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DILEMMAS FOR U.S. FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD THE
MIDDLE EAST IN THE NEXT U.S. ADMINISTRATION

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INTRODUCTION

What kind of Middle East will exist after the 41st president of the United States ends his four year term in 1992? There are three general variables which will likely influence the answer to that question: the nature of the Middle East itself after more than four decades since the end of World War II, the progress already achieved in guiding a partial solution to the Arab-Israel conflict, and the parameters of making American foreign policy in general and Middle East policy in particular.

Though the next U.S. president will be confronting and managing numerous foreign policy issues in many regions of the world, the seemingly inherent insolubility of the Arab-Israel conflict has a true potential for movement. We are in the middle of a negotiating phase which began two decades ago: there is a noticeable Palestinianization of the Arab-Israel conflict; Israelis have come to the uncomfortable realization that the notion of a majority Jewish state is endangered if there is annexation of the occupied territories; the West Bank and Gaza have become the territorial focus for a negotiated settlement; Egypt restored diplomatic relations with most Arab states without abrogating the peace treaty with Israel; and there is both a general decline in tension in the Soviet-American relationship and an increased super-power willingness to find solutions to regional issues. All these factors have conditioned the Middle Eastern environment for possible negotiating progress. The process requires enormous energy in peace-seeking; it requires enormous resiliency in peace-making; and it requires enormous commitments in peace-keeping. But in order to make real progress in finding solutions to the Arab-Israel conflict, the next administration must dedicate effort and must not permit the most concentrated array of talented, shrewd, and sometimes devious political leaders anywhere assembled to derail the undertaking at any turn.

NATURE OF THE MIDDLE EAST

What is the nature of the Middle East in the last decade of this century? Geographical, sociological, topographical, and philosophical characteristics have designed and have continued to guide the region's political history. In addition, the

development of the region has been influenced by a unique colonial heritage, patrimonial political culture, social heterogeneity, rapid social change, ethnic and linguistic diversity, and porous frontiers. And yet, historically, the Middle East as a region has reacted to outside pressures, external ideas, and foreign presence. And while never liking its status as the "receiving" party, the region has nevertheless been molded through time by non-Middle Eastern ideas and nations. Foreigners and non-Muslims, working in concert with particular native Middle Eastern social groups and leaders, have helped shape the region's history.

Since World War II, U.S. interests in the Middle East have remained relatively constant and have helped shaped its direction by their advocacy. These have included: 1) general promotion of stability in the region; 2) physical access to and through the region for strategic purposes; 3) preservation of Israel's national security and in the last decade maintenance of the Egyptian-Israeli relationship; 4) denial of use of the region to outside powers if it might jeopardize our interests; 5) retention of a regular flow of Middle Eastern oil; 6) assistance in the security and territorial integrity of Arab states along the coasts of North Africa, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf; and 7) a concerted effort since 1967 to stimulate negotiations in the Arab-Israel conflict based upon the protection of Jordan's territorial integrity, provision for Palestinian participation in their political future, and unqualified support of Israel's right to exist within secure and recognized borders.

The U.S. is still contributing to shape the political and social contours of the Middle East through a variety of means. In the last decade one American president negotiated an Arab-Israeli peace treaty, while the other used force in sending troops to Lebanon and the Persian Gulf, intruded on an Egyptian airliner in an effort to punish supporters of international terrorism, and militarily solidified its relationship with Israel. But U.S. intervention in the Middle East is certainly not comparable to American projection of force or interest in influencing policies in other regions of the world such as Europe, the Soviet Union, Latin America, or the East Asia.

It is not physical U.S. intervention, but western and specifically American value penetration, which has had the most noticeable impact on the Middle East in the last two decades. In this sense, exportation of American culture has influenced other regions of the world as well; but in the Middle East, western and American values systems are transforming the political landscape and helping to cause an indigenous response at a prodigious rate. These unseen value exports include materialism, consumerism, secular beliefs, and the egalitarianism which has emerged from the movements for black civil rights and women's liberation. Equally telling on Middle Eastern societies is the change in

attitude toward time and pace. Traditionally, the region was characterized by "insha'allah," "ma'alesh," and "bukra." Now, there is an impatient reaction to the slowness of change, as much as to the nature of the cultural change itself.

