

## Cold War, post-Cold War: does it make a difference for the Middle East?

EFRAIM KARSH

While the euphoric predictions of a ‘New World Order’ and the ‘End of History’ have been buried in the alleys of Sarajevo and the killing fields of Rwanda and Chechnya, the end of the Cold War still constitutes the primary prism through which world affairs in general, and Middle Eastern events in particular, are observed. When in 1991 an American-led international coalition under the auspices of the United Nations expelled Iraq from the emirate of Kuwait, invaded and annexed six months earlier, this move was at once lauded as a confirmation of the New World Order, based on respect for and enforcement of international law, and castigated as an imperialist ploy by the United States, now ‘the only remaining superpower’, to impose its hegemony over the Persian Gulf and the Arab world as a whole. Likewise, the first-ever agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, signed on the White House lawn on 13 September 1993, was widely interpreted as a corollary of the end of the Cold War. To its proponents the accord represented the immeasurable potential for coexistence and cooperation generated by the end of superpower global rivalry; to its detractors, a humiliating *pax Americana* imposed on two disorientated and subservient clients.

This article rejects this approach. It argues that not only does the Cold War fail to provide a satisfactory analytical framework for the understanding of Middle Eastern affairs, but the main impetus for regional developments during the Cold War was provided by the local actors themselves, with the great powers playing a secondary (if at times crucial) role. Hence, the end of the Cold War is bound to have only a limited impact on the international politics of the Middle East.

There are three principal reasons for this assertion. First, none of the Middle Eastern conflicts or schisms owed its origins to the Cold War; they were all deeply rooted in indigenous soil and some of them, like the Arab–Israeli and Iran–Iraq disputes, predated the advent of the Cold War and have outlived its demise; consequently, as long as these protagonists do not view the resolution of their conflicts as being in their best interest, no major breakthrough in this direction is likely to ensue.

Secondly, superpower policy towards the Middle East was not exclusively motivated by global Cold War considerations. This was particularly pertinent in the case of the Soviet Union, which viewed the Middle East in predominantly regional terms by virtue of its being part of the Soviet rimland, like Eastern Europe, Finland, or China; and it was only during Mikhail Gorbachev’s tenure that the Soviets came to

subordinate their regional interests to global considerations.<sup>1</sup> Western interest in the Middle East was more globally oriented; but this had never precluded the existence of other weighty considerations which had nothing to do with the Cold War, not least the need for Middle Eastern oil and the lucrative trade in arms; these considerations are certain to persist in the wake of the Cold War, as demonstrated by the 1990–1 Gulf Conflict.

This state of affairs also made superpower rivalry in the Middle East more complex and nuanced than the standard black/white Cold War dichotomy, particularly since superpower alignments and loyalties often cut across local divides and vice versa. The Shah's Iran, for example, America's foremost Middle Eastern ally, developed a good working relationship with the Soviet Union, while Saddam's Iraq counterbalanced its alignment with Moscow through a network of relationships with the West Europeans. Even the Arab–Israeli conflict has never fallen into the all-too-often misconceived pattern of an Israeli–Western axis vs. a Soviet–Arab one. Western association with many Arab regimes (Saudi Arabia, Transjordan, Iraq, etc.) predated the establishment of the state of Israel and persisted during the entire Cold War era; some formerly pro-Western regimes (e.g., Iraq) were lost to Moscow, but equally prominent former Soviet allies were gained, most notably post-1973 Egypt.

Finally, the Cold War had nothing to do with Francis Fukuyama's idealized vision of a Manichaean struggle between liberal democracy and Communism. Although in Europe the line between liberal and popular democracy was clearly drawn, there was no great demand in the Middle East for either form of government, especially liberal democracy; this in turn made superpower rivalry in that region an opportunistic struggle for assets and allies, devoid of ideological convictions or high moral grounds. A mutually beneficial interdependence between the superpowers and their Middle Eastern allies thus emerged, favouring each partner in accordance with the vicissitudes in regional and global affairs, but on the whole kinder to the junior than to the senior partner. Far from being the hapless objects of policy, undertaking political initiatives 'with an eye to the reaction of the outside world',<sup>2</sup> Middle Eastern states have been active and enterprising free agents, doggedly pursuing their own national interests, often in disregard of superpower wishes; this is not going to change following the end of the Cold War.

By way of substantiating this argument, I will first outline the pattern of relations between the superpowers and their Middle Eastern allies during the Cold War, then demonstrate its persistence into the 'New World Order' as manifested by the two most outstanding regional developments in the post-Cold War era: the 1990–1 Gulf Conflict and the Israeli–Palestinian Declaration of Principles of 1993.

<sup>1</sup> Surprisingly enough, most Western analysts tend to overlook Moscow's predominantly regional perspective on the Middle East and to cling to the erroneous belief that Soviet policy towards this region has always been primarily motivated by global considerations. See, e.g., Robert O. Freedman, *Soviet Policy toward the Middle East since 1970* (New York, 1982); Alvin Z. Rubinstein, *Red Star on the Nile* (Princeton, 1977); Galia Golan, *Yom Kippur and After* (Cambridge, 1977); Adam Ulam, *Dangerous Relations: The Soviet Union in World Politics* (New York, 1983), pp. 40, 114–15, 182–3; Walter Z. Laqueur, 'Soviet Dilemmas in the Middle East', and Roman Kolkowitz, 'Soviet Policy in the Middle East', in Michael Confino and Shimon Shamir (eds.), *The USSR and the Middle East* (New York, 1973), pp. 77–89; Henry A. Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston, MA, 1979), chs. 10, 14, 15, 30. A slightly dissenting view is presented by Adeed and Karen Dawisha, 'Perspectives on Soviet Policy in the Middle East', and Adeed Dawisha, 'The Soviet Union and the Arab World', in their edited volume, *The Soviet Union in the Middle East* (London, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> L. Carl Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East* (Princeton, 1984), p. 16.

### Great powers, small states, and the Middle East

Analyses of international politics in general, and great-power/small-state relationships in particular, often fall within one of two paradigms: 'the patron–client relationship' and 'the tail wags the dog' (or 'the power of the weak', to borrow Arnold Wolfers' term<sup>3</sup>). The first paradigm argues that relationships between actors of unequal power and status favour, by and large, the senior actor, whose bargaining position is by definition superior to that of its junior partner. Such relationships may range from a more-or-less symbiotic interaction to a situation of unilateral exploitation, and are based on reciprocity in the exchange of material goods or protection for services, loyalty and deference to the patron.<sup>4</sup>

Conversely, the tail-wags-the-dog paradigm views great-power rivalry, an inherent trait of international politics, as advantageous for the small state. This applies not only to the Cold War system, in which inter-bloc polarization and the nuclear balance of terror significantly enhanced the bargaining power of the small states *vis-à-vis* the great powers,<sup>5</sup> but also to earlier international systems in which 'no state has ever been strong enough to eat up all the rest; and the mutual jealousy of the Great Powers has preserved even the small states, which could not have preserved themselves'.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, the 'power of the weak' is not a mere extension of great-power rivalries. Small states possess coercive power assets of their own, at times formidable ones indeed:

One such asset is the solidarity that usually prevails among the lesser countries and makes all of them sensitive to the 'bullying' of any one of them. The potential hostility of a large number of lesser countries, some of which may be allies or close friends, is a deprivation that any nation setting out to impose its will on a weaker country must take into consideration. Further power accrues to a weak country if it can credibly threaten to switch its allegiance from one side to the other. The mere belief on the part of the great power that it would suffer a serious loss if a weak country with which it was dealing shifted either from one camp to the other or from alignment to neutrality gives the weak country a far from negligible coercive asset, sometimes called the power of blackmail.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, if there is one aspect of their Middle Eastern experience that both super-powers would rather forget it is the negative correlation between the magnitude of their investments and the amount of influence gained. For all their exertions, neither the United States nor the Soviet Union managed to have a decisive say in their

<sup>3</sup> Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration* (Baltimore, MD, 1962), p. 111.

