

## THE IRANIAN CHALLENGE

This week, President Bush's tour of the Middle East has highlighted the challenge of Iran for US-Middle East relations. The main points covered by the Arab and Iranian media are:

- Arab coverage of Iranian issues largely shaped by Bush visit this week. Many judged that US President's primary aim was to isolate Iran from Arab neighbours leaving Gulf states uncomfortable.
  - Many judged Pres Bush trying to rebuild case for military action despite NIE report – while many Arabs are content that the NIE has removed immediate likelihood of a new US military venture in the region.
  - Continued discussion of last week's Hormuz Strait incident involving US and Iranian naval craft. Many judged it to be rehearsal for escalating to a wider military response against Iran. Some thought it might be a trigger for war.
  - Iran media presented Bush tour as evidence of the US's continuing failure to make a case against Iran – and of Bush's weakness in his final year of office.
  - More subtly, some still believe that the US and Iran may be on brink of secret deal and this informs much of the Arab commentary on the President's visit.
  - IAEA Chief's visit to Tehran and acceptance of Iran's undertaking to disclose outstanding info by end-Feb seen as further evidence of Iran's 'innocence'. Commentators remain concerned that Iran is still playing for time and that this must be the last deadline.
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- The Gulf phase of the Bush visit, this week, brought Iran back to prominence in Arab media coverage, as it seemed obvious that aligning the Arab world against Iran remained President Bush's primary objective. The Israeli intelligence report, discussed during President Bush's visit to Israel, was also thought to underline the US continuing concerns over Iran and counter the conclusions of the recent NIE report which have effectively removed the likelihood of precipitate US military intervention as far as most of the Arab media are concerned and allowing a collective sigh of relief. However, Bush's insistence on trying to isolate Iran together with the incident in the Strait of Hormuz on the eve of his visit, were widely seen as the key elements in Bush's continuing efforts to rebuild a case for possible military action in the future – particularly if Iran does not reveal all to the IAEA by the end of February. The major weapons deals announced during President Bush's visit with Saudi and with the UAE were also widely seen as preparing the region to counter the threat of emerging Iranian influence.
  - The Strait of Hormuz incident inevitably attracted widespread commentary in the Arab media. The perception that the incident had effectively been a rehearsal for likely future confrontation was increased by Arab media attention to the publication of a report regarding a 2002 US Navy exercise in which the capability of speed boats was tested against much heavier and larger navy vessels. This, for some analysts, explained the US's worry about the confrontation in the Hormuz Strait. However, some commentators also thought that the focus on Iran's military capability and suggestions by some in the US administration that Iran may also use terrorist "asymmetric warfare" tactics was seen as a further push by the US to make the connection between Iran and terrorism.
  - Iranian reactions to President Bush's visit concentrated on negating his efforts to persuade the Arabian Gulf States to break off relations with Iran. To achieve this, the 'official' Iranian media worked hard to point out President Bush's "incapacity and helplessness" in the face of Iranian solidarity and implacability. The Bush tour was also

portrayed by much of the Iranian media as an increasingly desperate attempt to undermine the growing influence of Iran in the region after all the recent US attempts to prevail over President Ahmadinejad's hard line have failed, including the imposition of economic sanctions and the threat of a military strike. However, in the wider Middle East, Iran's studied indifference was interpreted in different ways. Some thought that they detected signs of fear behind the bravado, while others judged it to be part of a more complex symmetry – somewhat akin to the end of a 'tug of war' struggle when both parties realise that they will have now to stop pulling and call it a draw. In particular, Ali Khamenei's statement about the possibility of a future relationship with the US was widely interpreted as keeping the door ajar to a future agreement with the US.

