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The Arab States and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process: Linkage or Disengagement?

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Executive Summary

Traditionally, Arab states have been unable and/or unwilling to make peace with Israel for a variety of internal and external reasons—domestic instability and external weakness in the case of Jordan, ideological and strategic militancy in the case of Syria, domestic opinion and regional weakness in the case of Saudi Arabia, and an ideological quest for regional hegemony in the case of Iraq.

Recent years have seen significant changes in the Middle East—Egypt's return to a leading role, the waning of pan-Arab ideology, the Palestinian uprising, mass Soviet Jewish immigration to Israel, the end of superpower rivalry and the coalition war against Iraq. While the Arab states have tried to respond to these new developments, they have not been freed of traditional constraints on their decisionmaking.

Saudi Arabia—whose participation in the peace process is central to its success—is doing its best to accommodate the U.S. Jordan, too, seeks good relations with the U.S., in light of its pro-Iraq tilt during the Gulf crisis, but has yet to fully formulate its own role in the process vis-a-vis the Palestinians. Syria, which is especially vulnerable due to economic problems and the loss of its Soviet patron, skillfully used the Gulf crisis to win U.S. support. Its involvement in the peace process is shaped by a twin desire to please the U.S. and exercise control over the process as a whole.

The U.S. should adopt a comprehensive strategy toward the Arab states, conditioning aid and political support on constructive behavior in the peace process, i.e., entering into good faith negotiations toward a settlement of the Arab-Israeli dispute. The changes in the region do offer hope for progress, but only if the power and presence of past inhibitions are acknowledged and taken into account.

The Gulf War and the diplomatic progress that has followed in its wake force a rethinking of Arab states' role in Middle East peacemaking. Traditional analysis, which has emphasized their longstanding inability to negotiate a diplomatic settlement with Israel, must be revised to incorporate changes in Syrian, Saudi, and Jordanian policy. This paper's purpose is to define and weigh old and new influences behind the stands of the Arab states on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

INTRODUCTION

Between December 1988 and the spring of 1990, the United States tried to initiate talks between Israelis and Palestinians. By the fall of 1990—after the U.S.-PLO dialogue was suspended and the Kuwait crisis had begun—Washington's emphasis shifted to creating a dialogue between Israel and Arab states. This shift was eminently sensible for a number of reasons: The Arab states threaten Israel more than do the Palestinians; U.S. interests are far more tied to Arab regimes than to the PLO; the PLO's continued terrorism, radicalism, vacillation, and finally its support for Iraq proved it unable to deliver on promises of moderation. Involving Arab countries also corresponds with other U.S. goals, namely easing the apparent (if not quite real) tension between the twin objectives of having close relations with Israel and the Arab world and simplifying efforts to construct Gulf security arrangements and impose controls on the proliferation of unconventional weapons.

Further, the lack of Arab state participation in previous rounds of talks discouraged Israeli flexibility on a range of issues. The chance of peace with the Palestinians alone—especially if that involved empowering the PLO—was insufficient inducement for Is-

raeli concessions. This is because in the absence of real peace with Arab states, a smaller, post-treaty Israel would be more vulnerable to Syrian or Iraqi aggression, Jordanian instability, Arab state support for Palestinian extremism, economic isolation and other threats. Saddam Hussein's demagoguery and aggression reinforced these concerns. Moreover, there could be no Israeli-Palestinian settlement without some role for Jordan given the long border that Israel and Jordan share and the Kingdom's shared demography with the West Bank.

Traditionally, however, Arab states were reluctant to pay a price for peace. Equally, the United States for reasons of its own was reluctant to use its leverage on Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Syria. Washington's power and willingness to press the issue was further limited by the ability of radical Arab states to play on superpower competition and their alliance with the USSR.

At the same time, Arab regimes faced a set of powerful domestic and inter-Arab forces that long made peace with Israel both risky and unnecessary. Ironically, the more effective were arrangements to avoid a new Arab-Israeli war—fostering a situation of “no war, no peace” or, more properly, “no fighting, no treaty”—the more the status quo became less risky and more acceptable.

