, is not unlike the position of the Roman Catholic Church, as articulated in Pope John Paul II's 1998 encyclical letter, where he describes the "chief purpose of theology" as providing "an understanding of Revelation and the content of faith." Reason and faith, Pope John Paul wrote, naturally support one another, each "offering a purifying critique and a stimulus to pursue the search for deeper understanding." Therefore, those who believe in the possibility of inter-faith dialogue should take courage from the fact that where reason is concerned, some Moslems at least believe there are no theological obstacles to rational debate and, more importantly, their religion is dynamic, not set in stone.

The Middle East following the Post-war Dismemberment

Unfortunately, Ibn Hanbal and his followers stifled theological debate in the Arab world for several centuries and it was only in the nineteenth century that Egyptian thinkers such as Al Afghani and Mohammed Abdu, strongly influenced by western philosophers, revived the liberal, rationalist tradition.

In short, far from being the anti-western, blinkered literalists, as Moslems are frequently portrayed by westerners, Moslems just like Christians, have subjected their holy texts to rational scrutiny. Moreover, like Christianity itself, Islam has also been open to outside influences. That an Arab Enlightenment failed to take hold in the Arab World - a phenomenon much lamented by such hostile western critics as Bernard Lewis, for example, in his book *What Went Wrong* (i.e. with the Arabs) - is probably due to a number of factors. Without doubt, the most important has been the impact of colonialism, which pushed many Arabs into a posture of defiance and encouraged them to believe that salvation lay not so much in adopting western ways as reviving traditional Islamic values.

This is apparent from the words of Hassan al-Banna, the Egyptian founder of the Moslem Brotherhood, who in 1928 told his followers to abandon western materialist ways which had brought them neither status nor dignity. They should return to the traditional values of Islam. Soon afterwards, al Banna and his companions founded the Moslem Brotherhood and undertook a series of acts of sabotage and assassinations in Egypt, designed to undermine the British occupiers and their local surrogates. Later, in his so called Testament, written in 1942, al Banna laid down what he thought should be his movement's guiding principles. These were primarily the rejection of western materialism, which founded as it is on "practical and technical knowledge, discovery, invention and the flooding of world markets with mechanical products," is "incapable of offering to men's minds a flicker of light, a ray, a grain of faith, or in providing anxious persons the smallest path to rest and tranquillity." It would be better to return to first principles, because unlike true Islam, the "materialistic life of the West can only offer him as

reassurance a new materialism of sin, passion, drink, women, noisy gatherings and showy attractions which he has come to enjoy."

This puritanical anti-western strain is a continuing theme in Arab thinking. Pious Moslems look around them and see what they call "jahiliya," literally the state of godlessness, immorality and social breakdown that existed before the Prophet Mohammed received and proclaimed God's message. They want change and the more extreme among them believe that violence should be used to achieve it. This combative strain is seen in the later writings of the Egyptian Said Qutb, whose paranoid ramblings have inspired several young Moslem activists in Europe and the United States to become terrorists.

The predominantly God-fearing masses also see that the Arab ruling elites engage in much the same kind of behaviour that al Banna and Said Qutb criticize. In fact, the disparity between the way Arab elites behave and the traditional values the masses continue to espouse has done much to undermine the authority of Arab regimes among their own people. This is especially true in countries which the West continues to regard as its allies, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, for example. In both countries there has developed a dangerous schism between the rulers and the ruled. Those in power treat their people with something like contempt, at times playing up to their puritanical sensibilities, by encouraging the censors to ban the showing of sexually explicit western films, for example. They will promise justice for all but will allow those breaking the law who have political influence to go free. They will say they respect freedom of speech but will unleash their brutal internal security forces on those who engage in political protest. This kind of hypocrisy is especially apparent in Saudi Arabia, where the rulers go to public mosques and pray ostentatiously with the masses and refer to their subjects as "brothers," while pursuing a lifestyle that most westerners would consider outrageously decadent.

That the United States has promised to bring democracy and human rights to these countries but has made few practical steps to foster their development, has also not gone unnoticed. To Arabs the US attitude seems to be: we don't really care how you govern; what we do care about is your oil and your support in the war against terror. This has caused widespread resentment. As Lawrence Wright notes in his recent book, *The Looming Tower*, an analysis of the development of Al Qaeda, many young Moslems have turned to extremism mainly out of feelings of powerlessness and humiliation, derived from their experience under the rule of their illegitimate regimes, who profess to govern in their name but deploy most of their energy to remaining in power.

Although I have tended to focus on what divides East and West, we should not ignore the fact that many Arabs, especially the younger generation, in spite of what we may deduce from the media, actually like certain aspects of western culture. The lines outside the visa sections of western embassies attest to that. In general, they like western films, western music, western clothes, McDonald's and they covet a western education. The more thoughtful among them may also cherish western ideals - especially the American ideal - which offers the prospect of increased economic prosperity and equality before the law.

But, as I have tried to show, this enthusiasm for the West is tempered by differences over politics and culture. The former we may be able to change, the other, perhaps we shouldn't even try to. In the final analysis, while the Christian West and the Arabs have much in common, we also differ in some very fundamental ways. Therefore, while we may be able to smooth out some of the differences that tend to divide us, we should not assume that we will ever sing from the same song book. In the final analysis, we are different, though whether we are superior is open to debate.

It is important to note that Christianity and its secular manifestation focus on the individual; Islam focuses on the community. The Bible is full of

stories of lost sheep going astray, prodigal sons being forgiven and concern for society's outcasts. Also, God sent his only son to redeem mankind. On the other hand, as the great Arab thinker Ibn Khaldun noted, assabiyah or group solidarity is what counts. What matters most to Moslems is not the individual but the community, the umma. Hence, a Moslem is more likely to be motivated by honour - in the face of the family, the tribe, the umma; the Christian is more likely to be moved by his conscience. That is why some British Moslems ignore their inner voice and have resorted to violence in the face of perceived injustices directed towards their community. That begs the question: which is more sacred, the individual or the community?

As I noted at the beginning, the East-West debate has been going on for a very long time. That said, we should not necessarily deduce that east is east and west is west and never the twain shall meet. Though the two faiths may differ with regard to the primacy of the individual and the community, the importance of honour and conscience, this does not mean reconciliation is impossible. Honour and care for the community are just as likely to be Christian concerns as Moslem; both acknowledge the call of conscience and value the worth of the individual. It is only ignorant extremists from both sides who provide fuel for the fire.

Unfortunately, at the moment, the extremists appear to be setting the agenda. And let us not forget, America's fundamentalist Christian right are no less toxic than the Taleban. We may ridicule a bunch of hotheads running about with dish towels on their heads frothing at the mouth and screaming "Alluh al akbar." But equally deserving ridicule are the Christian fundamentalists (cynically co-opted by the Zionists), who believe that God's chosen shall inherit the earth after the Jews are fully restored to their kingdom of Judea and Samaria with Jerusalem as its undisputed capital. Log on to rapture.com and weep. It is people such as these on both sides who have transformed what could have been a civilized debate into a Manichean struggle between good and evil.

There is no doubt that culture is a complicating factor in relations between the Arabs and the West but as I have tried to show, it should not be an insuperable obstacle to mutual understanding. For the moment, the West is obsessed with terrorism and believes it has the right to impose its will on the Arab world, especially when the high price of the Arabs' main resource, oil, is imposing severe strains on the world economy. On the other hand, Arabs see little genuine sympathy for the Palestinians' legitimate desire for self-determination and resent the West's over-bearing attitude towards the things they hold dear. Add to that the region's elitist regimes clinging to power, though generally derided by their own people; the intensifying competition for markets and natural resources; the impact of a global media choking out traditional cultures; the widening gap between rich and poor nations - and the widening gap within nations; plus the general apprehension and insecurity that globalization has brought with it, and you have a climate of fear and uncertainty that encourages people to take refuge in the immutable values of their traditional cultures, to withdraw into worlds where they feel comfortable and secure. And, incidentally, nowhere is this more clearly illustrated than in the recent race for the White House where the exotic Barack Obama arouses fear and mistrust among conservative, white voters.

In such a climate, when in America Creationists insist on having their wacky, Bible-based theory of the origins of the universe implanted in the curricula of American high schools, and on the other, when people like Dr. Zaghloul Al-Naggar continue to speak to the masses through the columns of *Al Ahram*, the Arab World's leading newspaper, about the absolute omniscience of the Holy Koran, we may doubt the likelihood of being able to bridge the space between East and West. Even so, we should not despair. As I said earlier while much may divide us politically and culturally, there is also much that can unite us. But as long as ignorant extremists on both sides influence the agenda, there is little hope for genuine accommodation.

Making sense of Iraq

In speaking of Iraq, once again, a good place to start is the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, when the three main allies, Britain, France and Russia, divided up the Middle East among them. As part of the deal, Britain gained control over the Mesopotamian provinces of Basra and Baghdad. Later a League of Nations arbitration committee in 1921 added Mosul. In other words, present day Iraq is an artificial construct that was initially designed to serve Britain's imperial needs.

While World War 1 was still raging, Britain had staked its claim to southern Iraq as a sphere of influence and had made clear its determination to control communication between southern Mesopotamia and India and in the other direction between southern Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean. As for northern Iraq, this initially was supposed to be under French control. But in 1919 France gave up its claim in favour of Britain in return for a share in oil revenues from the region.

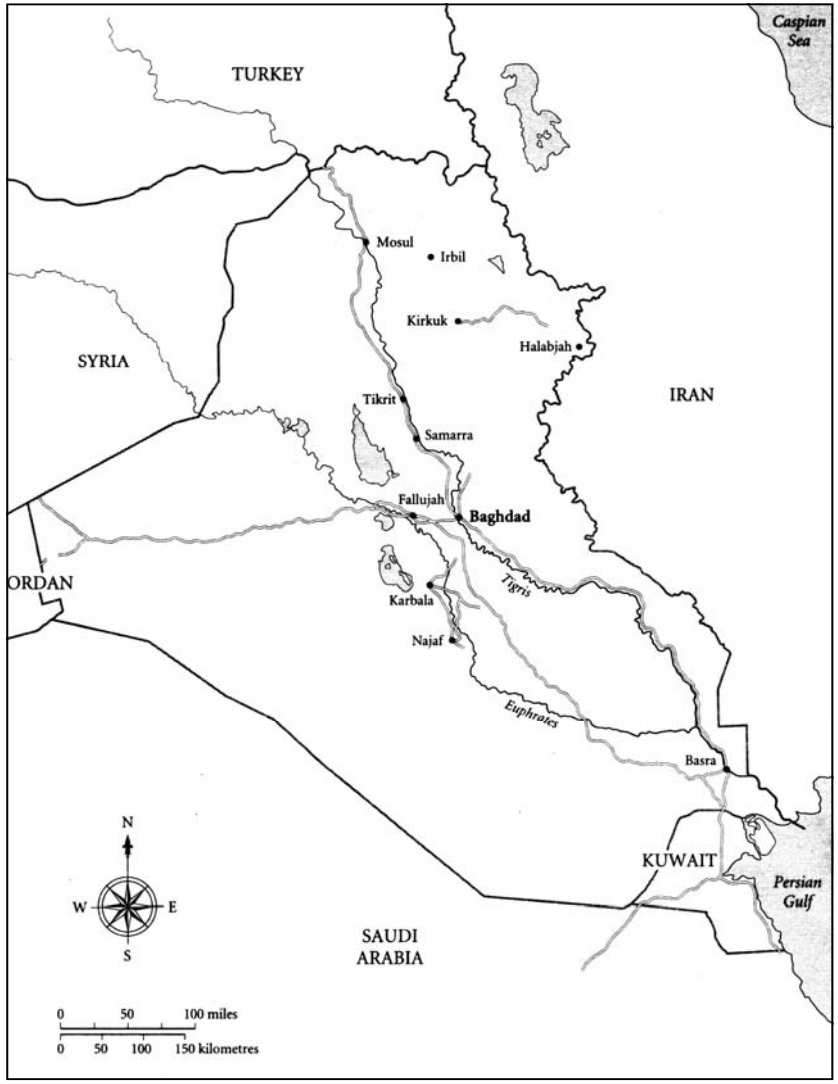
From the outset there was controversy in British government circles as to how Iraq should be governed. When the British first marched into southern Iraq in 1914 they envisaged a military occupation, similar to their occupation of India: that is to say a semi-independent unit of empire with a viceroy who reported directly to Whitehall. It was only as British and Indian troops approached Baghdad in the spring of 1917, in a campaign delayed by a catastrophic defeat at the hands of the Ottomans at Kut in 1916, that the British gave serious thought to an alternative arrangement. Eventually, it was agreed that British authority should be exercised by a group of Arab notables under British control.

Therefore, when General Maude, Commander of British forces entered Baghdad in 1917, he emphasized that the British were coming as "liberators" not "conquerors." He also expressed the "sincere hope" that an alliance between Britain and the Iraqi people would enable "the Arab race to rise once more to greatness and renown among the peoples of the earth."

Sound familiar? Donald Rumsfeld said pretty much the same thing on April 29, 2003, when US forces entered Iraq. America was coming to free the Iraqis from tyranny, he said, not to turn it into an American dependency.

The "alliance" that General Maude - and later, Washington - envisaged was flawed from the beginning. The population of Iraq is not homogeneous. In the south of the country the majority is Shia Moslems but there is also a Christian community in and around Basra. Around Baghdad Sunni Moslems is the most populous grouping, though many Shiites also live there. In the north there are primarily Kurds, also Sunni Moslems, but they differ from other Iraqi Sunnis by reason of language, customs and traditions. Also living in the Kurdish region is a sizable Christian community, Turkoman and a sprinkling of Yajzidis and Zororastrians. To complicate matters further, tribal agreements and affiliations, which in some instances subsume religion, also exist. These arrangements can also be quite fluid; some last for months, others for years. We should also note that Iranian and Iraqi Shiites undertake pilgrimages to study at each other's centres of learning, at Iraq's Karbala and Najaf and Qom in Iran. Today, the most prominent Shiite leader Ali Sistani and many of his followers speak both Arabic and Farsi with equal facility.

As for the Kurds of northern Iraq, they have kinsmen in neighbouring Turkey, Iran and Syria, to whom they feel closer than with either Iraqi Shia or even Iraqi Sunnis. In the Kurdish area itself, power is divided between two main factions: the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), followers of the Barzani clan; and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), followers of the Talabanis. Previously at each others' throats, they are currently allied.



Iraq

In short, the population of Iraq is far from homogenous. As the Americans have discovered - but should have known from the British experience - Iraq is not a country that lends itself readily to centralized governance. In spite of Saddam Hussein's brutal attempts to impose a sense of Iraqi identity and national unity, he was never able to eradicate his countrymen's strong tribal loyalties. Finally, we should also note that Washington's recent attempts to enlist the support of some Sunni tribes - often called the "Sons of Iraq" - but not others, have arguably contributed to the likelihood of Iraq's future fragmentation. In trying to do peace-keeping on the cheap, they have probably made Iraq potentially even less governable than it already is.

Economics also plays a powerful role in pulling the country apart. Wealth is not evenly distributed. The area around Kirkuk in the north is the centre of an oil-producing region; the central Sunni heartland is relatively impoverished; in the mainly Shiite south there is the Rumeila oil field oil and its attendant refineries, while the port of Basra on the Shatt al Arab waterway is an important centre of commerce. That the former Sunni leadership comes from the most deprived part of Iraq and is still smarting from having been removed from the power they enjoyed under Saddam Hussein, also points to trouble ahead. They will be looking to fellow Sunnis in the region to bolster their status, perhaps encouraged by the US, which remains fearful of Shiite Iran and may wish to play the two groups against one another.

The irony is, of course, that history should have provided ample warning about the difficulty of an outside force imposing order over Iraq. The British - just as the Americans did later - ran into trouble from the start and were never able to overcome local resentment against their rule. When they tried to set up their administration, the former Ottoman governor of Basra called for a revolt against the occupiers and a number of tribes joined in. In 1920, there was a nation-wide revolt that had to be quelled by British air power, which left many Iraqi civilians dead, an act of aggression which stoked up fierce hostility against Britain which lasted until Iraq gained full independence.

The 1921 revolt pushed Britain to set up a local puppet regime which it hoped would be loyal to its wishes. They installed the Hashemite prince, Faisal, who proved to be deeply unpopular. Even the granting of nominal independence in 1932 did little to improve relations. What particularly irritated the Iraqis was the fact that, under a previous agreement, British troops had remained on Iraqi soil. Moreover, the British were given something close to illegal immunity and Iraqis had no control over their foreign policy.

All this should sound familiar. Initially, after the invasion, the US opted for a new government rather than rely on existing political realities. They disbanded the army and banned former Baath party members from holding official positions. Then they cobbled together a parliament of mainly former Iraqi exiles, selected in accordance with the supposed numerical strengths of the individual communities. Just as Britain's political experiment failed, so did the American.

But the British didn't give up. In 1931 they installed the pro-British Nuri al Said as prime minister. He was later ousted in a nationalist coup led by Rashid Ali Gailani in 1941, which the British eventually put down. Then they brought back Nuri al Said once again. But his pro-western stance alienated popular feeling, especially his insistence on joining the pro-western, anti-Soviet Baghdad Pact and his refusal to condemn Egypt's aggressors, Britain and France in the 1956 Suez war. These acts not only undermined Nuri al Said's popularity at home but brought about Iraq's virtual isolation among other Arab nations. He was finally ousted in a military coup led by Brigadier Abdul Karim Qasim in 1958, which resulted in his assassination and the murder of several members of the Iraqi royal family.

In 1963, Abdul Karim Qasim was himself overthrown, this time by Iraqi Baathists, a political party which espoused a mixture of Soviet-style socialism and Pan Arabism. There followed a period of political turmoil as rival Baathist factions squabbled for power and after a series of coups

and counter-coups, in 1979 Saddam Hussein emerged as the main player. Once installed, he set about consolidating his hold on power.

