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Which way will they go?

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A great struggle for ideas is under way in the Middle East

AFP



The Hizbullah factor

“THE Arab world is more or less a vicious circle. None of its problems will be solved soon. All these troubles have the capacity to reinvent themselves.” So says Ali al-Din Hillal Dessouki, a former minister and senior figure in Egypt’s ruling party. This special report opened by arguing that the causes of conflict in the Arab world—the competition for energy, the conflict with Israel, the weakness of Arab statehood and the stagnation of politics—are taking on the characteristics of a chronic condition. But they are not just chronic. They are also connected to each other, and self-reinforcing.

One cause of Arab woes is the interference of outsiders. The end of colonialism in the mid-20th century did not leave the Arabs free from external meddling. During the cold war, anxiety about the vulnerability of oilfields sundered the region into American and Soviet camps, and the cold war’s end brought the briefest of respites. At present at least four non-Arab powers—America, Israel, Iran and to a much lesser degree Turkey—play an active part both in shaping relations between the Arab states and influencing their internal politics.

Even after its chastening experience in Iraq, the strongest of these is America. The superpower that once saw its strategic role in the region as an “offshore balancer” has since the Gulf war of 1991 been very much onshore, with bases in the Persian Gulf and, for the time being still, a large army and air force in Iraq. America continues to have a vital interest in the region’s oil and remains the chief armourer and presumed protector of Saudi Arabia and its GCC neighbours. Because America is also Israel’s great

defender, American policies have a sharp impact on all the Arab states affected by the Palestine conflict, on the fate of the Palestinians themselves and on the internal standing of regimes that are seen as American allies or dependants.

However, America's brief moment of unchallenged dominance, ushered in by the collapse of the Soviet Union and sealed by the ease with which the first President Bush summoned a grand regional coalition (Syria included) against Iraq in 1991, did not last for long. The younger President Bush's invasion sent American prestige into a dizzying fall. It also created an opening for Iran, another non-Arab power with vital interests in the region, to promote its own ambitions.

Given the opacity of Iran's politics, the extent of those ambitions is hard to fathom. Some Iran-watchers fear that the country aspires to fulfil the vision of Ayatollah Khomeini, its revolution's founder, and export a brand of theocratic government to its Arab neighbours. But an equally plausible counter-argument is that Iran is motivated by insecurity rather than ambition, seeks only to secure its rightful place in the region and is therefore susceptible to the overtures of a President Obama who has abandoned the reflexive antagonism of the Bush years. Or it is possible, in light of the recent upheaval, that both points of view are represented within the regime and that neither has yet prevailed.

For as long as this riddle remains unanswered, the eastern part at least of the Arab world seems condemned to remain an arena of rivalry between America and Iran. And like the cold war, this struggle has an ideological dimension. Arabs may be excluded from participation in real politics at home, but Mr Lynch's "new Arab public", forged by the al-Jazeera phenomenon, cannot but be vicarious participants in this argument between great powers.

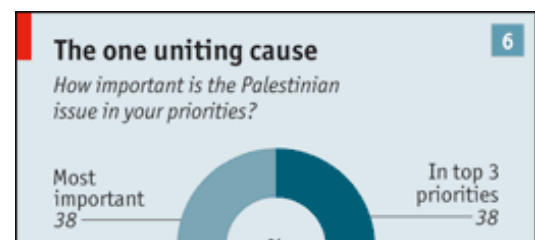
Which way the majority will eventually turn is impossible to say. For the present, al-Qaeda's vision of endless war against the West and a return to the simple verities of Islam's first century appears to have lost the glamour it acquired after the felling of the twin towers. America's reputation suffered a terrible beating in the sands of Iraq, but so in the end did Osama bin Laden's as the Arab public, Sunni as well as Shia, recoiled from al-Qaeda's atrocities, which killed more Muslims than infidels.

The waning of al-Qaeda's star does not mean that Islam itself is losing its potency in Arab politics. For millions of Arabs it goes without saying that the faith should have the main or even final say in the ordering of society. But in the Sunni world political Islam comes in a bewildering variety of forms. Shia thinking on the political role of Islam is divided, too. In Iraq, the only large Arab country where Shias outnumber Sunnis, the Shia religious establishment has not embraced the Iranian idea, invented by Ayatollah Khomeini, of setting a supreme Islamic jurist above the elected leadership of the state.

