

## The Middle East into the 21st Century

GCSS Staff Report

As we approach the beginning of the 21st Century, the Middle East remains one of the most fought over and divided regions of the world. It is all too easy to look to the future of the region with pessimism rather than optimism with the major problems still unresolved despite decades of seemingly endless conflict. It is in this context that *The Middle East into the 21st century: The Japan Lectures and other studies on the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Gulf crisis and political Islam* by Chibli Mallat has been published. In the Middle East the Arab-Israeli and Gulf conflicts should not be thought of separately, and thus the difficult path to a comprehensive and lasting peace requires a fresh approach at the dawn of a new century, one that encapsulates a truly consistent approach to conflict resolution. This is true of the region as a whole, especially in countries with a heavy legacy of ethnic strife and political instability. The need for change, most pressing in the case of Iraq since the end of the second Gulf war, calls for a long-term strategy and a sophisticated programme based on the rule of law as a way out of the existing strategic deadlock. Similarly, a better understanding of the causes of instability following the Islamic revolution in Iran will make it possible to identify the fault lines in regional security, both existent and potential, and to remedy them.

The elements of Mallat's book which are of the greatest potential interest to readers concerned with the Gulf are those dealing with the great destabilisers of the region, Iran and Iraq. Regarding Iraq, Mallat discounts the instrument of a coup from within the state structure as a policy element which should be relied upon to bring about a positive change of government in Baghdad due to the utterly unpredictable nature of such events. In assessing the chances for the removal of Saddam and his legacy, one is thus required to assess the options open to the organised forces of the Iraqi opposition, which, it can be argued, is best defined as the Salaheddin-based Iraqi National Congress. This stems from the assertion that any serious institutional change in Iraq can only stem from within Iraq itself, and must be Iraqi-based, with Baghdad as its objective. Because of its Kurdish base, the INC is the only group which can purport to act for the motley collection known as "the Iraqi opposition", as it includes a serious Kurdish component and has a foothold inside Iraq.

If we accept this, what then does Mallat prescribe? He sees the possible way forward for the INC as lying between two archetypal courses of action - the 'civil war' model and the 'collapse' model. Following the first option and conducting a civil war would seem to be a distinct possibility for the INC - they possess territory; the nucleus of an army exists; their breakdown with the Iraqi government is politically total and the avowed advocacy of the replacement of the regime is a common platform for the INC and the Iraqi opposition in general. The other component may also be there: Mallat details that US support for the INC as the only option available to them has been, ever since the first meeting of US Secretary of State James Baker with the INC delegation in the

summer of 1992, rich with the potential of military implications. What would be required for Iraqi civil war to become a reality would be considerable financial and military support for the INC. Military support from the US would probably lead directly to a situation comparable with that of the rebel Contras in Nicaragua in the 1980's - tension would be increased on the fragile borders separating the safe haven area in the north from the Saddam-held area, provoking incursions and counter-incursions, and the strength of rebel-held (and expanded) territory would quite possibly be underwritten by US and allied air cover. Once the INC was empowered with determined US military support, all regional actors would wait for the only possible outcome: a piecemeal defeat of the regime in the form of a rolling back of its territory after a series of pitched battles.

All of the above is plausible, and as such forms one of the most useful sections of the book to interested observers of today's middle eastern strategic balance. However, three reservations need to be held in mind when countenancing Mallat's assertions in this area: The recent incursion by Saddam's forces into the northern Kurdish-held 'safe haven' has been judged by many to have been a success for Baghdad due to the inadequacy of the western response in defence of the regime to which Mallat makes reference - thus the potential for the INC to conduct civil war against Saddam may in hindsight be seen to have become seriously impaired. Second, Mallat is himself active in the anti-Saddam movement, and wishful thinking can often cloud the judgement of the harshest self-critic. Thirdly, as Mallat himself points out, the pursuit of civil war would be likely lead to horrific casualties in Iraq, and the future of the nation would demand that a less blood-letting alternative be posited.

This leads us on to the 'collapse' model. Whilst accepting that the conditions of collapse are difficult to assess and, certainly, to predict, Mallat argues that the combination of diplomatic isolation with an active model of contrast for the Iraqi people (the INC) in a northern safe haven, will lead in time to a structural disaffection in Saddam-held Iraq. When and if this leads to a demonstrable sign of collapse - ie the fall of a city - then the all-important factor determining the outcome for Iraq will be the efficiency and strength of the INC's response. At the present stage of the game it is impossible to predict how the Iraqi opposition will ultimately be affected by the current round of Kurdish infighting. However, it remains the case that the persistent absence of a fully viable alternative to Saddam Hussein means that the whole of Iraq's future remains dangerously uncertain. If we accept Mallat's arguments then it is imperative that the INC survives its present problems and re-emerges as a credible and more representative opposition group. Meanwhile, the suffering of the Iraqi people continues.