Of course, one should not press historical parallels too closely: the American experience does not have to end with a dictatorship. Still, there is little doubt that America's attempt to control Iraq has run into the same kind of trouble experienced by the British. Moreover, the long term outlook looks like ending with something the Americans could hardly have envisaged: dominance by a single political grouping, most probably hard-line Shiites backed by Iran.

Up until 1979, as we have seen, the Iraqi people had little opportunity to experience political stability. It is hardly surprising therefore that Iraq was unable to establish a durable civil society. However, with the installation of Saddam Hussein, things actually took a turn for the better. He spear-headed a program of economic and social reform which among other things improved women's rights, nation-wide education and health care. He also managed to instil in most Iraqis a sense of national identity.

Unlike the rulers in the Gulf, who lavished their oil wealth on glitzy projects and subsidies - read bribes - which were designed to tamp down political dissent at home and abroad, Saddam Hussein initially tried to turn Iraq into a genuinely modern state. He also earned the support of the United States. Later, of course, it all went wrong. Harbouring dreams of becoming a reincarnation of the charismatic Pan-Arab leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Saddam established a personality cult and installed his psychopathic sons, Qusay and Uday, in key positions. Then he began to spend lavishly on palaces and monuments and in spite of his Baathist credentials, engaged in a bizarre campaign to burnish his credibility as a Moslem hero by seeking to emulate the glory of Baghdad's eighth century Abbasid caliphate. Towards the end he lost the support of the majority of the Iraqi people and had to rely on his internal security forces to keep order. But during the first few years of his Baathist rule he was generally hailed as a hero both at home and in the rest of the Arab world.

That Saddam Hussein was able to embark on an ambitious reform program was of course largely due to the revenues he derived from the country's oil industry. Oil was known to exist in Iraq even in Biblical times, when it was used in the form of bitumen to caulk boats and build houses. It was initially exploited by the Turkish Petroleum Company (TPC), an offshoot of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC), which discovered oil in richly exploitable quantities in 1927 in the Kirkuk area of Kurdish northern Iraq. This had the effect, among other things, of making Palestine strategically more important, as the oil was to be pumped through Palestinian and what is now Jordanian territory to the Mediterranean.

In 1931, the TPC was reconstituted to become the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC). Oil output quickly began to soar and by World War 2 Iraq had become a major strategic asset for the western allies, to be protected at whatever the cost. Therefore, when Rashid Ali Gailani engineered a nationalist coup in 1941, Britain intervened militarily to ensure that the oil would keep flowing. There were casualties on both sides and a residue of ill will.

Smarting from this military intervention, in the late 1940's the Iraqi government began to demand an increasing share of IPC's oil revenues. After the 1958 revolution, Abdul Karim Kassim turned the screw even tighter, issuing a decree in 1961, which deprived IPC of 99.5% of its holdings. In June 1973, IPC was fully nationalized. The debate over Iraq's oil revenues still continues. It is the main sticking point in negotiations between Iraq and the US and internally among Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds, who after five years are still unable to determine how the wealth should be distributed.

Besides being fired-up over oil revenues and resentment against the British, Iraq's confidence was bolstered during much of this period by the Soviet Union. The Soviets had been gaining influence in Iraq during the rise of the Baathists and although they suffered a setback when the

Baathists turned against their pro-Moscow, communist supporters and expelled them from government, the Soviets still felt that Iraq was a useful ally. Therefore, they were willing to provide not just political support and military hardware but also oil industry expertise, which enabled IPC to manage its petroleum affairs.

One of the factors contributing to the Iraqi government's decision to nationalize IPC was the so called October war of 1973 between the Arabs and Israel, which aroused a great deal of ant-western feeling. Interestingly, Iraq did not join the ensuing oil boycott of the West, preferring to look after its own best interests. For all their Pan-Arab sympathies, the Iraqi Baathists have always tended to put Iraq's interests first and that of their Arab brothers a distant second.

Then came the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1979 and the return of the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini to Tehran. When Khomeini's supporters took over the US embassy there and held its staff hostage for 444 days, the US realized Iraq might be a useful ally in its fight against a new enemy: a radicalized Iran. Washington also realized that Iran's growing Shiite Islamic fervour was undermining the confidence of America's traditional Sunni allies in the Gulf and, not coincidentally, threatening the West's oil supplies. Something had to be done. Therefore, the US began to send substantial shipments of arms to Iraq (a policy recommended by Donald Rumsfeld, no less, at this time Special Presidential Envoy to the Middle East under US President Ronald Reagan). Meanwhile the Americans also sought to undermine Iran's influence by stirring up trouble with the Kurds, whose ties to Iran, though less strong than they had been under the Shah, were still important.

We need to treat the Kurds separately from the rest of Iraq. During Ottoman times, they were continually opposing the central authority in Constantinople and during the nineteenth century Kurdish nationalism steadily grew. At the 1920 Treaty of Sevres which was supposed to formalize the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, they were promised

independence. However, at the later 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which eventually superseded Sevres, there was no mention of a Kurdish homeland. Instead, the Kurdish region was tacked on to the existing provinces of Baghdad and Basra to form what constitutes modern Iraq.

Yet the Kurds continued to nurture nationalist aspirations. During World War 2 the Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani led a failed rebellion against the British; he was forced to flee first to Iran and later to the Soviet Union. Following a change of regime in Iraq in 1958, Barzani returned home to back the new Iraqi government. His Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) was formally legalized, its constitution declaring that "Arabs and Kurds are associated in this nation" (of Iraq). Barzani then presented the Iraqi government with a plan for autonomy, which Baghdad rejected, provoking another outbreak of hostilities. Fighting went on intermittently between 1961 and 1966, when it was agreed that there should be official recognition of the Kurdish language and proportional representation in the civil service.

What the Kurds really wanted - and still do - is a state, not limited autonomy. At this time, they thought their goals might be achieved by directly opposing the central government. And up to a point they were successful. Eventually, after more fighting there was yet another agreement. This time the central government agreed to recognition of the Kurds as one of the two "nationalities" of Iraq, with Kurdish being one of Iraq's two official languages.

In the 1970's, fighting broke out yet again. This time the Kurds were openly supported by the Shah of Iran and covertly by the United States, which hoped to weaken the pro-Moscow regime in Baghdad. For a time, it looked as though there might be civil war but this was averted by the 1975 Algiers accord, which obliged Iran to cut off military support for the Kurds and led to the exile of Barzani in Tehran.

But the Kurdish problem did not go away. It simmered on to the end of the 1970's and broke out more fiercely when Iraq became bogged down

in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, otherwise known as the First Gulf War. Although on this occasion Saddam Hussein had considerable Western and Arab backing, the war turned out to be a costly stalemate. Hundreds of thousands of lives were lost and many tens of millions of dollars were spent. The only discernible outcomes were the consolidation of Khomeini's revolution in Iran and, thanks to the support that Iraq had received during the war from the US and others, Iraq's emergence as the most powerful military force in the region (barring Israel).

As for the Kurds, they had gained nothing. On the contrary, Iraqi forces had pounded their region in retaliation for their setting up liberated zones along the borders of Iran and Turkey while Saddam Hussein was otherwise preoccupied. Again, more fighting, which this time included Iraq's barbaric bombardment of Halabja in 1988, which resulted in the death of 5,000 Kurds mostly from poison gas. Again the Kurdish leadership was forced into exile. It was only when the Second Gulf War had drawn much of Iraq's troops out of the Kurdish areas that the Kurds were able to regroup and their leaders return. Predictably, they rebelled and once again the Iraqi army came in to quell them; this time, however, a much weakened Baghdad was left in only nominal control.

In the meantime, the United States and its allies had made the Kurdish area a no-fly zone, that is to say a virtually independent area, free from Baghdad's influence. So it largely remains to this day: a quasi-independent entity able to run its affairs much as it pleases. Alone among other Iraqi political groups it has its own militia, the Peshmerga, legitimized by both Iraq's central government and the US occupiers. Today, the Kurds are cooperating with the Al Malaki government but few doubt they are simply biding their time in the hope that they might gain something like genuine independence. This, of course, will be hotly opposed by Turkey out of fear that an independent Kurdistan might embolden its own Kurdish community.

Iraq was at war again in 1991. This was the so called Second Gulf War, otherwise known as Desert Storm. It was partially provoked by Iraq's

irritation with the drop in the price of oil (thereby curbing its rearmament and development). Baghdad was also unhappy with the position of the Arab League over this issue and also with the attitude of the Arab members of OPEC, which of course included Kuwait. Saddam Hussein felt he deserved some recompense from the West and his fellow Sunni Arabs for having depleted the military power of Khomeini's Shiite Iran but none was forthcoming. Saddam therefore decided to shake things up.

There was some disputed territory between Kuwait and Iraq and Saddam decided that this might be used as an excuse for going to war. On August 2, 1990, Saddam Hussein ordered his tanks across the Kuwaiti border. On August 8 Kuwait was annexed as an Iraqi province. The Arab League condemned Iraq's takeover as did the United Nations; a huge, American-led, multi-national force was assembled and Iraq was summarily defeated and forced to retreat across its borders. In the aftermath, sanctions were imposed on Iraq and a UN resolution demanded that Iraq should rid itself of weapons of mass destruction and destroy its long and intermediate range missiles. Several of these had been fired against Israel during the war.

There are at least four important issues relating to the Second Gulf War. The first was President Bush Senior's decision not to pursue the Iraqis across the border from Kuwait. This meant that Saddam was able to cling on to power with dire consequences.

The second is America's indecisiveness in fomenting a rebellion among expectant Shiites in a bid to topple Saddam Hussein's government. While they were blowing hot and cold about supporting an insurrection, Saddam unleashed brutal reprisals against the Shiites. To this day, they remember how they were let down by the United States and have remained suspicious of American intentions ever since.

The third issue is the imposition of UN sanctions, which were easy to circumvent, and the accompanying "oil for food program." The latter was badly administered and it enabled Saddam Hussein and his regime not

just to cling to power but to exploit loopholes in the program and prosper. Finally, there was the decision by the Saudi royal family, keeper of Islam's holy places, Mecca and Medina, to allow US forces to set up bases in Saudi Arabia from where they attacked Iraq. This gave a huge boost to the rise of Osama bin Laden, who regarded this "crusader presence," as he called it, as justification for creating Al Qaeda and carrying out the 9/11 bombing of the World Trade Centre in New York.

In short, the Second Gulf War did little to destabilize Saddam Hussein. What was worse, by defying both the US and the UN, Saddam gained mythic status on the Arab street. The Arabs admire strong rulers, even those who are ruthless and unprincipled: they believe political stability not public morality is what counts. Saddam Hussein had demonstrated his strength and the masses throughout the region compared him favourably to their own pro-western puppets, who jumped to attention whenever the West cracked the whip. As far as the US was concerned, it had gained little or nothing from the two Gulf wars.

For those who favour a Freudian interpretation of history, what happened next provides ample support for that view. Daddy had failed in Iraq and George W. was going to show him how it should be done. In spite of being warned against invading Iraq by his own State Department, George W. knew better.

Even though for the past thirty years, it had been a cardinal principle of US foreign policy that Iran was their real enemy, not Iraq, George W. went to war and as we now know, on extremely unreliable evidence. But he got his comeuppance. The irony is that George W. Bush's 2003 invasion of Iraq has actually boosted the position of Iran. Tehran now plays a key role in Iraqi affairs, providing arms and logistical support to its Shia allies and generally undermining American efforts to establish a properly functioning government.

And it could all so easily have been avoided. George W. was seduced into going to war by a group of shady characters. He was encouraged by

the mischievous Ahmed Chalabi, head of the Iraqi National Congress (a sort of government in exile). Chalabi's reasons for becoming involved with the Bush administration are unclear. There is little doubt, however, that he was partially motivated by the idea that as a westernized Shia he might emerge as a key player in a newly constituted Iraq, perhaps even its president. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz was impressed by this urbane, MIT doctor of mathematics. And so were his friends at the American Enterprise Institute, a right-wing think tank, whose members are as interested in enhancing the power of Israel by reducing its enemies as promoting America's place in the world. These neo-conservatives were convinced that the US should assume responsibility for shaping what they called the "new American century," mainly by the aggressive promotion of democracy, a policy also espoused by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney.

Blinded by their convictions, they put out the false rumour that Saddam had been complicit in 9/11; then they drew attention to his so called weapons of mass destruction (which he didn't have); and when it was clear that neither justification would hold up, the excuse for going to war was to bring about "regime change." Saddam was described as a latter day Hitler (Stalin would have been a closer analogy) and had to be removed so democracy could thrive. In short, in the run up to the war no less than the handling of its immediate aftermath, President Bush and his supporters pursued their "war of choice" - rather than necessity - with duplicity, deceit and ineptness that beggars belief. And it could have been avoided if the Bush administration had paid attention to history rather than pursue their own hubristic fantasies.

Forget about the arrogance that lies behind the notion that an external force can somehow impose democracy on another state; forget that implementing democracy is a gradual process. Forget, finally, that the idea of bringing democracy to Iraq was hardly a disinterested endeavour. Access to oil was a key issue, as was undermining Iran. Worse, thanks to its many blunders in conducting the war, its casual disregard for the

Geneva conventions at Abu Ghraib and the establishment of the prison at Guantanamo Bay, no less than the dismissive attitude to the chaos they have caused - remember Donald Rumsfeld's "stuff happens" - America's status throughout the world has been vastly diminished.

President Bush's policy for Iraq was doomed from the outset, primarily because it flew in the face of history. Even now, when things appear to be getting better militarily, progress on the political front has been halting. Iraq is still a fractured country. The recent US military "surge" may have helped to reduce the violence but the support given to the US by the Sons of Iraq, Sunni Moslem mercenaries paid for by the US, has also been crucial. In fact, their growing power has the Shiite-dominated central government so alarmed that it is now covertly trying to rein them in.

Finally, an admonition from the past, which with a few minor revisions might serve as an epitaph for the US invasion of Iraq. This is what T.E. Lawrence wrote in the *London Times* in 1920:

"The people of England have been led in Mesopotamia into a trap from which it will be hard to escape with dignity and honour. They have been tricked into it by a steady withholding of information" and have been left with the task of "policing an immense area, paying dearly every day in lives for the wilfully wrong policy of the civil administration in Baghdad."

Making sense of Syria

Ideally, one should talk about Syria and Lebanon together, as their fates are so intertwined that separating them is something of an artificial exercise. One way to grasp the relationship is to compare both countries with China and Hong Kong: a powerful secular state which has close relations with another less powerful, though nonetheless vibrant entity, whose per capita income overshadows that of its more powerful neighbour. Of course analogies such as these are hardly watertight but it may help if we view the two countries this way. First, though, a Syrian perspective:

The contours of present-day Syria differ from the Greater Syria that existed under the Ottoman Empire. That included present day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine and some southern bits of south-eastern Turkey. For a very brief period after the defeat of the Ottomans in 1918, Greater Syria enjoyed independence under Faisal ibn Hussein. Unfortunately, although an independent Arab state was promised by the western allies, France objected, demanding that it should retain control over present day Syria and Lebanon. The French then attacked Faisal and forced him into exile. The British stood by and Faisal was paid off eventually, as we have seen, with the kingdom of Iraq, a poisoned chalice if ever there was.

France's mandate over Syria and Lebanon came out of the Sykes-Picot agreement, which we also discussed when speaking of Iraq. In 1924, France made an adjustment to this agreement. In collusion with a group of mainly Lebanese Maronite Christians, who entertained ideas of creating an independent Christian state under French protection, the French were persuaded to enlarge the existing emirate of Mount Lebanon at Syria's expense. The remainder was divided into the districts of Latakia, Jebel Druse, Aleppo and Damascus. This constitutes the area of present day Syria.

Not everyone was happy with this new arrangement, notably the Syrian Druse. The Druse are a heterodox Moslem sect, whose origins date back to the eleventh century. They believe taawil (inner truth) trumps tanzil (outer truth) and rely on their imams for guidance rather than the Koran. Neither do they feel they should observe two of the pillars of Islam, making the hajj and fasting during the holy month of Ramadan. Not surprisingly, the Druse have been routinely scorned by other Moslems. That is why they are mainly found in the mountainous areas of the Levant, notably the Jebel Druse in Syria, the Shouf in Lebanon and in northern Israel, where they took refuge to escape persecution. Generally speaking, the Druse tend to be somewhat introverted as a sect and are regarded with suspicion on account of their secretive conduct. They also have a reputation for being fierce fighters and resent being pushed around.

