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Editorial

MID-POINT IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

LOOKING DOWN ON the world from the imperial grandeur of the Oval Office in the fall of 2001, the Cheney–Bush team was confident of its ability to utilize the September events to remodel the world. The Pentagon’s Vice Admiral Cebrowski summed up the linkage of capitalism to war: ‘the dangers against which us forces must be arrayed derive precisely from countries and regions that are “disconnected” from the prevailing trends of globalization’. Five years later, what is the balance sheet?

On the credit side, Russia, China and India remain subdued, along with Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia. Here, despite the attempts of Western political science departments to cover the instrumentalist twists of us policy with fig-leaf conceptualizations—‘limited democracies’, ‘tutelary democracies’, ‘illiberal democracies’, ‘inclusionary autocracies’, ‘illiberal autocracies’—the reality is that acceptance of Washington Consensus norms is the principal criterion for gaining imperial approval. In Western Europe, after a few flutters on Iraq, the EU is firmly back on side. Chirac now sounds more belligerent than Bush on the Middle East, and the German elite is desperate to appease Washington. On the debit side, the Caracas effect is spreading. Cuba’s long isolation has been broken, the Bolivian oligarchy defeated in La Paz and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela has assumed a central role in mobilizing popular anti-neoliberal movements in virtually every Latin American country.¹

More alarmingly for Washington, American control of the Middle East is slipping. No irreversible setbacks have yet occurred, but in the past year the position of the us in the region has weakened. The shift has not been uniform—at least one front has moved in the opposite direction, with a successful intervention in Lebanon. But elsewhere the tide of events is running against Washington. In Iran and Palestine, elections have humiliated those on whom it had counted as pliable instruments or interlocutors, propelling more radical forces into power. In Iraq, the resistance has inflicted a steady train of blows on the us occupation, preventing any stabilization of the collaborator regime and sapping support for the war in America itself. The Cheney–Wolfowitz political project of establishing a model satellite state for the region lies buried underneath the rubble of Fallujah. In Afghanistan, guerrillas are on the move again and Washington is wooing Taliban factions close to Pakistani military intelligence. Further revelations of torture by us and British forces, and plunder of local resources by the invaders and their agents, have intensified popular hatred of the West across the Arab world. American forces are overstretched, and the belief of troops in their mission is declining. Establishment voices at home are beginning to express fears that a debacle comparable to—or even worse than—Vietnam may be looming. But outcomes across the whole theatre of conflict still remain uncertain, and are unlikely to be all of a piece.

Palestine

Western enthusiasm for rainbow revolutions stops, as is to be expected, when the colour is green. Hamas's triumph in the elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council has been treated as an ominous sign of rising fundamentalism, and a fearsome blow to the prospects of peace with Israel, by rulers and journalists across the Atlantic world. Immediate financial and diplomatic pressures have been applied to force Hamas to adopt the same policies as those whom it defeated at the polls. Numerically, the extent of that victory should not be overstated—with 45 per cent of the vote on a 78 per cent turnout, Hamas took 54 per cent of the seats. But morally, given the undisguised intervention by Israel, the us and the EU to assure a Fatah majority, the result was equivalent to a

¹ Over the last few years, Chávez has visited the major countries in every continent, embarrassing some of his hosts by demanding a global front against imperialism. His hour-long interview on al-Jazeera had an electric impact on 26 million Arab viewers. It received the station's largest ever email response—tens of thousands—with the bulk of them posing a simple question: why can't the Arab world produce a Chávez?

landslide. Palestinian voters rebuffed the concerted threats and bribes of the ‘international community’ in a campaign that saw Hamas members and other oppositionists routinely detained or assaulted by the IDF, their posters confiscated or destroyed, US and EU funds channelled into the Fatah campaign, and US congressmen announcing that Hamas should not be allowed to run. Even the timing of the election was set by the determination to rig the outcome. Scheduled for the summer of 2005, it was delayed till January 2006 to give Abbas time to distribute assets in Gaza—in the words of an Egyptian intelligence officer: ‘the public will then support the Authority against Hamas’.² Popular desire for a clean broom after ten years of corruption, bullying and bluster under Fatah proved stronger than all of this.

