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BETWEEN BAGHDAD, TEHRAN, RIYADH AND JERUSALEM IS THERE A WAY FOR THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST?

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Between Baghdad, Tehran, Riyadh & Jerusalem

Is there a way for the Greater Middle East?

Working Paper No. 26
of the
European Security Forum

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Chairman's Summing-up

Michael Emerson*

The idea of this seminar was to look at the whole landscape of interlocking conflicts in an area that was termed the 'Greater Middle East' by the administration in the United States as it sought to follow up the invasion of Iraq with a strategic plan for peace and democratic reform in a vast region stretching from Morocco to Afghanistan. The invention of this term has itself been controversial, with questions about whether this region has any unifying factors that warrant the suggestion of a unified foreign policy strategy on the part of the major global actors. Nonetheless, the term served our purpose, because the multiple conflicts of the region have now become so interconnected, crosscutting and overlapping, partly because of the unintended consequences of US policy and partly because of the widening reach of al-Qaeda. Put even more bleakly, some would now regard the region as the Bush administration's defining disaster.

The seminar was well served by a set of excellent papers by Rosemary Hollis (Chatham House, London), Bruce Riedel (Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C.), Vitaly Naumkin (Centre for Strategic and Political Studies, Moscow) and Mamoun Fandy¹ (International Institute for Strategic Studies, London).

Rosemary Hollis contributed a strategic overview, but with a sceptical message to policy-makers under the title "Competing Agendas and No Overall Winners". Her main argument was that the region represents not a dichotomy in a fight of good against evil, but a mosaic with criss-crossing fault lines. No single player can prevail across the board. Either the region will be embroiled in continuing asymmetric warfare and escalating conflict, or multilateral accommodation will have to be found in each of the interlinked crises. A grand bargain between the US and Iran looks unlikely, however, and an Arab-Israeli bargain equally so.

Vitaly Naumkin criticised the Western blockade against Hamas, and US policy towards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict more generally. He illustrated this with a quote from a public speech to a Jewish Republican audience by Elliot Abrams, US Deputy National Security Advisor, that the current American engagement on Israel-Palestine was a "process for the sake of [a] process" intended to silence nascent European and Arab criticism. Naumkin argued that attempts to isolate political Islam and shut the door on dialogue merely foster its radicalisation. Existing Western strategies towards the region, American above all, are in need of revision. It is the failure of present strategies that exacerbates the dangerous collision between the West and the Islamic world.

Bruce Riedel's main argument is that 'al-Qaeda is back' with the creation of affiliates or franchises virtually worldwide, notably in Iraq, Palestine and Algeria, with the latter providing a jumping-off point for operations in Europe. Yet al-Qaeda is increasingly critical of Hamas, which it sees sliding into collaboration with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and thus with his Western patrons. The most recent developments, with Hamas taking over Gaza after a bitter civil war with Fatah, may modify this view, and the Palestinian cause remains the centrepiece in al-Qaeda's narrative of Western Crusader aggression. The recovery of al-Qaeda has progressed alongside the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, which has happened for three reasons: i) the Taliban were never fully defeated in 2001, ii) the US then took its eye off the Afghan ball, and iii) the Taliban benefited from a safe haven in Pakistan.

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¹ This paper is in the course of being completed.

Mamoun Fandy focused on the Shia–Sunni divide, which Arabs now begin to see as the major threat, rather than the Arab–Israeli conflict. Many Arabs now view the Iranian nuclear programme as more dangerous than that of Israel, for, as the saying goes, ‘better the devil you know than the devil you do not’. Sunni Arabs are content to see a Sunni bomb in Pakistan, but not a Shia bomb in Iran. The Shia today have a very strong influence in four states (Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain) as well as with Sunni radical groups such as Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

In the debate, there were three mini-sessions on Iraq, Iran and Palestine–Israel. On Iraq, it was questioned whether a partial withdrawal plan for the US and its allies would make sense, leaving behind a residual military presence. There were no takers for this proposition.

On Iran, Vitaly Naumkin sketched three scenarios: 1) Iran acquires the bomb; 2) Iran only wants energy security and does not intend to make the bomb; and 3) Iran goes for a ‘Japan scenario’, meaning a build-up of nuclear capabilities sufficient to hold in reserve the possibility to make the bomb within a small number of years. Naumkin speculated that Iran would be willing to negotiate this third scenario alongside gaining full international recognition. On the hypothetical military option for the US, Bruce Riedel commented that it would need a Pearl Harbour-level of provocation to obtain backing for such an action by Congress.

On Palestine, one official commented that after the elections, which Hamas had won, President Abbas only asked the West for money and the release of some prisoners. Instead, he received weapons for Fatah and a boost to the dynamics of civil war.

In conclusion, some brave souls advanced positive proposals, but more out of desperation than real hope. Bruce Riedel advocated a return to where the Camp David negotiations of 2000 had left off. Some discussants were sceptical, in referring to changes on the ground since 2000 (further West Bank settlement construction and the separation barriers) and to the hazards of imposed solutions. Rosemary Hollis advocated a set of three overlapping but differentiated conference tables, for Iran, Iraq and Israel–Palestine. Despite the huge difficulties of implementing a grand strategy of this kind, the debate acknowledged the dramatic dangers of the status quo.

Competing Agendas and No Overall Winners

Rosemary Hollis*

During the 1990s, the European Union took several steps towards developing a comprehensive approach to its southern Mediterranean neighbours, largely in the name of promoting economic liberalisation and political reform across North Africa and the Middle East. The shock of 9/11 and the declaration of a ‘war on terror’ by the Bush administration then gave rise to a more pressing and overarching agenda to combat extremist elements associated with al-Qaeda and Islamist militants. European and Arab governments signed up to this new agenda, only to splinter again over the quest by the United States to force regime change in Iraq.

In the wake of the US-led invasion of Iraq, a new, ad hoc alliance or ‘coalition of the willing’ took shape around the objective of stabilising Iraq and the surrounding region. Thereafter the Bush administration launched a new plan to promote political and economic reform across the ‘Wider Middle East’, with Iraq as the centrepiece. Europe responded with its new Neighbourhood Policy in 2005. Despite some initial gains, however, neither of these initiatives has gained substantial momentum and the agenda for political reform in the Arab world has faltered in the face of the challenge posed by political Islam.

A crucial problem throughout has been the persistence of the Arab–Israeli conflict – which turned into full-scale war on the Israeli–Lebanese and Palestinian fronts in summer 2006. The slide into civil war in Iraq, meanwhile, has discredited Washington’s lofty aspirations for re-shaping the political landscape of the region on the back of regime change in Baghdad. Failure of the EU-3 (Britain, France and Germany) to negotiate a halt to Iran’s nuclear fuel-enrichment programme has also introduced a new source of tension.

Worse still, terrorism has become an even more pressing threat for Europe and the US, with al-Qaeda regrouping, gaining strength in Iraq, rallying, along with the Taliban in Afghanistan, and striking anew, through surrogates and affiliates elsewhere, notably in Britain.

In the circumstances, it is perhaps not surprising that Tony Blair among others has attempted to galvanise support for a broad front against the terrorists that consolidates the reformist agenda with the anti-terrorist one. Nevertheless, as is argued below, the situation is so complex, with so many crosscutting currents, alignments and agendas, that there seems no realistic possibility of defining neat dividing lines between ‘them and us’, ‘good against evil’ or even moderates versus extremists. Indeed, as concluded here, it could be counter-productive to try to do so. Better, rather, to acknowledge the complexities and devise a multifaceted approach to the problems that recognises the interests of all the players and seeks some accommodation with all but the most implacable.

The Manichaean approach

Speaking in Los Angeles in August 2006, Tony Blair called for “a complete renaissance” of foreign policy to combat “reactionary Islam”. He depicted “an arc of extremism now stretching across the Middle East and touching, with increasing definition, countries far outside the region”.¹

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¹ See the “Speech to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council” on 1 August 2006 (retrieved from <http://www.number10.gov.uk>).

In Dubai on 20 December 2006, he called for an alliance of moderates across the Middle East to combat Iran and Tehran-sponsored terrorism and extremism.²

Blair's Manichaean depiction was no doubt intended to galvanise the supporters of stability, liberal democracy and counter-terrorism against the Islamist militants and their state supporters battling for hearts and minds across the 'Greater Middle East'. Yet the contending forces in the region cannot be reduced to a dualistic struggle between opposites.

Certainly, there are at least two big ideas competing for adherents in the region. One is the vision of representative, accountable government, rule of law, human rights and economic development that informs the European Neighbourhood Policy and before that the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership initiative championed by the EU, together with parallel initiatives promoted and funded by the US and various Western non-governmental organisations and their Arab counterparts since the mid-1990s. The other is the vision of a new caliphate championed by al-Qaeda and its affiliates across the region and beyond, reaching into Europe and embracing Islamist movements in Africa and East Asia in a quest to banish Western forces and influence from the heartland of Islam.