Even so, there have been potential incentives to Arab states for making peace, including the desire to avoid war, the possibility of gaining land, the opportunity to control the Palestinians, and the hope that a strategic “peace offensive” could hasten Israel's collapse. In 1991, a series of developments made peacemaking seem more attractive: overwhelming U.S. strength and America's new status as the world's sole superpower;

the concomitant loss of Soviet support for geopolitical confrontation; the proliferation and accessibility of dangerous and long-range unconventional weapons, creating a more threatening environment overall; economic stresses; the strengthening of Israel by Soviet Jewish immigration; frustration with the Palestinians; and growing doubt that outright victory over Israel will ever be possible.

The twin-track approach highlighted by the Madrid peace conference—that is, simultaneous and concurrent negotiations between Israel and the Arab states and Israel and the Palestinians—was the ultimate confirmation that the balance of forces in the region had indeed changed.

TRADITIONAL DISINCENTIVES FOR PEACE

U.S. policymakers and analysts tend to assume that countries invariably prefer conflict resolution over confrontation. Yet Arab states have had many reasons for rejecting peace with Israel: the tenets of both secular pan-Arab and religious Islamic ideology are opposed to Israel's existence and have long equated compromise with treason; each state has feared that its Arab rivals would seize on temperance as an opportunity to weaken that state's inter-Arab position; it was also feared that domestic opponents would seize on moderation toward Israel as an opportunity to discredit rulers; radical regimes for their part have tried to exploit the conflict in a bid for Arab leadership; and it was hard all the way around to give up hope of reconquering Palestine. These factors have declined, but all still play important roles in the calculations of key Arab states.

Jordan

While, in principle, King Hussein might like to have peace with Israel and the return of the West Bank, domestic and inter-Arab politics have made it hard for him to negotiate a settlement. His internal difficulties have included a domestic Palestinian majority that would look askance at any compromise with Israel (particularly one reached without wholehearted PLO endorsement) and potential opposition from other Jordanians, augmented in recent years by a seriously ailing economy and manifested politically in the rise of Islamic fundamentalist groups. In addition, Jordan has not been free to make fully independent decisions since it was subject to military pressure or subversion by Iraq and Syria and to Saudi economic leverage. These factors, daunting enough if taken separately, together cast a veto over Amman's involvement in the peace process.

Competition between Jordan and the PLO was another historic problem. Although much weakened by its defeat in the 1970 civil war, the PLO could mobilize Palestinians in Jordan against the regime. There are more Palestinians in Jordan than in the West Bank and Gaza. Even if Jordan regained the West Bank—where the King has not been particularly popular—the number of potentially rebellious Palestinians living under its rule would increase. An independent Palestinian state apart from Jordan would likely be a destabilizing factor, appealing to the state's internal Palestinian majority.

Leading up to and during the Gulf crisis, the fundamentalists, who take a hard line against Israel, brought large numbers of East Bank Jordanians into the opposition for the first time. This suggested that actual

involvement in any significant diplomatic settlement, unless preceded by a showdown between the regime and the radicals, could produce serious internal violence. At the same time, any Jordanian effort to make peace without the PLO's sanction could create a Palestinian-fundamentalist alliance that would constitute the greatest threat ever faced by the regime. And even Jordan-PLO cooperation might put the regime in a weaker situation by diluting the King's authority.

There are, then, considerable reasons for Jordan to see participation in an Arab-Israeli peace process as dangerous and destabilizing compared to the status quo. This was why, in July 1988, the King dropped his claim to the West Bank, cooperated with the PLO and held parliamentary elections restricted to the East Bank.

Historically, Jordan, a weak buffer state sandwiched between Israel, Iraq and Syria, was intimidated by the probability that radical states and forces might subvert it if it joined the peace process. Moreover, there was no guarantee that participating in the peace process would win Jordan any additional financial subsidies from the oil-producing states on which it depends. Amman also distrusted Israel (especially those elements on the Israeli right who call for toppling Hussein and creating a Palestinian state in the East Bank) and doubted whether it would receive sufficient benefits from making a deal. Thus, while it was always worthwhile for Jordan to give the United States the impression that it was ready to help in negotiations, the King always refused to publicly commit himself to talks. (In April 1987, the King did conclude a secret accord with then-Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres. The proposal, the so-called London Agreement, was rejected by the Israeli gov-

ernment and never formally acknowledged by Jordan.)

