IAI8523

THE INTER-ARAB PICTURE IN 1985: A EUROPEAN VIEW

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Paper presented at the Arab Thought Forum
Amman, September 19-20, 1985

A state of unprecedented fragmentation

At the beginning of August 1985 the "special" Arab Summit of Casablanca closed its deliberations with no significant results. Summoned by the King of Morocco with the aim of supporting the present "moderate" Arab constellation (Egypt, Jordan and the PLO) in advancing their proposals for negotiating a solution to the Arab-Israeli dispute, the Summit was expected to endorse the Jordanian-Palestinian "framework for cooperation" of February 11, 1985 as the basis for negotiations. Instead it limited itself to recognizing its conformity to the so called Plan of Fez, put forward by the Arab States in 1982, but didn't give any green light to it for negotiating purposes. The family of Arab "peace plans" has consequently enlarged, but for the moment not even this new offshot will be able to achieve peace.

In line with this inability to achieve peace were also two more facts: Egypt was not yet re-integrated in the League of Arab States and, whereas a number of commissions were set up to settle differences between Arab elements at odds (Jordan and Syria; Syria and Iraq; Iraq and Libya; Libya and the PLO), no such commission was created for the key PLO-Syria dispute.

The Casablanca Summit is not the first failure in the history of the Arab Summits. As a matter of fact, very few of them have proved successful in creating a workable inter-Arab balance, as for instance the 1976 Cairo Summit did. (And even in that case, the balance lasted only for a short time.) Casablanca's failure, however, seems particularly unfortunate for at least two reasons. First, it failed to support the most serious negotiating effort of the Arabs and the PLO so far. Second, it revealed a situation of inter-Arab fragmentation and rivalry which has rarely been recorded before. One must not forget that the Casablanca "special" Summit was called by Morocco because the expected "ordinary" Summit to be held in Riyadh is being indefinitely postponed by the Saudis. The Saudis can accept neither a Summit marked by the absence of the Syrians, nor one characterized by a clash between hardliners and moderates.

It is not simply a diplomatic question. It goes even beyond the entrenched Saudi inter-Arab style of consensus and balance. Saudi policy is the consequence of an inter-Arab situation which is unusually locked and difficult. What is this situation?

The Gulf war as an inter-Arab factor

The crux of the inter-Arab paralysis today lies in the Gulf war. The alliance concluded by Syria with Iran gives Damascus a far-reaching influence on the Gulf Arab States (GASs), particularly on Saudi Arabia.

Because of this alliance Syria is allowed to play a direct role in the security of the GASs. As it is known, the GASs' security perception is presently affected in a prominent way by the different threats emanating from Iran's fundamentalism and nationalism. First, fundamentalism is an explicit threat to the social and political stability of the GASs' regimes. Second, the Iranian regime may be induced to attack wells and oil installations in the GASs' territories with the aim of undermining their stability and/or punishing them for any support they may have given to Iraq. Third, Iranian imperial expansionism and assertiveness within the Gulf area has been taken up by the Islamic Republic. Because of this situation, in the eyes of the GASs, Syria's security role may appear twofold. On the one hand, it may moderate Iran and bring the Teheran regime to negotiate the end of the war. On the other hand, Syria may deliver and/or increase military and political support to Teheran in response to the GASs' policies which it considers opposed to its own national and security interests.

While it seems evident that the possibility of Damascus mediating peace negotiations is weak, because its influence on Teheran is far from strong, the "stick" role is more important and effective. By assuming this role Syria has succeeded in exploiting the Iran-Iraq war within the framework of inter-Arab politics and in making Iran a political factor. Syrian interests in the inter-Arab arena have become a factor of the GASs' security and the GASs are now forced to account carefully for them and even help to protect them. In practice this has two main consequences. First, the GASs will never endorse the different proposals put forward by the moderate Arab group for negotiating with Israel as long as they are opposed by Syria. Second, they will never accept any inter-Arab policy which may have the effect of isolating, excluding or even doing without Syria. It is for this reason that the Saudis are postponing the "ordinary" Summit of Riyadh and did not attend the "special" one in Casablanca.

American and Israeli policies

a) Lebanon

This central trend and the disproportionate veto power it gives to Damascus is reinforced by American and Israeli policies.

The broad goals of the Lebanese war in 1982 were to disperse the PLO and to make Lebanon an Israeli protectorate under Maronite governance. The policy of giving prominence to a specific Lebanese community was a serious miscalculation, because it ignored the nature of Lebanon's inter-communal politics and that of the crisis which erupted in 1975 with the civil war. This war was the consequence of the collapse of the confessional and communitarian balance established by the 1943 Constitution. Though compounded by the Palestinian presence and by growing expectations of social promotion from the poorest groups of the population, above all the civil war marked Lebanon's return to its longstanding tradition of inter-communal conflicts and competition.