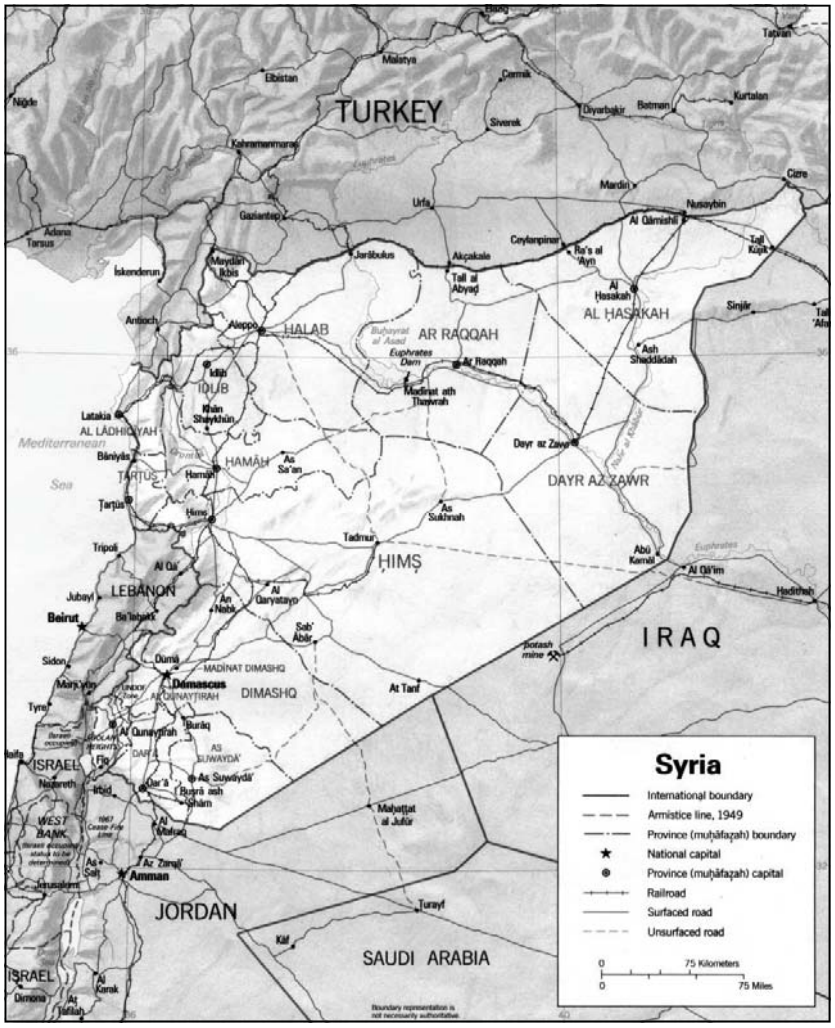
It was hardly surprising, therefore, that in 1924 the Druse in Syria objected to France's new mandatory arrangement and engaged in armed rebellion. It was not put down until 1926. There was more trouble in 1928, when a group of Syrian nationalists met in Damascus to adopt a new constitution which did not recognize France as the mandatory authority. France then dissolved the assembly and imposed its own constitution in 1930, which the Syrian Nationalists also rejected. This led to more unrest and eventually the French and the Syrians concluded an agreement in 1936 under which Syria was promised independence after three years in return for long-term military and economic privileges.

Later, after World War 2 broke out, France suspended this arrangement and the ensuing Vichy French government introduced martial law instead. In June 1941, the Vichy forces were defeated by the British. When elections were held in 1943, which the Nationalist forces won easily, they were granted full independence. They won the support of both the United States and the Soviet Union shortly afterwards. This was in recognition of their declaring war against Germany, albeit only a few months before the war ended. In late 1945 France tried to reassert its authority over Syria but failed and finally gave up and left in 1946.

Syria then fell under military rule until 1954, when the first genuinely free elections in the Middle East were held, in which women were allowed to vote. In addition to the Nationalists, several radical groups, including the Baath party (a rival to the Iraqi Baathists) contested the election. Afterwards, the Syrian Baathists were offered the option of joining either the Nationalist bloc or the radical communist party. Realizing that this would dilute their authority, the Baathists sought a way out, proposing instead a union with Egypt, which lasted from 1958 to 1961.

Even so, the in-fighting continued. Eventually, a secret committee of Baathist officers engaged in a coup in 1963 which brought them to power. This was followed by more in-fighting, assassinations, conspiracies and counter-conspiracies, essentially between two movements within the Baath party. One faction favoured a relatively gentle form of Pan-Arab socialism and the other, made up of more militant Baathists, wanted to pursue a radical, socio-economic program of reform and build up Syria's military capability in the hope of defeating Israel. Eventually, in 1966, the more extreme Baathists under Salah Jadid won out.

Hafez al-Assad, father of Bashar, the present president of Syria, was one of the most prominent (and ruthless) members of the new regime. While he was regarded as a member of Salah Jadid's inner circle, there were clear differences of opinion between the two men with regard to goals and strategy. During the short-lived United Arab Republic with Egypt, Hafez al Assad was commander of the air force; when Salah Jadid became president, Hafez al Assad became his defense minister. But in seeking to boost Syria's military might rather than pressing for domestic socio-economic reform, Hafez al Assad eventually ran afoul of his president, who favoured a less belligerent policy.



Syria

Then there was another coup to unseat Salah Jadid and in 1969 a new Baathist government finally emerged with Hafez al Assad as its undisputed leader. Once installed, he went about consolidating his position, assassinating, jailing or forcing into exile anyone who dared to oppose him. In 1970, during the national congress of the Baath party in Damascus, Assad took control of the party, assumed the role of prime minister and gave the presidency to his nominee Ahmad Khatib. In 1971, Assad sealed his role as the prime mover of all things Syrian by taking on the role of president as well, a position which was ratified by parliament which gave Hafez al Assad 99.2 percent of the vote. Henceforth, the modern history of Syria is inextricably entwined with the rise and consolidation of the Assad dynasty.

Hafez al Assad ruled Syria with an iron fist; he had to if he were to stay in power. It is important to note that the Assad family belongs to the obscure Alawite sect of Islam. The majority of Syrians are Sunni Moslems; Alawis constitute only about 12 to 15 percent of the population, most of whom come from the mountainous district around Latakia. Essentially, the Alawi derive their beliefs from Ali the Prophet's son-in-law. Therefore they are close to the Shia in terms of their basic rituals and beliefs.

Historically, the Alawi owe their prominence in modern Syrian politics largely to the French who, during their mandate, cultivated them, in accordance with the principle of divide and rule. In particular, the French favoured the elevation of Alawis into the military and the Syrian security services, where they remain strongly represented today.

With Hafez al Assad now in control, he set about social reform. One of his first tasks was to nationalize Syria's economy. Industrial enterprises and large tracts of land were taken over in line with Baathist policy but the underlying aim was to assert his authority by crippling those who might have opposed him. In particular, Assad was determined to put the Sunnis in their place. The new constitution identified Syria as a

democratic, popular, socialist state but the Sunni Moslem clergy objected. They pointed out that there was no reference to Islam as the state religion. Assad tried to fudge the issue by engineering a change in the constitution to affirm that the president should be a Moslem. This was not enough for the Sunnis, so Assad proclaimed that the 1973 war against Israel was actually a jihad against the enemies of Islam; he also made the pilgrimage to Mecca which appeared to placate them.

But Hafez al Assad realized that the Sunnis Moslems constituted a threat. Therefore, while he was playing up to them, he was also working against them. He announced that the Moslem brothers of Syria - a Pan-Arab, mainly Sunni Moslem organization with its roots in Egypt - was illegal. Later, in 1982, in response to an insurrection by the Brotherhood in Hama, Assad ordered his troops to raze the old city and show those living there no mercy. Today barely a third of the old quarter exists and in its place are a public garden and a car park.

The person mainly responsible for the Hama campaign was Hafez's brother Rifaat who, as head of Syria's internal security forces, exhibited the same kind of ruthlessness characteristic of his brother. After Hama, Rifaat gained greater political influence and built up a personal fortune. Hafez tolerated Rifaat for a while but in 1984, Rifaat over-reached and attempted to seize power. This led Hafez to divest his brother of his authority as head of internal security and Rifaat reportedly escaped being executed only through the personal intervention of their mother, Arisa Makhlouf. She persuaded Hafez to allow Rifaat to go into exile in Paris instead, where he still lives.

Since then, there has been virtually no overt domestic opposition to the ruling Baath party; in fact, not much opposition to the Assad family' rule either, thanks partly to a highly effective internal security force that ruthlessly enforces domestic peace: to this day there are no Sunni dominated units of the army stationed near Damascus; they are based in the desert border town of Deir ez Zoor. Another strategy employed by

Hafez al Assad to keep order was to create the impression that Syria was surrounded by enemies. Israel was of course the top of the list but America was up there as well.

While Hafez al Assad was consolidating his base at home, he was also seeking to become a major player in Arab politics. At the top of his agenda was the return of the Golan Heights, which Israel had seized from Syria during the 1967 war. Part of Syria since the end of World War 1, it was decreed in 1948 that the Golan should be a demilitarized zone policed jointly by Syria and Israel. But Israel wanted to secure the Heights for itself, partly for strategic reasons but also because it would provide access to the waters of the Sea of Galilee. Both sides were guilty of breaching the ceasefire but in the 1967 war Israel finally occupied the Golan and has held on to it ever since.

In 1979 Egyptian President Anwar Sadat made a separate peace with Israel. This made Assad realise that without Egyptian military support there was little hope of regaining the Golan. He changed tactics. In 1980 he signed a Friendship Agreement with the Soviet Union to provide him with military equipment. This was not enough to make him a major player but it did boost his role as a spoiler. Hence the dictum: no war against Israel without Egypt (which had the largest army) but no peace without the consent of Syria.

Therefore, Syria has always been able to play a significant role in the Middle East peace process, because other Arab leaders felt they had to have Hafez al Assad on board if they were to make peace. Moreover, Assad was not willing to compromise, insisting that there would be no Pan-Arab peace with Israel without the full, unconditional return of the Golan Heights to Syria. This remains a constant in Syrian foreign policy. During the Clinton presidency, when Ehud Barak was Israeli prime minister, the two sides did come close to making a deal but in the end Barak backed off. Today there are peace talks between Syria and Israel under the sponsorship of Turkey but little progress seems to have been made.

Militarily, Syria has never really amounted to much but Assad was a master tactician, who deployed his resources to punch above his weight. One of his initiatives was to bring the heavily factionalized PLO under his control. His intention was to make sure that no peace overtures by the PLO were made without his knowledge, or indeed his approval. He also allowed extremist Palestinian groups to have offices in Damascus, where he could keep a close eye on them and, if necessary, use them to undertake terrorist acts to bolster his political interests. All this created the image of Syria as a terrorist state but a more charitable interpretation would be that Hafez al Assad was simply positioning himself to be a key player in Middle East affairs.

Assad's boldest political gamble was to intervene in Lebanon's civil war in 1976 on the side of the Maronite Christians against a mainly Moslem grouping. Assad's move was motivated by two main concerns. First, as an Alawi, Assad was determined not to allow Lebanon's Sunnis to become too strong in case this might boost the confidence of Sunnis in Syria. Second, Assad - as well as other Arab leaders - firmly believed that Israel's plan was to factionalize the Middle East, in accord with the colonial practice of divide and rule. Therefore, the Lebanese civil war posed a threat on both the domestic front and in the wider Middle East.

Syria's intervention in Lebanon meant going up against its traditional allies there, notably a loose alliance of socialist parties and various Palestinian factions who had been co-opted by Lebanon's Sunni Moslems who, lacking a strong militia of their own, had to rely on proxy forces to protect them. Fighting dragged on and during this period several notable Alawis both in Syria and Lebanon were assassinated, probably by Iraqi agents, who were alarmed by Syria's growing importance.

Hafez al Assad held firm and step by step, using guile, threats, bribery and strategic assassinations, he gradually extended his control over Lebanon. This brought a semblance of peace, which earned him the grudging support of other Arab rulers, who feared initially that Assad's

intervention in Lebanon might have unpredictable consequences in their own countries. Eventually, their fears were allayed and they formally approved Syria's quasi-sovereignty over Lebanon at a meeting in Taif, Saudi Arabia, in 1989. This brought an official end to hostilities between Lebanon's warring factions and the emergence of Syria as the legitimate peace-keeper in Lebanon. Syria became so deeply entrenched that it easily engineered the installation of a puppet president, Emil Lahoud to safeguard its interests.

Hafez al Assad died in 2000 and was replaced by his son Bashar. But there was little change in policy. Later, after the assassination of Lebanon's prime minister, Rafik Hariri, in 2005, which was widely attributed to Syria's security services or their agents, Syria had to yield to international pressure and accede to a UN investigation into Hariri's murder and withdraw its forces from Lebanon. This was a major blow but Damascus, as we shall see later, did not abandon Lebanon altogether.

Meanwhile, the Middle East peace process was staggering on but Hafez al Assad, realizing that there was nothing to be gained by participating stayed aloof. However, in 1991, after Syria had joined the western alliance during the Second Gulf and was hopeful of being rewarded for its cooperation, Assad was persuaded to attend the Madrid peace talks. When Hafez al Assad realized that there was unlikely to be any concessions over the Golan Heights, he withdrew. Shortly afterwards the talks collapsed.

Like most Arab rulers, royal and republican, Hafez al Assad was determined that control over Syria would continue with his family after his death. Initially, his oldest son Basil was favoured, a rather dashing, aggressive young man, who could be seen on posters in Syria alongside those of his father. Unfortunately, Basil killed himself in a car accident in 1994 while speeding along the road to the airport in the early hours of the morning. Bashar, his younger brother, who had been studying ophthalmology in London, was called back to take his place as heir

apparent. He underwent a crash course at the Homs military academy, received a high level rank in the army, and waited out his time until his father's death in 2000, when he was voted in as president.

It was hoped that under Bashar, Syria would pursue a more liberal policy, renounce terrorism as a tool of diplomacy and rejuvenate Syria's creaking economy. Bashar spoke fluent English, had married a middle class, Sunni Moslem girl, who was the daughter of a well respected medical practitioner living in north London. He was an enthusiastic proponent of the internet and shortly after his installation as president, internet cafes were allowed to open in Damascus, though under government control. He also released a large number of political prisoners and encouraged political debate, even allowing criticism of his regime. Most importantly, Bashar spoke of liberalizing Syria's central-command, Soviet style economy. He claimed he was in favour of privatizing a number of state business enterprises and pressed for the liberalization of Syria's moribund banking system. This was the so called Damascus spring, when it seemed that Syria was about to emerge from the shadow of Baathist rule.

But dictatorships don't quietly disappear. They stay in power by having built up important relationships with key members of their community: and that usually means opportunities to make lots of money. Hafez al Assad, although famously frugal himself, was not at all averse to helping his cronies become rich as long as they showed total allegiance to him. This inner circle, which included family members, high officials in the ruling Baath party and the civil service and most importantly the military, were still in power when Bashar became president. Initially, they tolerated his liberalizing ways and even allowed him to jail or send into enforced exile several minor members of their tightly knit group. But when Bashar began to set about serious reform, they closed ranks.

Just how much authority Bashar really has today is hotly debated. Some say he is little more than a puppet. Others suggest that there is a power

struggle going on between the modernizers and those who favour maintaining Hafez al Assad's hard-line policies. Others insist he is his own man. Wherever the truth lies, there is little doubt that this inner circle continues to wield considerable influence. It includes many members of the Assad family, including Bushra, Bashar's sister, familiarly known as the "iron lady." She exerts considerable influence over foreign policy and her husband Assaf Shawkat, is head of military security. Maher, Bashar's somewhat impulsive younger brother, is head of the presidential guard. Many members of the Makhlouf family - that is to say Bashar's mother's family - are also well represented. Foremost among them is Adnan Makhlouf, who heads the Republican Guard. Other members of the family have profited mightily from their association with the president's family. It would be naïve to assume their influence is no longer potent.

That said, since becoming president, Bashar does appear to have consolidated his hold on power. Although Syria's civilian population may have welcomed him as a reformer, the ruling clique must have been alarmed. Opening up Syria's political life threatened to undermine their authority. In particular, they mistrusted his economic privatization plans. As long as the state was in control, the group's wealth and influence would be assured. Any attempt to loosen the state's grip over the economy could see them sidelined. However, it seems that in one way or another Bashar has managed to create a working arrangement with those who, some claim, actually pull the strings.

Certainly, Bashar has matured and has now begun to assert himself on the international stage. At recent meetings with French Prime Minister Sarkozy both in Syria and in France he looked quite presidential. Even the United States, which initially refused to hold face-to-face talks with Syria and still keeps it on its terrorist list has softened its stance. This, of course, is not due solely to Bashar's growing maturity; it has far more to do with Syria's potential usefulness as a mediator with Iran.

While Bashar inherited Syria's alliance with Iran from his father, Bashar has continued to foster good relations. In particular, he has forged a strong alliance with Iran's proxy force in Lebanon, Hezballah and helped Iran when hostilities broke out between Israel and Lebanon (or more accurately Hezballah in Lebanon) in 2006. True, Bashar was careful not to engage Israel itself - following in the footsteps of his father - but he did more or less openly facilitate the flow of arms between Iran and Hezballah, while other Arab states simply watched from the sidelines.

Ironically, thanks to Israel's bungling its invasion of south Lebanon, what could have been a fatal miscalculation has boosted Bashar's standing both in the Arab world and internationally. However, his close alliance with Shiite Iran has caused some unease at home. Hafez al Assad, always a canny politician, played upon Saudi Arabian nervousness vis-à-vis Iran by squeezing money out of them to prop up his faltering economy. Many Syrians fear Bashar does not have the same political instincts and may push his luck too far. For example, Israel's recent bombing of what appears to be an Iranian sponsored and possibly Iranian financed nuclear facility in Syria, has alarmed not just the West but many Syrians as well, who fear Bashar may have gone too far.

Although Hafez al Assad had signed a friendship treaty with the Soviet Union in 1980 and Syria's relations with Russia are probably better than those of any other country in the region, Bashar has also played up to the Americans. Even US General David Petraeus himself has acknowledged that Syria has inhibited cross border traffic between Syria and Iraq for Al Qaeda sympathizers but as the recent US raid against Syria suggests, he has perhaps not done enough. Or can we just put it down to US lame duck presidential spite?

Politics aside, Bashar must be mindful of Syria's under-performing economy. His country's oil reserves are almost depleted; agricultural production, although improved as a result of help from such agencies as the World Bank and the FAO is still below its potential; light

manufacturing - mostly textiles - is badly in need of modernization; and while tourism is up, there are many who are put off Syria by the country's unsavoury reputation as a police state.

Lebanon could prove to be Bashar al Assad's Achilles heel. Although Syria has been forced to withdraw its troops from Lebanon, it still regards Lebanon as its legitimate sphere of influence. But how can they maintain their hold? Damascus has only grudgingly recognized that Syria and Lebanon are actually two separate national entities and has only this month reached a formal agreement to allow the opening of embassies and an exchange of ambassadors between the two countries.