All these exportable values helped transform the popular culture in the region. Rapidity is now sought in articulating the rights and privileges of the individual above that of the community. Washington's emphasis on human rights, which became a hallmark of the Carter administration, has already contributed to political change in Iran, the Philippines, Nicaragua, Poland, the Soviet Union, and elsewhere as people increasingly ask of their governments, "What have you done for me lately? Why not?" If the Palestinians are demanding and obtaining self-determination, then when will the Syrians, Libyans, Saudis and other nationals of Middle Eastern Arab states ask, request, and demand changes in those political structures which reflect 19th century hierarchical notions of governance rather than 21st century democratic structure to oversee and direct their own destiny?

When the American president-elect takes the oath of office in January 1989, he will be facing a Middle East that is tired and undergoing the stresses of cultural and sociological transformation. The region is financially and emotionally drained after eight years of the Gulf war. Oil prices remain at depressed levels and GNP growth is, at best, stalemated. Domestic infrastructures need attention in the fields of housing, electricity provision, sewage disposal, and other daily services. Most Arab regimes face severe demographic pressures. Increasingly larger segments of the Middle Eastern mosaic are better educated, under-employed, and over-urbanized. Arab capitals are coping with Egypt at peace with Israel and are struggling to find Cairo's rightful place in the Arab orbit. Each nation or population group in the Middle East possesses a large ethnic or ideological minority or, conversely, a minority which rules the majority. Each nation is concerned with managing, co-opting, and negotiating with citizens imbued by religious zeal. People's political aspirations and appetite for involvement are greater today than ever before. Authority and power patterns are under scrutiny and are sometimes changing. Political leaders are often seen as unresponsive, anachronistic, and overly dependent upon ubiquitous security services. There is also a skepticism -- if not cynicism -- among populations within the region that politically induced solutions to outstanding problems will not be quick in coming.

At the end of the Reagan administration there is in the region a negative dynamism which has been indigenously engendered rather than externally precipitated. A casualty of crowded national agendas is the slippage in focus given to the Palestinian quest to restore Palestine to the Palestinians. National interests have overtaken commitment to the Palestinian

question. In 1977, Egyptian President Sadat flew to Jerusalem; since 1983, the Syrian President preferred to kill Palestinians rather than negotiate with those whom he ideologically opposed. In February 1986 King Hussein said, "No, thank you," to the PLO and in July 1988 he challenged them to take the responsibility for failing to liberate Palestinian territory held by Israel. In the political malaise and tragedy that is Lebanon, a scarce few Lebanese factions want a Palestinian presence in that strife-torn country. As compared to the period under Nasser's Egypt thirty years ago, the Palestinian issue lacks the drama, vibrancy, and cement it once possessed.

The Palestinian issue no longer has the emotional clout and feared capacity to bring down Arab regimes. Defense of the Palestinian issue does not bring people into the streets of Arab capitals to protest the meetings of Arab leaders with Israeli officials. The financial and political cost of the continuing non-solution to the Palestinian question has become a burden to some regimes. The financial commitments from the 1978 Baghdad (Steadfastness and Confrontation) Arab summit have expended. The PLO has been driven from areas bordering on Israel because Arab states contiguous to Israel do not want an active anti-Israeli Palestinian presence that will possibly provoke Israeli reprisals involving physical damage to easily attacked industrial, agricultural, and population centers. The PLO, created as a feature of inter-Arab politics in 1964, continues to be negatively buffeted by the inter-Arab system. Today the PLO still fears usurpation of its cause by other claimants, either internally or by Arab states. PLO-Arab state relations two decades after the June 1967 war are at a low point. PLO offices are either closed or severely restricted in Jordan, Syria, and Egypt; in Morocco and Libya, Arafat's PLO is handicapped by a cool alliance; and in Lebanon, the government has unilaterally abrogated the November 1969 agreement regulating and ensuring Palestinian political presence in that war-torn country. On the eve of the American presidential election between Michael Dukakis and George Bush, the PLO still fears a diplomatic process evolving in which its decision-making is confiscated by Arab states or an alternative to it, leaving the PLO ultimately out of all diplomatic discussions.

THE ARAB-ISRAEL THEATER

It is highly probable that, if left to its own devices, the Middle East in the period of the next American administration will remain in its current state of stress. Tensions over a variety of issues will retain attention over the Palestinian issue: political legitimacy, economic uncertainty, ethnic divisiveness, philosophical dissonance, and nation-state insecurity. Though the area is replete with weapons, the region's

actors find themselves in a process of negotiations which began intermittently after the October 1973 war. Egypt and Israel signed a peace treaty. Other Arab countries have recognized Israel in a defacto manner. Negotiating formulas abound concerning substance, procedure, and the method of Palestinian representation. Moscow and Washington, once exclusively identified with opposing sides, are now more predisposed to lend support and have positive relations with the other great powers's traditional clients.