Yet neither of these visions have much appeal for the autocratic, corrupt and militaristic governments in the Greater Middle East, South and East Asia, which have aligned themselves with the cause of the war on terror declared by the Bush administration after 9/11. And Washington has shied away from challenging such governments, since experiencing the chaotic fallout of regime change in Iraq and Afghanistan. Neither the Americans nor the Europeans have pursued totally coherent and consistent policies, and inevitably, the use of force in pursuit of any goal will temper the appeal of the cause.

A mosaic, not a dichotomy

In Iraq, the elected government features several sectarian parties, some of which were incubated in the Islamic Republic of Iran and almost all of which look to Iran for political and financial support as well as weaponry for their related militias. The balance of power in Baghdad belongs to Kurdish groups dedicated to defending Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq, if not outright independence. Neither the Shia Muslim nor the Kurdish nationalist parties in Iraq make common cause with al-Qaeda, though some Shia militants may hope to capitalise on the challenge to US and allied forces in Iraq posed by al-Qaeda affiliates. Meanwhile, Sunni and secular Arabs in Iraq, opposed to the US presence there, have turned against al-Qaeda and related radical Salafist groups who would sacrifice Iraqi nationalism in the name of global jihad.

Ironically, the two most committed supporters of Iraq's elected government are the US and the Islamic Republic of Iran, but they have been enemies of each other, on and off, since the Iranian Revolution toppled the Shah and ended years of privileged US access and influence in that country. Even as American and Iranian diplomats were meeting in Baghdad in May 2007 for their first formal bilateral meeting in three decades, they were accusing each other of subversion and were at loggerheads over the future of Iran's nuclear programme.

If Iran and the US could make common cause in Iraq, both would face opposition from Sunni Arab elements in Iraq and their supporters elsewhere in the region. Meanwhile, Turkish forces are poised to cross their southern border in pursuit of PKK separatist Kurds operating out of Iraqi Kurdistan. The US is attempting to dissuade Turkey from such a venture, but the Turks are deterred only by lack of agreement on the ultimate objectives of a cross-border operation.

Turkey is undergoing its most serious political crisis in a decade, as the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) faces down its secular nationalist opponents championed by the army, who fear the popular AKP will subvert the secular nationalist tradition that dates back to the founder of the

² See Daniel Dombey, "Blair seeks closer ties with moderate Arabs", *Financial Times*, 20 December 2006.

modern state, Kemal Ataturk.³ Since Turkey refused to assist the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the traditionally close relationship between Washington and Ankara has cooled. Washington has supported Turkey's quest to gain membership of the EU, but because this goal was adopted by the AKP government, its secular nationalist detractors feel abandoned. European ambivalence and in some cases outright opposition to bringing Turkey into the EU fold has alienated all Turks.

In the circumstances, it is unclear where the Turks stand in relation to Blair's dichotomy between the good guys and the bad. Meanwhile, neither Britain nor America are ready to embrace Iran as an ally in Iraq, though both recognise that Iranian influence among the ruling parties in Baghdad and their respective followers and militias is greater than their own. Both the British and the Americans blame elements of the Mehdi army, recruited in the aftermath of the invasion by Muqtada as-Sadr, for subverting their attempts to bring some semblance of stability to Baghdad and Basra. As-Sadr is implacably opposed to the presence of foreign forces in Iraq, but is more of a nationalist than are the Shia parties that advocate autonomy for southern Iraq to match Kurdish autonomy in the north, at the expense of national cohesion and the interests of Iraq's Sunni Arab minority.

The criss-crossing fault lines that now define the civil war in Iraq are replicated elsewhere in the Middle East, rendering it impossible for either the US or the Europeans to distinguish clearly between friends and foes. The governments of the so-called 'Arab Quartet' – Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Jordan – are all long-standing allies of 'the West', and opposed to the al-Qaeda forces in Iraq and elsewhere. They are also deeply unsettled by the rising power of Iran, manifest since the toppling of Saddam Hussein and his clan in Iraq. Their distrust of Iran is infused with both Sunni antipathy for the Shia version of Islam championed by the Islamic Republic, and Arab antipathy to Persian nationalism. Were the US to cement cooperation with Iran to stabilise Iraq, these Arab states would not only be discomforted, but would likely channel support to Iraq's Sunni Arab minority. As it is, much of the support already reaching Sunni Iraqi groups in Iraq is coming across the borders from Saudi Arabia and Jordan. It is also channelled through Syria.

Yet King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and President Bashar al-Assad of Syria are not about to close ranks. Abdullah, a long-time friend of the late Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, who was assassinated in February 2005, has done little to help the Syrian regime resist calls from the UN for its senior officials to be subject to investigation for Hariri's assassination. The governments of the Arab Quartet are all supporters of the Lebanese government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, who has defied the efforts of the Lebanese Shia movement Hizbollah, backed by Syria and Iran, to take over his cabinet.

When Hizbollah and Israel went to war in summer 2006, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan initially gave every indication of wanting Hizbollah to be defeated. As the war progressed, however, hundreds of Lebanese civilians were killed and injured and the country was devastated by bombing, they rallied to the cause of the Lebanese people and government, against the Israeli onslaught.

So too did the Europeans, except for the British government, which, along with the Bush administration, held off calling for a ceasefire resolution at the UN, seemingly in hopes that Israel would deal a fatal blow to Hizbollah first.⁴ Their stance embarrassed Siniora to the point that he refused to receive US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in Beirut at one stage and hostile demonstrators greeted Tony Blair when he made a trip there subsequently.⁵ Lebanese opponents of

³ See Soli Ozel, "Turkey: Testing Democracy", *The World Today*, May 2007.

⁴ See Ewen MacAskill, Simon Tisdall and Patrick Wintour, "United States to Israel: You have one more week to blast Hezbollah", *Guardian*, 19 July 2007.

⁵ See Christopher Adams and Andrew England, "PM's Mideast tour marred by protests over support for US", *Financial Times*, 12 September 2006; see also "Hizbullah ministers did the right thing by publicly shunning

Siniora have continued to try to undermine him by labelling him a ‘Western stooge’. All of which complicates any quest to line up Middle East ‘moderates’ against the forces of ‘extremism’.

The governments in the Arab Quartet have also acquired this label as a result of their efforts, led by Saudi Arabia, to try to bring some semblance of order back to the region by offering a way to resolve the long-running Arab–Israeli conflict. Habitual defenders of the Palestinian cause against Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the governments of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were embarrassed when Hizbollah took on the Israelis in summer 2006 in solidarity with the Palestinians. That war was fought on two fronts, starting in the Gaza Strip when Palestinian militants, linked to the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas, tunneled under the barrier around Gaza into Israel and abducted an Israeli soldier. Hizbollah began its offensive two weeks later in much the same manner, crossing the Lebanese border with Israel and capturing two soldiers, killing others.

The tactic of capturing each other’s fighters and personnel, to hold as bargaining chips for prisoner exchanges has been a feature of the Arab–Israeli conflict for years. In summer 2006, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert made the mistake of declaring the rescue of the missing soldiers one of his war aims. He failed to deliver. Worse yet, a subsequent inquiry in Israel revealed that Olmert and his cabinet had launched their offensive without a clear plan of campaign. Instead of defeating the guerrilla forces of Hizbollah, who proved well prepared, elusive and armed with more sophisticated weaponry than the Israelis had imagined, the armed forces of Israel were unable to stem the flow of rocket attacks deep into northern Israel right up to the last day of fighting before a ceasefire finally went into effect.

The psychological victors of the 2006 war were Hizbollah and their supporters, including Iran, Syria and public opinion across the Arab world and beyond. Lebanon was devastated, but Hizbollah had proved that a highly motivated, ideologically committed guerrilla force could deprive the region’s most powerful conventional army of victory in the field. Hizbollah and Shia militias in Iraq taunted al-Qaeda and its affiliates with claims that they were the better defenders of the Muslim cause against ‘the Zionist enemy’, contrasting their direct assault on the Israelis, and solidarity with the Palestinians, with al-Qaeda’s mass attacks on fellow Muslims in Iraq and elsewhere.

Manoeuvres and setbacks on the Israeli–Palestinian front

After Hamas won a majority of the seats in the Palestinian legislature in January 2006, Israel refused to deal with the Palestinian Authority (PA), aside from Fatah leader President Mahmoud Abbas, unless and until Hamas renounced violence, recognised Israel and accepted agreements reached by previous PA governments with Israel. These were the principles set in March 2006 by the Middle East Quartet that groups the US, the UN, the EU and Russia. Crucially, because of their own counter-terrorism regulations and their designation of Hamas as a terrorist movement, the EU and its member states have been prevented by law from providing funds to a Palestinian administration run by Hamas.

