

Mideast Week

Weekly digest of news from the Arabic and Persian Media, from Mideastwire.com.

Week of May 15-19, 2006

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--- SUMMARIES ---

IRAQ

1.) **“Elaph publishes the most serious report on Iraqi fuel smuggling”**

Osama Mehdi reported on Elaph.com, a pan-Arab newspaper, on May 19 that: “An official Iraqi report on fuel smuggling accused political and religious forces of forming a smuggling mafia and reaping huge sums of money involved in corruption circles where many smugglers get power through the support and provision of funds to these forces. More so, they receive protection by giving this money and some also use it to support terrorist operations.

“The official confidential report that Elaph got a copy off and that is composed of 48 pages was recently issued by the Office of the Inspector General of the Ministry of Oil of Iraq. The report explained the methods of smuggling in Iraq where the value of oil and its derivatives smuggled during the past year 2005 alone reached one billion dollars from southern ports with Kuwait and Iran, the northern border crossing with Turkey and Western borders with Jordan and Syria - in the absence of control over these outlets.

“The report confirmed that one of the most important dangers that smuggling leads to, considering it as a corruption and an economic crime, is the negative impact on the political system in terms of undermining confidence between the people and government and increasing the fuel crisis. This forces the authorities to import fuel to meet the local demands in order to strengthen its position in front of the people and consequently weakens the annual budget and the government economically in addition to hiding information from people and weakening state institutions and the security services.

“The report also says that at the same time such a phenomenon is bad for the political system and foreign relations especially with countries and organizations that could provide it with the financial support it needs and that these states and organizations may develop conditions which may affect the sovereignty of the State.

“As for the security and social effects of smuggling, the report says that the money from smuggling has created a high degree of social class divisions and an imbalance in social structures because of the concentration of this wealth in the hands of the few who use it for the disadvantage of people and the state especially when parts of these funds are used to finance terrorist operations [which spread] a spirit of despair and frustration among the citizens. The report warns that the amounts earned from the smuggling activities and the black market has attracted political, social and religious forces into the circles of corruption. It is a very serious issue especially since many smugglers and beneficiaries are tempting these forces by supporting and providing funds to protect them.”

The report continues to provide details of the smuggling operations, methods of smuggling, the conditions that provide the climate for smuggling and the economic, political, social, security and legal effects of the smuggling in addition to the measures taken to combat them. (Elaph, United Kingdom; MEW May 19)

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2.) “Iraq: prices of fruits and vegetables on the rise due to gas crisis”

In its May 19 edition, Akhbar Al Khaleej, a government-influenced daily, reported that: “The recent gas crisis, particularly that of ‘gasoline and diesel’ gas, has entailed the rise in the prices of goods in the markets of Baghdad. The price of some items has doubled or even more than doubled in some cases, because the car and truck drivers that are transporting the goods have raised their transportation fees since they are forced to buy gas from the black market and at high prices. Fruits and vegetables markets have witnessed a major price rise, which has placed a huge burden on Iraqi citizens, namely low-income workers and the unemployed, whereby the prices of tomatoes, cucumbers, potatoes, apples and oranges have doubled...”

“Muhammad Faruq who sells fruits and vegetables stated that: ‘The prices of fruits and vegetables are continuously rising because motorists have considerably raised their fees due to the recent gas crisis in Iraq. The high transportation fee is added by the main dealer to the price of the merchandise which we, in turn, make the consumer pay. That is way our business has been highly affected by it. Before [the crisis], I used to sell about 1,000 Kg of tomatoes, cucumbers, potatoes, apples and eggplants. Now I don’t sell more than 500 Kg... Unfortunately, the consumer is accusing us of greed’.