Egypt is no longer a confrontation state with Israel; their peace treaty is almost ten years old, and though taken for granted by some, its strategic importance can not be overstated nor undervalued. The peace treaty has survived Egypt's isolation from the Arab world, Sadat's assassination, Israel's destruction of the Iraqi reactor, Israel's invasion of Lebanon, Israel's bombing of the PLO headquarters, and Israel's handling of the Palestinian uprising. No single Arab state or collective group of Arab states can hope to destroy Israel militarily without Egyptian involvement. Minus Egypt's full engagement as a confrontation state, the Arab world has no real military option to destroy Israel.

As compared to thirty or even twenty years ago, the issue today is not Israeli existence but within what boundaries. How will the Palestinians be provided political rights? Israel is accepted as a reality in a majority of Arab states. Egyptian President Sadat's meetings with Israeli leaders, which caused anger and outrage eleven years ago, are no longer the exception. In July 1986, Moroccan King Hassan met with Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres; Jordan's King Hussein has met with Israelis periodically throughout the years, with the most publicized private visit made between Peres and him in London in April 1987 to discuss the peace process.

Since the June 1967 war, mutual exclusivity in the Arab-Israel conflict has been on the decline. Gradually both Israelis and Arabs have come to the conclusion that eradication of the other is not possible. Certainly the evidence from the 1973 war suggests that it was fought by Egypt not to destroy Israel, but to regain Egyptian dignity and a portion of territory Israel won in the 1967 war. For a time after the 1973 oil price rise, petrodollars were a source of "Arab" strength in the post-Nasserist pan-Arab period. The opulent presence of petrodollars transcended Sadat's visit to Jerusalem; their unsteady flow to Egypt may have stimulated President Sadat to look elsewhere to support his infrastructure needs. Today, however, petrodollars no longer provide the lubricating reluctance to maintain antagonism toward Israel.

After the 1973 October war, the United States was vigorously engaged in seeking accommodations between Arabs and Israelis; and

however imperfect or incomplete those agreements were, they have stood the test of time. These included the 1974 and 1975 Egyptian-Israeli disengagement agreements, the 1974 Syrian-Israeli disengagement agreement, and the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty built upon the Accords signed at Camp David in 1978. Where the United States became vigorously engaged in the negotiating process, wars were avoided and realistic opportunities for negotiating progress were made. From 1980 to 1988, the Reagan administration proposed American engagement only after violence erupted in the region, namely the presentation of the Reagan plan in September 1982 after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the Shultz initiative after the outbreak of the Palestinian intifadah in 1988.

During the last eight years, other plans and ideas have surfaced in reaction to the earlier Camp David accords. UN Resolution 242 of November 1967 is the cornerstone of American foreign policy and of the world community in the quest for a negotiated settlement to the Arab-Israel conflict. These other plans and ideas have included Europe's Venice Declaration of 1980, the Fez Arab summit plan, the Reagan plan, and the Brezhnev plan, all of September 1982; the one year life of the Jordanian-PLO accord from February 1985 to February 1986; and the Shultz initiative of 1988. The accepted premise in each is the resolution of the conflict through negotiations resulting in an exchange of territory for peace, through a mechanism of direct bilateral negotiations via an international Middle East peace conference, or some combination of the two.

The focus of attention in the Arab-Israel conflict has moved from Arab state acceptance of Israel to the Palestinian-Israeli segment of the dispute. Palestinianization of the conflict began in earnest after the 1967 war. At that time regular Arab armies proved incapable of liberating Palestine. The PLO took up the charge, but it has proven unable to liberate one inch of Israeli-held territory. Ironically, former Israeli Defense Minister Sharon's legacy to the Arab-Israel conflict was a reaffirmation of its Palestinian component. Israel's Lebanese war, which drove the PLO from southern Lebanon, geographically shifted the focus from overwhelming Palestinian presence in Lebanon to the PLO's most important political constituency: the Palestinians under Israeli occupation and administration in the West Bank and Gaza.