In short, Damascus still expects to be a key player in Lebanon and many Lebanese (read Hezballah) are ready to cooperate. The new Lebanese president, Michel Suleiman, a compromise candidate accepted by Syria, after having blocked the election of alternative candidates through the votes of its proxy Hezballah, is regarded primarily as a man Damascus can do business with. Moreover, both Syria and Lebanon are involved in mutually satisfactory economic initiatives.

In the past, Syria turned a blind eye to Lebanon's drug trade and even participated in it. Rifaat, Hafez al Assad's brother, made a vast fortune in this area of economic activity, providing protection and assisting in the drugs' distribution. Syria's ruling clique has also benefited from the entrepreneurial expertise of the Lebanese and has cooperated with them to build up more legitimate lines of business, particularly in banking and finance. With so much at stake it is unlikely that Syria will stop trying to influence events in Lebanon. It would prefer to use diplomacy but few doubt that if this fails, terrorism will be an option.

For many years, Lebanon's relations with Syria, though rarely cordial, were smooth enough. It suited both sides to stay close. But now the relationship is threatened in one way or another by Iran, Israel, the United States, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, all of whom want to influence Syrio-Lebanese relations for their own advantage. Negotiating

the treacherous currents of Syrio-Lebanese politics is likely to prove a critical test for Bashar's leadership.

But it does appear that Bashar is slowly consolidating his position at home and winning respect (albeit grudging) abroad. True, there was the assassination earlier this year of Imad Mughniyeh, Syria's point man with Hezballah. There was also the more recent assassination of Bashar's personal security advisor, Brigadier General Mohammed Suleiman. Both these incidents are said to point to dissension within Bashar's inner circle (probably over relations with Iran). Finally, the bomb that went off near the offices of Syria's internal security forces earlier this year also highlighted the fact that Bashar lives in a dangerous neighbourhood. Even so, he still looks reasonably secure. He might even become the great reforming president his friends claim he genuinely wants to be.

Making sense of Lebanon

First of all, let's look at the topography of Lebanon. There is a narrow coastal plain, where the main cities of Tripoli, Beirut, Sidon and Tyre are located. Up from the coast, the mountains rise steeply, then on the other side there is the fertile Bekaa valley and beyond this is the anti-Lebanon, and on the other side of that is Damascus. In short, apart from the Beirut -Damascus road that cuts directly through Lebanon into Syria, traditional access was from individual mountain fastnesses towards the coast. It is only in recent years that it has been possible to drive across the mountains parallel to the coastal road.

This geography has had a profound impact on Lebanon's history. For one thing, the mountains virtually pushed the Lebanese to seek their fortunes overseas and today some four to five times as many Lebanese live outside their small country as those within. The rugged terrain and the difficulties of access have also meant that for centuries Mount Lebanon has been a safe haven for the religious heterodox, the Druse, for example, who live in the Shouf. During Ottoman times, because of the difficulties in controlling the populace, the ruling authorities left the Lebanese to their own devices, contenting themselves with collecting taxes when and where they could.

In short, unlike Egypt, where despotic rule has been the norm, the Lebanese have always shown great independence of spirit. They have tremendous faith in their own abilities and have been hugely successful in all sorts of entrepreneurial activities both at home and overseas.

The downside is that most Lebanese have little respect for central authority and rely on personal initiative to make their way. Not coincidentally, they cherish education as a means of social and economic advancement. Since the nineteenth century they have been well served by western missionary schools and universities, mainly French and

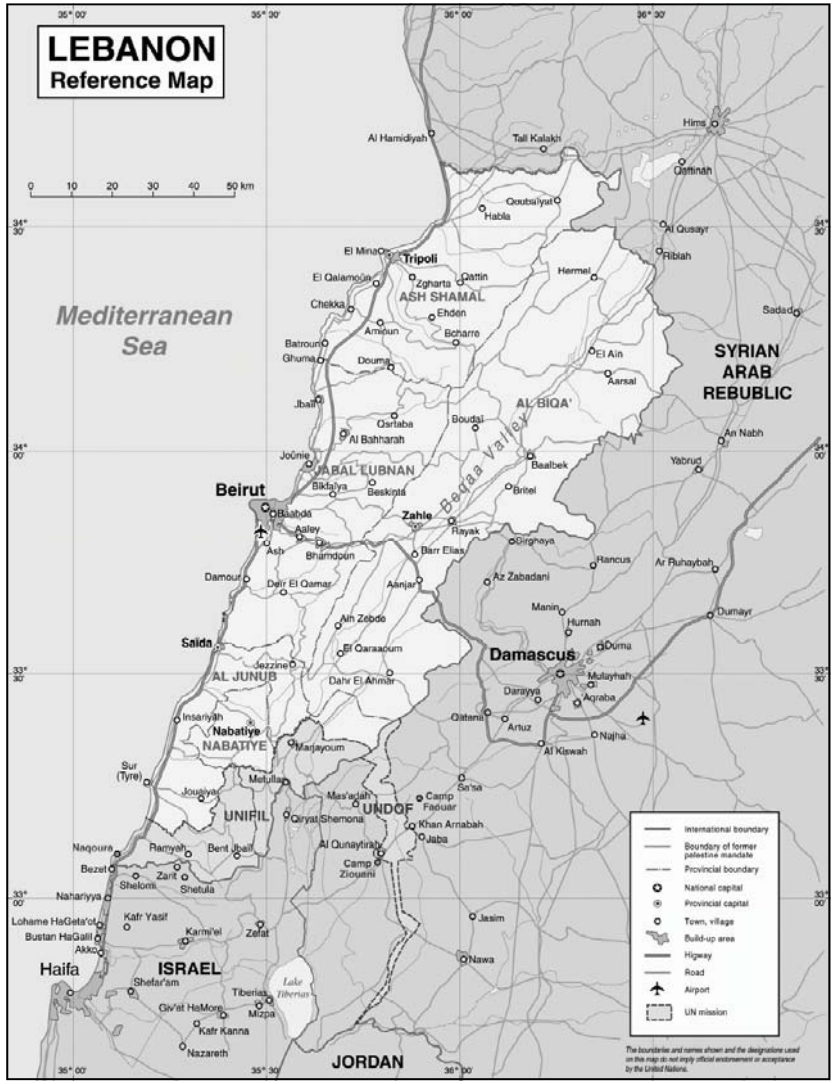
American. What all this means is that while all the ingredients are there for a flourishing, western-style democracy, Lebanon is also fruitful terrain for political chaos.

The Lebanese constitution was framed in 1943, when the British representative Sir Edward Spears brought Lebanon's warring factions together to hammer out an agreement. It was decided that power should be apportioned on the basis of the relative size of individual confessional groupings as determined in a 1932 census conducted by the French. It resulted in parliamentary representation being based on a ratio of six Christians to five Moslems; the President should be a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Moslem and the Speaker of the House a Shia Moslem.

This arrangement was generally accepted at the beginning but after the 1960's there was growing agitation for reform, mainly from the Moslems, who complained they were under-represented. Their birth rate was higher and more Christians than Moslems were believed to be emigrating but there was little stomach on either side for a new census which could create political difficulties.

Thanks to the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1958 and its subsequent closure between 1967 and 1975, Beirut had become increasingly prosperous as a transit centre for goods destined for Jordan, Iraq and the Gulf. Lebanon had also emerged as the main centre for banking and financial services as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states became more prosperous. The trade roots ran through Beirut. Lebanon also became a centre for Arab tourism.

These conditions tended to favour the Christians, who were more generally represented in the professions (Moslems were more typically engaged in trade). Also, Lebanese Christians tended to be favoured for work in the Gulf, being regarded as more politically reliable. (Remember, this was during a period when Nasser's brand of Pan-Arab nationalism was on the rise). The 1967 Arab-Israeli war hardly touched Lebanon at



Lebanon

But Lebanon was a society on the edge. The sudden influx of wealth, conspicuous expenditure and the perception on the part of a large section of the Moslem community that they were missing out, were all creating social tension. Shia Moslems, in particular, whose numbers were steadily growing, felt they were being discriminated against. Tension was building and soon all Lebanon's sects were arming themselves and training their youth in anticipation of civil warfare.

Things began to go wrong in 1969, when Lebanon's President Charles Helou gave official approval to the Palestinians to wage guerrilla warfare against Israel from Lebanese soil. Lebanon had taken in well over a hundred thousand Palestinian refugees after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, settling them in 13 camps up and down the country. They were deprived of citizenship, the right to work and were generally disregarded by the Lebanese authorities. Their birth-rate was increasing; they had no resources; they were mainly dependent on hand-outs from United Nations agencies, notably (UNRWA). Palestinians supplemented these handouts with a wide variety of activities in the black economy. Not all Palestinians were poor. Many middle class Palestinians had also settled in Lebanon and had been absorbed into Lebanon's expanding economy.

There was strong political pressure on Lebanon from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states to sign the Cairo Accord, sweetened by generous financial handouts to leading Lebanese politicians. Although Arab governments consistently pledged support for the Palestinians, they also feared them. They were a destabilizing force and it suited Arab governments to use Lebanon as a front against Israel, far from their own territory. Nasser also had an agenda; he felt the Christian Lebanese were less than enthusiastic about his cherished dream of Pan-Arabism and wanted to impose his authority over them. The Cairo accord formally acknowledged what had been obvious for some time: the Palestinians were not just a refugee problem; they were a political issue as well, and tiny Lebanon was about to pay the price.

Within two or three years of the signing of the Cairo accord, the Palestinians were functioning as a state within the Lebanese state. They had their own army, their own internal security forces, their own economic interests, their own industries. They even had their own bank, the Arab Bank, which wielded considerable economic power. Moreover, as the Palestinians were mostly forced to live in densely populated refugee camps with rudimentary social and health services - and this in a country heaving with prosperity, they became increasingly resentful of their status. They began to exert their collective influence, being co-opted by the Sunnis, who lacking military credibility, readily supported them.

While the Palestinians were gaining power in Lebanon, coincidentally during the early 1970's the Middle East peace process was faltering, therefore it is possible that Henry Kissinger encouraged the Christians to move against the Palestinians. In April 1975, the Christian Phalange, attacked a bus carrying Palestinians, causing a large number of casualties. From here the story becomes rather complicated as Lebanese sects of various political shadings, aided and abetted by outside parties, entered into alliances with and against one another, for and against the Palestinians.

After some months of fighting, the picture began to clarify and there emerged the oppositionist Lebanese National Movement, led by the Druse leader Kamal Junblatt and on the other side the Lebanese Front, led by a former Lebanese president, Camille Chamoun. The Lebanese National Movement, which significantly had co-opted the PLO, insisted that it was time to change the constitution to make it reflect the increase in the Moslem population. The Lebanese Front insisted that any change in the constitution should be preceded by the expulsion of the Palestinians from Lebanon.

At this stage the civil war was not defined in terms of religion. In fact the Christians did not constitute a united front. Chamoun headed one Christian faction; Pierre Gemayel another; and then there was the

Franjieh clan, traditional friends of Syria. The Moslems were not united either. The Sunnis and the Shiites did not get on with one another, and neither were particularly keen on the Druse. So the next stage in the confrontation involved both sides trying to shore up their base by eliminating rivals and seeking support from wherever they could find it.

Eventually it became clear that the Moslem dominated Lebanese National Movement was emerging as the superior force, which prompted the Lebanese Front to look to Syria for help. As we saw last time, President Hafez al Assad leapt into the breach, partly because he feared that if the radicals gained too much support, it might provoke Israel and Syria would be drawn into a confrontation it did not want and partly because he did not want Lebanese Sunnis to become a major force in Lebanon as it might embolden the Sunni opposition back home.

Syria's intervention tipped the balance decisively in favour of the Lebanese Front; Syria quickly assumed a dominant role in Lebanon and eventually saw to it that its pro-Syrian nominee, Elias Sarkis, was elected president.

Then came Israel's invasion of south Lebanon in 1978, assisted by a pro-Israel, Christian militia, the South Lebanon Army, which later was to serve as its proxy in the area. By now, the Lebanese Front had entered into a direct alliance with Israel, receiving arms from the Arabs' traditional enemy. The Front also agreed with Israel that Bechir Gemayel should be the next president of Lebanon, a move that involved the assassination of his only possible rival, the pro-Syrian Tony Frangieh.

By this time the country was divided and after Bechir defeated the leadership of Chamoun's National Liberal Party in a vicious gun battle, a more unified Lebanese Front emerged, headed by Bechir Gamayel. This realignment led to sectarian migrations from mixed areas to homogenous areas and for a while it looked as though tiny Lebanon was destined to become two states, one dominated by Maronite Christians, the other by Moslems supported by the PLO. Beirut became a divided city: west

Beirut was the stronghold of the predominantly Moslem faction; east Beirut of the predominantly Christian.

From 1980 to 1982, the Lebanese state began to crumble. The civil service effectively split into rival factions; the army remained united but only because it stayed above the fray. Later it simply melted away as individual militias imposed their rule. In 1982, the Israelis invaded Lebanon for a second time and this time they moved as far north as Beirut, linking up with their Christian allies. By now Syria was becoming seriously concerned with the way things were going. They feared a formal alliance between Israel and the Lebanese Christians. The Syrians made their move. They assassinated Bechir Gemayel, an act which inflamed Christian sensibilities, provoking a mass execution of some 2000 Palestinians in the refugee camps of Sabra and Chatila by the Lebanese Forces (with the connivance of Israel).

The Israelis could not stay in Lebanon as an occupying power, so a multi-national force of American, British, French and Italian soldiers was sent in to keep the peace. Almost immediately, Amin Gemayel, Bechir's brother, was elected president. The multi-national force did not last long. A suicide bomber killed some 240 US marines in their barracks and another one killed a lesser number of French paras in their barracks. The multi-national force packed up and went home. This left the field open to the militias. On the one hand there was the Lebanese Front backed more or less openly by the US and Israel; on the other were the Palestinians and their allies, backed by the Soviet Union, Egypt and now also Syria. Lebanon was on the brink of disintegration.

Eventually in 1983, Lebanon and Israel agreed on a peace treaty but President Amin Gemayel (with advice from Hafez al Assad who now wielded real power in Lebanon) refused to sign. There followed a period of stalemate. By now the international community was beginning to despair of peace in Lebanon and by general consent it was agreed that Syrian hegemony over what looked like a failed state was probably the best of several unsatisfactory options.

In 1984, under pressure from President Hafez al Assad, President Amin Gemayel finally abrogated his country's peace treaty with Israel. Israel withdrew its forces from southern Lebanon, leaving its proxy South Lebanon Army in charge of the border zone. It was now left to Syria to keep Lebanon's warring factions apart, which they did more or less successfully. But by the end of President Amin Gemayel's term, there was still no sign of a permanent solution. When parliament could not agree on his successor, he appointed his chief-of-staff, General Michel Aoun as a temporary replacement before going into exile at Harvard University.

In 1989, Aoun decided to take things into his own hands. First he beat the Lebanese Forces into submission and then turned his guns on Syria. Syria responded forcefully and the Arab League, now thoroughly alarmed, felt it was time to bring the crisis to an end. A conference was convened in Taif, Saudi Arabia, where an accord known as the National Reconciliation Charter was reached. This was a compromise agreement which put an end to the fighting and accorded equal numbers to Christians and Moslems in the Lebanese parliament. It also promised the gradual elimination of confessionalism in the civil service and the continuation of a Lebanese Maronite as president. General Aoun rejected this agreement. Hafez al Assad then prodded some of Lebanon's militias to oppose Aoun. He was eventually forced into exile in Paris, leaving Syria in control of Lebanon.

That Syria was able to do this with little or no opposition from either the US or Israel was due to a happy coincidence. While Lebanon's drama was unfolding, the US was entering the Second Gulf War and was eager to shore up support against Iraq. Syria joined the US-led coalition, thereby earning the gratitude of US President George Bush Senior.

By now, the political landscape of Lebanon had changed significantly. Most notably, Shiite Moslems, who constituted only the third largest population grouping according to the 1932 census, had become more numerous and were beginning to throw their weight around. Until the

1980's, the Shiites had played only a minor role in Lebanese politics. Located primarily in the Bekaa valley and south Lebanon, the two groupings followed different traditions: in the Bekaa they cultivated hashish and had a general reputation for lawlessness. The central government left them largely to their own devices, as long as they did not interfere with the political status quo. Shiites in the south cultivated mainly tobacco under a succession of repressive landlords who told them how to live, what to do and how to vote.

Things began to change in the early 1980's. Under the leadership of a charismatic preacher, Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, the Shiites gathered Iranian backing and a movement called Hezballah (the "Party of God") finally emerged. Initially a provider of education, health and social services, Hezballah eventually built up a militia, ostensibly to offer resistance to the Israelis but also to put pressure on the Lebanese government to give the Shiites greater representation.

Although Hezballah was partially backed by Lebanese émigrés, mainly from West Africa, where a number of wealthy individuals were involved in both the legitimate and illegitimate diamond trade, its main support came from Iran. Iran supported Hezballah partly to take the fight to the Israelis but also to build up a force whose ultimate aim was to install an Islamic republic in Lebanon, from which Shiites might assert themselves throughout the region.

Hezballah's links with Iran grew steadily, both ideologically and politically. In the late 1980's it achieved notoriety by assisting its non-Arab ally to take western hostages. Iran's aim was to put pressure on the United States and the West not to openly intervene in the First Gulf war on the side of Iraq. Hezballah's rise upset Lebanon's Sunnis, who resented their growing power. Hezballah's rise also alarmed Hafez al Assad. Previously, he had supported Lebanon's more moderate, purportedly secular, Shiite movement, Amal. The idea of openly supporting an organization known as "the Party of God" dedicated to the

establishment of an Islamic Republic in Lebanon was not something he relished. Still, there were clearly opportunities.

This led Syria to provide covert support for Hezballah in south Lebanon to carry out attacks on the South Lebanon Army. However, Assad was cautious not to overplay his hand by openly confronting the Israelis. Assad also continued to support Amal but after Hezballah thrashed them in a battle in the southern suburbs of Beirut, Amal's authority was much diminished. This gave a boost to Hezballah and Syria, recognizing that it was now a key player swung in behind.