“Mahmoud Amin, a truck driver stated that: ‘The rise in gas prices is making truck owners raise their prices to balance the effort they are making to deliver the fruits and vegetables to where they are sold. I think that the price increase is borne by the consumer, who is considered to be the sole loser in all of this’. He criticized gas stations in Baghdad by saying that: ‘The stations do not provide diesel gas for motorists on a steady basis. They also sell diesel gas for double the price that was set by the state. That is why I wish that the new Iraqi government fights administrative corruption... so that Iraqis are able to lead a comfortable life, because they are sick and tired of the failures of the successive Iraqi governments...’.” (Akhbar Al Khaleej, Bahrain; MEW May 19)

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SAUDI ARABIA

3.) “Custodianship and civil society”

Saud Al Balwi, a Saudi writer and regular columnist for Al Watan, a government-influenced daily, wrote in the paper’s May 19 edition that: “‘Custodianship’ is a very dangerous legacy – required by the dominating disposition of humans – that has affected cultures in general and the Arab culture in particular whereby we have not yet rid ourselves of it. Thus, ‘custodianship’ has taken many different shapes which are still being recycled until this day, one way or the other, in what meets the interests of the ‘custodian’, his way of thinking and his vision of the other – blackened – party. A custodian must exercise his custodianship tasks by acting on behalf of others and running their affairs, due to a wrong belief that the other party is unable to make its own decisions and choices regarding what it wants or doesn’t want.

“Therefore, the existence of this custodian annuls the role of the individual and society and makes them feel as though they were inferior and had no autonomy, whereby someone was thinking and acting on their behalf... In Arab societies, the culture of which relies on custodianship, the Arab individual is unable to use his head and run his affairs in complete autonomy because he always feels inferior and is therefore unable to make a decision regarding the most trivial issues that are directly linked to him... One of the most obvious signs of disorder in our Arab societies which are under custodianship is the monopolization of ‘truth’, and defining how to believe in it far from reality, the laws of the universe and the inevitability of development and change, which is creating a great gap in the society’s like between reality and the visions of the custodianship ideology.

“The gap is getting wider and is splitting society into two factions – which is something it honestly can’t handle – which is scattering it between the paramount of virtue and utmost depravity! It is not logical to ask an individual to have a ‘pro’ or a ‘con’ position on unilateral thinking, without providing any real chance for dialogue and discord, in respect of the political and social national unity. Custodianship in a society like ours is not restricted to one aspect but has come to include all the aspects of life... That is why we are witnessing the expansion of the custodianship culture in our daily life, in our thoughts and opinions when discussing change and the inevitable social requirements which are often wrapped in ideological covers that might be hindering human development.

“This comes at a time when it has become a necessity to take society up to the next level and prepare it for a real ‘civility’ whether socially, politically and ideologically. Such efforts might be obstructed by ‘unilateral thinking’ which might hinder social reform, development and the balanced openness of society. Therefore, it has become crucial for us to define the distance between the religious and national principles and values on one hand, and the attempts to use these values for other purposes and interests than those of the nation... This aims to lead society towards an archetype of ‘civil society’ which is considered to be ‘a societal structure that ensures the collaboration between the individuals and the groups in the economic, social and cultural sectors, in order to protect the rights and interests of the different divisions of society...’.

“The existence of ‘civil society institutions’ aims to enhance the participation of the individual in running the society, which necessarily means his efficient participation in public life... in what would voice the demands of the citizens, through legitimate channels in the form of (non-governmental) associations and institutions that are independent and to which citizens can belong by choice and not by force... Thus, any ‘strict custodianship’ over the civil society institutions will necessarily make it lose the ‘partner’ position which it should hold to run the society... The Shura Council is the first one to be entrusted with discussions on such crucial projects regarding the establishment of civil society. That is way it is necessary for it to listen to

the opinion of the Saudi street regarding [the establishment of civil society], study it and assess it if necessary before taking it up with the government to get its approval on it.