Syria

Syria has long had major domestic, ideological and strategic reasons not to make peace with Israel. It is ruled by an Alawi minority whose Arab nationalist and Islamic credentials are suspect to the Sunni majority and whose stewardship has made a mess of the economy. Thus Assad's claim to be the most militant leader of pan-Arab and Palestinian struggles had been his key asset. In this light, negotiating with Israel would create serious domestic difficulties.

Syria has cared little for the PLO's interests over the years, and its army even fought against Arafat in 1976 and 1983. Assad attacked Arafat for being too moderate and criticized his 1988 peace initiative. (The Syrian leader's current rapprochement with Arafat derives less from a personal rapprochement than from their common interest in controlling the pace of the peace process.) The Syrian-influenced Palestinian groups have long been the most hardline: Abu Musa's Fatah rebels, Ahmad Jibril's PFLP-GC (still credited by many with the 1988 downing of Pan Am 103), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Despite Syria's acceptance of an international mechanism for Arab-Israeli peace talks (via its endorsement of UN Security Council Resolution 338), Syria's continual efforts to outflank Arafat and take over control of the Palestinians have pushed it toward greater radicalism.

Another deterrent to Syrian diplomacy was the fear that a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict would undermine its geopolitical

position, since if Israel were to become a normal regional power, it would almost certainly align with Jordan and Egypt against Syria's interests. Were Israel to gain regional legitimacy it would also be better placed to counter Syrian influence in Lebanon. As a result, so determined was Syria to block diplomacy that it employed terrorism to intimidate Jordan in the mid-1980s and led the Arab Rejectionist Front which isolated Egypt as punishment for the Camp David Accords until the mid-1980s.

In this context, Syria's only likely gain from a negotiated solution—the Golan Heights—was seen as relatively unimportant. The domestic and regional cost of regaining this sparsely populated, symbolically meaningful but economically inconsequential land was simply not worth the effort. Moreover, Israelis across the political spectrum are more opposed to relinquishing the Golan than to giving up the West Bank. In sum, Syria was long a major barrier to peace, punishing Egypt and threatening Jordan to prevent any such outcome.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's historic refusal to support peace-making efforts stems from its position as a weak, yet wealthy, country surrounded by stronger neighbors. Iraq, Syria and Islamic Iran all sought regional domination over the Gulf region and posed a direct threat to the conservative kingdom. The Saudis handled this menace alternately by timidity, appeasement, paying subsidies, and trying to mediate disputes. As its fundamental line of defense, Saudi Arabia depended on U.S. support and arms sales. Yet, over the years, this American support was never conditioned on Saudi participation in any peace process.

The Saudis have a strong ideological bias of their own against entering into negotiations with Israel. Given strong anti-Jewish feeling and Islamic sentiments (with a particular emphasis on conquering Jerusalem), domestic public opinion could be expected to oppose peace. Though the Saudis have experienced a dozen years of upheaval in the Gulf having nothing to do with Israel, a decision to sign a peace treaty with Israel would hardly be popular at a time when the Kingdom faces strains over modernization and Westernization. After skating so close to being seen as American lackeys, the Saudi royal family has not wanted to appear to be confirming this charge.

Indeed, it is hard to identify any material gain which would accrue to Saudi Arabia by participation in the peace process. There is no territory to be gained and the Saudis were able to get all that they wanted up to the end of the Gulf War without doing anything for the peace process. The United States fought for them and would continue to defend them and sell them arms regardless of their policy on this issue.

Iraq

During the Iran-Iraq war, Baghdad needed Western help, as well as Saudi and Kuwaiti financing, in order to survive. Saddam Hussein tempered his radicalism and raised hopes of a new Iraqi moderation. After the war ended in August 1988, however, Iraq's drive for new weapons was undiminished. Rather than turn inward to focus on reconstruction, Saddam renewed his ambitions for Arab leadership. The decline of Soviet power and the fear of American hegemony intensified these moves as Iraq followed the traditional route of seeking Arab leadership through militancy.