Initially, under the leadership of Hussein Musawi, Hezballah had gained prominence for kidnapping westerners and for blowing up the Beirut barracks of the US marines in 1982. Later, under the leadership of Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, Hezballah emerged as the single most powerful military and political force in Lebanon. It developed a well armed militia which was and is more than a match for the Lebanese army. It also entered politics, gaining a substantial bloc of seats in the Lebanese parliament.

At the same time, Syria's hold on Lebanon was being weakened. Syria's presence in Lebanon was tolerated when it was seen as a stabilizing force but its increasingly unpopular political interventions began to turn the Lebanese against them. Syria's most notable setback came in 2004, when it tried to persuade the Lebanese parliament to change its constitution so that its puppet, Emile Lahoud, could continue as president for an additional three years. This prompted the resignation of Lebanon's popular Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Syria kept up the pressure. Lebanese who opposed the Syrian presence were steadily eliminated. Eventually, in 2004, as a result of the passage of UN Resolution 1559, sponsored jointly by the US and France, Syria was obliged to withdraw its forces from Lebanon; Hezballah was called upon to turn in its arms.

Syria did not go quietly. It had been in Lebanon far too long and had established a whole range of linkages with the Lebanese military, its

intelligence forces and with a wide array of business enterprises. Also, although Syria had a strategic alliance with Hezballah, its relationship with the movement had not been close. Now Syria found that if it were to continue to exercise influence over Lebanon, it needed Hezballah. Hezballah also realized the value of Syrian support.

Matters came to a head in February 2005 with the assassination of Rafik Hariri, who had resigned previously in protest against Syrian meddling. It was assumed that Syria was responsible. A UN special commission was set up under Detlev Mehlis to investigate. Shortly afterwards Syria's interior minister, Ghazi Kanaan, who had served as Syria's pro-consul in Lebanon until 2002, apparently committed suicide in his office in Damascus. Meanwhile, Syria dragged its heels in co-operating with the commission and until now it has not produced its findings.

Hariri's assassination prompted Lebanon's anti-Syrian forces to reassert themselves and in 2006 there was the so called Cedar Revolution, when thousands of Lebanese demonstrated in a show of defiance. This was quickly followed by another mass demonstration of pro-Syrian supporters, mostly Hezballah. Judging by their numbers it appeared that the two sides were more or less evenly balanced.

Then Hezballah received an unexpected boost when Israel invaded Lebanon. They put up a spirited resistance and emerged as heroes.

This was not at all to America's liking. The Bush administration regarded Lebanon as the only genuine Arab democracy and it did not want to see Hezballah and its Syrian backer resurgent. It decided to boost the capability of Lebanon's army but Israel, not relishing a strong Lebanese army on its border, demurred and congress refused to agree to significant arms shipments.

In the meantime, Arab states had pledged large amounts of aid to rebuild Lebanon but through mismanagement and outright corruption little of it trickled through. By contrast, Iran moved in swiftly after the Israelis

withdrew and provided cash to rebuild hospitals, homes and schools. They also gave money to those who had lost family members as a result of Israel's attack. Meanwhile, the Lebanese government was nowhere to be seen.

Since the Israeli invasion, Hezballah's status has steadily grown and with its allies is now the most powerful political force in Lebanon. When the other political parties wanted to elect a president who was not to Hezballah's liking, they dug in their heels until Qatar stepped in to mediate. Eventually, a document was agreed to by all parties which gave Hezballah and its pro-Syrian allies de facto control - i.e. the power of veto - in the Lebanese parliament. Shortly afterwards the former head of the army, Michel Suleiman, generally regarded as an independent, was appointed president. Although Hezballah's militia is supposed to have been disbanded, it remains intact.

Beirut now appears calm and business and tourism are picking up but there remains a spirit of uncertainty in the air. Few expect there will be a future without trouble. Many Lebanese resent Hezballah's powerful role and there have been suggestions that Rafik Hariri's son, Saad, now a member of the cabinet, has co-opted some Al Qaeda sympathizers to harass the Syrians. Meanwhile, new battle lines have been drawn, this time not between Moslems and Christians but between those who support Hezballah and Syria and those who don't.

While much has changed in Lebanon, much has remained the same. Its respected educational institutions, though a bit battered, are still intact. Its media are still freer than that of most other Arab countries. More importantly, the eternal optimism of the Lebanese and their instinct for survival seem not to have been diminished. The party still goes on.

True, thousands of Lebanon's middle class emigrate every month and Hezballah has made no secret of its commitment to the transformation of Lebanon into an Islamic republic. Moreover, with Iran's new found confidence and willingness to use its windfall from oil revenues to spread

its influence, coupled with Syria's continuing involvement in Lebanese affairs, there is no cause for complacency.

But it is difficult to imagine an Islamic republic in Lebanon. In Lebanon individual freedom has always been prized: few wanted a regulated business environment; banking secrecy laws ensured that money from whatever source could be safely protected; a free press enabled all shades of political opinion to be expressed. But that same freedom also undermined Lebanon's best interests, enabling outsiders to exploit these freedoms for their own ends and in the process drag Lebanon into conflicts it had little appetite for.

But whatever the future may bring, it is clear that Hezballah will remain a key player. Unlike other political parties in Lebanon, which are little more than tribal groupings promoting special interests, Hezballah is that rare thing in the Arab world: a genuine, grass-roots revolutionary movement dedicated to promoting the welfare of its constituents.

Also, Hezballah, being resolutely opposed to making peace with Israel except on what it would call honourable terms, can lay claim to a patriotic legitimacy that is conspicuously lacking elsewhere; it has made genuine sacrifices for the Arab cause. With its similarly minded (though Sunni) ally in Gaza, Hamas, two forces have emerged that may justifiably claim to be the only legitimate political movements in the Arab world since the fight for independence. Whether the West likes it or not, common sense dictates that sooner or later it will have to do business with them if a Middle East peace is to be attained.

Making sense of Egypt

Egypt is a curious country. It's big and size matters. It has a proud cultural heritage. It has the largest and most effective military in the region (barring Israel). It is one of world's fastest growing emerging economies. It has a well-educated elite: prominent among whom are Dr. Magdi Yacoub, the world's leading heart surgeon and two recent Nobel Prize winners: Najib Mahfouz for literature and Ahmed Zweil for chemistry. It is home to the Arab League and its current and previous two presidents have figured prominently on the world stage.

Yet, almost everyone who knows Egypt expresses regret that it has somehow failed to live up to expectations. The title of a recent book by Eberhard Kienle about Egypt's economic reform program and the growth of democracy is *A Grand Delusion*. That says it all and might serve as a working title for any number of books about modern Egypt. Today we will see why.

For once we don't have to start with the Sykes Picot treaty, because Egypt was not part of the geographical redistribution that followed World War 1. Great Britain was already in control of Egypt and had been since 1882. On the eve of the war, Britain announced Egypt would become a "protectorate" and later recognized Egypt as a sovereign state under King Ahmad Fouad. But Egyptian nationalists, spearheaded by the Wafd party, were pressing for independence. In 1936, under the terms of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty they got it, more or less, although Britain still retained the right to keep troops on Egyptian soil and, with France, also held on to the Suez Canal.

During World War II, Egypt remained neutral though there were many Axis sympathizers: one can still find several "Hitlers" in the Cairo telephone directory. Then came the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, which showed up the deficiencies of the Egyptian military. Gamal Abdel Nasser, a

military man himself, was mortified by Egypt's defeat. He needed little encouragement to join a plot to overthrow Egypt's corrupt royal regime. In 1952, King Faruq, the only son of King Fouad, was dethroned in a military coup and forced into exile. A Revolutionary Command Council was set up with General Mohammed Neguib at its head. Nasser was his chief associate.

Later the two men quarrelled when Nasser unilaterally banned the Moslem Brothers from the political scene. The Brothers were a powerful organization, founded by Hassan al Banna in 1928. They had been prominent in the struggle for independence and had spread their influence throughout the Arab world. But their goal of reinstating the caliphate did not sit well with Nasser's socialist agenda. General Neguib was ousted from the leadership of the Revolutionary Command Council and placed under house arrest, where he remained until pardoned by Nasser's successor Anwar Sadat. Meanwhile the Brothers maintained clandestine opposition to Nasser and tried to assassinate him in 1954. Later Nasser made an unsuccessful bid to win them over but reverted to force when his initiative failed.

Nasser was strongly backed by the Soviet Union. They prodded him to mobilize what became known as the Non- Aligned Movement, which the Soviets reckoned, correctly, would be amenable to their influence. Nasser supported the initiative because he saw that Egypt would wield greater influence as part of this group than alone. Later, Nasser was instrumental in setting up the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Conference in 1958. In 1963 Egypt joined the Organization of African Unity and in 1969 became a partner in the Islamic Conference Organization (a Saudi Arabian initiative) all in a bid to play a decisive diplomatic role in the region and beyond.

Without doubt, though, Nasser's most important collective political initiative was to revive the concept of Pan Arabism. Pan Arabism first emerged under the rule of the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II, when a group of influential Arabs put pressure on the Sublime Porte to grant

them a measure of independence. The Sultan acceded and granted them a limited degree of free speech. Later when the Sultan was overthrown by the Young Turks, the Arabs were promised greater autonomy but when the Young Turks were in turn overthrown, Arab dreams went with them.

During World War I, as we have seen, the Arabs were promised an independent state if they joined with the western allies to overthrow the Ottoman Empire. They fought bravely during what is known as the Arab Revolt but after the war their hopes were dashed when details of the Sykes-Picot agreement became known. The Arabs received nothing. The Arabs had to wait until after World War II to gain their independence and shortly afterwards Pan Arabism mutated into collective opposition against Israel.

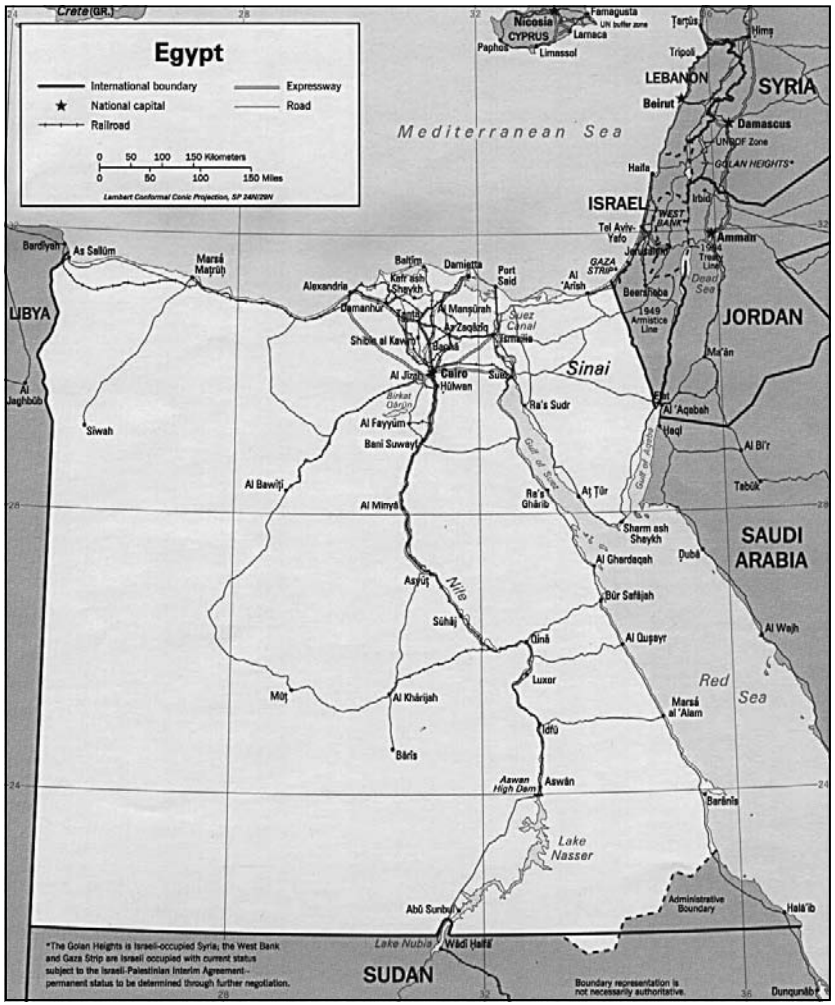
As for Nasser's more grandiose dream of uniting the Arab world with a view to creating a major economic powerhouse and wiping Israel from the map, this ran into trouble from the start. Although united by language, the religion of the vast majority, post-colonial optimism and opposition to Israel, the Arab states were nonetheless wary. They realized that a Pan Arab movement would be dominated by Egypt and were not sure they wanted to give up any of their newly won independence to such an organization.

In the event, the only tangible result of Pan Arabism was the short lived United Arab Republic between Egypt and Syria, established in 1958. As we saw earlier, Syria's decision to join the union was driven mainly by domestic political considerations rather than enthusiasm for Pan Arabism. As one could have predicted, the union collapsed three years later with much bitterness on both sides. In 1962, Egypt intervened in Yemen to support a group of republican army officers who were intent on unseating the royal regime. Nasser was hopeful of extending Pan Arabism from there. All he got for his trouble was heightened suspicion from his Arab brothers and a depleted treasury. Nasser also intervened in Lebanon,

where his agents assassinated Kamal Mroue, an influential, westward-leaning newspaper editor whose sympathies were with the Shah of Iran and the Gulf royals.

In retrospect, Pan Arabism as a political movement was a failure. It still survives, however, mainly among Arabs who feel frustrated by their impotence and dream of firm collective action, particularly against their common enemy, Israel. But politically, it is a spent force As for Egypt, the idea of it being able to play a decisive role on the world stage by dominating developing world political organizations still endures. Official statements coming out of the Foreign Ministry are likely to include a diagram of ever widening circles with Egypt at the centre, indicating Egypt's conviction that it is still a major international player, in spite of the ineffectualness of all the organizations that Egypt has either promoted or joined.

Nasser was not to have much success with his Soviet style economic program either. He introduced several central command initiatives, which included extensive land reform, the creation of a range of state run industries, nationalization of a whole range of private enterprises ranging from department stores to cinemas. He also introduced subsidies for essential commodities such as bread, sugar and cooking oil. Realizing that Egyptians were addicted to their cigarettes, Nasser also subsidized these too. He expanded the state's higher education system and abolished tuition fees. He also guaranteed every university graduate a job. This initiative, as one might imagine, was a disaster. It boosted the intake of ill prepared high school graduates and the standard of Egyptian higher education went down. Also, as the only jobs that were available were in the public sector, it virtually guaranteed a large, malfunctioning bureaucracy, which survives until today. These initiatives impoverished Egypt's thriving middle class and pushed large numbers of the country's entrepreneurial elite - Jews, Greeks, Italians, Maltese and Egyptian Copts - to emigrate.



Egypt

However, the centrepiece of Nasser's economic reform program, the building of the Aswan Dam, must be seen as positive. Nasser's goal was to irrigate an extra two million acres of land and generate sufficient electricity to power a diversified economy that had previously been heavily dependent on cotton. Initially, the World Bank agreed to lend Egypt $20 million and the US and Britain agreed to provide Egypt with an extra $70 million worth of credit to cover construction costs. But the unwritten assumption was that Nasser should shrug off his association with the Soviet-influenced Non Aligned Movement. When he refused and went on to recognize the People's Republic of China against the wishes of the United States, Washington pulled out of the deal.

In retaliation, Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal and announced that its income would finance the building of the dam. Then the Soviets stepped in and agreed to buy the whole of Egypt's cotton crop to provide funds for work on the dam to begin. Construction began in 1960 and its final stage was completed in 1971. Today, it powers a vast electricity network, while the water that is accumulated in the newly created Lake Nasser is used to irrigate a vast area of desert now made suitable for agriculture.

In spite of the dam's success, there is little doubt that Nasser's regime was a failure. His ambitious economic reform program impoverished Egypt and his dream of uniting the Arabs was also frustrated. As Tahsin Bashir, President Sadat's spokesperson used to scoff: "Arab unity? How can you unite a bunch of tribes with flags." In retrospect, it could also be argued that Nasser did irreparable damage to Egypt by feeding the nation's grandiose ambitions while failing to provide the country with a sound economy that could have underpinned its political ambitions.

If Nasser was such a failure, how then did he manage to retain the affection of most Egyptians? Even his critics are inclined to forgive him. But Nasser did fulfil a psychological need. First, he was a charismatic figure who inspired the masses. He was also seen as someone who set them free from the tyranny of colonial rule. Hence Nasser's enduring

legacy as the father of modern Egypt. At his death, the whole nation mourned and to this day his memory resonates among the common people.

Outsiders may find this difficult to understand. But place Nasser's popularity in a cultural context and it begins to make sense. Egypt has always prized strong leadership. Geography has been responsible for that. It is a vast desert country bisected by the River Nile, which rises in the highlands south of the equator, flows north through Sudan into Egypt and spreads out into a delta before running into the Mediterranean. Anyone who controls the Nile's water governs Egypt. That was the way it was in Pharaonic times; that is the way it was throughout most of Egypt's history.

Through the ages, that economic dependence morphed into psychological dependence and virtually guaranteed despotic rule. Given this penchant for autocracy, reinforced by a peculiarly Egyptian brand of Sunni Islam, which emphasizes almost total subservience before God and you have a vast nation of people making a precarious livelihood but surprisingly tolerant of their condition as long as the centre seems to hold. The Nile goes up and Egyptians prosper; when it goes down they don't. Ripeness is all.