Inter-communal politics is dominated by vicious circles which arise from profound insecurity perceptions. Because of this insecurity, communities either seek to get stronger for mere defensive purposes or they try to impose their domination to pre-empt threats emanating from other communities. These attempts are perceived as a threat by the other communities which in turn try to become stronger. If they do not manage to feel sufficiently strong, they call for the intervention of external powers. This normally triggers a similar reaction from other communities, and so on and so forth. Aware of this mechanism, any external power may start the process the other way round by inspiring insecurity in a community, promising its support and exploiting rivalries. It was in this the way that the Ottoman Empire began to be dismembered by Western European powers.

Two more points related to the inter-communal politics deserve attention. First, the external power community relationship is one of the most ambiguous of alliance conceivable. The term "proxy", currently being used to describe such a relationship, is particularly misleading. The assumption for defining a political "proxy" is a reasonable identity of fundamental goals, possibly based on strong ideological ties. By contrast the external power community relationship is by definition instrumental and finds a severe limit in the interest of the community (or the external power) as perceived by the latter. As a consequence, a community will never be entirely the "proxy" of any given external power.

Second, inter-communal politics is an intrinsically unstable model. Its equilibrium cannot be found by reducing to one the external powers involved, in the context of a "pax" imposed by a single power, because a competing power will sooner or later become involved. The only solution would be to shift the game within a domestic context (or to eliminate the international context by means of an internationally, fully accepted form of protectorate). As a matter of fact, under the Arab and the Ottoman dominations these communities were living substantially in peace.

Since the Israeli government did not keep these facts in mind, as soon as its policy of choosing the Maronites to govern Lebanon emerged during the war and the occupation, the other communities - even those which had welcomed the IDF, such as the Druzes and the Shi'ites - felt immediately in danger and revived their inter-Arab alliances with an obvious concentration on Syria.

This mistaken policy was aggravated by the intervention of the Western Multinational Interposition Force, which in terms of inter-communal politics was also perceived as no less one-sided than the Israeli presence. Finally, it was brought to a political disaster by the US policy of supporting the Israeli plan of a Maronite leadership under Israeli guardianship. For this was the way the Lebanese communities read the American policy of preserving the "national unity" of Lebanon under its "legitimate" President Amin Gemayel and of forcing the Lebanese government into the peace agreement of May 17, 1983 with Israel. It may be worth remembering that at the time the invasion of Lebanon was unleashed, Syria was isolated and weak and its influence on Lebanon was very much reduced. In the process of the Israeli occupation, Syria was allowed to increase its influence and during the IDF withdrawal in 1985, Syria may have got a chance to extend on Lebanon that same protectorate Sharon had dreamt of.

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b) Palestine and the Arab-Israeli conflict

The Lebanese policy is only the first reason why Israeli and US policies are contributing towards reinforcing Syria and stalling inter-Arab politics. A second reason is the policy related to the Palestinian issue and the Arab-Israeli peace proposals being put forward by the moderate Arab group.

The Lebanese war has had the effect of displacing the PLO. However, it has been Syria that has caused the political disruption of the PLO and has forced the loyalist mainstream of the organization to try a moderate course in accordance with Jordan. It must be noted that, were it not for its alliance with Iran and the effect on the GASs' security perception, the outcome of Syrian policy towards the PLO would be disastrous for Damascus. For, were it not for the Gulf war, the GASs would side more effectively and unambiguously with the PLO mainstream and its fellows of the moderate Arab group and Syria would be seriously isolated.

Why then did Syria help the PLO to split? In the Lebanese inter-communal model the PLO performed the role of an external power, though with anomalous characteristics and capacities (so that in some respects it also played the part of a local community). In this sense the PLO was a direct competitor of Syria and, though its power could not compare with Syria's, its peculiar position within inter-Arab politics made it extremely strong on political ground. Syria could exploit and harass it, but could not get rid of it. The defeat of the PLO in the Lebanese war and its expulsion from the southern part of the country has allowed Syria to eliminate its Arab competitor in Lebanon by dealing the PLO the final blow with Abu Musa's split and the battle of Tripoli. It may be that this option has been forced on Syria by its new alliances with the communities which are emerging in the aftermath of Israel's occupation. After the invasion, the Druzes and the Shi'ites turned out to be no less anti-Palestinian than the Maronites. Whichever may be the balance among these different motivations, the fact remains that the Syrians have caused the split of the PLO and triggered the present moderate evolution of its mainstream under Abu Hammar's leadership.