Saddam became the PLO's patron, threatened to "burn half of Israel," posed as the self-proclaimed protector of all Arab states, and engaged in harsh anti-American rhetoric. Today, having survived the Gulf crisis, Saddam is hardly likely to make peace with Israel, though he can do much less harm to diplomatic progress than before. Over time, Baghdad is likely to gain readmission to Arab counsels.

Saddam's fall would have further persuaded Arab leaders of U.S. power and will to use it, making them more cooperative. Allowing him to survive may in the long run make it difficult for the United States to persuade other Arab rulers to help resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict.

NEW FACTORS IN ARAB POLITICS

Recent changes in Arab politics—including indigenous developments, the Cold War's end, and the Kuwait crisis—pose some challenges to the Arab states' historic stand on the Arab-Israeli conflict. The new factors, however, need not inevitably overcome historic ones; Arab states may well respond to these new conditions by changing rhetoric and tactics while keeping the same basic position and strategy.

Egypt's Return to a Leading Role

There are a number of reasons why Egypt has been the only Arab country able to make peace with Israel: as the most powerful and populous Arab state, it had the self-confidence and strong sense of national identity to stand alone against the whole Arab world; war cost it more—and peace offered it more—than any other Arab state; it needed the revenue from the Sinai oil fields and Suez Canal; and President Anwar al-Sadat was willing to take the dramatic, risky initia-

tive needed for a breakthrough, an initiative his successor, Hosni Mubarak, has been willing and able to follow. Other Arab regimes bereft of Egypt's strength and cohesion had less freedom of action, less motivation, and less bold leadership. They responded to Egypt's peacemaking with a ten-year policy of ostracism, which ended in 1987. The Gulf crisis underscored Egypt's indispensable role in the Arab world and it was rewarded with the cancellation of roughly half of its financial debt to U.S., European, and Gulf allies.

Today, a successful peace process would cost Egypt nothing and highlight its role as America's ally, the Palestinians' patron and Israel's bridge to the Arab world. These links would further strengthen its case to be leader of the Arabs. Egypt served as a broker in the 1988-90 round of diplomacy, pushing the PLO to be more moderate, trying to bridge Israeli-Palestinian differences and speaking up for peace in Arab circles. When, at the 1989 Arab Summit, Mubarak told Arab leaders that Israel was an established fact and urged them to stop wasting time and opportunities, a relatively moderate resolution was passed on the peace process. By contrast, the 1990 Baghdad summit, dominated by Iraq, took a much harder line. In the end, though, Iraq's challenge to Egypt for Arab leadership was defeated.

Declining Pan-Arabism: Disengagement from the Conflict

Arab states increasingly and more openly seek their own interests. They have become less willing to fight Israel, less able to form alliances against it, and less eager to help the PLO. Pan-Arab nationalism has declined steadily due to its failures and the growing strength of state institutions and loyalties. Undoubtedly, it means far more to be an

Iraqi, Jordanian, or Syrian in the 1990s than it did when these were infant states whose ruling generation remembered an era before most of the region's boundaries existed. Today, each state operates under its own particular circumstances, economy and political culture. Arab states took different sides in the Cold War as their own interests dictated. Since Nasser, no charismatic figure could unite the Arabs or even enjoy a significant following outside his own borders. At first, Saddam seemed a throwback to earlier times, but his inability to mobilize Arab support—and his Arab enemies' willingness to oppose Baghdad and solicit American military intervention—provide a perfect example of how things have changed.

Although the Arab-Israeli conflict superficially united the Arabs, in practice it was often a major cause of division among them. Jordan fought and expelled the PLO in 1970, Egypt made a separate peace with Israel in 1978, Lebanese Christians allied with Israel in 1982, and Syria sponsored a split in the PLO and fought Arafat. When Arab rulers needed better relations with Washington, neither the PLO nor Palestinian interests had any effect on their policies. Jordan, Iraq, Syria and Egypt have each in their turn attacked or ignored the PLO, and Arab leaders see Arafat as unreliable, if not incompetent; his siding with Saddam in the Gulf crisis only enhanced this impression. These and other events have demonstrated that, contrary to the conventional view in the West, the Arab-Israeli conflict was not the most important issue for Arab states, did not dominate their relations with the United States, and never made them do much to help the PLO. Rather, each state has interpreted and manipulated the issue for its own benefit.

