

PROSPECTS FOR PEACE OR CONFLICT
IN THE MIDDLE EAST
1987-1992
United States Policies and Objectives

I Policy Determinants

At the heart of American policy in the Middle East is the goal of maintaining US influence in and access to the region. The reasons are largely obvious and well-understood: oil, the strategic character of the place, the desire to forestall expansion of the Soviet sphere of influence, here as elsewhere, at the expense of the West.

This general national purpose translates into a number of specific policies. Support for the conservative Arab regimes, that are in the main pro-Western and some of which produce most of the region's oil, is prominent among them. A related aim is to nourish conditions in the area that conduce to the stability of these states. The festering and volatile Arab-Israeli conflict is considered to be a prime threat to regional stability, and hence achievement of a peace settlement has been a consistent component of American policy. Soviet opportunities in the region, moreover, have been thought to be improved by turmoil and war, and it has been assumed until recently that regimes that would arise in the wake of deposed conservative rulers would tend to be pro-Soviet. Regional war has also been seen as a possible trigger for superpower confrontation.

The priority given by the US to support for Israel is related but it springs from sources that are in part different. Strong domestic pro-Israeli sentiment has endowed this policy with an incontestability that allows it to stand on its own. It is not always or entirely consistent with American policy goals for the region as a whole, but even when it seems to be at cross-purposes with them it often prevails. It is buttressed by the rapport that frequently develops between Israeli and American officials at various levels, a personal rapport that is seldom matched with Arab leaders.

These determinants of American policy, and the policy itself, are durable and unlikely to change in the next five years. Major shifts in the Middle East political landscape could, however, change the way the US tries to achieve its goals and carry out its policies, including changes in priorities among conflicting purposes. So far as a peace settlement is concerned, certain regional developments could make it seem more important (deployment of nuclear weapons by Israel and an Arab state, for example, or the more likely event of an Israeli-Syrian war) or cause it to be de-emphasized (a reduction of tensions in the current modus vivendi).

The status quo in the region as a whole is unlikely to be stable. In many ways the Arab World is in such a state of flux that the only realistic question is what kind of change will occur and how rapidly. It is possible, though, that the modus vivendi among Israel, the occupied territories and the Arab states, particularly Jordan, will hold up, at least for five years. This depends most heavily on Israel, which has the greatest capacity to maintain or change the relationship.

II Requirements for Settlement

However desirable a settlement may be for the US, the makings of a conventional peace agreement do not seem to be present in the situation as it has evolved in the region. It is doubtful that there is any political/geographic arrangement that would satisfy the minimum requirements of all who must agree to a peace or who must at least refrain from preventing it. More importantly, perhaps, each of the two main parties -- Israel and the Palestinians -- is a deeply divided coalition of diverse attitudes toward peace and lacking the strong leadership necessary to make the compromises a bargaining process would entail. Israeli and Palestinian leaders -- in the latter case the PLO -- as well as King Hussein of Jordan are sufficiently preoccupied with the problems of survival, political and in some instances physical, that they have little latitude for risk-taking. And the risks for all in any settlement, the negotiating process as well as the new status quo to follow the conclusion of peace, are real. The current modus vivendi, with all its dangers and disadvantages, seems safer to these leaders than the daring moves that would be necessary to bring serious negotiations today. That they may be correct in this assessment is something that cannot be brushed aside by the US or any other outside power aiming at a settlement.

Conversely, however, each of the leadership groups faces important risks if the whole idea of a formal peace is abandoned. Present Israeli and PLO leaders have rivals for power considerably more extreme than they, rivals whose position would be strengthened by abandonment of hope for peace. For King Hussein, more extreme policies, especially on Israel's part, can mean another major flight of Palestinians to Jordan, engulfing the Hashemite monarchy. The US, similarly, must see in a deepening cynicism and despair about peace a threat to its policies. The current modus vivendi is dangerous enough, but if it unravels the consequences are likely to be worse.

The question for the US is therefore not so much how to bring about a real settlement as it is how to keep the possibility of peace high on the agenda of Middle East politics. The difference between the two questions may seem to be a quibble, but it is a real one. Those who argue that the US should disengage from the peace process because there are no evident prospects for its success are dealing with the wrong question. The US should stay engaged if only to ensure that the process continues to play an important part in the politics of the region whatever its prospects.

An important corollary to this approach, of course, is that some form of settlement may ultimately become feasible, and that this is more likely to happen if the goal has not been abandoned and more violent ways chosen to resolve the unresolved issues. An important exception is the possibility that a deterioration in the situation might shake the parties sufficiently to press them toward a settlement. This is hardly a game that the US would deliberately play, however.

Leaving aside a traumatic and galvanizing event, the circumstances that would be necessary before real movement toward a settlement became possible are difficult to identify beyond stating the obvious: a greater willingness to compromise by any or all parties for whatever reason, growing fear of the consequences of no peace, etc. So far as US policy is concerned, the key circumstance would be firm American commitment and engagement. Without that it is hard to see how the strong tendencies within the region to cancel out and frustrate any forward movement could be ridden over. In some cases, a joint superpower commitment could be decisive. The US could also spur the gradual redefinition of the issues that might bring to light solutions not visible today. Such a process could be helped by imaginative exploration of solutions even now that do more to take into account the changes that have already occurred than do the standard concepts.

Much is sometimes made of the need to build trust between the parties. Unfortunately, the distrust that exists is all too well-founded, and genuine changes of attitude are required, not gestures alone. Changes of this sort are more likely in the context of a specific process looking toward negotiations. The precise moves would depend on the issues being dealt with. A moratorium on Israeli West Bank settlements was a logical gesture in the Camp David context, for example. A commitment to forego violence by the PLO would be a necessary move if the PLO were ever to be included, as another example.

