

# Arab nations unwilling to endorse U.S. stand on Iraq

By Jal Taraporevala  
Times News Network

MUMBAI: President Saddam Hussein of Iraq has again warned the United States of the risks of raising tensions on the issue of weapons inspections. Indeed, compared to the situation a month ago, Mr Hussein has several reasons for being more confident of dealing successfully with the continuing U.S. threats against his regime.

Recent Israeli military operations in the West Bank have fuelled considerable resentment at the grassroots level in large parts of the Arab world at the Bush administration's failure to bring sufficient pressure to bear on the Jewish state. Given the extent of anti-American sentiment in

## NEWS ANALYSIS

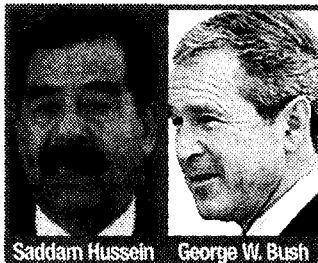
the region, the governments in the Arab world are clearly unwilling to back the tough U.S. stand on Iraq.

Besides, the price of crude oil has been rising as a result of growing tensions in West Asia and the expected increase in demand for energy as the American economy improves. This being so, Mr Hussein seems to calculate that it will be difficult for Mr Bush to secure the backing of other Western nations for a more aggressive stance on Iraq. After all, these nations will be wary of a possible Gulf crisis at this juncture, which could result in a further hike in oil prices and thereby undermine their fragile economic recoveries.

In addition, by keeping its negotiations going with the United Nations on the question of weapons inspections, the Saddam Hussein regime has managed to blunt the effectiveness of U.S. efforts to turn up the heat on Baghdad. Such permanent members of the Security Council as China, France and Russia have been arguing that it is premature on the part of the U.S. to increase its military threats against Iraq at a time when there still exists the possibility of the UN working out an agreement with Iraq on weapons monitoring.

In any case, Beijing, Moscow and Paris have their own economic and politico-strategic reasons for seeking a negotiated solution to the long-festering question of how to deal with the leadership in Baghdad. Mr Hussein will also continue to use the continuing war of words with Washington for his own domestic political purposes. He will do so in two ways. First, Mr Hussein's track-record indicates that he has usually used crises in relations with the U.S. to try and galvanise domestic support for his regime.

Second, the Iraqi president will blame the problems on the economic front on the continuing international sanctions against his country. However, although recent factors have worked in favour of Mr Hussein, the Bush administration is scarcely likely to ease the pressure on Iraq in view of the power realities of the uni-polar world and Washington's increasing assertiveness on the international stage in the post-September 11 period.



Saddam Hussein

George W. Bush

# Arab leaders discuss Saudi peace plan

By Kesava Menon PD-14

MANAMA (BAHRAIN) MAY 11. Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdelaziz today met the Egyptian and Syrian Presidents, Mr. Hosni Mubarak and Mr. Bashar al Assad, in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el Sheikh to assess the current situation in West Asia.

In such statements as have been attributed to the Governments it was said that the main subject of their discussions would be the Saudi, or as it is now called, the Arab initiative. But the leaders were surely aware of the new policy that Washington is trying to launch and of the U.S. administration's repeated calls for support from the Arab world. It appears that the U.S. administration is now interested in a process of rebuilding, restructuring and reforming the Palestinian Authority.

The security apparatus of the Palestinian Authority was severely damaged during Israel's recent military operations with personnel being scattered, offices raided and installations wrecked. Much of the physical infrastructure pertaining to civic affairs

such as power and water lines were also damaged in the Palestinian towns. The functioning of other civic institutions such as the education and health care systems have also been impaired. Repairs are necessary in all these sectors if the Palestinian Authority is to be able to function even as a conglomerate of municipal bodies that it has been reduced to.