Though Egyptians are no longer economically dependent on the Nile, the psychology that it has fostered still exerts a powerful influence. Thus, Nasser's takeover was not a grass roots revolution; it was a military coup undertaken by a handful of army officers and, let it be said, with remarkable delicacy. Today, Egyptians who remember the dethronement of Faruq and his being sent into exile stress how he and his family were allowed to leave the country - with dignity. Few see his overthrow as just retribution for ineffectual rule. Egyptians tend to see life in terms of millennia, not decades. Through it all life goes on and one way or another one survives, irrespective of who is in power. It is better to close one's eyes to unpleasantness and hope that this is if not the best of all possible worlds at least one in which survival is possible.

Nasser died in 1970 and was succeeded by his Vice President Anwar Sadat. Generally regarded as a lacklustre figure (no Arab president would want anything else for fear of having a potential rival), Sadat soon surprised everyone by making a violent break with Egypt's recent past.

At first there was little indication that Sadat would be anything other than a timid follower of Nasser, when in 1971 he signed a 15 year co-operation agreement with the Soviets. But only a year later, without any warning, and despite Egypt's heavy reliance on Soviet military assistance, Sadat expelled the 15,000 Soviet experts based in Egypt. Few Egyptians were upset to see the Soviets leave; their heavy handed presence was universally resented. But as far as Moscow was concerned, Egypt was too important an ally to let go easily. The Soviets turned on a charm campaign and relations between the two countries improved sufficiently for the Soviets to resume arms shipments.

Thus emboldened, Sadat decided to attack Israel unilaterally. Taken by surprise, the Israelis were at first forced to retreat from the Sinai territory they had occupied, first between 1956 and 1957 and later after the 1967 war. They soon recovered, however, and drove the Egyptians back. Then Sadat looked to the US to mediate - not to the UN as one might have expected. In 1975 a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel was signed.

It is difficult to underestimate the impact of Sadat's dramatic initiative. It marked the end of Egypt's close diplomatic and military ties with the Soviet Union; henceforth Egypt was to align itself with the United States. It also marked the definitive end of Pan Arabism. Egypt was ostracized by its Arab brothers for breaking ranks and unilaterally making peace with Israel. It suffered a range of punitive sanctions and Egyptian workers in the Gulf were sent home. The Arab League headquarters was moved from Cairo to the Gulf.

Sadat's swing to the Americans also marked the beginning of the end for Egypt's central command economy. Prodded by the United States, Sadat announced an economic liberalization policy, the "infitah," or open door.

Henceforth, Egypt's creaking nationalized industries were to be privatized; import restrictions were to be lifted; exchange currency controls and other restrictive financial practices were to be phased out. The US richly rewarded both Israel and Egypt for making peace. Egypt received a massive infusion of American financial aid; access to US markets and military hardware (though with certain restrictions). In 1978 Sadat signed the Camp David Accords with Jimmy Carter at the White House, which set the seal on peace with Israel and opened the door to further cooperation. Sadat had transformed Egypt from being one of the West's enemies to one of its closest friends.

Or so it seemed. While the West was happy, few Egyptians were genuinely pleased with the turn of events. They resented being ostracized by their Arab brothers. Most importantly, they saw that Egypt's new economic policy benefited the privileged elite who surrounded the president but did little to improve theirs. Traditionally, the Egyptian economy has been primarily dependent on four sectors: oil and gas; tourism; Suez Canal revenues; and remittances from Egyptians working overseas. Apart from remittances, which are spread throughout the economy, income from the other three sectors benefit primarily the state. The government runs the oil and gas industry and the Suez Canal; it also has a commanding stake in the tourism industry. Those with privileged access to the leadership have also invested heavily in the tourism sector, so they benefit too. True, some of the income from oil and gas, the Suez Canal and tourism trickles down but not very effectively.

In other words, while Egypt's economy improved under Sadat, it was only a relatively small number of Egyptians who really benefited. Previously, the poor had managed to eke out a precarious existence, thanks largely to government subsidies on essentials. Now, with Sadat eliminating these subsidies, the poor were being squeezed. Prices went up and "bread riots" broke out all over the country, forcing Sadat to back down. The subsidies were re-introduced. Fortunately the US stepped in to stem the financial shortfall. It increased its financial aid to Egypt and

cancelled its $10-12 billion debt (after the Soviets had refused). Shortly afterwards Sadat abrogated the Soviet Friendship Treaty.

Like most Arab leaders, Sadat's ruling instincts were despotic. Moreover he was almost paranoid in his fear of opposition to his rule. Concerned that making peace with Israel would turn the military against him, he sacked his chief of staff and defense minister and brought in a group of technocrats to advise him. A year later he summarily dissolved parliament two years short of its normal term. Then he rigged a multi-party election, in which his ruling National Democratic Party secured 83% of the vote. He then appointed himself prime minister and staged a referendum which abrogated the constitutional provision that a president should serve for only one six-year term. His next move was to ban all strikes and demonstrations and crack down on anyone who looked like opposing him. In September 1981 alone, there were no less than 2,000 politically motivated arrests.

By now, almost the whole country was against him. The fact that his dark complexion made him look like someone from Upper Egypt (though he was born in modest circumstances in the Delta village of Mitl al Kom) did not help either. Though few Egyptians will admit to racial prejudice, the hardworking farmers of the Delta from where most of Egypt's elite derive, generally look down on those from Upper Egypt, whom they consider irresponsible layabouts. Moreover, Sadat's increasingly imperial lifestyle contrasted sharply with the frugal existence of most Egyptians and the fact that he smoked a pipe marked him as a man with few links to the common people. The end came on the 1981 anniversary of the October 1973 war, while Sadat was watching a military parade in Cairo. A group of Islamic militants broke ranks and assassinated him before they were gunned down themselves. Unlike the funeral of Nasser, where the whole nation mourned, Sadat's death went largely unlamented.

After Sadat, Hosni Mubarak became president. Mubarak had been Sadat's vice president. And just as Sadat had been chosen as Nasser's

vice president because he was regarded as an unambitious nonentity, the same was true of Mubarak. Therefore, when he came to power there were few who expected much from him. In fact, most Egyptians regarded him as a dolt. Soon, people were making a more favourable assessment. They saw that where Sadat was impetuous and addicted to the grand gesture, Mubarak was reassuringly cautious. Neither was he instinctively confrontational. One of his first acts was designed to win over Islamic militants. He released from jail the majority of the political dissidents whom Sadat had imprisoned during the last two months of his life. But this perceived softness did not last for long. In a few months Mubarak was locking up suspected Islamic militants almost as quickly as Sadat had done before him. Henceforth, Mubarak's rule was marked by extreme caution. He moved slowly and deliberately to implement Sadat's open door economic policy. He was equally cautious in his dealings with other Arab states. He treated his own people with a mixture of wariness, control and contempt.

Mindful of the previous reaction when Sadat lifted subsidies on essential commodities, Mubarak shrugged off American prodding to quicken the pace of economic reform. While this policy may have been politically sensible in the short run, nonetheless Egypt's economy was floundering. Its population was expanding faster than job creation. Its hugely inefficient state run industries were losing vast amounts of money; the state banking system was heavily regulated, with an eye to ensuring economic stability rather than stimulating enterprise; government bureaucracy and institutionalized corruption were stifling even the most adventurous spirits.

But privatizing Egypt's inefficient state run enterprises would throw a huge number of people out of work and on to the streets. Privatizing the banks would put Egypt's financial institutions at a disadvantage vis-à-vis foreign owned banks and the government's friends would no longer be able to raise loans at privileged rates. Also, freeing other sectors of the economy from monopolistic control might undermine the support of the

regime's favourites who were the main beneficiaries. In short, internal security took precedence over much needed economic reform. Better to drag one's feet than upset the status quo.

Simultaneously, Mubarak was beefing up his internal security forces and clamping down on dissent. Among the organizations that suffered was the Ibn Khaldun Centre, a human rights organization, and in particular its head, an American trained sociologist, Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim, who was tried and jailed for undermining the security and prestige of the state.

Mubarak's main target, however, were the Islamists. The Moslem Brotherhood had been banned in Egypt since 1983 and while they continued to engage in politics as independents, their power was constrained. In spite of being hounded mercilessly by the internal security forces, support for their cause had grown. This is not necessarily because a wave of religious fervour has swept the country; rather it was on account of the Islamists being regarded as less corrupt than the ruling National Democratic Party and more mindful of the welfare of the people. Also, because Mubarak had systematically suppressed political dissent, those who disagreed with him took comfort in their faith and looked to it for reassurance.

It is wrong to assume that the Islamists depend mainly on the uneducated poor for their support; the movement also attracts large numbers of the middle class as well. Also, many middle class Egyptians owe their wealth to working in conservative Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, where their instinctive piety was reinforced. Of course religious fervour does not necessarily translate into Islamic militancy. But it does provoke a degree of anti-western feeling as well as hostility towards the political elite, whose decadent lifestyles have become infamous. Finally, because almost all other modes of political opposition have been choked off, the only way Egyptians are able to express their resentment is by supporting critics of the regime who also claim to be deeply religious. When the government clamped down on the secular opposition, few were outraged. It was

altogether different when the government began to clamp down on those who raised the banner of Islam. Today, Islamists, whether openly flaunting their Islamic credentials or masquerading as independents, constitute the most powerful opposition to President Mubarak.

While Mubarak's domestic policy has justifiably been subject to criticism, his foreign policy has been more successful. Here again, Mubarak has adopted a cautious approach, juggling his different priorities with some skill.

While maintaining good relations with the US, he has also revitalized Egypt's relations with Russia. (Mubarak, at one time Egypt's air vice marshal, speaks Russian and has studied on several occasions in the Soviet Union). Mubarak has also contrived to keep Israel at arm's length without upsetting Washington. Sadat had addressed the Israeli Knesset in 1977; when invited to do the same, Mubarak resolutely refused. When Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, Mubarak withdrew Egypt's ambassador to Tel Aviv but he also rebuffed efforts by other Arab states who wanted him to break diplomatic ties with Israel. He also joined with the US in siding against Iran in the first Gulf War. On the other hand, in 1983, he used Egypt's diplomatic leverage to assist Yasser Arafat to regroup his forces in Tunis, after they had been expelled from Lebanon.

Perhaps his greatest diplomatic achievement was to bring back Egypt into the Arab League in 1989 and resume Egypt's traditional influence over the League's policies. He also manoeuvred his foreign minister Amr Moussa into the presidency of the League. Finally, he also played a leading role in persuading the majority of his Arab brothers not to support Iraq when it invaded Kuwait the following year. He also sent troops to Saudi Arabia to support the US led coalition, though they went there with strict orders not to enter Iraq itself.

Since then, Mubarak has continually put himself forward as the leading interlocutor between the Arabs and the West, trying with some success not to like Washington's stooge. An interesting example of the fine line

Mubarak has walked vis-à-vis Israel and America was demonstrated last year, when he came to the help of Gazans suffering under Israel's blockade. Although there is no love lost between the hard-line Islamist Hamas government in Gaza and the Mubarak regime, Egypt allowed the not so secret tunnels that link Gaza with Egypt and the outside world to remain open for several days, in defiance of Israel's demand to close them. He closed them several days later when he felt that the pressure inside Gaza had been relieved.

In spite of Mubarak's skilful diplomacy, which have coincided with an improvement in Egypt's GDP, at home he is increasingly unloved. He appears remote and detached from his people. Instead, he lives surrounded by Egypt's movers and shakers, who meet frequently at his luxurious home in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el Sheikh. Thus, while Egypt's macro-economics may have improved, the majority of the population sees little change in their condition. Put simply, the wealth has still not trickled down.

It remains in the hands of the nouveau riche, Mubarak's favoured few.

Today, attention is being focused on what happens to Egypt after Mubarak. He has two sons, Ala'a, who shows more interest in money than politics and Gamal, who started his professional career with an American bank and has been manoeuvred into the leadership of the ruling National Democratic Party. It appears that Gamal is being groomed to be Mubarak's successor. The big question is how this can be managed.

While Gamal has considerable economic expertise, he lacks charisma. Moreover, now into his forties and still unmarried, there are rumours that he is gay. In short, he does not fit the profile for an Egyptian president, who has traditionally been a military man. The army, to some degree marginalized by the entrepreneurs surrounding Mubarak, is not happy with the likely succession. Nor are the Islamists, who resent his western ways and see him as an outsider. If there is to be opposition to Gamal's presidency, it will likely come from either or both these sources.

However, there are signs that President Mubarak may have understood that he needs to clean house if a transition of power is to be smooth. A recent scandal may turn out to be a significant turning point. Allegedly, Hisham Talaat Mustafa, an Egyptian tycoon and a leading figure in the ruling National Democratic Party has been accused of paying $2.0 million to a former member of the internal security services to murder a Lebanese singer Susanne Tamim, his former lover. Her decapitated body was discovered in an apartment building in Dubai.

Normally, an incident like this would have been hushed up. However, in this instance the alleged murderer and his paymaster have been identified and ordered to stand trial. If the alleged perpetrators are indeed indicted and imprisoned, it suggests that the favoured and often corrupt oligarchy surrounding the presidency, who could quite literally get away with murder are perhaps becoming too much of a liability to be sustained.

Mubarak's successor is unlikey to have an easy ride, especially if he hopes to assume the role of the powerful leader most Egyptians seem to want.

Although Egypt's runaway population growth is now under control and the four main sectors of the economy are now functioning more or less satisfactorily, Egypt remains a country in which a tiny percentage of the population has the wealth and 40% of the population lives on less than $2 a day. The problem is, as I mentioned earlier, Egypt's ambitions have traditionally outpaced its actual influence and authority. Its political institutions are dysfunctional; corruption is endemic. The Islamists are increasing in power and the succession to Mubarak, now over 80, must be imminent. Gamal, the leading candidate, has little popular support and his elevation to the presidency could be constrained by the military, who resent being sidelined by Egypt's nouveau riche. While history suggests that the likelihood of a grassroots upheaval is extremely unlikely, it does appear that Egypt will be experiencing some difficult times ahead.

Making sense of the Peace Process

Finally, the Middle East peace process - more process than peace, unfortunately. And today, frankly, not much of a process either. In short, regional peace remains elusive in spite of various US administrations having tried their hand at it. And that is where the problem lies: the only player which has the power and authority to bang heads together in the Middle East is the US. But it is constrained by its close ties with Israel and therefore cannot act as an honest broker.

First, let us look at Zionism as a political force. It has its origins in the late nineteenth century, when European Jews realized they were not sharing in the increased freedoms enjoyed by their non-Jewish countrymen. In 1862, Moses Hess, a German Jew wrote a tract called *Rome and Jerusalem*, in which he advocated a return of Jews to Palestine. His words had little impact until Theodor Herzl attempted to turn this Jewish dream into political reality by convening the first Zionist Congress in 1897. Herzl's goal was to create a Jewish state by peaceful means in the Ottoman held territories of Palestine. To assess the project's viability, two Jews were dispatched to Palestine to review the situation. Their response: "The bride is beautiful but she is married to another man." In other words, Palestine was a desirable choice but it was not, as the Zionist writer Israel Zangwill later wrongfully claimed "a land without a people for a people without a land." It was home to a native Arab Palestinian population. In the event, Herzl's initiative was rebuffed by the Ottoman Sultan and although later Great Britain offered Uganda as an alternative, this was rejected by the Zionists.

But the pressure grew before and during World War I. Jews in Russia, especially, were being victimized. Soon, large numbers of them were being assisted to immigrate to Palestine. Simultaneously, two prominent Zionists, Chaim Weizman and Nahum Sokolov began to lobby the British

government to assist their efforts. In 1917 they persuaded Lord Balfour, then British Foreign Secretary, to commit to the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The result was set forth explicitly in the Balfour Declaration.

Considering its importance, it is worth quoting in full: "His Majesty's government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a National Home for the Jewish People, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this project, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country."

The Balfour initiative was not just a humanitarian gesture; it was also fuelled by the need to persuade Jewish bankers to facilitate funding for the 1914-18 war. Primarily it was designed to boost Britain's colonial aspirations by establishing control over Palestine to ensure free passage through the Suez Canal and thence to India. It was also seen as a way of securing British access to oil deposits in Mesopotamia. In short, Zionist aspirations and British colonial outreach reinforced one another. The details were tidied up and formalized at the League of Nations meeting at San Remo in 1920.

By this time, Jewish immigration to Palestine had increased significantly. The Palestinians objected. There were armed clashes throughout the 1930's, and in 1939 the British imposed a limit of 75,000 Jewish immigrants over the next five years but the numbers only increased. By this time Jews were being violently discriminated against in Germany and Eastern Europe and particularly during, World War 2, when Nazi Germany was responsible for the holocaust. Eventually, in 1947, after Hitler had been defeated, the United Nations General Assembly formally ended the British mandate over Palestine and agreed to its partition. The Jews, who at that time constituted 30% of the population, gained 53.5% of Palestinian territories. Jerusalem and its suburbs were declared an

international city. The World Zionist Organization accepted this arrangement but the Arabs rejected it, though to little avail.

On May 1, 1948, the State of Israel formally came into being and war broke out between Arabs and Israelis. The Arabs lost and Israel was able to extend its reach, reducing Arab control of the land originally allotted to them to 23.4%. The Israelis also took over west Jerusalem. During the next twenty years international Jewry gave liberal support to the Zionist project.

In 1967, war broke out again between the Arabs and Israelis, which resulted in the Israelis extending their control over Arab land, mainly on the West Bank of the Jordan River and in Gaza. After the war, UN Resolution 242 was passed to regulate a tenuous peace. In a very real sense it favoured Israel, as it swept aside Palestinian claims to the territory which had been taken from them and focused on settling its refugees. In short, Israel was fully legitimized as a state and "the Palestine problem," as it was euphemistically referred to, was reduced to a humanitarian issue. What should be the fate of the Palestinian refugees? In short, in creating a homeland for the Jews, the international community had dispossessed a large number of the people already living there.