- Iran's nuclear programme also continued to attract widespread, speculative comment amongst the Middle East's observers in the media. This was largely due to the meeting between Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, and the head of the International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA), Mohamed El Baradei, during the latter's first visit to Tehran in 2 years. The announcement that Iran would finally respond to the IAEA's enquiries about its previously secret weapons' programme was taken as confirmation that the completion of Iran's nuclear programme is finally drawing to a conclusion. It was also taken as a response to the publication of the conclusions of the NIE report. There was also speculation, however, that this would not effect the UN Security Council's deliberations over further sanctions, mainly because many believe that Iran simply cannot be allowed to ignore the international community's demands.
- Finally, the prospect of war in the Gulf region continued to be hotly debated by the Arab media. Despite the fact that the US's decision to publish the NIE last November seemed to remove all likelihood of an early US strike – something that the Arab media believed was a near certainty during last autumn – there remains a fear that Iran will not be allowed to "get away" with its defiant attitude and, moreover, that it is winning too much of influence in a very sensitive region. A fact that the Arab media is largely far from happy with. Accordingly, observers sense that there is a continuing build up in the tempo and mood of anti-Iranian reporting in the international media that may be intended to prepare wider public opinion for an act of war.

## **Outlook**

Arab commentators generally are likely to continue looking for signs of a US military strike against Iran. Despite the publication of the NIE and the removal of any logical reason for US military action, there remains widespread suspicion that, in his final year in office, President Bush will move one of two ways. First, many judge that he will attempt to manoeuvre Iran into over-playing its hand with the continuing development of its nuclear programme. This could result either in further serious UN sanctions against Iran which would effectively isolate it or, as many also believe, it could result in Bush's "China moment" where he travels to Tehran to announce a completely fresh relationship with the Iranians – leaving the rest of the Arab Middle East feeling worryingly exposed. In the longer term, many seem to sense that this week's Bush visit may prove to be more significant than the immediate analysis might suggest.

## **CONTINUING CHAOS IN LEBANON**

Events in Lebanon also continued to dominate the attention of the Arab media this week, largely due to the continuing impasse over the election of a new President which is increasingly revealing, once again, the fault lines in the country's political make up. The main points from the week's Arab media coverage are:

- 12<sup>th</sup> electoral meeting fails to produce new President for Lebanon.
  - Beirut bombing sparks new fears of Al Qaeda in Lebanon and possible increased international security involvement. Some see significant expansion of UNIFIL likely.
  - Arab League initiative fails to gain traction.
  - General Suleiman's prospects as a unification President appear to fade.
- Across the Arab media this week's bombing in Lebanon sparked serious fears that the country is starting to fall apart. Given the similarities to an Al Qaeda in Iraq-style operation, and the fact that it was reported to be targeted at a US embassy employee, many took this as clear evidence of Al Qaeda's arrival in Lebanon. If this proves to be the case, this could lead to Lebanon being identified as an Al Qaeda operational base which many believe would bring greater international security involvement in Lebanon. Later news reports asserted that Shaker Al Abssi, the leader of Fatah Al Islam, had announced an alliance with Al Qaeda and that he is operating from the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. Such inference gains credibility from the fact that the information about Al Abssi's operation in Lebanon was leaked by the Hariri-run Internal Security forces. Al Hariri and the majority are seen to be the most likely to benefit from an international security presence in Lebanon. Observers also speculated that this could take the form of an increased UNIFIL capability with a wider scope of responsibility, or the introduction of US military forces to provide security to US assets, which many think the least likely possibility considering the history of the Marine forces in Lebanon. The bombing, which was similar to the attack on UNIFIL forces last week, may suggest that the threat of attacks against western interests in Lebanon is increasingly credible and this could be used to drive foreign forces out of Lebanon – just as it seems to be helping to encourage the withdrawal of western forces from Iraq. However, there are many who also wonder whether such attacks may not be restricted to western targets and there is also speculation that Saudi targets maybe included among other Arab interests. Conspiracy theorists, however, have also concluded that the use of roadside IEDs is primarily intended to implicate Iran and Hezbollah, more than Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda, in their view, is being cited “as the usual suspect” while the evidence leading to Iran and Hezbollah is actually more credible. If such theories are correct, the path would lead to justifying attacks on Hezbollah and Iran, and even Syria if has not taken up Saudi's offer of reconciliation by then.
  - Commentators sense that Hezbollah is going through a difficult time at present. In his recent interviews, Secretary General Hasan Nasrallah seemed to show some nervousness and agitation: something he has ever done before. For Arab observers, this was an indication of his concern at the current situation and there were a number of suggestions as to its causes. Some judged that it was to do with either the success of US efforts draw Syria back into the fold with its Arab neighbours instead of Iran. This possibility has been widely discussed among different political factions. An MP belonging to Al Hariri's Mustaqbal Party suggested that a Syrian move towards the Arab states was going to be a “pleasant surprise”, while Omar Karami, a former Prime Minister, suggested that the real danger still lies in the smaller organisations that work on the margin of the main two factions.
  - The failure of the Arab League's Secretary General, Amr Moussa, to persuade Lebanon's conflicting factions to accept the latest Arab initiative was seen in the further delay in the presidential elections that were slated for last Monday. Commentators emphasised that the opposition now seemed determined to disable the political process in Lebanon and the general change in attitude was widely judged to be the result of reconsideration of the unifying role that General Michel Suleiman could play.