Uncompromised by the Palestinian Authority’s combination of greed and dependency, the self-enrichment of its servile spokesmen and policemen, and their acquiescence in a ‘peace process’ that has brought only further expropriation and misery to the population under them, Hamas offered the alternative of a simple example. Without any of the resources of its rival, it set up clinics, schools, hospitals, vocational training and welfare programmes for the poor. Its leaders and cadres lived frugally, within reach of ordinary people. It is this response to everyday needs that has won Hamas the broad basis of its support, not daily recitation of verses from the Koran.

How far its conduct in the second Intifada has given it an additional degree of credibility is less clear. Its armed attacks on Israel, like those of Fatah’s Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigade or Islamic Jihad, have been retaliations against an occupation far more deadly than any actions it has ever undertaken. Measured on the scale of IDF killings, Palestinian strikes have been few and far between. The asymmetry was starkly exposed during Hamas’s unilateral ceasefire, begun in June 2003, and maintained throughout the summer despite the Israeli campaign of raids and mass arrests which followed, in which some three hundred Hamas cadres were seized from the West Bank.³ On 19 August 2003 a self-proclaimed ‘Hamas’ cell from Hebron, disowned and denounced by the

² Graham Usher, ‘The New Hamas’, *MERIP*, 21 August 2005.

³ By the end of 2004, Israeli death squads and helicopter gunships had assassinated much of the Hamas leadership—Sheikh Yassin, Abdel Aziz Rantissi, Ibrahim Makadmeh, Adnan Ghoul, Sheikh Khalil—and tried but failed to kill Muhammad Dayf, Mahmoud Zahhar, and possibly Khaled Meshaal and Musa Abu Marzuq in Damascus.

official leadership, blew up a bus in West Jerusalem, upon which Israel promptly assassinated the Hamas ceasefire's negotiator, Ismail Abu Shanab. Hamas in turn responded. In return, the Palestinian Authority and Arab states cut funding to its charities and, in September 2003, the EU declared the whole Hamas movement to be a terrorist organization—a long-standing demand of Tel Aviv.

What has actually distinguished Hamas in a hopelessly unequal combat is not dispatch of suicide bombers, to which a range of competing groups resorted, but its superior discipline—demonstrated by its ability to enforce a self-declared ceasefire against Israel over the past year. All civilian deaths are to be condemned, but since Israel is their principal practitioner, Euro-American cant serves only to expose those who utter it. Overwhelmingly, the boot of murder is on the other foot, ruthlessly stamped into Palestine by a modern army equipped with jets, tanks and missiles in the longest armed oppression of modern history. 'Nobody can reject or condemn the revolt of a people that has been suffering under military occupation for forty-five years against occupation force': the words of General Shlomo Gazit, former chief of Israeli military intelligence, in 1993.⁴

The real grievance of the EU and US against Hamas is that it refused to accept the capitulation of the Oslo Accords, and has rejected every subsequent effort, from Taba to Geneva, to pass off their calamities on the Palestinians. The West's priority now is to break this resistance. Cutting off funding to the Palestinian Authority is an obvious weapon with which to bludgeon Hamas into submission. Boosting the presidential powers of Abbas—as publicly picked for his post by Washington as was Bremer in Baghdad—at the expense of the Legislative Council is another.⁵ But since each of these involves some risk of boomeranging, more likely

⁴ *Yediot Aharonot*, 12 August 1993, cited in Khaled Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, Washington 2000.