While the U.S. administration has asked the European Union and wealthy Arab nations to help in the rehabilitation of the above-mentioned sectors, that does not make for the sum of their objectives. Most ordinary Palestinians too would agree that the Authority till now has been functioning as a chaotic autocracy where every decision must ultimately back up to one man, its President, Yasser Arafat. The Authority's functioning also suffers from rampant corruption and nepotism as funds donated by external donors or the distribution of favours is manipulated to keep intact hierarchies of power. As a first stage for the reconstruction of the Authority, the CIA chief, George Tenet, is to arrive in the region soon to force Mr. Arafat to shrink his

multiple security forces into one single entity. Till Israel's attacks there were at least half a dozen, if not more, security services operating in the Palestinian territories.

For the U.S. the restructuring of the Palestinian security services is such a priority mainly because it hopes that these services, once re-energised, can do the job of stopping Palestinian militants from attacking Israelis. But Mr. Bush and his officials have also let out that they want to re-order the Authority so that it functions in a more democratic and transparent manner.

They also want the Authority to allow the development of an independent judiciary so that the rule of law will prevail.

Many of these ideas have been articulated by Mr. Bush and his officials after the U.S. President had hosted Israel's Prime Minister, Mr. Ariel Sharon, who took them with him to Washington. But if Mr. Sharon's real plan is to posit PA reform as yet another hurdle to be crossed before peace negotiations will begin, or as yet another diversionary tactic, it would appear that the U.S. is not going along. Or at least not for now.

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## Arab Ministers discuss Saudi initiative

**BEIRUT, MAY 18.** Arab Foreign Ministers came together here on Saturday to promote the Saudi initiative for peace with Israel, which was virtually swamped by reactions to Israel's five-week offensive in the West Bank.

The meeting is the first since the Beirut summit of March 27-

28 mandated the eight ministers and the Palestinian Authority to pursue the initiative, which offers Israel diplomatic and commercial relations with the Arab world in exchange for full withdrawal from territory captured by Israel in the 1967 Middle East war.

The initiative, proposed by

Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah, was adopted as an official Arab League position at the summit. But the day afterward, Israel invaded the Palestinian Authority-controlled areas of the West Bank, provoking widespread condemnation and diplomatic attempts to secure a withdrawal by the European Union and the United States.

The Arab League secretary-general, Amr Moussa, who is attending Saturday's meeting, said on arrival on Friday that any future negotiations with Israel should be based on the initiative. It calls for the establishment of a Palestinian State with a capital in east Jerusalem and a "just solution" for Palestinian refugees.

However, Mr. Moussa said he did not expect progress toward implementing the initiative because of the policies of the Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon's Government. "This is evident from (their) measures, policies and practices," he told a Lebanese television channel. The States represented at the meeting are Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Yemen and the Palestinian Authority. — AP



The Lebanese Foreign Minister, Mahmoud Hammud (right), escorts his Arab counterparts at the start of the meeting of the special committee of nine Arab Foreign Ministers in Beirut on Saturday to discuss ways to reactivate the Arab initiative for peace with Israel. — AFP

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# Blair to push Saudi plan

By Hasan Suroor

HD-19  
LONDON, APRIL 5. At a weekend summit in Texas with the U.S. President, George W. Bush, the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, is expected to press his host to back more actively the Saudi Arabian peace plan for West Asia. Seen here as potentially the best deal on offer from Arab countries to put an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the plan includes Arab guarantees for Israel's security in return for the formation of a viable Palestinian state.

Mr. Blair left for America, reportedly determined to make sure that Mr. Bush would remain "engaged" in West Asia and would follow the U.S. Secretary of State, Colin Powell's upcoming visit to the region with concrete steps to restart the peace process. He would also stress the need for "sustained" U.S. engagement and impress upon Mr. Bush America's importance as a "third force" in bringing the Israelis and Palestinians to the negotiating table.

"Two sides will not be able to make progress alone. You have to have a third party to bring the

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sides together to get a political dialogue going. You need an external force, external pressure to bring the political process forward all the time. That is why we want the United States to play this role," his spokesman said, emphasising that a political, rather than military, response was the way forward.

The U.S. decision to intervene in the region after weeks of dithering has been greeted here with relief, and there were suggestions that Britain's quiet diplomacy had much to do with it. It was portrayed as a vindication of Mr. Blair's approach which, in recent days, had been criticised for being soft on Israel, particularly after the Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw's statement on "understanding" Israel's anger following a spate of suicide bombings.