The new course of the PLO mainstream has allowed the Jordanian-Palestinian platform for negotiations to emerge and the Arab moderate group to acquire a credible political dimension. Despite the existence of several contentious aspects (negotiations within the framework of an "international conference" including the USSR; the actual composition of the joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation attending negotiations; UN Resolution 242; Palestinian self-determination; etc.), what is crucial in the Jordan-PLO accord of February 11, 1985 is the acceptance of two points: a) the principle of land in exchange for peace; b) the principle of a Jordan-PLO arrangement within the framework of a Jordanian-Palestinian entity. While the second point accepts the guideline requested by the 1982 Reagan Plan, the first one matches the long established Israeli Labour party policy for negotiations on the West Bank occupied territories. Neither the US government nor that of Israel, however, have taken up the proposal as timely and seriously as it would deserve. Clearly, the Middle East is not seen at present in Washington as a priority (and honestly one has to say that it is not). It might be upgraded, however, if it were thought capable of giving a success to an Administration which is not at ease

with international affairs. This seems hardly the case, because Shultz is notoriously reluctant to get involved in Middle Eastern politics and negotiations ever since the collapse of the Israeli-Lebanese agreement of May 17, 1983, which he had helped to create and the unfortunate evolution which ensued and led to the withdrawal of the Multinational Force. On the other hand, the Israeli party would not be reliable in a negotiation at present, because of the "fifty-fifty" nature of the government in Jerusalem. Despite a number of Peres' declarations which more or less overtly advocate negotiations, the Likud coalition - which will take over the premiership in September 1986 - continues to strongly oppose them and within the Labour Party itself there are not negligible dissensions (as is being shown by the vagaries of the withdrawal policies from Lebanon) and strong competition for the leadership of the party. Both the struggle within the coalition and the Labour party may induce Peres and those who support negotiations to steps which in the end would prevent any negotiation from starting. One new factor in Middle Eastern politics that the West has not yet presumably realized is that Israel may have entered a stage of political decay and can no longer be considered as a stable and reliable "Western" rock in an unstable and unreliable Arab sea.

Whatever the Israeli and American reasons may be for not accepting the proposals coming from the moderate Arab group, their inertia and their byzantinism (as shown by the saga of the list of Palestinian negotiators) certainly contribute towards weakening Egypt and Jordan, strengthening Syria and paralysing inter-Arab politics.

Sunnis vs. Shi'ites

Besides American and Israeli policies, other trends are at work within the region which may either counter and change the present situation or plainly bring about new elements of conflict and instability.

In its tortuous policy of engineering its Lebanese protectorate, Syria is giving a certain prominence to the Shi'ites. It has militarily and politically covered two moves of Amal which have triggered strong reactions from all over the Arab world (including from members of the Steadfastness Front): the expulsion from West Beirut of the Morabitoun in April 1985 and the attack of what remained of the "loyalist" Palestinian camps of Sabra, Chatila and Burj el Barajneh one month later. This reaction has largely taken place in a Sunnite vs. Shi'ite dimension. Rightly or wrongly, ever since the Iranian revolution the old Shi'ite-Sunnite dispute has been revived and Shi'ism is seen by the great majority of Arab governments and people as a factor of instability, capable of projecting itself from country to country and connected with the growing importance that terrorism and political assassination are holding in Middle Eastern political life. The chain of terroristic acts which is taking place in Kuwait, for example, is largely ascribed to Shi'ite subversion. The emergence of the Lebanese Shi'ite community, as witnessed by the importance Amal and the Hizbollah (presumably connected with Islamic Jihad) are assuming, is looked upon therefore with preoccupation in wider Arab circles.

The links between Syria and the Lebanese Shi'ites, its alliance with the Iran Shi'ite Islamic Republic and the fact that the Syrian regime is based on the Shi'ite Alawi community are more and more perceived by the Sunnite Arab majority as elements of an organic scenario menacing to the Arab world.

Though the association of the Syrian regime with a pro-Shi'ite policy is highly debatable and the alliances with Iran and Amal remain fundamentally

non-ideological and opportunistic, this perception may play a role in shaping the decisions of Arab regimes, particularly those of GASs. This could in turn induce Syria to become more amenable to inter-Arab solidarity.