Another major factor reducing the level of Arab state involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict was the increasing respect for Israel's power and the realization that they could not destroy it. The major wars of 1948, 1956, 1967, 1973 and 1982 and the bouts of attrition in between were costly in territory, money, lives, prestige, and stability. At home, economic problems, domestic opposition, the Iranian threat, Islamic fundamentalism and Iraqi aggression preoccupied them. The oil producers had less money than before to finance the PLO or military spending. Arab states responded to this situation by disengaging, either declaring that it was the Palestinians' job to solve their problem or hoping that Washington would deliver a settlement by pressuring Israel.

The Intifada and Soviet Jewish Immigration

The Arab states' progressive disengagement from the conflict with Israel was further demonstrated when Arab rulers gave remarkably little financial or diplomatic—much less, military—aid to the Palestinian uprising, the *intifada* that arose at the end of 1987. They did not mobilize their forces nor did they launch any major diplomatic initiative. Except for Jordan's disassociation from the West Bank in 1988—the most vivid demonstration of disengagement—the Arab states behaved no differently than if the revolt had never happened.

Moreover, the *intifada* itself has been thought by Arab ruling circles to carry a dangerous precedent for Arab states by providing a model for the Arab masses tempted to rebel against authority. In terms of the peace process, civil unrest may be sparked by extremists exploiting a regime's move toward peace with Israel. There is certainly no organized peace camp in the Arab world.

Jordan, Syria, and Saudi Arabia cannot take for granted that their people would accept peace for Israel on any potentially realistic terms, while domestic rivals and dissatisfied citizens may use the occasion of such "treason" to vent their rage over a variety of issues.

The Arab world saw Soviet immigration to Israel as making that country even stronger, another sign that it was here to stay and that the dream of destroying it was a fantasy. Saddam's appeal arose partly out of a sense that his ascendance might be the last chance for victory, but no other Arab leader joined him in attacking Israel, while his defeat will discourage imitators for some time. Moreover, after the experience of direct U.S. military intervention, no Arab state—especially Syria—can be sure that an attack on Israel would not also bring armed U.S. retaliation against it.

These developments further demonstrated that the Arab states' position toward Israel is dictated by their own national and regime interests. They are not so highly engaged in the "Palestine question"—the situation of Palestinians in the occupied territories and the status of the PLO—as in the "Israel question"—seeing Israel as a strong, potentially threatening regional power. The Kuwait crisis, and the anti-PLO reactions of the Arab states in the coalition, further extended this trend.

End of Cold War and of the Kuwait Crisis

The collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe has removed from the scene the key defender of radical states in the Arab world, especially Syria, the Soviets' main ally in the region. All Arab regimes now have less room to maneuver inasmuch as they can no longer play the two

superpowers off each other. Without the USSR as a diplomatic partner and a reliable source of weapons, the Arab military option against Israel was further reduced. At the same time, Moscow's increasing cooperation with the United States has also made possible joint endeavors to promote stability and solve conflicts.

Ironically, the loss of Soviet protection encouraged Iraq's attempt to carve a niche for itself as a local Arab "superpower"—with its own shield of nuclear and unconventional arms—climaxing in its attempted cannibalization of Kuwait. Yet it was these very developments that made such a role much less possible, since the chief strategic constraint on U.S. leverage and intervention was now removed and the new U.S.-Soviet collaboration made a global alliance against Iraq possible. While this change in the international balance of power was not the only development changing the regional situation, it was probably the most important one.

For eight years Iraq fought Iran, with hundreds of thousands of casualties on both sides, in order to determine which would dominate the oil-rich Persian Gulf. When Iraq won in August 1988, it proceeded to claim the prize. This result, combined with Saddam's ambition to pose as an Arab alternative to U.S. domination, led him to defy America, woo the PLO, develop more unconventional weapons and seize Kuwait. These actions made Iraq a new radical pole opposing U.S. influence and Egypt's leadership.