In turn, it seems that the sudden shift in the US's position in support of General Suleiman has disheartened the opposition and led the minority parties to believe that he would use his influence to support the majority. There were also reports that Qatar was conducting follow up talks on the initiative that was supposed to be a test for General Suleiman's position regarding the opposition and Syria. However, the news that the visit by the Qatari officials had been cancelled led many people to think that the situation has become much worse than was previously the case. However there are commentators, such as Ghassan Al Imam writing in *Al Sharq Al Awsat* on Monday, who believe that the timing of Amr Moussa's visit to Lebanon was simply wrong given that the solution to Lebanon is related to US-Iranian relations. He argued that Iran at this stage would not want to offer Lebanon as a gift to President Bush during his visit to the region.

- There were widespread rumours that the Shiite celebrations of Ashura will be 'zero hour' for violent events in Lebanon. The rumours suggest that Hezbollah will use the Shiite celebrations to block the access to the airport and the port with thousands of cars in order to cripple the city. However, many questioned the source of these rumours, which was seen as an attempt either to increase tension between Sunnis and Shiites or, if the rumour was true, to deny Hezbollah any support from the Sunnis. On the other hand major Lebanese figures seem to think that the opposition move will probably be more organised and done through using unions and concentrating on inflation and the economic depression which will secure support not only of different sects within the opposition but could also attract some of the masses that have no political alliance. This process started on Tuesday as hundreds of demonstrators used their cars to block access to Beirut airport. *Al Hayat's* cartoon on Wednesday picked up this theme, showing Lebanon becoming besieged by its own security measures as the cartoon shows the word 'Lebanon' in Arabic made by high walls topped by barbed wire.
- Walid Jumblat now appears to be one of the biggest losers in the political process in Lebanon. He is claimed to have written a letter to Nasrallah asking to align himself with the opposition if Nasrallah agreed to appear with him in a public conference. Jumblat, who is rumoured to have been refused a request to visit the US and present his anti-Syrian position, was not accepted. Nasrallah's reply to Jumblat's request was reported to be "we don't need Jumblat and his like".

## **Outlook**

The outlook for Lebanon looks increasingly bleak. The failure yet again by Lebanon's parliament to elect a new President suggests that this is becoming less and less likely – particularly as the compromise candidate, General Suleiman, looks to have moved his position into the majority camp. In turn, this seems likely to leave a political void which will allow the myriad of Lebanon's political sects and parties to manoeuvre – probably accompanied by rising levels of violence. This suggests that further assassinations of prominent figures should be anticipated and, if this is the case, then a wider pattern of violence between the political factions seems inevitable. From the perspective of the Arab world, this seems likely to draw in further international involvement – which again may foment further western confrontation with Iran. Or, Arab leaders may try to find a solution themselves – although the failure of Amr Moussa's mission this week does not auger well for Arab success. Whatever may happen, it seems highly unlikely that Lebanon will recover its stability and hard-won peace any time soon.