A critical dimension predisposing the Arab-Israel conflict to some additional resolution is the general reduction of tensions between Moscow and Washington. As those tensions are reduced in the bi-polar relationship and in other regional areas, the likelihood of the two super-powers reaching understandings about the substance and procedure associated with the Arab-Israeli negotiations are also greater. Certainly the beginning of negotiations on resolution of the Gulf war will permit the super-powers time to focus on aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Both the Soviet Union and the United States have steadily developed a disciplined approach to non-traditional clients in the region.

Moscow has a unique opportunity in the next decade to increase its influence in many Middle Eastern capitals. This will mean an Arab world that neither totally embraces the Soviet Union nor rejects overtures from the United States. Some in the Arab world seek a powerful balance to America's support for Israel. Arab leaders are convinced that even if there will be an international Middle Eastern peace conference, the long term likelihood of any American shift in support of Israel is highly unlikely. In the aftermath of a peace conference -- during the peace-keeping phase of relations between Israel and her Arab neighbors -- a political counterpoise to Washington from Moscow is important. Moreover, the current crop of Arab leaders want to exercise leverage on Washington through the other major European and Asian capitals, such as London, Paris, Bonn, Peking, and Tokyo.

Any obvious reduction in tension between Jerusalem and Moscow will remove long-held Israeli apprehensions about the Soviet design toward Israel. Moscow and Israel have exchanged low level diplomatic delegations and, in 1988, Israeli leaders met publicly with Eastern European counterparts for the first time since the break in diplomatic relations after the June 1967 war. Soviet President Gorbachev told both Syrian President Assad and PLO leader Arafat that Moscow's (non-diplomatic) relations with Israel are unnatural.

Twenty years ago, the U.S.-Israeli relationship was warm and cordial in the wake of the June 1967 war. During these 20 years the relationship solidified, but only after severe disagreements between Washington and Jerusalem over a variety of issues. The relationship bent severely in the last decade from the Begin-Carter controversy over the establishment of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, Gaza, and Golan Heights to the Pollard spy scandal which might have ruptured the relationship. The U.S. Senate, Congress, and Executive Branch remain collectively supportive of Israel and will undoubtedly continue to do so well past the tenure of the next administration.

In 1988, Israel and the United States are so intertwined economically, politically, strategically, and militarily that the Arab world has come to the unwelcome conclusion that, instead of focusing on changing Washington's attitudes toward Israel to a more pro-Arab or a more balanced view of the Middle East, Arab states must deal directly but reluctantly with Israel. Neither the Congress nor the President are likely to apply pressure on Israel to make concessionally withholding economic or military aid. Far more likely are continued public disagreements from the

Executive Branch about Israel's management of the occupied territories and its Palestinian inhabitants.

American Foreign Policy for the Middle East in the 1990s

Unlike the 1950s, American foreign policy professionals are much more sophisticated and less consumed with the absolute commitment of Middle Eastern leaders to total loyalty, dependence, or friendship with the United States. American foreign policy expectations of the region and its leaders are more realistic today than in the post-war period. However, the burden of responsibility for successful American engagement in Middle Eastern affairs and the Arab-Israel peace process will rest with the next president and his advisors.

Continuity in personnel from those who have served previously in the Washington bureaucracy would benefit the next president. It would be wasteful to discard the presence or to disregard the expertise of career bureaucrats who have worked the halls of Middle Eastern foreign ministries and who understand the region's players intimately. It would be a mistake to choose only newly selected political appointees, who would require precious time to learn first-hand about the region's key figures. Adopting the latter option permits the region's leaders to dictate the tenor of negotiating discussions, which inevitably means delay and obfuscation, before the new administration can undertake a firm and vigorous effort at pushing the negotiating process forward.

The new administration must be collectively activist without being over-bearing; it must be sophisticated without being presumptuous; it must be on the offense without being offensive; it must be privately engaged with Arab and Israeli leaders without seeking public credit. It must not allow the region's leaders to determine exclusively the pace and scope of negotiations. Those engaged in making American foreign policy during the next four years must initially realize that, while there is a variety of attitudes on Arab and Israeli sides, the absence of consensus does not require a stalemate to evolve. The new administration must understand that all of the principals in the Arab-Israel conflict want a negotiating mode that will not infringe upon their ability to decide their own future; all of them do not like surprises or isolation; all want to be consulted and know that the President himself is deeply concerned with, if not personally knowledgeable about, the complexities of Middle Eastern politics.

