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# The Middle East in 1999: Changing Guard

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The world had to wait for the Middle East in 1999: key countries underwent domestic transitions, and interested outside parties could only cross their fingers. Israel and Turkey, the region's two democracies, both experienced major shifts as a result of general elections. In Jordan, Bahrain and Morocco, death claimed monarchs who had ruled for almost forty years, and they were succeeded by their eldest sons in an orderly manner. The US, responsible for keeping order in the region, seemed pleased that the Middle East deck had produced a decent hand of new cards.

The rest of the Middle East also awaited the outcome of these transitions. The leaders of Egypt, Syria, and the Palestinian Authority (PA) were careful to tiptoe during the Israeli elections, lest they tilt the contest in the wrong direction. Royal funerals turned into opportunities for high-level consultations. But lesser transitions also took place. Everywhere, the Islamists were in retreat; arrests and crackdowns were the order of the day, and seemed to work. In Iran and Sudan, self-proclaimed Islamic states, the guiding dogmas came under criticism. The curtain came down on the longest-running sanctions show: the US let the Lockerbie affair move to "closure," and Libya's leader off the hook. But Iraq was not forgiven: US bombs fell somewhere on Iraq nearly everyday. Yet Iraq's leader, Houdini-like, managed to evade one sanction after another. Iraq was an inevitable future crisis that kept ticking in 1999.

All in all, it was a year that demanded patience — which *The Devil's Dictionary* defines as "a minor form of despair, disguised as a virtue."

## ISRAELI TRANSITION

The prospects of the region continued to hinge on the Arab-Israeli peace process, and the prospects of the peace process hinged on Israeli elections. The first half of 1999 was consumed by Israeli electioneering and coalition-building; the second half, by efforts to relaunch the peace process.

### IN WITH THE NEW

On 4 January, Israel's parliament scheduled general elections for 17 May — this, following the breakdown of the coalition led since 1996 by Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu.

In one corner stood Netanyahu, swept to the premiership three years earlier on a wave of revulsion against continued Palestinian terrorism. Netanyahu applied the brakes to the peace process, and held the Palestinians strictly to their security commitments. But his foot-dragging on Israel's own commitments, especially the Wye River memorandum of October 1998, damaged Israel's international stature and soured relations with the

US (see *MECS* 1998, pp. 67–68). American criticism worried the broad center of the Israeli electorate. Yet the far right, usually a more reliable constituency, refused to forgive Netanyahu for reaching the Wye agreement in the first place.

Netanyahu limped into the election campaign, and as his situation became desperate, he increasingly resorted to divisive themes, presenting himself as champion of the downtrodden against the "élites," and questioning the Jewish credentials of his opponents.

In the other corner stood Ehud Barak, former chief of the general staff and a protégé of the late Yitzhak Rabin. Barak had succeeded Shimon Peres as leader of the Labor Party in June 1997. As the Likud-led government began to unravel, his strong points came into play in the election campaign. He persuaded David Levy, whose Gesher faction had been part of the Likud, to amalgamate with Labor in "One Israel." He played up his military credentials — "Israel's most decorated soldier" — especially to Russian voters. He targeted constituencies traditionally considered beyond Labor's reach, especially Sephardi and religious Jews. He emphasized unity and reconciliation — themes that resonated after years of deep political and social polarization.

Other factors also came into play. One was the surge of Shas, the orthodox, ethnically Sephardi party led by the charismatic Arye Der'i. On 17 March, Der'i's six-year bribery and corruption trial ended in his conviction. The verdict actually galvanized Shas supporters, who saw it as one more example of ethnic persecution, and this theme came to dominate party electioneering. Leaders of other parties were pressed to boycott Shas, so long as a convicted felon led it. Barak announced he would not deal with Der'i; Netanyahu said he would, and earned endorsement by Shas.

But the Shas surge created another complication: a surge among Russian immigrants of anti-Shas sentiment. On a social level, the resentments of Russian immigrants against Sephardi political clout had been brewing for some time. It now took the form of a campaign against Shas' control of the interior ministry, where Shas rabbis and bureaucrats had questioned the Jewish bona fides of many Russians. Natan Sharansky, head of the immigrant party Yisrael B'Aliyah, based an effective electoral campaign almost exclusively on this theme. Netanyahu's too-close embrace of Shas turned into a liability with Russian voters.

