

The Middle East After Saddam and Arafat

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In the past, America has often erred in its analysis of Middle Eastern crises. Washington's self-confidence regarding the superiority of its democratic system, and the appropriateness of the free market concept as the economic model for the 21st century, may prove to be exaggerated with respect to Iraq and the entire Arab world. From its own short experience in Middle Eastern diplomacy, Israel has painfully learnt that democracy and modernisation are not necessarily the best tools for the advancement of peace and well-being in the Middle East, especially when marketed from Jerusalem or Washington. The expected American failure to transform Iraq into a pro-western democracy might, in the final analysis, also cause damage to the US's staunchest allies in the area – Turkey and Israel.

The European Union plays a vital role in determining the future shape of the Middle East. The decision to enable practically all of Eastern Europe to join the EU has brought the borders of the Union significantly closer to the Middle East. Europe has also reached the critical point where it must decide whether to include Turkey as a full member of the EU. Such a decision will separate Turkey from the Middle East and make the region more Arabic and less democratic, making Israel feel even more isolated and disliked than before.

In this context, Israel should start reflecting about its own regional future, especially if and when its peace negotiations with the Palestinians resume in a manner that might finally conclude the conflict. The entry of Turkey and perhaps of Russia into the EU, will increase Israel's chance of being accepted too. The opening of such an option will probably put the issue on Israel's public agenda and result in a formal Israeli request to join the EU. On the other hand, a European decision to block Turkey's bid for full EU membership will probably determine the final borders of Europe. Such a decision, together with Turkey's ensuing frustration, is likely to create pressure for the creation of a Euro-Asian grouping starting with Turkey, several former Soviet Union republics headed by Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkmenistan, and perhaps Iraq in its possible new pro-western guise. Israel can also become a member of such a regional association in view of its good relations with both, Turkey and Russia. Such a regional grouping could lead to the creation of a new "sub-continent" placed between Europe and Asia.

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The el Aqsa Intifada and the Region

The *el Aqsa Intifada* is completing its third year. Together with the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York, these two events have already changed, and will continue to change, the face of the Middle East. The *Intifada* broke out at the end of September 2000, as the result of the most intensive and advanced Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations ever conducted. In its wake a severe wave of violence erupted followed by a breach of confidence between the sides; almost 4,000 Palestinians and Israelis lost their lives. The *Intifada* caused a sharp decline in the economy and a meaningful decline in the international status of both Israel and the Palestinians. The September 11th attack and the resulting revelations about international fundamentalist terror, created American ambitions for revenge that are nurturing a new Middle Eastern strategic activism. This induced Washington to lead a series of military and diplomatic operations that will undoubtedly leave their mark on the region.

As far as Israel's regional position is concerned, the *el Aksa Intifada* almost fully destroyed the emerging relations between Israel and the Arab world structured after the 1993 Oslo Agreement. The "Declaration of Principles" between Israel and the PLO, signed in Washington, resulted in a series of accords and arrangements between Israel and various Arab countries. These accords were added to the existing peace treaty Israel had signed with Egypt eleven years earlier, in 1982. Together they managed to alleviate Israel's regional isolation and almost instantly improved its international status.

The following bilateral accords, agreements and understandings between Israel and several Middle Eastern countries should be mentioned in this context:

- a series of economic and commercial agreements between Israel and the Palestinians that were implemented during the second half of the 1990s. ✓
 - Diplomatic, security and economic relations with the Kingdom of Jordan ✓
- (from October 1994 on.)

- Massive intensification of Israel's relations with Turkey in almost every possible sphere. ✓
- Semi-diplomatic ties with important Arab countries such as Morocco, Tunisia, Qatar and Oman, that led to the launching of overt economic relations. ✓
- Mauritania, another Arab state, in the African Southern Sahara, established full diplomatic relations and exchanged ambassadors with Israel. ✓