<sup>4</sup> M. Handel, *Weak States in the International System* (London, 1971), pp. 132–5. To be sure, there are those who, by adopting the so-called client-centric approach, emphasize the bargaining power of the client *vis-à-vis* the patron and go so far as to include cases of unilateral dependence of the patron on the client within the patron–client paradigm. Such views, nevertheless, fail to comprehend the essence and inner meaning of the concept of patron (or alternatively, client) which, originating in the Latin *pater*, implies preponderance, authority, and seniority. Hence, any interrelationship clearly favouring the weaker partner *ipso facto* falls within the boundaries of the 'power of the weak', or the tail-wags-the-dog paradigm.

<sup>5</sup> Stanley Hoffman succinctly described this interrelationship: 'When the eagle's claws are clipped the dove can save its life'. S. Hoffman, *Gulliver's Troubles, Or the Setting of American Foreign Policy* (New York, 1968), p. 53.

<sup>6</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848–1918* (Oxford, 1971), p. xix.

<sup>7</sup> Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration*, p. 112.

smaller allies' grand strategies, and they found themselves time and again forced to give a retrospective blessing to actions with which they were in total disagreement.

This is not to say that the superpowers were slavishly trailing the wishes of their junior partners, or that their impact was not critical at times; yet successful intervention was largely due to its convergence with indigenous dynamics that had made the local players more receptive to external influence. The superpowers managed to reinforce existing regional trends and even to bring some of them to fruition; but they neither swayed the Middle East in new directions, nor changed existing currents of flow. It was the shock of the October War in 1973 that made Israelis painfully aware of their vulnerability and allowed the US Administration to mediate the Egyptian–Israeli disengagement agreement of 1975, and it was Anwar Sadat's and Menachem Begin's determination to end the historic enmity between their peoples that rendered American mediation effective. Had either been implacably opposed to the idea of a bilateral peace, there would have been nothing that President Carter could have done about it, for all his naive enthusiasm.

It was on the cardinal questions of war and peace that superpower influence was most constrained. Just as the United States could not bring Israel and its Arab allies to accept its position on a political settlement, so the Soviets failed to convince most of their Arab partners to disavow their total rejection of Israel; just as Israel launched the Six-Day War (1967) without Washington's blessing when it deemed its existence to lie in the balance, so the Egyptian War of Attrition (1969–70), the October War (1973), the Syrian military invasion of Lebanon (1976), and the Iraqi invasions of Iran (1980) and Kuwait (1990) took place against Soviet wishes and advice. The only place where superpower intervention seemed to carry weight was in the sphere of war termination, and even this was more limited than met the eye: the superpowers were normally successful in preventing Israel from carrying military victory to its natural conclusion (e.g., 1967, 1973, 1982), but far less so in bringing other combatants to stop fighting when the going was good. The Soviets failed to convince Sadat to accept a cease-fire on the first day of the October War, or to force Assad to stop his offensive against the PLO in summer 1976.<sup>8</sup> Both superpowers toiled for about a year to bring Iran to accept a UN cease-fire resolution, and even then the Iranian decision was more a result of the total collapse of national morale and a string of successful Iraqi offensives than of superpower pressure.<sup>9</sup>

### Soviet–Arab disputes

Take, for example, Soviet–Arab discourses on the role of armed force in resolving the Arab–Israeli conflict. During the twenty-five-year period from the Six-Day War to the disintegration of the Soviet Union in January 1992, the Russians sought to convince their Arab allies of the merits of a peaceful resolution to the conflict, predicated on Security Council resolution 242 of November 1967 and negotiated under the auspices of the United Nations and the active supervision of the two

<sup>8</sup> Efraim Karsh, *Soviet Policy toward Syria since 1970* (London and New York, 1991), pp. 74–6, 100–8.

<sup>9</sup> Shahram Chubin, 'Iran and the War: From Stalemate to Ceasefire', in Efraim Karsh (ed.), *The Iran–Iraq War: Impact and Implications* (London, 1989), pp. 13–25.

superpowers,<sup>10</sup> but their pleas fell on deaf ears. Violently opposed to Israel's right to exist, Syria and the PLO dismissed the idea of a political settlement altogether and voiced their commitment to the continuation of the 'armed struggle'.<sup>11</sup> Even Egypt, Moscow's foremost Middle Eastern ally, though accepting Resolution 242, launched a war of attrition against Israel in April 1969.

The Soviets pleaded with Nasser to forgo the use of force and, once hostilities broke out, to stop fighting and reach a negotiated settlement; they even threatened him with military sanctions—to no avail.<sup>12</sup> Not only did these pressures fail to impress Nasser, but on a secret visit to Moscow at the end of January 1970 he managed to implicate the Soviets in his war by threatening to step down in favour of a pro-American president unless Soviet air defence units were immediately sent to Egypt to neutralize Israel's overwhelming air supremacy.<sup>13</sup> The power of blackmail was exploited to the full.

An even more pronounced demonstration of the limits of Soviet influence was afforded by the outbreak of the October War in 1973. When Anwar Sadat, who in the autumn of 1970 had assumed the presidency following Nasser's premature demise, began threatening Israel with war unless there was progress towards a negotiated settlement, the Soviets were greatly alarmed. For over a year they denied Egypt vital arms, thus frustrating its war preparations and forcing Sadat to postpone the impending campaign. The Egyptian retribution was ominous: in July 1972 Sadat ordered the immediate departure of all those Soviet units placed in Egypt in 1970 at Nasser's request.

This move caught the Soviets off guard. Notwithstanding their reluctance to introduce these units into Egypt in the first place and their consequent unease about keeping them in place, this was certainly not the way they envisaged their departure. They therefore tried to cut their losses by resuming arms deliveries to Egypt, though not of the scope or at the pace desired by Sadat. At the same time they sustained their efforts to forestall a regional conflagration. Only now they resorted to friendly persuasion rather than arm-twisting tactics, trying to show the Arabs the hazards of war and the benefits of a negotiated settlement. A special effort was made to alert the US Administration to the inflammability of the Middle East situation through a steady stream of public and private warnings, in the hope that the Americans would be sufficiently alarmed to lean more heavily on Israel, or alternatively, that the Israelis would recognize the severity of the situation and accept some of the Arab demands. An exceptionally stark warning was conveyed to President Nixon by General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev during their summit meeting in California in June 1973;<sup>14</sup> similar warnings were made by Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko in

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., *Pravda*, 18 February, 6 and 21 June, 19 August 1968; *Izvestiya*, 2 February 1968; Soviet Government Statement on the Middle East, Tass, 28 April 1976; Soviet proposal concerning a Middle East settlement, Tass, 1 October 1976.

<sup>11</sup> e.g., Damascus Radio, 22 February, 8 March 1971; Assad's interview with the Bulgarian Communist Party organ, *Rabotnichenko Delo*, 2 February 1971, and with *al-Anwar* (Beirut), 10 August 1972.

<sup>12</sup> Mahmoud Riad, *The Struggle for Peace in the Middle East* (London, 1981), p. 102; Muhammad Heikal, *The Sphinx and the Commissar* (London, 1978), ch. 11; Jean Lacouture, *Nasser: A Biography* (London, 1973), pp. 330–1.

<sup>13</sup> Muhammad Heikal, *The Road to Ramadan* (New York, 1975), pp. 79–83.

<sup>14</sup> For the June 1973 summit, see Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York, 1990), pp. 884–5; Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston, MA, 1982), pp. 297–9.

his address to the UN General Assembly on 25 September 1973<sup>15</sup> and during his meeting with Nixon in the White House three days later.<sup>16</sup> When all their warnings were ignored by the Americans, the Soviets made a last-ditch attempt to alert the Israelis to the impending war by withdrawing their civilian dependants from Egypt and Syria in a massive air- and sealfight on 4 October, two days before the actual outbreak of hostilities.

