

The Inter-Arab System and the Gulf War: Continuity and Change

At the same time, the crisis contained many of the enduring themes of inter-Arab affairs over the past half century: a particular country bidding for regional hegemony, in the service of which it invoked a combination of patriotic, pan-Arab and Islamic themes; the banding together of other Arab pa

territorial disputes between states and rival ambitions for hegemony (e.g., Libya in Chad, Syria in

foundering on the shoals of very real disparities in social structures, regimes, histories and economies. Nonetheless, even if the League was mainly a debating society, its return to Cairo signified for Egyptians that the inter-Arab center of gravity had been restored to its rightful place. Concurrently, however, Saddam Husayn had begun making the most concerted bid for all-Arab leadership since the days of Gamal Abd al-Nasir, one which would rock the inter-Arab system to its core.

The first signs to that effect came at the four-way ACC summit conference held in Amman, Jordan, on 23-24 February 1990. The sharp contrast in tone and content between Husni Mubarak's and Saddam Husayn's public remarks at the summit pointed to serious differences between them over how to best ensure "the Arab future." Behind the scenes, it turns out, their differences were even sharper. These would be played out again at the all-Arab summit conference in Baghdad three months later. Still, Mubarak continued to publicly defend Saddam against Western and Israeli charges of aggressive intent. Both Mubarak and Saddam would avoid direct confrontations with one another right up until 2 August, the former in the hope that Saddam's good behavior could best be ensured by cajoling him, the latter so as not to rock the inter-Arab boat prematurely.

The issue on which both Arab leaders and the Arab media were expressing themselves most forcefully in early 1990 was that of Soviet Jewish emigration to Israel, the dimensions of which had only recently become apparent. For Saddam, it was an ideal tool through which to assert his brand of regional leadership. The end of the Cold War, he declared at the ACC meeting, had conferred heretofore unknown power on the US, enabling America to exert pressure on the Soviet Union for "an unprecedented exodus of Soviet Jews to Palestinian territory...whether in Israel or in the occupied territories." Moreover, he warned, the possibility of American-backed Israeli military adventures was very real, since time in the long run was now on the side of the Arabs, with their growing scientific and military capabilities. Saddam also foreshadowed his later actions by insisting that the US withdraw from the Persian Gulf and warned the Gulf Arab states of American dominance if they were "not careful." Finally, he suggested that the oil-producing Gulf states think of using their assets to advance overall Arab interests (as defined by him) in order to create a new international balance of power based on Arab strength, like-mindedness and a well-defined plan of

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The crisis seemed to be on its way to a peaceful resolution on 25 July, when Mubarak issued an upbeat statement announcing that

tactics, the Arab League Council, meeting in emergency session in Cairo that evening, sharply condemned Iraqi "aggression" against Kuwait and called for the "immediate and unconditional withdrawal" of Iraqi troops. The statement also opposed any intervention by foreign forces. 17 Saddam's adversaries and sympathizers would exchange bitter accusations during the coming days and weeks over which party bore responsibility for the introduction of Western troops to the region.

The vote on the resolution provided the first concrete indication of inter-Arab divisions over the Iraqi invasion. Six League members of the 20 presen

Saddam Husayn's bid for regional hegemony. Doing so marked the renewal of an enduring pattern in Arab and Middle Eastern history: the competition between Mesopotamian and Nile Valley-based power centers for regional preeminence.

The Egyptian President and his GCC allies sought two concrete steps from the summit. The first action they wanted taken was the dispatch by Arab governments of armed forces to the region. Were the Iraqis to withdraw either wholly or even partially from Kuwait, an Arab peacekeeping force would be installed along the Kuwaiti-Iraqi border, as had been done during the Iraqi-Kuwait crisis of 1961, until a negotiated settlement of outstanding issues could be reached. Given Iraq's defiant stand, however, the intent at this stage was for Arab troops to take up defensive positions alongside of Saudi Arabian forces facing down Iraqi units across the border in Kuwait. Doing so would mark the most tangible expression possible of Arab solidarity with the Saudis against the perceived Iraqi threat. Moreover, and even more importantly, an Arab military presence in Saudi Arabia would legitimize the other act which Egypt and the GCC states desired from the summit—the endorsement of Saudi Arabia's invitation to American forces to enter the Kingdom to assist in its defense, an invitation whose unstated corollary was the application of at least the threat of force in order to compel Iraq to disgorge Kuwait. The Egyptian-GCC strategy at the summit was to submit a prepared resolution to that effect and bring it to a vote as quickly as possible.