“Lately, the Saudi Shura Council included on his agenda the discussion of a new bill for civil associations and institutions supervised by an autonomous governmental committee located in Riyadh (the National Committee for Civil Associations and Institutions). According to Al Jazirah newspaper, the committee was given wide prerogatives to conduct its tasks in establishing the general policy that will ensure the growth and development of civil associations and institutions... As part of its prerogatives, the committee has the right to interfere in the associations’ decisions and elections, to disband an association or merge it in ‘cases’ that were mentioned in article 23. However, the nature of these cases remained vague, just like the article regarding the violations of the associations and institutions...” (Al Watan, Saudi Arabia; MEW May 19)

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EGYPT

4.) “Gamal Mubarak and the American assignment”

In its May 17 edition, Al Quds Al Arabi, an independent daily, editorialized: “The ruling National Party in Egypt, admitted to the visit made by Mr. Gamal Mubarak, the son of the president and the deputy secretary general of the party and head of its politburo, to Washington. However, it announced that the purpose of the visit was to explain the political reform that the party intends to implement. If we consider that what the party said was true, why was the visit kept a secret and wasn’t made public? Why wasn’t it officially announced before it was exposed?”

“It is most probable that Mr. Gamal Mubarak went to Washington for something more important than explaining about the reforms and easing the tensions in the relations between the two countries. He went to Washington to prepare for the bequeathal and strike a strategic political deal with the American administration in exchange for its approval on the passing on of power from the father to the son. What was noticeable was that Mr. Gamal Mubarak met with President Bush, Vice-President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Ms. Condoleezza Rice and National Security Advisor Steven Hadley.

“These meetings that were held over a few days couldn’t have been made to explain about reform or ease the tensions, not to mention the fact that they are usually restricted to kings, presidents and princes and not all of them, just a chosen elite from these milieus and depending on the importance of their countries and the position of their states on the American list of strategic priorities. Mr. Gamal Mubarak visited Washington as the president of the republic and the true ruler of Egypt. That is why the American administration took an interest in him and received him, to place the final touches on some strategic details regarding Egypt’s role on more than one level, namely on those of the Palestinian and the Iraqi dossiers and the expected American war against Iran due to its nuclear program...”

“The tensions in the relations between Washington and Cairo couldn’t be due to demonstrators being beaten, to the dictatorial aspect of the regime and the absence of reform, since Washington has established full diplomatic relations with Libya and is preparing to send Ms. Rice to visit Tripoli, even though Libya’s dossier in terms of human rights is the worst in its entourage and despite the fact that it has never conducted democratic elections, never recognized Western democracy and has always mocked it...”

"The American administration only deals with Arab dictatorships, especially those who abide by its dictations, and Egypt is considered one of the most democratic Arab dictatorships: it has a semi-elected parliament, a free press, a government that enjoys full diplomatic relations with the Hebrew state, provides it with oil and gas and conducts joint industrial projects with it. Why would the American administration be mad at it and why would there be tensions between the two of them?

"Mr. Gamal Mubarak will return from Washington, assigned by the White House as the president of the Mubarak Kingdom of Egypt. The agreement has been reached and the father president is busy conducting his trips abroad. If ever he hits his country's soil, he acts as though he was a guest and spends his days at his favorite resort in Sharm al-Shaykh, far from the political disturbances and the increasing problems of the Egyptian people. The bequeathal has been adopted most probably and the issue now is only a matter of directing, marketing and choosing the right timing." (Al Quds Al Arabi, United Kingdom; MEW May 17)

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LIBYA

5.) "Painful lesson for Libyan opposition"

An editorial May 16 in the daily Al Quds Al Arabi said: "The United States has resumed full diplomatic relations with Libya and decided to remove it from the list of countries supporting terror as a reward for abandoning its nuclear, biological, and chemical programmes and its full cooperation in the war on terror. The timing of this step is greatly important, especially as it coincided with the current aggravating crisis between the United States and Iran because of the latter's insistence on pressing ahead with its uranium-enrichment programme and the production of nuclear fuel.

"The US administration uses the carrot and stick policy with Iran and is telling the Iranian leadership through this Libyan message that it can win good relations and improve its image as a rogue country if it does like its Libyan counterpart. The more important message is probably the one addressed to the Arab, and in particular Libyan, opposition that had wagered on US support to overthrow the regime or reach power. And here is the United States abandoning them and restoring relations unconditionally with a rogue country and an undemocratic regime.

"The Libyan Government's human rights record might have improved a little but remains bad by international standards. The same is said about political and democratic reform and freedoms of expression. Like all other Western countries, the United States uses the human rights and freedoms issue as a pressure card against the regimes that disagree with its policies and interests. But when it takes what it wants and these pressures bear fruit, it abandons all its ideas on this issue very quickly.