Netanyahu and Barak differed over economic and social policies, and the relationship of religion and state. They also differed over the peace process. "I am convinced that a Palestinian state will endanger Israel and cause war," Netanyahu announced.[1] The most he could accept was a small, quasi-sovereign Palestinian entity, in non-contiguous areas covering perhaps half of the West Bank. All Jewish settlements would remain under Israeli control. Barak accepted the inevitability of a larger, more contiguous Palestinian state, and insisted it be separated from Israel by a clear international border. Only settlement blocs contiguous with Israel would be maintained.[2]

Their differences extended to the Syrian-Lebanese track. Netanyahu rejected the Syrian precondition that peace negotiations be resumed where they ended in February 1996, under the short-lived Peres government. He believed that Shimon Peres, and Rabin before him, had gone too far in making implicit territorial concessions to Syria. Barak was willing to resume talks where (he believed) they had ended, but like Rabin, he insisted on submitting any Syrian agreement to a general referendum. Netanyahu opposed a unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon; Barak also preferred a negotiated withdrawal, but promised Israel would exit Lebanon by July 2000. (By 1999, 55% of Israelis favored unilateral withdrawal, up from 44% in 1998 and 41% in 1997.)

In 1996 the election campaign was deeply influenced by Hamas bombings in Israeli cities. A repeat of this might have worked in favor of the Israeli right, and this time PA head Yasir 'Arafat kept a tight lid on Hamas. He also put Palestinian demands on hold. Earlier he had announced his intention to make a unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) on 4 May, the expiration date of the five-year interim period stipulated in the Oslo accords. In the spring, he visited fifty-six countries in search of support for statehood. Leaders everywhere urged him to delay a declaration, and on 29 April, the PLO Central Council postponed all action on statehood.

On 17 May, voters gave Barak a resounding victory, 56% to 44%. Middle-class centrists, unwilling to pay the cost of isolation involved in maintaining "Greater Israel," moved en masse to Barak, and Russian immigrants punished Netanyahu for his indulgence of Shas. But Netanyahu lost support in every ethnic and religious constituency. Excluding the Israeli Arab vote, Barak still enjoyed a comfortable margin of 4% of the Jewish vote.

Paradoxically, however, the 120-seat Knesset emerged more fragmented than ever, as sectorial parties took seats away from the two major parties. One Israel finished with 27 seats, down from 34; the Likud won 19 seats, down from 32. The primary beneficiaries were Shas, which went from 10 to 17 seats, and its antithesis, the new, militantly secularist Shinui, which went from no seats to six. Overall, the balance in the Knesset between left and right did not shift. Barak enjoyed the mandate of a clear victory, and over seven weeks he managed to put together a seven-party, 75-member, coalition. Nevertheless, coalition crises dogged the new government almost from day one.

## RUMORS OF PEACE

"Just think how nice it will be to travel from Haifa to Turkey via Syria," gushed the loquacious Israeli president, Ezer Weizmann, shortly after Barak formed his government.[3] Weizmann reflected a general optimism that prevailed in some sectors of Israel, the Arab world, and the US following the Israeli elections. Barak's strategy, as it unfolded during the rest of 1999, involved repair work on Israeli relations with the US, efforts to renew talks with Syria, and assurances to the Palestinians that they were next in line. Barak accomplished the first task almost effortlessly, during a July visit to Washington. The others proved more difficult.

That the Syrian track came first with Barak was axiomatic. "The Palestinians pose no military threat to Israel," he noted. But "the Syrians have 700 warplanes, 4,000 tanks, 2,500 artillery pieces and surface-to-surface missiles that are neatly organized and can cover the whole country with nerve gas."[4] After elections, the line of would-be mediators between Israel and Syria grew long. The shuttle travelers between the two countries included Asad biographer Patrick Seale, former US diplomat Edward Djerejian, and former US secretary of state James Baker III. "Never have the prospects for peace between Syria and Israel seemed better," announced Seale.[5] Barak and Syria's President Hafiz al-Asad exchanged compliments: Asad, said Barak, "built a strong, independent and self-confident Syria." Barak, said Asad, was "strong and honest."[6]

But Syria continued to insist that Israel pledge a full withdrawal from the Golan Heights to the line of 4 June 1967 — and made this pledge a precondition of resumed talks. That line would give Syria the status of a riparian state on the Sea of Galilee. Syria wanted not just the Golan, but access to the lake. Barak held that the basis of negotiations had to be the Palestine-Syria border of the mandate period — a line that kept the lake shores wholly within Israel.