Among the above, the most intensive bilateral relations between Israel and one of the neighbouring Arab countries, were developed with Jordan. Between 1995 and 2000, despite internal opposition to the ties with Israel, King Hussein until his death, followed by his son King Abdullah, succeeded in navigating the ties with Israel very carefully and wisely. Both Jordan and Israel came to the conclusion that their links are of strategic importance because of the security and economic advantages they entail. Peace with Israel enabled Jordan to join the limited number of nations that receive significant US aid (today Jordan receives about 250 million dollars per year and the sum continues to rise). Jordan also benefits from the special trade status of a *Qualified Industrial Zone (QIZ)* – a special tripartite agreement signed between the US, Israel and Jordan in 1997. The QIZ enables goods produced in defined Jordanian industrial parks and containing Israeli added value, to penetrate the US market under the same conditions formulated in the US-Israeli Free Trade Agreement. The Israeli-Jordanian QIZ was the first (and so far the only) agreement of its kind to be signed between the US and another country; its purpose was to encourage peace between Israel and its neighbours. The result was that at least 15 Israeli companies shifted part of their operations to the Irbid Industrial Park in northern Jordan. These companies, mainly in the textile field, employ thousands of Jordanian workers today. Some of the companies have reaped nice profits, mainly due to their exports to the American market.

The North African and Persian Gulf developments in Israel's diplomacy were also meaningful politically. Israel exchanged diplomatic and commercial representatives, albeit not on an ambassadorial level, with Morocco and Tunisia. Israeli companies

began operating openly in northern Africa, chiefly in the field of agriculture, and Israeli tourists, mainly those seeking to revisit or discover their roots, began to pour into both countries - Morocco and Tunisia. The oil-rich principalities of Qatar and Oman allowed Israel to open delegations in their countries and Israel has assigned foreign office representatives, although no official diplomatic ties were established. Senior Israeli officials also visited Morocco, Tunisia and Mauritania and openly met with the local leadership. The same occurred, although with minimal media coverage, in Qatar and Oman.

During the first months of the *el Aqsa Intifada* it became clear that the embryonic ties between Israel and the Arab world were about to dissolve. Morocco, Tunisia and Oman cut off their official links with Israel and de facto removed the substance from all the commercial and cultural contacts. Following Israel's aerial bombardments of the Gaza Strip, Egypt withdrew her veteran ambassador to Israel, Muhammed Bassouni. Jordan decided simultaneously to defer sending her intended ambassador to Israel; both countries remained represented by a charge d'affaires. Meanwhile, the daily functioning of Israel's ambassadors in Cairo and Amman became increasingly difficult. In addition to security hazards (two Israeli diplomats were attacked and injured), Israeli representatives are constantly boycotted by large numbers of the Egyptian and Jordanian public. In Egypt the media is maintaining a vicious anti-Israeli campaign that occasionally has anti-Semitic overtones. Only as a result of US and Turkish pressure, has the official link between Israel and Qatar survived but relations have been reduced solely to the maintenance of an Israeli delegation. Mauritania has been more courageous: this African state, a member of the Arab league, has continued to allow mutual visits and, most importantly, has left its embassy in Tel Aviv intact. Obviously any preliminary contacts with additional Arab and Muslim countries in the Middle East and North Africa (Algeria among them) were aborted. Prospects for economic relations with two important Muslim countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia have almost totally evaporated.

To round out this gloomy picture of Israel's Middle Eastern status, we must also mention the collapse of the multilateral frameworks for the advancement of peace in the Middle

East in the areas of trade, tourism, environment, water, disarmament and the future of refugees. Even the forum of regional economic talks, the Middle East-North African Conference (MENA), that hosted ambitious gatherings in Casablanca (1994), Amman (1995), Cairo (1996) and Qatar (1997), was silenced even before the outbreak of the *Intifada*. Nothing has remained of these conferences that for a short period had engendered hope for a “New Middle East” in which nations would work together for economic welfare, democracy and modernisation. There is little prospect at the moment for the renewal of these events covered so widely by the media.

Turkey as the odd-man-out

Against this dismal picture, we could observe the positive ties between Israel and Turkey that, despite the *Intifada*, were not harmed. The Turkish leadership continued, at least until the electoral upheaval of November 3, 2002, to trust in Israel’s desire for peace. Turkey has maintained regular and continuous relations with the Israeli leadership and has enabled the relationship to flourish in a variety of spheres. At the same time, Turkey has also maintained close ties with the Arab countries that are involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict and has frequently offered its services to defuse tense situations, including during violent acts associated with the *Intifada*. Turkey’s unique position, with its close links to Palestinians as well as to Israelis, has enabled it to participate in the International Security Force for Hebron (TIPH) and to offer Ankara as the host city for the international conference for the settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Both sides of the conflict, as well as the Americans, have accepted the Turkish offer.