Syria and Lebanon

This Sunnite solidarity however, will never be a major obstacle in the inter-Arab path Syria is following. Presently its most serious problem, despite the powerful image it is now casting on the Arab world, is its effective incapacity to strike an inter-communal balance in Lebanon as the basis for its protectorate of the country. Stability in Lebanon, on the other hand, is not only a problem of foreign policy, because Lebanese instability may affect the stability of the Syrian regime itself.

Syria has already made a long term mistake by splitting the PLO and by stirring up the moderate political course of the PLO mainstream, and this mistake is casting a shadow on Syria's future role in inter-Arab politics. What will be the outcome of her Lebanese policy?

As astute and ruthless as Syrian Lebanese policy may be, the possibilities for Damascus to solve the game of the inter-communal politics are minimal. Damascus' ability in changing policies and alliances on the Lebanese stage and its capacity in manipulating the communities to her own ends cannot save Syria from being manipulated by the communities themselves. As said above, the external power/communities relationship is fundamentally ambiguous and does not allow any definite political solution, that is any stable "pax Syriana" in Lebanon. Such a solution would be possible, however, if the Syrian "pax" or "protectorate" were enforced internationally so as to change the nature of the issue from international to substantially domestic. As already noted, this would prevent communities from calling for the support of other external powers. However, this is exactly what the present international situation does not allow. For, even if the Arab and the Western world (but what about France? and the Vatican?) recognized Syria's role in Lebanon, Israel would never do so. As never before, the Lebanese setting is turning into an essential element for a possible Syrian-Israeli peace agreement.

Withdrawing from Lebanon

In this framework, Israel's present Lebanese policy, and especially the way the withdrawal from South Lebanon is taking place, deserves a comment. The withdrawal implies two aspects: first, whether it should be complete or whether it should leave a presence on the southern border connected with a network of local micro-alliances and the mercenary police of General Lahad (the so called SLA, South Lebanon Army). Second, Israel's continued influence on the Lebanese inter-communal balance so as to curb it to Israeli security and political interests (this would in turn have an impact on the micro-alliances we have just mentioned).

The policy of maintaining an Israeli presence on the southern border is advocated by the Likud, the army, the intelligence and the Labour hawks, such as Rabin, the Minister of Defense, for security reasons. These reasons are no

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longer clear after the PLO presence in South Lebanon has been eliminated and the Shi'ite community living in the area has proved to be no less ferociously anti-Palestinian than the Maronites. The southern border environment has dramatically changed since Lebanon was invaded in 1982. If Israel could manage to be on good terms with Christian and Shi'ite communities inhabiting the border - with both recognizing it as a State - these communities would police the area by themselves. By contrast, because of the occupation and Rabin's "iron fist policy" the Israelis are fuelling and exacerbating the Shi'ites resistance against the IDF and the SLA. They are creating a new Shi'ite enemy which is unnecessarily taking the place of the old Palestinian enemy. This attitude is bound to erode and disrupt Israeli chances of preserving some influence on the Lebanese inter-communal game. It is destined to help feed the Shi'ite's already overflowing assertiveness, a factor which will in no way contribute to the stability of Lebanon and the Middle East. Finally, it complicates an already overcomplicated game and for this reason makes any future understanding with Syria even more difficult.

Some prospects

As stalled as it may seem, inter-Arab politics is affected by factors and trends which may change it, though not necessarily for the better. Some main events could be: a change in US and Israeli policies; an Iraqi or Iranian military victory; a change in the Iranian regime leading to negotiations and peace within the Gulf; a change in Syrian leadership.

While Iraq's military victory seems highly unlikely, as does Iran's, a change in the Iranian leadership and in its attitude towards the war is not to be excluded, though it is extremely unpredictable. Such an event would give back to GASs considerable freedom in their inter-Arab relations.

Whether this would strengthen the moderate Arab constellation and allow the Arab world a more cohesive stance, however, will depend on Iraq's attitude. If Iraq tries to take advantage of the peace with Iran to harass Syria or to bid for a Gulf leadership, the GASs will be forced to fully support Syria, on one hand, and to deny adequate support to the Arab moderate group, on the other. If Iraq supports this group, Saudi Arabia will support Syria and/or Egypt with the aim of preventing this group from being created and any group from becoming too strong.