To channel humanitarian assistance the EU set up a Temporary International Mechanism through which to pay the salaries of key workers in the Palestinian education and health sectors. Humanitarian aid from Europe to the Palestinians has actually increased in absolute terms. The US provided direct assistance to the Fatah forces around President Abbas to bolster their camp against Hamas activists. Meanwhile, the boycott of the PA contributed to the disintegration of the shaky political and administrative infrastructure that had barely survived the second intifada and Israel’s forceful response in the West Bank and Gaza. In December 2006, rivalry between Hamas and Fatah officials, activists and fighters in the occupied territories turned to violence.

Blair”, Editorial, *Daily Star*, 12 September 2006; and also Therese Sfeir, “Protests against Blair visit aim to topple government – Jumblatt”, *Daily Star*, 12 September 2006.

The prospect of a descent into chaos on the Palestinian front induced Saudi Arabia to assert leadership. First, at a meeting in Mecca, King Abdullah brokered a deal between the Palestinian factions and persuaded them to agree to form a unity government. Then he organised the re-launch of the (2002) Beirut or Arab peace initiative, at the Arab League summit in Riyadh in March 2007. In return for an end to Israeli occupation of Arab land and a resolution of the Palestinian refugee issue, the Arab states would normalise relations with Israel. On this occasion, many influential Israelis professed interest – but could not stomach acceptance of the right of return for Palestinian refugees or a total withdrawal to the status quo *ante* of the June 1967 Arab–Israeli war. So decisive action on the Arab peace initiative was not forthcoming, but the field was open for one or another of the regional or international players to make the next move.

The Palestinian factions fell to fighting again. Israel responded to renewed Palestinian rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip with a new aerial assault in May. The same month, violence erupted in and around a Palestinian refugee camp in northern Lebanon, with a previously un-remarked Arab militant group calling itself Fatah al-Islam engaging the Lebanese army in what became a showdown. In the process, civilians who were unable or unwilling to flee the camp suffered death and injury.

Then came the fatal conflict between the Palestinian factions that has divided Gaza and the West Bank. Accusing the Fatah-controlled security forces of working against the Hamas leadership, in June 2007 Hamas fighters stormed the Fatah forces' premises in Gaza, killing scores and forcing the remainder to flee the Gaza Strip or go into hiding. Street battles paralysed life in the crowded Gaza neighbourhoods and refugee camps for several days, causing casualties among the civilians and terrifying the populace. Abbas reacted by declaring a state of emergency and dissolving the unity government of Prime Minister and Hamas leader Ismail Haniya. Abbas accused him of orchestrating a *coup d'état*, while Haniya countered that he had only pre-empted a Fatah coup. Within days, Israel, the US and EU leaders had pledged their support to Abbas and his hastily appointed emergency administration, headed by former Finance Minister Salam Fayad as the new Prime Minister.

With Gaza under Hamas rule and international isolation, and the West Bank more or less under the control of Abbas and his Fatah forces, speculation mounted that the US and Israel intended to capitalise on the separation to bolster their preferred Palestinian interlocutors at the expense of Hamas and the citizens of Gaza. Olmert promised to release to Abbas half the tax receipts collected on Palestinian purchases over the past year and hitherto held by Israel as part of the boycott. He also said he would release some 250 prisoners from among the thousands in Israeli detention – mostly Fatah members and associates. He did not, however, propose renewed peace negotiations, pending a consolidation of Abbas's position, notwithstanding the urgings of Egypt and Jordan.

Sidelining reform

The boycott of the PA in 2006–07 has discredited the US and European reform agendas for the Middle East. After all, both Washington and the EU had called for the Palestinian elections, which the EU subsequently funded, monitored and declared free and fair. Their subsequent refusal to deal with the elected officials because of Hamas's ideology and anti-terrorist laws of their own opened the US and Europeans to charges of duplicity and fuelled cynicism across the Arab world. Certainly Hamas was offered accommodation provided it lived up to the three principles outlined by the Middle East Quartet, but when Hamas made some steps in that direction in the Mecca agreement, the EU made no move to reward this and the US increased support to Fatah.

Following the confrontation between Hamas and Fatah, and the split between Gaza and the West Bank, the overt support extended to Abbas to consolidate his position in the West Bank at the expense of Hamas and to the likely detriment of the 1.3 million Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip is not a tenable situation. Meanwhile, the reputation of the reform agenda has also suffered as a result of

backsliding by the Egyptian government on its pledges to introduce more democracy. It did not help that Condoleezza Rice had only recently hailed Egypt as an example for the region, but made no remonstrations when progress was reversed.

Shifting alignments in Iraq

The release of the findings of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group in Washington at the end of 2006 seemed to promise a return to multilateralism by the US. Instead, the Bush administration announced a new military agenda, dubbed 'the surge' to push for victory against insurgents, terrorists and militiamen in Baghdad. As they pushed forward their offensive to clear out militants, including the Shia militia in as-Sadr's stronghold of Sadr City and separate neighbourhoods along sectarian lines, the casualty rate for US forces escalated to unprecedented levels, though the Iraqi death toll began to decline. After apparently going to ground or sheltering in Iran for a while, as-Sadr himself then resurfaced in Kufa, to preach once more against the US presence in Iraq. His supporters, as did also the small alliance of Sunni Arab parliamentarians, withdrew from the coalition government.

As of this writing, it seems that a new alignment has formed at the centre of power in Iraq, around Dawa party Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Yet, it is not clear how far he will go along with the anti-Sadr and increasingly anti-Iranian strategy of the US forces in Iraq. Reports of growing Iranian influence and supplies of weapons to various factions in Iraq have drawn strong condemnation from the Americans and the British.

In March 2007, the Iraqi government called a meeting of regional and international leaders in Baghdad that produced a broader gathering, hosted by Egypt in Sharm el-Sheikh, in April. In May, again at Iraqi instigation, the American and Iranian ambassadors to Iraq sat down to their first formal bilateral talks in 28 years. Their agenda was limited to Iraq. In the background, Washington resumed pressure at the UN for new sanctions on Iran over its failure to accept a UN Security Council call to suspend its nuclear fuel-enrichment programme.

Apparently, the Americans deemed the moment right for diplomacy because they and Iran's other opponents had recouped some ground since the Lebanon war. The Arab peace initiative was one indication. Agreement at the UN on limited sanctions against Iran was another. Washington had also taken into custody five Iranian nationals who had been based in Irbil. But by the time the bilateral meeting took place in Baghdad, Iran had countered by arresting several Iranian-American nationals visiting Tehran. They were subsequently charged with espionage and subversion.

Seemingly, the US has shelved the idea of attacking Iran, while testing the prospects for diplomacy and sanctions. In the meantime, however, its various programmes to fund and support Iranian civil society groups and some dissident elements in Iran has fuelled anxiety in Tehran that the US has a secret agenda for regime change by stealth.

Where to now?

The Iranians think they are winning in Iraq and it is only a matter of time before the US forces are obliged to withdraw. Asked whether they could handle the chaos if this transpired, this author was told by Iranians in Tehran in late May that they were sanguine. The Americans, meanwhile, seem equally confident that a combination of pressure and dialogue can produce a change of policy in Tehran. And if not, the Iranian hardliners will be the losers. Certainly, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is rapidly losing popularity at home and ordinary Iranians are experiencing increased economic hardship.

Nevertheless, in these circumstances it would be folly for either the Iranians or the Americans to expect to triumph over the other in Iraq or across the region. The situation is delicate and their positions finely balanced. They are, in effect, engaged in asymmetric warfare, on several fronts. And while neither sees any need to cave in to the other, the prospects of a 'grand bargain' between

Washington and Tehran do not look likely either. The appetite for such a bargain is insufficient on both sides. And even if such a rapprochement were to occur, there would be an Arab backlash. Israel would not relish the prospect either, since it could expect to pay a price. That could be relinquishing territory or its exclusive position as the region's sole nuclear power outside South Asia (or both).

An Israeli–Arab bargain, forged as a counterweight to Iran, seems equally unlikely, since that would bear a price too. And a deal that excludes Iran would leave the US without the cooperation from Tehran needed to salvage the situation in Iraq.

The choices are stark; therefore, either asymmetric warfare and potential escalation will prevail across the Greater Middle East or multilateral accommodation on each of the interlocking crises will have to be sought. No single player can prevail across the board. Equally, potential alignments of some players against others will not be decisive, since the lines of confrontation are so muddled and fluid. A set of compromises, with some gains and some losses for all, would thus seem to be the only recourse.

