

Something has to give – and very soon

by Chibli Mallat

Listening to the world service of the BBC these days, one would think that the planet is reduced to the Middle East. The top, if not exclusive stories, are Middle East disasters in the making: the deadlock on the West Bank, with Palestinian and Israeli leaders meeting separately with the US president in the White House to find some vicarious arrangement; Saddam Hussein mobilising what remains of his people under the pretext of saving the country's honour from intrusions into his chemical and biological stockpiles by allegedly spy-infested UN missions; the Algerian government condescending to let in a low-level EU delegation to "look at", with no clear mandate or idea to offer, the umpteenth horrendous massacre in a forlorn part of the country; the banning of the party of the last prime minister of Turkey, with Algerian scenarios being openly discussed in and around Turkey. The list goes on and on.

From time to time, the region is lucky to be omitted in the headlines because of a sudden bout of violence in Asia or Africa, or a scandal surrounding the American presidency; but otherwise, the place rests secure with a recurring violence which ensures its sad dominance over world news. Welcome to the Middle East, the

birthplace of the great religious messages of love and brotherhood in the history of man and womankind. And yet, things will surely get worse.

As sabre-rattling proceeds in the Gulf, one cannot fathom a terrain of compromise with Saddam Hussein, who seems to have outdistanced the Nazis by testing chemical and bacteriological weapons on prisoners of war, after trying them out against Kurdish Iraqis and against Iranians. The recent Netanyahu article by Eric Rouleau, a former ambassador of France and a fine expert on the Middle East, is testimony on this very page to the unprejudiced lows of an incumbent Israeli prime minister who is described by his own allies in government as a liar and a cheat; this, at a time when Yasser Arafat has lost all credibility with the massive majority of the elected Palestinian parliamentarians. In Algeria, the attitude of the government towards any manifestation of interest by the outside world is a quip over "foreign interventions in our internal affairs", while people are slaughtered in a way unknown

to the cruellest animals. And in Turkey, the Refah gets banned by a mediocre use of the judicial system, at a moment when it is already out of power...

"Sooner or later something is going to give." The phrase is president Clinton's two days ago, on the occasion of the stand-off with Iraq. What will give is unpredictable, but the problem is one which brings together, in the complicated Middle East, layers of crises which are superposed in a region where there is no Gordian knot solution. As Edward Mortimer, the distinguished foreign affairs columnist of the *Financial Times* suggested at a seminar

at St Joseph's University on Wednesday, one should perhaps address the problems in the region piecemeal, and use any opportunity to advance a different agenda, even if the paradox is that all the crises are so deeply intertwined that one is forced to look for any opportunity to start unravelling the deadlock.

In the gloomy prospects ahead, the only opportunity might be the one triggered by the chance election of Muhammad

Khatami on May 23. It would indeed be sad to see the opponents of Khatami smother the hope raised by his access to the presidency, by bludgeoning his supporters into submission as they did with former prime minister Bazargan. But even if Khatami can fulfil the agenda of the rule of law, which he is seeking regionally and internationally, the whole appeasement process is bound to take time. Perhaps, closer to home, the Israelis can wiser up by reducing the misery of their people and ours and by pulling out, unconditionally, in two or three well advertised stages.

Perhaps, from within home, the Lebanese government might be able to offer to the gloomy region some elements to emulate this year. A first idea would be to allow the process of municipal elections to be carried out in a civilised and peaceful way; the other is to proceed with a decent and open change of president in October. The people in power have no excuse to prevent either process from happening as it does elsewhere in the world – except in the Middle East, of course – peacefully and naturally.

Meanwhile, something has to give...

'The Middle East rests secure with a recurring violence which insures it will maintain its sad dominance over the world news.'