On Iran, Mallat has much to say concerning the troubling possibility of the proposed export of the 'Islamic revolution' which has done much to worry the nations adjacent to the Islamic Republic. In attempting to analyse the myths and

realities of the "export of the Islamic revolution" Mallat concentrates much of his analysis on projections of Iranian activity into its Sunni middle eastern neighbours, choosing also to focus in some depth on the US policy of "dual containment", which has set the US and Tehran on a collision course many times since its initial declaration in Washington in May 1993. He quotes President Rafsanjani several times as categorically denying both any Iranian support for terrorism and that Tehran had sought to encourage the 'export of the revolution'. He follows on from this by making two commonsense points concerning the activities of the Iranian state. First, that a country which enjoys such bad relations with so many powerful states is bound to welcome contact with groups opposed to its enemies, even if this is undertaken merely in the quest for self-defence. Second, that the annual week-long commemorations of Ayatollah Khomeini's death provide perfect cover for foreign sympathisers of the Islamic Revolution to attend Tehran, and, in addition it is widely known that training camps for guerrillas exist in Iran. Furthermore, it must be remembered that there exists in Iran a rather hazy pool of private sector financing, for example the Foundation of the Oppressed, that would always be potentially available to support covert activities with which the authorities in Tehran may not wish to be associated.

It is thus unsurprising that those nations which have had trouble caused by Islamic groups are the ones most worried by Iran. Bahrain is a good contemporary example of this phenomenon. The Bahraini government blamed the riots on foreign-backed extremist groups, and decided to act with the Gulf Co-operation Council ministers of interior in order to stop "foreign interference". Amidst rioting in late 1994, accusations against Iran were inevitable. As was to be expected, the Iranians denied involvement in Bahrain's affairs.

It is a truism to say that Saudi-Iranian relations have been poor, and sometimes confrontational, in the past two decades. Areas of tension have included the conduct of Iranian pilgrims on Hajj, and discontent over the price of oil. However, the main concern of the Saudi government has been the role that Iran could, at least potentially, play in causing domestic disturbances. As for the rest of the GCC states, Mallat characterises Iranian relations with them as being healthy, with the obvious exception of the UAE due to the Tunb controversy. The picture that emerges from Mallat's Iranian overview is complex, but one can nevertheless distinguish from his analysis that on the political level, Iranian influence has so far been checked across the Arab Sunni Middle East as Tehran has failed to project a clear model of governance beyond a vague reference to Islam and Islamic law. *Velayat-e faqih*, (the Tehran-style rule of the jurist), has proved to have little or no appeal for Sunnis, and a feeble attraction in mixed countries where there is a sizeable non-Shi'i section of the population. Additionally, the pervasive influence of the religious network based in Qom cannot be said to be intrinsically enhanced from the time of the Shah.

It can be argued that the failure of the Arab rejectionism of Israel, based on the purity of the Arab world and the presence of Israel as an unnatural evil in its heart, has given way to the concept of an 'Islamist' rejectionism, which has been culti-

vated alongside the Islamic revolution in Iran. As a consequence, violence with an 'Islamic' twist, (ie the advocacy of deadly acts against Israel) has now replaced the former secular brands of 'liberation', be they Palestinian, Arab, or internationalist-socialist. However, this development has led to an understandable but nevertheless dangerous analytical depiction of developments in the late twentieth century in terms of a clash of world civilisations. This vision operates in practice as the perfect fuel for violence, which needs this kind of simplistic vision in order to grow and be vindicated. In accepting this, Mallat also acknowledges that underlying much of the fuel for the current revival in Islamic fundamentalism are simple economic pressures, concluding: "as long as more than half the youth in the Middle East has shrinking economic horizons, there will be no toning down of fundamentalisms. At the same time, as economic competition increases worldwide, there will be no production of wealth in a region which is primarily preoccupied with war and security."

A valid point indeed, and clearly made, but sadly the same clarity cannot be said to be found throughout *The Middle East into the 21st century*. Whilst Mallat is clearly capable of a lucid and disciplined writing style, too often he strays off into impenetrable thickets of academic minutiae, the syntax and vocabulary of which seems almost intended to intimidate and confuse the non-specialist. Whilst this is by no means the case for anything approaching the majority of this book, it is true often enough to reduce the user-friendly nature of what could otherwise be a useful addition to the subject for the generalist reader. Whilst in many ways this is an unfair criticism to level at Mallat as one can only assume that he had an academic readership in mind when he put it together, (indeed, the fact that the book started life as a series of lectures to civil servants in the Japanese Foreign Ministry provides ample scope for such a defence), it remains the case that Mallat would seem to have had the opportunity to produce a book which could have been of more value to a non-academic audience, and chose not to do so.

However, this is not a fatal flaw in his book, which nevertheless has much with which to reward the reader who perseveres with it. Mallat is intellectually rigorous in the truest sense of the word, in that his arguments and assertions are presented in a measured and responsible manner which almost always allows one to glean something of value from preliminary arguments, even when one disagrees with his final conclusion. The sections of the book which deal with Iraq are the most vibrant, reflecting perhaps the author's close involvement in the struggle for the political future of that beleaguered nation. Throughout, one is bombarded with a well stocked armoury of facts, figures and anecdotal evidence, and the author's obvious care for the Middle East results in a more sympathetic treatment of its problems and peoples than can often be the case with works produced by western academics looking in on the region from afar. Perhaps the highest recommendation one can bestow upon Mallat is that *The Middle East into the 21st century* is consistently permeated with a sense of the ties of commonality which bind all Muslims in the middle east together, when so often all that many analysts focus on are the sources of discord that drive them apart.