To conclude, the recommendation is for a set of interconnected or overlapping dialogues to be initiated – one focusing on Iraq, one on Lebanon and one on the Palestinians. In each case, the main stakeholders or powerbrokers would need to be at the table. Conceivably, the UN could provide the umbrella, though the EU could take a lead on both Lebanon and the Palestinians, while the US would be central to making progress on the stabilisation of Iraq and would be needed in the other two dialogues as well. The point, however, is that the time has gone for Washington or any other single powerbroker to force its regional agenda on the others.

A View from Russia

Vitaly Naumkin*

The 'Greater Middle East' (GME) is a very unusual geopolitical construct. Its singularity lies in the fact that the geographical limits of the GME are uncertain, just as is the criteria for the attribution of particular countries to it. It appears that as conceived by those who coined this concept these were states in which, as Bernard Lewis put it, something had gone wrong. But these states in essence have little in common. Nevertheless, this construct has been accepted by all the main global actors, including those of the G8, in whose framework it serves as a basis for political discourse. The GME idea is understandably functional, but what task does its action plan envisage – war against terror, democracy promotion or, more widely, modernisation?

To the quadrangle specified by the European Security Forum's subject one would be well advised to add Kabul, but with this addition, the picture becomes even more disconcerting. Stuck somewhere between the GME and Europe is Turkey, for which, according to French President Nicolas Sarkozy, the road to the EU will be barred for a long time to come owing to geographical parameters alone, but which in relation to many other parameters stands out from the group of Middle Eastern states. Recent clashes between sympathisers of political (but moderate!) Islam and secularists are a characteristic collision that perhaps in future is in store for Europe as well, in whose population the share of Muslims is steadily growing.

It is common to think that the states located in the GME are doomed to engaging in catch-up development (or to increased lag), resisting modernisation, conserving archaic forms of social life and polity, being torn by conflict and remaining a source of threats to global security – primarily international terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. This view is only partly true. Certainly, as stated in the UN's first *Arab Human Development Report* in 2002, the overall population of the 22 Arab countries (280 million in 2002) had a GDP equal to the size of Spain's.¹ The prospects for the future look rather gloomy. But there are states in the region that, for instance, by the levels of GDP per capita have outstripped many developed countries (the Arabian monarchies), while Saudi Arabia, according to the available forecasts, will by 2020 enter the group of the world's most-developed countries – the G20. In a number of countries, parliamentary institutions and electoral systems are well developed, political parties (including those of the opposition) are active and the process of democratisation, albeit slow, has been underway in the region in recent years. Suffice it also to mention the local elections in Saudi Arabia, the steps towards political reform in other states of the Arabian Peninsula, the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon, etc.

Yet, as a result of free elections, the positions of Islamist forces in the region, including radical ones, have robustly consolidated. The mainstream Islamist organisations have benefited from the democracy-promotion strategies of the US. Even in Iraq, two Iran-oriented Islamist parties – al-Dawa and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution – form the main pillars of the regime, which is paradoxically supported equally by Washington and Tehran. The West has imposed a blockade against Hamas, which had won the elections in Palestine. This move has sharply aggravated the situation in the zone of the Arab–Israeli conflict. The project to form a government of

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¹ See the United Nations Development Programme, *Arab Human Development Report*, United Nations, New York, 2002.

national unity in Palestine, as is known, has been thwarted by the renewed internecine war. Facts on the ground repeatedly convince the unbiased observer that attempts to isolate political Islam and to shut the door on dialogue with it merely foster its radicalisation.

The continuing Israeli occupation and vicious circle of violence in Palestine feeds radical Islamist mobilisation and makes the need to find a solution to this protracted conflict urgent. It seems that the efforts of the international quartet are not adequate to bring the conflicting sides back to negotiations and the global actors are not committed enough to the peace process. US Deputy National Security Advisor Elliott Abrams was recently reported to have said at a meeting of Jewish Republicans that the current American engagement on Israel–Palestine was a “process for the sake of [a] process” intended to silence nascent European and Arab criticism.²

Obviously, the fresh round of violence in the conflict zone will put off the prospect of settlement even more. Is it possible to promote a stable Palestinian Authority (PA) unity government and can it, for its part, not only become Israel’s partner in negotiations but also achieve real results? As the Palestinian public figure Hanna Siniora believes, “neither Hamas nor Fatah, alone or combined, have learned the political culture of working together in a coalition to serve their public, the Palestinian people”.³ But in order to change the situation, global actors – Europe first of all – have to proceed to diplomatic engagement with all the parties, including Hamas, and resume financial aid to the PA. Of course, if Israel continues its strikes against the Palestinian territories and rejecting the original ceasefire, one can forget about the peace process.

It is worth referring once more to Siniora and his call for accepting the attractive Arab peace plan:

All the armed elements in the PA, clans, families, militias, Fatah and Hamas, even the PA security forces should be disarmed, and the Arab troops will be allowed to carry arms to stop lawlessness and implement law and order, and bring total security. Later, a non-factional Palestinian force, professionally trained, will be reconstituted to eventually takeover the security role.⁴

Under these provisions Israel should withdraw its troops from the occupied territories and the Arab League should place its troops in the PA (in order for Israel to comply, these troops are supposed to come from Egypt and Jordan – the two Arab countries that have diplomatic relations with Israel).

To enhance these developments political reform in Palestine is of major importance. This author cannot disagree with Nathan Brown’s observation that for a brief period, “the circumstances favoring political reform in Palestine seemed more propitious than they ever had in any Arab context”.⁵ Indeed, the reform had begun to move ahead, and certain progress had been achieved; nonetheless, the Hamas victory brought to naught all the efforts of the bloc of secular reformers to affect a resolute change of the situation in their favour. The sad experience of Palestinian democratic reforms also makes one wonder whether that failure was inevitable. Brown believes that Arab reform advocates and their international supporters can derive five lessons from their experience: “the need to align agendas, the peril of short-term goals, the peril of personalising reforms, the long-term nature of the reform project, and the need to engage Islamists”.⁶

² See Daniel Levi, “If Gaza survives, Europe must act”, *Guardian*, 19 May 2007.

³ See Hanna Siniora, “Arab peace plan is key to ending Gaza violence”, Opinion, 18 May 2007 (retrieved from <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0.7340.L-3401820.00.html>).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See Nathan J. Brown, *Requiem for Palestinian Reform: Clear Lessons from a Troubled Record*, Carnegie Papers, Middle East Series, No. 81, February 2007, p. 13.

⁶ Ibid., p. 14.

It looks like the aggravating, disastrous situation in Iraq – unfortunately for us all – makes the final defeat of the most powerful state in the world inevitable. Or at least victory is not likely to be achievable. Some facts pertaining to this situation merit recalling:

- 1) We are still unaware of American plans for settling the situation in the country.
- 2) The Sunni–Shia strife is continuing and even growing.
- 3) The Sunnis continue to feel discriminated against.
- 4) Iran wields tremendous influence in the situation and may stand to gain in the event of American withdrawal.
- 5) The country lacks elementary security conditions.
- 6) Especially acute is the problem of refugees (2 million in Syria and Jordan) and displaced persons (no fewer than 2 million and possibly more).
- 7) There is a severe deterioration of educational, medical and communal services.
- 8) Government armed units are themselves taking part in sectarian violence.
- 9) Terrorist activity goes unabated and terrorists groups are becoming stronger.

In analysing the current divisions between President George Bush's administration and Congress, one should note the ongoing relevance of the issue of continuing the war in Iraq. Testifying to the serious nature of the disagreement is the fact that the Democrats are insisting on the legislative definition of a withdrawal date from Iraq, deeming it a necessary condition for additional financing of the military operations in Iraq. They have twice endeavoured to pass the corresponding bill, which President Bush has vetoed, believing that such a step would only give a free hand to the extremists. Still, it is not quite clear whether a Democratic president, if elected, would seek a complete withdrawal from Iraq or if it would rather be a question of redeploying troops, cutting their strength and redirecting them out of the zones of contact with the adversary to the territory of the military bases, from where they would be able to make raids.

An idea voiced by certain politicians of Muslim states – to replace the American–British contingent in Iraq with one formed by a number of member states of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference – is hardly feasible. It is argued here that the Iraqis will not want to substitute one occupation for another. Furthermore, any Muslim contingents would be suspected of bias and of being able to fan sectarian hostilities still more, preventing national consolidation.

In Afghanistan, where the military operation bears a collective character and has been supported by the greater share of governments around the world the situation is far from stable. The positive results gained at the initial stage of reconstruction (particularly before the start of the military operation in Iraq) are continually being undermined by the present trend of events, which, among other things, is characterised by the following:

- 1) The government of President Hamid Karzai does not enjoy support in the country, nor does it control the situation in the regions.
- 2) The fact that the 'free democratic elections' held in the country were won by manifestly unpopular government forces has discredited the democratic institutions.
- 3) The Taliban movement is again growing in strength and, according to some reports, is already controlling more than half of the country's territory.
- 4) The number of civilian victims of the hostilities is skyrocketing.
- 5) Terrorists are increasingly using the same tactics as the Iraqi groups linked to al-Qaeda.