US diplomacy entered the breach, and in early December, secretary of state Madeleine Albright went on rounds to both countries to finesse a compromise. Barak apparently provided Asad with enough to go on — a willingness to resume talks "from the point where they left off" — and Syria's leader dispatched foreign minister Faruq al-Shar' to reopen negotiations with Barak in Washington on 15–16 December. In-depth talks were scheduled to resume in January 2000. It became clear in 1999 that both Israel and Syria desired some sort of agreement, although not with identical measures of urgency or flexibility.

On the Palestinian track, Barak worked to buy time. It was a law of nature that the Israeli body politic could only handle so much concession-wrenching diplomacy. If the Syrian track was going to move fast, the Palestinian one would have to move slowly. With this in mind, Barak proposed skipping the implementation of the last stage of the Wye withdrawal. That withdrawal — from 3% of the West Bank — would leave some Jewish settlements isolated, and create the potential for violent confrontation. Barak instead proposed to move straight to final status talks. 'Arafat, however, insisted on "full and immediate implementation of Wye." On 4 September, Barak and 'Arafat hammered out the difference in an accord signed at Sharm al-Shaykh in Egypt, which became known as "Wye II."

In the negotiation, 'Arafat agreed to put off the last stage of the Wye redeployment until 20 January 2000 in return for a new timetable for final status negotiations. Both sides would negotiate a "framework agreement for permanent status" (FAPS) by 15 February 2000, and a "comprehensive agreement on permanent status" (CAPS) by 15 September 2000. Negotiations toward the FAPS commenced on 8 November, effectively opening up the questions of Jerusalem, refugees, borders, sovereignty, settlements, and water. The talks were suspended on 6 December, amid acrimonious exchanges — but in realistic anticipation of Jerusalem's reengagement with Damascus. In the meantime, Barak announced he would not approve new settlement projects.

As the year closed, the general-cum-peacemaker was ready to move, map in hand. As he would soon discover, diplomacy is no more predictable than war.

## TURKEY QUAKES

By mid-1998, Turkish politics had begun to wobble to and fro, in anticipation of scheduled general elections. On 11 January, 73-year-old Bülent Ecevit became prime minister, forming the fourth government since the 1995 elections. Ecevit had been prime minister three times in the 1970s; he hardly represented a changing of the guard. His only mandate was to steer Turkey safely to elections on 18 April.

But Turkey surprised itself and the world by capturing Abdallah Öcalan, leader of the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (Parti Kerkeren Kurdistan; PKK), on 15 February. Öcalan had led a dwindling insurgency against the Turkish government; by late 1998 he was a hunted man, who unsuccessfully sought asylum in a string of countries. Turkish special forces abducted him in Nairobi, Kenya with the help of US intelligence, and bundled him back to Turkey for trial.

The capture/abduction provided a major boost to Turkish morale, which was reflected in a nationalist surge in the April elections for the 550-seat Grand National Assembly. Ecevit's own Democratic Left Party (Demokratisi Sol Partisi; DSP) won a plurality of the popular vote, and doubled its parliamentary seats (from 76 to 136) to become the

largest party in the chamber. The party had not won an election since 1977. Even more surprising was the strong showing by the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Action Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi; MHP), which had last crossed the 10% threshold on its own in 1983. Under a new and moderate leader, Devlet Bahçeli, MHP more than doubled its electoral support, to emerge as the second-largest party, with 129 seats. The traditional centrist parties — Mesut Yılmaz's Motherland (Anavatan Partisi; ANAP) and Tansu Çiller's True Path (Doğru Yol Partisi; DYP) — saw their parliamentary size cut by a third. (ANAP dropped from 132 to 86 seats; DYP, from 135 to 85.) The Islamist Virtue Party, divided against itself and subjected to constant pressure by the judiciary, dropped from 159 seats to 111 (but did well in municipal elections).[7]

The unexpected results were contradictory. Turkish democracy obviously remained vibrant, but the electorate continued to split into ever-smaller fragments and gravitate away from the political center. On 28 May, Ecevit formed a three-party government composed of the DSP, MHP, and ANAP. It proved to be a stable coalition.