⁵ For this hopeful prospect, see Hussein Agha and Robert Malley: 'Insofar as the burden has shifted to Hamas, the US and Israel could achieve their objectives at less cost than had the old regime prevailed . . . The leader who stands most to gain from this new setting is President Abbas . . . He has become the central figure upon whom all depend: the Islamists, who need him as a conduit to the outside world; Israel, which will see him as the most palatable and reliable interlocutor on the Palestinian scene; the US and Europe, as they seek to shun Hamas without turning their backs on the Palestinians'—'Hamas: the Perils of Power', *New York Review of Books*, 9 March 2006. A photograph taken at the obsequies of King Fahd in Riyadh shows Abbas, Allawi and Karzai sitting together at the feet of more eminent mourners, as if auditioning for a Hollywood remake of a *Three Stooges* film.

is an attempt to domesticate Hamas, in the belief that it too will relax with the fruits of office, and become in time as 'pragmatic' as its predecessor. This is certainly a reasonable calculation. Hamas is historically an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose Egyptian branch is now scarcely more radical in outlook than the ruling party in Turkey.⁶ Like all religions, Islam offers a complete palette of ideological positions, from fulsome collaboration with capital and empire to impassioned opposition to them, with a great deal of mobility in between.

Whether Hamas could be so rapidly suborned to Western and Israeli ends may be doubtful, but it would not be unprecedented. Hamas's programmatic heritage remains mortgaged to the most fatal weakness of Palestinian nationalism: the belief that the political choices before it are either rejection of the existence of Israel altogether, or acceptance of the dismembered remnants of a fifth of the country. From the fantasy maximalism of the first to the pathetic minimalism of the second, the path is all too short, as the history of Fatah has shown. The test for Hamas is not whether it can be house-trained to the satisfaction of Western opinion, but whether it can break with this crippling tradition. To do that would require the Palestinian national cause to be put on its proper basis, with the demand that the country and its resources be divided equally, in proportion to two populations that are equal in size—not 80 per cent to one and 20 per cent to the other, a dispossession of such iniquity that no self-respecting people will ever submit to it in the long run. The only acceptable alternative is that outlined by Virginia Tilley in this issue: a single state for Jews and Palestinians alike, in which the exactions of Zionism are repaired.⁷

Lebanon and Syria

To the north, the relative independence of Syria's Ba'ath regime, and the institutional stability that allowed it to punch above its weight in the

⁶ In the late 60s and 70s the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood stood by as their secular PLO rivals were decimated in Jordan and driven to Beirut. The Brethren's inactivity was justified by a refusal to work with godless militants; instead a period of 'mosque-building' was in order. As the secular leadership was discredited in the 90s, Hamas, while retaining the cloak of Islam, adopted an increasingly nationalist persona.

⁷ Virginia Tilley, *The One-State Solution*, Ann Arbor and Manchester 2005. For NLR's positions on what a viable two-state solution might entail, see Perry Anderson, 'Scurrying Towards Bethlehem', Guy Mandron, 'Redividing Palestine?', Gabriel Piterberg, 'Erasures', Yitzhak Laor, 'Tears of Zion', NLR 10, July–August 2001.

region, have long been irritants to Tel Aviv and Washington. Whatever its history of political opportunism, Damascus, unlike Cairo, has refused to scuttle the Palestinian cause by signing a separate peace with Israel, or to collaborate with the us occupation of Iraq. With the spread of the Iraqi insurgency in the provinces along its border, able to draw on a sympathetic hinterland, neutralization or removal of the younger Assad has moved up the American agenda.⁸ Since us forces are now in no position to mount a second invasion, the obvious route to toppling the government in Syria was to create a pressure point in Lebanon, where Western powers can manoeuvre freely. For there Syrian troops, installed since 1976, were an exposed and unpopular presence. Forcing their withdrawal, it could be hoped, would foment domestic unrest conducive to regime change.

Contemporary Lebanon still remains in large measure the artificial creation of French colonialism it was at the outset—a coastal band of Greater Syria sliced off from its hinterland by Paris, once it became clear that Syrian independence was inevitable, to form a regional client dominated by a Maronite minority that had long been France's catspaw in the Eastern Mediterranean. The country's confessional chequerboard has never permitted an accurate census, for fear of revealing that a substantial Muslim—today perhaps even a Shi'a—majority is denied due representation in the political system. Sectarian tensions, over-determined by the plight of refugees from Palestine, exploded into civil war in the mid-seventies, providing the occasion for the entry of Syrian troops into Lebanon with tacit us approval, and their long-term establishment there—ostensibly as a buffer between the warring communities, and deterrent to a complete Israeli takeover, which was on the cards with the IDF invasions of 1978 and 1982. Over time, Damascus came to exercise a pervasive control over wide areas of Lebanese political life. Its military and intelligence apparatus picked candidates for the highest offices of the state, manipulated cabinets and factional disputes, assassinated recalcitrant politicians and amassed personal fortunes in the process.