But in the final analysis, Saddam's failure to renew a credible Arab military or radical option may have demonstrated the impossibility of such an enterprise. The crisis also weakened the PLO, the Arab world's main

revolutionary movement, whose support for Iraq undermined the patronage it enjoyed from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Syria. While the political effects would have been stronger if Saddam had been toppled, the lessons of Iraq's defeat and America's power have had a strong impact on the region as a whole.

By saving the Arab rulers from Saddam, the U.S. gained a great deal of potential leverage—more than Washington has seemed to realize—in shaping the situation and achieving diplomatic progress on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Yet the U.S. seems reluctant to employ these assets fully, perhaps underestimating them or believing Gulf security to be a higher priority. In the context of the peace process, the most the U.S. has seemed to secure from the Gulf states for its monumental labors in terms of direct participation was a promise that Gulf Cooperation Council observers would attend a regional peace conference, not that they would directly engage Israel.

ARAB RESPONSES TO THE NEW FACTORS

The Arab states have had to adjust rapidly to these new factors and somehow synthesize their responses with the enduring presence of traditional constraints. Given their different situations, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria have each formulated new policies.

Saudi Arabia

While Saudi policy had shifted, it has not been transformed. As with Syria and Jordan, the basic domestic and geopolitical situation of the regime has remained the same, although the constraining threat of foreign radical forces has lessened. Three factors are

especially salient for the Saudis.

First, the country has used its oil revenues to develop itself, becoming more modern and more ambitious as the leader of the neighboring sheikdoms in the GCC. This growing wealth, new degree of modernization, and extent of education have generated renewed self-confidence.

Second, while Saudi ties to the United States grew closer, this relationship did not make any demands on Saudi Arabia in terms of the Arab-Israeli conflict; on the contrary, it was based on a Saudi willingness to ignore the issue completely in favor of deepening its ties with the U.S. In this spirit, the Saudis had earlier over-built military facilities for use by the United States in an emergency, bought huge amounts of American arms and employed large numbers of American technicians.

Third, and equally important, the strategy of appeasement had been insufficient in deterring radical neighbors. Iran sought to spread Islamic revolution, despite Saudi attempts to soothe relations; and Iraq invaded Kuwait, despite generous Saudi-Kuwaiti subventions. Yet, in the final analysis, Riyadh had no choice but to react on each occasion. During the Iran-Iraq war, the Saudis helped Iraq and supported the U.S. reflagging of Kuwaiti tankers and in 1990, Riyadh requested U.S. troops to defend it from Iraq and allowed the Desert Storm offensive to be launched from its soil.

This situation increased Washington's ability to press Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to participate in talks with Israel. Although Saudi Arabia has no direct border with Israel, it is of immense financial and religious stature in the Arab world. As a result, its full

presence at talks is indispensable to encourage other Arabs to act by further undermining the taboo of peace with Israel; providing a guarantee to bankroll Arab participants in a diplomatic solution (and to cut off aid to the recalcitrant); and to increase pressures and financial inducements for Palestinians to compromise and change their policies or their leadership. Saudi participation would also clearly signal to Israel that real regional peace and recognition can be achieved in exchange for concessions. It would give Israel a true alternative of trading territory for peace rather than—as this formulation appears to many Israelis—a trap of trading land for vague and probably short-lived promises.

The Saudis did use their influence in the Arab world to encourage others to participate in the Madrid meetings and this was indeed useful. Such indirect, tentative and non-publicized measures, of course, put less onus on Riyadh than the choices faced by Jordan, Syria and the Palestinians. Still, Saudi Arabia's participation in the regional dimension of the negotiations—along with other Arab states including Morocco—would be an important boost to the process.

Yet while the Kuwait crisis increased a Saudi need to maintain good relations with the United States, it did not necessarily reduce the traditional reluctance to help the peace process. Of course, to ensure U.S. support, the Saudis must continue to convince Washington they are being helpful. Yet as in Gulf security arrangements—where Riyadh is eager to see U.S. forces leave—this can be more a matter of good image than of actual performance.