Observers said Mr. Bush's move allowed Mr. Blair to save face on the eve of his U.S. visit. He was under pressure to convince the U.S. administration to use its considerable influence in the region and there was talk of tension between London and Washington over what was seen as the latter's reluctance to intervene.

# Peace by piece

## Problems with Saudi proposals surface

With growing mayhem in the Mideast Saudi prince Abdullah bin Abdel Aziz's peace proposal represents the only hope. Land for peace type deals such as this have been suggested before, but what is significant is that an Arab leader, moreover one with the financial and political clout that Saudi Arabia enjoys in the region, should come with a straightforward proposition to end hostility with Israel. Unfortunately, Arab unanimity was lacking when the Arab League met in Beirut recently to discuss the proposal. Only 10 out of 22 League heads of state turned up; and intransigence on both sides helped to scuttle the proposals. First, the Israelis refused to give any guarantees that they would allow Arafat back to the West Bank and Gaza if he travelled to Beirut; as a consequence Arafat stayed put in Ramallah. Since then his situation has got a lot worse. Secondly, and this suggests machinations afoot, Lebanese President and summit host Emile Lahoud refused to allow Arafat to address the summit by satellite video conference, which prompted the Palestinian delegation to walk out. The official reason is that Israel may have interfered with Arafat's broadcast, but this doesn't sound right.

It is known that the Syrians wield a lot of influence in Lebanon, and President Bashar Assad made an uncompromisingly hardline speech. If peace gains momentum in the region, Syrian leverage over Lebanon would be undermined. The leaders of two influential moderate nations in the region, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and King Abdullah of Jordan, stayed away — they may have anticipated that hardliners would dominate it. Perhaps Lebanon itself was an unfortunate choice for holding the summit, dominated as it is with Hezbollah militia. But Prince Abdullah has little choice but to persevere with the peace proposal; it is time an independent initiative came from the Arab world that settles the conflict with Israel, and tackles the related problem of terrorism emanating from the region.

THE STATESMAN

30 MAR 2002

ARAB SUMMIT / ARAFAT MAY NOT MAKE IT

Arabs world HO-14  
**'Choice is peace or chaos'**

BEIRUT, MARCH 25. Arabs face the prospect of peace and justice or more bloodshed, the Arab League chief, Amr Moussa, said on Monday as Arab Foreign Ministers opened consultations dominated by a Saudi initiative demanding Israeli withdrawal from Arab lands in return for full Arab recognition.

The Ministers met under tight security to prepare for a summit of heads of state on Wednesday that is expected to launch the Saudi proposal on ending 18 months of bloodshed in the Israeli-Palestinian areas and turning regional attention back toward peacemaking. Mr. Moussa said challenges include occupation of Arab land, threats of strikes on an unspecified Arab country — a reference to U.S. threats of military action against Iraq — and threats to Islamic culture. "This summit is sensitive because the international and regional situation is so critical and we as Arab States and societies face an unfavourable situation at this stage of international developments," Mr. Moussa said. "It relates to the future of the entire region: either justice, peace and progress or total chaos and escalating confrontations with conse-

quences nobody can predict.

Before Ministers began a closed session, Mr. Moussa called for an initiative to "restore matters back to order after the continuous attacks against us and against our positions on various

subjects relating to war, peace and the future." The Palestinian issue is high on the agenda, but it was not clear whether the Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat, would be able to take part in the deliberations. He needs Israeli permission to travel from the Palestinian territories to Beirut, and an Israeli official speaking in Jerusalem said Israel would decide whether to grant it Tuesday, the day before the summit. The Israeli adviser, Raanan Gissin, added Israel would not allow Mr. Arafat to travel unless he takes decisive steps against militants. The Palestinian Planning Minister, Nabil Shaath, said chances for Mr. Arafat's attendance were slim.

**U.S. keen on ceasefire**  
Sridhar Krishnaswami

reports from Washington:

The Bush administration is leaning hard on the Israelis and Palestinians to agree to a cease-

fire. Washington is keen that Mr. Arafat should attend the Arab Summit.