"The Libyan opposition, or specifically some of its groups, agreed to be the cat's paw for the US schemes against their country, recruited armies, and carried out assassinations and bombings that claimed the lives of some innocent Libyans. And here is the US administration abandoning them and treating them like paper tissues, that is, dropping them in the rubbish bin after using them. The restoration of US-Libyan relations closes a page that lasted for more than 35 years during which the Libyan revolution confronted the US schemes and even built all its revolutionary

discourses on opposing the United States and backing all the liberation movements that shared its hostility to the mother of imperialism.

"The US administration is certainly the biggest winner. Its gains are primarily propaganda ones followed by the oil gain, which is as very important at this age when the United States is trying to improve its image in the Arab and Muslim worlds after its two bloody wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. As to Libya, it too will not lose much. All the Arab regimes have diplomatic relations with Washington at present. But under this new stage, it had to change much of its political discourses so as to adapt itself to the new situation, especially the anti-US slogans some of which remain on the walls of the Green Square at the heart of Tripoli." (Al Quds Al Arabi, United Kingdom; MEW May 17)

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IRAN

6.) "From the earth to the stars" - editorial criticizes president

An editorial in the reformist Aftab e Yazd on May 15 said: "If someone seeks to identify the factors which led to the victory of Mahmud Ahmadinejad in the second round of presidential elections, without any doubt one of these factors was his modest and unassuming approach and attitude during his election campaign. In his radio and television campaign broadcasts, he did not present a cohesive and full economic and political programme, and contrary to what a group of his supporters are trying to suggest, his performance during his term as the Mayor of Tehran was not all that astonishingly good to bring the electorate en masse to the polling stations on the election day in his favour.

"However, his campaign team, thanks to their correct identification of a part of the social sensibilities, adopted a tactic which was completely different to that of the rival candidates, and they came across as so down to earth that many people began to feel assured that a man who was similar to many ordinary people would win the seat of presidency. For his turn, when Ahmadinejad - who was aware of the fact that the people had had enough of the snobbish postures adopted by some of the officials and managers - was told by one of the supporters of the rival candidate that his 'appearance was not suitable for presidency', he skillfully resorted to traditional modesty and said he was in fact the 'servant' of the people and not their 'boss'.

"In addition, of course, Ahmadinejad put his finger on a number of other points as well, and one cannot deny the impact that these had on the number of votes he won. For instance, we can mention his emphasis on the main duties and responsibilities of the President instead of concentrating on peripheral issues or indulging in constant theorising, and the promise to expose the economically corrupt elements and confronting the oil mafia with all his means and powers.

"In any case, the campaign time eventually ended and Ahmadinezhad was elected to the seat of presidency; that it to say a seat which had been occupied by others before, and the serious criticism of those individuals against him in fact attracted some popular votes for him. However, after a short time in office, some new developments began to happen: The person who later on was given the leadership of the Oil Ministry publicly announced that 'I do not know of any oil mafia'; 'benevolent friends' prevented the publication of the names of the people involved in economic corruption; and in the majority of his public speeches, the President embarked on offering different theories about the international arena and developments.

"Even further than that, some of the supporters of the President (whose most important slogan concerned his status as the servant of the people, and his most important behavioural feature was his down to earth attitude) began a series of efforts to portray him as a celestial figure. On that basis, the rumours about the observance of a 'halo of light' during his speech at the United Nations and the claim that his audience of heads of states were rendered motionless (to such an extent that they did not even blink) were never properly denied, and the web site which published that news (that is to say a source which enjoys great affinity and closeness with the principle-ists and the supporters of Ahmadinejad) too was never prepared to question the authenticity of the pictures broadcast or published in connection with the above mentioned claims.