In contrast to other Muslim countries that maintained links with Israel prior to the 2000-2003 *Intifada*, Turkey did not break off any of its economic, cultural and tourist ties with Israel, not even in the case of government projects, mainly in infrastructure and security. Israel was offered a huge irrigation project in South-East Turkey, valued at about 800 million dollars, as well as fresh water from Turkey’s Manavgat river, to alleviate its acute water shortage. Israel’s aviation industries continued to enjoy the benefits of a large contract to upgrade Turkish F-15 planes (signed in 1996). Israel has managed to maintain

its political advantage in Ankara as a result of the good relations between the two countries, and even during the midst of the *Intifada*, in October 2002, it obtained another important contract for the restoration of 170 Turkish battle tanks.

The volume of civilian trade between Israel and Turkey reached the unprecedented level of US\$1.2 billion in 2002, this was in addition to the US\$1.5 billion in defence contracts (primarily the refurbishment of the tanks and the aircrafts) that will be spread out over the next several years. Prominent Israeli companies have also started to invest in joint ventures in Turkey. All these developments indicate a political and economic picture totally different from Israel's overall cool relations with Jordan and Egypt during the years 2001-2003, where commercial ties with each amounted to only some tens of millions of dollars on a yearly basis¹.

2003 - The Iraq War: Potential Implications

In addition to the above-mentioned changes in the Middle Eastern arena, the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq during April 2003, might evolve further dramatic developments in the region. Besides the significant change in the character of the Iraqi regime itself, we might eventually witness the collapse of the present form of the Iraqi state, which might shake the whole region in totally unexpected ways. The American military campaign was very convincing indeed. Less so it seems are the American political plans for the second stage, following the war. At present, it is difficult to identify within Iraq any single focal point of political substance that could lead the country following the fall of Saddam Hussein. The Iraqi opposition, now returning from exile, was far from impressive. Hence, the Americans cannot rely on ongoing pro-American sentiments in Iraq. The opposite seems to be true. It is more likely that the Iraqi population will soon feel the daily burden of the defeat, which will probably reduce its willingness to co-operate with the Americans.

¹ For additional info see: Liel, A. Turkey in the Middle East, Oil Islam and Politics, Lynne Rienner, Colorado; London 2000.

Things look especially complicated in the Kurdish region in northern Iraq. The Kurds are hoping for a change for the better in the political status of their autonomy in the wake of the American entrance into Iraq and especially the fall of Kirkuk and Mosul into American-Kurdish hands. The Kurdish leadership, headed by Massud Barzani and Jallal Talabani, has been co-operating with the Americans for several years, including during the days of actual fighting, and was instrumental in bringing about the fall of Saddam Hussein. The Kurds have renewed during 2002 the meetings of their Parliament, established ten years earlier, and have formulated a draft for a Kurdish declaration of independence, in which the oil-rich city of Kirkuk is designated as the capital. The fall of Saddam Hussein and the collapse of his regime, dramatically enhanced the nationalist feelings among the Kurds in Iraq and the Americans will find it very difficult to prevent the enhancement of Kurdish independence, even should they want to do so.

The growing nationalist feelings in the Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq and especially the possible future Kurdish involvement in Kirkuk, could still trigger ongoing political and perhaps even military reaction from Turkey. The implications for Turkish-USA relations of a possible Turkish intervention in northern Iraq are difficult to envisage at this stage. Any Turkish attempt to influence the future developments in Mosul and Kirkuk will not be acceptable to the Americans, and will arouse the objection of a major part of the Arab world. A Turkish-American dispute in this regard will deepen the wounds already created by the Turkish refusal to open a northern front in the Iraqi war. Such a development might lead to ongoing Turkish-American tension and may have awkward implications for Turkish-Israeli relations as well. Turkey, with a Kurdish population of about 12 million, Iran - with 5 million Kurds, and Syria - with 1 million, will probably voice strong protests against long-term American control of Iraq as well as against the strengthening of Kurdish independence in the north of the country. All three countries fear that growing Kurdish nationalist feelings might spill over into their own territories.