But Turkey itself stood on unstable ground. Early on the morning of 17 August, an earthquake of 7.4 magnitude, one of the most powerful anywhere in this century, rocked the industrial heartland of northwestern Turkey. The official death toll reached 17,000 persons; 85,000 buildings were destroyed. The earthquake revealed the social fault lines that cut across Turkey. Corner-cutting contractors had put up shoddy buildings, which had never been properly inspected. These structures collapsed like cards. Even though the northwest of Turkey sits on a quake-prone fault, there were no emergency disaster plans. Government rescue efforts were tardy and inadequate. The Turkish state, which had looked so efficient in the abduction of Öcalan, appeared inept in the face of nature.

As for Öcalan, he was found guilty of treason and sentenced to death on 29 June, despite having thrown himself at the mercy of the court. On 2 August he issued a call from prison to the PKK to withdraw from Turkey and cease operations. To all intents and purposes, the Kurdish insurgency in Turkey was moribund. A Turkish appeals court upheld Öcalan's death sentence on 25 November. But the diplomatic and political cost of executing Öcalan seemed too high to many Turks, and he ended up in a kind of legal limbo — just as well, given Turkey's aspirations for inclusion in the European Union (EU).

On 10 December an EU summit finally declared that Turkey was "a candidate state destined to join the union on the basis of the same criteria as applied to the other candidate states."[8] The "Copenhagen criteria" were political and economic, not cultural and religious, so the decision put Turkey squarely in the European basket. Three shifts produced the change: US diplomacy, the 1998 formation of a German government favorable to Turkish candidacy, and the trend toward Turkish-Greek reconciliation. No longer could Turkey be excluded from Europe because of its Muslim identity. But there were plenty of other grounds for exclusion, and Turkey's road to EU membership promised to be a long one.

## WHO RULES IRAN?

Iran remained locked in domestic struggle, which played itself out in elections, police arrests, newspaper editorials, and court rulings. It was quite conceivable that this process would produce a different Iran, the product of internal dynamics rather than external pressure. Yet it was hard to say who had the upper hand in Iran at any given moment.

Experience showed that whenever public opinion was consulted, reform and reformists

prevailed by a wide margin. On 27 February Iran held first-ever municipal elections; across the board, most notably in Tehran, results favored reformist supporters of Iranian President Muhammad Khatami.

But experience also demonstrated that every reformist victory had an equal and opposite reaction. So the judiciary continued to prosecute leading reformists, including the maverick cleric Mohsen Kadivar and former interior minister and newspaper publisher 'Abdallah Nuri. (Both were convicted in 1999 and sent to Evin Prison.) The judiciary also arrested thirteen Iranian Jews on what many in the West believed were bogus charges of espionage for Israel, a move that demonstrated the limits of Khatami's authority. (The arrests were made in February, but Iran only confirmed them in June.) And opponents of reform in the parliament passed a draconian press law, which enjoyed the support of Iran's constitutional "leader," Ayatollah 'Ali Khamene'i.

On 7 July a court ordered the closing of the oldest reformist newspaper, *Salam*. Students protested at Tehran University; vigilantes and riot police stormed student dormitories, resulting in several deaths and several hundred injuries; and over the next week, violent clashes ensued between students and police in the capital and other cities. The protestors' slogans expressed a deep-seated desire for democracy and secularism, outside any Islamic framework. 1,400 persons were arrested. The regime organized a giant counter-demonstration, the courts prosecuted student leaders, and the closure of reformist newspapers recommenced with doubled vigor.

Still, the US, Europe, and the rest of the Middle East pinned great hopes on the cause of reform in Iran. In March, Khatami visited Italy and France, where he was greeted as a champion of change. In August, even the US made secret overtures to Iran's president. (They were rebuffed.)[9] Whether Khatami justified Western expectations remained an open question in 1999. But certainly the Khatami phenomenon demonstrated that Iran had real politics, even though they defied definition.

## THE ARAB WAY

Power in the Arab world did not pass from party to party or person to person in elections. Hereditary designation and no-choice referenda were the rule, as 1999 amply demonstrated.

### SMOOTH SUCCESSIONS

Monarchies proved their resilience, as aging monarchs passed on, and eldest sons quickly assumed their place.

The only succession twist involved Jordan, ruled by King Husayn since 1952. Since 1965, it had been assumed that Husayn's younger brother, Crown Prince Hasan, would ascend to the throne on Husayn's demise. In 1998 the cancer-striken Husayn was hospitalized in the US, and he spent six months undergoing treatment. During that long absence — his longest outside the kingdom since his student days at Sandhurst — Husayn recalculated the succession equation. His own sons were now mature enough to take the reigns; why cloud their prospects? Returning briefly to Jordan in January 1999, the king effectively executed a palace coup: he removed Hasan and named his own eldest son, 36-year-old 'Abdallah, as crown prince. Husayn then discredited Hasan in a pointed parting letter. After Husayn died on 7 February, 'Abdallah ascended the throne, and appointed his half-brother Hamza as crown prince, in accordance with his father's wishes.