- 6) Taking part in the fighting against government forces are not only members of clans in sympathy with the Taliban, but also recruits from various strata of the population who are deeply angry, particularly on account of the civilian victims.
- 7) Drug production and trafficking continues to grow. Although during its period in power the Taliban had taken serious steps to eliminate the drug business, it now relies on the drug trade as the main source of its financing.
- 8) Iran has sharply increased its influence in the western regions of Afghanistan.
- 9) Despite the enormous funds for the recovery of Afghanistan allocated by the West, chiefly by the US, efforts to work out a mechanism for their use have not been successful so far.
- 10) It has not become possible to normalise relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- 11) The Afghan refugee problem (more than 2.5 million in Iran) is as acute as before.
- 12) The emerging hopeful prospects are complicated by US preoccupations with trying to find a solution to the Iraqi problem, the crisis over the nuclear programme in Iran, the continued Sunni–Shia antagonism in the Islamic world and particularly the lack of a solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. One may say that limited success could be achieved by the ‘Greater Central Asia’ strategy, which envisages cooperation with former Soviet Central Asian republics on transport, trade and other policy areas for the socio-economic development of Afghanistan.

Iran’s key significance for the US fight against nuclear proliferation cannot be viewed out of the context of Israel. And on this question, there are virtually no differences between Republicans and Democrats. According to a British scholar, Marc Leonard, Israel is regarded by both groups as a democratic country in a sea of obscurantism and autocracy but, by contrast, “many Europeans see Israel as militaristic, unilateral, and obsessed with killing terrorists, rather than tackling the causes of terror”.⁷ Iran – which believes that the overthrow of regimes hostile to it in Iraq and Afghanistan along with the growing need felt by the coalition forces to cooperate with it gives it a golden chance to affect a decisive strengthening of its regional role – is using resentment against Israel to win support among the population of the region. At this point, the growth of Iran’s influence cannot be deterred. The strategy of containment has generally exhausted itself. In addition, it is long since Iran ceased to be the revolutionary state that it was in the first years after the Islamic Revolution, when its leaders sought the latter’s extension to other countries. There is sufficient evidence of pragmatism on the part of Iran’s leaders, among whose behaviour nationalism looks a much stronger imperative than Islamism. The regime is undergoing a process of complex transformation and in the new balance of political forces a new generation of politicians, especially those of a conservative orientation, is playing an important role. In any case, it would be worthwhile for the US to change tack on its hopeless policy of regime change and of ostentatiously wasting millions of dollars on supporting opposition groups unable to affect the situation in any way. This policy should be replaced by one that involves diplomatic recognition of Tehran and entering into negotiations.

All this signifies that no matter what term we apply to the Middle East, the existing Western strategies with respect to it and the American one above all are in need of revision. It is the failure of these strategies that exacerbates the dangerous collision between the West and the Islamic world.

⁷ See Marc Leonard, *Divided World: The Struggle for Primacy in 2020*, Centre for European Reform, London, 2007, p. 14.

The Return of the Knights

Bruce Riedel*

Introduction

Almost six years after 11 September al-Qaeda has spread throughout the Greater Middle East with franchises from Indonesia to the Maghreb. Thanks to the war in Iraq it survived the West's counterattack in Afghanistan. It has a secure sanctuary in Pakistan and it is building avenues of approach to attack Europe and America using the Muslim diaspora community in Western Europe. In Iraq it is the dynamic edge of the Sunni insurgency, albeit only a small minority within the movement and its goal now is to break the Iraqi state apart and create a jihadist state in the heart of the Arab world. Al-Qaeda wants to play a larger role in the Palestinian conflict but it has had a discordant relationship with Hamas. Al-Qaeda has been very critical of Hamas's participation in electoral politics but is now supportive of the Hamas coup in Gaza. As argued below, understanding al-Qaeda's ideology and operations is the key to defeating it.

'Greater Middle East'

The phrase, the 'Greater Middle East' enjoyed brief notoriety at the end of President George W. Bush's first administration and the beginning of the second. It became a shorthand expression for the president's idea of transforming the Middle East from its violent and despotic past to a new, democratic and peaceful future. Old conflicts like the Arab-Israeli one would disappear once democracy came to the region. Senior administration officials travelled to Europe and the Middle East to explain the Greater Middle East strategy to allies as a break from the past policy of supporting stability over freedom – a policy that allegedly had failed to deliver either and created the conditions for the 11 September 2001 attack on America by al-Qaeda. The president's second inaugural address after his re-election in January 2005 was the apogee of this movement. He promised support to democratic movements "in every nation and culture, with the goal of ending tyranny in our world".

By the next morning, the administration was 'walking it back'. A senior national security official explained that this was not a new policy, but rather an "acceleration" in long-term US goals. It would not be applied precipitously to US allies in the Muslim world such as Saudi Arabia or Egypt. The next day, the president's father, former President George Bush Sr, was brought out to explain to reporters that they should not over-stress the speech or over-interpret it.¹

Ironically, the concept of a Greater Middle East also lies at the core of the ideology of America's enemy, al-Qaeda, but of course with a very different emphasis. Al-Qaeda sees the countries of the Greater Middle East as the Muslim community of believers, the *umma*, which has been under attack by the West for the last century or more. Al-Qaeda argues that, thanks to its leadership, the *umma* is now for the first time in more than 90 years successfully resisting the attack of the Crusaders and Zionists on the Islamic world. Not since the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, al-Qaeda argues, has

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¹ The walk back is laid out by Carla Anne Robbins in "Bush Foreign Policy: Grand Vision and its Application", in John C. Fortier and Norman J. Ornstein (eds), *Second Term Blues: How George W. Bush Has Governed*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Press, 2007, pp. 89–90.

the Muslim world been as successful as it is now in resisting Western and American domination by defeating the West in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The al-Qaeda leadership proclaims the victory of the jihad and the ‘knights’ who lead it in their propaganda almost every day now. In May, Ayman al-Zawahiri said, “we are going through a historic period of utmost importance...the Empire of Evil is about to come to an end, and that a new dawn is about to rise over a mankind liberated from the Caesars of the White House, Europe and Zionism”.² A central key to the success of al-Qaeda’s strategy in its Greater Middle East is the creation of al-Qaeda affiliates or franchises in different parts of the region, each of which operates largely independently of al-Qaeda’s core leadership but proclaims their allegiance to the al-Qaeda emir, Osama bin Laden, and his jihadist principles and ideology.

Indeed, al-Qaeda was established in 1998 as an alliance of several jihadist groups in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Bangladesh as a World Islamic Front to “kill Americans and their allies...in order to liberate the al-Aqsa mosque [in Jerusalem] and the Holy Mosque [in Mecca] from their grip so that their armies leave all the territory of Islam, defeated, broken and unable to threaten any Muslim”.³ The use of ‘knights’ (*al Fursan* in Arabic) harkens back to the medieval Muslim warriors who fought the Crusaders in Palestine. It also reflects al-Qaeda’s self-image that it is an organisation of elite vanguards who by their acts of sacrifice will inspire the masses to take action. In less than a decade, bin Laden and his movement have established a truly global presence. Since 9/11 al-Qaeda or its affiliates, franchises and sympathisers have carried out terrorist attacks in Algiers, Casablanca, Madrid, London, Istanbul, Riyadh, Jeddah, Karachi, Sharm el-Sheikh, Taba, Mombassa, Kuwait, Mumbai, New Delhi, Bali and many other cities, not to mention the chaos and anarchy they have produced in Iraq and Afghanistan. The breadth and audacity of attacks is a mark of the movement’s success in building its local allies and surrogates throughout the Muslim world from Morocco to Indonesia, and in the Muslim diaspora in Europe.

Securing the base in the badlands

Critical to this success was al-Qaeda’s survival in late 2001 after the American intervention against its host in Afghanistan, the Taliban, on the side of the Northern Alliance forces in the Afghan civil war. Five years after the fall of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the Taliban movement has made a significant comeback with al-Qaeda. Those who placed the Taliban in the “dustbin of history” like former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld have been proven premature. Today the Taliban and al-Qaeda are the prime movers in the insurgency in southern and eastern Afghanistan.

Attacks on NATO forces in the country are a daily phenomenon. British army commanders have said that the fighting in the south is the toughest the British army has faced since Korea. Suicide attacks on Afghan government, NATO and US forces and Afghan civilians have increased dramatically. There were two suicide operations in all of Afghanistan in 2002; today one occurs every three days. And the Taliban leadership, along with the al-Qaeda leadership, is still at large, still planning attacks on its enemies in Afghanistan and globally.