Their opponents tried a number of different avenues to block the Egyptian-led majority. The Iraqis were utterly defiant, even threatening at times. PLO leader Yasir Arafat, Libya's Mu'ammarr al-Qadhafi and Yemen's President Ali Abdallah Salih all sought to forestall a condemnation by having the summit send a committee to Baghdad for talks with Saddam. However, the Egypt-Syria-GCC group considered it a non-starter without a prior Iraqi commitment to the status quo ante and

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Arab consensus was lacking. Most of the time, support for this view stemmed from frustration over Syria's ability to effectively block decisive action on a wide variety of issues. 24 Ironically, Syria was now an important part of the majority grouping aligned against Iraq. In praising Mubarak's decision to push through the resolution, an Egyptian journalist declared the conference was a sign that the Arabs were entering the "spirit of the age," and that the summit's results were not a sign of division but a "form of resolution" which had always been required. 25

Mubarak wasted no time in dispatching forces to Saudi Arabia. The first of what would come to be 30,000 Egyptian troops began arriving on 11 August. Morocco followed shortly afterwards with a symbolic contingent of between 1,000-1,200 troops (a 5,000 man unit had been stationed in the UAE since 1986). The arrival of Syrian troops was especially significant in political terms. Given Syria's traditional posture as the standard bearer of pan-Arabism and resister to American preeminence in the region, its participation made the anti-Saddam coalition more than a club of conservative, pro-Western regimes. By the end of the year, the breakdown of Arab armed forces deployed in Saudi Arabia under a Saudi-headed unified command was as follows: Egypt 30,000; Syria 17,000; Morocco 1,000-1,200; Kuwait 3,000-5,000 and the four smaller GCC principalities approximately 3,100. Token Egyptian, Moroccan and Syrian contingents were also deployed in the UAE. With Saudi Arabia's 45,000-man force included, the total number of Arab ground combat troops taking part in the international coalition against Iraq was approximately 100,000.

As for those who opposed the Arab League's resolution, the common theme running through their statements was that the crisis was being exploited by the West to impose economic and military hegemony in the region. While most emphasized their support for the principle of Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait, they were like-minded in declaring that foreign intervention posed the greater threat to the region and had made it that much more difficult to mediate a solution. 26

Other factors were at work as well. Jordan had been one of Iraq's most ardent supporters during the Iraq-Iran war and, as a result, had derived considerable economic benefit from the relationship, particularly in the realm of overland trade and transit, which had come to constitute 25 percent of Jordan's GNP. The imposition of UN economic sanctions against Iraq would cause severe damage to the Jordanian economy. During the previous year, the King had broadened areas of cooperation between the two countries to the military field as well, as he sought to bolster Jordan's strategic posture vis-a-vis Israel. The risks entailed in too tight an embrace of the much stronger Iraq could not have been lost on the King. Nonetheless he deemed it prudent to forge friendly ties with the growing power to the East, even while maintaining good relations with his other Arab neighbors. With the onset of the crisis, however, this became untenable.