In 1994, the billionaire property magnate Rafik Hariri—a creature of the House of Saud—was approved for premier. Once installed in power, he became the Berlusconi or Thaksin of his native land, rebuilding

⁸ Initially, it was hoped that Bashar, trained in a British medical school, would prove as amenable as the younger Mubarak or Gaddafi, both in the pocket of the West. His loyalty to the traditions of his father was a severe disappointment.

the centre of Beirut with his own companies to his own profit and engineering an exchange-rate crisis when he was briefly ousted, to return as the only man rich enough to solve it. With his huge hoard of cash, he could purchase connections to give him increasing leeway in dealing with Damascus. Among friends acquired in these years was another venal politician, Jacques Chirac, to whose campaign funds he is said to have generously contributed.⁹ France has never lost interest in its colonial foothold. By 2004, Chirac was seeking to make up for the desertion of the us over Iraq required by domestic considerations, and after arranging for a joint Franco-American coup in Haiti, had every reason to help Bush and Hariri expel Syria from Lebanon. Damascus, of course, knew what was afoot. In August, Bashar Assad summoned Hariri and—according to his son—told him: ‘If you think that President Chirac and you are going to run Lebanon, you are mistaken. This extension [of President Lahoud’s term] is going to happen or else I will break Lebanon over your head and over Walid Jumblatt’s’.¹⁰

The following week, France and the us pushed a resolution through the Security Council demanding Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon and the disarming of the Hizbollah militia. The response was not long in coming. In February, as the campaigning season opened for Lebanese elections, Hariri was blown up by a car bomb outside the St Georges hotel in Beirut. He was not the first Lebanese politician to suffer this fate—two previous presidents, Bashir Gemayel in 1982 and René Moawad in 1989, had gone the same way without much commotion. This time, however, the UN Secretary-General immediately convened a Commission of Enquiry, dispatching a German prosecutor armed with plenipotentiary powers to investigate the crime, which duly concluded that Syria was responsible. Since this was plain from the outset, all that the Commission has revealed is the extent to which the UN, under the miserable figure of Annan, has become an automaton for the will of the West. For, of course, Israeli assassinations—of leaders of Hizbollah, Fatah, Hamas—have never raised a whisper of reproach in the Secretariat, let alone any commission of enquiry. The fate of Lumumba, Ben Barka, Guevara, Allende, Machel, says enough about the continuity of these Western traditions.

⁹ On the Elysée’s campaign, see Flynt Leverett, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar’s Trial by Fire*, Washington 2005, p. 259.

¹⁰ See Detlev Mehli’s UN IIC report on the assassination of Hariri, October 2005. Jumblatt is the—currently staunchly pro-Western—clan leader of the Druze.

In Lebanon itself, the killing of Hariri—whose largesse had built a wide clientele—provoked more genuine reactions, with vast demonstrations by the country’s middle class demanding the expulsion of Syrian troops and police, while a host of Western organizations arrived to assist the progress of a Cedar Revolution.¹¹ Backed by threats from Washington and Paris, the momentum was sufficient to force a Syrian withdrawal, and produce a more congenial government in Beirut. But the various Lebanese factions remain as spreadeagled as ever, Hizbollah has not disarmed, and Assad has not fallen.¹² America has taken a pawn, but the castle has yet to be captured.

Inferno in Iraq

If it is Syria’s shelter for the Iraqi resistance to the east that has made it the target for an American siege, it is with good reason. For in Iraq itself, the war has gone from bad to worse for Washington. Confronted with a dauntless insurgency, the Occupation is still—after three years and an outlay of over \$200 billion—unable to assure regular supplies of water and electricity to the people it has subjugated. Factories remain idle. Hospitals and schools barely function. Oil revenues have been looted wholesale by America’s local minions, not to speak of a horde of us contractors on the take. Wretched as living conditions were for the majority of the population under UN sanctions, under the Americans they have deteriorated yet further, as sectarian killings multiply and minimal security disappears.