The opium of the Arabs

With a world of alternatives to choose from—authoritarianism, democracy, secularism, different brands of Islamism—it is a pity that Arab perceptions are overshadowed by one issue that ought in principle to have nothing to do with the way they are governed. This is Israel. Egypt and Jordan have made peace with Israel but the conflict shows no sign of abating. Thanks in part to al-Jazeera, it looms larger than ever in Arab minds (see chart 6), and this distorts the internal Arab debate about politics and government.

One country that has understood this well is Iran. Far from the front line, with none of its own interests directly at stake, Iran has turned the Palestinian conflict into a tool against America's Arab allies. By ramping up its words and deeds against the "Zionist regime" and taunting the Arab governments for their relative pusillanimity, Iran reaches over the heads of the Arab leaders directly to the passions of the street. This is desperately uncomfortable for the pro-American regimes. Lacking the



legitimacy democracy might confer, they rightly dread being branded as appeasers who have sold out the Palestinians at the behest of a resented superpower.

The job of the Arab moderates was made all the harder by Israel's recent wars in Gaza and Lebanon. Shocking television footage transformed both of these local fights into moments of pan-Arab and even pan-Muslim rage. Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, which on both occasions made it too clear for too long that they would not mind seeing Iran's allies in Hizbullah and Hamas take a beating at Israel's hands, had to pay a heavy price in public opinion.



Amal Saad Ghorayeb, a political scientist at the American University of Beirut, takes an extreme view of the consequences of the two wars. In their wake, she says, many Arabs have come permanently to reject the very idea of peaceful coexistence with Israel. More: this conflict now eclipses familiar internal quarrels between secular and religious, Sunni and Shia or left and right. Arabs, she says, are judging their leaders less on their democratic credentials or domestic behaviour and more by their will and capacity to "resist" Israel and America. That is why, in Lebanon and beyond, Hizbullah is admired even by its enemies for having fought Israel to a standstill in 2006. Ms Ghorayeb sees Hizbullah as a state within a non-state—"a microcosm of the successful Arab state we haven't seen anywhere else in the Arab world: efficient, uncorrupted and self-sufficient".

For more than a year this notion—that the Arabs are divided by an internal cold war between a "resistance" front sponsored by Iran and a "moderate" front sponsored by America—has been the prevailing conventional wisdom. But how long, especially after Iran's recent internal upheavals, will it continue to be true?

Mona Eltahawy, an Egyptian columnist who writes from New York, calls Israel "the opium of the Arabs": an intoxicating way for them to forget their own failings, or at least blame them on someone else. Arab leaders have long practice of using Israel as a pretext for maintaining states of emergency at home and putting off reform. At a meeting in Amman in 2005, when an American official suggested that it was time for an Arab democratic spring, the Pavlovian response of Amr Moussa, secretary-general of the Arab League, was this: "There will be no spring or autumn or winter or summer without solving the Palestine problem. We want our friends in the United States to know that this is the consensus in the region."

How disconcerting, then, must be the advent of an American president who shows signs of heeding Arab complaints. By expressing impatience with Israel and empathy for the "intolerable" plight of the Palestinians in his speech in Cairo last month, and forcefully reiterating his promise to withdraw America's armies from Iraq, Mr Obama plainly hopes to open cracks in the resistance front. It may be no coincidence that within a week of his big Cairo speech Lebanese voters re-elected a pro-American government and withheld victory from a coalition led by Hizbullah.

Come the revolution?

The failure of Mr Bush's freedom agenda suggests that no amount of American soft power is going to persuade the regimes to embrace democracy. The presidents, kings and emirs know that this could cost them their jobs. And as this special report has argued, it is far from clear what sort of future Arabs would opt for if they had a free choice. After all, the ultra-conservative Saudi royals may well be more liberal than the ultra-conservative Saudi people. Perhaps the best to hope for is that a rebalanced American diplomacy will draw some poison from Palestine and Iraq and prevent the case for reform being drowned out by the calls for "resistance".

And then? In a much-noticed essay in 2004, Sadik Al-Azm, a professor of philosophy at the University of Damascus, said the modern Arabs had become "the Hamlet of our times, doomed to unrelieved tragedy, forever hesitating, procrastinating and wavering between the old and the new". Mr Dessouki, the former

minister, says that the advocates of democracy in the Arab world "are not willing to pay the price of change".

That seems too bleak. The Arab world faces chronic problems, but its people are no longer docile or passive. They are starting to speak out, to strike, even to take to the streets in pursuit of their demands. But a revolution? "You need an occasion for a revolution," notes Paul Salem, director of the Carnegie Centre in Beirut. "The volcano is there, but it is held in place by the heavy mountain of the Arab state, which oppresses its people very well and has learned how to play the game of elections." Will change come? Some day.

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