No one was more angered with King Husayn's position than Saudi Arabia. The King's mediation efforts, his criticism of the Cairo summit and of the West's purported designs to dominate the oil fields, and his unwillingness to publicly criticize Saddam all led the Saudis to conclude that he was acting as Saddam's apologist and advocate. Consequently, whatever financial commitments the Saudis had made at the May Baghdad summit were now inoperative. Thus, Saudi aid, which had amounted to 15 percent of the annual budget, and Saudi shipments of oil ceased. Moreover, a number of Jordanian diplomats were expelled from Riyadh, the Saudi-Jordanian border was closed for a time, and the Saudis even reportedly began extending more active support to major tribes and clans in the southern part of Jordan contiguous to Saudi Arabia.²⁷ The crisis in Saudi-Jordanian relations also carried echoes of what had been a central thread of inter-Arab relations for more than half a century, up until the end of the 1950s: the competition between the Saudi and Hashimite royal houses. King Husayn's directive to the Jordanian media that he be referred to as sharif (a reminder that as a Hashimite he was a descendant from the family of the Prophet Muhammad) particularly irked the Saudis, who were already sensitive to Iraqi charges that they had forfeited the right to serve as protector of the holy sites of Islam by allowing the "infidels" to trample on Saudi, and therefore sacred Islamic ground. Moreover, the title immediately evoked the memory of Husayn's great-grandfather, Sharif Husayn's who had ruled Mecca and Medina until being ousted by the Saudis in the mid-1920s. Could King Husayn's tilt toward Iraq and renewed emphasis on his sharifian lineage be a prelude to a grand scheme to wrest the Arabian peninsula from Saudi hands and restore the Hijaz to the Hashimites? With the Middle East constituting fertile ground for conspiracy theories, this one was not dismissed by the Saudis.

Although less vulnerable than Jordan, recently united Yemen shared some of the same dilemmas. Like Jordan, it had derived economic benefits from its support for Iraq during the Iraq-Iran war. Like Jordan as well, it hoped to benefit, both economically and politically, from membership in the ACC, which held out the promise of much needed development aid and political support from Iraq and Egypt. With the imposr of J,il My.00cti[ground.i2ra p)6u Tc -0.00n (.0001 Tc 0.0001 TYehe Proph)6(m)8, ag

who were already concerned over the potential long-term threat to its southern border posed by a unified Yemen, 28 and not dismissive of the possibility that Yemen too was part of an Iraqiled conspiracy to dismember the Kingdom. 29 To punish the Yemenis, the Saudis imposed strict residency regulations on Yemeni nationals working in the Kingdom, resulti

immediately came forth with much needed financial aid, estimated at \$2 billion. Syria's alliance with Iran was newly appreciated by the GCC states, so much so that Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad could break a long-held taboo in late September by making his first official visit to Tehran. Although the two sides did not completely see eye-to-eye on the Gulf crisis, particularly with regard to the presence of foreign forces and the nature of post-crisis security arrangements for the region, Asad left satisfied that Iran would continue to oppose the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait and observe the UN-sponsored economic sanctions against Baghdad. 31 Most important, perhaps, Damascus apparently received a green light from the Saudis and the US in Lebanon (whether explicit or tacit is not known) to remove rebel General Michel Awn and impose a Pax Syriana, based on the 1989 Ta'if Accords.

In mid-October, the violence on Jerusalem's Temple Mount temporarily shifted the focus of Arab and international attention back to the Palestinian-Israeli arena. However, to the relief of the anti-Saddam coalition, and to the disappointment of Iraq and the Jved IC(chO608 Tmus 8anc)TJmimment Tcy detour

The war's results initially held out the prospects for significant modification on two issues: the question of collective security in the Gulf and for prospects of progress in Arab-Israeli negotiations. These changes were expected to be underpinned by sober-minded, hard-headed attitudes shorn of the debilitating illusions of pan-Arab grandeur which had been so damaging in the past. President Bush's talk of a "new world order" was mirrored by Saddam's Arab opponents. A "new Arab order" was in the offing, declared GCC Secretary-General Abdallah Bishara. It would be based on "legality, mutual respect, noninterference in internal affairs, and the primary role of the economy to create mutual interests." 33

On 6 March, the foreign ministers of the six GCC states, Egypt and Syria issued the "Damascus Declaration," their blueprint for the post-war era. Its guiding principles were those which Husni Mubarak had been trumpeting in collective Arab forums for years: good neighborliness, the respect for all states' unity and territorial integrity, the inadmissibility of seizing teal intego995 0 Tdgress in

Whether this would result in the reemergence of differences among the parties or, alternatively, give them the time to devise a durable framework remained to be seen.