## THE BUSH VISIT, 'PEACE' AND WIDER US POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The week's Arab media coverage was dominated by the visit of President Bush and his renewed effort ostensibly to drive forward the Annapolis process, although few Arab observers believe that he is genuinely committed. The main points covered by the Arab media this week were:

- Bush visit dominated all media coverage across Middle East. Most Arab commentators judged it to be a failure and most remained critical of US policy.
  - Bush's decision to visit Israel first, seen sending clear signal of support for Israel.
  - The subsequent increase in tension in Gaza and the Israeli attacks which left 24 dead, widely seen as direct result of Bush support to Olmert government.
  - President Bush judged not to be even-handed in negotiations with Palestinians and universal Arab dismissal of US initiative to give up right to return for compensation.
  - Israeli efforts to increase pressure on Hamas judged likely to force the movement underground. Many wondered why Israel has never learned that the Palestinians are now largely defined by resistance and that this plays to this victim culture.
  - In Egypt, question of Mubarak succession hardly raised by Bush. This seen as indication that US unwilling to lose another Arab ally to less 'reliable' government.
  - Cynically, many Arabs thought US arms sale to Gulf states a success for Bush, bringing \$20 billion of contracts for US and binding Gulf forces more closely to US.
  - Sarkozy visit deemed great success for France – particularly announcement of first permanent French based in Gulf (Abu Dhabi) and UAE contract for nuclear plants.
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- The outcome of President Bush's visit was judged to be the immediate rise in Israeli aggression which was not just confined to Gaza but included attacks on the West Bank. The seemingly immediate increase in violence by Israel seems to have triggered a corresponding increase in violence by Hamas and Islamic Jihad militants. The casualties from Israeli attacks on Wednesday and Thursday resulted in 24 killed, including the son of Hamas leader, Mahmud Al Zahar. Commentators concluded that such attacks were an Israeli attempt to provoke a terrorist attack by Palestinian extremists that would justify an Israeli sweep back into Gaza. Such an invasion, it was maintained, would enable Israel to eliminate the Hamas leadership and dismantle its organisation, or at least that is what it plans.
  - Arab commentators were unanimously agreed that the peace initiative that Bush was "pushing" during his visit was not acceptable, mainly because it overturned the right of the Palestinian refugees to return to their historic homelands. This issue seems to be agreed amongst most Palestinian factions to the extent that even the flexible President Abbas had to stress this very forcefully to the US President. The issue of the refugees, mandated by a clutch of UN resolutions, was also seen as a test of President Bush's ability to overturn a political reality that has been standing for almost 60 years.
  - Forcing Hamas back underground, as Israel seems to be trying to achieve, is widely judged to be a costly error for all parties – not least for the Palestinians themselves. Some commentators wondered whether the Israeli government, after all these years,

has simply failed to understand the Palestinian mentality that has adapted itself to pressure and seems thrive on it. Many offered the view that the Palestinian people have survived on their feelings of resistance and injustice. Accordingly, forcing Hamas back to “resistance tactics” will almost certainly attract widespread support from the Palestinian people who have seen peace bring a worse blight than occupation. The situation now, according to many Palestinians is worse than it was before Oslo.

