

Israel and the Gulf:

New Security Frameworks for the Middle East

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In-Depth Reports

The 1991 Gulf War and the post-war Arab-Israeli peace process fundamentally altered the relationship between the Levant and the Persian Gulf and prompted widespread regional and international interest in new security frameworks for the Middle East. Various existing proposals reveal divergent national positions on the future shape and boundaries of such a security system.

Israel has been one of the most active promoters of a security system, primarily as a means of supporting the peace process. Following the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, the Peres government proposed to the United States a bilateral working group to investigate the possibility of creating regional security alliances in parallel with a peace agreement with Syria. In January 1996 the two countries agreed to establish such a working group. Peres also sought to explore the idea of a formal U.S.-Israel alliance as the basis for a larger multilateral security system.

Jordan, a relatively small state surrounded by powerful neighbors, has consistently supported the idea of a regional security system modeled on the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), through which Amman could create bilateral relationships with different states and blocs. Jordan's geostrategic location is pivotal to regional stability, serving as a buffer between Israel and Iraq, and between Saudi Arabia and Syria. Jordan supports immediate efforts to create an inclusive regional security system that is not tied to completion of the peace process.

Egypt's interest in remaining the Arab world's dominant military and political power has led it to insist on an Arab-based security system rather than a broader, Middle East-based version that Cairo views as an instrument of Israeli (and possibly Turkish) regional hegemony. Egypt's attitude toward regional security arrangements reflects its perception of Israel's qualitative edge in conventional weapons and general preponderance of military power (due to Israel's purported nuclear capability). Cairo seeks a regional security system that would create a new balance of power with Israel through the revival of Arab defense arrangements and the elimination of any Israeli non-conventional capability. Thus, it has generally opposed (or sought to delay) the idea of an exclusive regional security system for the Middle East.

Instead of the NATO paradigm, in which mutual threats serve as a basis for a regional security system, a more suitable approach for the Middle East would be to focus on common challenges that -- while taking into account the

interests of concerned parties -- must be addressed collectively rather than on the basis of the narrow national interests. Three such challenges stand out:

The eventual re-integration of Iraq. Iraq directly affects the national security interests of both the Levant and the Persian Gulf. Baghdad has repeatedly challenged its neighbors in order to achieve regional hegemony, sent forces to take part in three Arab-Israeli wars, and fired missiles at Israel during the Gulf War. UN sanctions and the U.S. policy of "dual containment" have hampered the revival of Iraqi military power and prompted Baghdad's efforts to initiate a dialogue with Israel as a means of improving its standing in the West; Saddam may believe that joining the peace process would undermine international support for sanctions. Some Israeli analysts have argued that Israel must prepare for the eventual end of the sanctions, even if this conflicts with U.S. policy. Moreover, a unilateral Israeli initiative toward Baghdad might force Syria to accelerate the peace process and make concessions, and could bolster the Israel-Jordan peace treaty. Any such move would come at the expense of the Gulf states, by accelerating Iraq's acceptance in the international system before it has fulfilled certain prior conditions.

Conversely, a decision by several Gulf states to restore ties with Iraq -- due to an enhanced Iranian threat or the revival of border disputes between Saudi Arabia and the smaller GCC states -- could bring about new alignments that would undermine dual containment at the expense of Israel. If Baghdad agreed to withdraw its heavy armored units from southern Iraq and concentrate them instead in the "panhandle" near the Jordanian border, the advantage in Gulf security would have a profound impact on the security of Israel. Regional stability will require an approach that takes into account the security of both Israel and the Gulf states. Only in the context of a comprehensive design for regional security can new arrangements be advanced that do not come at the expense of either side of the Middle East.

Jordan's role as a buffer state between Middle East subregions. The challenges facing Jordan as a buffer state did not end with the Israel-Jordan peace treaty in 1994. Although Amman has disengaged from its Gulf War alliance with Iraq and become one of Saddam Hussein's most vocal critics, it has not experienced a corresponding improvement in its relations with other neighbors. Egypt and Syria remain suspicious of Jordanian aspirations in Iraq, and enduring dynastic rivalries still overshadow the Saudi-Jordanian relationship. At the same time, its policy of peace toward Israel appears to lack broad domestic support and will be difficult to sustain if popular economic expectations are not met. Moreover, Jordan's new connection with Israel remains vulnerable to the uncertainties regarding the future of Israeli-Palestinian "final status" talks, and Jordanians and Palestinians retain considerable mutual suspicion.

Jordan's most immediate problem is the uncertainties of the Oslo process. Amman would perceive movement toward the creation of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank as an immediate national security threat; a complete breakdown of Oslo, however, could also expose Jordan to new instability, with the Palestinians pressuring Amman to abrogate its peace treaty with Israel and Arafat improving ties with Jordan's main regional rival, Syria. Theoretically, these problems could be offset by re-enforcing Jordan from the east. Close ties to a post-Saddam Iraq would buttress Amman politically and revive a trade relationship that was vital to Jordan's economy for much of the 1980s. In the absence of such a breakthrough, Jordan must complete the restoration of its ties with the GCC states and seek new forms of cooperation. (Jordan was not party to the 1991 Damascus Declaration, which tied Egypt and Syria to the defense of the smaller Gulf states.) New regional security arrangements, anchored in a cooperative relationship with Amman, would serve the long-term interests of Israel and the Gulf states alike.

A "safety net" for the peace process. The peace process could become far more fragile in the future unless special steps are taken. The Oslo agreement deliberately postponed negotiations on difficult issues such as borders, settlements, security arrangements, refugees, water, and above all, Jerusalem, until talks on final status. As these remaining issues become more daunting and the pace of diplomacy slows accordingly, the peace process will likely

face the kinds of crises (and even temporary breakdowns) that usually accompany difficult negotiations. In addition, regional and international factors could also weaken the process at this critical time. The new relationship between Israel and the Gulf states is among the most obvious accomplishments of the peace process that could be threatened by this. Neither Israel nor the United States can afford to allow their relations with the GCC states to be completely contingent on the successful implementation of the peace process. A regional security regime that institutionalized contacts between Israel and the Gulf states could make their bilateral ties less vulnerable to transient events.

Although the idea of the Gulf states benefiting directly from security ties to Israel may be premature, the smaller GCC states have an interest in a broader regional security system that could reduce their dependence on Saudi Arabia. Moreover, Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia lack Israel's ability to deter a militant Iran or resurgent Iraq from using its arsenal of non-conventional weapons to exert influence on its neighbors. Thus, a regional security structure linking Israel and the Gulf states would not only serve as a hedge against problems in the peace process, but could enhance Gulf security by acknowledging their shared threat perceptions.

Israel and Jordan alone are not sufficient to make such an arrangement work, however, any regional security system will also have to include key Middle Eastern states to provide critical mass. This may prove difficult. Without significant external inducements, Syria is unlikely to participate before achieving a full peace settlement with Israel. Egypt is reluctant to support multilateral security concepts that are not based on Arab states alone, and Saudi Arabia tends to follow the Egyptian-Syrian line. Thus, considerable diplomatic effort will be required to convince Egypt that even a minimal regional framework is in its interest.

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