The United States fears that if Mr. Arafat is not allowed out of Ramallah, the focus of the meeting will be on the Palestinian leader and not on the peace process. Administration officials believe that the presence of Mr. Arafat in Beirut will add momentum to the Saudi plan. The Secretary of State, Colin Powell, who is in El Salvador, said he hoped there would be progress at the Beirut meeting. "There is a very positive declaration in draft form that I think could be an important step forward dealing with the recognition of the right of Israel to exist and dealing with Arab nation relations with Israel as we go forward and, of course, endorsing the Palestinian State to live side by side with Israel," Mr. Powell said. U.S. efforts at mediation ended on Sunday after Israeli and Palestinian negotiators broke off talks, saying they had to study the U.S. proposal on a ceasefire. According to one version, Washington has proposed that the truce period be reduced to two weeks instead of the four weeks demanded by Israel.

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## Arab nations increase aid to Palestinians

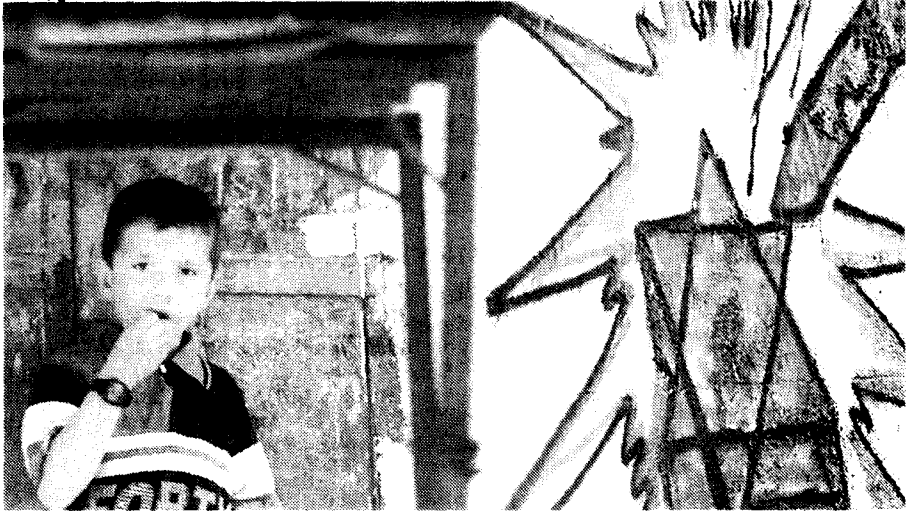
**CAIRO, MARCH 9.** Arab countries have decided to increase their aid to the Palestinians from \$45 million to \$55 million per month, the Palestinian Minister of International Co-operation, Nabil Shaath said today.

The decision was taken at a ministerial meeting here of the committee of the Arab League charged with following up the decisions of Arab summits, Mr. Shaath told reporters. The aid had been set at \$40 million, or \$240 million over six months, at the Amman summit last March. It was increased to \$45 million at a meeting of the follow-up committee last June. The aid is taken from two Arab funds to support the Palestinian *intifada*, or uprising, which currently total \$677.7 million, according to an internal report of the committee.

Arab States pledged a total of one billion dollars to two funds during their summit here in October 2000, weeks after the *intifada* erupted. The two are the Intifada Fund for the Support of Families of Killed and Wounded Palestinians, and the Al-Aqsa Fund for the Preservation of the Islamic Character of East Jerusalem Annexed and Occupied by Israel and the Support of the Palestinian Economy.

The Islamic Development Bank was chosen to distribute the two funds at the request of certain donor countries, reluctant to give directly to the Palestinian Authority, which they argued was not transparent enough. The follow-up committee meets every few months.

Meanwhile, a man wanted by Israel over his alleged involvement in the assassination of an Israeli Cabinet Minister has been



**HEART IN MOUTH:** A Palestinian boy stands next to a wall mural depicting a rocket hitting an Israeli target in Gaza City on Saturday. — AP

arrested by Palestinian secret services, a Palestinian security source said today.

