

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

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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.

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