This move was drastic enough to enrage Sadat, who feared that his meticulously prepared war would be jeopardized at the last moment, and to raise a few eyebrows among the Israeli intelligence community. Yet since the Israelis believed that the Soviets would most probably alert the Americans to an impending war (which they did), and that the Americans would in turn warn Israel (which they did not), they concluded, albeit with considerable misgivings, that the Soviet action signified another rupture in Arab–Soviet relations, of the sort that had taken place in Egypt in July 1972.<sup>17</sup>

The Soviets were no more successful in bringing their Arab allies to the negotiating table than they had been in preventing them from waging war. Convinced that the key to a political settlement lay in Washington, not in Moscow, Anwar Sadat began extricating Egypt from the Soviet orbit already in the early 1970s. The breach between the two countries was rapidly widened in the wake of the October War, as Egypt tied its political, economic, and military fortunes to those of the United States, and was made absolute in March 1976 when Egypt unilaterally abrogated its 1971 Friendship and Cooperation Treaty with the Soviet Union and terminated the latter's naval services in Egyptian ports.

Syria, by now Moscow's foremost Middle Eastern ally, proved no more cooperative a partner. Ignoring repeated Soviet pleas, it refused to attend the Arab–Israeli peace conference convened in Geneva in December 1973. Shortly afterwards, much to Soviet dismay, it opted for an American-sponsored disengagement agreement with Israel and, moreover, accompanied the negotiation process with a war of attrition on the Golan Heights.

Although the Syrians would eventually drop their objection to the Geneva framework and adopt the preferred Soviet *way* to a settlement, namely, an international peace conference, they would remain adamantly opposed to Moscow's perception of the essence of such a settlement, which was predicated on the right of all regional states, Israel included, to secure existence. As a result, a delicate 'balance of tolerance' evolved from the mid-1970s onwards, whereby the two allies agreed to disagree. The Syrians supported the convocation of an international conference on the Middle East but continued to reject Israel's right to exist. For their part, the Soviets made no bones about their acceptance of Israel, yet refrained from exerting overt pressure to drive Syria to adopt this position; they reluctantly signed a bilateral treaty with Syria in October 1980, yet told Damascus not to interpret it, or for that matter their military and political support, as an endorsement of its political stance.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *Pravda*, 26 September 1973. For further public Soviet warnings see, e.g., *Soyetskaya Rossiya*, 13 September 1973; *Izvestiya*, 5 October 1973; Tass, 4 September, 4 October 1973.

<sup>16</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 463.

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., Hanoch Bartov, *Dado*, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv, 1978), p. 314; Chaim Herzog, *The War of Atonement* (Boston, MA, 1975), pp. 48–50.

<sup>18</sup> Karsh, *Soviet Policy towards Syria*, ch. 1.

Even Mikhail Gorbachev, the first Soviet leader to attempt an even-handed approach to the Middle East conflict, which put the Arab and the Israeli causes on a par and called for a solution based on a 'balance of interests among all sides',<sup>19</sup> was forced to recognize the limits of Soviet influence. He went to far greater lengths than his predecessors to eradicate Syria's intransigence: he repeatedly declined its requests for state-of-the-art weaponry; sought to isolate it in the Arab world by supporting the conservative Arab regimes; restored diplomatic relations with Israel (severed since the 1967 war); and allowed a mass exodus of Soviet Jews to Israel. When Assad questioned the prudence of these actions he was bluntly told to seek a peaceful solution with Israel since 'reliance on military force in settling the Arab-Israeli conflict has completely lost its credibility'. The quest for 'strategic parity' with Israel, the cornerstone of Syrian regional policy since the mid-1970s, drew a particularly scathing criticism for 'diverting attention from the question of achieving security and peace in the Middle East'.<sup>20</sup>

While there is little doubt that this approach heightened Assad's sense of vulnerability, it also intensified his hostility towards Gorbachev and left him impervious to the latter's wishes. For example, when in 1988 the PLO implicitly recognized Israel's existence and declared Palestinian independence, the Syrians denounced this move as a sell-out and refused to recognize the self-declared Palestinian state;<sup>21</sup> their response to the 1993 Israel-PLO Declaration of Principles was equally scathing.

### The limits of American power

America's relationship with its Middle Eastern allies was no simpler. Neither its most spectacular success in the post-1967 era (the winning over of Egypt from Moscow) nor the most disastrous setback (the fall of the Shah and the consequent loss of Iran) was primarily of its own making. It was Anwar Sadat's deep animosity towards the Soviet Union (significantly exacerbated by its attempts to forestall the October War) and his belief in America's leverage over Israel and ability to relieve Egypt's economic plight that produced his change of heart, and it was he who was the driving force behind the improving relations. He first nodded in the American direction in July 1972, when he expelled the Soviet units from Egypt; he did so again in February 1973, by sending his National Security Adviser, Hafiz Ismail, for talks with Nixon and Kissinger. As the administration would not bite the bait, Foreign Minister Ismail Fahmy turned up in Washington shortly after the October War with the explicit message that Sadat meant business. To underscore Egypt's strategic and

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., *Pravda*, 21 July 1988; *Izvestiya*, 8 September 1989; *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, 31 May 1989; Tass, 5 September 1988; Radio Peace and Progress in Hebrew, 31 May 1988. See also interview with Vladimir Polyakov (Head of the Near East Department in the Soviet Foreign Office), in *Le Quotidien de Paris*, 13 October 1988, and in *Izvestiya*, 8 September 1989; Deputy Foreign Minister Petrovskiy's speech at the UN General Assembly as reported by Tass, 14 December 1988, and his interviews with *al-Hawadith* (London), 21 October 1988, and *al-Qabas* (Kuwait), 14 October 1988.

<sup>20</sup> Tass, 19 June 1985, 29 October, 1 November 1988; *Pravda*, 20 June 1985; *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 1 and 3 November 1988; Moscow Radio, 24 April 1987; *al-Anba* (Kuwait), interview with Konstantin Geyvendov (*Izvestiya's* Middle Eastern commentator), 12 September 1987.

<sup>21</sup> Damascus Radio, 8 March 1989. For further Syrian criticism of the growing Palestinian pragmatism see *ibid.*, 19 and 20 November, 16 and 30 December 1988.

political value to its would-be ally, Sadat gave the green light for the ending of the Arab oil embargo that had been imposed on the United States and several West European states during the October War. As architect and direct beneficiary of the embargo, he sought to cash in on its suspension now that his brainchild had outlived its usefulness.<sup>22</sup>

Another example of a mutually beneficial alignment in which the junior partner called most of the shots, with the benevolent consent of his senior counterpart, was afforded by the US–Iranian relationship in the decade preceding the Islamic revolution. Though Iran was a long-time associate of the United States, it was only in the late 1960s or early 1970s that it established itself as America’s closest Middle Eastern ally. The process began during the Johnson presidency, when Iran began receiving large quantities of sophisticated weaponry, and gained considerable momentum in 1972, when President Nixon gave the Shah a blank cheque to buy whatever conventional weaponry he wished.<sup>23</sup> As the latter took the administration at its word, Iran evolved into the most lucrative market for American military and civilian goods. Between 1972 and the Shah’s downfall in January 1979, the value of US military sales to Iran amounted to some \$20 billion, including the highly advanced F-14 aircraft, attack helicopters, M-60A main battle tanks, and various types of missiles. In the summer of 1976 the two countries worked out a five-year trade programme which provided for the purchase of \$50 billion worth of American goods, including \$10 billion worth of military equipment. On the eve of the revolution, the number of Americans working in Iran exceeded 27,000.<sup>24</sup>

This state of affairs gave the Shah an ever-growing leverage over the United States.<sup>25</sup> He was no longer the young, malleable ruler of 1953, reinstated through Western cloak-and-dagger operations, but rather a confident autocrat, keeping his subjects in permanent awe, pursuing grand ambitions, a player on the world stage courted by West and East alike. While the Shah’s grand aspirations would have been less tenable without American aid and support, his dependence on the United States was more than matched by Washington’s need for Iran. Already in 1967, Secretary of Defense McNamara wrote to President Johnson that ‘our sales have created about 1.4 million man-years of employment in the US and over \$1 billion in profits to American industry over the last five years’.<sup>26</sup> As bilateral trade would soon enter the multi-billion sphere, the stability and well-being of Iran, or more precisely of the Pahlavi dynasty, would become an American concern of the first order.

