

Central Intelligence Agency

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Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

20 July 1984

Arab Support for an International Conference  
on the Middle East

Summary

Recent endorsements by Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, and the PLO of a UN-sponsored international peace conference on the Middle East chiefly reflect Arab frustration over the lack of progress toward a comprehensive peace settlement and increasing skepticism that the United States can be evenhanded or will exert pressure on Israel. The Arabs realize that US and Israeli opposition makes it unlikely that such a conference will be convened. They will keep the proposal alive, however, mainly because it is a politically convenient way to show support for the Palestinian cause. Arab statements of support for an international conference will place continuing pressure on the US to soften its opposition to such a meeting and will provide the USSR an opportunity to align itself with moderate Arab opinion on the issue.

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This memorandum was prepared by the Arab-Israeli Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. It was coordinated with the Office of Soviet Analysis and the National Intelligence Officer for the Near East and South Asia. Information as of 18 July 1984 was used in its preparation. Questions and comments should be directed to Chief, Arab-Israeli Division at

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Background

The nearly simultaneous statements of support by several Arab governments for an international conference are partly the result of prior endorsement of the concept in the United Nations. The General Assembly, in a resolution passed last December, called for a conference that would include the PLO, the United States, the USSR, and "other concerned states" on an "equal footing" and with "equal rights." The resolution also laid down several other guidelines, including the right of the Palestinians to an independent state and the rejection of Israeli policies and practices in the occupied territories. [redacted]

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Secretary General Perez de Cuellar wrote in early March to all members of the Security Council plus the PLO, Israel, and the Arab states bordering Israel to solicit their views on a conference. The proposal was a subject of Perez de Cuellar's meetings in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel in early June, as well as of Arafat's discussions with King Hussein in Amman in early May. Nonetheless, the Arab leaders involved are still not close to attaining a coordinated position regarding a formula for negotiating a Middle East peace settlement. [redacted]

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General Arab Motives

The lack of movement toward a comprehensive settlement for more than a year is a major reason that a UN-sponsored conference seems to the Arabs to be worth touting, if not holding. From the Arab viewpoint, further delay means more time for Israel to establish new "facts" through settlement activity in the occupied territories. The widespread assumption that the United States will be preoccupied with its election campaign leads most Arabs to conclude that peace efforts will remain on dead center through 1984. [redacted]

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The proposal for an international conference has also gained support because of the increasingly prevalent view among Arabs that the United States is no longer an honest broker in the Middle East. Proponents of this view contend that Washington has acquiesced in such Israeli actions as the bombing of the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981 and the invasion of Lebanon in 1982. They also point to efforts within the Congress to transfer the US Embassy to Jerusalem. Arabs note that the United States did not obtain Israeli support for President Reagan's peace plan of September 1982, and many doubt that any US-directed negotiation would place sufficient pressure on Tel Aviv to accommodate Palestinian interests. [redacted]

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We believe the Arab governments that have endorsed the proposal for a conference hold little hope that one will be convened, in view of US and Israeli opposition. They see no significant costs in voicing support for the idea, however, and several modest benefits:

- Conveying an image of reasonableness by being willing to negotiate.
- Identifying regimes with the cause of Palestinian Arabs.
- Avoiding close identification with either superpower (unlike Camp David).
- Side-stepping inter-Arab differences by supporting a negotiating procedure rather than a specific formula for a settlement.
- Exerting additional pressure on the United States (and ultimately on Israel) to make greater concessions to Palestinian interests.

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#### Specific Arab Positions

Syria. Assad called for an international conference in a speech on 10 May. When asked in the past whether Syria has an alternative to Camp David, Assad has pointed to the Geneva formula, in which the United States and the USSR have central roles. The US Embassy in Damascus believes Assad may now be exploring the possibility of UN sponsorship to diminish the Soviets' ability to disrupt a conference. According to the Embassy, the Syrians are concerned that the original Geneva format would result in confrontation between the Soviets and Arabs on one side and the Israelis and the United States on the other.

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With the dialogue between Arafat and Hussein stalled, Assad probably sees this as a good time to sound out support for a multilateral conference. Syria has tried hard during the past year to prevent the Jordanian/PLO talks from leading to any new initiative that would exclude Syria. Assad will continue to set tough terms regarding peace talks, especially because his minority Alawite regime would be politically vulnerable if he appeared to abandon his claims to legitimacy as a champion of Arab unity and the Palestinian cause.