The administration of the 41st President must be prepared to reward leaders and nations that promote stability and enhance the human condition of their citizenry. With Israel, the influence of

Israeli interests in Washington and throughout the American electorate cannot be discounted. There is a widespread interest among both Jews and non-Jews in America who want to see Israel remain strong. Any effort to go around those interest groups in fashioning American foreign policy initiatives is self-defeating. Likewise, congressional support for political efforts must always be understood and nurtured if the Congress is to help reward those foreign leaders who show courage and display wisdom by their political actions.

It is the height of post-colonial arrogance to believe that somehow the United States could or should be solely responsible for seeking and preserving an Arab-Israel settlement. Moreover, it is an unwarranted estimate to suggest that American permanence in the Middle East either physically or culturally is fully accepted by the region's actors. America and the industrialized nations of the world have great difficulty in gaining permanent basing rights for their military needs, except for in Israel. Hence the U.S. has resorted to "joint training maneuvers" and "cooperative military agreements" as acceptable euphemisms for regular and periodic American presence in the region.

Washington's dilemma in crafting a foreign policy for the Middle East is how to protect our interests when the indigenous leaders are reluctant to allow us to show the flag on a permanent basis. The lingering distrust for the European colonialist is a legacy partially inherited by American foreign policy specialists. Yet while our physical permanence is not wanted, our presence and concern for the region is appreciated and dearly sought. Witnessing from first-hand experience, I have seen Palestinians, Algerians, and Syrians, who generally despise the Camp David Accords, thoroughly enamored with President Carter's presence in the region and his concern for the Arab world and Israel. It is not sheer politeness nor "Arab hospitality" that causes shopkeepers in Damascus, street vendors in Algiers, and Palestinian leaders on the West Bank to embrace the former President. It is not important that there is profound disagreement between a former American president and Middle Eastern elites about the form and substance of negotiations. It is the desire of the region's people and leaders to see an America which cares, understands the political landscape, articulates the bountiful supply of byzantine nuances, and negotiates the treacherous linguistic formulas which characterize Middle Eastern politics in general and the Arab-Israel conflict in particular.

A dilemma for the next administration will be the manner in which it solicits Moscow's engagement in solving Middle Eastern problems and issues in other regional areas. The precedence of Gorbachev's actions of 1987-1988 is a good one upon which to build. But the United States and the industrialized democracies have two tacit advantages over the Soviet Union in leading or

choreographing the peace process: namely the accompanying western tradition of stressing democratic ideals and the rights of the individual, as well as a technological base, which Moscow can not match.

The collective but unsystematic result of military acquisitions by moderate Arab states in the early 1980s indicates that Europe's role will be primarily economic and financial. Jordan, Kuwait, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq have all armed themselves with European-made supplies. But Europe's military supply to the region in the 1980s does not automatically translate into a major European role in future diplomacy aimed at resolving the Arab-Israel conflict or reducing tensions surrounding it, except for participation in an international conference. Just as the Europeans have earned a role in military technology transfer, they seek a justifiable role in the diplomatic game when it unfolds. But many European capitals lack perceived or actual clout with Israel, leaving Washington as the pivotal actor in determining the pace and scope of future Arab-Israel negotiations. But China, Japan, European nations, and the Soviet Union must be part of the peace-keeping process as it evolves.

Twenty years ago Washington was not actively involved in the negotiating process. Today, after more than a dozen special negotiators, successive Secretaries of State, and a U.S. President who personally stepped into the negotiating process, American participation as mediator and guarantor is dearly sought. In general, the PLO and the Palestinian community lack the political will to accept Israel's reality unequivocally and to renounce the use of violence. Israel can make peace, but its political system precludes it from offering peace. Both the PLO and Israel suffer from internal immobility which inhibits bold and decisive action.

Past American involvement at the presidential level and persistent executive engagement (either personally or through a special Middle East envoy with presidential prerogatives) have been necessary to keep all sides focused on one another. To restart Arab-Israeli negotiations, the sides to the conflict need to be prodded relentlessly and promptly in the administration of the 41st president. It is not impossible that by 1992 a Syrian-Israeli non-belligerency agreement could be signed, a transitional arrangement for a portion of the occupied territories could be underway, Jordan and Israel might be prepared to sign an understanding determining the nature of their future relationship, and several present Middle Eastern leaders may be gone to their natural eternal rest.