

Post War Issues #3: The Arab-Israeli Peace Process

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Brief Analysis

The staggering allied victory in the Gulf War has been followed by presidential statements from Washington and Paris about the need to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict. On the face of it, however, the war against Saddam appears to have made a solution to the Palestinian problem more necessary and yet less likely. But it is a mistake to assume that it must be bloody-minded business as usual in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Instead, the region will be in shock and a narrow window of opportunity will have been opened. If exploited adroitly and expeditiously, it may well be possible to generate a viable Arab-Israeli negotiating process. To be sure the war has made the Israelis even more sensitive to the security threat posed by Arab armies, the zero-sum intentions of the Palestinians and the strategic value of the depth afforded by retaining the West Bank and Golan Heights. And the Palestinians, in the frustration generated by their failed dependence on yet another perfidious pan-Arab leader, are expected to be too divided and leaderless to engage in reconciliation with Israel. Nor are the Arab states likely to do much to further peace. Egypt is already at peace, rendering President Mubarak's role more limited. Saudi Arabia is not a front-line confrontation state. Jordan's King Hussein has become the mouthpiece for the anti-Israeli and anti-American sentiments of the Jordanian street. And Syria's President Assad would like to be the central focus of any post-war peace process but the Bush administration has so far received no clear indication of his actual willingness to make peace.

But the subterranean currents may be moving in a more promising direction. First, in the aftershock of the Gulf war, new realities are bound to intrude on the comfortable calculations of all the players. Israelis have been reminded of the horrible costs of war at a time when they are confronting the huge challenge of Soviet immigration. The choice between seeking peace and preparing for the next war has also been eased by this war's removal of the Iraqi army as a major eastern front threat to the Jewish state. And the total discrediting of Arafat has provided Israel with a golden opportunity to deal with an indigenous Palestinian leadership in the territories before the PLO phoenix rises again. True, Prime Minister Shamir leads an unruly coalition of right wing and religious parties unwilling to countenance territorial compromise in the West Bank. But if there is a genuine offer of peace from the Arab side, Shamir is capable of delivering a territorial deal on the Golan Heights and an interim deal for Palestinian self-government which leaves open the final status of the territories.

On the Arab side, the Gulf crisis has produced a new dominant axis which combines the largest, the richest and the most nationalist states. This unprecedented alignment of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria would be unassailable if it chose to sit down and negotiate peace with Israel. In this crisis, they faced a common threat with Israel and should have come to appreciate the contribution Israel's restraint made to their interests. After the crisis, President Mubarak and King Fahd certainly have a huge incentive to demonstrate to the Arab street that, through peace with Israel, they are better able to secure Palestinian rights than Saddam could with his aggressive behavior. Can they bring Syria along? That depends on whether Assad will view the package of incentives -- territory on the Golan, stability in a Syrian-dominated Lebanon, an interim arrangement for the Palestinians, improved relations with the U.S., and Saudi aid -- as more attractive than the potential of a radical alliance with Iran, a post-Saddam Iraq and a

post-glasnost Soviet Union. Assad would like Syria to be the "swing state" but he knows that in the wake of the war the radical alternative will look unpromising. That means he will at least be prepared to receive offers and exploit the naivete of Western leaders only too willing to make the pilgrimage to Damascus to warrant him a man of peace. If Saudi Arabia, emboldened by the protection we have afforded it, refuses to fund a renewed Syrian effort to achieve "strategic parity" with Israel, and if the Soviet Union -- in return for a seat at the table -- refuses to provide the weapons, then Assad might be persuaded to engage in negotiations with Israel.

The second track of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations also holds more promise than might at first appear. Shamir's principal objection to the last effort to launch an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue was that the U.S. was trying to force him to negotiate with PLO proxies over a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. With the PLO out, Likud ministers are now discussing the idea of municipal elections in the West Bank and Gaza to produce a Palestinian leadership with which Israel would negotiate an interim arrangement for self-government. Will the Palestinians boycott free and fair elections, seeing in them an effort to exploit their weakness? There is clearly a powerful selfdestructive urge in the Palestinian national movement. But other factors may now come into play. First, the Palestinian leadership will be up for grabs. Nationalists in the territories already believe that the movement would be better led by people rooted in the land who would be more responsive to the needs of the local population. Second, Hamas -- the Palestinian fundamentalist movement -- is likely to seize the opportunity of elections to demonstrate its strength. Other Palestinians will then have to participate for fear of being shut out of the negotiations. Third, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are capable of lending vital Arab legitimacy to the municipal elections process with their political and financial support. Weekend reports quote senior Saudi officials as being willing to support such a process. Also, in the wake of Saddam's devastating defeat, the U.S. will be the dominant and influential power in the region. All the local powers will take their cues from us. But we will need some guidelines for productive and expeditious engagement:

1. Avoid the appearance of a Pax Americana. In the wake of victory, the Arab world will tend to view the U.S. as the new imperialist power. In this context a "Bush Plan" will generate unnecessary opposition. Better to work with Israel, Egypt and Saudi Arabia on initiatives that they can propose and we can support.
2. Give priority to Gulf security. While it is important to move ahead quickly on Arab-Israeli issues, a failure to secure post-war arrangements in the Gulf will not only endanger the victory it will also impact adversely on the prospects for progress on the Arab-Israeli front. We should want to avoid the fate of the 1982 Reagan Plan which, because it was premature, failed either to secure Lebanon or an Arab-Israeli breakthrough.
3. Avoid the UN-sponsored international conference. Israel's government is allergic to this idea. Any effort to promote it will result at worst in stalemate, at best in endless wrangling about the modalities. Instead, the focus should be on regional talks between the Arab states and Israel, perhaps under superpower auspices.
4. Engage the Arab states. The opportunity now exists to engage the Arab states and ease the risks of peacemaking for an Israel which has always been more threatened by Arab armies than by Palestinian rock-throwers. The logic of the process should be to encourage the Arab states to make Israel an offer of genuine peace and full recognition in return for negotiations on the Golan Heights and an interim arrangement in the territories. The more generous and comprehensive the Arab offer of peace, the more forthcoming Israel might be. However, it would not be helpful to try to engage Jordan in the process at this stage. The King would likely insist on bringing the PLO to the table for Palestinian cover and on a prior commitment from Israel to territorial compromise on the West Bank. Both are non-starters for the Israeli government.
5. Get the process started. If too much attention is paid to the outcome, our efforts will be diverted from getting the process underway. After almost a decade of false starts, what is now needed is a breakthrough to a viable negotiating process that builds confidence among very distrustful partners.

Martin Indyk is the executive director of The Washington Institute and an adjunct professor at The Johns Hopkins University Paul Nitze School of Advanced International Studies. He visited Saudi Arabia and Israel from January 3-12, 1991. ❖

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