"...At the present too, eight months after the start of Ahmadinezhad's presidential term, the Secretary of the Guardian Council has chosen to use the Iranian President's letter to George Bush as an excuse to voice his position and views about the ninth President of the country. In that connection, he has described the said letter as a "divine inspiration" and has called for its inclusion in the curriculum of universities and schools. Of course, perhaps this kind of judgment may be useful in a sense, given that it can divert the people's attention from some issues - for instance it may prevent some people from asking the question that 'if the letter had in fact been written by Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, how would have the Tehran Friday prayer orator reacted to it?' However, one must say that there were other less costly methods available for the achievement of the said objective.

The author of this article believes that one does not need to work very hard in order to refute the claims of the Guardian Council Secretary. This is because while it is being claimed that the Iranian President enjoys divine inspirations in the way he fulfils his duties, only a few days ago, the Society of Qom Seminary Instructors described one of the decrees of the very President as being in contravention of religious tenets, and, in addition, a number of sources of emulation showed serious opposition to his decree.

"However, making claims about the presence of divine inspirations in the activities of a non-infallible human being will lead to a lot of dangers, and in view of these, any kind of silence in that connection cannot be deemed acceptable. The people remember well that a few years ago, some similar propaganda efforts were launched in relation to the then President, and unfortunately, his silence and the silence of some of the influential opinion formers in the society made it very difficult to oppose that propaganda and bring into open the criticisms against the then President and his Government..." (Aftab e Yazd, Iran; MEW May 18)

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7.) New Internet filtering system to enter "test phase"

The reformist daily Sharq reported on May 1 that: "Iran's Central Filtering Site, with the capability to identify internet users and record the sites they visit, will soon enter its test phase. The centre is intended to block unauthorized sites uniformly across the country, saving 500 thousand dollars for the country each year. The test phase of the filtering data bank will commence within the next two weeks with equipment installed in Tehran, Shiraz, Mashhad, Tabriz and Ahvaz including two high-capacity and eight low-capacity ICP centres, and all unauthorized sites will be filtered through this centre by the next two months.

"The centre includes four types of equipment: network traffic control, a search engine, system

administration and customer support and its database supports 2,000 keywords. The software provides service to 300 centres and supports Persian, English, German, French, Russian, Spanish, Italian and Turkish languages with various algorithms. Unlike current foreign versions, the centre's search engine is capable of adding new words and URLs to relevant categories based on the native cultures of various regions and an unlimited number of new categories can be added to the database.

"...One of the most important features of the filtering centre is that it identifies user IP addresses and saves their visits to unauthorized and authorized sites, which can be accessed by the system administrator and operators. Other domestic filtering systems can also be updated using a specific protocol through this centre. The centre's search engine finds all filter-bypassing IPs and blocks them within two to five days. The managing director of the Information Technology Company, Reza Rashidi, told ISNA that the test phase will begin in two weeks, and added, 'The centre will only be used for filtering unauthorized sites and our main objective is to make this technology indigenous.'" (Sharq, Iran; MEW May 15)

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ISRAEL

8.) "Increase in Israeli exports to Arab countries by 34%"

Asharq Al Awsat, a pan-Arab newspaper, reported on May 18 that: "Last years witnessed an significant rise of 34% in the volume of Israeli exports to Arab countries that Israel maintains diplomatic or trade relations with, namely Egypt, Jordan, Mauritania, Qatar, Oman, Morocco and Tunisia, as well as Iraq and Bahrain despite the absence of official relations. Sources said that the volume of exports in the first quarter of the current year was \$57 million; out of which Jordan and Egypt had \$52 million... It was disclosed that Israel in this period has exported goods to Iraq worth \$320 thousand. Although the amount is relatively small, the Israelis found it to be a wonderful start." (Asharq Al Awsat, United Kingdom; MEW May 18)

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9.) "Israeli decision to deprive 100,000 Israelis from reunion"

Ali Saleh reported in Asharq Al Awsat, a pan-Arab newspaper, on May 15 that: "The Israeli court of Justice approved by a simple majority (6 to 5 judges) yesterday the amendment of the citizenship act law that the Knesset took in 2002 which prevents the reunification of the West Bank and Gaza Strip Palestinians and the 1948 Arabs with their wives, husbands and kids. This decision came in response to the petitions filed by the Adallah [Justice] center, citizens' rights organizations and a number of Arab deputies in the Knesset in 2003 that asked for the cancellations of what they called the racist amendments.