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Jordan. King Hussein has publicly endorsed the concept of a UN-sponsored international conference as the "only hope" for ending the stalemate in the peace process. He supports it mainly as a way to broaden responsibility for the peace process and move away from exclusive reliance on the United States. [redacted]

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Hussein believes that Soviet participation is needed to solve the region's problems and has consistently advocated Moscow's inclusion. Jordanian officials admit they do not expect Moscow to play a constructive role in negotiations. They believe, however, that the lack of progress gives the Soviets opportunities to expand their activities in the region. The Jordanians believe that they, together with other Arab moderates and the United States, would be better able to contain Moscow's troublemaking by involving the Soviets in a multilateral negotiation. [redacted]

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Egypt. The Mubarak government has consistently said it wants to explore all possible avenues to a comprehensive Middle East settlement. It contends there are positive and negative elements in each of the peace plans that have been proposed, including the Reagan, Brezhnev, and Arab League (Fez) formulas, as well as the initiative that Egypt and France sponsored at the UN in 1982. In Cairo's view, a UN-sponsored multilateral conference is one more possibility to be given careful consideration, one that does not contradict Egypt's commitment to the peace process launched at Camp David. During French President Mitterrand's visit on 11 July, Mubarak said Egypt would attend such a conference if all other concerned parties did likewise. [redacted]

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Support for the proposed conference enhances Mubarak's Arab credentials at a time when he is trying to reintegrate Egypt into the Arab world. It is also politically important for Mubarak to show that Camp David did not mark the end of Arab-Israeli negotiations, that the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty will not be detached forever from the issue of a Palestinian homeland, and that he is not in the pocket of the US when it comes to the peace process. [redacted]

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Egyptian officials have freely acknowledged, however, that there is little chance a conference will be convened. Presidential adviser al-Baz recently told reporters "it might take months or years" to arrange one. Egyptian officials expressed similar doubts to Vladimir Polyakov, head of the Soviet Foreign Ministry's Middle East Department, during his visit to Cairo in April. According to a mid-level Egyptian official, the Egyptians told Polyakov that a conference might ultimately be useful but was impractical in the foreseeable future. [redacted]

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The Egyptians share the Jordanians' view that the USSR has little to contribute to the peace process but would do less damage if it were included in a negotiation than if it continues to be excluded. The recently announced resumption of Egyptian-Soviet ambassadorial relations is consistent with this view but has no specific connection with Cairo's support for an international conference. [redacted] 25X1

Lebanon. Lebanon's favorable response to the Secretary General's letter regarding an international conference is largely pro forma. Lebanon's deep internal problems and its tenuous position between its Arab neighbors and Israel limits the government's interest in such a meeting. Beirut probably does have some interest, however, in using a conference to bolster its position once it begins negotiating with Israel over security arrangements in the south and an Israeli withdrawal. Lebanon's response to Perez de Cuellar's letter asserted that the UN-sponsored armistice concluded in 1949 is the legal text that controls Lebanese-Israeli relations. [redacted] 25X1

The Lebanese Government is seeking US mediation in Lebanon, both to settle internal disputes and in negotiations with Israel. The government thus probably would heed any US request not to participate in a conference if one were convened. [redacted] 25X1

PLO. PLO Chairman Arafat strongly supports a UN-sponsored international conference. The PLO considers such a meeting to be the best chance for realizing Palestinian national aspirations because the UN framework assures considerable sympathy for the Palestinian cause. Moreover, the General Assembly resolution calling for a conference specifically affirms the PLO's right to participate. [redacted] 25X1

In approaching a conference, Arafat would consider the Fez formula--which calls for a Palestinian state--to be his minimum demand. He continues to insist on self-determination, national independence, and the right of return as the only bases for peace in the Middle East. [redacted] 25X1

### Outlook

As long as an international conference is not convened, the Arab governments that have supported it probably will keep the proposal on the table, frequently paying lip service to it in public statements and occasionally making it the subject of

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private, bilateral consultations. There will almost certainly be further endorsements of the idea in such forums as the General Assembly, the Arab League, and the Islamic Conference. Any signs of progress through other diplomatic channels, however--specifically, through US-sponsored talks in which Israel addresses the future of the West Bank--would tend to lower enthusiasm for the proposal. [redacted]

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In the meantime, the endorsement of the proposal by Jordan and Egypt probably will encourage Assad to adhere to his demand for a comprehensive approach toward a peace settlement. He has probably already interpreted the Arab moderates' statements of support for a conference as signs of further erosion of their faith in step-by-step methods. [redacted]

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The Soviets have endorsed the UN proposal and claimed that it is based on their own longstanding plan for an international conference. Moscow prefers a forum modeled on the 1973 Geneva conference--which it co-chaired with the United States--rather than one under UN auspices. The Soviets probably believe, however, that their support for a UN conference will cost them little because US and Israeli opposition will prevent one from convening anyway. They can be expected to exploit US opposition in order to drive a wedge between the moderate Arabs and Washington. Moscow will draw attention to the Arab endorsement of a Soviet role when the prospects for a Geneva-style gathering seem more propitious. [redacted]

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