All of this has developed remarkably closely to the script Taliban leader Mullah Omar, the self-proclaimed Commander of the Faithful, outlined in late 2001 and early 2002 right after the fall of Kabul and Kandahar. At the time, Omar lamented the “catastrophe” of the Emirate’s fall but said that his organisation would survive and return to challenge the coalition and its Afghan backers over time.

² See Al-Sahab Media Productions, “Interview with Shaykh Ayman al Zawahiri”, Open Source Center, 5 May 2007.

³ Al-Qaeda’s declaration of the World Islamic Front can be found in Bruce Lawrence (ed.), *Messages to the World: The Statements of Usama bin Laden*, London: Verso, 2005, pp. 58–62.

Mullah Omar was also quick to predict that he would not be captured by the coalition and would still be able to lead the Taliban in its war. Here is what he said as early as 26 September 2001:

I am considering two promises. One is the promise of God, the other of Bush. The promise of God is that my land is vast. If you start a journey on God's path, you can reside anywhere and will be protected. The promise of Bush is that there is no place on earth where you can hide that I cannot find you. We will see which promise is fulfilled.⁴

Mullah Omar also put the Taliban struggle after 2001 in a wider context from the start. He associated his movement with other Islamic struggles against perceived foreign occupiers, especially in Palestine, Kashmir and after 2003, in Iraq. In a message in October 2006 at the start of the Eid festival, he praised Muslim fighters everywhere and especially those in Iraq for fighting America.⁵ A constant theme in his rhetoric is that the Taliban will defeat the US and NATO just as the Mujahideen defeated the former Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. This history is important. Like most people, Afghans remember who promised what – validation occurs when you are seen to be right.

There are at least three key reasons for the Taliban's resurgence. *First*, the Taliban was never fully defeated in 2001. After a few defeats on the battlefield with the Northern Alliance and coalition airpower, the Taliban dispersed. It did not fight for Kabul or Kandahar; rather it followed classic guerrilla tactics and fled. It was definitely on the ropes, however, by the early months of 2002 and vulnerable to a decisive takedown. That never came.

Instead, the cadres moved to remote areas of Pashtun Afghanistan like Omar's home province of Uruzgan and went to ground. They hid their time and survived. This proved fairly easy as the new government of Afghan President Hamid Karzai and its coalition supporters had far too few security forces to secure and govern the country. And the Taliban adjusted its tactics. It adopted new battlefield tactics such as the use of suicide bombers and improvised explosive devices from the Iraq war. Almost certainly, the al-Qaeda organisation provided key help in transmitting these techniques from Iraq to Afghanistan. Indeed, according to Taliban leaders, Osama bin Laden is actively involved in planning many of their operations, including the attack on Bagram airbase when Vice-President Dick Cheney visited Afghanistan in February 2007, as well as operations in Iraq.⁶

Second, the coalition and especially the US took its eye off the Afghan ball when the invasion of Iraq began. Key US military and intelligence assets were diverted from Afghanistan and the hunt for al-Qaeda to the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Gary Schroen, the CIA officer who led the first CIA team into Afghanistan in late 2001 to topple the Taliban, notes that "as early as March 2002 the US military began to withdraw many of the key units involved in the effort [to hunt bin Laden] in order to allow them to regroup and train in preparation for the coming war with Iraq".⁷ Schroen notes the same was true for the CIA as well. Afghanistan was put on the back burner and given relatively little reconstruction assistance after the Iraq war began. US aid to Afghanistan, a country devastated by a quarter-century of war, totalled less than a billion dollars in both 2002 and 2003. Compared with other reconstruction efforts, Afghanistan was simply done on the cheap. Lack of security and economic reconstruction fuelled not only the Taliban's revival but also the return of the poppy crop and the drug culture.

Third, the Taliban benefited from a safe haven and help in Pakistan. The Taliban of course had long and well-established ties with the Pakistan's intelligence service, the ISI, and the Pakistani army. While these were broken by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf after 9/11, the ties between the

⁴ See "Mullah Omar in his own Words", *Guardian*, 26 September 2001.

⁵ See "Text of Mullah Omar's Eid Message", *Afghan Islamic Press*, 21 October 2006.

⁶ See Anna Johnson, "Taliban: Bin Laden Planned Cheney Attack", *Associated Press*, 20 June 2007.

⁷ See Gary Schroen, *First In: An Insider's Account of How the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan*, New York: Ballantine Books, 2005, pp. 359–60.

Taliban and various militant Pakistani and Kashmiri groups remained very much intact. These ties had developed over the course of the 1990s and were most dramatically illustrated during the December 1999 hijacking of Indian Air flight 814 from Kathmandu to Kandahar, when al-Qaeda, the Taliban and Kashmiris also mixed together with the ISI to carry out the plot.⁸

The Afghan government, of course, goes further and suggests that the Pakistani army and the ISI still actively assist the Taliban. Afghan authorities say Mullah Omar spends a great deal of his time in Quetta. President Musharraf says this is a lie. For his part, Omar has consistently denied any official Pakistani assistance and has called President Musharraf a traitor who should be overthrown and executed.

Where the truth lies precisely in this regard is very hard to know but there is no doubt that the Taliban has used Pakistani territory to regroup and has enjoyed assistance from fellow travellers in Pakistan. Pakistan's own internal fragility, highlighted by a Baloch rebellion in the southwest, only makes the situation more complex. As recently noted by Paul O'Sullivan, chief of Australia's intelligence service, "al-Qaeda is rebuilding both its organisational structures and operational capabilities from bases in the tribal regions bordering Pakistan and Afghanistan, and networks in the Middle East, North Africa and Western Europe".⁹

As he suggests, al-Qaeda has used Pakistan extensively as a fertile recruiting ground to penetrate the large Pakistani expatriate population in the United Kingdom for operations. The 7 July 2005 attack on the London Underground was a dramatic demonstration of this approach to attacking Europe. The British have been remarkably successful in foiling other plots, including the 2004 Operation Crevice plot to use a half-tonne bomb to attack targets in London and the 2006 plot to blow up 10 jumbo jets over the Atlantic. As noted by Deputy Assistant Commissioner Peter Clarke, chief of Scotland Yard's counter-terrorism department,

[T]he fact is there are in the UK many young men who are vulnerable to be drawn into extremism and violence [in the Pakistani community]. In case after case, the hand of core al-Qaeda can be clearly seen. Arrested leaders or key players are quickly replaced, and disrupted networks will reform quickly.¹⁰

Al-Qaeda has also used the Pakistani connection to attempt attacks in Israel. The captured terrorist leader Abd al Hadi al-Iraq reportedly engineered a plan to use two Pakistanis with British passports to blow up the American embassy in Tel Aviv in April 2003; instead, they bombed a seafront restaurant nearby.¹¹

As long as NATO keeps forces in Afghanistan, the Taliban cannot march on the cities and retake the country. But that is not Osama bin Laden's or Mullah Omar's objective at this point. The Taliban leadership has successfully survived the collapse of its emirate five years ago; it now seeks to demonstrate that the Karzai government and NATO cannot govern effectively in large parts of the country. As a guerrilla movement, the Taliban and al-Qaeda win in South Asia by not losing. They want NATO to bleed in Afghanistan just like the Soviet 40th army bled in Afghanistan 20 years ago.

⁸ See Jaswant Singh, *A Call to Honour: In the Service of Emergent India*, New Delhi: Rupa and Company, 2006 is the best source on the hijacking and its perpetrators.

⁹ See "Australia's Spy Chief Says Al-Qaeda Appears to be Rebuilding", *Associated Press*, 20 June 2007.

¹⁰ See Alan Cowell, "British AntiTerrorism Chief Warns of More Severe Qaeda Attacks", *New York Times*, 26 April 2007.

¹¹ See Yoram Schweitzer, "Is al-Qaeda Closing In?", *JCSS Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 10, No. 1, June 2007. This article chronicles al-Qaeda's plots against Israel including the plot to bomb Eilat from Saudi Arabia and the attacks on Israeli tourists in Kenya.

Creating the franchises in the Greater Middle East

With a strong base of operations rebuilt in the badlands along the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan – 1,500 miles of the most desolate and difficult terrain in the world – al-Qaeda opened its post-9/11 global offensive with a number of local affiliates. Indonesia was an early example of the pattern that would emerge. Al-Qaeda had been training Indonesian jihadists in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan for several years. A close operational link was forged with Jamaah Islamiah (JI), an extremely violent jihadist group. The JI has been responsible for a series of attacks, most notably the 12 October 2002 multiple attacks in Bali that killed over 200 persons.¹² In the last couple of years, the Indonesian authorities seem to have had some success in suppressing the JI but it is far from eradicated.