"The law would deprive about a hundred thousand Palestinians from reunion and will disperse around twenty thousand families whose requests for reunion were rejected according to estimates by the Israeli deputy general [as received]. Despite that, Israelis are saying that the reason behind the law is based on security grounds, 26 operations out of the 146 [have been conducted by those who hold the Israeli nationality. There are demographic reasons for the decision because Israel fears that there is a threat to the Judaism of the Jewish State of Israel if they grant Israeli citizenship to Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza Strip who are married to Palestinians holding Israeli nationality 1948.

“Attorney Abir Bakr, from Adallah [Justice] organization that represents Palestinians and Israeli couples of both sexes who wish to obtain the Israeli citizenship said that the law means that thousands of ‘mixed’ families will have to separate or live outside of Israel. She added that the law ‘simply says pack your bags and get out of here...this means that they will abandon their rights in Israel and the historical rights to land’.

“Maad Saneh, who is an Arab Israeli married to a Palestinian women from Bethlehem in the West Bank said that the day the decision is issued will be a black day for Israel and ‘a black day for my family and other families that have also been deprived of the right to live together’. The Arab parties criticized the decision of the court and threatened to go to the international court of justice.” (Asharq Al Awsat, United Kingdom; MEW May 15)

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10.) “Deputies from Hamas and Israeli peace supporters protest together”

Asharq Al Awsat, a pan-Arab newspaper, reported on May 14 that: “The Palestinian occupied territories witnessed, two days ago, an unusual scene in the history of the Palestinian–Israeli crisis. Members of the Palestinian legislative council from the Islamic resistance, Hamas, stood side by side with Jews who support peace in Israeli in a demonstration against the separation wall. It appeared that the scene unnerved the military commands of the occupation army and even though Israel considers Jerusalem and its suburbs an Israeli civilian city, it declared it a closed military region and went about attacking all the demonstrators whether Jewish, Arab or foreigners.

“Clashes between the demonstrators and the Israeli army resulted in the arrest of around 20 demonstrators, the injury of dozens of civilians and five Israeli soldiers as a result of stone throwing amongst the demonstrators. The dispersion of the demonstrators took place by force.

“Israeli peace movements have been organizing activities for the last two days in coordination with around 30 peace activists from Europe and the United States in addition to dozens of Palestinians civilians and some leaders from the Fatah movement. Hamas, for the first time since its establishment, sent a delegation to the demonstration that was led by the deputy in the legislative council of the Jerusalem region and accompanied by many other deputies from the movement. Yesterday’s demonstration also called for alliances between many Jewish and Arab peace movements in Israel such as ‘Taayush’ [Coexistence] and ‘Coalition of Women for a Just Peace’. The demonstrators chose the separation wall area to demonstrate in Al Ram in the suburbs of the occupied east Jerusalem. The occupation forces declared the closing off of the area and detained dozens of demonstrates. Some Palestinians responded to the Israeli soldiers by throwing stones at them, while the forces shot rubber bullets, sound bombs and tear gas bombs.” (Asharq Al Awsat, United Kingdom; MEW May 15)

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THE US

11.) “America lets down Arab liberals”

Abdel-Beri Atwan, the editor-in-chief of Al Quds Al Arabi, an independent newspaper, wrote on May 18 that: “In the last few days, America’s calls for democratic reform in the Arab region suffered from three setbacks that have undermined its credibility in the minds of tens of millions

[of] Arabs and Muslims. The first setback was due to the fact that it has restored its full and unconditional diplomatic relations with Libya; the second setback was the fact that it has received Gamal Mubarak, the son of the Egyptian president in Washington, in what was considered his assignment to the throne of Egypt; and the third setback was entailed by its support of the presidential guard which Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is currently establishing to have a presidential militia aiming to face Hamas's victory in the last democratic legislative elections and overthrow its government.