Majdi al-Rimawi, who was singled out by Israel as the mastermind of Rehavam Zeevi's October 17 assassination, "has been arrested by Palestinian secret services," an official from the preventive security services told AFP on condition of anonymity. The source did not say when or where the arrest took place, but that Rimawi, an operations officer in the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) who allegedly recruited Zeevi's assassins, was believed to

be in Ramallah.

A senior Israeli official said last month that Rimawi needed to be arrested before Israel would consider lifting the house arrest on the Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat. Zeevi was assassinated by the PFLP in retaliation for the August assassination of the group's leader, Abu Ali Mustafa. Mustafa's successor Ahmed Sadat was arrested in January. In February, the Palestinian Authority announced the arrest of Zeevi's two alleged killers, as well as that of the man who allegedly sent them. — AFP

# U.S. working on Saudi peace plan

By Sridhar Krishnaswami

WASHINGTON, MARCH 2. The United States and Saudi Arabia appear to be working on the peace plan outlined by the Saudi Prince Abdullah in a quiet manner.

The Assistant Secretary of State for Near-Eastern Affairs and the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency have met the Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Abdullah in the port city of Jeddah, but few details are being divulged by the two sides. "They had a good discussion of the ideas and the situation and how we go forward", the State Department spokesman, Richard Boucher, said. Officials in Saudi Arabia made no mention of the discussions.

The proposals of the Crown Prince which were floated two weeks ago has merited serious attention in the United States with the Republican administration evincing interest in reviving the West Asia peace process. But for the record, senior officials of the administration are making the point that Washington cannot impose a solution; rather Israelis and Palestinians would have to hammer out a final settlement. Washington in the last several months has been pressuring the Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat, to come to grips with the violence; and Arab nations have been appalled that the U.S.

seems unwilling to pressure Israel similarly. But against a backdrop of escalating violence in the recent past, the U.S. is cautioning Israel on its response, especially on the civilian front. "We are in touch with the Israeli Government to urge the utmost restraint be exercised in order to avoid harm to the civilian population", Mr. Boucher said, even while placing the responsibility on Mr. Arafat for the attacks on Israeli targets.

In the context of the Saudi proposal and the response of the U.S., what has to be kept in mind is that the idea of a full Israeli withdrawal to its pre-1967 borders in return for Arab diplomatic and cultural recognition is not new. What is different this time is that a country such as Saudi Arabia which is normally very quiet in its diplomatic dealings is publicly talking about its plan. There are those in the administration and outside who argue that the Saudi proposal as it stands will place the Israeli Government of Ariel Sharon in a tighter spot.

Major elements in the ruling coalition in Israel are flatly opposed to the idea of withdrawal of forces from the Golan Heights and East Jerusalem. Politically, Mr. Sharon is being pressured by both the Right and the Left and his popularity rating is at the lowest point since February 2001.



# US casualty in battle with al Qaida fighters

FROM MOHAMMAD BASHIR  
AND TARAS PROTSUIK

**Gardez (Afghanistan), March 2** (Reuters): Taliban and al Qaida fighters killed a US soldier and wounded others today in repelling an attack in eastern Afghanistan described as the biggest battle since the Taliban were routed last December.

Afghan soldiers, who went into the battle aided by US advisers and B-52 bombers, said in their initial assault they were forced to retreat under withering fire from 3,000 to 5,000 diehard fighters in bunkers on snowy mountains in Paktia Province. They said there were a number of Arab and other foreign fighters among their foes.

The US military said at least one US service member and two Afghan troops were killed and others wounded in the battle that started at 2 am today (9 pm GMT yesterday) east of Gardez, the capital of Paktia Province.

"US, coalition and Afghan forces have sustained casualties," the US Central Command said in a release from its headquarters in Tampa, Florida. "Initial reports are that one US serv-

ice member and two Afghan forces have been killed, an unspecified number of US and Afghan forces have been injured."

US military officials said the assault was the biggest offensive carried out by US and Afghan troops since Taliban and al Qaida forces were routed by US-led attacks that brought down the Taliban in early December.

The Afghan soldiers said they feared some of their units might have been cut off or surrounded in the battle about 30 km east of Gardez near the Pakistan border.