Arab and Muslim countries that do not border directly on Iraq will also disagree with long-term American military control there. Perhaps most of Europe and certain other

major countries of the world (like Russia and China) will add their objections to a long-term American presence in Iraq, considering possible future risks in the region. International pressure to cease the American occupation of Iraq (especially if Europe will not be involved in its rehabilitation), together with all kinds of possible complications, might cause significant damage to US standing in the Middle East. Western satisfaction and the feeling of relief at the fall of Saddam Hussein will quickly be transformed into anti-American feelings both within and outside the area. Furthermore, the temporary management of Iraqi oil resources under American auspices – surely every Texan’s dream – is not likely to be welcomed in the international arena. In the past, America has often erred in its analysis of Middle Eastern crises. Washington’s self-confidence regarding the superiority of its democratic system, and the appropriateness of the free market concept as the economic model for the 21st century, may prove to be exaggerated with respect to Iraq and the entire Arab world. From its own short experience in Middle Eastern diplomacy, Israel has painfully learnt that democracy and modernisation are not necessarily the best tools for the advancement of peace and well-being in the Middle East, especially when marketed from Jerusalem or Washington.

The expected American failure to transform Iraq into a pro-western democracy might, in the final analysis, also cause damage to the US’s staunchest allies in the area – Turkey and Israel. On the other hand, an American success in changing Iraq’s international orientation and creating a different, pro-western, state (for which the outlook is still low) could revive the short-lived pro-western “Baghdad Alliance” (1955-1958). This would take the form of a pro-American Turkish-Iraqi axis that would co-operate with Israel in military and economic fields. However, even such a new alliance, backed by the US, would still be unable to make significant changes in Israel’s status in the region. As long as there is no significant progress toward the solution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, i.e. toward a long-term peace agreement, Israel will not be able to break out of its almost total isolation from the Arab world.

Thus, Iraq’s ideological shift to the West, should it occur, will not suffice to create an American-backed democratic peace camp in the Middle East of which Israel can become

a part. Egypt and Syria would head the opposition against such an alignment. These two regional players will object to any change for the better in Israel's international standing, without Israel paying the full territorial price to Syria and the Palestinians. It seems, therefore, that even following the successful Iraqi campaign, Israel's greatest strategic asset in the region will continue to be its bilateral relations with Turkey, its closest companion in the Middle East. This is true especially at a time when the current Turkish leadership in Ankara, which is headed by conservative-Islamist Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and is less sensitive to Israel's needs than the previous leadership, is taking its early governing steps. Israel's ability to maintain and even strengthen the bilateral link with Turkey during the period of Erdogan's administration, will prove that the ten-year-old alliance (1993-2003) can withstand almost any obstacle.

Europe and the Region

Especially these days, the European Union (EU) plays a vital role in determining the future shape of the Middle East. The decision to enable practically all of Eastern Europe to join the EU has brought the borders of the Union significantly closer to the Middle East. Europe has also reached the critical point where it must decide whether to include Turkey as a full member of the EU. After 50 years of NATO membership and 40 years of courting the European (Common Market) Union, Turkey is now demanding a definite date for the talks to begin. Twelve countries, most of them East-European members of the former Warsaw Pact, will become EU members by 2007; Turkey is patiently waiting for December 2004, when it will find out if its 2002 updated Parliamentary reforms and their implementation, will be sufficient to meet the EU's criteria for membership.

For the time being, the decision to incorporate Cyprus by May 2004, is the most significant step the EU has taken to affect the Middle East. Geographically, Cyprus is not a European country but it does meet the EU's criteria on economic and democratic governance issues. The upcoming entry of (Greek) Cyprus, followed by a practical entry of the TRNC, will facilitate Turkey's prospects of obtaining an admission date. Even if the target date is fixed for 2010, such an unequivocal European decision will separate

Turkey from the Middle East and make the region more Arabic and less democratic, making Israel feel even more isolated and disliked than before.

Other various implications might follow from a European decision regarding Turkey's future. A positive decision will put pressure on the EU to expand its borders even further, especially toward Russia and several North-African countries such as Morocco and Tunisia. In this context, Israel should start reflecting about its own regional future, especially if and when its peace negotiations with the Palestinians resume in a manner that might finally conclude the conflict. If indeed a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is found within the next decade, the entry of Turkey and perhaps of Russia into the EU, will increase Israel's chance of being accepted too. The opening of such an option will probably put the issue on Israel's public agenda and result in a formal Israeli request to join the EU.