In the midst of these scenes from hell, the morale of the occupiers themselves is showing signs of giving way. Denied the luxury of a casualty-free attack from 30,000 feet, American troops are stalemated: confined to barracks, embarking on missions only with air power or ultra-protective ground cover, but still losing lives almost daily. In a February 2006

¹¹ Saatchi & Saatchi helped orchestrate ‘Freedom Square’ rallies; Spirit of America supplied sandwiches, flags and theatrical effects, including a huge Freedom Clock with an electronic ‘countdown to liberty’; a deck of ‘Most Wanted’ playing cards with Syrian faces—a gimmick pioneered by the Israeli paper *Maariv* when targeting Palestinians, and publicized globally by the American army in Iraq—was distributed. See *CounterPunch*, 18 November 2005.

¹² During the recent crisis, several Syrian opposition groups offered the Assad regime a deal: a national government to defend the country against the West, followed by elections in which the Ba’ath Party would be a major player. The Ba’ath High Command turned it down, preferring to rely on repression at home and manoeuvring abroad.

Zogby poll of American troops serving in Iraq, 72 per cent thought the us should pull out within a year, and of those 29 per cent thought they should pull out 'immediately'. Less than a quarter—23 per cent—backed the official stance, reiterated by the president and most of the domestic establishment, that the us must 'stay the course'. Military reserves are now so depleted that the Pentagon has announced a waiver on criminal records for army recruits and is increasingly forced to rely on mercenaries bought in the marketplace.

The political cover laboriously constructed for the invasion has not fared much better. A first round of elections for a puppet government was boycotted *en bloc* by the Sunni community. A Made-in-usa constitution had to be rammed through with a manipulated plebiscite. A second round of elections has led to quarrels between the different American clients, and accompanying parliamentary deadlocks. Vast sums spent on bribes to assorted figures and funding for favoured candidates have yielded scant rewards, with the humiliation of the stipendiaries of both the cia and the Pentagon, Iyad Allawi and Ahmed Chalabi, at the polls. At the time of writing, the American viceroy is using a Kurdish president to oust a Shi'a premier who has become inconvenient. Popular cynicism about the 'Purple Revolution' is general, the credibility of the authorities in Baghdad all but invisible.

Not that the liberation of Iraq is close at hand. The continuation of the Occupation has led to an intensification of the sectarian tensions upon which it has rested. Lethal attacks by Sunni on Shi'a and Shi'a on Sunni have now become a daily occurrence, with tragic loss of life in both communities. The initiative for these came at first from deadly bigots in the Sunni resistance. But the originating responsibility for a disastrous slide into communal warfare, alongside and interwoven with a patriotic struggle against the foreigner, lies with the Shi'a clerics—and above all Ayatollah Sistani—who threw in their lot with the conquerors of the country, fatally exposing their communities to risk of retribution from the resistance, so long as ordinary believers followed the direction of their leaders. The cisterns of sentimentality ladled over the collusion of Sistani with Bremer, Negroponte and Khalilzad rival those once poured over that other taciturn, dignified elder of his country, who in the evening of his years protected his people while keeping his distance from the occupier. But the Pétain of Najaf can expect a better fate. Gratitude for his role in saving the American bacon should assure him of the Nobel

Peace Prize for which Thomas Friedman, a swaggering champion of the invasion, has recommended him.¹³

Had the Shi'a leadership at large, and Sistani in particular, told the Americans to pack their bags in the spring of 2004, when Sunni and Shi'a alike rose against the Occupation, Iraq would now be a free country with a reasonable prospect of communal harmony, founded on joint struggle against the invader. Instead Sistani and his entourage joined forces with the Americans to suppress the revolt of Muqtada al-Sadr's Mehdi Army in the south and the Sunni resistance in the north and west of the country, with the aim of taking power in Baghdad under us tutelage, and building a sectarian regime on demographic preponderance and foreign arms. The confessional parliamentarism of this option has predictably guaranteed a deepening of sectarian hatreds, as the taint of collaboration with the enemy spread downwards, leading to indiscriminate retaliation and then reciprocal massacres by *jihadis* on one side and death squads on the other. The progenitors of this mayhem are now using it as a pretext to prolong their invasion of the country, with kick-backs to Sunni politicians to induce them to plead with America to stay, as if the occupation that has unleashed it were the remedy rather than source of an ongoing catastrophe.