Another al-Qaeda franchise quickly became active in bin Laden's home, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which has witnessed the longest and most sustained political violence and unrest in the Kingdom's history thanks to al-Qaeda. In a major sermon in early 2003 released as an audiotape, bin Laden extolled "the band of knights" that had attacked America on 11 September and urged his followers to overthrow the House of Saud. A series of attacks followed over the next three years. Western targets including the US consulate in Jeddah and compounds of Western firms were attacked as well as the Saudi interior ministry headquarters in Riyadh and the Abqaiq oil-processing facility (responsible for 60% of Saudi oil).

Al-Qaeda had in mind plots that were even more devastating. According to the testimony of the captured 9/11 mastermind, Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, given on 10 March 2007, one plan was to recruit pilots in the Royal Saudi Air Force to hijack their own fighter aircraft and use them for a bombing attack on Israel's southern city of Eilat in 2003. If successful, al-Qaeda had hoped the raid would spark an Israeli counterattack and start another Arab-Israeli war. In the end, the mission was foiled before it got off the ground. Only after a series of violent gun battles did the Saudi authorities gain the upper hand over the terrorists.

Even with their successes, however, the Saudis keep uncovering new al-Qaeda cells and arresting dozens of cadres, some of whom have been trained in Iraq. In April, the Saudis uncovered several cells planning an operation to use hijacked aircraft to blow up the Saudi oil infrastructure. It is clear that the terrorists have a good understanding of the critical nodes of the system from their attack on Abqaiq. Should they succeed at hitting the vulnerable points in the system, the results could be catastrophic for the global energy market. And that is in fact exactly what Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri are publicly urging their followers to do.

Of course, al-Qaeda's most successful franchise has been in Iraq. Founded by the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia has been spectacularly successful in attacking Western targets and in precipitating the Sunni-Shia civil war that now grips the country. Al-Qaeda in Iraq actually makes up only a small minority of the fighters within the Sunni Arab insurgency. Its extremist anti-Shia views and its brutal violence have alienated it from many Iraqis and even some of its original Sunni supporters. Nonetheless, it shows no sign of changing its strategy, which is designed to create civil war and lay the groundwork for a jihadist state in heart of the Middle East. Given its many enemies inside and outside Iraq its chances of success are probably slim in the long term. But as long as it can portray itself as leading the fight against the foreign occupation in Iraq it is likely to be a deadly and serious adversary. For now it is well funded with the proceeds from ransoms of kidnapped Iraqis and donations from sympathisers, especially in the Gulf States. Thus, despite being only a small minority of the overall Sunni insurgent movement, in Iraq al-Qaeda has been successful in accomplishing its goal of driving Iraqi society into warring factions, creating a quagmire of civil war in which the American and British armies find themselves today.

¹² See Sadanand Dhume, "Radicals March on Indonesia's Future", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 2005.

The memoirs of Paul Bremer and George Tenet have dramatically revealed how ill prepared the US was for the post-invasion occupation of Iraq. We apparently had no plan. Al-Qaeda did. As soon as the Bush administration began talking about a showdown with Iraq, al-Qaeda began to prepare. In the autumn of 2002 Ayman al-Zawahiri spoke about the need to be ready to fight in Iraq and reported that Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar were alive and preparing for the next round. He turned US rhetoric about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction on its head and told his audience that the goal of American occupation was to “confirm Israel’s uncontested monopoly over weapons of mass destruction in the region to ensure the submission of Arab and Islamic states”.¹³ A few weeks later, bin Laden issued a longer message to his followers urging them to go to Iraq and prepare to fight the invaders who sought a “stooge government to follow their masters in Washington and Tel Aviv”.¹⁴

Zarqawi prepared the battlefield on the ground and set the trap. On 17 October 2004, Zarqawi formally proclaimed his allegiance to bin Laden and the al-Qaeda group. In his statement of allegiance he said the Crusaders and Jews “have thrown their weight around this Muslim land of Iraq deciding it would be the cornerstone in their plan which they named the ‘Greater Middle East’ in their effort to impose their infidel democracy, transform the peoples of the region and uproot Islam, however, God will shame them and forsake them”.¹⁵ Zarqawi also created a support network in Europe and the Muslim world for his war in Iraq, a network that smuggled money and martyrs to Iraq to join the jihad. According to the National Counterterrorism Centre, Zarqawi’s operational network had extended across 40 countries by 2006 and provided dozens of recruits, many of whom will someday return home with the expertise gained in the battlefields of Iraq.¹⁶

Since the death of its founder, Zarqawi, the al-Qaeda franchise in Iraq has announced the establishment of an independent Sunni state in western and central Iraq. The Islamic State of Iraq promises to be the base from which additional jihadist movements can grow in the heart of the Arab world. The emir of the new state has an impressive Islamic pedigree, Abu Omar al Qureishi al Hashimi al Baghdadi as he is known, literally means he is a descendant of the prophet’s family. In proclaiming al Baghdadi as the emir of Iraq, al-Qaeda is making a statement about its long-term plan for the creation of a caliphate in the entire *umma*.

One of al-Qaeda’s next goals after Iraq has been to create a franchise in Algeria, which can serve as a node for jihad throughout North Africa and in the Maghrebi diaspora in Western Europe. For some two years or more Osama bin Laden and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri negotiated with the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) on the terms and conditions for its joining the movement. In late 2006, bin Laden instructed that the group be renamed al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and it began conducting attacks in that name in late 2006 and early 2007, with a series of strikes at police stations and Western oil targets.

On 12 April 2007, ‘Black Wednesday’, the new group carried out multiple suicide bombings (previously unknown in Algeria) in Algiers targeting the prime minister’s offices and police headquarters, killing almost three dozen persons. Another truck bomb was apparently defused. The group later produced a martyrdom video of three suicide bombers who had died in the ‘Badr raid’ (as it was named after the famous early Muslim victory).

Zawahiri has it made clear that France is a major target of the new Maghrebi franchise. In announcing the union with the GSPC and al-Qaeda’s core on 11 September 2006, Zawahiri said it would be “a source of chagrin, frustration and sadness for the apostates [of the regime in Algeria], the treacherous

¹³ See “Al Zawahiri Says Bin Laden, Mullah Omar Enjoy Good Health”, *Al Jazeera*, 8 October 2002.

¹⁴ The text of bin Laden’s message to Iraqis is in Lawrence (2005), op. cit., pp. 180–85.

¹⁵ See Jeffery Pool, “Zarqawi’s Pledge of Allegiance to Al-Qaeda”, *Terrorism Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, Vol. 2, No. 24, 16 December 2004, pp. 4–6.

¹⁶ See the *New York Times*, 9 June 2006.

sons of France” and urged the group to become “a bone in the throat of the American and French crusaders”.¹⁷ French intelligence officials anticipate the group to stage attacks on French targets in North Africa and probably in France itself sooner or later.

Threats to attack France are not new for the GSPC. In February 2005, for example, press reports said the French domestic intelligence agency estimated that there are about 5,000 sympathisers and militants in France as part of the GSPC, grouped around 500 hard-core individuals.¹⁸ Spanish officials have also expressed concern recently; the intelligence chief of the Civil Guard noted, “there is significant activity in the Maghreb which is most worrying for us”.¹⁹

Zawahiri’s warning should be taken very seriously. There have been reports of planned Algerian attacks in the past on American and Israeli targets in France and Belgium, as well as on targets such as NATO or EU installations elsewhere in Europe.²⁰ The interior minister of the German state of Baden-Württemberg summed it up well, noting “the danger is getting more specific, the calm is deceptive”. Finally, one should recall that the first-ever plot to hijack an airliner and crash it into targets on the ground was an Algerian plot in 1994 to crash an Air France jet into the Eiffel Tower – a plot the 9/11 Commission rightly surmised may have been a role model for 11 September.

The ultimate franchise is Palestine

The franchise that bin Laden and Zawahiri would most like to attract and create would be in Palestine. In particular, it is likely they would welcome an alliance with the Hamas movement. Hamas has more credibility as a Sunni jihadist movement than any other organisation with its dozens of martyrdom attacks on Israel and its record of resistance to Israel. Thus, it is interesting to review the record of al-Qaeda’s relationship with Hamas for insights into al-Qaeda’s strategy and vulnerability.

Hamas’s founder and spiritual leader, Sheikh Yassin, said positive things about al-Qaeda during his lifetime. For example, after his release from prison in 1997 following a botched Mossad assassination attempt in Amman, Yassin travelled throughout the region in triumph and was asked about al-Qaeda. His response was “we support and sympathise with any movement which defends the rights of its people to enjoy self governance and independence but we are not prepared to seek an alliance with those movements”.²¹

There is also evidence of operational links between the two groups. Hamas operatives assisted an al-Qaeda cell in the Sinai in 2004 and 2005 to carry out attacks on Israeli and Western targets in the Sharm el-Sheikh and Taba holiday resorts. The Egyptian intelligence service uncovered these connections and was extremely angry with Hamas about this terrorism in Egypt’s booming tourism centres.²² The extent of these connections is very unclear but some contact is certain, particularly between the military wing of Hamas and al-Qaeda.