Jordan

While the Saudis may have the luxury of standing aside from talks, however, Jordan and Syria do not. Jordan's pro-Iraq stand in the Gulf crisis antagonized Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the sole likely patrons for its ailing economy, while its weakness after the Gulf War made it seem advantageous to revive its traditional interest in the West Bank. Thus, King Hussein renewed his 1985 plan for a joint Jordan-Palestinian delegation to negotiate for a Jordan-West Bank federation, hoping for the PLO's approval without being burdened by its participation.

Amman had ample reasons for wanting to appease America, the sole superpower and its ultimate protector, since without taking such measures, Jordan could have remained a pro-Iraq pariah. President Bush actually relieved some of this pressure by announcing that he forgave the King immediately after the war, apparently without eliciting any quid pro quo. Still, the monarch desperately needs to strengthen his relationship with America.

Jordan's supportive role in Madrid can be seen as the coming together of several factors:

- The pursuit of better relations with the United States and the West.
- The (at least temporary) decline in some of the previously constraining influences, including the strength of Syria and Iraq.
- King Hussein's interest in regaining the West Bank and of having a major say in any resolution of the Palestinian issue and the future of the occupied territories.

Jordan wants the talks to succeed but has not necessarily decided what role it will play. It could pose as an interested neighbor, minimizing its involvement in the Palestinian/West Bank question, seeking merely to rectify its border while making peace with Israel. Alternatively, Amman's strategy might be to seek a Jordanian-Palestinian federation or a de facto reincorporation of the West Bank. Amman's ultimate response to the peace process would depend on the mix of signals sent by the United States, Israeli policy and the relations of "inside" Palestinians with the PLO.

It is important here to emphasize two points: First, the United States does not seem to have given Jordan much sense of the role Washington would like it to play. Second, any outcome would still pose significant dangers for Jordan in line with the traditional constraints outlined above. The return of an estimated 300,000 Jordanians (most of them Palestinians) from the Gulf only heightens the kingdom's economic and political fragility.

Syria

Like Jordan, Syria is at a particularly vulnerable point, feeling impelled to please the United States so as to escape isolation and secure financial aid. Recognition of American power may—but will not inevitably—translate into a real willingness to reach an Arab-Israeli peace agreement.

Syria is the Arab state most hurt by the USSR's decline. Before the Kuwait crisis, Syria had no Arab ally. It was on bad terms with Iraq, Jordan and the PLO, and Saudi Arabia had just stopped its subsidies to Damascus. The regime's effort to build its army to achieve "strategic parity" with Israel had

failed. While Syria effectively dominated Lebanon, it seemed to be bogged down there in a permanent civil war.

The Kuwait crisis dramatically benefitted Syria. The Assad dictatorship, despite its longstanding human rights violations and support for terrorism, was now on the side of the "Free World" against its traditional Iraqi rival. Assad won three extremely important gains from the crisis: The United States granted Syria absolution for its past terrorism and anti-Americanism, allowing it to escape international isolation; Washington posed no obstacles to Syria's consolidation of control over Lebanon; and Saudi Arabia gave Damascus huge amounts of money, much of which was quickly spent on arms.

The question remains, however, whether a desperate Syria, or one feeling more self-confident, is the more likely candidate to enter the peace process. For Syria to really change course, it would have to be forced into a choice between making peace or losing these gains. In other words, Syria's political rehabilitation, financial well-being and position in Lebanon would have to be made conditional on Assad's cooperation on the peace process.

Assad has understood better than any American policymakers the new primacy of the United States and the importance of maintaining good relations with it, and he may even overestimate the likelihood that the devastating arsenal used on Iraq might some day be turned on him. To protect his own regime and his domination over Lebanon, Assad assured the United States of his willingness to cooperate in diplomacy—he did not want to appear responsible for destroying the peace process. In fact, he would rather show that his help was indispensable

for its success. Soviet and Saudi leverage over Syria were also significant in affecting its behavior. Moscow was his arms' supplier; Saudi Arabia was his source of funds. Both sought—or could be expected to want—his participation.

Syria's decision to make a regional conference possible, then, was a tactical move: a way to relieve pressure rather than conclude a peace. Syria's willingness to attend a regional conference was a response to change in the regional and world power balance, including most especially a respect for U.S. power and foreign pressure and a need to make a tactical response to it.