The reality is that there is only one way to halt this spiral of violence: the path refused by Sistani in 2004, and now taken up once again by Muqtada al-Sadr—a national agreement between Sunni and Shi'a leaders, the *maquis* in the provinces and the militias in the capital, to secure the expulsion of all occupying forces from the country without further ado. 'Cut off the head of the snake and remove all evil', as Muqtada exhorted on returning from Lebanon to a shattered Samarra and Baghdad. His militias, largely made up of the urban poor, are recruited in quarters that were once strongholds of Iraqi communism. The expeditionary armies from America and Britain could not last a month in Iraq, if the Shi'a at

¹³ Reuel Marc Gerecht, ex-CIA Middle-East chief, had a similar view. In an essay that begins: 'The January 30 elections in Iraq will be easily the most consequential event in Arab history since Israel's six-day defeat of Gamal Abdel Nasser's alliance in 1967', Gerecht concludes: 'Continue to pray every night for the health, well-being and influence of Grand Ayatollah Sistani [sic] . . . It is a blessed thing that Sistani and his followers have a far better understanding of modern Middle Eastern history than the American or European liberals.' 'Birth of a Democracy' in Gary Rosen, ed., *The Right War? The Conservative Debate on Iraq*, Cambridge 2005, pp. 237, 243.

large followed the example of their Sunni compatriots. Indeed, it would take only a vote in the puppet parliament demanding the immediate withdrawal of foreign forces to make the position of Washington and London untenable. Given the modern history of Iraq, there would still be many grave tensions in the relations between the two communities, not to speak of the recent role of the Kurds as the Gurkhas of the invader. But until the spreading poison of Western intrusion is removed, there is no chance of wounds, past or present, healing. The Anglo-American armies need to be driven out of the country, bag and baggage, for Iraq to have any future.

Iran in the crosshairs

In Basra and Maysan provinces, in the far south-east of Iraq, the local Shi'a authorities are now refusing to cooperate with the British occupiers. Their change of attitude is likely to bear some relation to the new situation across the border. The victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran's presidential elections of 2005 represents the biggest political upset of the new century in the region. The mayor of Tehran, a hard-core clerical militant from a working-class family and soldier in the war against Iraq, handsomely defeated the candidate favoured by the Western media and its masters: the corrupt clerical tycoon and political operator Rafsanjani, ruler of the country in the late 80s and early 90s, whose lavishly financed campaign—complete with hi-tech rallies, bumper stickers and *hijab*-ed rah-rah girls—was overwhelmed by the protest votes of the dispossessed. Running on a platform of egalitarian redistribution—'put the oil money on the table of the poor'—with a CD portraying his millionaire opponent living in the lap of luxury, while he gave much of his own salary to the needy, Ahmadinejad was the only candidate who could, with any conviction, put on street-cleaner's clothes to sweep the Tehran gutters. Against Rafsanjani's hollow establishment rhetoric, he called for concrete solutions to the housing crisis and unemployment, and the problems these caused for young couples wanting to get married, as well as promising an end to corruption and to compliance with us dictates on energy issues.¹⁴ As a result, the campaign was sharper in tone and offered a

¹⁴ For a hostile account from the Left, see *Iran Bulletin—Middle East Forum*, series 11, no. 3, December 2005. For a cinematic examination of the class polarization in Iran see Jafar Panahi's *Crimson Gold* (2003), scripted by Abbas Kiarostami—the film was banned by the Khatami government. Will Panahi's latest offering, *Offside*—about women and football—share the same fate under Khatami's successor?

more serious choice of social policy than did the elections of 2004 in the United States, or 2005 in Britain, and saw a higher turnout.

