

IAI86 10

INTER-ARAB DEVELOPMENTS BY MID 1986
by Roberto Aliboni, Director
Istituto Affari Internazionali, Rome

Conference on "Economic and Political Factors in Mediterranean Stability"
Council for the United States and Italy
Porto Cervo, May 14-16, 1986

After the failure of the talks between King Hussein and President Arafat, exactly one year after they started, the Arab world seems more than ever plagued by a serious stalemate within the framework of the Arab-Israeli conflict and by an extremely rigid split between a small group led by Syria and Libya and the wider circle of moderate Arab countries and entities. This situation is leading, more and more, to the political decay of the PLO and its return to terrorism. Terrorism is also a consequence of the Israeli and Syrian presence in Lebanon, where resurgent shi'ism and traditional communal competition are inclined to use terrorism as an instrument of political struggle. Fragmentation and stalemate are also causing political decay in the management of inter-Arab and international relations in the sense that a number of Arab states are ever more ready to use the growing terrorist factors available in the Arab world and to direct them toward implementing their international goals. Finally, political stalemate and fragmentation combine with economic failures and difficulties in fuelling social unrest and profound frustration. This frustration is among the causes of fundamentalism which in turn is an important factor in the spreading of terrorism as a pervasive way of political life.

The interaction of the different segments of the international system with the Arab world more often aggravates its problems than helps to resolve them. In order to evaluate prospects, however, in this paper we will not consider this interaction, which is taken into consideration by other papers. Here we will discuss some central trends within the Arab world, namely the current state of the Gulf war, the breaking-off of the Jordanian-Palestinian talks and the situation in Lebanon.

The Gulf war

Irrespectively of its military impact, the Iranian offensive on the Fao peninsula across the Shatt River is emerging as a new political factor within the Gulf crisis. By occupying the Fao peninsula, Iranian forces happen to be separated from the Kuwaiti island of Bubiyan by only a few kilometers of water. Iran is now speaking of Kuwait as the "new neighbor". Despite the fact that Teheran issued a number of reassurances to the Gulf Arab States (GASs) as soon as the offensive began on the night of February 9, the new Iranian "neighbour" has stirred a deep sense of insecurity and danger in the GASs' leadership. This

perception has been accentuated by the fact that the Iranians very soon associated their new military move with the present Saudi oil prices policy and the market glut it produced. Since mid-March, after the subsequent opening of a second offensive in northern Kurdistan, Iranian statements in relation to the GASs have started to be less comforting, like that of Mr. Kharrazi - head of Iran's War Information Headquarters - inviting GASs to stop backing Iraq because "Now that the Iraqi regime is about to be brought down, it will take its supporters down with it".

As a first reaction to these developments, GASs have tried to convince Syria to moderate her Iranian ally. To this purpose the foreign Ministers of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia visited President Al-Asad on February 17. The Saudi Minister again visited Damascus after the beginning of the offensive in the Kurdish mountains. These attempts, however, were to no avail and, while Syria has adamantly confirmed her alliance with Iran, in a subsequent move the GASs responded by stiffening their stance. The six foreign Ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) met in Riyadh on March 1-3 and issued a surprisingly tough communiqué in which they condemn Iran and point out that it is jeopardising their "collective" security. As a consequence they warn that the "Peninsula Shield" force (the joint GCC's rapid intervention force established in December 1984) is ready to move "to any location which might be affected by the recent developments". In the same mood, the Saudi Crown Prince subsequently declared that "any attack on Kuwait will be viewed as an attack on Saudi Arabia".

These developments seem to indicate a turning point in the GASs' attitude which, on the occasion of the previous GCC meeting in November 1985, had taken the decision to improve relations with Teheran with the aim of convincing it to accept a political solution to the war. At the same time, they underscore a more explicit alignment of the GASs with Iraq and the Arab moderate mainstream in contrast with the mostly ambiguous attitude held especially by Riyadh in relation to Syria. This new attitude lines up with the dwindling financial funds which GASs extended to Syria over the last ten years.

The Arab-Israeli conflict

A second central trend in inter-Arab relations is that related to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Over 1985 two different patterns confronted each other. On the one hand, there was the attempt to create a Jordanian-Palestinian entity destined to negotiate with Israel on exchange of peace for territories. On the other hand, direct negotiation between Jordan and Israel was again envisaged by Jordan and the US with the purpose of exchanging peace for territories. King Hussein and the US have negotiated with Chairman Arafat's mainstream PLO in such a way as to reduce Palestinians to nothing more than a territorial segment of the Hashemite Kingdom. In this way, they took for granted the least probable outcome of Jordanian-Palestinian talks and tried de facto to materialize a form of direct Jordanian-Israeli negotiation. Within the framework of this ambivalent diplomacy, King Hussein met President Peres and a variety of Jordanian and Israeli officials kept in touch while the Jordanian-Palestinian talks were still an official priority. On the other hand, the US government kept on insisting for non-PLO representatives in the joint Jordanian-Palestinian team which was expected to be a part to peace negotiations.

In a context in which the PLO was more or less requested to disappear it was evident that it would not agree with Jordanian and US insistence for it to accept UN Resolution 242, a document which does not mention the Palestinians either. However, in an attempt to put pressure on the mainstream PLO and or to obtain Damascus' green light for negotiating directly with Israel, at the beginning of January 1985, King Hussein restored relations with Syria. This move did not give any significant results, either. As a consequence, on February 19 King Hussein dismissed the Jordanian-Palestinian attempt because his government "could not continue coordinating politically with the PLO leadership, until its words become bonds, characterized by commitment, credibility and consistency". According to King Hussein, PLO leadership had failed to agree on a formula which would allow the US to accept the PLO as a negotiating partner in the peace process. To remove this obstacle, the king declared to the New York Times that "It is time for Palestinians to decide who leads them" (March 23), an invitation sent especially to the West Bank.