- The fact that President Bush’s first stop in his Middle East tour was Israel, sent a clear message to most Arab commentators that supporting President Olmert was firmly at the top of the US agenda. President Bush was reported to have asked the Israeli factions to support Olmert and this intervention seems to have embarrassed some of Olmert’s political opponents with some speculating that it may even have caused the withdrawal of the hawkish Yisrael Beiteinu from the Israeli Prime Minister’s coalition. This seems to have had a considerable bearing on the Arab states’ view of President Bush’s objectivity and of his ability to act as a genuine broker in the peace process to the benefit of all parties. *Al Hayat*’s cartoon on Tuesday commented on the simplistic objective of President Bush’s visit by depicting it as solely for teaching Arabs that Israel is an angel and Iran a devil.
- *Al Jazeera* covered a different aspect of the meeting in Cairo. Former Deputy Foreign Minister Abdulla Al Ashaal told *Al Jazeera* on Wednesday that the meeting between President Mubarak and President Bush would be far from cordial. He suggested that the meeting was more likely to be a “fight” because of their divergent stances over the Peace process. Ashaal said that Bush is going to discuss things such as smuggling through Gaza, while the Egyptian president will express disappointment at the US peace initiative which overrides the Arab initiative and overlooks major issues such as the right to return and disregards extant UN resolutions on the Palestinian issue. The *Al Jazeera* report also quoted Amr Al Shubaki of Al Ahram Political Studies Centre who commented that the issue of passing on the Presidency to Mubarak’s son would not be a major issue of discussion. He interpreted this as part of the lesson learned in Palestine as democracy has led to groups coming to power with an anti-US agenda. Al Shubaki also thought that the US is now primarily concerned that whoever leads Egypt must be willing to co-operate with the US.
- President Bush’s tour in the region, that started in Israel and ended in neighbouring Egypt, seems to have been widely perceived as a major failure. This must be measured against the fact that, while the peace process made little progress, neither did Iran become more isolated. However, the announcement of US arms sales to the region could make the tour seemingly successful for President Bush who is returning to the US with \$20 billion worth of defence contracts. The media coverage of the arms deal was focused on Iran and the way this deal could further increase the disparity between Iran’s military capability and that of the US. However, some commentators, based on experience from the Gulf War, also suggested that the arms deal was a clever way of storing military equipment for US forces on Arabian lands – and making the Arabs pay for it!
- President Bush’s visit to the Arabian Gulf countries also included many cultural elements which are very clear in the photos released of his visit such as this photo from his visit to Dubai. The President’s dances, traditional food sampling and falconry seem to have been used as a double-edged sword. Many noted that it made President Bush keen to understand more about the culture of the region, which was something that defied the stereotypical depiction of this president. However, the head of a UAE think tank observed that the visit was made overtly cultural for two reasons. On the one hand it stressed that President Bush is treated under the code of generosity that compels Arabs to be hospitable to any guest even if they are an enemy. On the other hand the festive nature of the visit helped downplay the lack of political progress during

the visit and US political objectives regarding Iran. The message was that George W Bush arrived as a guest and was entertained as a guest.

- In contrast, the visit of French President Sarkozy seems to have had much less glamour but achieved more. The agreement with the UAE to build 2 nuclear power facilities as well as the establishment of the first French foreign base in the Arabian Gulf seems to have been more than was expected of the French President's first visit. The agreement was seen as part of the growing relationship between France and the UAE, particularly after a number of cultural projects in Abu Dhabi including a branch of the Sorbonne and plans for a first branch of the Louvre museum outside France. Analysts were divided over interpreting the visits of the two western allies, particularly as to whether it was part of a co-operation agreement or competition - or a bit of both. Some analysts saw Sarkozy dealing a blow to Bush's efforts to capitalise on the region. On the other hand, many thought that Sarkozy was actually acting as a side-kick for Bush and he came to reiterate the same message and was allowed to make some gains as the reward for his efforts.

## **Outlook**

For most Arab commentators, the Bush visit to the Middle East this week seems unlikely to change much in terms of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Despite the warm words and obvious desire to move forward with a process that Bush tried to initiate in Annapolis, most have concluded that this is too little, too late in the Bush presidency and that he has given a 'green light' to the Israelis to bear down on Hamas in Gaza. President Abbas, meanwhile, is seen as being too weak to reunite the Palestinians and therefore there will be no substantive settlement. Indeed, if Bush had hoped that his visit would send a positive message of support and even-handedness, it seems to have had precisely the opposite effect. According, few Arabs believe that there will be any settlement of the Palestinian situation this year and they believe that this will be firmly in the 'in-tray' of America's new president in 2009. Meanwhile they fear that Israel will use the continuing impasse to lay siege to Gaza, possibly invade – and very possibly re-ignite a 4<sup>th</sup> Intifada.