Ahmadinejad reaped a harvest of discontent not only with the corrupt and brutal record of Rafsanjani's presidency, but also the time of his spineless successor. Under the reformer Khatami, economic conditions steadily worsened even as oil prices rose, while naive overtures in foreign policy, Gorbachev-style, merely produced Bush's Axis of Evil, much as the Russian versions met with Reagan's Evil Empire. Ready to defend the rights of foreign investors, but rarely those of independent newspapers or student demonstrators, given to vacuous dialogues with the Pope on spiritual values, but incapable of firm protection of civil rights, Khatami manoeuvred ineffectually between contradictory pressures until he had exhausted his moral credit. Ahmadinejad's base in the popular classes embeds a greater social sensibility in the new presidency, but there is no guarantee the practical outcomes will be better. The millions of young, working-class jobless, crammed into overcrowded living conditions, are in desperate need of a coherent policy of national development. But Islamic voluntarism is not a stable alternative to creeping neoliberalism, and the temptation to ratchet up cultural repression to compensate for economic frustration is usually irresistible.

In Iran's sprawling, opaque political system, the presidency is surrounded with competing centres of power, nearly all of them more conservative than the incumbent. The Supreme Leader Khamenei does not want to be upstaged by a young firebrand. The mullah-*bazaar* nexus behind Rafsanjani has already thwarted Ahmadinejad's efforts to clean up the Oil Ministry, and remains entrenched in the Expediency Council. The pro-Western middle class that identified with Khatami is licking its wounds, and looking for a comeback. All are ready to pounce on any inexperience or misstep, of which there will be not a few.¹⁵ The social backdrop to such disputes remains tense enough in its own right. The

¹⁵ Denial of the Judeocide, a typical expression of the ignorance, stupidity and prejudice of fundamentalist culture, is one of the first examples. Euro-American outrage—the French Socialist Party's Fabius has gone so far as to call for an international travel ban on Ahmadinejad—is, of course, the merest *tartufferie*. Iran had no part in the Shoah. Turkey, on the other hand, denies the genocide for which it was responsible, without *bien-pensant* opinion in Europe batting a diplomatic eyelid: indeed, no cause is so eagerly embraced, in the name of multiculturalism, as rapid Turkish entry into the EU. Armenia is not Israel: who cares?

skewed development model inherited from the Shah, battered by nearly a decade of war, then subjected to Rafsanjani's inflationary boom and Khatami's privatizations, has produced a vast black market, an unofficial unemployment rate of 25 per cent and a looming agricultural crisis. Students are disaffected, labour rebellious, the Arab south-west, Kurdish and Azeri north, and Baluch south-east simmering. There is ample material in this maze for every kind of domestic and imperial intrigue to topple the unwelcome victor of a popular contest. Meanwhile, those who once dreamt of 'liberation' via a US intervention should take note of the worsening nightmare in Iraq.

But for the moment, it is Iran's external role that holds centre stage. Here too the directionless clerical state has left a scene of confusion. Since the end of the Iran–Iraq War, its foreign policy has been little more than a ragbag of incoherent opportunism, combining conventional diplomacy of a cautious, typically collaborationist sort with largely costless gestures of solidarity to fellow-Shi'a abroad, principally Hizbollah in southern Lebanon, with crumbs for the Palestinians. Tehran was tactfully silent during the Gulf War of 1991, with not even a peep of complaint when US troops were stationed in the Holy Places. It instructed its surrogates in the Northern Alliance to pave the way for the American invasion of Afghanistan. It collaborated with the CIA in preparations for the occupation of Iraq, and directed SCIRI and its other political assets to prop up US rule in Baghdad. In exchange for these favours to the Great Satan, what has it received? American armies camped on its eastern and western borders, and American threats to obliterate its reactors.