On the occasion of the assassination of Mr. Zafer, the mayor of Nablus, the Palestinians of the West Bank protested against both the Jordanians and the Syrians. Emblematically this shows that the two countries which in different ways have attempted to "capture" the PLO have failed. At the same time, however, despite the fact that one may understand the Palestinian rebuff of the US and Jordanian terms for negotiating, it is also true that the PLO is left without any serious option. And this in an Arab context which shows growing neglect for them. Actually, things stand as if the PLO factor were about to quietly vanish from the inter-Arab equation. Only Egypt seems interested in keeping in touch with Chairman Arafat to the extent that this may be helpful for the sake of Egypt's inter-Arab role. This role, however, continues to be no weaker than that of the PLO. As a consequence the PLO-Egyptian relationship, however significant it may be, is not likely to be mutually reinforcing.

That the PLO factor is vanishing from the inter-Arab equation is only partially true. What seems closer to reality is that, because of the obstinate stalemate incurred by the lack of any peaceful arrangement in the region, the PLO is undergoing a process of political decay and this process also involves a number of other states, regimes and communities. The PLO is not vanishing. Rather, fragmentation and frustration are ever more translating into terrorism. What grew up as a political movement rooted in a social body is now splitting into sectarian splinters which fatally are resorting to that kind of political subculture which is terrorism. This in turn, more easily than ever, is making them play into the hands of those Arab states which use terrorism for asserting their national interests or those of their regimes. If this is a central trend within the Arab world, one has to say that it is disquieting indeed.

Lebanon: how strong is Syria?

Events in Lebanon in recent months reflect Syria's failure to arrange a satisfactory agreement among the different communal and factional entities which represent the Lebanese polity today. In 1985, a number of Syrian steps were intended to help the inter-communal balance to change in order to give the Druzes and especially the Shi'ites more weight in comparison with the Maronites. Striking an inter-communal balance is the key to any form of protectorate Syria may aspire to in Lebanon. At the end of December 1985, for a brief while, this aim seemed attained, as on the 28th of the same month the different Lebanese communities consented to a Syrian-sponsored agreement to re-establish a fundamental working pact in the country. On January 15, Mr. Hobeiqa, leader of the Lebanese Forces, was discomfited by President Gemayel's

followers in a fierce inter-Maronite military battle, replaced by Mr. Samir Geagea at the head of the Lebanese Forces and exiled first to Paris and then to Damascus.

As a matter of fact, Syria's hopes of succeeding in striking a stable inter-communal balance in Lebanon are minimal. To this inherent inter-communal instability one has to add the fact that the Lebanese radical Shi'ite wing, the Hezbollah, is opposing the Syrian presence in Lebanon no less fiercely than that of Israel. Maronites, Mr. Jumblatt and the Hezbollah, although in diverse contingencies and with different styles, will never fully accept a Syrian protectorate in Lebanon (even though, none of them is capable of building up a viable foundation for an independent Lebanon).

In any case, difficulties in Lebanon are not the only ones for the Syrians. After the disastrous Western mission in Beirut, in the course of 1985 Syria appeared more and more powerful within the frame of inter-Arab politics. The balance sheet at mid-1986 may be very different.

More or less behind the scenes, Syria has conducted a year of ruthless inter-communal wars in Lebanon with the aim of arranging a pax syriana. No peace has been attained and today Lebanon is once again plagued by barbarous convulsions. Secondly, during the Lebanese war Syria seemed to have acquired a leverage on the PLO and consequently on the entire Arab world. However the PLO's disgregation is making this very leverage meaningless. Syria seemed to have acquired a leverage on the GASs because of her alliance with Iran, but events following the Fao offensive seem to show that Syria is unwilling or unable to affect Iran's decisions. This may have convinced the GASs to rely on their own forces, to support the moderate Arab circle more explicitly and to get rid of Syrian leverage. Moreover, her alliance with Iran has not stopped the difficulties the Hezbollah is contributing to the Lebanese crisis, while her alliance with Amal and the crackdown on the Palestinian people Amal was allowed to accomplish with Syrian complicity, has played an important role in eliminating and or in reducing GASs financial help to Damascus. Finally, the regime in Damascus is subjected to a fearful wave of domestic terrorism by an opposition it had believed to have liquidated with the massacres in Hama.

Provided only with formidable vetoing policies, Syria and her Arab allies, especially Libya, are more and more isolated in the Arab world. The fact that Libya was not able to obtain an Arab summit after the US raids on Tripoli and Benghazi is evidence that the Arab world no longer tolerates the leverage capability Syria and Libya draw from their alliance with Iran and other vetoing policies. This isolation and the Syrian weakness it implies, seem to be the new feature of the present inter-Arab situation. This is not to mean, however, that inter-Arab politics is getting simpler and that some viable solution is in sight. The weakening of Syria will not necessarily be compensated by a change in the regional balance of power. Moreover, it may be dangerous in East-West terms (it may invite an Israeli attack, or even a Syrian attack, should Damascus reach the conclusion that Moscow would feel obliged to support it). Inter-Arab politics is not endowed with an inherent mechanism of stabilization. External powers' co-operation is needed in order to develop emerging possibilities. This co-operation is missing and the spiral of terrorism and counter-terrorism launched by the US is neither a substitute for co-operation nor for politics.

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n° Inv. 9447	