

# Acting with Caution: Middle East Policy Planning for the Second Reagan Administration

[Dennis Ross](#)

1985

---

[Download PDF](#)

## Executive Summary

Although the disincentives to war are great among the parties to the Arab-Israeli conflict, there is little prospect of real movement toward peace.

### THE REGIONAL CONTEXT: 'NO WAR, NO PEACE'

Israel is preoccupied with the withdrawal from Lebanon and its economic crisis. However, Peres may wish to precipitate a new election over the future of the West Bank and may welcome a U.S. peace initiative.

For Jordan, the change in the Israeli government has made the consequences of inaction less grave than before. But King Hussein retains an interest in appearing to move toward peace while avoiding any actual commitment to negotiations with Israel.

Syria is preoccupied with Lebanon and an internal power struggle. Assad is unlikely to react adversely to peace maneuvering unless the U.S. launches a major initiative aimed at excluding him. Yet he cannot be included because he has no interest in negotiating a peace treaty with Israel.

Egypt is likely to deal with its deepening domestic malaise by distancing itself from the U.S. and reasserting its leadership of the Arab world. Mubarak's interest in the peace process is geared toward winning Arab favor without jeopardizing Egypt's reintegration into the Arab world. He will not take the lead in the peace process but will want credit for any progress.

Saudi Arabia's policy is driven by weakness not strength. The Saudis will press us to move on the peace process but are not interested in real movement if it requires taking sides and supporting us. The best they can do is provide money and help legitimize concessions made elsewhere but they cannot deliver concessions.

The PLO has been severely weakened and Arafat's hold is tenuous. While he will try to insert himself in the peace process to appear relevant, he remains unable to deliver anything like real peace. Rewarding him will rebuild his credibility and thereby undermine Hussein's efforts to speak for the Palestinians.

## US POLICY: ACTING WITH CAUTION

Despite the absence of reasonable prospects for peace negotiations, the Reagan Administration will come under pressure from Arabs and Arabists to launch a new initiative. The State and Defense Departments will also argue for new arms sales to Saudi Arabia and Jordan.

The Reagan Plan and Lebanon failures damaged America's credibility in the region. Therefore, the Reagan Administration should respond with caution, focusing on what is achievable and avoiding more failures:

\* Arms Sales: The primary concern should be to avoid an all-consuming fight with Congress that will damage the domestic consensus, humiliate the Arabs, alienate Israel, and prevent development of a coherent strategy. The Administration should:

Insist that the Saudis and Jordanians first take positive steps to advance the peace process.

Justify the arms sales only in terms of real or potential threats; it is no longer credible to claim that they will encourage Arab moderation.

Avoid any linking of economic aid to Israeli acquiescence because it will be counter-productive.

\* Involving the Soviets: We should not grant the Soviets increased stature in the region until they demonstrate a willingness and ability to deliver something meaningful in return. We should establish tangible "tests" of their interest in cooperation:

Can they deliver PLO sanction of Hussein entering negotiations?

Will they lean on the Syrians to moderate their behavior in southern Lebanon?

Will they cut their support for Libya and other trouble-makers?

Will they accept Israel's need for "defensible borders" instead of backing maximalist Arab demands?

\* Peace Process: We need to adopt our own strategy of motion while patiently awaiting real movement from the local parties. That will require a number of initial steps:

Appoint a non-Arabist special Middle East envoy to give the impression of seriousness while conveying the clear message that the ball is in the Arabs' court and that the U.S. objective is to get Jordan -- not the PLO -- to negotiate with Israel.

Discreetly try to establish "red-lines" between Syria and Israel in southern Lebanon.

Press for an improvement in Egypt-Israel relations.

Put King Hussein on notice that we expect him to make a real move towards negotiations with Israel, independent of Arafat.

We should then lay out a near term strategy that will either make the Jordanian option feasible or produce an alternative option altogether:

\* Work with Israel on the implementation of unilateral autonomy that will both help create a credible alternative Palestinian leadership and also put pressure on Hussein to intervene and coopt it.

\* Explore the possibilities of a Syrian-Israeli agreement that would raise Hussein's fear of exclusion.

- **45 pages**