"The resuming of the American-Libyan relations, knocked out the neo-liberal Arab parties that were counting on the American support to change the dictatorships and introduce democratic reforms. Neo-liberal Arabs are in an extremely awkward situation since they were counting on an unreliable superpower that would give up on them if it gets what it wants from dictatorships, just like what happened with some Libyan opposition factions that were also counting on American support. The US administration is rewarding an Arab dictatorship by restoring its full relations with it and removing its name from the list of countries that are sponsoring terrorism.

"The US is sending the following message to Iran: those who relinquish their nuclear, chemical and biological programs and partake efficiently in the war against terror, are friends of Washington. It will forgive them all of their sins, allow them to uphold their dictatorial regimes and continue to violate human rights as they please. The American administration is using democracy and neo-liberal Arab as a pressure card on the Arab dictatorships which it has supported and the violations of which it has disregarded for the past 50 years to achieve three main goals: the first is maintaining Israel's position as a regional superpower and normalizing relations with it; the second is keeping the oil flowing and stopping any regional force from threatening America's dominance over its pipelines, reserves and sources; and the third is fighting terror, and by terror it means Islamic fundamentalist terror, and keeping any moderate or extremist Islamic movement from coming to power if it does not accept America's plan in the region.

"The fact that high officials in the American administration have received Mr. Gamal Mubarak with open arms, was probably the biggest slap in the face of the Egyptian liberal opposition since it represented through its timing and its results, the abortion of all the hopes which were hanging on this administration in terms of pressuring the Egyptian government to remove the state of emergency, release the freedoms, establish political plurality and refute the bequeathal. The reception came in the context of increasing tensions in Egypt and blunt violations against the judiciary and its men... To say that Mr. Gamal Mubarak visited Washington to explain about democratic reforms to its administration is not convincing...

"What does the national security advisor, the American vice-president and President Bush himself have to do with this explanation? Does the American administration need someone to explain these reforms which do not exist in the first place, at a time when it has the biggest embassy in the Middle East in the heart of Cairo as well as FBI and CIA bureaus operating officially and from well-known headquarters?... The American pressures for democratic reform in Egypt have decreased when the regime agreed to export gas to Israel, establish joint industrial zones and refuse to recognize Hamas's government if the latter does not recognize Israel...

"Accepting the bequeathal, not only reflects a step back away from reform, but also the triumph of the dictatorships that are currently in power and the relinquishing of the real democratic forces which thus become the prey of the regimes' oppression. Moreover, it would encourage other countries such as Yemen and Libya which have been waiting and passionately anticipating the

results of the Egyptian experience in those regards. This direction could escalate the current tensions in the region and the increasing hostility vis-a-vis America, and would force the powers that are demanding change, or the majority of these powers, to adopt the most extremist positions and to choose between these two options: follow the al-Qa'idah model, or the rising leftist forces in South America, led by Venezuelan President Chavez.

"In Palestine, things are moving towards the first option and there's nothing that can be done to prevent it. The US, the EU and the remainders of the corrupt authority, are publicly talking about overthrowing the elected Hamas government, and are using starvation to do so. The American administration is publicly talking about supporting Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and European countries are financing a presidential militia with \$55 million, drawing plans to train it and arm it so that it becomes an elite force and handles the disarmament of the Palestinian resistance and security... Extremism is growing, the world has become less safe, al-Qa'idah organization is getting stronger by the day and its ideology is spreading... and we will soon be watching tapes by Abu-Mus'ab the Palestinian if this series of American mistakes continues, the most important of which is the policy of starvation, the support of dictatorships and human rights violations.

"It was not a coincidence that the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, a faction which emerged from the womb of Fatah, have threatened to strike American and Israeli interests inside and outside of Palestine. The Palestinians already did it in the seventies and they were one of the first in hijacking airplanes. When they stopped, they were rewarded with more settlements, by being evicted from Lebanon and being placed under a starvation siege inside of Palestine. The whole world is now suffering and there's only one Qa'idah. What would it be like if other equally fierce Qa'idahs were to emerge, especially if the American missiles were to be directed at Iran?" (Al Quds Al Arabi, United Kingdom; MEW May 18)

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RELIGION

12.) "An attempt to use religion"

Muhammad Al Hamadi, an award-winning journalist, wrote in the May 16 edition of Al Ittihad, a pro-government daily that: "Since the events of 11 September 2001, religion has regained its glow in the eyes of some, and the world has started to address it in a different way and by use of a language it has never been accustomed to before. I am not only referring to Islam but to all those who belong to a religion and who have started to go back to that religion one-way or the other. Religion has become an important topic in the conversations of the cultivated and the ignorant alike...