Pakistan, which backs the US war in Afghanistan, sealed its border to stop Taliban and Osama bin Laden's al Qaida fighters escaping from the offensive.

## B-52 strikes

"Some people think there are 3,000 fighters against us. Some think 5,000," one Afghan soldier involved in the fighting said.

A Reuters television cameraman saw flashes and loud explosions from B-52 bombing strikes. At least two US Chinook military helicopters headed out of

the battle area in the mountain village of Shahi Ko in Arma district. Bombing continued into Saturday night.

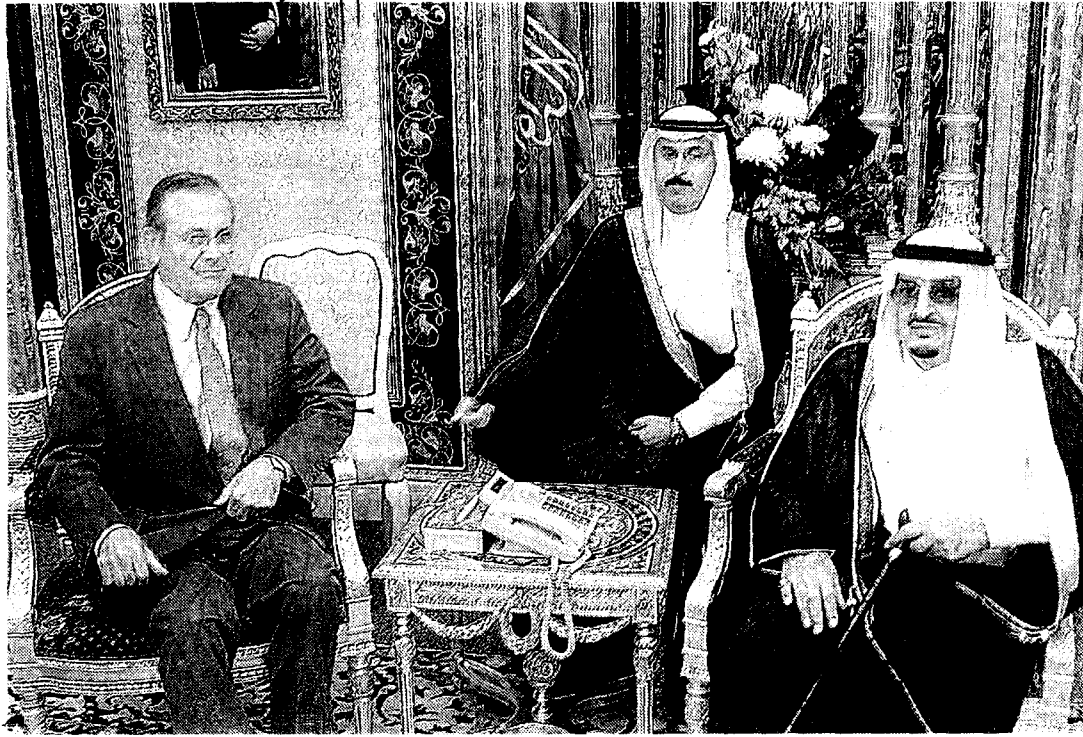
The Pentagon has said pockets of bin Laden's al Qaida network and followers of deposed Taliban leader Mullah Omar have been travelling to the area from all over Afghanistan and regrouping in the isolated mountains dotted with caves.

The soldiers back from the front said they launched their attack with a force of about 1,000, accompanied by about 60 US advisers. "There were 200 of us and five carloads of Americans with us. There were no civilian casualties. Right now the whole campaign has retreated. We failed and our campaign did not succeed," Rahmatullah, who was at the front, said. Rahmatullah arrived back in Gardez with the body of 27-year-old Kalim, who was killed in the fighting.

"For some time now, coalition and Afghan forces have been conducting operations in eastern Afghanistan to eliminate al Qaida and Taliban groups that have been identified in the area," a US military spokesman said.

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# Addressing Arab angst



Donald Rumsfeld with King Fahd... staying friends.