Even by the standards of today's 'international community', the Western campaign to oblige Iran to abandon nuclear research to which it is entitled under the Non-Proliferation Treaty itself is breathtaking. The country is ringed by atomic states—India, Pakistan, China, Russia, Israel—and American nuclear submarines patrol its southern coast. Historically, it has every reason to fear outside threats. Although neutral, it was occupied by both British and Soviet forces during World War Two. Its elected government was overthrown by an Anglo-American coup in 1953, and the secular opposition destroyed. From 1980 to 1988, the Western powers abetted Saddam Hussein's onslaught, in which hundreds of thousands of Iranians died. In the war's final stages, the US destroyed nearly half the Iranian navy in the Gulf, and for good measure shot down a crowded civilian passenger plane.

At present, Iran has little more than primitive gropings towards the technology needed for nuclear self-defence. Yet these are being presented as a *casus belli* by Bush, Blair, Chirac and Olmert, whose own states are armed with hundreds—in the American case, thousands—of nuclear weapons. Whining and cavilling over the small print of Vienna protocols, however warranted, is a futile pursuit for Iranian diplomacy. The country would do better to choose the right moment and simply withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Of all the anachronistic emperors in the world, it is the most brazenly naked. There is not a shred of justification for the oligopoly of the present nuclear powers, so hypocritical it does not dare even speak its name—Israel, with 200 nuclear bombs, is never mentioned. There will never be nuclear disarmament until it is broken.

To face up to the enemies ranged against Iran requires a coherence and discipline of which there is little sign at present. With their own operational habits and doctrines to the fore, the Iranian clerics have played a profoundly divisive role in keeping the Shi'a parties and Sistani, Tehran's bearded queen on the Iraqi chessboard, pitted against the resistance forces. A de-confessionalized alliance of forces from Tehran to Damascus, via Basra and Baghdad, would both damp down communalist conflict and strengthen Iran's position. Little in the recent Iranian record suggests the country's ruling institutions are capable of dealing with imperial arrogance when they confront it, other than with a hydra-headed incompetence. However, circumstances may now be forcing them into decisions they have so far sought to evade. It will not be easy to dress up surrender to Western threats as dignified national wisdom. It will not be difficult to turn Shi'a crowds and militia against the Western occupation across the border. Tehran controls more significant hostages today than a mere embassy. It is unlikely, if the country kept its nerve, that the Pentagon or its proxies would risk an attack.

Outlook

The crisis in the Middle East that began in 2001 is not in sight of any dénouement. At best, we are perhaps only at mid-point in the unfolding drama. New forces and faces are emerging that have something in common. Muqtada, Haniya, Nasrallah, Ahmadinejad: each has risen by organizing the urban poor in their localities—Baghdad and Basra, Gaza and Jenin, Beirut and Sidon, Tehran and Shiraz. It is in the slums that

Hamas, Hizbollah, the Sadr brigades and the Basij have their roots. The contrast with the Hariris, Chalabis, Karzais, Allawis, on whom the West relies—overseas millionaires, crooked bankers, CIA bagmen—could not be starker. A radical wind is blowing from the alleys and shacks of the latter-day wretched of the earth, surrounded by the fabulous wealth of petroleum. The limits of this radicalism, so long as it remains captured by the Koran, are clear enough. The impulses of charity and solidarity are infinitely better than those of imperial greed and comprador submission, but so long as what they offer is social alleviation rather than reconstruction, they are sooner or later liable to recuperation by the existing order. Leaders comparable to figures like Chávez or Morales have yet to emerge, with a vision capable of transcending national or communal divisions, a sense of continental unity and the self-confidence to broadcast it. Thanks to its ex-mayor, there is now a statue of Bolívar in Tehran. The region awaits an equivalent spirit.

Meanwhile, the emplacements of the hegemon have scarcely budged. The current turmoil is still confined to those areas of the Middle East where for twenty years or more American power never really penetrated: the West Bank, Ba'athist Iraq, Khomeinist Iran. The real us anchorage in the region lies elsewhere: in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States and Jordan. There its traditional clients have held the line, and are on hand to help out with regional problems. Beyond them, Europe and Japan stand shoulder to shoulder with America on Iran and Palestine, while Russia, China and India make no difficulties. It is too soon to count on imperial defeat.