Nonetheless, Hamas has always jealously guarded its independence from outsiders as Yassin indicated in his victory tour. It knows all too well the sorry history of Palestinian movements that align themselves with Arab patrons and become pawns in the inter-Arab political warfare of the Middle

¹⁷ See *Le Monde*, 18 September 2006. The full interview was posted by Al-Sahab Media Productions on 11 September 2006.

¹⁸ See Kathryn Haahr, “GSPC Joins al-Qaeda and France becomes Top Enemy”, *Terrorism Focus*, Jamestown Foundation, Vol. 3, Issue 27, 26 September 2006.

¹⁹ See *El Tiempo*, 24 April 2007.

²⁰ See *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, 21 April 2007.

²¹ See Zaki Chehab, *Inside Hamas, the Untold Story of the Militant Islamic Movement*, New York: Nation Books, 2007, p. 108.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 173–97.

East. Hamas has only developed close relations with Syria and Iran in recent years, in reaction to the need for a source of military assistance and increased economic aid. In public, most Hamas officials have been careful to distance the organisation from the violence of al-Qaeda, especially when its targets are outside of Iraq or Afghanistan, and it has joined the electoral process in Palestine with great success.

For its part, al-Qaeda has been increasingly critical of Hamas's participation in the electoral process and its success in winning a majority in the last Palestinian parliamentary elections. Bin Laden and Zawahiri have warned Hamas against being seduced by the attraction of political power and government jobs into abandoning or scaling back the jihad against Israel.

Last March, Zawahiri was particularly harsh in condemning Hamas's agreement to form a national unity government with Fatah, especially as the deal was brokered by Saudi King Abdullah in Mecca. Zawahiri, claiming to speak in sorrow and not anger, said Hamas had "fallen into the swamp of surrender" and the leadership had "sold out" to King Abdullah. He concluded,

I am sorry to have to offer the Islamic nation my condolences for the [virtual demise] of the Hamas leadership as it has fallen in the quagmire of surrender. The leadership of Hamas has committed an aggression against the rights of the Islamic nation by accepting what it called respecting international agreements [a code word for the Oslo process].²³

"Nobody, be he Palestinian or not," Zawahiri said, "has the right to relinquish a grain of Palestinian soil."²⁴ Zawahiri was particularly upset that Hamas had negotiated with Fatah security chieftain Muhammad Dahlan, who al-Qaeda regards as a spy for Israel and America. In May, Zawahiri repeated these charges against Hamas in another interview, with maps of Palestine shown on the video demonstrating the rise of Israeli control over the country from 1948 to today. According to Palestinian journalists, al-Qaeda is now seeking to set up its own miniature franchise in Gaza and may have been behind the kidnapping of a BBC journalist there. The kidnappers had openly proclaimed their support for bin Laden and Zawahiri and the Islamic State of Iraq.

Hamas's response is to deny any moderation in its commitment to the Palestinian cause. In a formal statement, Hamas said, "we are a movement of Jihad and of resistance... We in the Hamas movement remain loyal to our positions and dream of dying as martyrs. We assure Dr al-Zawahiri and all those who remain unwavering in their attachment to Palestine that today's Hamas is the same Hamas you have known since its founding."²⁵

Since this exchange, Hamas has abandoned the Mecca process as al-Qaeda urged it to and broken with Fatah. In a well-planned and executed three-day war in June 2007, Hamas evicted Fatah from Gaza, creating in effect a three-state solution (at least temporarily) to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Outnumbered by Fatah, Hamas fighters used mortars and improvised explosive devices to demoralise their opponents, who had already been abandoned by their leaders including Dahlan, who had fled to the West Bank. How long this solution will last is unclear.

Al-Qaeda responded to the change in Gaza with cautious approval. Zawahiri issued a new statement urging all Muslims to rally behind the Hamas takeover in Gaza and send men and money to help defend it. He reminded Hamas that it had made serious mistakes in the past and urged it not to repeat them by accepting offers to form another national unity government with Fatah.

Al-Qaeda's attack on Hamas before the coup in June reveals important information about what the al-Qaeda leadership really worries about regarding the weakness and vulnerability of its movement. The

²³ See Al Jazeera, 11 March 2007; the entire text of Zawahiri's message is available from the Open Source Center, "Al Zawahiri Censures Hamas, Discusses Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan, Other Issues", 12 March 2007.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ See YNETnews.com, 14 May 2007.

Palestinian cause is the centrepiece of al-Qaeda's narrative of Western Crusader aggression against the *umma*. The defeat of the Ottoman Empire in 1918 and the creation of the British mandate in Palestine set in train the events that would lead to the creation of Israel after the Second World War. For Zawahiri this is the West's most evil act because the "Zionist entity is a foothold for the Crusader invasion of the Islamic world. The Zionist entity is the vanguard of the US campaign to dominate the Islamic Levant. It is a part of an enormous campaign against the Islamic world in which the West, under the leadership of America, has allied with global Zionism."²⁶

As Zawahiri argues, "after the fall of the Ottoman Caliphate a wave of psychological defeatism and ideological collapse spread" throughout the Islamic world.²⁷ This defeatism made possible the victory of the Zionist movement in the 1948 war that is considered by Palestinians to be the great disaster of their history, the *naqba* or catastrophe. For Zawahiri the issue is profoundly personal as well, since he began his career in terror as a junior participant in the plot to assassinate Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981 for making peace with Israel.

Understanding al-Qaeda's strategy is the first key to defeating it. The West needs a 'Grand Strategy for the Greater Middle East' that can win the war of ideas away from al-Qaeda's vision of the 'Caliphate of the Greater Middle East'. Fortunately, most Muslims share that goal with us. With new leadership in the West, a more sophisticated strategy has a very good chance of winning the war with al-Qaeda.

A good place to start would be to focus with great energy on the Arab-Israeli peace process. The proposals former President Bill Clinton and his team put on the table in December 2000 can still serve as the basis for an agreement. The next American president should carefully consider the recommendation of the Iraq Study Group chaired by former Secretary of State James Baker, which suggested convening an international conference to resolve all aspects of the Arab-Israeli crisis, perhaps along the model of the Dayton peace summit that ended the Bosnian war.

The West also needs to redouble its efforts in South Asia and in Afghanistan. The stakes in Afghanistan are high. With the growing disillusionment in America and elsewhere with the Iraq war, there is a real risk that Afghanistan will all too easily be branded as just another failed adventure. Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden are doubtless counting on that and thus encouraging the Iraqi resistance. But whatever we do in Iraq, we cannot afford to fail again in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is where al-Qaeda planned and prepared for 9/11, and its leadership is still in the area. Furthermore, Afghanistan is NATO's first significant out-of-Europe operation, and its first-ever land war. Failure would probably consign the alliance to irrelevance.

²⁶ See Ayman al-Zawahiri, "The Emancipation of Mankind and Nations under the Banner of the Koran", an audiotape broadcast by Al-Sahab Media Productions on 30 January 2005 on the website forum www.almjlah.net/vb; also available from the Open Source Center.

²⁷ See the interview with Ayman al-Zawahiri on 11 September 2006 to mark the 5th anniversary of 9/11, Al-Sahab Media Productions.

About the European Security Forum

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The Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) and the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) joined forces late in the year 2000, to launch a new forum on European security policy in Brussels. The objective of this *European Security Forum* is to bring together senior officials and experts from EU and Euro-Atlantic Partnership countries, including the United States and Russia, to discuss security issues of strategic importance to Europe. The Forum is jointly directed by CEPS and the IISS and is hosted by CEPS in Brussels.

The Forum brings together a select group of personalities from the Brussels institutions (EU, NATO and diplomatic missions), national governments, parliaments, business, media and independent experts. The informal and confidential character of the Forum enables participants to exchange ideas freely.

The aim of the initiative is to think ahead about the strategic security agenda for Europe, treating both its European and transatlantic implications. The topics to be addressed are selected from an open list that includes crisis management, defence capabilities, security concepts, defence industries and institutional developments (including enlargement) of the EU and NATO.

The Forum has about 100 members, who are invited to all meetings and receive current information on the activities of the Forum. This group meets every other month in a closed session to discuss a pre-arranged topic under Chatham House rules. The Forum meetings are presided over by François Heisbourg, Chairman of the Foundation for Strategic Research, Paris. As a general rule, three short issue papers are commissioned from independent experts for each session presenting EU, US and Russian viewpoints on the topic.

The Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) is an independent policy research institute founded in Brussels in 1983, with the aim of producing sound policy research leading to constructive solutions to the challenges facing Europe.

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