On the other hand, a European decision to block Turkey's bid for full EU membership will probably determine the final borders of Europe. Such a decision, together with Turkey's ensuing frustration, is likely to create pressure for the creation of a Euro-Asian grouping starting with Turkey, several former Soviet Union republics headed by Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkmenistan, and perhaps Iraq in its possible new pro-western guise. Israel can also become a member of such a regional association in view of its good relations with both, Turkey and Russia. Such a regional grouping could lead to the creation of a new "sub-continent" placed between Europe and Asia. Assuming the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, such a formation will gradually tend to include several Arab countries alongside Israel. In an alternative scenario, the continuation and exacerbation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict may damage Israel's relations with Turkey, which could lead to the formation of an association between Turkey, Russia and several Arab countries while bypassing Israel and thus intensifying the pressure resulting from Israel's regional, and perhaps even international, isolation.

The American Task in the Area

Of course, the US has assumed, as a result of its victory in Iraq, a vital role in shaping the face of the Middle East in the next decade or two. The US aims to re-orient the region towards peace, democracy, prosperity, transparency and globalisation. These ambitions, clearly expressed by President Bush (in his Rose Garden speech of 24 June 2002) and by Secretary of State Colin Powell (in his Louisville, Kentucky speech of 19 November 2002 and his Heritage Institute speech of 12 December 2002), reinforce America's role in the region. The increased American influence in Afghanistan and Pakistan; its efforts to strengthen the Egyptian and Jordanian economies, together with the "American-Middle East partnership" that Secretary Powell declared recently, will receive additional impetus from the American success in Iraq.

So far, the US has devoted special effort to convince Europe to accept Turkey to the EU.

It is hard to tell if the US will vigorously pursue the same policy in the near future. A European expansion into Asia and perhaps North Africa might strengthen Europe's global standing. On the other hand, if the enlargement efforts (beyond the 27 countries), are doomed to fail, and Europe's doors are closed, Washington might be more aggressively involved in creating a peace and democracy coalition in the Euro-Asian region. Such an effort will encourage a possible Russian-Turkish-Israeli-Iraqi alignment as a lever for transformation in the Middle East. Although such a move may seem extremely audacious at present, the Bush, Rumsfeld, and Condoliza Rice administration is definitely capable of attempting its promotion, especially if George W. Bush is elected to a second term of office.

If Turkey and Russia are rejected by Europe, The US will try to shape the Euro-Asian region (and not only the Middle East) according to the principles expressed by Bush and Powell. To do so, it will rely on the regional momentum it has acquired in its international campaign against terror. If Washington succeeds in its efforts to create a regional pro-western coalition of peace and democracy under its auspices, it will obviously become the major force in the entire region, exerting a major political blow to Europe; yet, the absence of a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict will doubtlessly hinder any American attempts in that direction. Only the resolution of this conflict, even

if only a temporary solution is achieved, will make a Russian-Turkish-Israeli alignment possible and enable part of the Arab world to join it. Such a development will combine the regional democratisation process with the Arab-Israeli peace process, and by doing so fulfill America's wildest Middle Eastern dreams.

We already notice that after the completion of the American military campaign in Iraq, the US is redirecting the thrust of its diplomatic efforts in the Middle East to the Palestinian-Israeli and the Syrian-Israeli conflicts. Past experience, especially that of the Egyptian-Israeli peace talks, has shown us that only massive and intensive American involvement is likely to bring an end to the decades-long hostilities. The American role is badly needed because of the chasm now dividing Israel and the Palestinians, in addition to the hostility of the rest of the Arab world towards Israel following the devastating results of the *el Aqsa Intifada*. Washington stands an improved chance of enhancing Arab-Israeli peace as a result of its "Iraq Momentum" and the sidelining of the controversial Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat. The US will try very hard not to let the Arab-Israel conflict hinder the regional and global task it has set for itself: to bring about a fundamental change in the shape of the "Third World" and especially of the Middle East. The historic renewal of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in Akaba, Jordan on the 4th of June 2003, is again completely changing the political mood in the region. The mutual Israeli-Palestinian acceptance of the "Road Map"; The Palestinian readiness to abandon terror and the Israeli readiness to remove unauthorized outposts, is re-launching a peace momentum, hopefully as an alternative to the three years long *Intifada*. If President G.W. Bush will demonstrate, on an ongoing basis, the determination that characterized his Iraqi campaign in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we are on the verge of a new and different Middle East. According to the US, only meaningful Westernisation of the Middle East will eventually enable its globalisation, and lead to the uprooting of international fundamentalist terror that endangers the safety of the entire world.

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