In retrospect, Husayn's decision was not out of character, and some observers claimed to have seen it coming. More surprising was the fact that the transition came off so smoothly. "There is a real danger of a loss of cohesion in the Hashemite house," warned one Israeli analyst, "to the point of an open rift between two rival factions — the pro- and anti-Hasanites."[10] "A change in the succession line," wrote one American analyst, "could pose serious challenges to near-term stability inside the kingdom and regionally as well."[11] "Husayn has always been capable of screwing things up royally," complained another American observer, who wrote that the succession switch would play into the hands of Iraq.[12]

None of these dire scenarios came to pass, largely because King 'Abdallah II possessed the qualities expected of a monarch in Jordan. His career of military leadership guaranteed the support of the army. His marriage to a Palestinian served to generally reassure Jordan's Palestinians. And his Anglo-American education and fluent English inspired the confidence of Jordan's foreign allies. He passed his first real test on 30 August, with a crackdown on the Jordan-based branch of the Palestinian Hamas. Its most prominent leaders were arrested and then, in November, banished to Qatar. In early December, authorities arrested thirteen men accused of planning terror attacks in Jordan at the instigation of Usama Bin Ladin. 'Abdallah clearly knew what ruling was about.

On 5 March, the emir of Bahrain, Shaykh 'Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa, died after a reign of thirty-seven years. Shaykh Hamad bin 'Isa, his 49-year-old son, succeeded him. There were no surprises here: the Sandhurst-educated Hamad, who was first designated heir apparent as a teenager, had run Bahrain's military for decades.

Morocco had been ruled since 1961 by King Hasan II. His death on 23 July came unexpectedly, but within hours his eldest son acceded to the throne as King Muhammad VI. Here, too, the transition went smoothly, and Muhammad later consolidated his grip by purging his father's powerful interior minister, Driss Basri, on 9 November. Two weeks later, Muhammad allowed the return to Morocco of the exiled family of Mehdi Ben Barka, an oppositionist who had disappeared in Paris in 1965. (By most accounts, he had been abducted and murdered by the Moroccan security services.) The new king thus demonstrated his ability to raise his chosen and bring low his adversaries, just as his father had done.

There was much talk during the year about how these new rulers were better educated, more worldly, and more attuned to the needs of the young. They and their generation, it was believed, would liberalize Middle East politics. But the new monarchs made no unequivocal promises, and in their first tests, they gave every indication that they intended not just to reign but to rule. In the meantime, they basked in expectations, and exploited the crisis-free year to settle in.

## PERPETUAL PRESIDENTS

Not only did monarchy thrive in the Arab world. It also remained perhaps the only region on earth where referenda returned 90% plus majorities for sitting presidents. "Nobody loses in Arab referenda or elections," noted a leading Arab columnist. "The results and turnout figures are known in advance. Otherwise, no presidential or parliamentary polls would be held at all. The outcomes are decided first, and then the ballots are tailored accordingly."[13]

On 10 February, Syria held a referendum to endorse Hafiz al-Asad for a fifth seven-year term as president (this, after Syria's parliament unanimously approved his

nomination). Of 8.9m. ballots, only 219 were marked "disapprove." On 26 September Egyptian voters gave Husni Mubarak a fourth six-year term in office, by a majority of 93.97%. 18.6m. Egyptians cast ballots; there were no other candidates.

The situation was not very different in supposedly "contested" elections. Algeria's presidential election, scheduled for 15 April, should have been an open contest. After Liamine Zeroual indicated he would not run for reelection, the field filled with seven candidates. There were debates and rallies. But at the very last minute, six candidates withdrew, charging that the military had rigged the election in favor of its own choice, former foreign minister 'Abd al-'Aziz Bouteflika — a man who had been out of politics for twenty years. Bouteflika won 73.8% of the vote. Both France and the US expressed disappointment and concern at the way the election ended. Perhaps to remove the impression left by his election, Bouteflika submitted a vague "civil concord" to a referendum on 16 September. "Do you agree with the president's moves to restore peace and civil concord?" 98% of voters answered yes.