The slow pace of forging a regional security system was paralleled in the Arab-Israeli sphere. While an explicit linkage between the events in the Gulf and the Arab-Israeli conflict had been steadfastly resisted by the anti-Saddam coalition throughout the Gulf crisis, there was considerable hope in the Arab world that the end of the Gulf war would lead to renewed Western efforts to promote an Arab-Israeli peace process. However, neither the GCC states, nor Syria, nor Israel for that matter, were themselves eager to undertake bold diplomatic initiatives alone. By the end of Secretary of State Baker's fifth visit to the Middle East since the cessation of the Gulf war, each party to the conflict desired to avoid being branded as the primary obstacle to a peace process. There was thus enough operating room for the US Administration to at least keep Arab-Israeli diplomacy alive, and by mid-summer, the US had narrowed procedural gaps between Israel and its Arab neighbors and was on the verge of issuing invitations for a regional peace conference.

The GCC states were a special target of American efforts to promote confidence-building measures. The results were mixed. The GCC countries balked at rescinding the Arab boycott against Israel and at actively participating in a Middle East peace conference. On the other hand, after much prodding, they agreed that a GCC representative could attend such a conference as an observer. In mid-July, the Saudis also expressed a willingness to suspend the boycott as a quid pro quo to Israel's suspending the building of settlements in the territories occupied by Israel in the June 1967 war. The GCC states were also apparently willing to meet with Israel in the context of a parallel conference addressing issues of regional development. What was clear was that their most pressing priorities were elsewhere: the reconstruction of Kuwait, sorting out Gulf security arrangements, keeping a close eye on developments in Iraq, and opening up a new chapter in relations with Iran. With regard to the Palestinian question, Saudi Arabia's and Kuwait's disgust with the PLO leadership was well known. However, this did not translate into greater Saudi and Kuwaiti willingness to press actively for changes in the leadership of the Palestinian national movement or indicate an abandonment of the Palestinian cause per se. Nor did it result in a greater willingness to adopt a higher profile in Arab-Israeli diplomacy.

Syria was extremely ambivalent about an Arab-Israeli initiative and spent much time weighing its options. Since 1974, the Arab-Israeli status quo (regarding the Golan Heights and the Palestinian question) had allowed Hafiz al-Asad to win legitimacy as the steadfast standard bearer of the Arab cause against Israel, to consolidate Syria's preeminence in Lebanon and to keep his country in a perpetually mobilized, and therefore politically quiescent, state. Moreover, Syria had derived much financial and political benefit already from its participation in the anti-Saddam coalition without having to alter its long-held positions on Arab-Israeli issues. Thus, Syria's traditional instincts to avoid rushing into a diplomatic process remained strong, particularly in the absence of any indication that negotiations with Israel would produce both a complete return of the Golan Heights to Syria and achievement of Palestinian self-determination in a manner for which Syria could take credit. On the other hand, the collapse of communep(options. Since 1974, tn)imihaving to alter0 Tw 18.57optipro

the Israeli-Palestinian sphere: the closer the reality of a separate Palestinian-Israeli dialogue, whose success would leave him alone facing Israel on the Golan and tarnish his claim to Arab leadership, the more likely he is to insist on being part of any diplomatic process (which would not preclude, and might even be complemented by, military moves, by proxy or directly, either in southern Lebanon or along the ceasefire line in the Golan Heights).

Egypt, the leader of the anti-Saddam coalition and the only Arab country to have concluded a formal peace with Israel, was particularly interested in seeing an Arab-Israeli peace process get underway and was willing to serve as a venue for Israeli-Palestinian meetings. For Mubarak, it would amount to a further vindication of his policies in the eyes of the Egyptian populace and in the region. He would also accrue further tangible benefits in the sphere of Egyptian-American relations. But Egypt's leverage on the other Arab parties and Israel remained limited.