## **INSTABILITY IN IRAQ**

President Bush's visit to the region – and the fact that he did not make an 'unscheduled' stop in Iraq as many expected – has taken the spotlight off events in that country this week. The main points from what Arab coverage there was include:

- Less Arab media focus on Iraq this week but many noted SecDef's suggestion that US could be in Iraq for at least another decade.
  - Arab media note that the Sahwa (Awakening) process seems to be stalling.
  - New alliance between 12 Iraqi political parties judged to be exercise in expediency to ensure that Iraq does not lose the future proceeds of Kurdish oil.
  - This week's relative lack of violence judged by some to be 'calm before storm'.
  - Rumours abound that insurgents may have access to chemical weapons.
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- US Secretary of Defence Gates' announcement that the US forces in Iraq may stay for another decade produced a number of commentaries that seem to have been shaped in the context of Bush's visit. On Thursday in *Al Sharq Al Awsat's* Abdelrahman Al Rashid entitled his column "Americans in Iraq till 2018... why?" He stressed that neither Iraq's nor the USA's best interests require such a near-permanent presence on Iraqi soil. The decision, according to Al Rashid, has serious implications. On one side, if Iraq perceives that it will remain weak for ten years, in constant need of protection,

then it should be dismantled and a new government should be formed. On the other hand, if this is a major alliance with the USA then it cannot be legal, as long as Iraq is under the protection of the USA. This made some commentators find a connection between President Bush's visit and what seems to be the basis of the USA regaining its influence in the region.

- The Sahwa initiative that was sponsored by the US troops seems to have started to split and there are now a number of Sahwas that do not seem to see themselves as part of one movement. Commentators argue that the reason why the Sahwa experiment, aimed at denying community support to Islamic militants, seems to be the least successful out of several in the region lies in its political roots. The Sahwa initiative depended on ambitious young leaders who found fighting Al Qaeda to be their way to achieve a political presence. The influence the young leaders seem to have is not that of conviction but of tribal ties, which seems to leave the masses vulnerable to the Islamic and nationalistic orientation of Al Qaeda.
- The chaotic scene of Iraqi politics seems to have found 'order in chaos,' although many wonder if that order can actually last. The announcement of the formation of an alliance between twelve different political parties was seen to be motivated by one aim: to secure Baghdad's control over the crude oil contracts for which the Kurdish autonomous, local government wants to be solely responsible. The massive loss, not only of revenue but of control over to whom the oil would be sold, seems to have created a strange alliance not only between Sunni, Shiite and Kaldani factions but also between the rival Shiites parties of Al Sadr and Al Hakim, as well as the Liberal party lead by Iyad Allawi.
- The return of calm to Iraq this week, with fewer terrorist attacks, was not widely hailed as a success of the security plan. On the contrary it was seen as 'the calm before the storm.' Analysts keep warning that the terrorist attacks in Baghdad, which are becoming less frequent, could see an increase in quality. There have been widespread rumours of taking the confrontation between the terrorist cells operating in Iraq to the next level by decreasing the number of operatives. Rumours of such an upgrade include the use of non-conventional weapons such as chemical agents. The fact that the weapons used against the US troops have been increasing in quality, as new technologies for IED and anti-aircraft weapons have been introduced, seems to support the theory that terrorist groups could receive non-conventional weapon systems from the same sources of support. Nonetheless, some analysts have dismissed these rumours as part of the communications campaign that is aimed at raising the fear of the involvement of Iran in Iraq.