After the passage of UN 242 there was a stalemate. The Arabs, with Soviet backing, refused to negotiate with Israel until it agreed to withdraw from the territory it had occupied. Israel refused and there followed a period of futile Palestinian resistance, first from Jordan, and when the PLO was driven from there by King Hussein, from south Lebanon. Palestinian resistance accomplished little and instead of gaining the world's sympathy, the Palestinians lost it. Then, in October 1973, after another futile Arab-Israeli war, UN Resolution 338 was passed, which called upon Israel to cease hostilities and allow 242 to be implemented. Israel now felt strong enough to ignore it.

Meanwhile, in 1972, President Anwar Sadat had expelled his Soviet advisors from Egypt. It was clear that the Soviets were unwilling to

support another Arab assault against Israel. A year later Egypt, unaided, made a surprise attack against Israel in the Sinai and initially drove its forces back. Then, Israel gained the upper hand and agreed to a ceasefire, which among other things enabled Egypt to regain Israeli occupied Sinai, which Egypt had lost in the 1967 war.

In 1979, there were the Camp David Accords, brokered by US President Jimmy Carter. Initially, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat insisted that Palestine be included as part of any deal but Israel's Prime Minister Menachem Begin refused. Sadat backed down and made a separate peace treaty with Israel. Egypt, once a passionate proponent of Pan Arabism, had broken ranks with its Arab brothers.

This meant that Egypt was ostracized; the Arab League moved its headquarters from Cairo; and it was not until 1989 that Egypt was able to restore relations with the rest of the Arab world. In 1981 Sadat paid the ultimate price for going it alone. He was assassinated by Islamic militants while watching his own military parade.

Negotiations to settle the Palestine issue all but ceased for a while. Later, with some lukewarm American support, Saudi Arabia put forward another peace plan. This appeared to give the Palestinians a better deal. However, Israel was having none of it, even though the Arabs for the first time acknowledged collectively Israel's status as a sovereign state existing within its pre -1967 borders. By now, most Palestinians, who had previously refused to accept Israel's right to exist, were ready to recognize Israel as a sovereign state.

Meanwhile, the Israelis were keeping up the pressure on the Palestinians, creating new facts on the ground, most obviously by allowing thousands of Israeli settlers to claim parts of the West Bank. This was a blatant act of defiance but the US felt powerless to do anything, mainly because of the lobbying power of the America Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Later, AIPAC's iron grip on American politics was well demonstrated when, after the Second Gulf war, President Bush senior's plans to create

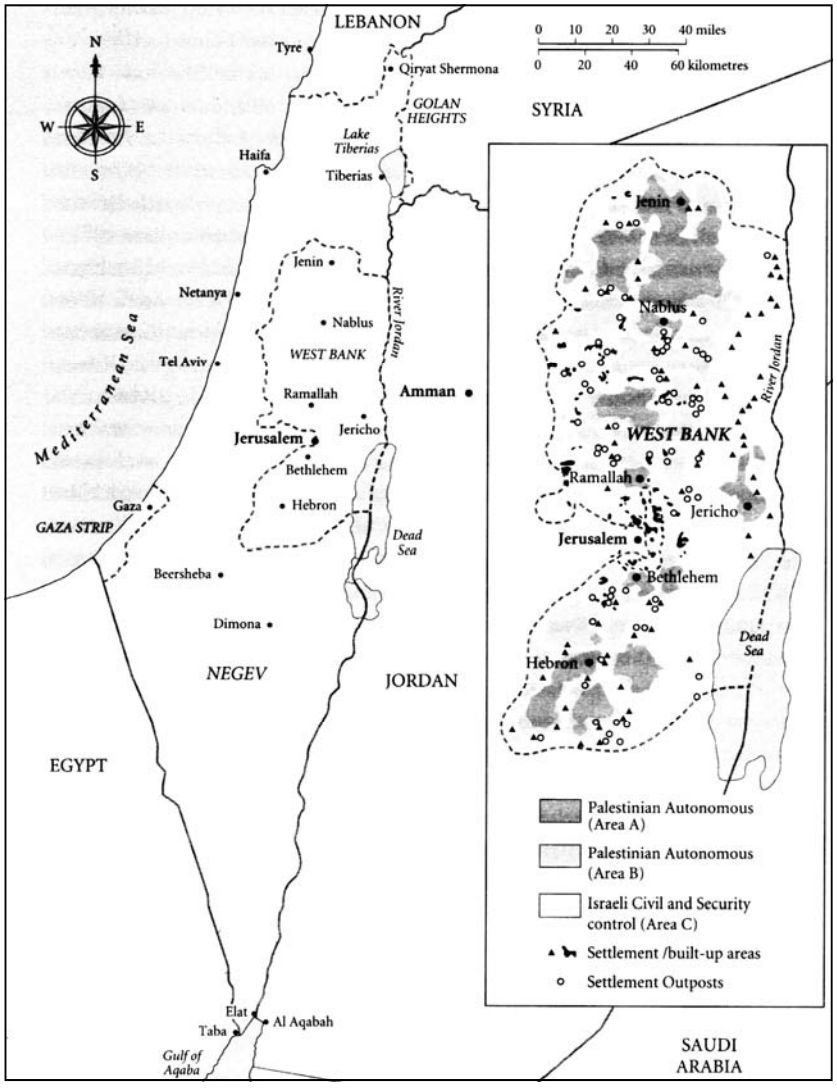
a "new world order," ran aground mainly as a result of AIPAC's obduracy. His mistake was to link the disbursement of further US aid to Israel being conditional on their stopping settlement-building. He was forced to back down.

Soon, a new dynamic was at work. In 1987, stone-throwing youths in Gaza created problems for the Israel Defense Force during what was called the first "intifada."

Israel came under intense international pressure when pictures of young, unarmed Palestinians confronting Israeli soldiers in full battle gear were beamed around the world but it still refused to countenance any new peace overtures.

The Palestinians realized they had to change direction. They began secret peace talks in Oslo in 1993 under the sponsorship of the Norwegian government. These produced a set of principles agreed to by both the Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres and the PLO negotiator, Ahmad Krai, which were intended to become the basis for a peace treaty between the two parties. Essentially, the Palestinians agreed to an Israeli state existing within its pre-1967 borders; the right of return (or compensation) for Palestinians living in exile; the right to east Jerusalem as their capital. This has remained the basis for an agreement to this day.

It appeared that the Israelis had realized they would not be able to occupy the West Bank and Gaza indefinitely. It also suggested that the Palestinians had recognized that guerrilla activity was leading nowhere. Hopes were high that genuine progress could be made. The US embraced the Oslo initiative and President Bill Clinton presided over a ceremony in the White House rose garden when Rabin and Arafat made their historic handshake. Sadly, this turned out to be no more than a photo opportunity. True to form, Arafat dragged his feet in bringing his supporters into line, while in Israel there was strong opposition, which led to Rabin's assassination by an Israeli fanatic in 1995.



Israel and West Bank, adapted from *Foundation for Middle East Peace*

Shimon Peres then became prime minister and while talks continued nothing significant emerged. This enabled King Hussein to follow Sadat's lead and in 1994 he made his own peace with Israel. This further damaged the Palestinians' position, as it gave Jordan sovereignty over large numbers of Palestinians living in its territory, thereby undermining the right of Palestinians to return to their homeland. Jordan also obtained the right to oversee the holy sites of Jerusalem, where the Palestinians had hoped to establish their capital.

When Ehud Barak became Israeli prime minister in 1999, there was another attempt to revive the Oslo talks. Unfortunately, Barak, a military man, was an impatient negotiator; he was up against Arafat, who favoured the long drawn out, circular approach to decision-making. With two such dissimilar negotiators, the end was predictable. Although Clinton constantly reminded both parties they were only a hair's breadth away from a historic agreement, in the end these talks also failed. Although Israel had undertaken to withdraw from large parts of the Arab territory, the burden of keeping the peace was placed squarely on Arafat's shoulders. This was an impossible task. The talks broke down.

Arafat's authority, by this time in decline, went further downhill until he became little more than the symbol of a lost cause. He died in Paris in 2004. While Arafat deserves credit for having kept Palestine on the international agenda and for uniting a fractious group of militants with widely different goals and strategies, ultimately he lost respect not just internationally but also among his own people as well. This was partly because of his failed diplomacy but also because he condoned corruption in the PLO. (He saw it as a way of rewarding his supporters). He was also a poor negotiator and ultimately a weak leader.

However, in spite of Oslo's failure, it did mark some sort of a breakthrough. At last, Palestinians and Israelis had sat down together for substantive discussions. In 2002, there was an attempt to revive negotiations with the introduction of the so called "Road Map," overseen

by a "Quartet" made up of the US, UN, Russia and the EU. Like the Oslo accords, the road map followed a gradualist approach to a solution, seeking to build on growing mutual confidence. The goal was to create an independent Palestinian state by 2005. That, of course, did not happen but the "Road Map" remains an on-going initiative, even though an attempt in 2004 to revive it at a meeting in Sharm el Sheikh went nowhere.

In 2004, there was progress of sorts when Israel's hard-line prime minister Ariel Sharon agreed unilaterally to withdraw from Gaza and dismantle Israel's 21 settlements there. Actually, Israel was happy to get out because Gaza had become virtually ungovernable. Once again, the burden of keeping peace in Gaza and the West Bank was placed on Palestinian shoulders and once again they were unequal to the task. The Palestinians were allowed to have arms but, unwilling to boost the power of a potential enemy, Israel refused to give them enough to dominate potential opponents. Clan fights broke out, splinter groups formed and the authority of the PLO was steadily undermined. Eventually, after a long power struggle and a genuinely democratic election, Gaza fell under the control of the extreme Islamist party, Hamas.

Although President Bush had pledged to promote democracy throughout the region, evidently what he meant was to promote democracy that favoured the US. Washington refused to recognize Hamas and has kept it on its list of terrorist organizations. Meanwhile, in the West Bank, a weakened Fatah-dominated Palestine National Authority under Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas (which the US does recognize) remains in charge.

Neither entity can be regarded as genuinely autonomous. Gaza has been fenced off from the rest of the world and is now subject to an Israeli blockade as a penalty for Gaza firing rockets into Israel. The West Bank has been carved up by a long, meandering wall which skirts Israeli settlements and isolates many villagers from their land. Intimidating Israeli

check points disrupt normal civilian activities. Routine punitive sanctions such as razing olive groves and demolishing homes are carried out in the name of enhancing Israeli security. The Israelis claim this is necessary; the Palestinians claim it is essentially a land grab. Look at your map. Clearly, it is both.

To even the most prejudiced observer, it is clear that for the Palestinians, the West Bank is now nothing other than a vast prison. In East Jerusalem, Arab homes are demolished to undermine the Palestinians' legitimate claim to it as their capital. How can the Palestinians hope to live let alone prosper in such a fractured land? How can Israel afford to maintain the status quo indefinitely, both morally and economically?

This brief history of the peace process leaves out a great many details. Neither side has much to be proud of; both sides are guilty of gross human rights violations. Oddly, the Palestinians are the ones who receive the greatest blame, though Israel is responsible for the greatest number of casualties.

Looking at the general picture, what emerges is that Israel seems determined to hold on to a substantial amount of Palestinian territory and has continued to create facts on the ground by building illegal settlements. Israel also continues to insist that its security concerns should take priority over everything else, including internationally agreed upon UN resolutions. It also expects the Palestinians to do the policing, though it must know they are incapable of doing it.

As for the Palestinians, they continue to preserve the fiction that they are genuine negotiators in a partnership for peace, though their power to negotiate is limited by what Israel and the US deem appropriate. Europe generally appears to be more sympathetic to the Palestinian cause than the US - not that the EU gives much more than financial and token political support. Internationally, patience with both Israel and the Palestinians is wearing thin.

The Palestinians are their own worst enemy when it comes to gaining international sympathy. Former Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban once said that the Palestinians never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity and there is some truth in that. Whenever the world looked as if it might be ready to sympathize, they would engage in activities that would turn the world against them: for example, unleashing suicide bombers to kill Israeli civilians. One of Palestinians' biggest blunders was to support Saddam Hussein during the Second Gulf War. Also, in spite of there being a whole new generation of well educated, articulate Palestinians, their leadership persists in relying for their spokespersons on an old guard, whose tired, repetitive rhetoric turns people off rather than on.

In contrast, Israel has a well oiled propaganda machine and spokespersons who can easily relate to an international audience. The Israelis are also especially adept at reinforcing the many myths that underpin their cause. One of the myths they have perpetuated is that to be a member of the Jewish faith is akin to nationhood. Israel itself continues to claim that to be a member of the Jewish faith is not just to subscribe to a set of religious beliefs and practices; it also means laying claim to a specific history, the history of the Israelites as recounted in the Old Testament from their Abrahamic origins to their dispersal from their ancestral home. This is reflected in their main feast, the Passover, which commemorates the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. By perpetuating this myth many Jews feel they have a justifiable claim to what is called "Eretz Israel," the lands between the river and the sea. This is variously interpreted to mean the land between the Euphrates in Syria and the Sinai in Egypt, or less ambitiously, between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean.

True, not all Jews, not even all Israelis, accept Eretz Israel as their patrimony but a noisy minority does. These are mainly Israeli settlers, among them many recent arrivals. They feel it is their God-given right to occupy east Jerusalem, the whole of the West Bank and Syria's Golan

Heights in perpetuity. Though their number is relatively small, the settlers' political clout is considerable. Israel's parliament, the Knesset, is elected on a basis of proportional representation. This means that even small parties wield considerable influence as uneasy coalitions come and go: right now, the (relatively) moderate coalition led by the Kedima party looks like giving way to a more extremist Likud led grouping, dominated by the hard line Benjamin Netanyahu.

To be fair, many Israelis regard the settlers as a thorn in their side and resent them dominating the debate over control of the occupied territories. But that does not mean they are ready to confront them. (By the way, another example of Israelis creating new "facts" - this time not on the ground but in people's minds is their recent practice of calling these territories "disputed" rather than "occupied.") Frankly, the primary concern of most Israelis is that, after centuries of discrimination and the ultimate horror of the holocaust, they now have a homeland and the precise size and configuration of Israel's borders hardly concerns them.

No one should deny that the holocaust was a major violation of human rights; it was ethnic cleansing on a scale unsurpassed in modern history. It was this awareness which prompted President Harry Truman to press for an independent Jewish state in Palestine. Great Britain, enfeebled by World War 2 and acutely conscious of its reduced role in world affairs, should have stood firm over the rights of the Palestinians as promised in the Balfour Declaration but they didn't. With the burden of the holocaust hanging heavily on the West's collective conscience, the establishment of the state of Israel was seen as a moral no less than a political imperative. This is something Israel has consistently exploited. It is quick to accuse those who would seek to criticize Israel in the search for peace as being guilty of anti-Semitism, though how one can be pro-Palestinian and at the same time anti-Semitic escapes me.

The holocaust is not a myth, as some revisionist western historians would have us believe, and one should be sensitive to Jewish sensibilities

concerning the issue. But some Zionists have no compunction in creating their own myths and forcefully exploiting them to bolster their claim to a homeland on Arab soil. One is that the land of Palestine was barren and under-populated until they came along and made the desert bloom. In fact, Palestine had a flourishing agricultural economy long before the Zionists arrived: think Jaffa oranges. The image the Zionists initially encouraged of bronzed kibbutzim working in the fields and listening to Mendelssohn in the evenings had even from the beginning, more substance in romantic western minds than in reality. Far more potent than Jewish muscle were Zionist financial investments.

Another myth that the Zionists have nurtured is that Jerusalem should be regarded as the undisputed capital of Israel. Their justification is because the Ark of the Covenant was transferred to Jerusalem from Hebron and Solomon's Temple was located there. But Christianity supplanted Judaism in Jerusalem after the Roman occupation, when the Church of the Holy Sepulcher was built. Later still Jerusalem became the third most sacred city in Islam, after Mohammed's legendary ascent to heaven from where the iconic Dome of the Rock is now located. In fact, Jerusalem was under Jewish rule for only a very short time and both Christianity and Islam have as much if not more right to claim it as their own. That is why Jerusalem was originally intended to be an international city.

Israelis also utilize other people's myths when it suits them, notably those of Christian, mainly American, fundamentalists. These people claim that the second coming will happen only after the Jews have been restored to Jerusalem, prior to the Jews' eventual extermination, leaving only a few cherished Christian survivors. Such Christian fundamentalists and their congressional supporters have been successfully wooed and co-opted by the Israelis.

There is also the myth of the Jewish David standing up to the Arab Goliath. Admittedly, this notion no longer resonates as much as it did: resounding victories in two wars against the Arabs have seen to that. But even in the beginning, Israel was equipped with the latest US military

technology. Also, France, as early as 1953 worked with Israel to develop its nuclear capability in the Negev desert. Today, Israel has probably 200 atomic bombs, though it has yet to make this public officially.

Finally, Israel has made a strong case for being the only genuine democracy in a region where it is conspicuously lacking. That is only partly true. True, there is more genuine transparency in Israel than in the surrounding Arab countries: consider the ongoing corruption charges against Israel's former Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert. It is hard to imagine anything like that happening in an Arab country. That said, let us not forget that Israel is an openly racist state, a country in which Arab Israelis - much less the Palestinians in the occupied territories - are treated as second class citizens. Incidentally, the Zionists are now also engaged in creating a new myth. A moment ago, I referred to the "occupied" territories. Increasingly the Zionists are more likely to use the term "disputed." One wonders how long it will be before that word starts being used in the international media.

Israel has also adopted the imperialists' practice of divide and rule. True, some Arab states are also complicit, having signed peace treaties with Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994). Less defensible, however, as we have seen, was Israel's attempt to create a Christian mini-state in Lebanon with the help of the Lebanese Forces. Israel also pushed the Bush administration hard to enter its recent, disastrous war against Saddam Hussein, hoping to undermine the one Arab country whose military could have posed a threat to its security. Such efforts have done little to bolster Israel's security but they have had a disastrous effect on western interests, destabilizing the region and encouraging the rise of Islamic extremism.