A change in US policy also seems unlikely. While public opinion expects an American initiative, it seems evident that today US Middle Eastern policy is more than ever dependent on Israel. The Administration appreciates the moderate Arabs' peace initiative and would be willing to support it. What prevents the USA from evolving a coherent and forthcoming attitude in relation to this initiative, however, is not so much Israel's opposition to the Jordanian-Palestianian proposal but the fact that the Israeli government is unreliable. Were Peres firmly in charge, the Administration would try to support the Arab initiative. In this sense the possibility that Peres calls for new elections before Shamir takes over the premiership next year, wins them and makes the Israeli attitude more credible than it is now, is a precondition for the Americans to take up any new initiative in the Middle East. A change in the Israeli leadership and in the US attitude would open the way to a new peace process and would obviously change inter-Arab cohesion and balance even

in the long term. At the same time a victory of the Likud and/or a continuation of the present balance in Israel cannot be excluded.

A change in the Syrian leadership is essentially tied to its inability to cope with Lebanese inter-communal balance. This inability may induce a crisis within the regime and a change in its inter-Arab orientation which is not easily predicatable.

To make our structural analysis (the inter-communal model) factual, two points must be emphasized. First, by giving prominence to a single community - such as the Shi'ites - the Syrians are making the same mistake the Israelis made by preferring the Maronites and will probably undergo the same consequences. Furthermore, as we have seen, Damascus' proclivity to make alliance with the Shi'ites - be it deliberate or not - is eroding long-term support from Sunni people and governments. Second, in Lebanon there are at least four forces which will never accept an exclusive Syrian protectorate: the Hizbollah, Chaabane (in Tripoli), Walid Jumblatt and the Kataeb. Any present Syrian alliance with these groups is based on and will work with the typical ambiguity of the inter-communal model. Protracted difficulties in coping with the Lebanese crisis could bring about a change of regime in Damascus.

Obviously, such a change would affect the present inter-Arab balance in a fundamental way and could open the way to more integrative and flexible inter-Arab relations (though the orientation of the new leadership could also go the other way round and bring about a hardening of the present Syrian stand).

Political-integration and inter-Arab fragmentation

Though some factors suggest the possibility of a less tense inter-Arab setting, presently there are no prospects for a definitely cohesive one.

Though non-Arab policies will be crucial for a substantial change in these prospects, there are a number of inherent peculiarities in inter-Arab politics which do not favour long-term political integration and sometimes also hinder international co-operation.

Among the various movements towards political integration which emerged with World War II and the independence of the Third World, pan-Arabism is particularly ambitious and direct in its search for political unity. This ambition, however, is based on consensus, that is on a non-integrative institution. Consensus is the foundation of the present multilateral international co-operation among States. It is destined to reinforce and legitimize existing States and not to favour their integration in new, larger entities. In this sense EEC's experience is typical. European political integration started to decline as soon as majority rule was dropped and the European Council - based on consensus - emerged besides the early institutional machinery of the Community. Arab and European summitries are today very similar exercises in international co-operation, though they are normally sold to respective public opinions as instruments devoted to political integration. An important difference, however, is that the European gap between ambitions and rethoric, on the one hand, and realities, on the other hand, is definitely narrower than the Arab gap. Besides the fact that it is more frustrating than the European one, Arab consensus is definitely hindering any real progress towards political unity and greater cohesion.

Another factor which prevents political integration and is constantly favouring fragmentation is the fact that the inter-Arab balance of power appears as a game without any stable solution. Disputes for influence and leadership in the Arab world among Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia are endless. The Palestinian problem and the conflict with Israel create further differences and allow for instrumentalities and manouvering. Saudi policies aimed at keeping any actors from becoming too strong or too weak on the Arab stage have the consequence of strengthening a structure which is itself intrinsically unstable.

Finally, one should mention the fact that foreign policy, particularly inter-Arab politics, is used by the Arab governments to mobilize domestic public opinion and to create support for the governments themselves. In this way conflicts and fragmentation on the inter-Arab ground become the necessary interface of domestic integration and stability. A dramatic delay in the progress and the promotion of democratic institutions certainly only favours this instrumental utilization of foreign policy (which of course is also practised in democracies) since it delays and hinders a process of greater cohesion in the Arab world.

In many cases external factors, such as Israel, Western interests or the Superpowers' policies, are responsible for the fragmentation of the Arab world. However, the Arab world is definitely no less responsible for the influence of short- and long-term factors hindering its own cohesion. The absence of peace is also a factor of Arab fragmentation. Again, however, Arab disunity is not conducive to peace and certainly will never allow the Arabs to win a just and lasting peace and move towards the political modernization of their politics. In this sense inter-Arab integration and co-operation are of fundamental interest to Arab as well as to non-Arab countries. Fo this reason one main focus of Western countries' policies in the Middle East should be that of favouring, through their co-operation, that of the Arab world. At the same time an Arab effort to improve regional integration and co-operation on both political and economic grounds would be of the utmost importance for peace.