But this was not all. Iran’s unique geopolitical location, in direct contiguity to the Soviet Union in the north and to the world’s largest oil deposits in the south, make it invaluable for US strategic interests. As the Americans desperately sought to extricate themselves from the Vietnam quagmire and to avoid similar future entanglements, they appreciated any local power that could protect US interests in this part of the world. In July 1969, during a visit to the Asian island of Guam,

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Yergin, *The Prize* (New York, 1991), p. 631.

<sup>23</sup> Secret Memorandum, Executive Office of the President, from Henry A. Kissinger to the Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense, ‘Follow Up on the President’s Talk with the Shah of Iran’, 15 June 1972; Secret Memorandum, Henry A. Kissinger to the Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense, ‘Follow Up on the President’s Talk with the Shah of Iran’, 25 July 1972.

<sup>24</sup> John D. Stempel, *Inside the Iranian Revolution* (Bloomington, IN, 1981), pp. 72–4; James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American–Iranian Relations* (New Haven, CT, 1988), pp. 202–9.

<sup>25</sup> Stempel, *Inside the Iranian Revolution*, p. 68.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Bill, *Eagle and the Lion*, p. 173.



Nixon announced what came to be known as the Nixon Doctrine. He reaffirmed America's unwavering commitment to its treaty obligations, but made clear that 'as far as the problems of internal security are concerned . . . the United States is going to encourage and has a right to expect that this problem will be increasingly handled by, and the responsibility for it taken by, the Asian nations themselves'.<sup>27</sup>

As an astute politician, well versed in the art of political survival, the Shah exploited this doctrine for his own ends. He supported American allies and actions worldwide and cultivated a well-oiled lobby in the United States to convince the American public of Iran's strategic importance. At the same time, he did not shy away from exploiting America's Achilles' heel: its obsessive fear of Soviet penetration. In June 1965 the Shah made a state visit to Moscow which culminated in a large-scale commercial agreement and, no less important, a \$110 million arms deal.<sup>28</sup> In the next few years, Iran's relations with the Soviet Union and the Communist bloc countries perked up further, lending greater credence to the Shah's occasional threats to seek Soviet arms and military equipment. And even if some American officials doubted the Shah's 'Soviet option', they could not ignore his threat to take his business elsewhere in the West. The United States was, after all, Iran's foremost but not exclusive arms supplier. Large quantities of British, French, and Italian weapons poured into the Iranian armed forces. Were the United States to reduce its share in Iran's military build-up, its Western competitors were certain to fill the void.

In these circumstances the Americans were happy to allow the Shah to dictate the general direction of the bilateral relationship. They ignored the virulent anti-American attacks by Iran's domestic media on account of the Shah's vocal international support for American policies; they tolerated the Shah's persistent striving for higher oil prices, lauding instead his refusal to participate in the 1973–4 Arab oil embargo and his attempts to preserve stability in the world oil market; they conveniently overlooked their own long-standing opposition to nuclear non-proliferation and agreed to sell Iran eight large nuclear power plants for civilian purposes;<sup>29</sup> and they supported the Shah's subversive activities in Iraq in the early 1970s, through the Kurdish uprising in the north of the country, and then looked the other way when the Shah betrayed the Kurds to the Iraqi regime once they had outlived their usefulness to his purposes.<sup>30</sup>

### Losing Iran

So pervasive was the Iranian–American symbiosis that successive administrations came to view Iranian interests as indistinguishable from their own. The Shah was seen as a permanent part of the Middle Eastern political landscape, something that

<sup>27</sup> Cited in Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 224.

<sup>28</sup> Bill, *Eagle and the Lion*, p. 171.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 178, 204; Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 1262; Yergin, *The Prize*, pp. 533–5, 582.

<sup>30</sup> House Select Committee of Intelligence Report (The Pike Report) on American involvement in the Kurdish insurrection, as reprinted in *Village Voice* (New York), 26 January 1976. The main findings of the report also formed the basis for two indicting articles by William Safire: 'Mr. Ford's Secret Sell-out', *New York Times*, 5 February 1976; 'Son of Secret Sell-out', *New York Times*, 12 February 1976.

had always been there—and always would. No writing on the wall, however ominous, was allowed to shake this illusion.<sup>31</sup>

Upon entering the White House in January 1977, Jimmy Carter was presented with a rosy picture of the domestic situation in Iran. ‘At age 57, in fine health, and protected by an absolute security apparatus,’ read a Department of State memorandum, ‘the Shah has an excellent chance to rule for a dozen or more years, at which time he has indicated that the Crown Prince would assume the throne’.<sup>32</sup> Actually the Shah’s health was anything but fine. He was suffering from terminal cancer, diagnosed a few years earlier by French physicians. But what had been known to the French for quite some time remained unknown to the American intelligence and foreign affairs community, despite the Shah’s centrality for US national interests.<sup>33</sup> No wonder that the administration remained largely oblivious of the gathering storm in Iran until this blew down the house built by the Shah.

In a memorandum to Secretary of State Vance in July 1977, his Assistant for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, Roy Atherton, opined that ‘there is less chance of a dramatic shift in direction in Iran than in most other countries’.<sup>34</sup> Reports by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) throughout the summer and autumn of 1977 were similarly sanguine. They anticipated ‘no radical change in Iranian political behaviour in the near future’ and estimated that, if anything, ‘we are looking at evolution not revolution’. In line with the standard fallacy of attributing Middle Eastern developments to external influences, rather than to indigenous dynamics, these assessments struck an exceedingly optimistic bottom line:

The Shah seems to have no health or political problems at present that will prevent him from being the dominant figure in Iran into and possibly throughout the 1980s. His style of rule and his general policies will probably remain the same *unless dramatic developments in the international environment force him to make a change*.<sup>35</sup>

It was only on 9 November 1978 that the US Ambassador to Iran, William Sullivan, sent Washington a dramatic memorandum urging his superiors to start ‘thinking the unthinkable’, namely, what was to be done in the event of the Shah’s collapse.<sup>36</sup> This view was shared by a handful of State Department analysts, while the CIA reached

<sup>31</sup> There were of course occasional warnings of the risks attending the Shah’s ambitious development programmes, some of which even questioned the prudence of predicating American national interests on the fortunes of one person, however powerful. Yet even these manifested self-doubts would normally conclude on a positive note, emphasizing the remoteness of the identified threats and the effective control being exercised by the Shah. See, e.g., ‘Religious Circles’, US Embassy, Iran, 15 May 1972; ‘The Conduct of Relations with Iran’, secret report by Department of State, Office of the Inspector General, October 1974; ‘Iran: An Overview of the Shah’s Economy’, confidential memorandum, CIA, 16 October 1974; ‘Iran’s Modernizing Monarchy: A Political Assessment’, secret aerogram from Richard Helms to US Department of State, 8 July 1976.

<sup>32</sup> ‘The Future of Iran’, Department of State, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, drafted by Franklin P. Huddle, 28 January 1977.