III US Policies

The volatility and unpredictability of the Middle East makes it a tough challenge for US policy. By the same token, active engagement in the region is all the more important as a means of gaining some measure of control over events and reducing unpredictability. In broadest terms, American strategy should be to build influence and credibility with all governments and key actors whether friendly or hostile to US purposes. In the wake of the arms sales to Iran, failures to support Jordan's arms needs, the debacle in Lebanon, years of unbalanced support for Israel, and other weaknesses of policy, such a recouping of credibility will be difficult but vital.

In designing American policy, looking ahead five years, it is safest to assume a continuation of the more troublesome regional trends. The revolutionary pressures within the Arab World which have, i.a., brought to the fore the underdog Shiites of Lebanon, can be expected to persist. The related Islamic fundamentalist movement will also likely continue, though its potential for gaining power will differ from country to country. The outcome of the Iran-Iraq war, likely within five years, can do much to stimulate or dampen the movement. It can also have a powerful impact of a broader nature, especially if Iran wins or if internal pressure resulting from the war brings down the Iraqi regime. The Lebanese Humpty Dumpty will not be put together again and more extremist forces will probably dominate the conflict, leading to further fighting with Israel.

Narrowing the focus to the Arab-Israeli conflict, internal Israeli developments may well have the most important influence over future events. Israel has the greatest power to affect

developments of any state directly involved. It would be prudent to assume a drift toward harder-line Israeli policies, with the possible ascendancy of militant Likud leaders such as Ariel Sharon. This could bring extremely destabilizing Israeli policies toward the occupied territories. On the Palestinian side, there is little reason to hope for more coherent, moderate leadership. It is not likely that the occupied Palestinians will step forward to make their own peace with Israel. Five more years of the current modus vivendi may, however, make it increasingly clear that complete separation of the occupied territories from Israel is not to be expected, and West Bankers and Gazans may look more and more for ways to accommodate to the unavoidable -- emigration, perhaps, or pressure for improvements in their condition and status. If extremism prospers elsewhere in the Middle East, among the Shiites of Lebanon for example, the occupied populations may on the other hand become even more prone to extreme action themselves.

The third party to the triangular post-1967 modus vivendi centered on the territories is Jordan. The Kingdom will remain in a delicate and exposed position between the Palestinian problem and the Arab World. The monarchy will continue to want an active peace process but in pursuing it will not venture farther out on a limb than it has already done.

There is thus a considerable potential for the unraveling of the current Arab-Israeli status quo and a descent into more violence and extreme solutions. US policy should aim at preventing this. Encouragement should be given to moderate elements within each of the parties, in the first instance by keeping alive the goal of eventual peace. Active American commitment to this goal should continue to be basic in US relations with Middle East governments whatever the likelihood may be of peace. The US should also make clear that policies threatening the goals of stability and peace in the region, whether by the Arabs or Israelis, will be opposed.

Among the approaches the US can take in promoting peace, two are especially relevant here. First, over the months and years ahead it can help put in place elements of a more durable status quo that may still be short of a formal peace. Current Jordanian-Israeli efforts, with US financial support, to improve conditions of life in the occupied territories, could be a beginning. Encouraging Israel to relax policies on reunification of West Bank families and in general to apply a more enlightened civil rule in the occupied territories would move in the same direction.

The second approach is to help move the parties toward some regularized exchanges that could lead to a negotiating process. There are disadvantages as well as advantages in doing so, of course. On the positive side, a slow-burning, low key process could serve to keep peace high on the regional agenda even in the absence of a clearly visible settlement outcome. In such a process the US could logically talk directly with Palestinian representatives and begin exploring with all parties innovative solutions that might have some viability. Most importantly, any agreed solution will almost certainly have to evolve out of the process itself and the changes it

can bring in the attitudes, expectations and readiness to compromise of the parties. If it is to come at all, it will not spring full-blown from the current status quo. On the negative side, negotiations increase regional tensions as those elements opposed to them move to scuttle them. Nice judgments on timing and on the balance of advantages and disadvantages will be required.

The proposed US strategy and policies are not a sharp departure from the past, but they require a broader and more consistent focus on the Middle East than the Reagan administration has provided. (Terrorism, however deplorable, is not America's principal problem in the area.) They also would require greater attention to US regional interests in pursuing the US-Israeli relationship. Whether Washington will apply itself in these respects depends in the first instance on the outcome of the 1988 election. Not too much can be expected in the pre-election year. It will also depend on the weight of other items on the US foreign policy agenda. A firmer line with Israel is the most problematic element of a more regional approach. It will depend heavily on how Israeli policy evolves and how it is perceived in the US. Another element of past policy that should be reexamined is the exaggerated concern about including the Soviet Union in a peace process, as well as the reluctance to work closely enough with Syria, the most powerful Arab state in the area.

IV Assessment

A low level of violence, especially in southern Lebanon, is virtually certain. A major war, presumably between Israel and Syria, is on balance unlikely but cannot be ruled out. Peace in the full sense of the word is unlikely and probably can be ruled out for this five-year period. Israeli-Arab conflict as such is not the most serious danger, however. The gradual replacement of essentially friendly regimes and political/economic systems by hostile ones throughout the region is more serious. Five years could well see worrying signs of such a development. American handling of the Palestinian problem should be geared to a broader strategy designed to forestall it, and not focused solely on a settlement for settlement's sake. Within such a broader framework, persistent American promotion of a peace process can reduce the chances of violence and extremism and improve the environment for some eventual more peaceful and durable relationship among the parties to the conflict.