## **Outlook**

While there has been rather less Arab media comment on Iraq this week than is usually the case, it seems inevitable that attention will return there next week and beyond. In particular, the Arab media seems likely to continue its concerns over the possibility – indeed likelihood – that Iraq could still split into a number of warring regions that would provide a new front in the sectarian divisions that are now so prominent across the whole of the Middle East. The period of relative calm that followed the Sunni tribes' denial of Al Qaeda in Iraq also seems likely to be drawing to a close and the evident fractures in the 'Awakening' alliance seem likely to deepen, paving the way to renewed violence. Moreover, Al Qaeda in Iraq is unlikely to be content to accept any form of defeat and it seems only a matter of time before further Al Qaeda violence returns to the streets of Baghdad and elsewhere. The sectarian construct of the Iraqi government seems likely to come under further pressure and many are predicting that an early election under new rules may be the only way out of the current political impasse. Finally, this weeks

announcement by Gates that the US could be in Iraq for a decade seems likely to result in renewed pressure for the US to make plans for its withdrawal. Many Arabs still believe that the US's main focus is on Iraq's oil and that plans for long-term basing are tantamount to a prolonged, unwanted and unsustainable occupation.

## **AL QAEDA AND INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM**

Once again, the Bush visit has largely taken the focus on Al Qaeda and other terrorist activity in the Arab media this week. However, the further evidence of Al Qaeda activity in the Maghreb region and further suggestions that Benazir Bhutto's assassination was the work of the Taliban has drawn some commentary. The main points covered by the Arab media include:

- Algeria thought to be becoming strategically significant for AQ, replacing Iraq.
  - Rumours that AQ planning attacks in Europe and that Paris may be the target of next major AQ attack – particularly following Sarkozy's higher profile.
  - Al Qaeda judged likely to be seeking to exploit the situation in Pakistan and some fears that it could become a 'failed state'
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- Although the Arab media concentrated on the implications of President Bush's visit to the region, there were a number of commentaries on the growth of Al Qaeda operations. Despite numerous reports that expressed the fear that Algeria could be the next main hub for Al Qaeda, a number of analysts maintained that Iraq will continue to be the natural regional focus for Al Qaeda. It is also widely believed that core Al Qaeda is not acting as the central command, but rather as an inspirational centre. This includes providing strategic guidance, introducing new tactics and creating alliances. Although this role has mainly been played by Osama Bin Laden and Al Zawahiri, it was recently played by Al Qaeda operations in Iraq. This seems to be inspiring other groups in the region. Algeria seems to have great strategic significance, as it could possibly be used as a base to launch attacks against Europe. If this happens, then Algeria could become an inspirational centre for other Islamist groups operating in Africa that would probably rely on Algeria for theological references and strategic direction.
  - Commentators have cited reports that Paris could be the next massive, European target for an Al Qaeda operation. There were reports about 'radio chatter' speaking about an operation against the Eiffel Tower. Although many analysts maintain that nothing should be ruled out, many judge that Al Qaeda has changed its strategy and is now focused on creating as much damage as possible to combatant forces rather than against civilians. This seems to be a lesson learnt in Saudi Arabia and it allows the organisation to counter propaganda campaigns against them that emphasise civilian losses. Others also argue that the level of Al Qaeda operations will stop short of an event that would generate a reaction similar to the one that followed the 9/11 attacks.
  - The use of "soft power" is seen also as a manifestation of this strategy. Osama Bin Laden is thought to be capable of agitating the situation in Pakistan and possibly capable of depriving Washington of one of its key allies in southern Asia – and of course a vital plank in the 'war on terror'.

## **Outlook**

After a relatively 'quiet' 2007, many sense that Al Qaeda has to re-emphasise its pivotal role as focus of Islamist opposition to the West. Accordingly, while some believe that Al Qaeda will work hard to make a further dramatic strike against a major western target –

probably in a European capital – many also believe that the movement may work more subtly to build a new base around the edges of the Sahara while at the same time, consolidating its position along the Afghan border with Pakistan. This seems certain to increase US pressure on Pakistan to allow it to conduct cross-border operation into Waziristan. It may also see less focus on the Taliban fighting against western forces in southern Afghanistan and more effort put into maintaining instability in Pakistan to the point that it may fall into the hands of extremists. Al Qaeda itself seems almost certain to continue to publish widespread propaganda against the West and continue to build the Al Qaeda brand that continues to prove so attractive to disaffected Islamists around the world.