<sup>33</sup> See, e.g., ‘Iran in the 1980s’, Secret Report, CIA, 5 October 1977; William H. Sullivan, *Mission to Iran* (New York, 1981), p. 155.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Your Appearance before the House International Relations Committee, Thursday, July 28, 10am on the Sale of AWACS to Iran’, Memorandum to Cyrus Vance from Alfred Roy Atherton, 27 July 1977.

<sup>35</sup> ‘Iran in the 1980s’, Secret Report, CIA, August 1977; ‘Iran in the 1980s’, Secret Report, CIA, 5 October 1977 (emphasis added).

<sup>36</sup> Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America’s Foreign Policy* (New York, 1983), pp. 325, 329.

the same conclusion a fortnight later.<sup>37</sup> Yet others remained hopeful almost to the bitter end. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, for example, could not bring himself to admit that the game was over. On 16 November, when the Shah declared martial law in a last-ditch attempt to arrest the avalanche, the Department of State endorsed the move on the understanding that ‘military rule is only temporary and he [the Shah] intends as rapidly as possible to move the country toward free elections and a new civilian-directed government’. Zbigniew Brzezinski and his National Security Council staff were equally mindless of the real nature of the Iranian upheaval. Until the situation exploded in their face in January 1979, they were convinced that a tough ‘no nonsense’ policy, either by the Shah or by a successor military government, could save the day.<sup>38</sup> At no stage of the crisis, not even when all was over, did the administration realize that what had just happened in front of its very eyes was a revolution in the grand style of the French or the Russian, not merely turbulence on a large scale.

As a tearful Shah fled Iran on 16 January 1979 and a buoyant Ayatollah Khomeini made a triumphant return home after sixteen years of exile, the paramountcy of indigenous dynamics in Middle Eastern affairs and the limits of superpower influence had been confirmed yet again. While the Carter administration no doubt mismanaged the Iran crisis on a grand scale, the fact is that the United States was reacting to events that were not of its own making and over which it had but limited control. The Iranian Revolution was a volcanic eruption of long-suppressed popular passions and desires. Putting this genie back into the bottle was well beyond America’s power. All the administration could realistically do was to try to limit the damage to US interests to the barest minimum. As things were, the perennial constraints on superpower regional policy came to the fore in a particularly devastating way: excessive Cold War mentality, competing international priorities, bureaucratic infighting, inability to transcend cultural barriers—all this coalesced to produce a setback that even a decade of bitter regional conflict (the Iran–Iraq War, that is) and momentous global changes would fail to redress.

### **A post-Cold War blunder: the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait**

Nor would American post-Cold War pre-eminence prevent the repetition of similarly catastrophic blunders. As a superpower with a global array of interests, yet with a limited capacity for comprehending the social, cultural, and political underpinnings of these interests, let alone for attending to them simultaneously, the United States had often failed to identify unfavourable regional developments before their escalation into fully-fledged conflicts; this tendency has not disappeared following the end of the Cold War.

As Iraqi troops were massing along the Kuwaiti border during July 1990, after a year of sustained pressure on the emirate to help finance Iraq’s rehabilitation from

<sup>37</sup> See, e.g., ‘Pessimism About Iranian Stability’, Confidential Memorandum by Theodore H. Moran, Consultant to Policy Planning Staff, to Department of State, drafted by Precht Henry, 18 October 1978; ‘The Politics of Ayatollah Khomeini’, Intelligence Memorandum, CIA, 20 November 1978; ‘Iran Update on Moharram’, Secret alert Memorandum, CIA, 5 December 1978.

<sup>38</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Advisor 1977–1981* (London, 1983), pp. 371–82; Bill, *Eagle and the Lion*, pp. 249–57.

the Iran–Iraq War, the Americans were fixated on Europe. So it had been since the revolutions of 1989 which brought the East European Communist regimes tumbling down. Now they were busy working with the Europeans to construct a new set of security arrangements which would allow conflicts on the Continent to be handled in a sensitive and efficient manner. The general mood was euphoric. A brave new world was around the corner. No minor disputes between Third World autocrats could cloud this moment of festivity.

This is not to say that the administration was completely mindless of the mounting tensions in the Gulf. American spy satellites picked up the movement of Iraqi troops to the Kuwaiti border almost immediately, but it was believed to be geared to intimidation rather than imminent action.<sup>39</sup> When Ambassador April Glaspie reported back to Washington after her disastrous meeting with Saddam on 25 July that ‘his emphasis that he wants a peaceful settlement is surely sincere’,<sup>40</sup> there was a general sigh of relief and a return to other business. The view was that the crisis had abated. So confident was Glaspie of Saddam’s peacefulness that she decided to revive her holiday plans, which she had shelved when the crisis erupted, and returned to Washington on 30 July.

These rosy assessments were hardly supported by developments on the ground. Intelligence reports continued to describe a rapidly expanding military build-up. By 27 July eight Iraqi divisions of some 100,000 men from the best Iraqi units were poised on the joint border. Senior officials in Washington still judged this to be more consistent with intimidation than with preparations for an actual invasion, which would have required a far heavier communications traffic and a more substantial artillery stock, munitions and logistics ‘tail’.<sup>41</sup> This view was reinforced by a personal message from Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to George Bush, assuring the administration that there was no problem, and encouraging the United States to keep a low profile. A message was thus sent from Bush to Saddam, ensuring him of US affability and asking for an Iraqi quid pro quo. The Americans also toned down their own remarks and heeded Arab advice to keep themselves detached from a problem that the Arabs now intended to solve among themselves.<sup>42</sup>

As news filtered out that Iraq had relaxed neither its demands nor its military pressure, a ready explanation was found. On 27 July in Geneva, a meeting of OPEC ministers was beginning. There the Iraqi oil minister set out to raise the current price from \$18 a barrel to \$25. This went against both prevailing market conditions, as there was still a glut, and Saudi determination to keep the price at a ‘reasonable’ level which would not trigger Western inflation. Working closely now with its former adversary, Iran, Iraq allowed itself to be pulled down to a lower price only reluctantly, first to \$23 and finally to \$21. In return it achieved what was assumed to be a critical agreement on overall OPEC production quotas of 22.5 million barrels a day, and promises of firm enforcement.

When this agreement was achieved on 28 July it was widely assumed that the Iraqis had been rather clever in imposing some discipline on the cartel’s affairs and

<sup>39</sup> The analysis in this section draws on Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict 1990–1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order* (Princeton, 1993).

<sup>40</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, 13–14 July 1991.

<sup>41</sup> Bob Woodward, *The Commanders* (New York, 1991), p. 212.

<sup>42</sup> *New York Times*, 23 September 1990; *International Herald Tribune* 13–14 July 1991; *Financial Times*, 27 July 1990.

had obtained a better OPEC agreement than they could have otherwise expected. However, it soon transpired that Saddam stepped up the military pressure on Kuwait by moving forward his artillery, logistics support and aircraft. This apparently indicated that Saddam had already made up his mind to invade come what may. His public readiness to continue a dialogue with Kuwait was largely a smoke-screen aimed at gaining international legitimization for the impending military action. Indeed, in conversation with the Arab League Secretary-General, Chedli Klibi, Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz unequivocally stated that the Kuwaiti royal family must go.

Unfortunately, this was treated in Washington with the disbelief that commonly accompanies a warning that another government is about to break a basic international rule. The prevailing view—shared by Kuwaitis, other Arabs, the British and even Israeli intelligence, which had long been cautioning against Saddam's aggressive intentions—was that the Iraqi objective was still intimidation, and, if military action was taken, it would probably be confined to seizing part of the disputed Rumaila oilfield or possibly the strategically located Warba and Bubiyan islands which Iraq had long coveted. It was assumed that Saddam would pull back from Kuwait once the islands were secured. A compelling strategic case was constructed to show why Iraq badly needed the islands.