"Many have started to base key strategic decision on religion and not because they are pious but because of religious segregation, on the grounds of which human beings are being differentiated from one another. This might be more obvious in the United States and Europe, namely against Muslims and Arabs, [who are treated] as though they were being punished for what others have perpetrated.

"Obviously, there's a will in the West to use the acts of some ignorant people amongst Muslims to judge all the rest accordingly, in order to realize political goals and conduct some of the tasks that are hard to achieve under normal circumstances. When we look at our reality today with objectivity, we find that the game of using religion is at its peak amongst the public and at all

levels, whereby the players are using religion starting from confessionalism and sectarianism and ending with racism and accusations of disbelief. What is more dangerous, is that it is being used to get rid of the unwanted and those that are referred to as the 'enemies' and are being liquidated here and there!

"It is worthy mentioning that even though the majority of those who speak in the name of religion are neither spiritually nor scientifically linked to religion, they nonetheless issue fatwas, give statements, partake in what is happening around them, make mistakes over and over again, but insist on their mistake in order to add more tragedy and pain to the overall scene! They are hurting religion and making it more prone to criticism and harm, because all they have known from religion is its peel... and they were the first ones to slip on it.

"What any observer might ask is whether this return to religion is normal or whether politics have taken over religion and are using it as a substitute ideology for all the other ideologies that have failed...? Is it due to the fact that the attack on the US was perpetrated by people who were allegedly religiously-driven, and hence made every reaction towards what is happening based on religion?! It seems obvious that the matter is neither a question of 'politicizing religion or giving politics a religious aspect'.

"It is simply a new approach to enable the clerics and the politicians to benefit from one another and make politics and religion at the service of one another, in what would help them reach their supreme goals and interests in the end. Even though the method is different between the two, the means and the goals on the other hand are not that different. However, there is another facet of 'politicizing religion or giving politics a religious aspect': at a certain point in time, some Arab governments banned political work and allowed, in exchange, the existence of religious institutions while thinking that the people, and through these institutions and groups, would become busy with worship issues and wouldn't watch the government or hold its officials accountable. Time has proved this theory wrong,... since religion did not replace politics and turned into a new policy itself, only with different means and methods.

"After politics and religion got mixed up, an inescapable truth emerged: when religion becomes a policy it is immediately afflicted with the symptoms of politics more than it benefits from its positive aspects and strength. The first symptom is sedition; hence, a religious party turns into many different parties, groups, factions and towards different ideas and opinions like the Muslim Brotherhood for example, whereby many groups have emerged from underneath its cloak, all recognizing one another and washing their hands of one another... and some of them were used...

"History stands as witness for how religion was used throughout the decades... It is sufficient to point out how the West used religion through its clerics to obstruct the liberation movements which were emerging at the end of the dark ages in Europe. In the Middle East, it was also used to hinder attempts towards enlightenment and civilization which might have led the nation out of the dark and endless tunnel it is going through today. The fact of the matter is that the religion game is one of the most dangerous because it could lead to the worst kind of exploitation of human beings. What is happening in Iraq today is the most perfect example for the wrong use of religion and is leading to terrifying outcomes, the future repercussions of which remain unknown.

"Religion has become very fundamental these days. Its importance does not stem from the fact that it is a religion, but from the outcome which it could entail. This is what has given importance to the content of the curriculums ... to all that is happening in mosques ... to everything said and

written about religions and other groups... But what is more important than all of this, is that those who have no religion should seek one because 'these are the times of those who belong to a religion', even if all that is known about this religion is its name..." (Al Ittihad, United Arab Emirates; MEW May 17)

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