Syria's performance before and during the Madrid conference demonstrated these points. At the least, Damascus tried to obtain veto power over the results, tying any progress in the Israeli-Jordanian-Palestinian negotiations to achievement of its own demands. Procedurally, it tried to block convening of the bilateral talks and has laid down strict conditions for its participation in multilateral talks on regional issues. Syria, then, is far less motivated to make progress than Jordan or, for that matter, the West Bank/Gaza Palestinians. One potential strategy for Assad is to rebuild his alliance with the PLO in making demands beyond those Israel would ever accept. Such a bloc could counter Jordan and the "inside" Palestinians who—while maintaining their own demands—are much more willing to make a compromise along the lines that the United States could advocate.

POLICY CONCLUSIONS

U.S. strategy toward the peace process could emphasize one of two aspects: the Israeli-Palestinian dimension or the Arab

states-Israel conflict. In 1989, the Bush Administration stressed the former, in 1991 the latter as a result of the Gulf War. The current peace process is moving along the two tracks more or less simultaneously. Looking at the post-Gulf War environment, it may be argued that the Arab world is sick of the conflict with Israel, more dependent than ever on the United States, weary of regional instability, frustrated with Arafat's inability to make peace, and thus ready for an historic diplomatic settlement of the issue.

A contrary argument could easily be made that the Arab states have not found the status quo so undesirable, since they have had rational reasons both for avoiding war with Israel and for not making peace with it. Of course, Arab regimes would be happy if U.S. pressure forced Israel to give up the West Bank and Gaza Strip. But the real issue was whether they would move toward peace as a way of making possible a comprehensive settlement.

Ironically, should the United States be seen as blaming Israel for breakdowns in the peace process, it would be even less likely that Arab states would act or make concessions. Why should they when they are getting everything they want from Washington, and by refusing to assist the peace process incur no cost, while at the same time bringing about a deterioration in the U.S.-Israel relationship? Thus the status quo becomes even more preferable.

Obviously, the Arab states' attitude toward talks has had nothing to do with the PLO's exclusion—they were not fond of Arafat—nor with such hot issues in U.S.-Israel relations as the role of Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem, European or UN participation, or the number of times a

regional conference would meet. Arab states were also little affected by anger over settlements in the occupied territories. After all, an increasing number of settlements should make talks all the more urgent lest it soon be too late to ever expect territory might be yielded.

Arab rulers are directed by their perceptions of national and regime interest. If, as should be clear, a solution to the conflict is only conceivable if they are ready to offer Israel serious negotiations and full peace, the question remains as to why they would take such a step. Given the basic premise of the new order—U.S. hegemony along with Soviet cooperation—Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria would most likely participate and compromise only if they needed to act this way to obtain what they wanted from the United States.

This situation requires a comprehensive strategy in regard to the Arab states. The Saudis and Kuwaitis must do everything possible to promote the process' success, funding Syria and Jordan only if they help reach a reasonable compromise, and pressing and subsidizing Palestinians in the same direction. Syria must be made to know that it can expect to gain Saudi aid only if it continues full participation in the bilateral negotiations and is flexible in reaching a compromise peace. Otherwise, Damascus must assume that Washington will do everything possible to cut that aid while covertly and overtly opposing Syrian influence in Lebanon. Moscow could cooperate by so conditioning arms sales to Syria. Jordan has to think that it will receive Saudi and Kuwaiti aid and be forgiven its trespasses with Iraq only if it negotiates in good faith. And Palestinians in the territories have to understand that forfeiting this opportunity will only bring

a further reduction in the Arab states' support for them. Israel for its part will find it advisable to yield benefits commensurate to the concessions of its interlocutors, including territorial concessions.

This is no easy task. But one of diplomacy's tasks is to transform tactical moves into political facts. The emphasis on modalities had been a dead end, producing only progressively more petty conflicts over less important details. In many ways, an immunity from blame for failure seems safer to the governments of Syria and Jordan (and to Israel and the PLO as well) than the concessions required by success and the new strategic situation created by a negotiated settlement. Success is only possible if peace is made attractive to the parties. The changes experienced by the region, and indeed the world, do offer some hope for progress, but only if the power and presence of past inhibitions are taken into account.

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