The only problem with this analysis was that this objective had never figured prominently in Saddam's public or private utterances, in which the immediate Iraqi demand was focused on cash. Nevertheless, this notion of a limited strike was critical to American policy. If it had been appreciated that the logic of Iraqi military action had been to take all of Kuwait, that might have required a firm American response; the thought that it was geared only to wounding produced more reticence.

But even if the United States had wished to take stronger action, which apparently was not the case, it was still dependent on its regional allies. The Egyptians and the Saudis were relying on the impending meeting between Iraq and Kuwait in the Saudi city of Jidda and wanted the Americans to do nothing that might undermine its success. There were limits to how far Washington could go ahead of its major Arab allies. Moreover, its coercive options were also constrained. Without local support it could not send ground troops into the area, and anyway, they would take weeks to arrive.

All the ambiguities and constraints in American policy towards the Middle East and towards Iraq itself were now surfacing. The administration could not ignore the Iraqi pressure on Kuwait, but it did not want to jettison the policy of placating Baghdad which it had been pursuing since the mid-1980s. It still wanted to get Saddam's help in opposing terrorism and in promoting a moderate view on the Arab–Israeli dispute. Saddam's unpredictability and ruthlessness were recognized, yet there was hope that he would be rational in his basic calculations.

Until Iraqi forces crossed the Kuwaiti border in strength on 2 August, the administration remained hopeful that the crisis would be peacefully resolved. When on 27 July the Senate voted eighty to sixteen to impose economic sanctions on Iraq, the administration still objected. When questioned on 31 July by Congressman Lee Hamilton what the administration's response to an Iraqi invasion of Kuwait would be, Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian and Near Eastern Affairs, John Kelly, refused 'to venture into the realms of hypothesis'. The following day, after a phone conversation between President Bush and King Fahd, the US issued a

statement hoping that the next meeting between Iraq and Kuwait would be more successful. Less than twenty-four hours later, Kuwait was no more.

Could the United States, and the West in general, have prevented the invasion? Probably not. The intensity of Saddam's anxiety over the future of his personal rule and his conviction that the incorporation of Kuwait's wealth into the Iraqi coffers provided the best guarantee for his political survival meant that only an unequivocal recognition that an invasion would lead to his certain undoing could have averted such a move. Since the Americans and the Europeans failed to grasp Saddam's predicament in the first place, the need for such drastic measures did not even cross their minds. Yet even if they had interpreted the situation correctly, they would have still been dependent on their key regional allies such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The administration therefore had little choice but to take its cues from those most directly involved with Arab efforts at mediation, who also failed to identify the real nature of the problem at hand. The result was an incoherent and ineffectual policy combining mild warnings to Iraq with attempts to sustain good relations with a state which, on the most favourable interpretation, was engaged in extortion and in opposition to a number of central US foreign policy goals. The unfortunate message this conveyed was one of indifference and infirmity which, in turn, encouraged Saddam to believe that he could invade Kuwait with impunity.

#### **Failing to bring about a peaceful Iraqi withdrawal**

Just as America's position as the 'only remaining superpower' did not deter Saddam from invading Kuwait, so it failed to induce him to withdraw peacefully from the emirate. Given the depth of Saddam's economic plight, and the commitment which he had made by the invasion, Iraq's peaceful withdrawal from Kuwait was never a viable option. It was infinitely more difficult for him to withdraw than it would have been for him not to invade. An unconditional withdrawal, or even withdrawal with a face-saving formula that did not involve the retention of the invasion's financial and economic gains, was totally unacceptable because not only would it have failed to redress the difficult economic problems which drove Saddam into Kuwait, and which were then made worse by the international sanctions against Iraq, but it would have also constituted an enormous loss of face which Saddam felt unable to afford. Only the credible threat that the retention of Kuwait would lead to his certain demise could have driven Saddam out of Kuwait without war; but this was a message the United States, as leader of a variegated international coalition, could not convey.

Nor did the various carrots offered to Saddam, some of them by the US Administration itself, do the trick.<sup>43</sup> Four basic types of concessions were on offer: a possible change of regime in Kuwait; serious negotiations with the Kuwaitis on economic and territorial questions; progress on other regional issues, such as the Arab–Israeli conflict; and a promise that Iraq would not be attacked and that American forces would leave the region following the evacuation of Kuwait. For example, on 24 September, French President François Mitterrand implicitly recog-

<sup>43</sup> Fred Halliday, 'The Gulf War 1990–1991 and the Study of International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 20 (1994), pp. 115–16.

nized the legitimacy of some of Iraq's territorial claims on Kuwait and suggested that the resolution of the Kuwait crisis be followed by a comprehensive peace conference on the Middle East. In the following months, France would offer Saddam several ladders for a climbdown; the last such attempt was made on 15 January 1991, a few hours before the expiry of the UN ultimatum to Iraq to leave Kuwait, only to be contemptuously rebuffed by Saddam. A request by Jacques Poos, Luxembourg's Foreign Minister and the European Community's rotating President, to come to Baghdad in January 1991 on behalf of the Community was similarly dismissed out of hand, as was his suggestion of meeting Foreign Minister Aziz in Algeria. An attempt by the Community's special envoy, Yugoslav diplomat Budimir Loncar, who visited Baghdad in January, to have Saddam clarify what concessions he expected from the anti-Iraqi coalition came to nought. 'Loncar realized then that the discussion with Saddam had been fruitless. He was ushered out of the presidential residence a short while later.'<sup>44</sup>

The UN Secretary-General, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, discovered no greater Iraqi flexibility, either in his meetings with Tariq Aziz in August 1990 or in a subsequent meeting with Saddam in January 1991. Even the Americans were showing signs of flexibility. In September 1990 Under-Secretary of State Robert Kimmitt hinted that the US would not be opposed to Kuwait being forced to negotiate away its differences with Iraq, once Iraq had withdrawn.<sup>45</sup> Later that month, in his address to the General Assembly, George Bush stated that Iraq's unconditional withdrawal from Kuwait would pave the way 'for all the states and peoples of the region to settle the conflict that divides Arabs from Israel'. Moreover, in an about-face in America's long-standing opposition to an international conference on the Middle East, on 5 December 1990 the US Ambassador to the United Nations, Thomas Pickering, indicated his government's readiness to consider such a conference, should Iraq withdraw from Kuwait.

That Saddam refused these offers of concessions, and many others of the same kind, was a clear indication of both his lack of interest in a withdrawal and the weakness of the anti-Iraq international coalition. Saddam wanted a political solution all right; but only one that would allow him to retain the financial and economic fruits of his aggression. Had the international coalition acquiesced in Iraq's *complete* satellization of Kuwait, Saddam might well have withdrawn, even though this process would inevitably have taken an exceedingly prolonged period of time. Since this was a non-starter even for the most appeasing members of the coalition, an Iraqi withdrawal was not on the cards; the gap between the two sides was simply too wide to bridge. A worldwide coalition thus failed to coerce a local dictator into reneging on his aggression and was forced to resort to arms to this end; and even though the war ended in a resounding victory, its very occurrence underscored the limits of American or for that matter great-power influence in the 'New World Order'.

<sup>44</sup> U.S. News and World Report, *Triumph without Victory* (New York, 1992), p. 195.

<sup>45</sup> George Joffe, 'The Multinational Build-up: Options, Opportunities and Anxieties', *Middle East International*, 28 (Sept. 1990), p. 4.