As for the Arab "losers," those who had either listed toward Saddam or were perceived as such, the post-war period was a time of both stock-taking and attempting to repair the damage to relations with the anti-Saddam group. The PLO, in particular, was faced not only with internal rumblings over its tilt toward Iraq, but also with an increasingly assertive and restive Palestinian constituency in the West Bank and Gaza, which is desperate for tangible progress after three and one-half years of the intifada. Palestinian self-criticism and reassessment was considerable, particularly in the West Bank, and included calls for giving Palestinians in the territories greater weight within PLO institutions. To repair its tarnished image and weakened standing, the PLO sought to rebuild bridges to the Saudis, Egyptians and Syrians. The increasingly precarious state of Arafat's loyalists in southern Lebanon vis-a-vis the Syrian-backed central government and pro-Syrian militias made a Syrian-Arafat understanding essential, but unlikely. The PLO thus needed to renew ties with Egypt and Saudi Arabia which could act as a counter-weight to Syrian pressure. But thus far, the GCC states have not hurried to repair their links with Arafat. Some of the same considerations were behind the PLO's demonstration of tactical flexibility in Arab-Israeli procedural matters. In a move similar to one taken in the aftermath of Arafat's expulsion from Lebanon in the early 1980s, the PLO agreed to countenance participation in a Middle East peace conference in either a Jordanian-Palestinian or united Arab delegation.

King Husayn, for his part, emerged from the war largely unscathed politically, although the economic devastation wrought by the crisis was expected to take a long time to repair. The US, Israel and even Saudi Arabia apparently developed a renewed appreciation for Hashimite Jordan's role as a moderate, buffer state. Moreover, the King's standing among the Palestinians on both banks of the Jordan River was higher than it had been in many years. Thus, he was able to reduce the influence of Islamic fundamentalists in his cabinet, to speak of the need to break old taboos regarding direct, above board meetings between Arabs and Israelis, and to make himself available as an interlocutor for Palestinians, should they so desire. It remains premature, however, to speak of the renewal of a "Jordanian option" for the West Bank and Gaza. If Jordan is to play a role, it can only be done in conjunction with West Bank Palestinians and with the assent of the PLO leadership. But the PLO was fearful that the recent governmental reshuffle in Jordan, which is now headed by a prime minister of Palestinian origin, might somehow usurp the PLO's negotiating prerogative.

the process, see Bob Woodward, *The Commanders*, (NY, Simon & Schuster, 1991), pp. 239-77. Back.

Note 21: Daniel Dishon, "Inter-Arab Relations," *Middle East Contemporary Survey (MECS)*, Vol. 1, 1976-77, Colin Legum and Haim Shaked, eds. (Holmes and Meier, NY, 1978), pp. 147-50 Back.

Note 22: *Al-Ahram*, *al-Akhbar* and *al-Gumhuriyya*, 12 August 1990. Back.

Note 23: For the text of the resolution, see *MENA*, 10 August - FBIS, 13 August 1990. Back.

Note 24: Daniel Dishon and Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, "Inter-Arab Relations," in *MECS*, Vol VI, 1981-82, Legum, et. al. eds. (Holmes and Meier, NY, 1984), pp. 227-29. Back.

Note 25: *Al-Ahram*, 12 August 1990. Back.

Note 26: Tunisia's President Zayn Al-Abadin Ben Ali, in speech broadcast by Radio Tunis, 11 August - FBIS, 13 August; King Husayn's speech at Cairo summit, text released by Radio Amman, 12 August - FBIS 14 August 1990. Back.

Note 27: *Financial Times*, 1 October 1990. Back.

Note 28: According to Yemen's President Salih, the Saudis had actively tried to thwart the union by bribing South Yemeni officials; *NYT*, 20 October 1990. Back.

Note 29: *Al-Wafd*, 15 October 1990. Back.

Note 30: *`Ukaz*, 2 September - FBIS, 14 September; *al-Bilad*, 17 September; *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 21 September - FBIS, 25 September 1990. Back.

Note 31: *Kayhan*, 27 September - FBIS, 11 October; *al-Ittihad*, 29 September; *Radio Monte Carlo*, 30 September - FBIS, 1 October 1990. Back.

Note 32: *Radio Amman*, 9 December - FBIS, 10 December 1990. Back.

Note 33: Interview in *La Republica*, 24-25 February - FBIS, 28 February 1991. Back.

Note 34: *Radio Damascus*, 6 March - FBIS, 7 March 1991. Back.