Yemen's first direct presidential election took place on 28 September. Although thirty-one nominees were submitted to parliament for inclusion in the ballot, only President 'Ali 'Abdallah Salih and another obscure member of his own party received sufficient votes in the chamber to enter the running. Opposition groups boycotted the elections; Salih came away with 96.3% of the vote, in what he called "a great democratic victory."[14]

On 24 October, Tunisia held presidential elections. President Zayn al-'Abidin Ben 'Ali ran against two approved "opponents." "This is the first time the president of an Arab republic has not taken his people for granted," gushed an Arab-American analyst.

> President Ben 'Ali has his own website. He's campaigning; he's not assuming that he is going to be reelected....The impact of seeing contested presidential elections will be felt beyond this small country, in the larger Arab world....Arabs as well as Westerners should pay special attention to the outcome as well as the implication of these elections.[15]

And this was the outcome: with a reported turnout of over 90% of the country's 3.5m. voters, Ben 'Ali received 99.4% of the votes. One "opponent" received 0.3%; the other, 0.2%.

The Arab world was also the only place in the world where an elected parliament could deny women the right to vote. Kuwait's strictly male electorate included only Kuwaitis of proven Kuwaiti lineage — only 15% of Kuwait's citizens, and 5% of the total population. In June, the emir of Kuwait, Shaykh Jabir al-Ahmad Al Sabah, issued a decree which would have allowed women to register to vote for the 2003 parliamentary elections, and to hold public office. US President Clinton sent the emir a congratulatory letter on his move.[16] But the decree would have to be approved by the Kuwaiti parliament — composed largely of Islamists and old-line nationalists. In November, the new parliament — reputedly more liberal than its predecessor — rejected the decree. The US called the vote a "regrettable setback" to democratic development.[17]

Close analysis of referenda and parliamentary elections brought out nuances, which experts dissected in every possible way. But the overall impression was inescapable: the Arab world had voting, but it did not have counting.

# FEWER ROGUES

Three states — Libya, Sudan, and Iraq — constituted a sinister club in the view of much of the wider world, and especially of the US. They figured on terrorism lists; they were subjected to sanctions and boycotts; they were "rogue states," beyond the pale. But 1999 witnessed the break-up of the category, as several of the untouchables shed their leper-like status, and took steps on the road to respectability.

## REGIMES ON PAROLE

Libya had been under UN sanctions first imposed in 1992, because of suspicion of involvement in the 1988 bombing of Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland (see *MECS* 1992, pp. 171–74, 633–37). Two prime suspects were Libyan operatives whom Libyan leader Mu'ammar al-Qadhdhafi refused to surrender. But Qadhdhafi had systematically chipped away at the fissures in the sanctions regime. He enticed European governments by dangling oil and gas contracts before European companies. He mobilized Egypt on his behalf, in return for Libya admitting more Egyptian workers. He persuaded Nelson Mandela to serve as mediator.

The long efforts finally yielded results. On 5 April, Libya surrendered the two suspects in the bombing to UN officials. Their trial would be held in the Netherlands under Scottish rules. But it would be limited to the activities of the suspects; the proceedings would not touch on the possible involvement in the bombing of Qadhdhafi or senior Libyan officials (although Libya agreed that if the two were convicted, it would pay compensation to the victims' families). That same day, the UN suspended all sanctions against Libya.

The US acquiesced in Libya's rehabilitation, in the hope that Qadhdhafi would turn over a new leaf. By summer, representatives of four American oil companies were in Libya, making initial overtures.[18] In December, Italian Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema became the first head of a Western government to visit Libya in eight years — this, following a $5.5bn. deal between Libya and Italian oil company ENI. Qadhdhafi had been readmitted to polite company.

Since 1989, Sudan had been ruled by a coalition of Islamist civilians and army officers. Hasan al-Turabi, Islamist eminence grise, provided the regime with ideological and religious legitimacy from within his party, the National Islamic Front. From 1996, he served as speaker of the parliament. Gen. 'Umar al-Bashir, Sudan's president, conducted the day-to-day running of the country. The record of the regime, especially in supporting radical Islamists elsewhere, had led the US to mark it as a sponsor of terrorism.