### The origins of the 1993 Israel–PLO deal

In a vitriolic attack on the Israeli–Palestinian peace accord of September 1993, Edward Said sneered at ‘the fashion-show vulgarities of the White House ceremony’ and castigated his own President, Bill Clinton, for acting as ‘a 20th-century Roman emperor shepherding two vassal kings through rituals of reconciliation and obeisance’.<sup>46</sup> What this hyped-up rhetoric failed to mention is that the agreement was reached in secret negotiations in the Norwegian capital, Oslo, at a time when the formal and highly publicized peace process under the auspices and good offices of the United States, launched at the 1991 Madrid Conference, were virtually stalemated. Not only was the US Administration conspicuously absent from the Oslo talks, but it was barely mindful of their existence. When news of the agreement broke, Secretary of State Warren Christopher was stunned (just as he had incidentally been on the occasion of Sadat’s Jerusalem visit seventeen years earlier, then as Deputy Secretary of State), while President Clinton sought to capitalize on the event to boost his flagging popularity by holding the signing ceremony in the White House. If there was someone who was shepherded to the White House lawn, it was the host of the party, not his two guests. Far from being the personal whim of two subservient vassals, the Israeli–Palestinian deal was the culminating point of a long and tortuous process of mutual disillusionment among Arabs and Israelis alike with the continuation of the conflict.

This process began with the 1967 Six-Day War, which dealt militant pan-Arabism a mortal blow and disabused many in the Arab world of their hopes of subverting the state of Israel. It continued with the 1973 October War, which was to Israel what 1967 had been to the Arabs: a great ‘shocker’. The complacency that had gained hold over the Israeli psyche following the astounding 1967 victory was irrevocably shattered. The Israel that emerged from the 1973 trauma was a different nation: sober, mellowed, scarred in many lasting ways. It was still distrustful of its neighbours, it is true, yet was better tuned to signs of regional moderation; highly apprehensive of the security risks attending territorial concessions yet aware that land could not buy absolute security. Indeed, successive opinion polls in the wake of the October War showed a steady growth in public support for the ‘territory for peace’ formula offered by Security Council Resolution 242. Even at the time of the 1977 elections, when Labour lost power to Begin’s right-wing Likud, three out of four Israelis were ready to trade part of the occupied territories, or all of them, in return for peace.<sup>47</sup>

This means that the 1977 elections were less a victory for Likud, let alone for its territorial maximalism, than a vote of no confidence by a young and angry generation of Israelis against Labour’s incompetence and corruption. This was later vividly illustrated by the fact that only some 100,000 Israelis—a mere 2.5 per cent of Israel’s Jewish population—made their home in the occupied territories, and the fact that the Israeli leadership was allowed to trade the Sinai Peninsula for contractual peace in 1979.

<sup>46</sup> Edward Said, ‘The Morning After’, *London Review of Books*, 21 October 1993, p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> Russell A. Stone, *Social Change in Israel: Attitudes and Events 1967–1979* (New York, 1982), p. 41; Baruch Kimmerling, *Zionism and Territory: The Socio-territorial Dimensions of Zionist Politics* (Berkeley, CA, 1983), pp. 175–8.



The advent of the Islamic Republic in Iran in 1979 and the eruption of the Iran–Iraq War a year later were yet another eye-opener to many Arabs. Tehran’s relentless commitment to the substitution of its militant brand of Islamic order for the existing *status quo*; its reluctance to end the war before the overthrow of the Ba’ath regime in Baghdad; and its subversive and terrorist campaign against the Arab monarchies of the Gulf, all this proved to the Gulf states that the Iranian threat exceeded by far the Israeli danger and that there was no adequate substitute for Egypt at the helm of the Arab world. Hence, before 1980 was out, President Saddam Hussein, who a year earlier had triumphantly hosted the Baghdad Summit which expelled Egypt from the Arab League for its peace with Israel, was pleading with the excommunicated Sadat for military support. As Egypt developed into an important military and economic provider—with more than a million Egyptians servicing the over-extended Iraqi economy—Saddam would tirelessly toil to pave the way for its reincorporation into the Arab fold, regardless of its peace treaty with Israel. By the end of the 1980s, Egypt had already regained its focal role in the Arab world, with its moderate policy becoming the mainstream Arab line and its former detractors seeking its friendship and protection. In May 1989 Egypt took part in the all-Arab summit in Casablanca for the first time since its expulsion from the Arab League a decade earlier. Four months later Libya’s radical ruler, Mu’ammār Gaddafi, paid an official visit to Egypt, and in December 1989 President Hafiz Assad of Syria, who for more than a decade had spearheaded the Arab campaign against the separate Egyptian–Israeli peace, swallowed his pride and restored full diplomatic relations with Egypt.

A similar process of disillusionment took place in Israel as a result of the protracted and futile Lebanon War (1982–5). While the Israeli public was willing to support the destruction of the PLO’s military infrastructure in South Lebanon as a means to bring ‘Peace to the Galilee’, it would not back the grandiose plan of Defence Minister Ariel Sharon and his Chief-of-Staff, Lieutenant General Raphael Eitan, to eliminate the PLO as an independent political actor; weaken Syria and neutralize it as a threat to Israel; install a friendly regime in Lebanon under the Christian leader Bashir Gemayel; and strengthen cooperation with the United States while further undermining and supplanting Soviet influence.<sup>48</sup> To most Israelis, therefore, the Lebanese entanglement discredited the notion of ‘war by choice’ (as Prime Minister Begin so proudly called the war), and provided additional proof that there was no military solution to the Arab–Israeli conflict.<sup>49</sup>

At the same time, the war had a sobering impact on the Palestinian national movement. By destroying the PLO’s military infrastructure in Lebanon and denying it a territorial base for attacks on Israel, the Lebanon War drove the organization towards the political path. This culminated in the PLO’s historic decisions in November and December 1988 to shed its commitment to Israel’s destruction and to accept a two-state solution: Israel and a Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

A strong impetus to these decisions was provided by the eruption of the intifada in December 1987. This popular uprising did more to redeem Palestinian dignity

<sup>48</sup> Zeev Schiff and Ehud Ya’ari, *Israel’s Lebanon War* (London, 1984), p. 304.

<sup>49</sup> See E. Inbar, ‘The “No Choice War” Debate in Israel’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 12 (Mar. 1989), pp. 22–37.

and self-esteem than two and a half decades of armed struggle by the PLO. Frustrated with the long-standing neglect and manipulation of their cause by Arabs and Israelis alike, the Palestinians proved capable of becoming self-reliant and resisting the Israeli occupation in a fashion they had never done before. This, in turn, brought the Palestinian problem to the forefront of the Arab–Israeli conflict and enabled Arafat to overcome his hardline opponents within the PLO. With the Palestinians in the occupied territories anxious to see progress on the diplomatic front that would make their sacrifice worthwhile, the PLO could hardly afford to remain entrenched in its rejectionist posture which had led it nowhere.

It was at this juncture that the evolving regional moderation received a further boost with the end of the Cold War. Both Arabs and Israelis were naturally wary of this development, which they feared would constrain their freedom of and capacity for action. Special dissatisfaction with the thaw in superpower relations was voiced in Damascus, which did not attempt to conceal its abhorrence of Mikhail Gorbachev's readiness to sacrifice Soviet regional interests—and allies—for the sake of superpower *détente*.

With this trend reinforced by the crumbling of the East European regimes, and even more so by the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the radical regimes in the Middle East concluded that the Middle East had been left to the mercy of the only remaining superpower, the United States, and its 'lackeys', first and foremost, Israel. This gloomy assessment led to the further weakening of the militant Arab camp, illustrated most vividly by the completion of Egypt's reincorporation into the Arab fold and the formation of the (apparently) moderate Arab Cooperation Council in 1989, with the participation of Egypt, Jordan, North Yemen, and Iraq. In 1989 Israel's right-wing prime minister, Yitzhak Shamir, at the head of a national unity government, proposed elections in the occupied territories to choose representatives who would then discuss some future form of self-government, as a first stage towards a comprehensive settlement. This alarmed elements within Shamir's own party, the Likud, and he began to backtrack. As a result, the coalition with the Labour Party collapsed and Shamir formed the most right-wing government in Israel's history.