**F**OR A while after September 11, the Arab world was under intense international pressure to undertake the long delayed tasks of self-scrutiny and internal correction. That pressure has eased of late with the world's attention having shifted to the subcontinental confrontation, the enormous job of re-building Afghanistan, renewed violence in West Asia etc. Western Governments, notably that of the U.S., might still be working behind the scenes to pressure the Arab world to reform itself but what is more noteworthy is that some of the Arab leaders and thinkers seem ready to take the reform process forward on their own initiative.

Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdelaziz, effective ruler of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, has been among the first to note the need for change. At a conclave of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, the Saudi Crown Prince described the present as a period of crisis for the Arab and Muslim worlds but went on to point out that the crisis threw up opportunities that should not be missed. To clear any doubts that his listeners might have had about the drift of his speech, Prince Abdullah said it was time the Arab and Muslim worlds stopped blaming others for their ills and instead tried to

*Some of its leaders and thinkers seem ready to start a process of reform in the Arab world, writes Kesava Menon.*

understand and rectify their own faults. A few writers have also pointed out that those who drifted into outfits such as Al-Qaeda were after all sons of the Arab world. If these sons had embarked on such a mistaken path it was high time their seniors addressed the reasons that led them on to such a path.

These sentiments and initiatives have probably been eclipsed by the Pakistan President, Pervez Musharraf's speech of January 12 in which he sought to demonstrate to the international community that he was the Muslim leader who would undertake the boldest of reforms. But, with all due respect to Gen. Musharraf's sentiments, what might happen to his plans vis-a-vis Pakistan can at best have a peripheral effect on developments in the rest of the Muslim world. Pakistan, for all that some might say about its being the "citadel of Islam", is not at the heart of

that world. In fact, the manner in which Pakistan misled the Muslim world about the nature of the Taliban and its true potential and character appears to have left a strong residue of resentment in the Arab world at least. (Those who have written about self-correction have also written about how Pakistan pulled askew the relationship which the Arabs had with the non-Muslim world).

Osama bin Laden and his ilk were fighting, or so they believed, for the "liberation" of the Arab and Muslim worlds. They believed this "subjugation" was epitomised by what they perceived was a western siege of the Arabian Peninsula and the holy shrines located therein. What they were most irked by was not just the presence of western business houses or military forces but by the intrusion of a culture which they could not cope with and which threatened to swamp their own. The mentality that the heartland was under siege was home-grown in the Peninsula and the Arab lands bordering it and for that mentality (and all that follows from it) to be eradicated, the civic work and ideological struggle have to be waged there.

At the core of this mentality is a concept — and the common use of the Urdu word *saazish* and its equivalents sum it up —

that the rest of the world has been conspiring against the Arabs and other Muslims. Such "conspiracies" are supposed to have halted the phenomenal advance of the Arab and Islamic civilisation four or five centuries ago and this uniquely malevolent attitude of the non-Muslim world is also supposed to have been manifested in events such as the attack on the World Trade Center (this was supposed to have been the result of a conspiracy by the Jews).

With the Saudi Crown Prince's words — that the Arabs would have to stop blaming everyone else and start a process of self-correction — the first step seems to have been taken towards dismantling the mental straitjacket that is their sense of victimhood.

The ideological struggle, once it is really joined, will be long-drawn and multi-faceted. It is not just the school curricula and the world view propagated through the mosques that will have to be changed.

The lack of a work ethic — a void created and perpetuated by three decades of oil-wealth induced complacency — is a matter the Arabs have to seriously address. Without the self-belief that they can tackle the technologies and systems of today, the youth of the Arab world will continue to be drawn to an ideology that the only way to defend themselves against an intrusion into their space is through rage and violence.

Ironically, organisations such as Al-Qaeda which made use of these technologies and systems for their own purposes — computers, global financial networks, a management style suitable for their requirements — showed that there was nothing intrinsic that prevented the Arabs from absorbing the requirements of the modern world.

It is too early to say whether that struggle will be waged with the commitment required. Meanwhile, despite some controversial reports both the U.S. and the Governments of the Peninsula states say their cooperation on the more mundane aspects of tracking Al-Qaeda men and their resources is functioning well. While not much is being said on the subject, the focus could well be on the financial networks that Osama and his ilk set up.

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