But Turabi's provocative Islamism and his personality cult finally wore down the patience of Bashir, and in 1999 their alliance came undone. On 13 December, Bashir dissolved the parliament and declared a state of emergency. "Either I sit in the president's chair in the Republican Palace or brother Turabi sits there," announced Bashir. "It is not possible to have two presidents — one, the real one, Turabi, and the other an imaginary one, Bashir."[19] Bashir had prepared the domestic ground carefully, and his move immediately won the backing of Egypt and Libya. On 21–22 December, Bashir visited Tripoli and Cairo, to demonstrate to Qadhdhafi and Mubarak that he exercised full control. The marginalization of Turabi lifted a major obstacle to Sudan's rehabilitation, although other obstacles remained.

## WAITING FOR SADDAM

The "rogue" category, therefore, was reduced to one lone denizen: Saddam Husayn's Iraq. Here the US set an unforgiving standard: Saddam would have to go. The problem: nine years after the Gulf War, the US had no clear strategy for expediting his departure.

In October 1998, President Clinton had signed the Iraq Liberation Act, providing that the US should "support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Husayn." The law allocated a meager $97m. to this purpose; the administration disbursed little of it in 1999 (and even then, only for "non-lethal" activities). This was because the US had no faith in the exiled Iraqi opposition, and did not want to encourage an armed insurrection. On 28 January, commander of UN forces in the Gulf, Gen. Anthony Zinni, told Congress that "I will be honest. I don't see an opposition group that has the viability to overthrow Saddam at this point."[20] Frank Ricciardone, the US State Department newly-appointed "special representative for transition in Iraq," believed that Saddam would "most likely" be brought down by "a military coup. It will be very sudden and without warning."[21]

While waiting for a pleasant surprise, the US kept up a constant barrage of international diplomacy and contacts with the opposition (what one wit called "Desert Talk").[22] But it also kept up daily flights over the "no-fly zones" in northern and southern Iraq, targeting a range of installations under expanded rules of engagement. In the first nine months of 1999, US and British warplanes flew 27,000 sorties over Iraq, dropping 1,650 bombs against 385 targets.

The difficulty with this policy of "talk, bomb, and wait" was twofold. First, the "suffering Iraqi people" became the focus of much debate. Just how much they were suffering, and why, were contested questions. Infant mortality had undoubtedly risen: the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported that infant mortality in the areas controlled by Baghdad (central and southern Iraq) had increased from 47 to 108 per thousand since 1989; for children under five, from 56 to 131 per thousand. The US claimed that Iraq had ample food and medicine, and that the regime's distribution policies were to blame. "The source of hunger and sickness in Iraq is not sanctions but Saddam," wrote US National Security Advisor Samuel Berger.[23] But Russia and France did not agree, and even the US felt it necessary to expand humanitarian imports to Iraq. How could this be done without strengthening Saddam Husayn? It probably couldn't.

Second, Iraq was not under any inspections regime. Perhaps Saddam's stoicism under fire and sanctions bore some relationship to a long-term plan to acquire a weapon of mass destruction. On 17 December, the UN Security Council finally passed a new resolution (No. 1284) replacing the defunct UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) with the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC). The UN was prepared to lift a wide range of sanctions in return for renewed inspections by the new body. But Iraq rejected the resolution as "another trick."[24] Saddam Husayn's Iraq remained a crisis on hold, certain to break at the least convenient moment for the US and the world.

# OIL COMEBACK

In 1998 the collapse of oil prices in the Middle East had cast a shadow over the region. Oil producers ran growing budgetary deficits, and warned of possible instability. Agreements among producers to cut production invariably broke down, and analysts wrote off oil cartels as a vestige of the past (see *MECS* 1998, pp. 158–59). In January,

the price of oil languished at $11 a barrel. Saudi Arabia, with its massive reserves and excess production capacity, was the key to pricing, and its policies had worked to drive prices down.

In March 1999, Saudi Arabia joined Iran to implement production cuts that reversed the direction of the oil market. In particular, the Saudis abandoned their production floor of 8m. b/d, a crucial decision that sent the price of oil on a steady climb. The rest of OPEC joined in a surprising display of discipline and unity, and pulled together to tighten the market. Within months, the price of oil more than doubled; in November, it spiked to $27 a barrel when Iraq announced a temporary suspension of production. On the cusp of the twenty-first century, the Middle East was returning to center stage — thanks to nothing more than an abundance of fossil fuel.

## NOTES

For the place and frequency of publications cited here, and for the full name of the publication, news agency, radio station or monitoring service where an abbreviation is used, please see "List of Sources." Only in the case of more than one publication bearing the same name is the place of publication noted here.

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