### **The Gulf Conflict and the Arab–Israeli peace process**

Significantly enough, the final nail was driven into the coffin of regional rejectionism, not by the momentous events on the European continent, but rather by a cataclysmic indigenous event: the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the ensuing 1991 Gulf War. Contrary to the standard perception, this episode was no confirmation of American post-Cold War omnipotence. Rather, as noted earlier, the 'only remaining superpower' was surprised by an act of aggression by a local actor, which it deemed detrimental to its vital interests, and which it was unable to reverse without resort to arms. Had it not been for the active support of the main Arab states and Saudi Arabia's consent to use its territory as the springboard for a military action against Iraq, the United States would never have been able to orchestrate the anti-Iraq coalition, let alone muster the political clout to wage war. Much as the Arabs needed American help to remove a lethal regional threat, the United States needed the Arabs to secure its political and economic interests.

More importantly, Israelis and Arabs found themselves in the same boat, as Saddam sought to legitimize his predatory move by portraying it as a noble attempt to promote the liberation of Palestine from Zionist occupation. While the falsehood of this linkage was eminently transparent, the widespread emotional outburst it aroused, particularly when Saddam began firing his missiles at Israel, underscored the explosiveness of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. This exceptional convergence of destinies led to a tacit collaboration between Israel and the Arab members of the anti-Iraq coalition during the conflict: the former kept the lowest possible profile, even refraining from retaliating against Iraq’s missile attacks, while the latter highlighted the hollowness of Saddam’s Palestinian pretensions and participated in the war operations against Iraq. This, in turn, made it much easier for US Secretary of State James Baker to kick off the Madrid peace process shortly after the war.

More than America’s newly gained pre-eminence, it was the trauma attending the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and Saddam’s survival that brought Syrian President Assad to Madrid. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, Assad had never viewed the evolving New World Order as necessitating a fundamental revision of his long-standing rejection of Israel’s existence, as illustrated by his acrimonious relations with Gorbachev and his venomous attacks on the PLO’s 1988 recognition of Israel. Yet once his mortal enemy, Saddam Hussein, had swallowed Kuwait, Assad could not allow the Iraqi action to stand, for fear that he would be Saddam’s next victim. Hence his immediate joining of the anti-Iraq coalition; hence Syria’s actual participation in the liberation of Kuwait and its outspoken opposition to ending the war before the physical elimination of Saddam Hussein.<sup>50</sup>

Paradoxically, the PLO’s folly in siding with Saddam gave an important boost to Arab–Israeli reconciliation. The Gulf monarchies were neither forgiving nor forgetful of what they considered an act of Palestinian betrayal of their hospitality. This state of mind was illustrated not only by the harsh treatment of Palestinians in liberated Kuwait: within a month of the end of the war Saudi financial support for the PLO had been cut off, driving the organization to the verge of bankruptcy.

Starved of financial resources; marginalized at the Madrid peace process launched in October 1991; increasingly outshone in the occupied territories by the Hamas militant Islamic movement; and beset by growing internal fighting, the PLO was desperate for political rehabilitation—and Yasser Arafat for a personal comeback. Fortunately for him, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was becoming increasingly exasperated with the inconclusive peace process under US auspices. Brought back to power in June 1992, the 71-year-old former chief-of-staff, who had masterminded Israel’s 1967 victory, was keenly aware that this was his last chance to go down in history as Israel’s greatest peacemaker and was determined to seize the moment come what may. And if this meant breaking the taboo to which he had previously subscribed and recognizing the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people, so be it. With the convergence of these Palestinian and Israeli undercurrents, against the backdrop of their long mutual disillusionment, the road to the September 1993 Declaration of Principles was short.

<sup>50</sup> e.g. Damascus Radio, 4, 5 and 10 March 1991.

### Conclusions

Whether they would admit it or not—and Middle Easterners have always found it easier to blame others for their mistakes—the main responsibility for the region's unhappy lot lies with the local players. That Arabs have been fighting Jews, Iranians, Kurds, and fellow Arabs for decades has had nothing to do with Cold War politics, but rather has had to do with the tangled web of conflicting national aspirations, ethnic cleavages, religious militancy, and economic and territorial greed. Similarly, superpower failure to stop the regional bloodletting and bring about a general reconciliation had less to do with Soviet or American machinations than with their limited leverage over the smaller regional states. To a certain extent this was a corollary of the political and ideological polarization that dominated superpower relations during the Cold War, where one's gain was (all-too-often erroneously) seen as the other's loss; at the same time it reflected the fundamental asymmetry inherent in any great-power/small-state relationship, regardless of the structure of the international system. The small state's parochial outlook and localized interests make it better tuned to the threats and opportunities in its immediate environment than the great power whose global range of interests precludes *ipso facto* full and lasting concentration on specific regional problems. To local actors, regional developments are an absolute; to the great power they are one of many problems competing for attention and resources. This, in turn, gives the local actors the ability to manipulate great-power weighting of the overall balance of forces and interests in their favour; and though it would be premature to try to gauge the full consequences of the end of the Cold War, there is sufficient evidence that this relative advantage is likely only to change, not to disappear, with the demise of the Cold War.

The global balance of power and international rules of the game have of course changed, but not to the extent of reducing the regional actors to malleable objects in the hands of the 'only remaining superpower'. The void left by the diminution in superpower rivalry has already been filled by a host of domestic and international concerns, such as greater US preoccupation with economic recovery and social malaise at home; the expansion and integration of the European Union; economic and political restructuring in the former Communist regimes; and across-the-board humanitarian and political intervention. With great-power attention vacillating among these competing issues in accordance with shifts in their acuteness, local actors are bound to take advantage of the situation to promote their self-serving objectives.

Thus, the forceful eviction of Iraq from Kuwait may prove to be the exception rather than the rule in the 'New World Order'; the unique historical juncture that made Operation Desert Storm possible is unlikely to recur in the foreseeable future, as already evidenced by the muddled Western response to a string of local conflicts and wars, from Yugoslavia to Somalia to Chechnya.

Nor has the recent Arab–Israeli peace process stemmed from America's new international prowess. It is no mere chance that the Israeli–Palestinian–Jordanian peace agreements of 1993–4 were negotiated outside Washington, with the US Administration kept in the dark. While the end of the Cold War has certainly contributed to the nascent peace process between Israel and its Arab neighbours, this development is, above all, the culmination of a prolonged and painful process of

mutual disillusionment with the utility of armed force, begun with the 1967 Six-Day War; as such, it underscores the continued supremacy of indigenous dynamics over global influences.

It would be advisable, therefore, for great powers and Middle Easterners alike to reconcile themselves, fully and unreservedly, to this reality. Just as a horse can be brought to water but cannot be forced to drink, so regional peace and reconciliation depend overwhelmingly on the local players; no external power will be able to perform miracles in the absence of indigenous will. The American mediation of the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty of 1979 was effective only because the Egyptian and Israeli political leaderships were bent upon making peace; but when the administration attempted to sustain the momentum and implement a self-governing rule in the West Bank and Gaza, as stipulated by the Camp David Accords, it ran into a brick wall: the PLO, which at the time was still committed to the destruction of Israel, refused to join the process.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, President Assad, or any of his likely successors, will not make peace unless this serves the Syrian national interest as they see it; nor can any Israeli leader be coerced into a withdrawal from the occupied territories unless this is done within an arrangement that satisfies Israel's security needs, as it sees them.

Now that the readiness that was long missing seems to exist on both sides, at least in the mainstream bodies politic, the great powers can add a valuable input to this historic indigenous process. They will not be the factor to make or break the Israeli–Palestinian deal, or for that matter a comprehensive Arab–Israeli peace; but they can help cultivate the nascent peace process through a string of mediatory and supportive roles, from the narrowing of political and perceptual gaps, to economic aid, to the construction of confidence-building measures and international structures to underpin the various peace treaties. The same applies to other Middle Eastern conflicts, Cold War or not.

<sup>51</sup> For the Palestinian refusal to join the peace process see Said, *Morning After*, p. 3.