Of course, the Arabs must also be blamed for the halting progress towards Middle East peace. They too have played a devious game. Illegitimate regimes all, they kowtow to the West, making a show of seeking better relations with Israel but simultaneously play up to their peoples' anti-Zionist sentiment to bolster their position at home. Such

hypocrisy has not gone unnoticed, boosting the authority of the Islamists, who are seen as more honest and certainly less corrupt than their rulers. In short, Israel's divisive policy coupled with the ineptness of Arab leadership, have combined to fuel increasing instability throughout the region. And this at a time, when the West needs not only secure access to oil but financial support from Arab sovereign wealth funds to shore up its faltering economies.

It should now be clear that Palestine can no longer be regarded as a purely political issue (if ever it was); it is not even a religious issue (remember, all pious Moslems are expected to respect those who follow "the book"). Nor is it a regional issue; it has bearing on the lives of all of us. In a very real sense Palestine is an existential issue.

Yet the world continues to treat it as a political problem, something that can be fixed either by force or diplomacy. On the one hand you have Israel, which regards itself (and is also regarded by much of the West) as not just an important ally but a morally justifiable force for good. On the other, you have the Palestinians, an indigenous people who have been brutally dispossessed of their homeland, albeit in accordance with international law - at least with regard to Israel's pre-1967 borders.

The formula currently adopted to resolve the issue is that the Israelis should swap land for peace. It was on this assumption that the 1993 Oslo accords were founded; it is also the principle underlying the 2002 "Road Map." But the principle of land for peace seems to be going nowhere. This is partly due to a lack of trust on both sides. The Palestinians want more than the Israelis are ready to deliver; Israel expects the Palestinians to give them the security they are incapable of providing. This has resulted in the Israelis becoming racist overlords of the Palestinians in much the same way as white South Africans ruled over the blacks in apartheid South Africa.

Most people continue to hope that Israel and the Palestinians will eventually live together in peace in two viable, contiguous states with

Jerusalem as their joint capital, with token reparations agreed upon to compensate Palestinians for their dispossession and displacement. But Israel appears to have hardened its position. Moreover, a new generation of Israelis and Palestinians has emerged, both of whom have been brutalized by decades of hostility and mistrust. They no longer want to make compromises. They don't even want to understand one another. Even the Palestinians, who for generations assumed that the two-state solution was the only way towards a diplomatic solution, are now having their doubts.

Hence, many Palestinians are now coming round to the idea of a one-state solution with Israelis and Palestinians living side by side in a shared state. But this clearly would put the very existence of Israel as a democratic, Jewish state in jeopardy. If we include the Arab population of the Occupied West Bank and Gaza with Israel, the Israelis would be a distinct demographic minority. Add to that the high birth-rate of the Arab population, and the ratio of the Jewish population to Palestinians would shrink still further. Finally, such a proposal would be sure to be opposed by Jews outside Israel.

In short, all the ingredients are there for indefinite mutual hostility, until one side or the other gives up through exhaustion. And that, sadly, remains the most optimistic scenario.

Let Palestine's finest poet, Mahmoud Darwish, recently deceased, have the final word. In his very last poem, he wrote: "He said: Will you bargain with me now? I said: For what would you bargain in this grave? He said: Over my share and your share of this common grave. I said: Of what use is that? Time has passed us by. Our fate is an exception to the rule. Here lies a killer and the killed, asleep in one hole. And it remains for another poet to write the end of the story."

Epilogue

With the culmination of George W. Bush's disastrous presidency and the inauguration of his successor Barack Obama, hopes were high that the year 2009 might herald a new, more positive era for the Middle East. Unfortunately, widespread optimism does not necessarily translate into significant change.

Some progress was made in Iraq at the end of December 2008, thanks to a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) concluded between Prime Minister Nuri al Malaki and the outgoing Bush administration, which enabled Mr. Al Malaki to announce that Iraq had at last regained sovereignty over its territory. Henceforth January 1 was to be a national holiday. However, precisely what was agreed to between the two countries is somewhat vague. The Americans did hand over Saddam Hussein's former presidential palace to the Al Malaki administration, over which the Iraqi flag was quickly raised. But this building is challenged by one equally assertive further down the road, the largest, most heavily fortified US embassy in the world. It would appear that while Washington may be ready to play a less forceful role in Iraq, its presence still looms.

True, the 146,000 or so American troops in Iraq are now nominally under Iraqi government control and most are to be withdrawn from the country's major cities by mid-2009. The infamous Blackwater contractors, whose trigger-happy conduct in Nisour Square, Baghdad, in 2007, led to the deaths of 17 Iraqi civilians and the wounding of 30 more, have had their immunity from prosecution lifted. They are now also banned from providing protection for diplomats. However, the US still controls the air as well as logistics and communications. For the moment, American soldiers are also still seen alongside the Iraqi soldiers at important checkpoints, notably at the entrance to the heavily fortified Green Zone, where both the US embassy and Iraqi government offices are located.

However, even though the Americans are still exerting their authority in Iraq, their presence is much less obvious than it was. Significantly, they were noticeably absent from the streets during the January 31 provincial elections, which turned out to be relatively free and fair. Altogether, some 150 political parties fielded approximately 2,500 candidates in 14 of Iraq's 18 provinces (elections in the Kurdish dominated north will take place later) and Mr. Al Malaki's Dawa party made impressive gains. Generally, speaking the moderate Shiite parties came out on top and the religious parties did less well than many anticipated.

It is still too early to say whether real democracy is taking root in Iraq and Mr. Nuri Al Malaki has yet to show that he intends to preside over an Iraq which provides an opportunity for all its citizens to make their voices heard. True, certain safeguards have been built into Iraq's new constitution to further that end, among them a clause that prohibits the prime minister from appointing ministers without parliamentary approval. But Mr. Al Malaki has yet to demonstrate that he is genuinely serious about establishing democracy. In fact, there have been some indications that his political instincts hew more towards creating the kind of strong, centralized government favored by Saddam Hussein. For example, his Dawa party, which is in political control of only Karbala province, is being supplemented by the creation of Dawa cells elsewhere and Mr. Al Malaki has also been seeking to enlist the support of individual tribal councils in much the same way as Saddam Hussein did when he was in charge. More ominously, Mr. Al Malaki has created two elite military forces, the Baghdad Brigade and the Counter-Terrorism Force, which have broad powers and report directly to him.

Nor is it clear that Prime Minister Nuri al Malaki will be a reliable American ally. In order for SOFA to have been approved by the various Sunni factions, the radical Shiite cleric Moqtada al Sadr and his followers and other Shia parties, Mr. Al Malaki must have reached some far-reaching agreements, the details of which are still unknown, though it is

safe to assume that Tehran must have approved. One interesting development was Mr Al Malaki's decision to defy the US by closing Camp Ashraf, the base of the American funded Mujaheddin al Khalq (MEK), which is opposed to the current Iranian regime. Whether Mr. Al Malaki is forging a close alliance with Iran or merely seeking to demonstrate he is far from being Washington's stooge, is still in doubt. President Obama's pledge to wind down the US presence in Iraq, will certainly be kept but he may find that events there are likely to occupy his attention for some time to come.

Overshadowing events in Iraq, however, was Israel's massive assault on Hamas controlled Gaza in late December 2008, that poverty-stricken enclave of 1.5 million Palestinian refugees crammed into approximately 140 square miles. Established after the 1948 war to accommodate displaced Arabs from mainly Ashkelon, Beersheba and surrounding villages, Gaza was initially under the control of Egypt until Israel took it from them during the 1956 Suez war. The Israelis withdrew from Gaza a year later but re-occupied it after the 1967 war and established a number of illegal settlements there. Israel remained in control of the territory until 2005, when the government of Ariel Sharon made a unilateral decision to withdraw, handing over control to the Palestinians.

But as we saw earlier, internal squabbles broke out between Fatah and its supporters on one side and Hamas which eventually left Hamas in control. In a bid to weaken Hamas, Israel imposed a blockade on Gaza in 2007 from the north, ostensibly to prevent the Gazans from launching rocket attacks against them. Israel also hoped to turn the inhabitants of Gaza against their own government, whom they (and the US and the European Union) regard as a terrorist organization. Meanwhile Egypt, concerned that Hamas might prove inspirational to its own Islamic opposition, also applied pressure on Hamas by closing the Rafah crossing on its border with Gaza in the south.

With the Gazans effectively imprisoned, under pressure and their fighters supplied with Iranian arms smuggled in through not-so-secret tunnels from Egypt, the result was predictable: growing militancy on the part of Hamas and increasing frustration in Israel, as Hamas rockets fell on Israeli citizens. Claiming that their assault on Gaza was basically a defensive move to shut down Hamas rocket launchers, the Israel Defense Force (IDF) utilized the full might of its air, sea and ground forces to batter Hamas into submission. After three weeks Gaza was reduced to a pile of rubble and 1,400 people killed and many more wounded (many of them women and children). Mosques, government buildings, schools and even UN installations were also targeted and destroyed. There were charges and counter-charges that both Hamas and the IDF were guilty of committing war crimes.

Israel's aim was clearly to crush Hamas and send a message: if Gazans want to do business with Israel, they must renounce terrorism, get rid of Hamas and accept the West Bank's Palestine Authority under Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas as their sole legitimate representative. Militarily, Israel's assault on Gaza must be judged a success but it is less clear whether their victory has done much to advance the cause of peace. Certainly Hamas suffered a crushing defeat. But if Israel's intention was to make the Palestinians "understand in the deepest recesses of their consciousness that they are a defeated people," as former Israel Defense Force head Moshe Yalaan is credited with saying in 2002, that goal was probably not achieved.

On the contrary, Hamas remains in control and while there are reportedly divisions in their leadership between the hard-liners and the pragmatists, it has gained support on the Arab street for holding out longer than any Arab army against Israel. Indeed, Hamas felt sufficiently secure to stage a "victory" parade after Israel declared a unilateral cease-fire and withdrew its forces from Gaza and have even sent a few more rockets into Israel, killing an Israeli soldier and wounding several others. While Hamas may

still be defiant, they are certainly weakened and are observing what they call a hudna, or honorable cease-fire. Moreover, most Gazans are now questioning the wisdom of Hamas in provoking the Israeli leadership, though they also recognize they are powerless to make Hamas change its ways.

In the meantime, the rest of the Arab world appears to be divided as to what should happen next. A conference convened in Kuwait and attended by the leaders of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the Palestine Authority's Mahmoud Abbas made a few pious noises about the suffering of Palestinian civilians and promised financial aid but accomplished little else. Meanwhile a rival conference in Qatar attended by Syria, Iran and hardline Palestinians, showed that other Arab states favored a more militant response, though little was said about how this might be implemented

Whether the existing stalemate can be broken remains to be seen. There have been some encouraging signs. After his inauguration on January 20, 2009, the first foreign policy initiative taken by the new president was to telephone Middle East leaders, saying he was ready to launch a new Middle East peace initiative. He also appointed George Mitchell, a widely respected negotiator, who brokered the 1998 Good Friday agreement between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, as his special envoy to the Middle East. He even reached out to Iran, saying that if they would unclench their fist, they would find his hand was open. He must also be aware that Turkey, a NATO ally, which has concluded several security pacts with Israel and has received the blessing from the US to engage in peace talks with Syria and Israel, is becoming increasingly disenchanted with its role. Not only is its closeness to Israel arousing suspicion among Arabs and Moslems elsewhere, it is also imposing strains at home. Most recently, at the 2009 World Economic Forum meeting in Davos, Switzerland,Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan stormed out of a session at which Israel's President Shimon Peres sought to justify the

conduct of the IDF during the assault on Gaza. Although both sides afterwards played down the altercation, the hero's welcome Mr. Erdogan received on his return home to Istanbul made it clear with whom the majority of Turks sympathized.

But these are early days in the Obama presidency and while it is encouraging that the American president has signaled his willingness to pursue a more even-handed policy in the Middle East, the actual problems are as intractable as ever and since Gaza may even be worse.

Israel's brutal assault on Gaza has encouraged its supporters to believe that only overwhelming force - rather than diplomacy - can guarantee its security. Therefore, Israel is probably less likely now to listen to arguments about rolling back the building of illegal settlements in the West Bank, which is absolutely vital if a negotiated peace is to be achieved. Moreover, Arab governments are still unable to agree on a unified policy with regard to the peace process; the West's protégé, Prime Minister Abbas has been reduced to an ineffectual puppet by being unable to make his voice heard while his fellow countrymen in Gaza were being slaughtered. He now commands little respect among Palestinians in general and is no nearer to being able to reassert his control over Gaza. Iran has gained prestige - as it did in Lebanon after Israel's botched invasion to destroy Hezballah - by distributing cash to Gazans and helping to repair damaged houses and infrastructure while international aid agencies were stymied by diplomatic niceties and red tape. Therefore, it is too much to hope that it will want to undermine the good will it has generated among Arabs by changing course and being nice to either the US or Israel.

Finally, life in Gaza is unlikely to return to anything resembling normality any time soon. Rebuilding the territory will require free access from both Israel and Egypt so that materials needed for reconstruction can be brought in. And that is unlikely to happen until Israel is convinced that

arms cannot be smuggled into Gaza from Iran. Moreover, resentment in Rafah, the border town in Egypt is growing, if only because the once lucrative trade through the tunnels to Gaza has been curtailed. If Egypt's promise to monitor the crossing is implemented effectively, it will not only anger the Islamist opposition at home but the people of Rafah as well.

Meanwhile Gazans will suffer and Arabs everywhere will once again be reminded of the ineffectualness of their leaders to influence events, even when it is the alleviation of the suffering of their Arab compatriots. If President Obama is to effect change in what still looks like a bleak climate for Middle East peace-makers, he will have to make some substantive, new initiatives and soon.

Bibliography

For those who would like to learn more…

There is no shortage of good books about the Middle East. What follows, therefore, is a personal, highly selective list, most of which are readily available on Amazon.

To see the East-West debate in its historical context, there is William Pagden's *Worlds at War* (2008), which traces East-West rivalries from ancient times until today. For an objective account of US policy in the Middle East during the past thirty years Lawrence Freedman's magisterial *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East* (2008) is indispensable. Far shorter and therefore less comprehensive is Rashid Khalidy's nonetheless important *Resurrecting Empire* (2005), which focuses on Iraq and exposes the US's fatal indifference to the lessons of history. Charles Tripp's recently updated *History of Iraq* (2007) remains the definitive historical account of that country.

The best guide through Lebanon's tortuous modern history is Kamal Salibi's *House of Many Mansions,* (1988) while Augustus Richard Norton's *Hezballah: A Short History* (2007) is essential for understanding the more recent rise and growing importance of this Lebanese, quasi-terrorist group. Nikolaos Van Dam's *The Struggle for Power in Syria* (1996) is the best account of the rise and consolidation of the Assad dynasty but anything written about Syria by Patrick Seale may also be recommended.

P. J. Vatikiotis' *The History of Modern Egypt* (1991) is both readable and authoritative but Fouad Ajami's *The Sorrows of Egypt*, published in the September/October (1991) issue of *Foreign Affairs*, though clearly dated, should also be required reading. Ajami takes a general overview of

Egypt's dysfunctional political culture and malfunctioning economy and draws a sharp contrast with the country's grand ambitions.

As for the peace process, apart from the indispensable Freedman, there are many partisan accounts by both Arabs and Israelis. Two of the more reasonable (among a flood of highly tendentious accounts) are two by Palestinians: Ghada Karmi's *Married to Another Man*, (2007), which covers recent events in the search for peace and the less biased, more scholarly *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestine National Movement, 1949-1993*, (1998) by Yezid Sayigh, which covers the movement's earlier years. Among Israelis, historian Benny Morris's revisionist *Righteous Victims* (1999) is notable for its fairness; another balanced Israeli account is by politician Shlomo Ben Ami, author of *Scars of War; Wounds of Peace* (2006).

For books about Islam and the West, it is difficult to know where to begin. Edward Said's *Orientalism*, an account of how colonial attitudes influenced western understanding of the Middle East, is important. This should be balanced by Bernard Lewis's *What Went Wrong* (i.e. with the Arabs) (2002). Less controversial than either is John Esposito's *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (1992), while Michael B. Oren's *Power, Faith and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present*, (2007) places US policy in the Middle East in its historical context. Two books by Olivier Roy are also important. His *Secularism Confronts Islam* (2007) is a brief account of the confrontation between Islam and the state in France, which also has implications for inter-faith relations elsewhere; his *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (2004) provides a broader, more in-depth review. Also worth reading is Ed Hussein's *The Islamicist*, which charts the path of a British Moslem from religious fanaticism to tolerance and common sense.

Finally, no bibliography would be complete without reference to the controversial article by Samuel T. Huntington which sparked off the

recent East-West debate. It appeared in the Summer 1993 issue of *Foreign Affairs* and is called *The Clash of Civilizations*. In it the author suggests that future wars will more likely be driven by cultural conflict than political ideology or competition for territory, markets or natural resources.

About the author

John Munro received his B.A. in English Literature from Durham University in the UK and his Ph.D. in the same subject from Washington University in the United States. He then taught English literature at the University of North Carolina and the University of Toronto before moving to the American University of Beirut (AUB) in Lebanon. There he became a university administrator and a freelance journalist before moving to the American University in Cairo (AUC). In Cairo he taught mass communication and established, and subsequently administered, an educational outreach program in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Poland, Russia and the Czech Republic. His last fulltime position was political and media consultant to the European Commission in Cairo. Finally, he served as a part-time visiting professor at the University of Malta, teaching in an MA, EU-funded program which drew students from both the north and south of the Mediterranean.

He also collaborated in establishing two regional publications, the Middle East Times and the Cairo Times, to which he contributed regular columns. He has also published a number of studies in literary criticism and several books on the Middle East. Among the latter are A Mutual Concern; a History of AUB; The Nairn Way, a History of Syrian Desert Transport; Theatre of the Absurd: Life in Amin Gemayel's Lebanon; and Between Venus and Mars: a History of Cyprus.